



"I leaned with the van as we turned and turned, up a hill. I had to hold on through the curves. I guessed we were heading to a house. Another mansion with a spectacular ocean view that no one was ever there to admire." (Matthew Daley)

A group of thieves has a simple, unifying mantra: that art should be seen.

By SUZANNE ALYSSA ANDREW

Another one.

The message flashed on my phone at midnight. I was in my flannels, ready for a long night of pacing and thinking. I wasn't sleeping. Dread is both an emotional bulwark and a stimulant. It's best to stay on its ledge for as long as you can. You get more done.

K. There in 10.

I typed back quickly, welcoming the assignment, even though he was my least favourite colleague. It was a distraction. He was Unknown Caller, Los Angeles, CA on my phone, and our messaging app was encrypted. We never got too close or too specific, just in case. We were also never in L.A. Our operatives worked a quieter stretch of the West Coast, near Seattle.

It takes preparation to scramble facial recognition software. There were makeup techniques, but I used stickers, placing black and navy dots on my face in triangles and asymmetrical lines. I prepared methodically: black jumpsuit, black jacket, steel-toed boots, and gloves. I masked my gender by folding my black braids inside a knitted hat. I checked my left pocket for the flashlight, my right for the five-in-one screwdriver. He carried a hammer on his belt loop and a box cutter strapped to his ankle. We kept the little soldering kit in the van with the wire cutters.

When I left my apartment I checked the lock three times, then raced down the stairs and out the back door, into the alley. It was a Monday night, and that month we were driving a grey utility van. He picked me up two blocks north and two blocks west. He never came to my place. There was C.C.T.V. everywhere, but we had systems to avoid easy detection: Never take the same route twice with the same van. Never circle a block. Never hesitate. The goal was quick, decisive action. Random movement kept us anonymous. Anonymity meant safety. Driving patterns could be recognized, just like faces. Part of our job was to scramble patterns.

This suited me. My work helped me practice subterfuge. It kept me nimble and safe. I had an angry ex and a restraining order. Anonymity meant survival.

The van was still rolling when I swung open the side door and jumped in. We made eye contact in the rear-view mirror, and my colleague nodded. His knitted cap bulged at the back, stuffed with errant curls that always threatened to escape and often did. He accelerated and flicked the fuel-cell display on the dashboard. The electric van was always running down on its charge. It smelled of oil paint and stale sweat. But it was our means of liberation. We made it work.

The van raced west. I didn't bother asking where we were going. I knew he'd say, You'll see. There was a long stretch of highway then an abrupt exit. I leaned with the van as we turned and turned, up a hill. I had to hold on through the curves. I guessed we were heading to a house. Another mansion with a spectacular ocean view that no one was ever there to admire.

He stopped the van, grabbed a vinyl roll from the front passenger seat, and jumped outside to place the fake delivery logo on the door. There was a thud as he smoothed air bubbles out with a slap. I wondered if we were organics, dry cleaning, or window washing this time. Then other thoughts snuck up, emanating from the dank fear pit in my gut. I needed the van to judder and weave recklessly around another curve. But we weren't idle long before he dove back in. I felt better racing uphill again, the engine revving like a panther's purr.

A current of adrenaline zapped me as soon as he turned onto a lane. He flicked the headlights off and slowed so the van crept forward. Up ahead was a wrought-iron gate flanked by two stone pillars. The entrances always look the same, and unless the owner is in tech, the security systems are identical too. I can crack them in two and a half minutes with my kit. There are never any dogs. The dogs are only in movies.

It was my turn to act. I grabbed the kit, hopped out, found the security box, and wielded the screwdriver. There was a tricky

parsing of wires. When I snipped the final one, I gave him the thumbs up. The van drove through and continued past the hedges, toward the fountain, while I closed the gate. I like walking toward a house, approaching slowly from a distance to look for cameras or drones. I also appreciate the architecture. It's usually classic brick and flagstone, but this one was contemporary—all glass and shiny white exterior panels resembling large-scale subway tile. It looked like a giant bathroom, but instead of a shower behind all the glass there was a tall staircase. If someone were to walk up that staircase they'd be visible anywhere on the property. My guess was the painting would be on one of the stair landings—top or entry level—to be enjoyed from all angles. I hoped it was at the bottom. I wouldn't want to appear on that stair stage. I don't like to be seen.

