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4<sup>th</sup> hour, Mrs. Guitar

# The Case of the Starry Night

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It was a rare occasion to see a starry night in New York, but this one was. It was rare that there were zero percent clouds in the sky, but there were no clouds tonight. It was never that you get to see someone steal a painting from the Museum of Modern Art; it was seen tonight.

“Hi Vanessa!”

“Hi James!”

“Did you hear what happened last night?” asked James.

“Yeah, can you believe the Knicks lost?”

“Yes, actually that’s not so hard to believe, but that’s not what I was talking about. I was talking about the stolen painting.”

“Stolen painting?”

“Yeah. Someone stole Starry Night from the Museum of Modern Art.”

“What? Why would anyone want to steal a picture of a bunch of swirling stars?”

“It’s not just a picture with swirling stars; it’s a classic painting. It is one of the most famous paintings ever. Anyway, doesn’t your uncle work as a tour guide at the museum?”

“Yeah, he does. Do you want to come meet him?”

“Sure.”

A short while later they arrived at Vanessa's uncle's, only to find that he wasn't home. Vanessa called his cell phone, but he didn't answer. James began to worry. Where was he? Did he know about the painting?

"Where is your uncle?" asked James.

"I don't know. Do you want to go see if he's at the museum?" suggested Vanessa.

"Sure, let's go."

They went to the museum and saw that police cars surrounded it. Vanessa's uncle wasn't in sight, so they went over to a police officer and asked him if he had seen George Swan.

"Miss, how do you know Mr. Swan?"

"He is my uncle. Have you seen him?"

"No, have you?"

"Well, no; that's why I was asking you, officer."

"Look, miss, this is very serious. Your uncle is a suspect in this case. He is believed to have stolen a 15 million dollar painting."

"What? My uncle would never steal that painting, it was his fav.....," Vanessa stopped herself before she gave out too much information.

"All the more reason to believe that he stole the painting. He was the last person here last night; the manager said that your uncle was supposed to close up after he was done admiring Starry Night," the policeman was smarter than Vanessa expected.

"Yeah, last one before the burglar. My uncle loved that painting, but he would never steal it. He would never steal anything. Last week he accidentally stepped on an

ant and made our whole family go to its funeral. Just kidding, but he felt really bad about it. How could a man so innocent seem so guilty to you, officer?"

"Well, then how would you explain his being missing on the day after the painting was stolen? The last time anyone saw him was last night before he left work, unless you saw him after work."

"No, I haven't seen him."

"Thank you for your time, officer," James cut in.

James could see that the conversation was going nowhere. He gripped Vanessa's hand and forced her to follow him back to the parking lot, where he noticed a trail of red residue.

"Hey, maybe the burglar is still near by. Maybe if we follow this trail we'll find him and we could prove that your uncle is innocent," said James.

"Why would they carry red paint though?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's blood."

"Why would he be bleeding?"

"Well, maybe he or she fell down and got hurt."

They followed the trail and it led them to a green bush, where they found their friend Lillie eating cherry pudding.

"Lillie? What are you doing here?" asked Vanessa.

"I was following you, guys."

"Why?"

“Well, I could have just come up to you and started hanging out, but that would have been too boring, so I decided to have a little fun. What are you going to do about your uncle, Vanessa?”

“I’m going to try and solve this case on my own, seeing as how the police just won’t believe that my uncle is innocent; and if you guys would help, I would very much appreciate it.”

“Sure, Vanessa; we’re behind you one hundred percent,” said James.

“Yep!” Lillie added enthusiastically.

“Guys, can we pick this up tomorrow? It’s getting dark and I have to get home before the street lights light up,” said James.

“Sure. Let’s meet here at the museum tomorrow at ten thirty in the morning,” said Vanessa.

“Ok, that’s fine with me. See you tomorrow, guys,” said James.

“Bye,” replied Lillie.

“Bye,” said Vanessa.

