

The Museum

By Michael Stahl

I was expecting to be let go for so long, that when it actually happened it felt almost like an anticlimax. The school was barely managing to keep the teachers for the core subjects. Math and English teachers had to take on some other subjects since management could get away with laying off literature and handicraft teachers but not the basic stuff folks. I think they kept art – me that is – for so long mainly because the headmaster had a weakness for the great masters and somehow hoped to pass this love to the children. But eventually he had to make the simple call between me and being able to heat the school in the winter. I'd have made the same choice.

As I was expecting this for a while, I was not in total panic. If I had a choice, I would not be looking for a job. The idea was actually to stay at home for a few weeks, live off some of my savings, and try my second passion in life: Writing. I have been writing on and off all my adult life and even managed to publish a thing or two in a small magazine, so in a way I was almost looking forward for the axe to come down.

Staying at home for two weeks, most of the time looking at a blank sheet, taught me something new: I can't write when I am idle. I need the pressure of daily commitments to be able to come up with things I want to write about. Having time just for myself, no obligations and no stress proved just the opposite of what I needed.

Helping my decision to look for a job was my landlord's comments on the cost of maintenance. That sounded suspiciously like the prelude to a rent hike and helped me decide to look for a job. Writing job if possible (not), or one that is related to art. Washing dishes was way down on my preference list.

A few days ago I saw a note at one of the art places in the Trump building. They were looking for a salesperson. I figured I can try this for a while. I had some experience in sales – during my college days I worked at an electronics discount shop in San-Francisco. It was one of those places that sold cameras, computers, disc players... anything remotely electronic – we sold it. After few months in such a place you get a knack for reading customers. You know right away if a guy is in a 'buying mode', is just starting the search, or dropped in as part of his roaming the streets of San-Francisco. Your attitude changes accordingly – from the knowledgeable, reliable and honest professional, to the non-caring, see-you-next-time empty Californian smile.

At the Trump building, I pushed my way with few thousands others toward the shopping area. The Trump Shopping gallery always put on an overwhelming display for the pre-Christmas shopping craze, and people are always swarming to take a look. I guess it is a New York tradition: go out in the freezing cold, window shop a place you'll never buy at, and touch rich-man's life by sipping outrageously priced hot chocolate in the coffee shop at the building's lobby.

The shop I was heading for – ‘The Trumpet’ – was on the 1st floor of the shopping mall. It was perfectly situated, and judging by the crowds, won the general admiration for its window display. It was selling art stuff; well, that new art stuff. Things you appreciate only if you’re intimately familiar with the latest art trends, and agree to swallow the improbable explanations that go with it, fed to you at ninety miles an hour by the sales person.

I can sell art. I can bullshit as well as the other guy. The fact I took few art courses in 1st year could become handy if it comes to an interview, and they want more than just looks and the capability to say big ‘Hi’ without losing your gum.

As it turned out, there was no interview. I had barely enough time to say "My name is Carl; I am a former art teacher" – and I was hired. I guess that with the Christmas rush, they were indeed only looking for looks and anti-gum-dropping technique. I was lucky I put on the suit, and not a sportier outfit. I was starting tomorrow (No, really, I just can’t start NOW; don’t worry – I’ll be here tomorrow, count on me).

I was almost late. I hate to be late. I am always envious of the subway driver. He is driving carriage-load of people, 50% of which are on edge since they are late. But he’s doing great! He is not late! He is already at his job... It turned out I should not have been worried. Mr. Novicz, the owner, was late himself. 15 minutes late. Obviously he did not care – at 9am no one was shopping yet – not even the unavoidable Japanese tourist groups. They were still busy taking photos in the lobby below, together with the morning-coffee crowd.

We entered the shop. Mr. Novicz went through an elaborate ceremony of alarm-disabling, while initiating me to the job. ‘There is really little to do here’, he said. ‘This is a pretty easy task – people come in, look around, and when they find something, you just ring it in and put it in a nice shopping bag for them. Can you wrap a present? Here is the paper and the stuff you need. Prices are on everything, so there is nothing to it. Self service policy. Just be nice to everyone and make them comfortable. Don’t spy on them. Answer questions politely. Say how are you doing and have you been to the Gugenheim and MOMA? and try to go to a show tonight. Narvika will be here soon to help you and show you around’.

I looked around. The large display area was littered with unbelievably ugly pieces, marked with unbelievably high prices. Who is ever going to buy any of this if I’m not expected to sweet-talk the customers? I was thinking. Good thing my salary is only partially based on commision. Without some base pay I’ll not survive a month.

Mr. Novicz was already in his back office when Narvika showed up at 9:25. As nothing happened till then, I could see why Mr. Novicz didn’t mind. I was relieved to have someone with me – I was nervous about my moves if a customer actually showed up.

Narvika looked more or less as here name would indicate. She had a low cut colorful dress on, and a mass of thin braids hanging gracefully from the top of her head, all the

way to her hips. She looked ethnic, exotic, and different. A type you kind of expect to see in New York. She was also quite beautiful. I figured she is at least partly foreign.

But the 'Hi' she gave me was definitely New Yorkish. Not a trace of foreign accent, and with the indifference of someone who have seen too many co-workers come and go to really care.

We were by ourselves for only a short while, not enough for more than introductions, when I noticed that the crowd started getting dense outside - moving by the large display window, and looking at the art. A couple has actually walked in! I put on my best Californian-style 'Good Day - please feel free to look around, and let me know if you need me', and let them be. Narvika hid a grin under her bowed head, and went on reading today's astrology page in her copy of People magazine. By the look of this couple, they were just mom and pop from Miami. They walked around, whispering in awed voices, as if in a museum. It was obvious that the pieces did not strike them as something they'd consider putting in their living room, and they were discussing the prices with disbelief in their voice. '\$4500 for a bowl!' she said. 'And an ugly one to boot!' he commented. 'Shhhh' she said. But they kept on looking, eventually making the full round of the room, and stopping to look at the trinkets under the glass near the cashier. 'Let's get one of these for Allison' said the woman. They pointed at a \$10 pen with 'The Trumpet' logo on it.

