

“Foyer”

She is on a mission. Perhaps the most important of her life. A mission of unbridled desire reeking of devotion. With 1,764 miles committed to the journey she spots an exit for Toledo, Ohio. Pulling off the highway as her phone’s GPS program spouts off directions she cruises into a run down Sheetz to gas up the ’94 Corolla. Stretching her arms she spots a “buy 1 get 1 free” sign advertising glistening pink hot dogs nestled in golden pillowy buns, side by side, partners in crime – Thelma and Louise – each sporting a squiggly hair-do of bright yellow mustard and deep ruby ketchup. She just can’t resist the color of that zigging mustard and zagging ketchup. Scarfing down Thelma, the first hot dog, she drops the now red and yellow smeared paper sleeve containing Louise into her purse and heads for the exit. Outside the panorama of flat bleak Ohio spreads itself out across the horizon like a meek yawn brought on by boredom. Can’t be too far now she thinks to herself as the smells of gasoline, concrete and Oscar-Meyer hot dogs tango towards her nostrils.

“Pardon me...?” a man in a long brown trench coat utters. She turns and squints at him. Slicked back brown hair flecked with dandruff, a furrowed brow so creased and filthy it said I-was-thirty-during-the-dustbowl-maybe-you-have-some-work-for-me and a square jaw that looks as hard as truth. He is leaning against the white cinder block shack with his arms folded and his hips pushed out a bit too far like all drunken contra Pasto. “You heading east by chance?” His voice like soot.

“Actually, south and then east, to some bumfuck village called Leetonia.”

“Ahh, Leetonia, that’s right! Hmm, I reckon I know just about all there is to know about Leetonia, Ohio,” he gurgles. She stares at him reluctantly. She is not akin to picking up hitchhikers but he has a disarmingly goofy quality about him. Somewhere in the back of her mind she hears the rolling Roto-toms and deep fried fuzz guitar of the Ohio Player’s song “Fire” scuttling forward.

“That’s right, eh? Well okay zombie McGruff the Crime Dog, then you can tell me all about it in the car; anyway I need some company. Driving through Ohio bores the fuck out of me.” Her instincts tell her this is a bad idea. This guy smells and looks like he sleeps in a fated chimney at the bottom of a landfill and sounds like Jim Varney on a couple bottles of Robitussin. But she is on a mission, and most missions she undertakes are littered with bad ideas and shady characters.

Entering the '94 Corolla she plops her purse down in the center console and turns over the engine. Simultaneously they both grab their seatbelts and secure themselves in for the haul. Click! She breaks the tension by offering the strange man the other hot dog she has in her purse. Louise is now a tepid smear of oranges on wax paper. Holding the hot dog she swoons over the painterly marks the condiments lay out. The colors cause her to drift for a moment as she recalls her mission: those fiery hues, thick streaks of them smeared over canvas, winding through everything. From corner to corner. Burning her eyes. Burning her car and her history and future. Burning the road and the rubber. Burning her neck as the hair stands up. These are the colors of truth, she realizes as she stares at Louise the hot dog in her hand. A universe of titian-reds, bright carrot oranges, smooth cantaloupes and zesty apricots swirling in-between saffron bisques and flaming copper creases. "Ahem," he plashes "so can I eat it or do you want to just stare at it?" She rouses from her torpor, "Oh. Just don't get anything on the seats." "Mmhmmm," his voice the sound of shears on animal hide, "I never do."

Six miles of silence turns into 26 miles of silence and on the 30th mile of silence she finally speaks her mind. "Sorry, but something is bothering me, why did you say back at the gas station 'Ahh, right, Leetonia' when I told you where I was heading?"

"I actually said, 'Ahh, Leetonia, that's right!'"

"Yeah ok whatever, but why did you say that like you knew where I was going?"

"You mean how did I know that you are driving 1,978 miles across the country from Rupert, Idaho to Leetonia, Ohio?" he grunted.

Her brain froze.

"And how on earth could I know that you are on a very particular mission, perhaps the most important of your life?" his disgusting voice croaked.

She wanted to swallow hard but she could not. The hot dog smell lingering under her nostrils. Isn't that what people smell before they have a heart attack, or stroke or something: hot dogs?

