

THE AMBER ROOM

by Ian Sales

A reverent silence rolled like fog through the rooms and galleries of the Museum. As Tina stepped down into the vestibule, she felt her rage sucked from her. The slam of the door echoed in memory, but she heard now only the metronome click of her heels on the marble steps. She glanced back up the cochlea-curve of the staircase. On the landing above, the double doors to the apartment remained shut. The bastard. He'd probably gone straight back to his books. Thirty or more of them, splayed broken-backed the length of the twenty-foot dining-table. Glossy art books, history books; photographs, drawings, sketches.

Tina was certain he'd not even heard her as she thundered out.

It had been the old argument:

"Have you found it yet?"

"No, I haven't. It's been a long day. I just want to —"

"When are you going to find it, Chris? When? You promised me!"

"For God's sake, it's not an exact science. There's a lot of ground to cover. I can't find it just like that."

Of course he could. He'd found all these, the contents of the Museum, "just like that".

She turned left, onto the gallery fronting the Museum. The windows to her right painted great rectangles of sunlight on the floor. As she passed through them she perceived them as their converse, the gaps between windows as bars of shadow laid across a bright floor. She was not in the right frame of mind to appreciate great art, and yet... she needed its solace, its assurances that she and her problems counted for little in the grand scheme of things. She needed perspective.

Her steps slowed. Here was *David*. A bronze of a nude male. It was not quite the "perspective" she had been seeking. The thought made her smile. Tina preferred the bronze to the marble version in Florence. This one's proportions were truer. He was a victor, too: he posed with one foot on his defeated enemy's head. Tina envied him his triumph. *David* was Chris's

triumph too: the bronze had been lost since the French Revolution.

Until Chris found it.

Lost art. Missing masterpieces. Titian's portrait of Suleiman the Magnificent. Rembrandt's *Circumcision*. Michelangelo again: *The Battle of Cascina*. Chris had found them all. Every painting, every rare manuscript, every *objet d'art*. Without him, there'd be no Museum.

Tina's route had led her to the Museum's centrepiece. She entered the display room, slowed, and stopped. She hadn't planned to come here. She never did. Yet it drew her.

Buttery light filled the room, reflecting from three walls and the ceiling. An overabundance of detail assaulted the eye and overwhelmed the senses. Pilasters and framed mirrors, engravings and chiselled rods, leaves and royal crowns, tiny cherubs and coats of arms. All carved exactly.

The Amber Room. Created in Prussia, in the first decade of the Eighteenth Century. In 1716, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm I had gifted it to Tsar Peter the Great. The Room had remained in Russia until the Second World War. Nazis had looted it then. By the end of the war it was lost, believed destroyed.

But Chris had found it.

The Room occupied three-quarters of a chamber. Visitors viewed it from behind a rope in the remaining quarter. Tina never crossed the rope. To her, living in the Museum was a privilege and she would not abuse it. Much as she longed to view each of the Room's wall-panels from a distance of mere inches, she refused to do so. And the four Florentine mosaics allegorically representing the five senses — how she wanted to lean close and scrutinise their richness and detail...

There was "sound": four men using hearing pipes to converse, against a backdrop of ruins and a pyramid. And "sight" — another group among ruins, one holding a telescope to his eye, while another read a book and a young woman regarded her reflection in a lake. "Taste" depicted a group of people picnicking among ruins; one young man with a jug to his mouth, and before the table a dog licking a plate. The fourth mosaic conflated two of the senses, "touch" and "smell", using a pair of lovers, one smelling a flower

brought by a young man, while a second pair gently caressed each other.

Large representations of the mosaics were provided on display boards on the visitors' side of the rope. It was not, Tina felt, the same. There was no sense of age from the copies. Whenever in the Room, she felt a desire to run her fingers over the mosaics' tessellae, to touch their amber frames, to map the curlicues and carvings with her fingertips.

Benches were provided beside the display boards, and on one of these she slowly sat. She began to relax — still holding herself stiffly, almost primly, knees together, hands on lap, the tight weave of her cotton skirt smooth beneath her palms. Her spiky emotional state began to soften and smoothly flatten. The Room soothed her, calmed her. It *smelled* of history, of great art. She found the fragrance calming.

