

THE SQUARE DRAWING

By Laurie Fendrich

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“Oh my god, oh my god, it’s not here.”

Molly Upton leaned forward and peered into the back of her old Volvo station wagon, her eyes squinting as she tried to locate the cardboard portfolio that held her 18-inch-square drawing. The drawing had been different for her—and not only because she’d chosen a square format over her usual vertical one. Instead of arranging diamonds of different sizes and shapes in an all-over pattern, she’d drawn only five, each the same size and shape, and placed them in a row in the middle. The three on the left stood straight, while the two on the right tilted leftward at about a 10-degree angle.

Molly had spent days working on preliminary sketches, fussing with the proportions of the diamond and with where on the heavy piece of Arches acid-free paper she should place each of them. After inscribing their outlines, she’d used her Conté crayon to methodically fill in each diamond with small choppy marks until the diamonds were almost solid black, with only tiny bits of white paper showing through. Now the drawing, which all told had taken two months to complete, and which had been in her car when she’d pulled away from her Brooklyn studio two days earlier, was gone. Gone.

Molly shut the hatch and closed her eyes, trying to remember when she’d last seen the portfolio. It was in the station wagon when she’d left Brooklyn early in the morning the day before, that was for sure. And she remembered it there when, at the end of yesterday’s exhausting seven-hour drive, she’d pulled into the parking lot of the Oak Ridge Inn near Laresville. In her mind’s eye, she could see it leaning against the desk in her motel room where she’d placed it when she first walked in. And she remembered getting up in the middle of the night and almost stumbling over it on the way to the bathroom, and thinking what a coincidence it was that the street lamp outside the window was casting a shaft of white light in the shape of a perfect diamond across its surface.

But was it really there alongside her laptop, her laptop, and the tote bag holding her book, journal, baseball cap and flip flops when she’d checked out of the motel at ten this morning? Was it really in the back of the station wagon when she’d left the motel to drive the remaining six and a half hours to her sister’s house in Normal? She closed her eyes tight. Yes, damn it, she could see it there, in that moment right before she closed the hatch—the pale brown portfolio made of duct tape and two pieces of

slightly bent but clean enough cardboard rescued from the dumpster outside her studio.

Yet with every item not bolted to the inside of the station wagon now lined up along the edge of her sister's driveway, baking away in the heat of the late afternoon, it was impossible to deny reality: There was no portfolio.

"What's going on, Molly? Could you please say something?" Paula asked. A long-established sisterly dynamic was at work—Molly with her distressed artistic temperament up against the older and wiser Paula, the gimlet-eyed accountant.

Molly threw her hands up in the air. "Your birthday present, that's all. A new drawing from my diamond series, but different this time. Special, for your birthday. So stupid of me. I didn't want it to leave it in the hot car, so I brought it up to my motel room. Paula, I swear I brought it down to the car this morning. Now it's not here."

Here we go, Paula thought. Certain and wrong at the same time. And please, dear god, help me, please don't say Molly wants to give us another one of her depressing diamond drawings. Another one will make—oh my god, six. Frank will have a fit. I'll tell her it doesn't matter if it's lost. No. Get real. I'll say that if they find it at the motel she can have them ship it to me at my expense.

Paula put her arm around Molly's shoulders and gave her a hug. "Not to worry. You probably left it at the motel. Call them—but first come

say hi to Frank. With Jack and Lily off at soccer camp, he's lonely as all get out. We'll settle you next to the pool, I'll put a glass of wine in your hand, and you can even swim before dinner. The two of you can have one of your discussions about the meaning of abstract art while I put together my avocado salad."

Molly cringed at the sight of Frank, with his meticulously trimmed goatee and sphere-like head that he always shaved so close it looked polished. She managed a perfunctory kiss on his cheek without looking at him, and sat down on a plastic chair in the shade. Calling the motel on her cell, she reached a reception clerk who said he'd check with Lost and Found, would she please call back in an hour.

"Relax, I'm telling you it will be there," Paula said, pouring some chilled Sancerre into Molly's glass. After the three of them were well into a second bottle of wine, Molly called again. So sorry, the man said, nothing in Lost and Found. Yes, she was welcome to call back as many times as she wanted, and yes, of course, she could stop by on her way home and look around for herself. He'd leave notes about it at the reception desk for the next shift, and if it turned up they would call her. Definitely. This was motel policy.

Molly's eyes followed two mean jays darting low above the ox-eye sunflowers, in full bloom even though it was only late June, that were clustered along the fence by the far side of the pool. There was no way she could go back to the motel. She wasn't leaving Paula's for another week, and on her return she'd be driving a

different route by way of Ithaca, to visit her college roommate. If the motel didn't find the drawing within the next day or two, it was lost forever.

