

The Thief

by Mary E. Martin

Celia Smith sat alone on the hotel patio above the river. She sipped her coffee and watched the grey water rush toward the falls. No one would intrude upon her solitude. The hotel was almost empty.

She picked up her book. A man and woman entered the patio from the dining room. Arm in arm, they strolled the perimeter of the terrace and stopped to look over the stone rail to the river. Engaged in their own conversation, they seemed not to notice her. A late fall vacation, Celia reflected, ensured the absence of tourists and their children. This couple would not disturb her. Relieved, she leafed through her catalogue of twentieth century painters from the National Gallery.

Appreciation of her copy editing was noted on the last page of the book, in the smallest print. Cramped in her work cubicle, she had sifted through the minutiae of each artist's life, distilling its essence into a single column of print, four inches high.

Celia looked up from the page. The couple continued to walk slowly to the farthest side of the patio. The woman was dressed in a black wool suit; the man, entirely in white. Limping only slightly, he held her arm to walk. They must be in their seventies, Celia thought, as she turned the page. They would not approach her.

At work, she had revelled in the harsh discipline of the allotted text. Her authority extended to fitting words into type-space. In reality, she knew, no real human being could exist in such a careful balance. Her fingers skimmed the glossy pages.

Silhouetted by the last, bright rays of sunlight, the couple approached her. She could not see their faces nor discern their words. Celia turned away.

The page fell open to a painting. Soft, willowy figures floated skyward. On the next page, fists of colour with sharp edges burst upward at her eye. Were artists born with daring in their souls, she wondered? Her question disturbed her.

Two shadows crossed her table as she tried to read a footnote. The sun dipped below the horizon and the breeze picked up. The waiter moved to a distant table and began fastening down the blue and white striped umbrellas.

The pair smiled hesitantly. Celia acknowledged their presence with a slight nod. The gentleman withdrew a scarlet handkerchief from his pocket and bent to whisk two chairs clean. Once seated, he gazed benignly at Celia.

"Miss?" he began.

Celia could not ignore him. A few polite words might discourage a lengthy conversation.

"Good evening," Celia replied. Her nod included both of them.

"Such a beautiful night," said the woman. Celia felt a drop of rain on her arm.

"I could not help but notice your book," the man began. His voice was low and musical. "Do you study art?"

"No, I don't." Celia realized her reply was churlish. To fill the silence, she said, "I work at the National Gallery." The couple looked expectantly at her. "In cataloguing and editing," she added.

"How wonderful," began the wife. "Samantha loved to paint." The husband nodded eagerly. "Loved?" Celia asked before thinking.

The couple smiled sadly as the last rays of sun blazed out. "Samantha's passed on. She left only a few paintings," said the husband.

"Lovely ones, too," said the wife.

Celia's interest flickered. "Who's Samantha? Is she a painter I would know?"

The light grew grey and dim. The river blackened and continued to surge onward toward the falls. "No dear," said the wife, inspecting her rings. "You would not know our daughter."

"Oh, I am sorry. I didn't realize..." Celia's voice trailed off and then she wondered why she was apologizing. Drawn into their world, she would have to share their sorrow.

"She was delicate and perfect like a flower," the woman said softly. Her gaze travelled to the horizon. "People have so little passion for life, until it's too late."

The man coughed gently, then rose. He pulled back his wife's chair and tucked his scarlet handkerchief into a pocket. The woman looked carefully at Celia, but spoke only to him. "I do see what you mean. She does look just a tiny bit like Samantha." The gentleman bowed and they slipped back into the shadows of the hotel.

The breeze from the river was chill. Celia pulled her sweater around her. Grief, she decided, could distort notions of propriety. In the growing darkness, she sat alone and tried to read. Time stopped in the next painting where Dali's clocks hung over table edges and headless horses stood on the horizon.

At first Celia thought the man approaching was a waiter. They must be wanting to close up, she thought, pretending not to see. When she did look up, she saw him motionless before her. He was not wearing a waiter's uniform.

"May I sit down?" His few words hung in the air. Celia closed her book and examined him as he stood patiently before her. He was not tall. He was neither heavy nor thin. He had no moustache or beard. Only glasses and curly hair. He smiled tentatively.

"Yes," she said, motioning to the chair across from her.

"You are alone?" he asked. His mildness disarmed her.

She detected no undertone of threat. "Yes," she replied, without further thought. He seemed relieved as he pulled out the chair. "I could not help but notice your book. Do you study art?"

"I work at the gallery. In editing and cataloguing."

"You love art," he asked?

"Yes," she nodded. "I do."

"Why?" His question was odd, yet legitimate. She did not think to refuse an answer.

She was surprised at her words. "Art takes you out of yourself and into another person's world." Such an answer did not come from a mere copy editor.

He looked at her shrewdly. "Well said. You must have a true appreciation of art." Suddenly, he blushed. "Forgive me," he said offering his hand, "I have not introduced myself." Celia had not noticed. "My name is Frederic Johnson. I study painting at an Art College." "But," he chuckled, "I am learning how little real talent I have." He shrugged. "Perhaps, I will switch to art appreciation classes." She heard her own laughter. She shook his hand.

"And your name?" he asked.

"Celia Smith."

He released her hand "Perhaps we will meet again tomorrow." Frederic Johnson turned and walked quickly away. Alone on the terrace again, she gathered her book to go in. Only then did she hear the roar of the river above the falls.

The next morning was heavy with cloud. Celia ordered breakfast in the cavernous dining room. Despite the comforts of her room, she had slept poorly. The elderly couple from last night sat near the window. Celia hoped they might speak again but they only nodded politely. The silence of the old hotel was growing oppressive.

