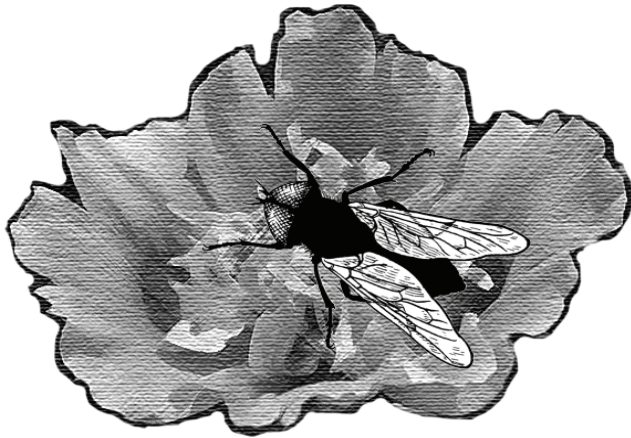


**Brushstrokes  
of a  
Gadfly**



**E.A. Bucchianeri**



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Purcell, Hogarth and Handel, Beethoven, Liszt, Debussy,  
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Handel's Path to Covent Garden

Faust: My Soul be Damned for the World. 2 Volumes



For my nieces

Gabriella and Josephina,

Make your lives a masterpiece,  
you only get one canvas.



**Brushstrokes  
of a  
Gadfly**





“Katherine Walsingham ... .”

Katherine’s heart skipped a beat when she heard her name echo over the loudspeakers, finally it was her turn to go onstage to receive her degree. At last! Springing from her seat, gingerly sidling past those seated next to her, trying not to crunch anyone’s toes, she sprightly made her way up the main isle, ascended the stairs, and walked across the stage to the podium. Shaking the hand of the President and receiving her hard earned credential in the other, she courteously thanked the giver, paused briefly for the cameras with a demure smile, turned and glided past all the robed dignitaries of the college, the Vice President, the Deans, the trustees, professors and distinguished guests. Returning to her place with her fellow graduates, she settled back into her red velvet seat, breathing a sigh of relief: “I survived!”

She turned to look up at her family seated in the balcony, waving the degree she held in her hand with a triumphant smile. Her father proudly beamed down at his daughter, while her mother, returning the wave, blew her a kiss, and Katherine reached up to ‘catch’ it before sending one back. How proud and happy Pops looks today, she thought. Dressed in a navy suit, his brown hair starting to grey at the temples, and in her estimation, a very handsome and distinguished man. Of course, Mom, in her quiet elegance, perfect as always, her soft blonde hair artfully styled with an ornamental clip, dressed in the deep rose suit they had painstakingly selected at their favourite boutique on Fifth Avenue two weeks earlier while picking out her own graduation ensemble, a sky blue two piece suit trimmed with a beaded collar. “Perfect with your blue eyes,” her mother had decided. To Pop’s left sat good old Gramps dressed in steel grey, what a contrast with his gleaming white hair. Although not a lip reader, she could just distinguish the words “That’s my girl!” aimed at her. Beside her mother sat the hopeful scientific genius of the family, her ‘little’ brother Steven, or ‘Steves’ as she always called him, two years her junior, a younger image of Pops with dark brown hair and eyes, looking elegant in his black Armani suit. How it must have pained him to relinquish his favourite blue jeans and polo shirts for the day! Forever the joker, Steves waved back, tilted his head sideways and goofily crossed his eyes. Katherine tried to suppress a grin as she watched her mother turn and quietly chide him to behave. That was Steves, you would never know that he was top of his chemistry class at MIT, a Nobel Laureate in the making, he could manipulate computer language with wizard-like dexterity, and prattle off information and statistics ala Mr. Spock. She quickly flashed him the Vulcan ‘live long and prosper’ sign, before she turned around to watch the last of the students receive their certificates.

