

The One Day Internship

by Katrina Dessavre

Poppy de Witte was content to spend her summers in Cape Cod, where her family owned a small beach house considerably less stifling than their spacious apartment on Park Avenue. One morning in June, before she could escape, her Aunt Iris came to visit.

“Poppy,” she said, “what are your plans until classes start again?”

An innocent question, it would seem, but one that did not require an answer. Whatever plans Poppy might propose would have to submit to those of Aunt Iris. She was a woman who regarded life as a series of petty accomplishments, scattering her days among charity events, opera performances, and art auctions. Poppy, she felt, needed a head start.

“I’m open to suggestions,” Poppy said, resigned.

“Good. I’ve arranged an internship for you. I can’t watch you spend another summer in tennis whites.”

“Where is it?”

“The Barclay Collection.”

“Is that part of the Met?”

Poppy was expecting an offer from the Metropolitan or Guggenheim in a naive way that was only natural for someone used to have things arranged for them. But Aunt Iris would not allow her ideas to slide into second helpings.

“The Met is too large, too impersonal for you to really make an impression. No, the Barclay Collection is a small museum, a brownstone between Park and Madison. You wouldn’t know it just by walking past.”

She was right. Poppy had to pace up and down the appointed street, like a tourist in her own neighborhood. She poked her straw through the crowd of ice cubes melting in her coffee, slurping the remnants while she waited for someone to walk into what she thought was the correct address. Propped against the steps was a skateboard covered in stickers of Warhol’s multiple Marilyns. She was skeptical that this was not a private residence until a woman

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moved the skateboard to the side and continued to the door. Late forties probably, with a bob of dull gray hair and a monochrome ensemble much too warm for the weather.

Poppy followed her inside and hoped to remain unobserved for a few moments when the floor creaked under her feet. The woman eyed her over.

"Admission is free but donations are accepted," she said with abruptness conditioned by habit.

"Actually, I'm here as an intern," Poppy said, looking at the dozen or so paintings that covered every inch of a dimly lit room, and added: "Well, this is nice and cozy."

The woman stiffened slightly. Cozy was not the word she would use to describe turbulent seas and expansive plains, but before she could entertain the newcomer with her thoughts on the brushwork of an American master, her expertise was wanted elsewhere.

"Dot, is that you?"

She turned to face an a tall, wiry figure curved over a coffee mug and dressed in cream-colored cashmere pajamas. He did not seem bothered by his casual appearance, but was, on closer inspection, at an age that allowed such liberties.

"Good morning, Richard. The intern is here," Dot said.

It took about ten seconds for polite acknowledgment to transform into personal recognition, during which time Poppy wondered if her aunt had not overestimated the reach of her connections.

"Iris, of course, she told me you would be joining us. What a fine opportunity for a young person like you." And after a long, indulgent sip: "What are you studying?"

"History."

"Oh, how nice. Gives you perspective, doesn't it. We need more of that these days."

Poppy tried to summon a semblance of professional enthusiasm but was out of practice and only glad when the subject passed to more immediate concerns. Richard lead them both through a corridor and into a room with floor-to-ceiling windows that faced out into a well-kept courtyard. Only now did Poppy understand why her

aunt had such close ties to this museum. The walls were covered in portraits of dogs, some with the heroic demeanor of seventeenth century naval officers, others with the restrained serenity of royal subjects.

Aunt Iris prided herself on having common sense, at least as much as her situation in life would allow her. But she had a pomeranian named Pebbles whom she indulged with enough money and attention to amplify his self-importance to Napoleonic proportions. Poppy suspected that her aunt's will listed Pebbles as the sole recipient of her apartment and entire estate.

One of these portraits depicted a hunting dog whose focused gaze was interrupted by drops of liquid falling from the ceiling and collecting in a pool on the floor. After a brief appraisal of the leak, Dot announced that she would take care of it, but Richard had already disappeared into his office, eager to plunge into a few hours of browsing golf forums before tackling his directorial duties.

