

BONFIRE
OF THE
VANDERBILTS

Gerald Everett Jones



LaPuerta

Santa Monica, California

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For Kathleen

The Paris *Herald* is run on the theory that most society people, and Americans generally, would much rather see their names in print and those of their friends than read any amount of news.

—Albert Stevens Crockett

Prologue

Mr. Julius Stewart is at present engaged upon a large work, the subject of which is a fashionable christening in a private parlor. He might not possibly care to have the scheme made public, and it is sufficient to say that he has treated his subject in an original manner.

—“Art Notes,” *New York Herald* (Paris), March 31, 1892

TUESDAY, MAY 31, 1892, PARIS

Julius Stewart laid his brush down. He'd just signed *The Baptism*, adding “Paris 1892” after his name. He had indeed painted the enormous work in his own studio on rue Copernic, and several of the figures in it had modeled for him there.

The annotation was literally true, but not entirely honest. His identifying the locale was accurate to a point.

But in another sense it was a deliberate lie.

Painters did not habitually note the city unless it had something to do with the work's subject, such as when the scene or the place of execution or both were someplace other than home.

The event depicted here had taken place across the ocean—six years ago in Newport, Rhode Island. And even though the faces of some of the figures were recognizable as

his professional models or friends and relatives who took the time to stand in, several of the most distinctive among them were faithful likenesses of people Jules had never met—people who, if this picture ever went on public display, might well deny being there in that place on that day.

The event seemed innocent enough—mundane as milk. Who would care enough to be annoyed by a subject little more momentous than a birthday party? Paintings aren't photographs, hardly proof of anything. Stewart had simply changed some facts, as artists do.

After all, only a handful of people in the world would see the scandal in it. But those powerful, famous few would be furious. And formidable as their reputations were, their images would be forever tarnished. The irony was, the more publicly angry they became, the worse it would be for them.

Stewart coveted fame—no, public recognition—much more than he feared reprisal. He'd changed enough details, he thought, so the sources and origins would be deniable. But he'd left enough of the truth in there for any careful observer to find.

After the last coat dried, he'd turn the canvas around and obliterate the notations he'd made on the verso. But he would stop short of doing a proper job of it, as one might do, for example, by painting over his charcoal scrawls with more charcoal ground in oil.

His crime would be no more than a hurried scratching out of several clues, leaving just enough for close inspection to uncover and guess at the truth.



1

The Painting

MONDAY AFTERNOON,
SEPTEMBER 6, 2010, LOS ANGELES

“Turn around,” Maggie said. “Tell me what you see.”

Grace thought it was a joke, that a museum guard would be standing behind her making rabbit-ears over her head—she didn’t know what. What she saw instead was “the painting,” as she would come to call it, because from this day forward this image would define her life.

Julius Stewart’s *The Baptism* stretched along the wall behind her. More than six feet tall, nearly ten feet wide, it depicts a family in a Victorian drawing room. In fact, it has twenty-one individual portraits. The event is somber and elegant, a priest standing in front of a young couple, the wife holding a newborn. Men in suits, women in silks and satins. Off to the left, a pre-teen girl holds a rag doll at her side. A couple of restless younger boys in sailor suits look like they can’t wait to race from the room.

The eye surveys it all in a moment and then comes to rest. And lingers. On the reclining figure of a woman in the lower right, seated all the way across the room from the priest, the

infant, and the ceremony. A fur-lined lap robe thrown over her legs, the woman is dressed in her peignoir, as if she were permitted out of bed just long enough to witness the event. Her eyes are heavy-lidded, her face is ashen, and with one hand she limply clutches a small bouquet of violets in her lap.

Violets.

A symbol of death.

The woman's eyes are focused on the baby. Not just focused—fixated. People surrounding her aren't as interested in the ceremony. A man, perhaps her husband, sits directly behind her, his head disconsolately in his hands. Beside him sits an older, white-whiskered fellow in a smoking jacket. Her father? His? He, too, is downcast.

Other people in the room might have their eyes on the ceremony, but their attention is really on her, on the one who is dying.

