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TEXT prose

Joshua Baird

Brando

‘No, no, this is not how I intended it at all. Not even close.’

‘It’s not? Looks spot on to me.’

‘I sent the canvases stacked in a carefully organised stack. They were to be hung in the exact order in which they were stacked. How could this possibly have happened?’

The decorator bit down on his tongue, pinning it to his bottom lip, and scanned the painting as if examining it for flaws. Admittedly, it seemed that there were none, but that didn’t erase the truth that what hung on the wall before us did not, in even the slightest of ways, resemble the original product.

‘I, uh, sorry about this, but...’ he sputtered, ‘but when I stopped the trolley, right over here on the carpet, a bunch of the canvases slipped off onto the floor and got jumbled up. I took it upon myself to piece the painting back together. Like a jigsaw puzzle. Start with the corners.’ He looked from top to bottom at the arrangement of canvases that hung on the wall. ‘And if you don’t mind me saying, I thought I did a pretty bang up job ‘til you turned up.’

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About three months ago, a giant man – whose nose and hands, despite his enormity, were too big for the rest of his body – walked through an art gallery in Morgan’s town centre. He did not usually stop to admire paintings; art

wasn't something that interested him. However, there was a particular painting at this particular gallery that caught him, as if it had cast a net over him and slowly dragged him towards it. It was a painting of a yellow weatherboard cottage with a white roof, a river flowing behind it, a hunch-backed old lady tending to something in the garden on the right-hand side of the little house.

There was no emotional reason for this painting. I don't paint in order to convey some kind of deeply moving political message, or to explore the inner workings of my mind and soul, or to do whatever it is that a passionate artist is *supposed* to do. I painted the cottage because I'm an excellent painter and I surmised that a riverside cottage was as aesthetically satisfying as any other subject.

Yet, as he gazed upon this painting, the huge man felt something swirl softly beneath his skin and blood and bones. There was something that lit a spark of recognition in his eyes, something to do with the grey hair of the old lady or the red circles amongst the leaves of the apple tree, and for this reason, he thought that the painting was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

It was also for this reason that I opened my front door to find this man, stooping so that his head wasn't cut off from my vision by the top of the door frame, his hand reaching for a handshake from mine.

In a deep voice, he introduced himself as Grant Veridia, owner of the Veridia Theatre in my hometown of Morgan, and he requested that I paint something to be displayed in the lobby. There was a strange desperation in his voice, an insistence, as if he *needed* this painting, and he needed it painted by *my* hand. I agreed, more for the money than anything else.

The painting he wanted was so enormous that, for ease of transport, I decided to take a more experimental approach. Across fifty-four smaller canvases, nine tall, six wide, I painted a gigantic portrait of Marlon Brando, so intricately detailed that you could see the pores in the skin of his nose, the individual threads on the green fabric of his t-shirt collar. When the canvases were placed alongside one another, the painting was roughly the size of a cinema screen, and I had to clear my living room of furniture to make space for it on the carpet.

'There's something incredibly human about it all isn't there,' Veridia said, his head turning with his eyes as he looked across the canvases. 'The size of it, it's like some kind of monster, yet he is just a man with stubble and sweat. Art does not usually ignite these flames within me, but your paintings, Mr Hartwell, they really are something else.'

I had meant it to be nothing more than a faithful depiction of Marlon Brando's features, but I suppose I was flattered by the comments.

The next week, the decorator had hung the canvases on the lobby wall of the Veridia Theatre. However, when I looked up at the painting, the canvases did not bind together to form a giant portrait of Marlon Brando staring down at me. Instead, the canvases had been rearranged in a way so that, inexplicably, they resembled a towering tulip with a grass-green stem and open, pink petals. Marlon Brando's nose, which had been in the centre of the original portrait, was now near the top, the canvas flipped on its side so that the nose was now the tip of one of the tulip's petals. The miniscule beads of sweat across Brando's forehead had become droplets of rain that had settled on the flower. The green of his shirt had become the stem. Yet somehow, not a thing looked out of place. The decorator had completely transformed the painting, and now gazed up and down his masterpiece, nine canvases tall, six canvases wide.

