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—PAUL STEIGER, Editor in Chief, ProPublica

JOSHUA KNELMAN

H O T
A R T

Chasing **THIEVES**

and **DETECTIVES** through the

SECRET WORLD

OF STOLEN ART

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ART



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PRAISE FOR HOT ART

“This is a crackerjack of a book—with enough rogues, thieves, and amoral civilians (not all of them on the radar of relentless cops) to people a dozen crime novels. First-rate.”

—**GILES BLUNT**, best-selling author of the John Cardinal mystery series including *Crime Machine* and *Forty Words for Sorrows*

“Now this is investigative reporting. Dogged, fearless, and thrillingly thorough. Joshua Knelman becomes our Virgil through the secret underworld of stolen art. Like legendary muckrakers Bob Woodward, Seymour Hersh, and Barlett and Steele, Knelman relentlessly trails both the bad guys and the slightly less bad guys, looking for truth amidst all the deceit. It’s an astonishing debut, and serious readers must take note—long-form reporting has a new title in the canon.”

—**RICHARD POPLAK**, author of *Ja No Man: Growing up White in the Apartheid Era South Africa*, *The Sheik’s Batmobile: Pop Culture in the Middle East*, and *Kenk: A Graphic Novel*

“Knelman’s book is the Godfather of investigative journalism. He takes us to places we always wanted to be but didn’t dare to enter, he makes us fall for people we are not supposed to love—on both sides of the law. Congratulations, this is haute art!”

—**ANDRAS HAMORI**, Executive Producer of *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Fugitive Pieces*

“Art theft is one of the largest underground markets in the world, yet very few people know how it works, or how to stop it. Joshua Knelman delves into this uncharted world with an open curiosity, befriending the detectives dedicated to retrieving stolen art, the lawyers struggling to protect cultural property, and the thieves who have their own reasons for doing what they do. These pages are full of shady characters and experts determined to outwit each other; an intriguing look at human lusts and foibles. *Hot Art* is fascinating, smart, and a page-turner.”

—**CATHERINE OSBORNE**, Deputy Editor, *Azure Magazine*

Chasing **THIEVES**



and **DETECTIVES** through the
SECRET WORLD
of **STOLEN ART**

For Bernadette Sulgit
and Martin Knelman

“The best way of keeping a secret is to pretend there isn’t one.”

MARGARET ATWOOD

“The greatest crimes in the world are not committed by people breaking the rules but by people following the rules.”

BANKSY

HOLLYWOOD

“This happened fast, and in the dark.”

DONALD HRYCYK

LAPD detective Donald Hrycyk knew his way around a homicide investigation. He knew about the Bloods and the Crips, how the color of your shoelaces could indicate which gang you belonged to, and whom you had to kill to get ahead in life. He knew about semiautomatics and shotguns and butcher knives, and about streets that felt a universe away from the pristine white walls of the art scene, or the jet set who ruled it. By the time I met him, though, the detective had visited almost every gallery and auction house in the Greater Los Angeles area and had contacts all over the world. He didn't gloat about it. Mostly, he just got up early every day and worked his cases.

One afternoon in L.A., in 2008, Detective Hrycyk and his partner, Detective Stephanie Lazarus, were cruising through the city in their unmarked silver Chevrolet Impala. Hrycyk was at the wheel, and drove down Sunset Boulevard toward a crime scene. It was a hot, bright day, and the sunlight burned a little. On Sunset the car passed the Chateau Marmont and the Comedy Store—the marquee read “George Carlin, RIP.”

At a red light, the Impala idled between two gleaming white SUVs. A driver looking down into the lowly Chevy would have seen that the detectives wore similar uniforms: checkered shirts, slacks, and black running shoes. On their wrists, both sported big digital watches. Their style was so uncool it was almost cool. Beneath their loose shirts, hardly noticeable, they kept a few of their work tools: LAPD badge, cell phone, handcuffs, tape recorder, extra ammo, and gun. They looked like gym coaches on their way to practice.