"And how could I know that your mission involves looking at, or rather, witnessing, in the flesh, experiencing! breathing in, consuming, absorbing, ingesting, devouring! A particular painting that has haunted you for the past three months day in and day out?" Barely any neurons firing now, just the steady whiz of the engine.

“Easy. Because I’m The Narrator,” he exclaims coolly. And just as the last ‘r’ of narrator rolls off his tongue, out of thin air like a clap of thunder the crack of a whip roars through the car followed by a chorus of baritone voices singing in D \flat minor: “THE NARRATOR!”

“What the fuck was that?” she exclaims.

“Oh, I’m trying out this new musical intro thing, I feel like it amps up the vibe a bit when I blow peoples minds. Is it too much?”

“So, wait, what in the actual fuck? You knew this whole time that I would pull into that gas station and, what, buy 2 hot dogs,”

“You bought one, the other one was free.”

“Buy *one* hot dog, and like, bump into you outside and offer you a ride, or like *be manipulated* into giving you a ride. Are you like some wandering Chip Coffey dumpster mystic?! You’re “THE NARRATOR” (CRACK! ‘THE NARRATOR’ just a touch less buttery than The Jarmel’s Earl Christian and Ray Smith) what the hell does that mean? I gave you a free hot dog! Did you know that was coming too you spooky fuck?!”

“I didn’t manipulate you in any way; you offered me a ride through your own free will. I told you, I’m The Narrator (Whp-schh! ‘THE NARRATOR’ dusty mellow baritones now with the grit of Sons of the Pioneers), but that does not mean you are without agency. I’m not the writer here (a crowd boos somewhere in the distance); I’m just doing my job (light applause). I did not put you in a ’94 Toyota Corolla with detritus strewn around, cigarette burns in the driver seat and random sheets of music littered about. I am not the one who put you in a troubled marriage that you’re clearly running from, or looking for answers to, I’m not the one who gave you such a filthy mouth and I’m not the one who first showed you an image of that painting that spawned this whole mission in the first place. But I do appreciate the hot dog, it was a generally kind gesture on your part.” He specifies.

She’s searching for words, to try to describe what the hell is going on. A narrator? So she’s in a story? Is this a shitty Tom Hanks movie? Or is this some joke; maybe her friend Dale set her up, hacked her phone and knew she would be at that fucked up Sheetz near Toledo? Found this Noah Joad-looking-mother-fucker on Craig’s List? But how? What the fuck?! Throughout all this thinking and swearing the bright lights inside the Corolla slowly begin to dim. She lights the Marlboro shaking between her lips. Finding no words, she jabs the stereo and turns up the sludge of Sunn O)))’s “Life Metal,” exhaling deeply and shaking her head. He turns to us as a soft spotlight gently cloaks him. Somewhere in the back seat a hi-hat begins to swing

lightly under the dooming drone of zippery octave fuzz muck. He snaps his fingers and the car fills with slag.

This was something different. Not about marriages, or families. This was about unabated desire bordering on desperation. A totally new type of mission, and maybe the most important one of her life. A pull she had never felt before. It was born like a star inside of her. A muted collapse and then the explosion of celestial diarrhea smearing life out into a void. It happened on an eventless Thursday evening. She was aimlessly scrolling through Instagram on her phone one afternoon when she came across an image of a painting. Posted by Galerie_Humble_Brag, a leading voice in contemporary art located in Berlin, Germany where, to borrow a phrase from our main character: 'the walls were as white as the staff of Xavier Hufkens and as smooth as the balls of Jeffrey Deitch.' The painting, nestled in a white frame of the wall supporting it, was framed by the app supporting that, which was framed by the edges of her screen, lay in her sweaty hand. Too many layers. So she zoomed in grasping at the screen like a child trying to pinch an ant. The pixelated impasto strokes of newborn-baby-stool yellow and pale Stockholm sunset orange overlapping and scoping each other out like teenagers at a school dance. Masking a stolid form that collapsed into the background and simultaneously exploded forward. Her heart raced. She dropped the phone into her lap and grabbed a pen and paper to scrawl her impressions on.

Dumb fire
Cloaked and dangling fire
Southwest orange fire
Bitter like fire
An aspirated consonant fire
Lapping at the scaffold fire
Smothering upmarket fire
Shirley Temple on fire
A family with two doors fire
"No exit," screams fire
So I scream "Fire!"
House fire

"Where did you get that? That is a private poem!" she interjects.
"There is no privacy in the '94 Toyota Corolla." He shot back.

