

## Impostor

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Rest me with Chinese colours, for I think the glass is evil.

—Ezra Pound

“You don’t look much like an artist to me.”

Addison Crowell gave her what he hoped was his best John Huston grin, “Which part didn’t pass the test?” They were sitting on her morning veranda overlooking the gray-green, rolling sameness of the mesa. It was a little after ten o’clock. He wished he’d asked her for coffee instead of tea. Arriving at the ranch, he realized that his humble rental car was at odds with everything else in the sprawling compound.

“The Bally loafers. I don’t know any artists who wear Bally loafers. Not one, and I know a lot of artists.” She nodded her head toward the bank of glass walls, through which could be seen—by her own attribution—a lot of art.

“I do own cowboy boots,” he said, wondering as soon as he’d said it what that was intended to signify.

“You look more like an aging tennis pro to me—more than a painter.” She waved a hand. On her wrist was a heavy Moroccan bracelet of coral, amber and turquoise. The bracelet served as a minor chord to her matching necklace, which was likely worth as much as the rental car. A white T-shirt, black trousers and bare feet completed the picture. She loaded her tea with cream and sugar.

“I played tennis in college,” he said.

He had decided what to do with her portrait before he left Los Angeles. He’d read all the background material her agent had sent. What he wanted from this trip was to see the spot where his painting would hang. He wasn’t disappointed. Everybody who was anybody was on her walls. Skins stretched out to dry. He’d be mounted in good company.

“Stanford?”

He gave her a quick, quizzical look.

She smiled. “I don’t speak with someone unless I can Google them first. You have six pages—good but not great.” Hers were once television

teeth; now they were stained brown from tobacco. Her famous lips had disappeared with the years. The British accent mostly gone to California.

“That’s me in a nutshell.” He wished deeply for a whiskey.

“You worked with Nathan Oliviera didn’t you—in school?”

“Yes. He meant a lot to me.” He would paint her picture just as Nate would have painted it.

“I have two of his at the house in Monterey. I love those giant canvases filled with red light.”

“Yes,” he said. Without knowing it she had confirmed his original concept—a canvas covered in cadmium.

“How do you do it? What’s your method?” She reached for her pack of Ovals, lighting her cigarette with a small, gold lighter. Hands with perfect oblong nails, clear polish, discolored skin, joints enlarged. Her descent had been swift and steep. The narrative was etched on her body—tanned skin with loose wattles of flesh hanging from her upper arms, bird-like wrists roped with veins. She carried deep lines around her mouth and eyes. Gone from the world—a kind of invalid—her recovery would never be completed. “My method is just what I’m doing now. I need to look for a time. Make some decisions—maybe chat for a day or two. That’s all.” There was some movement far off in the brush. A fleeting shape—they were a long way from town.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” she said. “Do you want me to pose or something? Dress up?”

“No, we can just chat. I don’t do any sketching.” He shrugged. “All the work’s done back in LA.”

“That strikes me as odd. Do you want another cup of tea?”

“I’d kill my sainted mother for a whiskey.”

That made her laugh. “Do you have a preference?” Her back molars were a row of gold crowns.

“I’m partial to Oban,” he said. “Bowmore will do in a pinch.”

“I don’t do pinches. Oban is easy.” She rose from her chair with the grace of a younger woman. She had shed too much weight. Her hips were flat.

She’d stashed him in the guest wing that occupied the western edge of the beige-colored collection of one-story buildings, favored by the

last rays of the sun before it set. The bedroom suite was huge, with a conical fireplace in one corner, a heavy writing desk and a four-poster bed. Floor to ceiling windows displayed views of the distant mountains. He had his own private terrace, walled with four-foot-high adobe.

In the middle-distance a solitary magpie perched high on the limb of a dead tree.

The place was pretty much what he had expected—a dusty cliché. If it weren't for the money, he'd be home, high in the hills, contemplating a discreet and unremarked upon suicide.

Who was this woman? Who commissioned an eight-by-ten-foot portrait of themselves these days?

She returned with two heavy glasses and a bottle. At least she wasn't on some kind of health kick. That would have made it all the more unbearable. They clinked glasses, and he took a sip that made him smile, his first genuine expression of the day.

“One for sorrow.” He guessed she knew the saying.

“Two for joy,” she said, eyebrow cocked. “Here's to departed comrades.”