Just before crossing into Beverly Hills, Hrycyk hung a left on La Cienega Boulevard. He was heading to a strip of antique and design stores. A few minutes earlier, when the detectives picked me up, they had both turned from the front seat and inspected my shoes (black Adidas with white stripes). Lazarus exchanged a glance with Hrycyk—the original wireless connection.

Lazarus said, “No. The soles don't look right.”

Hrycyk's eyes smiled quietly in the rearview mirror. “The antique store that wa

burglarized has a few clues," he said. "Apparently there are some shoeprints on an antique dining-room table. From the description, they don't match yours."

So I was a suspect?

"You never know," Lazarus said. "A journalist is here from Toronto writing about art theft, and an antique store happens to be hit. It's good news for you, right? Because you get to ride along for the investigation. We just wanted to rule you out." Later Hrycyk and Lazarus told me about a journalist in the Midwest who had murdered people and then written about the murders for the local paper. Their point: don't rule out anyone too early—it's all about motivation. Everyone's a suspect. I felt guilty just sitting there in the back seat.

Hrycyk parked on La Cienega near the crime scene. The antique store was a street level, one of two in the same unit, with a large bay window facing the sidewalk and traffic. The window, which was intact, featured a few choice pieces of Italian Renaissance furniture.

The attached store was under construction; a large piece of plywood covered the empty hole where its front window should have been. A shade tree stood near the sidewalk in front of the store. A small group of construction workers huddled in the pool of its shadow, their workday frozen by the burglary next door. The construction site was now part of the crime scene. There was almost no breeze that afternoon, and the heat was stifling. The group of men, roughly in their twenties, looked slightly nervous at the sight of the detectives, but it was one of them who had discovered the break-in and called 911. For now the workers waited for their foreman and watched the police from the shadows.

Hrycyk and Lazarus stood on the sidewalk in the open sunlight as a black and white cruiser with the gold insignia "TO PROTECT AND TO SERVE" pulled into the asphalt driveway leading to the antique store's back parking lot. A tall white painted iron gate, there to protect the back lot from intruders, stood ajar.

In the patrol car were two officers from Hollywood Division. Officer Ramirez occupied the driver's seat. He was a sleek-looking man in his early thirties, in perfect athletic shape, with shorn black hair. His aviator shades reflected back the intense afternoon light. Ramirez was relaxed and smiled often. His movie-star white teeth matched the aesthetic of the neighborhood—upscale fashion and design, expensive. On the road, a cherry-red BMW with tinted windows slowed down, the driver staring at the small crowd and the police cruiser.

Hrycyk and Lazarus strolled over to the window of the patrol car. On the way Hrycyk explained to me that Ramirez and his partner had already done a preliminary inspection of the crime scene. The detectives now taking over relied on the officers' notes and first impressions. "We completely depend on them," said Hrycyk.

According to Ramirez, this is what the officers had uncovered: The lock on the gate to the back parking lot had been opened. A large white pickup truck had been seen driving into the lot. The thieves had entered the building through the plywood on the store next door, then unlocked that store's back door for the crew in the truck. Once inside the empty store, the thieves had knocked a hole straight through the shared wall into the antique store. The thieves had then entered the

store and carried a number of antiques through the hole, through the empty store, out the back door, and into the truck in the parking lot.

Ramirez got out of the patrol car and strolled with Hrycyk and Lazarus down the driveway and into the parking lot. The lot was enclosed at the back by a high fence, behind which the balconies of a large, low-slung apartment complex had a perfect view of the lot. Ramirez and his partner had already canvassed the apartment building. They got lucky. A witness had seen the events unfold from a balcony—and had noticed a tattoo on one of the men's legs.

"Yeah," said Ramirez. "It was a cobra or a snake."

"Maybe a marine tattoo? Something like that?" asked Hrycyk.

