

Basket of Gold

by Peter W. Andersen

The door opened, ringing a small silver bell attached to the frame above. The old painter shuffled into the shop as a carriage rumbled past on the cobblestones outside.

“Bonjour,” said the fruit seller from behind the counter.

The painter, a shy man, nodded in response. He surveyed the small, crowded shop. The tables were piled high with colorful oranges, apples, melons, and other fruits. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the rich scent of the sweet-smelling air. Then he began to move slowly among the tables. In the warmth of the shop, the painter unbuttoned his long brown coat, depositing traces of dust from his long ride into the village.

He picked up a plum, held it in his hand, examined it closely, then turned to the window and held it at arm’s length, looking at it from different angles.

“Groceries today, Monsieur Cézanne?” asked the fruit seller.

“No, Monsieur Duplées,” the painter said, never taking his eyes off the plum. “Today, models.”

With this the painter walked quickly to a table under the front window and set the plum down in a patch of sunlight. A ray of golden light angled through the glass window and illuminated the plum, as if it had traveled all the way from the sun for that very purpose.

The painter moved around the rest of the shop carefully picking individual pieces of fruit, each piece meeting a set of criteria only he understood. When he had collected nearly two dozen pieces of fruit he returned to the table and arranged them all in the vicinity of the plum. His rugged, weathered hands arranged the fruit on the table with balance, color, and shape.

Then the painter took four steps back and glared hard at the fruit sitting in the patch of sunlight. Raising one hand to his long white beard, he suddenly let out a shriek of terror, ran to the table, plucked a pomegranate from the bunch, and put it back on the table it had come from.

The painter turned and gazed back to the patch of sunlight. Staring, his eyes brightened, and a smile illuminated his wrinkled face. But he stopped. There – between the melon and the banana. *Something was missing.* His eyes narrowed to slits as he turned slowly on his heel, his gaze moving from table to table around the room. In a moment, his eyes came to rest on a medium-sized green apple on a table in the corner. He moved toward it, and was almost there when another customer, a very old woman barely half his size, stepped in front of him, picked up the very same apple in her bony fingers and dropped it into her bag.

The painter stood, open-mouthed, as he watched her walk to the counter.

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A 52-year old New Yorker in a \$6,000 steel-gray suit gazed over the podium of a crowded auction house on East 57th Street, took in the crowd who had come to buy his painting, and rang a small silver bell to get their attention. His name was Gerald Manning and it was his 14th year as Executive Auctioneer at Sotheby's.

“Lot three,” Manning said, and a microphone carried his voice across the large, crowded room. “Item 19 in the catalog.”

The painting, mounted on a mahogany easel, was carried onto the stage by three Sotheby's employees and placed next to the podium. A closed-circuit video camera threw an enormous likeness of the painting onto an overhead screen. Projected at this size and in a fully lit room, the painting was stripped of color and depth, as if it had been created not on canvas, but on the side of an aluminum barn. But the audience wasn't interested in color or depth. They strained instead to see the signature – there it was, the actual signature! – in the lower right corner.

There it was.

Manning thought of the still life as *his* painting for two principal reasons: first, as Executive Auctioneer and sole custodian of the painting's care, he was responsible for it as much as anyone. Second, he knew that in a few moments it would be gone, and what would it matter then, anyway?

Of his 22 years at Sotheby's, including 14 as Executive Auctioneer, this was only the fifth auction over which he would personally officiate. That was a perk Manning enjoyed about his job: when he wanted to, he could simply manage the planning, cataloging, and operation of any Sotheby's auction, or he could actually bang the gavel himself. Over the years he'd chosen only those items that pleased him: a handwritten notebook of John Lennon's in 1995, a Picasso

that went for \$27 million in 1991, a \$1.3 million purse once used by Princess Diana in 1993, and in 1987, Elvis Presley's actual gold record of *How Deep is the Ocean?*

He rang the bell once more and the crowd quickly settled. He leaned forward to the microphone and announced, "Your attention please, ladies and gentlemen. *Still Life With Curtain, Pitcher, and Bowl of Fruit*, a painting by Paul Cézanne, 1874."

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The old woman was nearly to the counter before the painter could act.

