

Hypothermia

I positioned myself in front of the pedestal at the center of the room, facing my small entourage, and waited for the visitors to fall silent. I could practically quantify their level of anticipation by how quickly they caught my hint.

“And finally, we’ve arrived at one of the most important and beautiful pieces in our collection. *Barcelona at Night*, by Martí Cuixart Pérez, is perhaps one of the most nuanced works—rich with symbolism and meaning—that the artist created in his tragically short career. Completed just two weeks before his mysterious disappearance, and after a long, arduous process of trial and error...”

Twenty-four eyes followed the graceful movements of my right hand in astonishment as I delicately—and with a prudent safety distance—pointed to some of the amber shards scattered across a white plywood board resting atop the pedestal. They had practically halted all saccadic eye movements to focus solely on the tip of my index finger, as if it were a laser pointer. After a few more arbitrary gestures, I realized they were probably inspecting my immaculate red-painted nails rather than where I was pointing.

“...inspired and driven by his insomnia to capture what he felt was the true meaning of life under moonlight. Thus, through the development of a new avant-garde technique—one that defied the hegemonic *trencadís* method used worldwide until then—a technique he later named *smashing*, he managed to transfigure the meaning of the signifier...”

You could smell the euphoria in the air. The desire to acquire a piece of history like this for their private collections had stimulated the salivary glands of nearly every art enthusiast present. Nearly all, except for a tall, suited man who had just slipped quietly into the group. He simply stared at me with an air of self-satisfaction and a marked, sly smile on his lips.

“...and so, through one of the rituals in his unique artistic process—aptly named ‘murder of conception’—he projected the contents of his mind onto a Moritz beer bottle with a furious yet meticulously calculated strike near its neck. He then carefully positioned four cigarette butts in such a way that they formed a perfect four. This number isn’t arbitrary, for as we gather from his autobiography—available in our gallery shop—the number four represents the artist’s intense sexual repression caused by...”

And that’s when I switched off my brain.

I headed to the gallery’s “office”—really just four walls with a desk and two poorly placed chairs—where I usually left my belongings during my twelve-hour shifts charming a few unsuspecting fools. I planned to leave as soon as I could lay my claws on my bag, but fate had other plans.

"Taiga, the Siberian, the smoke seller," greeted the same suited man from before, now perched on one of the chairs in that filthy hovel, feet propped up on the desk.

"Fuck you, Carlos."

"Come on, you know I say it with love," he replied with a playful lilt. Despite my harsh tone, he knew I wasn't entirely serious. "No, seriously—how did you come up with the cigarette butts? More effort went into that than the entire rest of the piece."

"I found it amusing to think someone would pay to take my drool home, I suppose. So, who ended up with that drunkard's misfortune?"

I dragged my bag to the only free chair—the one farthest from the door, which I'm convinced Carlos placed deliberately just to piss me off—and sat down. After weighing my options, I decided to take off my heels before pulling out my flats. I hated wearing heels, but I'd found I could hypnotize clients better if I didn't have to crane my neck to look them in the eye.

"You know that chubby man with the puffy face, stuffed into a hideous Jacques Martinet suit? Yeah, him."

"Not surprised. He looked like money burned a hole in his wallet."

"Speaking of the alcoholic... Did you know I heard from the Syndicate that they've got him stashed away in some mansion in Malta? Pumping out 'recently discovered unpublished works' like hotcakes."

"It could be a lie and I'd still believe it," I replied, finally pulling my scarf from my gym bag.

"Hey, I'm gonna head out. I've got another twelve-hour shift tomorrow, and I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, that's what I was going to tell you," Carlos said, standing up. "That you've got a twelve-hour shift tomorrow... and I don't."

"You son of a bitch..."

"I'm juuust kidding!" he said in the tone one uses with a wild animal to delay the inevitable.

"No need to bare your claws. Look, my car's parked nearby. Want a ride?"

"Oh, a ride? Is this just an excuse to tag along and try to get into my pants?"

"No, no, no... well, maybe."

Carlos had been in the "art" world longer than I had, so it was no surprise he drove a Mercedes like his. A black sedan that perfectly matched the gallery's uniform; two doors, signaling this car was exclusively for his enjoyment; Class E, leaving no doubt its driver swam in abundance. What all this ostentation hid was the reality of his tiny apartment on the outskirts of town. As for me, I'd spent my money on a somewhat decent flat on Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron, months before the city commissioned a complete facade redesign by the renowned painter William Schnitz—which likely doubled the property's value. The perks of insider trading.

