

The Case of Jack's Masterpiece

Sug and I always get stuck on who saw it first. Not that it truly makes any difference—but if I happen to be telling the story, you can bet on her jumping in to correct me.

Now you might wonder what it was we saw. It's not what *was* there, exactly; it's what *wasn't*—namely, the Masterpiece. Jack never called it that, but he did call it the best painting he ever did in his forty-odd years as an artist. There's still a lot of talk about how it went missing. The going theory you can attribute to Darrin Shiflett. Darrin was a rookie on the Armadillo Police Force at the time. He's since landed his dream job as a CSI in Savannah, and swears that cracking this case was his big break.

But you don't need Darrin to tell you. Ask Sug, and you'll get the whole story blow by blow. So just to keep you from nodding off, I'll boil it down for you.

I remember it was July 29th, and the three of us—Jack, Sug and I—were home from two weeks' vacation at Jekyll Island Beach. As soon as we stepped in the house, I *knew* something was wrong. If Sug were standing here right now she would say “That's right, Tea, because I told you. I was the first one in the living room and looked.”

She may have looked, but she didn't *see*. That's where we always get into it.

It's gone! That was me screaming. And there we stood gaping in horror at a picture hook on a wall.

That empty wall flashed me back six years to the time we met Jack Sanders. Sug and I were 43 and on this road trip to nowhere after Mama passed. We'd just crossed the state line from South Carolina to Georgia, it was noonish, and we were both starving.

About ten minutes later, up pops a sign saying *Armadillo, 2 miles*. Sug spots another sign, one with the little knife and fork on it, and says “Hey look, Tea...gotta be a restaurant here somewhere.”

I'm thinking, I hope they serve something other than *armadillos*.

“There’s a Subway over there,” Sug says, and then “Hey, check this out, Tea, you’re the artist.” To the right is a church with a life-size mural painted on the wall. It shows a tall, red-headed clergyman in front of the same church. Then we start to see other murals too, all showing people or goings-on in the town.

And yes, I am an artist. At least I went to art school for two semesters. Sug likes to say that I’m “undiscovered”. In a slightly snarky way, I might add, but that’s neither here nor there; what I’m leading up to is, these murals were intriguing. Folksy, yes, but real art—not just some school-kid stuff.

At the Subway when I was ordering my six-inch turkey-and-swiss it occurred to me to ask the girl if she knew who did the murals.

She says “Oh yeah, for sure—Jack Sanders. He lives over on Chestnut. Studio’s in back of his house.”

“Can you give me directions?”

At this point Sug was giving me the look, but she pretty well knew we’d be paying a visit to Jack Sanders’ studio.

Long story short, Jack was totally taken with us for some reason. Said he was mesmerized by our eyes—that they made him weak in the knees, although if you ask whether it was Sug’s hazel eyes or my cat-green ones that got him, he won’t say. Who knows, maybe my eyes weakened the left knee and Sug’s the right.

He wanted to paint us, and in two weeks the Masterpiece was born. Honestly, Sug and I could only stare at it with our mouths open when we first saw it.

More about that in a minute.

Of course there were sittings, and sometime during those, we fell in love with Jack too. *Magical*...that’s the only way I can describe it. He was an odd bird, with his long gray ponytail, bushy eyebrows and red beard, but they grew on me.

Well, not literally, of course.

Jack asked us to move into his old farmhouse, and we honestly couldn’t think of any reason not to. Took some time to settle in, but we love our arrangement now. He focuses on painting, Sug does the website, and I more or less do the rest. Part of which is to learn Jack’s painting techniques. His eyesight is gradually failing, even with

treatment from Doc Barnes. In case he gets so bad he can't paint, the "Jack Sanders School" of the future is yours truly.

I'm actually getting pretty good with his style, but he has some quirks that are hard to imitate. I remember complaining that I couldn't get these strange shadows right.

Then he says "Hmm, I don't know—guess you just gotta *see* 'em."

