

OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS

by

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Keep your nose out of it, Dora told herself. She forced herself to study the canvas on the easel in front of her, but before long her concentration began to wander, distracted by the figure walking on the far side of the sand wash. As she watched, he paused behind a hackberry thicket, the outline of his body clearly visible through the branches. She waited for him to move, but the minutes passed, and he remained planted as though he were part of the tree. Perhaps he's watching me, Dora thought uneasily, shifting her camp stool to the side of the easel to get a better view.

But appearing unaware that she was there, his eyes were directed toward a house about three hundred feet away, the only house Dora knew of in the vicinity, not that she was all that familiar with the neighborhood. She had only recently started coming to the scenic area to paint en plein air.

Suddenly she felt a guilty flush of heat surge through her chest and up to her face. Maybe he was . . . well, maybe he was attending to a call of nature. That was it. She smiled and looked away.

Just then, without glancing her way, he stepped from behind the bushes and strode quickly toward the house. Dora tracked his movement until he disappeared behind a tangle of desert broom and catclaw.

None of your business, she reminded herself. The wash is a popular place to walk. He probably lives nearby or came here to enjoy the scenery just like I did. There's no reason to suspect that anything out of the ordinary is going on. Still . . . she felt that little tingle that told her something was amiss . . . and she knew about her little tingles.

Again she tried to focus on the partially completed landscape. It was the third in the series of five she needed to qualify for the annual juried exhibition of the Leisure Years En Plein Air Painters Society. Leisure years! she grumbled. It griped her to admit that beneath her pert blonde exterior she sported a crop of washed-out gray; but be that as it may, she wasn't about to turn down a chance of winning one thousand dollars. That would buy a lot of paint and canvas and a few gourmet items to snack on.

The rules of the competition stated that each member was to be judged on five paintings depicting various aspects of a scenic location of their choice. This year she had chosen Agua Fresca Wash on the northeast side of Tucson.

She remembered back to the day two weeks earlier when she had visited the site for the first time with her easel and paint box loaded into the back of her 1983 Suburban. After parking along the side of Military Way close to where the wash crossed the road, she began to explore downstream. Mature sycamore trees lined the banks, their huge roots partially exposed in places where flood water had gouged away the soil. Large boulders cluttered the riverbed and only small patches of sand remained. Here and there small pools filled deep hollows between the rocks, remnants of February's floods.

Upstream of the road, the riverbed was smooth and sandy, disturbed only by a narrow trickle of water. Dora knew that in the next week or two, what remained of the stream would sink below the surface. She would have to hustle to finish her work.

She blocked out two large-scale vistas, contrasting the two aspects: the tranquility of the undisturbed sand and the turbulence of the tumbled boulders. Then she picked three detailed views. In the first of these, where a desert willow papered the ground with orchid-like flowers, she could already see her signature in matching lavender—Theodora Penstock.

For the two major paintings, she set up her easel just off the side of the road. Wanting to take advantage of the low angle light, most mornings she drove to the site shortly after sunup. Neighbors out for walks often paused to chat. Others peered over her shoulder and moved along without comment. Several couples came with their dogs and let them romp free. Still later in the morning, three young mothers brought their children and gossiped while the little ones threw pebbles in the gently flowing water.

Each morning a man, who had introduced himself as Bob Robertson, strolled down the long, mesquite-lined, dirt driveway from the solitary house with his dog Job. Occasionally he would check on her progress, but mostly he just waved when she called out, "G'morning, Mr. R.," as the black lab pounced on the newspaper and trotted proudly back toward the house. Usually Mr. Robertson left at seven-fifteen, but she had no idea when he returned; she was never there in the afternoon.

A couple of hours later, his wife Fran often went out shopping or to the hairdresser or to visit friends, returning at indeterminate hours. Once she dropped off a bag of homemade cookies to Dora and another time they shared a container of hot cocoa, while Fran watched Dora paint.

"Beautiful," Fran sighed. "I wish I had your talent."

The mail came at 11:30, or close to it, and sometimes the mailman, whose name was Jim, parked next to her Suburban to have a cigarette and a Dr. Pepper before finishing his route. Before long Dora felt like part of the neighborhood.

