

JOHN PECK

Viola, 2009
Oil on Linen, 17 x 25 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MARION DE BOOY WENTZIEN

Secret Treasures

Ana was born in a war zone. She lived through the civil war that killed her brothers and parents. She made her way from the blood and bodies, from the rampaging soldiers and hid in a cemetery with other survivors. They ate weeds and an occasional bony cat.

When she was thirteen she made it up into Mexico and crept over the border with a coyote. A trucker took her through Texas and Arizona. Once she reached the United States, Ana lived in a scramble of oleanders behind a gas station with a homeless woman. She bathed in the gas station's sink. She ate from dumpsters. The old woman taught her English during the long days.

Mitch first saw Ana when she was fifteen. He was twenty. By then she was being fostered in an American family four doors down from his dad's house.

A few months later they met at neighborhood party. Ana was standing next to a potted palm in the overcrowded kitchen. Mitch was on his third beer. She was sipping a cola. She was wearing a short red-and-white flowered dress and she was barefoot.

There was something about her that just went straight to his heart. Not an easy thing because a past girlfriend had accused him of being heartless and he'd come to believe it was true.

He tried to chat her up. She watched his lips. Her brown eyes gleamed but she said very little. Someone slammed into him from behind and he turned, fist ready. When he turned his attention back to Ana, she was gone.

He did go to her house the next evening and came nose-to-nose with her foster mother who took one look at him and hissed, "Get out of here or I'll call the cops."

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They met again ten years later. Suzanne, his wife-to-be, had dragged him to a catering company to pick out a menu for their reception. Ana was behind the front desk. Her hair just as black and silky as he remembered. "Hey, I know you," he blurted out. "Ana—it's Mitch."

"I know who you are." Her English was precise with a slight accent. He felt that pierce in his chest again followed by a zip that let him know he was alive and breathing.

"Hey, Mitch!" Suzanne pinched his arm. "Let's figure out what we're having. Do you want shrimp cocktail or crab cakes for the starter?"

He wanted Ana.

Later there was a fuss, tears, and Suzanne’s enraged biker brother. In the end, even though Mitch had a black eye and two broken ribs, he didn’t care. He was free.

It took some doing but finally he found out where Ana was living—a crappy apartment in a rough area. He knocked on her apartment door.

Ana looked at his battered face and asked in her soft voice, “Mitch, what have you done?”

“I’ve come for you.”

Often when looking at Mitch, Ana thought of the stealth of the coyote who’d brought her to the border—the way his eyes squinted as he followed the sun through the desert, how he knew his way through the washes, how he could outwit La Migra—yet he was completely untrustworthy.

She thought of the dusty border towns and how she kept saying no to his hands, his mouth. She said no to Mitch for a year. In the meantime, she had moved into the kitchen of the catering job and filled in as the sous chef on large parties.

* * *

Ana had nothing when Mitch married her except a few clothes, a little savings account, and a small painted red wooden box.

“What’s in the box?” he asked when he noticed her shut it and hide it under the cup of her hand when he came into the bedroom. She had that box out every night before she went to sleep. He knew she slept with it under her pillow.

“Small things.”

“Like?”

“Treasures.”

“Let me see.”

“No. They are mine,” she added somewhat fiercely. “They would mean nothing to you.”

He wondered, mildly hurt, why she wouldn’t just tell him. He wondered about the hard shine that had entered her eyes when he questioned her. Then he decided not to press it. He wasn’t a particularly introspective man and frankly he didn’t care much about secrets—who had them or why. He was happy. That’s all that mattered.

Ana was a wonderful cook. Dishes he’d never dreamed of appeared on the table nightly. Her mother came to her

in dreams, all the meals her mother had made. She packed his lunches. He was the envy of his construction crew.

Thanks to Ana and her job and her cookbooks, they ate through all the countries in the world. His favorite was Japan ... the noodles, the soups. Every New Year’s Eve, Ana made him just one folded over cookie, complete with a fortune written by her in tiny blue letters on a white slip of paper. *Love can break*, the first one said. It perplexed him a little. He wondered if she knew about Sally the receptionist at work. Yeah, they’d kissed, but Sally meant nothing to him.

“Where’s your cookie?” he asked.

“I already know my fortune,” she answered. “You.” She smiled and hugged him.

The next year he opened, “*Life alone is lonely.*”

He looked across the table at her. “Not that I’m complaining or anything, but why can’t I have a simple fortune—one that says, ‘You’ll get a great bid and make lots of money?’”

She didn’t answer.

The third year he read, “*Why?*” It spooked him. He couldn’t even eat the cookie. He got up and left the table and went onto the back patio—one he’d laid with old brick all hot summer long. Overhead the moon was solid and white. He felt small and miserable.

He stayed there while she did the dishes and until he was sure she’d be sitting on the bed, looking through her red box. It occurred to him that maybe the answer to these weird sayings were inside the box.

On Saturday he waited until she had gone to the store. The box was under her pillow, tied shut with a thin white ribbon. He looked at the ribbon. He knew his thick, callused fingers and his lack of small muscle coordination would never be able to tie the bow properly and she’d know he’d opened it. And somewhere deep inside he knew his peeking would be unforgivable to her. She’d leave and never come back. He put the box, untouched, back under her pillow.

Gradually his thoughts turned inward and slowly what the fortunes might mean occurred to him. He stopped seeing Sally and quit flirting with Rose the cashier. The days passed, quietly. He spent more time at home. They planted a garden—together. At Christmas Ana told him she was pregnant.

He was anxious when he saw the fortune cookie on the little white china dish on New Year’s Eve. He grabbed it too hard and the cookie broke, the fortune fluttering to the white tablecloth. “Read it,” Ana whispered. She was smiling.

Like Ana’s red box, the fortune remained his secret. He kept the bit of paper in his shirt pocket, carefully putting it into every freshly ironed shirt each morning.

Marion de Booy Wentzien received the New Letters Literary Award as well as the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award (twice). She has published more than forty-three stories in various literary journals as well as one novel, *Desert Shadows*.