See 'em. Really? Like, you're seeing a ghost and I'm supposed to see it too?

The shadows might be dark, light, or just shapes in the brush strokes.

Sometimes they look like faces, or animals, sometimes things. Half the time I don't think Jack even realizes he's putting them in. He finishes a piece, and sure enough, there they'll be.

Strangest of all, I swear they *predict* things. Last year he did this portrait of Janie Baker's family, and she noticed her two kids seemed to be throwing three shadows on the floor. Jack blamed his poor eyesight, but I bet that painting wasn't hanging in the Baker house a week before Janie found out she was pregnant.

I promised to tell you more about the Masterpiece. Everyone always exclaimed over it—how wonderful it was, how vibrant! Jack did it in oils on wood, with this gorgeous background of rich cerulean blue. In the foreground were the two of us, Sug and me, holding hands, dancing in a kind of ring-around-the-rose. If you know your art, you'd think of the famous Matisse painting *The Dance*. Jack did it in his own style, of course, shadows and all. Really, *shadow* isn't quite the right word this time—these were more like translucent feathery shapes behind the figures.

Which were nude, by the way.

Sug had all kinds of trouble getting past that. But she had noticed the feathering and asked Jack "Are those *wings*?"

"Hmm. I'm thinkin' yes."

Whenever you hear *hmm*, you know he's not sure himself.

We'd hung the painting over the mantel in the living room after endless discussions of the propriety of it. I mean, who gets all het up over nudity in art? But Sug was all *OMG, Mama's gonna turn in her grave seeing her daughters prancing around with their butts in full view. What will people think?* And so on.

House guests did invariably zero in on that painting. Sug was forever worrying they'd get the wrong idea. *We are sisters, for God's sake, and it looks like—well, there we are, holding hands, naked as jaybirds.*

I kept telling her she was being silly, and besides, did she really think anybody would pay attention to the faces?

Masterpiece or scandal piece, now it's gone.

So here we were, back from the beach all sandy-footed, gaping at this lonely little hook on the wall above the fireplace. You know that instant of disbelief. You blink and think everything will be back to normal when you open your eyes. But blink away, you can't make a painting reappear, and that picture hook is not squeaking out an eyewitness account for you; that picture hook is forever silent.

Sug shakes her head like she just woke up, and says "What the hell are we doing standing here like idiots? We've been robbed!"

All of a sudden I feel breathless. "What if they stole other stuff too? Or...God forbid, what if they're still in the house?"

Jack can tell I'm about to have a panic attack. "Hold on...the alarm was still set when we came in. How could they get past that? And then reset it?"

Jack gets out his shotgun and checks every room, every door and window. Nothing to indicate a break-in. Nothing disturbed. No one in the house. Thank heaven for that.

Next thing you know, the best of the Armadillo Police Department, namely Captain Arnold Tibbens and Officer Darrin Shiflett, are in taking pictures, gathering samples, and dusting everything for prints.

I will say they were polite, but they went on and on with endless questions to the point we practically felt like suspects.

Who last saw the painting?

"Me, I think. I locked up," Jack said.

Was it on the wall at the time?

“No, it was kinda *off* the wall, right Sug?”

Sug rolls her eyes. “Tea, quit it. Yes, Arnie, for the past six years it’s been right there on that wall. Over the fireplace.”

What time did y’all leave the house on July 15th?

“I think about 9 AM.”

Anybody else own a key?

“Just the three of us.”

Isn’t it true that folks have heard Sug express discomfort over the painting?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Now, Sug.” I’m the voice of balm.

What would you say is the monetary value of it?

One Atlanta dealer had offered nearly twenty grand.

Was it insured? For how much?

“Jeez, we didn’t steal our own painting.” Sug’s getting those little red patches on her neck.

“Come on Sug, it’s not personal...” I look over at Darrin Shiflett. “Right, hon? By the way, how’s your mom? She get the porch fixed?”

