

Nick Hornby

# Nipple Jesus

They never told me what it was, and they never told me why they might need someone like me. I probably wouldn't have taken the fucking job if they had, to tell you the truth. And if I'd been clever, I would have asked them on the first day, because looking back on it now, I had a few clues to be going on with: we were all sat around in this staff-room type place, being given all the do's and don't's, and it never occurred to me that I was just about the only male under sixty they'd hired. There were a few middle-aged women, and a lot of old girls, semi-retired, ex-Army types, but there was only one bloke of around my age, and he was tiny - little African geezer, Geoffrey, who looked like he'd run a mile if anything went off. But sometimes I forget what I look like, if you know what I mean. I was sitting there listening to what this woman was saying about flash photography and how close people were allowed to get and all that, and I was more like a head than a body, sort of thing, because if you're listening to what someone's saying that's what you are, isn't it? A head. A brain, not a body. But the point of me - the point of me here, in this place, for this job - is that I'm six foot two and fifteen stone. It's not just that, either, but I look . . . well, handy, I suppose. I look like I can take care of myself, what with the tattoos and the shaved head and all that. But sometimes I forget. I don't forget when I'm eyeballing some little shitbag outside a club, some nineteen-year-old in a two-hundred-quid jacket who's trying to impress his bird by giving me some mouth; but when I'm watching something on TV, like a documentary or something, or when I'm putting the kids to bed, or when I'm reading, I don't think, you know, fucking hell I'm big. Anyway, listening to this woman, I forgot, so when she told me I'd be in the Southern Fried Chicken Wing looking after

number 49, I never asked her 'Why me? Why do you need a big bloke in the Southern?' I just trotted off, like a berk. I never thought for a moment that I was on some sort of special mission.

I took this job because I promised Lisa I'd give up the night work at the club. It wasn't so much the hours – ten till three Monday to Thursday, ten till five Friday and Saturday, club closed on Sunday. OK, they fucked the weekends up, and I never saw the kids in the morning, but I could pick them up from school, give them their tea, and Lisa didn't have to worry about childcare or anything. She works in a dentist's near Harley Street, decent job, nice boss, good pay, normal hours, and with me being off all day, we could manage. I mean, it wasn't ideal, 'cos I never really saw her – by the time the kids were down and we'd had something to eat, it was time for me to put the monkey-suit on and go out. But we both sort of knew it was just a phase, and I'd do something else eventually, although fuck knows what. Never really thought about that. She asks me sometimes what I'd do if I had the choice, and I always tell her I'd be Tiger Woods – millions of dollars a week, afternoons knocking a golf ball about in places like Spain and Florida, gorgeous blonde girlfriends (except I never mention that bit). And she says, no, seriously, and I say, I am being serious, and she says, no, you've got to be realistic. So I say, well, what's the point of this game, then? You're asking me what I'd do if I had the choice, and I tell you, and then you tell me I haven't got the fucking choice. So what am I supposed to say? And she says, but you're too old to be a professional golfer – and she's right, I'm thirty-eight now – and you smoke too much. (Like you can't play fucking golf if you smoke.) Choose something else. And I say, OK, then, I'll be fucking Richard Branson. And she says, well you can't just start by being Richard Branson. You have to do something first. And I say, OK, I'll be a bouncer first. And she gives up.

I know she means well, and I know she's trying to get me to think about my life, and about getting older and all that, but the truth is, I'm thirty-eight, I've got no trade and no qualifications,

and I'm lucky to get a job headbutting cokeheads outside a club. She's great, Lisa, and if you think about it, even her asking the question shows that she loves me and thinks the world of me, because she really does think I've got choices, and someone else is going to have as much faith in me as she does. She wants me to say, oh, I'd like to run a DIY shop, or I'd like to be an accountant, and the next day she'd come back with a load of leaflets, but I don't want to run a DIY shop, and I don't want to be an accountant. I know what my talent is: my talent is being big, and I'm making the most of it. If anyone asks her what I do, she says I'm a security consultant, but if I'm around when she says it, I laugh and say I'm a bouncer. I don't know what she'd say now. Probably that I'm an art expert. You watch. Give her two weeks and she'll be on at me to write to *Antiques Roadshow*. I don't know what world she lives in sometimes. I think it's something to do with the dentist's. She meets all these people, and they're loaded, and as thick as me, half of them, and she gets confused about what's possible and what's not.

But like I said, it wasn't the hours at the club. There were a couple of nasty moments recently, and I told her about them because they frightened me, so of course she did her nut, and I promised her I'd pack it in. See, the trouble is now, it doesn't matter how handy you are. I mean, half of those kids who went down Casablanca's, I literally could pick them up by the neck with one hand, and when you can do that . . . Put it this way, I didn't need to change my underpants too often. (I do anyway, though, every day, in case you're thinking I'm an unhygienic bastard.) But now everyone's toolled up. No one says, I'm going to have you. They all say, I'm going to cut you, or I'm going to stab you, and I'm going, yeah, yeah, and then they show you what they've got, and you think, fucking hell, this isn't funny any more. Because how can you look after yourself if someone's got a knife? You can't. Anyway, about a month ago I threw this nasty little piece of work out of the club because he'd pushed it too far with a girl who was in there with her mates. And to be honest I probably slapped

him once more than was strictly necessary, because he really got on my fucking nerves. And the next thing I know, he's got this . . . this thing, this . . . I've never seen anything like it before, but it was a sort of spike, about six inches long, sharp as fuck and rusty, and he starts jabbing it at me and telling me that I was dead. I was lucky, because he was scared, and he was holding this thing all wrong so it was pointing down at the ground instead of towards me, so I kicked his hand as hard as I fucking could and he dropped it, and I jumped on him. We called the police and they nicked him, but when they'd gone I knocked off. I'd had enough. I know what people think: they think that if that's the sort of job you choose, you're asking for whatever you get, and you probably want it, too, because you're a big ape who likes hurting people. Well, bollocks. I don't like hurting people. For me, a good night at Casablanca's is one where nothing's happened at all. I mean, OK, I'll probably have to stop a couple of people coming in because they're underage, or bombed out of their brains, but I see my job as allowing people to have a good time without fear of arseholes. Really, I do. I mean, OK, I'm not Mother Teresa or anything, I'm not doing good works or saving the world, but it's not such a shitty job if you look at it like that. But I'm a family man. I can't have people waving rusty spikes at me at two in the morning. I don't want to die outside some poxy club. So I told Lisa about it, and we talked, and I packed it in. I was lucky, because I was only out of work for a fortnight. They wouldn't let me draw the dole because I'd left my previous employment voluntarily. 'But this geezer had a rusty spike,' I said. 'Well, you should have taken it up with your employers,' she said. Like they would have offered me a desk job. Or given the kid with a spike a written warning. It didn't matter much, though, 'cos I found this one pretty much straight away, at an employment bureau. The money's a lot less, but the hours are better. I was well chuffed. How hard can it be, I thought, standing in front of a painting?

So. We had the induction hour, and then we were led through the gallery to our positions. On the way I was trying to work out

whether I'd ever been in an art gallery before or not. You'd think I'd remember, but the trouble is, art galleries look exactly like you think they're going to look – a load of corridors with pictures hanging on them and people wandering around. So how would I know if I've been to one before? It feels like I have, but maybe I've just seen one on the telly, or in the films – there's that bit in *Dressed to Kill*, isn't there, where that bloke's trying to pick her up, and they keep seeing each other in different rooms. I can say this for sure, though: I've never had a good time in one. If I have ever been, it was on a school trip, and I was bored out of my skull, like on just about every school trip I was taken. The only one I remember now is when we went to some Roman ruins somewhere, and I nicked a few stones out of this mosaic thing. I stood on the edge and loosened a few with my foot, and while the teacher was talking, I crouched down as if to do up my shoelace and slipped a few in my pocket. And when we got back on the coach, I showed all the other lads what I'd done, and it turned out they'd all done exactly the same, and we were holding half the fucking floor in our hands. And the next thing we knew the bloke in charge of the place was chasing the coach down the street, and we all had to go to the front and put what we'd nicked into a carrier bag. We got in a lot of trouble for that. Anyway, what I reckon is we did go to an art gallery somewhere, and I don't remember because nobody walked off with a painting.

The thing is, this gallery's like the normal sort of gallery for the first few rooms – pictures of fruit and all that, and then it starts to go weird. First we went through a couple of rooms where the pictures aren't pictures of anything, just splodges, and then when we get to our bit, the new exhibition, there aren't many pictures at all. There are bits of animals all over the place, and a tent, and ping-pong balls floating on air currents, and a small house made of concrete, and videos of people reading poetry. It looks more like a school open day than an art gallery. You know, biology here, science there, English over at the back, media studies next to the toilets . . .