She took a swallow and sucked the inside of her cheek—staring out at the blue horizon. When he poured himself a second drink, her eyes swiveled toward him. Those eyes hadn't aged. They were the same startling grayish-blue he'd seen a thousand times on TV. Her movements reminded him of a cobra, trying to decide if he was interesting enough to investigate.

“I think you're an impostor, Mr. Crowell.” She pronounced his name as two, equally weighted syllables—Crow-well.

He paused for a beat, took a sip. “You got me, I suppose. But aren't we all? In one way or another?”

“No. I don't think so.” She toyed with the white pack in front of her. “Why do you spend time painting people?”

“That's how I make my way.”

“Does it make you happy?”

“No,” he said too quickly. “It keeps me from starving.”

“That's the truth,” she said. “I've seen your fees.” There were blue smudges at the corners of her eyes. The hand holding what was left of her cigarette trembled. She saw him watching and hid it under the

table. “Your eyes are sad. Painters are supposed to be happy—all that daubing of bright colors here and there.”

He blinked. “Mirrors of the soul.”

“Bah! I think we both sold our souls a long time ago, don’t you Mr. Crowell?”

There was no denying it. He gave an open-palmed shrug—another Huston-ism.

They sat in silence for nearly an hour, looking out at the endless scrub. Finally, she stood and walked to the end of the veranda and back. Her hair was better short, now that it had gone gray. She knew how to move. She owed it to her training, but still, it was impressive.

Taking a bundle of dried sage from a copper bowl, she lit it with her lighter and waved it around. She saw him watching and said, “We need to purify before we proceed.”

He raised his glass and poured a libation onto the green stones that paved the veranda. “Remember the gods.”

“I’m going into town to lunch with friends,” she said. “Would you like to tag along?”

“I have some reading I need to get done. I’ll hang out here if that’s okay?”

“Suit yourself. I should be back before dark.”

Later, in his room, he heard the sound of a car on the gravel drive. After that, there was only silence. Bookshelves lined the walls everywhere—in the main house, his suite. He hadn’t thought to bring anything appropriate. A slim volume of Ezra Pound poems was all he found in his duffle. It had been there since Paris—months ago.

Glad that he had thought to bring her bottle of Oban to his room, he read for a while, then stretched out on the wide bed and slept deep into the afternoon. He woke up feeling disoriented and disappointed with himself. He had lost the thread of the plot devised in LA. He had planned a kind of indulgent charade out in the nowhere of the desert so as to appear to earn his money. He would be cryptic. He would seem unsynchronized, but at the same time captivating. Problem was, his pantomime required an audience, and she was on another wavelength. He wondered if she were truly there at all.

Wandering into the main house, he was surprised to find no servants—not one. Making himself a coffee in the metal-clad kitchen, he guessed there would be cameras hidden in the rafters. He spent an hour trying to ferret them out. Nothing.

Off a long hallway, lined with trite, western-themed landscapes, was a small, dimly lit gallery. Once his eyes adjusted, a chill crept up his spine. Hung in a modest rank along the walls—each occupying its own pool of yellow light—were paintings that made his mouth dry. Side-by-side, Rivera, De Chirico, Kahlo and Max Beckmann—paintings from before the war, each one steeped in its own kind of attractive madness. Beyond, a Hopper sketch preceded an early Bainbridge landscape. Further along, he found something he could barely believe—Arnold Böcklin’s *Isle of the Dead*. He was sure it was a forgery. The Swiss artist had done a number of versions—at least seven—but the whereabouts of all of them were well documented. If the painting was real, then some museum had been duped.

He pulled a chair from the corner to the middle of the room and admired the diminutive piece with its towering rock formation, black cypresses and solitary boat with its shrouded figure. The varnished surface was cracked and chipped, the colors clouded with age. To academics, the painting was something of a joke—a Nordic, hyper-romantic melodrama, Wagner minus the grand scope. But, there was something there. Despite all its kinky weirdness, the painting had *something*.

Looking around the room, he felt the familiar emptiness expand in the pit of his stomach. He had only come out to the desert to confirm his initial intent. He would paint her as St. Sebastian. The idea was fixed in his mind. His primary resource would be the Baglione version—*St. Sebastian Healed by an Angel*. She would play both the saint and the angel—old and young, young and old. He couldn’t decide which arrangement would be most poignant.

