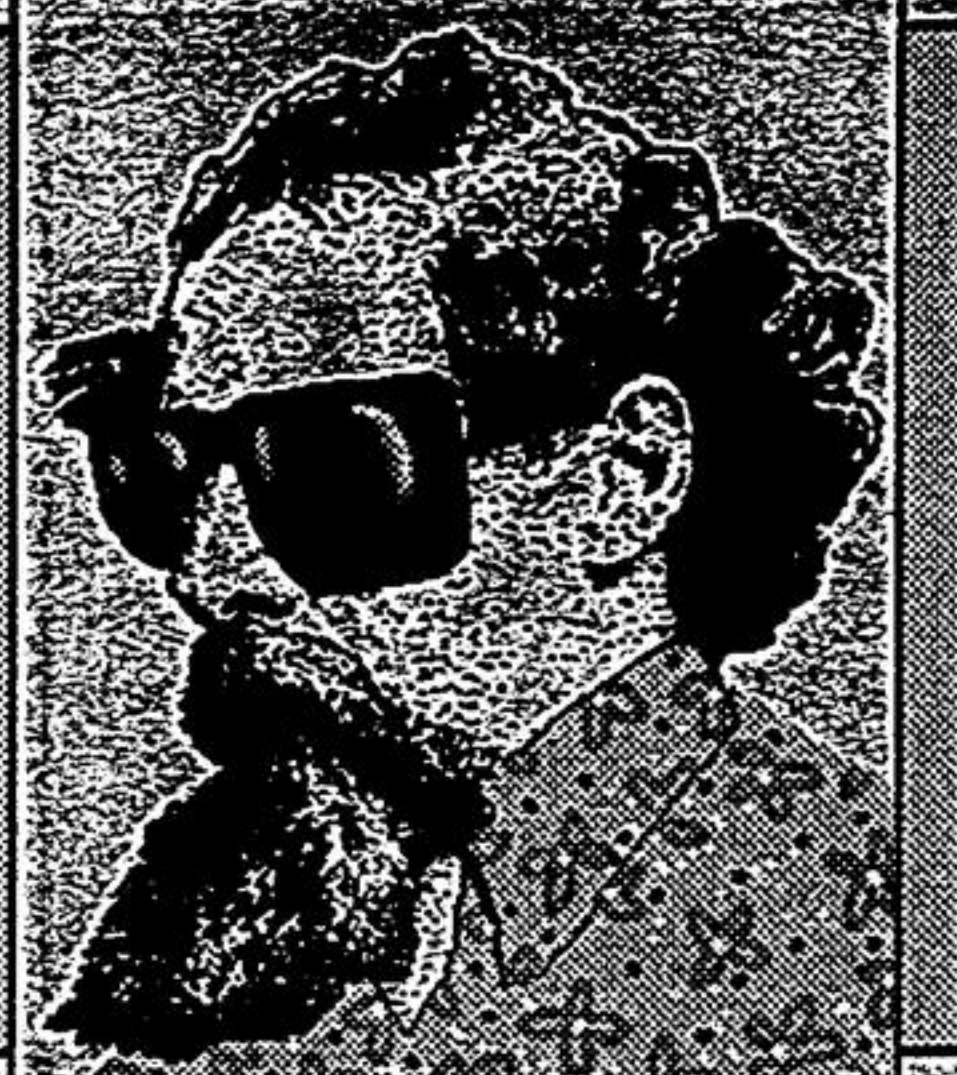


The Miracle Painting

By Kent Wideman

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Experience has taught me that there are at least three situations in life which have the capacity to escalate above and beyond any normal level of acceptable risk - an angry woman, a misguided politician and cornered animal.

Blake Conners was a cornered animal. Born into an extremely wealthy family with the added blessings of a six-foot frame, good looks and a treasured job that could hardly be referred to as demanding, Blake had thoroughly enjoyed his 31 years of life on easy street, and he was not taking kindly to news that the ride may soon be ending.

