

The Capture of Art



DONNA VILLANI

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With the exceptions of actual personages identified, historic events and places as such, the characters and incidents in the fictional story of *The Capture of Art* are entirely the products of the author's imagination and have no relation to any person or event in real life.

Dedication

Thanks to the blessings from God who, through the love of my father, August John Eimer, Jr., and my mother, Rosemary (Cookie) (nee) Schuler, gave me life; for my sister, who knows her submarines, Connie Voss (nee) Eimer and Ken Schmitt for their endless intellectual support in making this work possible; for the ever caring ear of my mother-in-law, Juanita Villani (nee) Powell; for the inspiring support from family and friends; and finally for my husband, Ronald Frank Villani, who kept my head out of the clouds and my feet on the ground.

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1

It was an unusually warm September day. The leaves were glowing with the waxy shine they always displayed just before their magnificent explosion of color. The dramatic changes from the familiar shades of green into breathtaking blazing reds, scattered with glimpses of flaming yellows, always fascinated Elizabeth.

She was sitting on the back porch of their wood framed farmhouse. She felt she was the luckiest woman in the entire state of Kansas. Happiness filled her every fiber. In times past she would have been a part of the scene in front of her working the field beside her husband, Jason. But at this time she took a woman's pride in watching her muscular, bronze-tanned spouse toil in his labor of love for her and the new life that now stirred and kicked within her.

While she sat, Elizabeth snapped fresh green beans for their supper. Also this evening she was planning to serve the rabbit Jason had snared the day before. The rabbit had been simmering since early afternoon, in an iron pot on the wood stove in their small, cozy kitchen. She now would add the green beans with a few pared potatoes and carrots.

Elizabeth rose from her seat and watched as the northwest winds blew the tips of the trees leaves. She knew that soon they would be showing the ember-colored hues, which would again remind her why they named their land Red Winds.

Jason saw her get up from her chair on the porch and go into the house. "Ah good, that gives me about an hour to finish things up," he thought to himself, knowing that was his cue that the vegetables were going into the pot and supper would soon be ready. He would take this time to bring in his mules from the field and finish up some barn chores.

"Let's go girls," he said, as he led his mules into the barn where he took off their harnesses and brushed and wiped them down. He finished up by cleaning out the stalls and feeding them their ration of oats.

"Good girls," he said, as he patted the pair in their stalls and watched them enjoy the oats. "Now it's my turn girls." he said, his mouth watering when he thought about the feast that awaited him, as he started for the house.

Before they married in 1904, Jason Webster confided to her that he had always known that the woman who became his wife would be named Elizabeth. She would be an eye-catching beauty with long silky-soft ebony colored hair. Her sparkling charcoal eyes would beam an intimate, soul-searching recognition to him, letting him know that she was to be his life companion.

So, when he met her, he could almost feel her velvety, creamy physique calling to him, as he stood beside her. He felt that she dared him to take her, and keep her in his arms forever as his bride. In time, as fate would have it, his dream became reality, and they became husband and wife.

After five years of marriage, his precious, petite-shaped Elizabeth had been saddened with two previous miscarriages. This cautioned her to take it especially careful this time, as she now delighted in the fact that her midwife, Mae Yarborough, had assured her that this, her ninth month, was as it should be. Her baby was doing fine, and was positioned to become a soft bundle, to be nurtured, and cared for in its loving parent's arms.

Walking to the house, Jason could not help but notice that the air had acquired a distinctive change about it. It had not only altered its direction but it felt warmer, with a closeness that made it difficult to breathe. "Looks like we're in for a good one." he said aloud to himself as he looked at the southwestern sky and saw the cause for this humid condition blackening the horizon.

Storms always worried Jason, but now with Elizabeth about to give birth to their first child, the fury of this storm put a greater

mental strain on him. He knew the storm would come, just as sure as he knew the baby would be born.

Inside the house, he washed up by the hand operated well pump spigot in the kitchen. He watched his wife go about her business of setting the table for their meal. She was still an attractive sight in her oversized dress, with her apron draped in front of her, tied in such a fashion as to make her belly stick out more than she surely wanted it to. But she was thankful and happy of its existence.

He smiled to himself, at the vision she created. She always had an aura about her personality that tickled him, and made him cherish his friendship with her. His mood suddenly changed, with the wish that he could spare her from the pain she would have to endure to bring such joy to their lives.