'I could have done any of these myself,' said this miserable old git called Tommy who'd already moaned once about the length of the coffee breaks. 'Yeah, you could now, you old cunt,' I said to him. 'Now you've seen them. Anyone could now. But you didn't think of it. So you're too late.' I was pleased with that. I pinched it off of a teacher at school, apart from the 'you old cunt' bit. That's mine. We were reading this poem at school, and some kid said exactly the same thing as Tommy – 'I could have done that.' Because it was an easy poem. It was short, and we knew all the words, and it didn't rhyme. And the teacher said, 'No, you couldn't. You could now, because you could just copy it out. But you didn't think of it.' I thought that was smart. Anyway, Tommy hasn't spoken to me since I called him an old cunt, and I'm glad.

I don't give a fuck about whether it's art, or who could do it. The thing is, it isn't boring, our gallery. The other rooms, with the pictures of cows in, they're boring. But our rooms, with the actual cows in, all cut up, they're not. There's got to be a lesson in there somewhere, hasn't there? It wouldn't work for everything, though, I can see that. I mean, it works for cows and tents and small houses, but it wouldn't work for, like, the fucking river. You'd still have to do a painting of that.

Anyway. Our group was getting smaller and smaller, because the woman taking us to our positions was sort of dropping us off, like we were in her bus. And it turned out that I was the last passenger. Like when me and Lisa went on a dodgy package holiday to Spain, years and years ago, before the kids came, and there was a coach to pick us all up at the airport, and every other bastard got dropped off at their hotel before we did, because it turned out that our hotel was two miles from the fucking beach. My painting was sort of the same thing as that. It was off to the side, in a room all of its own, and there was a curtain across the entrance, so it was separate from the others. Outside, there was a sign that said: 'WARNING! This room contains an exhibit of a controversial nature. Please do not enter if you feel you might be offended. Over 18s only'. The woman didn't say anything about

that. She just ignored it – never asked me if I might be offended. 'You're in here,' she said. 'Watch out. We're expecting trouble.' And then she went off.

I went behind the curtain, and there on the far wall was this massive picture of Jesus. I'd say it was probably ten feet high, five or six feet wide, something like that. It's kind of like the pictures you've seen before – eyes closed, the old crown of thorns on his head. That was when he was on the cross, wasn't it? It's sort of a close-up, head and shoulders, so you only see a bit of the cross, but what this picture has that the normal ones don't – not to me they don't, anyway – is that you can really tell just how much it must have fucking hurt, being nailed up. Usually, it looks like he's having a kip, but this one, his face is all screwed up in agony. You really wouldn't want to be in his shoes. I'll tell you. So the first thing I thought was, bloody hell, that's a good picture. Because it makes you think, and I don't often think about things like that. I haven't been anywhere near Jesus since Lisa's sister got married, three years ago.

And the second thing I thought – I'd forgotten about the sign and the curtain and all that for a moment – was, who the fuck would get offended by that? Because you can go into any church and see the same sort of thing. Not so realistic, maybe, a bit more PG than R, but, you know, basically the same sort of stuff: moustache and beard, crown of thorns, sad. Because you can't tell how it's done from a distance, see. When you step behind the curtain, you just see the picture, and the face. You have to get quite close up to see anything else. So I couldn't understand it, why there was all the fuss. I just thought: religious people. Nutters. 'Cos they are, most of them, aren't they? I mean, to each his own and everything, but you wouldn't want to marry one, would you?

There's a chair in front of the picture, and I walked towards it to have a sit-down. And as I got closer, I could see that the picture was made up of hundreds – thousands, maybe millions – of little squares, like the mosaics I pinched from the Roman ruins. And

when I got really close, I could see that these millions of little squares were actually little pictures, and every single little picture had at least one female breast in it. So . . . you know those pictures that are made up of dots? Well, that's how this Jesus picture was done, except all the dots are nipples. And that's what the picture's called – *NippleJesus*. There were big breasts and small breasts, and big nipples and small nipples, and black breasts and white breasts. And some of the pictures had as many as four breasts in them, and I could see then that all of the pictures were stiffs from porn mags, and he'd cut them all up and stuck them on. Must have taken him years. So now I understood what the sign was about.

I hated the picture then. Two minutes ago I'd liked it, now I hated it. And I hated the bloke who'd done it, too. Wanker. I went to have a look at the name of the artist, and it turned out to be a woman. Martha Marsham. How can you be a woman and do that? I thought. I could have understood some bloke doing it, some bloke with too many dirty magazines and no girlfriend. But a bird? And I hoped that someone did manage to fuck the picture up somehow, and if they did, I said to myself, I wouldn't try to stop them. I might even give them a hand. Because that is offensive, isn't it, a Jesus made out of nipples? That's out of order.

One thing I forgot to say before: this was about six o'clock in the evening, and the exhibition hadn't opened to the public yet. It was opening the next day, but we'd been called in to do the first-night party. I was actually still looking at all the little pictures when the first people came in, holding wine glasses. I felt a bit of a tosser, like I'd been caught looking at dirty pictures, which is actually what I was doing, if you think about it. Or even if you don't. I stopped looking, quick, and stood by the chair with my hands behind my back, looking straight ahead, like I was on sentry duty, while these two people, a man and a woman, looked at the picture.

'It's rather lovely, isn't it?' said the woman. She was about my age, short hair, quite posh.

'Is it?' The bloke didn't seem too sure, so I decided I liked him more than her, even though he had floppy hair and braces and a suit.

'Don't you think?'

He shrugged, and they left the room. There was none of that stuff, the stuff they take the piss out of in TV comedies, where they stroke their chins and talk bollocks. (There never is, in my experience, which has now lasted two days. Most people don't say anything much. They look and they go. If you ask me they're scared of talking bollocks, which pisses me off, because once I was sat here for a while I wanted the bollocks. Something to laugh at. But there isn't any.) The next couple were younger, early twenties, studenty types, and they were more interested in me than the picture.

'Fucking hell,' said the bloke.

'What?'

'Look at him.'

And the girl looked at me, and laughed. It was like I was part of the exhibition, and I couldn't hear what they were saying.

'Well,' she said. 'Can you blame them?'

And then they went, too. By this stage, I was starting to feel a bit sorry for this Martha woman. I mean, you spend fucking who knows how long doing this thing and people come in here, look at me, laugh, and then fuck off again. I might ask her for half her royalties, or whatever it is she gets.

The moment the students left, the curtain swished back, and I heard this woman's voice going 'Ta-ra!', and then a whole group of people came in – two younger guys, an older couple, and a young woman.

'Oh, Martha,' the older woman said. 'It's amazing. That'll get them going.' So I looked at the group, and straight away I guessed it was her mum and dad, her boyfriend, and maybe her brother. Martha is about thirty, and she doesn't really look like I thought she'd look – no dyed hair, no pierced nose, nothing like that. She looks normal, really. She was wearing this long, green, sort of

Indian skirt and what looked like a bloke's pinstripe jacket, and she's got long hair, but . . . she's nice-looking. Friendly.

I wondered for a moment whether her mum and dad knew about the nipples and all that, because I liked the picture when I first came into the room. But then I realized that was stupid, and she would have told them something about it before they came, or ages and ages ago. So what kind of parents were these? I know what I would have got if I'd told my dad I was making a picture of Jesus out of women's breasts. He probably would have wanted to see the breasts, but he would have given me a pasting for the Jesus bit. So I looked at Martha's mum and dad and tried to work them out. Her dad was tall, and wearing jeans, and he had long grey hair in a ponytail; her mum was wearing jeans too, but she looked a bit more like somebody's mother than he looked like somebody's father. They all looked like they were artists, though. They looked like they all sat around at home smoking dope and painting. Which was why no one had given her a back-hander for making a Jesus out of porn, probably.

'I want a photo,' Martha said. 'With all of us in it.' And then she looked at me. 'Do you mind?'

'No,' I said.

'I'm Martha, by the way.'

'Dave.'

'Hello, Dave.' We shook hands, and then she gave me her camera, and I took a picture of them all, standing there grinning and pointing, and I didn't know whether it was right, what with the kind of picture it was. But at that precise moment, I wished that I knew them better, or people like them, because they seemed nice, and happy, and interesting. I wanted a dad with a grey ponytail instead of a miserable old git who was always going on about the fucking Irish and the fucking blacks; it seemed to me that if I'd had a dad like that, I wouldn't have ended up going into the Army, which was the worst mistake I ever made.

I wanted to ask them questions. I wanted to ask her, Martha,

why she'd wanted to do what she'd done, and why it had to be nipples, and why it had to be Jesus, and whether she actually wanted to upset people. And I wanted to ask them whether they were ashamed of her, or proud of her, or what. But I didn't ask anything, and nothing they said made me any the wiser; after the photos they talked about where they were going to eat, and whether someone else that they knew had come to the party, and then that sort of thing. Before they went, Martha came over to me and kissed me on the cheek, and said, 'Thank you.' And I went, you know, 'Oh, that's OK.' But I was really pleased that she'd done it. It made me feel special, like I had a proper, important job to do.

