

## The Critic

As he leaned over the hand-polished mahogany railing, gazing down at the crowd of patrons milling about in the atrium below, a sense of nervous excitement began to stir within him. Vibrating its way up to him through the hidden iron skeleton of the recently renovated downtown highrise, despite the insulation of his expensive loafers, the soles of his feet easily detected the focused energy of their collective eager anticipation.

He gasped ... there ... there was the critic for the Evening Globe, clinging to his arm a gorgeous young blond woman not much more than half his age ... a "secretary" he reminded himself, remembering clearly the scathing review given the last artist who had somehow made the mistake of asking a few questions too many of the old man. At least he was here, he mused, his absence at the showing would have made the entire affair a waste of good champagne and extremely expensive caviar.

And, almost spilling his brightly colored drink into the crowd beneath him as he bent forward for a better view, after watching for almost fifteen minutes he was finally able to spot the curator of the Metropolitan Museum, who was engaged excitedly with the governor in a very animated discussion ... the topic of which couldn't quite drift up the distance to his ears.

Damn ... he looked across the wide open space before him ... they were all here. Yet it didn't have to be unanimous, that was the elegant beauty of the whole process. No ... for a second he tried to mentally calculate the net worth of the assemblage in front of him, but had to cease his juvenile efforts when he could no longer keep track in his head of the number of zeros involved ... no, all I need is six or eight of them, that's all. Five he was sure of, at one time or another in the media they'd already nodded in his direction. Only two or three ... that's all ... but which ones, who, he hadn't a clue.

Taking a glance at the huge gilded grandfather clock across the hall from him, he became aware that it was almost time for the doors to open, signaling the formal beginning of the evening's presentation of his work. He had actually begun to turn away from his comfortable vantage point, and was already thinking of the grace and dignity with which he was going to descend the curving staircase to join the crowd, when he spotted her, standing by herself in a tiny alcove at the far side of the room below.

Could it be ... was it really possible? Turning back to the rail, his attention was so focused upon the vision of the gray-haired woman that he paid little attention to the sound of his glass shattering as it hit the hardwood floor he was standing upon. Could it be her? After all these years ... all this time ...

"... and I want all of you to remember to very, very carefully follow the directions printed on the piece of paper I gave you. What happens, class, when we don't follow directions?"

"We can't do anything right!" they all chorused with glee.

"And if we don't want to do things right?" she prompted.

"We might as well not do anything at all!" they sang.

How they loved her. Their teacher ... their leader ... their friend. She was so pretty. She was the smartest person in the entire world ... Melinda had told him that at recess one day, "You know, Frankie,

she's the smartest person in the whole world. That's how she got to be our teacher. I know 'cause I heard it from Mike Williams, and she was his teacher when he was in the third-grade last year ... so it must be true." He sighed softly as he watched the graceful manner in which the young woman placed a tiny box of supplies upon the time worn surface of each of the ancient wooden desks where her students sat. Yes ... it was obvious ... coming from Mike merely made it even more true.

"Each step is listed very clearly, and I want you to ..." she glanced across at one of her young charges who, as she spoke, was staring through the dust covered panes of the classroom window, his vision directed towards a small sparrow in the tree outside the class. The tiny bird was building a nest, and the boy who watched was clearly completely captivated by the involved efforts of the feathered creature.

"Ahem ... ah, Danny!" The boy's head snapped towards her, his attention instantly hers. "So ... Danny ... what was it I just said to the class?"

"I ... um ... I think ... I mean ..."

"Do you mean you think, or do you think you mean? Which is it?"

The class burst into giggles, instantly stifled as the sweep of her cold gaze across the room brought back their silence.

"I ... I ... I'm sorry, Ma'am?"

"Yes, you are. And during afternoon recess you and I will discuss exactly how sorry that is, okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Redirecting her attention to the class, she proceeded to give them clearly enunciated verbal instructions for the assignment that they were to complete during the period.

"Are there any questions?" she concluded. "Good, you have exactly forty minutes. You may begin."

... the movement of the crowd caught him by surprise. He glanced over to his left just in time to see the large double doors leading to the gallery as they began to move, and by the time he looked back to the alcove she had disappeared. He'd no time to search for her, and was forced to sacrifice his plans for a dignified entrance as scurried down the stairs and rushed through the waiting throng, arriving at the velvet rope stretched across the portal even as the guards were latching the doors against the shiny brass stops attached to the hallway baseboards. Somewhat out of breath, and with a final glance back towards the alcove, he accepted the microphone that magically appeared in his hand and began his words of welcome.