"Looks like a storm is brewing up in the southwest," he said in a matter-of-fact way. Elizabeth knew what he was going to say next, because every time the sky darkened in that direction the winds would undoubtedly bring their turbulent tempest their way.

She waited, with a smirk on her lips, for him to say they would have to prepare for it as it would surely be raining cats and dogs before sunset. He surprised her, when he turned to her with a somber look on his face, and asked in a caring way. "Are you feeling all right?" she should have realized his concern for her knowing her time was close, and that Mae lived an hour's horse ride away. And then, there also was the stream that always flooded its banks, and crossed the road. Elizabeth tried to keep her mood light and happy, even though she had been experiencing some slight cramping during the day.

"Honey, I'm sure this baby will let us know when he's ready to come into the world. I have been having some slight cramping, but Mae said that is to be expected at this time in my pregnancy." Looking at him, she could sense the fear he was trying to hide from her.

"Should I go for Mae? I might have enough time before the storm hits and floods the stream," he said, concerned for her safety, but not wanting to leave her by herself.

"No, I truly don't think that's necessary yet. Besides, Mae is with Mrs. Anderson this week. Remember, she just had her fourth baby, and Mae always stays with the newborns and their mothers for about a week. I'm expecting her, the end of this

week,” she said, hoping not to insight panic in him. She knew her husband was a strong man, but since their other loses, she was afraid he thought the worst for her, so she always tried, if possible, to add less stress on him. Natural events were going to occur, and neither of them had any control over the situations.

Jason turned to Elizabeth, and hugged her at the familiar, soft-bulged distance he had become accustomed to, between them. She placed her small hand, on his day old, unshaven cheek, giving him a chill at its delicacy. Bending down, he kissed her lips. Looking at her, she noticed a twinkle in his clear blue eyes as he smiled and gave her a quick wink. “Well, if you’re sure everything is all right; do you think you could put a hold on supper? I want to check on the mules. They always get skittish when a storm’s coming. And yes, I’ll lock up the chickens,” he said in a teasing way. They always took turns with the latter task, and today it was her turn.

She nodded her approval, and smiled at him, as she gave his soft brown hair a light stroke with her fingers. Then, she playfully placed a swift pat on his backside as he turned to walk out the back door.

Outside, he could feel the air was cooling in wake of the storm. The wind had picked up velocity since he was last outside. Walking towards the barn, he could smell the fresh scent of rain in the air. He glanced over to see if all the chickens were in the coop, and they were, so he locked it.

Reaching the barn, he looked at the billowing clouds now racing across the field. Clouds ready to burst their contents. This storm was coming in faster than he had anticipated.

Opening the barn door, a sudden down-draft pulled the door from his grip, jerking him sideways. He hurried and grabbed the door and shut it behind him, just as a sharp bolt of thunder clapped; at the same time a flash of lightning lit up the barn through its small windows. The wind howled, as large hail pellets belted the roof.

Jason lit the lantern to find his nervous animals. The booming noise of the storm had them jumpy. “There you go. It’s all right girls.” he said, his familiar humming and petting calming their jitters.

Standing with his animals the storm let up. But then, the well-known eerie calm prompted him to put out his lantern and head

for the house. He knew he had to get Elizabeth to the safety of the fruit cellar.

He darted out of the barn, letting his animals out to fend for themselves. Closing the barn door, he noticed the damp air had a warm musk odor, and a tingling feeling that made his hair stand on edge. The sky had an ominous, lime green tint to it that seemed to filter through the air and mix with an opaque swirling cloud that was tunneling a whirlwind towards earth.

In the house, Elizabeth heard the storm lull, and the threatening calm. Thinking of her baby, she hurried to their small bedroom. Quickly, she started rummaging through their cedar chest. "Oh God, where is that gunnysack," she said aloud as she tossed unwanted items aside searching for Jason's gunnysack that he used for hunting. Finding it, she poured its contents on the dressing table, and replaced them with articles she thought she might need.

Mae had given her a booklet on childbirth, and she had helped Jason when their cows had trouble giving birth to the calves, so hurriedly she collected each item she thought she would need. "I'm sure we'll need the vial of medicinal alcohol, and I'll take these clean dish cloths, and when he's born he'll need this," she thought, as she stuffed the quilt she made for the baby in the sack. "And unfortunately these," she again said aloud, as she tucked her sharp sewing scissors in one of the cloths, and stowed them in the sack. "Oh God Mae, I'm glad I read that book, and I hope I have everything," she said, taking a moment to catch her breath.