Fatigue made the ride feel longer than it was. With my cheek against the cold window of Carlos's passenger door, I squinted at how much Barcelona had changed since the dawn of the modern art craze. Everywhere you looked, even far from the city center, buildings were

decorated with splashes of vivid colors, crude grotesque statues perched on every corner, and other post-kitsch paraphernalia—jarring to anyone not pretending to be an aesthetic scholar.

To my left, just after leaving Carrer de l'Escultor (where our gallery was), stood a sculpture by Amadeus Custó—aptly titled *Society*. It was a rusted metal chair missing three legs, its single leg teetering on a massive blob of white plaster holding it in place. Apparently, the plaster wasn't suitable for outdoors, despite the artist's claims when selling it to the city, and began cracking weeks after installation. We posed as art restorers with forged papers from the Syndicate and offered to fix it for a hefty fee. We simply slathered silicone over the cracks (and the rest of the mound—no skimping, no polishing). Now it had an even larger gelatinous blob supporting the leg, but no one seemed to notice. The city paid a laughable €50,400 for the chair joke—or €62,100 if you count the "inevitable restoration."

And like that story, there were many others on the short ride from work to home. Like the facade by Hikari Murakami, requiring subcontractors on lifts to hurl buckets of blue paint at the installation for €142,780. Or Adolfo Quintana's paintings on the plaster of the old Telefónica exchange: peculiar long-lashed eyes in various colors staring nowhere, commissioned for €322,140. Or the gas pumps at Horta service station, decorated by Mireia del Pilar Plana—who, in a display of abstract impressionism, splattered paint cans against the tank for €75,900. And let's not forget the grotesque crime against taste by designer Uriel Broes on Vall d'Hebron Hospital's facade: a "party of eyeballs" covering every building, billed directly to the Generalitat for €3,433,800.

By the time I snapped out of my trance—induced by a mix of sleep deprivation and psychedelia manufactured by people who'd likely never tried hallucinogens—we were parking in front of my building. It was an aging block with slightly ornate (by today's standards) yet cozy architecture. Still, Schnitz's facade design elevated it to the level of its avant-garde neighbors, so monetarily, it had nothing to envy.

My gaze drifted to the wall facing the porch. A relic of bygone days, now a monument, displayed a mural-like concrete collage of paintings by various artists across history, united only by the shared trait of being "pictures liked by whoever decided to hang them here."

I heard the unmistakable clack of the parking brake lever, followed by a slight jolt as the car halted abruptly. I saved my sarcastic remarks about his driving for later.

"Alright, we're here."

I didn't respond. I could feel Carlos's eyes drilling into the back of my neck, thirsting for a reply, but I didn't care. Instead, I looked up at the artistic splendor of the building where I spent my short nights. The facade boasted exclusive designs by the famous William Schnitz, whose devotion to transgression and originality led him to create a unique pattern for this building: PVC rectangles in rounded shapes of various colors and sizes, holding decals of multicolored eyes at intervals of a handspan or a finger's width.

"Want to come up for coffee?" I asked the man to my left.

"Is that a euphemism?"

"No. I'm literally asking if you want coffee."

"Coffee? At 11:15 p.m.?" Carlos replied, in a tone I couldn't decipher—resignation or disorientation.

"Yes. Want some or not?"

"Well, I guess inviting me for water would be tackier."

We got out and headed to the building entrance, where I made Carlos wait longer than necessary while pretending to search for my keys. When I decided he'd waited enough, I opened the door and ushered him in with a mock "ladies first."

Carlos held the door for me, but before entering, I took one last look at the mural behind me. Piet Mondrian's *Composition in Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black*; a crude interpretation of Van Gogh's *Langlois Bridge*; Miró's *Mural Painting for Joaquim Gomis*; Picasso's *Guernica*; Lichtenstein's *Kiss II*... Lost in works from simpler times, I couldn't help but feel nostalgic for their innocence—a feeling that faded as I heard the lock click shut.

