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The Empty Gallery

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An Illustrated Story by Gabe Morrison

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Thank you.

The lazy Tuesday afternoon murmur of patrons whispering their way through the halls and galleries greeted Tess as she slipped into the museum after school. She stepped into the dusty silence, and the rest of the world receded back into the sunlight behind the hall's enormous doors, the long, dreary morning dropped happily from her mind. Now was when the day really began, the only part worth looking forward to.

Antoine was at the gate, and, as usual, he stared sternly down at Tess past the waxy bristles of his handlebar mustache.

"Well, young lady, your ticket?" he said, beginning their daily routine.

Tess patted her pockets for several seconds, feigning surprise. "Mon Dieu! I must have lost it."

"Lost it?" said Antoine theatrically. "Well, where did it go?"

"It must have been those pickpockets under the bridge. You know they need paper to wrap their tobacco in."

It was a different story every day. Sometimes a pigeon flew off with it, sometimes it was burned in a terrible fire Tess only just managed to escape from. Today's was a brand new story, and Antoine's lips quivered momentarily beneath his mustaches, but being the professional that he was, he twitched back his laughter and frowned down at Tess.

"Well then, what *do* you have for me?" asked Antoine. "We can't have children getting into museums for free."

"I have this," said Tess, pushing her little leather satchel into his arms. Sometimes she thought of other things to give Antoine — leftovers from lunch or lost treasures she picked up on her way home from school. But today she was tired and just wanted someone else to carry her bag for her.

Antoine chuckled and pushed the bag under the guard's desk.

"Your father has to work late tonight. Monsieur Petit is ill."

Tess shrugged. She would much rather be at the museum than at home where it was hot and the stale, humid air suffocated her.

“Today I have something for you as well, Princesse Tess,” said Antoine, reaching into his pocket. “I was cleaning out the lost and found yesterday. It’s been there for a month now, so I figure it might as well be yours.” He held out a small paper box.

Tess opened the box. Inside were eight slim, wooden pencils, each one brand new and whittled sharp. “They’re so pretty!” Tess exclaimed, brushing her fingertips across the pencil points.

“I thought you might like to start writing down all those stories you’re always making up,” Antoine said. Tess could tell he was proud of his gift.

“Merci, Antoine,” she said, as she gazed at the straight, perfect rods in her hands. She hugged him quickly around the waist.

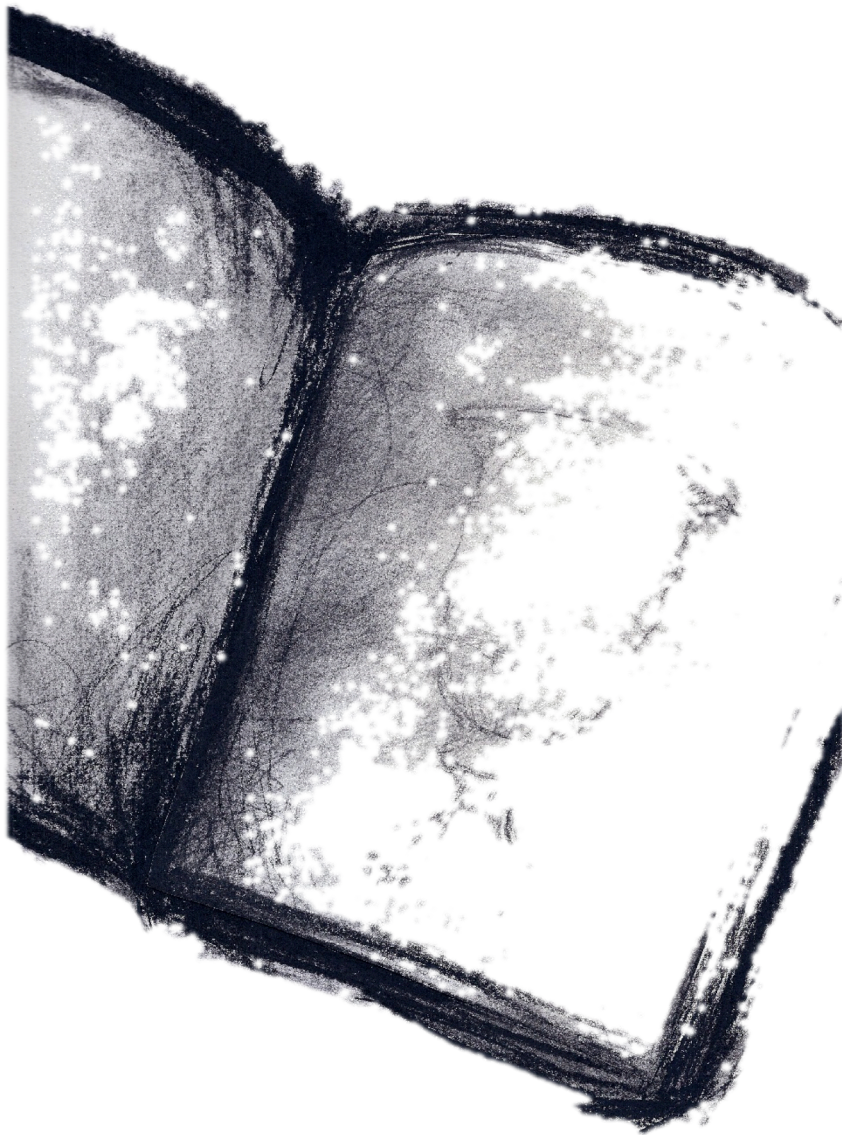
“Why don’t you see if you can find some paper in the guard’s office?” suggested Antoine.

But, as she made her way down the corridors ten minutes later, Tess realized she didn't know what she wanted to write about. She had never tried to write her stories down before, and when she thought of it, her imagination became suddenly shy.

She made it halfway to the guard's office before she thought maybe she ought to find something to write *about* first. So she wandered through the familiar rooms, swung around a banister and up one staircase, then another. It was quiet for a Tuesday, even though the museum was only open for a few more hours. Perhaps Papa would give her his keys so she could go exploring through the basements for an hour or so before it was time to close. Or perhaps she would hide in the cool, dark Antiquities section and scare tourists by making ghost noises through her cupped hands from behind the sarcophagi.



She was at the top of the stairs when she noticed it — a little black book with a string wrapped around it to keep it closed. Tess looked up and down the corridor, but there was no one in sight besides a medieval painting of Jesus who looked dolefully at her from the cross. Ignoring him, Tess bent down and picked up the book. She unwrapped the string and peered inside.









There were many artists who came every day to copy paintings in the Louvre, and Tess supposed it wasn't unusual that they should drop something from time to time. But she had never discovered something like this before. She wondered who could have dropped it. She flipped to the front and back covers, but there was no name, nothing indicating who used it or why. Somehow this made the sketchbook even more alluring, however. Its mysteriousness could mean so many exciting things. Perhaps she would write about this, Tess thought.

But before she could do much of anything, Tess heard the clunk of footsteps moving toward her and the voices of two men bouncing down the hall.

"It's probably just with the photographer. From time to time he takes pictures up to the roof, you know, to photograph them."

“Mon Dieu! If it is not being moved or getting that infernal glass put over it, it is at the photographer’s! How is an artist to do his work?”

It was Monsieur Bérout and Monsieur Girard, moving swiftly, Monsieur Bérout chattering in his thin voice and Monsieur Girard attempting, unsuccessfully, to pacify him.