Running into the kitchen, she wrapped a fresh loaf of bread in a napkin, and jammed it into the bag, as Jason ran into the house. They both knew time was of the essence. The underground fruit cellar was their only refuge.

"We have to hurry," he said, as he picked her up into his arms and ran out of the house towards the shelter. Elizabeth held the bag tight and her head down close to his chest. She did not see the giant tornado skipping across the field, racing towards them.

Reaching the cellar entrance, Jason put her down so he could open the door. "Watch your step, it's slippery," he caringly said, as he helped her down the narrow steps to the soft earthen floor.

The single room of the cellar was small but well equipped for such an occasion. Living in Kansas everyone knew the necessity of refuge from these deadly storms.

Jason secured the door above them and lit the lantern that cast a yellow glow in the room.

Elizabeth went directly to the straw mat that they kept in the cellar. She opened the small cedar box that held some emergency supplies, and brought out a warm cotton blanket. As the vibration of the storm shook the overhead door, they snuggled together on the mat, under the blanket.

The roar of the tornado seemed to go on forever, but only lasted a few minutes, and then the rumbles of thunder started, as the rain drenched the sod roof of the shelter.

“Beth, are you all right? Have the cramps gotten worse?” he asked, as he tried to focus his eyes on her in the limited light. She knew he was concerned when he used his pet nickname for her.

She tried to resituate herself on the mat when a severe streak of pain racked through her lower back, and she shrieked out his name. “Jason!” so shocked at its intensity.

Startled, he bolted straight up. He could see the blood drain from her face and her dark eyes transfix on the ceiling as she tried to control her pain. Just then another reeling lurch of pain, much worse than she had expected, stabbed at her back and she screamed out again. “Oh God, this must be it Jason! Please help me!” she yelled, as she started to roll on her side reaching her hand to her back trying to ease the pain.

Jason grabbed her shoulders, and turned her struggling body from her side to flat on her back. She let out a yelp, and tried to bend her body into the fetal position to subdue the painful labor. Her breathing increased, as perspiration flowed from her pores, and drenched her clothing.

Jason stripped off her clothes, and could not believe her strength as she resisted his help. Finally the pain subsided, and she eased her body slowly down on the coarse mat.

He took a jar of water from the cedar box, and the clean cloths she had brought from the gunnysack. He dipped the cloth into the water, rung it out, and wiped the perspiration from her body. He cooed her like a pet, but his hands trembled as he felt how cool her body had become. Wiping her brow, he pushed her matted hair away from her face and kissed her forehead. Looking deep into her eyes he vowed to her his loyalty until they could hold their baby in their arms.

“Beth, love, you are my life. Your pain is my pain. My strength is your strength. Remember that Beth, my strength in yours. I am a part of you. And with God’s help we will get through this together.” he said, with tenderness in his voice.

Elizabeth looked at him with such a deep trusting look in her eyes that it brought tears to his eyes. “Jason, it doesn’t hurt right now, but I think my water just broke.”

“Honey, it won’t be long now,” he said, after he checked and saw that the mat was soaked.

“The pain, oh no, the pain again, oh God no Jason!” she squealed, as she arched her back with her legs slightly open and bent at the knees. She was holding her breath, and at first he thought she had stopped breathing, as she fell to the mat.

“Beth, breathe. Take it in, and blow it out Honey. You can do it. Remember, I am your strength Beth, remember,” he yelled, at her.

“Yes, yes Jason I remember, you are my strength,” she said, as the pain decreased, easing her body from shaking, while again, she lay limp and spent on the mat.

Regaining her composure, she looked at him, not quite sure how to explain what she wanted to relate to him. “Jason, I don’t know what we might have here in the cellar, but remember when I helped you with the cows, and you rubbed that grease on them to help their calves out? Well, I think something like that might help me. What do you think?” she asked, as Jason started looking around the cellar for something, anything greasy. Then he spotted it. Would it work, he wondered. He reached for a jar of strawberry preserves on the shelf.

Opening the jar, the sweet smell of the preserves flared his nostrils. He jabbed his fingers into the jar, and scooped out an ample amount of the gooey substance.

