

Antiques and Curiosities

By A. R. Alan

Main Street in Nyack, New York was quaint and rather historic looking. The buildings lining the seven blocks were a mix of old gingerbread-trimmed Victorians and three story flat-faced buildings, all of which boasted hand-made crafted items or antiques. More interesting than the area or I should say intriguing, was why I felt so compelled after waking up this morning to take a bus ride from Manhattan to Rockland County to visit this small town. I dislike antiques and my apartment is furnished in ultra-modern, yet here I was peering into windows of musty shops as though I were being drawn by an invisible force.

It was mid-way down the second street that I noticed the store with the tattered lace-covered window. I stopped before it and peered inside, but couldn't make anything out. On the wall above the window there was a sign that read: Antiques and Curiosities and on the paint-flaked door a small hand-printed sign with the scrawled words: Come In. I hesitated for a few moments, staring at the door, wondering why I was in this particular town, and why had I stopped at this particular shop.

A bell tinkled when I opened the door and entered the dimly lit room. The smell of dying flowers or was it incense wafted about the hot, stuffy space. The center of the room was filled with old Victorian furniture that was covered in dust and spider webs. The old wood-framed sofas needed reupholstering; the marble-topped tables were covered with knick-knacks, none of which appealed to me. Lined up on both sides of the room were china closets, their shelves filled with old crystal stemware, vases, chipped antique dolls, and items I knew nothing about. Yet here I was, standing in a large cluttered room, staring at stuff that I didn't like or care about.

"Can I be of help," a man asked stepping out from beyond a curtain on the far side of the room. He was tall and lean, dressed in a gray suit, and had a shock of gray hair that covered one eye. But it was his face that drew in my breath. It was ashen and wrinkled like an old, dehydrated apple.

“Just looking,” I finally said.

He nodded and just stood there, hands clasped before him.

I wanted to walk out, but for some unknown reason didn't. Instead, I took two steps to my left and looked down at a table. Sitting on top of the cherry wood top was a small easel holding a miniature painting. I lifted the painting and held it in the palm of my hand.

The colors looked fresh and vibrant, not old or crinkled with age. The scene was of a forest, tall trees with beams of sunlight streaming down from above. I brought the painting up closer to get a better look. On the far left on the bottom there was a figure of a young woman huddled beside a tree, her arms wrapped about it, her head lifted as though she were looking up at the beams of light.

A moment later my heart skipped a beat, and my fingers curled around the edges of the picture so I wouldn't drop it. The woman's head had turned, and she was now staring at me with pleading, blue eyes. I set the picture back on the table, straightened, and tried to compose myself. This was an allusion I told myself, trembling. It's the flickering light from the antique fixtures, or the light coming in through the lace curtains. It's not real. My fingers shook when I picked the picture up again. She was still staring at me, but now her arms reached out from her silver cloak, as if she were trying to draw me to her.

“How much do you want for this picture?” I asked the man who hadn't moved from where he stood.

“One twenty-five.”

“Excuse me.”

“One hundred and twenty-five dollars,” he said in a hushed tone.

“I'll give you a hundred. It's only a small painting and it's not signed.” I looked down at the painting and saw glistening tears trickling down the woman's face.”

“All right. Cash only.”

“I put the painting back on the table and rummaged through my purse. I only have ninety-five in cash. I'll have to give you my Visa card.”

He shook his head. "That'll do. Leave the money on the table."

"Thank you," I said. I placed the bills on the table, picked up the painting, and left the store as quickly as I could. I was so unnerved, that I didn't release my breath until I was out in the street and the shop's door tinkled when it closed behind me. I hesitated before walking away, then looked down at the painting again so I could examine what I'd bought in the sunlight.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It had to be the lighting in the store. Once again the woman's head was facing the beams of light streaming through the trees. There were no pleading eyes, no glistening tears running down her cheeks, and her arms were once again wound around the tree.

