

The Shock Of The View

By

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Pieter Breughel and the Missing Models

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The cover picture is a detail from “The Artist and The Connoisseur” by Breughel. Drawn circa 1565. It is thought to be a self portrait.

1: Hunters in the Snow

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Brueghel_the_elder_-_Hunters_in_the_snow.jpg

It was too bloody cold. Pieter Breughel looked out across the wintry scene that he was painting. He was already thinking he should have set up his easel closer to the inn and the bonfire that was flaming so attractively outside it. Sure, the view was better from here but it was, as he had already decided, too bloody cold.

The mobile phone in his pocket went off. Its piercing ring tone, a rip from Hocus Pocus by Focus, startled the hunting dogs as they passed following their masters down to the lake. Breughel fumbled in his overcoat for the phone and answered it.

“Ya,” he said, “is Breughel.” He was famously abrupt and his telephone manner did nothing to dispel the impression that answering telephone calls was not one of his great life pleasures.

“Pieter?” He recognised the voice at the other end as Janine Schenk, the British super-realist.

“Ya,” he said. “What can I do for you, Janine?”

“I have a friend,” she said. “He needs some help.”

“We all need some help sometimes.”

“This is rather specialised help. The sort of help you gave me recently.” Pieter felt weary. The trip to London had taken a lot out of him. Nobody likes seeing people killed and the business with Vallance had been messy. He’d been pleased that Schenk had come out of it all right but as for the trustees of the National Gallery and the Tate; well, they should have seen it coming.

“I dunno, Janine,” he responded warily, “I’m working on ‘Hunters in the Snow’. It’s a commission for the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.”

“Oh, come on Pieter,” Janine sounded impatient. “Another of those genre paintings? You know you don’t have to stand around out of doors to do them. You must have enough snow scenes in your gallery to recreate the arctic. This will be more interesting. And it will be warmer.”

“Warmer?” said Pieter. Suddenly the opportunity that Janine was presenting sounded more interesting. His breath was already turning to ice in his beard.

“Come to Italy, Pieter, come to Rome. There’s someone here that wants to meet you.”

A group of small boys ran past where Breughel was painting. Their snow fight managed to shower him with cold white powder. His fingers were already getting numb. It had been a stupid idea to try to paint this outside. It was alright for those impressionists in their nice, warm, south of France sun but it didn’t work here in Breda. It didn’t take much more effort on Janine’s part to make him agree.

2: *La Gioconda*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Mona_Lisa.jpg

The plane touched down at Rome's international airport. As Pieter stepped across to the bus from the foot of the aircraft steps he looked across at the terminal building. "Bloody hell," he thought, "they've even named the airport after him."

Janine was waiting in the arrival hall when he had collected his baggage. She waved as he came through the barrier. He smiled back. All right, he was probably old enough to be her father but that didn't stop him appreciating her dark, slight good looks in a most un-fatherly way. He'd never gone in for painting women in the nude. Maybe he was making a mistake, he thought. He pushed the trolley with his bag on across to where she was standing.

"Hi, Pieter," she smiled. "He's sent a car. Just through here." Janine waved a set of car keys and pointed to the exit. Outside Pieter could see a Lamborghini Miura.

"I wouldn't have thought that was his style," Pieter said. "I had him down as more of an aesthete." Janine shrugged. Pieter guessed, given Janine's current enthusiasm for super-real pictures of classic cars, that she was more than happy with their assigned transport. He followed her out to the car. She climbed in and he followed suite, balancing his bag on his lap. It wasn't an easy manoeuvre – either the getting in or the balancing of his bag. The cockpit of the car was hardly roomy. He just hoped they hadn't far to go.

Janine swung the car confidently out of the airport and on to the A12 Autostrada Azzura. They were heading north, Pieter decided. The Miura growled as Janine slipped through the afternoon traffic. Comforted by her assured handling of the car, Pieter relaxed and started to enjoy the ride. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Tarquinia," Janine replied slicing between two enormous trucks. Pieter looked up at the cab of the truck. The driver's foot board was above his head. The relaxed feeling evaporated. "He's got a villa near there," Janine went on. "He'll explain all about it when we get there."

"If we get there," thought Pieter, clutching his bag tighter as Janine slipped through another disturbingly small gap.

By the time Janine skidded the car to a halt outside the villa, Pieter was convinced he had lost several pounds in fright-induced sweat but they arrived without a scratch on the car or themselves. Pieter unfolded himself from inside the car, straightening up with care, his joints still stiff from the flight. The warmth of the afternoon was adequate compensation for the terrors of the drive. As he looked around a bald man with a long flowing beard came bustling out of the villa. "Hey, Pete, hey!" the figure called.

"Leonardo!" Pieter acknowledged. "Good to meet you!"

"Please," the other said, "it's Leo. To my friends it's Leo. Everyone else it's 'Mr Da V' but to friends it's Leo."

"Leo," said Pieter taking his hand. He looked around. "Nice place."

Leo was looking at Janine as she bent over the car, pulling her handbag from where she had wedged it between the seats. "Nice arse," he hissed conspiratorially then, as Janine stood up. "Come in both of you. Come in."

A rather effete looking man was waiting at the door and offered to take their bags. Leo introduced him as il Salaino. Pieter wasn't sure what the relationship was between them. Leo didn't bother to explain.

The building was old but the interior was packed with electronics and other gadgetry. Leo showed them though into a large sunlit lounge. He pressed a few buttons, blinds closed the window and a screen dropped from the ceiling.

"Here," said Leo. "Do you get to watch TV?"

Pieter shook his head. He had cable in one of the flats in Breda but there had never seemed to be anything on that he wanted to watch. Besides he was pretty busy most of the time.

"You should, you should, Pete. You paint the man in the street – this is what he does; what he watches." Leo thumbed a remote control and the screen flickered into life. "Now this is one big show...."

"America's Next Top Model" the title said over a series of pictures of girls strutting along a cat walk.

"Leo, you're not planning to launch a line of designer clothing are you?" Janine cut in.

Leo looked puzzled for a moment but then scribbled a note on a pad of paper. "Interesting thought, Miss Schenk," he said. "Interesting thought. No, just watch for a moment. It's not that sort of model."

The program went on. A group of girls were sitting in a room, listening to a presentation by another girl and then the scene dissolved to an artist's studio. "Twelve girls," the commentary began, "one ambition. To be part of the world's greatest painting. This is the race to find America's next Top Model!!!"

"World's greatest painting. Pah!" grunted Leo. "In America? Pah!"

The programme continued. Each girl was being asked to show her abilities to pose and to remain motionless. The camera panned along the line. The soundtrack was giving a short biography of each. Telephone numbers appeared on the screen inviting the audience to vote for their choice. As the camera reached one girl with dark waving hair Leo froze the frame. "Look," he said pointing to the girl's blank look.

"Very attractive," said Breughel. "She should do well, within the limits of the programme."

"That's not the point," said Leo. "That's my model. I am half way through her portrait. She disappeared two weeks ago. Now she turns up there. Something must be done." He reached behind the couch on which he was sitting and pulled out a half finished canvas.

Janine looked at it. Even in its current state it was impressive. The girl in the picture was staring out of the frame at the viewer, a curious half smile on her lips. Leo had obviously been having trouble with representing it; clipped to the stretcher of the canvas were a series of sketches of the girl's mouth as he had tried to work out exactly how to show it.

Pieter turned to Leo. "So, your model decides to take off. She turns up in the USA. She wants to find some fame and fortune. Is that new? It's difficult of course when you have a picture half finished like this but what can we artists do? That's models for you."

"It's not like that," said Leo with a determined look on his face. He tugged irritably at his beard. "No, something else is going on. There have been others. Not seen on this show but there have been others. Ingres has lost a model. Velazquez too. Perhaps three or four more. There is the welfare of these girls to consider."

“And the inconvenience of the artists too?” Janine interjected.

Leo scowled at her. “Of course. But you should understand that. Or do you just work from photographs these days?”

Janine nearly came back with some remark to the effect that at least her paintings didn't fade the minute they got up on the walls but, in the end, ignored the jibe at the way that she and many super-realists approached their work. Pieter cut in to stop the thing descending into an argument over artistic technique. “So, Leo,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Find her,” he pointed to the screen. The programme had run on and now Leo's model was draped across a couch in a state of undress. The pose she was adopting didn't really fit with the prim individual in Leo's portrait. “and bring her back here.”

“Maybe I can do the first. The second? Who knows? I can try. What can you tell me about her?”

“She's a local girl, Donna Vellani.”

“I'd heard you were painting Lisa Gherardini – that's not this picture then?”

“I'm still arguing with Francesco Del Giocondo about that one. He's a difficult man. You know what these Florentine's are like!”

Il Salino came back into the room clutching a telephone. “It's for you,” he said. “It's ...” He looked at Breughel and Janine, “well, it's....you know.”

Leo tutted and took the phone from him. “Hello, Pierre. Yes, I see. No. Well, that's very concerning. No, no I don't think I can help. I'm very busy right now. Have you tried Nicholas? Yes, Nicholas, Nicholas Poussin. He might be able to help. He'd be worth a call anyway. ... All right. ... Good bye, Pierre.” He broke the connection. Leo turned back to Pieter and Janine. “Lunatic!” he said. Brueghel looked puzzled. “Pierre Plantard. His delusions about the Priory of Sion will cause a great deal of trouble. He wants me to be involved. I've told him no.”

“So, it is all a myth then? Just a hoax as many claim?”

“Certainly for Plantard,” said Leo with a wink. “But what good would a secret society be if you let people find out about it?”

Breughel felt himself warming to the man. Janine was sitting quietly listening to all that was being said and watching the television programme as the various tasks the girls were being given were played out.

“Well, Leo, if I wanted to help. I say IF. If I wanted to help, will the others talk?”

“Perhaps. I will do what I can to persuade them. Here,” he gave Pieter a paper with an address on it, “Donna Vellani was staying in Rome, down on the Corso Vittorio Emmanuelle. But there is one other you should see.”

“Who is that?”

