

Las Meninas: The Alchemy of a Life

Anne stared at the miniaturized “*Las Meninas*” in her hand. Velasquez’ vast painting reduced to postcard size. She could wallpaper her kitchen with cards like these. Ones her students — current and former — mailed her from summer vacation spots. Anne steadied herself for another one.

She put on her reading glasses and turned the card over.

“Dear Professor Carroll,

At the Prado I saw this magnificent painting we had studied in class. It’s huge — what a proud self-portrait alongside the perfect princess and her maids. The way Velasquez toys with us by hiding the subject of his painting and reflects the King and Queen in the mirror is brilliant. The intensity with which the figures stare out at me gave me goose bumps as if I were the subject of the painting. I can’t wait to discuss it with you. See you in the fall.

Hasta Luego,
Martha Hernandez”

Like so many others Martha Hernandez had sought out a masterpiece Anne had described in her lectures and wanted to discuss it with her. She wanted to compare her experience of standing in front of that larger-than-life painting with Anne’s.

“Goosebumps,” Martha wrote. Anne sighed. Now was not the time to dwell on Martha’s misconception. How lucky Martha was to travel to see Spanish paintings while in her twenties. At her age, Anne had been living an artist’s existence and broke. What would it be like to have her whole life ahead of her? To feel so passionate? Since widowed two years ago, Anne felt mostly lonely. How would she feel standing in front of that masterpiece?

Anne placed the card in her pocketbook and pulled out a hanky to wipe the beads of sweat from her neck. Her first class of the fall semester at the Des Moines Area Community

College — Urban Campus began in 15 minutes. Not likely the precocious girl would be back in her classroom this semester. She'd already taken all four classes Anne taught. More likely she'd show up for Anne's office hours.

The path through campus led her past full parking lots and white boxy buildings. Her light grey sweater matched her hair, in contrast to the brilliant colors presenting on the tips of maple and elm leaves. She crossed 8th street, stepped onto the sidewalk, and paused to regain her balance. Students surged around her as if she were a logjam in a flowing river. In front of Hamlett Hall, she tucked her bulky slide box under her left arm and reached for the door handle. At the same time a student pushed open the heavy glass door, stepped through it and held it for her. She nodded, grateful for the gesture.

Suzanne and Mary, the middle-fifties executive wives who had the time and could afford to repeat her survey courses, chatted in the front row. They travelled extensively and over the years, they, too, had sent Anne postcards with famous paintings from far away museums. How had Martha afforded such a trip? The young woman was working her way through school.

Anne made her way to the slide projector in the middle of the classroom. Her son Stuart, a painter in Chicago, had offered to convert her hundreds of slides to a PowerPoint presentation. But she couldn't be bothered to learn new technology at this point in her life. A life that hadn't turned out the way she'd imagined when she graduated with a BFA from New York University fifty some years ago.

"Hi, Professor Carroll," Suzanne called out. "How was your summer?"

"I saw the Mona Lisa again," Mary said. "I just love that painting."

“I’ll save time at the end of class,” Anne said, avoiding their eyes. “For all of you to tell us about the paintings you saw this summer.”

She clicked the slide carousel in place, took a deep breath, and walked to the front of the room. Nearly every seat was filled. Despite the fact that she’d been voted most popular teacher 13 out of the 30 years she’d been teaching, the first lecture of the term always made her nervous. If the class had been quiet, surely, they would have heard her rapid heartbeat. Sweat now dripped down her back. The lights dimmed. Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” appeared large on the screen. She stood in the dark room illuminated only by the magnificent painting and took three slow deep breaths. The conversation hushed. With a strong voice she began her 31st “Renaissance to Modern” lecture.

She explained that this was the first painting done on a canvas in Florence. Alabaster powder was the secret to its brilliant long-lasting color. If it were not for the commissioners of the work — the powerful Medicis — this shy nude, rendered at such a scale, would certainly have been denounced. More Florentine paintings appeared on the screen in rapid succession. Then, her slides transported her students to Rome. There, in the early 1500’s, artist-geniuses finally came into their own. They wanted to be seen. Artists had declared that patrons should no longer see them as just craftsmen. They, along with the poets, should be seen as members of the *intelligencia*.

