

# The Orchard

Tony Veale

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# THE ORCHARD

Tony Veale

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imprint**arts**

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*For my wife Sue, family and friends*

## ONE

**Y**ou 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.

‘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. Says it brings to mind Kiefer and *Nigredo*.’ For all Feltz all knew, this might have been some kind of double-act, like a man with a dog that did tricks. He kept his ignorance about the great painter and his *oeuvre* to himself. ’

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 show-bizzy 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.

## TWO

Matt eventually dropped off to sleep. He woke again late that morning to a scuffle of pigeons copulating on the studio skylight. Staring at their feet, he could see clouds drifting way above, carried by the same wind that was humming over his roof in highs and lows as if in sympathy with the throbbing in his head – the aftermath of an evening he would rather forget.

‘The Piranha Pool’ had taken its toll. It was a favourite haunt of Feltz’s, especially for parties after a private view. Its fish tanks and pulsating glitz were well suited to the new money that frequented his exhibitions. Matt had been there, doing his bit for the gallery, but his outwardly genial manner had concealed a strong desire to go home.

Hemmed in between Feltz’s guests, high on their cocktails and cocaine, he had prayed for deliverance. It hadn’t come until the early hours, when burning Amaretti wrappers ghosted to the ceiling and everybody stood up to leave, tossing him their small change of good wishes amidst a flurry of vacuous farewells.

Come the morning, will they remember anything? Matt asked himself. No: by then, his paintings and everything he’d said would be forgotten, sunk in the stagnant canals of their brains. Bastards!

The phone rang, intensifying his pain. It was Feltz.

‘Sorry, mate. Did I wake you?’

‘No,’ Matt drawled.

‘You sound half dead. Are you hung over?’

‘Yeah,’ he admitted, sliding the earpiece down his cheek to muffle Feltz’s cackling laugh.

‘Listen,’ said Feltz, ‘Holly Tree’s called me.’

‘Holly Tree?’

‘You spoke to her last night, remember?’

It’s got to be that redhead, Matt thought. ‘Yeah, I remember. She was the only one who gave me a break. D’you know her?’

‘Sure. She’s a bit of a wild child, but she comes to most of the shows. Even helps out a bit.’

‘Does she ever buy?’

‘Sometimes. If she trusts a guy’s work.’

Matt was intrigued. ‘So, what did she want?’

‘She’s coming in for another look.’

‘When?’

‘Later this afternoon. Can you make it?’

‘Yeah. I’m coming over now, anyway.’

Holly Tree. So that’s her name, Matt thought, surprised that she was keeping to her word. He remembered how pretty she was. Comforted by the thought that she at least was on his side, he eased himself out of bed.

Picking his way through the chaos of the studio, he reached the kitchenette. The partitioned area offered little in the way of amenities. Switching on the kettle, he turned to the refrigerator with its persistent leak. A tortured sausage and half a carton of milk awaited him, signs of someone who found cooking a waste of time. He sniffed the milk. It was passable – just. The sausage he returned to the cold, like a corpse to the morgue.

A torn foil of aspirin lay on the draining board from the night before. He chewed on a couple more, his face contorting as he tried to drown their bitterness with sweet tea. Somehow this never quite worked.

Holly Tree. What's she like? he wondered. A wild child, whose dark glasses hid the life in her eyes. If red hair was anything to go by, then 'a handful' was the likely answer.

It was midday. Scooping up some change he grabbed his old leather jacket and left for the Underground in a thoroughly gloomy mood.

May was special to Matt – a month when flowering trees brought an air of carnival to the street, scattering blossom in celebration of Spring's union with Summer.

The seasons affected his mood. Bad weather could trigger depression, spilling negative thinking into his work and leading to failures, hard to accept. But today was fine enough and his worries faded when the sun found his face through the panoply of tender green above. He thought, how strange it is; high in these trees is another reality – the life of grubs, burrowing and nibbling through leaf and bark. Their memory span must be so short, nagging anxiety is surely unknown to them.

