

The Painting

They were driving south. Mitch and Gus were in the front seats. Billy was in the back. Beside him in a sack were four hundred thousand dollars.

“See anything?” asked Mitch, the man at the wheel.

Billy looked out the back window. A few minutes ago, Gus had thought he’d seen a bright, flickering red light, like a police car’s, far behind them among the pine trees. Billy looked for a few minutes. He turned round.

“Nah. Nothing.”

After a series of switchbacks in the mountains, they’d come to a long, straight section of road along a ridge. The sunlight was dwindling. All about, the tall trees cast their enormous shadows.

Gus smiled. Mitch grinned, showing his yellow teeth. After the morning’s heist, then switching their license plate for a stolen one in a back alley, and then a full day of driving, the mood in the car finally seemed to be relaxing. Billy stroked his beard and sighed, sinking back into his seat.

Near a black peak, the sun was setting. Its rays tickled Billy in the eyes. Soon the engine starting grumbling, then made faint knocking noises.

“Damn,” said Mitch. Glancing at the fuel meter, Gus grumbled dejectedly.

It was growing chilly. Billy buttoned up the top of his jacket and pulled his knit cap down over his ears.

After a few minutes, Gus leaned forward. “Hey... slow down.”

Mitch touched the brake. “What is it?”

Gus pointed. Behind the pines, a small, rundown house could be spotted. No lights were on.

Mitch found the dirt driveway, pulled up to the house, turned the engine off. There was no other car in view – just an outhouse, a pump, a garage, and the house itself. The men piled out. The building was small, shoddy, made of clapboard, with a brick and stone chimney on one side. Most of the white paint had peeled off, and shingles and shards of broken boards littered the weeds around the walls. It was unclear to Billy whether the place was abandoned or merely empty right now – but he was glad they’d found a place to stay for the night.

Mitch turned on a flashlight and handed another to Gus. "I'll check out the house, you look in the garage."

Billy watched them go. He felt his gun in his pocket, then sat back down in the car. A breeze picked up, died away. Billy stretched his legs through the open door. A few birds were cawing. He lit himself a cigarette and looked around. The sun was well hidden by the mountains now. The men had driven all day across prairie into the near-wilderness. Studying the map, Billy thought they were about four or five miles from the nearest town.

He crushed his cigarette in the ashtray, then leaned an elbow on the front seat. He looked up, admiring the gold-fringed clouds drifting above.

Mitch was staring through a window of the house. Gus, after shining his flashlight through the garage windows, called to Mitch: "No car inside!" Mitch gave a thumbs-up. Gus aimed carefully and shot the padlock on the garage door. Billy flinched. He saw that Mitch had the same idea for the padlock on the house, and plugged his ears with his fingers.

After shooting, Mitch shoved the door open. He shone his flashlight inside, but could see little except wooden furniture and a swell of dust. He peeked his head in as Gus came over.

"No cans of gas in there?" Mitch asked.

"Hard to tell," said Gus. "Damn mess. No car, but lots of paint, looks like."

"Not all dried out, though?" asked Mitch.

"We'll have to see."

Mitch walked over to Billy. "Hey – clear out some space in the garage and put the car in. Here're the keys." He tossed them to him. "And then put all our stuff in the house and pump some water."

* * *

As he was closing the garage door, Billy for some reason looked up. It was night now, but there was still enough lingering daylight to see the clouds. His eyes tracing over the sky, Billy fixed his gaze on a cloud that looked strangely like a fat bird or airplane, its wings spread in flight. Billy watched it until its stomach brushed against the treetops.

Inside, Mitch and Gus had lit some candles on a table and had gotten a fire going in the hearth. With a grunt, Billy set down the three men's load of

bags in a corner. He sneezed as he sat down in a chair – the house was swimming with dust.

“Did you pump any water?” asked Mitch. Billy cursed, found a bucket, went outside, came back with the water and put it by the sink.

“Pantry’s empty,” Gus told Billy. “Dinner’s what we brought.” Billy shrugged, happy enough with the beer, bread, cheese, cold cuts, and jerky on the table. He opened a bottle, took a swig, and started making a sandwich. He moved his seat to the fire to warm up while he ate. Mitch and Gus were there, half done with eating.

“Must’ve loved their peace and quiet, these people,” said Gus.

“I think it was just one guy,” said Mitch. “There’s just a single bed in the other room.”

They ate in silence for a while, Billy eating quickly, catching up on dinner. He went back to the table for seconds.

“That’s enough, fatty,” snapped Mitch. “Don’t take more than your fair share.”

