

## If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen

'Can you get rid of that clutter, for goodness' sake?'

OK, so my books had outgrown the bookcase and become a librarian's scream. And arguably worse we had a book mole. Piles kept appearing on the floor, sills and in other rooms. And yes, I was the book mole. If it were possible, Linda would vacuum a molehill straight up. No question. *The new Dyson, D50, book muncher*. Yet there was never a mention of her outrageous collection of shoes and bags.

'I'll take some to the charity shop.'

'I don't care what you do with them, Paul, as long as they go.' Her eyes closed as she spoke, only opening after emphasising the *go* as if checking I'd not scarpered.

'Is there anything else for the charity shop, maybe?'

'And don't be all day. It's Sue and Alan's anniversary at 7pm. She's doing Salmon En Croute with dauphinoise potatoes, fresh asparagus and roast fennel.' She sniffed as if the plate was already in front of her. 'And try to make an effort this time. Alan, David and Tom talk about boxsets, movies, sports and cars. Could you try being a bit more *normal*, like them?'

I dropped a hefty bag at the *Second Chance*, charity shop counter. Fifty culled books and my spleen. The bookshelf opposite caught my eye. Big mistake. I automatically scanned titles like crossword clues. Twelve across, *The Sound and the Fury* by

William Faulkner. And three down, *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood. Fifty books going, two coming back – no harm done.

My foot tapped against a painting. An Italian bistro – sandstone building, burgundy canopies, olive green foliage adorned with pink blossom. I picked it up for a closer inspection. Sharp, vibrant oils woven from fine brush strokes. Colours to match the kitchen, perhaps?

'All yours for a tenner just came in this morning.' A bohemian in her 60s peered over tortoiseshell glasses. She wore a long tunic top, patterned with rust-coloured geometric shapes. A traffic light of bangles slid down her arm and clanked together. I overemphasised waving the books to pay like I was signalling a waiter from the painting.

I felt all at sea as I headed home. Was it parting with the books or the impending Salmon En Croute? *All yours for a tenner just came in this morning.* Should I take another look? She'd hate not being consulted. And God forbid we had a painting from a charity shop.

The bell tinkled as I re-entered. I didn't notice it the first time – maybe my senses were heightened like a kestrel circling its prize. A fusty odour filled the shop as I slalomed past two old crows screeching hangers across a metal clothes rail.

There was a gap where the painting had rested against the bookshelf. I'd only been gone half an hour. My loyal books remained. I felt like buying the whole lot back.

Around the corner, bric-a-brac and toys. The bohemian stood with a man holding the painting. My painting. A rush of excitement, then fear, then hatred. He wore one of those beige rain macs. Hey pal I've got news, it's not the 1970s anymore. Columbo kept rocking the painting from side to side as if trying to topple the diners off their chairs. He mumbled about size and his wife's agreement. Yada-yada-yada. Did he want the damn thing or not? I faked interest in the bric-a-brac. Blue and white ceramic statues of farmers, a cannon sat on a dark wooden carriage, a Charles & Diane wedding plate. I felt as desperate as the items on the shelf.

'Traffic warden is out front. Looks intent on making a name for himself.'

Nothing. I waited.

'Clouds are coming in, could be heavy rain soon.'

He glanced across and shrugged his shoulder. Ugh, that pathetic rain mac. The bohemian spun around.

'Oh, hello again.'

Oh bollocks.

'You were interested in the painting earlier. Have you come back for it?' The silence choked me. Columbo's grip tightened. She tapped my forearm, her coloured bangles providing an unwanted encore. 'Eh, I could start one of those bidding wars, like on *eBay*.'

'Oh no, not at all. I noticed if you hold it at an angle the canvas is slightly warped. Sorry, I shouldn't say, I know it's for charity.' My work here was done. I swooned back to the safety of the bookshelf. Columbo dragged the painting to the till then left to fetch his wife. A crow cawed for advice on a pink dress.

I casually slipped a tenner onto the counter, then clamped the painting to my side, shuffling past the safe side of the clothes rail. The bell screamed *thief*, *scoundrel*. I wasn't a thief as I'd paid, but it had me on scoundrel. I took a sharp left, terrified I'd hear the bell again. Shit. Columbo walked towards me. I tightened my sweaty grip, keeping close to the shops. Chatting to his wife, he didn't spot me as he passed. Probably trying to convince her to buy it. Save your breath, Columbo.

'A gallery opened in town, Linda, I knew we needed something for the kitchen.' I turned the painting like a gameshow host revealing a mystery prize. 'The man said if you don't like it, we can get a full refund. I'm not sure. What do you think?'

'How much?'

'It was their opening weekend, so we got a cracking deal.'

'How much?'

'With discount, £60. Do you think the colours will match?' My arms strained from holding the painting, *The Sound and the Fury* slipped from my jacket. She shook her head.

'You just can't help yourself, can you?' I tightened my arm, ensuring the *Blind Assassin* remained welded to my sweaty armpit. 'I bet that ugly thing is from the charity shop as well, isn't it?'