One day the Robertsons emerged in their car together with Job, his head hanging out the window, and they all disappeared up the road. The next morning the newspaper was there but Dora saw no sign of Mr. R. and Job. Jim left the mail at 11:30. The following morning only the current day's paper was lying in the driveway. They must be off on a trip, Dora thought. Someone's picking up the mail and paper later in the day.

Dora felt a little lonely without the Robertsons, but she didn't dwell on their absence because she had finished the two large landscapes and was ready to concentrate on the detailed paintings which took her farther away from the road.

That same day she moved all her equipment down the wash, set up a canvas on the easel and started to work on the desert willow scene. Isolated in a small hollow out of sight of the road, she knew she had found her own private world. Close by, a cactus wren

was busily threading bits of grass into a nest that was hidden deep inside the spiny arms of a jumping cholla, while overhead, a brown towhee was chirping at her as he bounced from limb to limb, inspecting the flowers for bugs. There was a light breeze and Dora removed her floppy tan hat and brushed back the fine wisps of hair that flicked at the corners of her eyes.

It was while she concentrated on sketching in the details of the picture that she gradually became aware of rustling in the bushes along the bank of the wash and saw the man moving cautiously in the direction of the house. She had seen many people walking in the wash and often horsemen in groups of twos and threes, but never had she seen anyone approaching the house on foot other than by the driveway—but then, she had been up on the road and didn't know this particular area. It's probably a neighbor out for a hike, she told herself, or maybe the person who's looking after the Robertsons' house.

Despite the logical explanation, she couldn't stifle her curiosity and focused on him, filing his face away in her memory: ruddy complexion, closely cropped light brown hair, and a skinny brown goatee—the poor excuse for chin whiskers that was popular with so many young men today. They probably don't have the hormones to grow a full, manly beard, she sniffed. He looked to be about six feet tall but was as skinny as his beard was skimpy, and he was dressed in a fatigue shirt and baggy cargo pants. Where did the young people get their sense of taste?

Her attention flagging, she set her canvas aside, folded up her easel, threw her tubes of paint into their box, and clamped her paint-dabbed palette into its holder. If I keep on working, I'll only end up having to re-do it, she rationalized. Besides, I feel like I'm coming down with a cold and I'm just not in the mood. Perhaps I'll feel more inspired tomorrow.

Leaving everything propped up against a prominent boulder, she set about finding the path to the house. As she passed by the willow, she noticed a tube of Grumbacher's Ivory Black paint in the sand. Instead of returning to open up her paint box, she threw it into one of the deep pockets in her misty-green smock along with her Kleenex tissues and cough lozenges, then continued toward the house.

She pushed down the slack strands of a barbed wire fence and stepped across without hooking her tan pants. The ground on the other side had been cleared of underbrush and only a scattering of mesquite and paloverde trees, clumps of prickly pear cactus, staghorn chollas and a few creosote bushes dotted the yard. Moving slowly from one patch of vegetation to another, she worked her way to within a hundred feet of the white stucco structure. A covered porch shaded the back of the house. Underneath the roof she could make out a small window high on the wall next to a door and what appeared to be a large dog door. A rollaway barbeque, one wrought iron table and two chairs completed the picture.

She scanned the outside of the building but saw no one. Either the ruddy-faced man had gone somewhere else or he was inside. Studying the window, she saw no sign of movement, only the mirrored reflection of the desert landscape.

The fine hair on the back of her neck began to prickle. Sinister thoughts entered her head. This is ridiculous, she told herself. All I did was see someone walking through the desert and now I'm imaging all kinds of ominous happenings. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Just as she was about to go back to the wash the dog door popped open. Arms and a head appeared. The ruddy-faced man turned sideways to accommodate the width of his frame and wriggled his torso and legs through. Reaching back inside and drew out a sack. When he rose and picked it up, she could see it was a partially filled pillow case.

Dora gasped and shrank back against the trunk of the closest tree. What if he returns by the same route and sees me? She looked around but saw no suitable cover. If I stay very still, maybe I can blend into the landscape—thank heavens I wore my ecology friendly outfit. Only my blonde hair stands out for the whole world to see—like a plastic supermarket bag snagged in a tree.

