

JOHN PECK

Viola, 2009
Oil on Linen, 17 x 25 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MARION DE BOOY WENTZIEN

Secret Treasures

Ana was born in a war zone. She lived through the civil war that killed her brothers and parents. She made her way from the blood and bodies, from the rampaging soldiers and hid in a cemetery with other survivors. They ate weeds and an occasional bony cat.

When she was thirteen she made it up into Mexico and crept over the border with a coyote. A trucker took her through Texas and Arizona. Once she reached the United States, Ana lived in a scramble of oleanders behind a gas station with a homeless woman. She bathed in the gas station's sink. She ate from dumpsters. The old woman taught her English during the long days.

Mitch first saw Ana when she was fifteen. He was twenty. By then she was being fostered in an American family four doors down from his dad's house.

A few months later they met at neighborhood party. Ana was standing next to a potted palm in the overcrowded kitchen. Mitch was on his third beer. She was sipping a cola. She was wearing a short red-and-white flowered dress and she was barefoot.

There was something about her that just went straight to his heart. Not an easy thing because a past girlfriend had accused him of being heartless and he'd come to believe it was true.

He tried to chat her up. She watched his lips. Her brown eyes gleamed but she said very little. Someone slammed into him from behind and he turned, fist ready. When he turned his attention back to Ana, she was gone.

He did go to her house the next evening and came nose-to-nose with her foster mother who took one look at him and hissed, "Get out of here or I'll call the cops."

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They met again ten years later. Suzanne, his wife-to-be, had dragged him to a catering company to pick out a menu for their reception. Ana was behind the front desk. Her hair just as black and silky as he remembered. "Hey, I know you," he blurted out. "Ana—it's Mitch."

"I know who you are." Her English was precise with a slight accent. He felt that pierce in his chest again followed by a zip that let him know he was alive and breathing.

"Hey, Mitch!" Suzanne pinched his arm. "Let's figure out what we're having. Do you want shrimp cocktail or crab cakes for the starter?"