I was about to just hand it to them, when Narvika stepped in. Tactfully she took the pen from my hand, and said in a sweet voice 'Is this a gift?' 'Oh yes', said the woman. Narvika took out a red-velvet padded pen-box, put the pen in there as if it was made of gold, went through an elaborate wrapping routine, complete with a false plastic carnation on the top, and put the whole thing in 'The Trumpet' shopping bag, the size of a 12" pizza. 'Here you are! Enjoy New York!' she handed it over, as they parted with their \$10.

I was puzzled. The price they paid could hardly cover this whole decoration. What's the idea? Narvika saw I was stupefied. She laughed. 'Yes, it is kind of puzzling, is't it?' she said. 'It does not make sense, right? But you know, I stopped thinking about it. It seems to work fine - you don't see Mr. Novicz here looking like he is losing money, do you?'

In fact, it went on like this all day. Sometimes, the shop was actually crowded with shoppers. All were looking around. All were whispering. All were shocked by the prices (well, few were pretending not to, and few were pretending they understood the art and just did not care for this specific style). All bought \$10 to \$25 trinkets. Sometimes they bought a few. As the day drew to an end, I saw that the proceedings of the day were not amazing, but not trivial either. For Mr. Novicz, that is. I now understood the purpose of that small print item about sales people not eligible for commissions on items that cost \$25 or below.

After a few days, I was allowed to work the shop alone, and switch with Narvika according to a schedule we worked out. One of us did mornings, the other did evenings, and we had 2-3 hours together during the noon rush-hour. After I got over my initial

reaction to her obviously not genuine ethnic look, we got along just fine. We did not even have to fight over commissions – there were none.

Until one afternoon when Narvika sold a \$12,500 vase to some Russian Tzar. Or at least a relative of his.

Or the morning, a week later, when she happened to be there when an oil tycoon walked in with his wife who just HAD to have that \$37,000 vase with the BEAUTIFUL pink angels.

Or a week later, during my lunch break, when a Japanese tourist took a \$7300 Sorvania Ash-tray.

Narvika said Sorvania will be delighted. Apparently she was the house artist or something.

I was disheartened. ‘How come they only get here when you’re in the shop? Why don’t I get some filthy rich customer to pay my bills?’ I complained.

‘It’s all a matter of luck’ she said. ‘Yes – it’s all luck, being there when the right customer comes in. But you can work on your luck. You just need to find what makes it tick’. I thought she was joking, but it turned out she was totally serious. According to her theory, her luck has to do with her clothes and hair style. If she dressed like she would actually like to, she will have no luck. No rich customers, no big commissions.

I challenged her to prove it. She refused. ‘Can YOU cover the losses I’ll have once I dress like myself? It’s at least \$700 a week! On average, I make \$3200 a month. It is just enough to let me pay the rent, and keep a decent life style. If I lose my luck for one week, I need to dig into my savings’.

‘What was your best month?’ I asked.

‘Well, I once sold a \$210,000 necklace to a broker, but then I sold nothing for the next two weeks, so it kind of evened out’.

‘Did you make sure to keep your lucky dress-up?’ I teased.

‘Well, I kept it on, and on the fourth week I sold again’ She said with the surety of the believer.

‘You don’t believe me, right? Well, go ask Mr. Novicz. He’ll tell you the same. It was really him that made me realize you can help your luck. I was just like you – full weeks with no sale to speak of. I was about to leave, when one day he said to me: “You know Alice (I was Alice then) – you really should do something about this lousy luck of yours. You need a change. But change does not just happen. You need to invite it; you need to welcome it. You need to do something different... wear something different; do your hair a bit... Remember”, he said, “unusual things happen to unusual people”. I decided I have nothing to lose, and the next day showed up like you see me today. I was sure I’ll be fired on the spot, but Mr. Novicz seemed happy. The next day, I got a new name tag from him. “This name fits better with the whole setup, don’t you think?” He said. Two days later I landed a \$20,000 sale’.

I decided to leave it at that. She was a nice girl, behind the charade.

My luck kept hiding. I was living in a cheap neighbourhood, and yet I could just barely make it on my salary. Anyway, it was better than being homeless – as my regular cab driver constantly reminded me.

That was one of the perks working for The Trumpet – If you worked mornings, you got picked up from home with a cab; if you worked evenings, you got a ride home. It was almost always the same driver. His real name, if you trust the name plate inside the cab, was Frank. But he preferred to be addressed as Franciscus. He was a one-man, mobile food-bank. The seat next to him, as well as the space between the customer and the back-window, was filled with food stuffs – meat and vegetable cans; flour, sugar, baby-food, cereals. Stopping at red light where a homeless was begging for a quarter, he would hand him some food. At the end of the drive, he would ask the rider for a contribution to the food bank, instead of a tip. He was real. He was doing good, compassionate work. I once asked him about it. ‘How come you donate all your tips for the poor?’ ‘Well’, he said, ‘you know the saying – “Cast your bread upon the water” – One new-year’s, I made a half-serious resolution to be more compassionate to my fellow man. I think I was a bit drunk, and also under the impression of a customer – a preacher – who chewed me for giving the finger to a beggar at a red-light. “Do something for your fellow man!” he said “Do something extraordinary! Do something unusual!” and then he added in a mysterious tone “because unusual things happen to unusual people”. I was shamed enough that he actually got me moving. I bought some food stuffs, and went around for about a month giving them out. I was about to stop - I felt a bit silly about it. But to my amazement, I noticed that during the last two weeks of my charity crusade, I was driving more people than ever. I made almost twice the amount I made before. Was this God’s way of telling me to go on? The atheist that I was, I stopped the charity. The same week I stopped, I was back to spending half the time riding the streets empty. I started handing out food again, and within a week was busier than I wanted. I got some contracts – like the one with The Trumpet. I get regular customers calling me on the cellphone to come pick them up... I actually have to refuse rides in order to get my lunch. So I guess it does all come back to me. And I came back to God. I’ve been a true believer for the last two years.’