Lucky buggers, he thought. What a price we humans pay.

On the pavement ahead, a mass of bouquets lay heaped against a wall. It was a common enough sight, but Matt noted the pile had grown since he last walked by. It trailed some distance now in both directions. Ten days ago there'd been a mugging there and someone had been murdered. The papers next day were full of it, regurgitating clichés of concern for the victims of crime.

Matt slowed to read the dedications, now blurs of inky sadness from the previous rain.

'We come up from Sidcup,' someone said to him.

Matt looked up to find a man and a woman standing beside him. 'You knew the guy?' he asked, noticing they'd bought a bunch of flowers.

'No,' the man said. 'But we was at the Natural 'istory Museum, to see that new flappin' pteradactyl they got. Triffic it is too!'

The woman nodded in accord. 'Yeah, real scary!'

'Anyways, as to get 'ere was only a short 'op on the tube, like, we thought we'd come an' 'ave a butchers.'

'Terrible business, weren't it?' said the woman, now shaking her head in disgust.

Matt agreed it was.

To his surprise, the man produced a street map. Opening it out, he said: 'The lady in the tourist kiosk at the station was ever so 'elpful. Look – marked the spot for us, she did.'

'Oh,' said Matt. He glanced at the cross inked in on the map.

'Dunno what the world's comin' to,' said the woman, a questioning look in her eye.

'Neither do I,' said Matt. Leaving the couple to gawp he moved on, wondering which of their visits they'd enjoyed the most. The latter, most likely – an opportunity to share in the national fever of collective condolence. Too good to miss!

In the depths of the station, he stood on the platform, listening to the roar of an approaching train. Excreted from the bowels of the earth it emerged in a rush of foul air. Lacerations of graffiti bore witness to dark hours spent in the purgatory of some distant siding. The doors shuddered open and a muffled call to 'Mind the gap!' reverberated over the public address.

Automated altruism; this is as good as it gets, he thought.

Stepping aboard, he sat down to be greeted by the smell of a spit-roasted chicken. Opposite, a youth sat perched on the edge of his seat. He was tearing at the bird's flesh and stuffing it into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten for days. Oblivious of his fellow travellers, he squinted repeatedly at the route map high on the other side of the carriage. Gaunt-faced and anxious, he appeared to be full of misgivings.



He has to be an immigrant, Matt thought. An illegal, one of the many freed each day from airless concealment only to find themselves on the run once more, in search of Shangri-La. Perhaps for this guy it was Cockfosters, at the end of the Piccadilly Line.

The doors closed on the thin volume of passengers and the train was on the move, a shabby repository of grey faces etched in suspicion and gloom.

At the next stop a man with an accordion walked on. Positioning himself at the back of the carriage he struck up a tune, its rollicking jollity contrasting absurdly with the passengers' pretended indifference. Swaying from side to side he studied the passengers one by one, his eyes narrow from a lifetime of reckoning which 'misery' would cough up and drop a coin in his old paper cup. On approaching Green Park he shuffled round to collect what little was on offer, his gratitude a cursory nod.

Matt walked up Piccadilly to Burlington House. He found himself in a struggle for space on the pavement. The Impressionists were back yet again at the Royal Academy and excited hordes were queueing up. Clambering under the comfort-blanket of retrospection, Matt thought. How can people pass time this way, when all around them is mayhem – their country falling apart at the seams like an unloved teddy bear? Don't they care? Or is it that they just don't see?

In the Burlington Arcade he peered into shop windows. Soft traps of cashmere and silk lay in wait to snare the affluent shoppers who were wandering about desultorily. To Matt they seemed bored and flabby-faced, their wants greater than their needs.

In Burlington Gardens, a beggar thrust a scrap of paper at him with a muttered threat. Barely legible, it was the second claim on his charity within fifteen minutes. Beggars were everywhere. He'd had sympathy once, but not since the menacing started. The police, hamstrung by politics, had little control over these marauders, who

sometimes worked in groups, pressurising passers-by until they yielded.