Alone in his dimly lit study, Blake rose from his arm chair, crushed one cigarette, lit another and began to pace while cursing silently to himself.

His actions seemed mechanical, reflecting hours of repetition. The words of his father continued to reverberate in his mind. "...lazy, slothful lifestyle...totally unacceptable...wasting your life...no more warnings...change immediately...or else..."

The confrontation was neither new or surprising but the finality of the ultimatum shocked Blake, and without his monthly allowance, life as he knew it was simply impossible.

Repeatedly he surveyed his options, but no easy solution emerged, and so he continued to pace, searching for the answer which would keep the ride going.

Before the sun came up, he had reached his decision, one born from desperation and destined to irrevocably change the life of his employer, Lewis Nathaniel Vallancourt.

"Not a bad beginning," I announced triumphantly, rising in the direction of my coffee machine and ignoring the fact that talking to oneself is not normally considered to be a sign of high intelligence.

As a journalist for the *Equinox Gazette*, I was attempting to write a feature article on the sensational and yet tragic Vallancourt/Conners affair.

Incredibly the true facts regarding the matter were only now coming to light following a long and highly secretive police investigation.

Stretching my arms upward in a motion that triggered a yawn in response, I realized that much work still lay ahead.

Nevertheless I was confi-

dent that my latest and eighty attempt at an opening finally captured the proper balance with which to unfold this saga, giving the reader a sense of expectation and at the same time laying the groundwork for the development of the key character, Blake Conners.

Blake's reputation as a golden boy was well earned. His career, for lack of a better term, involved managing the schedule and press contacts for the renowned artist, Lewis Vallancourt.

Given the fact that Vallancourt had a strong dislike for appearing in public and painted only when greatly inspired, Conners' responsibilities were often non-existent, which allowed him to make better use of his valuable time at the club, the racetrack or sharing his charm with some lonely damsel.

Those few individuals who knew Vallancourt personally were aware that the famous artist was not in great health and was generally lacking in most of the basic positive human emotions, facts which no doubt eased Blake's conscience as he began to develop his scheme.

While lazy in most respects, it appears that Blake spared no effort in his new project.

From the two libraries he frequented, I learned that he had signed out virtually every Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen novel in existence during early 1990, as well as a number of medical journals which had feature articles on poisons, suicide and post mortem observations.

In essence, his plan was a trade off.

He would give up his cushy job for one huge payoff, a Vallancourt original.

Including print potential, this collectible would command a market value of close to \$1 million even before Vallancourt's death, and with that kind of money, his father's actions need no longer concern Blake.

Given associations which Blake had built in recent years, selling a Vallancourt painting quietly and anonymously would not be difficult, assuming that the paintings' authenticity could be verified.

The latter would have been relatively easy, as Vallancourt had a highly distinctive style which was virtually impossible to duplicate, and in the Picasso tradition, he also both signed and dated all of his paintings.

Blake's plan finally sprang into action in June of 1990, as

he somehow convinced Vallancourt to spend a week painting at a small rented cottage in an almost uninhabited section of northern Ontario.

It goes without saying that Blake Conners was the only person who was aware of the cottages location.

As Vallancourt toiled at his painting, Blake's scheme continued to unfold.

The next step occurred at about 8 p.m. on Saturday, June 20 while Blake was attending what one would politely refer to as a loud and boisterous gathering.

Finding a secluded room away from the noise of the party, he phoned one of Vallancourt's oldest friends and original financiers. (The latter still swears it was Vallancourt speaking, but recent events show that it must have been Blake).

Imitating Vallancourt's voice, Blake commenced to thank his companion for the friendship he had shown through their time together, but added that life was no longer worth living and was therefore being ended.

Before his shocked friend could repay, a sound like a gun shot echoed across the phone line, which immediately went dead.

Blake rejoined the party without ever being missed.

The police were contacted without delay but steps to track down Vallancourt were of course futile, and Conners had kept the party he was attending a closely guarded secret.