"*Madame!*" he called. She didn't answer. He called again, moving quickly to the front of the shop where she was taking off her gloves to count her money.

"Madame. The apple! I must have that apple. Please allow me to buy it." He looked to the fruit seller, but the fruit seller was not going to take sides.

The old woman put her gloves on the counter and looked at him coldly. "Leave me alone, monsieur," she said. "Buy your own apples."

"But Madame, surely you don't want this apple. Can't you see that it's bruised?"

Both the fruit seller and the old woman looked at him.

"Sir," the fruit seller began. "My fruit is the finest in the region. I do not sell...."

But the woman had reached into her bag and pulled out the apple. She stared with disgust at the bruise on one side, the size of a coin. The painter gazed at the perfect green-to-brown bruise with delight, and almost yelped as the old woman poked a thumb at its center, scowled, and thumped it onto the counter.

"Get me another one then," she said.

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In the seventh row of the auction house sat a young man wearing a name tag which read, “Representing Mr. Hirano.” Like Manning he wore an expensive suit, like Manning he had only participated in a handful of auctions, and like Manning, he considered *himself* to be the owner of the Cézanne painting about to be auctioned. He was an employee of Mr. Hirano, and Mr. Hirano had sent him to buy this painting. True, he had never met Mr. Hirano, and he would never see the painting again after tonight, but he was the one who would bid on it, and he was confident that he would be the one to actually purchase it, to actually determine its ultimate value in front of the whole world, and wasn’t that what it was all about?

He adjusted his nametag for the fifth or sixth time, glanced around the room again to see who the competition was, and opened the catalog one more time to Item 19.

He reread the instructions he’d written in the margin while on the phone in the limousine. Why had Mr. Hirano himself telephoned at the last minute? His heart beat a little faster as he recalled the voice on the telephone as the limousine drove through the city. The voice was as impressive and awe-inspiring as everyone said. And frightening.

“Do not fail me. . . .”

Hirano is like a king, they all said. If you please him, he will do anything for you. But if you do not, you will pay.

Suddenly the awe and power of the gentleman’s exciting position became a heavy weight on his heart.

He gazed at the number he'd written at the bottom of the page, the maximum he would be allowed to bid for the painting. He knew that the price was only part of the art of bidding. That Mr. Hirano was depending on him, and that he must not fail.

The representative of Mr. Hirano took a deep breath and sat up straight as Manning completed the obligatory background information, paused, and said casually into the microphone, "We will begin the bidding at ten million dollars."

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At last, the painter stood before the counter in the fruit seller's shop, cradling in his arms four lemons, five peaches, two oranges, a pear, five apples (four green and one red), one lime, and the original plum.

"Eight centimes?" he asked, incredulous.

The fruit seller smiled. "Yes, monsieur. That's the price."

"I'll give you six."

"Eight."

"I'll give you six centimes for the lot. Six centimes is a perfectly fair price for 19 pieces of fruit, and remember that the green apple is bruised."

The fruit seller laughed. "Monsieur Cézanne, why would you buy a bruised apple for the price of a good one?"

The painter sighed. "I'm going to paint the apple, not eat it, Monsieur Duplés. The canvas only knows color, not taste." He waved to the apple table. "The other apples, they're all the same." Then he smiled, and held up the apple between himself and the other man as if he

were toasting a vintage wine. “This one is different, monsieur. It is beautiful. And the value of God’s creation is in its beauty, not its taste.”

The fruit seller grunted. “That’s fine,” he said. “The price is still eight centimes.”

The painter pulled three coins from his pocket and lay them on the counter. “My friend, this is all I have. With these 20 centimes I must buy the fruit and the canvas for my new painting. If I give you eight centimes, how will I buy my canvas? My brushes? My paints? Oh, the price one pays for the sake of art today!”

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The bid was now at \$14 million, topping a West Coast museum’s bid of thirteen-eight. The gentleman representing Mr. Hirano had bid twice, and was getting warmed up. Unfortunately, the other bidders were just warming up, too. Before he realized it, three others had driven the bid past nineteen million. The gentleman again raised his numbered paddle the way he had learned, and Manning called him in at nineteen and a half.