“Does anyone doubt that this is the work of a genius,” she said. “This glorious fresco is ‘The Creation of Adam’ by Michelangelo.”

The entire class stared up at the work. After a minute of silence Anne motioned for the florescent lights to return overhead. An eruption of applause followed that continued until Anne asked her students to quiet down.

“Who would like to tell the class,” Anne asked, “what paintings they saw this summer?”

“I was thrilled to see the Mona Lisa again,” Mary answered. “I always find her eyes so penetrating.”

“Not me, I was really disappointed,” a male student, unknown to Anne, said. “It was so small. Covered in bulletproof glass. And the crowd was sneaking flash photos. I bought the poster in the gift shop. It gives you a better sense of his *sfumato* technique.”

“I agree. You can learn a lot from reproductions,” Anne said, impressed with the boy’s observation. “Say more about the *sfumato*.”

“You know, blurred edges,” he said. “You actually see the forms dissolving because of the continuous interaction between light and shade.”

“What did you think, Professor?” Suzanne asked, her tone a denouncement of the boy’s arrogance. “Were you disappointed when you saw it for the first time?”

Blood surged through Anne’s body as if it were water pumped to the surface from a deep aquifer. Her mouth grew dry. Prior to this decade most of her students had been too poor to travel. They hadn’t assumed she’d stood in front of every famous European masterpiece. But this crop of students did. And she hadn’t dissuaded them of this notion. Her image, now larger than her life had been, could easily be dismantled by the truth. Why hadn’t she corrected her students’ assumptions of her ability to travel? When she had the chance? Her omission festered inside her like the pain lingering after the prick of a thorn.

“Well, most people...” She swallowed what little saliva she had left. “Most people are disappointed when they finally see the Mona Lisa. The majority of viewers spend at most only 15 seconds looking at it. How many of you have seen it?”

She looked around the room. Martha Hernandez had slipped into the back row. Anne's pulse quickened. She wasn't prepared to converse about *Las Meninas*, Velasquez, the Prado, Madrid, Spain, any of it. Why had the girl shown up this morning? Her eyes landed back on the boy who'd provoked the controversy.

"Over half of you travelled quite a long way for such a short view." She pointed towards the boy. "Like this gentleman here observed, reproductions can be necessary to really study a painting's details."

A few more students described their visits to the Tate, Musee d'Orsay, and Galleria Borghese. Anne made eye contact with Martha encouraging her to say something, possibly something Anne could riff off later. Martha offered nothing. She had rarely participated in class discussions. Anne couldn't even recall Martha's voice. Yet, Anne recalled her insightful papers and exams had contained a zeal for the subject matter.

"Would anyone," Anne said, "like to tell us about their summer and the paintings they didn't see?"

The class laughed. She waved her right hand and with a twist of her wrist dismissed them. A line formed in front of Anne's desk. Anne signed the last student override slip and looked up. Martha had moved to the front of the classroom and now sat in a first row desk. What could be so urgent?

"Sorry to be late," Martha said. "My shift ends after this class starts. Can you stay?"

"I have a few minutes," Anne said, feeling the moisture that had accumulated on her bra line and under her arms.

If Martha wanted to talk about the painting, Anne could oblige her. If Martha wanted to compare notes on their experiences in front of the painting, Anne had choices. She could tell her she had not seen the painting, get it over with, live with the fall out. Or pretend that she had. But she had never outright lied about her lack of travel to Europe. At 75, she didn't want to start now.

She stared at the tomato sauce splotches staining Martha's white blouse, just below the collar. Splattered pattern like a Jackson Pollock.

"Where are you working?" Anne said.

"Taco Bell on E. 12th Street. I just started," Martha said. "I lost my nanny job. After we returned from Spain, the husband was transferred just like that."

She snapped her fingers. Then, Martha folded her arms and pressed her lips together. She looked ready to get down to business. Anne wouldn't let her.

"Why didn't you tell the class you were in Spain when I asked?" Anne twisted the straps of her purse around her fingers.