Grace stared at the sick woman.

Maggie studied Grace. "What do you think of it?" Maggie asked finally.

"I think the sick woman is the mother, not the woman holding the baby," said Grace. "How do I know that?"

"Because it doesn't make sense, otherwise," said Maggie. She waited for Grace to say something, but it never came. Her attention was on death, which was staring at life. It was so tragic.

The woman would not live to see her baby grow up.

It was horrible!

Compounding her horror, Grace now realized, was the fact that the sick mother looked just like her—a tall, blonde beauty.

No one should have to be subjected to this! Not on her birthday, of all days. But Grace couldn't stop staring. She knew how the woman felt. She couldn't put it into words. But she knew—everything about her. Everything except the facts, of course.

Maggie was the lecturer now. "The couple standing with the priest are the baby's sponsors."

"That's right," Grace said. "You were raised Catholic, weren't you?"

"It's not Catholic. It's Episcopal," she said. "The other woman standing beside the priest is the third sponsor. They need two sponsors the same sex as the baby and one of the opposite."

"How do you know?" Grace asked.

"I've been to those churches. For a christening. The priest explained it." Maggie came closer and joined Grace in studying the painting. "Know what I think? I think her husband is cheating on her, and she knows it."

"It's killing her," Grace agreed.

Maggie studied Grace, who gave her no visible reaction.

There was another long pause, but Grace didn't find it uncomfortable. She was busy, not thinking, just occupied, the way a cat could study a mouse or a three-year-old could watch television.

Maggie sat down to put on her shoes. Still on her feet, Grace was momentarily dizzy.

“You all right?” Maggie asked.

“Low blood sugar, I guess,” said Grace.

Maggie stood up, straightened her clothes, and smoothed back her dark hair. “Can’t do the tea, I’m sorry. Another time.”

“You have to get back?” Grace was not sure she was ready to leave.

“I have to pick up Sylvie at three,” Maggie said.

“Piano lessons?” Grace asked.

“No. Tai-Boh,” Maggie replied, and laughed. “Don’t cross her. Sylvie’s a tough kid, and now she can defend herself.”

Grace wondered why Maggie still hadn’t mentioned her birthday. And whether Maggie had seen the painting before. And why she was dropping those hints about adultery. Did she think the painting would inspire the same feelings in Grace? How could two people, even close friends of the same age and sex, be expected to react the same way to a piece of art?

Grace had to admit, the painting upset her deeply, but she couldn’t explain why.

She insisted on staying a few minutes longer so she could take a dozen shots of the painting with her phone. Just before they left, it occurred to her to read the museum card affixed to the wall beside the painting. The card said the family might be a branch of the Vanderbilts, but nobody knows for sure.

It also mentioned that the painting once had an inscription, which the artist took pains to remove.

2

The Challenge

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1889, PARIS

“Publicly humiliating Cornelius Vanderbilt would be the crowning achievement of my shamelessly unprincipled career,” the older man said.

“And why would you want to do that?” Jules asked.

“Because he’s not only the richest but also the most insufferably self-righteous man in the world.” Jim gulped his liquor and smacked his lips. “Whereas I am an unrepentant sinner who just happens to own Europe’s most notorious scandal sheet. My readers want the high and the mighty knocked down to their level and preferably into the stinking muck. What’s that Balzac novel? *A Harlot High and Low!* I never read it, but I’m sure it’s my kind of story.”



Just a few hours earlier, getting drunk was far from Julius Stewart’s plan. In fact, before his friend suggested dinner, he’d intended going to bed early because he expected tomorrow to be most momentous day of his career.

The great and grand Paris Universal Exposition of 1889 would open in the morning, and Jules had done all he could to prepare himself. While the lamplighters were tending the gaslights along the Champs Elysées this evening, workers at the hall would be unpacking the last of the crates containing six of his most stunning works. At least one of his paintings, probably *The Hunt Ball*, was sure to garner a Grand Award, the prestigious show's highest honor. For an American who had lived most of his adult life here among the greatest living artists on Earth, that would be a stellar accomplishment, a coup.

