

“Raise your sights, Sugar,” he advised, walking away. “Aim low? All you hit are rats, snakes, and rock bottom.”

She stood, furious, and reached for the crystal ashtray, intending to throw it at his bony old spine. She snatched her hand back when he stopped, leaning on his cane, head down.

“If you had the money,” he asked quietly, “could you go home?”

There was something about his voice. An unexpected kindness.

Irrational anger gave way to a familiar despair.

“They think—I told them Johnny and I were married.”

He looked out the window and took a shallow breath. “I’ve let *my* people think I am still a dentist.” Shaking his head, he snorted softly: disgust, well worn.

For his family’s enduring illusions? For his own deepening disgrace? Either. Both.

Without looking at her, he spoke again. “There will be fifty dollars deposited in your name at the front desk of this hotel. If you ever decide to leave that presumptuous, third-rate, overdressed Irish pol, ask for the envelope, y’hear?”

Mouth open, she watched him leave the way he came. The swinging doors creaked on their hinges.

Nearby, the hotel owner had listened to all of this from his perch behind a high and narrow carved-oak desk. Al Bilicke could see the girl from where he sat, and asked her, “You know who that was?”

She shook her head.

“Doc Holliday.”

She looked sharply toward the door, hoping to catch another glimpse of the man Johnny Behan had been fulminating about ever since he got home from Prescott. Doc Holliday had a fearsome reputation, but Johnny Behan had always been convinced he could make friends with anyone, and he’d done his best during the long, dull stage-coach journey they’d shared partway—Johnny fetching his eight-year-old son back to Tombstone to live, Holliday presumably moving here from Tucson to gamble. Things had seemed to be going well until a short, sharp dispute over the Non-Partisan Anti-Chinese League, and Johnny was still shocked by the swift verbal violence of Holliday’s reaction. “All I did was invite him to join when he got to town!” Johnny had told her. “I never heard a white man take on so about chinks! He just tore into me, and with a little kid sit-

ting right there! No consideration at all for Albert!” Johnny had been tedious on the subject, and he still turned the conversation toward it as a distraction whenever *she* raised a delicate subject—such as why on earth he would expect her to raise his ex-wife’s child, just because Victoria was getting married again.

The hotel owner spoke again. “Word is, Holliday hates your...husband.”

Always that little hesitation. That tiny pause.

Angry again, she was tempted to snap, “Well, that makes two of us!” But that would sound childish. “*Kwand meem!*” she said breezily in what she believed to be French. “It’s all the same to me!”

Mr. Bilicke shrugged and turned away. Soon he was busy with a guest’s query about telephone service to the silver mines. “Just between the pits and their stamping mills, sir. Wires to the offices are going up now, and the *Cosmopolitan* is next on the schedule. Shall I arrange for a messenger in the meantime?”

Their voices faded. Alone again, and mercifully forgotten, she sank onto the wingback and closed her eyes.

Leave, she thought. That’s the solution to everything. Take that fifty dollars and go home.

All she needed was a story to tell when she got back to San Francisco.

You’ll think of something, she told herself. Just leave—

Mary Doria Russell’s first novel, *The Sparrow* (1996), was chosen as one of the Ten Best Books of the Year by *Entertainment Weekly* and won the Arthur C. Clarke Prize, the British Science Fiction for Best Novel in 1998. The sequel, *Children of God* (1998), won the Friends of the Library USA Reader’s Choice Award and was nominated for the Hugo Award, Best Novel in 1999. Her first historical fiction was *A Thread of Grace* (2005), nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Russell’s fourth novel, *Dreamers of the Day* (2008), was nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her most recent fiction, *Doc* (2011) was named a Great Lakes Great Book. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

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Beach Scene, 2005
silver gelatin print, 8.5 x 12.5 in



courtesy: the artist