Paula reached over, patted her hand, and told her to stay put while she went to the kitchen to prepare the salad. Frank turned on the grill and began sticking marinated prawns, colored peppers and tomatoes onto long skewers. For Paula's sake, be nice, Molly thought. Gritting her teeth, she strolled over and stood next to Frank. With his face lit by the gold of the sun, he looked handsome.

"Can I help?" she asked, popping a small round tomato in her mouth.

"No need, really, but thanks. Relax. Have a seat while I get this stuff ready," Frank said.

Molly sat down on the nearby bench and cleared her throat. "Frank, I know you're no fan of abstraction, and that you work hard, for Paula's sake, to support my work. Losing this drawing—well, it hurts a whole lot. I made it to celebrate Paula turning 40, but really I made it for the two of you. It's different from the other five you own—for starters, it's a square instead of a rectangle, but it's also simpler than my usual style. I thought you, especially, would like that it's classical. Not to worry, it fits perfectly with the collection of my more expressionist vertical drawings you and Paula already have." Molly looked down at her phone. "But they're never going to find it, Frank. I just know it. Never."

"They'll find it," Frank said unconvincingly, pushing a skewer through a recalcitrant piece of orange bell pepper.

"The problem is, I never signed my name to it," Molly said. "I was going to sign the drawing the way I always do, in the presence of the two of you, and it never dawned on me there was any need to sign the portfolio." Molly sighed and took another swallow of wine. "What a stupid jerk I am."

"Well, yes, Molly, it was a little absent-minded of you," Frank said. Picking up another skewer, he continued. "Since you bring it up, you're right that I'm no fan of abstraction. But please. I may not like abstract art much, but that doesn't make me a philistine. I know a hell of a lot about art, especially modern and contemporary art, and more to the point, I appreciate it."

Molly knew what was coming, and here it came. "The problem isn't that abstract art doesn't require much craft or skill, although generally that's the case. It's that abstract art is nothing more than elitist decoration. Modernist figurative art, you know, like that of Hopper, Wyeth, Homer and so forth—like the Hopper museum poster I have in my office, for example—is the only kind of modern art that speaks to a wide audience. Don't get me wrong. Art doesn't have to be realism for it to be art. But if artists can't make art that's understood and felt by someone like me, who's educated and has reasonably good taste, what's the point of making it other than as therapy for abstract artists?"

Satisfied with himself, Frank suddenly remembered his somewhat fragile sister-in-law had an emotional dog in this fight. “Not your art,” he quickly added. “I mean, sure, you make abstract art, but your art requires craft. And skill. What I’m talking about is the abstract art where artists do whatever they feel like doing and justify it with some French intellectual caca—or worse, read some French caca and then afterwards make art about it. That’s what I’m talking about. That kind of abstract art is incomprehensible to anyone not privy to all the theory behind it.”

He thinks he’s so smart just because he subscribes to *Artnews*, but he doesn’t have a frigging clue how dumb-ass he sounds, Molly thought. It was all so fatiguing—every time she visited Paula, this self-satisfied, super successful dermatologist—for God’s sake, a pimple doctor already—sucked her into his same tired argument about the lack of meaning in abstract art. The man doesn’t have a poetic bone in his body, and yet—her eyes fixed on his muscled forearms maneuvering another pepper onto a skewer, Molly felt a sudden flush in her cheeks..

“Frank, we’ve tried to hash this out a gazillion times,” Molly said, pouring more wine into both their glasses as a way of gaining time to work up a response that would pique him. “You’re flat out wrong. Abstraction doesn’t rest on theory. Never has. For anyone with an open mind, a rudimentary education and a little visual acuity, abstract art offers an emotional, non-verbal way to merge beauty and philosophy

into one. The problem is, some people are close-minded.”

“Not only that,” she continued, her voice rising, “abstract art is the most important art of the 20th-century, and a lot of people are deeply involved with it. Yet here you are—pardon me for saying this, Frank, but here you are, once again, promoting your pigheaded idea that abstract artists are nothing but self-absorbed navel-gazers.”

“Not true,” Frank said slowly, sliding his hands into two large red mitts and laying the first kabob on the grill. “But unlike you, I know that abstract art is over and done with. Maybe it was necessary, historically speaking, for there to be some exploration of what art could do if you pried it loose from nature. But those exploring days are over. For God’s sake, Molly, wake up. You bring up the 20th century as if it’s the present. It’s the past. The point is, how many variations of stripes, triangles and squares can abstract artists come up with before the whole edifice collapses?”