The winter ended, and some days were actually nice. I was doing the summer cleaning of my place one weekend, when I came on my old roller-blades. It’s been a while since I used them... but it’s something you never forget, I guess. I decided to give myself the afternoon off, left my place in a mess, and went to Central Park. There were many skaters on the ring-road, and on the main rink in the center of the park. I did some trial laps, just to prove to myself I still got it. Yes, absolutely. Once again the feeling of total control; the feeling I can move at any speed, in any direction... I joined the crowd in the rink. A band of African drummers were playing on the sideline, while I was flying like I used to do in my home town, zipping through the mall, with everyone watching.

It has been a while... I could not keep it very long, but when I finished and stepped aside to rest, I got a modest applause from the crowd of watchers.

An audience is a bit addictive. I admit I enjoyed the response, which had a lot to do with my going there the next weekend. This time the music was a sentimental Viennese waltz, which was a bit awkward to do alone. I looked around, and offered a dance to one of the girls who looked like she can cut it. She definitely could. We flew together on the rink, and it was obvious people liked what they saw. Tourists were taking photos. Others just stood around and watched. When the dance was over, and we were getting our breath, an elderly English tourist came over and congratulated us on our dance. He said: "That was quite a performance you put there! It is such a pleasure seeing two young people excel in something! Something beautiful... something...unusual. Keep it on! Remember: unusual things happen to unusual people!". And he turned and left.

The next Monday I sold a Sorvania ash-tray.

It was that day that Mr. Novicz announced that he needs us on Sunday next week. Both of us. He was expecting a large crowd, he said, since Sorvania will be paying us a visit, and will personally autograph 'Genuine Sorvania Ash-Tray' certificates to the lucky ones who will buy them.

I was looking forward to the day. Finally I'll get to see the woman behind the horrors. I tried to imagine her, but never got even close. When she appeared on Sunday, with her entourage, I could hardly keep my mouth closed. She looked like an alien.

She was very small and extremely thin. She hardly had any tits at all. Only the nipples showing under her semi-transparent gray flowing gown, made you realize this was a woman, not a 14-year old boy. She spoke with some undefined accent, which made her difficult to understand. She was also whispering, and not looking at anyone in particular while she spoke, which added to the confusion. She walked on glued-on soles. No laces, no straps. Just soles. Her eyes were such light gray, they were almost transparent. She had a crew-cut, with one strand of very long and very black hair extending down to her butt. She was mesmerizing. She was a goddess.

With the current backfire on last decade's anti-smoking fad, ash-trays were again in fashion. And apparently Sorvania's were your ticket to the high society. We sold a bunch of them to phonies of various degrees. Sorvania sat at a special table her lackies brought for her, sipping on *her* special mineral water, and whispering to the customers. She never smiled, not even when people were admiring her work loudly. She just nodded, crossing her hands in some elaborate scheme across her left shoulder, and signed their certificate.

It was a good sales day. We were OK for the rest of the month even if we did not sell anything more. It was also quite tiring. Partly since wrapping a Sorvania is not a trivial task. One has to be careful not to break the odd glass protrusions; not to bend the thin copper linguini-like strands, nor to tear the paper-thin acrylic cigarette holder. These ash-trays were never meant to be used for anything but for show.

By the end of the day, even Sorvania seemed a bit tired, and a little more in touch with the world. At one point, she even smiled at me. I thought I sensed some mockery in her smile.

Finally we closed. I went to get some coffee from the little kitchenette we had in the back. Sorvania was in there. She was looking at the mirror, and I heard her saying in a perfectly normal, albeit low voice: “Oh God, how I hate these phonies”. I made a noise and she turned around in alarm.

When she saw me, she relaxed just a bit. She gave me a full, totally non-bizzare smile. ‘Maybe I’m a bit less of the alien you thought... I have noticed you staring out there...’ I managed to get my mouth to move again, although my brain was not fully engaged, as I said ‘You’re Normal’.

‘Yeah... I guess you can say that’ she mused.

Suddenly she was frightened. She looked around the door. ‘God forbid my people hear me talk. They may start wondering. You won’t tell on me, will you?’ She was serious. She had a strange effect on me, which made me want to protect her. ‘No, I won’t. But it’ll cost you...’ I sometime surprise myself. ‘How about a drink once we are out of here?’ She looked at me curiously, and whispered: ‘You have guts, I’ll give you that. You’re obviously out of your league, you realize this?’ I admitted humbly, and she said ‘OK... but not straight from here. I have to change, otherwise I’ll be recognized, and we will not have a private minute. Why don’t you join me in a ride to my place, and then we can go on from there?’ I did not need any convincing.

I was expecting her place to be artsy; to fit her works. But instead it was a very sensible apartment, with a large studio in the back where she did her art work. After asking, I got permission to look there. I was surprised. All around were aquarelles of various sizes. They were all done expertly. Some were just nice to look at, but some were actually good. And there were no Sorvania ash-trays in sight.

‘Where are the ash-trays?’ I asked.

‘Oh, these’ she made a face. ‘I do them in my official studio. This is my private one’.

‘It’s amazing how you can work in two completely different styles’ I said. ‘I always thought artists have a hard time doing that – at least during a certain period in their career’.

‘Oh...’ she said noncommittedly ‘Ash trays don’t require that much of an effort’.

And that was as much as she would discuss her art that evening.