Monsieur Bérout was a painter Tess did not much like. He had a fussy manner and often asked Tess defensively what she thought of his paintings. No matter how she answered, however, she always seemed to have the *wrong* answer.

The last time she saw, Monsieur Bérout had asked her opinion on a painting of a Greek vase he had been working on. Tess replied (kindly, she thought) that he had managed to catch the lights and the colors just right. Monsieur Bérout tutted dismissively and returned sullenly to his work as though Tess had said something terribly disappointing.

Now the man was in a frantic state, eyes bulging comically, leading the disgruntled museum guardian along as though by an invisible leash.

They stopped next to Tess, just outside of the Salon Carré.

“She has been missing since this morning,” complained Monsieur Bérout. “If she has been with the photographer, why is she not back?”

Tess crept behind the two men, trying to peer into the gallery, but the backs of their dark coats blocked her view.

“Would you like for me to check with the section head?” asked Monsieur Girard.

“Bien sûr, yes!” exclaimed Monsieur Bérout and Monsieur Girard turned and left, looking relieved to be rid of him. Monsieur Bérout, for his part, began to pace the room, agitated, picking up a paintbrush from time to time, then setting it down again on his table. Finally, his restless feet

came to a stop in the center of the room and Tess followed his gaze over to the four hooks set into the empty space of wall.





Tess knew Monsieur Bérout was right — the painting was not with the photographer. Yesterday was cleaning day, so the photographer would no

doubt have taken his pictures then, while the museum was still closed. Nevertheless, Tess stood in the corner of the room until finally the section head of the guardians, frazzled and red-faced, entered and began speaking with Monsieur Bérout in hushed tones. One by one, more guardians trickled into the room to gape at the space between the paintings.

When the detectives showed up, one of them asked Tess some questions, but for the most part they ignored her until Papa arrived.

“They’re closing the museum,” he told her, taking her hand. “They just need to ask me a few questions and then we can leave.”

Ten minutes later, Tess sat outside the curator’s office, listening to the detective’s voice and watching her father’s wavy silhouette through the smoky glass bob and shake its head in response to the questions. The word “stolen” slipped through the door several times.

Tess pulled the sketch book from her pocket and returned to the sketch on the last page. The very last drawing was of the painting that was now missing.

She could not believe it was a coincidence. No, it was a clue. It didn't occur to Tess to show the sketch book to the detectives, but if it had, of course no one would have paid it any attention. But Tess knew that somehow the little black book was trying to tell her something. She just had to figure out what.

It was quiet and lonely in the dimly lit galleries. The museum was closed to the public with the investigation underway, and the only activity came from the knots of detectives who conferred in sharp whispers as they marched from one place to another.

Papa and the other museum staff were busy answering questions and aiding the investigation by showing the detectives around and searching

every corner of the museum. There were many new security routines to learn and Papa had to work much longer shifts. Tess spent a lot of time wandering the galleries on her own, feeling invisible. The first night after La Joconde's theft, Aunt Claire stayed at the house to keep an eye on her, but after that Tess stayed at the museum late into the evenings, long after its ordinary hours ended.

She tried a few times to write with the pencils Antoine had given her, but she usually grew bored and her mind wandered into one daydream after another.

Long days at the museum with no one to talk to or play with, had taught Tess to invent friends for herself. She would speak to them, in her head sometimes, but out loud if there was no one around, and they spoke back to her in their way, each with a different voice. She had spent countless hours in this strange company of lords and ladies, saints and goddesses, and she felt like she knew each of them intimately.

Tess never grew bored of the Louvre's paintings and sculptures. There was always something new to discover in them. She was constantly making up new stories about them, scrutinizing the cracked ridges of paint in each portrait for clues to secrets she knew they all kept from her.

La Joconde had always been one of Tess's favorites, not because she was painted by Leonardo Da Vinci or because of her famous smile or for any of the reasons men like Monsieur Bérout liked it. Tess loved the painting because Papa had once told her (or she imagined he had told her) that Tess's mother looked just like La Joconde, only prettier. Tess also loved it because La Joconde, more than any of the museum's other pieces, seemed to hold secrets, which for Tess were somehow wrapped up with her mother.

Tess had spent hours sitting in front of the portrait, memorizing every feature, hoping that one day she would see the woman who looked just like La Joconde (only prettier) in one of the muse-

um galleries and know, instantly, that she was Tess's mother. In her daydream, her mother walked through the front door, gazing confusedly around her like someone waking from a long sleep. Tess would see her across the sun-lanced hall and would run forward, and when her mother turned around, when she knelt down, arms outstretched and clasped Tess's body to hers, the reason for her disappearance didn't matter at all. The only thing that mattered was the two of them and their happiness at having finally found one another.

Some days, when Tess grew tired of merely imagining, she would sit in the Salon Carré and gaze at La Joconde in the silent, late afternoon hours. It felt like spying through a magical mirror that showed her mother to her no matter where she might be in the world. But now the mirror was stolen.

Each time Tess entered the Salon Carré, she was met with a tiny disappointment. She didn't admit it to herself, but part of her hoped when she

turned to face the wall that the painting would be returned to its usual spot and the reality of the theft would vanish like a bad dream in the morning. During her frequent visits, Tess often examined the sketch book she had found. All of the sketches depicted art from the museum. But it was the sketch of La Joconde that she obsessed over.

It wasn't quite finished, and this bothered Tess. If it had been, she felt that somehow she would be able to understand something. She wasn't quite sure what, but something. She felt that whoever had drawn the sketch must know something she didn't about La Joconde.

When Antoine caught her, for the fourth time, staring at the bare hooks on the wall in the days after La Joconde's disappearance, Tess realized she couldn't explain why the theft upset her so much, and, unsure what else to do, she crumpled against his side and cried into his jacket.

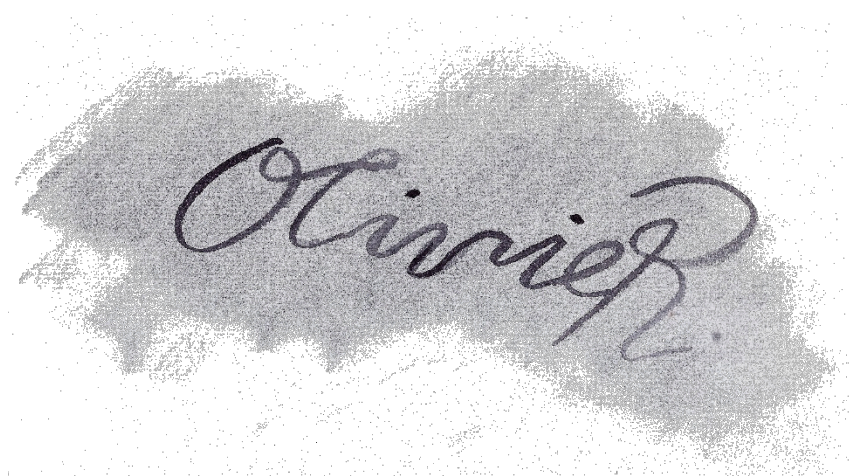
"What's wrong, Tess?" Antoine asked, clearly surprised but trying to soothe her.

“Nothing,” sniffled Tess, wiping her eyes. “I just miss Mother.”

But that wasn’t quite it. Tess couldn’t remember her mother, and though she often daydreamed about her, she didn’t imagine she could properly miss someone she’d never known. No, it was more the fact that Tess still didn’t know all she thought she should about La Joconde, and now Tess’s chance to discover them might be gone forever.