Back in the screen the post described firstly that the provenance of the work was limited, but as the head curator and lead art advisor for the gallery Alexander Zander von Kleinschwanz wrote, the artwork was dated 1894, titled “Foyer” and attributed to a little known artist who went only by the name Schlarmfickle. Deeper research brought no new information and she was left only with endless images of differing quality of this one astonishing painting.

Not an artist herself, she had for a brief period studied art history in college and thus inadvertently hung around arty types her whole life. Her husband, a poorly recognized avant-garde composer, had no shortage of friends who had dedicated their lives to the arts. Her home was not full of paintings, prints, sculptures and drawings swathed in deep personal histories or inside jokes that could be relied upon to educate and culture future grandkids. Nonetheless she appreciated the dedication, concentration, unending abject failure and rampant jealousy most artists had to endure in life to keep their passion from souring. But this painting was different than any she’d seen before. It’s hot oranges and flashing yellows whipping up frenzy from corner to corner, guiding the eye through an all-engulfing haze that was neither flat nor dimensional but para-dimensional – nearly sonic – almost like Rosie Hamlin’s gentle cooing a minute and a half into her hit “Angel Baby” punctuated by the matter-of-fact-swagger of George Clinton’s intro to “Maggot Brain.” The music of this painting swirled around her. Underneath what she interpreted to be the gospel that saved her life, a small form that looked to be a crudely sketched house, but sounded like the talking pedal steel guitar of Pete Drake dressed up as David Johanssen two-stepping inside of Mingus’s pork pie hat, dipped in caramel and drizzled over a high gain SM57. Pure bliss.

Deeper into the screen she found the painting existing in myriad representations - available online as a Giclee print scaled to the original dimensions, or bigger. It could also be reproduced on a t-shirt, a coffee mug, key chains, candles, re-sealable freezer bags, pens, oven mitts, cock rings, flower vases and baseballs. She imagined a giant tree made of knotted t-shirts sprouting rolled posters that grew sinuous fingers of writing utensils from which dangling tumorous baseballs grew on coffee mugs which spilled glinting key chains tipped with cock rings. But even a hefty bite of this low hanging ripe plastic dream would not satiate. She simply had to see it in the flesh, and beyond that: she felt she had to have it in her hands and physically near her heart. And thus the mission was born.

Her phone blurts out what to do in 500 meters and they spill off the highway onto State Route 30 heading east.

“So what’s the plan then Narrator?” (CRACK! “THE NARRATOR” the chorus moaned like the gentle voices of Los Zafiros)

The plan? The plan is that we go into that library very casually, we admire the painting for a moment or two, very casually, and then we grab it off the wall and run out of the library, very casually.

“The plan is that we just steal the painting?” she asks steadily.

Very casually.

She hits the gas and turns up the sludge now loud enough to open her sinuses. The guitars sub-octave hustle runs through her body and tickles her bowels as the fuzz piles up. She stubs her cigarette out gently on the steering wheel and watches the blooming terracotta and ambulance reds melt the plastic and fade to smoke.

The Leetonia Columbiana County Community Public Library looks a bit like a low rent Country Club version of the White House, if James Hoban had downed a bunch of Xanax before sketching the roof. The whole thing sags over itself and into the ground into some kind of bashful yoga pose. On any given day there may be two to three people including the librarian loitering around quietly in the library. At 11:21AM there are four: the librarian, an 11-year-old schoolboy munching on sweating string cheese, our main character and The Narrator (hhwwwppsch “THE NARRATOR” A Glassian augmented 7th delivered in a library appropriate whisper). They weave their way to the back and there it is. Sandwiched between two bookcases with a small table underneath it. Her painting. All 53 x 41cm of it. Glowing like a portal to another world. Its beauty unflinching and astute. More real than any real thing she’s ever encountered. The sinuous streaks of fire hugging the form in the middle. She reaches out and inhaling deeply rubs her hand across the canvas. Tears form in the corners of her eyes. “This painting is the only thing that matters in my life anymore,” she quips as rivulets of tears splash onto her brown shirt. And then both hands are on it, caressing the painting and moving their way to the sides of the canvas. And then she’s sliding it off the wall and rubbing her cheek against the rugged impasto surface, licking the swirls of amber dusk and daffodil yellows with her tongue. Tears dripping onto the canvas. Nothing will take her away from this painting ever again she feels.

