

AN ART FORGER'S SPELL by Mark S. Forgy

By the summer of 1969 college was little more than my bulletproof vest giving me a deferment from the draft and going to Vietnam. The previous year saw hope and sanity burn on the funeral pyres of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Chicago's Democratic Convention captured the mood of the country. Tear gas, riot police, batons beating protesters and organized resistance. The country had not been as polarized since the Civil War. By April of '69 more than 33,000 bodies in black zippered bags came home from the Tropic of Hell. I knew I wouldn't let myself be inducted or induced "to just sign up and get it over with" as my father urged me to do. It was an immoral war, indefensible and not winnable, I thought. Drugs and the spirit of rebellion carried me and millions more in their currents. Rather than going to beautiful Southeast Asia, I elected to go to Europe. It would be an escape from my flirtation with higher learning, although the consequences of my decision would change my life in ways I could not have imagined.

On the Spanish Mediterranean island of Ibiza I discovered a refuge friendly to the 60's counter culture. There, I met an artist named Elmyr (pronounced *El-meer*). "De Hory," his family name, he declared "is *Hungarian*," the inflection in his voice elevated the ordinary to extraordinary, as in "I would like a *steak*," lending a piece of meat the uniqueness of a jellyfish soufflé. He had an impresario's flair about him I came to accept as normal, and this infectious enthusiasm was apparent to anyone around him.

It was a sun-filled autumn morning when the ship tied up to those steel knob hitching posts along the port of Ibiza town. Towering above the clustered white stucco

buildings, like irregular, vertically stacked dominoes, the sand-colored ramparts of the Old City suggested this small island had been a once-important landmark along an ancient sea-faring trade route. An outpost to every successive dominate culture along this body of water, and who would leave their mark, I later learned.

The Carthaginians, Romans, and Moors were now supplanted by sandal-shod, twenty-something backpackers arriving in legions, believing Ibiza's reputation as a sanctuary for hippies and eulogized in the movie, *More*. Its producers reputedly obtained all the requisite permits with embossed seals to make a film about tourism in Spain. Somehow the glorification of drug-taking and death by heroin overdose was probably not the kind of publicity the Fascist Franco regime had in mind as the wholesome promotion of its burgeoning tourist industry. It did nevertheless attract a certain demographic group.

I sensed something special about Elmyr when I spotted him that first day I arrived on the island. Leaning over the rail I watched as two port workers pushed the mobile stairway next to the ship. The crowds of summer had vanished. A silver-haired man stood alone, wearing neatly pressed trousers, a cardigan sweater, open-collar shirt, ascot and Hollywood sunglasses, inspecting the scruffy brigade as we debarked. He searched our faces, looking for one familiar to him. I approached him and asked if he spoke English. He smiled. "Like they do in Kansas City!" he responded, although his accent was something other than Midwestern. "Can you recommend any hotels?" He pointed to a narrow cobbled street. "You'll find several inexpensive *pensions* in that direction," guessing correctly I would not be paying with an American Express card. When I discovered nothing available I resigned myself to another night sleeping on a beach. That evening, after weaving in and out of some portside bars I ran into Elmyr again. "Did you

have any luck finding a place?" he asked. I told him "No." He said "Well, I have a guest room in my house you're welcome to use if you like." It was a spontaneous offer, I thought, one I couldn't refuse. My overnight stay drifted into days, then a week. I tried to make myself useful, offering to help with whatever needed to be done during that time. He then asked if I cared to stay on working as his assistant. Let's see --- his home had a swimming pool, a housekeeper he'd fashioned into a damn good cook, he was generous and entertaining. There was no down side that I could tell. Nor could I guess the secrets in Elmyr's past. All I knew was that he disappeared into his studio each morning and I wasn't supposed to bother him during that time. Curiosity only once prompted me to ask what might warrant knocking on that door. He glared at me as though I'd forgotten my mother's name, turned without replying, entered his sanctum and closed the door.

My chores around his house entailed helping out at his frequent parties, keeping his garden weed free, cleaning the pool, driving for him, and secretarial duties, helping with his correspondence in English. His English vocabulary was larger than mine; it was just that his handwriting looked as cryptic as a doctor's prescription. I also had a slightly better grasp of punctuation. There was no heavy lifting, just mostly indulging a need I recognized--- companionship. Here was a man who was lonely despite the flurry of social activity surrounding him. Within a few weeks of meeting him he told me that if I wanted to live in Europe I needed to speak two or *three* languages. He then enrolled me at the local Alliance Française for private French lessons. Elmyr was becoming my 'mentor' before I knew what that meant.