"... so, as you can see, it's been a long road leading to this exhibit. I'm tired, exhausted is more the word ..." the crowd tittered appropriately as he feigned resting his head against the wall, "... but I'm also

very happy with what I've accomplished. But ... but now I guess it's time to find out how happy I can make all of you. So enter ... please ... and welcome to my show!"

This time his repose wasn't a parody, as he leaned against the wall, although, if the truth were to be known, the casual nature of his body language remained an act. He watched as everyone walked by him, and was finally rewarded with a brief glimpse of her as she passed into the gallery.

This will be so sweet, he thought, so very, very sweet. All these years, after all this time I'll finally get to tell her what I think. Oh, how good this was going to be. He glanced into the gallery, noticing the groups of people beginning to cluster in front of his drawings and paintings. Adjusting his tie, and making sure that the dark velvet surfaces of his lapels were free of lint, he made his own entrance into the exhibit that was his life.

"That's really nice, Frankie, really nice," Melinda chirped at him from across the desk, "I like the way that you ..."

"Melinda?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"We don't have to remind you that talking and doing are not the same thing, do we?"

"No, Ma'am."

"And which are we supposed to be doing?"

"Doing ... Ma'am, doing."

He felt a growing sense of pleasure as he strolled from room to room in the gallery. Everywhere people were smiling, laughing, enjoying themselves. Even the critic and his ... secretary, he grinned to himself, momentarily touching in his vest pocket the business card she palmed to him when, at the appropriate moment, his agent had introduced him to the pair ... they, too, seemed to be having a great time. His work was a hit with the crowd, it was easy to see, and ... the warmth spread through him like a shot of fine brandy ... and he was a success. Finally. A success.

"Frankie." she whispered across to him, "Frankie!"

"Shhhh ... you're gonna get us in trouble!"

"Don't worry, she's over by the window. Frankie!"

"What?"

"I ... I like what you made. It looks ... I mean ... it almost seems real."

He flushed, something that had been happening to him of late whenever she talked to him, "Well ... it isn't really much. Not really. The one she made is so much better. Hers is perfect ... look at it."

They both looked over to the sample she had perched upon the tiny pedestal on her desktop. She'd even focused the beam of a small metal spot lamp so that its shaft of soft light illuminated the work she had produced from the hidden depths of her huge handbag at the beginning of the period.

Melinda stared at it only for a moment, then turned to him, "But Frankie, your's ... your's seems so much more better."

His face reddened, and he resumed his efforts to complete his work before the time allotted him ran out.

He glanced at the expensive watch gracing his wrist. Not something he would have purchased himself, he only wore it to remind himself how frivolous his marriage had become towards its end. His wife had bought it for him to replace the one he had lost while they were vacationing in the West Indies. "But honey, I don't really care for such a fancy ..."

"Nonsense! I'm glad you lost that old thing. If you're going to play the role you've got to dress the part."

"But ... but it seems so silly, a watch that costs more than most people make in a month."

She gave him a condescending stare, "But we're not most people ... that's all behind us. Now ... soon ... soon it's going to be our time to wear fancy jewelry and live in a penthouse apartment. That's how it works ... you understand that, don't you?"

But he hadn't, and it wasn't long after that she'd left, soon to be married to an investment banker with a six-figure income and a timepiece that cost more than the average person earned in a year. He checked the time, still aware how uncomfortable the watch was compared to the one that he had worn for so many years.

The clock in the classroom made the special ticking sound that meant the bell was soon to ring. He glanced down at his wrist, comforted by the fact that the position of the minute hand of the school clock matched perfectly the tiny one on the chrome plated watch his father'd bought for him to wear to school that year. "This is for you, Frankie, I think it's about time you took responsibility for keeping track of your own life, okay?"

"Frankie!" He was interrupted from the memory of his father.

"What is it, Melinda?"

"What time is it?" The deep blue of her eyes always made him wonder if he should go outside and check the color of the sky.

Meeting her gaze, knowing that for sure the heavens had lost their hue, he answered her, "Almost time for the bell! You can see the clock on the wall, Melinda, why do you always ask me?" he questioned, knowing full well she would respond with her usual answer.

"Because your time's so much better, Frankie, you know that!"

He began to sweat, despite the relative coolness of the classroom, and hurried to clean up his work area.

Strolling the halls of the gallery, without her becoming aware of his surveillance, he managed to keep track of her progress as she slowly worked her way through the exhibit. Funny, he thought, over the years she didn't seem to have changed very much. Oh, he noticed the gray hair and gentle lines in her face, but a quick glance into an antique hanging nearby reminded him that the same process was affecting him. Yet, he felt comfortable admitting it to himself, he wasn't really bothered by it all ... not really.

