

## Brisdon

Mad shadows are crawling across the wall like the fingers of Quasimodo's ghost. The antique clock on the mantel goes *tick...tick...tick...* as it measures out the back of time. As I sit reading *Notre- Dame de Paris*, I keep hearing a strange scraping noise. I'm at the end of my book but the last pages have been dragging on because every so often I'm forced to look up as if someone is watching me.

*'...Quand on voulut le détacher du squelette qu'il embrassait, il tomba en poussière.'*

There. Finished. I close the cover. I feel hypnotized and my eyelids grow heavy. I'm powerless as I drift off to join the undertakers from the book, with their long beards and dark surcoats. But something's wrong. I cry out, *Stop!* but it's too late. When they try to detach the lovers from their embrace, the skeletons don't crumble to dust. Instead, their bones fall into a single heap, becoming indistinguishable from one another. For a fleeting instant I am a wild bird trapped in a dark room and then the chiming of the doorbell brings me tumbling back to my body, as if I'm hearing the bells of Notre-Dame themselves.

I switch on the lamp. The hands of the old clock point to half-past six, clasped together as if in prayer. Then the doorbell rings again and I realize, *Yes, of course—the first trick-or-treaters for Halloween.* Imogen must have forgotten to turn off the porch lights before she left for work.

I push myself up from my easy chair. My leg is starting to smart. When I switch on CBC Radio 2, the room fills with a cacophony of horns and violins and the clashing of cymbals. It's the piece from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* where the hero is being dragged into the depths of hell. I've always enjoyed that part. It certainly sets the tone, and a few minutes later I'm in front of the foyer mirror wearing my costume.

Tonight I'll be the *Plague Doctor*. When I lean forward my beak taps against the glass. In the Middle Ages this same mask would have been stuffed with lavender and lemon balm and mixed with straw to cover the stench of death and decay. Now all I can smell is my own

breath. And I'll be bringing my cane, not because I still need it but because, long ago, the plague doctors used to prod their unfortunate patients who were riddled with buboes and writhing with fever. They never gave a second thought to the dead rats festering in the corners or the fleas biting the ankles of their patients. As old Doctor Noxon used to say, *The art of medicine has always had its flaws.*

Sometimes misfortune happens by degrees. When Imogen drove out to the Costume Bazaar at the last minute to pick up an outfit for me, she was worried all the good costumes would be rented. As she was parking the car, she was rear-ended by a white mini-van.

"It was just a *nudge*, Brisdon," she explains, seeing my expression.

"White mini-vans are nothing but trouble," I tell her.

"The only real trouble is that the trunk won't stay shut," she admits and I roll my eyes. "I've tied it together with bungee cords."

This isn't a good start, I think. Ever since pulling out *Doctor Schnabel von Rom* from his package, I've had a sense of impending doom about this party, because sometimes misfortune happens with a big *wallop*. It's as if the shadowy, misshapen figure who has clung to me since childhood knows what's coming. He whispers into my ear, *If you want to see into the future, Brisdon, you have to move faster than time.* Somehow I know it's a he, but that's all I know. I shrug my shoulders to shake him off.

All dressed now with cane in hand, I turn off the radio, grab my keys from the bowl, switch off all the lights, and am out the door.

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Next to the waning moon, Venus is twinkling above the horizon. I pull my Jetta into the *Reserved for Curator* spot at the Tamaddon Art Museum, which is better known as the TAM. Stepping behind the car, I see how cleverly Imogen has tied the trunk shut. To wear my mask I have to remove my glasses and the heavens become a celestial blur. As I make my way

through the museum's entrance hall, the brass tip of my cane goes *clack-clack* on the marble floor. The sound rebounds throughout the foyer and into the galleries, rousing the sleeping portraits and dozing statues and the bas-reliefs of the weeping saints.