Pushing the remains of her poached egg and toast to the side of her plate, she then tossed down her napkin.

She wandered out to the lobby and bought a pen and some hair clips at the shop. At the front desk, Celia feigned interest in a stack of magazines and then spoke to the clerk.

"Excuse me. Is there a Frederic Johnson registered?" She held her breath while he tapped the computer keys. "Yes, ma'am. May I take a message for him?"

Celia blushed. "No thank you." She hurried away under his gaze. For half an hour, she examined the shelves of books in the library then returned to the lobby. The dining room was empty. Mr. Johnson had not appeared. Celia returned to her room.

At one o'clock, she ordered lunch. She started at the knock at the door. The waiter entered. Smoothing her skirt, she watched his deft movements as he spread out the cloth and set the table. When he had departed, she ate some tomatoes, cheese and a slice of bread. She opened her catalogue.

Art takes you out of yourself and into another person's world. Had she really said that? She flipped through several pages. It was true. Instantly, she was gripped by the sense of isolation in the next painting. The girl wore an old fashioned green hat and sat alone, utterly exposed in the harsh light of a restaurant. The girl's loneliness was her own. Never had she entered a world so painfully familiar. She checked the foot note. 'Automat,' Edward Hopper. She shut the book.

At two o'clock, there was a brief tap on her door. She rose swiftly to answer.

Frederic Johnson wavered in the hallway, as if expecting to be dismissed. "I thought we might talk," he said. "Yes. Please come in."

He flushed. "Perhaps downstairs on the patio?"

"It's much too cold." She walked slowly to the sitting area in the bay window. He stood fidgeting in the doorway, then followed her. The sun burned through grey cloud and momentarily illuminated the room. He shut the door.

Celia was surprised at her composure. She sank into the cushions of the chesterfield and crossed her legs. He sat on the edge of his chair. She considered him for a moment. He was definitely suitable.

"I thought about your views on art last night." He glanced at her catalogue on the coffee table. "Did you work on the book yourself?"

"Yes. But many others were involved." She saw herself from a distance watching him.

He cleared his throat. "There are several galleries down in the city, we could visit tomorrow. That is, if you are planning to stay a few days."

He must be about her age, she thought. Neither heavy nor thin. Neither tall nor short. The sunlight glinted on his glasses. He ran his fingers through his curly hair.

"I won't be here tomorrow. I must get back," she said.

His glance contained the briefest question. She stood up and stared out the window to see the river whitening and curling, just above the falls. She returned to her seat. He sat beside her. His eyes searched hers. With determination, she reached out and took his hand. She placed it on her breast.

Surely, this is what you do, she thought. But where was the flame of passion? She led him to the bedroom and let him undress her. He was slow and careful, not hesitant. She hoped she was pleasing. He pulled the curtain against the grey light.

His flesh, pressed on her, felt odd, but not unpleasant. His kisses grew insistent, but not disagreeable. The violence of his motions was not alarming.

This is all it is? What had she feared, she wondered? Then, it was done. He rolled away on the bed. Briefly, she touched his hand in the darkness.

"Shall I go now?" he asked. She nodded. A considerate man. But he looked hunched and worn as he dressed. He slipped from the room.

At dinner, Celia sat alone near the dining room entrance. Frederic did not appear. The elderly couple arrived and sat nearby. They smiled warmly at her.

"Did you have a restful afternoon? We had hoped to see you in the garden."
asked the woman.

"Too cold for me," Celia replied. As an after thought, she said, "I read all afternoon in my room." She sipped her wine and wondered at her compulsion to offer this detail.

The gentleman lowered his menu and said, "Forgive me, my dear, but my wife and I are struck by your resemblance to our daughter, Samantha."

The dead one, Celia thought grimly as she opened her menu. "So you said," she replied. When she looked up, she saw the woman's eyes were damp.

"Samantha took such joy..." A tiny sob escaped the woman's lips. "Such pleasure from life." She twisted her hands on her lap. "Then, it was too late."

Celia did not wish to be rude, but she refused to be drawn into the old woman's misery. She looked about the dining room. Still, no Frederic. Where was the waiter? The room was stifling. A window should be open.

In an urgent voice, the woman said, "Don't forget! Experience in life is one thing; passion is quite another."

Celia was startled. She did not intend to be cruel. She raised her hand in protest. "Madam, please! Your daughter has nothing to do with me."

The effect was immediate. Sobbing, the old woman pushed back her chair. With the greatest solicitude, her husband escorted her from the dining room. In passing Celia's table, he said stiffly, "My wife meant no offence. She sees our daughter everywhere, although she has been dead twenty years."

The dining room pressed in on Celia. She had to escape. She would eat in her room. Blindly, she rushed through the lobby. The elevator clanked to the third floor. No sign of Frederic.

She lost her bearings. Many hallways of tall mahogany doors confronted her. At a distance, she saw the huddled figures of the elderly couple disappearing through a doorway. Celia marched down corridors narrowed by shadows and took several turns leading nowhere. Rushing on, she stifled little cries. At last, she found her room.

She unlocked the door. Except for the open bay window, the room was unchanged. The wind from the river blew in and billowed the curtains. Her catalogue was gone from the coffee table, replaced by a cream coloured envelope. Trembling, she slit it open. Inside was a drawing. A reasonable likeness of herself. At the foot was scrawled a note. "I entered your world, but cannot stay. I have taken your book and left this drawing, in exchange....Frederic."

Celia shivered in the steady wind. She folded the drawing back in the envelope and set it on the table. Tomorrow, she would return to her work in the city.