**Like Immigrants**

In October 1967 two men are standing at the entrance to the grill bar of the Westover Hotel waiting to be seated. The man in the dark suit is my father; the man in the sweatshirt and grey leather jacket is Andy Warhol. The waitress is busy clearing tables for a few minutes, so my father turns to Andy Warhol, who he doesn’t know or recognise.

 “I didn’t think it would be this busy at six o’ clock. I thought New Yorkers ate later than this.”

 My father smiles in a way that encourages a reply. He has a manner which makes people feel comfortable, which is why his company send him out to meet the clients.

 “They eat at any hour,” says Andy.

 My father, who is in America for the first time, nods in a way that makes it clear he’s interested in this reply.

 “I suppose there are a lot of people from out of town anyway,” he says. He hasn’t used the expression ‘out of town’ before coming to America. “There seem to be people from everywhere in the world in New York. Are you from here yourself?”

 For a moment it seems that he may have said too much, but then the other man smiles very slightly and offers his hand.

 “No I’m not. My name is Andy. Shall we share a table?”

 My father’s smile completes.

 “I’m Ken Jeffers. Yes, let’s share.”

 Andy orders cocktails to start, a Manhattan for him and an Old-Fashioned for my father. My father has never drunk a cocktail apart from a vodka and orange.

 “Do you always stay here?”

 “No,” says Andy. “I’ve never stayed here before. Usually I stay in much worse places.” He laughs for two beats. “Which I like much better.”

 My father agrees with him though he would have expressed it differently. It’s by far the most expensive hotel he has ever stayed in, the kind that could diminish people. Normally he stays in small hotels in the UK, where nobody drinks cocktails and dinner is always served at six-thirty.

 They look through the menu and Andy orders a plate of tomatoes and cheese for himself, but recommends that my father should try a Waldorf salad at least once while he is in New York. The tomatoes and cheese are not on the menu but this doesn’t seem to bother Andy. They both order steak for the main course; Andy tells the waitress that he’ll have his “super-rare”.

 The two men sit back, look across the table at each other and smile their different smiles.

 “What line of business is it you’re in Andy?” says my father after a while.

 “I’m an artist.”

 “Oh”. My father would look interested whatever the answer, but this does intrigue him. “You paint, sculpt…?” He can’t think of much else.

 “I paint, I print. I do some other things. Do you paint?”

 The question comes unexpectedly and it’s not one my father has ever been asked before.

 “No, oh no. I mean it’s a very decent profession and very interesting, but I don’t paint.”

 Andy leaves pauses which last at least five seconds before he makes his replies.

 “Never?”

 “Well, no. Not since I was at school, years ago.”

 “What did you paint then?”

 My father looks up at a fan on the ceiling and then closes his eyes for a while.

 “You know, it’s so long ago. And I didn’t do art exams or anything like that, this was when I was eleven or twelve.” He opens his eyes slightly and watches the light catch and fall on the blades of the fan. “I did paintings of woodland scenes sometimes. With deer and snow. I did them in black and white. I don’t know why.” He laughs and looks down at the table.

 “Do you have deer in England?” says Andy.

 “No. Well maybe, but I’ve never seen one.” My father laughs again. “But what do you paint?”

 “All kinds of junk,” says Andy.

 “Oh come on. You’re a professional, I’m sure you must be very good.”

 “The subject is junk. That’s what I mean. I paint junk.”

 “I see. You paint junk, but you paint it well.”

 Andy shrugs as the waitress places his tomatoes and cheese in front of him.

 “I just paint junk.”

 There are a lot of unaccompanied women in the grill bar tonight. They are elegant and thin and most of them smoke. Some are in pairs or groups but others are by themselves. They read books or magazines at the table while they wait for their orders.

 “They’re in some kind of business. Like you. Staying over for a few nights on business,” says Andy when my father mentions it.

 “They all look young to be away on business.”

 Andy laughs. His laugh sounds like a combination of a cough and a laugh.

 “They’re in their twenties,” he says. “Bright women, twenty-two years old, earning plenty of money. Don’t you get that in England?”

 “I suppose so, sometimes. But not so young I don’t think.”

 “Were you earning plenty when you were their age?”

 “No. I’m not now, not plenty.”

 My father eats his salad and makes approving noises but adds plenty of salt. He looks up suddenly.

 “I was picking potatoes when I was twenty-two.” He goes back to his salad. “I don’t know why I’m mentioning that.”

 “Where?”

 “In East Anglia. In England. I’d just finished my National Service.”

 “I picked potatoes in Poland. When I was a teenager, I did it all the time.”

 “It’s hard work.”

 “It’s really hard work,” says Andy, who has put down his fork. “It makes your thighs and back ache like nothing else. But the women- the old women- used to do it every day. Hours in the fields, bent over. Jesus, it’s hard hard work. And cold.”

 “In Poland I would think so.”

 For the rest of their time at the dinner table the two men talk about potato picking, mainly about Poland. My father asks a lot of questions and Andy is much quicker with his answers now, talking about his life as an adolescent as if it’s a story he’s just discovering. When they have finished their dessert my father looks around for the waitress.

 “Do we have to tell her that we’re going? Do we need to sign something?”

 “No. They’ve got your room number.”

 Andy walks towards the door and my father follows him, though he does manage to catch the waitress’s eye and mouth his thanks at her. When they are out in the foyer Andy says over his shoulder:

 “Do you want to come for a drink?”

 He keeps going towards the revolving door.

 “Well yes,” says my father. “But shouldn’t I change maybe?”

 Andy looks at his suit very briefly.

 “No, I don’t think you need to.”