It was up to me to cut the main power. That shut down any alarms or cameras and involved looking for cables or an exterior box if the wiring was run underground. It ran a risk of electrocution if done wrong, but I was decisive. This hill house had a white ceramic circuit box by the steps leading up to the front door. The circuit box's flimsy mailbox lock popped easily. I cut the live wire and the property went dark, except for the garden lights, which turned out to be solar.

He likes to go through the front door to make an entrance, while I prefer sneaking in a window. I'm always surprised at what's left unlocked. People think their security systems will take care of it all. He tried the door. It was tall, lacquered, polished to a shine and swung open easily. The large foyer appeared empty. But when my eyes adjusted I could see shapes in the shadows: an umbrella stand, an oblong side table, the curve of a large vase.

The foyer was silent. My ears searched for sound, but it felt like someone had stuffed them with cotton batting. I heard my heart beating. He was on my left, wheezing softly. I hoped he had his asthma inhaler with him. There was the tiniest muffled sound. I felt a prickle of nervous voltage flutter from the top of my head to my toes. What was it? I couldn't tell. I thought a bat, a mouse, the flap of a curtain in the breeze from the open door? The door sighing on its hinges?

I thought a ghost, and shuddered.

But there was another shape by the stairs. It was tall and oblong. I hoped it was a sculpture or a potted plant. Then it moved. Hello? A man's voice said. It was not my partner's voice. I froze. Oh God! My partner jumped into the air, as if trying to take flight. Then he wheezed and coughed. Blimey! The shape echoed it back British in the dark. None of us shifted from our spots.

I waited for a fight.

I wasn't expecting visitors, the shape said. Now the blasted power is out again. I'm terribly sorry.

I reached into my pocket for the flashlight and spotlight him. He was middle aged and balding. The embroidery on his robe shone, the fine gold threads glimmering like filaments.

He squinted.

Hello, I'm Phillip, and you are?

I thought about it and decided on something fake. It seemed appropriate for my role.

Kip, I said, extending my hand. We're with the art restoration service.

Is that your name? my partner said, not keeping up. What I knew about him was that he was literal. He also liked to dispense advice, if you gave him any opening. I'd learned not to talk about my problems around him because he'd immediately try to solve them.

I ignored him, letting Phillip pump my hand aloft daintily, as though I were wearing gloves for a different kind of evening. Are you here for *The Goddess*? Phillip pronounced it properly British, rushing the *God* and emphasizing the *ess*. He waved his arm toward the right, in an art curator's gesture, the movement saying, And here we have . . .

We all turned to see the shadow of a mammoth canvas hulking

on the wall. My partner raised his flashlight, illuminating the image from the bottom up, the opposite of how it was supposed to be viewed. *The Goddess* was a red flood terminating in swirls and black whorls that suggested infinity when viewed from the top down. Viewed the other way, it looked like a disappearing act, containing red into a trickle, a line, finally absorbing into the white wall above.

From any angle the torrent of red was violent against the austere whiteness of the house, like a gash cut through the wall deep into the guts of the structure.

Bloody brilliant, isn't it? Phillip said. When neither of us responded he continued: I quite loathe it. It certainly wasn't my choice, and my husband's never here to admire it.

Excellent. Give us a hand then, my partner said, tugging on the picture's metal frame. When it didn't come away from the wall he reached down to his ankle. He stood up wielding the box cutter. We didn't bother with bolts. Ratchet sets are heavy. I felt at the picture and touched the surface of the canvas, relieved there was no glass to smash. That can get messy. Then I lunged into action, grabbing the corner of the side table and dragging it noisily across the floor. Phillip picked up the other end and together we placed it underneath. My partner leaped up on top of it like a parkour Peter Pan.

Phillip and I stood witness as my partner sliced *The Goddess* away from her frame. She curled in a dash for freedom. Her crash to the floor echoed. Phillip squeezed my arm and gasped in shock and delight. He smelled like nutmeg.

Then it was time to roll. My partner jumped down. I held two ends of *The Goddess* taut and he spun her expertly into a compact version of her grand self.

Let's go! he shouted, whirling the rolled genius above his head. Bye, Phillip, I said over my shoulder, as we dashed out the door for our getaway.

Oh hell, I'm coming with you, he said. He left the door open to the night and its nocturnal creatures. Outside, in the glow of the solar garden lights, I saw that Phillip was in burgundy silk pajamas under his robe and still wearing slippers. He climbed into the back seat with me. My partner revved the engine and we sped away. I rummaged around on the floor, feeling for fabric.