Generations of art historians would classify Stewart as an American painter. He would not have approved. He preferred the French "Jules" to his given "Julius." He was a French gentleman in all other respects, wasn't he?

There was absolutely no cause for worry about how the next day would go, but a *digestif* does tend to relax a man after a sumptuous dinner. One drink led to another, and now he was in serious danger of not greeting the auspicious morning with a clear head.

His vision was beginning to blur. With difficulty, Jules studied his drinking companion across the table. James Gordon Bennett, Jr. looked old, animated, and positively rosy all at once. He pulled himself up a bit, as if sitting straighter would impart dignity to his lofty subject. "Dear boy," Bennett began in a tone the younger man detested, "could you paint something you'd never seen?"

Despite his irritation at Bennett's addressing him as the junior man, Jules perceived it as a professional question and made an effort to reply as seriously as if they were having afternoon tea. "From imagination, do you mean? That's a schoolboy's trick—lacking in richness, lacking in any art at all, really. Art is in the details, you understand. One would need a model of some kind, because details do not exist in the abstract, I assure you. Besides, it's been done."

"You don't say!" Bennett exclaimed. Jules suspected he was begin mocked.

Undeterred, Jules lectured, "Alonzo Chappel's *The Last Hours of Lincoln*. Must be twenty years ago—1868, if I have it right. The artist wasn't present at the deathbed, of course. He reconstructed the scene from Matthew Brady photographs of the ungodly number who came to pay their respects, almost fifty of them. Gérôme has an engraving of the thing," said Jules, referring to the famous painter, his mentor at the École des Beaux-Arts. "A bit stiff and contrived, if you ask me, but a technical achievement, nonetheless. My colleague Jean Béraud did much the same thing. His was called *The Editorial Room of the Journal des Débats*. He liked to brag that it included forty likenesses. All stiff as a board! The problem is not so much the likenesses, but getting realistic poses, making the thing breathe."

They had been drinking absinthe for well onto four hours now, having started in the early evening after dinner at a decorous little sidewalk café on the Boulevard Saint Germain.

A dwindling inventory of Bennett's favorite drug-laced liquor, Stewart's short supply of coins, and Bennett's habit of bellowing at odd moments had forced them to change venue to a smoky little *caveau* on Avenue Kléber where the proprietor knew Jules and was only too happy to let them drink on the cuff. For these two sodden playboys, it was a wise choice, situated within walking distance of Stewart's small but comfortable house on rue Copernic. When Bennett either decided he'd finally had enough or swooned, they'd be able to stumble eventually to the painter's home, where his housekeeper Violette could be roused and induced to turn down fresh linen in the guest room for his illustrious friend.

A supreme advantage of carousing with Bennett was, if you didn't want your name in the papers, your anonymity was assured. He owned *The New York Herald*, which published all the gossip from both sides of the Atlantic that was fit to print—and quite a bit more that wasn't. Having inherited the prestigious scandal sheet from his father, he was a veteran of the trade and an unashamed pragmatist. Bennett unerringly knew, not so much the facts other people should know, but the rumors and slanders they would feel compelled to know—and repeat. Years later, Albert Crockett, one of Bennett's veteran reporters, would observe, "The Paris Herald is run on the theory that most society people, and Americans generally, would much rather see their names in print and those of their friends than read any amount of news."

Bennett didn't often play the managing editor, though. His chief editorial directive to his reporters, it seemed, was to keep his own name out of the paper. But tonight he acted as if he were assigning a dirty-linen story to a man on the society beat.

"This painting of yours," Bennett finally got around to saying as he waved a professorial finger in the air, "it wouldn't be just any subject matter. You don't get to choose some vivid fantasy of yours." He paused for a wicked chuckle, suggesting that the younger man's fantasies were naughtier than they were, then knocked back another shot. (Stewart had indeed dabbled in *plein-air* nudes, and he would do more in later years.) "Rather," Bennett continued with a cough and a wheeze, "it's to be a specific event. A significant event. One you could not have witnessed personally. And I don't mean anything so trifling as the assassination of Garfield. Something private, but big."