Molly stared hard at Frank, whose back was now fully turned to her. How smart was that not to include diamonds on that list. “Well,” she said, groping for words, “How many variations of human beings, houses, trees and cute little doggies can figurative artists come up with before *that* whole edifice collapses as well?”

Frank turned around and gave her half a smile. “You’re refusing to see my point, Molly. Most human beings simply can’t get meaning out of abstract art. At best, they see pretty shapes,

colors and brushstrokes. And contrary to what you say, no one, not curators, critics or art historians—certainly not dealers or collectors—understands the intentionality of abstract artists, who live inside the hermetically sealed art world. Unless, that is, the artist is willing to forever stand next to the work explaining it.”

It was true. She was perpetually offering disquisitions on her art to Paula and Frank, and sometimes even dragooning her niece and nephew, restless preteens who cared diddly-squat about any art that wasn’t digital, into listening to her tortured explanations about how diamond shapes manifested beauty, change and stability all at once.

Molly tried a new tack: “Why do you use a word like ‘intentionality,’ Frank? What’s wrong with plain old ‘intention’? You say you don’t like theory, but whenever you talk to me, you toss around words that make you sound exactly like one of those French intellectuals you say you dislike so much.”

“All you’re doing is deflecting the discussion away from the hard truth that abstract art is completely meaningless. It certainly has nothing to do with the 21st century—nothing to say about relevant topics like sexual and racial identity, or serious global problems like nuclear war or climate change.”

“I repeat,” Frank said, “Abstraction is no more than elitist decoration. In a word, it’s blank. You always say you derive meaning from your art by knowing it introduces beauty into the world. Sorry, but that beauty you tout is utterly

subjective. Your beauty isn’t my beauty. Stop pretending you live in the 18th century. If it’s meaning and beauty in art you’re after, you should turn to something powerful and full of humanity for inspiration—like, say, ‘Las Meninas.’”

Paula arrived with the avocado salad just as Frank finished. “What are you two talking about?” she asked cheerily. “Arguing the meaning of abstract art again?”

“Well, Paula, as a matter of fact, yes. Your husband is telling me that my abstract art needs to be measured by how it stacks up against the single greatest painting in the history of art.”

Molly stood up and looked out over the rippling aqua in the pool. Once again, Frank had rattled her, but this time she’d managed not to cry. “Tell you what, you two. I’ll bow out of this little argument right now. Before we sit down for dinner, I’m going to run upstairs, put on my suit, and then come down for a quick dip in this fabulous pool of yours.”

Once Molly was out of earshot, Frank turned to Paula and said, “Look, I’m sorry your sister lost her drawing and all that, but the last thing we need in this house is another one of those fucking glorified tablecloths. Especially a square one—which will look ridiculous hanging alongside the stupid vertical ones we already have. If the motel finds it, great and all that, but you need to tell her we can’t take any more of them.”

“OK, OK,” Paula replied, reaching out and touching his shoulder. “Just this last one—OK? That is, if they find it, which isn’t likely. But could you just be nice, Frank? Molly’s all that’s left of my family. She’s already thirty-two and has nothing going for her other than her art and that low-rung lawyer boyfriend of hers. And if she didn’t have that adjunct teaching job, she’d have absolutely nothing going as an artist—worse, she’d lose that closet she calls a studio.”

Frank turned the kabobs over without answering. “We’re both rooting for her, aren’t we, Frank?” Paula pleaded. “If we’re lucky she’ll find a gallery and won’t have to fob off her art on us anymore.”

The sound of flip flops along the walkway made them go silent. Molly had emerged from the house wearing a black one-piece bathing suit and a towel wrapped around her waist. Even from a distance, Paula could make out that she’d put on lipstick. Molly waved as she strolled silently across the far side of the lawn toward the deep end of the pool, where she draped her towel on a chair and dove in. As she began swimming the breast stroke under water, the stark beauty of her body, which Frank had assured himself he no longer cared about or even noticed, suddenly turned him cruel.

“Paula, stop being a fool. Your sister is talentless. She needs to quit trying to be an artist and get a real job.”



Managing the Oak Ridge Inn, about ten miles east of Columbus, suited Bernard Souser, a quiet, slightly frumpy man who had never had any overweening ambition in life, remarkably well. True, he had to put up with a boss who thought nothing of chewing him out in public whenever he made mistakes on his Excel spreadsheets, and yes, he was expected to put in extra time, even on Sundays and holidays, when an enraged guest whose toilet had overflowed, or whose pillowcases were discovered to smell faintly of sweat, insisted on speaking to the manager immediately. But the job was such that he glided effortlessly through most days, and seldom found his work stressful or tiring. He had regular hours, and did what was required of him without being micromanaged. He especially liked that it paid well enough so Cindy didn’t have to work, and he could spend weekends with her and their two little boys.