Now, finally a Master graduate of the Belvedere College of Arts and Humanities, a private institution with a thousand or so students, the old childhood sing-song rhyme came to mind: “No more teachers, no more books! No more

teachers' dirty looks!" Well, the book part she enjoyed, she was a bookworm after all, an avid information seeker revelling in the world of art and literature. She was tempted to major in English and perhaps take a few courses in journalism, but finally chose the world of sketching pencils, acrylics and oils. She preferred the quiet solitary atmosphere, to create in her own world of paint and colour, the thrill of anticipating how her works would turn out as she eyed the blank sheets of paper or canvas before starting her next masterpiece. How satisfying it was to mess around in paint gear, without having to worry about spills, starch or frills, that was the life! When the work was finished, to see an image that had lain quiescent in her imagination as a lovely dream captured for all posterity on canvas. It was almost too unreal to imagine she had spent half a decade of her life studying at college, it only seemed like yesterday she was a timid freshman awestruck by the venerable ivy-laced establishment with its neo-Gothic campus, gate tower, halls and arches, and now, the moment was fast approaching when the President would finally announce the winner of this year's coveted Sirrac Prize, a competition open to the Master students of Belvedere. She waited with baited breath as Jonathan Xavier received his degree, there were no 'Ys' or 'Zs' on the list of students this year as far as she could remember, so any minute now!

"You may now applaud the new graduates of 1990!" the President announced, a command quickly obeyed as the visitors were only too eager to show their appreciation to their loved ones, for they knew full well the dedication and hard work that went into achieving their degree and to finally arrive at this auspicious day.

"And now, it is my privilege to announce the winner of this year's Sirrac Prize, and those who have received an honourable mention. The lucky student will have their work displayed in the exclusive Sirrac Gallery on Fifth Avenue."

A hushed, but excited murmur was audible from the students, for they knew this was a spectacular break, a springboard that could provide them instant access to the art patrons of New York, perhaps the world. Practically every Sirrac winner they knew or heard about had received new commissions and opportunities to present their future works in other fashionable galleries.

"As you are aware, the theme for this year's contest is 'Mankind and its Achievements'. The choice of medium was left open to the entrants, within reason of course."

Everyone burst into laughter, the story of the *Iron Vesuvius* was a legend at the college. A very ambitious student interested in theatre design chose to construct an elaborate volcano sculpture complete with gas flames for the particular theme that year, 'The Element of Fire', and caused an explosion that nearly cost the college its auditorium.

The Vice President handed a sealed envelop to the President. Silence

descended as everyone held their breath and listened to the ripping of the paper, watching his hand extract the card that would reveal who had been granted this prized introduction to the art world. A slight pause, and finally the announcement

...

“*A Giant Leap* by Anna Millbank!”

Listening to the rousing applause, Katherine’s heart sank, a wrenching reversal of emotion after the adrenaline surge of the day. Totally deflated, “I didn’t win,” she thought. Disappointment surged through her as she applauded the winning entry. She watched the two professors wheel a platform onstage from the wings upon which stood a sculpture about three feet long and one and a half feet high veiled under a white canvas. The President removed the covering to display this latest magnum opus to the audience. Well, Katherine had to admit, it was an interesting piece, if you believed that theory. It featured a three dimensional rendering of the iconic progression of human evolution, a procession of figures from the ape to the primitive Neanderthals until the procession reached the age of modern man, gradually ascending a rocky outcrop to the precipice of a cliff; the final figure, a graceful Grecian youth poised nude on the very edge, his right foot just touching the cliff, his arms outstretched towards the sky prepared to take flight, the image of Mercury without the brimmed hat and winged sandals. The leaping demigod held a small figure of a space shuttle in his right hand. As far as Katherine could tell, the piece was sculptured from a plaster block and then varnished with clear enamel giving it a shiny protective covering. She had to concede the delicate figures were well executed. The President stepped aside as Mr. Joseph SIRRAC came forward to read the results and comments of the judges explaining the reason for their choice, a long-winded list of the work’s merits, vis its graceful style, the originality of the subject, and the optimistic symbolism it represented. The cameras flashed as the artist rose from her seat and walked to the stage to receive the certificate and have her picture taken with Mr. SIRRAC, the President and the prize-winning artwork. When Anna had resumed her seat amidst a new peal of cheers and applause, the President waited until the hubbub died down and *A Giant Leap* was awkwardly rolled to the other side of the stage. A fresh round of applause before the President continued, and finally the auditorium grew quiet again as the second envelope was passed.

