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New World

Tania Nathan

The sound of the marketplace is loud through the open window.

A man sits at an easel painting, the subject a young woman. She sits uncomfortably in her starched lace ruff; in her hands she holds a fan, opened showing the grand opulence of the fine painting that has been added to its mounts. A scene of nymphs and satyrs frolicking. The man who paints is stern-faced; his commission was to finish this work before the new bride would be dispatched to her husband's home, her portrait to be hung in the grand hallway of their new home. An object to be admired like all the other objects in the house. The harpsichord she has been trained to play, gathering dust awaiting her arrival. The card table inlaid with fine ivory stolen from an animal the inhabitants neither have had the chance nor need to see, from a colony of enslaved they neither had to think nor worry about. A generation of wealth made from stepping on the necks of others.

They displayed their wealth in gloomy grand hallways, awaiting fresh new brides to bear fresh new sons. Repeating the cycle.

The artist adds a bloom of peach to the new bride's cheeks. In reality, she is pale from fright and exhausted from carrying the weight of her enormous lace ruff, but that reality is not one he chooses to repeat in his painting. He also flatters her chin, blurring out the childishness of her rounded face with shadows and contrast. The final work shows an arrogant jut, fine-boned hands clutching an open fan that now featured bounteous fruit bowls with grapes, lemons and peaches. The bristling lace ruff bounces light into eyes full of youth, contrasted by the rich silk of her dress. Satisfied with his work, he adds the final coating of varnish to protect the masterpiece.

The young bride disappears under the glaze, gloss sealing her youth into perpetuity. The hue of the silks in her dress deepens under the weight of the varnish, as do the pearls that tip the bones of her lace fan, taking on a luminosity in contrast to the gloom of the shadows she is painted in. A frightened young bride is transformed into a proud, rich wife. The artist wraps the painting in a canvas sheet, then an oilcloth and ties it shut with twine. He carries it to the framers himself, the most famous one in the city. His patron will pay for the heavy wood frame, most likely ebony, carved and then gilded, perhaps enriched even with ivory inlays and gold leaf. The apprentice receives him, carefully taking the precious package. An apprentice must learn under his master for six years before being allowed to frame anything. In fact, the frame will end up costing more than the painting itself. This bitter thought is swallowed by every artist in the realm who was fortunate enough to have a

patron. These were the times when the merchants who established trade routes to the New World abounded. Bringing spices and tea, silks and wood, human suffering in the form of enslaved humans that could be sold back and forth like chattel, blood money they earned had to be spent quickly before it would begin to stink. By the transformative powers of riches, merchants that formerly were the humble sellers of things transformed themselves into those who commissioned and took in the Arts.

After many weeks, the master framer summons the apprentice. The framing is complete. The frame, a dark ebony wood of a bolection style, is very handsome, and heavy. The coatings of dark varnish the master framer has applied to the carved wood echoes the dark room the young wife in the painting stands in. She stands there, transfixed as if a light shines upon her, the painter's brush capturing the cream of her complexion, the lusciousness of the pearls tipping the fan. The gilded carving of fruit and flowers of the frame seem to mock the seriousness of the young woman's expression, as they frolic in the expanses of the borders of the frame. The warmth of the gold gilding applied to the fruit and flowers carved into the frame seem at odds, for the marriage of the young woman to the son and heir of this rich family is known to not be a happy one. The artist leaves this in the painting, along with the hint in the fan she clasps. While it shows off her dainty fingers, it is open, and her little finger is extended; its secret meaning "Goodbye" to those that understand. But to who? And why?

The family's matriarch receives the painting and is satisfied. She does not notice the look on her new daughter-in-law's face, nor the secret message painted there for all to see. She only remarks on the beauty of the frame, and how well it shows off the delicate beauty of the new wife. The master framer's apprentice bows, and takes her payment of many gold sovereigns back to his master. After supper, the painting, now in its handsome (and expensive frame), is unveiled to the family. They gasp, and the matriarch smiles, satisfied. It was a good match, her son to the daughter of the governor, old connections and new money. She knows nothing of the girl's feelings nor does she care. The young wife's only role is to bear the family many children.