"No, I know marines, and it's nothing like that."

"So more like a creature?" asked Hrycyk.

The problem was that the witness spoke only Russian.

"We'll have to find a translator," Hrycyk nodded. "We have a number for someone, right?"

"Lost in translation for now," answered Ramirez.

"Lost in translation," echoed Hrycyk.

Hrycyk walked into the darkness of the back door of the building under construction. The room was long and narrow. In the process of being gutted, it was empty save for some bundles of plywood. Along the wall shared by the two stores two holes had been smashed through the drywall. One was very small, the other large.

Hrycyk peered through the smaller hole. "Come have a look," he said. Through the small hole was the antique store, where a crime-scene photographer roamed around the furniture, snapping pictures. "This is what's called a peephole," Hrycyk explained. The thieves had created the smaller hole to look into the store and figure out the best place to smash a larger hole.

Hrycyk walked up to the larger hole. It was big, brutal, the kind the Incredible Hulk would make. It didn't just provide a perfect view of the antique store—it was a door: the antique store was right there. Lower down, a thick electrical wire stretched across the jagged opening.

"Nothing here was finessed," said Hrycyk.

He noticed some broken pieces of porcelain on the construction-zone floor. "Can we bag these?" Hrycyk said to the room.

According to Ramirez, the thieves had also stolen the tools stored by the construction workers, who were still waiting outside in the shade. They watched as the owner of the antique store arrived in a silver Porsche and disappeared up the driveway into the back lot.

When Hrycyk entered the antique store through its own back door a few minutes later, Lazarus was already questioning the owner, who stood just inside the back door to his shop, beside a desk and computer that looked out onto the showroom floor.

The owner was dressed in a pale blue polo top, designer jeans, and brown loafers. He was in his late thirties and had just returned from one of his Italian expeditions with a tan and Calvin Klein-worthy facial stubble. He was sporty Euro

ultra-cool. He agreed to let me stay and watch the investigation as long as I did not mention his name or the name of the store.

The owner explained that he dealt mostly in Italian Renaissance and French antiques and served a wealthy clientele all over the city. The room was still full of supply—a French nineteenth-century gilded mirror for \$9,000; a neoclassical nineteenth-century Italian mirror for \$13,500; a Tuscan walnut refectory table for \$27,000. There was a nail on a wall where a painting had once hung. He told Lazarus that he visited Italy often, to hand-pick the pieces for his shop. A few of those pieces he carried with him on the plane home, and the rest arrived via shipping container.

While Hrycyk focused on the scene, Lazarus focused on the owner. Her voice as she questioned him was flat, and her questions were brief and pointed.

“Sir, where were you last night?”

“Sir, have you noticed anyone unusual around the store lately?”

“Oh, and sir, do you happen to have the only key to that lock on the fence?”

Lazarus kept steady eye contact with the owner. She was pleasant without being nice. I got the feeling from the speed of her questions that she was looking for inconsistencies in his answers. She was so direct and at ease while she worked that it was obvious she had done this a thousand times.

There didn't seem to be any inconsistencies. The owner remained calm, serious, and slightly detached from the whole scenario. He may have been in shock.

The large, dark, antique wooden table in front of them dominated the space. Its surface held precious pieces of evidence left behind by the thieves—those shoeprints. According to the owner, four large chandeliers used to hang above the table, each worth around \$20,000. The intruders had climbed right up onto the table, using it as a stepladder, and removed the chandeliers from hooks on the ceiling. Hrycyk and Lazarus both noted that it would have required at least two people. Hrycyk also noted that this all would have happened with little light except from the streetlamps and the traffic passing by the front window, not bright with sunlight.

“This happened fast, and in the dark,” said Hrycyk.

“Yeah, no light,” said Lazarus.

The shoeprints were very faint, their shape formed by the dust from the construction site next door. It was hot in the store, and suddenly everyone looked a little sweaty. Lazarus wiped her brow and smiled just slightly with her eyes. “It's hot out, isn't it?” she said, to no one in particular.