In his annual reviews, Bernard’s boss always chided him for not participating more during corporate planning meetings, but balanced this by praising him for his high room occupancy rates (to Bernard’s continual surprise, his motel never failed to rank in the top 100 of the 1,163 properties in the Oak Ridge Inn chain, which now operated in all 50 states). And he always got high marks for his “people skills”—something he’d been told he was a natural at back when he was at motel management school.

On the first day of the new year, however, an email from corporate headquarters made the usually easygoing Bernard feel a spasm of anxiety:

As part of our ongoing effort to offer team members additional opportunities for advancement and growth, we are requesting proposals for pilot programs aimed at enhancing revenue in individual motel properties. Managers should propose creative themes for their individual motels that reflect their particular locale. Proposals can range from such things as music programs, cuisine and décor, to campaign strategies to attract national conferences. Oak Ridge Inn, Inc., will fully fund ten approved pilot programs, and successful theme implementation, measured by revenue enhancement, will result in a year-end bonus. We look forward to receiving your individual proposals by January 15th.

This command—for Bernard knew submitting a proposal was a command, not a request—was unfair. In two weeks' time come up with an idea to “enhance revenue”? How could he “enhance revenue” when his occupancy rates were already so high? And what “creative theme” could he, Bernard Souser, for whom creativity meant building the occasional birdhouse in his basement, possibly come up with?

Bernard had always been proud to be working for Oak Ridge Inns, and not one of those chain motels aimed at exhausted drivers drawn from the Interstate in search of nothing more than a hot shower, a bed and a flat-screen TV. Every Oak Ridge Inn was equipped with a gym and

heated pool, and had turndown service that included a mint placed on top of each pillow. Bernard's decision four years previously to add gluten-free muffins, fresh fruit and organic yogurt to the chain's already extensive breakfast menu brought in local businessmen, which won him praise from his boss. And last year's high-risk decision to spend almost all of his discretionary budget on the Swiss-made Franke A600 automatic coffee system (a machine he'd discovered while at a hotel management conference in Berlin—the one time he'd ever been out of the country) meant that with the press of a button, happy guests could make their own cappuccino, espresso macchiato or café latte. Luck of all lucks, it won him an award for excellence from corporate headquarters.

Yet had he been more ambitious, Bernard admitted, he would have tried to do more of these sorts of things—maybe done what management was now explicitly asking for. Maybe done something theme-like that would have drawn on the presence of Laresville State University, only twelve miles south. With its 14,000 students and new Performing Arts Center—where he and Cindy had attended two concerts and a performance of “The Phantom of the Opera”—Laresville State was a ready market. His motel had a large, nicely decorated but underused events room that, if marketed right, could be useful to the university. In his happy lassitude, however, Bernard had never bothered to make even so much as a phone call to see if there were anyone there who might be interested in using his Inn to host an event or conference.

This was probably the kick in the butt he needed to get something like that going. If he could somehow manage to come up with a theme that would ramp up the motel's ties to the university, hell, that would be perfect. Headquarters would take notice, and come to think of it, his occupancy rates might even crack the top fifty.

Leaning back in his chair, Bernard exhaled unhappily before gazing up at the work of art hanging on the wall in front of him. It was impossible to put into words, and Cindy had laughed whenever he tried, but he got a strange, pleasurable tingle whenever he looked at it—a small, carefully done black and white hand-made picture of five diamonds, that was all, but really, it was so handsome and clean looking, especially all framed up like that.

What a stroke of luck that he'd found it, back in September. To think that if Cindy hadn't asked him to locate a couple of big pieces of cardboard in the motel's recycling room and bring them home for one of Justin's school projects, he'd never have gone there, never have seen the slightly oil-stained, bent cardboard leaning against the wall, never chosen it and taken them home, and never pried the two pieces apart and discovered what was inside.

Not finding a signature anywhere on either the drawing or the cardboard, Bernard had studied the log book in Lost and Found (which, to his chagrin, he discovered was sloppily maintained). He also sent a memo to the entire cleaning staff inquiring whether anyone had found a drawing or any pieces of cardboard during the past year,

with no results. By early December, three months after finding the drawing, Bernard was convinced that the owner, whoever it was, didn't care enough to try to retrieve the drawing, and it was perfectly justifiable for him to claim it as his own.

