

FROM HITHER TO YAWN
TALES AND MUSINGS FOR THE STILL AWAKE

DR. SEYMOUR KLEERLY

“Do not spill thy soul in running *hither and yon*,
grieving over the mistakes and the vices of others. The
one person to reform is yourself.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

“From *hither to yon* we chase our fortune, and in the
end, it was sitting on our porch all along.”

— Mark Twain’s mom

“There are some, down the road between *hither and
yon*, that can scare you so much you won’t want to
go on.”

— Dr. Seuss

*All names have been changed to protect the
innocent and avoid awkward conversations*

1

ART

It began, as many bad ideas do, with an assignment.

Technically, I'm in Paris on "professional matters." Which sounds elegant and discreet, and so far, absolutely is not.

I've been sent to interview one of the world's great art hunters. A man whose job description lurks somewhere between archeologist, forensic detective, historian, and international fence.

His name is Émile de Belcombine, and according to the Editor who shipped me here, "if a priceless object goes missing anywhere on Earth, he either knows where it is or who is lying about not knowing."

Émile lives on a narrow street near the Seine, in an ancient townhouse that leans the way old men lean when they're listening very intently. Inside, the place looks like the annex of a cursed museum.

Ancient relics nap next to Greek statues and Roman figurines that wandered off official inventories. Countless oil-painted eyes peer through the centuries from ornate frames covering the walls. A shrunken head beneath glass stares back with the impeccably composed expression of those who have already seen the worst. A West African bronze glares regally down from the stairs, still the subject of an "active discussion" with a sovereign nation.

We get to know each other over cigarettes, coffee and Cognac.

"Do you catalog all this?" I ask, looking around with wonder. In the corner stands a mummy who went to sleep for eternity and woke up next to an art deco drink trolley.

"It's compliqué," he says.

"Do you declare all this?" I ask.

He smiles in perfect French. We share the laugh.

And that's when his phone rings.

He answers, and his whole posture changes. His voice drops into that clipped rapid French reserved for emergencies and romance. I catch fragments: vol ... récupération ... pas possible ... Louvre.

Then he hangs up, looks at me, and says the most dangerous words in any language:

“Come, mon ami, you’ll want to see this.”

And, of course I do. Of course.

* * *

THE LOUVRE after a theft resembles a perfectly set table missing one spoon: the absence suddenly becoming the centerpiece.

There are police. There are museum officials with faces like funeral directors. There are men in suits who are not officially here, which is how you know they are very much here.

Émile flashes a laminated credential (homemade, if you ask me) and we’re waved through barricades and roped corridors until we arrive at a salon in the Denon Wing.

The area is sealed, but “sealed” is a flexible idea when you are with a man who collects civilizations in his townhouse. We step inside.

And you can feel it instantly.

Not noise. Not chaos. Absence.

There’s an empty frame on the wall: still hanging, still wired, like a mouth mid-scream.

The stolen work isn’t a celebrity piece. Not something the public would riot over. A small 17th-century oil, Flemish, attributed but contested (of course contested), technically insured but spiritually already deleted from the inventory.

Not the kind of thing a tourist has ever pretended to like in order to look intelligent on a date. A scholar’s painting. Quiet. Gone.

While the forensics team argue in neat latex, Émile approaches the frame the way a priest approaches a collapsed parishioner.

He leans in. No glass shards. No forced sensor. No scrambled lock. “This is clean,” he whispers, which in his vocabulary means “this is fascinating.”

Meanwhile I do what I always do in high-stakes cultural situations: drift to the edges and pretend I belong.

That's when I see her.

The Mona Lisa is smaller than people expect, and by "people" I mean me. You imagine her billboard-sized, stadium-scale, a visual equivalent of a national anthem. But in person she's almost intimate. Portable, even. Stealable, historically.

She is behind thick armored glass and a custom climate rig that could probably support tulips on Mars. And still: she looks like she knows something you don't. She looks like she's keeping books.