Here, put this on, I said, shoving an old black hoodie at Phillip. We sometimes used it to mop condensation off the windows on rainy days. He was so stunned to find himself racing away from the big white house in a van with two strangers that he zipped it on over his robe, flipped the hood on and tied the strings under his chin in a bow.

I shook my head and pulled the string, releasing him from the wrongness of that. Where we're going you're going to have to try and blend in. I wagged my finger at him. Don't be weird, I added.

I found it curious when Phillip didn't immediately follow that up with the obvious where question. I sat back, silent in my seat, then thwacked him across the chest with the back of my arm, holding him in place while I rooted around under the hoodie and his robe with my other hand, checking for a wire or a weapon.

There was nothing but soft tufts of hair. This was no set up. I thought you might be wired, I mumbled. I felt sorry for our captive, but not sorry enough to apologize.

I looked up as the van lurched around a tight turn then accelerated down the winding hill. *The Goddess* bounced around in the front passenger seat. When I looked over at Phillip again, his eyes were wide with terror.

Then, to my horror, he started to cry. My husband's never home. Always travelling for business. What kind of marriage is that? I'm always alone. You're the first people I've seen in . . .

He shook his head instead of completing the sentence.

We don't even have a dog because Tom's allergic! You've admitted you have a problem, that's good, my partner said, already twelve-stepping the poor guy. Are you addicted to the idea of love and putting it on a pedestal, or ad-

dicted to being alone because it affirms your deep inner shame and secret fear that you are unlovable?

Phillip sobbed onto my shoulder as the van turned onto the highway. He wept as the van maneuvered into the H.O.V. lane. He was still sniffing when we raced across a dark expanse I knew to be the empty parking lot of an abandoned Ikea. The Klieg-like lot lights were off. My partner spun the car around and backed up into a loading dock.

Where are we?

Phillip sat up. He daubed his nose with the sleeve of the dirty hoodie.

Don't worry, you're loveable, I said, patting him on the shoulder. It's showtime, my partner said. He grabbed *The Goddess* and jumped out of the van, slamming the door behind him.

I swung the side door open and tugged on Phillip's sleeve to follow.

Come on, hostage. You can't stay here, I said.

How did he know? Phillip asked me, stepping gingerly out of the van.

Oh, his problem solving? I dunno, maybe he's a therapist, or maybe he says the same thing to everyone. Maybe someone told him, I said, omitting the small detail he'd said the same thing to me.

We were en route to a collection at the time, and I was livid at how accurate it felt. I moved to the back seat and refused to return to the front after that, or to speak for a while, as if physical distance and silence would protect me from questions. I was always fortifying the bulwark.

Aside from the tears, Phillip was handling the blunt truth better than I had. It was weird. I grabbed his arm and led him up four concrete steps onto a platform. My partner opened the metal industrial gate for us. A trail of tea lights twinkled in old soup cans and jam jars along a long corridor. There was music in the distance—muffled vocals and a heavy bassline grew louder as we strode forward. Then we were suddenly bathed in light, song, and cheer as my partner flung open the final door to the Gallery.

What is this place? Phillip marvelled, as we stopped and stood at the Gallery's precipice.

A large crowd was assembled, dancing inside the massive arena-like space a furniture store had once occupied. We watched as my partner swung up a rope ladder to clip *The Goddess* onto a laundry line that stretched and weaved throughout. The line was anchored by tall poles—lampposts stolen from a tourist area downtown. Someone had wired all the lights together and connected them to a generator. The orange orbs dotted through the space like planets lighting up a galaxy of artworks hanging from the line. When not affixed to walls, the artworks shimmered as if alive. They were finally free, liberated from private storages and vacation homes. Not all by us, of course. There was a network of clandestine teams operating all along the coast. Our one unifying mantra was that art should be seen.

People cheered as *The Goddess* unfurled. My partner leapt to the ground, receiving hugs and high-fives from those crowded around the new artwork, appreciating its grandeur. In the warm exultant glow of the bacchanal the painting no longer looked violent. It was vivid.

Phillip ran toward it, panicked. He touched the canvas, as if to claim it, his learned instinct to take it back. But, surrounded by an exuberant crowd, he hesitated. Dancing bodies jostled against him. A reveler grabbed his arm and gave him a spin. His shoulders relaxed. Someone handed Phillip a beer and he tipped it back, drinking it in.

There was a metal staircase along the far wall. I walked up the steps and stood offside in my own spot. From a distance each of the dancing paintings told its own story. They made me feel dangerously sad.

I'd had a story once too.

Maybe it was time to cut it loose and watch it roll away, like a painting.