"I'd need reference materials, of course..." Jules said, not quite agreeing. He didn't want to dodge the challenge, but he wondered whether the old fox might be setting a trap for him.

Bennett leaned forward confidentially, cleared his throat of a rummy's phlegm, and said in a lowered, sober voice, "You'd have to do it so well, so brilliantly, your subjects would never admit—and no one else would dare to guess—that you didn't observe it firsthand." He sat up again, his eyes growing wide with a new thought: "You know, you might even put your own likeness in it. Good God, that would be a stroke." (Stewart had done as much before, in *The Hunt Ball*, as Bennett knew.)

“Why would I attempt such a thing?” asked Jules.

“To prove that you can, of course. Alone of all the skilled portraitists in the world. Nothing stiff, casual as you please. Show the stuck-up portrait photographers they can still learn a thing or two from a true artist.”

“But if I succeed, if my execution is as masterful as you demand, and if the illogical objective you set is indeed met—I won’t be able to tell a soul!”

Bennett sighed, sinking into his chair with a smile. “That’s the beauty of it, dear boy. To achieve an impossible thing just for its own sake!”

Jules thought the idea over for a moment. Jim Bennett evaluated all transactions in terms of money or pleasure or some other form of useful social currency. He was not a man of ideals, nor was he prone to conceive of intellectual challenges that brought no profit. He would take a bet if he were certain of winning—particularly on an embarrassing piece of gossip he could print in his newspaper to subvert and infuriate one of his many and powerful enemies.

Jules took a brave gulp of the absinthe. “I know you better than that,” he said. “If the result is to bring me no benefit, except in my own mind, there must be another, more immediate benefit. Perhaps to you personally?”

“I have my reasons,” Bennett said.

“So, how does this stratagem of yours humiliate Vanderbilt?”

“Oh, his brother Willie is an all-right sort. Married to that hellion from wherever in the deep South they breed her kind. You have to respect a man who can tie himself to a demanding woman and not lose his good sense in the bargain.”

“Everything I’ve ever heard of Cornelius Vanderbilt says he’s honest to a fault,” said Jules. “The Vanderbilts bought a painting of mine, in fact—my *Lune de Miel*.”

“So, you’ve met him, then?”

“Oh, I never met him. Avery handled the transaction. I was told C. V. was in Paris at the time—that’s what Avery always called him—but he never brought him around.” Jules’ father, William Hood Stewart, had made a fortune in Cuban sugar cane and was one of the most respected art collectors in Paris. The American dealer Samuel P. Avery, Sr. was of the same generation. When he visited Paris, he called on William—his friend, customer, and talent scout—and was an honored guest at the Stewart family table. Even after Jules had established himself as a painter of some repute, he resented Avery’s continuing to treat him as if he were a boy still in knickers. “You know,” Jules said as he poured himself a shot, “I’m not sure Vanderbilt even laid eyes on the work before he paid.”

“Betrays a distinct lack of taste, if you ask me,” said Bennett, visibly pleased to find another flaw in the man’s character.

“Still, I have no reason to judge Vanderbilt harshly.”

“I have a corker of a story,” Bennett chuckled. “You’ll see. This man’s monstrous vanity craves laceration.”

3

Her Birthday Morning

EARLY MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2010, LOS ANGELES

Grace Atwood had not yet laid eyes on *The Baptism*. When she awoke this bright morning, she thought her life was perfect. It was the last day she would ever, could ever, think such an innocent thing.

That night, she'd had the now-familiar dream—a cat licking her hands. Brushing her hair from her eyes, she got a whiff of the bad smell again. It was the scent of civet, but not strong, on her hands. Had a skunk gotten into her garden and Grace brushed against something that had captured its scent? Had a stray cat crept into the house and sprayed on her sheets? It had to be something like that. It always took some washing to get it off, but with a little soap and water, it was gone.

It didn't surprise her that Alan's side of the bed was empty. He liked to joke that his Saab sailed with the prevailing onshore wind in the morning. He had to get up early to beat the smog to Pasadena.