Elmyr recommended books he deemed essential. He urged me to read Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann etc. along with art books, biographies, history, all that

would give me a well rounded education. Daily life however provided the most amazing learning experiences of all, and meeting Prosky made clear the chasm between life as I knew it and what it had become.

While it would have been easy to dismiss Prosky as an archetypal thug, I tried to avoid that impulse of first impressions, one Elmyr indulged with a nonchalance he learned from a lifetime of habit. I wanted to be more generous in my assessment of others. Still, it was hard not to notice that Prosky's nose had been at odds with others' points of view more than once I imagined, and how his early-man features stretched over Bigfoot's chassis. Underneath his black leather jacket and half-buttoned shirt shocks of black chest hair intertwined with gold chains. A neat shave line encircled the base of his neck where the forest began. It was true; he possessed the coarseness of a wood rasp but he and Elmyr shared an interest in art, money, and both were Hungarian. Moreover, Prosky could sell you cold dishwater and make you feel good about it.

One day I glimpsed his black Mercedes convertible with its red leather seats from the second-floor window of Elmyr's home. A talc of off-road dust dulled the car's sheen. He parked in the shade of the house, got out and walked up the stone steps to the front door. The steel doorknocker announced his unexpected call. Again, he left his six-year old daughter and Doberman pincer in the car "in case the dog got hungry," Elmyr quipped

On this occasion, Prosky brought him an auction catalog from Sotheby's in Geneva. Inside, he proudly pointed out a painting featured in its sale of 20th century art, a scene of Nice in southern France. Palm trees lined its harbor and street-lamped promenade, swaths of pinks, blues and greens were backdrops for people, buildings, and

horse-drawn carriages. What was unusual about this painting was the signature in the lower right hand corner of the canvas. Elmyr and I examined the reproduced picture and instantly recognized it as one he had done a few months before. Only now, it bore the name of the French artist, Raoul Dufy, not Elmyr.

For more than twenty years, Elmyr made a career of creating fake masterpieces, not only Dufys but also many better-known impressionist and postimpressionist artists. His long trail of chicanery earned him the title of the “*world’s greatest art forger*,” a label that always made him wince, as it demeaned his dignity, he believed. However, the specter of those years and evading the consequences of his illegal activities still troubled him. Every knock at the door might be an Interpol agent and a moment of reckoning. Furthermore, he was weary of constantly looking over his shoulder to see if a Damocles sword was waiting to fall. Now, he was trying to emancipate himself from his past and establish a reputation as a fine artist in his own right, but Prosky, among others, was more interested in passing off his fakes as originals...again. That was where the *big* money was and people knew Elmyr’s reputation as an easy mark.

Despite his efforts to sell his own work, people still wanted his Picassos, Matisses, Modiglianis, Renoirs, and others. He also understood the likelihood of others trying to profit from his talent, but did not have the stamina or will to *police* their intentions. I recall how his suntan could not disguise the blood loss in his pallor that afternoon as he gazed in silent déjà vu at the catalog’s Dufy. Its pages trembled in his hands. Prosky remained oblivious of the growing storm in Elmyr’s face. Instead, unable to contain his joy, Prosky began moving with the gaiety and weightlessness of a marionette. His little secret burst. “It fetched \$35, 000,” he chortled.

Visibly upset at the surprise news, Elmyr went off on a tirade in Hungarian. His stiffened forefinger bounced repeatedly off Prosky's sternum, backing up a man whose shadow easily swallowed him. Suddenly, moving with not-seen-before speed, he began frisking Prosky in a ticklish way, dissolving the steel cable tension into shrieks of playground laughter. Elmyr's hands darted into Prosky's trouser pockets one after the other like a striking serpent, emerging with fists full of cash. Then, pushing him into an easy chair, lifted one of his legs like a professional wrestler, removed his shoe and sock to reveal a neatly folded wad of money, repeating the surprise move with his other leg. Disarmed by Elmyr's slapstick assault, Prosky lay supine in paroxysms of laughter; tears trickled down his cheeks while his naked feet rested on a small table in front of his chair. Their comic ballet ended as abruptly as it began.

The booty from his money-yielding piñata lay on the floor, Swedish kroner, dollars, and Swiss francs. Collecting them on his hands and knees did little to salvage Elmyr's dignity, but the glint in his eyes signaled his triumph. No matter how long removed from the sandbox antics of these two men, the memory remains imperishable. At the time, I didn't know if this spectacle was typical of gypsy bargaining techniques, but happily it became an entertaining ritual each time they did business. Fernand Legros, Elmyr's former dealer, had not acted as brazenly as Prosky had, saying to his face, in essence, "See, I can exploit you and there is nothing you can do about it."

