



A short story in four parts  
by Christopher Bollen

### Part Three

The pinewood box that contained *Untitled, #7* leaned against the wall of Kit's studio, the only painting in a series of nine that had been returned by her gallerist Haskell Vex after the immediate closing of her show. Haskell's decision to pull the plug hadn't been much of a surprise; after all, Kit had refused to allow him to run tests on *Untitled, #7* to uncover the source of its mystical tears. Yet even Kit hadn't predicted his final valedictory punch until she read his full statement on the *Artnews* website: "Due to the recent controversy and understandable outcry, we also regret that we are no longer able to represent Kit Carrodine and her special needs. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors."

Kit had laughed out loud at that last bit: Haskell had thrown her to the lions to salvage his tarnished reputation. But if Kit had special needs she also had special skills—and one was making friends with lions. Fearing correctly that Haskell would shut her *Killers* show down, she had decided to get ahead of him on the story by calling a few reporters of her own. Kit's news had beaten Haskell's to the papers and blogs by five hours. "I have made a crying painting," she told the press simply and solemnly. "I deliberately chose to paint the mug shot of an incarcerated black man. I did not choose for this image to sprout water from one eye and appear to weep as it streamed down the canvas. I won't explain or justify what is, to my knowledge, inexplicable and unjustifiable. But I won't renounce it either. Art isn't a toy you send back to the factory if its edges are too sharp or its stuffing catches fire. All I will say is that I have since met the mother of the man I depicted. I have listened to her and others who claim that Ronell Stephens was convicted of a murder he did not commit. I don't know where I stand on miracles. But I do believe in justice." Kit had hung up before the reporters could quiz her on the specifics of Ronell's case.

Was Ronell Stephens innocent? Kit had no idea. How could she? She had listened to Ronell's mother talk passionately of planted evidence and forced confessions, and she had dispatched her studio assistant, Grace, to dig up the few articles on the murder and trial. Ronell had earned an impressive rap sheet of drug-dealing arrests in the Bronx before being accused of shooting an undercover narcotics officer to death in the middle of a hot September night five years back. The jury had found him guilty in less than forty minutes—and that had included a lengthy bathroom break. In her more vulnerable moments Kit worried that she had simply used Ronell as a convenient moral cause to deflect attention from the ludicrous circus that had formed around her after *Untitled, #7* had begun to weep. But she recalled the devotion of the believers, the prayerful worshippers with eyes closed so tightly they looked like shotgun holes and hands balled at their chests like second hearts; they had come together because of her painting and had found strength and hope in it. From her own talent and hands she had produced something that made people sob in piles on the floor. That's when Kit caught herself thinking things she had never anticipated. Things like, *Maybe this happened for a reason, or, If I'm truly honest, I've always felt chosen to be an instrument of greater good, or even, Who am I to say that this painting isn't a miracle that could exonerate an innocent man?* Ronell's mother, Alice, had been calling Kit's studio night and day, begging her to speak at a rally next weekend at City Hall to demand the reopening of his case. Two local morning-TV shows had invited Kit on to discuss Ronell and her "magic artistry" (their words). So far she had declined all invitations, but she was beginning to warm to the idea.

Kit had already received one unexpected boon from speaking publicly about the painting: as soon as she openly refused to renounce the work, the art world that had abandoned her came rushing back in her defense. Haskell, now officially her ex-gallerist, fielded endless requests about *Untitled, #7* from collectors—basically speculators following the divining rod of scandal and press—who sensed that a Kit Carrodine *Killer* might be worth quite a bit even after the initial notoriety died down. Poor Haskell had phoned her, mumbling in meekness and apology, as he mentioned numerous six- and even seven-figure bids for her miracle painting. Kit knew he needed to recoup his losses—he was a man dancing on the strangling wire of the market—and, in an attitude of what she saw as utter magnanimity, she had said, "Hey, no hard feelings, okay? I tell you what. *Untitled, #7* isn't for sale. You send that painting back to me. But you can sell the other eight in the show that you're currently dismantling and take your usual cut." Haskell had

sent *Untitled, #7* to the studio the following day, along with an enormous bouquet of peonies. He had always had the safest taste in flowers.