She yawned, groped for her glasses on the nightstand, and plodded to the bathroom. She delighted in her decision

to ignore her slippers in favor of the luxuriant caress of plush carpet on her bare feet.

How long had this sensation been bothering her? A month? A year? The oddity of it had disturbed her at first. Had the smell persisted after she washed, she might have sought help, but these days it was simply a minor annoyance. When she'd first noticed it, she'd asked Alan to smell her hands at breakfast, before she washed them, and he said he couldn't smell anything. Then, when it didn't go away, she waited several hours to wash until her friend Maggie could come over, and Maggie said she didn't notice it either.

Grace was somewhat oversensitive to smells of all kinds. She didn't wear perfume, and she couldn't bear to be in the same room with lilies. By now she'd rationalized that the cause must be something in her daily routine, probably some activity in late evening. Or, it could be the side-effect of some medication or vitamin oozing from her pores. But it was something subtle enough that she alone could detect it. The silly thing was embarrassing. She was sure she wasn't imagining it, but she'd decided not to confide in anyone else—at least for the time being.

She was pleased with her new glasses—Paloma Picasso, vintage frames she'd special-ordered from Tiffany. She thought they made her look European. It annoyed her that the acrylic lenses seemed to get smudged a lot. But her prescription was so strong that glass lenses would be hopelessly heavy. She disliked glasses slipping down her nose. Pushing them back up

made her look geeky. Which, of course, she was, by anyone's definition. Geeky *and* pretty.

Alan wore glasses, too, but lately he'd been talking about getting contact lenses. Grace thought this was odd. He wasn't even slightly vain. At least, not about his appearance.

Her nearsightedness had been getting progressively worse. The eye doctor said this was typical in old age, but it was somewhat remarkable in a young woman like herself. It was one more symptom she might mention the next time she saw her internist. She couldn't see any detail without the glasses. The entire world looked like some Impressionist painting, composed of splotches and daubs. Often, it was a pleasant sensation.

With her glasses on, she could see every pore. There she was in the gilt-edged bathroom mirror. Peaches and cream. Rose-tipped breasts molded from two fine-china teacups. Makeup would not improve her, and she would not need a bra, not for years and years. All right, she saw some puffiness under the eyes, but that's what you get for allowing yourself a second glass of Pinot Grigio with dinner. Of course, tonight she wouldn't limit herself at all. Not tonight, on her thirtieth! She wasn't the slightest bit sad. Alan was predictable as a clock, and she was sure he was giving her a surprise party, as he had every one of the eight uneventful years they'd been married.

Grace could rightly say her marriage was perfect, from all appearances. Alan was so attentive that he seemed needlessly possessive to people who didn't know them. They had

no children, but she told herself that had been a career decision for each of them. This also was a rationalization, but she didn't dwell on it.

Besides, Sylvie was as close to her as a daughter, and Maggie didn't seem to mind.

As she washed the odor from her hands, Grace remembered: Hadn't Maggie called? Something about wanting to do the county museum today? What kind of ruse was that? If it's going to be a big party, the caterers will need time to set up. Still, it was odd for her to call so early. Had it been four? Five? If Grace didn't know better, if the coincidence of Maggie's invitation and the birthday party weren't so obvious, she'd think it was something else. Perhaps her friend had had a sleepless night, man trouble—excuse me—relationship issues?

It was a workday, but since when did Lucas care? Wear something silk with lots of color. They'd wander through the Impressionists, then take tea on the sunny patio at that old marbled building somebody turned into a Marie Callender's. Share a piece of chocolate truffle cheesecake and get the scoop. Man trouble, she was willing to bet. Maggie doesn't usually tell her the details, but she would make her: *It's my birthday, sweetie, so give it up!*