It was back in 2000 when Fiona Tamaddon, executive director of the TAM, interviewed me herself for the position of curator. I already knew that Fiona, the wealthy heiress of the Tamaddon publishing empire, had saved the old distillery from the wrecking ball swinging like a noose above its soot-stained bricks. She had hired a famous architect to reshape the building, twisting and turning its lines and topping it with a domed glass ceiling, all to house the famous Tamaddon art collection. What I didn't know was that Fiona's grandfather was Lord Tamaddon of *Brisdon*, the incredibly wealthy newspaper magnate from Scotland. You see, I am John *Brisdon* Noxon, with a broken family tree, and simply known as *Brisdon*. It was an incredible coincidence to have the same name associated with the peerage of Fiona's grandfather, and it was my foot in the door. During the interview all Fiona could talk about was Lord Tamaddon of *Brisdon* and *Brisdon House*, the ancestral home of her family located near Inverness in Loch Ness country, and where her late father, James Tamaddon, was born.

"Have you ever seen Nessie?" I asked during the interview, trying to ease the tension in the room, even as I knew I was the perfect fit for the job.

Her back shot straight up in her chair. "Yes, of course I have! Nessie was my aunt."

I wondered if she was putting me in my place because I couldn't imagine any family naming their daughter after a sea monster. Then again, I didn't know Fiona yet and the kind of monster that ran in her veins.

Riding up in the elevator now, I adjust my mask and pull down my hat. I should be more excited, this being the first North American retrospective celebrating the reclusive artist known as CÁLA, but I can't help feeling this whole masquerade has been overdone without my recent oversight. When I step into the gallery the light that flickers over the paintings comes from tall electric candles that have been placed around the gallery to mimic real ones. Off to the side a string quartet is playing Handel's *Sarabande* in D Minor, which is quite nice,

and servers in bow ties and cummerbunds are circulating with trays of wine and champagne, which is tasteful. But it's as if every move is choreographed. The shadows leap and pirouette as I try to focus without my glasses. A scarecrow walks past me and up close I recognize him as my intern, Parfait. He hands a leprechaun a glass of wine. I feel a little giddy because no one can recognize me. A couple dressed as the King of Spades and the Queen of Hearts are picking from a tower of shrimp on the food table. Marie-Antoinette swishes past me in her tall wig and wide skirts, flipping her lacy fan at me as if to shoo away death. Three Shakespearian sprites with horns and tails scamper around the chocolate fountain. King Henry has Anne Boleyn on his arm; she is wearing a green satin gown with her head tucked underneath her arm. The king laughs.

And I ask myself, *Is anyone looking at the art?*

I spy Fiona Tamaddon in the crowd, conspicuous because she isn't wearing a costume. I make my way to the adjoining galleries where CÁLA's largest work is displayed. I remove my mask to put on my glasses because I want to see the full scope of his most famous painting *The Art of Dying*. I'm too close to take it all in which is when I back right into Fiona.

"Brisdon, is that you? It is you!" I turn and someone dressed as Zorro is standing by her side. "I'm surprised to see you, Brisdon. I didn't recognize you."

"I should hope not." "So you're finally back."

"Yes, but with a bit of a limp for now."

"You were injured?" Zorro asks.

"Yes, something to do with gravity and a ladder." Fiona

leans in to confide in me that Zorro is our esteemed artist CÁLA, which I have already guessed. "It's an honour," I say.

Just then, one of Fiona's loyal assistants, dressed as Prince Feisal with a turban and scimitar, comes along and grabs her attention. This gives me a moment to be alone with the reclusive

painter critics have tagged as *The Shadow Artist* because no one knows who CÁLA is, having hidden himself from the world for his entire illustrious career.

He moves closer—perhaps a little too close—so I inch back.

“Have we met?” I ask.

He extends his gloved hand, smiling under his black mask. *That smile...*

Fiona has detached herself from the Prince and is resuming introductions.

“This is our curator, Brisdon Noxon, who has been away for a while but has managed to make it tonight after all.” I detect a touch of derision.

“Mister Brisdon.” Zorro finally lets go of my hand.

His voice. The way he says *Mister Brisdon*. It’s common for people to mistake my first name for my last, but this is different.