An artwork returning to Kit's studio was usually unboxed, checked for damage, rephotographed, and archived in cloth and Bubble Wrap. But she kept *Untitled, #7* nailed shut in its pine crate and told Grace not to let anyone open it. Right now, Kit eyed the box leaning against the wall. Sliding from her chair, she grabbed the hammer on her desk and walked toward the box, brandishing the tool with its claw raised as if threatening to put it out of its misery. But as Kit reached the giant rectangle of raw pine, she couldn't get herself to yank the nails free. Inside was her canvas of Ronell Stephens, her miracle masterpiece. Was it still crying? If she set it loose in her studio, would she find moisture around the eye? Or would it be as dry as old paint, no miracle at all, just the result of condensation in Haskell's air-conditioned gallery? It frightened her to learn the answer—and she wasn't sure which would upset her more, a painting still weeping or an inert accumulation of oil strokes. Suspecting that either case would rip her life apart, she set the hammer down. Her life was safe as long as the box wasn't opened. Still, she tried to peer between the seams of the wood for any sign of activity. "What are you doing in there?" she whispered into the splintery crack. Kit got on her knees and pressed her fingertips along the cement floor, searching for any trace of water. She laughed—she was confusing the mechanics of a miracle with that of a leaky kitchen pipe—but her fingertips continued to explore the corners of the box for dampness. "What are you?" Kit said quietly to the box. "Are you alive? A message? A mistake? Are you here?"

"Kit?" Grace boomed. She had returned from her lunch break to find her boss on her hands and knees muttering madly at thin air. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing," Kit groused as she climbed to her feet, her face turned toward the windows so as to hide the blush scorching her cheeks.

"Were you praying to the box?" Grace asked. Kit scowled at her assistant. Nevertheless, in recent weeks their hostile relationship had transformed into something close to friendship. Kit couldn't afford to lose her. Grace was one of the few constants she had in her life.

"No, of course not," Kit replied. "I told you, I—" She was about to swear yet again to her unyielding faithlessness when Grace waved her hands to ward off the familiar speech.

"I booked your rental car for tomorrow," Grace interrupted. "I got one with GPS so it will take you right to the prison gates. It should be a two-hour drive."

"Was there any trouble clearing my visit with the warden? Tell him Alice Stephens made a special request that I be admitted."

Grace nodded. "They know you're coming. Even Ronell knows." Grace snapped her fingers to remember the last part of her instructions. "Oh yeah. Don't bring him any gifts. He can't accept them. Apparently they have to throw them in the garbage and it upsets everyone to see things go to waste."

It wasn't the set of white metal bars shutting behind Kit that disturbed her. Those she expected. It was the twelve-plated steel door that she heard being bolted behind her that brought tremors of panic to her chest as she and her escorting officer entered the innards of the prison. *Locked up. Locked in. No way out. Inside for life.* Kit had thought she understood what those terms meant, but now, physically sealed inside the deadening walls of this deadening institution, she realized that she had never known. A horrific fact was beating from her chest to her brain: she was trapped in here—even though her allotted stint in prison would only be sixty minutes.

Feigning a casual swagger as she walked with the officer down the polished-linoleum hall, Kit was actually fighting the urge to run screaming toward the steel-plated door and beg the guards to unlock it. From there she'd sprint out into the parking lot and hug the air and gravel and budding summer trees, and from thereon she'd live eternally in wide open spaces.

"You okay?" the officer asked as they turned a corner.

"Yeah, fine," Kit said with a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?" She was experiencing claustrophobia so extreme that she felt as if she were being suffocated in a thick wool blanket, or that time itself had hardened and was crushing her ribs. But she wanted this officer to like and respect her because he controlled the keys to the outside world. It occurred to Kit that she couldn't even call the police if something happened: they had confiscated her purse and phone at the entrance desk.

On the drive up to this remote maximum-security prison in the bucolic, slightly methy-looking Catskills, Kit had actually been excited for the adventure of prison. Now she felt ashamed for painting mug shots of inmates, as if their daily torture inside these human warehouses had given her a tough street cred that she hadn't in any way earned. She had behaved like some thirteen-year-old suburban kid who dreamt of being a gangster because she liked listening to rap music. Her art was a con, a lie, and the only genuine element of *Untitled, #7* was the strange tear rolling down from the prisoner's painted eye. *Human beings shouldn't be locked up for life in these inhuman places*, she thought. And yet many were—many, many, many.

The officer led her into a small white-cinder-block room with a laminated faux-wood table in its center and plastic chairs on either side. There were two windows in the room, with beige blinds covering them. She couldn't have pulled the blinds up had she wanted to because they were encased in locked grates.

"Is this the waiting room before you take me in to see him?" she asked. The officer was tall, plump, and white, with a doughy, dimply face that didn't seem sufficiently intimidating.

"No," he said. "We bring Stephens in here to meet with you."

Kit quickly glanced at the arrangement of table and chairs as if expecting a sheet of safety glass to materialize and separate the visitor from the inmate.

"You mean, we talk over a table?" she asked. "With no barrier between us?" The officer smiled. More dimples emerged on his cheeks.