While fishing my keys back out, I glanced at Joaquim Sorolla's *Stroll Along the Seashore*: his wife Clotilde and daughter María enjoying a lazy sunset walk at Playa del Cabanyal, the pinnacle of Valencian luminism. The sea breeze perfectly modeled in the ripples of their rich dresses, the exquisite colors (Sorolla's whites "whiter than white"), and the perfection of his daughter's face made me sigh before releasing the door. I knew I felt only a fraction of the love the artist poured into it—yet it was more than I ever planned to feel.

When we finally reached my apartment after a short elevator ride, I slid the key into the lock. After two loud twists and a shove, I felt Carlos smoothly lunge through the crack I'd opened. "Me first!" chirped the toddler in Carlos's brain.

I shut the door behind me, locked it, and crossed the bolt for good measure. The tall suited man turned his head fractionally at the sound but quickly faced away, hoping I hadn't noticed. I left my scarf on the hallway hook and my flats beneath it.

Just past the hallway, I caught Carlos facing my living room, devouring its sublime minimalist furniture—disturbed only by multiple easels, frames, and canvases scattered in every corner.

"I know you only want to stay over because you don't want to go back to your grimy dump."

"Well, it has its charm," he said timidly, like someone who knows he's wrong. "Mine, I mean."

I jerked my chin toward the kitchen, where I set the coffee machine rattling and pointed him to a stool at the narrow, high circular iron-and-granite table.

"Oh, so the coffee was serious?" he said, hopping onto the stool smoothly.

"Of course! Or do you want me to fall asleep during fornication, you somnophile?"

I lit a cigarette and went to the living room to grab a bottle of Baileys from the bar. If I wasn't sleeping tonight, I'd do it in style. Carlos followed but got distracted by an easel near the balcony. I returned to the kitchen without sparing a thought for whatever my imminent dance partner was scheming. He took longer to return.

"Are those paintings in the living room yours?" he asked, settling back.

"Yes," I replied curtly.

"They're beautiful. They won't sell."

"I never planned to sell them."

We sipped our spiked coffee in unison. An awkward silence hung as I took another drag.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That you paint. You never mentioned it."

"You said it yourself: they won't sell."

"Listen," Carlos murmured, uncharacteristically serious, "despite everything we do at the gallery and the Syndicate... I like art. The kind not mass-produced to make quick cash."

"What is art to you, then?"

"To me, art is a way to express something that matters. A window to the artist's soul, exposing their rawest ideas and feelings to the world—and to themselves."

"And what did you see in my soul?" I asked.

"That it exists."

I stared at Carlos's hands for what felt like an eternity. I snapped back when he downed his spiked coffee in one gulp.

"Who are they?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'm sure they matter to *you*." He waited for a reply that never came. "What is art to *you*, then?"

"El arte es... morirse de frío."

"You've used that joke since I met you. Why is it so hard to talk about what art means to you? It's like you've got some kind of trauma with it."

"I'll remind you: you came here to fuck me, not psychoanalyze me."

"It's just... I don't know which of the two I find sexier."

I replied with a raucous laugh that probably woke the neighbors. Not like I planned to let them sleep: if I suffered, so would they.

"That's the kitschiest pickup line I've ever heard!" I exclaimed between uncontrollable laughs.

Carlos laughed too, covering his face in shame for such a cheesy line—a tacit admission he hadn't said it entirely sarcastically.

"Come on, let's get down to business before I change my mind," I said, hopping off the stool and wrestling off my blazer.

"No, don't take it off," whispered the corny man, gently pinching my lapels to pull them back together. "It's hotter this way."

Carlos agreed to drive me back to the gallery at 9 a.m., even though Saturday was his day off. We agreed not to tell anyone about last night and that it was just casual sex. He seemed to understand perfectly—in fact, he seemed almost *too* enthusiastic about it.

Between the rocking waves and the orca-like snores from the man beside me, sleep was impossible. But I decided to do something more productive than lamenting insomnia during the few dark hours left—and pocket some extra cash that month.

Carlos helped me carry the canvas-wrapped sack to the gallery "office," where we hurriedly mounted it on an easel and unwrapped it in the minutes before opening.

"It's... an ass?"

"*Your* ass."

"Signed by Charles Pompidou. I can almost taste the comedy."

But no matter how much he looked, he knew this abstract sketch—abstract like Carlos's booty, technically making it figurative art—lacked something for the gallery. It lacked transgression, spark, a hook to spin into a grandiose lie for clients. So I threw my cardboard cup of coffee at it.

"Perfect," Carlos murmured. "Think we can sell it with the repressed sexuality angle?"