“Yes ma’am. She’s fine, thanks. I’m doin’ some of the carpentry for her—” But then he stops. Probably trying not to get too chatty on the job, being new. His mother Leila’s influence, no doubt. She would always tell anybody who’d listen how her boy was going to be a detective; poor kid has to live up to her standards. Darrin is Leila Shiflett’s oldest and reputedly brightest son. I say *reputedly* because I’ve had my doubts from time to time. But he tries hard.

Everyone knows everyone else in Armadillo, so it never takes long for news to travel. No surprise, Leila was the first to call.

“Hello, Tea?... It’s Leila Shiflett.” She pronounced it “Shif-*flay*”, like Hyacinth Bucket calling herself *Bouquet* on that old British comedy. “I couldn’t believe it when I heard! Who on earth would do such a thing?”

“Yeah, we’re still sort of numb.”

“My Darrin was so shocked! He said he got lots of samples...you know, evidence.”

“Oh he did, Leila. He’s grown into a responsible young man. You can be proud.”

“Well, that’s how we raised him.”

“Course. Thanks so much for calling, Leila. Appreciate your concern. I’m sure we’ll be hearing some news from Darrin soon.”

After that it would’ve been easier to count who *didn’t* call or stop by to express their concern. There was even a reporter from the *Armadillo Gazette* and one from the *Savannah Morning News*.

By 9:00 Sug and I were flat-out exhausted. Jack, can you believe, was all energized. That’s because he skipped the afternoon drama by holing out in his studio to work on a piece. Can’t really say I blame him. He’d snagged a nice commission—a life-size portrait of Homer J. Preble, President of First Savannah Bank, and he was keen on getting it done on time. He said Preble was such a jerk, he would’ve walked if not for the money. That’s saying a lot for Jack, because he usually finds at least something positive in people. But apparently this asshole spent all the sittings talking about his *wife*—what a “gold-digging bitch” she was—and how he even had half a mind to do her in and run off with his stenographer! I’m not even sure what a stenographer is; but no matter, I would’ve called that poor wife to give her a heads-up.

Anyway Jack did do something: he painted Preble with vultures circling. Sug and I had a good laugh at that, but wondered if it was such a good idea. Jack said not to worry, he’d never notice ‘em in the shadows cast by the chandelier.

I’ll act surprised, but won’t be, when I read some headline like *Wife Charged With Prominent Banker’s Murder*.

So into the living room strolls Jack, all paint-spattered and grinning.

“Well, well...don’t you look like the cat that ate the canary.”

“Yeah,” Sug says. “Here we are about to kick from exhaustion, and you’re downright *peppy*.”

“Hell, one piece is gone, but one’s done! Break-even point, right?” He plops onto the sofa in his favorite saggy spot. “You girls had a pretty rough day, I take it.”

“Talk about rough *days*.” Sug’s voice has that dry little tone she gets. “I swear half the *town* dropped by to have a look at a blank wall. Sweet Jesus.”

“Oh, they were just trying to be nice. Considering we got broken into, and all. And I’ve got to admit I’m feeling kind of violated. Lord knows, it’s nice to have some friends out there.”

Jack’s grin vanishes. “It just seems like...how in the hell did this bastard get in?”

All of a sudden I can’t hold in the tears.

“Tea...I’m sorry. I should have protected y’all better. And then I left you to face all those rubberneckers.”

“Group hug.” Sug says. “It’s okay, Tea...Jack, honey, there was nothing you could’ve done. You had to finish that portrait. We know that, we’re big girls. Most important, nobody’s hurt.”

Sometimes Sug’s a pretty good grown-up in the room.

A few mornings later I’m out in the driveway picking up the newspaper when I look over and there’s this big truck parked at Fiona Bradley’s. Just out of curiosity, I walk up the road in my robe and slippers until I can see the logo: Bubba’s Bugs-Be-Gone.

My first thought was *Maybe the cockroaches finally took over*. I like Fiona, I really do, but she’s always got old food molding away on her kitchen counter, dirty dishes and piles of junk lying around. There’s talk of her being a hoarder, and I think there’s something to it.