Matt noted the crusted blood hanging from the corner of the man's mouth. Perhaps he'd been in a fight. Doorways in side streets bore daily witness to quarrels over lucrative pitches. Matt eased past the man, tailed by a curse blurted out with such vehemence that it stirred the hairs on the back of his neck. Rather a curse, he thought, than risk a tubercular cough in the face.

Lagoon Art came into view, its fascia prominent in the sobriety of Cork Street. From the street, 'the shop' (as Feltz liked to call it) gave little away. There was no artwork in the window and potential visitors would put their noses to the glass for a cautious peer, nervous about what they might find.

Inside the gallery, focus on the artist was intense. 'Artist's Statements' were writ large on the walls between exhibits. Deliberately controversial, they were part of Feltz's armoury of marketing gimmicks. Supposedly, they provided insight into the artist's persona: their '*raison d'être*' and '*modus operandi*' as Feltz liked to say – foreign phrases which he bandied about to impress.

Only in the rear gallery would a photographic image of the exhibiting artist be revealed, usually much enlarged. This small room was a hallowed sanctum where artists might also be seen on video, their pained facial expressions accompanying sombre expositions of earnest methodology.

Not for Feltz the sterility of silent white walls, but rather a focus on developing the artist as a celebrity. An artist should be as familiar to the public as his work, he would say; sometimes more so.

'Face it – it's about money now. Commission is commission is commission, whether it's on a painting, a sculpture, or an appearance on a chat show. Spread your risk and cash in while you can. Don't talk to me about integrity – that went out with the Ark. Successful artists

today are shits with laptops jabbering into mobiles – on the make like everybody else.’ Matt would protest at this kind of talk; then Bernie would tell him to come down off his high horse and knuckle down to the reality of earning a living. His bottom line potential could be huge!

On ‘The Street’, Bernie Feltz was looked at as a Johnny-come-lately from the yellow brick roads. He’d rudely banged on the temple door demanding admittance and now he riled everyone with cocksure opinions on the future of art – globalization being the route to unimaginable riches.

‘Why couldn’t he have stayed where he was,’ the high priests of Cork Street complained, ‘trading modish junk along with the rest of the Brit Art crowd in the East End.’

But Feltz wanted ‘class,’ the cachet of an address known to collectors the world over. And that meant Cork Street. The rents were excruciatingly high, but it was where the real money was. ‘You can smell it in the air,’ he’d once said to Matt as they stood looking out of the gallery window, watching for likely punters in the street. Some men were passing by; vicuna overcoats draped across their shoulders, they seemed the kind of guys Feltz liked: men about town, flush (he hoped, with fingers crossed) from some lucrative deal.

‘Cool, so cool,’ Feltz commented admiringly. One of them glanced in the window and Bernie adjusted his cuffs ostentatiously, evidently hoping they would stop and come in. But he was out of luck; they avoided his gaze and walked on.

Sometimes they did stop, and Bernie would be pleasantly surprised – their gambits of enquiry sending him into a spin of unctuous cordiality.

Save for the curse of wealthy foreigners who always demanded a discount, Lagoon Art was for the most part spared the machinations of bargain hunters. Such people insulted his judgement, Bernie believed – just as they used to do, way back when first he started selling artists’

work from his house: 'Come on, Bernie, you ain't going to shift this for that sort of money. The guy's an unknown! But, tell you what, I'll take it off your hands for...'

Now that he was the owner of a gallery in Cork Street, Bernie had learned that the higher the price of an exhibit, the greater was its mystique and the easier it was to sell.

Matt put his face to the gallery window and peered in. Feltz was talking to two men in partial silhouette against the illuminated expanse of his masterpiece. He wondered if it was under discussion. It certainly looked that way.