In a caring way, he returned to his wife. With his arm outstretched and his hand cupped holding the preserves, he went next to her with the “grease” he would use to help his baby out of her agonized body, and into their arms. While she lay, regaining her will to continue her feat, he smeared it between her legs; any place he thought it would help her.

It was starting again, and Elizabeth tried to remember to lean on his strength. But something odd was happening this time; something, that in the aftermath of all that was now happening she would always refer to as her miracle. It would be her mira-

cle that willed her to fight, to live; not only for herself, but also for her family.

As the first pang pinched at her, her mind started swimming in a mirage of steamy fog. Looking at Jason, he appeared to be a liquid. She reached for him, but her hand passed right through him. The next thing she remembered, she was witnessing the birth of her baby. She was above, looking down at herself giving up a part of her body so her baby could have life.

She saw the black haired, pink body emerge from between her legs. She saw the little arms waving, and Jason gently cradling his hands beneath the baby to protect it from the scratchy mat. Her baby's legs kicked out, and she could see Jason take the baby in his arms. He put his fingers around the pulsating cord, and tied it in an odd knot, which stopped the blended flow of life that linked her with her baby, and at that very moment she felt herself returning to her body. The pain was not as intense, but definitely present with an urge to push out the afterbirth.

Turning to her, Jason prompted her to bear down; as the placenta spewed from her body, she expelled an exhausted sigh of relief from her expanded lungs.

Jason held his baby close to his chest, as he took the scissors and the vial of alcohol from the sack, and placed them on a cloth in front of him. He opened the vial, and to purify the scissors, he poured the alcohol on them. With his fingers still holding the cord, he could feel that the throbbing had stopped, so he cut the cord, leaving the knotted side closest to the baby.

Looking at Jason, she could see he was wrapping their baby in the quilt. Then she realized that she had not heard a cry from the baby.

"Jason, oh dear God, my baby, is he all right?" she said as he looked lovingly at her, with the baby nestled in his arms.

"Sweetheart, everything is all right. And right now I am holding the most beautiful creation I have ever seen in this world, a work of art. Beth, may I introduce you to your mirrored image, our lovely daughter," he said, as he knelt down next to her and placed their daughter in her arms.

Jason then went about cleaning his wife. She had forgotten about her naked body. All she cared about was wiggling in a very familiar way in her arms.

Jason covered them with the blanket, and tucked it in around his wife. He then tidied up the cellar. He wrapped the afterbirth in the soiled cloths, and put them in his gunnysack, which he would later bury in the backyard.

“Jason, she didn’t even cry. Isn’t she something special?” she said, as he looked at them. He thought he could see a halo of light around them. He felt that surely they were a blessed family.

“She is something special Sweetheart, and so are you. Congratulations Mom,” he said, as Elizabeth lit up his eyes with her loving smile.

“And congratulations to you too Dad,” she said, as they all cuddled together on the mat.

Finally, Jason realized that the storm must have been over for some time. He got up to open the door and check outside, but he could not budge it. He figured something must have fallen on it during the storm. Returning to his wife he calmly told her that the door was stuck, but that he would try it again later. This did not frighten Elizabeth because everything she had ever dreamed of was right there for her to enjoy in the cellar.

This dilemma did disturb Jason though, and he thought he might be able to dig out through the air duct. He then thought about Mae. She was not due for a few days, and they could hold out in the cellar for more than a few days.

Suddenly, Elizabeth distracted his concentrations. “Jason I can feel my milk coming in. It kind of tingles,” she said, as she drew out one of her breasts and fed her baby for the first time. Jason delighted at the sight of his two angels.

As she nursed her baby, Elizabeth noticed the opened jar of strawberry preserves. “Have a snack while I was having a baby?” she teased, as he saw what she was looking at, and realized she did not remember about the grease.

After he told her what he used the jam for they had a laugh about it. It was easy to laugh now that it was over, and besides the strawberries did the job.

“Jason, you know we have to name her. We can’t call her baby all the time.”

Feeling in a playful mood, he teased her, and said, “You know Sweets, we could always call her Strawberry.”

They both laughed. Elizabeth felt so good she could not feel any after pain, and she surely did not want to remember the

pain she experienced giving life to this little pleasure she beheld in her arms.

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