

Banned - Competition Entry

I A Donald

3000 word, short story competition.

Theme - 'Too hot to handle.'

Category - Written mainly in the first person. 3028 words.

Short Story Name - Banned

I could always tell when my father was home. I was wary of him, my early memories of him were fleeting and distant. A distinct aroma: a mix of cigars, new leather shoes and freshly-pressed suits followed his passage as a faint trail, left as he strode, swift and purposeful, through the house on his way to somewhere else. Somewhere much more important than me. He did make time for Christmas and birthdays. These family times were always strained and thin.

My mother often spoke of when she and Papa - "my Sacha" - first met, at the Le Select Cafe on the Boulevard du Montparnasse Paris. Long my father's favourite haunt for business, the cachet of famous painters and writers on the terrace made it the place to be seen. Mama was a waitress, dealing with a customer screaming abuse. She was standing frozen, terrified. Six foot five Sacha walked over and glared at the man - who looked up and shut up. My Papa roughly took his arm and led him out onto the terrace into the custody of the newly-arrived police. Pale and dignified, with her saddened blue eyes, Mama would still brighten when she spoke of "my Sacha" as being galant, brilliant and a hopeless romantic.

Home was a Georgian terrace in London's Bedford Square. Stockbroking meant I was never short of anything. My earliest memory was my bedroom on the third storey. It had huge windows with delicate crossed window frames that cast shadows that I used as a part of my play with wooden blocks and wooden trains. My other early memory was waking startled in the middle of the night. The house was solid brick but vibration and the sharp thud of doors slamming always woke me. I would hear the muffled yelling and screams. I would bury my head under the pillows, regularly checking to see that the noises had stopped. I wondered were the arguments about me or because of me? I would lie in my bed, head under my pillow imagining horrible outcomes. Always in fear of footsteps and yelling coming to my

bedroom door. My father believed in old school physical discipline which sometimes left bruises. The atmosphere of threat and unease was always present. At breakfast I sometimes saw make-up masking black eyes.

School was a different type of hell. I was regularly taken to 'the principal's' office because of my classroom behaviour. My classmates thought my verbal attacks on teachers hilarious. Older students were another matter. Walking into the main school entrance I heard the voices I most dreaded.

'Here is the fat little slug. Where have you been the last few days? I've missed having a punching bag.'

I turned in time to receive a sharp slap in the ear. My ear stung and my head swam. My self-preserving study of the senior students time table meant that I was mostly adept at avoiding the "gang of three" as I called them. I closely examined the exam results when they were posted on the locked noticeboards. I knew my enemies' strengths and weaknesses and had a plan to use them.

I turned and faced my largest tormentor Nigel. Eyeballing him I said:

'You are kinda thick aren't you? Would you like to pass a subject for a change?'

He drew back from me shocked. He raised his fist and then lowered it.

'Are you saying that I'm stupid?'

'Well you haven't passed any of your school work have you? I can change that.'

'You horrible little worm.'

He slapped me hard again on the side of my head. He leant down to my ear saying quietly:

'I will see you later.'

I thought: 'So much for rational conversation.'

‘The rude little kid that I beat up, maybe could help me? I didn't even know his name. My sister was in his class so I asked her. She had fun at my expense wanting to know about my interest in the class smart arse. The pressure for me to succeed at school was huge. Both my parents were obsessed with money and worked stupidly hard. They always told me I was receiving the education they never had. I just wasn't good at study. Beating up this fat smart kid gave me relief. Now just possibly I might have to be nice to him so I could get the dead weight of my parents off me.’

I managed to avoid the gang of three for the next week. Approaching the school entrance the next Monday it was cold and crisp. I saw Nigel standing by himself at the school entrance stamping his feet to keep warm. I pulled down my woollen beanie, looked down and walked past quickly, hoping desperately that I would not be noticed. He called out;

‘Hey Anton, could we talk?’

I didn't know what was more shocking: the fact that he knew my name or the fact that he used it to when talking to me.

‘Look I know I have been horrible to you. Could you really help me with my school work?’

This was the first time that the power of my words positively and dramatically changed my situation. Other than other than being comically mean to my teachers for an easy laugh. He continued:

‘I have plenty of money, I can pay you.’

The feeling of power and control rushed over me like a warm golden wind. So this was what power felt like.

For my school and university years I did what I needed to pass and ran a profitable business copying student's writing styles, quickly writing appropriate assignments to gain pass marks or better for struggling students. My select group of drinking friends and I breezed through University not working much. We all were proudly amoral with our own business interests supporting our studies. Soft drugs, low level extortion and cheating were a big part of my education.

