

Circles of Confusion

By APRIL HENRY

Circles of confusion:

The luminous spots caused by imperfections in a camera lens. In painting, refers to the effects of the camera obscura, a pinhole device that projects an image upside down and backward, a forerunner to the camera. Vermeer was perhaps the best-known painter to use the camera obscura. Many of his paintings are marked by circles of confusion.

NEW YORK CITY. NEW YORK, October 3, 1997

Dante Bonner grinned a little in satisfaction as he contemplated the portrait on the easel in front of him. Golden light, curly hair, the left side of the face in shadow. He set down his delicate paintbrush, stood back and looked at the painting critically, one eye half-closed. No one could ever doubt that Rembrandt's hand had painted those lines, that the great master himself had laid those bold brushstrokes. He snapped off the magnifying light and went to lunch.

BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTIA, October 3, 1997

Rudy Miller found the one-inch article buried on the last page of local news, just before the want ads began.

Local Woman Found Dead September 30 (White City),—Cady Montrose, 80, was found dead in her home in the Tarrymore Trailer Park on Tuesday.

Neighbors said they had not seen the woman for several weeks. Ms. Montrose, who never married, retired from the head teller position at Jackson County Federal Bank in the early 1980s. During World War II, she served as a clerk in the Women's Army Corps, and was stationed in Germany after the war in Europe ended. No funeral is planned.

Rudy closed the paper with a satisfied snap. It hadn't been cheap, having the *Medford Mail Tribune* mailed to Argentina. But as usual, his forethought had been rewarded. If his grandfather and namesake had only put as much care into what he had done, Rudy would never have been

forced to go to these ridiculous lengths. He pulled a cellular phone from his breast pocket, unfolded it and tapped out a number.

"Tell Karl I have a job for him."

NEW YORK CITY. NEW YORK, October 3, 1997

Troy Nowell placed the picture, encircled by a golden frame, on a velvet-covered easel. Fifi regarded the painting with the perpetually surprised look of a too-taut facelift. Her real name was Margaret Montgomery, but Troy privately thought of all well-dressed Park Avenue women as Fifis.

"It's beautiful," he said. "And very rare. No other Pieruccini angel displays such joy at seeing the Christ child." And until recently, neither had this particular angel, who actually had begun existence as a dour-looking saint. It had been John who had suggested that the addition of a joyful expression and some gold-leaf wings would make this painting fly right out the door.

"That hair. It's the exact same color as my Toby's." "Toby?" Troy inquired politely.

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"My apricot AKC-registered teacup poodle. He is everything to me. Everything."

Troy nodded his appreciation of this completely unforeseen selling point. Then, with a few carefully chosen words of praise, he began to reel her in. If he applied just the right amount of pressure, Pifi would prod her husband, a man who had made millions selling low-flow toilets, into buying this painting of a rather insipid-looking angel, his hair not blond exactly, but instead a pale shade of red.

PORTLAND, OREGON, October 3, 1997

"... And as a lot of our listeners out there remember, next weekend will be the anniversary of Oregon's Columbus Day storm...*

Claire Montrose quickly snapped off the radio (brought from home, tolerated if played at a low level) that sat on top of her state- issued gray metal desk. Great. It was that time of year

again. She was tired of hearing about the Columbus Day storm that had ravaged the West Coast nearly thirty-five years before, the day before she was born. Each year, Claire's mother could be counted on to remind her about how she'd suffered to bring Claire into the world, trapped at home with all roads blocked and no telephone, no lights, no heat and no assistance except for an elderly neighbor.

The great windstorm of 1962 had left dozens dead and hundreds more stranded for days on end. Huge fallen trees had blocked Portland streets, crushed cars and homes, and turned power lines into spitting snakes. The wind had peeled back roofs, pushed trucks off highways, and snatched up small animals and patio furniture. Of course, Claire didn't have any of her own memories of this, but she felt as though she did. Every October, the TV stations could be counted on to trot out the grainy file footage to pad a slow news day.

It served only to remind her that she was getting older, rusting into place, with most of her waking hours spent in a cubicle that resembled a cross between a cattle pen and a prison cell. Sometimes Claire thought her dramatic entrance into the world had been the last exciting event of her life.

The phone on her desk shrilled into life. Claire used a neon- orange Chee*to to mark her place in the department's Spanish- English dictionary.

"Oregon Motor Vehicles Division, Custom Plate Department. How may I help you?"