"Yeah. It isn't like TV, ma'am. You sit across from him like in a normal meeting. I stand outside."

"Outside? So we're alone together?" Kit had come to visit Ronell because she might very well champion his release. But he was still a man convicted of first-degree murder, and she had thin bones and zero fighting skills and could imagine herself the perfect sacrificial hostage in a botched prison escape.

"I'll be right outside the door," he assured her.

Kit took the chair by the windows. Who was she kidding in undertaking this ridiculous mission? Did she really think she could determine guilt or innocence simply by showing up and talking to a stranger for an hour? She was dangerously out of her depth, and even the dimply officer knew it. The rare murders that intruded on Kit's New York universe were hopelessly white collar, the motives being passion or money—anything but necessity, which she supposed was the reason most of the inmates had ended up in here.

She heard a jingle of keys in the hallway and a young black man in a drab green jumpsuit strode into the room with his wrists cuffed behind his back. An elderly Latino officer reached to unlock the handcuffs. These were careers that involved locking and unlocking all day long. Kit kept her eyes trained on the prison jumpsuit. She identified its precise shade of green from the tubes of oil paint that cluttered her mind: oxide of chromium #459. She could paint every wrinkle of that jumpsuit. It was the rest of Ronell she had gotten wrong. In real life, he was smaller and thinner than his mug shot had suggested; he was also less handsome and pompous looking. As Ronell shook his wrists theatrically at their freedom, smiled at the two officers who stepped outside (leaving the door half open), and sat down across the table, Kit found his expression hard to discern. There was a softness in his eyes and lips that regular doses of mistrust and disappointment were slowly turning brittle.

They stared at each other for a solid minute—two random people who were never meant to meet in a secure cinder-block room in upstate New York. Ronell rotated his wrists again. Then he spoke.

"I didn't think you'd be Asian."

Kit didn't mean to grin, but once a grin spread across her face she let it remain there. It seemed to relax him. He slumped a bit.

"What did you think I'd be?"

"White."

"I'm half white and half Asian. My mom's Korean."

"Know what I am?"

"What?"

“Property.” Ronell pinched his green shirt, where PROPERTY OF was emblazoned across his chest. Below it spread a litter of worn-away letters that must have once spelled out the name of the prison. “I’ve always been property — of the state, or the police, or white people — even before I landed here.”

Kit nodded. In some way she agreed with his assessment.

“Shit,” he hissed and shoved himself back in his chair, folding his arms over his stomach. He was eyeing her paint-stained fingers on the table. “My mom says you’re a painter. A real artist.”

“I am.”

“I live in a painting.” At first Kit thought he meant *Untitled, #7*, and she maneuvered her dry tongue to begin explaining why she had painted his mug shot. But Ronell hadn’t meant that. “I live nineteen hours a day, every day, inside four painted walls and one painted ceiling. No window.” He laughed humorlessly. His hair was shaved so close to his scalp that she could see each fine black hair the shape of a curlicue against his brown-pink flesh. “I hate paint. I didn’t want to meet you.” His eyes fled to a corner of the room. “My mom made me promise I would. She thinks you can help me. You can’t.”

Kit wanted to reach her hand out and press it against his fists. But she presumed — even though the officers weren’t in the room — that physical contact was against the rules.

“I’d like to help you, or at least try,” she said. “Ronell?” She waited for him to gaze up at her. This awkward next question required eye contact. “Can I ask, are you really innocent?”

His eyes constricted, almost closing entirely, as if to shut her out. “What do you think?” he answered coolly. “It doesn’t matter what I think, does it? All that matters is what *you* think.” It struck Kit that Ronell’s response to the question of his guilt was the same as the one she gave when people asked what her paintings meant. But murder wasn’t the same as art: there was a definite answer as to whether he had killed someone or not. Wasn’t there?

“I don’t know enough about your case,” she replied. “I know what your mom says, and what the papers say, and —”

— And what twelve straight folks in a jury box said so they could be done before lunch.” He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. She thought she saw tears in them, although the harsh institutional lighting glistened any shiny surface. “I’ll tell you the truth. I fucked up. I fucked up my life real bad. I was young. And you can’t blame my mom for it. She tried. But I was bent, man. I was bent on it.” He went quiet for a while, watching his thumbs dance on the table. The face that finally emerged was both softer and older than it had been minutes before. Ronell looked directly at her. “I didn’t kill anyone. I did a lot of other stuff. I sold drugs. I was not good. But I didn’t kill that undercover cop. No matter. The police needed to nail someone for the loss of one of their own, and they saw me as a gold opportunity, take down this punk and look like heroes. They got one of my friends to rat me out in exchange for charges dropped on another crime. So he swore in court that I bragged about shooting that cop. But I didn’t. He lied. It’s the usual story. Here I am.” He rotated his head to flex every muscle of his neck. “It’s the same story you’ll hear from every other guy in this pen. *I ain’t guilty, I ain’t guilty*. So why should you believe me? I wouldn’t.”