“Victorine Meurent.” Janine sat up at the sound of the woman's name. She was a famous beauty, whose cool elegance had transfixed Paris only a few months earlier. “She is the president of the Artistic Posers Collective – it's a sort of model's union – she will have an interest in this too. You'll find her villa a little further down the coast.”

3: *Olympia*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Manet%2C_Edouard_-_Olympia%2C_1863.jpg

Victorine Meurent lounged back on her chaise-longue, looking towards Breughel with barely concealed contempt. She was naked apart from a thin black ribbon around her neck. One hand was draped decorously across her lap but her gaze dared the man to look away from her pale body. "So," she said, "suddenly the artists wish to take an interest in our affairs. Freezing studios, weak absinthe, poor wages were all good enough before. Now, though, now they want to give us a detective!"

"Mister Da V is very concerned for the welfare of the models," Pieter responded. "He is only trying to help."

"Mister Da V is concerned for the welfare of Mister Da V. He knows that without models he would have to go back to painting fruit or, worse still, landscapes." Breughel held his tongue; he knew the girl's taunt was directed at his own work.

Breughel shrugged. "Well, perhaps you are right. If you don't feel I can help then...." He made to pick up his cap and started turn to the door."

"No. Wait." Victorine said. She reached out for a small bell on the table beside her and rang it.

Her black maid servant appeared clutching a vast bunch of flowers. "From Monsieur Manet," the maid said. "He hopes you will see him later."

Victorine looked bored. "Perhaps," she said. "I will think about it, but for now I want no callers."

"Very good madam," the maid said, putting the flowers down beside Victorine's couch.

Victorine swung her pale legs down from the couch gathering her robe about her. As she did so she disturbed the black cat that was sitting near her feet. It hissed and buried itself under the couch. "Come," she said, gesturing to a group of armchairs arranged around the fire on the far side of the room. "I shall give you a hearing and we shall see. You'll take some tea?"

Breughel nodded. He gestured towards Janine. "I should introduce my associate, Miss Schenk."

"Associate?" said Victorine sceptically. "A new word for it."

"I am an artist in my own right, mademoiselle," Janine responded feeling prickly. "Members of your organisation have sat for my works."

"An innovation!" exclaimed Victorine. "A woman behind the easel instead of in front of it. Whatever will things come to if the world is exposed to women's views instead of views of women?" Her voice was heavy with irony and she looked at Janine with an evident degree of distaste.

The maid arrived with a tray of tea things and poured each of them a cup. Victorine pulled her wrap more closely about her. "There have been six girls to my knowledge. At least two of them have turned up on the programme that you talk of but of the others, no trace. We have tried to get messages to them but there have been no replies. There may be nothing to worry about. Mr Da V and the others have been inconvenienced but that is hardly our concern. I am more worried about the welfare of my members, though. If there is any suggestion that these girls have not gone of the own accord..."

"Do you believe that to be the case?"

Victorine shrugged. "It is hard to say. Our members are often impulsive. The life of a model is hardly one of stability and conventional morality." She granted Janine an acidic look. "It mirrors that of our employers." Janine returned it. "I do know that at least one was planning to be in Florence this week but is not there and another had said she expected to be in Rome and is not there either. Let us say that I suspect that all is not as it should be."

"Go on," Breughel urged.

"One of the girls at least. I was surprised that she would go off without at least a word to others. She was working with Buonarrotti. In Rome. He was furious when she left."

Breughel felt no enthusiasm for a meeting with Michelangelo. A mercurial figure at best, he was too prone to solving problems with his fists for the quiet Belgian.

"In fact," said Victorine. "Two of the others were last heard of in Rome. It could be a good place to start."

Breughel grunted. "You'll let me have a list?" he asked. "Names, employers, date and place last seen."

Victorine nodded and reached for her bell. The maid appeared again. "The ledger," Victorine called. The girl left and returned with a large black leather bound book. Victorine copied out some details from it and passed the paper to Pieter. He got to his feet and Janine followed suite. "Do call me," Victorine said to Janine, "if you ever decide to hang up your brushes. I'm sure there are many that would love to"

"Of course," said Janine in as sweet a voice as she could muster, "though I don't think it likely." She and Breughel took their leave.

4: The Creation

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:God2-Sistine_Chapel.png

Pieter and Janine headed back towards Rome. If anything Janine's driving was more aggressive than before. Pieter winced as she carved the Miura between two small vans and slipped down a gear to accelerate away from them, earning a growl of appreciation from the gear box.

"Bitch," she muttered under her breath.

Pieter heard her but chose not to be drawn. It was obvious that Janine and Victorine hadn't seen eye to eye. Whatever her views on the emancipation of women might be, it was clear which side of an easel Victorine thought a woman should be.

They picked up the autostrada just before Civitavecchia but the traffic was still too heavy to allow Janine to take advantage of the V12, 4 litre engine. The exhaust grumbled as she wove through the stream of cars heading towards Rome.

At the edge of the city, Janine took the circonvallazione north to pick up the Via Aurelia. The Carabinieri were less than impressed with the way that Janine swung the Lamborghini into St Peter's Square. A contingent of Swiss Guard approach them as Janine and Pieter climbed out. "Friends of Mr Da V," Janine called as they reached the car. The guards stiffened at the mention of the artist and engineer. She tossed the cars keys to the first guard. "Can you park it please?" she smiled, winsomely. "We'll be in the Capella Sistina."

The guard smiled. "Sure," he said. "But watch out. We've got workmen in there. They're doing some stuff to the ceiling."

"Thanks," called Janine, leading Pieter to the door to the chapel. Pieter looked back to the scene in the square. The guards were arguing about which of them would actually get to park the car. Pieter thought there might be a few more kilometers on the clock than was strictly needed by the time they got it back.

Pieter had heard great things about the Sistine Chapel but right now the place resembled a building site more than an artist's studio. A large hydraulic platform stood at one end of the chapel, its legs extended so that those working on it could easily reach the ceiling 60 feet above the ground.

"Hey Mike," Janine called up. "Are you going to be up there all day?"

"Janine, hey!" the artist responded with spontaneous warmth. "Hold on, I'll be right down." He barked some orders to the others working on the platform alongside him, and scrambled down the ladder from the platform to the floor of the chapel. He picked up a cloth to wipe the paint from his hands and then embraced Janine affectionately. "Still keeping it real?"

"Better than that," she laughed. "Do you know Pieter?"

Breughel extended his hand. "It's an honour to meet you," he said sincerely.

"Naturally," Michelangelo responded in the manner of a man known for his lack of modesty. Janine gave him a scolding look. "And, of course, you. Your work with the everyday is as great in its field as is mine with the divine."

Breughel's natural tendency to the taciturn made him wary of the Italian's over blown manner. "We hear that one of your models ran off. Mr da V thought it might help if he could find her."

Michelangelo looked annoyed. "Inconsiderate slut!" he snapped. "If Eve cannot be relied upon what chance is there for the rest of womankind? Look!" He pointed to a drawing on a sheet of paper hanging on one wall of the chapel. In the picture the head and shoulders of a woman were peering out from under the arm of God at the act of creation. "It was almost complete, I was ready to transfer it to the ceiling. The plaster was already applied and wet, She should have been on hand if I needed to check any slight detail. And what do I find?"

"What?" said Pieter.

"Nothing! I come back from lunch to find she has gone. No letter, no message, nothing. We've had to chip the plaster off again. I don't know what we will do if she doesn't come back. Sure I can get on with the rest for now but it will have to be done soon."

"You've tried to find her at home?"

"Of course! At home, her parents, her – how you say – 'significant other'. No sign. None of them know where she has gone or that she was planning to go anywhere."

"And the police?" Janine asked.

"Why should they be interested? She's a model. They come and go, they say. How can you expect anything else, they say. They took the details but I don't think they took much notice."

"But you have friends in high places. Didn't you try Julius?" Pieter thought that the Pope ought to have been able to help.

"You think he can spare his time worrying about one girl. You know what he said? Mikey, baby, he says, you do the pictures, you worry about the fucking girls. I gotta church to run. You think you got problems with girls, let me tell you how many nuns I gotta worry about. That's what he said. So I got a ceiling with a big hole in it right now. If you can find her, then great."

Pieter listened. He could understand why Luther was pushing things the way he was. "Can you tell us where she was staying?" He'd already concluded that he wouldn't learn much from Buonarrotti.

Michelangelo gave them an address for his model, Gina Perdice. She'd been living in an apartment down near the Piazza Navona. Pieter said he'd do what he could. He and Janine left the painter climbing back up to the ceiling, haranguing his assistants and yelling at the plasterers for putting up more than the painters could hope to cover before it dried. Back in the sunlight that streamed down on St Peter's Square. Pieter confided in Janine, "I'm not sure this is getting anywhere yet."

She shook her head. "No, the artists take little interest in the models apart from peering at them when they are painting or fucking them when they're not."

Pieter was sometimes affronted by Janine's language but he didn't disagree with her analysis. They walked together slowly. "I think we should try the addresses that Victorine and Leo gave us," Pieter said. "If you take these three, I'll do the others. Just try to see if anyone knows when they went missing; if they remember anything odd about the girls; if they had any callers. Let's check these out and then we'll go see Gina Perdice's place."

Janine nodded. "Sure," she said. "Where will I meet you?"

Pieter thought for a moment. "How about by the Trevi Fountain at seven o'clock"

Janine said, "Fine." She waved and headed off across the street dodging between the hooting traffic of the late afternoon.

Pieter trudged off in the opposite direction with his own list. He knew that leg work was the heart of detection but that didn't make it any more interesting.

When they met again they were both feeling despondent. The views of those they had spoken to were remarkably consistent. "She was a model. They come and go don't they? How would I know where she is? No she hasn't paid the rent – either before she left or after. No I don't remember any callers. I don't let the girls bring guests in here. What sort of a house do you think this is?"

"What we need," said Janine, "is to get closer to things. Listen. When we get to Gina Perdice's apartment let me talk to the landlady. I've got an idea but you'll need to go along with it."