"I'm not officially enrolled in the class. And I wanted to share more than the painting," Martha said, her right leg springing up and down. "How the trip changed my life."

At about that age Anne had been changed too. Not by Madrid but by New York City. She had loved being surrounded by all that creative energy. Her nighttime dreams had been filled with swirls of color, and she woke up to the smell of oil paint and turpentine. From her mattress on her loft's floor she could evaluate her previous night's work in the morning light. Some of her work had been good. She would roll on her back and examine her stained fingertips. She had shared the loft with two other girls, both painters. Did they still paint? Or did they give up like she had?

“Before I went to Spain,” Martha said. “I had planned to become a nurse. But because of your classes, the museums, seeing the original paintings, I’ve decided to major in art history.”

Art history? Hadn’t Martha heard what Obama had said about the impracticality of studying art history in this job market? Anne’s professional organizations had flooded her with requests to sign petitions, which explained to the President how art history majors are trained to think critically — a necessary skill in this job market. Martha couldn’t be thinking of teaching, could she? There were so few jobs and the pay abysmal. Perhaps she could be talked into becoming a curator, restorer, or appraiser.

“What do you plan to do with an art history degree?” Anne said, resting her clasped hands on the desk.

“I’d love to teach just like you,” Martha said, imitating Anne’s hand gesture.

A flush of warmth spread in Anne’s chest like salve rubbed on a wound. Martha loved paintings because of her. Yet Anne, at Martha’s age, could never have imagined teaching — she’d wanted to be a successful artist. After college, she’d tried to make a living as a painter. Her professors thought she had talent. She even showed her work in a SOHO gallery. But when her work didn’t sell right away, she’d panicked. She was 26 and her parents said the longer she stayed the less likely she would marry. There were several eligible young men they wanted to introduce to her. They insisted she could paint while her children were asleep or in school. The insecurity of living an artist’s life led her to pack her things and return to Iowa. And over the years the thought of standing in front of these masterpieces in the great art houses throughout Europe made her anxious. Reminders of the passion she’d squelched. The talent wasted.

“The school cut back on my financial aid,” Martha said. “My work schedule interferes with most of the classes I need. So, I was wondering if I could take an independent study with you.”

Martha drew some crumpled forms out of her backpack and stepped forward. Anne pursed her lips and resisted shaking her head “no.” She had never allowed herself to take on that extra work. Earlier in her career, while raising her family, she didn’t have the time. Now she was afraid the intimacy would lead to the truth about her lack of travel, her life limited by anxiety, and that teaching was not the career she had imagined for herself.

“Let me think about it.” Anne pressed the papers into her binder. “Give me your phone number, and I’ll be in touch.”

Martha wrote her number down and handed it to Anne.

“Please say yes,” Martha pleaded. “It would mean the world to me to work one-on-one with you.”

Anne’s throat tightened at the thought of disappointing her.

Anne made tea and spread butter on toast in the kitchen of her 100-year old farmhouse. Not the most nutritious dinner. Then she took the tray up the stairs, intending to enjoy the setting sun in her studio. That’s why they’d bought this house. The previous owner had been an artist, and had been genuinely pleased to pass the studio on to her. But Anne had never really painted seriously here. Now she used the studio as a sitting room. The view from the studio’s large windows soothed her.

She walking past her husband’s office and peered in. Nothing in the room had been removed since he’d died. She had tried to clean out his closet once, but had given up when

cassette tapes unraveled like hospital tubes gone haywire, baseball caps invoked memories of chemo induced baldness, and errant lengths of fishing wire secured a snug cage around her heart. She had stuffed it all back into the closet and hadn't opened that wooden door since.

The sun had set by the time she entered her studio. She reached for the light and noticed the package from her son she'd brought up there yesterday but had forgotten to open. She could tell it was books. Martha's postcard laid on top of it.

It was no wonder Martha had been so captivated by *Las Meninas*. A grand painting that captured an intimate moment in court life. But the image was not as simple as it seemed at first glance. Martha was right; it was a brilliant self-portrait.