"No way, Bernard," Cindy had said coolly when he held the drawing up for her to admire after he'd decided it was his. "I'll say again what I said when you first showed it to me last September: It's not coming into this house. Think about it, darling. It's one of those modern-art things, and it doesn't fit with the landscapes I've got in the living and dining room. Besides, it's really on the ugly side. There's no color."

Bernard, pride in his find deflated, said, "Look, Cindy, I don't claim to know a lot about modern art, but I like this. Even if it is modern art, so what? I think it's good looking. What's wrong with me wanting to hang it in our home? Can't we take a flyer on something? Somebody, we'll never know who, put time and effort into making this, and then either decided to throw it away—hard to believe, but who knows—or accidentally left it behind. Whatever, that person is obviously never coming back for it at this point—that's certain. I think it should be saved and appreciated."

Bernard carefully laid the drawing on the floor so they could contemplate it together. Cindy looked down at it, put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "You're being ridiculous, Bernard. It's the kind of thing snobby rich people hang in their home—and I'm telling

you, they're lying when they say they like things like this. If you insist on keeping it, go hang it in your office."

Bernard didn't tell Cindy that the frame he bought for the drawing cost a small fortune. Non-reflective glass, the framer told him, would protect it from ultraviolet light, and the newfangled French cleat system would make it easy as pie to install. Once the drawing was nestled in the thin, black, steel frame he selected, Bernard thought the drawing became even more handsome. Now it hung on his office wall as calm and serene as a mountain.

The idea hit him so suddenly he let out a gasp, and then had to sit without moving for a full minute. That was *it!*—the décor theme. He'd take management up on their suggestion about doing something with the décor. He'd redo the entire motel with variations on his beautiful black and white diamond drawing. There'd be prints of it everywhere—but wait. Cindy was right about one thing: Black and white wasn't for everyone, and anyway, it might get monotonous throughout an entire Oak Ridge Inn. He'd have the prints made up in different colors, and even sizes. There would be prints above the reception desk, behind the bar, in the restaurant and events room, and even in the hall on the way to the pool. Some could be big—maybe three or four feet square. And maybe he'd hang a few turned 90 degrees, making the pictures diamond shapes, which would mean diamonds inside diamonds. Why couldn't he be creative? He'd transform the look of his Inn from bland and stodgy into classy and

modern—a place suggesting real culture like the kind you found in the Performing Arts Center at the University. The Inn would end up pulling in not only more Laresville State people, but would even become a destination for people in Columbus.

Bernard cancelled his morning meeting with his linen supply representative, and spent the rest of the day, and the whole of the bitter cold week that followed, struggling to come up with sketches of his idea. Finally conceding drawing wasn't his strength, he tossed the pile of smudgy sketches into the wastebasket and settled down to write a detailed description of what he had in mind, titling it, "The Laresville Diamond Standard."

A week later, his proposal was accepted.



Paula emailed Molly that everyone had missed her terribly when she'd skipped visiting at Christmas the previous year—the year when turning forty had caused her to have to fight off a severe depression. This time she insisted on treating her to an airline ticket, but Molly refused. There was no way she'd ever visit her sister again without Dirk by her side to act as a buffer against Frank. The good part was that Dirk liked visiting her sister and her family, and though he hated flying, he would always agree to a road trip.

They'd take the Interstate Molly had driven a year and a half earlier, surviving the gray drear of the Midwestern winter landscape by playing

The National at full blast and debating the reasons for America's decline. So as not to exhaust themselves, they planned on spending the night at that same boring but clean and comfortable Oak Ridge Inn Molly had stayed at the summer she'd lost her drawing. Maybe Molly would even poke around a little to see if by some crazy chance it was hiding in a corner where no one had thought to look.

Molly had never blamed the motel for losing her drawing. How could some overworked maid, earning next to nothing to do the gross job of cleaning up after strangers, be expected to recognize as art some pieces of nondescript cardboard left leaning against a desk—or, as she'd come to realize later, leaning not against a desk but against a wastebasket? Even so, pulling into the motel parking lot at the end of the seven-hour drive from Brooklyn made her feel a pang of regret.

"Scene of the crime, say what?" Dirk said, as he turned off the ignition.

"That's totally unnecessary, Dirk," Molly said, wrapping her circle scarf around her neck in two big swoops. "But go ahead, joke all you want. I seriously got over it a long time ago."

Tiny white Christmas lights, bright and blinking, were strung around the two large bushes next to the automatic doors leading into the motel lobby. Dirk walked with his duffle slung over his shoulder, while Molly carried her purse and tote, rolling her suitcase behind her. While they walked toward the reception desk, Dirk checked his phone for messages and Molly

scrolled through her email to find the reservation.

