

Design

Roxanne said, “That had to be one of the worst days of my life, honestly.”

Bert said, “Babe, I think you’re overreacting. It was a microscopic sample size.”

They were sitting at the kitchen table of their one-bedroom apartment, eating boxed Thai noodles from Trader Joe’s.

Roxanne said, “It was so degrading. Even one of my very favorite customers, Mrs. Rossi, she all but said they were garbage.”

“Did you tell her it was you?” Bert said.

“Are you nuts? Why would I do that?”

Bert didn’t say anything. He reached over and patted her hand.

Roxanne had hung a bunch of her paintings in the bank where she worked. They had rotating shows of outside artists, so she’d gotten on the list. Today was the first day of hers.

She said, “You know the one with the wooden water tower? That I painted on Eastside Road?”

“I’m trying to think,” Bert said.

“Someone said the green in the pasture, it was so artificial.”

“What, you asked every customer?”

“Pretty much. I just said what do you think of the new art.”

“And they’d swivel their head around and take a look, and give you an evaluation?”

“Oh, and another customer, she singled out the one I painted on that old guy’s property, who collects the tractors? . . . You know, with the mustard and fence. She said why would they put the tree right in the middle?”

Bert could picture that one, and the tree always bothered him too. He said, “She said ‘they’? That’s pretty funny actually, when she’s talking to you about the artist, who’s you, and doesn’t even know it.”

“That’s great. You’re starting to piss me off now too.”

“Okay, what you do tomorrow,” Bert said, “ask them what their favorites are.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Play along, tell ‘em the bank put up some pretty bad art, don’t they agree? But if they had a gun to their head and had to pick three, which ones?”

+++

Tuesday night they were taking a walk in the neighborhood. Roxanne said, “It was what I sort of suspected. The Golden Gate Bridge, that one from out in Utah with the red rock, and the vineyard at peak . . . In other words, my most unimaginative works.”

“You mention the bridge, and something rings a bell,” Bert said. “There was a guy, or maybe still is, who all he does is paint it.”

“My God.”

“Every day. He has a few different locations, depending on the fog, the time of year and so forth. He apparently does very well with it. I think it was on YouTube.”

“Can you imagine?” Roxanne said.

Bert said, “I know, but there was also that artist in the studio in Carmel, remember?”

“Who kept turning the lighting up and down to showcase his colors? Talk about amateur hour.”

“He basically lived off that one painting, which was admittedly pretty impressive. As I recall, he gicleed it and then put a few original marks on the giclees, and kept re-selling it, for like five thousand dollars a shot. Somewhere in the conversation the guy mentioned he lived in Pebble Beach, probably the most expensive zip code on the west coast.”

Roxanne was thinking about the bank, that tomorrow she wasn't going to ask anyone about her art, that was for sure. “So what's your point?” she said.

“I'm just throwing stuff out,” Bert said, “But one thing -- you don't have to reinvent the wheel, maybe.”

“Fine. Believe me, I wouldn't have any problem knocking myself off. Except that no one likes anything to start with.”

“That's not true,” Bert said. “You've had plenty of sales.”

“All these years I've been trying it,” Roxanne said, “workshops, figure sessions, plein air events, open studios . . . not to mention Facebook, Instagram, all the rest of the bullshit . . . you know how many paintings I've actually sold?”

“No,” Bert said.

“Maybe a dozen. And your brother bought two of them. And a couple others, at least, went at charity auctions. For pennies on the dollar.”

They were in the fancy market now, around the corner from the Healdsburg plaza. One of the aisles had about 50 varieties of olive oil. They waited in line for lattes and sat outside.

Bert said, “Okay hon, now don’t take this the wrong way. But when I was really struggling? I copied paragraphs. As a learning experience.”

Bert was a writer. He’d been a reporter for the Press Democrat but got laid off eight years ago. He’d been able to set himself up as a freelancer, which was essentially technical writing and web work, but he was most proud of getting two short stories published in obscure literary journals.

“Or better yet,” Roxanne said, “I can pack it in. Who knows, another two or three years, I’ll probably get promoted to one of the desks.”

“What I was doing without realizing how,” Bert said, “was cluttering up my prose. So finally I took the bull by

the horns and opened a John Cheever story, found a random passage, and typed up the fucker word for word.”

“Well whoopee.”

“I’m serious now . . . Something about the act -- the physical part -- of a master’s words flowing off my fingers, it picked up my game.”

Roxanne laughed. “Not to be critical Bert, but I’ve read John Cheever. John Cheever is a favorite of mine too -- and sorry, you are no John Cheever.”

“You’re a real sport, you know that? Thanks a lot.”