Velasquez had depicted the artist in his studio. He'd wanted to be seen. But he was making a statement about painting as well. The strokes of white on his shirtsleeve drew one's eye to the paint palette, as if the artist said, "Look at me. See what I can do." He highlighted the alchemy of paint itself. His strokes both dissolved into nothingness and created a new reality, rich with detail and texture. Paint brushed one way portrayed an emotion. Another way revealed a different emotion. Velasquez' message was clear — he was not merely a craftsman, but a gentleman.

King Philip the IV awarded Velasquez knighthood several years after he'd finished this painting. The Red Cross of the Order of Santiago now on his chest, presumably painted by the King himself after the painter's death. How the artist must have felt to realize his dream.

Anne, at a younger age, had wanted to be seen too. But the attention she received from her early works felt unnatural. She had been taught to be humble and avoid the spotlight. Her ego to be resistant to praise.

She set the postcard aside. Her fingernail lifted the tape off the brown package wrapping. The stiff paper folded back to reveal a set of travel books labeled Barcelona, Madrid, and Toledo. Her son Stuart wrote, "I'm having a show in Barcelona this summer. Please come with us." An invitation to Spain? What strange and delightful timing. She flipped through the book and found *Las Meninas*. Was she capable of travelling to her son's show and onto Madrid to see this painting?

A week had passed and Anne's son, Stuart, and Martha awaited answers. Answers, which could bring both travel and companionship into her life. In the dark bedroom Anne wrestled with her blankets. Her breath labored. Moisture soaked her nightgown. Her body shook from chills. Chest pains. A heart attack? Call 911. She sat up in bed, throwing off her covers. She rubbed her numb legs. She only heard the sounds of her rapid heartbeat, a stomach growl. The cold tea and hardened toast had remained in her studio uneaten. No one knew if she ate or not. No one would know if she didn't wake up. At least not for days. Breathe. Breathe.

Over the years her doctor wanted to prescribe medication for her anxieties but she didn't believe in taking drugs. And lately he suggested other pills for what he called her "depression." She had watched her husband suffer with a long illness. Now he was gone. Wasn't she entitled to a little grief?

The pain subsided. Her heart slowed. Just another panic attack? It had been awhile since she had one this intense. As a young artist anxiety had prevented her from pursuing her artistic dreams. As she aged the anxious feelings occurred more frequently and lasted longer. Her husband's hospital stays during his long illness brought them on. After he died panic attacks

often led her to cancel outings with friends all too frequently. Until they stopped calling. She had agreed to prescription sleep aids, though. Her medicine cabinet contained a bottle.

Eventually, slivers of sunlight lit her bedroom. The pills had done their magic. She stared up at the ceiling's shadows. Could things change at her age?

Gestures were being made towards her, gestures that wouldn't be repeated if she turned them down. She would take it one step at a time. She would invite Martha to her home for tea to discuss her proposed independent study. A first.

Anne heard the knock. Martha was right on time. She opened the door. Martha entered her living room. Things bought at tag sales over the past forty years filled every space. Martha took a few steps forward, and each time she focused on a new object, her eyes lit up.

"So much art," Martha mused. "You've created your own museum."

"Except you can touch everything," Anne said. "And very little has any value."

Martha rubbed the marble bust, fingered the Egyptian tapestry hanging on the wall, and laughed at the life-size clown puppets sitting on the red velvet settee. Martha seemed stunned by the yard sale bounty.

"There's a Stickley bench and the lamp's a Tiffany," Anne said. "I'm in the process of authenticating some other things. Most things I picked up for my own amusement."

"Wow, a real Stickley bench." Martha ran her finger through its dust.

"The dust increases its worth," Anne said, embarrassed by her obvious inattention to housekeeping.

Martha laughed, her ponytail bouncing up and down.

"How can you tell if it's a real Tiffany?" Martha asked.

Real? As in not an imitation and not on the pages of a book? Another challenge to authenticity. Was she becoming paranoid?

“Besides the Tiffany Studios New York stamp?” Anne said. “When you turn it on, the colors of the glass actually change. Go ahead. See for yourself.”

Martha reached for the turn switch on the lamp’s brass base. The intense colors of the floral pattern glowed in the dimly lit room.

“Beautiful,” Martha said. “The room needed a little light.”