Poppy's attention drifted, too, sinking ever deeper into her phone. She was texting furiously, debating the abrupt death of a TV character, when Dot came to fetch her.

"You're familiar with the area, right?"

"I think so."

"I have a job for you. A few weeks ago one of our trustees gave us a small watercolor in bad condition. Now it's restored and ready to be delivered back. I just called. She's expecting you. Here's the name and address."

Poppy looked at the note. Henriette Barclay. She imagined an apartment stuffed with antiques and cats, but the doors of a private elevator opened into a cavernous, minimally furnished penthouse. A tiny, shriveled woman floated into view holding a clear glass garnished with an olive. It was around eleven in the morning.

"I see you have something for me," she said. With closely-cropped black hair and sunglasses that covered most of her face, she held a distinct resemblance to a dung beetle.

"You're the intern, aren't you? They come and go so fast I never remember their names. You'll have to remind me."

“Poppy de Witte.”

“De Witte. Are you old Harold's daughter?”

She nodded. Her father worked at a hedge fund, an association which prompted Henriette to tilt her sunglasses downwards and squint, assessing the de Witte trustworthiness.

“I guess you'll do,” she said. “Would you mind taking this back to the museum? Give it to Lorenzo with my thanks. Tell him to call me at his earliest convenience.”

This was the first time Poppy had heard of a Lorenzo. When she mentioned the name to Dot and held up an envelope stamped with the Barclay crest, the grey bob lost some of its linearity.

“Why don't you go upstairs and check if he's in his studio. I'll hold on to this.”

Poppy had no way of knowing about the intense struggle between horror and giddy excitement that flourished in Dot's mind, temporarily preventing her from realizing that an intern did not have the same awareness, let alone investment in, the upstairs.

“Third floor. Behind a velvet rope with a “private” sign. Take a left and go straight.”

Poppy got lost in her own apartment building, so following these directions took a few wrong turns and curious glances from visitors. Dot was only glad for the delay. She knew that Lorenzo was out on his lunch break. There was just enough time to examine the envelope and decide what to do with it.

When he was not practicing his skateboarding skills in a desperate attempt to appear younger, Lorenzo was a restorer who worked in the museum. The money in the envelope was payment for a few canvases he had restored for Henriette. They were not associated with any of the artists represented by the museum and so were not officially under Lorenzo's area of expertise. But Henriette Barclay had a vast and varied collection, and appealing to the restoration departments of larger museums would only result in months of waiting and a steep price. The very rich, it turns out, take a curious sense of pride in finding the better deal.

She was not the only wealthy lady in the neighborhood who had a closet full of art and an itch to restore it without any fuss. Over the past few months, Lorenzo had built a steady clientele. Dot did not know any of these details and could only speculate based on snatches of conversation and visits that seemed a little too friendly.

She opened the envelope to find a thick stack of twenty dollar bills.

So he is an escort, she thought. How vulgar. Under our noses, too.

“Excuse me.”

She looked up sharply, expecting Lorenzo, but met the red face of a visitor wearing a satin shirt two sizes too small, unrolled at the sleeves to reveal a gold Rolex.

“I'd like to make a donation.”

“Please leave it in the box the museum appreciates your patronage,” she said breathlessly, absorbed in counting twenties under the table.

The man took a one dollar bill from his wallet and placed it ceremoniously on the table, looking around to see how many people had witnessed his generous gesture. Dissatisfied with the lukewarm response, he coughed not too subtly and Dot looked up to find his fleshy Rolexed hands lingering on the counter. She was about to dismiss him politely when she saw Poppy coming down the stairs.

“Thank you so much for your donation,” she said with admiration loud enough for the room to hear. “The museum would not exist without the generosity of patrons like you.”

The man's posture straightened, bursting a button, and he left with the slightest nod of the head.

“He wasn't there,” Poppy said.

“Never mind that. I'll give it to him when he comes back. Could you do me a favor?”

“Of course,” she said, contemplating what would happen if she refused. Deciding that it was too early to irritate to her aunt, she chose to play the eager intern for another few hours.

