THE FICTION

FINDER

BY ROSEANNE CARRARA

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GEORGE PFROMM

It was just after seven o'clock in the morning, mid-November, and the sky was dusty pink. The empty café tables and chairs in the centre of the Distillery District were coated with a thin frost that caught the blush but soon exchanged it for the candy reds and blues of the Ferris wheel being hoisted into the square by a crane.

The iron gates, brick walls, and cobblestone walkways of Gooderham and Worts were spectacle enough, prime background for every organized-crime and holocaust epic filmed in the past thirty years. The Distillery didn't need any more set dressing. Give it a week, though, and I wouldn't be able to go in and out of my condo without getting stuck behind tourists gazing at the string lights, spilling their mulled wine, and selecting stockings and pine-scented candles from the temporary wooden chalets set up for the Christmas Market.

I didn't like to be mussed, and the things I carried for my clients had to be taken care of properly. I figured I was lucky to be finished with the case before the rush.

That morning, I was a million bucks on the way to making a million more. I'd recently cut my hair, shaved the sides, and kept the top kinky, natural—though I'd bleached it again. And I hadn't gone for a run or gotten drunk enough to sleep with anybody to ruin it yet. I'd put on my thick gold hoops, a vintage Missoni sweater dress in waves of wine and orange that clung to my body, making me feel like every curve had a purpose, and a pair of claret-coloured stockings with matching stilettos.

Then, over my shoulders, cape-style, I'd draped the gold taffeta coat my mother had custom tailored for her wedding. That coat lasted decades longer than my parents' marriage, not to mention their generation as a whole.

All I needed to complete the look was a driverless Mercedes. Only I preferred to walk. I had a specific routine when it came to wrapping up a case. Most of my investigative work up to that point had been in lost items, nostalgia. I'd been reuniting gen Xers and millennials with objects belonging to their parents or grandparents, respectively, before the cull. I did most of my business via text or chat, rarely meeting my clients until I'd found what they were looking for. When my work was done, though, I liked to arrange for a get-together in my office to return the goods in person, notarize the official documents, and make sure they transferred their final payments to me, then and there, in full.

So, on the day of, if my finds were light enough, I'd pack them in a cardboard box and walk them from my condo, in the Distillery, up to my office, in Cabbagetown. It was only a couple kilometres, tops. But taking the slow, steady incline of Parliament Street, dressed to the nines, while reviewing the case in my head, always felt like a sacred pilgrimage. I needed that kind of ceremony to put me in the mood for conversation.

The trickiest part of the whole routine was usually the start, when I had to navigate the Distillery's cobblestones to get out onto

Parliament. I'd just about cleared the square without breaking a heel when one of the wooden vendor chalets fell face down in front of me and a cool hand gripped my elbow from behind.

"Need a little help, there, ma?"

The kid's voice had not quite dropped.

The problem with millennials, or the children of, was that now their grandparents had been disappeared, people like myself, gen Xers in their late forties and fifties, were the oldest folks they knew. So, despite the fact I looked put together, or maybe because of it, I was bound to inspire one of them to accommodate the only grande dame or matriarch in a ten-kilometre radius by helping her cross the stones. I tried not to take it as an insult. But I had my client's heirlooms to protect.

"Down, boy." I elbowed his chest, holding fast to my cardboard box. "Haven't you been fixed yet?"

"Aw, come on, gran!" Damn kid wouldn't lay off. He brought his hand to my wrist, brushing his greasy fingers on the side of my carton. "Let's see what we've got here in our goody box!"

The little ginger had pencilled wrinkles on his hands and face. He'd even played a game of dot-to-dot, using grey liner to connect the freckles below his squinty blue eyes. Probably a hired Santa practising his shtick. Who else would come out into the open in a red flannel

onesie and black Doc Martens? Though, there *were* younger people who dressed old on purpose these days, not unlike goths in the eighties, but with more specific contouring. I'd used a few as pickpockets myself.

"I swear, if you shit my sleeve with your makeup, I'm gonna take this jacket off and smother you with it. Christmas Market's not till the weekend. Back the fuck off."

The kid let me go immediately, fanning his hands out in front of himself, checking to see if his pencilled wrinkles had smudged or stained the baggy front of his onesie, where the stuffing was probably supposed to go.

"I'll see you Sunday, then, after church? Say hello to Father for me. Tell him Jasper don't need no confession. Not like ye."

Wrapping his arms around his belly, he tried to chuckle like old St. Nick. Except it came out like a hoarse cough.