'How is this possible?' Although I was awed by the painting's transformation, I was also offended by its replacing my original artwork. 'Take it down, put it up properly. I'll give you directions if need be. Mr Veridia wanted Marlon Brando.'

'Why don't we let the big man decide for himself?'

Grant Veridia had arrived to meet us. He resembled a giant from the movies, stepping over mountains as he approached us. He came to a stop beside us, stood before the painting, gestured to it with a humoured smile and said, 'Mr Hartwell, what's this? What happened to Brando?'

'Can't explain it, sir,' the decorator answered for me. 'Picasso here said he painted Brando. The canvases got all mixed up, I put them back together, now we have this.'

The flower was bent over and seemed as if it was staring down, ridiculing me.

'Shall we take it down then?' I suggested. 'See if we can get Brando back?'

'Not a chance,' Veridia replied. His mouth hung slightly open as he admired the painting, from way up at the tip of the tulip's petals, down to the blades of grass at knee height. 'There's something beautiful about it, isn't there?' He asked it as if it were a genuine question, not a rhetorical one. 'Something delicate, yet so horribly ... I'm trying to find the right word ... erotic.'

'If you're leaving it up there like that, it won't be under my name,' I told Veridia.

‘Nonsense!’ he insisted as he laid his huge hand across my shoulder blades. ‘As long as the strokes are from your brush, your name shall remain on the painting. And its title shall remain “Brando”.’ It was sometimes difficult to determine whether Veridia was persuasive because of his insistent demeanour or his intimidating size.

So, for months, the canvases were laid out across the wall of the Veridia Theatre’s lobby like a misquotation. Although my name, Hartwell, was inscribed upside-down along the side of one of the canvases in the middle of the painting (it had originally been signed in the bottom right corner), I felt as if my own masterpiece had been outdone. The compliments I received were not for me, they were for this transfiguration, this supposed improvement imposed upon my own work.

I must admit, I felt some twisted joy when I’d heard, months after the reveal of ‘Brando’, that part of the theatre had been vandalised, and most of the canvases that composed the artwork had been pulled from the wall and strewn across the maroon carpet of the lobby. Veridia requested that I repaint those canvases that had been damaged and restore the flower that loomed in Veridia Theatre. I recreated those canvases exactly, and when it came time to put the canvases back up, I secretly ordered them so that they would once again compose the portrait of Marlon Brando.

I’m not sure what went wrong. I had replicated my original painting perfectly, precisely ordered the canvases, made sure they were oriented the right way, and supervised closely as the canvases were fastened to the wall. But as each one was put in its place and a picture slowly spread outwards from the top left corner, it gradually became clear that the painting would not depict Marlon Brandon. But neither would it depict a giant pink tulip. Across the top six canvases, the shades that previously formed Brando’s green t-shirt now formed a sickly, cloudless sky. As each of the fifty-four canvases were placed, more of the picture was revealed, until finally it depicted a blood-spattered feast – three wild wolves tearing at the carcass of an indeterminable animal, its stomach ripped open so you could see its jagged ribcage, bits of its flesh hanging from the wolves’ teeth.

‘Take it down!’ Veridia boomed. ‘We can’t have this here, Hartwell – it’ll make our customers sick!’

‘This is not what I painted.’ I almost felt myself cower.

The decorator and I pulled the canvases from the wall, laid them across the floor of the theatre lobby, and tried to find the portrait or the tulip hidden within them.

