

Shape No 8

Written by Cora Buhlert

A tale of a hardbolied female Government agent

Hi folks! My name is Caroline Ragnarok. But you can call me Carrie. I am a writer. Like most writers, however, I can't really live off it and need a job that pays the bills besides. Thus, I am also a spy. That means I get to do all sorts of interesting things. Such as saving the world from whacked-out psychos hell-bent on destroying it, protecting American heiresses from shotgun weddings to East-European potentates, reacquiring the stolen blueprints for some doomsday device, dealing with killer viruses that have infected Alaskan resort towns, investigating immaculate conceptions connected to UFO-sightings in the New Mexico desert and the like.

However, my job is not always that interesting. There's also the boring bits. Such as my personal favourite: courier duty.

Which means taking something from one place to another and protecting it with my life – if necessary – should somebody try to steal it. Which – most of the time – nobody does. Who would even want to steal buff Manila envelopes or battered briefcases? And mostly that's the sort of thing I am supposed to deliver.

This time, however, the object I am to escort is a bit more interesting. It is a work of art on its way to the biggest

ever exhibition of 20th and 21st century art in Berlin. Shape No. 8 by Bulgarian artist Vassily Bagdanorowsky (and here I thought my name was unpronounceable). Valued at 2.8 million dollars.

According to Dewar's Art Dictionary on DVD - All of Art from Cave Paintings to Cyber Art, Bagdanorowsky is the most famous artist of a school known as Minimalist Brutalist Barbarism. His oeuvre is characterized by a simplicity of form and sparse use of colour in connection with the full utilization of the natural structures and effects of the organic material. Whatever that is supposed to mean. Bagdanorowsky's most important work is a series of thirteen sculptures imaginatively entitled Shapes No. 1 to No. 14. Apparently Bagdanorowsky is superstitious.

And now it is my job to pick up No. 8 of that series at its owner's – multimillionaire Benton B. Hutchison's – apartment on Park Avenue. It's in one of those lovely art deco buildings directly on Central Park.

Once I've got the sculpture I'll take it in an armoured limousine to JFK airport. Then a plane to Berlin and finally yet another car (don't know whether armoured or not) to the museum. In short, an easy job.

Exhausting though. Traveling six time zones here and back and all that in the course of a single day.

My ID gets me past the security guards in the lobby. An elevator with highly polished wood panels, brass inlays and a thick soft carpet takes me up to the 16th floor, where Benton B. Hutchison's apartment is.

Benton B. Hutchison is the typical eccentric millionaire. Case in point, he opens the door himself instead of having some servant do it for him. At least I suppose that the gray-haired man in a slightly worn red robe who opens the door is Benton B. Hutchison. I can't be sure, for nobody has seen Mr Hutchison in the last four years. Excluding me of course.

"Mr Hutchison? Good morning. I'm Carrie Ragnarok."

"Ah, you're the security person. Come in, come in."

I step inside and watch Mr Hutchison lock and bolt the door with about seven different locks and chains. So he's not only eccentric, he's also paranoid. His apartment is fascinating, though. The place must be huge. I can see only part of it, and that part is bigger than three ordinary apartments. And what I can see looks more like an art gallery than a home. There are large abstract paintings on every wall, and in the middle of the room there is an enormous rusty sculpture. Apart from that there are no furnishings whatsoever. I can't help but wonder what the other rooms are like. Somehow I imagine Mr Hutchison sleeping

on Dalí's Mae West sofa and pissing into Man Ray's ready-made pissoir.

"Miles told me he'd sent one of his very best people", Mr Hutchison says. By Miles I suppose he means Major General Miles J. Barrington, the most influential person in the US intelligence community and maybe even of the whole USA as well. Hutchison is on first-name terms with Major General Barrington? Major General Barrington who even the toughest field agents cower in fear of? Major General Barrington of whom they say that even knowing his real name is the equivalent of a death sentence? This man truly is eccentric.

"Actually I had expected someone not quite so... young", Hutchison says.

And not quite so female. Yeah, yeah, I know. "Do you have a problem with that?", I ask him, maybe a bit harsher than I should. After all, the guy appears to be pretty close to Barrington.

"Oh, well, I suppose it's all right. If Miles thinks you are capable enough..."

Capable enough? He wonders whether I am capable enough to protect some damned piece of artwork? Hell, any junior agent they just recruited out of college would be capable enough for that!

"If I wanted to", I say, "I could crush your windpipe with the index finger of my left hand. That capable enough for you, Mr Hutchison?"

I know, I know, I shouldn't have done that. But, hell, I don't care just

how close this guy is with Barrington. They could play golf, damn it, they could even go to the sauna together every weekend, and I wouldn't care. Contrary to most, I'm not afraid of Barrington. Because Barrington happens to like me. Or rather, he likes the books that I write.