Tess knew the reason she visited the Salon Carré every day to stare at the blank square of wall was to try to remember. Already, when she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to picture La Joconde, there were details she was unsure about, and Tess was terrified she would eventually forget what she looked like altogether. Tess knew Antoine would never understand this, but she appreciated that he did his best to comfort her anyway.

Tess had been through the book several times before she noticed the signature penciled onto the inside cover.



She ran her fingers over the name. *Olivier*. She didn't know the names of most of the artists who came to the museum. If only there were a way to find out. . . .

And then she realized there *was* a way to find out. Tess sprang to her feet and clattered down the corridors and stairwells with the sketch pad tucked under her arm until she reached Antoine's desk by the door.

"What is it, Princesse Tess?" said Antoine, looking up from the newspaper in his lap.

"I need your help," said Tess.

"You do? Is it your mathematics lesson again?"

“It’s not school,” said Tess. “I need you to help me find something. Someone,” she corrected herself.

“How do you mean?” Antoine arched his hedgelike brows.

“I need to find someone who’s been to the museum. I need you to check the museum files for the name.”

Antoine twiddled the mustache hairs beneath his nose. “Why don’t you ask your father?” he asked.

“Because he wouldn’t do it,” said Tess.

“Then I think I’d better not either,” concluded Antoine.

“Antoine, please. You know how Papa is. He doesn’t like me to ask questions about her.”

“About who?”

“About La Joconde,” said Tess. “You see, I found this sketchbook —” Tess handed it to him “— and I want to know who it belongs to. You don’t have to show me anything I’m not allowed

to see. I just want to know.” Tess looked imploringly at him. “Actually, I want to write a story about it. You did say you wanted me to write down my stories. But I need your help.”

Antoine glanced through the pages. His gaze lingered on the last page for a moment longer than the rest and his eyes softened.



“It reminds him of Mother,” said Tess quietly. “You know how he is about that painting. That’s why I can’t ask him.”

“Tess —”

“Please, Antoine?”

Antoine hesitated and looked about him as if he might see something that would help him make his decision.

“Well I suppose I wouldn’t want to get in the writer and her story,” said Antoine, lowering his voice just enough to be conspiratorial. “What’s the name?”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” said Tess. “The name is Olivier.”

Antoine nodded. “I’ll have a look tonight.”

The tapping of Papa’s boots as he carried her down the stairs gently coaxed Tess to wakefulness that night. Tess realized she must have fallen asleep on the velvet sofa in the Salon Carré and was vaguely aware of a dream she’d had about her mother. In the dream, Tess remembered catching sight of her in one of the museum’s galleries, but every time she tried to approach, a crowd of people would get in the way, or her mother would turn a corner and Tess would lose her and wander

helplessly around the museum, taunted by quick glimpses from across the room, too far away to call out to.

It was pleasant being borne through the hallways, the dull rhythm of Papa's footsteps making her feel that she might or mightn't still be dreaming. In the foyer, Tess stirred and Papa, realizing she was awake, gently lowered Tess to the ground.

"I'm sorry we had to stay so late," murmured Papa as he helped Tess's sleepy arms into her frock coat. "We're opening again Monday and there are many things to do."

Papa crouched and started doing up Tess's buttons. "Who knew such a little painting could cause such a fuss? The whole country's in a state."

Tess remained silent. Such a fuss, she thought sluggishly. Her dream kept swirling her thoughts together, making it difficult to know what was real and what was not.

Papa stared into her face and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “What’s wrong, darling?”

“Where did Mother go?” asked Tess. She at least knew enough not to ask why. But it had been a long time since she asked where her mother was.

Papa sighed. “I don’t know, *ma chérie*. Somewhere far from here, I think.”

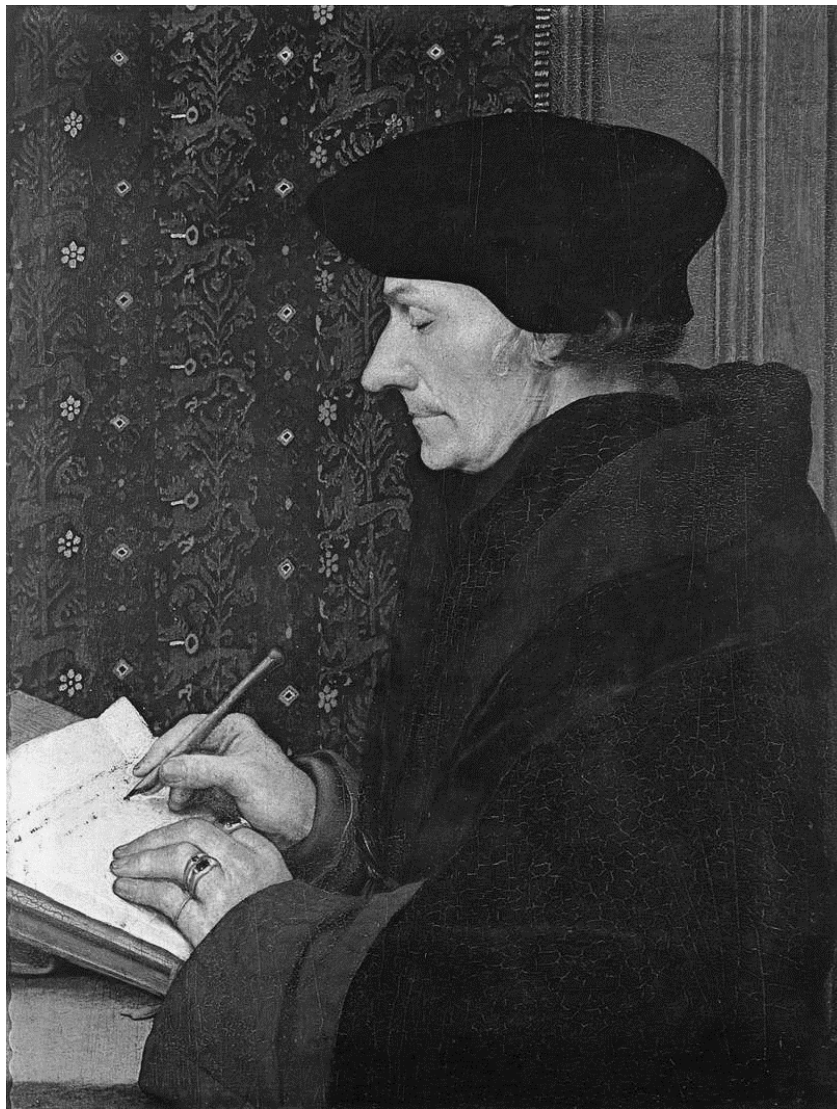
“America?”

“Perhaps.”

Papa rose to his feet and took Tess’s hand. As they approached the door, they saw the gaggle of detectives gathered around the guard’s desk, sweaty and disheveled, drinking brandy and smoking as they passed papers around and argued halfheartedly with one another.

All these people looking for such a little painting, Tess thought.

She wondered if anyone besides her was looking for her mother.



Tess went to visit the portrait of Erasmus the next morning. Erasmus was a pointy-nosed scholarly man who was always writing. She knew that he was listening intently to everything she said, just recording it all for reference. She liked that he was

a writer and often came to that corner of the Germanic Countries collection to do homework under Erasmus's supervision.

Today she was writing something else. She had begun a journal of the events that had occurred since last Tuesday with the pencils Antoine had given her. While she wrote, Tess told Erasmus all about La Joconde's disappearance (even though it was common knowledge by this point), about the sketchbook, and about asking Antoine to go looking for its owner. She told him the things she couldn't tell Papa or even Antoine, and wondered about what sort of secrets she suspected the sketchbook's owner must know.