Grace turned the hot water tap, grabbed a fresh Egyptian linen washcloth, and waited for the steam to rise. Running water is white noise, as Alan would describe it, and white noise stimulates brain cells in random ways, stirring suppressed thoughts. You could try it anytime. Just turn on the tap and see

what comes up. As she did, she almost caught a dream flitting by, but she couldn't hold it. There were other images, not just the cat. She almost never remembered her dreams—a sign, she was sure, that she was happy and well adjusted. Whatever healing her brain did at night, it was done without her having to worry about it during the day. She was a self-repairing human miracle. Oh, there was the glimpse of a car skidding. But she remembered from freshman psych class that, contrary to popular belief in Bible stories, dreams have no supernatural predictive power. They simply translate subconscious feelings into images—and not very sensible translations, at that. She suspected quite reasonably that a skidding car meant lack of control, or, more precisely, the fear of losing control. Perhaps she was only afraid she'd misfiled something at work. No big deal, proof of how organized she was, to worry about something as minor as her filing. And that didn't really deserve to be a significant problem at all.

If Lucas would just break down and get her an assistant, she wouldn't have to deal with those annoying paper files anyway. She hated them. Each one had to have a label—you couldn't just print directly on the tab. The label had to be neat. She didn't want to do them on the computer because she didn't want to waste a whole sheet of labels. She'd prefer to type them.

Imagine! Who uses a typewriter anymore? Try to even find one. All the other research associates scribble a mess right on the tab in pencil. The department was full of reused file folders,

recycled as they should be, but with all those eraser-smudged tabs. What is the world coming to?

Lucas complained she was having trouble with the filing, both paper and electronic. She didn't think her organizational skills had gotten any worse. She suspected he was becoming fussier in his old age, which at sixty-nine is hardly old, but apparently it comes with the right to be more opinionated.

There was sometimes another dream, not part of the same one, because it felt different. It had a panic with it. A voice, calling to her:

Who's your friend, Grace?

The panic hovered momentarily as she walked to the window and caught her breath. She looked up to see old, stooped Norm Schlosser watering his roses, and the panic vanished. Freshman psych again delivered a convenient answer: The brain doesn't want to be roused, wants sleep to flow on like a surging river. Hear a noise or feel something on the skin, and the brain incorporates it into the dream imagery in an instant. Take, for example, the sensation of the cat licking her hands. Now, there's some fast computing! Was there an actual physical sensation involved? A breeze or a wisp of fabric? In a moment, her brain incorporated the noise or itch or whatever into her dream instead of waking her.

The voice had to have been from Schlosser's television. He can't sleep, poor man. A widower, all alone for four years now. Stays up all hours watching the late movie. Loves the 'fifties horror stuff. So, he's got a window open, the audio on

his home theater system cranked way up (because he can't hear very well), and Grace's inventive brain comes up with spooky voices speaking from her subconscious. Clever—Norm gets to watch his scary movie and Grace gets her beauty sleep.

Human beings are amazing creatures, aren't they?

As she toweled off, Grace found her phone and called the office. She got the robot voice announcing the Celini Foundation and punched Lucas Milner's extension. Ah, good, voice mail. He's not in yet, or else he's got a mouthful of croissant and soy latté. He's reading the *New York Review of Books* and wondering whether anyone else in Los Angeles reads above the tenth-grade level. She waited for the beep and then told him she was taking a personal day, which was nothing but the truth. He wouldn't be upset, she was sure. She'd been working like a demon all last week, running down reference items for computer-challenged art history students who were late with their term papers—and, after all, he'd be invited to the party tonight, wouldn't he? She'd give him a big, wet kiss and tell him what a lovely day she'd spent with the Impressionists. Call it a refresher course, continuing education.

Alan was the scientist of the family. Was his need to explain things down to the minutest detail rubbing off on her?

Here she was, worrying about psychology and brain function on this bright, clear day, on her birthday. She wished she had more of Alan's knack for organization. Maybe the two of them weren't so different, this computer nerd and this art

historian. He was logical, she was sensible. They had done it right. He wasn't passionate, but he was sweet.



Later that day, Grace's dream of perfection would evaporate in an instant. She would see something, an image, not different in character from a dream, but nonetheless a real image, and her life would change. More precisely, her view of life would change. The image would stir an involuntary feeling in her, without her taking thought, without putting the thing into words.

Her distress about that feeling and her obsession with it would shape all the days she had left.