

Bacon's *Black Triptych*, or *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*

- 1 -

'He never paints a normal portrait of me! Makes me look like somethin' fallen out a butchers' van. He makes everyone horrible even Henrietta, who most guys reckoned a peach'. As the pair stumbled across the frosty cobbles of Rue de Saints Pere, a Citroën parped its horn, and George responded with the two finger salute.

'I stopped inviting my other friends to the openings - they never knew how to play it with the West End types. At the Marlborough' - he mimicked how they'd say it, with the long first vowel - 'I spotted an old girl in a blue twin-set, admiring the newest one of me: "When Francis promised me a Saville Row suit", I nudged her, "I thought it was gonna to be in the painting! Wahaahaahaaa!" After a moment she laughed in that singsong way they do. 'Oh, delightful.' She necked the rest of her bubbly, "I must go and tell..." she looked around, then headed over to Miss Beston. I could see them having a right laugh, and I waved'.

He held the leaded glass door open for Ayman, then handed him a crisp twenty to get the drinks. George was never sure if they really didn't understand English, or were just uppity. After a rapid exchange in French, a little green bottle, a glass like a champagne flute, and an orange juice were pushed towards them, and the barkeep handed Ayman a note and several coins. George pushed the glass back across the counter with a finger, then manoeuvred some red and blue capsules from his watch pocket. Under cover of the bar, he held the Tuinals out to the kid, who shook his head. George shrugged and popped the lot, he'd plenty more in the hotel. He washed them down with half the tiny bottle of pilsner. 'You can't get a decent pint of bitter over here!' They certainly had plenty of spirits, a whole wall of whiskies, gins, and things he'd never heard of. One was called 'Bols', and he chuckled to himself. This was like the joints he'd go with Francis and the arty crowd that followed them.

They'd first met at Muriel's club in Soho. She seemed the most unlikely publican, if you were lucky she called you 'Mary'. George had accepted this as simply life in the West End, before realising that due a combination of sexual identities, painful histories, and addictions, these were fellow travellers: outsiders who'd found a refuge together, protected by a ferocious pack mother. She called Francis 'daughter', and George sensed a truth to this. Francis had opened up to each of them. His birth mother, Francis said he remembered mainly cowering in the background while his father, would put him over his lap and take a riding crop to his young flesh. His nanny was more of a mother to him, as an adult he'd invited her to London and she lived with him right up to her death. She accepted his lifestyle without question, vetting responses to his 'gentleman's companion' ads, and keeping his guests topped up with their choice of drink and drugs.

George had only had a mother, though she was close to a man he called 'uncle' Ron, and idolised. He wore smart suits like someone from the movies, and met other men the same. Ron was always vague about what he did, even though George would often deliver packages for him. For this he would give George toys, and sometimes money, all of which - Ron had told him in an unusually serious voice - would stop if he ever told anyone, including his mother. Once little

George had asked the pair if they were going to get married, and they had both laughed. Sometimes his mother would have visitors at the weekend, and he'd be packed off to a matinee. He remembered *Ivanhoe* - England divided, with the Saxons against their Norman rulers. They had been acting it out in an overgrown area flattened in the blitz, with George on a bigger lad's shoulders for the jousting, and Uncle Run had come to collect him. He said that his mum still had a visitor, and he was to take him back to his. He kept saying 'are you still playing?' he poked him in the chest: 'Are you a boy or do you want to be a man!?'

A hand on his wrist, and a shout brought George back to his senses. The kid was fiddling with the watch: must have been trying to check how long George had been out of it. He'd gotten so used to places with Francis, where you just had to keep your head off the table!

'Mr artist - where is he now?'

'At the Palais...'

'Grand Palais? Big money artist!'

The kid's interruptions were starting to grate, and George carried right on. 'So Francis says: "The reception's two days away!", and I say, "Yeah! two days away! I thought I was here to spend some time with you!" "We want to get the hanging right". He's a brilliant man, and I love to hear him talk, but sometimes he loses me. I mean don't they have people to hang them - those guys with the white gloves? I mean what is he doing there for all that time!? Then he starts on something about how when you walk into a room you take it all in in those first few seconds".

'Well if he's busy I can make other friends - right kid?' George hands the barkeep another twenty Franc note and gestures for the same again. Ayman shouts something else, and the drinks come with a plate of meats and cheeses that the kid wolfs into.

'Maybe I get it, 'cause when I walked into Muriel's that first time and saw him there - I mean, he's older, and not really handsome, but straight away there was something about him - confident like a film star, holding people's attention like a magician. And he looked at me like, really no-one else ever had. But that was then - years ago!' George picked from the plate a thin slice of some kind of ham, and moved it towards his mouth, then stared at it, and dropped it back on the plate. He looked at the floor. It was already getting dark outside, and everything here looked more brown than before, chair legs and people's feet now hard to pick out against the dulled varnish of the floor.

The lights came on and brought him out of it. 'He's painted me more than anyone! Ayman was catching the last few crumbs on his finger. 'They sell for so much money!' The kid stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked it, then gave George a wide grin. 'I mean shitloads of money!' The kid looked puzzled, and George simplified: "Money. Much money!" 'Yes!' said the kid, grinning even more widely.

