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When Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him

CHAPTER ONE EXCERPT

AN EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE: FALL POSTWAR AND CONTEMPORARY SALE MONDAY, 7:00PM

The Lulu in the painting has circular grey eyes. When they fix on yours they lock in. You move before her and her eyes move with you, like Mona Lisa's eyes, only much bigger. She's riveting. From her spot above the audience gathered for tonight's sale, the nine-by-twelve-foot Lulu gazes down at the art world with a wry smile, as though amused by the spectacle before her. It is quite a spectacle.

There are three types of people crammed into the tightly packed rows of seats. First, of course, are the collectors. The big players peer down from their boxes above the action, like at the ballet. The others occupy seats as good or as bad as their recent buying history. There are passionate collectors, fueled by lust, and others, only mildly horny, looking to enjoy themselves without commitment. Within this category are a crop of new-moneyed thirty and forty-year-olds with an air of being on a Saturday shopping spree.

Then there are the dealers, like Simon. They monitor the market carefully at auction, if they're good, sniffing the wind. There are young ones, scrappily negotiating arrangements that are only slightly unethical, and older ones, guarding their turf, knowing that in the contemporary world, new is always desirable. There are secondary market dealers. They're the ones who sell the works that come up for resale, unlike the gallerists who represent artists and sell art on what's called the primary market. That's the stuff you can buy, if you're lucky, when you walk into a gallery.

There are also lots and lots of art advisers, spending other people's money with a nice cut for themselves, sometimes a kickback from certain dealers. All of them trying to grab a piece of the pie, any way they can. Even the most jaded of them enjoy the spectacle.

I suppose I fall into the third category. The gawkers. We're here to watch. It is a thrill, seeing other people spend what feels like obscene and frivolous--or simply impossible--amounts of money on something as tenuously valuable as a piece of art. It's especially exciting when the numbers go crazy, way above the estimates in the catalog. This has been happening a lot. Apparently we're in the middle of a bubble.



In the gawker group are curators and art historians, elegant couples in smart suits who are cultured and speak many languages, ladies in long flowered coats they've brought back from Bali or large plastic earrings that are funky and awful, men in leather jackets they're too old or too bald to be wearing, the pretend collectors, and pretty young things in BCBG cocktail dresses and blown-out hair more interested in snagging a husband than a good deal on a Matthew Barney video piece.

"Fair warning," the auctioneer states in British English, slightly accented with Swiss German. There are a lot of wonderful accents in the international art world. The auctioneer's is a cocktail of European influences, but he is fully in control of his English. He wears a crisp Italian tuxedo and has noticeable sideburns and a very full head of hair. He's known for a penetrating stare that is famously effective at wrangling one or two more bids out of buyers in the room. He stands at his little podium with supreme confidence, a preacher at his pulpit, commanding the room. Some of us have a small crush on him.

Above his head is an electronic board that posts the bids in different currencies. It's fun to watch the prices appear in yen and euro and British sterling. Lot number 7 has sold. A hundred thousand above the high estimate. There's a strain in the air you can almost taste, sweet and tart, a combination of anxiety and self-congratulatory glee at simply being here. The sale is going well, but I'm anxious for it to move more quickly. I'm interested in Jeffrey Finelli's painting of Lulu. Lot number 22.

