

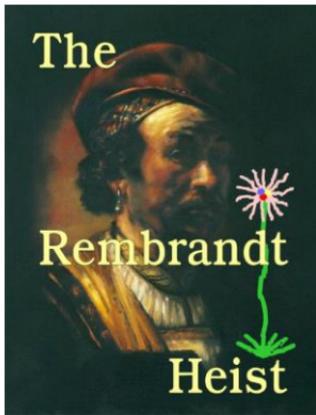
"The Rembrandt Heist" first appeared in the August 2014 issue of *Pulp Modern*.

Three Story Collections in One is [available at Amazon](#) as part of the Grayscale Collection.

This PDF is free to pass around, but you must have my express permission to use its contents in any other way.

[Contact](#)

Copyright © Mike Sheedy
mikesheedy.wordpress.com



Vera's head throbbed. She never drank enough water at the hospital, which meant dehydration headaches on the double shifts. Her feet burned too. As she unlocked the front door of the apartment she looked forward to kicking off her shoes, downing a glass of water, and then stripping off her uniform for a bath. She'd stretch out in the tub and rehydrate from the inside and out. Then a quiet evening at home.

"Oh . . . hi mom." Amber's voice.

Vera closed the door and turned to say hello. And she saw that her daughter was with a man.

"What're you doing home?" Amber asked, sounding guilty.

Vera felt herself tense up as she looked at the man in her living room. He rose from her favorite easy chair and she was struck by how good-looking he was. She assumed the worst; Amber was involved with an older man. Not that he was *that* old — maybe thirty-five, same as Vera — but Amber was only eighteen. She wouldn't even graduate from high school for another two months.

"I, uh, I took off a half hour early," Vera said, recovering from her surprise. She was glad she hadn't taken off an *hour* early. No telling what she would have walked in on.

Amber was wearing a pink button-front shirt tied off above her bare midriff, and matching shorts that showed off her long legs. Vera thought how pretty she looked standing beside the window. Her sunlit blonde hair framed her face like a halo. It was no wonder she had a boyfriend. Or *man*

friend. Vera turned her attention to the man.

He was tall, dark-haired and tanned, and so handsome. He could have been in movies, with his dark eyes and strong chin. Plus there was the body. It looked trim and strong beneath the flowered beach shirt and khaki shorts. Strong legs stuck out of the shorts and strong arms out of the shirt-sleeves. She saw the muscles in one of his fore-arms bunch up as he gripped something at his side. A book.

Vera nodded to the man and Amber said, “This is Mr. Ticker, mom. Claude. I’m glad you two are finally meeting.”

Finally? Vera walked to the counter between the living room and kitchenette and laid her keys next to the cookie jar. She thought about going for a glass of water but suddenly felt the long hours overwhelm her. She dragged to the couch, plopped down, and she would have put her feet up on the coffee table if not for the presence of a guest.

“Okay,” she sighed, “how long has this been going on?”

She thought nothing could be worse than Amber getting involved with a man twice her age, but five minutes later she *wished* things were as simple as that.

“It wasn’t a burglary, mom. Not really. The drawings in the book are his.” Vera was tired of watching Amber pace. She looked at the man, Mr. Ticker. He sat in the easy chair and held the book across his knees. His forearms rested on top of it and his fingers curled protectively around its edges. The book was large, maybe fifteen inches square, and old. Covered in burgundy leather, with small, glittery jewels on the front. A shiny gold clasp held it shut.

Vera said she didn’t understand. “If the drawings are his, then why steal them?”

“Because they were in my father-in-law’s

house,” Mr. Ticker said. Those were the first words he’d spoken, and his voice was deep, like Vera knew it would be. It was also soft. “Or, he’s my *former* father-in-law.”

Vera looked at his left hand. No wedding ring. She’d noticed that earlier, but now she looked more closely and couldn’t detect any pale band of skin either. Nothing to indicate on-again/off-again deceptiveness. She still suspected that he and Amber might be having a fling, but if they were at least Amber wasn’t going out with a married man.

She could understand how Amber would be drawn to him though, married or not. He looked a lot like her father. Big and dark like Hannibal, dead five years now but still so alive in Vera’s thoughts that she hadn’t looked at another man with any interest since his passing. But this man in her living room now, he reminded her of Han and the way his big tanned body used to lean out over the side of his shrimp boat in Port Aransas (“Gunwale, Vera, it’s called a gunwale.”) Whenever he saw Vera and Amber walking the bags of food out to the boat before one of his trips he would lean over the gunwale and shout, “Sirens to the starboard!” and then they would have a bon voyage meal of sandwiches and pickles on the rocking deck. They went through the food ritual before each trip and always had a big meal of shrimp when Han returned, until one day there was no return. The Coast Guard said his boat must have gone down in a storm, and after waiting a year for him Vera tore herself away from Port Aransas. The smell of the sea breeze kept her in a constant state of expectation. She moved to Dallas with Amber and . . .