'He didn't even want me there when he did the paintings! He'd get Deakin to take photographs. You know,' he mimed holding a camera to his eyes 'click click.' 'Ah, click click!' replied the kid. 'From different angles, see. He turned his head to the right, paused face on, and then looked left. 'They looked like mugshots! You know, Police photos?' The kid leaned back and glanced around. 'One time I gave him a frame - he'd got me a gig in a framers, and I made, like, three frames attached with little hinges, but he never used it. He'd just taped them to the wall, or

they'd just lie around the floor with his pictures of wrestlers and medical stuff. Once I spotted one of the photos on the floor, and it looked like he was deliberately grinding it with his heel.'

'Even the nudes...' The kid looked blank, so George held his jacket open, then mimed pulling a vest off. 'Yes, yes!' The kid mirrored this, pulling his grubby T-shirt up to reveal as far as his protruding ribs. George shook his head, and the kid lowered his shirt and pantomimed some model poses. 'Artist! Click click! Pictures! You want?'

George ignored this. 'The nudes could have been, you know, tasteful. But it would just be on a old kitchen chair in his mess of a studio'. He grabbed the beer that was sitting there getting warm, and took a slug. 'i've not talked to anyone like this for ages! You're a good listener...what was your name again?'

They'd been back at the hotel some time when Francis arrived back. Ayman was wearing George's jacket and shirt. They looked huge against his scrawny brown legs.

'George!'

'You were out with other friends!'

Unconcerned by the situation, Ayman shouted 'Mister Artist!' and waved, the cuff slipping down to reveal the watch.

'Really George!? The Rolex!' and Francis walked back out, and closed the door.

‘George is here!?’ David Sylvester’s voice was raised from its usual baritone, ‘Francis actually invited him?’

I nodded.

‘Is he coming to the reception? A drunk George can be the absolute worst!’ He lowered his cup, and it looked tiny in his huge hand. ‘Even Francis can’t take him like that!’

‘Let’s hope the rehab worked this time!’ I imagined George draping his arm around the President, and asking him if French people really ate frog’s legs. ‘I think that’s why they brought Barry.’

‘Barry?’ David had just arrived late last night. He looked tired, his wisps of hair, not properly swept back across his crown.

‘From the gallery. Hangs the shows, and looks after the artists?’ He looked blank. ‘The point is, he gets on with George.’

Tara, the debutante from the gallery, leaned in, ‘I heard they met when George broke into the studio!’ The image of George climbing in a window, one foot just alighting on the toilet seat was lodged in my head, though surely invented. ‘Francis likes the idea of that’. I leaned in now, towards her. ‘He gets off on danger!’ She blushed slightly, and David and I laughed. Enjoying the reaction I pressed on: ‘When he was with Peter Lacy, he’d appear covered in bruises!’ I paused, and David jumped in with ‘Sometimes a burst lip, or a swollen eye!’ Tara leaned away. David always had to start a competition. ‘It’s rumoured,’ I said, ‘that Peter threw him through a window!’

She gasped, and her eyes darted around the dining room. ‘Is that appropriate? Francis wouldn’t like...’

‘Francis would hate people not talking about him!’

I saw Barry at the counter, tonging some charcuterie onto a plate, and I nodded. He added some cheese, came over, and sat beside me, and opposite David. ‘Have you to babysit George then?’

He glared at me, and I turned back to Tara. ‘Once he phoned the police to say Francis had illegal drugs in his kitchen cupboard.’ David, who’ll always try to impress a young lady, cut in again, ‘Francis told them George, a convicted criminal, and must have planted them.’ He roared with laughter. I laughed too, but Barry just said, ‘Leave off George’.

Sylvester, didn't seem to take this well. He stroked his beard. I've found the middle class often lack manners with those below - perhaps trying too hard to set themselves apart. David, in truth, had hardly more formal education than Barry, but had felt distanced enough to coin the term 'kitchen sink'. Francis, while he abhorred that kind of social realist painting, had a genuine fascination for the working class - which played out in the homosexual practice of 'rough trade'.

David must have been having similar thoughts, as he looked straight at Barry, and said, 'George came up in the world when he met Francis, eh?' Barry held his gaze. 'Do you really know George?' This seemed to further antagonise David: 'An older man, and a wealthy one.'

'Francis only became really rich once he was with George, who was companion, model, and muse to him. In any case, who here hasn't benefited from Francis?' Tara looked at myself, then David, who looked down at the table, then picked up the pot and poured himself some coffee, presumably long cold.

'Well,' I said, but neither of the pair looked at me. Like a good butler, I knew when to step back, and winked across at Tara.

'He's holding Francis back! He's milking it.'

'How would you know!? Francis offered George a house in the country. He didn't want it: all he wants is Francis!' He paused, 'and a bit of respect from his....' he looked at each of us in turn 'entourage!.

No one else spoke. 'He'd have been better off if he never met Francis!'

Time to intervene: 'Come on Barry, David', I held an open hand across the table to each of them.