I've seen living world leaders project less authority.

And all at once, it hits me. This ridiculous, disorienting thought: she wasn't always like this.

We treat her like she descended whole, fully famous, carried on velvet cushions by angels of Italian diplomacy. But no.

She hung quietly, relatively unknown, for hundreds of years.

And then in 1911, someone stole the Mona Lisa. Not a shadowy syndicate. Not a trench-coated villain stroking a sinister cat, but a perfectly normal maintenance worker at the Louvre named Vincenzo Peruggia.

He simply lifted the painting off the wall, tucked it under his work smock, and walked out. Proof that the greatest security systems in history can sometimes be foiled by a man sporting mustache and confidence.

When the police hauled in the great poet Apollinaire for questioning, he attempted to defend himself with verse (seldom a recommended legal strategy).

Picasso, summoned in the same sweep, immediately performed the most avant-garde maneuver of his career: he denied ever having met his dear friend, Apollinaire.

“Apollinaire? Never heard of him,” says Picasso.

To be fair, Apollinaire had once publicly suggested the Louvre should be burned to the ground. It may have sounded cool in a smoky Montmartre salon surrounded by absinthe and admiration, but considerably less so in a police interrogation room when the Mona Lisa just went AWOL.

Field Note: True friends will bail you out. Great friends will join you in the interrogation room. Artists will pretend not to know you, then apologize over wine and an unfinished sketch.

The theft made front page international headlines everywhere. Suddenly, overnight, the face of the Mona Lisa was ubiquitous.

And as the world-wide hunt for La Gioconda rages on, her celebrity status goes viral. Everybody who's anybody is wondering, arguing, speculating: where is Mona Lisa?

Meanwhile, La Gioconda spends two years under Peruggia's bed, in his one room attic hideout. It turns out that Vincenzo Peruggia had no plan whatsoever.

He was finally caught trying to sell her in Florence.

But then, in a surprising twist of fate, the Italians hailed Peruggia as a patriotic hero. Because nothing says "I love my country" like art theft followed by questionable storage choices.

As I look at her smiling back at me, I wonder if she misses those under-bed years. The dust bunnies. The quiet. No crowds, no selfies, no existential floodlight

of attention. Perhaps that was her sabbatical from immortality.

Mona Lisa stopped being a painting and became a myth.

We did that. We made her a celebrity by losing her.

That's how value works. The market is fluent in drama.

There is a superstition in the art world. Émile told me this later over an ashtray and a bottle of something that could dissolve a cathedral bell. "Every masterpiece needs its wound," he confides.

Some scandal. A theft, an exile, a banning, a near-destruction. Something that proves it matters enough to be attacked.

Van Gogh never had that in his lifetime. He only had hunger and loneliness and disappointment and the slow, grinding humiliation of believing he had failed at the one thing in life that mattered to him.

Van Gogh created over 2000 pieces. And yet, he sold only one painting (for a pittance) while he was alive. One. That's the number after zero and before two. I did the math twice.

When he shot himself in the head, he said simply: “the sadness will last forever.” He was convinced that the world had rendered its verdict.

But the verdict hadn’t even been scheduled yet! The jury, as they say, was still out to lunch.

Now, of course, his work sells at auction for numbers that can fund nations.

Museums display him with reverence. People stand in front of his sunflowers and cry as if he personally loved them, which in a way he did.

And he never saw any of it. Nothing. No show of recognition. Not even mild like. Just the heartless void of indifference. He died, completely convinced that he had miserably failed the assignment.

It’s one of the cruelest institutions we’ve built as a species:

1. Create beauty.
2. Suffer.
3. Die broke.
4. Appreciate exponentially in value.

We do this in literature, too. We do it in music and science. We do it with prophets, martyrs, visionaries,

and the odd quiet genius who wasn't trying to be any of those things. We love them most once they're no longer around to invoice us.