It was the strangest thing; no matter what order we arranged the canvases in, we could not recapture the Marlon Brando portrait, nor the tulip. Even stranger, though, is the fact that every single combination of the canvases revealed a new picture, almost perfect in its presentation: A dimly lit stage featuring a ballet performance; a hammer driving a chisel into stone; a bonfire; a shield and sword; and a hand lifting the chin of a crying boy. The colours and lines seemed to transform as we moved the canvases. The pinks of flesh turned into the reds of blood, the greens of leaves into the ocean's blues. Over the course of several days, Veridia invited painters, critics, owners of art galleries, and a collection of other experts to attempt to recreate the tulip – or if that was unachievable, then at least restore Marlon Brando – but with each new arrangement came a new unique picture.

On top of all this, each of the pictures would only ever appear once. We would rearrange the canvases to find a tiger hiding among the tall grass, then move the canvases again to reveal a severed head. When we then tried to recapture the tiger, in its place within the tall grass was a toucan. Every picture that was created, we would only see it once before it was lost forever among the canvases.

As the painting transformed before our eyes, I could feel my mind unhinging; the pictures had become a fog behind a haze, and I could no longer determine the difference between a human and an animal, a limb and a landscape. They had all simply become brush strokes – I couldn't tell if I was simply imagining pictures where there were only lines and scribbles.

Finally, I created something that satisfied Veridia. The canvases had been organised in such a way that they depicted a yellow cottage with a white roof, a river running behind it. It was almost identical to the painting I had done years ago, the one that first captured Mr Veridia, except the weatherboards of this cottage had aged and rotted, the garden was unkempt, and the old lady was no longer there.

Veridia gazed up at the enormous painting, a gap hanging between his lips. He was softly clenching and unclenching his fists as if it helped whatever he was trying to comprehend. He looked at the cottage the way a boy might look at his wounded father; a wicked mixture of sorrow and admiration upon his face. Standing there in front of the many canvases, he was a tiny man lost in the vines that crawled their way up the cottage, along the weathered roof.

'So, are we okay to leave it like this?' the decorator asked. 'I can't look at these canvases much longer.'

‘Thank you.’ Veridia spoke so quietly that his voice hovered between a deep rasp and a whisper. ‘This one can stay. It’s moving, isn’t it? I can almost feel it move inside my body, over my face and my skin.’

The decorator and I glanced at each other with raised eyebrows. It was almost difficult to tell the difference between this picture and the countless others we had arranged over the past few hours. They had all blended into one painting, coming to mean the same thing.

I was surprised; I preferred the original cottage – the one hanging in Morgan’s art gallery – but Veridia seemed immobilised by the one that hung before us. Perhaps it was the sheer size that captivated him, or the fact that if you looked closely, you could see the miniscule cracks in the weatherboards and the pattern of the lace curtains through the shattered window.

The decorator and I left Veridia standing there, mesmerised. I saw him once or twice over the next few years. I visited the theatre sometimes, glimpsing my artwork on the way into a show. I never saw anyone stop to look at the painting except for Mr Veridia, and the cottage stayed on the lobby wall even after the theatre closed down decades later.

I most recently saw the painting a few months after the theatre’s closure. The building had been abandoned and a window had been smashed, leaving a jagged hole that led into the lobby of the theatre. Walking past one morning, curiosity captured me and I stepped in through the hole. I could still hear the echoes of voices in the lobby, the din of music humming behind the closed doors that opened to the stage. I could feel Grant Veridia standing in the lobby, though I don’t know what happened to him. To my surprise, my painting still hung on the lobby wall, vandalised again. Several of the canvases were missing and the remaining ones had streaks of paint splattered across them, obscuring the cottage. You could no longer tell what was depicted within the painting. It was a mess of nothing, indecipherable. I gazed at it for a while. Still, there was *Brando*, a tulip, a pack of wolves, and innumerable other things hidden within the remaining canvases covered in graffiti. As I continued to look at it, feeling Mr Veridia standing there beside me, the painting seemed to have been destroyed, but despite all that, I’ll admit that I didn’t find the picture altogether unappealing.

Joshua Baird teaches Creative Writing at Deakin University. He recently completed a PhD thesis which focuses on links between masculinity and unreliable narration in first-person fiction.