“I mean the one where the guy thinks his wife is cheating on him, so he hides in the back of the SUV with a tarp over himself?”

“Yeah?”

“How ridiculous is that. At least put him in a trunk or something . . . and what’d you call that one, ‘Motor Ride’ was it?”

Bert was silent. “That’s like a third-grader’s title,” Roxanne said. “I’m reading the story and I’m thinking, what’s he doing?”

“Is that right . . . So why didn’t you say something back then?”

Roxanne blew out an exhale. “I’m sorry Babe.”

“No worries. You’re frustrated, which I get.”

“You know I hate that expression,” Roxanne said. “I wasn’t worried.”

+++

At 8:30 the next Monday, a half hour before the bank opened to the public, Roxanne pulled a painting of a barn off the wall, popped the canvas out of the frame, and inserted a fresh one that she’d copied off the internet.

The new painting was of a flower farm, down by Half Moon Bay. The artist had pushed the color, and Roxanne’s version was pretty accurate and, though it wasn’t her taste at all, she had to admit it was more vivid than any of her other pieces.

When she came back from her mid-afternoon break the floor manager, Mel, asked her how he should handle a sale, and if the person can take the painting on the spot or did she want sold paintings to be left up until the end of the show?

“Gosh,” Roxanne said. “Someone wants one?”

“A gal seemed pretty interested,” Mel said, “I’m sure you know her, Mrs. Hawkins. She wants to bring her husband by . . . it’s that new one with the flowers, which I kinda like myself.”

Roxanne didn’t want to jinx anything by identifying herself as the artist, so she told Mel to please handle any transaction himself, and yes, anyone could certainly take home a painting right away.

And lo and behold, an hour later there were Mrs. Hawkins and her husband and Mel huddled around the piece, and Mel carefully took it off the wall and Mr. Hawkins put it under his arm and hauled it out of there.

Roxanne didn’t want to tell Bert on the phone, and when she got home he was in the park playing pickleball so she had to wait. Meanwhile, what could it hurt to see what else this artist had produced? Her name was Elsa Bakkar. There were quite a few on her website that in fact might make nice candidates. Most of Elsa’s scenes were in central California, but Roxanne was thinking

you could have fooled me, they could just as easily be right around here.

Bert walked in and Roxanne said, “Let’s go out to dinner, I sold that one.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Bert said, putting down his paddle.

“See? I knew you never liked my work. You’re shocked.”

“I’m not shocked . . . just thrilled for you Roxie -- that’s terrific!”

“Well, it was probably a one-hit-wonder. But I’ll take it.”

“And see Babe, I knew once you copied someone verbatim, like I did, you’d get over the hump.”

“You make it sound like it was nothing. It’s not that easy to copy art. Alls you did was type the same words.”

“No, I give you credit, I do . . . I just didn’t realize you’d be selling it as your own . . . I was picturing it as an exercise.”

“Well I looked up this person, and I’m going to do more.”

“You are?”

“I made four hundred on it Bert. That’s a week’s pay, take home.”

“Which helps out, I agree,” Bert said. “But what about the . . . legal part . . . and the ethics?”

“Are you kidding?” Roxanne said. “You change a little something, is all . . . Like you notice with the sold one, where her sky is solid royal blue? I put in some wisps of clouds . . . I mean when you think about it, artists are knocking each other off right and left.”

“Gee . . . it sounds kind of flaky . . . But I guess you can’t fault them, can you? Since most of ‘em are starving.”

“Like wanna-be fiction writers,” Roxanne said.

They went to a brew pub in Windsor and Roxanne had a martini and Bert tried the homemade black stout, followed by burgers where every ingredient, according to the menu, was farm-to-table.

Bert said. “Do you have another one of this person’s . . . picked out?”

“Sort of. They’re these sheep, with mountains in back? I like how she achieves the purple glow in the recession.”

Roxanne pulled out her iPad and showed him, and he took it from her and rattled through the rest of the works on the website. “Yeah that should work,” he said. “I also like the lavender ones, and the ones with old signs.”

“That’s a good point, and those could definitely be local.”

“Right, you title them local,” Bert said. “No one’ll know the difference . . . So you think you’ll start on one of them this weekend?”

Roxanne said, “Or I was thinking tonight, when we get back.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bert said.

It took two weeks and she had to pull a couple of all-nighters but Roxanne had successfully replaced all 14 of her paintings in the bank with fresh ones she copied, or as she and Bert were putting it now to each other, ‘developed’, from Elsa Bakkar.

She actually had to paint 18, because she sold 4 along the way, not including the flower farm one that started it all. Mel told her she was setting a record for the bank, that no one sold this many paintings.