Martha smiled, and I was left on my own again.

I told Lisa about the picture when I got home that night, after the party. She couldn't believe it – she said it was disgusting, and how come it was on the wall in a famous gallery. For some reason I found myself sort of defending it, taking Martha's side. I don't know why. Maybe I fancied her a bit, maybe I liked the look of her family – maybe I trusted them, and, like, took my lead from them. Because I knew they were nice people, and if they didn't see anything wrong with *NippleJesus*, then maybe there wasn't anything. And anyway, the stuff that Lisa was coming out with . . . It was just plain ignorant. 'You should take it outside when no one's looking and smash it to bits,' she said.

'After all that work she's put in?' I said.

'That's got nothing to do with it,' she said. 'I mean, Hitler put in a lot of work, didn't he?'

'What harm is she doing you?' I asked her. 'You don't have to go and look at it.'

'Well, I don't like knowing it's there,' she said. 'And I paid for it. Out of my taxes.'

Out of her taxes! How much of her taxes went towards *NippleJesus*? She sounded like one of those lunatics you hear on

radio phone-ins. I got twopence out of my pocket and threw it at her. 'There,' I said, 'there's your tax back. And you're making a profit.'

'What you gone all like this for?' she asked.

'Because I think it's good,' I said. 'Clever.'

Lisa didn't think it was clever. She thought it was stupid. And I thought she was stupid, and told her, and by the time we went to bed we weren't speaking to each other.

So yesterday morning, I get on the bus to go to work, and I pick up the paper that someone's left on the seat, and there it is, my painting, all over page seven. 'PROTESTERS TARGET SICK PICTURE', it says, and then there's all this stuff about what a disgrace it is, and people from the Church and the Conservative party going on about how it shouldn't be allowed, and someone from the police saying that they might want to interview Martha and maybe press charges of obscenity. And I read it, and I think, I've never been in the news before. Because it is me, sort of. That's my room there, my private space, and I've even started to think of the picture as mine, in a weird sort of way. Probably no one apart from Martha has spent as long looking at it as I have, and that makes me feel protective of it, kind of thing. (Which is just as well, when you think about it, seeing as that's my job.) I don't like these people saying it's sick, because it is and it isn't, and I don't like the police saying they're going to charge Martha with obscenity, and I don't like the idea that they're going to take it out of the exhibition, because it says outside the door that you shouldn't go in if you think you might not like it. So why go in? I want people to see what I saw: something that's beautiful if you look at it in one way, from a distance, and ugly if you look at it in another, close up. (Sometimes I feel that way about Lisa. When she walks into the room when we're just about to go out, and she's got her make-up on and she's done her hair and that, you'd think she could be a model. And sometimes I wake up in the night and I roll over and she's an inch away from me, and she's got bad breath

and she's snoring a bit, and you'd think . . . Well, never mind what you'd think, but you wouldn't think she'd make much of a model, anyway. So maybe Martha's picture, it's sort of like that a bit.) But if these people have their way, no one's going to see anything, and that can't be right. Not after all that work. All that cutting up and sticking on.

Did you know you couldn't smoke in an art gallery? Neither did I. Fucking hell.

When I got there, there was already a crowd outside. Some of them were people queuing to see the exhibition, and some of them were protesters – they had placards and they were singing hymns – and there were TV crews, and photographers, and it all looked a bit of a mess. I just pushed through them and knocked on the front door and showed my pass through the glass and one of the guys let me in.

'You're in for a busy day,' one of the others said when I went to change into my gear, and I thought, yeah, I'm looking forward to this.

Nothing much happened at first. A steady stream of people came in and looked, and a couple of them sort of clucked, but what's really clever about the picture is that you have to get close up to get offended, because if you stand at the back of the room you can't see anything apart from the face of Christ. So it makes the cluckers look like right plonkers, because they have to go and shove their nose up against the painting to see the nipples, and you end up thinking they're perverts. You know, first they have to ignore the sign on the door telling them not to go in, and then they have to walk the length of the room, and then they go, 'Oh, disgusting.' So they're really looking out for it.

After about an hour, I got my first nutter. He looked like a nutter: he had chunks missing from his hair, like he'd been eaten by moths, and he wore these huge specs, and he kept blinking, like

some demented owl. And he dressed like a nutter too: even though it was a hot day, he was wearing a winter coat covered in badges that said things like 'DON'T FOLLOW ME - I'M LOST TOO' and 'I'M A SUGAR PUFFS HONEY MONSTER'. He stank, and all. So it wasn't like he was hard to spot. He wasn't an *undercover* nutter, if you know what I mean.

He stared at the picture for a couple of minutes, and then he dropped to his knees and started praying. It was all, 'Heavenly father who gave his only son Jesus Christ to us so that we might be saved please deliver us blah blah blah', but what was weird was, you couldn't work out whether he was praying because he was looking at Christ, or whether he was praying like they prayed in *The Exorcist*, to get rid of the demons in the room, sort of thing. Anyway, after a little while I got pissed off with it and made up a rule.

'I'm sorry sir. We don't allow kneeling in the galleries,' I said.

'I'm praying for your immortal soul,' he said.

'I don't know about that, sir, but we don't allow kneeling. No flash photography, no sandwiches, no kneeling.'

He stood up and carried on muttering, so I told him praying was out, too.

'Don't you care?' he said.

'About what, sir?'

'Don't you care about where you are going?'

'And where's that?'

'To hell, man! Where serpents will suck on your eyeballs and flames will lick your internal organs for all eternity?'

'Not really, sir. What I meant was, I didn't think I was going to be sent to hell. Not for standing in front of a picture, anyway.'

You don't really want to go down that road, the eyeball-sucking road, do you? It's not very... *cheerful*, is it? I mean, what must it be like to be this geezer? And what's he doing here? Does he just wander around looking for stuff that's going to make him blink and drop to his knees and mutter away? Does he spend all his life wandering around Soho and King's Cross? Because if he does, then

no wonder he's a nutter. If you don't spend any time playing with your kids (and I'll tell you, this is not a bloke with kids), or drinking with your mates (and I'll bet mates are a bit thin on the ground as well), or watching *Frasier* (I like *Frasier*)... you're going to end up like him, aren't you?

Just as I was wondering what I was going to do with him, a couple of women came in and he scuttled off, and things went quiet for a while. But then just before my lunch break, just as I was starting to think that it was going to be an aggro-free day after all, a bloke walks in wearing a dog-collar. A fucking vicar! He was younger than most vicars, and a bit trendier, too - he had a sort of Hugh Grant floppy haircut, and he was wearing jeans. He came into the room and stopped and stared, and I knew, because I knew all the angles and distances by now, that he couldn't see anything from where he was stood. Or rather, he could see Christ, but he couldn't see the nipples. So when he started to walk down towards the picture, I started to walk towards him, to block him off, and we stood there almost nose-to-nose.

'Why do you want to do that, your honour?' I asked him. 'Why don't you just stay where you are?'

'I have to make up my own mind,' he said.

'You know what's there,' I said. 'Everyone knows what's there now. Why do you have to go and look at it? Stay where you are. Look. It's beautiful.'

'How can anything made out of pornography be beautiful?'

For a moment I wanted to get into a whole different argument. This isn't porn, I wanted to tell him. This is just page 3 stuff. Porn is what we used to watch in the Army, with dogs and lesbians with strap-ons and all that, but you don't want to be talking to a vicar about sex with dogs, do you? I didn't, anyway.

He moved to his right to get by me, so I moved to my left, and then we did the same dance the other way round. He was getting annoyed now, and in the end I had to let him through; otherwise I swear it would have all gone off, and I would have been fired for decking him.

'Happy now?' I said after he'd been there a while.

'Why did she do it, do you think?'

'I wouldn't know, your honour. But she's a very nice, young lady.'

'That makes it even sadder, then.'

Nor to me it doesn't, I thought. If it had been made by a seedy old git whose hobby was looking up women's skirts, then that's one story, but it's different when you've seen what Martha is like, the kind of person she is. You end up sort of trusting her, and trusting what she does, and why. I did, anyway. I can see that wouldn't work for everyone. It wouldn't make a lot of difference to the nutter, for example.

'I think you've been here long enough now,' I said to the vicar. This was completely out of order, of course, but the truth was I was sick of him, and I didn't want him in my room any more.

'I beg your pardon?'

'We've been told to watch out for people who stay here more than five minutes. You know, perverts and that.' That did the trick.

