

fugitive  
blue

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# I



I am not writing this to be sentimental. I am just trying to find the answer to a story.

I did not imagine myself here. I certainly did not imagine myself here alone. So, for you and for myself, I want to explain how it happened. How this bit of it happened, anyway. Because there are other threads, of course, that I cannot find, that twist and pull at me now and will probably continue to do so forever.

But with you, there is no forever. Of course. I am away from home so it is more difficult to comprehend that, harder than it would be if I were in Melbourne where we lived. Or in Asia, where you are now. But I'm here, instead, in this old wet European city, and so I must repeat some words over and over to myself to comprehend. No forever. Slowly, I am beginning to register it.

This is the part I'm telling you.



There was nothing unusual about the arrival of Ana Poulos. She walked into the Centre like the other clients, then waited in the foyer for a few minutes, sitting neatly on a charcoal upholstered bench. The senior conservators were at a conference that morning, so I had been asked to greet her. I squeaked down the dark rubber floor of the passage towards the client, roughly wiping my hands on my black apron before pushing through the heavy transparent door of the foyer.

She stood up, held out her hand and I welcomed her.

‘Let’s go into the meeting room,’ I said.

She was carrying a leather handbag that pulled at the red sleeve covering her forearm and a brown paper bag, the type you get from clothing stores, with crisp side folds and twisted cord handles. Her bags bounced together as we moved towards the consultation table that dominated the meeting room in the Centre. As I followed Ana Poulos, I tried to see what was inside the paper bag—to make out a shape or a sense of weight—but the only visible detail was a small corner of white tissue poking out at the top.

‘You can put it up here,’ I suggested.

With that, she placed her things on the table and pushed the handbag to one side. Then she pulled a work of art from the brown paper bag, releasing a few unexpected flakes of paint like shaken-off snow. I followed a piece of it as it floated into a dimple of rubber between our two pairs of

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feet. Ana's black court shoes, my grey Campers and a dot of blue between them. I had to stop myself from rushing through to the lab and grabbing a container to collect the delicate debris.

Mrs Poulos folded back the tissue paper and there it was. A simple composition. Two fat angels flying through blue, white wings waving and little legs kicking out behind.

'Wow.'

'It belonged to my mother,' Ana explained. 'She recently passed away.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. And then I felt my face heating up. Five minutes into the consultation and I'd already hit a moment in which my awkward words got stuck.

'That's okay,' she smiled. 'She was over ninety.'

I tried to be professional. 'This looks like it could date from the early Renaissance, perhaps the mid-fifteenth century. It could be a practice piece by a workshop apprentice. Does that fit with what you know?'

'I don't know much at all about its history, really.'

'See that knot in the wood there,' I continued, waving my smudge-covered fingers over the painting. 'That would have been enough for it to be rejected by a professional. And the subject's unusual.'

'The angels?'

'Yes. Angels are everywhere now but in this period they were usually placed on the edge of the picture. Like fruit or leaves. As an embellishment.'

Mrs Poulos nodded. 'I've often thought of it as a draft for something larger. Like a study in a sketchbook?'

'Maybe,' I said. 'But it is properly finished. And all that blue. It looks like ultramarine. Ultramarine wouldn't have been used in a study.'

'The pigment?'

'Yes. It was very expensive, literally worth more than its weight in gold at certain times. It comes from lapis lazuli, the gemstone.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'I've got a lapis pendant.' And then she reached inside her red shirt and pulled out a smooth sphere of blue, held to a long chain by thin tentacles of gold. 'I've had this since the seventies.'

'It's lovely,' I said. And I thought of my own lapis jewellery: beads of flecked stone I'd bought from Ishka as a teenager. I'd forgotten what I'd done with those bracelets. Probably just shoved them inside some box with countless other discarded decorations. Friendship bands plaited from embroidery thread, brightly coloured badges for radio station promos, a few sparkling pink hairclips.

'Isn't it interesting how the value of things can change so much?' Mrs Poulos said. 'What's considered precious at various times through history.'