Jekyll & Hyde

Art has two lives.

Life One is the making: cold rooms, bad light, borrowed time, self-doubt, paint under the fingernails, bargains with landlords, quiet panic. That life belongs to the Artist.

Life Two is the pricing: security glass, climate control, velvet rope, champagne, catalog essays, private viewings, men in narrow suits saying words like "placement in a serious collection." That life belongs to Money.

And those two lives barely know each other. They nod across time, like relatives at a wedding who still aren't speaking.

Émile finishes his first pass at the crime scene and motions me over.

"They knew what they were taking," he murmurs.

“Professional?” I ask, because I like sounding like television.

“Exactement,” he says. “This is a shopping list job. Someone ordered it.”

This is another thing I learned: very little high-value art theft is chaos. It’s not desperate bohemians in black turtlenecks trying to impress a girl. It’s procurement. It’s supply chain. It’s logistics. The same way you might order a sofa, someone else orders a 1422 Venetian still life. Delivery in forty-eight hours.

Discreetly.

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FIELD NOTE: We like to romanticize thieves as if they’re swashbucklers restoring cultural justice. Sometimes, maybe. Often, they’re just contractors to someone richer.

Yes, there is stolen art tucked away in anonymous Swiss vaults. Yes, there are superyachts with climate-controlled panic rooms that contain one painting and a chair. Yes, there are private dining rooms in certain cities where billionaires show each other illegal Renaissance pieces the way other men show each

other pictures of fishing trips. “Got this out of Aleppo, absolute nightmare, customs almost had us, you had to be there.”

And museums, for their part, are not clean either. Let’s not pretend otherwise. A meaningful percentage of what we call “world heritage collections” is, technically speaking: evidence.

The Louvre, the British Museum, the Met. All of them house objects that were acquired in an age when “acquired” was a generous word for “removed from the people who live there by a visiting empire with a boat.”

So when you stand in these halls surrounded by masterpieces and money and insurance and sorrow and glory, it is very hard to point to any one person and say: “This is the thief.”

The answer is almost always: “Yes.”

* * *

AT SOME POINT the police decide they no longer love my presence, and I am quietly rotated out of the room. Émile stays.

Mona Lisa stares back through bulletproof glass at a world that has converted her into an ATM.

She is, functionally, an economic engine. She is an attraction. She sells tickets, postcards, umbrellas, mugs, mousepads, tote bags, refrigerator magnets, silk scarves, puzzles, NFTs, documentaries and conspiracy theories.

She is a face, a logo, a brand.

The painting is fine. The brand is priceless.

I walk back along the Seine. Paris is at its best at night when the stone goes soft, the bridges glow, and the river flows by in iambic pentameter.

There are booksellers with their little green boxes. Couples walking their dreams. Teenagers passing a bottle of something heroic. Crescent moon floating above the rooftops.

I think about Émile's townhouse. I think about the empty frame on the museum wall. I think about Van Gogh, who never got to walk along any river thinking, "They'll remember me."

And I write this down for myself, because sometimes I forget, and I suspect you do too:

DR. SEYMOUR KLEERLY

You don't actually get to decide what you'll be worth to other people. That's their vulgar math.

You only get to decide what you'll make, and whether you'll make it anyway.

Everything after that is auction chatter.

Art is not the price. Art is the attempt.

2

THE LOGS

They call themselves the Logs. As in wooden, as in heavy, as in not moving with the current. I'm heading to them now.

The road I'm on has been deteriorating by degrees you don't register at first. Metaphorically, you ask? Well, perhaps that too, but I mean the actual road. The asphalt developed a patchwork deconstructive vibe, then mostly just patches, now apparently giving up altogether and handing it off to gravel and dirt. Mile markers vanishing as we speak.

My assignment rides shotgun: a manila folder with the word "LOGS" scrawled in stadium letters, like a warning or a dare.