He felt a kinship with the Italian. Nothing Baglione had done was ever quite enough for his more celebrated peers.

Surrounded by deities of his craft, Crowell fell into an unhappy funk. He slumped deep in the chair, mulling over the irreparable wreck of his

career. When he eventually came out of it, his mouth was filled with a gummy paste and his head throbbed with the residue of unwelcome despair. The bottle of Oban sitting at his feet was two-thirds empty.

He returned to the kitchen and made a peanut butter sandwich. Outside, the light was steeply angled. Broad swaths of blue and rose-pink lit the sky. A thin band of Aureolin yellow sat at the horizon.

The house was empty. He rustled around in the stainless steel space and found a bottle of red—not a label he recognized. In a drawer was an elaborate corkscrew that defied every effort to decipher its use. Finally, he located his Swiss Army knife in his duffle and managed to uncork the bottle.

Carrying his book of poems out to the veranda, Crowell pulled a chair over to the farthest corner and propped his feet up on a masonry planter. He thought he'd engage in the art of bibliomancy to find the right inflection for her portrait—but every line he found failed miserably to get at the lone thing he sought.

Later, when she returned home, he was sitting in the dark, listening to the furtive sounds of wildlife issuing from the deep arroyos that bounded the property.

She wore a gauzy white over-shirt, which fell caftan-like to her knees, and a pair of purple tights that in earlier days would've showed off her strong calves. "Did you find something to amuse yourself in my absence?"

She waved another bunch of smoking sage twigs in the air, cigarette dangling from one corner of her mouth. His eyes began to water, until a breeze carried the purifying smoke in another direction. "The Dali Lama likes to do this at the beginning of a session. I've spent a good bit of time with him over the years—both here and in India."

"I managed to find your Böcklin," he said. "The work in that gallery surprised me."

"Danny picked those out." She named her long-departed husband. "That was right before he took off with that ridiculous creature—that boy who produces music videos. I never go into that room anymore." Her mouth tightened for a moment, then relaxed as she took a sip from his glass.

She read the confusion on his face, and said with a sad smile, “You’d better find another glass. This wine is from the Canary Islands—it’s quite good. Dry with a bit of mustiness to it.”

He returned holding a jelly glass he’d found in the back of a cupboard. He loved her nose. A demure hawkbill, it served as a delicate bumper for her face, as if it were designed to keep the world at a distance while her huge eyes did their savage work.

“I brought you a bag of *Dosas* and some other stuff. They’re frightfully wicked. You missed a jolly time by staying here at the ranch.”

“I could smell the food when you walked in. Do you mind if I fix myself a plate?”

“Why not bring everything out here? We’ll pick the bones, so to speak. Nothing in the world beats leftover Indian.”

He found the china and flatware and ferried them out, then returned for the food. She’d brought three bags filled with Styrofoam containers. In addition to the *Dosas* were two kinds of *samosa*, cardamom rice with yellow raisins, a fish curry and some fiery pickled melon. She ladled each plate full to overflowing, and they ate in reverent silence.

“I’m glad you like Danny’s art collection.” She pushed back her chair and lit another Oval. “I don’t hate him, you know. I did for a while, but I don’t now. I do blame him, but I don’t hate him. He never knew whether he was coming or going—sexually. I guess I could’ve been more careful—I’m never as prudent as I should be in my choice of husbands.”

“You failed to attend his funeral, I understand.” He said it without inflection, only wanting to see her facial reaction. She didn’t give much away.

“I was filming something in Cyprus then. It was too long a flight. I miss him sometimes.”

He eyed her white box of cigarettes. “Could I try one of those?”

“Help yourself.” She blew out twin funnels of blue smoke from her nostrils. “I have cases. I keep them in a refrigerator in the pantry. They’ve stopped making them, you know.”

He took one and lit it. Since quitting, he’d missed the ritual—tamping the end, picking bits of sharp tobacco from the tip of his tongue,

the first glorious puff. For some reason, he was reminded of a scene from a 1950's movie—Ava Gardner in an Austin-Healy.

The next morning, he slept in. His night was plagued by erratic visions—caused no doubt by the Indian food. In one dream sequence, he was hobbling down a deserted alleyway trying to find a doorway he'd long forgotten. His gait was hampered by Frida Kahlo's red prosthetic boot on one foot. He slipped on wet cobbles, bruising his shin on a curb. No door would open to him.