 So they go out onto the street, my father slightly breathless now, and they get into a cab. It swerves in and out of the evening traffic and my father has no idea where they are. Andy doesn’t point out any of the sights, not that it seems likely there are any real sights on this route. They pull up on a poorly lit street outside what looks like a warehouse.

 “My studio’s here,” says Andy as he pays the driver. “But we can get a drink.”

 They go though the doors into a very large, cool room with high windows. There is a crowd of maybe sixty people; they’re young and many of them smoke, but they don’t look anything like the young women in the grill bar. My father is the only person in a suit and he and Andy are older than anyone else in the room. A small crowd comes together and glides towards Andy, shouting above the noise of rock music.

 “Yeah, Andy.”

 “Hey Andy.”

 “Andy.”

 There seems to be no conversation beyond this and Andy stares into the distance, but not at any person. He goes to the bar and a girl with long black hair and heavily-mascarad eyes gives him a bottle of beer. Andy makes a small motion with his head and she passes one to my father as well.

 “So what is this place?” says my father.

 “It’s a kind of artists’ environment,” says Andy, who has gone back to leaving the five-second pauses before speaking. “Excuse me a moment.”

 He goes off into the crowd and then he seems to disappear from the room. My father drinks beer and keeps the bottle up to his chest. No-one is dancing but people shake their heads to the slow thump of the music. For several minutes he stands watching and makes no attempt to join any of the groups or to start a conversation. Then a small man with a thick bush of hair and a thin moustache comes up to the bar.

 “Nice suit man,” he says. “That’s a nice suit for New York City.”

 “You like it?” says my father

 “Yeah, it’s a nice suit. Can I have it?”

 They both grin without making it into a laugh.

 “Then what would I wear?”

 “Yeah. What would you wear?” The young man trails off and walks away from the bar.

 Over the next fifteen minutes my father has a number of these strange conversations which lead nowhere and border on something he doesn’t like. He drinks his beer, keeps a look-out for Andy and turns back to the bar.

 “Can I have another of these please?” he says to the girl with the make-up.

 She passes him a beer and shakes her head when he holds out a dollar.

 “Andy,” she says.

 He looks around, thinking that he has returned, but then realises that she means that being with Andy allows him not to pay.

 “Oh, I see.” He laughs and nods.

 The girl nods once and blows a smoke ring towards him with a kissing motion of the lips.

 My father drinks more beer and then Andy comes back into the room and slowly makes his way back towards him, stopping to listen vacantly to the greetings of small groups of people who line the way.

 “Hi,” he says when he makes it to the bar. He looks bored rather than tired. “Anything happen?”

 “No,” says my father. “How do you mean?”

 “You had a good time?”

 My father frowns. “No. Just a few conversations. Short ones. Rather odd ones actually.”

 Andy smiles a little now. “Okay.”

 They stand there and people look around at them, or at least at Andy. There is no talking and the music, which doesn’t seem to have changed since they came in, is dull and fierce.

 “I think I might leave,” says my father. “Need to be up early.”

 “Okay. Come up and see the gallery first if you want?”

 “Fine, let’s do that.”

 So they go up two flights of stairs, Andy with little sparrow-skips, my father with heavy two-at-a-time steps. When they’re at the top my father looks sternly at Andy in the way he sometimes looks at his boys.

 “I found it rather strange in that room. Uncomfortable.”

 Andy’s eyes grow suddenly wider behind his glasses, just for a moment. He doesn’t speak for ten seconds and then he shrugs.

 “You did okay.”

 “Was it a test?”

 Now Andy doesn’t have anything to say, but he ushers my father through a set of double doors. They are in a studio which takes up most of this floor and there are big pieces of art on the walls and stacked in the corners. My father follows Andy around and stares up at the pictures.

 “Are they paintings?”

 “Some are. Some are screen prints. Some are just photos.” He says photos in a way which makes him sound like an immigrant, a Polish immigrant.

 My father walks around some more and examines the works carefully, occasionally going back to one that he has already studied. Andy stands in the middle of the room and watches him. Then my father laughs, a short laugh like one of Andy’s.

 “What?” calls Andy. He laughs too. “What is it Ken?”

 “Just this one.”

 It’s a painting of a pile of dozens of old bottles and cans.

 “Why is it funny?”

 “It’s not funny. I don’t know. This is the modern world isn’t it? We consume and we throw away. Sometimes it’s all we seem to do.”

 “Yeah,” says Andy, closing his eyes and smiling. “Yeah.” He’s like a ghostly preacher and his smile is thin but strong.

 “Well,” says my father. “It’s all very interesting, but I think I’d better be going now.”

 “Do you want that painting?” says Andy.

 “Want it?”

 “It’s yours if you want it. You get it. And I know that you’re angry about me leaving you in the bar. Take the painting, take it back to England.”

 “No, it’s alright. You don’t have to. But thank you.”

 So there it is, my old man refuses a Warhol original because he doesn’t need that big an apology and he’s worked out already that it’s an expensive thing to ship back home. And because he can’t really imagine it on the lounge wall, above the settee with the green leaf pattern on a blue background.

 “Okay. Well, let’s get you a cab.”

 They go outside. Andy raises his hand and a taxi just seems to appear, like he’s peeled a yellow sticker off of the night and smoothed it down right there in front of them. They shake hands.

 “Will you be back at the hotel?”

 “No,” says Andy. “Probably not tonight.”

 “Right, then I’ll say goodbye. Thank you for your company. And for showing me your art.”

 “It was good Ken. Good talking with you. See you around.”

 The taxi rumbles off down the dark street and my father and Andy Warhol are still watching each other. There could be a slow but powerful spring mechanism that has to force them apart now. They watch each other through the light but frenzied rain and Andy raises his hand and waves a little.