Anyway, looks like that little bit of intimidation worked, for Hutchison gets very friendly all of a sudden. "Oh, I'm sure that you are very capable, Miss Ragnarok. After all, Miles says so. And I did not mean to doubt your abilities, not at all. It's just that my collection means everything to me. The objects are dearer to me than my own children. That is, if I had children. What do you think, Miss Ragnarok, isn't my collection just amazing? This here, for example, is a genuine..."

Ugh, I guess I'd better interrupt him before I get the grand tour of Mr Hutchison's private museum of modern art and miss my plane.

"Your collection is very impressive and I'd really love to see more of it, but you see, I'm on a tight schedule here. My flight leaves in one and a half hours and I'd really like to take the piece now."

"Oh, I see", Hutchison says, slightly disappointed. Funny, I thought he'd be glad to get rid of me. But I suppose if you've seen nobody for four years (except Major General Barrington of course), you're glad of any company.

Just then I realize that I have absolutely no idea what a sculpture by Vassily Bagdanorowsky is supposed to look like. Dewar's Art Dictionary on

DVD had no pictures of Bagdanorowsky's work. Multimedia isn't all it's cracked up to be.

For all I know, Shape No. 8 could be that enormous rusty monstrosity in the middle of the room. Which would be a real load of shit! For there's no way I can get that thing in the car. Hell, there's no way to get it on the plane for that matter.

You'd think that they'd have told me beforehand. But then, what do you expect of an agency that tells you you're dealing with five terrorists and then you find yourself slugging it out with fifty?

As it is, Mr Hutchison vanishes for a minute and then returns with a case about the size of a large packet of washing powder. No problem getting that in the car or on the plane for that matter. Looks like intelligence was correct for once.

"She is already packed up for the journey", Hutchison says, "but I believe you will want to see her first. She is truly lovely."

"Oh no", I begin, "that's really not necessary, Mr Hutchison." My only concern right now is that I catch my plane. I couldn't care less about what the sculpture looks like. If I want to see it, I can visit the exhibition. But it's too late. Hutchison has already opened the case and removed a thick layer of Styrofoam. Next, he takes a small object out of the case, very gently, and holds it up for me to see.

"Here she is", he exclaims triumphantly, "Isn't she beautiful?"

I must say, the thing in the case is

anything but beautiful. It is a small piece of pottery, dark brown streaked with red. The surface is rough, unglazed, which gives it a certain primitive look, but primitive in an artistic kind of way. As for the form of the thing, it somewhat resembles a flower vase, though I believe it has little practical value. Not that it is supposed to. This is art. At least that's the theory.

The object consists of an upright tube, about 20 centimeters tall, with a snout and a loop which serves as a handle. Or at least is supposed to serve as a handle, for I doubt that anybody could get their fingers through that. As I said, no practical value.

What's more, the whole thing is tilted forward and looks as if it's about to fall over. In a book on 20th century design (see, I'm not an art-illiterate at all) I once read that a forward-tilt form such as this is supposed to make objects look dynamic, speeding into the future, pushing away the past. But that book was talking about a 1950s water pitcher of bright pink plastic. This is nothing but a pretentious lump of clay and all the forward-tilts in the world will not make it look dynamic. And anyway, why would anybody even want a flower vase or water pitcher that looks like it's about to run out on you any minute? That book on 20th century design had no answer to that.

Nevertheless, even bright pink plastic water pitchers on the verge of take-off are closer to being objects of art - at least in my opinion - than this thing. Oh, it sure tries hard to be arty, but somehow it doesn't succeed. It

looks as if some overly ambitious amateur potter had attempted to imitate art pottery. And that's as good a description as any.

Unfortunately, Mr Hutchison does not quite share my opinion on Shape No. 8. "Isn't she just amazing? Have you ever seen anything so lovely? What do you think, Miss Ragnarok?"

I suppose I could tell him the truth. Except that the truth would hurt his feelings. And I don't really want that. This guy is a friend of Barrington's after all, so maybe I ought to humour him. I could also tell him, "Sorry, I don't know anything about art." But that would make me seem like an idiot and I don't want that either. Not all of us spies are semi-illiterate doorkickers or Martini-slurping playboys. Thus, I believe some creative lying is in order now.

"A very... interesting object, Mr Hutchison", I say, "Though I'd prefer if you could return it to its case."

What is more, I must admit, Minimalist Brutalist Barbarism is not one of my favourite schools of modern art. I prefer the kind of art that has a more sensual appeal and generates an emotional as opposed to an intellectual response in the audience. For I believe that appealing to a person's emotions is still the best way of stimulating that person's intellect."