Sometimes, hours would pass in the blink of an eye. She would come to, with no memory of the intervening time. Yet she would feel cheered all the same, as if she had spent her period of fugue sublimely happy.

The Amber Room meant many things to her, but chiefly it was a testament to Chris's perseverance. It had taken him over a year to fetch it piece by piece.

And his patience; although she had witnessed that much earlier during their courtship. The term was old-fashioned, but Chris's pursuit of her had felt old-fashioned. She remembered one of their first dates. He had taken her to an Italian restaurant. Red-checked tablecloths, knobbly candles rammed into straw-covered Chianti bottles, the smell of hot wax, rich tomato sauces, garlic, frying oil... There'd been a steady stream of Italian, sounding anything but romantic, from the kitchen.

They both picked the same dish on the menu. That made them laugh. Chris chose a wine, a red, and it was the nicest wine she'd ever tasted. She was no oenophile, but the wine tasted unnaturally full-bodied and rich to her. Perhaps it was the company.

Tina smiled at the memory.

Tina ignored the rustle of paper opposite her, the muttered imprecations,

the hissed profanities. Chris was reading the newspaper. Even opinions he shared with the journalists and correspondents resulted in grumbling. Tina had long since given up asking him what was wrong. He had seen so many variations on forms of government and society, he considered himself an expert. No one ever “got it right”.

This time, however: “The bastard!”

Then: “Look at this!”

A thud, and the newspaper landed beside Tina on the sofa. It had been folded to show one article uppermost, but fell open with a papery hiss as it hit the cushion. She put down her book. Chris had her reading assorted “alternate history” science fiction. It would help her understand, he’d told her. *The Man in the High Castle*, Philip K Dick; *Aztec Century*, Christopher Evans; *Fatherland*, Robert Harris; ‘The Lucky Strike’, Kim Stanley Robinson; ‘The Amber Room’, Ian Sales; ‘Weihnachtsabend’, Keith Roberts; *The Hemingway Hoax*, Joe Haldeman; *The Two Georges*, Harry Turtledove and Richard Dreyfuss...

“What is it?” she asked, reaching for the newspaper.

“Read it,” he said, voice clipped from suppressed anger.

She found the piece, carefully folded the paper to make it easier to hold, and read. It was about Chris.

The article opened with a simple introduction to the Many Worlds Interpretation. Chris had explained this to her before. Many times. She skimmed through it, seeing nothing that might have upset him.

Ah. Here it was. She glanced up, over the top of the paper. Chris glowered at her, although his ire was aimed at the paper she held.

The writer of the article had concluded that discovery didn’t necessarily confer ownership. Chris had recovered numerous lost artworks, but that didn’t give him the right to display them in the Museum. He should have instead returned them to their original owners. In fact, declared the writer, Chris’s deliberate mislabelling of his activities made his transgressions worse.

“It’s about the government,” Tina said.

It seemed plain to her. The true target of the piece was the party in

power. Through their support of Chris, their creation and continuing endorsement of the Museum, they had tacitly condoned his thievery. Confidence was low among the chattering classes, and the newspapers were looking for angles to sell more copies. This was merely another one.

“I know that,” he snapped. “But it’s me they’re slagging off!”

She folded up the paper and laid it down beside her. “It won’t stop people from visiting the Museum.”

“It’s free,” Chris replied, dismissively. “They’d come even if all I brought back were lumps of rock.”

“What a horrible thing to say.” Sometimes, Tina found Chris’s cynicism hard to stomach.

“I go to a lot of trouble,” he continued. “I don’t want to be made to feel like a common thief.”

There was nothing “common” about Chris. Tina dropped her hand to her side, and encountered the stiff tissue-like folds of the newspaper. Sliding sidewise, her hand came upon her book. She trailed her fingers across its smoothly-finished card, felt the rounded bumps of the author’s name embossed on the cover. She wanted to finish it. But Chris was in one of his moods.

“Ignore them,” she soothed. “You know no one believes what they write in the papers.” She sympathised: she had such moods herself.

Chris laughed, a harsh jagged sound. “You’d be surprised.”