After getting over the awe of dating a prominent artist, I had a good time. It was so clear that I was ‘out of her league’, that there was no need to put on a show. I was just myself; she was just herself... well, her other-self.

The one I did not know existed.

Her normal self.

I think she had a good time too. As we said goodbyes at her door, she gave me a card with her number. It was the first time I got to see her real name – Sybil.

‘You can see how I could only keep the first initial to get anywhere in life’, she said, half apologizing, half joking. She gave me a brush and the cheek, and went in. I was still contemplating the card when the door re-opened, and she said in a small voice: ‘I had a real good time tonight. Real as in genuine, not fake. Thanks’. And she closed the door.

Life continued. Summer was at its height. New York was full of tourists, which meant more trinkets to wrap, and more crowds to show off my skating on the weekend. Sales kept on the same level. I grossed \$3200 a month. I became obsessed with this weekend activity. I became convinced it had something to do with my skating. I hated this belief, but I kept skating.

Sybil and I saw each other on a regular basis. She had some other guy she was seeing – a son of one of a large New York hotel owner, but she kept on saying this was just part of her job, and better for me. ‘Do you want YOUR picture all over the Tabloids? Be happy you are out of that scene’.

As I gained her confidence, I got her life story too. The art, the ash-trays, the costume.

She was an aspiring artist for a few years, before she admitted to herself that she will never make it selling one or two aquarelles in a month. She liked to paint, but she wanted a better life than a cramped studio with a leaky ceiling. She went around the main galleries, and started to learn what it takes to make it. Her conclusion was that the stranger an artist was, the more uncomprehensible his work was, it sold better. It seemed like New York was cultivating the bizzare and the unusual.

‘That’s the key word’, she told me one evening. ‘Unusual. This sums New York for you in one word. And this saying... Unusual things happen to Unusual people?... you must have heard it too, right?’

I admitted it sounded familiar. Creepy familiar, I added.

She decided to try being Unusual. She cut her hair. She started to talk funny, and to gaze into the air. Later, more by chance than by reason, she came upon the dress design. The glued-on soles were a brain-wave brought on by broken sandals. She invented the ash-trays.

‘I wanted to do something that is a day-to-day artifact, so it can have an easy recognition, and yet to make it unusable, as a revenge on the phonies’ she explained.

It was a meteoric success. She had to invent a life story fast (old Eastern-European family all killed in the Russian Revolution; only she was left; ash-trays are a monument to the infant memories of grandeur implanted in her vison, bla bla bla). She accented her strangeness by whispering and by looking alien. She rented a larger studio to make more ash trays. She made it.

But she also hated it. It took away her real self. It was all a charade, and she did not enjoy the constant effort to keep the lie going. She could not develop real relations with anyone.

‘How many ash-trays did you make so far’ I asked once.

'1735 to date. Including the one baking in my studio oven tonight'. I was surprised she knew the number right off.

'Oh, that's easy. They are all numbered. Take a look at the bottom of one, and you'll see it'.

That was the first thing I did the next day. We had few of them on display this week, and indeed, they were all marked with numbers. Most of them were numbered 1600 and above, but one had 634.

I was surprised. This one came in just last week. How come we have an old vintage ash tray among the new ones? I mentioned this to Sybil.

'You know, that *is* strange' she frowned. 'I noticed that myself in some of the public sales. There are few of them – more than a few, I should say – that seem to be circulating. I see the same number coming up again and again – in different stores. I can't say anything – and as far as I can tell they ARE mine, so I can sign the certificate without qualms, but I am at loss as to how they are back on the market'.

I made a note of that. Something to check later; I had more important things on my mind that evening: convincing Sybil to move in together. The whole notion was strange to me. Until now, my #1 rule was not to get overly involved. I managed to keep girlfriends as long as I wanted, yet never to move in with any of them, despite some real enticing suggestions. Of course "as long as I wanted" ended up with me dumping them when they got too pushy or them dumping me when they realized I had a "commitment issue".

Only this time it was me. At the beginning I thought it was because she looked so small and fragile that I wanted to protect her. But as I got to know her better, I learned she needed protection. I was just falling for her. Anyway... it came to the point when I was not scared of her bringing up the topic, but actually hoping she will. But that would be out of character, so it was left to me to make the move.

For the first time I got to feel what it was like to be on the receiving end of a "commitment issue". She was nice about it – enough for me to swallow my pride and not just bail out. I also knew I was not going to abandon a good thing for one small setback. I will wait.

To my surprise, it was Sybil who brought up the topic again, and it was not exactly a discussion. I was to meet her for dinner. She called and asked me – somewhat mysteriously - to come a bit earlier and meet her at a certain street corner. When I arrived, she did not arrive yet. I was not the only guy on the corner. Apparently it was a popular meeting place. In the ten minutes I was standing there before Sybil showed up, a number of people arrived and left with someone else. I started to feel uneasy – I was sure everyone else thinks I have been stood up. I was consoled by the fact that I was not the only potentially-stood-up loser. A tall and obviously English guy was waiting as well. He had a Major mustache, an English barret and the most striking Great Pyrenees I have ever seen: A huge white dog adorned with a red collar and some medals.

Sybil arrived a bit flushed, but said nothing. Instead, she took me over to the English guy and introduced us. He was Chester. No family name. Apparently he was so well known that it was not needed. Chester was a real estate agent. "The best in town" if to trust Sybil. Chester would show us some potential *lodgings* (not *apartments*, mind you) if we don't mind. I thought I should be angry at her presumptuousness. Instead I felt elated and happy.

While we were walking to the place, Chester gave us the latest dog adventure. He was doing it in full blown volume and with an English accent that sounded as if he was mimicking the movies.

