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Marriage and Other Games

Written by Veronica Henry

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Marriage and Other Games

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One

Sebastian Turner sprawled like a starfish in his favourite armchair, a bottle of Grey Goose swinging from the paint-smothered fingers of one hand, a roll-up in the other. He narrowed his eyes through the smoke, gazing around the walls at his companions. He'd spent the last six months with them, and it was nearly time to say goodbye. There was Madonna, slumped in front of *EastEnders* stuffing in a Big Mac; Katie Price in a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, engrossed in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; Pete Doherty in the middle of a flower-bed, deadheading some roses.

Alter Egos.

It had seemed like such a great idea at the time, to do an entire exhibition based on the infamous painting that had got him all the publicity in the first place: a portrait of the Queen, slobbing out in her dressing gown and a pair of leopard-skin mules, smoking a fag and watching the Channel 4 racing. Sebastian wasn't fooled by anyone's public image. There was always an alter ego just below the surface. And he didn't believe that Madonna was virtuous all the time, or Pete Doherty a villain. Just as he wasn't always a temperamental, highly strung artist. He had days when he was perfectly down-to-earth and balanced.

Only today wasn't one of them.

This latest exhibition was bound to be a success, not because it was controversial, but because here was art that people – the public – could actually understand. The paintings were visual puns, easy to grasp; not intellectual conundrums like pickled sharks or unmade beds that would have the Arts sections of the broadsheets locked in debate. And they were stunning. The subjects were instantly recognisable, almost photographic. Hyper-realism, if the man on the street did but know it. Which he probably wouldn't.

Sebastian Turner loathed every last one of them. As he scrutinised his work, he could feel the bitter bile of self-loathing in his mouth. What a cop-out. What a waste of time. How could he have deluded himself that this was worth doing? It was a cynical, money-making exercise, a joke at other people's expense. Admittedly, they were all people who could afford to have jokes made about them, and to be included in the exhibition would bring a certain kudos, affording them notoriety and guaranteed column inches. They would all be there at the preview – their publicists would make sure of that, because Sebastian Turner was, along with Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin, one of the few living artists that your average punter could actually name.

The son of boho-aristo parents, he had been expelled from three major public schools before finally settling down at a 'progressive' school in Devon which succeeded where everyone else had failed by tapping into his artistic talent and sending him on to art college, where he flourished. He first became known for his nudes. Exquisite and mouth-wateringly erotic, the skin of his subjects glowed with a shimmering

luminosity that it didn't seem possible to create with mere oil paint. In their eyes, he captured a look of unrequited lust or total satiation that earned his work the description of 'posh porn'. Celebrities queued up to be painted by him. No one knew the identity of his client list, although Victoria Beckham was rumoured to have sat for him recently – a birthday present for David. But if he didn't fall in love with his subject, he refused to let them sit for him. In his own words, his brush 'couldn't get it up for just anyone'.

When *Saturday Afternoon at Buck House* had first appeared, the painting had been decreed positively treasonous but had tripled the already considerable price of his work overnight, as well as catapulting Sebastian into the public awareness. Critics had been shocked and delighted in equal measure; the tabloids had been scandalised. Brian Sewell had declared him a genius; the *Sun* had demanded his head on a plate. The painting had gone to a mysterious private buyer who had reputedly paid over two million for the privilege. The Palace had refused to comment.

Job done. Sebastian Turner didn't need to pick up a paintbrush for another year if he didn't feel like it. And in the meantime, he had become an overnight celebrity. He was ravishing, of course, which always helped, with his tortured lettuce-green eyes and his overgrown pageboy, skeletally thin because of his decadent lifestyle. And he was difficult. Even Parkinson had struggled with his fiercely intense aggression. He was capriciously snarling and uncooperative. Spoiled and world-weary. Some said entirely charmless. Yet the public was fascinated, because underneath there was a little boy lost. And a genius. England was always

proud of her geniuses, even if they were tricky. In a world where the chat-show sofa was increasingly filled with the anodyne, guests with attitude were like gold-dust. He sparked debate: you either loved him or hated him.

Infamy breeds success and success breeds more success. Sebastian was now a commodity and there was immense pressure on him to produce, from dealers, agents, collectors, the media. Four white walls in a prestigious gallery were waiting to be filled. Hence these Alter Egos. He lifted the bottle of vodka and took another swig, wincing at the flaccid warmth of the fluid – it had lost the crisp icy edge it had had when he'd pulled it from the freezer an hour ago. But he was grateful to it nevertheless. Its purity and clarity had made him see his work for what it was. There was nothing for it. He dropped the now empty bottle carelessly to the floor, where it bounced, then rolled under his chair.

Then he picked up the Holland and Holland shot-gun that had been resting across his lap. He ran his hand along the barrel, looking at his father's initials engraved in gold underneath the family crest.

He looked around his studio with a smile.

'Adios, amigos,' he murmured as he cocked the gun.

Some hours later, Catkin Turner came in search of her husband.