He left the bed a tangle of sheets, rank and damp—smelling of failure. After a long shower, he dressed in a T-shirt, plaid shorts and a pair of plastic flip-flops he'd picked up on a trip to Key West.

He found the kitchen deserted, as was the veranda. It was only when he returned to make himself a cup of coffee that he saw an orange sticky note with a message scrawled in pencil—*at the pool, follow the Maguey!*

As far as he could tell, maguey plants grew everywhere. Finally, he found a gravel pathway lined with spikey green, curving around several outbuildings. After he'd walked a quarter mile, he saw a cluster of huts sitting in a grove of Sweet Acacias.

Rounding the corner of the largest hut, he found her on a white plastic lounge, the bill of a red baseball cap shading her eyes from the brilliant sunlight. He raised a hand as he approached. When she saw his shadow on the paving stones, she looked up.

“My, my don't you look the part.” She squinted up at him.

“I try to blend in wherever I am.”

“Maybe you should aim for something more,” she said pointedly.

The pool was a long, narrow rectangle, its edge lined with black basalt. It reminded him of an oculus with a turquoise blue center. The water was so clear, he thought there had to be a pool-boy somewhere around.

“Mind if I take a dip?”

“That's what it's here for,” she said, giving him a wave with her paperback.

He stripped off his shirt, conscious of the growing paunch that shaded the waistband of his shorts. He thought to suck it in, but decided



he couldn't be bothered—he needed to save his final fictions for the canvas. Despite the sunlight that dazzled on its surface, the water was chilled from the long desert night. He swam a lap or two, then pulled himself out and sat on the black stones at the edge.

“There are towels and whatever else you might want in the cabana.” She pointed toward the glass doors of the hut behind him. “There’s a fridge in there, it’s stocked with everything.”

He sat still, letting the sun sear his shoulders. The light was brutal. He could feel it drilling into his skull. No reasonable thing could live out here for long. Pain throbbed in his frontal lobes.

“I’m wondering,” she said. “I’m wondering when you’ll tell me what you’re planning to do with me.”

He turned toward her. “I’m working some things out in my head. I’ll send you images from LA once I’ve begun.”

“Can’t you give me a hint?” She dropped her paperback on the paving and drank from a plastic water bottle. “What if I don’t like it?”

“That’s always a possibility,” he said. “You’re under no obligation to accept the portrait. If you don’t like what I’ve done, you don’t pay the balance, and I keep the painting. Your lawyers have a copy of the contract.”

“It seems to me that you hold all the cards.”

“That’s the way it works.”

He slipped his shirt on over his head and stood up. The stone paving blistered his feet before he could slip into his flip-flops. The air was so dry, it killed all smell except for the faint hint of chlorine from the pool water. Dragging a spare lounge next to hers, he sat down beside her.

In the shade of her ball cap, her eyes were wary, vast and luminous. “Will I like it? What you do?”

“Yes,” he said, certain now. “May I show you something?” Lifting a laptop from the table between them, he flipped it open and logged in with the password she’d provided when he’d arrived. He located the Baglione and enlarged it until it filled the screen. When he handed the laptop to her, she stared at the image for a long time, her eyes scavenging his thoughts.

After a pause, she said, “It’s dark, too dark. I don’t want gloomy.”

“Yours won’t be so dark. I’m going to paint you on a ground of red—Chinese red.”

“Are you going to play the angel to my Sebastian?”

“No. You’re the angel and the saint—both roles.” He could see that she liked the idea of dual roles. She was famous for them. The lines around her eyes relaxed. Across the blue pool a pair of magpies was joined by a third. They flitted from branch to branch, their black and white plumage unmistakable in the empty air of the desert.

“You’re a clever boy, aren’t you? I like that,” she said. “The saint of plagues. It’s fitting.”

“A kind of recursive irony.”

“I think I can live with that.” She laughed at her own bit of irony.

“It’s not painted yet,” he shrugged. The gold disc of the sun melted down on them without mercy.

“Are you sure you’re up to it? This grand gesture?” She placed a hand on his wrist and squeezed. It was the first and only time she had touched him. Her hand left an imprint on his skin.

“Yes,” he said, eager to be on the plane back to LA.

“They’ll never forget it, will they?”

“No,” he said. “They never will.”