After graduation, escape from home and London was my objective. Family friends suggested I should try advertising because of my writing skills. My father spoke to one of his friends and he offered an internship with the WWP Group. My father sat down to talk and we had a one way conversation about not being a smart arse and that WWP were the biggest agency in Europe and Asia and that this was a good opportunity. Would I please give it a try. Our distant relationship was now one where I felt hostile. It was difficult to be civil. However the starting salary was decent and it appeared to be an easy option. My parents had been concerned about my university friends and were relieved to see me placed in a safe solid job. Their attitude made me feel ill.

My first day working at a real job. I was told: do as instructed and you will do well. Learning the ropes is boring but we all had to do it. I was given an assignment to script a television advertisement for a boring-as-batshit sedan car. Thrilling. I listened to the customer brief with a stupid corporate look on my face. My new boss Adam moaned on about features and benefits and the greatest new look. All of this had to be included. I did none of this. I wrote satire about corporate nonsense. Adam read my work, looked at me, raised an eyebrow, He sat for a moment staring at me. Finally he said:

'I need to speak to Karl about you.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'While I'm gone have another look at the brief I gave you. Come at it from another angle. See what you can do.'

Before I had written some crap about the power of nature and the clients car. This time, some aspirational nonsense about the emotion of being seen with the car in a social setting. I printed them out as instructed, was summoned and walked up the

wood-panelled corridor with the boss. Karl's office was large, sparse and white. I was introduced, he held out his hand for my proposals and said:

'Sit.'

His large desk was completely clear apart from a large slim laptop and a huge computer tablet. The walls were all glass with a clear view of the London Eye and the cucumber building. He quickly read my pitches and looked at me.

'You have the potential to earn a great deal of money.'

I deadpanned:

'Really.'

'Yes really, a healthy six figure really. The catch is that you report to me and work with me. I will give it two weeks to see if we can stand each other. Sleep on it. Be here at eight tomorrow morning if you want to try out. You will be working hard on corporate crap. If not, I wish you all the best.'

He flicked his hand at me gesturing, away with you. How rude; my kind of rude. His blunt direct approach was refreshing. I felt like I was looking in a strange mirror reflecting an older self and a life writing, playing with minds, twisting realities. Some rare excitement built in me. Earning big money would satisfy my family's ego. I couldn't care less. As long as I had enough money to play with expensive watches and designer clothes.

The next day Karl started with confidentiality agreements and documents regarding intellectual property ownership.

'Remember all that you do is mine.'

'Naturally' I replied.

'You're not going pay me shitloads to keep my work to myself or give it away.'

I signed my life over to the company.

'Now, what do you know about soft drinks and Indonesia?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Is that what this is? Selling colored sugar-rich fizzy water to the natives at high prices? How deliciously evil!'

Karl gave me a death look.

'IDEAS!' he said. He handed me a marker and gestured at a white board.

Two years later I was earning six figures and was offered a position in Bangkok as an Executive Creative Manager. This Included: being paid in American dollars, a penthouse, car with driver and a maid. I had mastered manipulating clients and had lots of slaves (employees). I was responsible for some of the largest advertising campaigns in Asia worth hundreds of millions of US dollars. My specialty was landing “whales” with offbeat pitches. These usually were multinational corporations looking to expand into the Asian regional markets. These companies generally had a low understanding of cultural context and individual sales motivators for target markets.

I was not only dealing with the clients but the media buyers, stores and elite store customers. Since I was creating the vision and the dream, I needed to live it also. The conventional designer look and style was conservative and easy to copy. I mixed the big names with quirky smaller designers products by accessorising. Designer brands everywhere were stating: I'm rich, I'm successful and I'm eccentric. My carefully crafted look is the look of privilege.

My day would start with a black or charcoal ZEGNA or ARMANI suit, then a choice of tee. Usually screaming yellow or red with a GUCCI logo. That or black with a stamped gold logo or sequins. Then I'd move to the wrap around mirrors in my dressing room. I loved the smell of new suits and new leather shoes. My favourite large blacked out glasses were PRADA. I had many to choose from. Then to choose rings and a solid gold neck chain. The ring selection included KING BABY fuck off rings as well as skulls with sapphire eyes. My VERSACE rings had logos the size of knuckle dusters. I always wore three or four on each hand. I usually chose my loose

fitting gold ROLEX which had a diamond and sapphire encrusted face. This made a special statement, hanging on my wrist below my suit cuff. Once I was satisfied I would take a selfie, so I could be sure I had a record of my evolving style.