"And what if you don't find what you expect?" Tess imagined Erasmus saying in his usual, skeptical way. "What if the book is just a book?"

Tess frowned at a word she suspected she'd misspelled on her paper, paused, then ground it away with an eraser.

“Sometimes I just know,” Tess explained. “I can *feel* it.”

“Feeling isn’t the same as knowing, my dear,” said Erasmus cryptically. Tess left the room shortly after, feeling cross.

It wasn’t until late that evening that Antoine arrived and Tess finally got the chance to talk to him. He had been signed up for the overnight shift for the second night in a row and had been sleeping all day. Even so, he looked exhausted; his face was drawn and his mustache had been left unwaxed so that the hairs slumped tiredly over his lip.

“Hello, Tess,” Antoine greeted her with uncharacteristic heaviness.

Tess rested her chin and arms on the guard desk while she watched Antoine take off his coat and unpack his bag.

“Well?” prompted Tess when he sat down.

Antoine raised his eyebrows. “Well, what?”

“Did you find out who owns the sketchbook?”

Antoine sighed. “I did not. I went through guest books and files and all the information we’ve collected on visitors in the past month, but I found no one by the name of Olivier. I’m sorry, *ma princesse*.”

He looked it too, which is why Tess tried to hide how disappointed she felt.

“But there must be someplace else we can look,” Tess floundered. “There must be another way. . . .”

Antoine started trimming a cigar. “We do not keep records of everyone who comes to the museum, Tess. Perhaps —” he paused to sweep the brown cigar shavings into a little pile on his desk. “— Perhaps you should leave this be. Just leave it in the lost and found. Someone will come back for it eventually.”

Tess eyed the overflowing box of unclaimed items by the desk dubiously.

“Well, thanks anyway, Antoine.”

Tess wandered back to the Salon Carré, but there were too many detectives and men moving paintings so Tess ended up sitting in a quiet stairwell leaning her head against a bannister. She couldn't say just why she felt so disappointed. What had she thought would happen? Perhaps the book was just a book.

The museum opened the next day and was no longer the dreary mausoleum it had become. It was fuller than usual at first, and crowds flocked to the Salon Carré as though some sort of bizarre magnetism drew them to gawk at what *wasn't* there. La Joconde had been a reasonably well-known painting before, but now that there was nothing to see, she was a spectacle.

Tess stayed away from the empty gallery. The surge of people made her claustrophobic and irritated. They had not been here all week like she had. They had not been here all her life like Tess had. It was *her* painting that was missing. Why

should everyone act as though was some sort of personal outrage? They didn't care the first thing about the painting a week ago.

Tess felt protective of the museum and its art. The Louvre had been a home to her, more than any of the many actual addresses she had lived at, which often changed from one year to the next. Papa had been working at the museum since before Tess was born, and much of the staff was like family to her. Tess didn't appreciate the sudden influx of intruders. They were like disrespectful houseguests who tramped in mud and spoke in whispers behind the backs of their hosts. Tess wished she could ask them to leave.

She started spending less time in the public galleries and more time in Papa's office and the staff rooms and maintenance hallways kept off limits to visitors. Papa and Antoine were busy keeping track of all the new visitors and making sure all the new security countermeasures were working properly. They were seldom in the guards' office.

Tess had found a decrepit upholstered arm-chair in the corner of the office and had staked it out as her work station. Besides the journal she had been keeping, Tess had started a story about La Joconde. In the story, a cruel, mustachioed Italian captured the great lady and locked her in a tower. He forced her to sit in front of a mirror and draw her own portrait for her kidnapper again and again, and the man became rich off of selling the drawings of this beautiful woman.

Tess was working on creating a hero to come and rescue La Joconde, but she invariably got stuck, for her heroes were either too serious or too silly, looked too much like Antoine (which wouldn't do at all, for he would notice the resemblance immediately when she showed it to him), or else was too perfect, and Tess didn't know what a perfect person was supposed to look like.

One day, frustrated with her story and bored of her schoolwork, Tess decided to go exploring the office. It was packed with accumulated clutter

from generations of museum guardians. It seemed as though when something entered the room, it was all too likely to stay in the room. But rather than filling up, the room (and its collective furniture, cabinets, and containers) created new nooks and crannies to store things, so that the office eventually developed a resemblance to a weasel's tunnels, so filled with useless trinkets and flotsam that the layers of rubbish seemed to *become* the walls and floor and ceiling.

Tess quickly found several neglected treasures: A broken bit of pottery (which Tess fantasized may have once belonged to a valuable Egyptian relic), a rusty kerosene lamp, and even two francs squeezed in between the cushions of the armchair. In Antoine's desk she found a half-finished letter to his sweetheart. Tess read this quickly, blushing, before taking care to return it exactly the way she had found it.

Eventually, Tess started rummaging through the drawers of Papa's desk.



Tess's heart fluttered excitedly. She didn't look exactly like La Joconde, but the resemblance was close enough that Tess knew who it was immediately.

And the door — Tess had seen it before, she was certain. A dozen fantastic possibilities bloomed and expanded in her head like ink drops in a glass of water, but she didn't allow herself to consider any of these too carefully. She needed to *know*, not just imagine.

Tess stuffed the photograph between the pages of the sketchpad, gathered up her things, and scrambled out of the room. She tore down the hallways, whirled around doorposts, and scurried up a flight of stairs as fast as she could.

“Careful, Tess,” she heard Antoine call after her, though in her haste she had not noticed him. “Where are you running to in such a hurry?”

“No time!” Tess gasped, vanishing around the corner.

She practically had to swim through the throng of people gathered around the Salon Carré, but once clear, she was able to run undisturbed through the last few galleries until —



“Well!” said the woman rising to her feet. Her eyes flashed and her gray hair seemed to bristle, like a cat who has been splashed with water.

“*Pardonnez-moi!*” exclaimed Tess. “I am so sorry, Madam!” She stooped and immediately began

gathering up paint tubes and brushes. A glass of turpentine had smashed on the floor and the oil oozed in a muddy puddle toward the upended canvas.

“Well!” said the woman again. She seemed stunned, though her eyes continued to glimmer angrily.

“I am sorry. I didn’t see you —”

“Do you not have eyes, dear? A very large woman sitting at a painting is not easy to miss.”

“I was running —”

“Well, why were you running?” snapped the woman. “For heaven’s sake, we’re in an art museum, not a park! Where are your parents?”

No, thought Tess. Papa mustn’t find out about this. But two of the guardians had been summoned by the commotion and were approaching. There was no way Papa would *not* find out about this. Tess’s cheeks burned. She couldn’t believe what she had done. She, who knew this museum better than anyone, she, who was always so careful

with the museum's art. Papa would never trust her to roam the museum on her own again!

The woman picked her canvas gingerly off of the ground. The paint had smeared in messy streaks. Tess began to apologize again, tears welling in her eyes, but the woman waved her words away.

"I was just starting anyway," she said brusquely. "Just put everything back. My knees are not as good as they used to be."

And she stood by, muttering to the guards who had arrived, watching while Tess cleaned up the mess and placed things, as well as she was able, on the small folding table beside the collapsed easel.

Tess had just finished mopping up the last of the turpentine with a rag when Papa's voice rang out from behind her.

"Tess?"