“Just Brisdon,” I say.

He indicates his painting behind us. “So, Mr. Brisdon, what do you think of my *work*?”

I can’t speak because the room begins to spin. CÁLA. *Why is everything so familiar?* Sweat is now trickling down my back beneath my scratchy robe. CÁLA sounds so much like *Ataccala*. I start to panic.

“Could you remove your mask?” I ask.

Fiona laughs, like a macaw. *The Shadow Artist* is gracious. “I’m sorry, I can’t do that. Let me remove my sombrero.”

As he does he comes up close. He has exposed the shape of his head, the copper complexion of his skin. Then he removes a glove to display the ring on his hand.

Fiona is saying something but I don't hear her. *The ring*. The milky moonstone comes alive in the candlelight, as if the whole room, the complete *vernissage*, the entire galaxy lies within that tiny stone. He rests his hand on my shoulder. Somewhere beyond the two of us, galaxies are colliding and I am being pulled into a black hole, the centre of which is the fifth floor of the Tamaddon Art Museum, right at our feet. Then the man I know as *César* lets go of my shoulder and I lose my balance, falling backwards in plain sight of all the guests and crashing into his painting. There's a screeching alarm. My mask clatters onto the floor. *The Shadow Artist* catches me and holds on until I regain my balance.

Two security guards come running. I have gone from incognito to being the centre of attention. I pick up my mask. The room flickers in time with the false candles on their stands. Everything is false. The band stops playing.

Prince Feisal clammers onto the platform and takes hold of the microphone just as the alarm is switched off.

"Now that I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen, there's no cause for alarm," Feisal says, and giggles like an imp. The speakers screech.

Then the artist who the world knows only as CÁLA— but who I unequivocally know is *César Angel Acosta*—looks straight at me and says, "*Brisdon por siempre.*" Yes, of course I remember... *Brisdon forever*. I remember *everything*. It's my curse. Then he smiles one last time... the smile that can melt Inca gold. He dons his sombrero and pulls his gauntlet back on and then Fiona escorts him away throwing me a dirty look for causing such a ruckus.

Suddenly I can't breathe. The back of my neck starts to prickle and burn. Is César looking back? I can't stay in this gallery any longer so I head to the spiral staircase for a quick descent. The heels of my shoes clang on the metal treads as I rush down the stairs. The eyes of the portraits hanging along the staircase wall are all watching me, judging me. I feel a sharp pain in my side but I keep going. Then, at last, I'm out into the cool night air. *Breathe. Breathe.* Soon I am driving home, running yellow lights and weaving across lanes. The man in the moon is looking down at me, laughing. When I walk into the house, the clock on the mantel

is ticking even more loudly than usual, as if all my senses are sharpened. I set down my cane and drop my costume in a heap on a chair with the mask resting on top. Its hollow stare bores into me.

Luckily, Imogen is still at work at her club. At the sideboard I pour myself three fingers of scotch and settle back into my easy chair. My hand is trembling. I put the drink down. I remove my glasses and rub my eyes. *Fuck fuck fuck!* How did I not know that CÁLA was César? Even if no one knows who CÁLA is, I should have read the signs. I should have known that I was seeing Ataccala again, larger than life in his painting, *The Art of Dying*. I take a large gulp of scotch and feel its warmth calm me. I close my eyes and try to take myself back to that tangled journey to Ataccala, but the power of the drink and the words I had heard earlier from my little monster overtake me and instead, time starts spinning forward: I am outside myself, watching as a fragment of moonlight through the bay window travels over my face, and then the sun rises as night passes into day, and the room turns bright and then darkens to night again while the days and nights begin to move faster as time races on in a rhythm of light and shade, and soon I am moving faster than time and my skin begins to wrinkle and turn green and shrivel inside my clothes and worms begin to eat out my eyes and my skin falls off my bones as weeks and months and years flicker by and my clothes begin to disintegrate until nothing is left of me, just a skeleton from another dream, from *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and then my BlackBerry sounds on the dining room table.