Instead of moving toward her, the young man dropped the sack on the metal table, turned and re-entered the dog door. This is my chance for a graceful exit, Dora thought, as she started to hustle back in the direction she had come. I'll make my escape and no one will ever know the difference. Then she slowed. No! That man is stealing. Who knows what he might have? Jewelry, silverware, personal papers? It's my duty as a citizen to stay on his tail. She reached into her pocket for her cell phone to call 911 and rummaged through the clutter. Stupid, she thought. I left it in the car.

Coming to a halt, she looked back. Maybe the man does have a legitimate reason for being there. Maybe he's the caretaker and lost his key. Then why had he exited through the pet door? Maybe there's a security system and he forgot the code. Maybe, maybe, maybe. No, she told herself. Some funny business is going on here.

Dora started back toward the house. The Robertsons are nice people. I'm not about to let some skinny young bum get away with robbing them, not if Theodora Penstock has anything to do with it. Trotting softly toward the back porch, she kept her eyes fixed on the dog door. Just in case he looked out the window, she tucked up close to the wall. By standing on her tiptoes she could sneak a quick peek into the room. Seeing no one, she dashed to the pillow case and peered inside. There were three pictures in ornate silver frames, several pieces of jewelry, among them two rings and a brooch in antique settings, a silver tea service and . . .

Before she could analyze the contents further, her nose started to run. Stifling a sniffle, she swiped at it with the back of her hand, then fished a tissue out of her pocket and dabbed at it, not wanting to blow. Rotten cold. As she stuffed the tissue back inside, her finger touched the tube of paint. Hmmm, she thought, I wonder . . . She listened for movement inside the house. Hearing none, she tiptoed over to the dog door. Drawing her

paint tube out of her smock pocket, she unscrewed the cap and lightly ran a line of paint along the bottom edge of the swinging rubber flap.

That'll skunk him, she thought. If my plan works, the paint will smear across his hair and the back of his shirt but he'll never notice. Let him explain that to the police. All I have to do is run back to the car and call 911. If the sheriff's deputies don't dawdle, they'll have him cold. At worst I'll have to tail him, but that's no problem. Once I'm out in the wash, I'll simply be another hiker out for a morning walk. And if he's already spotted me painting, then he knows why I'm there.

Hardly had she capped the tube of paint when the flap popped outward. Like a rabbit, Dora scurried across the concrete pad and slipped around the corner. She heard the man grunt, pictured him clambering to his feet. Looking around, she saw no place to hide. If I run he'll hear my footsteps on the gravel. I'll have to stay put. With any luck, he'll gather up his loot and head back toward the wash without checking around the side of the house.

Scuffing sounds were followed by a couple of small clinks—probably the booty in the bags clacking together. He would be throwing them over his shoulder in preparation for his escape. Her throat tight and dry, Dora held her breath.

Just then she felt an irrepressible urge to cough, the same type of cough she remembered muffling behind tightly wadded handkerchiefs in church or at concerts. Involuntary contractions gripped her as she covered her mouth with her hand. Desperately she fought to silence gasps and sputters, but the force behind the spasms overpowered her ability to staunch two harsh croaks.

A terrible clatter struck her ears and he was there in an instant. She shrank back against the wall as he approached. He was so close she could feel the heat of his breath as he towered above her. "What are you doing here?" he bellowed, his florid face twisted with anger.

"I . . . I . . . I was painting down in the wash and felt ill and . . . and thought I'd come up to the house to see if I could get a drink of water."

"Fat chance." He glared at her, his shoulders hunched forward as though he were going to grab her. "You were sneaking around."

"No, I . . ." She struggled for words. "I feel ill," she wheezed and collapsed onto the ground. She did feel ill—ill from fright.

"Get up!" he shouted, tugging her arm; but she remained limp, dead weight, refusing to move.

For a moment she thought he would kick her, but appearing undecided, he released her as she struggled for breath. She could feel his eyes locked on her.

"I'm sorry," he said after a long pause. "I'm Ned. My parents had a burglary here recently and I thought you might be . . . Wait here. The house is locked, but I'll get you some water from the hose out front. I think I saw a cup there. Be right back."

