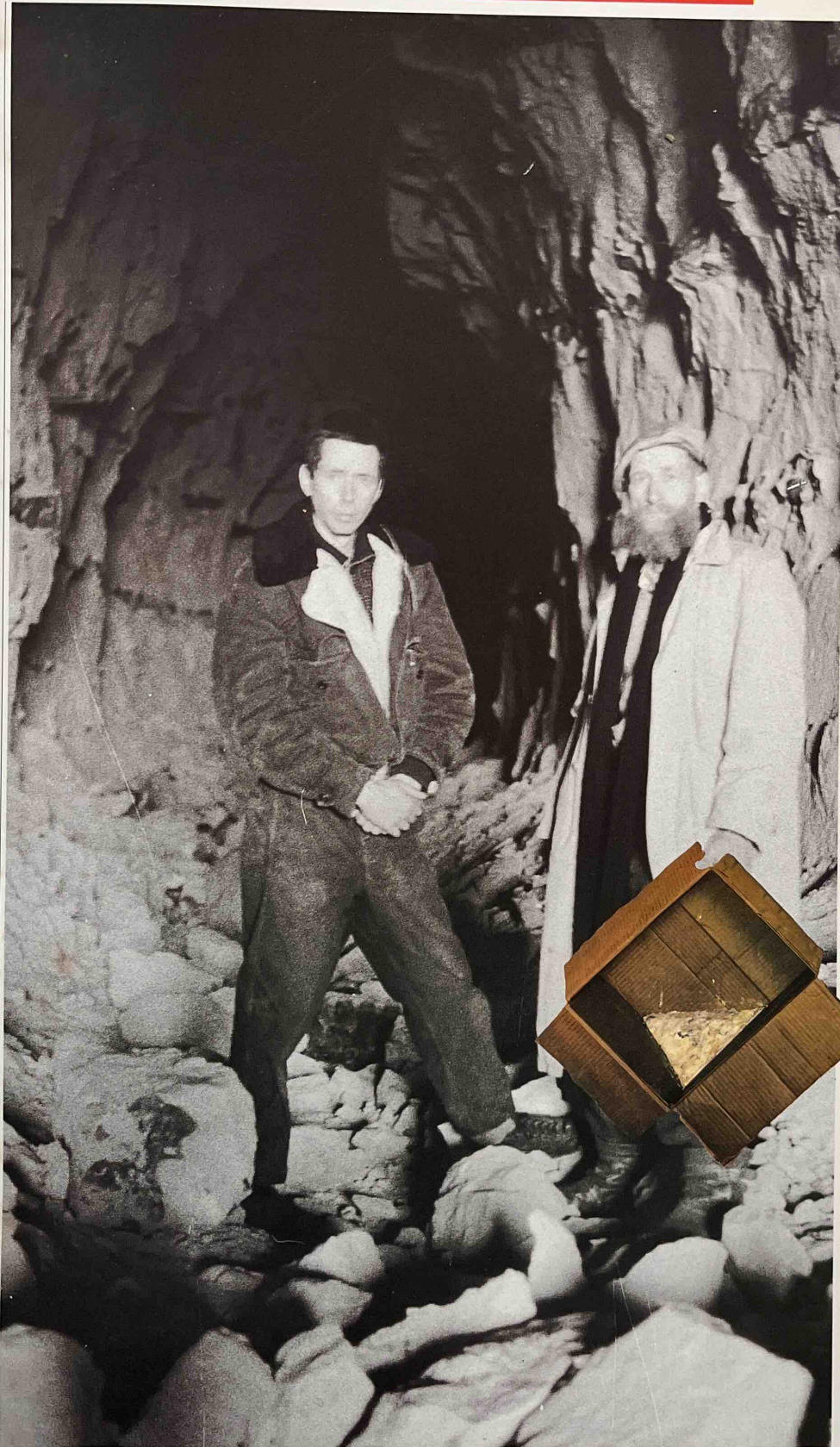


CRIME TIME

221 b Bakerstreet



At seven o'clock on this stormy November evening we find Sherlock Holmes reclining in his easy chair in front of the fireplace at number 221B Baker Street. Holmes is reflecting with great satisfaction on a "case", as he is in the habit of referring to his criminal files, that was brought to a satisfactory conclusion the day before. Once more he turns over each detail in his mind. His freshly filled pipe rests in his hand.

From the hall comes the sound of the doorbell, followed by the familiar shuffle of Mrs. Breunstone. Holmes abruptly comes to himself, brings his pipe to his lips and lights a match. Just as he puts the flame to the tobacco, the study door opens and Watson enters, accompanied by a sudden gust of wind that extinguishes the match. Watson holds in his hand The Parool of 29 September, 1992 and he is pointing to an article on the editorial page with his finger.