It has occurred to me that Conners would have had an easier time of performing the murder first and then making the phone call.

I believe he chose the more difficult route so that he could be certain that his voice imitation would be accepted before he completed the remainder of his plan.

Given Blake's air tight alibi on June 30, credit card usage and other factors, since learned, we know that the actual murder must have occurred on Sunday, July 1.

I envision that the actual murder must have occurred on Sunday, July 1.

I envision that Blake went to the cottage, found that the painting was finished and completed Vallancourt's suicide on schedule.

Blake had access to Vallancourt's own gun, and was meticulously careful in ensuring that the phone, the gun and fingerprints were all left so as to indicate suicide.

In place of the complete painting, Blake left several half-finished works which Vallancourt had put aside at various times in recent months.

Blake then bolted the only door from the inside and left via one of the windows.

The police were unable to contact Blake until his return on Tuesday, July the second. It was crucial that Vallancourt was not found quickly so that the actual time of death would be virtually impossible to establish accurately.

Had the latter occurred, the timing of the phone call would not have matched the actual time of death and the suicide theory would have been destroyed.

As detailed in the following statement by Sergeant Reed, the police were completely fooled. Conners' plan was simple but brilliant.

There was not one single fact that in any way suggested that we were not dealing with a suicide.

The cottage was found bolted from the inside, and when we gained entrance, we found that Vallancourt's body had been shot at close range with his own gun.

There was nothing but Vallancourt's body had been shot at close range with his own gun.

There was nothing about Vallancourt's character that made suicide out of the question, in fact, his artistic nature, health problems and a melancholy personality actually made him a high risk candidate.

Facts from ballistics, the autopsy and our own investigation also gave no evidence to refute the located, the timing of the phone call on June 30 fit well within the broad time range during which death could have occurred.

Above all, there was simply no motive.

Vallancourt's estate settlement was surprisingly small and was willed totally to distant relatives in Europe who were not even aware that they were related to the famous recluse.

With the paintings found at the scene, we had no indication whatsoever that anything had been stolen.

In retrospect, perhaps we should have questioned the fact that Vallancourt phoned in his epithet rather than leaving a written note but remember, we were dealing with an eccentric old artist here.

It appears that it was not until mid August that Blake ventured to return to claim the painting from its hiding place, the location of which we will likely never know, and return

to his study where he now deemed it safe to finally admire his treasure, and savor the culmination of his plan.

At least briefly, he must have been ecstatic.

Even to a casual observer, Vallancourt's final painting was clearly exceptional.

Experts have since argued that it was his best effort ever, and since his death, market prices for his works had already reaffirmed that Vallancourt was an artist with lasting appeal.

As expected, Blake had been removed from his father's allowance by this time, but bank accounts have proven that he had ample funds to carry him through the next year or so, during which time he had undoubtedly planned to carefully market the painting.

However, at some point on that August night in his study, Blake came to the realization that his apparently unblemished plan was fatally flawed.

The latest draft for the conclusion of my *Equinox Gazette* article is as follows:

"They found Blake very still and very cold, sitting upright in his arm chair and facing his treasured painting. It was evident that his research on poisons hadn't been a total waste of time after all. We will never fully know the process in Blake's mind as he made his final and irrevocable decision, but it was unquestionably a terrible struggle.

Undoubtedly, hour after hour passed as he desperately searched for options that were never found, because in reality, there were only two alternatives, and despite the shocking nature of the first, it appears that Blake was not willing to choose his second option and destroy the painting, which would also have meant ending the ride.

If you want to view the famous painting, it remains on display at a gallery just outside of Toronto.

Most days of the week you'll see a crowd around it, some of which may be referring to it as "The Tragic Painting" or "The Painting of Death".

I prefer to call it "The Miracle Painting".

If you look closely at the bottom right hand corner, you can see the miracle for yourself with the easily legible signature...Lewis Vallancourt, July 1, 1990.

After all, how many paintings do you know of that were completed by the artist the day after they died?