

Peregrine Chumbley-Smythe stepped out of the taxi onto the Bond Street pavement and momentarily glanced up at the facade of the de Beauvoir Gallery. He took a deep breath and snorted as he flicked at an imaginary fleck of lint, from the sleeve of his damson velvet suit. The liveried doorman saluted as he held open the door for London's most acclaimed art critic. As if on a viscous wave, Peregrine swept past the minion, snatched at a proffered tulip of champagne and affected his standard sneer, as the gallery owner approached him. "Peregrine! What a delight to have you here, for what is probably this year's most important showing!" The critic regarded Simon de Beauvoir as if he had just scraped him from the sole of his shoe. "Well of course that remains to be seen. Where are the canapés?"

Six savoury vol-au-vents and three glasses of champagne later, Peregrine was staring at a large canvas depicting a pneumatic nude holding a ripe bunch of grapes. "Hmmm! Reminds me of your second wife, Simon!" Peregrine smirked. The gallery owner was about to protest and then took a second look. "Well, it's true that she always had food in her hand...." The critic turned to the next exhibit. "You know Simon, everything is soooo passé! Soooo predictably twee! Soooo last year!" He drained his drink and seamlessly snatched at a replacement, from a passing tray. Taking the handkerchief from his cuff he dabbed at his brow in a theatrical display of despair. "Where, oh where, is the cutting edge modernity? Where is the brave statement? Where are the bold foundations for an artistic future?"

Suddenly Peregrine froze. He dropped a half-eaten cocktail sausage and rammed his pince-nez up his beaky nose. "Oh my god, what do we have here?" He took a dramatic step back and screwed his eyes in a determined focus, as he regarded the wall. "What an incredible deceit! Look at the sheer impertinence!....The absolute fearlessness!.....The clear disregard for convention! This is the artistic statement that I've been looking for!....Tell me Simon, who is this artist?" de Beauvoir looked hard at the work and then back to the critic. "I errr! I errr! I errr!" "Stop spluttering man! What is the name of this twenty-first century Da Vinci?" "Well actually Peregrine, it's a sign showing all of the fire exits and extinguishers! Health and safety you know! We don't have a choice, I'm afraid."

The critic seemed to deflate, like a punctured air-bed. There was a long silence before Peregrine drained his glass. "Nice to see that you still appreciate my humour, Simon!"

446 words.