If I'd just read about *NippleJesus* in the paper, or seen it on the news, I'd have thought it was wrong, no question. Sick. Stupid. Waste of taxpayers' money. (You always say that even if you've got no idea if taxpayers pay for it or not, whatever it is, don't you?) And then I'd never have thought about it again, probably. But it's more complicated when you actually stand by it all day. And now I still don't know what I think of it, really, but what's so great about the nutter and the kinky vicar and all the other people who came to have a look that first morning is that they make up your mind for you about whose side you're on. I'm not on theirs, that's for sure, and the longer I have to spend with these wankers the more I hate them. It's so simple, really. The nice ones like the picture, and they get it, and they have a look at how it's done but that's not why they're staring; the horrible ones come in, gaze for hours at the tits, moan to each other (or, if they're really mad, to

themselves) . . . You don't need to work out what you think. You just need to have a look at what other people think. And if you don't like the look of them, then think the opposite.

No sooner had the vicar gone than a whole fucking zoo turns up. I recognize a couple of the monkeys in it: there's this woman politician I'm sure I've seen on TV, that fat one who's always banging on about the family and all that, and she's brought a TV crew with her. The interviewer is that bloke who does the local news on the BBC. You'd probably recognize him too – smoothy, sharp suits, fake tan. Anyway, you should have heard this woman. She was calling for Martha to be sent to prison, for the people who put on the exhibition to, I don't know, have their licence taken away or something . . . And the smoothy geezer was just egging her on. 'You've been campaigning very hard for a return to family values, and presumably this kind of thing doesn't help your cause . . .' Snuff like that. When they'd finished I wandered over to the interviewer and had a word with him, just to wind him up, sort of thing.

'So,' I said. 'You getting someone else to say something?'

'How'd you mean?'

'Well, you can't have just her, can you?' She was standing about two feet away, having her microphone taken off, so I knew she could hear me. She turned round and looked at me.

'We'll be talking to the artist, too,' said the presenter. 'She should be here in a second.'

'Did you do a close-up of the painting?'

'I would imagine so,' he said. All sarcastic, like I was being thick.

'So you're going to show thousands of nipples on the local news? My kids watch that.'

'Do they?' he said, like he didn't believe me. Like no one with a skinhead haircut could have kids who watched anything but football. Cheeky bastard. OK, my kids don't watch the news, but that's because they're too young, not because they're too thick. Wanker.

When Martha turned up, I realized I sort of had a crush on her. She looked great – fresh, and friendly, and young, and she was wearing this bright lime-green T-shirt that added to the freshness. The politician was wearing this dark suit, and she had a hard face anyway, and Martha makes her look old and cruel. She said hello to me, and asked me how it was going, and I told her about the nutter and the vicar, and she just smiled.

The interviewer didn't like her, I could tell. He asked her whether she minded offending so many people, and she said she didn't think she had, only one or two. And he asked her what the point of the picture was, and she said that she didn't want to have to explain it, she thought it could explain itself, if she could tell everyone what it meant then she would have just written the meaning down, she wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of sticking all the nipples on the paper. And the interviewer said, well, some people wish you hadn't bothered, and she said, well, it's a free country.

I was disappointed, to be honest. I was hoping she'd talk about how beautiful the picture was – how holy, sort of thing. And I wanted her to explain that if you wanted to see the nipples you really had to get up close, like the vicar had to, and what kind of vicar you were if you wanted to do that. And I wanted to hear why she'd done it, too. I mean, there had to be an idea behind it, didn't there? A meaning, kind of thing. It's not just something you'd wake up in the morning and do, is it? You know, 'What am I going to do with all these pairs of breasts I've been cutting out?' Oh, I might as well turn them into a picture of Christ on the cross . . .

Maybe they should have interviewed me. Like I said, maybe I've thought more about this picture than anyone. Because she doesn't know, Martha. She hasn't seen it in action, like I have. And she hasn't spent any time standing in front of it, watching people looking at it. Perhaps she should; then she'd be able to say things about it in interviews.

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Just before we closed, the smelly nutter with the badges came back with an egg, and tried to throw it at the picture. I saw it coming a mile off, and I grabbed his arm just as he was raising it, and the egg travelled about two feet and landed splat on the floor. It was so pathetic it made me laugh, and I remembered the kid with the rusty spike outside the club, and why I'd packed that job in; it's hard to be scared by a scrawny weirdo with an egg. I was still angry though, so I didn't let go of him after he'd thrown it – I pinned his arm behind his back with more violence than I needed, and he started yelling. I marched him out, and down the corridor towards the front entrance. I hated the fucker so much that I got carried away a bit – I was twisting his arm and calling him all the names under the sun, and he said he was going to sue me and report me to the police and he wasn't going to pray for my soul and he hoped that all the agonies of damnation were heaped upon me. Pillock.

But he knew what he was doing. As I was shoving the nutter down the corridor, there was a commotion behind me, shouting and crashing and alarms going off and then the sound of running. I let the nutter go and went back to my picture, and a couple of the other security guards were in there staring at the floor. Someone had fucked *NippleJesus* over good and proper. They'd taken it off the wall and stomped all over it and then fucked off. There wasn't hardly anything left of it.

I felt like crying. Really. I'd let Martha down, and I'd been stupid to leave the room, and it was only when I saw the picture smashed up on the floor that I finally realized how much I loved it. But I'll tell you something else, something really weird: seeing Christ on the floor with his face all smashed in like that . . . It was really shocking. What they'd done was much more blasphemous than anything Martha had done. I wonder if they'd thought about that when they were doing it? Whether they'd had any moment of doubt, or fear? Because, I'll tell you, if I was religious, and I thought that there was a hell where serpents suck your eyeballs out and all that, I wouldn't go round stomping all over Jesus's

face. Jesus is Jesus, isn't he? No matter what you make him out of. And maybe that's one of the things Martha was trying to get at: Christ is where you find him.

Some people from the gallery turned up, people I'd seen at the party the night before but no one who'd ever bothered to speak to me. And I told them about the nutter and the eggs, and how I shouldn't have left my post but I did, and they didn't seem to blame me much. And then a copper came, and I told him the same stuff. He seemed to think it was funny, though. He didn't laugh or anything, but you could tell that it was low down on his list of crimes to solve.

And then Martha came in. I walked towards her because I wanted to hug her, but I worked out just in time that my relationship with her was not the same as her relationship with me, if you see what I mean. I've spent a lot of time over the last couple of days thinking about her, because of my job, but she couldn't have spent much time thinking about me, could she? Anyway. I didn't hug her. I just went over to her and said, you know, I'm sorry and all that, but she didn't seem to hear me. She just stared at the picture on the floor, and said, 'Oh my God', which considering the circumstances was about right.

And when she looked up again, her face was all lit up. She was thrilled to bits, excited like a kid. I couldn't believe it.

'This is perfect,' she said. 'Brilliant.'

'How'd you mean?' I said, because I didn't get it.

'Who did this? Did you see?'

So I told her about the smelly nutter with the eggs, and how I thought he'd done me, wound me up to get me out of the room so his nutter mates could do their stuff, and she loved it. She loved the whole story. 'Perfect,' she kept saying. 'Fantastic.' And then: 'I can't wait to see the video.'

And I was, like, 'What video?', and she pointed out the CCTV camera up in the corner of the room.

'That's part of it,' she said. 'That's part of the exhibition. What I was hoping was that someone would come in and do this on day

one, and on day two we could show the film, and . . . I'm going to call it *Intolerance*.'

And I thought about the vicar, and the politician, and all the other people who'd come in and struck their noses up close and then said how disgusted they were and how shocking it was and I could see that it would be a bit of a laugh for people to see them on the telly. But that was all it was, really, a bit of a laugh.

'So that was the idea?' I said. 'Someone would come in and smash it up?'

'Put it this way,' she said. 'I'd have been stuffed if they hadn't. I'd have been struck with a portrait of Jesus made out of breasts, and what use is that to anyone? It's Dave, isn't it? Well, Dave. Art is about provocation. Getting a reaction from people. And I've done it. I'm an artist.'

I remembered the party, when she thanked me, and I asked her why she'd done that if all she wanted was for someone to smash it up. But she didn't remember thanking me. So I said, you must remember, last night, at the party. When I took your photo, and you came over and kissed me on the cheek and said 'Thank you'. And she shrugged, and said, 'Oh, yeah. I was thanking you for the photo, I think.' Like it wasn't a big deal. Which it clearly wasn't, I can see now. I suppose if you're an artist, it doesn't mean anything: kissing someone on the cheek. They do it all the time. 'Twenty Marlboro Lights, please.' Kiss. 'Leicester Square, please.' Mmmmm. It doesn't mean, oh thank you for the important and dangerous job you're doing, obviously. Silly cow. I should have just stood there. I shouldn't have gone out with the smelly nutter with the egg. Because, if you think about it . . . The only reason it got smashed up was because I cared about it too much. I could have just stood there, stopped the eggs, got rid of the nutter; but he'd got on my nerves, he'd tried to damage my picture – *my* picture – and I wanted to make sure he left the building; maybe give him a couple of digs at the same time. Which is why I wasn't in the room when it got broken. So. She wouldn't understand this, but she needed me for her film as much as she needed them.

number 49, I never asked her 'Why me? Why do you need a big bloke in the Southern?' I just trotted off, like a berk. I never thought for a moment that I was on some sort of special mission.

