Theresa Rebeck

Art Appreciation

(Miss Paula stands beside an easel, on which a painting has been placed.)

MISS PAULA
People have a lot of questions. It’s been a cause for concern, for many, many years now. And pain. I know that some people are worried, distressed—truly distressed, deeply, anguished even. I feel that. I really do. That’s why I feel—I just have to say—to put everyone’s minds at rest—I have it. The Vermeer. From the Gardner.

(She points sideways, at the painting.)

MISS PAULA (continuing)
I have it.

(Looks at it.)
And I have to tell you—It’s really beautiful.

(She laughs.)
Truly, truly. You can stop worrying, it’s in good hands, because I love it.

(She laughs.)
Do you want to see it?

(She makes to turn it around.)
Just kidding. I mean, I’m not kidding that I have it, I’m kidding that you can see it. Of course you can’t see it. What would be the point of stealing a Vermeer if you were just going to show it to everybody? I mean, if I were interested in sharing my Vermeer—I like the sound of that, “my” Vermeer. “My Vermeer,”—anyway, if I were interested in sharing my Vermeer, I would just give it back. Wouldn’t I? I would, like, roll it up, stick it in a tube and FedEx it to the Gardner. Boy, that would make the papers. All over the world! People would be talking about that for a looong time, in hushed tones, the wonder of it, the mystery: The Vermeer was gone for years and
years, and then it just showed up one day, because some anonymous art lover suddenly remembered a deep truth lost in the distant echoes of time itself: Sharing is good . . .

(She laughs.)

No, no, I’m not making fun of sharing. What kind of person do you think I am?

(She laughs again.)

I’m just saying, sharing and art are not necessarily two words that often appear in the same sentence. Look, let’s face it, when old Isabella Gardner bought the damn thing, sharing was not exactly on her mind. She wasn’t thinking, oh cool, I’ve got a Vermeer now, let’s hang it in the window so everyone on Comm Ave. can see it. No no no, she was thinking, I have a Vermeeeeer. Now me and my favorite friends can look at it whenever we want, and no one else can, unless I say so. When I die, maybe I’ll let people look at it then. Yes, I think I will. They can come to my house and look at my Vermeer, so long as they can afford the entry fee. Look, I’m not criticizing Saint Isabella. Far from it. She is my hero. We are a lot alike, you know. She was a vibrant and passionate lover of art, and lover of artists, but she also suffered from depression her whole life. She really struggled with it, sometimes it would come on her and overwhelm her, and she would have to take long fabulous European vacations to get over it. I suffer from depression too. It’s true, and I’m telling you, it’s no joke. When you fall into it, it’s completely overwhelming. You just don’t know how to get out. It’s like being trapped inside your own mind, spinning into ever-darker places, and you know that, somehow, this isn’t true, what you see and feel about yourself and the world, that the world is a bigger place, full of light and hope and meaning, but all of that is so far from you, and it’s virtually impossible, simply impossible, to know how to climb out of your own despair. Nothing helps. Well—having your own Vermeer helps a little.

(She laughs.)

MISS PAULA (continuing)

Okay, it helps a lot. The surest fix I know, when things are getting a little gloomy, is just to sneak a peak. Let me demonstrate.
(She looks, admires, puts her hand on her heart.)
Well, I do, I feel a lot better. No kidding, this painting is very satisfying to look at. It fills my spirit with so much reverence for humanity, for beauty and light—one of the purposes of art is to enoble the human spirit, and I can feel that happening, when I look at my Vermeer. I feel really noble.

(She laughs.)
Well, I do, but it’s not like I don’t understand the irony of my situation. You own your own Vermeer, that’s the sort of thing that helps you keep things in perspective. Sure, I’m out of work. But I have a Vermeer! Okay, my boyfriend dumped me. But I have a Vermeer! I hate my landlord, my thighs are fat, my bank account is non-existent, but . . . See how it works? It’s a palliative to life! It’s a cure for all woe. I had always heard that art could do that. But it wasn’t until I owned my own Vermeer that I understood how deeply, literally true that was.

So stealing a Vermeer—not that I stole it, I’m not saying that either, and I’m not absolutely admitting I have it either, that’s the other reason I can’t show it to you, plausible deniability is absolutely essential in cases like this—but hypothetically, let’s say, stealing a Vermeer would not necessarily be a transgressive act. Well, it would be transgressive, but my point is, all art is transgressive, isn’t it? Artists live transgressive lives, no one wants their kid to grow up and be a painter or an actor, God forbid, your kid says “I want to be a playwright,” and you want to blow your brains out. It’s just not a wise thing, being an artist, well, there’s potentially wisdom in it, but potentially madness too, in equal proportion. Maybe even more madness than wisdom, that would depend on how stable you are, and how stable is any artist? Are you following this? Cause I’m not entirely sure I am, but I also think I may be onto something. The fact is, artists make the culture very nervous. They’re always saying or doing upsetting things, for no money. Which, let’s face it, makes people want to hit them. The critics are always so upset and angry and mean, you got to think about that, critics are people who see art all the time and it seems to have made them a little nuts too. It certainly has made them angry. So here we have these artists, flailing around, making beautiful things that seem to upset people, people are embarrassed if their kids become artists, critics want to beat them up all
the time, and they’re constantly broke unless they hit the big time, which even Vermeer didn’t do, so hitting the big time isn’t exactly what makes a person an artist. What is my point? I’m not sure. No. I have a point! My point is, as far as the culture is concerned, artists and what they do, all of that is really just one step away from criminality and madness. Vermeer was nuts, the way he lived his life was nuts, he had ten kids, and he took years to paint these things, and then he couldn’t sell them. What he was doing with his life, by all modern American standards, was completely insane. He died a pauper. They had to auction off all his work, to pay his bills. He left his family in utter destitution. He was, in short, a complete loser. A talented, brilliant, visionary loser. I feel an affinity for that. I feel that by claiming this Vermeer as my own, I am celebrating his transgressive essence. And creating my own little work of art. By stealing it. The way he stole light. The way he stole earrings, and faces, a blanket on a table, a glass of wine, a servant girl. The way he stole windows and maps, on walls, and desire, and a red hat.

MISS PAULA (continuing)
He was a thief, he stole life in the name of art, and we revere him for that. And that is why, I’m not saying I did steal it. I’m not making any admissions, remember. But I will say, I wish I did. In my heart, I hope I did. Because there, when I look at it, I can be with it, in its essence, as I remember what it means to be human, in all its greatness and sorrow and beauty and insanity. (She turns and looks at it. Her face lights up.)

MISS PAULA (continuing)
It’s really magnificent. It really just is.

(Lights fade out as she admires her Vermeer.)