The lamp’s glow caused the oriental carpet pattern below to spring to life. Why didn’t Anne enjoy her things more often instead of feeling overwhelmed by them?

“Are you ready for tea?” Anne said. “I’ll show you the rest of the house after we’ve finished.”

“Sure,” Martha said. “That’d be great.”

Martha followed her into the kitchen. Anne motioned for her to sit down on one of the rattan kitchen chairs and lit the burner under the kettle on the stove. Two mismatched Wedgwood cups rested on chipped saucers already in place on the thick walnut kitchen table. She reached into the tin canister and pulled out two bags of Earl Grey tea.

“Where do you live?” Anne asked.

“Near Drake,” Martha answered.

Anne expected that response. It was one of the poorer sections of town.

“Tell me about your family,” Anne said.

“I’m the fourth of seven,” Martha answered. “The third girl. First to go to college. My older sisters are married with young kids.” Contempt in Martha’s voice suggested determination

to do something different with her life. Then her eyes dropped. “My older brother was killed in Iraq three years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.” Anne rose to the whistle of the teakettle. Martha knew loss too.

“How old were you when you married?” Martha asked.

“Thirty,” Anne said, pouring the steaming water into the waiting cups. “Old for my generation. Why?”

“I don’t think I want to marry,” Martha said, dunking her tea bag up and down. “I definitely don’t want kids.”

Did Martha feel she had to choose between family and career the way Anne had? Surely times had changed.

“What did you do before you married?” Martha asked.

“I stayed in New York after graduating from college,” Anne said. “I was a painter.”

“I didn’t know you were an artist as well,” Martha said, taking her first sip.

“I was but not now,” Anne said. “I haven’t really painted consistently since I returned to Iowa. I started to, then I had kids. I thought I would when the kids grew older. But then my husband became ill.”

The familiar excuses rolled easily off her tongue. Her words pierced her skin like arrows hitting their targets. How long would she blame others for derailing her dreams, when she was the one who had gotten in her own way? Anne winced.

“How’s your husband now?” Martha asked.

“He died,” Anne said. “Two years ago. But I’m still unable to paint.”

“I’m so sorry,” Martha said. “It takes time to get used to the new normal. My mom’s still depressed about my brother’s death. Sometimes I feel like I’ve lost her too.”

Anne nodded. Did she appear depressed to Martha?

“My brother dying so young,” Martha said, “makes me more determined than ever to do something with my life. He wanted to be a pilot. Sometimes I feel like he’s pushing me to fulfill my dreams since he couldn’t.”

A tingling started at the base of Anne’s neck. Anne wanted to fulfill her dreams too. Not exactly a push but something stirring.

“Would you,” Anne said, “like to see the rest of the house?”

“Sure,” Martha said, placing her cup in the sink.

“There’s not much to see,” Anne said. “But I have a lovely studio.”

The studio looked magical with its twelve-foot high ceiling and large glass windows. The setting sunrays streaming through the windows bounced off the metal easels forming light streaks on the floor. The metal rings on the paintbrushes sparkled.

“It’s a wonderful room,” Martha said. “So much light. You could easily paint a 10’ by 9’ canvas. Like *Las Meninas* in here.”

Didn’t Martha understand there’s nothing easy about painting? Anne ignored the comment. Martha fingered the paint tubes squeezed into diverse shapes spread across a rectangular table covered with butcher-block paper. Several threadbare oriental rugs lay on the hardwood floor.

Anne walked towards the west-facing window and felt the sun on her face. Reds, golds, and orange leaves glowed in the setting sun. Her favorite time of day.

“Are you going to Spain?” Martha asked.

“Why would you ask that?” Anne said, turning around, startled.

“The travel books here on the table,” Martha said. “Barcelona, Madrid, Toledo.”

Anne had forgotten she had left them there. She started back across the room towards the pile of books. The warmth drained from Anne’s skin.

“I haven’t decided,” Anne said. “My son has invited me to go with his family this summer.”

“I’d love to go back to Spain,” Martha said, flipping through one. “How many times have you been to Europe, Professor Carroll?”