“*Don’t* go squirrely on me, mom.”

Vera realized she’d been staring at Mr. Ticker and she felt herself blush. She looked at Amber.

“What do you mean, ‘squirrely’?”

Amber stopped her pacing. "You know, the way you make up your mind sometimes before you have all the details."

"Fine. Give me all the details. And start over, from the beginning."

Amber snorted and did her little pantomime of bearing a great weight on her shoulders.

"Posture," Vera said. "Details."

"Okay. Claude's the chef at one of the restaurants where I work. The nice one. We talk on our breaks sometimes, and one day I told him I know a lot about computers. And he asked if I could help him get something back that he lost in his divorce."

"Just like that? You agreed to help someone commit a crime because he asked you to?"

"No. I did it because he said he'd pay my way through college."

Vera was dumbfounded. Was this a joke? She searched Amber's face and saw that she was serious.

"Think of that, mom. No more double shifts for you, no more *three* waitressing jobs for me."

"Well . . . yes, that would be nice, but how do you know . . . No offense to you, Mr. Ticker, but you shouldn't believe everything people tell you, Amber, not when it comes to money."

"He's already paid me half, in cash. It's in my room."

Vera looked at Mr. Ticker.

"I could only raise half right now, Mrs. Lee, but I'll be able to pay the rest as Amber needs it. She said she didn't know if she could afford school, so it's the least I could do, since she helped me get this back."

He lifted the book from his lap and clutched it to his chest.

Vera didn't know what to say. No more arguing over short skirts for bigger tips, no more temptation of ruinous student loans.

“Well, I appreciate what you’re doing, Mr. Ticker, but . . .”

“Claude,” he smiled. “Please call me Claude.”

Vera knew she should reciprocate, tell him to call her by *her* first name, but she couldn’t. Wouldn’t. The man had involved Amber in a crime. “Okay . . . Claude. Like I was about to say, I appreciate what you’re doing, but I don’t understand. That seems like an *awful* lot to pay someone to help you get a book.”

“Maybe. But it’s worth it. This is my book of Rembrandts.”

So *that’s* what was going on, Vera thought. He’d used Amber to help him get his hands on a collection of priceless drawings. Or no, they wouldn’t be priceless, their value would be in the millions. Tens of millions. What had Amber gotten herself into? Surely someone would investigate.

“Tell me about the drawings, Mr. . . . Claude. Exactly *where* did they come from?”

“From a house in Preston Hollow.”

“*The* Preston Hollow, with the oil millionaires?”

“Yes. My ex-wife’s father is in oil. His name is Gusher Dabbs. I met him in the oil fields when I was cooking for one of his outfits, and he liked me and sent me to a culinary academy. After I graduated I married his daughter, Gabby, cooked here and there, and now I’m the chef at one of the restaurants where Amber works.”

Vera felt a little better about the situation. Not about Amber being involved in a burglary, but about the victims living in Preston Hollow. Oil people could probably afford the loss. She pointed to the book.

“So, the drawings in that are yours?”

“Yes. The judge awarded them to Gabby, but they’re mine.” He clutched the book more tightly to his chest. “They always were. She only claimed them to annoy me. I bet she hasn’t even looked at

them since she moved back in with Gusher and put them in his vault.”

“Gabby’s an odd name,” Vera said. She heard her voice rise in pitch and take on a slight tremble. “Is it short for something?”

“Gabrielle.”

“Do you ever . . .” Still the trembly voice, but she couldn’t help it. He was *so* good-looking, and it had been *such* a long time. “Do you ever think about getting back together with her?” Vera pictured herself as a sea anemone, tentatively opening up its petals, worried about exposing too much.

“No. I thought we might have a chance once, but it wouldn’t work. And we have our daughter to think about, so . . . I don’t know. I really shouldn’t talk about that.”

Amber made an impatient sound. Vera looked at her and saw that she was standing with her arms locked across her chest.

“Can we go on now, mom?”

“Of course,” Vera nodded, voice firm again. “Go on.”

“Well, Claude needed help to defeat the lock on the back door of the house and to get into the vault, so I learned all I could about the security systems from the internet. Safes *aren’t* that hard to open, you know. Anyway, he wore glasses fitted with a pen camera so I could monitor remotely, and I gave him instructions through an earpiece.”