“But I’m bigger than you guys,” Billy protested. “I need more. I’m tired and hungry.”

“We’re all tired and hungry,” said Gus. “And you’ve eaten plenty.”

“More than the two of us together,” snarled Mitch. “Anyway, you’ve got another job: go gather some of them boards in the grass, then nail ’em across the door on the inside.”

“What for?” asked Billy.

“So the cops can’t just sneak in in the middle of the night and put us in a headlock, dummy!” said Mitch. “That’s what happened to me the last time I robbed a bank – caught me in my sleep. Eleven fuckin’ years in the big house. This way, we’ll get some warning: the cops’ll have to break the windows or kick the door in or somethin’. We’ll have time to grab guns, shoot our way out. So get to work.”

Billy sighed again, more put-upon than ever. “I think there’s a hammer and some nails in the garage,” said Gus.

Billy was about to leave, but as he turned he noticed something over the fire. He stared at it.

“Hey – what’s up, lard-ass?” growled Mitch. But Gus followed Billy’s gaze – then so did Mitch.

Gus brought a candle over, and they all moved close to study what Billy had noticed. It was a painting. There was a woman in it – she was sitting in a wooden chair, in the middle of a glade or meadow. Surrounding her was rich vegetation – vine-wrapped trees, lush boughs, cream-colored flowers, and clusters of red and yellow fruits mixed together, improbably, on the same branches.

She wore a long white gown with what looked like many tucks and pleats, and a black hat with netting across her face. Above her and the foliage loomed a few spots of light blue sky. The painting, covered with dust, seemed very old, and the paint looked layered thickly on the canvas.

Mitch leaned forward, pointing. “What the hell’s that?”

Gus edged his candle closer. Behind the woman, on the right side of the picture, a stream ran among giant tree roots. Just beyond it, in the shadows and the dark green leaves, stood something indistinct with two large white eyes. From its vague face protruded a long, curved-down nose or beak. Though he couldn’t remember the name of the bird, Billy thought back to a distinctive illustration of an ibis he’d seen in a book as a child.

“Goddamn,” said Gus softly.

Billy looked back at the woman. He noticed that she held her hands slightly outward, palms up. He thought she seemed somehow distressed, as though pleading with someone. Her head was tilted – she was looking through the branches, upward.

The three men kept staring. After a moment Mitch straightened up.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “Let’s burn it.”

Gus and Billy eyed him but said nothing. Gus turned back to the painting, fidgeted, seemed to choke back a cough.

Mitch cursed. He nudged the other two aside and pulled the picture off its nail. Soon the dying remains of the fire were given new life.

* * *

In the middle of the night, Billy woke.

He lifted his head from the pillow on the floor. A strand of moonlight peeked through a corner of a window on the side of the house opposite the driveway. Billy could hear Gus snoring a few feet away, and Mitch snoring in

the bed in the other room. Billy breathed very gently, and reached a hand out from under his blanket to grip his gun.

No sounds.

He had the vague sense something had roused him. He glanced all over the house, at the windows, but saw nothing amiss.

Suddenly, outside, something moved: it was a scrape, a rustling. It seemed not far from the door.

Billy flinched, and his heart went wild. He kept looking in turn at each window, occasionally the boarded-up door.

Minutes went by. He hardly dared to breathe.

Should he wake the others? He couldn't decide... He wouldn't.

He heard the next sound from the opposite side of the house, not far from the chimney. This one sounded almost like a knock against the clapboard wall. Billy looked: no windows were on that side.

Heart racing again, he listened acutely, but could hear only Mitch and Gus snoring, and sometimes the clicking of his wristwatch on the floor beside him when both were momentarily silent.

Had it been an animal? A deer? Billy's blood rate started to slow. But it was odd how the two sounds, only seconds apart, had come from opposite places.

A scratching noise – above! On the roof. Instinctively Billy aimed his pistol at the ceiling.

Now quiet again – a long, long quiet.

Snoring. The clicking wristwatch.

And now the scratching came again, very softly. It seemed to be directly above Billy.

He couldn't take much more of this. More scratching sounds came: they sounded like claws on the shingles. Slowly, they moved towards where the chimney went up through the roof.

A rodent? Raccoon?

The anxious dread made Billy ill in his stomach. Moonlight no longer shone into the house. His eyes raced over the windows, then the sooty fireplace – just a black blur in the night. Oblivious to everything, Billy's two companions slumbered on.

Minutes, minutes, minutes. No sounds.

Gently, Billy set his gun back down. He set his head on the pillow.

He listened.
Listened.

