

The Masterpiece

Lucy Bauer

It wasn't that Jake despised his customers' tastes. On the contrary, he was well aware that if it weren't for the fact that many people's notion of the ideal picture to hang on their wall was an exact copy of a famous work of art, he would be out on the street scraping a living as a pavement artist. Jake was eternally grateful for orders for, say, Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" (But smaller, please - we live in a semi-detached), because producing replicas of masterpieces was what he excelled at. When it came to creativity, originality, a unique composition, Jake failed miserably. On the few occasions he felt inspired to put brush to canvas to attempt to capture the essence of a vase of flowers himself, the result was mundane and insignificant. Most photographs had more artistic merit than Jake's own artwork. This he knew, and this knowledge he abhorred.

One morning Jake was at his easel changing a Renaissance Madonna and Child into an abstract. The order for the Bellini had been cancelled when the customer's girlfriend, who had recently undergone a spiritual conversion, suddenly realized that she had no further use for him in her life. Unfortunately, the offering of a devotional painting was rejected as categorically as the lover. So here was Jake putting the finishing touches to a new background: what had been a landscape of distant rolling hills was now an intricate interweaving of geometric shapes. Jake never wasted a canvas if he could paint it over. When the doorbell rang, he hastily draped a cloth over the hybrid painting. Jake kept nobody in the dark as to the nature of his profession, but there was no need to expose the crasser aspects of his work process to prospective clients, he felt.

The man at the door exuded the prosperity of the middle-aged middle class. He gave his name as Gyle and said Jake had been recommended to him: he was in search of something out of the ordinary for his wife. Jake inclined his head graciously, reflecting inwardly that this customer's visit was therefore likely to be a brief one. On being shown into the studio, however, Gyle marched straight past Jake and made a beeline for the easel. Turning to see what had attracted his attention, Jake caught his breath: the cloth over the "work in progress" had slipped and was hanging to one side.

“Remarkable!” Gyle exclaimed. “This is it! See how those blobs and squiggles in the background convey the chaos of our modern life but are subdued by the serenity and harmony of the mother and baby dominating the foreground. Who is the original by? And the cover obscuring half the painting, concealing, revealing – intriguing! Tell me, what exactly is the meaning of the cloth?”

“Oh, that’s just in case...” Jake faltered.

“Justin who?” Gyle interrupted. “Can’t say I’ve heard of a contemporary artist by the name of Justin, though I must admit I don’t know much about art. I do know what I like though.”

It was a constant source of amazement to Jake that his customers trotted out this platitude time and again, but Gyle was taking “knowing what he liked” to a whole new level.

“Who is this Justin guy?” he repeated.

As Gyle gazed at the easel, Jake gazed at Gyle. He realized with some alarm that the man was being perfectly serious: he was convinced that he was looking at a copy of a genuine work of modern art and that the cloth was an integral part of it. An idea was forming in Jake’s head.

“Oh, it’s Justin ... Casey,” he replied slowly. “You probably won’t have heard of him. Unique style, pure genius, in my opinion. Little known. Lived the life of a recluse somewhere in ... Tibet, I believe. Passed away recently at a very early age. Tragic!

“Fascinating,” Gyle murmured. “What’s it called?”

Jake cleared his throat to win time and then answered as truthfully as he could in the circumstances: “Simply transformed.”

“Perfect!” Gyle exhaled extravagantly. “You see, it says so much about how becoming a father and having a family of my own at last has transformed my existence. I’m not as young as you might imagine. (Jake hadn’t actually imagined for one moment that he was particularly youthful.) Until I met Mary, my life was all about work, work, work. Money, money, money. (Jake was starting to warm to Mr Gyle.) But then, last year, my lovely Mary came along and she agreed to marry me – God knows why! (There was only one reason Jake could think of.) And now God has blessed us with a son. Let me tell you, it is quite simply the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me: it has simply transformed my existence. (Just in case I didn’t get that the first time, Jake thought.) And you wouldn’t believe it (Jake thought he probably would - he felt prepared to believe

just about anything now) but the mother in that picture actually looks a lot like my Mary. Oh, I am so excited about this! She's going to love it. Maybe you could put a few blond highlights in the hair, like Mary has, and make her just a tad slimmer? Can you get it done by Mother's Day? I'll make it worth your while." Whereupon Mr Gyle pulled out his wallet.

Whether or not Gyle eventually found out that no artist by the name of Justin Casey had ever existed, Jake never knew. It was of no consequence. Gyle got a painting that meant everything to him, and Jake sincerely hoped that Gyle meant as much to his wife and son as they obviously did to him. As for Jake, he had at long last created something original – well, partly, at least – and it hadn't been difficult at all.



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has spent the last 37 years in Austria but is originally from Edinburgh, Scotland, a place very close to her heart.

She has always loved words in all forms, be it limericks, Scrabble or the Brontes. Newly retired from teaching, she's enjoying her old pastimes more than ever: reading, travel, music, walking, Netflix, running, sunbathing, Zumba, words, words, words ...