James liked to run, so while he was running home, he was thinking about the missing painting. So far he hadn’t found any clues, and that red pudding Lillie was spilling on her way to hide in the bushes, proved to be his first red herring. Had Lillie really followed them just for fun, or was she following them to make sure that they wouldn’t be onto her? Maybe she had left something behind when she was stealing the painting last night, and she was going back to retrieve it, but the police were in her way. However, why would Lillie want to steal Starry Night? She does like art, and she does have about twenty copies of Starry Night on her wall, but she would want the real one to

be preserved in a safe place, wouldn't she? Did Vanessa's good natured, gentle uncle really steal the painting? His impeccable conscience would never allow him to commit a crime.

On the next day, the three friends met at the Museum of Modern Art, as planned. The museum usually looks the same every day. It has blue tinted windows, and is surrounded by lush, green gardens and there are a couple of trees on the side. Today it looked different. Today a yellow band that warned "Caution" over and over again surrounded it. The police weren't there yet, but they were going to arrive soon. The yellow band wasn't the only difference in the museum. James had also noticed a hat on the marble lobby floor, next to the door. Was that hat there yesterday? It couldn't have been. The police would have noticed it and would have taken it in as evidence, James convinced himself.

"Vanessa, doesn't your brother have a hat with a monkey on it, like that one?" James asked, pointing to the hat.

"Yeah, so? You don't think my brother stole the painting, do you?"

"No, I'm sure there are thousands of people in New York City with the same hat. I was just pointing out that your brother has something in common with the possible burglar."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he were the one who stole the painting. He gets more and more annoying each day. I can't stand him anymore," Vanessa said, feeling annoyed just thinking about her older brother. "What are we going to do? Where do we start?"

"Right now, the only clue we have is that hat. Do you know if your brother is missing a hat?" Lillie asked.

“No, but we could go and ask him, if you insist,” Vanessa answered.

“Could you identify your brother’s hat by any insignia if you saw it up close?” asked James.

“Yeah. There is a tiny red heart under the eye of the monkey. His girlfriend drew it, and he hasn’t washed that hat since. That was three years ago.”

As soon as James heard the words “red heart,” he hurried past the caution strip and looked closely at the hat.

“There’s a heart under the monkey’s eye,” James said.

Vanessa was staring at him in disbelief. “Okay, let’s go to my house and search his room for more clues.”

“I think she took that rather well,” Lillie whispered to James.

“That doesn’t mean anything yet, Vanessa. You know that, right?” James tried to make Vanessa feel better.

“Yeah, I know. I’m just trying to figure out why he would steal a painting.”

“Well, he’s pretty mischievous; you know that,” said Lillie.

“Yeah, I know. Let’s go now,” urged Vanessa.

When they arrived at Vanessa’s house, they didn’t even bother to stop by the fridge and get something to eat, like they usually do; instead, they shot straight up to Ricky Swan’s room (Vanessa’s brother). They searched for five minutes, until they finally came across a large square case, hung on a coat hanger, under a large black coat. They opened the case and inside it was a painting, “the painting”. There was one question now. Was it real? After they examined the painting, they saw it wasn’t painted

on canvas. It was painted on a huge regular piece of paper. It was just like one of Lillie's copies.

"What do we do now, guys?" asked Vanessa." It's not my uncle. I know him well enough to know that he would never steal anything. I'm not so sure that it wasn't my brother."

"It can't be your brother, Vanessa. This painting is a replica," said Lillie.

"But why would he have this painting anyway? He hates art. He says it's the most boring thing on Earth. His girlfriend is always talking about this painting, and he was getting annoyed by that, so maybe he stole it, so she would be disappointed, and because it doesn't exist anymore, she might not talk about it anymore."

"Maybe; or maybe he just bought it for his girlfriend, since she loves it so much," said James.

"I have to go, guys. My mom wants me to be home for lunch," said Lillie.

"I have to go, too. Why don't we meet back here at two thirty, and we'll continue our investigation?" suggested James.