When I turned back to the store, I almost collapsed. There were no lace curtains on the window, and the sign on the door now said vacant.

By midnight I still couldn't fall asleep. Tropical storm Evan was raging through the city with a vengeance. Claps of thunder boomed above the tall skyscrapers, and echoed off in the distance. When lightning struck, brilliant flashes of light slipped through the slats of my Venetian blinds and lit up my bedroom. I finally climbed out of bed and walked over to the window.

After lifting the blind, I peered through the sheet of grey rain, to the rain-slicked street two-stories below my apartment. The fruit vendor's cart on the corner was covered by a tarp, and he was nowhere to be seen. The street was deserted, and the illuminated signs on the shops were blurred and unreadable. A chill ran through me so I decided I'd make myself a cup of soothing herbal tea.

The light wouldn't turn on when I flipped the switch in my small kitchen. Power failure was unusual in Manhattan, but I did have a couple of candles that I used for dinner parties, so I found the drawer that I kept them in and then lit one of the white-tapered ones. The flickering

flame only added to my nervousness, and since the electricity was off and my stove was run by it, having a cup of tea was out.

I carried the candle into my living room, set it in a candlestick, then sat down on my straight-backed, white leather sofa and stared across the room. I had custom white-lacquer cabinets made for that wall, and in the middle of them sat my useless TV set. On the lower right shelf, I had placed the small painting when I came home. I stared at it now, and as I did, the gold frame grew brighter. My eyes widened. I shrank back against the sofa as I watched the picture grow bigger and bigger, until it fell off the shelf and stood almost six-foot tall.

I could barely breathe. The woman was now life-size. Once again her arms were outstretched toward me, and tears were streaming down her face.

“Please,” she whispered.

“I’m dreaming or I’m going crazy,” I said aloud. My heart hammered against my chest. “This can’t be real.”

“Come with me, or it will be too late to save them.”

I blew out the candle thinking the mirage or dream would end. It didn’t. The leaves in the picture’s trees rustled, and then turned from a dark green to a shriveled-up brown. When they started to fall, most of them landed on my rug, but one settled on my lap. I looked down, then gently laid my finger on it. The withered leaf was real. My heart raced. I was frightened, ready to scream, and found myself totally paralyzed—unable to move even a finger when she walked out of the picture and over to where I sat.

Thunder boomed and lightning lit up the room, bathing the young woman and her long silver robe in a shimmering blue light. “Come. I need you,” she said, placing her soft palms on both sides of my face.

My cheeks burned at her touch. The nerves in my body tingled. Unable to stop myself, I rose off the sofa. She took my hands in hers, and then stepped back slowly until we both stood within the picture. I closed my eyes, drew in a deep breath, and prayed that when I opened them, I’d find myself back in my bed.

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

The trees were bare, and the light in the forest had dimmed when I finally opened my eyes. I turned around and gasped. My living room was gone. Tall, futuristic, concrete, windowless-buildings with lighted spires appeared in the distance.

“Where am I?”

“You are in inner Earth, and this village is called Atlantis.”

The End

A. R. Alan bio: Barbara Bixon writing under the name A.R. Alan has had many short stories, poems, and 14 Comedy, Mystery, Romance, Thrillers, and sexy books published. She's also sold comedic material to Joan Rivers and has been published in Playgirl Magazine. Her humorous book talks about sex, romance, and mystery will definitely entertain you. Worldwide travel and a career that brought her into contact with a never-ending stream of interesting personalities and celebrities fanned her already fertile imagination over the years and validate the vivid, often zany characters that people her novels. Barbara is also an avid environmentalist and played a major role in saving a New Jersey/New York mountain range from developers. It will remain open space forever. Screenplays available for: "The House Of Cupcakes, The CB (Chocolate Brown) Social Club, and Do I Flaunt My Fat, Or Jump Off A Bridge? Please check out her website: www.aralanbooks.com