

fugitive



I was twenty-seven, working in the warehouse of the art storage operation. This was not an ordinary warehouse; it was a five-star resort for art, climate-controlled, cameras every ten yards, plastic surgery a.k.a restoration available on the premises. We workers were not feckless vassals; we were custodians of the treasures of the race, the scraps of canvas and resin and wood oozing market value. We had monthly drug tests. We were provided uniforms, laundered daily. The starch in the collars chafed my neck.

As in every religious enterprise, things were sketchy behind the scenes. I was put on forklift because the last guy stuck a prong through a Richter or some other gaseous German. He was terminated. He

sued, claiming the lift was defective, which it was and is. One of its gears, in extreme situations, slips. You have to be prepared for it. That guy wasn't because he was stoned half the time. I don't know how he got away with it so long. It came up in the trial. Lawyers got richer. He didn't.

I didn't hate the job, but it could have been more engaging. We rarely saw the art since it was generally swaddled in tape and bubble wrap. And because a truckload of it arrived twice a day, mystique was another popped bubble. Channels embedded in the ceiling facilitated sliding 24-rung ladders from one end of the warehouse to the other. Only in the gloomy recesses was there empty space, in the cubicles of levels three, four and five.

Even with the steady deluge of arrivals, I had lag time on most days. The uppermost levels of the cubicles were out of range of the cameras, except for the one at the ceiling's apex, and that one was on the fritz. The fifth level generally features Minor Collections of the Obscure, practitioners whose artistic talent may have surpassed their promotional abilities and/or work ethic. That's where I'd go to hide out. C5a7 was my oasis. I'd move a few boxes and take a nap there. A refreshing nap.

C5a7 contained twelve stiff paper boxes with reinforced corners. The boxes were separately wrapped in transparent plastic held in place by the blue tape used for so many arty tasks, tape that is easily lifted without damage. Lift it I did one slow day in October when the Giants were in the World Series. I unwrapped the plastic casing and coaxed the tight lid off the first box. It let go with a sigh, as if to say, if you must.

Inside were matted paintings, the uppermost covered by an opaque sheet of acid-free paper. I lifted the sheet. Colors flashed into fullness, a meadow with a jangle at the margins.

In the flower-flecked meadow were three giraffes and a hovering angel, a scenario that appeared to be part of a tale. I removed the other two paintings. One depicted an oceanside cave with an overturned rowboat, and the other a view out of a window onto a snowy garden.

I didn't have the nerve to look in the other boxes that day but over the next few months I pieced the story together. A boy and a girl shipwrecked on an island, like Crusoe. Their adventures may have been imaginary, conjured from a hospital bed in winter. Every time I took off the lid, I had a visceral reaction to the paintings, my heart beating faster, trying to batter its way into a deeper place. The sensation was primed, I am sure, by the risk involved. Somebody was going to notice my ass regularly disappearing into C5a7. Fishiness is quickly sniffed out in the warehouse.

I cooled it. When I thought enough time had passed, that is, when I thought that the attention of the human monitors had wandered, I returned to my oasis. My fascination fixated on one painting, the first I'd seen, the one with the giraffes and the angel. The giraffes didn't make any sense but there was magic to them. Maybe that was the point. I kept the painting out of the box for easy access. I was careful, making sure the acid free paper was in place. I covered it with the plastic wrap formerly surrounding the box.

A seed grew, a persistent weed, a need to know more. One day my supervisor left a printout on a pallet and, doing a diligent perusal in order to return it to its rightful place, I discovered the last name of the artist of C5a7. Harris. A common name, probably an Ellis Island bequest to a multi-syllabic ancestor.

Thus, it was no simple task to identify my artist. A lucky accident enabled it. I followed a link in an article

about neglected illustrators of the twentieth century and came upon the volcano on the island where the children are shipwrecked. My heart did its drumming.

There is very little about her online. Amanda Harris. Never married. Died from pancreatic cancer in 1973. She illustrated several moderately successful books. One about crossing the plains in a covered wagon reeled in some minor prizes.

Now, a half-century later, she was a whisper from oblivion. And yet somebody cared enough to pay the inflated fees of the warehouse. Perhaps the cash came from a periodic flushing of a bank vault.

My birthday came and went, the twenty-eighth of my wasted life. I decided it was time to look for a different job but there was no urgency other than the dangerous flaw in my own nature. As soon as something settles, I start testing the limits and my luck. The office was starting to trust me.

One day I was ordered to retrieve a four-by-four canvas from C5b7, a small hop from C5a7. If I had premeditated, I would have chickened out. I slipped the three-giraffe illustration into the loose paper wrapping the larger canvas. On the ground floor I stood the canvas next to three others near the freight elevator. My skin prickled from the stares of the cameras. The service elevator opened, I loaded the canvases, dramatically arranging a quilted fabric to prevent abrasion. On the way upstairs I sequestered the painting in one of the quilts.

Downstairs again, I returned the quilts to the pile in the corner of the warehouse. No alarms sounded. I transferred the painting from the quilts to the lavatory stall to the cardboard totes to the recycling bin to the space behind the seat of my pickup. And finally, to the wall of my bedroom where I see it every morning, convinced it will charm my life in ways I can't foresee.

I told my girlfriend, the only person who goes into my bedroom, that a friend had painted it, and she, naturally incurious, believed me. I was not worried about getting busted. Who was going to miss it? The bank vault? In the unlikely event someone would decide to publish the series, no one would even know it was missing. It was better on my wall than buried in a warehouse, unseen and unappreciated.

Not feeling remorse didn't mean things felt settled in the warehouse. It used to be I could breeze through the workday, unfurl the riggings of the mind and sail, but now I was obsessed by theft. I didn't intend to take anything else but I kept having ever more elaborate fantasies of heists. This swaddled statue, that fat gaudily framed thing said to be a Caravaggio or a disciple. It wasn't just latent anger toward the overprivileged art mavens. It was the paradoxical notion that any collection would be fuller with a missing piece.

Sometimes my fantasies went to a darker, real place, a cell in which I am imprisoned, bemoaning my impulsive behavior.

I might have returned the piece to regain some equilibrium, but I couldn't. I can't. The painting has changed. The colors have faded; some have disappeared so that all that remains are vestigial brushstrokes. The giraffes are legless.

I figured out what happened. For a half hour each day around the solstice, sunlight comes into my bedroom and bleaches the pigments. This happens with gouache. The colors are fugitive.