Both girls agreed, and Lillie and James started to head home. On his regular run back home, James was thinking about all of the clues they had so far. There was Ricky's hat, and the painting in Ricky's closet. Both of those clues led to Ricky, but he had no real reason to steal anything. The replica was just like one of Lillie's. Could she be trying to frame Ricky? Why? She has never had anything against him. On the other hand, Vanessa's always talking about how annoying her older brother is, and how much she hates him. Could she be trying to frame him? Why did Vanessa's uncle disappear all

of a sudden? He must know something about the burglar, if he wasn't the burglar himself.

The kids went home, ate lunch, and met back at Vanessa's house.

"Hey guys. I was thinking that we should go to your uncle's place and take a look around for some clues," suggested James. "Do you have an extra key, Vanessa?"

"Yeah. My uncle gave these keys to me last year when he started working at the museum. He thought that I could drop by sometime and borrow some of the books in his library in the basement. Let's go," answered Vanessa.

Off to George Swan's they went. They split and each one of them searched the house very carefully. Lillie shot straight for the kitchen, Vanessa searched the bedroom, and James remained in the Living Room.

James thought the Living Room to be very classy. It had old fashioned couches, a grandfather clock, one of those big old TVs with the dials on the screen, and an elegant fireplace. The walls were painted red, and the ceiling was white. The curtains on the big windows looked heavy and old fashioned, like ones that would be found in a French chateau. There were a couple of plants in the corner, and a coffee table in the middle of the couch arrangement. Over the fireplace hung a copy of Picasso's "Las meninas", and there were a bunch of tiny sculptures of people and animals sitting on a shelf next to the fireplace.

None of the young investigators found any clue that would suggest that Vanessa's uncle stole the painting, or ones that led to the burglar's name. Except.....

"James, did you find anything?" Lillie burst into the room spontaneously, and quite unexpectedly. Lillie was good with stuff like that. She's so sneaky and quiet; she



pops out of nowhere all of the time. She could probably even surprise the fearless Chuck Norris.

James quickly hid the mysterious clue in his pocket and answered, “No, nothing.”

“Let’s go find Vanessa and get out of here,” Lillie said, looking around the room.

“Are you looking for something?” James asked.

“No. I’m just making sure you haven’t overlooked something important.”

They went off to find Vanessa, who hadn’t found any clues either, and then they went to the park to analyze all they had so far.

“I still think it was my brother,” Vanessa said.

“I still can’t believe someone actually stole the greatest painting of all time,”

Lillie complained, but with what James thought was a little too much concern. He knew her better than she knew herself. He could tell when she was acting, like she was doing now. What was she hiding?

The sky looked gray that day. The wind was picking up speed, and the temperature was dropping slowly. It looked like it was going to rain; maybe even a thunderstorm would arrive any second now.

“Hey, guys? Let’s go home and call it a day for now. I think the weather’s on the burglar’s side today,” James recommended.

Vanessa looked disturbed by the thought. “Why do you say that?”

“Because the sky is gray, and the air feels just like it’s about to rain.”

“Ok, let’s go home. See you tomorrow guys,” Lillie announced.

Despite the rain signals, James decided to take the long way home today. He thought he had found the answer to the mystery. How could he prove it though? Was the

clue he found at George Swan's house enough? He would soon have to act...sooner than he thought. He knew that the police would find Vanessa's uncle any time now.

The next day the three friends met at the Museum of Modern Art, where they found themselves surrounded by police and media. The authorities had caught Vanessa's uncle, trying to enter the museum. They were going to arrest him with the charge of stealing a fifteen million dollar painting. People always wonder what their future's going to be like in a year or two. Vanessa's uncle didn't have to wonder anymore; he knew that there would be nothing but bars around him, for at least the next twenty years, unless someone could prove him innocent. "Hey, Vanessa? Did your uncle mention something about losing one of his keys to the museum?" James whispered quietly.

"Yeah. He said that he was in trouble because he had lost one of the keys last Wednesday. He said that he remembered dropping it on the floor, and he was about to pick it up, when a customer caught his attention, and asked for his help," Vanessa answered.

