

## Framed

Jim and Liz baker were just like any other couple, they both worked hard, had managed in their early years to save enough to buy a house and lived the quiet suburban life spending their spare time tending to the garden and going for walks. The only dent in this idyllic life was the fact that no matter how hard they had tried, they were childless.

But that was not the worry that blew the bubble on this settled life, was by no means the worst thing that occupied their minds after the 15<sup>th</sup> of two months passed on a Friday afternoon about 15.30 in the afternoon. For that was when the directors of the company they both worked for and where they first met had arranged a meeting for all their staff. Being that the month was December, the usual rumor mill had passed around the fantastical theory that it was to offer all of them a bonus, they could not of been further from the truth.

Two months on and the cold snap that had held their town to ransom for the last few weeks was to Jim and Liz just another let down, another pain to feel dread and despair about. Out of work and with the savings running very low, there future was looking more grim than ever, naturally they had pulled their belts up and tried their damnest to find other work. However, in a town now full of the unemployed it was to say the least, bloody impossible!

This morning, despite being the same as every other morning they had for the past few months was surprisingly different in a small way. Not so different that they could tell but events that were to transpire from it could prove to be their lifesaver

'I know you don't like talking about it, but these debts are getting worse.' Liz ventured as they both sat at the kitchen table. 'Yes I know you don't have to remind me, I'm at my wits end' replied a frazzled Jim, as Liz got up from her seat to pick up an item that she had hidden in the narrow space between their fridge and the wall.

'There is still this painting.....' Liz said as she motioned to the painting she was holding.

'Don't even consider that, it's all I have left of Dads' Jim stormed in reply shaking his stressed hand towards her.

'We've sold everything else of value.....' pleaded Liz which Jim followed with silence before she continued.

'It's not like you even like the picture.....what would it hurt to at least get it valued at that art shop in the high street'

Jim looked up at her from his feeble bowl of soggy weetabix that he had been spooning with knowing perfectly well about their situation and the fact that plenty of her stuff had already been sold.

'I guess I have very little choice. In the end it would be better for the family rather than going into more debt.'

'I'll ring them and see when there open' Replied Liz with some excitement, hoping that it did not show too much to Jim, but all he said in return was;

'Do it now before I change my mind'

As Jim drove the car to the town centre, he recalled with some sarcasm the reaction he had when Liz told him that of course, the shop was open and of course, they were welcome to have their painting valued. 'Ye of course they would be, in a town full of skint people, they're probably making a bloody mint from em' he had thought and still did, but just like all the others, they were in the same situation, they were bra sic or would be soon. One more mortgage payment and that would be it, one more month or two at the most and they would lose the house like so many of their neighbors had. After

finding a free parking space, which were rare in the week, Jim walked the short distance to the shop taking a look up at its name plate before entering while thinking ‘ well this is it’

‘Good day sir...How may I help you’ enquired the shopkeeper behind the counter

‘Hello, my names Mr Baker, my wife just rang about getting a painting valuated’ replied Jim half hoping the shopkeeper stated no knowledge of a phone call.

‘Ah yes I remember’ he unfortunately replied ‘It’s a Valincy I believe your wife said.

‘To be honest I wouldn’t know but my Dad gave it to me who’d got it from his Dad’ stated Jim just as he heard the shop door open and close behind him.

‘Excuse me a second please sir’ the shopkeeper said before speaking to the person who had just entered ‘Rob every things in the back as usual....I’ll be with you in a minute’

‘OK’

‘Apologies for that sir’

‘No worries’ replied Jim before lifting up the painting and placing it on top of the counter for the shopkeeper to see ‘This is the painting in question’

‘Thank you; stated the shopkeeper before running a quick eye over the painting in front of him ‘yes it certainly looks like an early Valincy, painted during his Athens period. I can’t obviously give you a valuation right now, we normally keep it for a day or so until our guy...Rob the man you saw just enter... to test it then ring you.....are you OK with leaving the painting with us? Asked the shopkeeper

‘Yes that’s OK’ Jim answered casually wondering why he bothered asking seeing, as he had no choice but to leave it.

‘Good, I’ll just take your contact details and give you a receipt for the painting’

After leaving the shop, Jim did have an inkling to wonder around the town centre, a habit he used to enjoy during flusher times but the joy of that had seemed to fade when it suddenly became impossible to afford anything he saw. And hated to be another of those people or specifically guys who he had seen increasingly wonder around aimlessly, with no purpose looking like tramps on a day out. Meanwhile back in the shop, the shopkeeper walked into the back of the shop where Rob waited for him.