Tina rose to her feet, smoothed her skirt down where it had ridden up. She crossed to Chris, perched beside him on the armchair and draped her arms about his neck. Bending forwards, she pecked him on the crown of the head. Feathery hairs tickled her nose and scents invaded her nostrils – the hospital-like sharpness of Chris’s shampoo, the musky peppery smell that was the aftershave they both preferred above all others. She breathed deep, and the odours prompted a memory...

It was the aftershave she had noticed first. He’d splashed it on with abandon by the smell of it. But she didn’t mind — the fragrance appealed to her. It was almost pheromonal. She wondered if he tasted as good as he smelled. By the end of the night, she’d found out.

In the dark doorway of her block of flats, he had fastened his arms about her and fastened his mouth on hers. He'd been chewing a mint, she could taste its freshness. The booze, too. A sweet tinge of Southern Comfort. And something deeper, more profound, fundamental to his being; ambrosia to her yearning taste-buds. She had eaten her fill, and possessed him —

No. She had allowed him to possess her.

In a manner of speaking, none of the objects in the Museum was “found”. They had been lost, *were* lost, yes. And so they remained. The silence of visitors was as much a product of wonder as it was of appreciation, wonder that these pieces of art should be *here*. Those who rented audio-guides heard how each item had gone missing... And yet there it hung or sat; it *existed* in front of them.

Another day, and just another visitor. Chris was a celebrity, but Tina stayed in the background. She shared with Chris a contempt of gossip magazines, *Chat* and *Hello!* and *OK!*. Happily, cameras were banned within the Museum, and so she could wander free from paparazzi. She was just another visitor.

Today, she strolled about the Museum, secure in her anonymity. A small group had gathered before *Portrait of Dr Gachet* by van Gogh. Someone explained in a whisper that it was the most expensive painting in the world — or rather, the version of it owned by a Japanese businessman was the most expensive painting in the world.

The one hanging before them was not a copy.

Tina continued her amble about the galleries. She passed others standing in front of Leonardo da Vinci's *Leda* and Michelangelo's *Leda*. Both had been destroyed by prudish owners. At length, she reached the main foyer. Children ran underfoot twittering with laughter. Parents at coffee-shop tables billed and cooed at them.

She entered the gift shop, and bought another alternate history novel from the many titles it carried. Penny at the till said hello as she scanned the book's barcode. “Busy today,” she added.

“It always is,” Tina replied, with a smile.

Penny slid the book into a paper bag. “Are these any good?”

“Some of them are.” Tina could not work up much enthusiasm. She did enjoy the books, even though reading them felt a chore because Chris wanted her to read them.

“I suppose I should try one,” Penny continued with a laugh, “seeing as I work here.”

Picking up her purchase, Tina gave a wan farewell and left the shop. Across from her, bright colourful display boards explained the science to which the Museum owed its existence. On a whim, Tina crossed the foyer.

Paintings, Chris often told her, were created to be *seen*. And that’s what he did: recovered paintings so they could be seen once again.

But only by people in *this* world.

In simple language and with bright colourful diagrams, the boards explained how, every moment of every day, something happened which could have more than one outcome. And for each outcome, a parallel world came into existence. The events didn’t have to be of global importance, like the assassination of President Kennedy or the invasion of Iraq. They could be trivial, banal, utterly personal. Like in those two films — different futures dependent upon whether or not a train was caught.

This was the Many Worlds Interpretation.

Tina did not understand half of the vocabulary used on the display — *wave function collapse, quantum decoherence...* When she’d first seen the board depicting the Schrödinger’s Cat experiment, she’d thought only: *poor creature*. Intellectually, she accepted the existence of many worlds, of parallel realities. Every article in the Museum was proof of their existence. As was she herself.

Chris could visit these parallel realities. He didn’t know how he did it. He was in his mid-twenties before he even discovered that he *could* do it. Throughout his childhood, friends would vanish as if they’d never existed; total strangers would act as though they’d been friends for years. He’d get lost on a regular basis — streets never quite where, or how, he remembered them. He did poorly at school: neglecting his homework, or handing in work

which had not been requested. Teachers didn't know what to do with him. He dropped out early.