“The gentleman before you left a generous donation, and I think it would be only fair to put it to good use, you know, in the interests of

the museum." Dot paused to tone down the haste in her voice. "Why don't you take the money and spend it on something practical for the museum. Use your initiative. Call me if you have any questions, but don't worry too much. Just spend it on what you see fit."

Poppy sensed that she was being ushered out for reasons that remained unclear to her, but she saw it as a good opportunity to get her afternoon iced coffee fix.

As she walked down the steps, prismatic Marilyns glistened in the light and the skateboard she noticed in the morning was wedged under the arm of a man who looked too old to have one.

"Lorenzo?"

"Yes?"

"There's a package for you at the front desk."

"A package?"

"From Henriette Barclay. She said you should call her or something. I left it with Dot since you weren't in your studio."

He ran his fingers nervously through hair soaked in gel and sweat and wiped it against his jeans.

"You left it? With Dot? Did she look inside?"

"I don't know," she said, adding "I'm just an intern" as Lorenzo sprinted up the steps, still clutching his skateboard. By the time he realized that it would be impossible to find out where the money was without confronting Dot directly, Poppy was already walking down Madison, holding her plastic container of iced coffee with the sharp angle of the wrist innate to Upper East Siders.

As Dot reflected on how Poppy would interpret "something practical," she feared the task would prove to be impossible and the intern would come back empty handed. After all, there was nothing practical within a twenty block radius. Even Poppy doubted her ability to find an appropriate object, despite knowing the staff in nearly every boutique in the area.

But there it was. Woven black leather with a stainless steel interior, made by an Italian brand famous for their luxury handbags. It was practical, in a way, because when Poppy came back to the museum, took it out of the Barney's shopping bag, and placed it on

the floor, the liquid dripping from the ceiling could now collect in a more elegant way than into already soaked towels.

During the next hour, Lorenzo came downstairs to look at the object — a dog bowl — every few minutes. He was determined to say something, but the receipt was buried in Dot's pocket. He had almost come to terms with the fact that his work had taken the shape of an overpriced pet accessory when reverberations from a shrill voice caused a slight ripple in the cloudy water.

“Poppy!”

The flurry of a floral scarf and halo of burnt orange fuzz peeking out of an oversized bag appeared in front of the front desk, where Poppy was looking through old auction catalogues.

“I thought I'd stop by and see how you're getting on. I'm not interrupting, am I?”

“No, no, I was just catching up on...well, just browsing, really. Afternoons are a little slow here.”

“Right. Well, I won't be long. Pebbles and I have to take our evening walk.”

As soon as she set the twitching creature down, he set a course straight for the next room. The tinkling sound of his collar stopped.

“Pebbles, where —? Come back, you silly animal. Oh, you serve refreshments for pets too. How considerate of you on a hot day like this.”

Despite being used to only drinking from overpriced bottles of water, Pebbles was lapping up the unidentified liquid, and by the time his owner noticed a fresh drip from the ceiling, he had cleaned out the bowl.

Aunt Iris did not need much encouragement to involve others in the small calamities of her daily life. She latched on to Dot, who had come in at the sound of high-pitched squeals, and was educating her on the finer points of Pebbles' digestive system.

“He's used to a special brand of water flown in from the Catskills. I'm not sure how this is going to react in his system. Richard!”

The director wandered in, knowing nothing about the bowl and its history. It was too late to slip back quietly, and he braced himself with a placid, vaguely sympathetic expression.

"Frankly, I'm appalled," she continued. "I didn't know you were so worse for wear. Deceiving poor little animals like this. It's a little below your standards, don't you think?"

"Well, pets are, strictly speaking, not allowed..." Dot began, but her resolve wilted quickly. Aunt Iris had already taken the stoic stance of a martyr.

"Come, Pebbles," she said. "We're going to the park."

"Wait, Aunt Iris!" Poppy said as the floral scarves skimmed past her.

"What?"

"Can I borrow your car? I can catch the ferry if I leave now."

She pulled out a set of keys clinging to a few strands of orange fur.