Whatever it was that I just said - and I don't pretend to understand it - it must have been the right thing. Mr Hutchison frowns for an instant, then his mouth twists into a broad smile.

"Oh, if you feel that way", he begins, "I have some objects here that

will surely interest you..."

Is there nothing that will stop this man? Damn, I should have told him I know nothing about art after all.

"Uh, that's very kind of you, Mr Hutchison. And I'd really love to take up your offer. But I'm in a real hurry. My plane, you understand? So if you could just give me the case?"

I'm not sure whether Mr Hutchison really does understand, but at any rate he does hand me the case. A short good-bye later I am back in the elevator with its luxurious art deco decorations. Now really, I prefer that to Hutchison's collection any day.

I give the security guard in the lobby a nod and walk to the car which is parked at the back of the building. It takes me a moment to fumble for the key, because I am loaded with Shape No. 8 in its case. Just at that instant I hear a voice behind me:

"Okay, lady, hands up! Give me your wallet, real nice and slow."

Great! A mugging! This is just what I need right now. There was a time this sort of thing happened to you only on Times Square. Not in the middle of one of Manhattan's richest neighbourhoods. New York isn't what it used to be. And anyway, where are those pesky security guards when you really need them?

I turn around, slowly. Not that the mugger said anything about turning around, but I do anyway. I want to see what I'm dealing with here.

In fact, what I do see isn't all that impressive. It's a scruffy-looking skinny young man with blond hair and a

goatee. There's a gun in his hand. Cheap job, Saturday Night Special. Probably can't fire a single round without something breaking. No match for my Walther P5. The only problem is that my gun is in its holster beneath my jacket and that I have no way of reaching it with the car keys in one hand and the case in the other. Well, maybe I won't even need it.

"Back off, punk", I say, "Snatch some old lady's purse or find yourself some tourists to rob. I don't care. Just leave me alone cause I really don't have time for this now."

With amateurs like him - and an amateur he is - intimidation works ninety percent of the time. Unfortunately, this guy belongs to the other ten percent. For he does not only repeat his demands, he even increases them.

"Shut up and gimme your money, lady. And the keys. And that icebox."

By icebox I guess he means the case which holds Shape No. 8. He's even right; it does kind of look like an icebox. However, while I personally believe that Shape No. 8 will be no great loss for the art world and no great gain for the robber, I still cannot let him have it. It's a matter of professional pride. After all, I am responsible for the safety of the thing.

"Okay, you can have the keys. And the money", I say though I have no intention of letting him have that, either. I've got a reputation to lose here. "But you can't have what's in that case. You wouldn't want to have it either."

"Forget it, lady. You give me the

money and the keys and the icebox. Bet you've got cola in there or maybe even a beer. And I'm feeling real thirsty right now. Now hand the stuff over or I'll shoot you."

"I assure you, there's no cola in that case. Nor beer either. You really wouldn't want to have it. If you'd just let me show you..."

I put the case to the ground, slowly, without waiting for his permission. He isn't going to fire. And even if he did, with a gun like that he's more likely to shoot his own toes off than to hit me. You'd think robbers would put some care into selecting the tools of their trade.

The case is on the ground, out of harm's way. The robber is still standing there, unsure what to do for a second. And that second is all I need. A spinkick sends his gun flying into some trashcans in the corner of the courtyard.

"Hey, what...?!", the robber exclaims, and that's all he has the chance to say before my fist hits his jaw and sends him flying to the pavement.

At just that moment - don't you know it - that security guard decides to show up. "Ma'am, are you okay?", he exclaims, still panting with exhaustion.

"I'm fine", I reply, "No thanks to you. But you'd better call the police. This little maggot here just tried to rob me. Oh yes, and please assure Mr Hutchison of apartment No 16A that his object is unharmed. As for me, I have a plane to catch."

Nevertheless, I had better make sure first that Shape No. 8 is really

unharmed. Thus, I bend down to undo the fastenings of the case. Meanwhile, the unfortunate robber is coming to again.

"Ugh, what hit me?", he wants to know.

"I did", I say, "you picked the wrong person to rob. And just for the record, you've got a real good chance to go down as the dumbest mugger in history. For you see, the object there in the case is Shape No. 8 by that famed artist of Minimalist Brutalist Barbarism, Vassily Bagdanorowsky. Valued at 2.8 million dollars. US dollars."

The would-be robber gives me an odd look, then shifts his gaze at Shape No. 8, which, by the way, is completely unharmed. Then, despite the circumstances, he begins to laugh. A wild mad laugh. "That...that thing?!", he exclaims, "You've got to be kidding me."

I must say, I even agree with him on that point.