Spontaneity wasn't Breughel's strongest suit but he was happy to let Janine take the lead.

The apartment block was a big rambling building, they made their way through the warren of corridors until they found an old woman carrying bundles of washing. "We're looking for Gina Perdice."

The woman responded immediately. "She's not here. I told Buonarotti already. I don't know where she is."

"I know," said Janine, "he suggested I could take her room."

The woman shrugged. "I don't mind who pays the rent." She looked her up and down. "You working for Buonarotti?"

Janine shook her head. "No. For this man." She grabbed Pieter by the arm and smiled warmly at him.

The old woman grunted. "Another artist, eh?" She prodded Breughel inquisitorially. "Is she going to earn enough posing for you to pay her rent?"

Breughel, taking his cue as promised, nodded.

"What do I care?" she said. "As long as she has the money! It's that room there." She pointed across the corridor. "And you! Artist!" she waved at Pieter. "You wanna fuck your model you do it somewhere else."

Pieter doffed his hat at the woman and muttered an assurance of probity. The two of them left her and went into the room. Pieter looked as if he was sucking a lemon.

Janine collapsed on the bed laughing. "Your face!" she giggled.

"I am not used to being accused of sexual impropriety," Breughel said stuffily.

"Well," said Janine, "you have now installed your devastatingly attractive model in her sordid apartment. You shall take a small studio somewhere. I shall model for you. We shall see what happens. Maybe I will find things out from some of the other girls."

"I am not a fan of these under-cover operations," Breughel said. "This could be very risky for you."

"I can look after myself, Pieter," Janine responded.

Pieter felt like reminding her that she hadn't been able to look after herself when she was snatched from the Delacroix exhibition and that he'd ended up pulling her out of that with the death of three of her guards. He looked at her determined face. It was obvious that she'd made up her mind. "I'd better find some paints and a canvas, then," Breughel said.

5: *Odalisque With A Slave*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Ingres%2C_Odalisque_with_a_slave.jpg

Pieter Breughel was taking a morning coffee on the Piazza Navona. He winced at the sight of Janine Schenk as she approached him across the square.

She was wearing an acid green blouse of a material that was sheer enough to make it plain she was wearing a black bra beneath it. Her skirt stretched to below her knees but was so tight that it provided all those watching with a perfect appreciation of the line of her buttocks and thighs. The black satin material glinted in the morning sunlight.

He was sitting outside the café where they had arranged to meet. We need to be seen, she'd said. The artist and his model. He looked at his canvases, brushes and easel, propped ostentatiously beside his seat. He looked back at the girl advancing towards him. There wasn't much risk that they wouldn't be noticed, he thought. Worst luck!

Now she strode straight up to him and sat down, giving the hem of her skirt an exaggerated tug downwards as she crossed her legs. Seeing Pieter's response, she smiled at him and blew him a kiss. The smirks of the men and the scowls of the women at adjacent tables told Breughel exactly what they thought about his companion.

Pieter picked up the tiny cup of espresso coffee and peered over it at Janine's back-combed and teased hair. "Very convincing," he said quietly.

"I thought so," laughed Janine. "Relax. It will do your reputation the world of good."

"I hadn't realised that 'model' was a synonym for 'prostitute' these days."

"You're reading the wrong papers."

She was right, thought Breughel. He was feeling increasingly out of touch with the man in the street.

Janine grinned at Pieter's discomfort. It got worse as Pieter realised that a girl in an exceptionally abbreviated skirt and a low cut top seemed to be waving at him. His relief was evident as he realised that she was waving at Janine rather than himself.

"Ciao!" the girl exclaimed as she arrived at their table. She sat down and tossed her capacious shoulder bag onto the table. As she leant forward to pull a pack of cigarettes from the bag, Pieter realised that he was being afforded a view of her cleavage that practically allowed him to see her navel.

"This is Francesca Corone," Janine announced. "We met at the apartments and I've got a job!" Janine leapt forward and clutched Pieter around the neck in an exaggerated show of affection. "We could have a clue," she hissed quietly in his ear as she hugged him.

"Si," said Francesca. "We have a real chance to be in an important picture. For Mr Ingres. You know him?"

Pieter nodded. Who hadn't heard of the painter of the debauched pictures that had outraged Paris in spite of his attempt to justify them as a sociological study of girls involved in the sex industry in the near and middle east. "More odalisques?" Pieter asked.

Janine nodded but seeing his concern said, "It's all very proper. Mr Ingres has assured us. We shall be chaperoned at all times."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said Brueghel stuffily.

"Come and see," said Janine, "we are starting this morning."

Breughel grunted acceptance, downed the last of his coffee, tossed a few coins on the table, picked up his easel and canvases and followed Janine and Francesca across the piazza. In spite of himself, he found he was enjoying the site of the two girls' backsides as they strode out as well as their tight skirts would allow them.

Ingres studio, in a tall Moorish building at the back of the Spanish Steps, looked more like a Turkish harem than an artist's workplace but he greeted Breughel warmly. He shooed the girls away to change, smiling at the way they giggled and grabbed at the bolts of brightly coloured and embroidered silks that were draped around the room. "I'm surprised to see you in Rome, Breughel," Ingres said.

"It was cold in Antwerp," Pieter replied, "and besides, I like pizza,"

Ingres gave him a sideways look, not certain whether or not he was being humorous. Pieter noticed a rather serious looking woman sitting in the corner of the room. Ingres waved her forward, "Pieter, do you know Madame Berthe Morisot"

Pieter nodded. They had met some time ago in Paris.

"Berthe will be keeping an eye on me to make sure I am not taking any liberties with the girls. She is quite incorruptible, I am sure you will agree," Ingres said, evidently irritated by the need to employ a chaperone as well as the models.

"You are right. I am sure that with Madame Morisot in attendance the good reputation of the girls and yourself should be well assured." Pieter took his leave of Ingres, Janine, and Berthe Morisot. He had work to do.

He spent the day trying to talk to some of the other girls that had worked for Michealangelo. Sure they knew "Eve" but no one had seen her since she disappeared. Too many girls were going missing they said. It wasn't a safe job any more. They were all looking for other things to do, working in cafes, jobs in the clubs or the theatres, anything was better than modelling at the moment.

Breughel didn't feel that he was getting very far. It would probably be useful to see if Janine had discovered anything, he thought and headed for the flat she was sharing with Francesca. The place was deserted.

Pieter called Dominique. "Dom," he said, "Is Janine still with you? She didn't show up at her flat yet."

"I left her with Francesca and Berthe They were getting dressed, I had to be over here, I had a call to meet with some guys. They didn't show up either."

Now Pieter was worried. "Meet me at the studio," he said, "as quickly as you can."

The two of them arrived at Ingres's Spanish Steps studio at almost the same time. Dominique fumbled with his keys trying to open the door. As soon as they got in, the muffled moans coming from upstairs confirmed Pieter's anxieties. The two of them bounded up the stairs. In the room that Dominique used to let his models change they found Madame Morisot.

She had been blindfolded, bound and gagged and tied to a large, heavy wooden chair. She was struggling against the ropes that held her to the chair. Dominique ran forward and tried to prise the cloth that gagged her from across her mouth but without effect, it had been tied too tightly. He turned his attention to the blindfold and wrenched it off. Berthe Morisot blinked in the light with relief at the sight of her rescuers. Pieter pulled a small folding knife from his pocket and managed to saw through the cloth. As he pulled that clear he saw that another cloth had been tied tightly between her lips holding further packing deep inside her mouth. He

cut that too and pulled the packing clear as Dominique fumbled with the ropes. Berthe coughed and spluttered as the mouth filling wadding came clear.

“Oh, thank you,” Berthe gasped as Pieter removed the last of the gag. “They’ve taken the girls. I couldn’t stop them.” Dominique had managed to untie the ropes around her waist and across her lap and now started on her wrists. Berthe gave a groan as the ropes came loose. She pulled her arms free and tried to massage some life back into her red raw wrists.

“Tell me what happened,” said Pieter.

“There were three of them,” Berthe began. “Masked, carrying guns. They burst in and made us all stand with our hands up. They wouldn’t let poor Janine dress. They forced Francesca to tie me up on this chair and then Janine. Then they tied up Francesca too. They gagged all of us and then they blindfolded me. After that I could only tell what happened by what I heard.”

“It must have been terrifying,” said Breughel sympathetically, “please go on.”

“Well one of them said he thought there was only supposed to be one and one of the others said they might as well take them both. There would be enough room in the truck, he said. The girls were making a lot of noise in spite of their gags. I think the men were pawing at them. They seemed to be waiting for something or someone. They took quite a long time. Then there was another voice. A woman’s voice. She was speaking in English but she was French, I am almost certain. She sounded angry. Said that there should only have been one of them and that one of them wasn’t really a model. One of the men argued back saying what did it matter. In the end the woman calmed down and they all left.”

“What time was this?”

“Perhaps around six o’clock,” Berthe said. She turned towards Dominique. “I am sorry Monsieur Ingres,” she said. “I did what I could.”

Dominic nodded. “I am sure,” he said. “Please do not concern yourself. Herr Breughel here will do all that needs to be done to obtain their safe return.”

6: A View Of the River Tiber

<http://tinyurl.com/364vqa>

Pieter was anxious to talk to Victorine Meurent once more. He discovered she was in Rome, staying at one of the grand hotels on the Via Flaminia. He took himself across town to meet her.

“Good afternoon, Mademoiselle Meurent,” Pieter was trying to be affable. “I hadn’t expected to see you in Rome.”

“I go where my members’ interests take me, Mister Breughel,” Victorine replied.

“Of course. And where did they take you yesterday?”

“May I be permitted to know why you ask?”

“Of course. I am enquiring into the disappearance of another model. At that time.”