“Hey!” A small shrill voice squawks. “Miss Maple these two people are trying to steal a painting!” They turn around to see a small sandy blonde haired boy about 11 pointing a plump index finger accusingly in their direction.

Their cover is blown.

“Oh shut up!” she caws. The painting now pressed against her chest like a newborn child. Behind the accusing little snitch is whom they deduce to be Miss Maple, a lanky bespectacled run-o-the-mill librarian type; kinky hair, wacky earrings and somewhere between the age of 60 and 129, but looking great for whatever that age is and clearly sharp as a whip.

“Oh, why thank you,” she coos to the narrator primping her hair. Shaking off the flattery suddenly in a more authoritative voice she states, “Alright well, anyone want to explain what’s going on here?” The boy jumps in shrieking his way through a poor interpretation of the events but basically gets to the point:

“The birds nest hair lady and homeless Waldo are trying to steal that painting of hair.”

“Hair? It’s clearly fire, kid, the deepest hottest most brilliant flames to ever be represented.” She states as the tears dry on her cheeks.

“Oh, I always thought it’s a Begonia” Miss Maple offers.

They’re all wrong; for it is clearly a close up Anne Bonny’s sphincter; showing the famous pirates well-known tattoo of a house just above her anus. When clinched and relaxed appears to open and close the tiny door of the house.

Everyone turns to The Narrator wearing disgusted looks.

“I want this painting. I have to have it.” She declares.

“Oh, ok, well one would have to call the state’s main library because we don’t actually decide what art gets put in our libraries.” Miss Maple is starting to become a problem for her.

“No, we’re not going to do that, look...” she eyes the Narrator.

“I want the painting to stay here in the library!” the boy cries.

This sets her off and just by looking at her contorted face it becomes clear the outlaw in her triumphs. She whips from underneath her brown shirt a huge magnum .57 revolver and tells everyone to freeze! Clutching the painting to her bosom with one arm the other outstretched pointing the revolver at the three of them. A frightened animal. The boy begins to whimper as Miss Maple holds him tight at her side.

“Look we are taking this painting. And that’s that!” she states, waving the revolver around.

“Please don’t hurt us!” The boy’s tear streaked face blurts out.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves robbing a small library like this, stealing a work of art that belongs in the public domain!”

“What are you suggesting lady?” The gun shaking in her hand.

“Well, the proper thing to do would be to have an auction. Right here in the library. Fair and square!” They all freeze and then slowly nod in unison. She lowers the gun in concession.

“Ok.” She says. “We’ll have a little auction. Real casual though and no sneaky stuff.” And thus the bidding is underway, starting at \$5. The boy quickly jumps to 10. She responds with 11. 13 the boy shoots back. 15 she counters, nervously eyeing her purse and assessing its contents. 18 the boy counters again, his fist slamming the desk. 20 she replies. “25!” the boy again. The librarian nodding towards him. “We got 25, do I hear 26, maybe 30? Going once, twice...” “33!” she shouts. “35,” the boy quips smugly, his fist revealing a wad of cash. She throws her final bid out, “36 dollars and 47 cents!” The librarian scopes the crowd, her left hand resting on a copy of Crime and Punishment and a large bowling pin in her raised right hand. “Going once, twice.” “\$37!” the boy shrieks! A heightened moment of tension grips the room. No one speaks for a long time. She can feel the flames of the painting lapping at her breast, heating her from outside in. “Going once, twice, annd sold to the lucky boy!” Clap! The bowling pin hits the desk. The boy jumps from his chair and proudly saunters over to her. But just then, a copy of Catcher in the Rye flies across the room and lands right on the face of the old librarian. Knocking her to the ground. I did it! I threw it! I grab the boy by the ear with one hand and rip the painting from our main character with the other and I’m headed for the door. I’ll be damned if anyone will take this beautiful painting from me. Befuddled the main character looks down for her purse but I’ve already snatched it up, slung it over my shoulder, with the car keys dangling in my fingers.