Tina could not imagine how that might have felt. To live in a world so mutable, so unpredictable. She reached out a hand and touched a photograph of Chris on the display board. She put her fingers against his mouth.

Once, drunk, he'd admitted he didn't even know if this world was the one in which he was born. Since no other version of him had ever surfaced here, he suspected it was.

She abruptly recalled the rest of that conversation. The remains of two Chicken Kievs sat on plates before them, an aroma of hot garlic still redolent. As Tina lifted her wineglass to her mouth, she smelled its bouquet, and Chris's bright-eyed grin seemed entirely fitting. She continued to hold her drink to her nose as he described the stranger worlds he had visited. A Europe under the fascist boot; a Europe under a communist yoke. A global Ottoman Empire. A world without the Bible...

She'd sipped her wine, felt the rich fruity liquid slide down her throat, and listened smiling as a warm glow spread within her.

A series of quick sharp raps on the landing outside drew Tina's attention to the apartment doors. They flew open with a bang, and the Prime Minister strode in. A chattering of assistants swept in after him, the arrhythmic drumming of their footsteps abruptly silenced by the carpet. The PM stopped, put his hands to his hips, and grinned broadly.

Tina, always self-conscious in the presence of authority, rose slowly to her feet. This visit was unexpected. She wondered how much milk was left in the fridge. Were there any biscuits in the cupboards? Should she put the kettle on?

She decided the best course of action was to do nothing.

Chris remained seated. He was too arrogant to show deference. The PM didn't seem to mind. He was a "man of the people".

"Have you seen the crap they're printing in the papers about me?"

demanded Chris.

Tina slowly sat, and saw the grin wiped from the PM's face. Chris had just set the tone of the visit.

The assistants settled into susurrant huddle. One closed the doors with an apologetic smile, carefully enough to make only a gentle snick. Two others bridled at Chris's complaint.

There was a moment of silence.

A smile reappeared on the PM's face. He gestured vaguely. "So," he said heartily, "anything new to show me?"

Tina bent her gaze back to her book. The words on the page, however, blurred. She could make no sense of them. Glancing up, she watched the PM follow Chris across to the bureau against the wall. Chris pulled open a drawer and, from it, he took a yellowed scroll.

"What's this, then?" the PM asked, as Chris handed the item to him. The PM unrolled it and peered at the writing within.

"Aeschylus. One of his missing plays, called *Phineus*."

"Yes, well," said the PM. "Not one of ours, though, is he?"

"Neither was Michelangelo," pointed out Chris. "Or Rembrandt." He took back the scroll. "And that book of Hemingway's lost stories and poems we published last year was a best-seller."

"Yes, but Hemingway." The PM gave one of his famously self-deprecating smiles. "He's a classic author."

"Aeschylus is a classic Greek playwright," returned Chris.

"Don't be facetious. I went to Cambridge. I know who Aeschylus was. You walk into any book shop, and you'll find books by Hemingway. But you won't find ancient Greek tragedies playing in your local theatre."

The PM crossed to the sofa on which Tina sat. She smiled warily at him as he lowered himself beside her. She did not like the way his eyes flickered over her whenever they met.

He leaned close. "How are you?" he asked, projecting sincerity. He put a hand on her thigh and gave a friendly squeeze.

Tina did not like that either. Happily, she was wearing jeans and so could feel only the pressure of his greeting against her skin. She gave a

weak smile. "I'll make some coffee," she said.

"Good idea." The PM nodded approvingly. He reached out to pat her —
But she had already risen to her feet. In the kitchen, she spooned ground coffee into a cafetière, and breathed in deeply of the rich aroma. She added hot water from the just-boiled kettle. Turning about, she stood, rear parked against the edge of the counter, and waited for the grounds to steep. From somewhere, a memory of the PM's cologne, a fruity floral fragrance she despised as much as she despised the man, tickled her nose. She twisted about, and breathed deeply of coffee-scented steam to rid herself of it.

In the living-room, Tina dished out cups of coffee and chocolate biscuits to Chris and the guests. Rather than return to her seat beside the PM, she sat on a ladder-back chair beside the bureau. She sipped her coffee, relished its bitterness, and listened to the PM say:

"We need to do something. I won't have my gift to the people of this country —" He threw out a hand, taking in the Museum — "thrown back in my face. After all I've done for them."