Roxanne decided she might as well go with a pen name too, so on all her title cards she was now Karina Matsumoto.

“If they pay by check,” she asked Mel, “they can just make it out to the bank, right?”

“Of course,” Mel said, “we can work it however. I’m not an artist, so I don’t understand the shift of identity though, but I’m sure you have a good reason.”

“I don’t like being front and center,” Roxanne said.

A month later, she’d sold 6 more and replaced all of those. Friday was supposed to be the last day of her show, but Mel told her he had pushed back the next artist and she could go until June. ‘By popular demand’ was how he put it, winking at her.

When she told Bert at dinner, he said, “All good . . . and your success, there’s a ripple effect. I’m finally getting the novel off the ground.”

“Oh boy,” Roxanne said. “Too bad you can’t use someone else’s, and, you know . . . re-frame it.”

“Thanks, but for your information, I’m actually a pretty good writer.”

“So I keep hearing . . . But I’m a damn good artist. As I look back on it now, I think the Dirigible Patterns gig really helped.” Years ago, Roxanne had taken some design courses at the JC, and landed a job with a textile company. She spent most of her time coloring small repeated patterns of fabric with inks.

“I can see how that could tighten your hand,” Bert said.

“What, so you’re saying I’m a good technician, but not a real artist?”

“Me? Not at all . . . Though that’s where you were going with it, it seemed like.”

“You must be having a bad day, because you’re an idiot,” Roxanne said. “When the check engine light came on, wasn’t it nice for once to go to a regular old-fashioned mechanic, rather than have to screw around finding someone on CraigsList?”

“Of course,” Bert said. “I’m not disputing that.”

They finished eating. Roxanne said, “Some of that, it came out wrong . . . Can we just move forward?”

“That’s the most reasonable thing you’ve said tonight,” Bert said.

Ten days later Roxanne had racked up 3 more sales. It was a quiet Thursday afternoon. A frizzy-haired woman about 60 years old who Roxanne didn’t recognize came to her window.

“The works are quite exquisite,” the woman said. “Might you be the artist?”

Roxanne debated for a moment, decided the woman fit the profile a gallery owner, perhaps in San Francisco, or possibly she was a wealthy matron looking to buy her out and furnish her vacation home in Sun Valley.

So she smiled and came clean.

“I’m Elsa Bakkar,” the woman said quietly.

Roxanne felt a panic attack coming on and tried to keep her breathing steady. Elsa stood there, and finally Roxanne said, “You don’t look like your picture.”

“I use one from 25 years ago,” Elsa said. “The image, and all.” She had a slight touch of a Scandinavian accent.

“Well, what can I say?” Roxanne said. “. . . this not going to end well, I assume.”

“No,” Elsa said. “It likely will not.”

There was a customer fidgeting in line. “I was kidding myself obviously,” Roxanne said, “to think word wouldn’t get around. Sooner or later.”

“I suppose that’s what one calls a calculated risk,” Elsa said.

Roxanne said, “Is there anything . . . I don’t know . . . I can possibly do for you? . . . I’m not a bad person, I’m really not.”

Elsa thought about it. “Fine, perhaps a meal then?” she said.

Roxanne excused herself for a moment and went in the office and made a reservation at the fancy place up the street, which had supposedly won a Michelin star.

“I’ll see you at 6,” she said to Elsa. “My husband’ll come down . . . Hopefully you’ll see, we’re just regular folks.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Elsa said.

The maitre d apologized but said they would need to please sit down or he’d have to give away their table. It was after 6:30 and it was just the two of them, no Elsa.

“That’s not a good sign, is it,” Bert said.

“You know something?” Roxanne said. “A, you’re an asshole for stating the obvious.”

“What’s B?”

“Well, that it felt . . . like I was a step away from connecting with the woman . . . Like she understood where I was coming from.”

“Ah . . . you mean like maybe she copied something out of a book and sold it, when she was getting started?”

“Why, yes . . . that wouldn’t completely shock me.”

“Say, something by an obscure 19th century Italian painter, that no one would ever find? That wouldn’t be bad.”

“That’s what I should have done.”

“What’s got me curious,” Bert said, “is how she found out. She’s all the way down in Visalia, isn’t she?”

“Taking it a step further,” Roxanne said, “I wonder how she knew I was the artist, actually.”

“Well, someone must have told her. In the bank.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Roxanne said, staring full-on at Bert now.

“Babe, hold on here . . . Whatever you’re thinking . . .”

“Un . . . frigging . . . believable.”

“What?”

“Lord have mercy on you . . . What kind of human being did I marry?”

Bert waited a moment.

“I guess time will tell,” he said. “The novel though, it’s coming along.”