The prospect of dealing with him later had been terrible enough. She would rather have drunk the whole jar of turpentine than face him now. In-

cidentally, Tess felt rather as if she *had* drunk a whole jar of turpentine, for her stomach churned and a poisonous heat rose up through her throat and flooded her face. Tess slowly pushed herself to her feet and turned around.

“What happened?”

Tess’s eyes dropped to the ground. Turpentine from the rag dripped limply through Tess’s fingers and fell with disheartening *plip-plip* sounds on the floor. She didn’t know how she would explain, but she was saved the trouble as the woman launched into an account. Tess’s eyes flicked up to study Papa’s face, and with each sentence, with each furrow added to his brow, Tess’s heart sank a little further.

“Tess,” Papa said sternly. “Apologize to Madam Riendeau.”

“I already did —” Tess began before she quailed before her father’s glare. “I’m sorry,” she almost whispered.

“Now return to my office. I will be there soon.”

There was a clock on the wall of the office, almost eight minutes slow, which ticked with an icy perseverance that filled the whole room. Tess watched the second hand’s excruciating journey around the clock’s disk until the ticking synchronized itself with the clicking of Papa’s footsteps coming down the hall outside.

He didn’t say anything when he came in. Tess couldn’t tell what expression he wore on his face. She was too afraid to look. The clock ticked on like an indefatigable chatterbox, gossiping on long after anyone cared to listen.

“What were you thinking?” Papa finally said.

Tess stared at the sketchbook in her lap, twisting the string fastener around her finger over and over again.

“I’m disappointed in you,” said Papa.

“I’m disappointed in *you*.”

The words tumbled out unexpectedly and Tess's mouth hung open afterward, horrified, as though hoping they would retreat back into her throat. The clock continued to tick.

Papa's eyes challenged Tess to continue. Her lip trembled.

"You're disappointed in *me*?"

Tess couldn't tell if he was angry or hurt.

"Why didn't you tell me Mother worked at the museum?" Tess pressed recklessly onward.

"What are you talking about?"

"I found the photograph in your desk," said Tess, her cheeks flushing. "It's her, isn't it? She's in front of the curator's office. Look —" Tess unwound the string and tore open the sketchbook, flipping through the pages in search of the photograph. She went through the book three times before she realized it was not there.

"Mon Dieu! Where did it go? I put it right here."

But even as she leafed through the book more carefully for a fourth time, Tess recalled the image of the sketchbook flapping through the air after she collided with Madam Riendeau. The photograph must have slipped out of the book when she dropped it.

“I must go back to get it,” said Tess, rising to her feet.

“You will not. You’re going home.”

“But —”

“But nothing!”

Tess knew better than to argue. Papa was not to be pushed.

“Come,” said Papa, opening the door, and he led her down the hall and out of the museum.

Tess was given the task of helping Monsieur Delacroix, one of the museum’s curators, sort files and clean out old cabinets in exchange for a small allowance. The allowance, it was made clear, would be used to pay off a debt Tess now owed to Papa,

for he had paid for the damage Tess had done to Madam Riendeau's paints and supplies. It was dull work, but would have been almost tolerable were it not for the fact that Monsieur Delacroix was quite hard of hearing and shouted directions at Tess with a brass ear trumpet in hand.

Tess didn't complain, not only because she knew she deserved it, but because it meant she no longer had to talk to Papa. He had scarcely said five words to her since her outburst in his office. It was not merely the fact that she had caused a mess by running into Madam Riendeau. Something Tess had said about the photograph upset him.

The photograph, meanwhile, was lost for good, it seemed. Tess had returned to the gallery she where she dropped the sketchbook, but there was no sign of it. This was truly the most disappointing thing about the day. Tess had never seen a photograph of her mother before and she wished now that she had taken the opportunity to study it properly. She had asked Antoine every day to

check the lost and found for her, but she knew it would not turn up there. She was almost sure Papa had found it, but Tess didn't dare ask him about it. She wondered if she would ever see it again.

It was on the third day of working for Monsieur Delacroix that Tess came across the door from the photograph. She had been by the office hundreds of times, but had never been inside. Monsieur Delacroix had sent her to deliver a bundle of envelopes downstairs, when she happened across it on her way toward the stairs. The door looked a little more worn and chipped than it had in the picture, but besides this, it looked the same.

Tess tried the door. It was locked, but she could tell by the grimy door handle and the rusty wheeze of the latch that this door had not been opened in quite some time. She yanked the handle with both arms, but it wouldn't budge. Tess traced the keyhole with a finger and felt her heart sink even further.

Later, Tess thought about asking Antoine to unlock the door for her, but she couldn't. A change, a disheartening stiffness, had come over his manner of late. He seemed to regard Tess differently since her accident with Madam Riendeau. And not simply because Tess had been wrong, for Antoine was far too amicable and forgiving. Instead, he seemed worried and uncomfortable, particularly when Tess asked about the photograph. Finally, Tess could no longer bear it, so she asked:

“What is wrong, Antoine? Have I done something to upset you?”

“No, Princesse, of course not,” he said and at first pretended not to know what Tess was referring to. But finally he said, “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to keep on after this photograph. I think it has upset your father very much. You must understand, it’s not easy for him to answer questions about your mother. It weighs very heavily on him.”

“It’s not easy for me either,” said Tess.

“I know, Princesse, I know.” Antoine put an arm around her.

It took her almost an entire week before Tess made up her mind to steal the keys from Monsieur Delacroix. It was remarkably easy — he left them on his desk while he went out for lunch every day. All Tess had to do was make sure she was back before the hour was up.

She stole out of the office, tiptoed down the stairs and to the old wood door. It took nearly a minute of trying one key after another before Tess found the one that fit the lock, turned it, and pushed the door open.

A musty smell escaped through the doorway. The space beyond was terribly dark and Tess wondered why she had not thought to bring a light. A thread of light between two curtains betrayed a window, however, and Tess struck out across the room toward it. She had not gone far before her knees bumped against some unseen bit of furniture and then another, and soon she was stumbling with arms outstretched like in a game of blind man's bluff, wading through a sea of clutter and cobwebs. Finally Tess reached the window, yanked the curtains aside, and got her first look at the room.



Clearly no one had used the room in quite some time and Tess could trace a set of footprints tracking from the door to her feet through the inch-thick dust as though it were snow. She wondered who had occupied it in its day, for now it seemed to be little more than a storeroom for the museum's castoff furniture and lost items. But it was the door set high into the wall that interested

Tess the most, and she made her way through the maze of stuff and up the creaky stairs to reach it.

The door was not locked and beyond it was a refreshingly bright, clean space. It was a small room, but filled with light and large windows that made the place look bigger. Desks squeezed up against the walls, a drop cloth draped from the ceiling, and unfinished paintings spilled onto every surface. But only one of them mattered:



It was her Joconde. Of course, it wasn't really; it was only someone's painting of a painting, and not a finished one at that. But it was a good paint-

ing nonetheless, Tess thought, and she liked it immediately for its familiarity, like meeting someone who reminds you of a friend you once knew long ago.

Tess hoisted herself up to perch on one of the desks. She gazed at the painting, drinking it in, and for the first time in many days felt happy. There was something comforting in knowing it was not all lost; her magic mirror was still here, privately preserved in this secret room. She didn't know how long she spent there, but finally she realized she had better get back to Monsieur Delacroix's office before she was missed. Before she left, however, she slipped the key to the room off of the key ring and into her pocket. She hardly thought anyone, least of all old Delacroix, would notice it was gone.

