

Bank Robbers

It was a quiet Autumn Monday morning at my old Notting Hill gallery, when the door opened and in walked two men who were far removed in appearance from my usual clientele . One well dressed in long black frock coat with mink lapels and sporting winkle pickers, Brycreemed locks, side-burns and a very long cigarette holder. His 'side-kick' presented the sartorial opposite: tight jeans, tea-shirt, no hair but many a colourful tattoo upon his muscle bound arms. The resemblance to George Cole and Dennis Waterman in the BBC's "Minder" of the 70's was uncanny!

They were perfectly polite and correct and asked the price of an Italian seventeenth century still life. They declined the invitation to have coffee but agreed on the still life price of four thousand pounds dolling out five hundred pounds as a deposit in crisp brand new notes. 'George' (as we will call him) assured me that they would return within two weeks to settle the bill but I would, of course, keep the painting as security.

Two weeks went by, three, then four, but no sign of George or Terry – I began to get worried. Some days later I was attending a Christie's auction of exceptionally boring and tame English watercolours. The room was hot, stuffy and I was in danger of falling asleep in the back row of the auction. But just as I was about to nod off, I spied the muscle bound 'minder' leaning nonchalantly against the rear green baize wall. Ah, I thought, the perfect opportunity to claim my three and a half thousand pounds in 'crisp notes.' I sauntered over and addressed the minder. 'Excuse me, I said, 'I'm sure you remember me, I was wondering whether I could have my money, after all, it is nearly three weeks overdue.'

There was simply no response, he just continued his nonchalant lean and kept his tattooed arms firmly folded but after what seemed an eternity his arms moved forward like a fifties robotic android and with almost professional ease, held on to my lapels, lifted me off the ground, pulled me towards his unshaven and very angular face and uttered just very few words....' No one, just no one ever, ever asks us for money – right – right?' He then dropped me onto the parquet floor where I lay crumpled in an embarrassing Welsh heap. The auctioneer stopped the sale, leaned over his podium and asked after my health. In reply I squeaked that I was al-right and tottered unceremoniously out of the back door of the saleroom.

Back at the gallery I was visited by a fellow art dealer, Alan , who being a particularly 'streetwise' kid on the block, told me in no uncertain terms, who these guys were that I had naively involved myself with. George had just done 'time' for masterminding a bank robbery where the thieves had tunnelled under Baker street to get at the vaults. His minder, Terry, had just been released from Broadmoor prison for the criminally insane. His crime had been the murdering of fellow villain by biting off his genitalia! With this last charming nugget of information I realized how lucky I was to have been let off with a sweaty bear hug and some loss of an art dealer's street cred.

Two days later the gallery door opened and in walked my gangster friends; I was, I have to say, very frightened but before I could retreat to hide behind the arras, they addressed me in a surprisingly polite manner' Mr Philp,' said George, ' we're so sorry to be late with our payment, do accept our apologies and as a token of our sincere regret we would like you to accept a little present.' With that opening line, George presented me with a box of Cadbury's milk Tray and then proceeded to leaf out three thousand pounds in unused crisp notes: I wonder where they originated?

In a true cowardly manner, I cowered in front of the thieves and kept repeating that they had no need to apologise for the late payment – yes, I know, quite pathetic but by now I knew when to keep quiet!

A few months later while I was perched on top of a Sotheby's very high extension ladder attempting illicit cleaning tests on an old master, I felt the ladder shake a little. I looked down and to my horror I see George and Terry holding the ladder and looking up. God, I thought, Terry failed to crush me to death at Christie's but now they are going to kick the ladder away in the rival saleroom and send me crashing to horrific death as I impale myself on the richly carved cresting of a Louis the fifteenth sofa. But, again, I had misjudged them, they simply asked whether the painting was a good one and did I need some help to get down. It transpired that they were visiting Sotheby's to view what they described as 'rocks'; I gather they were referring to diamonds!

George and Terry were an extraordinary 'life-like' metamorphosis of the television characters but the last encounter with these villains made me decide to draw a distinct line between fact and fiction – I would spend more time watching television's cops and robbers and keep well away from Broadmoor ex convicts and Baker street tunnelers.