I took this job because I promised Lisa I'd give up the night work at the club. It wasn't so much the hours – ten till three Monday to Thursday, ten till five Friday and Saturday, club closed on Sunday. OK, they fucked the weekends up, and I never saw the kids in the morning, but I could pick them up from school, give them their tea, and Lisa didn't have to worry about childcare or anything. She works in a dentist's near Harley Street, decent job, nice boss, good pay, normal hours, and with me being off all day, we could manage. I mean, it wasn't ideal, 'cos I never really saw her – by the time the kids were down and we'd had something to eat, it was time for me to put the monkey-suit on and go out. But we both sort of knew it was just a phase, and I'd do something else eventually, although fuck knows what. Never really thought about that. She asks me sometimes what I'd do if I had the choice, and I always tell her I'd be Tiger Woods – millions of dollars a week, afternoons knocking a golf ball about in places like Spain and Florida, gorgeous blonde girlfriends (except I never mention that bit). And she says, no, seriously, and I say, I am being serious, and she says, no, you've got to be realistic. So I say, well what's the point of this game, then? You're asking me what I'd do if I had the choice, and I tell you, and then you tell me I haven't got the fucking choice. So what am I supposed to say? And she says, but you're too old to be a professional golfer – and she's right, I'm thirty-eight now – and you smoke too much. (Like you can't play fucking golf if you smoke.) Choose something else. And I say, OK, then, I'll be fucking Richard Branson. And she says, well you can't just start by being Richard Branson. You have to do something first. And I say, OK, I'll be a bouncer first. And she gives up.

I know she means well, and I know she's trying to get me to think about my life, and about getting older and all that, but the truth is, I'm thirty-eight, I've got no trade and no qualifications,

and I'm lucky to get a job headbutting cokeheads outside a club. She's great, Lisa, and if you think about it, even her asking the question shows that she loves me and thinks the world of me, because she really does think I've got choices, and someone else is going to have as much faith in me as she does. She wants me to say, oh, I'd like to run a DIY shop, or I'd like to be an accountant, and the next day she'd come back with a load of leaflets, but I don't want to run a DIY shop, and I don't want to be an accountant. I know what my talent is: my talent is being big, and I'm making the most of it. If anyone asks her what I do, she says I'm a security consultant, but if I'm around when she says it, I laugh and say I'm a bouncer. I don't know what she'd say now. Probably that I'm an art expert. You watch. Give her two weeks and she'll be on at me to write to *Antiques Roadshow*. I don't know what world she lives in sometimes. I think it's something to do with the dentist's. She meets all these people, and they're loaded, and as thick as me, half of them, and she gets confused about what's possible and what's not.

But like I said, it wasn't the hours at the club. There were a couple of nasty moments recently, and I told her about them because they frightened me, so of course she did her nut, and I promised her I'd pack it in. See, the trouble is now, it doesn't matter how handy you are. I mean, half of those kids who went down Casablanca's, I literally could pick them up by the neck with one hand, and when you can do that... Put it this way, I didn't need to change my underpants too often. (I do anyway, though, every day, in case you're thinking I'm an unhygienic bastard.) But now everyone's toolled up. No one says, I'm going to have you. They all say, I'm going to cut you, or I'm going to stab you, and I'm going, yeah, yeah, and then they show you what they've got, and you think, fucking hell, this isn't funny any more. Because how can you look after yourself if someone's got a knife? You can't. Anyway, about a month ago I threw this nasty little piece of work out of the club because he'd pushed it too far with a girl who was in there with her mates. And to be honest I probably slapped

him once more than was strictly necessary, because he really got on my fucking nerves. And the next thing I know, he's got this . . . this thing, this . . . I've never seen anything like it before, but it was a sort of spike, about six inches long, sharp as fuck and rusty, and he starts jabbing it at me and telling me that I was dead. I was lucky, because he was scared, and he was holding this thing all wrong so it was pointing down at the ground instead of towards me, so I kicked his hand as hard as I fucking could and he dropped it, and I jumped on him. We called the police and they nicked him, but when they'd gone I knocked off. I'd had enough. I know what people think: they think that if that's the sort of job you choose, you're asking for whatever you get, and you probably want it, too, because you're a big ape who likes hurting people. Well, bollocks. I don't like hurting people. For me, a good night at Casablanca's is one where nothing's happened at all. I mean, OK, I'll probably have to stop a couple of people coming in because they're underage, or bombed out of their brains, but I see my job as allowing people to have a good time without fear of arseholes. Really, I do. I mean, OK, I'm not Mother Teresa or anything. I'm not doing good works or saving the world, but it's not such a shirty job if you look at it like that. But I'm a family man. I can't have people waving rusty spikes at me at two in the morning. I don't want to die outside some poxy club. So I told Lisa about it, and we talked, and I packed it in. I was lucky, because I was only out of work for a fortnight. They wouldn't let me draw the dole because I'd left my previous employment voluntarily. 'But this geezer had a rusty spike,' I said. 'Well, you should have taken it up with your employers,' she said. Like they would have offered me a desk job. Or given the kid with a spike a written warning. It didn't matter much, though, 'cos I found this one pretty much straight away, at an employment bureau. The money's a lot less, but the hours are better. I was well chuffed. How hard can it be, I thought, standing in front of a painting?

So. We had the induction hour, and then we were led through the gallery to our positions. On the way I was trying to work out

whether I'd ever been in an art gallery before or not. You'd think I'd remember, but the trouble is, art galleries look exactly like you think they're going to look – a load of corridors with pictures hanging on them and people wandering around. So how would I know if I've been to one before? It feels like I have, but maybe I've just seen one on the telly, or in the films – there's that bit in *Dressed to Kill*, isn't there, where that bloke's trying to pick her up, and they keep seeing each other in different rooms. I can say this for sure, though: I've never had a good time in one. If I have ever been, it was on a school trip, and I was bored out of my skull, like on just about every school trip I was taken. The only one I remember now is when we went to some Roman ruins somewhere, and I nicked a few stones out of this mosaic thing. I stood on the edge and loosened a few with my foot, and while the teacher was talking, I crouched down as if to do up my shoelace and slipped a few in my pocket. And when we got back on the coach, I showed all the other lads what I'd done, and it turned out they'd all done exactly the same, and we were holding half the fucking floor in our hands. And the next thing we knew the bloke in charge of the place was chasing the coach down the street, and we all had to go to the front and put what we'd nicked into a carrier bag. We got in a lot of trouble for that. Anyway, what I reckon is we did go to an art gallery somewhere, and I don't remember because nobody walked off with a painting.

The thing is, this gallery's like the normal sort of gallery for the first few rooms – pictures of fruit and all that, and then it starts to go weird. First we went through a couple of rooms where the pictures aren't pictures of anything, just splodges, and then when we get to our bit, the new exhibition, there aren't many pictures at all. There are bits of animals all over the place, and a tent, and ping-pong balls floating on air currents, and a small house made of concrete, and videos of people reading poetry. It looks more like a school open day than an art gallery. You know, biology here, science there, English over at the back, media studies next to the toilets . . .

'I could have done any of these myself,' said this miserable old git called Tommy who'd already moaned once about the length of the coffee breaks. 'Yeah, you could now, you old cunt,' I said to him. 'Now you've seen them. Anyone could now. But you didn't think of it. So you're too late.' I was pleased with that. I pinched it off of a teacher at school, apart from the 'you old cunt' bit. That's mine. We were reading this poem at school, and some kid said exactly the same thing as Tommy – 'I could have done that.' Because it was an easy poem. It was short, and we knew all the words, and it didn't rhyme. And the teacher said, 'No, you couldn't. You could now, because you could just copy it out. But you didn't think of it.' I thought that was smart. Anyway, Tommy hasn't spoken to me since I called him an old cunt, and I'm glad.

I don't give a fuck about whether it's art, or who could do it. The thing is, it isn't boring, our gallery. The other rooms, with the pictures of cows in, they're boring. But our rooms, with the actual cows in, all cut up, they're not. There's got to be a lesson in there somewhere, hasn't there? It wouldn't work for everything, though, I can see that. I mean, it works for cows and tents and small houses, but it wouldn't work for, like, the fucking river. You'd still have to do a painting of that.