“Now, it is time for the honourable mentions. This year, the SIRRAC judges have chosen two works. The first honourable mention goes to ... Dennis Harrington for his oil painting *Electrovision!*”

Again, two professors brought in an easel upon which they placed the canvas, while a larger image was projected on a screen overhead. Is that a painting, or a Techie portrayal of a psychedelic acid trip? Mr. SIRRAC proceeded to read the judges’ opinions on this entry, lauding its boldness, its modern futuristic

style that captured the energy of this new era. Dennis gave a whoop of victory as he bounded up to the front. Although he did not win, an honourable mention from the Sirrac Galley was also a welcome bonus as it was a known fact that art reporters from several of the New York papers attended the graduation ceremonies at Belvedere to catch the first 'scoop' on who had won the contest. Possibly the runners up would be mentioned in the culture and art columns the next day, and perhaps, attract the attention of other galleries. To the plastic art students, this would be akin to receiving an Oscar nomination.

Dennis approached to receive his certificate, Katherine studied the painting, from the orange swirls, red jagged lines and purple blobs, with difficulty, she could detect the outline of a television, a keyboard with a monitor, a cell phone, microchips and wires. Obviously an animated abstract tribute to the dawn of the electronic age of computers, widgets and gizmos. Well, one cannot account for other people's tastes, Katherine mused, but where is the skill? Sure, anyone could slap paint around with a palette knife and call it high art! It is amazing to think that productions like this actually became accepted as high art. At least she could recognise some objects in Dennis' picture. He might make a name for himself if he continues in this style. Generally, she could not understand the praise lavished on the vast majority of modern art and the astronomical prices that it commanded on the world market. It was all false hype, Katherine had concluded long ago. How could intelligent, well educated people attend abstract art exhibitions and stand around for hours at a time voicing their self-proclaimed sophisticated interpretations of a piece and listen attentively to each other, while blithely sipping champagne and nibbling *hors d'œuvres* or *petits fours*, when there was nothing to interpret? A measly circle here, a paltry line there, a canvas with a dirty smear on it, and they could envision a new world unfolding before them. It was obviously a pandemic case of wilful delusion, the modern art patrons had fallen victim to an overwhelming fear of being excluded from the 'fashionable set'. They had allowed themselves to be persuaded it was the 'in thing' to attend these exhibitions, to be able to say they were there, that they hobnobbed in the most exclusive art circles, proudly affirming they too were cultured and could appreciate the New Age of expression. They lived off each other's hypocrisy, fuelling a worthless market of trash. Now, take the French Impressionists, their work is truly admirable. Renoir, Degas, Manet and Monet, their paintings victoriously stood the test of time. They had perfected the art of capturing the effects of light with their revolutionary natural style, and their unfettered passion for displaying nuances.

"The second honourable mention goes to ... Katherine Walsingham for her oil painting, *Le Sacre d'ingéniosité Humaine!*"

At the sound of her name and the round of applause, her mind snapped

back from its ruminating reverie. Although she truly had hoped to win, she watched with mixed feelings of exhilaration and apprehension as the professors brought a second easel onstage and revealed her piece to the auditorium. She eyed her creation basking in the golden glow of the spotlights. Judging from the raised eyebrows, the disgruntled wry faces of the professors and the lively murmuring in the auditorium ranging from sounds of amusement to incredulity, it is a wonder they gave it an honourable mention at all, she decided wistfully. What did the judges have to say about her bold allegorical remake of Jacques-Louis David's monolithic mural? Mr. SIRRAC read out the comments of the judges, praising the craftsmanship of the composition, yet diplomatically guarding their compliments of her biting allegory, graciously declaring her piece was a reminder that mankind has a great responsibility to use knowledge and discoveries with wisdom and prudence.

Recalling her first inspirations for the SIRRAC contest, Katherine realized at that time she had never seriously considered man's achievements in any great depth, taking her modern lifestyle for granted despite the flaws and imperfections that were evident in the world and society around her. Yet, when probing the theme set for the contest that year, she had to admit much of what could have been accomplished for the benefit of mankind had turned sour. The ambitious lust for power and monetary rewards manipulated many good intentions, therefore, man's greatest 'achievements' were often recipes for future disasters. The human race has always fallen short of its high ideals, the weaker element will take what is good and progressive, and for their own selfish purpose, turn it to evil. What a pity, so many opportunities to achieve true greatness were lost, she concluded. Curiously, an image of David's work came to mind, *Le Sacre de Napoléon*, known to the English-speaking world as *The Coronation of Napoléon*. Set in the cathedral of Notre-Dame, the Emperor magnanimously crowns the kneeling Empress, while Pope Pius VII, seated behind the man of destiny, gives his papal blessing to the proceedings. In the background sits Napoléon's mother, a touching element of artistic licence as she did not attend the ceremony, but Napoléon was pleased when David had thought to include her. What had brought this particular mural to mind? Could it be that book from the Louvre she had been browsing through? Initially, Katherine could not perceive any connection between the triumphant scene and her cynical observations. Was her subconscious prompting an inspiration? Musing on the subject, she thought, didn't Napoléon crown himself? Well wasn't that a bold action!