“Ah, of course. Monsieur Ingre’s girls, I assume. I see. Well, let me think. Yesterday, you say? I was here in Rome as it happens. I had lunch with Signor Canale and Monsieur Claude Lorraine Then I was shopping in the Via dei Condotti until perhaps 4 o’clock, Versace, Prada. You can ask them. After that I came back here to my hotel. Signor Canale collected me from here at around 7 o’clock and we went to the Opera together. A performance of Mozart’s “Die Entführung aus dem Serail” – rather appropriate don’t you think?”

Pieter ignored her irony, wondering about the excellent intelligence she obviously had about Janine’s abduction. “And how about late that afternoon? Around five to six o’clock?”

“Let me see,” said Victorine, “I’m sure that I should be more discreet about my encounters but, since you ask, I was with Mr. Constable. An English artist, you understand. He paints such delightful, bucolic scenes but has little call for the services of my girls, I regret.”

Pieter smiled disingenuously. “And these gentlemen can vouch for your whereabouts? They will remember your meetings with them?”

Victorine looked offended at the suggestion that anyone would fail to recall an encounter with her. “I would felt I had failed if they did not,” she said. “I have my personal reputation to take care of as well as concerning myself with my members. Perhaps if we spent some more time together Mister Breughel, you might discover why they would be unlikely to forget.”

Breughel felt uncomfortable with her flirting. “A delightful suggestion Mademoiselle but at present...” he shrugged his shoulders. “You understand?”

It was clear that Victorine didn’t but she tried to appear concerned. “Of course,” she said. “It must be difficult for you. Mister Da V and now Monsieur Ingres. No doubt they are both anxious to continue their paintings.”

“I think they are also concerned for the welfare of the girls,” Pieter asserted.

Victorine raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “Perhaps,” she said.

“One other thing,” Pieter began. “Do you represent any girls in the United States?”

She looked puzzled for a moment. Pieter couldn’t tell if it was affected or not. “No,” she said, eventually. “I have had talks but it’s a very different place. So many amateurs! Little room for professionals like ourselves. And the artists! All over the place. Not like here. Paris, London, Florence, Rome, Venice, Madrid, Amsterdam. Maybe ten cities and you have Europe

covered. There the artists seem to enjoy being as far as possible from one another. Who did I see? Oh yes, O'Keefe. In the New Mexico desert for heaven's sake! How can an artist live like that? And what model would follow them? It's no wonder she paints rocks."

"Did you see the TV show while you were out there?"

"TV show?"

"It's a sort of talent show - America's Next Top Model," Pieter was watching Victorine's face closely. She shook her head. Pieter still couldn't tell if she was lying or not. That's the problem with models, he thought, they spend so much time giving face for the artists you can't see what they are thinking for real. He let the remark hang in the air and waited to see which of them would rush to fill the silence first.

It was Victorine.

Her face remained impassive. "Oh yes," she said. "Now you mention it. They asked me if I could identify some European girls that might be interested in travelling to the States to join the programme. I passed their details to some of the girls and told them to make their own contact if they wanted to. I couldn't see any value in getting involved."

"Would that have included Donna Vellani, Mr Da V's girl?"

"They don't belong to the artists!" Victorine reacted with a prickly tone before composing herself. "It may have done. I'm afraid I really don't remember. It didn't seem very important to me at the time."

"I can see that," Pieter was trying to be affable. He was sure that Meurent had more to reveal and it was more likely that she would say something helpful if she was relaxed. The conversation wound around the programme, US TV and the state of American art for some time but Breughel could find nothing more of use. In the end, frustrated in some ways but feeling he had made some progress, he took his leave and headed back to his own hotel.

7: The Bucintoro Returning to the Molo on Ascension Day

<http://tinyurl.com/yd9e5u>

Pieter thought about his conversation with Victorine. The more he did so, the more he felt sure that she was involved. Possibly she was the woman involved in the abduction of Janine and Francesca. There was little to be gained from trying to have her arrested, though. Pieter couldn't imagine that the Carabinieri would get any more out of her than he had. Besides, as Buonarrotti had said, the police had shown little interest in the affair. Pieter did, however, have one thing to go on. He knew of Canale, Lorraine and Constable and he knew where to find the first two of them. That afternoon he took a flight to Marco Polo airport. By early afternoon he was standing outside St Mark's in Venice.

Giovanni Antonio Canale was standing behind his easel in a gondola in the middle of the Grand Canal, cursing and waving his fists as the wash of passing launches disturbed his painting by rocking his own boat.

Being hailed by Breughel from the bank only appeared to add to his irritation.

"Canaletto," Pieter called. "Mr Canaletto. I must talk with you."

Giovanni looked upstream at the apparently never ending flotilla of tourist barges heading towards where he was moored. It was clear that his painting would continue to be disturbed for some time. He wiped his hands on a cloth and signalled to his gondolier to make for the bank. He clambered out and put his hand forward to Breughel, evidently unclear as to who it was that had been calling him.

"Breughel," the Dutchman said, shaking Canaletto by the hand.

Canaletto looked unimpressed. "I know your work," he said. "It's a cold country, the Netherlands."

"I'm looking for a model," Breughel said. "In fact I am looking for two."

"I doubt I can help you," Canaletto replied. "My art," he gestured to his canvas, "responds to the power of the place. The light on buildings and the water. I have no need of models. There are sufficient passers by to give my pictures the scale that they need. I do not think I can help you."

"Mademoiselle Meurent," Breughel said. "You know her?" Pieter noticed that one of Canaletto's assistants seemed to react to the name as he continued to clear the artist's materials from the barge.

Canaletto affected an air of disinterest. "We have met. She was in Rome last week. So was I. We have mutual friends."

"Lorraine? Constable?" Pieter asked.

"What of it?" Canaletto responded.

Breughel shrugged. "I'm always interested by people's friends," he said.

"They are landscape artists like myself. Victorine is more likely to help you find your models. She has many on her books, I am sure there would be some to suit."

"Well, if you cannot help," said Breughel resignedly.

Canaletto shrugged. "Good bye then," he said and walked off following his assistants out of the square.

Breughel watched him leave and made his way slowly back towards the hotel. There was a message waiting for him when he got there. "Meet me in the Piazza San Marco beside the Procuratie Nuove. Seven o'clock." it said. "There are things that you need to know." Breughel asked the desk clerk who had left it but a shrug of the shoulders was all that he got in reply. Looking at his watch he saw that he had a little time before the appointment. He grabbed his jacket and headed towards the hotel door. As he reached it he saw that his old friend Vermeer had arrived.

"Leave your bags," Pieter said, taking him by the arm. "We need to go meet someone." The two men headed towards the Piazza San Marco. As they turned into the square they could see a short man dressed in a dark coat apparently waiting for them. Breughel recognised him as one of Canaletto's assistants. They hurried across towards him.

As they reached him, he looked nervous. "There are two of you," he said.

"Do not worry. I am Breughel," Pieter said. "This is an associate of mine. You can trust him."

The man looked thoughtful and peered beyond them, scanning the square anxiously. "There are no others?" he asked.

Breughel shook his head. "No. What did you want to say? Can you help us find any of the missing models? Miss Schenk? Or Miss Corone."

It was the man's turn to shake his head. "I can say nothing about them. You just need to know you are dealing with dangerous men." He was looking furtively over his shoulder pushing past them as he started to get away. He stopped and turned to face them, his back towards Saint Mark's "Go back to Rome, Dutchman. Listen to Benny. Go back to Rotterdam. That's what Benny's telling you. Go back before something bad happens, before...."

The man's words were cut off by the crack of a rifle shot. The first bullet hit the man in the back of his neck, pushing him forward towards Breughel and Vermeer. The bullet spat out through the man's chest and slammed into the pavement, narrowly missing Vermeer as it ricocheted away. Vermeer and Breughel threw themselves to the side. As the man lay gasping on the ground a second shot rang out. This time the bullet hit him squarely in the head, exploding his skull with terrifying finality.

Crowds were screaming, people cowering in the shelter of the surrounding buildings. Spattered with gore from impact of the second bullet, Breughel thought quickly. "The Campanile," he called to Vermeer, "the shots came from the tower."

"Right," said Jan, diving towards the arcaded front of the Libreria Sansonvinia.

Breughel felt rooted to the spot. He knew that in moments the police would be there. The man was obviously dead, killed before he could say anything of use to the Dutchmen. Breughel quickly went through the man's pockets in an attempt to find any clue that might help them. All that the man had was a wallet. Breughel caught a glimpse of a credit card with the name "B. Casey" on it. "I think that I had better take that," a voice came from behind him. He turned around to see a Carabiniere standing behind him.

"Of course," said Breughel, passing the wallet to the policeman and feeling pleased with himself that he had managed to palm the small card that had been sticking out from it. He had learned something from De La Tour after all.

Vermeer came padding back across the square. "Missed him," he said, frustrated and disappointed.

A man pushed his way through the gathering crowd. "I'm a doctor," he said. Looking down at the lifeless body spread on the pavement, none of them needed medical qualifications to decide that his skills would be of little use. Breughel and Vermeer spoke to the policeman, giving him details of where they could be reached. The Carabinieri made a brief call on his radio and then nodded to the two Dutchmen that they could go.

The two of them left the square and fell into the first bar that they found. In the absence of Genever the two of them ordered Grappa and gulped down the harsh liquor in an attempt to ease the shock. "Did you see anything at all," Pieter asked Jan.

"No," said Vermeer, "nothing. There was crowd leaving as I reached the door to the tower. All tourists by the look of them but our man could have been with them. A pity that your contact wasn't more ready to talk."

Pieter took another sip of Grappa. He grunted and showed Vermeer the card he had pulled from the dead man's wallet.

"Il Giardinerra," Jan read. "The Garden?"

"Yes," said Breughel. "It looks like some sort of club. Perhaps we deserve an evening out."

8: The Garden of Earthly Delights

<http://tinyurl.com/3cdsj5>

Breughel felt foolish. The elaborate mask he was wearing felt stiff and uncomfortable on his face; the cloak awkward and heavy as it hung from his shoulders. He looked across at Vermeer who was similarly dressed. Even behind his own mask, he looked no more content than Breughel was.