When they reached the desk and Molly looked up, it took her a moment to focus. Behind the smiling blonde woman in a navy-blue pants suit hung an enormous print—or perhaps it was a painting—with five large red diamonds in the middle resting on a white ground. Three of the diamonds were positioned vertically on the left, and two on the right in such a manner that they tilted slightly toward those on the left.

A rush of dizziness—exactly like the time she was in high school and was waiting on line to take the SATs—caused Molly to sway.

"That's *mine!*" she said hoarsely, staring up at the print.

"Sorry?"

"That's *my* work of art that's hanging behind you," Molly said, fumbling to get the words out.

"Oh, how nice! I had no idea who had designed them. Here at the Oak Ridge Inn we love your prints. We have lots of them! They're everywhere!"

Dirk, who had done most of the driving, began nudging Molly to speed things up. Instead, Molly pointed to the red diamonds.

"Yeah, what?" Dirk said.

"Dirk, can't you see? That's my art!" Molly said.

"Um, I guess it does sort of look like it, come to think of it. Cool. I had no idea you used ink-jet

prints as a source for your work,” Dirk said, without even a hint of irony.

“You’re kidding, right?” Molly said. “Surely you can see that this square print is based on my square drawing, and just as surely you know that I lost that drawing right here, right here in this very motel—a year and a half ago, to be precise. I lost it when this place had nothing remotely like this hanging here. Somehow, some way—look, Dirk, I don’t claim to know how—someone stole my drawing and turned it into this print-thing for this motel.”

Dirk surveyed the lobby and saw eight additional prints, slightly smaller, each a different color from the one behind the desk, yet all with the same composition.

“Hey, whoa. What are you saying? Look around you, girl. Those diamonds are everywhere. You think someone decorated the whole lobby of this motel using that little square drawing you did for your sister?”

Molly swiveled her head around to see what Dirk was talking about.

The receptionist smiled and said in a cheery voice, “If you like what you’re seeing here, you’re going to really like what you find in the rest of our inn—especially when you visit our dining facilities. There we’ve got five big prints in different colors hanging behind the entry bar, and several more, in still more colors, on the walls in the restaurant itself. Let me tell you, people just love, love, love them.”

Dirk, fatigued and cranky, insisted they go up to their room. In a daze, Molly complied. On the wall facing the elevators on the first floor hung two more prints, each with diamonds a pale fern green color, decorated for the holidays with red trim. On the fourth floor, where their room was, they exited to a single large, ultramarine blue iteration of the same diamonds, followed by a row of framed prints of pale cerulean blue diamond shapes hanging along the long hallway leading to their room. There they found two more, in muted violet, each hung on a diagonal above the bed.

Dirk put down his suitcase and placed his hands squarely on Molly’s shoulders. “OK, Molly, you have to pull yourself together. You’re asking me to believe that this motel in the middle of Ohio stole your drawing and used it to decorate every wall in the place. I have to think about this. I may be a nothing fish in the big lawyers’ pond of Bigelow & Morris, but I sure as hell know enough about the law to tell you, for a fact, that no corporation anywhere would ever steal a drawing and then make prints of it without the artist’s permission. Especially not like this—displayed everywhere and in every damn which way. It’d be Lawsuit City for them to do shit like that, and they know it. I realize you’re upset, but you need to think this through with some clarity. I know what I’m talking about here.”

Molly stepped back and unbuttoned her coat. “So, you’re saying that all of this is a coincidence—my losing my drawing at this

motel, and then my drawing showing up a year and a half later, in the same motel, in the form of these multiple ghastly prints?”

“I’m not saying anything. Well, actually I’m saying I’m wiped out and I want to watch some basketball and fall asleep. I’m too tired to think about this now.”

“Do what you want, Dirk. Me, I can’t fall asleep right now. I’m going down to that bar and restaurant the woman at the desk talked about. I want to see what’s going on in there. Besides, I need a drink.”

“Whatever,” said Dirk, as he flopped onto the bed and reached for the zapper. “I love you Molly, and I want to be there for you, but don’t go all crazy on me. Whatever it is can wait until morning.”

The sounds emanating from the restaurant behind the blue-gray wall with the single large print with five orange diamonds indicated a lot of people were having dinner, but the bar area was almost empty. After peeking into the restaurant, whose walls were filled with even more large diamond prints, Molly returned to take a seat on a stool at the bar, and ordered a bourbon and ginger ale. She’d was a red wine drinker who’d had whiskey only once or twice in her life, but wasn’t that what people in movies ordered when they needed to cushion a shock? Still, she softened it with a sweet mixer.