She also never throws away an opportunity to chat, having a legendary gift of gab. Janie Baker has a great story about how one afternoon Fiona was visiting, and Janie’s four-year-old was being unusually quiet and kept looking at Fiona. When he piped up with “Mama, I don’t see any blue streak,” well, you can imagine what followed.

I’m just turning around to go home when I hear *Hey, Tea!*

Here she comes. Damn.

“Oh, hey Fiona...I just saw the truck out here and—”

“Yeah, I want to talk to you about it. Think I may have a big problem. I called Bubba’s when—oh, wait a minute, there he is comin’ out now. Listen Tea, I’ll get with you this afternoon. Right now I better go find out what the damage is.”

Yes.

“Okay, catch you later.”

Sug was down in the kitchen by the time I got home. “Hey, where were *you*?”

“Just out picking up the Gazette. Here.”

“Thanks. Where’d you go, all the way downtown to get it?”

“In my jammies? Not quite. I just went up the street to check out this truck parked at Fiona’s—”

“Oh, say no more...hey, look here, page two. *Art Heist Still a Mystery*. Huh. Maybe we need to call in the FBI!”

“*Who* needs to call in the FBI?” Jack’s gravelly morning voice from the stairway. Right then a ringtone interrupted.

“That’s mine...now where the hell-?” says Jack.

“Here in the kitchen, by the coffee machine.” I always know where his phone is.

“Sanders here...who?...Oh, hey Darrin. Hang on. I’m gonna put you on speaker.” He fiddled with the phone. “Okay. We can all hear you. Any news?”

“No—I mean, there *is* something—we’ve been workin’ on the evidence we gathered. There was oil-based pigment and turpentine residue on some wood shavings or sawdust in your fireplace. Underneath where the painting was.”

“Sawdust? That’s weird...”

“Um...Mr. Sanders, there’s no chance you or the ladies burned the picture, is there?”

“Burned it?” Jack burst out laughing. “Girls, for the love’a God, please tell Darrin that you two didn’t burn up the damn painting.”

“Jack Sanders, what a thing to say! Of course not.”

Sug says “Here we go again, us being treated like effin’ suspects when we’re the victims.”

“Sorry...sorry, Ms. Sug...Ms. Tea. I had to ask, that’s all. Just for the record.”

“Darrin, we haven’t had a fire in that fireplace since last winter.”

“Yessir, I understand. And to be honest, we saw very little charred material. Something’s still not adding up, though. Do y’all mind if I come back out and take one more look?”

“Sure, come on over. We’ll be in.”

“How about 4:30 this afternoon?”

At exactly 4:25 Officer Darrin Shiflett appeared in order to examine the crime scene for more evidence. He went over to the fireplace, looked again at the mantelpiece, the hearth, and inside the firebox. Then out came the camera, more plastic bags, little tools and what-not.

After forty minutes Sug whispers to me “Christ, is he gonna take all night?”

Jack says why don’t we all break for happy hour and have a cold beer. Sounds like a great idea to us, but Darrin says no thanks.

“No drinkin’ on the job...I’ll be done in five minutes, I promise. Go ahead though, don’t mind me.”

So Sug, Jack and I are out on the verandah with an iced six-pack when here comes Darrin busting out through the screen door. Scared the shit out of us.

“Jeez, Darrin,” says Sug, “Take it easy, that door’s sixty years old if it’s a day.”

Darrin’s eyes are glowing in his cheeks like two bright blueberries in yeast-rolls. “Sorry Ms. Sug...but I’d say you’re lucky that door’s still hangin’ there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am about to explain that right now. I got the perps.”

“Are they contagious?” Jack’s the picture of solemnity as he says this.

Darrin just stands there for a second, then clears his throat.

“Um—the *perpetrators* were evidently lookin’ for dinner.”

Darrin does his pause-for-effect thing again.

“Okay, okay, cut the CSI suspense crap,” says Jack, “You ready to give us the scoop here, or are we gonna end up hearing it from your Mama?”