There is something special about a room you can call your own, and only yours. It doesn't have

to be a room, of course. It can be a tree or a closet or even a gallery in a museum. But it must be *yours*.

The room with the paintings became a secret hideout for Tess, and she found herself sneaking off to it similarly to how she had used to disappear into the Salon Carré to visit La Joconde. It became a sanctuary away from Monsieur Delacroix and her father, who Tess could no longer seem to talk to without feeling guilty.

She always brought her pencils and some paper. She was making progress in the story, but still hadn't managed to find a hero brave or serious or *something* enough to rescue La Joconde.

For some reason, Tess was more interested writing about the villain. He had caught La Joconde trying to escape the tower by stealing keys from his dopey old servant, and had punished her so severely that Tess began to truly hate this man she had created. And yet, it didn't make sense, because deep down Tess knew he loved La Joconde

— that was why he had kidnapped her in the first place and bottled her up in a tower all to himself.

As she wrote, Tess spoke to the painting. Unimportant things, mostly: What happened at school, what Monsieur Delacroix had her doing today. She also told her about her story, and the sketch book, and how she wondered if Papa really was sad. But unlike the other paintings, Tess couldn't imagine what she sounded like. If she could, perhaps she would tell Tess what to do with her story.

There was something odd about the room that Tess didn't notice at first, but began nagging at her as time went on, even though she wasn't precisely sure what it was. Perhaps it was the lack of mustiness which permeated everything in the room below, or the clearness of the windows. Sometimes Tess wondered if the room was haunted (even though she didn't believe in ghosts, of course), because from time to time she got the peculiar feeling that she was not alone. It wasn't until she left

the room one day to descend to the dark space below that Tess knew for certain what it was: Someone else was visiting the room.



From then on, Tess was on the alert, but she continued to go to the room every day after working for Monsieur Delacroix. She didn't know who else had discovered the room, but Tess couldn't leave now. It was *hers*.

But she started to notice other things. One day, one of the old canvases disappeared. Another time Tess arrived in the room to find a paint-stained rag and two stiffened brushes. It was inevitable that she and the visitor should cross paths eventually, but it was still a surprise when Tess finally did.

Tess pushed recklessly into the room one day and saw her sitting at an easel, paints arrayed around her, staring out the window as she worked on a painting of the city outside.

Of all the people it could have been! Tess was mortified, but she had already been seen. There was no way to escape without at least an explanation.

“I’m so sorry, Madam Riendeau. I —” But she didn’t know how to go on and the look in the woman’s eyes had the peculiar effect of making Tess’s tongue feel suddenly numb and useless.

They stared at each other for several shocked moments. Then, as though Tess’s sudden appearance were perfectly ordinary and perhaps even for-

tuitous, Madam Riendeau held out a fistful of oily brushes. “Please, wash these for me. There’s a sink behind the chiffonier downstairs.”

Tess had no choice but to accept the task. She had seen, but never quite noticed, the sink in the dusty mess, and was mildly surprised to find it in working order when she turned the taps. As Tess scrubbed the bristles in the water, Tess wondered what her punishment for this latest transgression would be. Of course it had been someone’s studio! How could she have been so stupid?

Tess returned with the dripping brushes.

“Thank you,” acknowledged Madam Riendeau without turning from her canvas. “Put them on the desk, please.”

Tess obeyed.

There was a chilly scratching sound as Madam Riendeau mixed a new color with her palate knife. Tess stood by and watched her lift the knife to the light and examine the smear of paint on it.

“Tell me, do you paint?” Madam Riendeau asked her after a minute.

“No,” said Tess. “No one’s ever taught me.”

Madam Riendeau made a staccato sound that was somewhere between a cough and a sigh. “What a pity,” she said. And then she continued to paint in silence as though Tess were not there.

Tess wasn’t sure what to do. “Is there anything else I can do?” she asked, hoping this would at least lead to either a new task or a dismissal.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Oh, all right,” Tess said, confused but relieved to have gotten off so easily. She began to shuffle toward the door, but stopped and turned back at the threshold.

“Are you ever going to finish the painting of La Joconde?” Tess asked.

“It’s unlikely,” said Madam Riendeau, squinting through the window and measuring some far-off rooftop or boulevard with the tip of a brush.

“Why not?”

Madam Riendeau's eyes finally turned to Tess for a moment. "It's not that easy to invent someone who's gone," she said.

"Where did she get the key from?"

Tess was sitting on the floor of the Germanic Countries collection with a pile of books in her lap and many more scattered across the floor around her like little islands. Erasmus peered over her shoulder from his frame on the wall behind her.

Rain rattled the dark windows outside. The museum was closed, but Papa had to work late this evening. It had been a long day already, and the same questions about yesterday's encounter with Madam Riendeau had been swirling around her head for hours.

"Perhaps she works here," said Tess, shifting one of the piles closer to her. Monsieur Delacroix was ill and had been unable to come to the museum that day, but he had left Tess a cart loaded with books about art to categorize.

Erasmus clucked dismissively. “But wouldn’t you know then? Wouldn’t your father have told you?”

Tess realized suddenly she had somehow made a whole pile out of order. She knocked the whole stack over and started a new pile.

“I’m not sure what Papa would tell me anymore.”

“She can’t work here,” said Erasmus. “She was painting. And painters don’t have studios in the museum.”

The full strangeness of it all hadn’t struck Tess until some time after she had left Madam Riendeau’s room. Painters weren’t allowed outside of the public galleries. What was Madam Riendeau doing there?

“Maybe she rents it or something,” said Tess.

“Or maybe,” said Erasmus, “she’s not supposed to be there either.”

Tess froze. She had just started on a new pile when one of the books caught her eye: *Da Vinci’s*

Masterpiece: The Story of La Joconde by Thérèse Élisabeth Archambeau and Olivie Riendeau.

Though she always went by Tess, Thérèse Archambeau was her full name, and, she knew, her mother's name. And Olivie Riendeau. It couldn't be a coincidence.

And suddenly Tess was struck by another idea. She reached into her bag and tore open the sketch book.



She had been looking for the wrong name all along. It wasn't Olivier. It was Olivie R. It was Madam Riendeau.

Books toppled with pages flapping like a flock of startled birds as Tess sprang to her feet and rushed toward the stairs. She needed to confirm, just to be sure.

“Antoine,” Tess gasped as she skidded to the front desk, but Antoine wasn’t there. Her heart sank. His shift must have ended. Tess wondered if she might catch him at the guards’ office, and she went hurrying back up the hall, both books tucked under her arm.

But when she reached the guards’ office, Tess ground to a sudden halt.

Madam Riendeau sat in the chair outside the office, an old, wooden painter’s box on her lap. They stared at each other for a long time, Tess still breathing heavily, Madam Riendeau sedately surveying her.

“You found the book,” the woman noted, as though stating something she knew had been inevitable.

“You knew?” Tess asked, wide-eyed.

Madam Riendeau nodded, then held up her hand quickly as she noticed the questions starting to bubble over Tess's lips.

"I'll explain," she said, "but you must follow me."

Madam Riendeau stood and led Tess down the hall, up the stairs, tracing a route to a familiar place.

When they reached the door, Madam Riendeau pulled a key from her pocket and opened it. It was pitch dark inside, but Madam Riendeau stooped at a table to the right of the entryway and found an old lamp and a book of matches from amid a pile of clutter. Once it was lit, the lamp cast a jittery light over the space which seemed to make the shadows cast by the room's miscellany jump and tremble ominously. Madam Riendeau passed the lantern to Tess and motioned for her to move forward.

