ONE

You can’t say that! Come back! Stop!’

Matt Flight woke up, sweating and terrified. God! A person could die this way, heart bursting, overwhelmed by an event conceived in a dreaming brain. He drew a deep breath and counted one to five. Emptying his lungs, he felt the fear recede.

His recollection of the dream was vivid. Running from the gallery exhibiting his work, he’d headed down Cork Street in the heart of London’s West End, pursued by an angry mob. Trying to escape he’d run faster and faster until, on the point of collapse, he’d woken up.

Motionless in his studio bed, he clutched his duvet. The darkness was close: physical, like the ear of a priest. ‘What have I done?’ he whispered. But there was no going back. The exhibition had pitched his life into immediate controversy. And all because of one canvas!

Central to the show, The Orchard was a painting of doves gorging on flesh bursting from the fruit of pomegranate trees. The trees were rooted in bodies – in the dead of human conflict. To Matt, this symbolized peace drawing its strength from war, the one giving meaning to the other.
All I did was paint the truth, he reflected. And what happens? I cause an outrage!

‘How can you paint such a horrible scene?’ a woman had cried, tears in her eyes. ‘Have you no faith?’

‘Yes, it’s obscene!’ another had said. ‘You’re a heartless beast!’

He told himself he should have known the image would insult. After all, wasn’t it his intention to push the glory train of false hopes off the rails?

Couldn’t they see? he thought. The point is to make clear something we’ve forgotten. Human nature doesn’t change! We are what we are – creatures of habit, good and bad.’

He wished he could turn back the clock – remove the picture from the show – anything to reverse the public’s indignation.

But Bernie Feltz, the gallery’s owner, couldn’t have been happier. The private view had been packed and the consternation of his guests gave him reason to feel his latest protégé was a winner.

Lagoon Art had a reputation for notoriety. Regular attacks in the press accused it of using shock to attract attention and of debasing art. By playing on the cognoscenti’s flirtation with ‘underground’ thinking, Feltz had built a good business. His customers were hungry for a place at the high table of metropolitan cool and Matt’s work was his latest offering – another plat-du-jour of delectable controversy.

Feltz knew artists backwards – or so he thought. Weaving his way through their layers of conceit and insecurity, he counselled and cajoled them with promises of recognition. It was a matter of mutual trust, he assured them: if they put their careers in his hands, he would lead them to the gilded rostrum of their dreams and the plaudits of an admiring public.
Unable to get back to sleep, Matt turned restlessly. He closed his eyes, re-living the events of the private view which for him had been a baptism of fire.

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‘Matt, you’re on your way,’ Feltz was assuring him, as he eased him through the throng on a slow meander round the gallery floor.

‘But they hate me!’ Matt despaired.

‘Hate, love – it doesn’t matter a toss!’ Feltz insisted. ‘With everybody fired up like this, the show’ll be talked about all over town.’

‘Yeah, and with me dubbed a pariah!’ grumbled Matt. His name was already a talking point, leaping from head to head in the gallery in a brushfire of opprobrium. Yet – all he wanted was the love and respect of his fellow men. And the recognition that he had something of value to say, something which might save society from what it had become. For hadn’t it gone soft?

Sparring with strangers at the private view, one after another, Matt’s discomfort had grown. And Feltz hadn’t helped, passing diplomatic asides, careful not to become embroiled. But that was Feltz’s party trick of course – get everybody wound up, step back, then referee the action.

‘Whatever’s going on in your head, to make you want to paint something like this?’ someone had shrilly demanded.

‘Peel morality away and this is what you’re left with,’ Matt tried feebly to explain.

‘The nitty gritty,’ said a voice to his side.

He turned to find a girl engaging him with a wry smile. ‘You’re a bit of a party pooper!’ she said.
‘Party pooper?’ said Matt, troubled by a feeling that she might not be taking him seriously – or even worse, that she might be mocking him.

‘Hey, but don’t get me wrong,’ she continued. ‘It’s great work, even if nobody else thinks so.’

People in the vicinity were blinking at each other in dismay.

‘Thank you!’ said Matt. He wanted to read the girl’s eyes, but they were hidden behind dark glasses. He felt awkward, like a suspect stood before a one-way screen.

‘How long’s your show on for?’ she asked.

‘Three weeks – if I survive tonight,’ he said, sensing she was eyeing him up and down.

The girl laughed, sweeping a hand through her hair. ‘OK, I’ll come in again. Maybe tomorrow.’

And like a dragonfly she was gone, but her support gave Matt strength to battle on. And the torture lessened as he got into his stride, repeating and refining his patter of justification.

Then, just as he thought it couldn’t get any better, he had found himself standing alone. The gallery was beginning to empty. Strains of hostility were giving way to crescendos of merriment, seesawing like a radio fiddled with by a meddlesome child. His ordeal was over: the evening was moving on, the party breaking up into little groups for whom thoughts of dinner were paramount. Mentions of booked tables fell from people’s lips in tones of loud subservience to this or that celebrity chef. ‘God, we were so lucky! Managed to squeeze in at Mario’s! Table for 9.30 – must dash or we’ll lose it.’

