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Visual Thinking and Writing

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Art Lost and Found

The smell of mothballs invaded his nasal passages like a group of barbarians raiding an unsuspecting village. The scent was so strong that it brought him back to his childhood. Weekends spent at his grandparents' house in Brooklyn Heights.

"This is the one, John," said Celeste. The petite brunette's words snapped John out of his reverie. They were stopped in front of an orange garage door. Celeste consulted the clipboard she held in her delicate hand. "Three A."

John looked up at the placard above the door. "Three A." He snipped the padlock on the door with the pair of bolt cutters he carried. He undid the latches then pulled up the door and gentlemanly ushered for Celeste to go first.

"Why thank you, kind sir." Celeste giggled as she sauntered into the storage locker. "I can't believe you bought this sight unseen." She looked around at all the boxes that were piled to the ceiling. There was an old, dusty piece of furniture tucked away in the corner. Maybe it was a dresser or even a dining room cabinet. "You have no clue what's in here."

“Exactly. That’s the thrill of the hunt, sweetheart,” said John. He stood there and looked around at the boxes upon boxes before him. The sight of all those boxes and what could be inside them gave him butterflies and goosebumps. It was such a rush. The thrill of the hunt, indeed. Usually his inner child, giddy with excitement and heady with wonder, would prompt him to tear open the boxes but this time was different. This time he was more careful in his choosing on where to begin.

“Where should we start?” asked Celeste. Not that she really cared. She was just along for the ride, really. Lately, John had an obsession with buying storage lockers that were up for auction. An expensive and sometimes fruitless endeavor but whatever made him happy made her happy. And truthfully, she loved how his face lit up every time he won an auction. The downfall was cleaning them out and hauling away the junk. The upside was turning a profit, which was rare and frustrating.

“I know exactly where to start,” said John. He moved a couple boxes aside and slid out an old mattress from behind them.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.” Celeste rolled her eyes but smiled. The mattress landed on the cement floor with a thud and dust puffed out from underneath it.

“Gross.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” John dove onto the mattress and Celeste shrieked in horror.

“That’s disgusting!”

“Quit being such a Debbie Downer, sweetheart.” John rolled over. “Ouch!”

“Was it a rusty spring?” asked Celeste as John got up from the old, musty mattress. “I hope you’re up to date on your tetanus shot.”

John rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t a rusty spring. But something did poke me. That’s a pretty hard mattress for it being so old. Gimme your knife.” Celeste reached into her pocket and handed over her box cutter. A prize from the last storage locker they bought. John opened the knife and bent down near the mattress. He felt around where he had jumped and found a rough, pokey corner. “I knew I wasn’t crazy.” He started to cut into the mattress, carefully going around whatever it was that was inside of it. Celeste helped him peel back the top.

“What is that?” asked Celeste.

“Looks like a poster or picture of something.”

“Why would someone hide it in a mattress of all things?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart, but it looks pretty old. Which means that it could be very valuable. I feel like I’ve seen this before.” He looked down at the seascape picture that was exposed inside the mattress. He reached out to touch it but Celeste batted his hand away.

“Don’t you dare! If it’s as old as you think it is your finger prints will ruin it. Here.” She handed him a pair of light blue, latex gloves then she put on a pair.

“We need to get it out of there to see what exactly it is.” They carefully brushed the pieces of mattress stuffing away from the picture and lifted it out of the hole

John had cut. They laid the picture beside the mattress on the cement floor of the locker.

“Wow,” said John. “I can’t believe it.” He dug his phone out of his pocket and started furiously stabbing at the keyboard. He showed his phone to Celeste. There on the screen, courtesy of Google search, a picture of the painting in front of them shown.

“It’s stolen art?” Celeste was in shock.

“I think so, sweetheart. We might have hit a little bit of a jackpot here.” It was hard for John to keep the smile off of his face. He started scrolling through his phone again. “I knew it looked familiar. An old college buddy of mine got a job at a gallery in Boston doing security or curating, maybe. Anyway, he was telling me about this theft that happened there almost 30 years ago.” He held the phone to his ear. “I think we might have found something, Celeste. Years of doing this might have finally paid off, sweetheart.” He turned his attention back to his phone. “Yes, hello, is Anthony Amore available? Sure, I’ll hold.” John still couldn’t keep the smile from his face.