I manage to reach the phone before it goes to voice- mail. It's Imogen calling to see if I'm still at the party. No? Didn't I enjoy myself? *Oh Imogen of my heart, what can I say?* Her own event at the club is winding down and she is coming home.

"I can pick you up," I offer.

"I've called a taxi. I didn't expect you to be home so soon."

That will put her twenty minutes away. I make my way down to the half-door at the bottom of the cellar stairs. It's a storage space for old photo albums and travel souvenirs. I have to get down onto my hands and knees to pull out the small suitcase I shoved to the very back

years ago. It's a scraped and scratched travel case that belonged to my father with art deco metal locks and corners. The leather straps have become frayed over the years. It's still locked.

I haul it all the way up to our bedroom and fling it onto the bed. Its key is hidden in my Japanese puzzle box which I keep in the bottom drawer of my bedside table. Other than the key, the box contains a few keepsakes that are important only to me: an old watch, a folded napkin, and a silver amulet and chain. I fish out the key and then hold up the medallion. I used to wear this all the time, even after I knew what it really was. I slip it into my pocket. *Not now. Focus.* I fiddle with the key in the locks until I hear them click. When I open the lid the nostalgic smell of musty paper wafts up.

The case is full of my old journals. One stands out from the rest. Yes, this is it, my book of the dead. I set it aside and lock the suitcase, shoving it under the bed and returning the key and puzzle box to its drawer. I almost trip down the stairs in my rush to find my briefcase so I can hide my journal there until tomorrow. Once that's done, I settle back into my easy chair with another scotch and wait.

When Imogen arrives home I don't tell her I met the artist CÁLA. I can't. I tell her that my costume was a hit, and she looks pleased. *Tick... tick... tick...* goes the clock on the mantel, like a metronome wagging a guilty finger at me. Imogen goes on about her event at the Beechwood Club but I'm not listening. She pours herself some red wine but only takes a few sips. She is noticeably worn out from her long day. She pecks me on the cheek.

"I'm going to bed. I have to work in the morning."

Alone now in the dim light of a single lamp, my thoughts race on. After more than thirty years, César is still wearing his moonstone ring. *How can that be?* Then again, I've kept his medallion. Has he come all this way to surprise me? Did he know that I was curator of the TAM? Has this all been a ruse, a plot? *Yes, that's it!* My mind is spinning.

Eventually I drag myself up to bed. I toss and turn, unable to sleep. The night goes on forever. Then the alarm clock surprises me at five a.m. and Imogen mumbles as I crawl out from under



the covers. I peek through the bedroom blinds; it's dark and the streetlights are still on. I get ready as quietly as possible. I pad downstairs to make a pot of coffee. I'm about to write a note to Imogen when I hear her moving around above me.

"You look like you haven't slept a wink," she says ambling into the kitchen.

"I didn't."

"Why are you leaving so soon?"

"I want to beat the traffic."

"It's Sunday morning, Brisdon. There won't be any traffic."

"The contractors will be early and they'll want their cheque."

She is talking about the old Shelter Lake Lodge, located north-east of the city and where I had my fall a month ago. We would have gone up together this morning but Imogen needs to oversee a last minute brunch party at the club. At first I was disappointed when she told me; the old lodge we're renovating is really *her* pet project. But now I'm relieved. It will allow me more time alone to think. I'll re-read my Peruvian journal there to sort out the jumbled images that have been assaulting me all night. I have a type of eidetic memory, but it's flawed. Sometimes it needs a trigger and the book will bring me back to my time with César, and help me determine what I should do next. Because I have to do *something* or I'll go stark raving mad.

"I suppose they'll be boarding everything up for the winter," she says.

"I don't think they will actually board things up."

"You know what I mean." She yawns. "Is there any coffee left?"

At the foyer I grab my briefcase from the closet. "I should be home for dinner," I call out.

When I snatch the car keys from the bowl, I catch my reflection in the mirror. Imogen is right.  
My eyes are puffy and my pallor is like wax paper: I look like I've caught the plague.