The owner offered to turn on the air conditioning.

Lazarus thought about it, exchanging a glance with Hrycyk.

“No,” she said, “'cause we don't want the air to blow in here. Not until we get those shoeprints off the table. Would be nice, though.”

Lazarus continued to question the owner on his whereabouts, his business practices, and whether anyone might want to hurt his business.

Someone in the room commented that no one in the apartment building or any of the neighbors had called police. The break-in wasn't reported until the construction workers showed up for work that morning, noticed their tools were

gone, and saw the new holes in the wall.

"It's unbelievable that no one called 911," echoed the owner.

"People just don't want to get involved," said Lazarus. "It's unfortunate."

Hrycyk had produced a tape measure and was walking the length and width of the shop, jotting down notes after each trip. He drew a little diagram of the layout. The photographer snapped pictures then sat down in one of the plush, multi-thousand-dollar chairs.

In the middle of the interview, a UPS delivery man knocked on the front door. He held a package and waded through the crime scene to deliver it. Normal life intruded. The Scientific Investigation Division (SID) officer entered through the back door. Hrycyk and Lazarus had both been excited that they got to have a SID technician show up. Or rather, they seemed excited for me to see him work. "It's like magic," Lazarus said. "Just like on CSI."

The SID was dressed in black slacks, a black T-shirt, and black cross-trainers with black laces. He had short, cropped black hair. His biceps bulged out of his T-shirt, just like on television. He surveyed the table and began to unpack his equipment. Hrycyk had already placed folded pieces of paper at four different points on the table: A, B, C, D. Hrycyk explained that the SID was using an electrostatic current to pick up a picture of the shoeprints and fingerprints.

The SID worked carefully. He chose his first spot on the table, examined it from a few different angles. Then he produced a square piece of foil, very thin, slowly placed the foil on top of a shoeprint, and used a roller to mash the foil into the surface. The foil was so thin it formed around the shoeprint, which was now visible in the metallic skin. He looked up at us and said, "You only get one chance because once you apply and roll, the dust is gone."

Then he took two wires, attached them to a small black box, and turned it on. There was a crackle of electricity. "Done," he said, and moved on to point B. It was indeed magic: electromagnetic resonance.

An hour later Hrycyk and Lazarus walked out into the heat and looked up and down the sidewalk. At this time of the afternoon there was barely a soul. It was too hot. The detectives looked up at the rooftops and above the alcove doorway of stores.

"We're hoping one of these stores has a security camera," Hrycyk explained.

"Can't see any," said Lazarus.

"Let's go ask around," said Hrycyk.

The two detectives spent the next two hours getting to know the neighborhood. At the first store Hrycyk asked the owner directly if he had a camera. The owner was suspicious. He said no. Hrycyk thanked him. The owner said, "Next time show me a badge."

A furniture store next door had no camera either. It sold slick stuff—expensive retro bookshelves, tables, and lighting. The woman working the cash said there was a gallery space upstairs. Hrycyk looked at Lazarus: "Want to go have a look?"

"Yes I do," she replied.

The detectives went upstairs. The exhibit was photography from Iraq: Eye of the Storm: War through the Lens of American Combat Photographers. There was

photograph of a boxing match, the ring surrounded by American soldiers in tan tops and camouflage pants. "That is a great picture," commented Hrycyk. Then he noted, "It's good for us to look at what's being shown around town. You never know, one day we might be hunting for this work."

At another shop there was a piece of meteorite for sale, a dark hunk of rock. It was 4.6 billion years old. It sat on a table almost right beside the front door, with an \$18,500 price tag. The owner said he had a fake camera mounted out back. The man seemed happy to chat with the detectives. He said the store was moving because they'd been priced out of the neighborhood. "Twenty-eight grand a month," he smiled. "The fashion people are moving in. Marc Jacobs is down the street. They pay something like \$32,000 a month."