‘So, what do you have for me today’ asked Rob

‘Those two on the table over there’ answered the shopkeeper as he walked to the table in question, adding ‘Oh and this one here’ showing the painting that Jim had just taken in.

‘Is that the one your customer just brought in’

'Yes, they think or hope it's an old Valincy' said the shopkeeper before lowering his voice 'an old family heirloom'

'Ye recessions really tend to unearth a few old paintings.....the frame looks odd I have an answer in a couple of days, see you later'

'Good.. see you soon' replied the shopkeeper as he saw Rob pick up all the paintings and walked out of the shop.

Jim knew that the shopkeeper had said two days until he might have had an answer, but that still did not stop him from being impatient for an answer after only a few hours. Not only that but he was experiencing that weird feeling that most would when there is a promise of a solution to all their financial problems in the air. Therefore, when the shopkeeper finally rang he jumped out of his seat as if he had been on a trampoline and drove the car round to the shop as if he was in a grand prix race.

'Good morning, thank you for the phone call' Jim stated as soon as he entered the shop, rushing uncharacteristically to the counter.

'Good morning Mr Baker' replied the shopkeeper with far less enthusiasm than was evident on Jim's face 'I wish I had good news for you....'

'What do you mean bad news' interrupted Jim?

'I'm afraid that your painting is actually a copy, a good copy'

'What do you mean a copy. My dad told me that it was very valuable' interrupted Jim again in shock 'how can you be so sure that it is a copy?' he continued not believing what he was hearing.

'The person who does my valuations works for the national gallery and has been doing his job for a few decades...but you could always try for a second opinion' the shopkeeper offered to Jim who looked very pale and in shock.

'No' Jim finally managed to say 'I don't know, I did have my doubts. Is it worth anything at all?' ventured Jim hoping for some recovery from this bad news.

'Only about £100.00 pounds I'm afraid but you might get slightly more at an auction'

'No, it's OK' Jim said feeling very helpless as that feeling of riches drained like water through a plughole 'that's nowhere near what we were hoping for. Thanks for your help...I'll see what the wife thinks and might be back'

'OK Mr Baker, sorry I couldn't be of more help' offered the shopkeeper as Jim dragged his body and the painting out of the shop with far less haste than when he entered, feeling let down and dreading what he would say to Liz. He guessed it would not be good as she too had been enthusiastic about a solution. He did wonder about hiding it from her but how could he, £100.00 was nowhere near the thousands they needed and in the end slamming the chair in the kitchen when he entered pretty much told her the bad news he had.

'What's the matter?' asked Liz hoping that the sudden bang and sullen look on Jim's face was due to something other than the painting.

'It's a fake' he blurted out 'a copy they said, not worth nothing or anything near what we need'

'Oh no' she said, not knowing quite how to react 'What is it worth, we.....?'

'Nothing' Jim flatly stated 'I'm gonna put it on the fire with all the other garden rubbish' continued Jim as he started to raise from the chair making his way to the back door as he picked up the painting.

'But doesn't it still have family.....?' Liz started to plead

'Its worthless, my dad left me nothing.' Snapped Jim

'Perhaps he didn't know' she stated hoping to stop Jim doing something foolish and which he might regret. It did make him stop and calm down but after only a short pause, he started for the garden again with a look of total rejection.

'Perhaps not, but it doesn't matter now' was all he said as he headed into the garden.

Liz could not help but feel terrible pity for her Jim who seemed to be taking all these debts worse than her being not as used to not working and being without money, and as she watch him start the fire outside the kitchen window, she knew that he had been let down again by his dad this time. Raising anger in him that he was obviously taking out on the painting as he smashed the frame with a hammer rather than saw it. Just then, she heard a knocking at the front door, grabbing her away from the sad scene unfolding outside the kitchen window to find a well-dressed man standing outside their front door as she opened the door.

'Hi, Mrs Baker my name is Rob Knowles, I am the art valuator the art shop uses which you recently took your painting to be evaluated. Apologies for the delay but I have some good news about your property'

'You mean that it might be worth something after all?' Liz replied with sudden shock and almost turned to run out to the back garden before Rob replied

'No the painting is a copy as I found, but the frame is a rare antique' answered Rob, which confused Liz greatly.

'What do you mean' she asked

'A frame just like yours sold at Sotheby's last year for over £250,000 pounds' ventured Rob who started to feel worried as the women's face in front of him turned from confusion to total panic and disbelief.

'Oh my God' was all that Liz heard escape from her mouth.