He thought of the encounter he'd had with his ex-wife a few weeks earlier, at cocktail party on the lower East Side. She'd been pleasant, as was her nature, and both of them had sensed that each had enjoyed the brief meeting. She had made sure to wish him luck on his upcoming exhibit, and he had made a point, very subtly, of course, to display his marvel at how tight and young her face appeared. Odd, when he thought about how she looked, it didn't seem to have made her look any younger ... or more attractive.

He watched as she entered the main gallery of the hall. The route she had taken through the building pleased him, its carefully calculated course indicated that she had a good sense of the scope and sequence of his work, and demonstrated an excellent knowledge of art. Good ... good. That would make everything so much better, so much more ...

"... so we've time for one more student to show their work. Who would like to come up to the front of the class with their art?"

"Pssst ... Frankie, raise your hand!"

He didn't have to glance to his side, like the big ocean near the beach he could feel Melinda's gaze washing over him.

"Okay, Frank, come on up and put your statue on the pedestal."

He made his way to the front of the class, feeling her eyes watching every step of his long journey through the maze of chairs and desks. Arriving at the teacher's table, and knowing that there was no longer any tomorrow, he placed his miniature construction upon the spotlighted block.

"Very good, Frank, very good. You cut all the parts out correctly. I don't see a single glue drop ... that's a bonus, if you'll recall. And I like the way you attached the eyes by using little pins, that shows excellent creativity."

He collected the little animal back into his hands, and, as he turned to return to his place at the back of the room, "So ... so what did I get? What's my grade?"

She looked down at him, adjusting the collar on her suit as she spoke, "Well, you did a very fine job, Frank. But I can't give you an 'A.' That wouldn't be fair, I'm sure you understand."

His curiosity overwhelmed his disappointment, "But ... why?"

"Because you didn't follow instructions, Frankie. Don't you see? You used too many cotton balls."

He watched her as she examined one of his more intricate works, at the same time remembering that long, lonely walk back to his desk. He'd kept his head up ... how proud his father would have been ... but the tears had stung his eyes with a pain that had taken years to forget. Very carefully he'd taken his seat, careful not to make a scraping noise that might bring any attention back to him. It was only after she'd turned to write the assignment for the next day on the board that he'd become aware of the soft touch upon his arm ...

"Frankie ... Frankie. Are you okay?"

He looked over at her, next to him so very far away, and couldn't find the words, conscious that his vision was blurred and the room suddenly seemed so very, very quiet.

"Oh, Frankie ... she's wrong. Yours is the best of all ... better'n hers even. Yours ... yours ... it's alive, Frankie, yours is alive!"

Still facing the chalkboard, "Melinda?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"See me at recess, okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

He walked up to stand behind her, after all this time now only an arm's reach from her. This is going to be so perfect, thought, so very perfect. I've wanted for so long to tell her how she made me feel. And now ... a sudden whiff of her perfume cause him to lose his vocabulary for a moment ... and ... and how ironic it was. Yes, that was the word. Ironic.

He reached out to touch her shoulder.

The crowd had long departed, and the exhibit had been locked up until the showing scheduled for late that evening. Only his newly established position in the art society kept the young waiter at his station in the art museum's small cafeteria.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I've got to close up soon for the afternoon. Can I get the two of you anything else, Sir? Perhaps a bit more coffee?"

"No, but thanks. You've been great ... I'll make sure the manager knows how special you've treated us."

The boy flashed a grateful smile, "Gee, I appreciate that. You two take your time, I'll leave your tab over on the cash register ... just put your money in the little tray on your way out."

As the waiter walked away he turned back to her, knowing as he did so that he would find her eyes upon him, "It meant so much to me, you know ... everything I am ... that I've become ... all of this I owe to that moment."

"But Frankie, all I said was that ..."

"... it's not that. Not that at all. It wasn't so much what you said ... I'm not really sure I was even aware of the words you used."

"Then what was it?"

"It was ..." he gazed at the softness of her face, the warmth of her life poured across the table ... cleansing him ... refreshing him ... reminding him who he really was, "... it was that you said it. Not what. Not even when. But that it was you ... you."

The waiter watched as they walked down the hallway, his youth in no way an indicator of the wisdom a thousand such encounters had brought to him. He noticed how she took the artist's arm as they stood by the elevator at the end of the hall, holding his elbow and keeping them close together. She'd begun to reach for his cheek as they entered the lift, and he knew ... beyond any doubt whatsoever ... that they would have already kissed by the time they reached the floor above.

Grinning to himself, suddenly happier at how nice a day he was having, he resumed his cleaning of the cafeteria tables. When he heard the closing of the elevator doors echoing down the long hallway, he suddenly remembered her eyes. Hesitating for moment, it struck him as odd how he suddenly thought that perhaps he should go outside to see if there was, indeed, any blue left in the sky.