"Hello, Dr. Watson," Holmes pre-emptively says. "I hope you'll first allow me to light my pipe."

"Hello, Holmes," Watson answers apologetically. "It's nothing urgent or important, but it aroused my curiosity nevertheless." He says as he hands Holmes the newspaper, already several months old. "It's another article in the wake of the unfortunate restoration of that Paul Newman painting Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue."

"Barnett, Watson, Barnett Newman."

"Sorry, yes of course, every time I hear blue I automatically think of those blue eyes."

Meanwhile, Holmes reads through the article with remarkable speed and knits his brow.

"I know," continues Watson, "that you don't care much for the modern art business, but I thought ..."

"The plot thickens," mumbles Holmes, as if to himself.

"I thought it was already thick enough," says Watson, taking a chair. "Look, the author claims that another doubtful restoration has taken place and this time not in America but in the Stedelijk Museum itself and, as he says, behind closed doors. What I'm wondering is how the author can know or see what he, given the closed doors, can't have known or seen. In any case, I assume that he was not present himself. And such strange doings ..."

"Wrongdoings, Watson," smiles Holmes.

"... are not really posted on a billboard for all to see by the perpetrators of the deed," continues Watson.

"You forget that we no longer live in the good old days, Watson. Everything is becoming increasingly incomprehensible. Imagine, just yesterday I saw someone in Oxford Street light a cigar without any matches. The flame just came right out of his thumb."

"Modern technology," Watson acknowledges wearily. "We're getting old, Holmes."

"But in order to solve this type of case, Watson, you have only to reason backwards. It is a convenient and accessible method, but is nevertheless infrequently employed. What does the Beuys object in question actually look like? Don't we have a reproduction in our archive?"

"Well, I counted on the fact that this would interest you so I just happen to have brought a few photographs with me. Look, here are three photos from three different periods, each one taken at approximately 10-year intervals. And this is the most recent, taken during the exhibition in the New Church this summer."

"Humm," says Holmes, emitting puffs of smoke as he examines the photos, "so this is what passes for a work of art nowadays? Well, it doesn't really matter. The author claims that this work of art... is that a lump of grease in the corner there?"

"Um yes, uh... yes, a lump of grease," Watson stammers almost shyly. "... that this lump of grease, because the museum did not store it under refrigerated conditions, was absorbed by the cardboard and that a restorer secretly provided it with a fresh supply of grease."

"In itself a simple and understandable motive, Holmes. Imagine, the man must have been at his wit's end."

"Easy, Watson, easy. Who says that it was a man? You forget the closed doors."

"But perhaps the box was weighed when it was purchased? People are always saying what skinflints the Dutch are!"

"But weighing works of art is probably not a routine practice."

And then, a few puffs later: "This is a third-rate case, Watson, really far too trivial for a genius like myself!"

Holmes lays the three photos next to each other on the study table.

"Would you hand me the badminton racket behind the bookcase, and throw some more kindling onto the fire because, at my age, I really can't get worked up about this kind of amateur crime time."

A few moments later: "Look doctor, the three photos show the object in the same size, that makes it simple."

Holmes lays the badminton racket like a kind of screen consecutively over the three photos and marks several points with a pencil.

"You just have to know how to make do, Watson. Look, if you compare the photos and the years in which they were taken, you see that the lump of grease becomes consecutively larger, smaller and then larger again. And the latter despite the fact that the box is completely saturated with grease, a condition that is clearly not the case in the first photograph. But let's put the facts in order, doctor."

"Firstly, the Stedelijk Museum buys a cardboard box with a lump of grease in one corner and forgets to store it under refrigerated conditions.

Secondly, the lump of grease is absorbed by the cardboard and disappears.

Thirdly, Watson, and this is clearly demonstrated by a comparison of the photographs, the box must have been in some way secretly filled with grease again, closed doors or not.

And fourthly, the question now occurs to me why the museum, after such a harrowing experience, still does not exhibit the object, and thus in all probability does not store it either, under refrigerated conditions. Look, Doctor Watson, the author of your article has overlooked something essential."

"What are you trying to say, Holmes? Did they provide the box with a fresh supply of grease or not?"

"Yes and no, Watson. They did indeed refill it, but very probably not with the same grease that it originally contained."

Watson empties the glass of whiskey he had just poured himself in one draught and groans: "Oh boy."

"Beuys, Watson, Beuys, and they have in all probability used a type of cheap candle grease with a more stable viscosity, so that they can store it uncooled. Yes Watson, if things go on like this, they eventually really will be afraid of red, yellow and blue. But that is no longer our concern. Let's return to our own daily life. Tell me, Watson, did you have a nice day?"

Translated from the Dutch by James Geary

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