Intrigued by this arrogant audacity, she decided a trip to the library was in order, and discovered David originally considered painting Napoléon crowning himself, but decided that image may be too egotistical and would display the Emperor in a bad light ...but it's perfect for my theme, Katherine decided. If

Hogarth could satirise the men of his day and be recognised as a genius, why can't I? She thought her idea had possibilities, and hoped it would be original. At least she would graduate with a bang! She could visualise the characters in the new roles she would assign them. She would paint Napoléon as an allegory of man's achievements, pompously holding the crown over his head, his royal mantle copiously embroidered with yellow and black radiation symbols to represent the advent of the nuclear age. The Empress, Josephine, shall also be standing erect crowning herself, no humility there! A nice touch representing woman's equality and her supposed new-found freedoms. Women can be educated, vote, have a career, have it all ... but for sure, we lost respect somewhere along the line, and we never achieved true equality, so, leave her where she stands, a few steps below the Emperor. Now, what can we do with Napoléon's mother? Well, isn't pride the mother of all misfortune? Pride, as an allegorical figure, must be young and beautiful, and she shall not have attendants, Pride always stands alone. Let us give her Icarus' wings to remind us of his fall, and in case this symbolism is lost on the viewer, the words 'Mater Superbia' should be painted on a sash draped across her breast like a badge of honour. The Minister for War in the foreground shall be leaning against the miniature replica of a cruise missile, the Arch Chancellor Prince of the Empire, Minister of Justice, shall be sleeping in a chair holding broken scales and a bulging brown envelope. Hmm, the rest of the royal entourage gathered around the central figures should all be decked out in currency symbols, the Dollar, the British sterling, the Deutschmark, the Franc, the yen, the rouble. Now, who shall deliver the blessing? A pope would never approve this travesty of humanity. Who should replace him in this scene? Of course! The new figure seated behind 'Napoléon' should have a red cloak and doublet embroidered in gold, a black hat with a few cockerel and raven feathers, he must be painted with red skin and use his left hand. With an icy sneer, the Father of Lies gives his approval to this epoch of industrial and technological 'advancement'. Man, crowning himself as the god of this new age. Well, the crucifix will have to be replaced with a detail more suited to this travesty, the Tree of Knowledge would be a nice touch with the crafty serpent hanging from its boughs. The bishops will have to be replaced ... ah yes, men in black suits with large briefcases brimming with bureaucracy, and a steel drum to represent our crude dependence on oil and the barons who pump it. Perhaps the royal insignia on that banner in the background to the left should be changed, a skull to symbolise death? Or better still, Gilbert's famous optical illusion with the lady looking in the mirror to show the vanity of it all. I hope David will forgive the liberty I took with his masterpiece, I'll just leave him scratching his head in confusion where he placed himself above Napoléon's mother. It was a pity she would have to be content painting this great satire on a smaller scale than the original, but then again, five

hundred square feet of canvas would be a little over the top, and never get finished in time.

Receiving her certificate of merit and posing with Mr. Sirrac, the President and the college dignitaries for the traditional photographs, Katherine could sense the atmosphere had chilled somewhat onstage. The President stood stiff looking down at his shoes, the Vice President and Deans shuffled back and forth on their feet uncomfortably, the professors gritting their teeth in a strained smile. She knew her subject may be considered contentious, but was not quite prepared for this frigid reception. Was it really that bad? One would assume they were accustomed to seeing wild, avant garde artworks issuing from exuberant paintbrushes by now. Perhaps they had expected me to paint a generic, trite, or optimistic scene. Did they forget they were the ones who taught us that the unexpected and the controversial are remembered, or hailed as milestones in creative expression? Her thoughts turned to the other entrants, and she contrasted the situation. They were uncomfortable with her piece, but could approve a statue glorifying the alleged animal origins of humanity, which was still a hypothesis and could never be proved to her satisfaction. The Evolution Theory was certainly a divisive theme, or where could they see the talent in liberal applications of paint encrusted on a canvas like rainbow-hued soap scum?