The detectives continued to search for cameras. The last place they tried was a giant old house surrounded by a perimeter of lush trees and bushes and guarded by a high iron fence. It looked like something out of a fairy tale. Lazarus rang the bell, but there was no answer. She shouted, "Hello! Police!" No answer. She raised her voice slightly and shouted again. "Hello! Police!"

The detectives walked around to the rear of the house. They found a door in the fence and slipped into the back garden, which was full of statues and plants packed tightly together. A narrow path led to a back door. They knocked. A Hispanic caregiver answered and invited them inside. The back hallway opened into a yawning room, two floors high. The room was packed full of antiques and paintings. It was chaotic; it looked like the piled-up remains of what once was a thriving antiques business.

An old woman sat in a chair near a row of television screens filled with images from cameras. Bingo. It turned out that she had just come out of a coma and her health was delicate. A voice somewhere screamed, "Hello. Hello. Hello." It sounded very much like Detective Lazarus. "It's a bird," said Hrycyk. And so was, in a cage near the front door.

The detectives took an hour figuring out if the cameras had picked up anything useful, scrolling through tape. Nothing so far. They'd have to come back. Before they left, both Hrycyk and Lazarus had noticed what looked like a Picasso perched carelessly on a cluttered sofa. They inquired about it, and the woman told them it was a genuine Picasso worth a huge sum of money. Hrycyk surreptitiously took a photo of the painting with his cell.

By the time the detectives climbed back into their Chevrolet Impala, they had spent a total of four hours at the crime scene and canvassing La Cienega. During that four-hour period they had both been standing or walking, but even though they had started their day at dawn, neither seemed tired. The car slipped into a traffic jam on Sunset, which ate up more time. The light cut harshly across the rush-hour traffic. They would drive back to the office to transfer their written notes into a computer file, check messages and updates on other cases, and make a few calls.

That was late June. Three months passed. In September, Hrycyk received a call

from the Los Angeles district attorney's office. They'd been following the activities of a gang of Armenians, through an informant working for the DA. The informant had identified the gang for the antique-store job on La Cienega. This was organized crime, not a simple break-and-enter: the Armenian gang was under surveillance because it was involved in a host of criminal activities. The DA passed along to Hrycyk the address of a house they believed the Armenians were using to store, among other material possessions like drugs and money, the antiques stolen from the shop on La Cienega.

After a search warrant was secured, the house was raided. The DA was right. The search turned up a cache of the stolen loot. It wasn't everything, though. "We've seized that stuff and we're still looking for the rest," Hrycyk told me.

"This particular gang was known for stealing from tobacco stores, so this upscale antique store was new for them. The gang was using the Italian antiques as furniture. That's the problem with stealing art or antiques. If you don't know the art market—in this case the Italian antique market—then it's going to be difficult to move it," Hrycyk said. "The Armenians weren't connoisseurs of antique Italian furniture. What they were interested in was money. They're into anything that is a commodity and that can be sold." The gang got sloppy and kept stealing from the same locations before they moved on to antiques. "If you keep hitting the same place, police put it together," the detective said.

For Hrycyk, the case was a prime example of the strides made possible by cooperation and an efficient flow of information. It was also another indication that organized crime was interested in art. The trial took place in May 2009, and a number of the men were convicted. For the detective, it was a small victory.

Hrycyk had seen all the movies about art theft, but his experience was different from the films being churned out by the city he patrolled. According to Hollywood, art thieves are dashing, educated, incredibly rich, obsessive, and cunning, and the world is their playground. Art theft, in fact, is a subgenre of heist films—films like *Once a Thief*, *Entrapment*, *The Score*, *The Good Thief*, *Ocean's Twelve*, and, of course, *Hudson Hawk*, starring Bruce Willis and a gang of whistling fools out to steal an invention by Leonardo da Vinci. Mostly, these movies star the thief as a sympathetic protagonist—and we want the thief to get away with the crime.