In a city renowned for its masked carnival he felt that he should not feel out of place. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that all of the crowd milling around the doors of the building were masked as well, he found the whole experience odd.

A few discrete questions in their hotel had prepared them for the venue and Breughel's discovery that it was run by one of his countrymen had made it easy to gain the promise of entry. A thick set man in a dinner suit that made him look like an elegantly attired gorilla was debating with Breughel whether the pair of them would be allowed in. "Breughel?" the bouncer said, peering at the list of names on his clip board. "How do you spell that?"

"The regular way," Pieter responded, taking a moment's pleasure from the bouncer's puzzled look. "Hieronymus – Gerome invited us. He said there'd be no trouble."

"Don't worry," the bouncer responded, making no move to let them through. "It's no trouble to me."

Vermeer leant forward and slipped a twenty euro note into the man's breast pocket. "Why don't you give Mr Gerome a call?" The gorilla pulled the note from his pocket, looked it for a moment and then put his head back inside. He reappeared a moment later.

"Mr Gerome says it's OK," he said, gesturing for them to come in. The two artists moved into the lobby. Two women, naked from the waist up except for their masks were emerging from the powder room. Another was being led on a leash towards the main room. It was just then that Gerome appeared. "Pieter, Jan," he enthused. "Good to see you! And so far from home."

Pieter looked at the man from S'Hertogenbosch. He wondered what the other members of the Brotherhood of Our Lady in Gerome's home town would make of this place.

"Come on through," said Jerome. The main room of the club was decorated like some outlandish green house. Enormous artificial plants acted as pillars to hold up the ceiling. Green suede covered couches were dotted around where the mainly male clientele sprawled, enjoying drinks and the attentions of the club's hostesses. All were masked, all the women bare breasted, most of the men naked at the crotch.

"I hope you don't mind our house rule," Jerome gestured to his own mask, an elaborate affair trimmed in gold and black leather.

"Not at all," Pieter responded. "We all like to hide behind a mask at some time." Jerome gestured to a couch.

"Perhaps a drink?" he said. When Pieter nodded, Jerome clapped his hands. A woman in a floor length velvet skirt, a green velvet mask and nothing else appeared carrying a tray.

"Yes, Mr Jerome," she said, curtsying to the three men.

"Champagne, please my dear. And from my bin, please, not the usual pop." The girl nodded, curtsyed again and disappeared.

"This looks like a successful venture," Pieter looked around at the busy room.

Jerome nodded. "Yes, it's a bit different from Aachen, though."

Jan watched as one of the hostesses was bent over a couch and her skirt was pushed up around her waist. The two men on the couch seemed to be debating the finer qualities of her naked buttock. "Mind you, I remember some of the Brabant Carnivals," he said.

Their champagne appeared. As Jerome lifted a glass as a toast, a violin started playing Spring from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. "Gentlemen, please excuse me for a moment," he said. "The show is about to start, I should make sure...."

"Please," said Pieter, considerately, raising his glass. As Jerome left them, Pieter turned back to Jan Vermeer. "It takes some nerve," he said "to turn one of your paintings into a night club."

The girl returned to re-fill their glasses and curled up on the couch beside the two men. "You have a nice time here?" she said, smiling. "Mr Jerome likes you to have a nice time. I can do that for you."

Pieter turned to the girl. "We have a nice time sure. You work here long?"

"Not so long. Maybe three weeks, I'm not sure." Pieter could see she was out of her head on something. He didn't think it was likely to be the wine.

"You know a girl called Victorine?" he said.

"Sure," the waitress replied. "She got me this job. She's been a good friend to me. Helped set me up in Venice, found me a place, found me this. I'm just doing this between modelling jobs. She's OK."

"Yes," said Breughel, "I'm sure she is."

As the music got louder, Vivaldi's intricate melodies gave way to a more urgent, driving beat and the lights in the club dimmed apart from a spotlight on a small stage at the front of the room, farthest from the bar. The waitress slipped away. Dark green curtains parted to reveal a backdrop painted as a replica of the centre panel of Jerome's most famous work, The Garden of Earthly Delights. Two women, clad only in green leggings but with ostentatiously dyed orange hair and sporting large artificial phalluses, appeared from either side of the stage and drew aside a panel in the backdrop exposing a large cage that appeared to be crammed with naked, chained, women.

A round of applause went up from the audience.

The display began. The helpless women were led from the cage in turn by the two women in green leggings and lined up across the front of the stage for the audience's inspection. The arrival of each was greeted with more applause, whistles and cat calls. None of the captives looked concerned by the behaviour of the audience; rather as the audience became more raucous, so those on display became more aroused. Each was brought forward in turn to engage in some tableaux of deviant sexual behaviour; the first sucking enthusiastically on the phallus of one of the women that had brought her from her cage; the second bending to take the phallus of the other woman in her arse, the third and fourth encourage to engage in a round of helpless 69, their wrists shackled behind their backs but their mouths well able to pleasure the other.

The women in green leggings began to invite members of the audience to join them on the stage, some came up to take over in the use and abuse of the helpless girls, others brought their own captives in tow to be displayed to the rest of the club and to be put to the phallus or forced into oral sex play.

Breughel looked around at the others in the room. All were deeply absorbed, either in the display on the stage before them or with whosoever was with them on their couches. Even Vermeer was staring at the display of debauchery. Pieter nudged him and nodded towards

the door that Jerome had gone through. The two of them left their couch and edged their way across the darkened room towards the door. It led to a corridor that wound its way down into the bowels of the building. There was no sign of Jerome or of anyone else for that matter. The sound of the music from the stage still throbbed through the structure of the building. Pieter and Jan searched through the rooms off of the corridor.

Pieter called to get Jan's attention. "Vermeer," he said. "Over here."

Jan joined Breughel in what was evidently the dressing room - or perhaps undressing room - used by the girls before they went on stage. Clothes were strewn around the room but Breughel picked up an orange silk skirt. "Look at this," he said. "Francesca was wearing this in the painting that Ingres was doing of her and Janine." He rummaged in the pile again and pulled out a grey silk gown with a gold lining. "And Janine, she was laying on this. They must have been here or someone who has seen them since their abduction must have been here."

Vermeer studied the clothes. "Well, they weren't on stage."

"No," said Pieter, "but maybe they were going to be. Follow me." He dropped the pile of clothes and headed out of the room and off down the corridor. At the far end was a door, wedged ajar with a brick. He stopped and listened intently before opening it.

Pieter and Jan found themselves on a small platform jutting out over the canal that ran behind the club. Barges and launches were pattering by. One gondola, its occupant peering up at the buildings on either side as their gondolier drove the boat forward, slid by barely an arm's length from the platform.

Breughel felt certain that the girls had been in the club and that, after his arrival with Vermeer, they had been taken away by boat. Now they could be anywhere though, lost in the maze of waterways that threaded through the city and led out to the Lagoon.

Pieter and Jan made their way back to the bar. The show was still continuing, a tangled heap of naked interwoven limbs like some manic version of Twister in the centre of the stage. Breughel and Vermeer waved for some more champagne. This time it was the low quality wine that the punters usually received. Jan and Pieter sank a glass each but without enthusiasm. It was only as the pile of bodies on the stage began to subside that Jerome reappeared.

"Gentlemen," he beamed, "my apologies. Business. You know how things are. So many responsibilities in a place like this. Did you enjoy the show? I could find you a girl or two if you like."

Pieter shook his head. "No need, Jerry," he said. "My last woman ran out on me. I'm still getting over her. Girl called Janine. You come across her?"

Jerome's face gave no flicker of recognising the name. He shook his head. "We get a lot of girls through here. They don't always use their own names."

"Do they all come willingly?"

"Sure, Piet, what sort of place do you think this is? There's no shortage of girls to play these games. I don't have to put a squeeze on anyone to play here."

Breughel shrugged and got to his feet. "I'd better be going," he said. Jan looked puzzled but joined his colleague. "Oh, by the way. Do you know Benny Casey?"

This time it was clear from Jerome's reaction that he did. "Sure," he said, "short guy, dark curly hair," Breughel nodded in response. "He comes in here sometimes. He's done some odd jobs for me. How do you know him?"

"We were talking, earlier on today?"

“Uh huh,” said Jerome, “how was he?”

“Not great,” Breughel replied. Jerome looked puzzled. “Last I saw of him, he had the top of his skull blown off by a rifle shell. He wasn’t looking great at all.” The blood drained from Jerome’s face but he said nothing. “Good night, Jerry,” Breughel said, tapping Jan on the shoulder to get his attention away from the last of the stage performance. “Look after yourself.” Breughel led the way out of the club.

9: The First Venice Set

<http://www.tfaoi.com/mn/mib/mib108.jpg>

No sooner had they left the club, than Pieter had urged Jan across the square and down to the canal. The square was filled with masked revellers and no one stopped them as they climbed down into a motor launch that was sitting conveniently by a jetty. Jan cast off as Breughel started the engine and steered the boat out into the canal. He motored up to the next junction turning into another canal that he thought would bring them around behind the club. As he turned once more he caught sight of the platform that he and Jan had been standing on not long before. He steered the boat in behind a moored barge and the two men sat down to wait.

Some ten minutes later another launch appeared in the canal and stopped alongside the platform. A figure appeared from inside the club and stood on the platform apparently arguing with whoever was in the boat. The man on the platform pulled out a cigarette. In the flare of the match that he used to light it, Pieter could see that it was Jerome. He flicked the match into the canal and leapt onto the boat. It took off along the canal, passing only a few feet from where Breughel's boat was concealed.

Breughel watched them motor away, letting them get well clear of the barge before pulling out to follow them. He wished Van Soest was with them – he could do with someone who knew more about boats than he or Vermeer did – the canals were much the same as Amsterdam's but the Lagoon was another matter. They managed to keep the launch in sight as it made its way through the warren of the city's canals and out into the Lagoon. There was sufficient traffic on the water for Breughel to keep himself hidden from the boat that he was following but he and Vermeer watched as it drew up behind a large motor yacht. Jerome jumped off of the launch onto the yacht's bathing platform and climbed aboard. From where they were Breughel could see three or four men moving around on the deck of the boat, one scanning the lagoon with powerful binoculars. He couldn't see any opportunity to approach the yacht so they cruised by trying to see what they could without attracting attention.