Kit had made a career of capturing faces. She’d drawn them, sketched them, painted them, studied them like subway maps. You don’t walk away from years of that specialty without learning how to read them. Ronell had irises the color of worn leather. He had a mole in the corner of his left nostril. The bottom of his chin was rounded like a buckeye seed. And according to Kit, he was telling the truth.

“I believe you,” she said. “I’m going to do whatever I can to have your case reopened. I can’t promise it will be, but I can promise I’ll try.”

The faint tug of an appreciative smile appeared at the side of Ronell’s mouth, which he immediately covered with his hand. He slumped back in the chair.

“By the way, since we’re being honest with each other, I don’t buy your bullshit.”

“What bullshit?” Kit asked.

Perhaps Ronell could read faces too because he was staring intently at hers as if he saw something revealing on it. “About you being some sort of saint who performs miracles like my mom thinks. About you making a painting of me that cries tears. I didn’t cry once during my trial.

Not once. So no god is going to come out of the clouds and choose a picture of me to strike with any stupid miracle. I don’t buy your whole religion act. It’s bullshit. Just so we’re clear.”

A part of Kit had expected Ronell to thank her. Even locked up in this remote corner of New York State, he must know that it was her painting that had spurred all the renewed interest in his case. Strangely, though, Kit preferred his honesty to gratitude. She broke her self-imposed rule against physical contact and reached her hand across the table. She pressed her fingers against his knuckles.

“You know what? I’m not sure I buy my bullshit either. We’ll both have to wait and see.”

Kit forgot to hug the sunlight as she walked through the prison parking lot. As she clicked the power button on her phone, she was already planning her speeches on the two morning-TV shows and at the rally at City Hall next weekend. Her phone displayed a flurry of missed calls from Grace. Kit called Grace back, cradling the phone between her neck and shoulder as she unlocked the rental car and tossed her purse across the seat.

“Kit!” Grace wheezed. “Where are you?” There was a pathological urgency in her assistant’s voice.

“I’m just leaving the prison,” she answered flatly.

“And you’re safe?”

“Of course I’m safe! I’ve been in jail for the past hour.” Kit sensed that something wasn’t right. “What’s going on? Are *you* okay?”

Grace’s breathing turned rickety. “I’m shaken up but otherwise okay. There was an intruder at the studio this morning. An attacker really. I was in the back room when I heard a voice. Oh my god, Kit, it was such a scary voice! It was so scary I thought it was a joke! It yelled in a whisper, ‘You evil cunt!’” Kit’s entire body turned to ice. It was the same message whispered to her by her relentless anonymous prank caller. The voice had finally grown legs and come looking for her at her own studio.

“Jesus,” Kit moaned.

“Right?” Grace rasped. “When I heard this stranger say ‘evil cunt,’ I knew he was looking for you.” Kit chose to ignore the unintended insult. “I raced out into the main room because I still thought it was someone joking, and a young man in a ski mask was standing there about to swing a baseball bat right at my head! He nearly killed me, Kit! Thank god you and I look nothing alike. When he saw I wasn’t you, he bolted. The police are fanning the neighborhood looking for him. I was worried he might have tracked you down up at the prison.”

Kit scanned the backseat of her car just to ensure that a young man in a ski mask wasn’t crouched below the seats. She locked the doors and started the engine.

“Look, I think I have an idea who the guy might be,” Kit said. “I know from mutual friends that Kai has been devastated by our breakup. He’s clearly heartbroken to the point that he’s lost his mind. I think it’s best if —”

“No,” Grace broke in. “The attacker isn’t Kai. The police know who the kid is, they just can’t find him.”

“They know who my prank caller is? How?”

“His mother was afraid he might try to hurt you so she called the police to warn them. I guess they’ve decided to take her warning seriously now that I was almost clubbed to death in your place.”

“But who would want to try to hurt me?” Kit whined. “Me, who made a painting that cries tears?”

“Easy,” Grace replied. “Ronell Stephens killed an undercover cop named Anthony Esposito. Esposito has a teenage son named Mateo. That’s our attacker. Don’t you see? Ronell was safely behind bars forever until you came along and made that painting. He blames you. You might be the reason his father’s killer goes free.”

Kit stared straight ahead, gliding her rental car onto the interstate that would lead her back to the scenes of past and future crimes — her lethal, beloved New York.

[To be continued]