"Go on. I daresay you know the way by this point."

They made their way through the shadowy labyrinth of forgotten things and up the creaky stairs to the hidden studio. Once inside, Madam Riendeau lighted some more lamps which hung from hooks on the wall and peered down from the tops of cabinets. The room glowed warmly like the inside of a woodstove while outside the rain continued to drum persistently against the windows.

Madam Riendeau sat down.

“Have a seat, my dear,” she said, although there were no more unoccupied chairs in the room. Tess set her books on one of the desks and lifted herself up to sit next to them.

Madam Riendeau looked around. “This was your mother’s office. They let me use it now that she’s gone.”

Tess’s mind was spinning. This room. Her room.

“You knew my mother,” said Tess. “You wrote a book with her.”

“I suppose.” Madam Riendeau sighed. “I mean, I did. But it’s her book, really. I only wrote a couple of chapters.”

Tess picked up the book and started leafing through it. There were no pictures and the writing looked dense.

“Did you know her well?” said Tess.

“Yes, I did,” said Madam Riendeau.

“And did you — did you know who I was?”

Madam Riendeau nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Tess.

“Because I am not a very brave woman,” said Madam Riendeau. Her voice no longer carried its usual note of surliness. It seemed uncertain, melancholy. She crossed, then re-crossed her hands over the box on her lap and stared out the rain-streaked windows. “I meant to speak with your father first.”

“About what?”

“About all of this.”

The sound of the rain roared in Tess’s ears.

“Papa wouldn’t want you to speak to me at all,” Tess said sullenly, staring down at the book beside her.

“I know,” said Madam Riendeau. She examined Tess with an uncomfortable shrewdness for a moment, and Tess thought that painters must be able to see something nobody else could when they looked at their subjects. She wondered what Madam Riendeau could see.

“I know he doesn’t want me to,” said the woman, “but I think your mother would have wanted you to know.

“She was an incredible woman. Not just educated, but smart. She worked here, before you were born, before she even met your father. She was a scholar and a historian. But she was even more than that. She was an artist.”

“Really?” said Tess. Papa had never mentioned any of this before.

“Oh yes, she was a real talent,” said Madam Riendeau. “Painted something marvelous. Her fa-

vorite thing was to paint in the museum at nights after the patrons had all gone home. That was how she met your father, you know. He would stop to chat after hours, get her a coffee. I would say he wooed her, but he didn't have to. She wanted him, and it wasn't long before she had gone and got herself married to him."

"And then I was born?" asked Tess.

"Some years after, yes."

"And then she left."

Madam Riendeau nodded.

"Why?" asked Tess.

The lamplight seemed to gleam suddenly bright in Madam Riendeau's eyes and an expression of — Tess couldn't quite say what precisely — crept across her face. It made Tess feel unaccountably afraid.

"I wish there were an easy answer," said Madam Riendeau. "I wish I knew for sure. All I can tell you is what I do know."

“Your mother loved painting, but it was a difficult love. I think that she loved it too much. She made beautiful paintings, but her love prevented her from seeing the beauty in them herself. She thought they were too precious. She was terrified of ruining something she loved so much. She made a portrait of your father once. He didn’t like the idea of being painted, so she took a photograph of him and painted from that. It was a simple painting, but a lovely one, I thought. But your mother — she wanted it to be something more. She couldn’t capture his shoulder. His shoulder! She obsessed about it. She tried to fix it, and when she tried, she fretted that her fixing it had ruined it too. She overworked it until it didn’t look like him anymore. It was no longer fresh, no longer beautiful.”

Madam Riendeau picked up a palate knife from the table next to her and listlessly prodded a lump of yellow paint on her palate. The lamplight stuttered. The rain poured on.

“It was like trying to balance a set of scales with stones that are always different weights,” said Madam Riendeau. “No matter what she did, it upset the balance. It terrified her. It broke her heart. I think the only reason she ever moved on to paint the next thing was because she could no longer bear to do more harm.”

Tess stared at the windows. A yellowish glow bled up from the city below and shone through the raindrops which slid in tracks down the glass. The droplets cast their wavy shadows out across the whole room, dappling the pale face of Madam Riendeau and the half-finished portrait of La Joconde beside her.

“Shortly after you were born, your mother became friends with an Italian man she met at the university,” continued Madam Riendeau. “He was an artist, too. He told her that her paintings were good enough to make a living on. He invited her to Florence to meet with an acquaintance of his, an art collector. But Thérèse was a mother now.

She couldn't just go gallivanting across the world on her own because she wanted to. But she did want to. So she took you with her."

"She took me to Italy?" Tess exclaimed, dazed.

"Yes." Madam Riendeau suddenly started chuckling. "I'm sorry, I know it's not funny," she said. "But it's just the kind of thing she would do. She saw the world differently. It was what made her such a good painter, but it also got her into a great deal of trouble. She didn't tell your father — he was furious, of course. He tracked her down and said he was taking you back to Paris. He couldn't comprehend why she had done it. He thought her terribly irresponsible, and he was right, she was. But she didn't mean to be. Your mother — well, she didn't always think about how things were going to end up. She just did what she *felt* was the right thing at the moment was doing it.

"Your father returned to France and brought you with him, but your mother stayed. She never intended to stay long at the beginning, but then

she finished the book. She found a publisher in Florence who would publish French books and she started to make a name for herself. She sold a few paintings, she went to parties with famous artists. She wrote to tell me about all the things she was learning and the people she was meeting. She always meant to return. She felt terrible about it. She knew things between her and your father would never be the same, but it was you she thought about the most. She thought she must be a bad mother. She wondered if you were better off without her.”

Tess didn’t understand, and for a moment it made her angry, but only for an instant before it drained away to a coldness under her skin. She watched the rain-shadows melt down the surfaces in the room and she felt suddenly as though she were sitting outside rather than in and was being slowly worn away by the water like a smooth pebble at the bottom of a stream. She felt tired and sad, but not the crying type of sad. It was a sadness

that slowly wears at you and you find out has been wearing at you for a long time without you fully realizing it.

Tess turned back to Madam Riendeau. She was staring at the palette, mixing methodically, adding paint onto more paint. What had started as a pale yellow was now a muddy brown.

“Did she love him?” Tess asked. “Her friend from Italy?”

Madam Riendeau set aside the knife and looked up. She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “Yes, probably. Look, I have something for you.” She undid the clasps of the painter’s box on her lap. “I kept some of the letters she wrote me.” Madam Riendeau opened the box and handed it to Tess. “They’re yours now.”

There were dozens of letters in the box. Some of them were written on yellowing stationery, others were scrawled on the backs of used sketching paper. Tess ran her fingers along the slim, ink letters, trying to absorb, through the pads of her fin-

gertips, the almost imperceptible ridges they created on the paper. Her mother's hand had written these words, maybe not to her, but to someone. The signatures at the bottom of each letter drew Tess's attention most, and she touched them again and again. They wrote their names almost exactly the same way.

Tess looked up and opened her mouth, but didn't know how to express what she was feeling. Gratitude? Joy? Longing?

"She used to draw me pictures sometimes," said Madam Riendeau. She reached into the box and selected one of the letters.



Lisette.

Finally, Tess felt tears warm the edges of her eyes.

Lisette.

“She’s — my sister? Or, half-sister, I suppose.”

Madam Riendeau smiled in a way that was neither happy nor sad. It was, Tess thought, somehow encouraging, though.