Anyway. Our group was getting smaller and smaller, because the woman taking us to our positions was sort of dropping us off, like we were in her bus. And it turned out that I was the last passenger. Like when me and Lisa went on a dodgy package holiday to Spain, years and years ago, before the kids came, and there was a coach to pick us all up at the airport, and every other bastard got dropped off at their hotel before we did, because it turned out that our hotel was two miles from the fucking beach. My painting was sort of the same thing as that. It was off to the side, in a room all of its own, and there was a curtain across the entrance, so it was separate from the others. Outside, there was a sign that said: 'WARNING! This room contains an exhibit of a controversial nature. Please do not enter if you feel you might be offended. Over 18s only'. The woman didn't say anything about

that. She just ignored it – never asked me if I might be offended. 'You're in here,' she said. 'Watch out. We're expecting trouble.' And then she went off.

I went behind the curtain, and there on the far wall was this massive picture of Jesus. I'd say it was probably ten feet high, five or six feet wide, something like that. It's kind of like the pictures you've seen before – eyes closed, the old crown of thorns on his head. That was when he was on the cross, wasn't it? It's sort of a close-up, head and shoulders, so you only see a bit of the cross, but what this picture has that the normal ones don't – not to me they don't, anyway – is that you can really tell just how much it must have fucking hurt, being nailed up. Usually, it looks like he's having a kip, but this one, his face is all screwed up in agony. You really wouldn't want to be in his shoes, I'll tell you. So the first thing I thought was, bloody hell, that's a good picture. Because it makes you think, and I don't often think about things like that. I haven't been anywhere near Jesus since Lisa's sister got married, three years ago.

And the second thing I thought – I'd forgotten about the sign and the curtain and all that for a moment – was, who the fuck would get offended by that? Because you can go into any church and see the same sort of thing. Not so realistic, maybe, a bit more PG than R, but, you know, basically the same sort of stuff: moustache and beard, crown of thorns, sad. Because you can't tell how it's done from a distance, see. When you step behind the curtain, you just see the picture, and the face. You have to get quite close up to see anything else. So I couldn't understand it, why there was all the fuss. I just thought: religious people. Nutters. 'Cos they are, most of them, aren't they? I mean, to each his own and everything, but you wouldn't want to marry one, would you?

There's a chair in front of the picture, and I walked towards it to have a sit-down. And as I got closer, I could see that the picture was made up of hundreds – thousands, maybe millions – of little squares, like the mosaics I pinched from the Roman ruins. And

when I got really close, I could see that these millions of little squares were actually little pictures, and every single little picture had at least one female breast in it. So . . . you know those pictures that are made up of dots? Well, that's how this Jesus picture was done, except all the dots are nipples. And that's what the picture's called – *NippleJesus*. There were big breasts and small breasts, and big nipples and small nipples, and black breasts and white breasts. And some of the pictures had as many as four breasts in them, and I could see then that all of the pictures were stills from porn mags, and he'd cut them all up and stuck them on. Must have taken him years. So now I understood what the sign was about.

I hated the picture then. Two minutes ago I'd liked it, now I hated it. And I hated the bloke who'd done it, too. Wanker. I went to have a look at the name of the artist, and it turned out to be a woman. Martha Marsham. How can you be a woman and do that? I thought. I could have understood some bloke doing it, some bloke with too many dirty magazines and no girlfriend. But a bird? And I hoped that someone did manage to fuck the picture up somehow, and if they did, I said to myself, I wouldn't try to stop them. I might even give them a hand. Because that is offensive, isn't it, a Jesus made out of nipples? That's out of order.

One thing I forgot to say before: this was about six o'clock in the evening, and the exhibition hadn't opened to the public yet. It was opening the next day, but we'd been called in to do the first-night party. I was actually still looking at all the little pictures when the first people came in, holding wine glasses. I felt a bit of a tosser, like I'd been caught looking at dirty pictures, which is actually what I was doing, if you think about it. Or even if you don't. I stopped looking, quick, and stood by the chair with my hands behind my back, looking straight ahead, like I was on sentry duty, while these two people, a man and a woman, looked at the picture.

'It's rather lovely, isn't it?' said the woman. She was about my age, short hair, quite posh.

'Is it?' The bloke didn't seem too sure, so I decided I liked him more than her, even though he had floppy hair and braces and a suit.

'Don't you think?'

He shrugged, and they left the room. There was none of that stuff, the stuff they take the piss out of in TV comedies, where they stroke their chins and talk bollocks. (There never is, in my experience, which has now lasted two days. Most people don't say anything much. They look and they go. If you ask me they're scared of talking bollocks, which pisses me off, because once I was sat here for a while I wanted the bollocks. Something to laugh at. But there isn't any.) The next couple were younger, early twenties, studenty types, and they were more interested in me than the picture.

'Fucking hell,' said the bloke.

'What?'

'Look at him.'

And the girl looked at me, and laughed. It was like I was part of the exhibition, and I couldn't hear what they were saying.

'Well,' she said, 'Can you blame them?'

And then they went, too. By this stage, I was starting to feel a bit sorry for this Martha woman. I mean, you spend fucking who knows how long doing this thing and people come in here, look at me, laugh, and then fuck off again. I might ask her for half her royalties, or whatever it is she gets.

The moment the students left, the curtain swished back, and I heard this woman's voice going 'T-a-ra!', and then a whole group of people came in – two younger guys, an older couple, and a young woman.

'Oh, Martha,' the older woman said. 'It's amazing. That'll get them going.' So I looked at the group, and straight away I guessed it was her mum and dad, her boyfriend, and maybe her brother. Martha is about thirty, and she doesn't really look like I thought she'd look – no dyed hair, no pierced nose, nothing like that. She looks normal, really. She was wearing this long, green, sort of

Indian skirt and what looked like a bloke's pinstripe jacket, and she's got long hair, but . . . she's nice-looking. Friendly.

I wondered for a moment whether her mum and dad knew about the nipples and all that, because I liked the picture when I first came into the room. But then I realized that was stupid, and she would have told them something about it before they came, or ages and ages ago. So what kind of parents were these? I know what I would have got if I'd told my dad I was making a picture of Jesus out of women's breasts. He probably would have wanted to see the breasts, but he would have given me a pasting for the Jesus bit. So I looked at Martha's mum and dad and tried to work them out. Her dad was tall, and wearing jeans, and he had long grey hair in a ponytail; her mum was wearing jeans too, but she looked a bit more like somebody's mother than he looked like somebody's father. They all looked like they were artists, though. They looked like they all sat around at home smoking dope and painting. Which was why no one had given her a back-hander for making a Jesus out of porn, probably.

'I want a photo,' Martha said. 'With all of us in it.' And then she looked at me. 'Do you mind?'

'No,' I said.

'I'm Martha, by the way.'

'Dave.'

'Hello, Dave.' We shook hands, and then she gave me her camera, and I took a picture of them all, standing there grinning and pointing, and I didn't know whether it was right, what with the kind of picture it was. But at that precise moment, I wished that I knew them better, or people like them, because they seemed nice, and happy, and interesting. I wanted a dad with a grey ponytail instead of a miserable old git who was always going on about the fucking Irish and the fucking blacks; it seemed to me that if I'd had a dad like that, I wouldn't have ended up going into the Army, which was the worst mistake I ever made.

I wanted to ask them questions. I wanted to ask her, Martha,

why she'd wanted to do what she'd done, and why it had to be nipples, and why it had to be Jesus, and whether she actually wanted to upset people. And I wanted to ask them whether they were ashamed of her, or proud of her, or what. But I didn't ask anything, and nothing they said made me any the wiser; after the photos they talked about where they were going to eat, and whether someone else that they knew had come to the party, and then that sort of thing. Before they went, Martha came over to me and kissed me on the cheek, and said, 'Thank you.' And I went, you know, 'Oh, that's OK.' But I was really pleased that she'd done it. It made me feel special, like I had a proper, important job to do.

Martha smiled, and I was left on my own again.

I told Lisa about the picture when I got home that night, after the party. She couldn't believe it – she said it was disgusting, and how come it was on the wall in a famous gallery. For some reason I found myself sort of defending it, taking Martha's side. I don't know why. Maybe I fancied her a bit, maybe I liked the look of her family – maybe I trusted them, and, like, took my lead from them. Because I knew they were nice people, and if they didn't see anything wrong with *NippleJesus*, then maybe there wasn't anything. And anyway, the stuff that Lisa was coming out with . . . It was just plain ignorant. 'You should take it outside when no one's looking and smash it to bits,' she said.

'After all that work she's put in?' I said.

'That's got nothing to do with it,' she said. 'I mean, Hitler put in a lot of work, didn't he?'

'What harm is she doing you?' I asked her. 'You don't have to go and look at it.'

'Well, I don't like knowing it's there,' she said. 'And I paid for it. Out of my taxes.'

Out of her taxes! How much of her taxes went towards *NippleJesus*? She sounded like one of those lunatics you hear on

radio phone-ins. I got twopence out of my pocket and threw it at her. 'There,' I said, 'there's your tax back. And you're making a profit.'

'What you gone all like this for?' she asked.

'Because I think it's good,' I said. 'Clever.'