Five prints, each a different color, hung in a row above the mirrored wall with its three long shelves packed with sparkly liquor bottles. The prints were dimly lit, but were the biggest ones she’d come across. She stared at them while waiting for her drink. She didn’t care what Dirk said. No doubt about it, the design was hers, and this was no coincidence. What explained it? The starting point for holding on to sanity was acknowledging that someone—some real person involved with this motel—had stolen her drawing and used it to make these godawful prints.

Seated or not, Molly felt as unsteady as when she’d stood at the reception desk and first tried to absorb what she was seeing. It was as if she’d tumbled down Alice’s rabbit hole—no, worse, it was as if she’d stepped into one of those otherworldly episodes in a *Twilight Zone* rerun. She’d need to talk to someone in management about this, but who?

As she sat with her drink, gazing up at the prints, she knew there was a problem: Not only had she never photographed her drawing, it was different enough from her usual style that, conceivably, another artist might have made it. How could she prove these prints had anything to do with her when her drawing was not only missing, but had been an aberration—a one-off square drawing rather than the vertical rectangles she usually worked on? Plus, in its simplicity and reductiveness, it was a far from her normal jazzy style. Without needing Dirk to tell her, she could almost hear her opponent’s

lawyer arguing in court that diamond shapes were a dime a dozen in contemporary art.

Through the comforting haze brought on by the whiskey, Molly noticed a tallish man with a slim build and graying hair who looked to be somewhere in his early forties trying to catch her eye. When he did, he moved over three stools.

“Hi there, I’m Matt Bronzky,” he said directly but politely, “from Chicago. On my way to New York. And you?” The greeting came with a smile and a swift glance at her left hand to ascertain if anything was on her ring finger.

Although Molly didn’t feel in the mood to talk, her mother had raised her to never be rude to anyone, friend or stranger, even a stranger on the civilized make. She knew how to handle Matt.

“Molly,” she said, “I’m Molly. Nice to meet you. I’m from Brooklyn—on the way to Normal, staying here with my boyfriend.”

The muscles in Matt’s face tightened as he registered that scoring with her was a lost cause. All that was left was to have a bit of meaningless chit chat before heading back to his room, alone.

“Nice paintings they have in this motel, don’t you think?” Matt said.

Molly hesitated. “Well, actually, they’re prints, not paintings.” She paused and took a healthy swig of her drink. “The truth is,” she said, “the prints you see in front of you—all the prints all over this motel, in fact—are mine.” She stirred

her drink vigorously, and then looked hard at Matt. He wasn’t exactly a looker, but there was something about him, around the mouth, especially, that was attractive and not entirely fake.

“Really? You’re kidding me,” Matt said, looking up at the prints behind the bar. “Seriously, before you came in here I was thinking they’re really nice. Very cheerful colors. I could use them in my business—I mean, I sell office furniture and supplies, not art, but this got me thinking I could try to sell something like this to upgrade our client base. Maybe use the design on some of our lines of upholstery. So, you’re really the artist? Seriously, I’m impressed. Congratulations!”

“Congratulations for what? It’s not what you think,” Molly said. “Look, it’s way too hard to explain to a stranger, but these aren’t what I intended.” Matt, surprised at her ferocity, shifted nervously in his seat.

“I have to tell you something, Matt,” Molly said, suddenly leaning slightly toward him. “Matt’s your name, right? Listen. I hate these things you say you like. They’re nothing more than dumb, blank hotel art. What you don’t know is that someone stole a drawing I made a while back and used it to come up with the design for the prints you see decorating this motel. These prints are based on my art, yes, but my art is different. It has touch and soul, and it doesn’t have all these stupid, random colors. It expresses something profound about the beautiful vagaries of existence on top of the underlying order of the universe, and it’s made

for people who love pondering abstract art and believe in its meaning. It's not for people who merely like decoration and pretty colors."

"I don't know about any of that," Matt said, in a weary voice. "All I know is that I stopped at this motel after driving a really long time and the first thing I saw was the way there were all these nice diamond paintings everywhere, and I thought to myself, 'Wow! These are beautiful.' I felt better just looking at them."

Molly pushed her empty glass to the side and stood up. "Nice to meet you Matt, but I have to go join my boyfriend upstairs. And first thing tomorrow, yes, I will be hunting down the manager of this place and having a little talk with him about this so-called art."

The receptionist on night duty told Molly that the manager, somebody named Bernard Souser, would be at the motel by around 8:00 a.m.

Molly left a note for him saying she had urgent business needing his immediate attention, and then went up to the room. Dirk was softly snoring.