The day went as planned, with several pre-arranged tours for suckers, until around 4 p.m.

Midway through one of my magnificently fabricated speeches, a tiny old man approached me. "Excuse me, dear. I'm getting old and wanted to leave something for my grandchildren. Could you guide me a bit, and—"

"Forgive me, sir," I whispered with all the patience in the world and my fakest smile. "I'm currently leading a tour and can't assist you, but if you speak to my colleague over there"—I pointed to a distracted Carlos inspecting the day's new arrivals for the ninetieth time—"I'm sure he can help."

"Thank you, dear," said the old man before heading toward the man who wasn't even on duty.

I apologized to my clients for the interruption and continued as if nothing happened. Two minutes later, during a pause to hydrate, I heard something in the distance that froze my blood. "And here we have *Perspective* by Vincent Jackson. A work nearly as devoid of aesthetic value as it is of meaning, which leads us to—"

I accidentally spat water onto Christine Duchamp's paint blots to avoid choking. I apologized again with a superlatively fake smile that shattered all previous theoretical limits and rushed to silence the fool before he said more stupidity. I dug my nails into his forearm like fresh buffalo meat and violently dragged him to the bureaucratic den to finish him off away from sensitive

eyes.

"Have you completely lost your mind?" I hissed, restraining myself from alerting the neighborhood.

"Am I wrong?! Look me in the eye and tell me that crap is worth anything!"

"You can't say that to a client, especially in front of a group this big! Do you know how much money they could've spent? They've even got designer disposable tissues!"

"You go tell that man to spend his life savings on trash! Do it if you're so brave!"

I slammed the door behind me, not caring if it hit Carlos's face, and strode toward the visibly confused old man still frozen by Vincent Jackson's canvas.

"Forgive me, sir," I said with a trembling ear-to-ear smile, unstable from murderous rage.

"After much debate with my colleague about his objectively incorrect opinions, we've concluded he forgot his meds today. So I'll be your private guide for the rest of the tour."

I planted myself before the painting, as usual, and glanced at it to ensure my spiel matched the work.

"*Perspective* by Vincent Jackson is..."

My gaze swept the octogenarian's wrinkled face. His eyes were fixed on the imposing canvas, his expression unreadable. His free hand (the one not gripping his cane) trembled like flan on a jackhammer—perhaps from the fear of an unprepared exam, perhaps from Parkinson's.

It was hard to know what he was thinking, but I deduced he didn't understand. He didn't understand the painting's shapes, Carlos's words, why gallery prices exceeded his means—or anything I might say about what stood before him.

"*Perspective* by Vincent Jackson is an eye. A shitty attempt at an eye, drawn with the exquisite disdain of twenty underpaid Vietnamese mass-producing ovals and circles in a sweatshop, under the vague, contradictory instructions of some smartass."

Then I understood why Carlos did what he did. Some people didn't deserve us dangling strings over their heads to replay the art factory waltz. And spewing that venom felt almost therapeutic.

"If you want to leave something for your grandchildren, put your money in an investment fund. Write them a book, paint them a portrait, or just spend time with them. It doesn't matter."

Carlos emerged with something hastily wrapped in beige cotton under his arm. He handed it to the man; the wrapping slipped, revealing Charles Pompidou's *The Morning After*.

"Take this and never speculate on art again," Carlos said, stoic as ever.

Problem solved, I apologized to the snobs I'd kept waiting, no longer expecting them to fall for the trap after our spectacle.

"Excuse me," said a blonde woman with pounds of makeup, clutching her designer bag like a shield. "Won't the water stains on Christine Duchamp's painting reduce its value?"

"Don't worry," I replied with my patented smile. "It's acrylic. It'll dry."

Once the day was over, Carlos helped me lock up the gallery and prepare for Monday. He offered to lower the metal shutters (unarmored despite consideration—we realized thieves, being family men, likely knew as much about art as we did). I first took it as clumsy chivalry, but it was just another stupid ploy to show off his height.

With the day's cash squared away and only the fuses left to throw before resting, an awkward silence lasted centuries in the gallery. We had unfinished business, and both knew it.

"About this afternoon..." I whispered to Carlos.

"Yeah..."

"What exactly were you thinking?"

"You weren't always like this, were you?"

"No, of course not. I used to have dreams. I thought visual arts were my calling, that painting all day would be a dream come true."

"And now?"