Anne froze. She wanted to say, too many to count and be done with it. But she had never been asked such a forthright question about her travel history, and she’d never lied outright about her lack of travel. Not since a lie had changed so much.

During her freshman year at NYU her professor had asked the class where they came from. The students answered, “the Boston Area,” “Westchester,” “Short Hills, NJ,” and right here “In Manhattan.” She, embarrassed to say she was from Des Moines, Iowa, lied and said, “Darien, CT.” A place she’d never been to but where her roommate came from. From that lie she was forced to pretend to be someone she was not the rest of her time in school. She never went home during that time so that didn’t give her away. But she clearly lacked the sophistication of an East Coast native not to mention the accent. They thought her shy. Now back in Iowa she had inadvertently created another false persona, this time by omission.

“Martha, please sit down.” Anne’s cracking voice sounded like one of her husband’s scratched LPs. Anne gestured towards a stool and then lowered herself down onto a folding chair. Frown lines appeared on Martha’s forehead and her fingers pressed her lips.

“Did I say something to upset you?” Martha said.

“I’m afraid there’s been a misconception among my students.” Anne blinked her moisture-filled eyes. “I’ve not been to Europe. Never seen any original Masters’ paintings hanging there.”

“What do you mean?” Martha asked, jumping off the stool. “You’ve been to the Prado. And to the Louvre, right?”

Anne shook her head no. She willed herself to look up in order to maintain eye contact with Martha’s widening eyes.

“People have just assumed I’d been there. But instead,” Anne gestured towards the book-lined shelves, “I’ve managed to acquire quite a large art book collection. Gifts, really. Many from former students and, of course, my children. I’ve studied these intensely.”

Martha squinted at Anne. Anne could see Martha’s perception of her changing. Anne’s carefully constructed image blurring and dissolving. Martha paced the length of the studio. She clenched her fists. The sound of her Keds slapping the floor increased the tension.

Anne waited for the rendered judgment. The layers she’d applied over time peeling away. Whatever esteem she held — lowered. She shivered from exposure. Not only would she remain alone, but she’d be more vulnerable than ever. Her deceit, the subject of discussions on campus for years to come.

“You’ve got be kidding. The way you describe the paintings.” Martha’s face turned red. “I just assumed... Can’t believe you haven’t actually seen the originals.”

“I never intended to mislead anyone.” Anne bit her bottom lip. “I know I’m a disappointment to you as I am to myself.”

“But in class when you said looking at such and such a painting. I took it to mean when you looked at the painting.” Martha pointed at her. “When you actually stood in front of it.” Her

hands dropped to her sides. She shook her head side to side. “But you haven’t. I’m trying to wrap my mind around this.”

“I really have been content studying the reproductions all these years.” That certainly was true when she started teaching and had no choice. But this rang slightly false now.

“Your slides are great,” Martha said. “But they don’t compare to the experience of seeing the original. *Las Meninas* pulled me in as I stood there. I stood in awe. Time stood still. I wrote you I had goose bumps. You can’t get that experience from a book.”

Anne stood, picked up the Madrid book and flipped through it. Again the color plate of the “*Las Meninas*” caught her eye. Could she be pulled in and feel timelessness standing in front of that enormous painting or would her anxiety limit her sense of wonder?

Anne drifted over to her paintings and reached for a half-completed portrait of a young woman stacked against the studio’s wall, and brought it into the light. The young woman’s eyes radiated in a way she hadn’t seen in the shade. Another painting drew her attention. A landscape where the studio’s sunlight revealed the water, luminous and flowing, reflecting bits of light created by heavy pigmentation. These were better than she’d remembered. Seeing original masterpieces suddenly mattered less than knowing if she could paint again. Could she now handle being seen?

Anne placed a large blank canvas on an easel. Then she nestled a paintbrush between her right thumb and forefinger and rested the paint palette in the crook of her opposite elbow. Her shoulders arched back, she placed her left leg in front of her right mimicking Velasquez’ stance.

“Are you okay, Professor Carroll?” Martha whispered.

“Fine,” Anne said, swiveling her neck to look at her. Her smile, grateful. She, then, turned back to the canvas.