The painting stands in the drawing room of the house for many generations, and presides over the comings and goings of visitors and important guests, the unwilling young bride and her frightened eyes. Most guests note only the beauty of the young bride, and the largeness of the frame, that cost so much more than the painting itself. A plague breaks out, then another, but there it remains, serene and still. Then, a great war like the world has never seen breaks out, a world war in which the Dutch try assiduously to remain in a neutral position. Her proximity to great world powers Germany and France ensures the battle to be a long and bloody one. Armed to the teeth and with considerable colonial plunder at risk, the Dutch delicately try to sidestep the war that rages through Europe. The rich merchant families wisely disperse, hiding their wealth in overseas bank accounts, in cellars, in secret country homes. The stately portrait of the young wife in its expensive frame, which broadcasts the power and riches of the family, is now a liability. Screaming of family connections and wealth to be plundered, it must be hidden. Two servants carefully take it down and wrap it in oilcloth then canvas, and it is taken to a secret location to be hidden.

There it remains hidden, through the Great War, an outbreak of the deadly Spanish flu weaponised by the war sickening five hundred million and finally killing fifty million souls. A brief period of calm follows, but soon the disenchantment starts to build again. A far-right political movement fanned by nationalism and a twisted desire to see a singular greatness bursts into the world scene. The hate and greed of those that felt wronged by the punishments that the world's first war had imposed brings forth an ugliness never seen before. A message of the supposed purity and superiority of one group over others seeps in like cancer, infecting a whole nation. The second great war breaks out, and the Dutch despite all their efforts, are invaded. Ugly red flags start appearing everywhere. The rich families that could escape, escaped. Those that stay soon discover that the promises of treatment like that of a velvet glove disappears. Groups of people are removed to gulags, and then work camps. Hundreds of thousands die in concentration camps, even more on battlefronts. Seventy-five to eighty million people die in this war. Disappear. Murdered. On the battlefront. Executed. Starve. Die from diseases.

The painting though suffers none of these. It lies dormant and still. The showing of colonial wealth and power is now dangerous, and so it stays hidden. The canvas covering becomes furred with dust, and the string brittle with age. It is moved from a cellar, damp and in danger of rot, to a nook in an attic of a farmhouse. Slowly, the painting's very existence starts to fade from memory. The matriarch who commissioned it is long gone, her bones dust in the family crypt, her son and his children gone too, and their children's children have long forgotten their great-great-great grandparents. Until one commissions the sale of the family country house, and when the attic is investigated for structural integrity, the painting is discovered, secreted away in a nook.

The painting appraised by white gloved experts, is found to be a lost work of an old Master. The frame is recognized first, to be the work of a master framer from the period, and the young wife depicted the muse of Dutch Master van der Helst. The painting is worth many times more because it is intact with its original frame, it in itself worth a small fortune.

It goes under auction, where it is sold amidst scandal. Did it really belong to a merchant family that had been murdered in the Holocaust? Or could the State claim it as a national treasure? The layers lapped and overlapped. The Sephardic Jewish Dutch family that had fled the Spanish Inquisition for Holland and became rich through their involvement in the buying and selling of enslaved people from Curacao in the 16th to 18th century. Finally, murdered by Adolf Hitler in World War II. Their property was stolen and divided up by the Nazis and the very city that they had lived in their entire lives. Now, talks of restitution were underway but the fashionable young couple that wanted the farmhouse for their weekend getaways were indignant. Surely those days were behind us now, the wife sniffed, her dreams of a country garden dashed. Who wants to think about those dark days in this day and age?

A survivor of the Dutch Jewish family is found. She is the only one of her family that was not slaughtered. She is one of the miracle babies born in Auschwitz that survived, thanks to the efforts of Polish midwife Leszczyńska, who tattooed a blue number on her forearm in the hope she would be found one day. That day had now come.

A writer sits at a table, a single beam of light shines on his work. He is writing the story of a painting that had been found, a hidden Master. The story is a complex one, even more complex if he knew of his connection to it. A Black writer living on the Upper East Side, whose roots go back to Brazil. Had he investigated, he would find his roots went back even further still, to the small island of Curacao. Where his ancestors had been enslaved by the transatlantic slave trade. Bought by a Jewish Dutch merchant house. Sold to Brazil. Where one escaped and travelled onwards to the New World. Fought for emancipation. For the right to a name. For freedoms and civil rights.

In the land of the free.

He couldn't explain why he felt drawn to write about this painting. Stolen but then found. When he first read the story, he shivered involuntarily. Somewhere deep in his bones, in the marrow, his ancestors stirred. He picked up the phone, and called his editor. This was the story he wanted to write about next. His editor was confused. "You always write fiction, why this?" The writer sighs. "It's just something I have to do Ed." His next call was to the trust of Zysla Perelman.