When Sebastian's parents decided to move to Barbados two years ago, they had given Sebastian and Catkin first refusal on their home on the wilds of Exmoor. She had leaped at the chance. It gave them

space and tranquillity, and kept Sebastian away from the hard core of rather dissolute and decadent art college friends who were hanging on his coat-tails and leading him into bad ways: all-night parties and drinking binges that Sebastian ended up subsidising. And Withybrook was the perfect environment in which to create. For it was vital for him to create. If he didn't, he plunged back into the black abyss that had threatened to swallow him up in the past. It was Catkin who had to force him to the easel. She was the only one he listened to. And she was quite happy to play bad cop and wield the stick. She understood him.

At least, she thought she did.

She picked through the detritus in the studio fastidiously, her long legs bare. She was wearing a gold sequinned tunic, beaten-up plimsolls and a felt fedora: a hybrid outfit that was a result of having to run to the train from the television studio earlier that afternoon. The room was in chaos. Empty mugs and glasses and bottles littered every surface. Every possible receptacle was utilised as an ashtray. The air was thick with stale smoke, turpentine, spilled wine, linseed, old coffee. And . . .

Cordite?

Sharp panic pierced her gut. Marriage to Sebastian meant Catkin was always ready for a shock, a disaster, a crisis. But gun smoke? Then she saw him, slumped in his chair, the gun crooked over his arm, the tell-tale empty bottle under his feet. Her heart leaped into her mouth. She shut her eyes, then opened them again, surveying the scene more carefully. There was no sign of any blood. And she could just detect the rise and fall of his chest. She waited for her racing pulse to drop

back to normal and the adrenalin to subside. As she took in deep calming breaths, she looked around for further evidence of foul play.

Then she saw what he'd done, and instead of panic she felt nausea. His marksmanship was surprisingly accurate, given that he must be completely plastered. He'd managed to hit every single bloody work of art; every last one of the paintings he'd been working on for the past six months. She'd been so proud of his dedication, his conscientiousness, the fact that he had seemed focused and absorbed and happy with his work for the first time in his life. He hadn't thrown his toys out of his pram once. The calm before the storm, it seemed.

For a moment, her composure slipped. Why did he have to do it to her every time? It was exhausting, living with someone so hell-bent on destruction. Maybe she should just give in. Give Sebastian the satisfaction of knowing he had annihilated everything. It must be what he wanted, because he kept on doing it, again and again.

She sighed wearily, knowing she had no intention of capitulating. It wasn't in her nature. That was why she was the nation's favourite agony aunt, a sexy, modern-day Claire Rayner dispensing relationship advice on daytime television: because she had an optimism that was infectious, an objectivity that dispelled the knottiest of problems; and all delivered with a mischievous wink that stopped her from being sanctimonious.

Oh, the irony . . .

Here she was again, little Polly Positive, having to take her own advice.

*

Sebastian could hear a voice calling him from far, far away. He stirred, looked up, and saw his wife gazing down at him. She smiled, and it lit up her face. Why was she looking so excited?

'Darling, you're a genius,' she was saying. 'They're going to love this!'

'What?' Sebastian sat up, wondering how something so pure could give him such a blinding headache. He kicked the bottle of vodka out of the way in a temper.

Catkin waved her hand around the room.

'It's such a fantastic statement: the artist destroying his own work so nobody else can. They're going to be queuing up.'

She looked round at the desecrated paintings in awe.

Sebastian scowled. She was so much cleverer than him. She always had been. It was typical of her, to sweep in and diminish his gesture, turn it into something it wasn't. She was refusing to recognise his mental anguish. She was supposed to be horrified by what he had done. She was supposed to rush to his side, console and reassure him. But here she was, jumping up and down with glee and declaring his act of defiance, his attempt to destroy six months' labour, as an artistic triumph.

Of course, Catkin never had a bad day, or even a moment's doubt, about her ability. That's why her star was in the ascendant; a meteoric rise that had, as yet, showed no sign of reaching its zenith. Sebastian knew he had been perched on his for some time, and it was a long way down from where he was sitting, which was why he was transfixed with fear, dissatisfied, filled with self-loathing and lacking in confidence. And why it was easier for him to destroy his work than let it be judged.

Catkin, however, was clearly not going to allow him the luxury of wallowing in his perceived imminent failure.

'The process of wilful self-destruction,' she proclaimed from the centre of the room. 'The ultimate artistic statement – nihilistic, perhaps, yet undeniably profitable.'

'Where do you get all this shit from?' Sebastian slurred.

'You, darling.' She beamed triumphantly. 'And it's all bollocks. We know that. Which is why this is going to be your most successful exhibition yet.'

'But they're ruined. I can't sell this lot.'

He'd shot more than a dozen paintings from his chair. Some of them had gaping holes. Others were merely sprinkled with shot. Madonna's Big Mac had been blown to buggery, while Jordan had escaped with a gentle peppering. The studio hadn't got away so lightly. Chunks of plaster had come off the wall and a Velux window had been blown out.

Catkin took off her hat and twirled it on her finger. The sharp edges of her signature Sassoon bob barely moved as she shook her head.

'In the words of Andy Warhol,' she said, 'art is whatever you can get away with.'

She was quite right. Three weeks later, Sebastian's exhibition opened. Every painting was sold before the rapturous reviews could even be read in the papers. And for those who couldn't afford the real thing, there was a fake rifle range, where punters could line up and take pot-shots at limited-edition prints, then take them home. Interactive art; DIY destruction.

It was a triumph.

Sebastian came back to Withybrook Hall considerably richer, then sank into an even deeper depression.