Although the gentleman knew the bid was still barely half the painting’s estimated value of \$35 million, the rapid pace had caught him off guard. Nine and a half million dollars in just over four minutes was too fast. Something exhilarating was in the room, and it excited and scared him at the same time. He watched Manning like a hawk, and glanced around at the competition from time to time. He wasn’t looking at the painting anymore.

Manning’s voice remained calm as he offered – and received – bids for 25, 28, 29, and eventually 34 million, the last from a woman in the second row whom the gentleman thought he recognized. Although her face was mostly hidden in her program as she made notes, he was sure

she was the owner of a number of hotels in Las Vegas, Nevada, a place he had never been. The gentleman took the bid at 36, lost it at 37, and took it back again at 38.

When Las Vegas quietly took 42, the gentleman began to sweat.

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The painter and the fruit seller looked at the three coins lying on the counter.

“Monsieur Cézanne, you drive a hard bargain. All right, for the sake of beauty! Give me seven centimes now, before I change my mind.”

“Ah, Monsieur Duplés! Thank you.” The painter leaned over the counter and kissed the fruit seller on both cheeks.

The fruit seller laughed, and coins were slid and exchanged across the counter. The painter unfolded a wicker carrying basket from his coat pocket and carefully placed each piece of fruit inside. He put the green apple in last, on the top, and smiled at the fruit seller.

“You, my friend, know the value of great art.”

The fruit seller laughed. “You are a funny man, you painter. And when your painting has great value, who will remember me? Who will remember the man who sold you the fruit to make your silly painting in the first place?”

“Monsieur Duplés,” the painter said. He put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “No one will remember you, or your fruit. No one will remember me, either. If they remember anything, it will be the beauty in that one green apple.”

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When the bidding reached \$46 million all but four bidders dropped out. The gentleman representing Mr. Hirano was quite nervous now, and dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, as inconspicuously as he could. Experience told him that the first sign of impending sale was when the field was narrowed to a handful of bidders. The second sign was that the price was raised in smaller increments with each bid. Both of these things were happening now. Forty-six, forty-six two, forty-six five, forty-six eight, *forty-seven*.

The intensity of the numbers filled his head until he had even forgotten what he was bidding for. He heard Mr. Hirano's voice again.

"Do not fail me. . . ."

He simply had to do it. He had to win. He had to bring home this painting, whatever it was, whatever it took. The gentleman could barely hear the other bids now as he sat, heart pounding. The three others continued to bid without him, raising the price, inching it towards fifty million.

The only number left in the gentleman's head was his bottom line, the maximum amount he had been authorized to pay. Finally, unable to control himself any longer, the gentleman rose from his seat and choked out the word, *"Sixty."*

Manning froze, and everyone turned to see the young man who had just committed to pay nearly double the amount that this single Impressionist painting was expected to bring.

The gentleman shot a nervous glance at the second row to see Las Vegas closing her program.

Manning cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said calmly. "Sixty. Who will give me sixty point two?"

The gentleman's heart nearly stopped when he saw Manning motion to the back and say, "Sixty point two." But for all his impulsiveness in bidding sixty, he knew he'd successfully scared away all but one other bidder, and with the half million he was still authorized to spend, he prayed he could crush whoever it was.

"Who," asked Manning, taking a deep breath before continuing, "will give me sixty point five?"

The gentleman raised his paddle for the last time, Manning looked him in the eye, and both men knew that he had won. Manning went through the motion of repeating the bid two times before he called "Sold! To the Representative of Mr. Hirano for \$60.5 million!" A wave of relief overcame the gentleman and a tremendous weight was lifted from his shoulders as Manning's gavel hammered down hard on the podium and the gallery erupted in applause.

He hardly remembered anything after that, as he was overcome with the joy and relief of not having failed.

Moments later, the gentleman representing Mr. Hirano emerged from Sotheby's into a hail of flashbulbs and television cameras from reporters who had waited in the rain. In his briefcase was a certificate of purchase signed by Gerald Manning, and potential contracts from three armored car agencies asking six, seven, and nine thousand dollars respectively to arrange for safe and prompt transportation of the painting he had just bought.

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The painter left the shop and stood outside in the warm sunlight with a smile on his face, holding a small basket heavy with fruit. The street was empty as he crossed it to shop for a canvas.