They motored on down the Lido until Breughel found a pier where they could moor up and disembark. "What did you think?" he said to Vermeer.

"Nothing suspicious on the face of it," he replied. "Sure, the guys on deck looked like they could handle themselves but there's no law against that." The two men were strolling back towards where the yacht had been moored. "The boat's name was Metamorphosis IV, out of Naples. It looked comfortable, and fast. Whoever owns it or chartered it has obviously got money. There was an artist's easel on the foredeck."

"Very good," said Breughel. They turned a corner towards the yacht mooring. "Ah, I was afraid of that," Pieter said watching as the boat left the pier. "They have been quick off the mark. Let us hope young Miss Schenk is quite well."

"You think that she is on board?"

"Almost certainly. And I think I know where that boat is probably going. We need to get the team together again, Jan, and we're going to be careful this time. We have the advantage that our quarry almost certainly thinks he has given us the slip. I don't want him slipping away like the one in London."

Vermeer nodded grimly. They hadn't been quick enough then, three of the opposite side had ended up getting killed and the man they had been after had almost got away with it.

The two men took a water taxi back to the Molo and headed off to the hotel.

Jan spent the rest of the following morning pounding the telephone, trying to make contact with the team that Pieter liked to work with on these occasions.

Pieter did little apart from thumbing through catalogues of recent art exhibitions.

Jan had finished his work when the phone rang again. Pieter picked it up. "Breughel?" the voice on the other end of the line said. "This is Inspector Vassari of the Venice Carabinnierri. I thought you might like to know that we just pulled a body out of the Lagoon. One of your countrymen, name of Jerome van Aachen, sometimes calls himself Jerome van den Bosch or Hieronymous. Did you know him?"

"I met him," said Pieter. "Why?"

"Thought you might like to explain how he came to be swimming in his suit. Plus, looking at what's left of his face, we wondered if you might know why someone in a big boat decided to run him over."

"I really couldn't say, Inspector," Breughel replied, evenly. "I last saw him yesterday evening just after he'd left his club – Il Giardinierra. I had no idea he was aquatically minded, but I guess if you don't like water, you don't come to Venice."

Vermeer listened to the conversation, amused by Breughel's responses but concerned by the evident ruthlessness of their foe. By the time Breughel had finished with the Inspector, Jan was able to let him know how the team was shaping up. Frans Hals and Pieter de Hooch were both coming down and Vermeer had also managed to find Jan Steyning, whose nautical background would come in handy. He'd also enlisted the help of Caravaggio. His local knowledge would be invaluable. "So what next?" said Vermeer.

"The Bay of Naples," said Pieter. "Get the team to check out all the yacht harbours between Naples and Salerno. My money's on Amalfi but I guess Positano is a possibility or even Stabiae. I want to know where that boat is."

10 : Relativity

<http://britton.disted.camosun.bc.ca/escher/relativity.jpg>

Pieter Breughel, Jan Vermeer, Caravaggio and Frans Hals were sitting outside a café in the small seaside town of Maiori. The four of them were each enjoying the warmth of the late morning and the sharp caffeine boost from a large espresso coffee.

“Well done for finding the boat, Frans,” Pieter said. Hals shrugged. He knew it had been a matter of luck. Any of them could have picked it up. “And Caravaggio, my friend, what have you been able to find? You know the men in these ports. What is being said about the splendid yacht, ‘Metamorphosis IV’ in the bars?”

“Too much money for their own good. People think it’s maybe a Mafiosi boat but nobody can point a finger at any particular family. The boat put in four nights ago, late. There were trucks waiting at the marina when it came in. That’s unusual, people expect a limo, a Diablo maybe for the owner of a boat like that but no - three small, plain, white, trucks.”

“You’re sure about that? Three small trucks? Not one big one?”

Caravaggio nodded. “People were sure about that. Heavies off the yacht made sure no one was close enough to see what went on or came off but come the morning the trucks were gone and the boat has sat in the harbour for the last three days with nothing going on.”

Pieter looked thoughtful. The next bit was going to be dangerous for all of them and for Janine too, if she was where Pieter thought that she was. Pieter turned to Caravaggio. “I need to find their place. It’s going to be somewhere around here. He pointed to the neck of land between Amalfi and Sorrento. “In fact my money’s on Ravello. Check out the large villas. Folk up there may not have noticed new comers – there’s a lot of tourists and a lot of artists too – but that’s what we need. Trucks coming and going may have been noticed – the roads are narrow and the last thing the good burghers of Ravello will enjoy will be more traffic.”

“Its OK,” said Caravaggio, “I’ll find it.” Breughel had his reservations. The man was notoriously unreliable but he knew the coast and the men in the ports and he was tough too; a good man to have on your side in a fight. Pieter didn’t usually like working with artists from outside the low countries but he was prepared to make an exception here.

A day later, Caravaggio had done his work. They’d found the house Breughel was looking for. The Villa Rafalla on the edge of Ravello, was perched high on the ridge with stunning views of the Bay of Salerno. It was cut off on three sides by steep escarpments.

The team mounted their assault mission that evening.

Pieter crouched down in the shadows. He was happy for the team to take on the first part of the operation. They trained for stuff like this. He’d managed to make his way through the maze of stairs and passages that made up the centre of Ravello into the far end of the Villa’s ornate gardens where he was crouching in the shadow of one of the poplar trees that lined the edge of the cliff. Between Pieter and the villa itself was the flood lit patio and the villa’s swimming pool. There was no way that he could get beyond the lights without being seen and no way that the others could get into the villa either. Fortunately Jan Vermeer was expecting to take care of that. Pieter scanned the stone balustrade at the edge of the patio through his night vision goggles. He caught sight of Jan crouched behind it, busily fitting the cables that would allow the others to climb up the steep escarpment. The suddenly Jan froze, motionless in the dark, evidently startled by something.

Pieter swung his glasses around. Victorine Meurent had emerged from the villa. Wearing a stunning, one piece, white, swimsuit and carrying a towel she was evidently heading to the pool. One of the heavies that Pieter had seen on the boat appeared at the door behind her.

The two exchanged words in an argument played out with emphatic gesticulation. Victorine seemed irritated by the guard's interference, the guard appeared to be concerned about her using the pool at night. Victorine's view prevailed. The guard shrugged and went back inside.

Breughel could sense Jan's impatience but he knew that nothing could be done while Victorine was in the pool. She dived in and made a few lengths of the pool. Satisfied that she had made her point she climbed out and headed for the shower post not far from the patio's balustrade. Knowing how Jan liked to work, Pieter wasn't surprised by what happened next. As Victorine showered under the stream of fresh water, hands reached out from the shadows, grabbing her and dragging her, silently, into the dark. Moments passed. Pieter continued looking through his binoculars and saw Victorine's towel pulled away from beside the shower, disappearing into the darkness as she had. Now he thought the team would make their move.

Within seconds the lights around the patio and the pool went out. Through his glasses Pieter could see the distinctive glow of infra-red lamps as well but within moments they were extinguished too. From inside the villa came the distinctive thump of stun grenades detonating. There was a short exchange of gunfire, the rattle of a semi-automatic weapon followed by the crump of what Pieter knew would be a gas grenade. Then it was over. Pieter saw Jan emerge from the villa and wave to him, beckoning him forward.

Breughel made his way across the garden and into the villa. "All secure, boss," said Jan as Pieter crossed the threshold. "The lads are through there." He pointed towards the front of the building. In the next room. Frans Hals, Jan Steyning, Caravaggio and Pieter de Hooch were standing guard over four men that sat on the floor, their wrists cable-tied behind them.

Pieter recognised the first of them immediately, "Hello, Herr Escher," he said. The man scowled up at him, through eyes streaming from the effects of the gas. The other three men, evidently Escher's paid muscle, looked no happier.

Jan returned to the room, pushing a helpless, struggling Victorine. With her hands tied behind her, strips of tape strapped across her mouth, and her white costume streaked with mud and grass stains, it was obvious that she had been left helpless in the garden after being snatched from her shower. Jan motioned to Steyning and De Hooch to keep guard of their captives. He turned to Breughel. "We'd better check the cellars," he said. Caravaggio led the way along a corridor and down through the slowly dispersing smoke and dust of the assault and down an endless series of flights of stone steps leading into the basement of the villa.

The cellars of the villa held what they were looking for. On either side of a central corridor were a dozen brick arched recesses, the semi circular fronts closed by steel bars. In each of the recesses two or three girls sat, chained by their wrists, ankles or necks to heavy iron rings set into the back wall of their cells. "Please," the two girls in the first cell called out when they saw Breughel and the others, "Please help us."

Breughel made his way along the line of cells, to his relief Janine was sitting in the third cell along with Francesca, the girl she had been captured with. Janine was naked, Francesca wore the remnants of the costume she had been wearing when the two had been taken, both wore ball gags but still showed their relief at the appearance of their rescuers. Breughel pushed through to the end of the cellar. There on a row of hooks he found a set of keys. He tossed them to Jan who set to releasing the women. Breughel went on examining the cellar, taking in the whips hanging from brackets at one end, the soiled, stained mattress that he imagined had seen many rapes of the women by which ever guard was on duty. He looked at the array of chains, shackles, gags, and clamps all of which testified to the brutality of the conditions in which the women had been kept. He turned to Jan Vermeer. "You'd better call the police," he said. The team went from cell to cell freeing the women from their chains and comforting them as best they could.

Later, Janine Schenk, wrapped in a blanket and with the sores from her shackles on her wrists and ankles bandaged, was sitting on the terrace of the Villa Rufalla as she and Breughel watched the flashing blue lights wind their way up the narrow road from Amalfi. "Are you all right?" Breughel said.

Janine nodded. "Yes," she said. "Though I did wonder for a while if I would be. Victorine recognised me at the pick up. She must have know that you'd come after me. That's why they were shutting things down. They had been using the Giardinera as a sort of auction house for the girls. After you turned up they decided to move us on."