Not wanting to be seen, he walked on a little way up the street. Better not interrupt; besides, Feltz's sales pitch was an embarrassment. His hype and flattery was so blatant; how anybody fell for it was a miracle.

But Feltz had sized up the two men as soon as they entered. They were far from typical customers. A staccato chatter of short wave radios clipped to their jackets was keeping them in a state of harassed readiness, which showed in their gloomy eyes. Presenting their identity cards, they had revealed themselves to be policemen.

'Er, is Mr. Lagoon available?' asked the Detective Sergeant.

'Lagoon?' queried Feltz. 'No. I think you mean Feltz, don't you?'

'Well, it says 'ere, Lagoon,' said the policeman, studying his check sheet.

Feltz shook his head. 'No, that's the name of the gallery,' he informed them.

'And you are, sir?'

'The name's Feltz.'

'Ah! Would you be the proprietor, then?'

'Correct,' said Feltz.

'Well, sir, in that case, you would be the person to whom we wish to speak.'

'Oh?' said Feltz.

‘Yes, sir,’ the officer confirmed. ‘Are you familiar with a revision in the law concernin’ the use of nudity?’

‘What law’s that?’ Feltz inquired warily.

‘The Depiction of Nudity Act, sir.’ With gravitas, he explained. ‘You see, there’s been an amendment bannin’ advertisers from exploitin’ a certain category of images. ‘Aven’t you read about it?’

Feltz remembered. Panicked by the growing use of sexually explicit material throughout Europe in advertising campaigns, the government had rushed a bill through Parliament designed to prevent an outbreak of ‘Eurotica’ in Britain. Of particular concern was a campaign in France linking the staying powers afforded by a glucose drink to an act of sex between naked aficionados. Their endorsements of the product – ‘*Encore! Encore!*’ – emerged in speech bubbles through sets of unnaturally white teeth.

‘There’s been extensive publicity,’ the officer advised him.

‘I remember reading something,’ said Feltz.

Libertarian protests – that imagery of this kind had been televised for the best part of thirty years – carried no weight. At least a screen could be switched off, said the critics. Salacious posters weathering on billboards all over the country were quite another matter.

Hysteria was rife. The responsibility for drafting changes to the law had fallen to the Council for Moral Issues, a body appointed by government to act as a watchdog on morality. Now the law was in force; and the police, nervous of being sued for neglect of duty by an increasingly litigious public, pursued incidents of suspected ‘Eurotica’ with zeal. After scrutinizing Lagoon Art’s catalogue for the Flight exhibition, they had no doubt there were adequate grounds for a prosecution.

‘Well, whether you’re aware of it or not,’ the officer continued, ‘the ban’s a fact of life.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ said Feltz. ‘But I can’t see how all this affects me.’

‘On the contrary sir, we have ’ere *prima facie* evidence that suggests your gallery is very much affected.’ The Detective Sergeant nodded to his colleague, who produced a copy of the catalogue: ‘Matt Flight: Recent Paintings’.

‘It’s connected with this material, sir.’

‘Really?’ said Feltz, puzzled.

The policeman coyly circled a finger over the catalogue’s cover. ‘The law clearly stipulates that advertisin’ material cannot carry images portrayin’ sexual activity.’

‘So?’ said Feltz.

‘Well, to my eye, the cover of this catalogue does exactly that.’

‘You’ve got to be joking!’ scoffed Feltz.

‘On the contrary I’m afraid,’ said the officer. Then, with a hint of embarrassment: ‘To be specific, it appears that tree roots ’ave inserted themselves in all manner of orifices on these bodies, if you get my drift.’

‘That’s absurd!’ protested Feltz.

‘To your eyes, maybe.’

‘You don’t understand,’ insisted Feltz. ‘What you’re looking at is a detail from a picture in this artist’s exhibition. Look, we’re standing right by it.’

The two policemen glanced briefly at the painting, as if to examine it closely would indicate an unhealthy interest.