'So I come home from this Gallery opening in Soho and what do I see? Levone (Levone was the dog; it took me a while to figure it out since he was referring to it as a real character) is on the floor whining. All around are bits and pieces of the MarieBelle chocolate box I got the evening before from – well I shouldn't say really – from... a happy customer of mine. Not a lot of bits and pieces mind you. Poor Levone ate the whole things – wrappers and all! I had to take the poor thing to the vet to get its stomach pumped. This is the first time he is out since the incident. Oh what he had to go through!' and with this he had to stop and caress the dog, whispering endearing terms in a bullhorn volume for the whole street to hear. It would have been embarrassing – but somehow went very well with the characters and people were reacting favorably. I even noted an impressionable young girl wipe her eyes.

'Do you always take Levone out when meeting customers?' I asked.

'Why Of course! He is my lucky charm! I'd never make a single sale if weren't for Levone!' and again we had to stop while hugging and cooing went on.

The place was nice. More than nice. And the price was nice. And Sybil was nice. And Levone was licking my hands while Chester went on bubbling. We took it without any discussion what it meant for the both of us. It just felt right. We moved in the next weekend.

My chance to check the reappearing ash trays came soon enough. It was around noon when a loud Texan came in and announced that he needs to see a Sorvania.

'My lovely wife is from out here, and all I hear day and night is how she wanted this ash-tray. Let me see one'.

I showed him our collection. He looked at it for a moment, and then, with purpose, picked up #634 and said 'I guess I'll just have to take this one home then'.

Narvika was in the store too. I told her I needed to leave urgently. She was too happy to take over the sale.

I left the shop, and waited for him in the lobby, eyeing The Trumpet door to make sure he does not leave the building via some other exist. He was out in a matter of minutes. His large white Stetson made it easier to recognize him, as he walked out to the street. He had

a car waiting for him. I managed to get into a taxi right after him, and without thinking about cliches too much, told the driver to follow them.

It was a short ride. The car stopped by Viranti Gallery on Fifth Avenue. It was another one of those trendy galleries, selling the latest art and crafts from New York's best artists. Somewhat like us, only boasting generations-old Italian connections to make the art more respectable. They also specialized in large wall paintings, which we did not have. A man stepped out of the car. It was not the Texan. At least, he did not have a Stetson on. But it was the same man who just left The Trumpet. He took a large box out of the car, and went into the gallery.

I paid the cab and waited for him to leave. Once he left I went in.

It was so much like our shop that I could almost tell where things are, and what things cost. Again, the glass cabinets with the improbable but high-priced art and the unavoidable low-priced trinkets display by the cashier. The walls were covered with huge pictures, all light brown, with a streak of different colors cutting across the canvas. This was their house-artist. I heard of him – saw his picture in the Art magazines we had in the store. He was an Italian who lived in Papua New Guinea for few years, and claimed his art was influenced by the locals.

I went in. This place prouded itself by not employing sales persons. It was the owner himself who stood behind the counter (at least, this was their pitch).

'Good Day Sir' he greeted me.

'Hi', I replied. 'Excuse me for bothering you, but this guy who just left – I think I saw him at an art exhibition in the W hotel last week. Is he an artist? He does not look like one!'

'Oh no', he laughed. 'He is just an agent. This is probably how you got to see him at the W. He supplies us with stuff – you know, Mording scupturs, Parlobo icons, Sorvania ashtrays...'

'Oh! You have Sorvanias? I need to see one! I heard so much about them, and never saw one in real life!'

'Hold on. We ran out of them yeasterday, but there should be some in the package he just brought in'

He went back, and after a minute came back with a large box. He fished inside, and finally grunted in satisfaction. 'There you are – looks like we only got this one... we usually have few of them, but they are in such demand lately... Take a look!'

I was looking. Boy I was looking. The ash-tray he held up to me was #634.

I faked owe. 'Oh My God! This is amazing!... it is Sooooo beautiful!...' I waited the appropriate pause, and then said in a conspiring tone 'not that I can afford it, but how much is it?'

'Let me see... It's not marked yet, but let me look at the papers for a sec and I can give you a pretty accurate figure'

He took out some paperwork out of the box. I could not make the details without being totally inappropriate, but I did see the logo on the papers. It said NYMF in some elaborate font. Underneath it was the Liberty figure, posing as a Sea Nymph. I decided I can afford to be impolite. The worst that can happen is that he marks me as a nosy character.

‘Is NYMF representing Sorvania?’ I asked.

‘Nymph’ he mumbled, busy clicking on his computer. ‘Not N-Y-M-F. At least this is how they pronounce it. No, it’s not just Sorvania. They are representing a lot of them. I think we actually get most of our stuff through them. Must be some big-time agency. It’s not always the same agent either. \$7200’.

‘Say what?’ I was not focused. I was still thinking about our customer, and NYMF.

‘\$7200. That’s what the ash-tray goes for’.

‘Oh... Well, I knew I could not afford it.... Nice to know though... now I have a target for my piggybank saving’ I smiled, thanked him and left.

I was very confused. Things did not make sense. First the phony buyer who turned agent, then the price. It was the exact same price we sold it. How can he make anything on it? Once you deduct the commissions to the sales force, to Sybil, to the agent... And why buy something just in order to drop it 10 minutes later at another shop?

When I came home in the evening, the street sax player was at it under our window. I still did not make up my mind if to hate him or love him. He would arrive twice a week, stand at the corner as if he owned the place and play for about two hours. He usually did Jazz pieces. He was pretty good so I did not really mind. Sybil actually loved it. She said it’s what makes New York what it is. The spirit of the city type of thing. We sometimes donated some change when we passed him on our way out.

I wandered a number of times how can a person make a living this way. I mentioned this to Sybil. ‘Why not just ask him?’ she said.

As we went down for a walk he was still playing. We waited for him to finish the piece, I put a \$10 in the box on the floor, and said: ‘This is not coming for free... I need you to explain something for us’.