"With fatal consequences for Jerome."

"I didn't know. He was always OK with the girls. At least the guards there didn't rape us. How did you find us?"

"I saw the yacht – 'Metamorphosis IV' – in Venice. I knew who'd painted Metamorphosis I to III and I knew where he got the ideas for some of his pictures. The more I thought about it the more it seemed like this was a likely spot. Then Frans found the yacht."

"Crazy," said Janine, "all that trouble, all that risk. And it's not like they were making much money from the auctions. Jerome reckoned he made more from his club. I heard them arguing."

"This wasn't about the money, Janine," Pieter said, just as the first police car pulled up in front of the villa. Janine looked puzzled.

A carabinieri got out, closely followed by Inspector Vassari. He touched his hat to Pieter. "Breughel," he said. "this looks like a mess."

"Inspector," Pieter nodded back in acknowledgement. "You're a bit off your patch."

"Some friends of the Chief of Police thought I should wander over this way."

"Mr da V?"

"The Chief didn't tell me," Vassari shrugged. "What's the score?"

"Plenty of plus points for your lads," Pieter said to the Inspector. "There's a boat in the harbour at Maiori that should have enough forensic evidence on board to tie it to Jerome's murder. If you're lucky you might find the rifle that killed Benny Casey. Inside here you'll find Maurits Cornelius Escher who's responsible for all this together with a rather foul mouthed young lady called Victorine Meurent who's been his main accomplice. You can start with trafficking women, abduction, false imprisonment and sexual assault. Miss Schenk here can testify to that." Janine nodded. "The real deal may be a bit more difficult though."

"The real deal?" the Inspector asked.

"Yes," said Breughel. "Give me a few days and there will be a few more people you'll need to talk to. Try to keep a lid on all of this. It would help a lot if nobody knew about it for a while."

Vasari, nodded. "OK, Breughel," he said. "I'll do what I can."

The following morning Breughel and the team met up again in the villa.

"The next bit is more of a challenge," said Pieter to the assembled team.

"I don't understand," Jan cut in. "We got Escher. He was the man behind it. Victorine set the girls up and Escher's team snatched them. Jerome ran the auctions. What else is there?"

"The real reason for all this," said Breughel. "Sure the police will put the squeeze on Escher but he won't incriminate the others. If we want to wrap this up we're going to have to go after the rest of them."

"The rest?"

"Yes. There's at least three more artists involved in this, if I am right. Maybe more. Either way I want to make sure about things."

"Who are we looking for?"

"Constable, Canaletto, Lorraine. They all gave Victorine alibis for the abductions. Maybe they're just her dupes but I don't think so."

"And what's the angle?"

"We need to get in front of them somehow. Get them to incriminate themselves, admit their involvement in the abductions."

"Maybe you could offer them another girl?" Janine said.

"What?"

"Tell them you can get hold of another model. Somebody working on some important picture. All the time they had us they were saying things about how keeping us caged would screw up Mr Da V, Buonarrotti, Dominique and the rest. They'd go for that. Set it up so they think Escher suggested you contact them. If they take the bait, you've got them."

"And who were you thinking of for bait?" Breughel was afraid that he already knew the answer.

"Me," said Janine with disarming simplicity.

"Janine, it's too dangerous," Breughel responded.

"No, not how I see it. Those guys don't know me and I'm pretty sure they weren't around at the club or when we got to Ravello. Caravaggio here would front it. They know he'd have an inside track and he's got a reputation as working on the seamier side of things. He'd go in with me. He can handle himself. None of the three guys you are talking about are up for much physical violence, as far as I can see. I wear some sort of wire. Caravaggio gets them talking and there you are."

Breughel looked sceptical. "I'm not happy with this, Janine," he said. "These men are ruthless."

"Maybe but maybe not. Maybe Escher was the muscle. I don't have any of the guys you talked of down for getting their hands dirty. Sure they could be the brains but I think they'll find it difficult to cope with the real world stuff."

"It sounds like too many 'maybes' to me, Janine."

"She could be right, boss," chipped in Vermeer. "From what you've said we need to get an angle and this could be a good one."

"What do you think, Caravaggio?" Breughel asked.

"I don't know the Englishman," he said.

"He's put on a lot of weight the last few years," contributed Steyning.

Caravaggio continued "Canaletto is a bright man but he's no fighter. Lorraine, well, maybe. If we could set something up, I'd be happy to sit in front of them. Do we know where they are?"

Breughel nodded warily. "Yes," he said. "I've been checking that out. They're in New York. They're the panel of judges for the final of 'America's Next Top Model'. The final programme goes out at the end of the week."

“Sounds like we need a trip across the pond,” said Hals.

Breughel looked glum. “Do you know how cold it is in New York right now?” he said. “I only took on this job to get some sunshine.”

Janine grinned. “Well, you did tell Leo you’d try to get his model back. I’m guessing that Donna Vellani is still in the running.”

Breughel nodded slowly. “All right,” he said reluctantly, “but we’d better have a good game plan.”

11 : Nighthawks

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4a/Nighthawks.jpg>

It was so cold. Breughel was walking down one side of the street, his hat pulled down, his collar up to protect him from the wind. This hadn't been the idea at all when he'd agreed to take on this case. Why couldn't they be back in Rome?

Across the street, in the bar, Caravaggio was sitting at the counter, staring into a glass of beer, waiting for his meeting. Around the corner in the back of a van, three of the others were monitoring the audio and video surveillance equipment. Breughel watched as Canaletto walked down the street and into the bar. Breughel walked on to the van. He pulled the door shut behind him. It wasn't much warmer inside the van than outside.

Vermeer passed him a pair of headphones. As he got them in place he could hear Caravaggio's voice. "I was told you were interested in buying some of things I can get my hands on. Maurits said I should contact you." Breughel looked at the TV screen. There was a flickering black and white picture being transmitted from Caravaggio's hidden camera.

"How is he? I haven't heard from him for a few days."

"Enjoying the Villa Rufalla, last time I saw him. Very good cellar he has there."

"Yes, so I hear. Apparently you have a contribution of your own to make."

"Yes, I can get my hands on a case you might be interested in."

"Why here, why not talk to Maurits? Why not Ravello?"

"This is a New World vintage. I've no way to ship it."

"We've not really been very interested over here before. Apart from some imports."

"So I heard. How is the show going?"

Canaletto almost choked on his drink. He dropped his voice. "Be careful he said, for heaven's sake. We might be overheard."

"Come on," Caravaggio hissed, "I know about Donna Vellani even if Maurits doesn't. OK so you've got a little scam of your own on the side. Hey, I'm cool with that. How you square your boss is fine with me."

"He's not my boss, it's more .. well.."

From Canaletto's tone it was evident that, while Escher might have been brought in by him, Lorraine and Constable, he was afraid of the man.

"So do you want me to pick up the case?"

Canaletto looked around over his shoulder, evidently nervous. He turned back to Caravaggio and nodded. "Yes," he said. "Sure. How much?"

"You decide. I'll take the risk. I know what the price on the stuff in Ravello was. I'll show you the case, if you're happy, you pay me the same. If you're not I'll return it."

"The value depends on where the case is from, you know." Breughel was happy. That was exactly the reaction he had expected. He was glad he'd insisted on Frans working up the portrait.

“Sure,” said Caravaggio, “that’s what Maurits said. “I’ve got the work in progress. It’s a good likeness maybe three quarters finished. If you’re happy with the picture and the case you pay me. If you’re not happy I put them back. My risk. Can you make the decision? Only Maurits said that the others might want a say.”

“I make the decisions,” Canaletto said. “What I say goes with Lorraine and Constable.”

“Sure,” said Caravaggio, “only I won’t have time to set up another tasting if they suddenly decide it’s a case that they are interested in. Just as long as you’re confident.” Breughel could see that Canaletto looked uncomfortable. Caravaggio was good, there was no doubt.

Canaletto downed his beer. “OK,” he said. “I’ll get the three of us there.” Result, thought Pieter. Canaletto seemed satisfied. “Can we do this before the show tomorrow night?” he said.

“Yes,” said Caravaggio. “There’s a car park on 10th and West 34th, just near the Lincoln Tunnel. You’ll need a van to take delivery. I’ll take cash. Eight o’clock.”

Canaletto nodded. “OK,” he said, “we’ll be there.” He got up and left. Breughel breathed a sigh of relief.

They got ready for the exchange. Breughel was still unhappy about the role that Janine was going to take as bait but she was insistent. She tried to placate Breughel. “Pieter, don’t worry. The boys will all be there and I’m going to put on a bit of a disguise in case any of Canaletto’s people have seen me before. Look.” She held out a long dark wig and then pulled it on over her own mousey hair. Breughel had to admit it was transforming but he still didn’t feel happy and his concerns grew as the team taped up her wrists and ankles and carried her into the back of their truck. “Come on, Pieter, I’m supposed to be Caravaggio’s hostage model. I can hardly walk up and shake Canaletto by the hand and say, good evening, can I?”

Breughel still wasn’t comfortable. It just seemed like there were too many things that could go wrong. Now Caravaggio was putting Janine’s gag on, stuffing her mouth with a wad of cloth and taping it over. She gave an experimental grunt and then a stifled moan to show that the gag was working. They put her in the back of the truck. She rolled herself from side to side, struggling as she would have done in reality. Her pale cream skirt was soon streaked with grease and mud from the floor of the van. She’d got a smudge of dirt across her face and she’d managed to ladder her tights as well. Pieter admired her attention to detail but then, he thought, what else do you expect from a super-realist!

They headed off to the rendezvous.

Breughel made his own way separately. He couldn’t afford to be seen arriving with the others.

Canaletto was in the van checking out the helpless Janine. He seemed to be making the most of it. Caravaggio was finding it hard to control his anger at the way the Venetian was pushing her clothes around. Janine was squealing authentically in protest. Canaletto saw the look Caravaggio was giving him. “Hey,” he said, “I’m paying for this. I just want to check the goods.” Lorraine was standing with the money looking bored.