‘What you ’angs in your gallery is not the problem, sir,’ said the Detective Sergeant. ‘The possible offence concerns this catalogue, circulatin’ freely within the public domain.’

To the policeman’s mind, naked bodies violated by tree roots, probing and phallic, was evidence enough of malpractice. ‘Sir, it’s my duty to tell you that distributin’ a catalogue like this is a clear breach of the law.’

Feltz shook his head, exasperated. 'Look,' he said, pointing to the cover, 'how can you say this is sexual? These people are dead! Corpses! Kaput, for Crissake!' Taking pains to explain the allegory, he said: 'Nothing's inserted itself anywhere! Those trees are growing from the victims of a massacre. This painting is about peace growing out of war.'

The officer looked at Feltz blankly. 'Clearly, them roots is penetratin' private parts.'

'They're tree roots, for God's Sake!' snapped Feltz. 'Not pricks!'

'Offensiveness will get us nowhere, sir,' said the Detective Sergeant officiously. 'And if you take my advice, you'll do well to consider your position, as the manner of this paintin' smacks of un'olesome shenanigans.'

Feltz sighed heavily. 'How you work that out beats me.'

But arguing the point was futile. Years of service in the Vice Squad had warped the officer's imagination: he saw phallic symbols everywhere, and Feltz's explanation was mere psychobabble. While his colleague made notes with an obstinate ball pen, he informed Feltz that a report would be sent to the authorities for evaluation. Furthermore, if the matter was referred to the courts and judgement found against the gallery, a fine was mandatory.

Already enraged beyond words, Feltz was further obliged to listen to an address before the policemen took their leave. It bore the usual hallmark of civil service verbiage:

'This law has one prime purpose in this case, namely to uphold the dignity of the human body. By so doin', the baser forms of exploitation practised abroad will be prevented from occurin' within these shores, where it is the responsibility of the law to safeguard people from the effects of salacious advertisin' which could otherwise undermine the moral fabric of the nation.'

Feltz muttered under his breath: 'And bollocks to the aforesaid.'

But whether he liked it or not, the moral welfare of the nation had become a matter of prime concern for the government. Experts blamed an increasing abnormality in sexual behaviour on the massive growth of internet pornography. Given the nature of the problem, counter-measures were futile. Nevertheless, an information pack was available at health centres nationally; published by the Council for Moral Issues, it was the brainchild of their chairperson Dame Bridget Bradstock. Alias 'Auntie Biddie' to the public at large, she was a one-time agony aunt with a self-proclaimed expertise in the field of human relations. Recently ennobled, she was at the height of her powers; a cabinet position had been specially created for her and she was now Minister for Moral Affairs.

In this climate, the heavy-handed response to Flight's catalogue was hardly surprising.

Matt waited until the two men had left before entering the gallery. He found Feltz flushed with fury.

'Whatever's happened?' asked Matt.

'What a load of crap!' shouted Feltz.

'What is?' cried Matt in surprise.

'Those tossers that have just left,' spluttered Feltz.

'What about them?'

'It was Plod!' he exclaimed.

Matt was incredulous. 'What?' he said. 'I thought they might have been buyers.'

'Fat chance of that!' snapped Feltz. 'Some bastard's put in a complaint about your work and I've been booked for it.'

'On what grounds, for God's Sake?

'Publishing offensive material! Would you credit it?'

'You cannot be serious!' said Matt, dismayed.



‘Oh but I am!’ Feltz pointed to the cover of the offending catalogue. ‘Look, they reckon those roots of yours are shafting the corpses.’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Matt protested.

‘Plod didn’t see it that way,’ said Feltz.

Matt shook his head in amazement. ‘This is crazy!’

‘It’s all to do with that fucking Nudity Act,’ explained Feltz, ‘You can’t use advertising material that even so much as hints at a sex act.’

‘But this painting’s not about sex,’ said Matt.

‘Try telling that to Plod!’

Matt shook his head. ‘Incredible, bloody incredible,’ he sighed. ‘Does that mean someone’s put in a complaint?’