I nodded my agreement, remembering a limestone Romanesque Madonna who was a chameleon over epochs. Initially painted black, the thirteenth century had seen her coated blue in recognition of the newfound significance of

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that hue. Later, she was given a Baroque revamp—gilded in gaudy gold—before being consumed, two centuries later, by lashings of white in a chilly response to a new doctrinal notion of purity. And I thought of the apothecaries I'd learnt about in art history with their hidden stash of ultramarine treasure and then the woven shop basket I'd fumbled through as a thirteen-year-old, tugging my chosen blue bracelets from a tangled mass of beaded colour.

'Well, do you think you'll be able to restore this?' Mrs Poulos asked, getting to the point of it all.

'We can definitely try,' I replied. 'I might not do the work personally, but the Centre would be happy to take it on. There's no doubt about that.'

My instructions that morning had been simple. Accept anything that looks like it could benefit from conservation treatment, explain the general procedural and fee options, and reassure the client that all due care would be taken with her possession.

As soon as Mrs Poulos left the Centre, I dashed into the lab, grabbed a small glass beaker and a pair of tweezers, returned to the meeting room and rescued five flakes of blue paint: the fragment from the floor and the others from across the table. Then I sat down and stared at the patch of colour that had just landed on an expanse of beige laminate. I was excited by my proximity to what was possibly one of the oldest artworks to have arrived at the Centre. I secured my

hair back into a ponytail and leant forward on the table, my elbows resting on its surface as I scrutinised the painting.

It was more of a plank than a standard joined panel—just a single piece of wood, coarsely sawn with the cuts still splintered. It had been previously restored, probably during the nineteenth century: a cradle support was attached to its back in an attempt to prevent the timber from curling and twisting as a reminder that it had once belonged to the trunk of a tree. The painting covered the surface with only a thin border of exposed wood left bare around the edges. There was significant degradation in the paint layers with visible cracking and flaking. It was unvarnished. The blue was still vibrant, although typically faded. The angels were united, complementary, but also unusually idiosyncratic: one was confidently cheeky with an almost coquettish tilt to its fleshy neck, the other a classic, wide-eyed innocent with a ruddier complexion and grasping, extended arms. Thick golden curls adorned their heads. Their plump legs were discreetly positioned to obscure any genitalia, while their faces had a pretty gender ambivalence. Their wings. Their wings were full of air, exultant. The brushwork was inconsistent—

Suddenly there was a thud at the doorway as my boss powered in to inspect what had been received in her absence. Gillian walked towards me, rolling up her long knitted sleeves. She leant over my shoulder towards the object on the table.

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‘Wow,’ she said. ‘What the *hell* is this?’  
That was the beginning.



Later that night, when I got home to our flat, I thought I’d try to find my old lapis lazuli hippy bracelets. I sat down on the floor in the study and began to pull out the piles of belongings stored behind the big sliding doors of the built-in wardrobe. Everything stank. It reminded me of when you’d put on a t-shirt that had been left sitting in the washing machine too long, so that the dampness had settled into the fibres and remained there even after the fabric was dry. The wardrobe had that mildew whiff without your masking cologne. As I pulled out box after box, the odour became increasingly pronounced.

The objects were slightly damp, then sodden, then, finally, as the bottom layer of boxes was uncovered, soaking wet. Everything inside the wardrobe was mine; you’d never stored anything in there. A shoebox I must’ve had for almost fifteen years was so drenched that it disintegrated at my touch; a sketch of a sneaker in profile evolved into a spongy pulp and several blocks of paper tumbled out. I cradled the dripping clumps as ink seeped into my hands. I was holding a pile of photographs, transformed into smears of colour with the images sticking together in stacks. I tried to peel the pictures apart and locate a discernible portion but all I found was a glimpse of a landscape, a hint of a hair ribbon.

The notations I'd earnestly written on the reverse side of the photographs were mostly illegible. I dropped the mess back inside the remains of the storage box; there was a muffled splat like a tomato landing in a sink.

Eventually, after carefully arranging the wet objects on a few old towels, I did find the jewellery that had initiated my search. I retrieved the blue beads from inside a hard green plastic box and shoved one bracelet onto my adult arm. It stretched tightly over my wristwatch.

The floor inside the wardrobe was wet. Plaster crumbs from the back wall covered the carpet and the melamine shelving was exposed—warped and tenuous. I sat there, feeling oddly desolated, with those drenched boxes of childhood archives encircling me like gravestones. Persistent spots of white—paint, plaster, paper?—clung to my dark clothing like lint.