Claude tilted the book away from his chest and took a pair of eyeglasses from a shirt pocket. He flipped them open and slid them on. Vera thought the long camera tube on the side and the earpiece hanging down looked pretty silly, and she smiled. Amber giggled. Claude smiled, shrugged and removed the glasses. He returned them to his pocket and clutched the book to his chest again.

“I have witnesses to my whereabouts today,” he said. “If anyone asks, I was playing poker with

some friends when the burglary took place. I picked today because I knew Gusher's house would be empty."

"But what's going to happen when they find the drawings are gone?" Vera asked. "Won't they call the police?"

Claude shook his head. "No. It'll probably be awhile before they even miss them, and when they do, Gusher won't let Gabby call the police. He'll know I took them and tell her to let it go."

"But what if they *do* call the police? Amber could get into trouble."

"She won't, Mrs. Lee. Even if the police arrested me, they'd just assume I knew enough about the house to break in on my own. And the most I could get would be maybe . . . five years. It would only be my second strike."

"Second strike? You mean you've been in trouble with the law before?" Vera looked at Amber. "Did you know about this?"

"It's nothing, mom. It was a long time ago, in the oil fields, and it was self-defense. The man didn't *die* or anything."

"*Great*," Vera snorted. She felt the anemone-like petals that had been stretching out jerk back in. A violent criminal gets her daughter to help with a burglary and . . . She'd forgotten about her headache with so much going on, but suddenly it came throbbing back. She rubbed her temples and said, "I need something to drink."

"Oh, I made some fruit smoothies," Claude said. "The leftovers are in the blender jar in the refrigerator. Just add an ice cube and give it a few seconds on frappé."

Vera did, and while the blender buzzed she saw that the kitchen was cleaner than it had been in some time.

"I used a couple of your bananas," Claude said from the living room as she took a tumbler from

the drying rack in the sink. "I added some strawberries I had with me, plus a couple of other things."

Vera drank a glassful of water, then half-filled the tumbler with some of the smoothie mixture. She returned to the couch and sipped. The drink tasted wonderful. Bananas, strawberries and something else. Coconut extract?

Claude was holding his book across his knees again, looking down at it and rubbing its jeweled cover. Amber went to the kitchen to get a drink. Vera held the cold glass to her forehead. She could feel the water coursing through her body, rehydrating her, and her headache began to fade. She watched Claude start to open the clasp on the book, stop, and return to rubbing its cover.

"That looks expensive," she said. "I mean the book itself. The leather and jewels and all."

"I'm sure it is. It's Venetian, I think. Three or four hundred years old. I might have to return it to Gusher, but that's fine. He can have the book as long as I get to keep what's inside."

Amber came back from the kitchen, drink in hand.

"Have you seen them yet?" Vera asked her. "The Rembrandts?"

"No, but I've been dying to." She looked at Claude. "May we see them? Please?"

"Sure."

Claude squared the book on his lap and carefully worked the clasp. Vera stood up, set her drink on the coffee table and went to the easy chair. She positioned herself slightly beside and behind Claude. Amber stood at his other shoulder.

"These are the most beautiful things in the world," Claude said. "I can't tell you how happy I am to get them back."

Vera leaned down for a better view, and as she did she came close to Claude's hair. It had a

musky scent, mixed with kitchen smells of basil and charbroiled meat. Claude's hands, broad and strong, swung the cover of the book open and it wafted even more of his scent upward. Vera's mouth watered.

The first page of the book was blank. Claude turned it carefully and Vera, expecting some drab pen and ink sketch, was shocked to see a burst of color. Her breath caught in her throat. Claude looked up at her and smiled. "Yes, isn't that something?" He turned to the next page and Vera felt her tear ducts tingle. She saw a tempera sunflower beside a smiling stick figure with dark hair. "That's me," Claude said, touching the painting gently. "And look at how my daughter signed it, with her thumbprint. That was before she learned to write. Some of the later ones have her name on them."

Vera's head reeled, and she laid a hand on Claude's shoulder to steady herself. She felt his muscles ripple as he turned another page. He let out a little cry of delight at the sight of the next picture.

And that was it. Vera knew she was in love. The anemone-like petals flopped out to full extension and tears blinded her. She reached up to wipe them away before they could fall, but a couple escaped and hit Claude's forearm. He looked up at her and smiled. "Yes, I especially like that one."

Vera struggled to gain control, and when she felt settled enough to speak she cleared her throat and said, "Would you like to see some of Amber's pictures?"

Amber snorted and stamped off to her room.

Claude smiled at Vera and said, "Yes, Mrs. Lee, I'd like that very much."

"Vera. Please, call me Vera."