* * *

“Nothing,” said Gus. They were all in the garage.

“You checked everywhere?” said Mitch.

“Yeah. No spare fuel.”

Mitch kicked an empty oil can across the floor. Billy yawned and tore at a strip of beef jerky with his teeth.

“Dammit,” said Mitch. “All right, gimme the map.” Billy ducked into the car, retrieving it.

“All right, here’s the plan,” said Mitch after studying the map. “Gus, you and I’ll start painting the car white after we find some brushes. Billy, you go into this town here and buy as much gas as you can carry back.”

Billy groaned. “Why’s it gotta be me? It’s more than four miles to town. Can’t we draw straws? Or can’t two of us go?”

“No, you moron,” sneered Mitch. “You’re the only one who can change his appearance.” He pointed at Billy’s beard. “For all we know, they’ve got our pictures out already. Police’ll be looking for us everywhere. Here’re some canisters – be sure to fill ’em all the way. We need to get to Mexico ASAP.”

Mitch turned away, looking for paintbrushes. Gus was using a screwdriver to pry open a can of paint. Billy sighed once again, sulking back to the house to find the razor and soap somewhere in his bags.

* * *

The gasoline in the two canisters in his hands and the one inside his knapsack sloshed back and forth as a clean-shaven Billy made his way back up the silent dirt road late that afternoon. God, how he hated those two – especially Mitch. His arms, his back, and his shoulders were killing him. Just because he was the new guy, he had to take all the hard jobs. He ought to get an extra cut of the cash for all this... But he knew he didn’t have the guts to demand it.

No cars at all had passed Billy that morning until he’d gotten nearly into town, and only one or two so far coming back – a much slower journey

for him, weighed down by the gas and going uphill. Occasionally, he thought back to the young Rottweiler in a nearby station wagon at the gas station that wouldn't stop yapping at him while he filled his canisters, its snout pushed up against the window and its white teeth showing with every bark.

It seemed strangely dreamy and unnerving in these woods, as if this long ridge of hills and mountains was a place few folks wished to go. He hadn't spied a single house or other building, now that he thought of it, between the hideout and the edge of town. It was weirdly silent along this road – no birds cawing or singing, very little wind. It seemed to Billy almost as if he had wandered onto the surface of another planet – airless, noiseless, uninhabited.

The ache becoming unendurable, he set the canisters down and took off his knapsack. He finished off his water, regretting he hadn't taken a second bottle or bought more than one soda pop at the gas station. He rolled his shoulders, rubbed his arms, moved his head side to side to stretch his neck, trying to soothe away the pain. He sat down on a little mound of dirt by the roadside, took deep breaths, watched the clouds move.

It couldn't be much farther – the sun was getting low and Billy felt like he'd been walking forever. It wouldn't be much longer with those two, he told himself. Once in Mexico with his fair share, it would be goodbye to Mitch and Gus forever.

The sun was obscured by clouds now. Billy felt drops start to fall. His back wasn't hurting anymore. The minutes went by. He felt the gun in his pocket. Started thinking.

Yes.

Yes – it *would* be goodbye to those two forever.

Billy put on his pack, picked up the canisters, started walking again. The rain increased a little, but not much. The low sun managed to peek out once or twice from the cloud cover, and the wet chilly air blew gently. Getting steeper, the road switched back and forth more tightly now – Billy remembered this from the trip down. From the east, storm clouds were approaching, dripping their cold burden.

Gotta be less than half a mile now, thought Billy. From a bare branch, an owl turned its head slowly to follow the man, unnoticed by him.

The drops fell heavier. The sun had gone down, or was close to it. Billy was breathing heavily. He took out his flashlight and flicked it on, scanning off to the left through the woods.

His heart leapt when the flashlight beam showed a window. Billy grinned. He put the flashlight away and gripped the pistol in his pocket.

He stepped to the door and put the canisters and knapsack down silently. He checked that ammo was loaded and the safety was off.

Billy steeled himself for the moment. With his left hand, he gripped the knob... then threw open the door, rushing into the room, aiming.

He darted his aim all around. But he didn't fire. Slowly, he lowered the gun.

One candle illuminated the room. Mitch and Gus lay motionless, face down. The floor around them was covered in blood.

Billy kneeled near Mitch, rolled him over. His eyes were deep gory holes, as though gouged.

Billy looked at the side of Gus's face. The same thing had happened to him.

Billy stood up, stunned. He kept perfectly still for a moment. He tucked the gun back in his pocket.

Then he froze, staring straight ahead.

Above the fireplace hung the painting.