My life by this time had evolved into an otherworldly existence that often seemed LSD-inspired for its strangeness. I know the sort of dance of the two silverbacks I

witnessed that afternoon would never occur in Minnesota. Outrageous behavior like that would be grist for Sunday's sermon and community indignation, but this small island of Ibiza was a universe away from the quiet life Midwesterners often seem comfortable with. "Don't draw attention to yourself" was a constant reminder from my parents. In Elmyr's world humility had its place, say, reposing in a casket. In his mind, it was a vapid attribute, like the word "nice," which I quickly dropped from my vocabulary to this day after using it as an ill-chosen modifier when describing someone. He said "What do you mean, *nice*? He wouldn't *pee* on your dining room table?" An image forever linked to that word. His observation was less a rebuff than realigning my view of a world order, one that conformed more to his oft-repeated adage, "kalt odor heiss, aber nicht warm" (cold or hot but not warm) meaning he had little tolerance for anything in half-measure. "Nice" was therefore tepid and uninteresting.

A good part of my education came by way of listening and observing as Elmyr held court at a sidewalk café. What I didn't fully appreciate before was how important this open-air school was. There, gossip was the common currency and the exchange rate generous. One of Elmyr's favorite haunts was the terrace of the Hotel Montesol. It occupied a strategic corner on the Vara del Rey. It was like the pass at Thermopylae, where almost everyone was obliged to pass by on the way to the port, old city, or the heart of Ibiza town. "Here," Elmyr explained, "everyone minds everyone else's business very intensely. They read each other's mail, their love letters and they tell who slept with whom and how they did it," ...ever the champion of an open society. One of the island's best conduits of this vital information was one of Elmyr's friends, Arlene Kaufman.

They shared a salacious curiosity for the tawdriest current news. She was Jewish, a former public school teacher from Brooklyn who, like many diminutive and inviting looking creatures when irritable, could remove your face like a wolverine. She was smart, articulate, and favored rude language for emphasis. We thought her remorseless candor and bare-knuckle invective were part of her charm. In any event, Elmyr savored the intellectual nexus in her company. While sipping a coffee during their morning rendezvous at the Montesol, their conversation topics careened from Kierkegaard, Spinoza, Hemingway, Proust, world politics, to a subject for which she demonstrated untiring interest and personal experience---*orgasm*. Never before, or since, have I heard someone so compelled to expound on this bodily function with the same wonder and respect, although Elmyr had no difficulty following the focus of their chat as it headed south. I always listened, hoping to improve my mind. Maybe it was the deliberate cadence and polished *high* Brooklyn accent that intoned a note of authority in what she said. She reminded me of Eliza Doolittle in reverse. As owner of La Tierra, the island's most popular bar, Arlene was a celestial body and all manner of Ibiza society orbited round her. She took herself seriously as queen of the night scene, so it may have been this perception of self-importance that imparted an oracular flare to her diction. Nevertheless, *amour* was a domain where most everyone possessed predictable expertise.

Ibiza was a lively Petri dish where people enjoyed sex first and asked for names later. From Elmyr's garden, one could see the flat profile of Formentera, Ibiza's neighboring island. When showing visitors his villa he often pointed it out from his poolside and asked if they knew what it was. Most responded with "No." He said "It is a *secret laboratory* where they are trying to develop new strains of venereal disease

unresponsive to antibiotics,” We laughed, impervious to the truth in his joke. Ibiza remains a training camp for hedonists and, I suspect, the least likely place to see an apparition of the Virgin Mary.

As popular as the Montesol was for a mid-morning rendezvous, it was Ibiza’s teeming bar scene where all of God’s creatures, or so it seemed, congregated when the sun went down.

In Ibiza, beautiful people were fifteen to the dozen. After tanning themselves shades of crimson or saddle-brown, these sun gods and goddesses strode through the streets each evening, spilling into portside restaurants, bars and outdoor terraces. The air was pungent with pheromones. One night Elmyr and I were entrenched at La Tierra. Arlene stage-managed the scene when a young woman walked into the bar through the whitewashed, arched doorway, emerging through long strands of Moroccan glass beads that reminded one of Ibiza’s Moorish past. Her wispy white dress contrasted her bronzed skin, pale blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair. She possessed a physical perfection that commanded everyone’s attention. The Saturday night saloon silenced as the crowd allowed her through, separating like the Red Sea for Charlton Heston.

With the flourish of a circus ringmaster, Elmyr stood up and gestured to her to join us as though he were hailing a longtime friend. We had eaten at a favorite French bistro earlier and were now enjoying a Cognac and socializing a bit with Arlene. The after-dinner brandy made him even more outgoing than usual. Always attracted to people for their looks, brains, or pedigree, this siren’s allure piqued his curiosity. She made her way to our table as if it had been a prearranged date. Elmyr rose from his seat, as I did,

introduced himself and me, bent courteously over her outstretched hand, as a “well-bred” man would do, and then embarked on polite small talk.