Returning to her seat, she mused about this disturbing polarity, but not for long, consoled by the thought ... it did not matter. From this point on, she could paint what she liked without having to win anyone's approval. It was a rude experience to suffer the critical evaluation of works that she considered good, if not great. Her days of trying to accomplish what the professors expected and the stress of wondering if 'this' or 'that' will receive a good grade were behind her.

After the President delivered his last congratulatory speech to the graduates, he made the announcements explaining where the contestants were to collect their entries, and the exact location of the official photographers in the main campus quadrangle for formal portraits, the ceremony concluded with cheers, laughter and light-hearted babble. Wondering if she should meet her family or collect her piece first, she decided that the middle path was best and motioned them to come down before edging her way up to the stage. She did not get far before her friend, Susanna Cooper, pushed through the milling crowd and eagerly greeted her.

"Well done!" Susanna commented, hugging her tightly, "I'm glad they gave you an honourable mention, your painting should have won."

"Thanks! Never mind, just wait until we get our own gallery started, then we get to pick the contest winners."

Awarded her place at the college through a scholarship, Susanna had arrived from Iowa and matriculated one year after her. They just happened to

meet at the library, Susanna was having trouble learning how to use the catalogue computers when Katherine came to the rescue, explaining she had the misfortune to pick a perpetually glitched computer nicknamed ‘Blunder Bolts’, which nobody bothered to fix. Learning they both majored in art, a lively conversation ensued. They discovered they appreciated the same artistic styles and shared a love of musical theatre, they had much in common, it was not long before they became fast friends. Katherine learned first hand the difficulties of a scholarship student from Susanna. Although her tuition fees were taken care of, Susanna found it a challenge to earn enough to keep up with the living expenses and the dorm fees of her new elite surroundings with her summer job in her hometown library. Her father was a high school principal, her mother a paralegal in a law office, and while her parents helped as much as possible, it was never enough for they also had twin sons already in college, and a younger daughter with just one year left to finish high school.

In contrast, Katherine hailed from a wealthy family, the Walsingham cosmetic and pharmaceutical empire to be exact, and never had to worry about tuition fees, in fact, money was never an issue for her. Gramps had already presented her and Steves with an enormous trust fund worth several million when they had turned eighteen—“I want to see them enjoy my gift to them while I’m still here and kicking!” he declared to their sceptical parents, further explaining this would be good training and teach them how to manage money — therefore starting a career was not a necessity as she could live very well off the interest she received from her investments.

Despite her independence, she was not a spoiled darling. An issue of an industrious family, she could just picture her father’s eyebrows disappearing into his hairline if she aimlessly whiled away her days playing tennis, attending endless lunches at the club, or foolishly shopping and accumulating stupid articles she really did not want or need. In any case, she could not imagine living that lifestyle. Surely, the world had more fulfilling goals to offer than that! Following a period of self-reflection, she knew she needed to channel her energies into something constructive, something creative. It was at this time she began to explore various career options that appealed to her. At one point, she toyed with the idea of becoming an architect, but talking it over with Steves, she realized this would be too technical and confining. Just thinking about the advanced mathematics and physics she would have to master was enough discouragement, definitely not a career for someone who hated to balance a chequebook. In the end, it may prove to be a dreary occupation, battling planning commissions, budgets, deadlines, and all the bureaucracy involved. Interior design had come to mind, but then, that would mean pleasing very demanding clients, restricting her own creative ability. She had displayed a unique talent for the plastic arts in high school, so developing

her skills became the logical choice, and if all went well, she was fortunate to have the finance necessary to design and open up her own art gallery with the freedom to display her own pieces and the work of artists that she appreciated.

