

OLÉ, OROZCO!
SIQUEIROS, SÍ!



2003–2004

SAM WALTER BURST INTO MY OFFICE, stared around at all the collectors' posters on the wall, and said: "Whatta you know about the major artists of Mexico?"

"Rivera," I said. "Martinez. Delgado."

"How about this?"

Sam tossed a bright folder on my desk.

"Read it!"

I read what I saw in big red letters.

"Siqueiros, *sí*, Orozco, *olé*." I read further. "Gambit Gallery. Boyle Heights. They're having an Orozco Siqueiros art show across the river?"

"Read the small print." Sam tapped the brochure.

"A memorial exhibit of the fine work of Sebastian Rodriguez, heir to the throne of Siqueiros and Orozco."

"I'm taking you," Sam said. "Look at the date."

"April twentieth. Hell, that's today, two p.m. Hell, that's in an hour! I can't—"

"You can. You're an art gallery expert, right? It's not an opening, it's a closing. A funeral."

"Funeral?!"

"The artist, Sebastian Rodriguez, will attend, but dead."

"You mean—?"

"It's a wake. His mom and dad will be there. His brothers and sisters will come. Cardinal Mahoney will drop by."

"Good Lord, the artist was that good? All those people!"

"It was supposed to be a party, but he died in a fall. So instead of canceling, they fetched the body. Now it's a semi-mass, with candles and choirs in lace."

"Jesus!" I said.

"You can say that again."

"Jesus. A funeral mass for an unknown artist in a fourth-rate gallery in Mexican-Hispanic-Jewish Boyle Heights?"

"Turn the pages. The ghosts of Orozco and Siqueiros are there."

I turned the pages and gasped.

"Holy mackerel!"

"You can say that again," said Sam.



ON THE FREEWAY heading to Jewish-Hispanic Boyle Heights I gibbered.

"This guy's a genius! How did you find him?"

"The police," said Sam, driving.

"The *what?*"

"Cops. He was a criminal. A few hours in jail."

"Hours? What had he done?"

"Big stuff. Mind-blowing. But no reason to be stuffed in the slammer. Big in one way, small in another. Look up!"

I looked up.

"See that overhead?"

"The bridge? Now it's behind us! Why—?"

"That's where he fell."

"Jumped?"

"No, fell." Sam speeded up. "Notice anything else?"

"About what?"

"The overhead. The bridge."

"What was I supposed to notice? You went too fast."

"We'll come back later. You'll see."

"Where he died?"

"Where he had his finest hour. *Then* died."

"Where he was Orozco, Siqueiros's ghosts?"

"You got it!"

Sam wheeled off the freeway.

"We're here!"



IT WAS NOT AN ART GALLERY.

It was a church.

There were bright pictures on all the walls, each so stunning in their brilliance they seemed to leap on the air in flames. But other flames intervened. Two or three hundred candles flared in a great circle around the vast gallery. They had been lit for hours, and their flames made it high summer, so you forgot you had just come in from April.

The artist was there but concerned with his new occupation, an eternity to be filled with silence.

He was not fixed in a coffin but laid out on a cloud embankment of snow-white cloth, which seemed to drift him up through the constellations of candles that now trembled in a draft from a side door where a member of the clergy had just entered.

I recognized the face immediately. Carlos Jesus Montoya, keeper of a great sheepfold of Latinos overlapping the dry bed of the empty Los Angeles River. Priest, poet, adventurer in rain forests, love assassin of ten thousand women, headliner, mystic, and now critic for *Art News Quarterly*, he stood as on the prow of a craft sinking in flames to survey the walls where Sebastian Rodriguez's lost dreams were suspended.

I looked where he looked and sucked air.

"What?" Sam whispered.

"These paintings," I said, my voice rising, "are not paintings. They're color photographs!"

"Sh!" someone shhed.

"Pipe down," Sam whispered.

"But—"

"It was all planned." Sam glanced around nervously. "First the photos to pique the viewers' curiosity. Then the real paintings. A double art premiere."

"Still," I said. "For photos, they're brilliant!"

"Sh," someone shhed even louder.

The great Montoya was staring at me from across a sea of summer fire.

"Brilliant photos," I whispered.

Montoya read my lips and nodded with majesty, like a torero on a Seville afternoon.

"Hold on!" I said, almost grasping something. "Those pictures. I've seen them somewhere else!"

Carlos Jesus Montoya refixed his stare at the walls.

"Come on," hissed Sam and pulled me toward the door.

"Wait!" I said. "Don't break my chain of thought."

"Idiot," Sam almost cried, "you'll get yourself killed."

Montoya read his lips too and nodded the merest of nods.

"Why would someone want to kill me?" I said.

"You know too much!"

"I know nothing!"

"You do! *Andale! Vamoose!*"

And we were out the door from hot burning summer to cold April, but were thrust aside by a cloud of weeping followed by the weepers, a dark mass of women shawled in black and shedding fountains.

"No family weeps that hard," said Sam. "Former lovers."
I listened.

"Sure," I said.