The screenwriter, director, movie producer and head of the studio sit at a table with the writer of the book. The table is groaning with food. Figs and cherries, watermelon slivers with mint sprigs, croissants and pastries, bagels and lox. No one eats. The talks on buying the rights to the book have stalled, because the writer is wary, and rightly so. Hollywood has had a habit of whitewashing stories, and he was not in the mood for his story to be turned into a soulless blockbuster. Against all odds, the story of Zysla Perelman, only known survivor of her Sephardic Dutch Jewish family, had found a long-lost painting of her great-great-grand ancestor, hidden from the Nazis and returned to her after a long drawn out court battle with the auction house and the painting's so-called owners, the State. If only the writer knew the stirring deep in his bones, was the memory of his ancestors. Enslaved and sold by the Perelman family, who themselves had fled persecution and forced conversions by the Spanish during times of the Inquisition. They made their riches through the slave trade. God's chosen people. They took his ancestors, stolen from the continent of Africa and shipped to the island Curacao, and then the world in the transatlantic slave trade. Still, something stirred the unease in him when the studio approached him for the rights to his book. An intergenerational trauma response.

Wouldn't it be incredible to see your story on the big screen? Imagine the reach you could have then! It would be amaaazing. The director was enthusiastic and breezy on the phone, the Californian upward inflection raising the hairs on the writer's neck. The sale of the rights of his book would be complete. He would have no say in the screenwriting, nor any part of the movie. He would be silenced.

Don't, he says to himself.

They will butcher your story, his friends tell him.

It will be an amazing opportunity! his publisher pushes him.

Isn't this what you wanted? his mother asks.

Isn't this what you've always wanted? his father chides him.

He didn't know what he wanted anymore.

The money they were offering him, glinted tantalizingly. It was a sum he could live off for years to come.

Blood money. Reparations. Make things right. "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son."

And so, despite his better judgement, he sells the rights of his book onwards. He signs on the dotted line with a lump in his throat. They shake his hand and slap him on the back and hand him a handsome cheque, with so many zeros behind the initial number that he stares at it incredulously, his coffee forgotten, grows cold.

But he has signed his rights away. A Hollywood accredited hit-maker screenwriter goes to work. The writer chooses not to read the script that the studio couriers to him, the sick dread he feels upon reading the title they have chosen for the movie is warning enough to proceed no further. The movie comes out to great fanfare; the actors they have chosen for the roles are all A-star. And unpredictably, all white. All the nuances, the important details, the heartbreak, the genocide and failed reparations are washed out into a weak side plot. A love story instead is written in. The movie is a huge hit. A moving tear-jerker you won't want to miss! A stunning portrayal of one woman's survival, and how love triumphs over evil. The writer politely declines to attend the premiere, unable to face the throngs of reporters that would inevitably thrust their microphones in his face and ask him how much he loved the movie. He was never a good liar. He didn't intend to try to prove himself wrong now.

The writer finally opens the script that the studio sent him. It is wrapped in handsome thick paper before being bound in a canvas sheet that is tied with twine. He unties the twine, and unwraps the work. It stares up at him, the title an accusation. He throws the whole script into the fire, the flames pause before hungrily engulfing it. Smoke rises up, and the writer watches as the script disappears. Had he not sold his story, it would have remained a modest hit, but not many would have known the story of the stolen painting of the Dutch Jewish merchant's wife with her sad eyes. So, he sold it. And now everyone knew the story of the Dutch Jewish merchant's wife who had an affair and the resulting baby went on to be the heroine of a concentration camp, going on to marry the American soldier that liberates the camp. Pure, unadulterated fiction. The audience eats it up. The real story retreats into the background, and disappears.

The flames devour the entire screenplay, and returns the smoke to the sky that darkens the horizon momentarily before evaporating. The writer watches wearily, and wonders if untold stories ever get told. By morning ashes will have turned grey, by the next day, the rain will have washed them away. To the ground, they return. To dust.

The painting of the wife remains in a gallery, her eyes sad despite her finery and the imposing brusqueness of her giant lace ruff. All her future unborn children, carved into grapes and peach and melons that run around the border of the frame. The pearls and the opened fan she holds delicately, with one extended little finger.

Goodbye.