Although Susanna did not discuss her difficulties, Katherine could see that not everyone had the luxury of arranging their life as she could. Pondering on what she could do to help her friend, she stumbled upon a brilliant plan, namely the spacious three bedroom apartment with the veranda over the garage that in times past served as the residence for the chauffeur and his family. As long as she could remember, her grandfather, father and mother had preferred to drive themselves, and therefore the place had been vacant for years until she decided to turn the living room into her private studio away from the main house. The carpet was old and she could work away to her heart's content without occasioning numerous sighs and pleadings from her mother not to spill paint all over the floor. I know the place needs fixing up, but why couldn't Susanna stay there? I hope Pop will think it's a good idea, she could save the money she would normally have to spend on the boarding fees for the Belvedere dorms. Of course, Susanna would have to commute to college everyday, I hope her clunker can hold out, or we could car-pool ... . Katherine was excited with this new plan, for this would give them an opportunity to spend more time together working on their projects. Not knowing how her parents would react to this idea, it took her a few days to think it over before she approached them with her proposal during dinner one evening. She was delighted when they agreed that Susanna could stay as long as she wished, but the interior of the apartment was in no fit condition for occupancy—it had been idle for years. Obviously, it would need repairs and a paint job, undoubtedly the kitchen and bathroom were in dire need of improvement. Susanna was the perfect excuse the family needed to refurbish that area of the property they had not used for an age, and it would have become a necessary repair job eventually. Elated with her parents' approval, Katherine explained Susanna may need a reasonable place to live, but was fiercely independent and would not accept her offer if it looked like charity, especially if she thought they had renovated the place on her account. Her father suggested that if Susanna felt she had to contribute, she could pay half the utilities of the apartment, and he hoped she would find this acceptable.

“After we fix it up, just let her know that the place had been neglected for far too long, it had become a convenient storage area until you used the living room for your artwork, and we thought it would be practical to have someone actually living there rather than let it go to wreck and ruin again. Tell her she would be doing us a favour by looking after the place, which is the truth. I am sure she wouldn't object to this arrangement,” her father suggested as he sipped his after dinner coffee.

Katherine could not wait to tell Susanna the good news of her parents' 'plan' to restore the old apartment, that they really wished they had a long term occupant to keep an eye on it, and it was perfect for her artwork, if she wouldn't mind moving in and contribute towards the utilities. Under these conditions, Susanna was happy to accept. It took six weeks for the workmen to rip out the old fixtures, replacing them with the latest models, and when the painters and interior decorators had finished the apartment, Susanna moved into the Walsingham Estate, 3 Oak Meadows, Englewood, New Jersey and became an adopted member of the family.

"I am sorry you couldn't attend the graduation ceremony Suzy, but at least you'll have your own next year." Due to the small dimensions of the college theatre cum auditorium, guests of the graduates were restricted to four family members or friends.

"Me too, but at least I'm here for the end. Come on, let's see the degree."

Katherine unrolled her scroll displaying a long declaration in Latin affixed with a red seal proclaiming her a Master of Art.

"Imagine working for years to obtain a piece of paper we can hardly read," Katherine joked.

"And to officially declare you have talent," Suzy returned.

"Amen! Well, let's go up and take one last look at the pariah canvas in all its infamous splendour before I have to take it down, and let this be a warning: beware of what you paint for the Sirrac Prize this coming year."

Suzy chuckled in disbelief, "It really is ridiculous, your painting is brilliant, and the only reason they passed you over, it obviously struck a nerve too close to home."

"Humph! I guess nobody likes to be reminded of the truth, even though the world badly needs it now and then. Isn't it strange how people are selective about the truth they want to see or hear? I mean, an artist or photographer depicts the countless famines in Africa, or the massacre in Tiananmen Square, and they are hailed as heroes for bringing the world's attention to troubled areas, which is fine, but, just try and point out where the true problem lies, destructive egotism, greed, intolerance, human fallibility, and every other fault of mankind, and people bristle," Katherine mused.

"Sure sounds like everyone wants to treat the symptoms, not eradicate the disease, and we end up with more problems," Suzy replied, "Well, if we can't obliterate the disasters of the earth, at least we can expose them through our art, and perhaps get people to think, it's better than doing nothing."

"I agree. Let's always try to paint the truth," Katherine declared, "our art must be made to mean something."

"You bet your sable paintbrushes. I refuse to portray anything else," Suzy

concluded. There and then, the girls embarked on a private crusade. Stopping to survey the other entries, they chatted with a group of graduates who had come to the stage for a closer look before Katherine turned to the side door leading backstage.

“Well, I had better go and retrieve the painting, everyone should be down in a minute or two, and then we have the photographs to take care of.”

