

In The Tattoo Parlour

Matthew Turner

The first time I saw it I was visiting the Sunset Quay development. A Saturday afternoon appointment, I'd been given an option to buy one of the flats, then in the last stages of construction. Since Rosie left I'd been casting around for somewhere more befitting the bachelor lifestyle. In no great hurry, I would wait for the right place. A river-pad could work, I thought, but I hadn't figured on the noise. The agent had praised the flat's seclusion from the town's bustle, but my ears are sharp and I could still hear the horns and sirens. Three bedrooms, enclosed parking and a large west-facing living room with a balcony overhanging the riverbank. Tempting, yes, but I need my rest.

Walking back down the High Street I saw the sign and stopped. It was a small but distinctive shop-front, and oddly high-class. None of that crude red neon showing from an upstairs window. Of course I'm no prude, I've seen these places before, in city side-streets beside second-hand clothes grottoes and long-defunct pubs. In the dingiest spots they look suitably garish and romantic, but here on our doorstep? Something about the image struck me but it didn't linger. Merely the sense of a foreign body in our midst, or that you've entered a room and the furniture is out of place. You can't even say what's changed exactly, and it doesn't matter.

It was the second time that I registered the name of the shop: Guy's Tattoo Studio. In stylish italics, white on a lime-green background with a black drop-shadow to make the letters seem advanced. A studio, then. So what are we supposed to think, that this isn't the place where you get your girlfriend's name stained under a rosy heart or your team's crest pinned to your arm, but rather some dusty sun-streaked atelier?

It's just an affectation, I know. A bit of glib marketing. The trade should be ennobled in some way, rescued from its drunken-sailor image to find a wider market. I can see that, and I admit my own mental picture is somewhat tainted by thoughts of dirty-bearded bikers and self-loathing skinheads. Perhaps I need some cultural renewal – my stock connotations are all out of date. Not that I even gave it much thought. Only it came as a surprise, an intriguing anomaly, and I joked to myself that presumably the name of this 'artist' is properly pronounced *Gui*.

I raised the subject with Adrian, in the squash club bar early in the new year. A vigorous work-out to shake off the holiday's excesses. Adrian had won a close-fought match and waxed loquacious on the world's ills.

'You don't see it,' he said. 'I wouldn't expect you to. We've got auditors, actuaries, commercial accountants, all the petty numbers-men counting and recounting the piles, counting each other's piles to be sure but not ever *making* anything. Calculating the mere *risk* that something might actually happen. Nothing real. Just plan, manage and report. Jealously guarding their allotted minuscule confines of power. Impress the boss, become the boss, nothing changes.'

Adrian's jaw is a wonder of nature. Jutting forth ever more abruptly as he becomes more animated in conversation, like a facial counterpart to finger-wagging. Now at its fullest point of extension, sharp angles added emphasis to his words.

'Teachers, firemen, doctors, nurses, granted they all do good work, but in the last analysis they'll be classed as servants. No different from the sales reps, the vicars, the housewives, all of them serving only a local need. Happy to resign any right to influence the way *real* change is effected. Powerless pathetic drones enslaved by a system they don't understand.'

‘And these are friends of ours?’

‘Friendship’s only another system of control.’

‘That’s nice.’

I don’t know why I stick with Adrian, a man who could abandon his family in a mere heartbeat. Two years earlier he had looked me straight in the eye and said: ‘I will not tolerate this life any more. It is no longer mine.’

The marriage had seemed secure to me – they had a sound joint income, a golden-haired daughter (with thankfully her mother’s chin) and a good deal of expressed affection. Rosie and I would spend evenings with them and return home itching with envy at their three holidays a year and their sculpted garden. Yet he described midnight agonies to me, envisaging long and barren years stretching towards the grave. The prospect of the same woman, the same conversations, the same daily odours. He had constructed a life which had become, he said, a cage of ice.

The next day he moved out of the family home. A week before Christmas. Simply packed some cases and left – no warning or explanation. Went to live in a rented maisonette on Farmer Street and then a bungalow in the Havens. He refused any discussion except through his solicitor, accepted his regulation access to the golden-haired daughter without argument. It was the cleanest way to effect the break, he said. Remarkable and somehow horridly impressive, this ruthless self-sufficiency, even at the cost of his own present comfort.

‘Maybe it’s a throwback to smuggling days,’ I said. ‘You know, a revival of our nautical heritage. The Council must have given a green light. Or maybe they think it’ll haul us into the twenty-first century. Whatever, the shop always seems to have custom.’