Darrin’s face is all flushed. “Right. Okay. As I was sayin’, they—”

“They?” says Sug. “So there’s more than one?”

“Not only more than one, we’re talkin’ thousands, maybe *millions*. Look at this.”

He pulls out a plastic bag full of something.

We all stare at it for an eternity.

“For cripe’s sake, Darrin, what are we lookin’ at?” says Jack.

“Wings! See? Zillions of tiny wings. In the fireplace, mostly under the grate, and lots more clear up the flue where we didn’t find ‘em at first.”

“*Wings...*” It’s starting to dawn on me.

He pulls out a second bag. It has some kind of particles in it.

“And here’s the rest of the evidence. Mr. Sanders, remember I said I found that wood dust?”

“Yeah. How could I forget your suggestion that I set fire to my favorite painting?”

Darrin Shiflett pulls himself up to his full 5 feet 9 inches. “What got your masterpiece, Mr. Sanders, was a *swarm of termites* the likes of which I daresay we’ve never before seen in Armadillo.”

Jack’s eyebrows shoot up about as far as they can go. “*Termites?*”

“Yessir.”

“What, they ate the whole freakin’ *thing*, just like that?”

Sug’s like, “No, that’s not possible!”

“Wait...maybe it is.” I’m waving my hand around now like a fool. “Sug, this morning, when I started to tell you I saw that truck parked up at Fiona Bradley’s? I didn’t think much about it at the time, but that was a Bubba’s pest control truck. Do you suppose—?”

“I can tell you for a fact,” says Darrin. “I talked to Ms. Bradley just before I came here. Her whole back wall’s gotta be replaced. And yesterday—”

“Too bad roaches don’t eat termites.”

“Say what?”

“Nothin’. Go on, Darrin.”

“So. Y’all were gone on vacation for, what, two weeks?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, yesterday I called Bubba. Seems he’s had a *bunch* of calls for subterranean termites lately. And no ordinary ones, either. These critters are some new

imported hybrid variety. Bubba says they can go through a two-by-four in the space a three hours. They probably started feasting on your Masterpiece well before you left. Give 'em a week or two to finish their work, and there you have it. Or more like, *don't* have it. Sorry to say."

"Jesus, what are these little bastards, the piranhas of the insect world?"

"Pretty good description, Mr. Sanders. Come on, let's go back in, I'll show you."

We all follow Darrin into the living room like a line of sheep and look in the fireplace. Sure enough, behind the screen there's a sizable accumulation of what looks like sawdust. Some of it even has specks of cerulean blue on it. Then Darrin sticks a poker up a little ways into the flue, and down flutter all these tiny wings. Thousands, maybe millions.

Jack's still skeptical, but no one's thought of any better explanation.

Darrin said to Jack later, "By the way, Mr. Sanders, I hope you didn't think my *mother* was privy to the department's forensics work."

Jack said no, why would he think that, of course not.

Fiona Bradley eventually caught up with me to bend my ear about the damage to her house. "Thirty-five hundred dollars, it cost me! You know, it wouldn't surprise me one bit to find out those horrible bugs tunneled right from your house to mine."

I decided just to sip my coffee.

Jack's starting to talk about recreating the painting. It will be oils on *canvas* this time around. I told him if he finds himself painting in rows of shadowy little legs or something, to please paint them back out. The last thing we need now is an invasion by some army of canvas-eating caterpillars.

Needless to add, we were the next grateful clients of Bubba's Bugs-Be-Gone, who determined the marauders had munched their way into the house from under the crawl space, then up through the back of the fireplace surround. Why they hadn't eaten out the wall behind the painting is still a mystery.

Sug and Jack think maybe they were repelled by some old chemical treatment of the wall slats. The painting itself was on untreated wood, so it makes some sense.

You want to know my personal theory? Those termites *chose* Jack's Masterpiece. We were dealing with a rare breed. Stands to reason they'd have very particular taste.