James was listening carefully to Vanessa's answer, while holding tightly, with his sweaty hand to the clue from George's house. The clue was in an envelope marked: Lillie. "Are you really going to stand here and watch them arrest an innocent person?" James asked Lillie. He knew that Lillie, too, like George, is good-natured, and can't stand by watching people getting hurt.

Lillie looked at James with an "I'm sorry, I'm guilty" kind of look, on her face. She went over to the policeman Vanessa had talked to yesterday and turned herself in.

"What's Lillie doing? Why are they putting handcuffs on her?" Vanessa asked worriedly.

“She’s doing the right thing,” James explained.

“What? What’s the right thing?”

“Lillie stole the painting, Vanessa,” James continued to explain. “Your uncle dropped the key on the museum floor, the same day Lillie was there. He must have been somewhere near her. When the customer distracted your uncle, Lillie picked up the key, thinking she would give it back to him, but she forgot, just like your uncle forgot he had dropped it. Lillie had no intention of stealing the painting until we saw that documentary on Van Gogh the other day..... I think. That night your uncle stayed late; he was worried that whoever had found that key would come and steal something. He was probably hiding somewhere, waiting for the burglar to arrive. He knew that he would be questioned when the police found out about the painting and he can’t lie, and he didn’t want to turn Lillie in, so he decided to disappear for a while.”

“But how do you know that Lillie was the one who found the key?”

“Well she said she was going to the museum, the same day you mentioned your uncle lost his key. Plus, I found an envelope, holding a key which appeared to be the one your uncle had lost because it had the words ‘Museum of Modern Art’ inscribed in it. I knew the envelope was Lillie’s because it said ‘Lillie’ on the front, and you know how Lillie always marks her property, so people wouldn’t touch it without her permission. That usually has a possible outcome, but not this time.”

“Why did my uncle come back, though?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” James glanced at Vanessa’s uncle, who was standing behind her.

When Vanessa saw her uncle, she jumped ecstatically and gave him a big hug.

“Why did you come back?”

“I missed my little ‘Nessa....and I forgot to pick up the hat Lillie left by the door, in her attempt to frame Ricky.”

“Hey, James? Where did Lillie get Ricky’s hat?” Vanessa turned to James.

“She probably saw it lying around your house somewhere. She doesn’t have anything against Ricky, but she had to frame somebody,” James replied.

“But Ricky’s hat wasn’t there the day the painting was reported missing. How did you know it was there, uncle?”

“Oh, I was there. People always look left, right, and all around them, except up. I was hiding high up in the tree next to the museum. I stayed there ‘till the museum closed and I felt it was safe to come down. That’s when I saw Lillie coming and putting the hat inside the museum. I wonder how the police didn’t notice the hat the past two days.”

“Lillie probably went back to retrieve it after we saw it lying there,” James suggested.

“I’m sorry, guys!” Lillie apologized as the police were walking her to the police car in the parking lot.

As Vanessa and George were waving to Lillie, James interrupted the wave with a statement, “I still can’t figure out how that replica found itself in your brother’s closet.”

“Oh, I think I can explain that,” Vanessa’s uncle stated. “Ricky asked me where he could buy that painting for his girlfriend’s birthday, since she liked it so much. I told him to order one off the internet, and I guess he took my advice. It was in his closet, probably because the girl’s birthday is tomorrow.”

Lillie didn't stay in jail long. After all, she did turn herself in, and she was only fifteen. After her three months in jail, Lillie also had to do community service for the next two years. Lillie stole Starry Night simply because she loved it so much. She had so many copies of it, but no copy is as good as a Van Gogh original. Despite her criminal record, Lillie remains Vanessa and James' friend, who are still a little suspicious of her at times, but it always turns out that there is no reason for their suspicions.

What became of the three fifteen year olds? One went off to be a private detective, one went on to be a book writer and later, part owner of the New York Knicks, who are still not winning; and one became an art teacher at the Art Institute of New York City, in...well, New York City.