His parents? Well . . . maybe, Dora thought. But maybe not. Hearing several clinks and the sound of footsteps crossing the concrete, she peeked around the corner. He and the pillow cases were gone. Either he's escaping, or he's hiding the evidence, she thought. After all, he doesn't know I saw him squirming out the dog door.

Tottering to one of the chairs, she plopped down, not sure what to believe. Resting her face in her hands, she tried to think.

Moments later Ned re-appeared with a cup of water. "Here you go."

Doubts about her little tingle were beginning to override her suspicions. He wouldn't have returned if he didn't belong there, if the Robertson's weren't his parents. And he did know about the cup. But then, he could have seen it when he was casing the place. Silly, she thought, he wouldn't have paid attention to something like that. "Thank you," she said weakly. "You're very kind."

He laughed, two short grunts.

Dora glanced at him and then quickly away. There was a hard edge to the laugh that made her wince. "I feel so much better now. I'd better be getting along. I'll be sure to tell your folks how helpful you were."

"Oh, no," he cut in abruptly. "Don't do that."

Dora choked on the water. "No? Why not?" she sputtered, fear resurfacing. All the questions she had dismissed recycled through her thoughts: the key, the security system, the water cup, his threatening manner.

"Why not?" His voice was sharp. He paused. "Well, I'll tell you why not," he said, staring directly at her. "My, sister and I are planning a surprise fortieth anniversary party for them. I was getting some photos out of the house to enlarge, you know, wedding photos, that kind of thing, and I'm, uh, going to have some of Mom's old jewelry re-set. Update it, you know? Something she never gets around to doing. They don't have a clue I'm in town so don't go giving it away."

"Oh, no, I won't," Dora said, feeling guilty about the black smear across the back of his shirt.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, so you take care now," he said.

Dora hurried across the yard to the wash to retrieve her easel and paints and sped home, not caring that she was at least twenty miles over the speed limit. Stupid old busybody, she chided herself. I always suspect the worst. Nothing untoward is going on. I should forget about it and get on with my paintings. All I need is three or four more days and I'll be done. Suddenly Agua Fresca had lost its charm.

Three days later, as she was preparing to move to the last site, the Robertsons drove past, giving her a big wave. Job's tail flapped back and forth, signaling he was happy to see familiar landmarks. Dora smiled, relieved that the house was no longer empty, but at the same time, ill at ease over the secret she felt obliged to keep to her.

It wasn't more than two hours later when a sheriff's patrol car pulled up behind her Suburban. She watched him look around cautiously, then make his way across the jumbled rocks toward her. Behind him the Robertson's were standing beside his car.

"Ma'am. I'm going to have to ask you a few questions. Anything you say . . ."

Dora froze. Is he reading me my rights?

"The Robertsons report a burglary in their house—silverware, money, some watches and jewelry, a few other things."

She gasped.

"Have you seen anything unusual?"

"Unusual?" she stammered.

"We found fresh black oil paint on the jewelry case in the bedroom and the drawers in the dining room where they kept their silverware. It's just a formality, but we need to check out all leads. The Robertsons said you've been hanging around here for the past couple of weeks and would have been aware that they were away. We'd like to take your paints downtown to test them."

Dora's hand flew to her forehead. That young man—Ned. He's a thief after all. When he discovered the paint on his shirt and hair, he must have realized what I was up to—or at least saw a chance to point the finger. He must have gone back inside and planted evidence to make it look like I had been there. Imagine, an old lady crawling through a dog door! I was so shaken and so glad to get away I didn't carry out my original plan: I didn't shadow him, didn't follow him to his car, didn't get a license plate, didn't call the sheriff—I didn't do anything. Where will they begin looking for him? I allowed him to bamboozle me. Foolish meddling old biddy.

"Please, let me speak with the Robertsons," she said.

Dora allowed the deputy to support her by the elbow as she tottered to the road. Every one of her leisure years was ganging up on her. "I'm sure your son can explain all this," she whispered, hoping that by saying those words, all she had done was spoil a surprise party.

"Son?" Mr. Robertson said. "We don't have a son."

Dora squeezed her eyes shut. But behind her closed lids, she found Ned lurking. He was laughing at her—a coarse, mocking guffaw.