He was cool. "Man – for \$10 you sure deserve a few minutes" he said and extended his hand. "Jerry". We shook hands and he gave us the whole story. His real job is playing in a bar – three nights a week. What he makes is just barely enough to keep him in town – not enough to pay for any extra lessons he wants to take or for a new instrument if it ever got to it. So he needed some extra income – and playing on the street seems to combine the need to exercise new stuff and his need for extra cash.

‘But you never get much’ I said. ‘I watched how much people donate – it’s never more than a few dollars’.

‘Right. Well – almost right. Every now and then there is someone that goes overboard and puts some real money. As in \$50 or \$100. I guess it’s rich tourists for whom shedding this money is the same as a one dollar for you and me. I make about \$600 a month on average. Enough for my needs’.

While we were walking, I told Sybil what I found - the strange re-sale. At the beginning she thought I was pulling her leg. When she finally believed me, she frowned 'It actually explains few things. I told you I noticed some ash trays seemed to reappear. I also get more commissions than makes sense to me - not that I complain - but it seemed that for months I was selling more ash trays than I am making. I make about five a week, but the sales figures are at the seven-a-week level. I knew there was some level of resale, but until now believed it was sporadic - you know, someone gets sick of it; people get divorced and liquidate; some stolen and resold...'

'Ever heard of NYMF?' I asked.

'Hmm...' she thought for a minute. 'I heard the name mentioned in a gallery opening I attended last month. I overheard two agents discuss something, and the name came up. At the time I thought they were discussing one of the sale-girls, or maybe me... although the tone was wrong. I did not think much of it - there was quite a lot of noise there'.

The next day I asked Mr. Novicz about it. His reaction was a bit strange. He looked surprised, and then seemed to recollect himself. He said 'Never heard of them. Sounds like an escort service to me...'. I told him about the Texan and the reappearing ashtray. He dismissed this as impossible, claiming I must have got the wrong ashtray number or somehow managed to lose the buyer and pick on someone else - or even both. His manager suggested he has enough strange people in his life and he does not need another one. I thought his reaction was strange; I was sure this will really interest him. Instead, he was less friendly than ever and picked up the phone to signal this conversation is over.

The Yellow Pages yielded little. There was an NYMF outfit - and it was indeed an escort service - at least that's what it sounded like when I called them. An Internet search yielded a lot of links to NYMFs of various kinds - New York Militia Force, the bibliography of Nymf Papassiopi, Swedish pages on parrot pets, New York Music Festival, New York Metropolitan Flora project, New York Municipal Funds... even New York Mother Fucker. Nothing that sounded promising.

I started wandering. If this agency is as big as the guy from Virant said, there is a good chance we buy from them too. But we never got to deal with the agents. Mr. Novicz made a point of not allowing us to talk to them, and he kept his office door locked when he left us alone in the shop.

I was slowly developing a distinct feeling that Mr. Novicz knew much more than he'd admit, as little things started adding up.

First, agents were arriving less in my shift, and more on Narvika's. When I tried the usual small talk with them, they seemed to avoid me.

Mr. Novicz started staying late, and locking-up himself instead of letting me do it. I also noticed that he installed a second safe in his office, and was moving some paperwork into it.

I also started resenting the whole business. There was something not Kosher here.

Possibly illegal or marginally so. A lot of money must be involved.

But what really annoyed me was that I felt someone was taking advantage of Sybil's talents, and my innocence.

As work life began to be less enjoyable and more strained, I learned to appreciate the weekends even more. Sybil loved to go with me to the park and had some bizarre pleasure from videotaping me skate and the people around applause. We had a few good hours of this – but she kept taking the videos camera with her each time we went to the park.

One weekend, I was doing my usual rounds in the rink. After a while the guy running the music changed to rap, which I don't much care for. I thought it's a good time for a breather and started gliding towards Sybil, waving to the video camera. Someone was gliding just next to me. A novice. I half turned to give her an encouraging smile when at the corner of my eye I noted a fast movement. Someone was moving full-speed at me – looking totally out of control. I had enough speed to get out of the way – just in time. The girl next to me was not that lucky and the skater collided with her at full speed. She was so small that she was literally thrown up in the air and landed about 10 ft. away – hitting a tree in the process. She fell in a heap of limbs. It was clear one of her legs was broken. I was betting on a concussion as well. The guy who bumped her was all over her, apologizing, calling 911 and generally being miserable. I didn't feel much like skating anymore after that and soon as the ambulance left, we went home.

We had a custom to watch the video together after dinner. Sybil would make fun of me and I would admire her video-shooting capabilities. I didn't have to fake it. She was good. I guess if you have a good eye for one thing, it carries over to other stuff. This night we did not watch the whole thing from the start as we used to. I wanted to see the accident again.

Once we fast-forwarded to the scene, Sybil slowed it down to about third speed.

There I was gliding slowly away from the rink. Half turning as if in a dream to take a look at the young girl. Sybil teased me "was she nice? Did you like her? You look like you like her!..." I gave her a kiss. "Yes, I love her. I was going to sell you off to a slave merchant and elope with her to New Jersey. Too bad she is broken now".

On the left side of the screen we could see the other skater. He was not moving at all – more like hanging out and resting against the rails. He was looking in my direction, and then – it looked fast even at third speed – pushed himself forcefully – in my direction. I did not notice him until he was almost on me. At what seemed an impossible slowness I was moving in a half-twist away from the beeline he drew to me. The girl was leaning in my direction – getting inch by inch into the line of the skater. In the silence of the room, the collision looked taken out of a modern dance scene. The skater moving – now looking at me with some surprise – trying to twist as well – losing his balance and crashing slow speed into the girl. She slowly moves up into the air, drawing an arc as she glides through the air and lands in a heap.

Sybil clicked the stop button. We both were silent for a long time. Sybil was wide eyed and breathing fast. I was working up a rage. We looked at each other. Eventually Sybil said what I knew to be true: "Carl – this was no accident".