"I did it," snapped Chris. "Tina says all you did was legitimise my thievery."

"She does, does she?" The PM looked back over his shoulder at her.

She smiled at him, took another sip of her coffee, and let his opinion of her sink away unmourned into the dark and pungent and earthy liquid which filled her mouth.

Chris was heading for the door, backpack slung from one shoulder, when Tina said:

"Weren't you going to say anything?"

The soft shuffle of his boots faltered, and stopped. Into the silence fell the faint scrape of the latch withdrawing from the mortice in the door-frame.

Tina waited, but Chris did not speak.

"You're never around anymore," she complained. "You're gone when I get up, and you don't get back until after I've gone to bed."

"I've been busy," he replied. He released the door handle; it snapped

up. “I *am* busy.”

“The least you can do is turn around when you’re talking to me.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“You don’t have time for *me!*”

A booted foot came down hard, the door pulled open to thud against the stop.

Eyes stinging, Tina looked up from her glass of red wine to see the door close. She blinked, momentarily confused by a faint green circle superimposed on her vision. It was nothing more than an after-image of her wine, at which she had been staring.

She turned to the window and gazed out at the city, grey and brooding beneath a louring sky. Even now, years after arriving here, she could see enough to tell her this was not her home. That bridge there, for example, had been sold decades before. How strange to see it back in place. And the great skyscraper which dominated the skyline of her city was here absent. The low uniformity of the horizon seemed almost oppressive to her. Nothing reaching for the sky, nothing interrupting those miles upon miles of grey rooftops.

Drops of rain hit the glass, trails of tiny distorting lenses rippling her view. She hoped Chris wouldn’t get wet. But perhaps it wasn’t raining where he was going.

She lifted her glass of red wine. They had drunk the very same label during that first meal in the Italian place. She had stayed loyal. Although not to the restaurant. The wine she now bought from a vintner; the eatery she and Chris had never revisited.

That first dinner date... The evening had been wonderful. The food was superb, deserving of praise in any self-respecting newspaper column. The décor and ambience conspired to heighten the romance, as though a painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard had come to life... Her friends had been so envious, they insisted on trying the place themselves. They couldn’t find a listing in the phone book, so they took a cab direct to the restaurant —

Only for Tina — tearful, bewildered — to find herself standing before a charity shop. Where had the restaurant gone? It had been *here*. She was so

sure of it. Her friends shook their heads. Despite searching nearby streets, she failed to find the place. It was as if it had never existed.

She knew its location now. And she had found the wine on sale throughout the city. Throughout *this* city.

Her gaze drifted across to the bureau. A book lay on its top, spine directed to the wall. She knew its title; she had been reading it earlier. Although non-fiction, she found its contents hard to take as fact. After all, the Amber Room occupied a chamber downstairs, in the Museum. It was not, as the book's convincingly presented research explained, forever lost — destroyed shortly after World War II by a fire in the Bavarian castle where it had been stored for safe-keeping.

Except, it *was* lost.

The Amber Room in the Museum was not the Amber Room of the book.

And Tina herself was not —

No, there had never been a Tina in this world.

Behind the book, two framed photographs looked out into the room. On the right, a young man and his parents; on the left, a young woman and her parents. The settings of the photographs were not the same — one taken at a cousin's wedding, the other on the patio of a holiday villa in Spain. The outfits too differed: suit and tie, best frock and hat; T-shirt and jeans, summer dress and sunglasses.

But the parents were identical in each photograph.

Tina hugged herself and shivered, feeling unaccountably cold. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with this city, but she would always feel a visitor in it. She wanted to go home, to see her parents again. In the flesh, not just in an old photograph. She yearned for their presence, longed to sink into her mother's embrace, to catch on the air the sandalwood-scented cologne her father always wore. Chris's parents were no substitute. It wasn't their fault, but she could not feel comfortable around them. The lack of a shared history, which should exist, which her senses insisted did exist, disconcerted her.

She sipped her wine. But the argument, Chris's abrupt departure, her

unrequited homesickness, all had soured her mood, and the wine turned to vinegar in her mouth.

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