

Marco Bertamini

THE CASE OF THE SHEPHERD AND THE MOUNTAIN

«I am the curator of the Museum of Modern Art»

I had to smile at that. Of course I meet strange people in my line of work, I meet them daily. Hard to give her an age but the brunette sitting in front of my desk in a tight crimson dress who could have been a minor star of the silver screen had just told me that she was the curator of a museum. Funny thing is, I believed her. Perhaps it was the glasses placed just a bit too far down her beautiful nose.

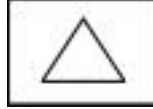
«I doodle in my notebook when I am on the phone, but I never thought the museum would come for them».

«Please do not kid, this is a serious business. If you don't want the job I can contact another private eye».

She was earnest, so I cut to the chase and asked for the details. Guess what, famous painting missing but no sign of a break-in. A real mystery and the museum wanted the case solved quickly and quietly. I like mysteries, after all you do not enter into this business for the money. My landlord was well aware of that. You do it because every now and then a beautiful lady walks into your office, looks at you straight in your eyes, and tells you that you are the only man in the world who can help her. Well, she didn't say that exactly, but I knew that that was what was at stake.

The museum was in the posh part of town, big building in the shape of a cardboard box kicked around by a bunch of kids. I prefer straight walls, but what do I know about art. And of course it had all the security systems that money can buy. The missing painting was called *The shepherd and the mountain*, by a Jack Beardie. The head guard saw it hanging on the wall the evening of Tuesday when the Museum closed its doors. By morning it was gone, just like that.

I felt a need for nicotine, but the twentieth century was over, and I had quit. The curator, Dr Fawn, got up from the chair and leaned on the desk to ask for maximum discretion. She was so tall that I wondered what she needed stiletto heels for, maybe she liked looking down on people. She left after placing her card on the desk, together with a photograph of the painting.



It seemed the shepherd was missing as well, but it wasn't my job to decide whether this piece of canvas was worth keeping in a museum. We are all vain, if she had asked for my doodles I would have signed them for her.

Later that evening I had a drink with «brains» at the usual dive. Dr Bain was his real name. I am a good listener, you have to be in my line of work, and he, well, he is an academic, so that is our friendship in a nutshell. But information is what a private eye feeds on, even if of a bookish nature. He was telling me about how we see the world. The laws of perceptual organization, as he put it. You don't get to work at the University if you don't have a way with words.

«Ever heard of a Jack Beardie fellow, famous artist I am told»

I passed the picture to him, and he seemed to hesitate. He ran his hand over his beard a couple of times before giving me an answer.

«Yes, I do. A bit overrated if you ask me»

«Would many people know of his paintings at the Museum?»

I knew it was a silly question, but one has to start somewhere.

«Sure, the *mountains* series is in all textbooks»

I put down my beer, replaced the picture in my inside pocket and offered him another round. The last one, these days I prefer to be sober at the wheel. I am proud, in a weird way, of the scar on my left cheek, but better not to tempt fate one time too many.

The next morning I had an appointment at the Museum, to meet Dr Fawn again and ask a few questions to the head guard. When I got there I had to pinch myself. The guard was as sexy as only oriental women who compete at the Olympics can be. Not as tall as Dr Fawn, probably in her twenties, and with black hair braided in two plaits that reached down to her waist. I do have dreams like these sometimes, especially when I work too hard, which I have been doing since Helena got on her plane to Rio. That was four years ago. Never mind, this seemed real. Her name was Ms Suzuki and to me they might as well have built the museum to keep her inside. Then again, if George Bush passes for president these days, then Ms Suzuki can be a head security guard.

She repeated what I already knew.

«Can I have a look at the whole *mountains* series?»

«Of course, they are all on the same wall. Well, all of them except the one missing, that is»



I was starting to see a pattern. *The lake and the eagle*, *The chimney of the bighorn*, *The flowers on the wall*, and *Moon and stars*. My doodles did not have titles, usually.

«What is behind this wall?»

Ms Suzuki was answering all my questions without blinking.

«This is the wall at the back of the museum, there is the millennium garden and then the road»

The emergency exits had been checked, they were sealed and the seal had not broken. Nevertheless I decided to have a word with the gardener. By this time I knew what to expect. Ms Almond was as stunning as only Norwegian women who in times past fought side by side with their Viking husbands can be. Her teeth were whiter than the snow and her eyes bluer than the water trapped in the fiords. She had seen nothing but she did say that if somebody wanted to approach the museum from the back at night they would not be seen by anybody. Even so, what's the point of that unless you can walk through concrete walls.

I ate lunch in my favorite Italian restaurant with Dr Fawn. She only had a buffalo mozzarella but she insisted on paying. I felt that the answer to the mystery was not far, but I needed to think and so in the afternoon I toured the museum on my own. Luckily most of the art did not interfere with my thinking.

That evening I had a crucial phone call to make.

When Dr Fawn rushed into my office the next morning she seemed to be unable to keep her composure.

«The painting, it is there again!»

«Yes, I know, it was put back overnight»

«It hangs exactly where... what?, you mean you are responsible for this?»

«Let's just say that the case is closed»

«But, how?»

«That I don't mind telling you, it's all to do with perceptual organisation»

«Has it?»

«Yes, you see, there was a weakness in the security, a hole actually. Someone visited the museum late on Tuesday and altered subtly the painting next to *The shepherd and the mountain*, the one called *The flowers on the wall* in the following way. As you see that creates a hole through which one can enter the museum, at night, from the back. The next morning this someone came to the museum and changed the painting again.»



«But who did it?»

«Does it matter?»

Brains had been too forthcoming with his lecture about perceptual organization, all that had been left for me to do was to put two and two together. Nine

times out of ten that makes four. I did not really feel sorry when he had started trying to justify himself on the phone. He had said that it was only for some publicity, and that it is difficult to get Grant money these days unless you are a celebrity. Not my problem, but then again he is not a criminal, so I had cut this deal where he had to put the painting back. The same method worked a second time. Now everybody was happy.

Later that day I was searching for a coin in my jacket to use a trolley at the supermarket. I found Dr Fawn's business card. Maybe it was my time to pay for a meal.