The NYMF mystery kept bothering me, and I finally decided to confront Mr. Novicz.

I went into his office one quite morning, when Narvika could cover the front for me. "I need a word with you" I said. In my excitement I used a harsher tone than I meant, since his reply was somewhat surprised, if sarcastic "That's sounds ominous... Sit down. What's on your mind?"

"Something is wrong here, and I intend to find out what's going on. I am sure you can explain this very well, so I am giving you a chance to discuss it with me before I start planting interesting ideas into some big ears".

I went on to describe what I have learnt, and why I was sure he is part of a scheme. "I don't mind if you found some convoluted way of evading the IRS, or making some extra money. But I first want you to stop taking advantage of Sybil, and second, I want us to be in on it".

"Oh", Said Mr. Novicz, slightly amused. "So you caught on, did you? Not that I expect you to understand what's really going on, but I'll give you this: you're the first employee that figured so much. OK – so I'll give you an explanation. But not with Narvika here. Let's do this tomorrow – you have the late shift – right? And tell Sybil to get here too – she may as well hear this first hand".

I went home excited. Finally I am making some progress.

I was drinking a glass of white and looking out the window. Jerry was playing today. Sibyl came over to say that dinner was ready. I held her for a minute and we both looked out. It was one of those wonderful New York late afternoons. People were passing by Jerry – some stopping to listen, some ignoring him. A tall person in a white Stetson was passing by. He bent when he passed by Jerry, and dropped a \$100 in his open sax case. Jerry tipped his hat, and the Stetson did the same. I dropped the glass. "It's him!" I said. "the Texan! The guy who bought and sold your ash tray!. Com'on!". I grabbed Sybil and we were racing down the stairs into the street. The Stetson was at the end of the street – walking at a good pace. Jerry was shouting Hi, but we ignored him and started running.

The Stetson moved at a moderate pace so once we caught up with him we could stop running and keep at some distance behind him. There was no risk of being spotted – he never looked back. He went into an apartment house and we followed through the door – just in time to see another door – at the end of the corridor, closing behind him. We knocked on the door. There was no answer. After a few trials, I tried the knob. The door was open. We looked at each other. What's now? We didn't have to discuss it. We were both hot on the trail and too curious to stop now. We walked in.

Sybil called in a small voice: "Anyone there?". There was no answer. Behind the door was a long corridor with a number of closed doors – all except the one at the end, on the right. We walked slowly in. The room was dark. We moved in a few more steps. The door behind us slammed shut and we could hear a key turn. A small light turned on in the room. A single person sat at a large heavy desk. In the back, silhouetted against the wall, was the Stetson. His face in the dark, his hand twirling a gun.

‘So’, said Mr. Novicz from the desk. ‘You want to know what’s going on. You want in.... let’s see. Maybe you’re in, maybe you’re out. We will see about that’.

He offered us a seat on a couch, as if him being there, as if us being there was the most natural thing in the world; as if we were just paying a planned visit. Now that I think of it, it probably was a planned visit.

The Stetson was standing on the opposite side, playing with his gun nonchalantly.

‘Mr. Novicz, let me explain...’ I started.

‘Nothing to explain, my dear. Your curiusity got the better of you. You saw things you should not have seen. Heard things you should have ignored, and now I need to decide what to do with you’. He poured himself a drink. ‘I have really only one option. Well, maybe two.’

‘What’s the first one?’ Sybil asked.

‘Dispose of you two, of course’ he said. ‘There will be some mess to clean; some hands to grease, but it will not be that difficult. We have done it before. It is actually good when it happens every now and then. Keeps the city’s reputation, and keeps certain people on their toes.’

We were silent.

‘It all has to do with NYMF, doesn’t it’ I said.

‘No one ever blamed you for being slow.’ he said. ‘Yes, it is NYMF. It is always NYMF. There is nothing other than NYMF in this game.’

‘What is it?’ I asked. ‘New York something something?’

‘Well, I guess you deserve to know why I must dispose of you’ he said.

He leaned back and gave us the story.

It is hard to keep a legend. New York was a legend for many years, but it was not enough. Other cities – better managed, with better weather or scenery, started to pull tourists and artists, and the competition was proving too much. What with the bad traffic, the crime, the winter cold, the summer stifling heat and the terrible cost of living, people started living the city and tourists started avoiding it. It was about to turn into another Detroit – crowded, dirty, with no glamour, someplace to skip on your way to better places.

But there was a group of people who dearly loved the city, and would not let that happen. They looked for ways to keep the legend going. And they found it.

To be a success, they reasoned, you need to be different. People want to see something different on their vacation, something they can tell their folks back home: ‘you can’t believe how it is.’

If you want to be unique, you must work on it. You must cultivate it. You must encourage the strangeness, the unusual, the bizarre. That is how the New York Museum Foundation came into being.

Its mission is to keep New York afloat. Its strategy is to encourage the city’s uniqueness. Strange people are encouraged to keep their strangeness. Impossible art is cultivated by making the artists successful. Restaurants that serve odd-tasting food in odd-looking plates by odd-looking waiters are made fashionable. Clubs whose main feature is the long queue outside are promoted as ‘The Place to be’.

‘But how is it done?’ Sybil asked.

‘You should be the last one to ask’ he snorted. ‘How come people buy that garbage you make?’ He was satisfied with the surprised look on her face. ‘Of course I know who you are – even without the costume. I was one of the people who suggested we push the ash-trays. A real nice success, isn’t it?’

‘You?’ she said, ‘It is MY work that they buy!’

‘Go on, ignore reality... tell us all about the hidden meaning of your lovely crap ash trays... but if you take a good look at reality, you will know I am right. Let’s see. Why did you start dressing like an alien?’