She runs outside to find me, The Narrator (CRACK! “THE NARRATOR” a mess of atonal Schoenberg chords from the mouth of the chorus), turning over the Corolla’s engine. But just before I can close the door she grabs me by the shoulders and with a scared mother’s might rips me from the car and onto the pavement, lands a heavy kick to my ribs and pulls the painting from my weak arms. Suddenly she is in the driver’s seat, flames shooting from her mouth, ears and nose; no longer distinguishable from the painting she is cradling. A ball of fire.

It was so easy to shift and take her foot off the break moving it quickly to the gas. She turns up the volume on the stereo as Stephen O’Malley’s skull rattling octave fuzz moves tectonic plates beneath the earth stirring down the neck and dropping sludge into the Corolla. She doesn’t feel a thing when she rolls over me – the guitars’ crystal clear mud drowning out everything in the universe. She is

taking back her story, goddammit. A phoenix empowered by her painting. Everything is on fire. Me, The Narrator (Splat! "Oh no! The Narrator" the chorus croaked out of tune) won't be manipulating anyone anymore.

"I'm in charge of this story again! Full fucking throttle baby!" I yell out holding the painting tighter. The boy in the back bawls out "you just ran that man over!" "No shit kid, and you're next if you don't shut up!" I double back on the Narrator's brittle old body to make sure he's really down for the count and then quickly shift back into drive and squeal out of the library parking lot swerving onto High Street hard, ripping through a stop sign just for good measure. Oh wow this got out of hand quickly I think to myself. In the backseat I can hear shrieking and crying cutting through Stephen O'Malley's tortured Les Paul and it annoys me. Fucking Ohio.

I know what I have to do with the kid now. We have a certain way of dealing with snitches in Idaho. After all this is America in 2019, baby, a whole new land, shaken up and tipped on its side. Yeah, there is only one thing to do with this little rat shit and his fucking \$37 winning bid on *my* painting. Get rid of him. Fucking chop off his limbs and double bag 'em to be found later by some road crew on I-70. Pull his bitch tattletale tongue out of his skinned head and use his skull for a fucking ashtray on the journey home. I feel like I am growing horns on my head as I gave out a piggish snort and hit the accelerator, exhaling black smoke and coughing yellow bile into my now clawed hand. The boy in the backseat is screaming with a death grip on his seatbelt, legitimately contemplating his end. "The boy must be taken care of," I yell into the rearview mirror in a low voice, wrinkling my nose at the putrid smell. I crank up the sludge metal and start panting. Bone saws and bleach bottles dancing in my head, as I imagine parading around a hotel room with the boy's eyeballs on shish-kabob forks repeatedly waving them in front of my painting, yelling "are you tired of winning yet?!"

Wait, what? Holy shit, what am I thinking? No, no the boy will be fine. I turn down the music, look into the rearview mirror and kindly ask him what his address is as the horns recede and the bile dries up. "352 Cherry Valley Road, right next to the police station" he whimpers between sobs. Ok, then. Outside of his house I lurch the Corolla to a halt and reaching over quickly open the door and shove him out onto the sidewalk. "You're a very very bad person!" the boy shouts at me, and the only thing I could think to say as I shuffle the gear into drive is, "Don't tell your mom!" Slamming the door I hit the gas and speed off to the highway. My eyes bouncing between the road

ahead and the rearview mirror, where I can see the boy receding quickly into the distance with tears streaming down his sour apple face bolting for the safety of his mother.

In the Leetonia Columbiana County Community Public Library now hanging in place of a stolen painting is a wanted poster with a pixelated photo from a security camera of my face. The words WANTED printed overtop of Leetonia Police Department phone numbers and a meek reward of 500 bucks if anyone has any information pertaining to the theft of the painting, vehicular assault of The Narrator (no whip crack in print) and the kidnapping of a local eleven year old boy. But disregarding all that, if one squints hard enough at the photo of me, one can see a mixture of ecstasy and mitigation sweeping across my blurry black and white face. Serenity represented through delinquency. Probably the only good photo of me to exist actually. Next to the wanted poster hangs an equally pixelated Giclee print of the painting. The oranges not as orangey, yellows not as yellowy, a pale comparison of itself, as if my act of vandalism has wilted the soul of the work.

Across town lying in a hospital room splashed with the afternoon sunlight, snuggled in gauze and stuck with tubes, The Narrator ("Help!" the bedpan cries) whispers in a low quivering voice, "Mission Accomplished" (very light applause).

-- Nicholas Hoffman, 2019