“Do you need some help with it? I think it will fit in my car if I lower the back seat. I can drop it back at the house, I have to go there anyway and finish some packing before I get ready for the dinner tonight. It looks like you might be here for a while depending on how long the photographers take, and you don’t need to drag a canvas all afternoon.”

“Thanks Suzy, I’d appreciate that. I should be out in a jiffy.”

Katherine went through the side door with a small group of crestfallen entrants who had not received an honourable mention, and she tried to graciously accept their best wishes without appearing too cheerful and pouring salt on their wounded feelings. As two volunteer professors returned their works, Katherine was approached and quietly taken aside by a robed figure who had stayed behind to converse with a few dignitaries still milling around in the backstage area.

“I believe congratulations are in order, Miss Walsingham. Well, I can see why you kept your entry a secret and refused any help,” chuckled Professor Matthews in his ‘Mr. Chips’ tone as he pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. “A David cum Hogarth hybrid, with quite an unusual twist. I believe you did not want to go softly into that good night ... planned to graduate in a blaze of controversial glory?”

Katherine grinned.

“Thank you, Professor. I wanted my work to say something important, but obviously my statement was judged to be over the top.”

No beating about the bush, that was Professor Matthews, her favourite instructor in the Art department. A man in his sixties, grey hair, down to earth, candid with a dash of elegant humour, he was an easy-going teacher and his classes a pure joy to attend. He never made a student feel uncomfortable and incompetent in front of others when they found a point difficult to understand, how to master a certain blending of colours or had trouble portraying the right perspective. If a student displayed a unique style of their own, they were encouraged, or if they needed assistance, he was ever patient, explaining information in ways they could quickly grasp with a joke or an amusing quotation drawn from masters of the past or the ancient classics. His field of study centred on the French painters from the Neoclassical, Romantic and Impressionist schools, Katherine’s favourite styles, and therefore she was fortunate when he was assigned to be her supervisor. She was going to miss working with him, and felt guilty for

not including him while her entry was a work in progress. Just once, she wanted to try a piece on her own without relying on the expertise of her tutor.

“Yes, I must admit they were my main sources of inspiration. I almost regret I displayed this satirical subject, but at the same time, I’m glad I did. Somehow, I don’t think I could have painted anything else. Once the idea got lodged in my head, it took on a life of its own, I had to run with it, it wouldn’t let go.”

“You have great courage. I am pleased you succeeded in offending their sensibilities, an artist should paint from the heart, and not always what people expect. Predictability often leads to the dullest work, in my opinion, and we have been bored stiff long enough I think. If Delacroix was anxious about portraying what people thought, rather than his inspirations and emotions, his *Liberty Leading the People* would have remained obscure in an attic somewhere in France and would not be hanging in the Louvre as a cherished national treasure.”

“Well, I wouldn’t presume to be ranked with Delacroix,” Katherine replied modestly to this lofty statement, “but I appreciate your comment. Hopefully, one day I will.”

“If you continue painting in this vein, I believe you will become a Delacroix or a David of the modern day. You don’t believe me? Then listen when I tell you I overheard the judges declare they would have chosen you first.”

“But, if they thought that, why didn’t they?” Katherine stammered, astonished at this unexpected news.

“Because, while your painting is brilliantly executed and technically flawless, it also wounds, for truth is not always beautiful, and they decided to ‘chastise’ you for their own feelings of discomfort. Remember that despite its iconic imagery and energy, *Liberty Leading the People* was originally decried for its frank portrayal of the 1830 Revolution, that the freedom fighters of the barricades were little more than scavenging bandits, the figure of Liberty looked like a dirty bare-breasted street tramp leading a mob bent on destroying decency and propriety. Nevertheless, in flamboyant brushstrokes, he displayed a sincere, if artful, patriotic message to spectators, and was remembered. Your picture, like Delacroix’s, shall not be forgotten by the judges, nor anyone else who sees it, let me assure you.”

“I really don’t know what to say, except you have confirmed my latest resolution never to paint anything that is not sincere or truthful. But,” Katherine continued, musing aloud, “what did they find ‘wrong’ with my painting, or what excuse could they give to explain their decision?”

“Oh, I believe it was on grounds of, shall we say, too much reliance on David’s masterpiece ... ?” the Professor replied with amused hesitation.