There is no film that has done more to push the myth of the dashing art thief—or the rogue collector—than the remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*, starring Pierce Brosnan. As Mr. Crown, Brosnan embodies the ultimate art thief: a Wall Street mogul, lover of champagne, women, and fine art. Crown has money and toys but he is bored, so for fun he rips off a hundred-million-dollar Claude Monet from a New York museum (think the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Later, at his mansion, he knocks back some red wine and laughs in self-satisfied glee while gazing at the Impressionist master's blood-orange sunset—now his alone to enjoy. Rene Russo plays the sexy insurance agent hot on his tail, but Crown seduces her as he seduces the audience, who, like him, are captured by Russo's fiery beauty. The Monet, it turns out, isn't the artistic centerpiece of the film; Russo is. Hollywood knew that fine art wasn't enough to keep the public, or Crown, aesthetically engaged.

At the end of the film, Crown slips the Monet back into the museum, undetected. He has a conscience: the restless billionaire wreaked havoc on the museum, got away with his crime, and then made good—a happy ending. John McTiernan directed *The Thomas Crown Affair*, based on the 1968 Norman Jewison cult classic starring Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway. McTiernan changed one important detail: Jewison's Thomas Crown was a bank robber. McTiernan, though, felt that audiences wouldn't be sympathetic to a hardened criminal knocking over your local teller, so he changed Crown's crime of choice to something more palatable—stealing art from a museum. The new version got at least one fact right: police, mostly, do not rank stolen art cases as a high priority. In one of the last scenes of the movie, a New York City detective admits, "I don't really give a damn about stolen art. The week before I met you I nailed two crooked real-estate agents and a guy who was beating his kids to death. So if some Houdini wants to snatch a couple swirls of paint that are really only important to some very silly rich people, I don't really give a damn."

Homicides, drugs, violence, sexual abuse, organized crime—those are urgent affairs. Art theft is the opposite. That is why Hrycyk was such a rare find: a detective who had spent years specializing in art theft investigations and who worked his cases with the patience of a scientist—playing the long game.

On that late afternoon in 2008, driving back through the pink haze of L.A. gridlock, Hrycyk's eyes flicked to the rearview. He'd been watching me take notes on the investigation all afternoon while he took notes at the crime scene. The detective asked, "So how did you get into all this?" He and Lazarus stared out the front window, listening to the former suspect in the back seat.

LAW AND DISORDER

“Art is one of the most corrupt, dirtiest industries on the planet.”

BONNIE CZEGLEDI

It was just after midnight when the phone rang.

A stranger’s voice said, “It’s _____. You’ve been looking for me.”

The name he’d given me clicked. Yes, I’d been looking for him.

“I thought you were in jail,” I said.

“I was,” he replied. “Now I’m out.”

Then the art thief listed off a few details about my education and professional life. He told me he knew where I lived, and proved it by reciting my address.

“I’ve done my research,” he said.

He agreed to a meeting.

I was twenty-six in 2003 and working as a researcher for the Walrus, Canadian magazine, earning enough to save some money while living with my parents. I was comfortable doing research, not being researched. I was also working on an article about a burglary at a small art gallery. It was supposed to be fun. Now the story was taking a turn I hadn’t expected. After the conversation I was apprehensive, but I still wanted to meet the midnight caller.

A few weeks later, on a crisp afternoon, we sat down at a small table on an outdoor patio in Toronto. The patio was unoccupied save for us. The man across from me was in his late forties, of medium height and medium build, and wore a yellow windbreaker. He was good-looking, but not movie-star handsome. In fact he looked like a middle-aged father, except there was an almost invisible edge to him, some heightened sense of awareness in his eyes that vibrated with tension. I didn’t want to feel nervous, but I did.

“Hello,” he said. And we shook hands.

