

Caitlin O'Neil
from *Souvenir*

The Devries place is one of those modernist houses that the summer people are building, a steel and glass box on spindle-legged piers that creeps toward into the bay like a reluctant swimmer. All the landscaping is indigenous sea grass and scrub pine. Martha is annoyed at the effort that's been put into making the yard look natural, but she supposes it is better than rolling out a gaudy green lawn. The front door, a series of portholes in glossy teak, opens before Martha can knock.

A young woman with tight red curls thrusts her hand forward.

“So sorry to drag you all the way out here. I'm Shelia Devries.”

She is younger than Martha expected. Most of the collectors interested in her mother's work are older women with frustrated artistic ambitions who are only too happy to settle for one of Martha's murals if it will get them a whiff of the Chambers mystique.

“It's not so far,” Martha replies. It revolts her how easily she can muster an obsequious tone of customer service. “I'm happy to do it.”

Shelia ushers her through a slate tiled foyer into a sunken living room with floor-to-ceiling windows split horizontally into two shades of heartbreaking blue: ocean and sky. There is not a bird or a buoy to mar it. Looking out, you could believe that you were on an island far from civilization. Shelia gestures toward a sleek suede couch where she sits down beside Martha.

“No, I mean, we've decided against the mural,” says Shelia. “A new Fiona Chambers just came on the market.”

“That's impossible.”

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As a condition of the sale, Martha had asked to be informed whenever one of Fiona's paintings sold. Alice thought it excessive, but Martha had vowed that her paintings would never again wind up forgotten in closet.

"It all happened so fast," says Shelia. "Maybe they didn't have a chance to call you."

Shelia is pale and well-kept like an exotic cat. Her jewelry is silver, handcrafted, and impeccable. Fiona would have been pleased with her new patron, thought Martha. She would have painted her in gray and blue.

"It's possible." Martha speaks calmly to mask the panic rising in her chest.

Shelia puts a hand on Martha's thigh. "Your mother is amazing."

"I know," says Martha.

Lord, how she knew. In lieu of a Fiona Chambers original, people clamored for a Martha Chambers, hoping that success might run in the family. But Martha has tried in vain. Last summer, when the college didn't have any teaching work, Martha even set up an umbrella on her mother's old corner and painted pastels for passersby, trying to channel Fiona and failing miserably. She couldn't even get the lame pastels to look right, let alone find the disturbing edge that made her mother's paintings so memorable.

"Do you have a picture of it?"

"The gallery just faxed one over."

Shelia opens one of the shining teak doors that ringed the sunken living room. Inside is a sleek and glittering home office with state of the art electronics whirring like contented animals. Martha has never understood the inclination to build such a grand temple to relaxation and then bring along the work that's paying for it, but perhaps that's the only way such extravagance could be afforded.

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Sheila returns holding glossy five by seven photo. Martha gasps when she sees it.

“There must be some mistake.”

“Is something wrong?” To Sheila’s credit, she does look truly concerned.

“That painting is not for sale.” Martha’s mouth was cotton dry.

Sheila stops smiling and snaps into action.

“I’ll call Helen. She’ll know what to do.”

Sheila marches into the office. While she is dialing the phone with quick stabs of her index finger, Martha runs to the door and lets herself out. She should have seen this coming.

It is a quirk of the old house that the porch is often warmer in the winter than in late August. The afternoon sun slips between the neighboring houses at just the right angle, sending cascade of warm, orange light onto the empty wall. Martha falls into the padded metal lounge chair and stares at the place where the painting should be. She tries to recreate it from memory, but for once her mind is blank. Martha sits and stares, perhaps for hours. She loses track.

By the time Fiona was diagnosed, it was too late to do anything. Against her wishes, Alice quit school to care for her. At the time Martha was in Boston, taking classes at the museum school to complete her degree. Her mother refused further help – she would not have two dropout daughters on her hands – and Martha knew she preferred to have Alice take care of her anyway. So she returned only at the end, when her pale shell of a mother was wrapped in bathrobe and propped here in the sunroom, where she died one Friday morning with her face turned toward the sun. Her last words to Martha were, “Take care of your sister.”

By the time Martha hears Alice pull into the driveway, it is dark. She has stared for so long that she can see the canvas on the wall. It looks like cracked stained glass. A face emerges

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slowly from the shards, the glittering emeralds and sapphires, the angry black edges. That's when she realizes she and Alice were wrong. It is not self-portrait. It is a painting of their father. He had been caught in a net and thrown over the side of his boat. They never found his body.

Through the dark house, Martha hears footsteps. Alice appears in the doorway dressed in Tim's faded red BU sweatshirt, one of their mother's flowered skirts, and combat boots that belonged to an old boyfriend. If Alice has clothes of her own, Martha has never seen them.

"You took Mom's painting," says Martha.

"You have to promise you won't be mad."

"Too late."