Brittany was her name, from Pompano Beach, Florida, a fashion model on vacation. A photographer told her about Ibiza and she wanted to visit this much-talked-about island before returning to work in Milan. When Elmyr mentioned he was a painter, her face flashed incandescent. Abruptly, she thrust her hands upward, palms toward her, fingers apart, inches from her face as though she were going to have him guess how many fingers she had. Then, wiggling them in case he hadn’t noticed she proudly exclaimed that *she* applied the new nail color, implying I guess that this creative endeavor surely ought to put these fellow artists on a first name basis.

It was apparent that her brain declared its independence from her body around puberty, so while he centerfold looks would prompt nocturnal emissions in Baptist ministers, her frontal cortex was still earning babysitting money. At the same time, she exhibited a frothy self-confidence about herself from all the attention directed her way, which she thought made her interesting---a delusion she was comfortable with. Despite her sensuality and adolescent mind, she was living proof that the Gods also have a cruel sense of humor, for she possessed a whiny, glass-shattering voice that would make one long for the soothing screams of a cat that caught its tail under a chair rocker. Hence, it was not her beauty, or brain activity with toe tag attached, or having the depth of a tea saucer that I found most memorable about this encounter, but her withering voice that would induce scabies in anyone within earshot. It was the most effective defense mechanism conceivable, one that guaranteed her untarnished virtue among the horniest of buccaneers.

Elmyr conducted himself like a gentleman and displayed unusual composure with our guest that evening. I admired him even more for his feigned interest in her chiseling prattle knowing full well he would have preferred being sprayed by skunk than endure her a minute longer. When a brief lull occurred in her self-absorbed monologue, Elmyr rose, stating he had to leave as his grandmother died in a tragic motorcycle accident that day and the funeral was early the following morning.

His riposte didn't surprise me. Nor was the funereal imagery beyond the realm of possibility on Ibiza. We accepted the unreal with a shrug. Furthermore, he had a knack for making the unbelievable believable. He possessed a natural theatricality that often turned conversation into performance art, ever aware of the audience and delivering his lines with the timing and conviction of a seasoned actor. When Elmyr created his pastiches of the modern masters he transformed fine art to a performing art, a grand impersonator at his craft of deception, blurring the distinction between what was real, and what wasn't.

I understood his seductive charm was endearing and authentic. It also helped disarm the wariness of others, opening doors to trust. Yes, he was a conman who had engaged in criminal activity with his art forgery, although from what I observed there seemed to be a symbiotic relationship, a culture of complicity within the shadowy recesses of the art world among dealers, curators, buyer/investors whose ethics and practices allowed Elmyr not just to survive, but thrive during his decades-long career. It is also hard to overlook the greed that underwrites these unsavory alliances. Elmyr eased his own conscience by saying, "The Big Money was not made by *me*, but the dealers and people who resold them". It was a disingenuous rationalization. However, he recognized the roles of his

enablers and how often mutual interests intersected at the bottom line, whether that meant profit or prestige. And it was this common ground where morality is brushed aside by willing participants and renders laws ineffective inhibitors. The lessons learned from this forger's tale, I suspect, may well arm the art world with knowledge to avoid being duped by future practitioners of this dark art, but will do little to thwart the indomitable self-interest and mercantile Darwinism that prevail in the largest unregulated market in the world. After all, 'regulation' is not a welcome remedy, rather a dirty word to the free-market slaves. They consistently insist that measures meant to police business practices are hostile to free enterprise, thus creating the loophole and haven for unethical or illegal activity. The upward spiraling prices attached to art continue to provide the greatest incentive to make art crime a growth industry in a bleak landscape of economic disparity. Elmyr's saga may then become a how-to book rather than a cautionary parable to the would-be forger.

Elmyr and I once broached the subject of others doing fake Elmyrs. We thought about it for an instant, then laughed together at the improbable notion. Today, I find myself in the odd position of exposing the visual flotsam being passed off as "Elmyrs." How strange indeed.

Then, in many ways my life in his company echoed that song lyric by Jim Morrison, "*Strange days have found us,*" at times unnerving, supernatural, but ultimately a time of enchanted illusion.

These stories are excerpted from Mark Forgy's forthcoming memoir: *THE FORGER'S APPRENTICE: LIFE WITH THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS ARTIST*

These stories are excerpted from Mark Forgy's forthcoming memoir: *THE FORGER'S APPRENTICE: LIFE WITH THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS ARTIST*