I was devastated by what I'd found. How ridiculous that seems now. A few ruined letters from penpals and destroyed happy snaps. But then, I couldn't cope. Imagine: that water frightened and confused me. I got up and left the room I'd already renamed. I shut the door on the Rotting Room, grateful that you were not going to be home for a fortnight.



The following day at work, I was required to make a call to Ana Poulos to get more detailed information about her panel painting and its history.

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‘It’s important for us to determine the provenance,’ I explained to her. ‘So we know as much as possible about the conditions the artwork has been subjected to.’

She was very patient with my inquiries, telling me the few facts that she knew. The painting had belonged to her mother and, prior to that, her mother’s French grandmother who had lived in Paris before moving to Greece with her husband. That was the extent of her knowledge. Mrs Poulos was unaware of any existing documentation relating to the panel.

‘And there’s something else,’ she said. ‘I’d like it to be restored in time for my daughter’s birthday. I forgot to mention that yesterday.’

‘That’s fine,’ I automatically responded. It wasn’t fine, I was fairly certain. I knew it was beyond my authority to be making such promises and yet the reassurances continued. ‘We’ll be able to work something out. It’ll be fine.’

My own amenability startled me. After hanging up, I held on to the receiver and glared at the phone as though to urge the finished conversation to a different conclusion. I cursed myself and my infuriating tendency not to say what needs to be said at the moment that it is required. But I had never encountered anything so old—or so odd—during my employment as a conservator. My favourite commission up to that time had been a lurid 1980s acrylic painting that was rapidly discolouring due to its hairspray varnish. Usually, I was treating nineteenth-century landscapes with their relatively predictable problems and vistas. You sometimes

joked about those pictures, asking cheeky questions about my progress on a patch of sheep fleece.

That's the only excuse I had for being so scatty. That I was overwhelmed by the object. Later, of course, I was overwhelmed more particularly with a love for the object, but that feeling was only beginning to seed.

When I turned around, Joy was watching. The lab at the Centre, which, incidentally, you never once visited, was devoid of privacy partitions. The ceiling was very high, the floor was very hard and the ensuing acoustics meant that every word anyone spoke bounced towards every other person in the space.

'What's the matter?' Joy asked me. 'You look a bit upset.'

You'd remember Joy; I whinged about her enough. Despite our shared title of Paintings Conservator, I was less experienced, a slight status distinction she rarely overlooked. She delighted in telling anecdotes that incorporated allusions to my later arrival at the workplace.

'Have you overcommitted?' she persisted.

'Maybe,' I answered, not bothering to bullshit.

'Oh well. You can always call the client back and set her straight. When I got that early Nolan, I was a bit excited too, made all sorts of stupid promises. Gillian forced me back on the phone the very next day. But it was all okay in the end. Remember?'

'No,' I sighed. 'That must have been before I worked here.'

'Of course, yes,' she laughed. 'That was before your time.'

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‘Would you like a cup of tea, Joy?’ I asked her then, making my way to the door. I made inordinate numbers of hot drinks each day, usually to escape from my colleague. Giggle from Joy, Earl Grey; it was a well-developed reflexive behaviour.

I made the teas in the sanctuary of the kitchenette with its shelves full of BYO funny mugs and its countless banal, carefully laminated announcements. *Do not open dishwasher if cycle is on. Please rinse your own cups and plates. Tea coffee milk sugar and biscuits are for everyone.* (Never having worked in an office environment, you might not have encountered such things. Except maybe in a dressing room, near a stained cream sink and mirrors bordered by globes.) I added a dash of skinny milk and two little pellets of chemical sweetness to Joy’s tea, stirring them swiftly inside the mug. *Joy to the world!* a faded angel trumpeted from the side of her white crockery. My own mug—adorned with a Barbara Kruger image from an exhibition we’d seen years before—appeared to be replying to the singing cherub nearby. *Don’t Be a Jerk* it implored in a weighty dark font.

Gillian bounded into the room and threw an apple core in a perfect arc to the bin. ‘So, how did the Poulos phone call go?’ she asked.

‘Okay. Not much info at all, really,’ I said, dodging the problem of the time constraint I’d already imposed on the project.