Claire had been looking up "AMORT", –the request of an accountant, –to see if it meant anything in translation that couldn't be put on a license plate. "Amort" hadn't been in the Spanish dictionary, but "Amor", –love, –had. Claire had become sidetracked considering how limited both Spanish and English were when it came to words for love. There were dozens of kinds of love, –platonic love, love from afar, love for one's family, love for a pet, love for food or other inanimate objects, hopeless love, passionate love, unrequited love. Why wasn't there a separate word for each, the way the Eskimos were supposed to have seventeen different words for snow?

"Hi, Claire. It's me."

"Mom!" Claire pressed the phone closer to her face. There should definitely be a word for the mingled love and annoyance she felt for her mother. "I told you not to call me at work unless it was an emergency." She hoped Frank wasn't listening on the other side of their shared cubicle

wall. Each time she received a personal call, she half suspected him of making a hatch mark on a clandestine list of her failings.

"But this is an emergency."

"What did you buy?" Please, not another thousand-dollar Kirby vacuum cleaner. Even though Oregon law allowed a three-day cooling-off period for major purchases, the last time it had been nearly impossible to extract her mother from the clutches of the contract's fine print.

"I didn't buy anything," her mother said, stung. "I'm calling about your great-aunt. I just got a call from her lawyer. Poor thing died last week."

"Great-aunt? What great-aunt?"

"Don't you remember Aunt Cady? My father's sister who lives in White City? I guess you probably haven't seen her since your grandmother's last group birthday party for you kids."

Claire was beginning to picture her now, a thin woman standing on the sidelines of family gatherings, her graying hair pulled back in a bun. "Wasn't Aunt Cady the one who was in the WAVEs or the WACs or something?"

"WACs, I think. She ended up in Germany after the war."

"How old was she? What did she die of?"

"About eighty. The lawyer guy said they think it was a heart attack. She lived alone, you know. Nobody's too certain exactly when she died." Claire suppressed a shiver. "Anyway, she's left everything to you."

"Me? Why me? I can barely remember her."

"Evidently she liked you the best of all us relatives. I don't think she was really close to anybody. The lawyer guy said that she'd been living like a hermit for years. Anyway, he wants you to go down there and go through her trailer. Sort it out. He says the park manager is anxious to rent out the space, so I promised him you'd come down this weekend."

"This weekend? You mean tomorrow?" Claire echoed incredulously, forgetting to keep her voice down.

Her mother's voice took on the wheedling tone that Claire knew all too well. "You know what they say about old people who live alone. Maybe she's held on to a fortune in pesos from the war."

"Marks, Mom." Claire effortlessly collected scraps of facts, and she pulled one out now. "I think the Germans use marks. But that's not the point, –the point is, I'm sure Evan won't want me to go on such short notice. You know how he likes to plan things in advance."

"Oh, Claire, it's not like you're married to him or anything."

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Claire waited until twelve, and the beginning of her lunch hour, to call Evan from the pay phone in the break room. No sense giving Frank any ammunition by making a personal phone call on company time. She sketched out the problem for Evan, fully expecting him to be annoyed by this change in plans.

"My mom tried to tell me it would be like a treasure hunt. I guess the lawyer says the place is piled high with all kinds of stuff." Claire turned to pace, but was brought up short by the absurdly short metal phone cord. She suddenly felt trapped, tied by a rigid umbilical cord to the hospital-green wall. "What's that squeaking noise?"

"I'm lysoling the phone. Someone asked to borrow it after a meeting. There's a courtesy phone in the lobby, but no, he had to ask to use this one, right at the beginning of cold and flu season." The squeaking stopped, and then Evan began to outline a plan. In her mind's eye, Claire saw his long pale fingers methodically ticking off the steps. "If we leave Portland at six tomorrow morning and drive straight through, we should be there by eleven. We'll spend the day cleaning things out, make a trip or two to Goodwill, pack up anything of value, and drive back to Portland with it tomorrow night. We can rent a U-Haul trailer if we need to."

She was surprised by his impulsiveness. "You want to go with me?"

"I'm not letting you drive that car of yours on a five-hundred-mile round trip. And who knows, it might even be worthwhile. If your aunt was anything like your mom, she'll have ephemera from the forties and fifties tucked away, still in its original boxes. Stuff like that could fetch a fortune now."

"Since she's related to my mother, it's more likely that we'll find some Jack LaLanne fitness plan still in its original 1957 packaging."

"That's exactly what I mean. Have you checked out those stores in Multnomah lately? They don't just sell Navaho rugs and Depression glass. People will buy anything if it reminds

them of their own past, –Howdy Doody mugs, old *Life* magazines, Nixon Now! buttons, handmade quilts, cast-iron frying pans. There are times when it pays to be related to someone who holds on to everything, and this may be one of them."

Claire sometimes thought in the shorthand of license plates, and she summed up Evan's hopes now: BG BKS.