“She couldn’t come back,” said Tess.

Madam Riendeau turned back to her paint, cutting the murky pile, turning it over, squashing it again and again.

“I’m sorry,” said Madam Riendeau at last, “about everything.”

“It’s not your fault,” murmured Tess.

Madam Riendeau kept her eyes on the palate. “Perhaps it is. I taught her to paint. She was my best student. I wanted the best for her, because I knew she could be the best. And I . . . I told her she should go to Italy.” She grabbed a rag and cleaned the palate knife with swift, violent strokes, then dropped both knife and rag. “It was stupid and selfish of me. But I wanted her to have the success I never did. I didn’t realize then that she already had it. I didn’t realize what would happen. I am sorry.”

Tess shrugged. “She would have gone anyway. She didn’t do it for you.” It was a rather unkind

thing to say, she realized, but she nevertheless sensed that it was true.

The woman nodded as a tear slipped down her cheek. Tess couldn't find it within her to feel angry.

"Does she still send you letters?" asked Tess.

Madam Riendeau shook her head. "I don't even know where she is anymore."

They sat in silence for a long while.

Madam Riendeau reached out and squeezed Tess's hand. "I have something else for you that I'm afraid I may have borrowed without your permission." She reached into her handbag and drew a photograph from it. She handed it to Tess.

"*You* had it!" exclaimed Tess. It was the one she had found in her father's desk.

“You dropped it when you crashed into me,” said Madam Riendeau. “I recognized her immediately. That’s when I knew I needed to tell you who I was. But you beat me to it. You found me on your own.”

“Well, sort of,” said Tess. “I found your sketchbook. Only, I didn’t think it belonged to you, not until I found the book tonight.”

Tess held out the black leather book.

“Well, you did do the thing properly, didn’t you?” said Madam Riendeau, taking the book from her. She flipped through the pages until she came to the last sketch.



Portrait







“It was her favorite painting,” said Madam Riendeau, holding the sketchbook to the lamplight.

“She was so interested in who the woman in the portrait really was. She had done all this research about who she thought La Joconde was, and she thought that the portrait was commissioned to celebrate the arrival of a new child. Everyone in the world wanted to understand her smile, but your mother said the secret was in her hands. See how they’re crossed like that? Thérèse said she was holding a blanket to cover her big belly. I told her jokingly once that she should write a book about it, and she went ahead and did it. That’s the type of woman she was.”

Madam Riendeau ran her fingers over the paper “I think I did this the day before it disappeared,” she said. “Strange.”

Tess jumped down from the desk and peered over her shoulder. “Do you think you could use it to finish your painting?”

“It’s just a sketch. I don’t know if it’s enough. It wouldn’t be the same.”

“I know it wouldn’t,” said Tess. “It would be how you remembered her. But that painting would still be better than no painting.”

Madam Riendeau frowned at the paper. “You think so?”

“Please,” Tess said.

Madam Riendeau looked up at the half-finished portrait. Her eyes danced around the canvas nervously, as though she were afraid to let them rest for too long in one place.

“Oh all right,” Madam Riendeau conceded eventually, “but only under one condition: you’re going to help.”

“But I don’t know how to paint,” said Tess.

“Well, I’ll teach you. Besides, I’m getting old. I need someone to carry my things, wash my brushes.”

“I can do that,” said Tess. “Merci, Madam.”

Madam Riendeau took a brush and scooped up a blob of the paint she had mixed. She squinted at

it, measuring it against the color of the hair in the portrait.

“It’s not going to be easy,” grumbled Madam Riendeau.

“I know,” said Tess, but she was smiling.

It was a while before Tess read all the letters in the box. She didn’t understand all of them. Many times they mentioned events and people Tess knew nothing about, and even Madam Riendeau couldn’t always remember when Tess asked her. But it didn’t matter. Finally the picture of her mother she had had for so long had been given a voice, and it delighted Tess just to listen to it, regardless of what the words actually meant. Some of the letters made her laugh, some of them made her sad, and some of them left her feeling very confused. But she read all of them. Some of them she reread many times.

She found that her mother often went on strange tangents that had nothing to do with the

usual content of her letters, and Tess particularly enjoyed reading these. Her favorite came at the end of a short letter written on a small, crinkly sheet of paper.

There is a spider outside my window. It has been quite busy spinning its web, so busy I sometimes wonder if it is aware of anything outside of it. It creates its own world with that web, or perhaps a cage even, and it loses itself. Certainly it must have no consciousness of me, silent observer from behind the glass, catching sight of it only when I pause to look up from my painting. It is such an ugly little thing. And yet I cannot deny that its web is truly beautiful. But it doesn't see beauty in the thing, I daresay; it only hopes it will catch an ugly little fly, and if it does not do that, I suppose it must think itself a failure. I feel bad for the simple creature sometimes, isn't that strange? And yet, at other times, I envy it, for it at least seems to know that a good web is all it really wants in life.

You must think me very peculiar, babbling on about spiders, but then you must think me peculiar in general, I

suppose. My brain turns to queer places, I know. Ah! I hear Lisette fussing, so I must leave off for now. Please write soon, my dear Olivie.

Much love,

Thérèse

The little scrap of writing made Tess smile. It felt like her mother was speaking privately to Tess, not about regrets or the past or anything in particular, but about a spider, for no other reason than that it interested her. It reminded Tess of her old daydream, when she and her mother would finally find each other and nothing would exist outside of the world they created for themselves.

She was reading on the windowsill of Madam Riendeau's studio room, suffused in a pool of white sunlight, when there was a knock at the door. Tess looked up to see Antoine poke his head into the room. Tess had shown him the room after telling him the incredible story of discovering the owner of the sketchbook, talking with Madam

Rieandau, and receiving the letters. Antoine had taken to stopping by during his lunch to check on her.

“A sandwich for la princesse?” he said, holding up a plate which bore two of them.

“You’re such a dear,” beamed Tess, making room for him and the sandwiches on the windowsill. Tess took one and Antoine took the other and the two of them ate them side by side, scattering crumbs across their knees.

“The painting is coming along *superbement*,” said Antoine gesturing to the copy of La Joconde. “It looks just like her. Maybe you can sell it back to the museum when it’s done, eh? They won’t even know the difference!”

Tess laughed. She could tell the difference, though. But she didn’t say anything. She didn’t know how to explain to Antoine that she didn’t mind that it was different.

“You are going to be a marvelous painter, Tess,” said Antoine. “I can already see it.”

Tess shrugged. "I don't think I'm very good at painting. I like writing better."

"How is the story going?" asked Antoine, pushing the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth.

"I finished it," said Tess, brightening.

"You did? And who rescues La Joconde?"

"No one," said Tess. "She escapes all by herself."

"And what happens next? Does she return?"

"I don't know," said Tess, leaning against Antoine's arm. They both sat in the window a long time, staring at the portrait and enjoying the sun on their backs.

Author's Note

Tess's story is entirely fictional. However, this book is inspired by one true event. On August 21, 1911, the Mona Lisa (or, as she is known in France, La Joconde) was stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris. An Italian workman named Vincenzo Peruggia hid in a broom closet until the museum closed and simply walked out with the painting under his coat. Monsieur Béroud was the real painter who discovered the theft.

The painting was missing for two years, and most of the world gave up hope of ever finding it again. Finally, Peruggia tried to sell the painting and was caught in the attempt. La Joconde was returned to the Louvre in 1913 and remains there today.



Photograph of the empty patch of wall after the painting was stolen.