He opened our conversation by threatening me. He told me that if I wrote anything about his involvement in the art gallery theft I would be physically hurt. Specifically, one of his business associates would be sure to cross paths with me. At best his associate would break my legs. No names, he said. Then he reached

down beside his chair. I hadn't noticed the long white papers rolled up in a re-elastic band. He handed them to me across the table. The roll practically glowed in the afternoon sun. Not thinking, I reached out and accepted it. When my hand closed around the roll I knew I had made a mistake—fingerprints, possession of stolen property. His eyes flickered playfully.

"What's this?" I asked.

"They're for you. I can't use them. They're from the gallery," he said.

I knew what I was holding, and I knew I shouldn't be holding it.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Chad Wolfond had woken up, skipped breakfast, and left on his usual ten-minute walk to his Lonsdale Gallery, a two-storey semidetached house on a picturesque street in Toronto's upscale Forest Hill Village. At his desk on the second floor Wolfond tapped the keyboard of his computer, expecting it to power up. When the screen didn't glow, he glanced down to see that his computer tower was gone. Then he noticed a paper trail across the gallery floor leading to the filing cabinets where he stored his vintage pinhole photography collection. As Wolfond looked through the drawers his heart sank. The best works he owned, including those by leading French photographer Ilan Wolff, were missing.

Wolfond was shaken. He phoned the police. Then he phoned his wife. She sounded panicked.

"Do you have any idea what just happened in New York?" she asked. It was after 9:00 AM, and the World Trade Center had been struck by hijacked passenger planes.

By noon officers were at the gallery, glued to their radios for the latest updates from New York and Washington. They dusted for fingerprints and inspected the hole that had been smashed through the drywall from an attached store that was under construction. Before leaving, one of the officers told Wolfond that a detective would be in touch, and then added, "Chances are slim that you will ever see those photographs again."

The detective never materialized. Wolfond remained on edge, and rightly so. One month later the thief returned and stole more art. All told, Wolfond had been stripped of photographs valued at over \$250,000. This time a detective visited and took notes. He said he couldn't do much.

Wolfond became paranoid. He had trouble sleeping and left his gallery every day with a sense of dread. He phoned a few other gallery owners for advice. Most told him not to alert the media or talk to anybody about what had happened. Some hinted that they too had been stung by theft but had mourned the loss in private. News of the break-ins, they argued, would only damage his reputation as an art-gallery owner.

One of them, however, suggested Wolfond call a lawyer named Bonnie Czegledi who specialized in cultural property law. She gave Wolfond the opposite advice.

"Go to the media," Czegledi told him. "Do everything you can to promote those stolen pictures. Publicizing your stolen art will make the works impossible to sell."

Contact Interpol. Get listed on the Art Loss Register.”

Interpol? The Art Loss Register? Wolfond had never heard of them.

About a year and a half later, when I showed up at the Lonsdale Gallery to write a piece about the burglaries, Wolfond hadn't taken Czegledi's advice: he was still nervous about moving his story into the public arena. He had settled the insurance already and was fearful of the thief's reprisal if he spoke openly about the burglaries. Still, I got the sense from him that he wanted to talk. He was warming up to the idea of a story but obviously needed more time. He told me to come back, and I did.

At our second meeting Wolfond disappeared into a back room and brought out the file he'd kept on the burglary—twelve inches of paperwork. He flipped through the file and showed me some photocopies of a few of the photographs that were still missing. He also told me that, by fluke, a man had been arrested who was in possession of some of Wolfond's stolen art.

“I remember being simultaneously pissed off and mildly flattered after the first theft,” Wolfond told me. “The thief had left photos that I also thought were inferior. I doubt I'll see the rest of them again. I really don't know much about the world of art theft.” Before I left he scribbled down the phone number of the detective who was working on the case and of the art lawyer who had advised him—Bonnie Czegledi. “You should talk to her,” was Wolfond's advice.