Lisa didn't think it was clever. She thought it was stupid. And I thought she was stupid, and told her, and by the time we went to bed we weren't speaking to each other.

So yesterday morning, I get on the bus to go to work, and I pick up the paper that someone's left on the seat, and there it is, my painting, all over page seven. 'PROTESTERS TARGET SICK PICTURE', it says, and then there's all this stuff about what a disgrace it is, and people from the Church and the Conservative party going on about how it shouldn't be allowed, and someone from the police saying that they might want to interview Martha and maybe press charges of obscenity. And I read it, and I think, I've never been in the news before. Because it is me, sort of. That's my room there, my private space, and I've even started to think of the picture as mine, in a weird sort of way. Probably no one apart from Martha has spent as long looking at it as I have, and that makes me feel protective of it, kind of thing. (Which is just as well, when you think about it, seeing as that's my job.) I don't like these people saying it's sick, because it is and it isn't, and I don't like the police saying they're going to charge Martha with obscenity, and I don't like the idea that they're going to take it out of the exhibition, because it says outside the door that you shouldn't go in if you think you might not like it. So why go in? I want people to see what I saw: something that's beautiful if you look at it in one way, from a distance, and ugly if you look at it in another, close up. (Sometimes I feel that way about Lisa. When she walks into the room when we're just about to go out, and she's got her make-up on and she's done her hair and that, you'd think she could be a model. And sometimes I wake up in the night and I roll over and she's an inch away from me, and she's got bad breath

and she's snoring a bit, and you'd think . . . Well, never mind what you'd think, but you wouldn't think she'd make much of a model, anyway. So maybe Martha's picture, it's sort of like that a bit.) But if these people have their way, no one's going to see anything, and that can't be right. Not after all that work. All that cutting up and sticking on.

Did you know you couldn't smoke in an art gallery? Neither did I. Fucking hell.

When I got there, there was already a crowd outside. Some of them were people queuing to see the exhibition, and some of them were protesters – they had placards and they were singing hymns – and there were TV crews, and photographers, and it all looked a bit of a mess. I just pushed through them and knocked on the front door and showed my pass through the glass and one of the guys let me in.

'You're in for a busy day,' one of the others said when I went to change into my gear, and I thought, yeah, I'm looking forward to this.

Nothing much happened at first. A steady stream of people came in and looked, and a couple of them sort of clucked, but what's really clever about the picture is that you have to get close up to get offended, because if you stand at the back of the room you can't see anything apart from the face of Christ. So it makes the cluckers look like right plonkers, because they have to go and shove their nose up against the painting to see the nipples, and you end up thinking they're perverts. You know, first they have to ignore the sign on the door telling them not to go in, and then they have to walk the length of the room, and then they go, 'Oh, disgusting.' So they're really looking out for it.

After about an hour, I got my first nutter. He looked like a nutter: he had chunks missing from his hair, like he'd been eaten by moths, and he wore these huge specs, and he kept blinking, like

some demented owl. And he dressed like a nutter too: even though it was a hot day, he was wearing a winter coat covered in badges that said things like 'DON'T FOLLOW ME - I'M LOST TOO' and 'I'M A SUGAR PUFFS HONEY MONSTER'. He stank, and all. So it wasn't like he was hard to spot. He wasn't an *undercover* nutter, if you know what I mean.

He stared at the picture for a couple of minutes, and then he dropped to his knees and started praying. It was all, 'Heavenly father who gave his only son Jesus Christ to us so that we might be saved please deliver us blah blah blah', but what was weird was, you couldn't work out whether he was praying because he was looking at Christ, or whether he was praying like they prayed in *The Exorcist*, to get rid of the demons in the room, sort of thing. Anyway, after a little while I got pissed off with it and made up a rule.

'I'm sorry sir. We don't allow kneeling in the galleries,' I said. 'I'm praying for your immortal soul,' he said.

'I don't know about that, sir, but we don't allow kneeling. No flash photography, no sandwiches, no kneeling.'

He stood up and carried on muttering, so I told him praying was out, too.

'Don't you care?' he said.

'About what, sir?'

'Don't you care about where you are going?'

'And where's that?'

'To hell, man! Where serpents will suck on your eyeballs and flames will lick your internal organs for all eternity?'

'Not really, sir. What I meant was, I didn't think I was going to be sent to hell. Not for standing in front of a picture, anyway.

You don't really want to go down that road, the eyeball-sucking road, do you? It's not very . . . *cheerful*, is it? I mean, what must it be like to be this geezer? And what's he doing here? Does he just wander around looking for stuff that's going to make him blink and drop to his knees and mutter away? Does he spend all his life wandering around Soho and King's Cross? Because if he does, then

no wonder he's a nutter. If you don't spend any time playing with your kids (and I'll tell you, this is not a bloke with kids), or drinking with your mates (and I'll bet mates are a bit thin on the ground as well), or watching *Frasier* (I like *Frasier*) . . . you're going to end up like him, aren't you?

Just as I was wondering what I was going to do with him, a couple of women came in and he scurried off, and things went quiet for a while. But then just before my lunch break, just as I was starting to think that it was going to be an aggro-free day after all, a bloke walks in wearing a dog-collar. A fucking vicar! He was younger than most vicars, and a bit trendy, too - he had a sort of Hugh Grant floppy haircut, and he was wearing jeans. He came into the room and stopped and stared, and I knew, because I knew all the angles and distances by now, that he couldn't see anything from where he was stood. Or rather, he could see Christ, but he couldn't see the nipples. So when he started to walk down towards the picture, I started to walk towards him, to block him off, and we stood there almost nose-to-nose.

'Why do you want to do that, your honour?' I asked him. 'Why don't you just stay where you are?'

'I have to make up my own mind,' he said.

'You know what's there,' I said. 'Everyone knows what's there now. Why do you have to go and look at it? Stay where you are. Look. It's beautiful.'

'How can anything made out of pornography be beautiful?'

For a moment I wanted to get into a whole different argument. This isn't porn, I wanted to tell him. This is just page 3 stuff. Porn is what we used to watch in the Army, with dogs and lesbians with strap-ons and all that, but you don't want to be talking to a vicar about sex with dogs, do you? I didn't, anyway.

He moved to his right to get by me, so I moved to my left, and then we did the same dance the other way round. He was getting annoyed now, and in the end I had to let him through, otherwise I swear it would have all gone off, and I would have been fired for decking him.

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'Happy now?' I said after he'd been there a while.

'Why did she do it, do you think?'

'I wouldn't know, your honour. But she's a very nice young lady.'

'That makes it even sadder, then.'

Not to me it doesn't, I thought. If it had been made by a seedy old git whose hobby was looking up women's skirts, then that's one story, but it's different when you've seen what Martha is like, the kind of person she is. You end up sort of trusting her, and trusting what she does, and why. I did, anyway. I can see that wouldn't work for everyone. It wouldn't make a lot of difference to the nutter, for example.

'I think you've been here long enough now,' I said to the vicar. This was completely out of order, of course, but the truth was I was sick of him, and I didn't want him in my room any more.

'I beg your pardon?'

'We've been told to watch out for people who stay here more than five minutes. You know, perverts and that.' That did the trick.

If I'd just read about *NippleJesus* in the paper, or seen it on the news, I'd have thought it was wrong, no question. Sick. Stupid. Waste of taxpayers' money. (You always say that even if you've got no idea if taxpayers pay for it or not, whatever it is, don't you?) And then I'd never have thought about it again, probably. But it's more complicated when you actually stand by it all day. And now I still don't know what I think of it, really, but what's so great about the nutter and the kinky vicar and all the other people who came to have a look that first morning is that they make up your mind for you about whose side you're on. I'm not on theirs, that's for sure, and the longer I have to spend with these wankers the more I hate them. It's so simple, really. The nice ones like the picture, and they get it, and they have a look at how it's done but that's not why they're staring; the horrible ones come in, gaze for hours at the tits, moan to each other (or, if they're really mad, to

themselves) . . . You don't need to work out what you think. You just need to have a look at what other people think. And if you don't like the look of them, then think the opposite.

No sooner had the vicar gone than a whole fucking zoo turns up. I recognize a couple of the monkeys in it: there's this woman politician I'm sure I've seen on TV, that fat one who's always banging on about the family and all that, and she's brought a TV crew with her. The interviewer is that bloke who does the local news on the BBC. You'd probably recognize him too – smoothy, sharp suits, fake tan. Anyway, you should have heard this woman. She was calling for Martha to be sent to prison, for the people who put on the exhibition to, I don't know, have their licence taken away or something . . . And the smoothy geezer was just egging her on. 'You've been campaigning very hard for a return to family values, and presumably this kind of thing doesn't help your cause . . .' Stuff like that. When they'd finished I wandered over to the interviewer and had a word with him, just to wind him up, sort of thing.

'So,' I said, 'You getting someone else to say something?'

'How'd you mean?'