Constable was looking at the portrait propped beside the van in which Janine was sitting. “I thought you said this wasn’t finished yet,” he called out.

“Yeah, sure,” said Caravaggio. “It’s nearly done but it’s not complete yet.”

“How come the artist signed it then?”

“Fuck,” thought Pieter, Janine and Caravaggio simultaneously.

“And who is this guy ‘Hals’ anyway?” Constable went on.

In one swift movement, Canaletto dragged Janine to her feet and had a pistol against her head. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," he said. "I fear our friends here have not been entirely honest with us. Mr Hals is an excellent painter. A splendid portraitist but there is one important reason why the presence of one of his works here gives me concern. He's a close associate of Breughel. And I fear Mr Breughel may not entirely approve of our little enterprise."

"Damn," spat Constable, tossing the picture to one side. Breughel was silently cursing the vanity of Frans Hals. Imagine signing it!

Caravaggio was watching the scene closely. Things were getting sticky but at least no more guns had made their appearance. There was no sign that Constable or Claude Lorraine were armed. Canaletto pushed Janine towards the tailgate of the truck. "She's coming with us," he barked, brandishing the gun. "Back off you others." He pointed the gun at Caravaggio and Vermeer.

As they got out of the truck, Canaletto snarled at Janine, "Stupid bitch, you're going to suffer for this." He grabbed her by the hair, intending to drag her towards his own van. The wig came off in his hand. Janine seizing the opportunity presented by Canaletto's confusion, hurled herself to the floor and rolled under the truck. She kicked herself along on the ground struggling to get clear.

In the same instant, Caravaggio jumped, slamming Canaletto's gun hand against the truck. The pistol fell from his grasp. Canaletto tried to dive after it but as his head came down Caravaggio's kick caught him in the ribs. He doubled up in pain. Caravaggio hauled him around, pushing him against one of the truck's wheels. Canaletto looked as if he wanted to make another move. Caravaggio slammed his forearm against Canaletto's throat, pulled his knife and pushed the point of it up against the Venetian's chin by way of discouragement. "You're a big man, but you're in bad shape," he said, quoting one of his favourite movies. "With me it's a full time job. Now behave yourself,"

Vermeer had his own gun out now and advanced on Constable and Lorraine. The two men surrendered, raising their hands. Breughel emerged from the shadows and ran to Janine's side, dragging her from under the truck. He pulled her up and sliced through the tape that bound her wrists. She eased the tape from her lips and pulled out of her mouth the wad of cloth that they had used to gag her. "I told you the wig was a good idea," she smiled, coughing and working her lips. "Now are you going to explain this? Why was Canaletto so concerned to see a picture anyway?"

Breughel looked around at his assembled team. "Well, he said, "let's ask Mr Canaletto here if I've got things right. Canaletto, Lorraine, Constable, Escher; what do they all have in common? Landscape painters. Me too for that matter but never mind that. Sure we've all done a few portraits but landscape is what we are really about. Only problem is it's not so popular with the punters. It's hard to make a living. You end up having to do all sorts of stuff to make a crust."

"Like solving crimes?" said Janine.

"Well, yes. But suppose the portrait painters found their work disrupted? Suppose they couldn't get models to work for them? The clients couldn't get their stuff; they'd have to buy landscapes instead."

"But that's crazy," said Vermeer. "It wouldn't work like that, would it?"

"No, I don't think so," said Breughel, "but these guys didn't think it through. This whole thing was done to disrupt the portrait painters; prevent the painting of people; force art into the outdoors; force artists to show the world around them rather than painting their models. That's why they had such little regard for the girls – the appalling conditions at the Villa, the inhuman treatment on the TV show here."

“And Victorine? What was her motive? Surely she had everything to lose.”

“You might think that but she knew her time was coming to an end. There’s not much work for an ageing model – I know Rembrandt did that picture of his mother but that’s unusual. She was worried by her fading looks, that her commissions would go and with that the reason why the other girls came to her. She knew she needed something else. Trading flesh for real was just the next logical step for her.”

“And what about ‘America’s Next Top Model’?”

“I’m guessing that was Canaletto’s idea. The aim was to set Donna up as their North American equivalent of Victorine. They needed a launch pad though. There’s was no way that they could produce anything like the scandal of Manet’s Olympia portrait so they thought they’d use TV. With the three of them as judges it wasn’t hard for them to fix the outcome and with the fame from that they’d be well on their way.”

12 : Vitruvian Man

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Vitruvian.jpg>

Pieter and Janine were sitting on the patio of Mr Da V's villa. Pieter was enjoying the warmth, a considerable improvement over New York only days before. Leo was sitting across the table from the two of them. Donna Vellani had just emerged from Mr Da V's pool and was wrapping her long hair, turban style, in a towel. The sun sparkled on the drops of water across her bare shoulders, the turquoise on her swimsuit, almost iridescent in the bright light. She sat down on the floor beside Leo, reaching up to stroke the old man's thigh, staring at him with an adoring look.

"I don't know what they did to this young lady," Leo said, "but I can't say I entirely disapprove."

il Salaino appeared with a tray of drinks, peering with obvious disapproval at the way in which Donna was fondling Leonardo.

Pieter didn't feel entirely comfortable, either. The girl had obviously been subjected to some form of conditioning that exaggerated and promoted sexual arousal. But, as he'd said to Janine, all he'd been asked to do was to get her back. He was just grateful they'd been able to do it with the poor girl in one piece after seeing Escher's psychopathic tendencies.

il Salaino put Pieter's drink down beside him and turned to Leo. "The other young lady," Salaino managed to use the term as if it were one for the lowest form of animal life, "is ready now."

"Good," said Leo, "you'd better bring her up. I'd like my friends here to see what I am working on just now."

Pieter raised an eyebrow. Leonardo was well known to be secretive. It was most unusual for him to share anything about his work. The young man left with a grunt.

"You see," Leo continued turning to Janine and Pieter, "one of the penalties of being a Renaissance man is that you are expected to turn your hand to anything. Inspector Vassari, he's a clever man, he sees some of the things in Gerry's club and he says, hey, Leo, why don't you see if you can improve on some of this? Help my boys out, why don't you? And I'm too soft hearted. So I say OK, Giorgio, I'll see what I can do. Still it's an interesting problem."

il Salaino guided Victorine into the room. Pieter hadn't expected that she would be pleased to see him and he wasn't disappointed as she favoured the entire room with a Medusa like scowl. Leo's 'project' for Vassari appeared to be in the area of personal restraints. Victorine was naked but her body was locked into a metal frame. Metal bands at the forehead, neck, waist, wrists, elbows, knees and ankles were linked by polished metal rods that passed through small ball shaped couplings on the bands.

"Mr Vassari has a problem," Leo said. "Too many prisoners, not enough cells. With this you can use one large room for many prisoners. Each has their own personal cell. Each of these connectors," he reached for one of the ball shaped couplings, "can be set to allow a limited amount of travel for the rods or can be locked to allow no movement at all. A few twists and the prisoner is able to walk or is," he snapped at the couplings on Victorine's wrists and ankles, "unable to move at all. For particularly recalcitrant individuals - and I am afraid that Mademoiselle Meurent comes into that category - the head can be locked in place as well."

Victorine was struggling against the bands and rods with no effect.

"Leo, that's positively medieval," Pieter said intending it as a remark of disapproval.

Leo took it as a compliment. "Thank you," he said. "I have used ideas from many sources." He looked at his watch. "Still, I must leave you. Vasari wished to see the prototype. Please enjoy the villa for a few days. Il Salaino will cater to your needs." Donna was reaching up to Leo from the floor. He smiled down at her. "No, my dear, you must stay here too. We will resume your portrait when I return." Leo reached out and twisted the connectors at Victorine's hips, freeing them for movement. "Come along my dear," he said taking her by the arm. Victorine had no choice but to follow, following with stiff legged steps. Donna watched him go with tears in her eyes.

Pieter turned to Janine. "Well," he said, "you promised me some sunshine and warmth. I'm going to take advantage of Mr Da V's hospitality. I think we've earned it."

Janine smiled. "Yes," she said, "but I've got some work to do. I'm desperate to do a picture of that Lamborghini and now my air brushes have turned up I can get started. The light on the chrome is something to die for."

"Well," said Breughel, grinning, "at least you don't need a model for that."

THE END

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A Selective Pictography

Some of the images that inspired The Shock of The View in the order that they appear.... The title of this tale is a play on Robert Hughes excellent account of modernism in art (book and TV series), "The Shock of the New".

Hunters in the Snow. Pieter Brueghel the Elder. 1565.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Brueghel_the_elder_-_Hunters_in_the_snow.jpg

La Gioconde (The Mona Lisa) : Leonardo Da Vinci, 1503 - 7

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Mona_Lisa.jpg

Olympia, Edouard Manet, 1863

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Manet%2C_Edouard_-_Olympia%2C_1863.jpg

The Creation, Michaelangelo, 1508-12

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:God2-Sistine_Chapel.png

Odalisque with a slave, Ingres, 1840

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Ingres%2C_Odalisque_with_a_slave.jpg

A View of the River Tiber Looking South with the Castel Sant Angelo and Saint Peter's Basilica Beyond, Rudolf Wiegmann, 1834

<http://tinyurl.com/364vqa>

The Bucintoro Returning to the Molo on Ascension Day, Canaletto, 1732

<http://tinyurl.com/yd9e5u>

The Garden of Earthly Delights – Ecclesias Paradise, Hieronymous (Jerome) Bosch, 1504

<http://tinyurl.com/3cdsj5>

The First Venice Set, Various etchings, James McNeil Whistler, 1879 - 1880

<http://www.tfaoi.com/mn/mib/mib108.jpg>

Relativity, M.C. Escher. 1953

<http://britton.disted.camosun.bc.ca/escher/relativity.jpg>

Vitruvian Man, Leonardo Da Vinci, 1492

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Vitruvian.jpg>