I phoned the detective a couple of times, and we finally connected. I told him I would be interested in talking to the thief's lawyer and gave him my number. The detective said he would pass the message on. I figured I'd never hear anything; at best, if the thief's lawyer got in touch, I could get a quote, maybe a little more information about the case. Instead I got the late-night phone call, and now I was apparently holding some of Wolfond's stolen artwork and looking across the table at the thief.

“I can't accept these,” I said, dumbstruck.

“They're yours now,” he said. “Hang them up. Or hide them. If you don't take them, I might have to destroy them.” That didn't sound like the best choice. I imagined telling Wolfond that I'd seen some of his missing art and that it was now probably a pile of ashes.

“Isn't there another option?” I asked. “You can return them to the gallery through a third party, anonymously. That way everybody is happy. Otherwise we might have to call the police.”

“A third-party arrangement might work,” he said, after a moment. “Let me think about it.”

I handed back the roll, and he placed it beside his chair on the concrete patio. I wondered why the art thief would even consider destroying the prints. After all, he'd gone through the trouble of breaking into the gallery, sorting through the flat files in the dark, and stealing works he'd carefully chosen. He had what he wanted, didn't he?

The thief told me that keeping the art was too much of a risk. He didn't want to go back to prison, and he didn't have a buyer lined up. Add to those problems the journalist sitting across from him asking questions. Clearly, he had agreed to meet

with me only to neutralize one of many things that were going wrong.

He seemed to be educated in art history and to have a collector's eye, because he'd stolen specific works and bypassed other, less valuable ones in the mess he'd left behind. He was also, I discovered, manipulative. At one point I went inside the washroom. When I returned, the thief had vanished but the roll of stolen art was still on the concrete beside his chair, unattended. What should I do with it? I pictured myself showing up at the gallery and handing the artwork back to Wolfond, trying to explain how I'd got hold of it. Or ending up in a police station for a day while a detective questioned me. I wouldn't want to mention the thief on my legs. I stood there staring at the roll of paper on the ground for a few seconds and my face probably looked nearly as white as the paper.

Then there was a knock from inside the window, beside the patio. The thief hadn't disappeared, only moved inside, but he'd left the stolen art for me. I picked up the roll and carried it inside to his new table. I placed it next to his chair, on the floor. He smiled. He was in control, said his smile.

He decided to change the subject. He wanted to tell me more about how art theft worked as an industry. He seemed to be trying to figure out ways to trade information with me, to get me away from the specifics of his story. There is a larger story, he explained. He discussed how poor the security systems were at most of the major cultural institutions and, of course, at midsized and smaller galleries. That made his job easier. So there was that angle—art galleries and museums weren't adequately protecting themselves against pros like him.

Then he veered in another direction.

"Okay, this is how it works," he said. "It's like a big shell game. All the antiquarians and art dealers, they just pass it around from one to another." He moved his fingers around the table in circles and then looked up. "Do you understand?" He looked very intense, as if he had just handed me a top-secret piece of information, but I had no idea what he meant. What did art dealers have to do with stealing art? But our meeting was over.

We got up from the table. He picked up his roll of stolen art. We paused at the door and shook hands. There were people inside the café, but even so, the thief repeated his earlier threat in a casual whisper and then looked at me coldly, in silence. I watched him walk up the street, just another shopper on a busy afternoon, and I never saw him again.

I'd now sat across from a criminal whose income was, at least partly, earned from the black market in stolen art. True, I didn't know how that black market worked or who the players were or where stolen art went. I had learned that there seemed to be more to the booming illegal trade than just the Hollywood myth, but how did it all connect? Some fine art had been stolen from a gallery and the person who'd stolen it had tried to give it back to me. He had also said he might destroy it. It was confusing and didn't add up to a coherent narrative. I walked away feeling as if I knew more about art theft but quickly came to feel as if I knew even less.

When in doubt, read. I started looking at articles from the BBC, the New York Times, the Guardian, and other papers from around the globe, articles usual

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