‘Well, I found out people buy more from me when I dress a bit out of the ordinary. I once rented a booth on Central Park - it was the Flea Market week, and tried selling some ash-trays. The first day was a bad one. I did not sell even one item. I got drunk that night, and the next day, getting up with a terrible head ache, forgot to dress properly, and found myself in the booth with no bra, and a see-through night gown. That day I sold two ash trays. I put it down to my half-naked state, and went back to normal dress. Sales dropped to zero again. On the forth day I was desperate enough to put on the night gown again. I made five sales. I distinctly remember one of the buyers telling me that he can tell I am a gifted personality because of the way I dress. I found a clear connection between my public appearances and sales figures. When I was strange-looking, I sold more. It also worked on the art side. The wilder the ash trays were, the less usefull, the better the sales’.

‘A natural Pavlovian reaction’ Mr. Novicz said. ‘Never fails. Ask your friend here too. When did you start making money?’

‘Beginning of last summer’, I said.

‘Yes, but what happened that started it?’ he said. ‘Think... what did you start doing that you were not doing before? Something unique – something others can’t do?...’

‘Skating?!!!’

‘Bingo! Go to the head of the class!’

‘How... what’s the connection?’ I was puzzled.

‘It’s all about cultivating the unusual’ he said. ‘People come to New York since they heard the city is unusual. “You have to be there to understand it”. We must therefore keep the unusual going - so we reward strange behavior. And like Pavlov dogs, the recievers continue with the rewarding behaviour. Look at Narvika – she does not dare to change

her clothing or hair style, afraid to lose her luck. And you know what? If she goes back to normal she WILL lose her luck. Because almost all her buyers are *us*. NYMF people. It all feeds each other: You skate at Central Park, helping to create the special atmosphere of the park and helping to propagate New York's reputation in the world. Tourists come to see Central Park. They come to the park to see you; to see Narvika look-alikes in strange dresses and fancy hair style. And while they are enjoying this diverse display of humanity, they pay for hotels, for meals, for shows, for taxis.

They go to see the Trump shopping mall, since their friend bought them a \$10 trinket there, and told them about the highly priced abominations they just *have* to see to believe. They go there by the thousands. They can't afford the high priced art – if you want to call it that – so they buy trinkets for their friends, which they get with a huge shopping bag, and lots of decoration. This brings the next wave of tourists. But where do we get the ugly art? Someone must make it. Someone has to be behind it – a name, a face that can be used in TV promotion shows seen all over the world and entice people to come visit. So we encourage people like you, Sybil, to generate this for us. Some do it out of belief in their art; others, like you, figured out it bring in money and they don't care too much about the phoniness of it all. So Sybil makes the art which is so strange it attracts tourists just to see. You sell trinkets which brings more tourists in. But you can't survive on base salary, and eventually you will leave town, and we will be with one less skater for the park scene – so we send buyers to get you commissions – which keeps you in the city, and keeps you skating, since by now you've been conditioned.

You get driven by a strange taxi driver, since we need to support strange drivers – tourists expect strange taxi drivers as part of the New York experience. We give some extra work for the strange ones – to make them keep the habit... it all feeds one on the other. And sometimes we actually make money from jerks that get caught in the game and buy Sorvina ash trays. Quite a few of them, I must say...'

'And then of course we must finance the Christmas shops windows displays, the Rockefeller Center tree lights, the better music players in the subway tunnels and even some of the homeless. We send lovers to ride the horse-and-carrige on Central park; we rent apartments from Chester; we drop the occasional \$100 in Jerry's sax case; we promote writers who write about this unique city and film directors who make movies on the city...'

'Like Woody Allen' I suggested.

'Oh yes, a long time employee.' he mused. 'The nicest thing about it is that everyone involved believe to know how they are making it. Franciscus believes it is God's hand, and his good deeds; Sybil thinks she found what makes Yuppies tick; Narvika is superstitious and believe in omens and luck; You... I don't think you even figured out the connection yet...'

'So everyone in New York is a NYMF employee in a way?' Sybil whispered.

'Not everyone. Most people are here because there is work with the tourists. Only some of you are on our staff and most everybody unknowingly so'.

'And who runs the foundation?' I asked.

'Eh' said Mr. Novicz, and gulped the rest of his drink. 'I already told you too much. Let's go'.

‘Wait, please...’ said Sybil. ‘Didn’t you say there maybe another option? Can’t we work something out here? Why kill us? You’ll lose a perfectly good fake artist, and a talented skater. A murder is obviously not good for attracting the tourists’.

‘Wrong here too’ he said. ‘New York is expected to have some murders. We usually can trust the gangs to do this for us, but if we have to, we can stage a nice murder, in a well-lit area, so the TV coverage will add to the general spirit of the city. People are attracted to the city in part due to its name as somewhat dangerous place. It adds an adventure flavour to the visit’.

‘So there is no way out? What if we swear not to tell?’ I did not believe this will work, but crossed my fingers across my heart for emphasis.

Mr. Novicz was silent for a long time. ‘You know’, he finally said. ‘I have a soft spot for you, Sybil. It was I who discovered you. It was I who bought that first ash-tray on that day. People in the Foundation told me I was crazy, and I had many occasions to enjoy my little victory. Let me think about it for a while’.

He sat thinking for a long time, and then said. ‘OK, here is the deal. You keep on doing your ash-trays – although I suspect in about a year you’ll have to think of something new. And you’, he looked at me ‘You can write – can’t you?’.

I admitted this is what I was trying to do, with little success.

‘Well, you’ll have quite a success from now on. New Yorker stories and The Times Best Sellers list. But you need to change your subject. You have a new subject from now on. And I don’t think I need to spell it out for you’

‘Elementary’ I said. ‘But I guess I can’t write about THIS...right?’

‘Go ahead’ he said. ‘Write whatever you want. As if anyone will ever believe you’.

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