I’m talking but he’s not listening. He doesn’t even nod to feign interest, gazing somewhere over my shoulder.

‘I wouldn’t have thought we’d have much call for...’ I give up. I’m not going to keep talking to an empty space.

‘Speaking of which...’ He tips his forehead towards the source of his distraction, his eyes still fixed to my left. ‘Their handiwork on display.’

I turn as casually as I can to follow his line of sight. A man and a woman, both early twenties, are sitting at a round table by the window. They look healthy and happy, the lazy pleasure of new love. The man is wearing *après-sport* leisure gear: Adidas pumps, expensively shabby jeans and a pale blue D&G polo shirt, under the left sleeve of which peeks a large and vicious rat. Half the creature is covered but the rest is bad enough: dirty grey fur with brown streaks, long thin whiskers around a mouth that seems to twitch upon the muscle.

Adrian says, ‘See, there’ll always be enough macho twats around to keep them in business.’

‘Point taken, though we don’t know this one came from the new shop.’

‘Yes we do. You can tell. Take a closer look.’

This would call for an extra layer of discretion. I put my hand to my forehead, as if in deep thought, and looked backwards past my shoulder. Like I’m staring at nothing. ‘So what am I looking for?’

‘You tell me. Something out of the ordinary.’

It *is* a peculiar specimen, as they go. In my limited experience you don’t get that precise detail, that fidelity to the object. I hadn’t thought the tools of the trade were capable of such fine work. And the subject itself is bizarre to say the least. I can’t imagine why anyone would choose the image of a rat, most ignoble of creatures. Pest and carrier of disease. Why brand your body with vermin?

Yet still there is something else that compels attention. And when it dawns I’m embarrassed not to have noticed before. It’s the eyes. They are quite out of proportion

to the rodent's protrusive head, yet devoid of any real life. Both wildly exaggerated and crudely simplified, wholly inconsistent with the craftsman's accuracy of the remaining image. You could only describe them as 'Disney-fied'.

Adrian senses I have made the leap.

'They all have them. You'll see. Each and every one.'

He was right. The images varied wildly while bearing that one feature in common. You could guess they were recent: the lines were crisp, the colours hadn't begun to bleed into the skin, and in some cases the skin around the work was still inflamed, the body reacting against the imposition. The customers were apparently multiplying rapidly, but that could have been merely an effect of my sharpened interest. And out of every image stared a pair of outsize eyes, grotesque in their vacancy. Each work of art undercut by the comic touch.

Soon I would look for the eyes first, quickly to confirm another addition to the list. Another fool has succumbed. The tide became unbearable. I remember a giant bloodthirsty bear, on the muscled back of a man stripping wallpaper waist-naked. Framed by the living-room window, the grizzly raged while the man laboured at the wall, up on its hind legs with dripping jowls and fierce teeth. I remember a winged horse, sleek and silver, its haunches tensely packed as the awesome beast launched itself into flight. A sketch to stir the soul, indeed, but still I had to look to the horse's face, knowing the power of the image must fail the moment I met those cartoon eyes.

I assembled a mental catalogue, and began to infer some other rules to Guy's repertoire. One type of tattoo was never executed: I saw none of the faux-Maori swirls and dots, no curlicues or thorned chains. Each example described a definite object, not

merely a pattern – well, where would the eyes go? Yet in all other respects the choice was vast, with never the same image twice as far as I could tell.

I can see them all now, shiveringly clear, this gay parade of animals, vegetables and minerals. A triple-decker sandwich, meats and pickles bursting between the layers. A row of hardback books of the sturdy ancient type. A vacuum cleaner and other assorted domestic appliances. A light bulb, a wooden crate, a microphone stand, a toaster, a whisky bottle (half empty), a set of golf clubs and a hot-water storage tank with frayed lagging. In such cases the object would be partially animated by the addition of the eyes, but no other facial features were included – the rest of the image would remain absolutely authentic.

What else? A baby in a cradle, a sparrow, a sailboat, a scattered nest of mushrooms arrayed around a shoulder-blade, a bat, a clown, cricket stumps, a well-laid cheese board, a tea caddy, a pantomime horse, a toad, a Victorian street lamp, a badger, an otter and freshly dug potatoes. I saw all of these and yet, whenever I mentioned to anyone this burgeoning taste in our town for unlikely body adornment, I received only a blank smile and even once the downright condescending charge that I ‘should get out more’. No one seemed to think it odd.