Barry pushed his plate of uneaten food away, and it clattered against the accumulated crockery. He jumped up, looked towards the exit, then turned back to us. He dropped his hands onto the table "He's dead! Alright. Slumped naked on the toilet, beside an empty jar of pills. George is dead!

We all stared at him in silence, until I said 'Who knows?'

'Francis, obviously, Miss Beston,' he looked at Tara, who also worked for her. 'She's sorting things out with the Hotel manager.' I imagined him backed against a wall. with the tiny woman wagging a finger in his face. She was even worse than Muriel from that club. Francis called her 'Valerie from the gallery', but no one else dared. It was rumoured she'd worked for military intelligence, said often she'd do anything for 'her' artists, which no one had been inclined to query.

'Not a word of this,' said Barry, and we all nodded, 'or George won't be the only one dead!'

I move in closer, leaning over the red rope, as if to study the brushstrokes. I can't fully hear from this distance, and my French is only 'A' Level. Francis is saying something about... 'accident' Oh no! Now 'geste' - that's 'gesture' and ... ah, they're talking about technique.

'Make sure he's okay!', Miss Beston had said, as if she were asking that the catalogues be kept away from the champagne, 'but he can't know you're doing it!'. I remembered the last girl, after some farewell drinks: 'She gives you nothing... except the responsibility!'

It's too cold for bare shoulders, and I cover up with the silk scarf. 'They are both intimate caress, and violent blow...' David Sylvester's staring at me with those piercing dark eyes. 'almost an assault!' He manoeuvres his well-tailored bulk, stretching an arm behind him towards the large nude of Henrietta. The invitation suggested by the pose was offset by the paint quality - the greys and flesh tones scraped across her curves.' Quite', I reply.

'He himself, can be like that, you know. He will act like you are the only person in the world - that he values your thoughts above anyone's. At the Lucien Freud opening, he was all "You're so right, David. Always. You must write my next catalogue!", then Lucien waltzes over, and Francis gets that look in his eye, and tells him that critics and curators are fatuous and useless, sucking the lifeblood from artists! You'll have your turn'. He looked up, for a moment, into the glass dome far above. 'I don't know how George copes with it. Peter Lacy was said to batter Francis, but George is really quite gentle. I hear Francis brought him over?'

'George is not expected tonight,' I was clear on the script. 'He took some sleeping pills.'

I look away, and towards Francis. 'He's gone!' I touch David lightly on the arm, as I push past him.

'Keep him away from the newspapers!' she'd said. How exactly? I don't recognise most of the faces, and these black tie events remove sartorial cues. No trench coats here. Tabloid headlines keep popping into my head: Arties Party as Lover Lies Dead.

Towards the far wall I spot one of the younger critics - Michael - the rough beard and tousled hair, almost folk singer - a month away from Cat Stevens. He's with two old ladies, and kisses them on each cheek - he's become so French - and makes his way towards me. He leans in and whispers, 'You need to look nonchalant, my dear. Only an hour to go. He's fine. Fired up about his next paintings - another triptych. No one would guess... '

'Where is he?'

'Last I saw, he was with John Russell,' he turned his head to the right.

'Russell?' I'm losing track of the critics.

'Combover, glasses. At your table, last night'.

'Just divorced his second Countess?'

He laughs. 'They headed that way.'

'Not towards the 'George room'!?'

I push past people, more urgently now, into the room with the newest paintings - mostly of George. The one bought by the French Government, is roped off for the unveiling. John Russell reads my face and comes over. 'Francis has been taken aside. The news may be out.' I feel his hand on my bare shoulder - the scarf must have fallen off at some point. 'Artists and scandal - it's hardly front-page news. In fact, the Tate show was marked by Peter Lacy's suicide.'

We let the dark irony sink in for a moment.

I lean in to whisper, 'The worry's the government connection. Imagine the headlines - "President Parties with Painter as Leftover Lover Lies Dead"!'

I go through the rooms looking for my lost scarf, I interrupt a chatting group all in black gowns: 'I've lost it - a Hermès scarf!' - polite shakes of the head. Two men admiring each other's moustaches, '... the classic 'square' with Fleur de Lys motif' - puzzled looks. Another group; 'My mother's, she trusted me with it!' - some angry looks, and there's John Russell again: 'Tara. Let me help you look for it'

Mother's scarf, dirty but intact, in my bag, we're in time for the unveiling. Flanked by an honour guard - brass helmets, swords - full regalia - are a solemn Jacques Chirac and a beaming Francis, sporting a grin looking to split his face. The President pulls the curtain to reveal the large nude of George on the toilet. Francis gushes in French: he loves the country, Paris is the home of modern art, a massive honour, and so on...

John whispers to me '...self control few of us could aspire to'.

People queue up to shake Francis' hand, he greets each more enthusiastically than the last, and I watch the final minutes count down, until a gong sounds.

As people turn to leave I catch Francis: 'You were phenomenal!' I lean in and whisper. 'No one would have suspected a thing. Thank god it's over!' He pulls back: 'Over!? The night is young - we're all going for drinks! You must come!'

'Yes,' I replied, 'I suppose I must.'