‘*Someone* must’ve,’ said Feltz. Among his enemies, there was one name which jumped to mind: Godfrey Privett, a columnist whose views on contemporary art had earned him a reputation as a guardian of reason and moderation. Much loved by traditionalists and vicious in his criticism, Privett was a St George thrusting his lance at the dragon of modernity.

‘Last night, there were so many people kicking up a fuss, it could have been anybody,’ said Matt.

‘No,’ said Feltz. ‘I’ve got a pretty good idea who’s behind it. Godfrey bloody Privett!’

‘Oh, him,’ said Matt, amused by how the name conjured up the apple-pie order of suburban hedges. ‘He’s that freelance critic, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah, but the odd thing is I never spotted him here. He must have sneaked in and out when the gallery was full, the old shit!’

Then – on patchy evidence, the kind of hand-me-down hearsay that can cling like a limpet to a bachelor – Feltz made him out to be a closet queen.

‘Oh,’ said Matt, not altogether surprised. There had been a number of gays at his private view – single men

and couples seemingly more interested in each other than his work.

‘Yeah, he’s a fudge-packing faggot, no mistake,’ sniggered Feltz, pleased at this chest-beating affirmation of his own manliness.

‘I should think he’s past that, isn’t he?’ said Matt, reckoning Privett was old enough to be sexually atrophied.

‘Maybe,’ Feltz conceded. ‘But if it is him, you can bet an article’ll pop up somewhere, making a meal out of this business.’

‘Paranoia,’ said Matt, dismissively.

Feltz grinned knowingly. ‘You want to put money on it? I can see the headline now: ‘Lagoon Art Charged! – Violation of Sex Law!’” Then it occurred to him: a fine was nothing compared to the possible upside. His shoulders hunched in a fervour of enthusiasm; his brain went into overdrive. ‘What a fantastic opportunity,’ he said. ‘Just think of the publicity!’

Matt looked at him nervously. Memories of his nightmare came flooding back. ‘God,’ he said, running a finger across his forehead, ‘if that happens, I’ll be in the shit up to here!’

Feltz smirked. ‘It comes with the territory, mate. We’ll drink to this!’

Bernie sped off to get bottle and glasses and Matt sat down.

So this was life with Bernie Feltz. It was all a far cry from the early stirrings that had set him on the path to becoming an artist. Born to creative parents, he had an aptitude for drawing at an early age and an inquiring mind. He spent hours of owlish communion in books with philosophers of the past. By his early twenties he’d found a truth he could grasp: that the positive and negative are fatally attracted. Good and evil are bedfellows; they can’t live apart, the one is the measure of the other. What is beauty without ugliness, or happiness without misery? Lose sight of this and the mind must succumb to

vacuous ideals which take no account of humanity's limitations.

With these thoughts in mind, his painting developed through a series of allegorical compositions featuring opposites. To date, *The Orchard* was his finest work.

That fate hadn't consigned him to a life of obscurity among her workaday millions was all due a chance encounter that brought Bernie Feltz, master opportunist, to the door of his attic studio.

Feltz had spotted one of his paintings quite by chance, waiting for a frame in the same shop that Bernie used. Instantly smitten, Bernie gleaned Matt's address from the proprietor. Before the day was out, he had trundled off in a cab in search of his quarry.

At the time, Matt's confidence had been low. Winter drabness was exacerbating a fear that his work would never be recognized. Matt had shown Bernie his canvasses, placing them one after another onto an easel, expecting him to lose interest and go. But Feltz had stood in awe, temporarily silenced, before blurting out in his uninhibited way: 'Jeez, this is mind-boggling stuff!' To him, it stood out a mile: Matt Flight was headed for a spectacular career. Feltz immediately offered him an exhibition. He had never seen work like it. Their dream-like quality reminded him of Hieronymous Bosch and the surrealist Paul Delvaux, but there was something else there too, something he knew he could sell...