Molly and Bernard sat in silence in Bernard's office, staring at one another. Things had started off badly, a half hour earlier at the front desk, when Molly had immediately and loudly proclaimed that she was going to sue both him and the motel for stealing her art, and that if any of her artist friends in New York ever discovered her drawing had been turned into schlocky prints decorating a motel, she'd be

humiliated and her reputation and career as an artist destroyed. After Bernard ushered her into his office and closed the door behind them, she fell to sobbing, so much so that it took her several gulping attempts to explain things before he grasped what it was she was talking about.

It wasn't easy for Bernard to give an account of how her drawing ended up on his office wall, and how it came about that it had been turned into 500 large format color ink-jet prints installed in just about every room and hallway of the motel, and in just about every which way. His virtue as a man had always been his sincerity, however, so he simply told her the truth as best as he could recall it. Now there seemed nothing more to say. Twenty seconds of silence seemed like an hour.

Bernard, his thick hands clasped together on his desk, was the first to speak again.

"Ms. Upton," he said, "From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. I can't tell you how sorry I am about this whole mess. I really and truly meant what I told you—I found your drawing and I immediately fell in love with it. To this day I love it. Can't you see that? Why else would I hang it here, on the wall in my office? I framed it with the best frame I could afford because I love it so much, and it makes me really happy to be able to look at it every day."

Molly listened to Bernard while wiping her wet face with the back of her hand. "I meant no harm when I made the prints—actually, you might be mad at me for this, and maybe it was overstepping, but I thought that by adding color

I was making your wonderful drawing into something regular folks who don't know a lot about art might enjoy. After headquarters gave me the go-ahead to use the diamond design for the décor, it took me eight months of working with the decorator to get them all printed up, framed and installed just right. There's really no need to talk about a lawyer. I'll pay you, out of my own pocket if I have to, whatever you think is reasonable compensation."

"That's not what I want, Mr. Souser. I want the damn things removed," Molly answered. "Every last one of them."

Bernard turned his head and looked through the window into the dull distance.

"Maybe you have that legal right," he said. "I don't know. A lawsuit would mean I'd certainly lose my job—not that that's your problem. Maybe you'd win in court. Listen, I believe everything you've told me about how you lost the drawing, but to be frank, it seems like an awfully hard case to prove, what with there being no photograph or signature or anything."

Molly turned around in her chair to look at her drawing, her tears welling up once again.

"I guess, Ms. Upton," Bernard continued, turning away from the window to look at her, "I'm asking for your understanding. From what you say, your artist friends in New York City would make fun of you for having prints of your work in a motel in a place like Laresville. I can't say I really understand that—to me, the prints here are beautiful, and you should be

proud of them—but I take your word for it. Everyone at the Oak Ridge loves them. Why not let me pay you something for them? And maybe even introduce you to other Oak Ridge Inn managers who've admired them and asked about having some in their properties? Wouldn't you like some commissions based off your beautiful diamond drawing?"

Molly thought about how her landlord had just emailed her that he wouldn't be renewing the lease on her 300-square foot studio, which she'd had for almost six years, as the building was being converted into condos. When she returned after the holidays, she'd have to hunt down a new studio, and it wasn't going to be either easy or cheap.

Bernard's eyes started to water. "It goes without saying that the drawing on that wall is yours. I mean, I'd love to keep it and pay you for it. But I understand from what you've told me that it was meant for your sister. So please, take it now. You can surprise her with it when you get there."

Molly stood up. She had stopped crying, but her face was hot and red. She pulled the strap to her purse up and over her head so that it crossed in front of her on a diagonal. Bernard stood up as well, his arms hanging loose at his sides.

"Mr. Souser, I've got to leave—my boyfriend and I have almost another full day of driving to get to my sister's house. I need time to get my head straight about this and figure out what I want to do. Right now, I'm confused. But I apologize for coming on so angry. That was definitely wrong of me. And I believe you that it

was all a misunderstanding, and that you like my drawing. But..."

Bernard waited.

"The artist in me can't get over what's happened to my art by your making these prints."

Molly walked over to her picture and carefully lifted it off the wall. She turned around and laid it flat on Bernard's desk, verso side up. Bernard made one final effort. "Please let me buy this drawing from you, Ms. Upton. Seriously, I'll pay whatever you want that's within reason."

Molly gently stroked the side of the frame exactly as if it were a purring cat. Aside from the hum coming from the wall heating unit, the room was silent.

"You can have the drawing, Mr. Souser," she suddenly said. "I don't want any money for it. Just keep it and enjoy it." Molly reached inside her purse, pulled out a black pen, and swiftly signed the back of the framed drawing: "*Five Diamonds in a Square,*" *Molly Upton*