"Now I'm just another cynic."

"Wouldn't you rather be doing what you love?"

"Not anymore. Seven years and one diploma later killed my passion for anything but stirring the pot."

"Wouldn't it be beautiful to live through another Renaissance?"

"You think I don't fantasize about that all day?" I snapped, harsher than intended. "You think I wouldn't love to make a living painting what I want? Without conforming to the same 'avant-garde' mold the Syndicate's vicious cycle demands?"

Carlos fell silent. He tried to meet my eyes but looked away seconds later. He already knew my answers—likely because mine wasn't the first case he'd seen in his Syndicate years.

"Scaring clients will only leave you starving, Don Quixote," I scolded, inches from his face.

"Don't overthink it. Just play the system a little longer, and pray for humanity's sake this is just a tasteless fad—a collective nightmare that'll fade in the coming decades."

"I want to blow the whistle."

I stared at him, incredulous, for a full minute. My face cycled through expressions before settling on my old superior smirk—the one that mocked him so often.

"Sure. And when you tell people the art Illuminati have controlled cultural perception for decades through mafias and brainwashing, they'll believe you—not think you're some guy who escaped a straitjacket and happened to climb walls well."

"The CIA documents detailing how they used abstract expressionism as a cultural weapon against the USSR during the Cold War have been declassified for years. It's not that far-fetched."

"Yes, declassified for years—and they still sound like conspiracy theories dreamed up by someone with too much imagination and free time to post online. You won't convince anyone."

"I've got years of Syndicate emails from Francisco Laborda and María de la Serna calling their

own work trash. Photocopies of contracts with sweatshops Manfred Dickinson, Adam Kampmann, and Katie Rosenzweig used to produce their ‘prestigious’ pieces. Stacks of spreadsheets tracking black-market kickbacks to officials awarding million-euro contracts. It’s all there. Impossible to deny."

"Oh... so you were serious."

"Dead serious, Taiga."

"You’re out of your mind. I don’t see it."

We finally left the gallery at 12:15 a.m., feeling we’d reached a crucial conclusion. Despite my objections—and my belief his quixotic plan would end tragically—I couldn’t help but wonder during the drive: *What if Carlos is right?* Goosebumps rose on my skin.

"No coffee tonight. I want to sleep."

The next day, after waking around 2 p.m., we headed to Carlos’s dump to collect evidence he’d hoarded over the years. Judging by his organization, he’d planned this madness since the start of his career—making me wonder why he hadn’t acted sooner.

We rummaged through boxes hidden under his unmade bed and found enough incriminating material to stop a train: photocopies of illegal contracts awarded through graft, hard drives with email dumps spanning five years, documents proving the Syndicate’s price-inflation schemes, letters exposing insider trading, and enough papers to decapitate everyone in the Syndicate. Ourselves included.

I had a university professor—now art director at *La Vanguardia*—who might be one of the few not entirely brainwashed by postmodernism. We decided someone with media reach and anti-Syndicate views could help us drop the bomb, so I retrieved his number from an old phone backup and scheduled an urgent meeting at my place that day.

We packed everything into Carlos’s car—so full I held boxes on my lap—and raced to my apartment, pausing only to glance at Carlos’s squalid home and thank myself for screwing him in *my* bed.

We waited thirty minutes for the doorbell—enough time for 4,172 heartbeats. There stood the old man I remembered most fondly from university. His classes were the only ones where I wasn’t expected to randomly flick paint at a canvas.

"Taiga! Long time!" he exclaimed, kissing my cheeks.

"Mr. Martínez! I’ve missed your classes."

"Likewise—and your paintings," he said before turning to Carlos. "She’s a genius, you know?"

"Well, I’m sure she’s not *that* good," Carlos replied. "Sorry to interrupt, but we must get to the point. Shall we sit?"

We placed a box labeled "contracts" in Carlos's near-illegible scrawl on the table.

"I'm sure, having taught at one of Catalonia's most corrupt art schools and directed a prestigious paper's art section, you're aware of a... let's call it a 'cultural elite' pulling art's strings from the shadows."

"Well, yes," Martínez chuckled. "I suspected something when I saw colleagues meeting hooded around a pentagram at night."

"Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I'd heard whispers, but the secrecy makes it hard to approach. That's why you called, right?"

"Yes, but for obvious reasons, we couldn't share details earlier. The material is vast, and time is short. Hence today's meeting."