Matt's confidence was instantly restored. Here at last was someone who understood. But all too soon, he'd realised Feltz didn't give a damn about their meaning. It was the power of the imagery that counted: the contrasting extremes arresting the eye. Still, the thought of exhibiting – and in Cork Street at that – filled Matt with hope. His shroud of anonymity gone, he would no longer feel like an outsider, like a sad street-wandering psychotic mouthing pleas through plate glass windows to people bemused and deaf to his words. Now at last people would

see that he had something of value to say. As for the money, it was a secondary consideration. His intention was noble – to enlighten the world!

Bernie returned with wine and glasses. ‘Here,’ he said, pouring out two glasses of house white saved from the private view. ‘You’re gonna have to face it, you know. The game’s only just begun.’

Sagging like a rag doll in his chair, Matt stared at Feltz across the vast expanse of the man’s desk. ‘Game?’ he queried.

‘Oh, yes! Don’t kid yourself it’s anything else.’

Matt frowned.

Feltz leant forward as if to confide a secret. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘Lagoon Art’s success is down to two things: controversy, and the publicity it generates.’ He took a gulp of wine. ‘If your work wasn’t controversial I’d never have touched it, believe you me! I could never have won the publicity. It’s that which puts you on the map. Gives you value.’

Feltz sat back again. ‘Now, don’t get me wrong when I say this, but in marketing terms your feelings are of fuck-all importance. We’re after major recognition here – household name stuff. And to achieve that, we have to build a story around your work that attracts attention and gives you provenance. Without that, you’re dead in the water.’

Matt listened intently, more scales falling from his eyes.

‘It’s all about sensationalism,’ Feltz went on. ‘That’s what sells. Without it, the real money’s not interested. Take Sylvester Rich. D’you think he’d be after your painting if it was some frigging little still life? Who’s going to pay to see something like that by an unknown? Nobody, I’m telling you.’

‘If that’s true,’ said Matt, ‘it makes the whole art scene phoney.’

Feltz shrugged his shoulders. ‘So what? Recognize it for what it is and milk it. Believe me, this is the way to go. High-mindedness gets you nowhere. Everything hangs on publicity. The more you get, the higher your profile, and the more valuable your pictures become. Then – hey, presto – before you know it, you’re a celebrity!’

‘Oh,’ said Matt, ruefully.

‘So what’s wrong with that?’ asked Feltz.

‘I’d hoped my work would be bought because it had merit.’

‘That might enter the equation. But it’s not what’s important.’

‘Investment upside being the main thing,’ Matt suggested cynically.

‘R-r-r-r-ight!’ said Feltz, drawing the word out, in pleasurable recognition that his message was getting through. ‘And here’s the rub,’ he went on. ‘This could go far beyond your painting.’

‘How d’you mean?’

Feltz grinned. ‘If we play things right, your name will be an earner in itself, maybe pulling in even more dosh than your work.’ He paused to allow his words to sink in. ‘Do you know how?’

Matt took a guess. ‘Spin-offs? Merchandising?’

‘You’ve got it!’ said Feltz, stabbing at him with his finger.

Shit! Matt thought to himself. Where is this all leading?

### THREE

**H**olly Tree breezed into the gallery at three o'clock, clutching an early edition of the evening paper. Matt and Feltz were munching sandwiches in the back office and keeping a covert eye on the comings and goings of visitors.

'Holly, luv, you're looking great!' Feltz spluttered through his mouthful. Crumbs on lips, he leapt from his chair to kiss her. Introducing Matt had almost slipped his mind. 'Oh sorry luv, this is...'

'Matt Flight,' Holly interjected. 'Yes, I know. We met last night.'

'Yeah, of course,' said Matt with a smile. He stood up to greet her.

'You were being so serious,' said Holly. Her dark glasses were again disconcerting. He wished she would remove them.

'I was under attack,' he said.

'So I saw!'

Matt turned to Feltz. 'She saved me from the baying hounds.'