'No, Linda it's-'

'Save it. Your clothes are in the bedroom. Make sure you're ready for Sue and Allan's anniversary. We will be there for 7pm sharp. I'm having my bath now.'

I laid the painting on the kitchen table. Angelo's Bistro, a well-dressed couple sat at a table under a burgundy canopy. Around the corner a woman in a red dress with just a glass of wine for company. The swirling mix of oils gave it a reflective quality like there'd been a downpour. In the foreground, a white poodle was tied to a wooden post.

Admiring the art, I caressed both edges with my thumbs. The colours shimmered making the painting blur. I heard fabric tear. A small rip appeared in the centre of the canvas. What the hell. I'd heard ancient paintings can react to extreme temperatures, but not this, surely. The frayed rip widened. Pale fingers writhed through the laceration. My chair thudded the wall as I slid back. I looked under the table for a magician's trick. Nothing. The painting lay flat on the table. A slender hand emerged with an index finger beckoning me.

Water pipes gurgled as the bath filled. A shimmering purple haze swirled around the disembodied opaque hand. I circled the table at a safe distance. It had to be some fancy trick. Augmented reality? But that was through my phone. I circled again then nudged the frame. It felt glued to the table. I left the kitchen, hoping it would return to normal. It didn't. I circled once more before leaning in to touch the hand. A magnetic vibration snapped our palms together. Someone switched off gravity. I floated off the chair, grabbing a corner of the table with my spare hand. A static white noise silenced the gurgling water pipes. My legs lifted towards the ceiling like I was doing a handstand. Jesus, what if Linda were to come in now? I prayed she was wedged deep in the bath, surrounded by scented bubbles. I was yanked down. I tensed ready for my head to crash into the table. Instead, my arm dissolved into the purple haze. I was sucked through the rip in the canvas.

It became dark and breezy like a disused train tunnel. The hand slipped away as I spiralled through the dark. Just as I feared the worst, I sensed the darkness losing its grip. Colours formed, swirling patterns of pink, green, white and burgundy like I was sliding through a kaleidoscope. Dense air seemed to slow my descent. Colours bled apart and solidified into shapes. Streets, buildings, trees. My shoes clattered a paved surface causing my knees to buckle. I rolled flat on my back.

I looked around. Tables. Chairs. A white sandstone building. Angelo's Bistro. People dining and chatting didn't notice me. Where had my bloody kitchen gone? Behind me, the shimmering purple haze. As I stepped into it the temperature dropped and colour started to drain. I shuffled forward, but without the guiding hand, it felt like a cliff edge. I stumbled back into the light and warmth.

Burgandy canopies. Balconies with flowers. Diners and waiters. The soft, alluring rhythm of Italian accents. The white poodle tied to a post jumped at my knee. I ruffled the fur on its neck. I could touch. I could feel. But I didn't belong. Was I a ghost? Had I died? I stepped towards the bistro. A chair screeched back and the woman in the red dress ran towards me. Either me or the poodle. She threw her arms around me gabbling in Italian. I stood rigid with my arms dangling. I made a pretty poor ghost. She's got me for someone else, surely. She eventually pulled away to look at my face. Her olive skin glistened with tears, glazing her brown eyes.

'Sapevo che saresti venuta.'

'I, I don't – English?'

'Spiacente. Sorry. Sorry. I knew you come.' She raised onto her toes and kissed both my cheeks

'Who are you? How did I get here?'

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She giggled. 'You funny. I Francesca. I wish. I pray. Every night. I knew you come.' Her enthusiasm was infectious despite me not understanding a thing. 'Your name is?'

'Paul.'

'Argh Paolo! Come, come.' She grabbed my hand and headed back to her table.

Linda yelled his name like calling a lost pup. Where the hell was, he? She rang his mobile countless times. Searched every room and the garden in case he'd tripped or worse. Would serve him right. He's doing it on purpose. Trying to embarrass me. He'd be back soon if he knew what was good for him.

Exhausted, she slumped into a kitchen chair and noticed the painting laying on the table. She grimaced. Diners sat outside Angelo's Bistro. One couple ordering. A second couple holding hands over a table, an eye-catching red dress. I'll show you. She grabbed the painting and stormed down the garden throwing it onto the lawn. Then doused it in lighter fluid. She lit a match then paused and blew it out.

I watched as Francesca checked her makeup with a vanity mirror. A noxious stench of paraffin burnt my nostrils. Was someone filling a motorbike nearby? Oblivious to it, she reapplied her mascara, gently stroking her long lashes upwards. I blew my nose on a napkin then gulped some wine to try and stifle the smell.

Linda raced to the bookshelf groping books to her chest. She flung them on top of the painting. A lit match dropped onto the pyre. Inferno raged. He'd be back soon if he knew what was good for him.

I cowered under a searing red and orange glow across the skyline. Should we dash inside? Francesca rejected its existence, smiling as it flickered intensely.

We walked hand in hand to where I first appeared. The purple haze had vanished. We continued along a winding paved path leaving the bistro behind. A raging heat chased behind me, but I was too fearful to look. She whispered I knew you come, Paradiso. Our hands locked together. The air cooled and the overhead glow faded to dusk as we wandered off-canvas.