Carlos pulled out stapled documents, sorting them on the table as I watched both men.

"We call it the Syndicate. You might call it the mob or the mafia."

"Ah, so that's its name."

"The corruption network spans politics, academia, and artists themselves. Everything's optimized for maximum profit and compliance."

"Are you saying my former colleagues were accomplices?"

Carlos grabbed two dossiers and slid them over. I recognized a professor's name in the footer. Martínez put on reading glasses and inspected them closely.

"These are grave accusations. Do you have corroborating evidence?"

"Plenty. Those boxes in the living room are full of it."

"If true, this would be the biggest scandal since Watergate. Though I doubt people will take 'the Syndicate' well. Art Illuminati, indeed."

I broke my silence.

"Mr. Martínez, what is art to you?"

"My dear, *el arte es morirte de frío*," he replied with mocking laughter.

"I see you've got hypothermia too. When did you lose your spark, Mr. Martínez?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I mean."

"No, I'm lost..." Martínez said, discomfort seeping into every syllable.

"Taiga, what are you doing?" Carlos cut in.

"Only the Syndicate knows me as Taiga, the Siberian."

"Goddammit..." Carlos muttered.

"Which means you didn't remember me." The man looked near cardiac arrest. "So who gave you my file? Someone at the paper? I admire the Syndicate archivists' diligence. A civil servant would've taken weeks."

Carlos jumped up, pacing aimlessly, hands on his head, swearing under his breath.

"Miss, I—"

"No excuses."

"I'm so sorry..." Martínez whispered, a flicker of genuine guilt in his voice.

"You were the ferryman who saved the last piece of my soul from that graveyard of dreams. You had real passion—unlike anyone. What turned you into the villain?"

I let my words sink like gravity-driven knives. The man stayed silent.

"They're coming now, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"How long do we have?"

"Minutes."

We fled with only the clothes on our backs, grabbing some black-market cash before bolting to Carlos's car. The Syndicate's eyes were everywhere; nowhere in the country was safe. Luckily, not all Syndicates were allies. We bet that poor communication between tiny Bourgogne Syndicates in France and Catalonia's would keep the mob's hitmen off us.

After hopping motels nightly to dodge potential spies, we settled in Montbard—a tiny, idyllic French town where we finally rested after weeks of nomadism.

Our rented apartment was in a three-story building with an electric-blue facade and crude handprint decals around every window. According to the landlady, Montbard's art craze had hit years prior: neighbors redecorated facades in clumsy attempts to mimic avant-garde European cities, hoping to revive the town through tourism. Judging by the dwindling economy, it failed.

The landlady proudly showed us the handprints—oblivious to kitsch—explaining each family member's contribution. They'd chosen blue because it was their favorite from the city's limited Pantone palette.

Luckily, we arrived just in time for the town's small independent art festival. The works were predictably mediocre (heavy on "chocolate-box art"), yet I found them more beautiful than anything in the city.

Browsing stalls, we encountered an abstract painting: greenish-blue hues with thick, square horizontal spatula strokes that evoked a Siberian taiga.

"So Taiga isn't your real name."

"Obviously, idiot."

"What is it, then? If I may know."

"Does it matter?"

"No, I suppose not. Taiga is quite pretty." Carlos started toward the next stall, but I grabbed his arm.

"Luna. My name is Luna."

"Ah, lovely. I see why you changed it."

"Fuck you," I whispered, walking ahead.

"Hey, while we're confessing. Anything else you want to get off your chest today?"

"Yes. I'm not Siberian either."

"Knew it."

Despite the risks, Carlos kept earning a living the only way he knew—though less shark, more sheep now. I decided to change my life: to *try* making a living doing what I loved. That day, we bought promising paintings at the fair (resellable at upscale events) and acrylics/art supplies for my new career.

At dinner, we discussed plans. Carlos found an art auction house in Dijon (Bourgogne's capital) to sell our five paintings for—with luck and sweet talk—a 50% profit.

"How about I christen my brushes with a painting of your ass?"

"My ass is very nice. It won't sell."

"I never planned to sell it."

That night, after dinner, I decided to break in my paints while stargazing from the dining room window. I dipped my hand in red paint, watching the acrylic shine like a moonlit sea. Feeling foolish, I reached out the window and pressed my hand beside the other prints.

My name is Luna. Today, I reclaim my radiance.