Feltz grinned. 'Lucky boy,' he said, thinking (as he often did) how lovely it would be to cuddle up to Holly's breasts. This delight had so far eluded him.

'That was yesterday,' Holly said. 'Today, you've got another problem.'

‘Yeah?’ said Matt.

‘Read this,’ she said, passing him her newspaper. It was open on the arts page.

Feltz peered over Matt’s shoulder and read the headline aloud. ‘FLIGHT’S ORCHARD OF DEATH – AN INSULT TO CIVILIZATION.’

‘Godfrey Privett,’ said Holly.

‘I knew it!’ exclaimed Feltz. He looked at Matt. ‘There! What did I tell you?’

‘What do you mean?’ Holly said.

‘Sorry luv, I should explain,’ said Feltz. ‘I’ve just had a visit from Plod.’ Feltz recounted the incident in detail, topping it with a corny remark about having had his collar ‘feltz’.

‘I simply can’t believe what you’re saying!’

‘Would I lie?’ Feltz protested, eyes wide.

Matt meanwhile was immersed in Privett’s withering critique, reading and re-reading and feeling increasingly ill. ‘Flight’s *Orchard* is an abomination, the work of a would-be Antichrist. Its celebration of human conflict is degrading and makes a mockery of those who strive for peace in this world. Its message is nothing but a wild fantasy: base, immoral and subversive. With its palette of vulgar clarity and heinous detail, this work wallows in a mire of barbarism. It should be burned!’

Matt stood motionless, stunned by the fiery *coup de grace*. Holly took the newspaper, sensing even its weight was too much for him to bear.

‘What does it say?’ Feltz demanded impatiently.

Holly passed him the paper. ‘Read it for yourself.’

A broad smile emerged on Feltz’s face. ‘Fantazibobo! Hey! He reckons you’re an Antichrist.’ He looked up gleefully, as if a pot of gold was stuck to the ceiling. ‘Bugger me, if that isn’t a libel!’

The tone of the article came as no surprise to Bernie. Privett had a public hatred for Lagoon Art. Bernie could well imagine what he might say about its owner – ‘That

nasty little man Bernie Feltz! A parvenu of dubious extraction who should have no place in the higher echelons of culture. God!’ – with a rolling of the eyes – ‘I can hardly bear the mention of his name.’

‘Godfrey, you old poof!’ Feltz roared. ‘You’ve done us proud, me old son, really proud!’ He turned to Matt, waving the paper in the air. ‘Wait till Sylvester sees this,’ he cried. ‘He’s gonna love it!’

Matt shook his head and sat down, utterly deflated.

Unmoved by Matt’s misery, Bernie was lost in joyous contemplation. With publicity like this, Sylvester was bound to buy. *The Orchard* would bring visitors to his gallery in their thousands, pouring through the turnstiles to see what all the fuss was about.

Holly studied Matt’s mournful face. ‘It’s typical Privett,’ she said. ‘You mustn’t take it to heart.’

‘I never imagined people would get so annoyed,’ he said. ‘I mean, hell, I thought the painting made a valid point.’

‘It does,’ said Holly. ‘But people don’t like this kind of truth. It’s too uncomfortable.’

‘I went too far.’

‘No. You’ve pricked a balloon, that’s all,’ said Holly, surprised at his sensitivity.

Meanwhile Bernie was pacing the gallery floor, mobile jammed to his ear. ‘Sylvester!’ he shouted. ‘Get a load of this.’ Whooping with glee, he read out bits of Privett’s article, expanding on it with his usual flair.

‘Bernie doesn’t give a shit, does he?’ Matt said gloomily.

‘About you, personally?’ said Holly. ‘Well, no. His life revolves around money.’

‘You mean he doesn’t give a toss about art either?’

‘He gets a kick out of it, all right,’ she conceded. ‘But only because it gives him a chance to bullshit with the best of them.’

‘You mean guys like me are just cannon-fodder.’