My walk north on Parliament should have been refreshing, enlightening even. But, after that send-off, I rushed, working up a sweat and blistering my toes. I was halfway to the office when the wind finally shifted, breaking my stride. I figured a cross-breeze might help cool me off. But the air went rancid fast.

The city must have been fertilizing the public parks and fields again. As usual, no warning. Same goat-shit smell as last time crept into my hair and my good clothes before I could think about hailing a cab. Why

bother, then? I raised the carton to cover my mouth and marshalled on. At least I'd sealed the box properly.

Sabing Lee hired me to find three objects, and I'd been lucky with them all. First, serendipity. I'd spotted his grandparents' wedding portrait hanging on an "accent wall" in a *Canadian Condo* magazine I picked up randomly at my dentist's office. It was one of several black-and-white portraits from the nineteen-forties grouped together "for their style and sacred mystery." It only took a stern e-mail to the publisher to have the interior designer send me the original photo in its frame, with her apologies to the grieving family for its ever being purloined, and her feigned enthusiasm for having facilitated a reunion.

Then, there was his father's anniversary Rolex, with the inscription celebrating thirty-five years in the auto industry: "LAST OF THE PENSIONERS." I made my application to the Ontario Families of the Departed Commission for that. Within a week, I had the watch and a handwritten letter from the resolutions archivist-on-call, who was so tickled to be of use, she slipped a bottle of the Balvenie in for me. "Everyone's so embarrassed to ask the O.F.D.C. for what's rightfully theirs. Do send more!"

Then, there was the singing bowl, which almost got me shot. It was a large brass vessel, hammered smooth on the inside. Its exterior, however, was etched with a dozen mermaids whose long hair spread out behind them in the waves, so you could appreciate their breasts. If

you held it in your hands, you'd come away with their impressions—scales, stomachs, nipples, everything—on your palms.

I'd traced the bowl to one of those mausoleums in Rosedale people tend to let out short-term these days, rather than taking residence themselves. They even leave the family valuables inside on display. Except those are usually locked in curios whose glass gets swapped for plexi.

I had my assistant, Felix, make the arrangements online for my two-night stay. But something about the booking must have piqued the host's interest, because I wasn't in the place for more than fifteen minutes before she showed up with a stack of fresh towels with a revolver sandwiched in-between.

"Flatfoot in heels, eh?" Victoria Herjavec had sniffed me out. Though I didn't need her permission to proceed. I had the Lee family's original deed-of-sale for the singing bowl and a signed affidavit from an O.F.D.C. judge confirming I could remove it from the premises. Once I saw that vessel through the plexi, however, I couldn't blame her.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" With the gun in her shaky pink hand, she entered the pin code and opened the curio cabinet for herself, looking to cop one last feel. "My parents took possession as collateral, before they were done in, too, by the whole reverse mortgage scheme. I couldn't let it go without paying my respects."

Victoria was so enthralled with the mermaids, fondling their tits, she forgot about the revolver in her hand and pulled the trigger accidentally. The bullet buzzed my ear before it sank into the canvas on the wall behind me. The shot was embedded in the bare left buttock of the painter, Kent Monkman, or his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who was perched on a cliff, looking back at me and Herjavec, mascara running, pissed.

"Ha!" Victoria cackled, handing over the gun and the bowl. "You know the title of that portrait, don't you? *Let He Who Is Without Sin Cast The First Stone!*"

That singing bowl was sin itself, and I hadn't even heard it sound yet. But Sabing still had the original hammer. He promised he'd demonstrate for me when he picked it up. I was looking forward to it. I planned on making a recording.

Flatfoot in heels, sure thing. And my office looked every bit the finder's agency. I'd taken the second floor of a converted two-storey walk-up whose street level had one-third vacancy. Amos's Apothecary had gone out of business decades ago, but his sign still dangled beside the door to my office, on the far left of the building.

The rest of the lower level was occupied by Cabbagetown Eco-Laundry. The cards in the window promised a "STEAM-GREEN DRYCLEAN PERFORMED ON-SITE." Though, every night, in the back

alley, the Wright sisters piled the clothes and linens into a minivan and shipped them off to be cleaned elsewhere.

"We never found out how it worked before our parents vanished," Angela, the older one, confessed to me. "Is that something you could investigate for us?"

I told her the next time Felix came around I'd have him contact one of his engineer buddies. Though, that was a lie, naturally. Felix was only virtual. There was no way I was researching anything to do with making those machines work, for fear my office would turn into a sauna.

I'd barely made it upstairs for our eight-thirty. But it didn't matter. I had a voice mail from Sabing saying he'd been delayed on the Gardiner Expressway. And he had to stop in at his digital-arts firm to sign a contract before he could make it to Cabbagetown. He could transfer me the money, though. And, if I didn't want to stick around, he'd have a courier come for the box.