'Well, you can't have just her, can you?' She was standing about two feet away, having her microphone taken off, so I knew she could hear me. She turned round and looked at me.

'We'll be talking to the artist, too,' said the presenter. 'She should be here in a second.'

'Did you do a close-up of the painting?'

'I would imagine so,' he said. All sarcastic, like I was being thick.

'So you're going to show thousands of nipples on the local news? My kids watch that.'

'Do they?' he said, like he didn't believe me. Like no one with a skinhead haircut could have kids who watched anything but football. Cheeky bastard. OK, my kids don't watch the news, but that's because they're too young, not because they're too thick. Wanker.

When Martha turned up, I realized I sort of had a crush on her. She looked great – fresh, and friendly, and young, and she was wearing this bright lime-green T-shirt that added to the freshness. The politician was wearing this dark suit, and she had a hard face anyway, and Martha makes her look old and cruel. She said hello to me, and asked me how it was going, and I told her about the nutter and the vicar, and she just smiled.

The interviewer didn't like her, I could tell. He asked her whether she minded offending so many people, and she said she didn't think she had, only one or two. And he asked her what the point of the picture was, and she said that she didn't want to have to explain it, she thought it could explain itself, if she could tell everyone what it meant then she would have just written the meaning down, she wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of sticking all the nipples on the paper. And the interviewer said, well, some people wish you hadn't bothered, and she said, well, it's a free country.

I was disappointed, to be honest. I was hoping she'd talk about how beautiful the picture was – how holy, sort of thing. And I wanted her to explain that if you wanted to see the nipples you really had to get up close, like the vicar had to, and what kind of vicar you were if you wanted to do that. And I wanted to hear why she'd done it, too. I mean, there had to be an idea behind it, didn't there? A meaning, kind of thing. It's not just something you'd wake up in the morning and do, is it? You know, 'What am I going to do with all these pairs of breasts I've been cutting out? Oh, I might as well turn them into a picture of Christ on the cross . . .'

Maybe they should have interviewed me. Like I said, maybe I've thought more about this picture than anyone. Because she doesn't know, Martha. She hasn't seen it in action, like I have. And she hasn't spent any time standing in front of it, watching people looking at it. Perhaps she should, then she'd be able to say things about it in interviews.

\*

Just before we closed, the smelly nutter with the badges came back with an egg, and tried to throw it at the picture. I saw it coming a mile off, and I grabbed his arm just as he was raising it, and the egg travelled about two feet and landed splat on the floor. It was so pathetic it made me laugh, and I remembered the kid with the rusty spike outside the club, and why I'd packed that job in, it's hard to be scared by a scrawny weirdo with an egg. I was still angry though, so I didn't let go of him after he'd thrown it – I pinned his arm behind his back with more violence than I needed, and he started yelling. I marched him out, and down the corridor towards the front entrance. I hated the fucker so much that I got carried away a bit – I was twisting his arm and calling him all the names under the sun, and he said he was going to sue me and report me to the police and he wasn't going to pray for my soul and he hoped that all the agonies of damnation were heaped upon me. Pillock.

But he knew what he was doing. As I was shoving the nutter down the corridor, there was a commotion behind me, shouting and crashing and alarms going off and then the sound of running. I let the nutter go and went back to my picture, and a couple of the other security guards were in there staring at the floor. Someone had fucked *Nipple/esus* over good and proper. They'd taken it off the wall and stomped all over it and then fucked off. There wasn't hardly anything left of it.

I felt like crying. Really. I'd let Martha down, and I'd been stupid to leave the room, and it was only when I saw the picture smashed up on the floor that I finally realized how much I loved it. But I'll tell you something else, something really weird: seeing

Christ on the floor with his face all smashed in like that . . . It was really shocking. What they'd done was much more blasphemous than anything Martha had done. I wonder if they'd thought about that when they were doing it? Whether they'd had any moment of doubt, or fear? Because, I'll tell you, if I was religious, and I thought that there was a hell where serpents suck your eyeballs out and all that, I wouldn't go round stomping all over Jesus's

face. Jesus is Jesus, isn't he? No matter what you make him out of. And maybe that's one of the things Martha was trying to get at: Christ is where you find him.

Some people from the gallery turned up, people I'd seen at the party the night before but no one who'd ever bothered to speak to me. And I told them about the nutter and the egg, and how I shouldn't have left my post but I did, and they didn't seem to blame me much. And then a copper came, and I told him the same stuff. He seemed to think it was funny, though. He didn't laugh or anything, but you could tell that it was low down on his list of crimes to solve.

And then Martha came in. I walked towards her because I wanted to hug her, but I worked out just in time that my relationship with her was not the same as her relationship with me, if you see what I mean. I've spent a lot of time over the last couple of days thinking about her, because of my job, but she couldn't have spent much time thinking about me, could she? Anyway. I didn't hug her. I just went over to her and said, you know, I'm sorry and all that, but she didn't seem to hear me. She just stared at the picture on the floor, and said, 'Oh my God', which considering the circumstances was about right.

And when she looked up again, her face was all lit up. She was thrilled to bits, excited like a kid. I couldn't believe it.

'This is perfect,' she said. 'Brilliant.'

'How'd you mean?' I said, because I didn't get it.

'Who did this? Did you see?'

So I told her about the smelly nutter with the egg, and how I thought he'd done me, wound me up to get me out of the room so his nutter mates could do their stuff, and she loved it. She loved the whole story. 'Perfect,' she kept saying. 'Fantastic.' And then: 'I can't wait to see the video.'

And I was, like, 'What video?', and she pointed out the CCTV camera up in the corner of the room.

'That's part of it,' she said. 'That's part of the exhibition. What I was hoping was that someone would come in and do this on day

one, and on day two we could show the film, and . . . I'm going to call it *Intolerance*.'

And I thought about the vicar, and the politician, and all the other people who'd come in and stuck their noses up close and then said how disgusted they were and how shocking it was and I could see that it would be a bit of a laugh for people to see them on the telly. But that was all it was, really, a bit of a laugh.

'So that was the idea?' I said. 'Someone would come in and smash it up?'

'Put it this way,' she said. 'I'd have been stuffed if they hadn't. I'd have been stuck with a portrait of Jesus made out of breasts, and what use is that to anyone? It's Dave, isn't it? Well, Dave. Art is about provocation. Getting a reaction from people. And I've done it. I'm an artist.'

I remembered the party, when she thanked me, and I asked her why she'd done that if all she wanted was for someone to smash it up. But she didn't remember thanking me. So I said, you must remember, last night, at the party. When I took your photo, and you came over and kissed me on the cheek and said 'Thank you'. And she shrugged, and said, 'Oh, yeah. I was thanking you for the photo. I think.' Like it wasn't a big deal. Which it clearly wasn't, I can see now. I suppose if you're an artist, it doesn't mean anything, kissing someone on the cheek. They do it all the time.

'Twenty Marlboro Lights, please.' Kiss. 'Leicester Square, please.' Mmmmm. It doesn't mean, oh thank you for the important and dangerous job you're doing, obviously. Silly cow. I should have just stood there. I shouldn't have gone out with the smelly nutter with the egg. Because, if you think about it . . . The only reason it got smashed up was because I cared about it too much. I could have just stood there, stropped the egg, got rid of the nutter; but he'd got on my nerves, he'd tried to damage my picture – *my* picture – and I wanted to make sure he left the building, maybe give him a couple of digs at the same time. Which is why I wasn't in the room when it got broken. So. She wouldn't understand this, but she needed me for her film as much as she needed them.

When I went home last night, I felt stupid. I felt like I look, if you like: a six-foot-two, fifteen-stone bouncer with a shaved head who doesn't know anything about art. I'd spent two days thinking something was, you know, beautiful, and worth protecting, and all the time it was a piece of shit, stuck on the wall because some bird thought it would be a laugh if someone smashed it to pieces. So everyone's a prat, aren't they? The nutters are prats for doing what they were supposed to do, and I was a prat for trying to stop them . . . The only one who isn't a prat is Martha. She's watching us and having a laugh. Well, fuck her.

Except maybe she isn't as clever as she thought she was. Because the film's showing now, up the corridor, and no one looks at it. It's too long, so most of the time nothing's happening, and you can't see very much anyway – they cocked up the angle of the camera, so you see the painting coming off the wall, but you don't see anyone jump on it. And it's not beautiful. It's just a CCTV film, like you see in a petrol station when you're waiting to get served. And that's what you get instead of the face of Christ in his agony. So who's the prat, eh Martha?

I've got an onion now. A fucking onion. And some other stuff, beds, and tents and shit, because I'm not in a room by myself anymore; the CCTV film isn't controversial, so they don't need anyone to keep an eye on it. But my chair's by the onion, and it bores me shitless, because there's nothing to think about onions, is there? So I don't. I just sit here and think about what I'd like to do, apart from be Tiger Woods or Richard Branson.