“In other words, lack of originality,” Katherine interpreted, not a little

chagrined with this pretext. “Well that’s rich, isn’t it? Everyone knows there is no such thing as true originality! Everyone is either influenced or inspired by something else ... Anna Millbank’s sculpture can’t be declared ‘unique’, everyone can see her idea sprang right out of the first scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.”

“Indeed! But, do not let this initial outcome of the contest upset you, remember what I said about predictability. Her work is accepted for the moment, for it follows the current scientific *zeitgeist* of the day that has been drummed into the mass psyche by the modern media, and therefore it is what people expect. However, I predict, in a short time it will become no more than an attractive lobby piece for a natural history museum, and eventually passed by simply because of its familiarity. Yours, while it addresses modern issues, blazes its own trail, and progresses beyond the expected and rouses the mind from its complacent torpor rather than confirm it in its set path.”

“I will remember what you’ve said. I guess this is my last lesson at Belvedere,” Katherine replied with a smile.

“I suppose so. My last bit of sage wisdom before you venture out into the big wide world. Well, are you all set for your trip to Paris? You were there before as an exchange student at the Sorbonne during your junior year, if I remember right.”

“Yes, that was a wonderful time! I’ll be home for the summer until about mid September, and then spend the next four months there, this time I’ll be staying at a friend’s apartment, a friend of my father. I want to study my favourite paintings at leisure, it was difficult to remain disciplined and attend all the lectures required at the Sorbonne rather than spend every day in the museums.”

“Not to mention the tourist attractions, the restaurants, coffee and pastry shops, and the shopping areas, I gather?” the Professor finished with a smile.

“That too! Paris is a different world, you have to live there to truly experience it properly. But I do plan to complete some works that have been in the back of my mind for some time, and this vacation period is exactly what I need. Who knows what I can develop with all that freedom and breathing the atmosphere of Paris?”

“Who knows indeed! I am happy for you. Any other future plans?”

“I would love to open a gallery sometime in the future, but I will have to assemble a collection first, and also do some research into the business end of a venture like that. A gallery is a wonderful idea, but I must also think of the practicalities. So far, all I know is that a gallery may be eligible for tax incentives, and that unless a gallery charges artists at least thirty to thirty-five percent commission, it will inevitably go broke, which means pricing is important as works do not sell everyday, unless you have a sought-after artist on show in your establishment. However, all that is in the future, we have to wait and see how my

plans work out.”

“I am expecting great things from you Katherine, and I will be keeping a watchful eye on you. And remember, stay in touch.”

“I will, you can count on that. You will be top of my guest list for the grand opening.”

“I shall await your invitation. I must leave you now, duty calls.”

Katherine returned to the auditorium with her painting in tow and joined her family who patiently waited in the centre isle for her to emerge from the backstage area.

“Well, well, Kathy. Congratulations on your honourable mention. Now I understand why you did not reveal your painting to us before you entered it for the contest,” her father declared with a chuckle, “I detect the activist returning with a vengeance.”

He could not forget her early teens, her days of placards and protesting, beginning with ‘Save the Wales’ to that day she decided that animal testing was beyond the pale and picketed their own cosmetic boutiques in the city, attracting a swarm of reporters in the process. How he had fumed back then when she cost the family business a small fortune! In this unexpected glare of public notoriety, he was eventually compelled to phase out live animal testing in their cosmetic labs and forced to adopt acceptable methods, but could now look back and smile at her heroic campaigns.

“Perhaps you could have been a little more discreet?”

“Harold dear, leave Kathy alone,” her mother interjected as she reached forward to tidy a strand of Katherine’s brown hair that had come loose. “It is a wonderful painting. A little unusual perhaps, but the colours are beautiful, and it is certainly much better than the ghastly display at the last art exhibition for the Heart Foundation. What a truly tedious event that was.”

“At least you didn’t paint Adolf Hitler crowning himself, now that would have made their day,” impish Steves snickered.

“You certainly did surprise them, Katie my girl,” Gramps added with a twinkle in his eye, “but I guess we had better get a move on, we have the photographs to do, and my old knee won’t brook dallying around for long.”

“I’ll take that,” Suzy said as she carefully took the canvas from Katherine. “The dinner’s at seven, right?”

“Yes, at the ‘C’est la Vie’.”

“All right, see you there.”

Leaving the auditorium, Suzy made her way to the parking lot, while the family waited for their turn with the photographers in the quadrangle.