"No! Final pick-up and pay always in person. Will wait," I texted him. "Besides, I want to hear it sound!"

In response, he sent me a mermaid, a smiley face, and a hammer.

I wasn't going to wait for Sabing before I ate. I'd ordered a carafe of coffee and a whole whack of *pains au chocolat* and lemon-curd muffins from Seulement Danielle around the corner. I was just cramming the

first quarter of a muffin into my mouth when the bell on the street door jingled and a pair of crisp dress brogues tackled the steps.

"That didn't take long at all," I hollered, trying not to choke on lemon curd.

"Sorry," a deep bass carried up the stairwell, "I mean, I heard you were good, but I didn't think you'd be expecting me."

He was right. He wasn't Sabing Lee. That is, he wasn't the forty-something small-boned South Asian man in the profile picture Sabing forwarded with his contact info. He was a tall, coal-skinned man, a good ten years older than me, with an athletic build he couldn't tone down, even by matching his shirt and tie to his dove-grey suit.

"Ms. Simmonds?" He offered me his hand.

"Kathleen," I shot up, dusting the crumbs off my lap. I couldn't touch him, yet. He was just that beautiful. "But everybody calls me 'Keene.' Why don't you take a seat, Mr. . . . ?"

"Massey. Israel Massey."

"I'm surprised you found my office, Israel. The street address is unlisted. I don't usually meet with clients until I've found what they're looking for."

"Oh, I've known about you for years. We all have."

“Who?”

My cheeks flushed. If I was getting this kind of spin, maybe it was time I raised my rates. Although, who’d trust me if I couldn’t blend?

“The people in my circle. You’re the one we all said we’d try if we found hope. And we found hope, my sister and I.”

“Hope for what?” My voice cracked worse than that Santa kid’s.

“Hope our auntie’s still alive.”

I’d taken a sip of coffee to soothe my throat, but I almost spit it back out at him.

“I’m sorry, do you mind if I ask your date of birth?”

“Haven’t you guessed, already?” He passed his palms over the gray waves at his temples. “Aunt Éloise, however, would be seventy-three this Christmas. She was in one of the younger cohorts, you know, to have been disappeared, at least, according to the commission.”

He handed me a blue form, the kind I’d seen hundreds of times before when sourcing folks’ belongings. It was the death certificate for Éloise Vancourt-Massey, whose C.O.D. was typed, in lower-case, “the cull.”

“So why, with this, do you think she’s still alive?”

“Well, she was a painter. We thought there was a chance she might have been among those cultural evacuees that got whispered about, a while back.” He cleared his throat. “But that’s not what brought me here. We had a message, the other day, from someone named Ed Kreisler. He’s one of the Alders, you know, one of the boomers they kept around for show . . .”

“*We* kept,” I butted in. “No matter how much you and I may have disapproved of an entire generation’s disappearance, or close to it, we’re still responsible.”

“We sure are.”

Israel covered his face with his palms, trying not to let me see his amber eyes well up. And I had to check myself for thinking he was handsome, even then. I had to stop smiling before he looked at me again.

“This man, Kreisler. He said he was a collector of my auntie’s work. And didn’t we want to come and see what else she did?”

“Well, if anyone, even an alder, is in possession of your aunt’s paintings or revenue-stream, I can get the canvases and commissions back for you.”

“No. My sister and I grew up in our auntie’s care. I slept on a cot in Éloise’s studio from Grade 1 through university. I saw every piece of work she ever did. And, as her executor, I have records of their

provenance, to whom they were sold and transferred, before, during, and after the departures. Plus, they're microchipped. No. If this man's talking about being a collector, he's talking about work that's being produced, now."

Excited, desperate, Israel stood up and started emptying his pockets on my desk, rolls and rolls of elastic-banded twenty-dollar bills. I hadn't seen actual paper money in a good five or six years. It was hard to look at the face of Queen Elizabeth without thinking of all those people vanishing. Yet, here they were, thousands of late-lamented queens, coming back to life in front of me. I had to turn my head away.

I'm glad I did. You don't always catch the first snowfall of the season. But, from my office window, I watched flakes falling from a fevered sky, a few of them catching on the glass, even, before they melted into one another and evaporated.

"Well, then, let's get started," I whispered, more to the weather than to Israel. "Tell me everything you know."

Roseanne Carrara is the author of the poetry collection *A Newer Wilderness* and recently completed the manuscript of her first novel. Her writing has appeared in the *Malahat Review,* the *Fiddlehead,* and *ARC.*

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