Back to trivia, he gloomily reflected. Watching the guests file out of the gallery he felt as if they were living in a bubble. The discord of the age, so real to him, was for them no more than a disturbance in the endless round of gossip.

Matt put his hands in his pockets and ambled into Feltz’s office. Feltz sidled in after him: ‘Hey, hey! Why the long face? You were brilliant!’
On nights like these, the word ‘brilliant’ would pop from Feltz’s mouth again and again, rounding off each remark with overflowing exuberance.

Matt succumbed to his scented hug. ‘Thanks. But I could have done without the flak.’

‘Comes with the job,’ Feltz laughed, slapping Matt on the back. He had good news. None other than Sylvester Rich had attended the private view. That was significant – an endorsement from a great collector, whose own gallery was full of art at the cutting-edge.

‘Sylvester admired your work,’ beamed Feltz. ‘The Orchard in particular.’

Matt was visibly cheered. ‘Great! But has he seen the price?’

‘Twenty-grand? That kind of money’s nothing to Sylvester. His gallery’s open to a paying public. Think of the money he could take with The Orchard! Look at the stir it caused tonight. All it needs is a hammering in the press and the punters’ll flock to see it. You’ll be made!’

Matt frowned. ‘A hammering in the press? I need that like a hole in the head.’

‘It’s what the Rich Gallery gets off on,’ said Feltz. ‘Their show’s the wackiest in town. Really freaky, man! And it makes a great day out for Joe Public. They lap it up.’

‘Freaky?’ said Matt, the word sticking in his craw.

‘Just a figure of speech,’ said Feltz. ‘Trust me, most artists would kill for a break like this.’

Matt felt insulted. I’m not like most artists, he thought to himself.

‘Of course, Sylvester’ll need his usual sweetener,’ Feltz added, smarting at the discount he would have to offer.

‘How much will that be?’ Matt asked anxiously. ‘I mean, I spent an age on that picture.’
Feltz tapped his nose knowingly. ‘Don’t get your knickers in a twist,’ he said. ‘It’s built into the price.’

Slippery sod! thought Matt.

Thumbing his lapels, Feltz gave Matt his version of the evening’s events. He eulogized the celebrities who had attended. Soap stars, fashion models and a celebrated footballer had all helped give the occasion that showbizzy buzz he adored. A nice turn out, he said, marred only by a drunk swinging a punch at a man in a lime-green seersucker suit, creation of the fashionable couturier Willie Fitz. And strangely, the bottle count was favourable – on budget, give or take a crate.

‘They were all talking their heads off,’ Feltz happily observed. And tomorrow would be better still – he’d get a grip on Sylvester, and edge him towards a deal.

Bernie Feltz was addicted to deals, Matt reflected. He was emotionally transparent – a villain from a cartoon strip, loud and theatrical. A transaction in the offing would bring a shine to Bernie’s face matching the silky red sheen on his dickie-bow, a clip-on touch harking back to days long before he had a gallery of his own.

Bernie had boasted to Matt about those days. He’d started as simply an agent with flair and a simple philosophy: ‘Talent alone is not enough. You have to have an angle, a story to grab the public’s attention.’

Several years ago, in the course of promoting a young sculptor’s work, Bernie had published a poster of two granite spheres, the one in close proximity with the other. Titling it ‘Talking Balls’ he’d plastered it all over the city, causing a flurry of amusement. Questions were raised in the media; who was the caption aimed at?

‘Take your pick!’ Bernie had proclaimed. ‘People talk balls the world over.’ Demand for the poster had soared and the sculptor’s name had found its way round the globe.
Not that Bernie was always successful. There were artists who blew their chance – ‘Fucking me about!’ as Bernie saw it. Like the artist who committed himself to a show then disappeared on a grant-aided whim to Patagonia. Life was ‘cool’ there, said his e-mail back to the enraged Bernie: mountains and open spaces a perfect antidote to the civilized world. ‘The bloody nerve of the guy!’ Bernie had shrieked.

In small doses, Matt found Feltz amusing, likeable in his better moods – for example when he received a large cheque. Then he became malleable, like a cuddly toy with bright glinting eyes.

But it was clear that lasting friendships played no part in Bernie’s life. Oscillating between euphoria and fits of pique, he would alarm anyone for whom restraint and discretion were the norms of everyday life. Friends and associates alike treated him with wary tolerance, guffawing at his puerile jokes only in fear of offending him.

Approaching middle age and divorced, Bernie lived on his own. The frenzy of business filled his life. Now Matt was a part of that frenzy – a talent on the brink of metamorphosis.

‘A word in your shell-like,’ Feltz would say, when taking a punter aside. ‘A year ago, this guy was nowhere! Now he’s five grand a throw and rising. If you’re thinking of getting on board, now’s the time.’

Matt had heard worrying stories about artists hyped by Bernie. Some had gone off the rails on drug abuse, some had grown absurdly self-important, some had fled the world entirely. He wondered what the future held for him.