I established Volkswagen as a new large account with blanket social media, television and magazine coverage. At this point it was time to hand on the account to a minion before I got bored witless. Decha was Thai born and brilliant, which I never told him of course. He was wary of me and in the office called me white devil. He was meeting the VW regional directors for the first time. I told him it was important to learn the formal German greeting. Under my close guidance he practiced snapping his heels together while doing a straight arm upward salute. Suddenly the door opened and my German CEO boss Werner put his head around the door. He said:

'Anton -'

and stopped mid sentence staring at Decha who had nearly perfected the World World II Nazi salute. He gestured to me silently and I went to a closed door meeting.

I was appalled by what the White Devil had taught me. Werner, my CEO, asked me to spend an hour looking up Nazism and 'The Holocaust' on Wikipedia and to ask if I had any questions, but said he would rather not talk about it. I did respect Anton's creative abilities, but his behaviour often made it hard for me to understand if he was serious when talking about his brilliant ideas or making an ill considered joke. He won many new large accounts including work with some of the worlds top designer brands. This bought in a huge amount of work and another thirty five workers were employed. I wanted to know what he knew, but was terrified of potential disaster by just working with and reporting to him.

My first creative meeting working for Anton went like this. A new range of designer clothes was to be launched in Singapore. The creative team and I sat in a darkened small theatre and watched the competitors advertisements back to back five times. After the second viewing I sneaked a look at my colleagues. One was sleeping. the

others were slumped staring at the screen with eyes glazed. I took out a notepad and made notes about the script, mood, music and message. the viewing finished. Yawning and stretching we strolled to the boardroom. Anton was there already scribbling on a huge white board. He motioned me over and said

'how did you find it?'

I opened my notebook, he glanced at it and said:

'Fine, fine. Make sure before the meeting starts you partake of the refreshment and creative support.'

My colleagues all milled around the well stocked bar. I selected tonic water with a squeeze of lemon. The others had a selection of boutique beers, whiskeys, and red wine. As everyone found their seat, I noticed beside the supplied pen and notepad was a stainless straw in a sealed packet, marked "sterile". Once seated Anton said:

'Ok Decha, write up the summary you showed me.'

The other team members looked at me icily as I took up the white board marker of leadership. It was only my second day at WWP. I finished my notes and Anton stepped forward.

'Anyone for creative assistance?'

A few put up their hands and Anton made a show of handing each a small stainless plate with a carefully measured small amount of white powder. These were accepted with a bow of the head and the traditional Buddhist Anjali pointed hand gesture of thanks and respect. Everyone waited while the straight lines were made and the straws used. Anton looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I gave a subtle 'no' head shake.

I closed the door to reprimand Anton about the Nazi salute incident. I also had to raise the issue of entertaining clients, and why he would often not take clients to venues of their first preference. This frustrated me as we were not getting the best value for our entertainment dollar. I had heard about the "Garçon" incident, in conversation with a large automotive client and friend. He related that Anton, dressed in his best "gangsta" finery, was at the client's favourite haunt; the Riverfront Restaurant at the Peninsula Bangkok Hotel. When the waiter approached the table Anton had raised his hand, snapped his fingers and called out loudly:

'GARCON, GARCON'

(french for 'BOY, BOY'). Conversation at the surrounding tables stopped and other patrons turned to stare at my gaudy distastefully dressed employee. He then made a big show of selecting expensive wine as part of ordering the meal. Later when ordering more wine he had loudly snapped his fingers and called out:

'HERE... BOY BOY.'

The Maitre De had then approached the table and addressing Anton said:

'You have to leave. Don't come back.'

He nodded to my client and said:

'But of course, you are welcome any time.'

My client said he was well known at the restaurant and often entertained guests there. He was cringing, mortified and embarrassed. He said he wanted to hide under the table.

I addressed Anton.

'You win new clients and then offend them. Your only direct report now will be an assistant whom I will choose with your input. You will act as a consultant to other business channels dealing only with department managers. I will be attending all future client entertainment with you. You also must dress more

conservatively when meeting clients. If not for your ability to land large new clients you would be sacked. You are building a reputation that one day you will regret.'

Home in my penthouse on my balcony, I stood gazing out across the Chao Phraya river. The sun's last rays rippled and bounced off the river surface. Cabin lights in the distant cruise ships flicked on in a random pattern. My twenty five year old single malt glowed golden in the fading light. Usually my favourite time to reflect on the day's victories and my client strategy, today I felt cast adrift. Werner's words lay heavily on me. My clients thought me rude. My dress sense was unappreciated. The millions of dollars of new business that I created appeared to cancel itself with the criticism. The meaning and fun working for WWB was starting to fade.