More crying followed. More women, larger and plumper, followed by a solemn gent as courtly and quiet as guidon spears.

"Family," Sam said.

"We're not leaving so soon?"

"There's a crisis. I wanted you to see everything so you would take it in like a virgin observer, nonjudgmental, before you latched onto the reality."

"How much you charge for that bag of manure you just filled?"

"No manure. Just artists' blood, artists' dreams, and critics' judgments to be won and lost."

"Give me that bag. I'll fill it for you."

"No. Step back in. Take one last look at genius slain and truth about to be corrupted."

"You only talk this way late Saturdays with your clothes on and the bottle empty."

"It's not Saturday. Here's my flask. Drink. One last swallow, one last stare."

I drank and stood in the door where the harvest weather breathed out smelling of hot candle wax.

Far away calm Sebastian drifted on his white cloth boat. Far off some boy choirs chirped.



ON THE FREEWAY, speeding, I guessed.

"I know where we're going!"

"Shh," said Sam.

"To where Sebastian Rodriguez jumped."

"Fell!"

"Fell to his death."

"Look sharp. We're almost there."

"We are! Slow down. Ohmigod. There they *are!*"

Sam slowed down.

"Pull over," I said. "God, I must be out of my mind.
Look."

"I am!"

On the freeway overpass bridge there indeed they were.

"Sebastian's paintings on the gallery walls!"

"Those were photos. These are real."

And indeed they were, brighter, bigger, phenomenal,
mind-blowing, cataclysmic.

"Graffiti," I said at last.

"But *what* graffiti," Sam said, gazing up at a cathedral's
stained glass.

"Why didn't you show me these first?"

"You did see them, but with peripheral vision at sixty miles
per hour. Now you've got them twenty-twenty."

"But why now?"

"I didn't want the real to interfere with the crazy mystery.
I wanted to give you answers so you could imagine all the lu-
natic questions."

"The photos in the gallery, the graffiti up there on the overhang. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"Half chicken, half egg. The priest Montoya sped under these miracles a month ago, did a shocked double take, and almost braked himself into a road wreck."

"He was the first art collector of Sebastian's freeway annunciations and holy revelations?" I guessed.

"Right on! Staring at these Latino-American beauties he spun and ran back for a camera. The resulting blowups were so mind blasting, so eye and soul riveting, Montoya conceived a super master plan. Since most people would snub any freeway graffiti art, why not nail Sebastian's white-hot bouquets on the gallery walls to burn people's eyes and inflame their purses? Then, when it was too late to renege, change their minds and ask for their money back, stage the big revelation: 'If you think these gallery eye-winkers are God-given,' Montoya cried, 'fix your eyes on Freeway 101, overpass 89.' So Montoya hung these windows on burning life as photos and prepared to spring the truth on the critics when they were all safely on board. The problem was—"

"Sebastian fell on the freeway before the show could open?"

"Fell and endangered his reputation."

"I thought death improved an artist's chances for celebrity."

"Some, yes, some, no. Sebastian's was a special case. Complicated. When Sebastian fell—"

"How come he fell?"

"He was hanging upside down over the edge of the freeway overhang, painting, a pal holding his legs, when the pal sneezed, God yes, sneezed and let go."

"Jesus!"

"Nobody wanted to tell his folks or anyone the truth. Christ! Upside down painting illegal graffiti and crashing down in traffic. It was listed as a bike accident, though no bike was found. They washed the guilty paint off his hands before the coroner came. Which left Montoya—"

"With a gallery full of useless photo art."

"No! A gallery full of priceless relics from an artful dodger's life, dead too soon but thank God the inspired photos stayed to be bid for in prices that skyrocketed! Cardinal Mahoney added his imprimatur, and they shot through the ceiling."

"So no one ever told where the original artwork could be found?"

"No one ever will. The relatives warned their boy never to play on the freeway, and look what's happened! They might have survived a living festival where Sebastian was celebrated for the gallery photo stuff but, my God, look, it's overhang 89 on Freeway 101, but with him dead, it was too melancholy and too commercial. Then Montoya thought to

light a thousand candles and create the Saint Sebastian church."

"How many people know this story?"

"Montoya, the gallery owner, maybe one or two aunts or uncles. Now you and me. Nobody will let the cat out of the bag to cross the freeway. Mum's the word. Reach over in the backseat. Feel around. What do you feel?"

I reached back, blind-handed.

"Feels like three buckets."

"What else?"

I probed. "A big paintbrush!"

"So?"

"Three buckets of paint!"

"Right!"

"For what?"

"To paint over Sebastian Rodriguez's freeway masterpiece graffiti."

"Paint over all those priceless murals, why?"

"If we leave them there, eventually someone will notice, compare them to the gallery photos, and the jig's up!"

"The world will discover he was only a freeway graffiti stuntman?"

"Or the world will spy his genius and gawkers will cause collisions or block traffic. Either way it's a no-go."

I stared up at the bright overhang.

"And who's gonna paint over the murals?"

"Me!" Sam said.