

## Bean Counter

by Dianne Bown-Wilson

*A leopard never changes his spots*, my mother used to say with a resigned pursing of her lips. But since ‘that night’ she doesn’t any more.

She used to say it about Dad who was, is, a typical accountant: steady, pragmatic, controlled. Whether that was his nature and he chose his profession to fit, or whether his work reigned in what was once a more effervescent disposition, I can’t decide.

“Oh, he’s always been like that,” Mum says. But then, thirty-five years on, perhaps today’s torpid reality has driven out all memory of any recklessness that might have punctuated his younger life. After all, she must have thought him exciting once upon a time.

Anyway, to understand what happened you need to know a little of how things were. A few years back my father’s advertising agency, established some twenty years earlier with his best friend Brian and until then, unswervingly successful, was about to go under. The reason for this change in fortunes was simple: Brian, the creative, the yang to Dad’s yin, had been diagnosed with cancer.

Of course, Dad maintained the status quo and carried on as best he could through the months that Brian went downhill; after all, you can’t insult a dying man by taking away his living. But a year or so after the diagnosis Brian died and a few months later, rather than lose everything himself and put people out of work, Dad reluctantly agreed to a merger with another firm. The company was a long-term rival and it would mean that in future he’d be working alongside Elwin, its head, a man with whom previously he’d had few dealings. Not that this seemed to bother him particularly, Dad’s never been one for letting relationships and feelings muddy the waters of any endeavour.

Nevertheless, *That Elwin is a one...* was a phrase we often heard in the ensuing months. Not that I was generally there to hear the full story as I’ve now left home, but frequently, in his calls to me, whenever I asked “How’s work?” that’s how he’d start. So I was curious to meet this Elwin. From what Dad said he was a typical salesman spiced up with a fistful of charismatic flamboyance. *A big I-am, irritating as hell, but good at what he does*, was how he put it.

So when Dad asked whether I and my long-term boyfriend Paul would like to accompany him and Mum to the charity dinner and auction that Elwin was organising, I accepted straight off. It wasn’t the sort of thing that the firm had ever done under Brian’s direction, and although Dad could see the point as a way of entertaining and impressing clients, he wasn’t naturally motivated to invest in such events.

When the evening came, the four of us looked each other up and down and couldn’t help but laugh: Mum and I kitted out like red-carpet celebs, the men as stiff as skittles in dinner jackets and bow-ties. Although my parents had a nice lifestyle, ostentation wasn’t them and that had rubbed off on me. We were more jeans and wellies and picnics in the rain, although we all agreed that just this once we had scrubbed up a treat.

Thankfully, as I was keen for us to make a good impression, Elwin must have thought so too. As soon as we arrived, despite the room already being packed, he swooped down on us with all the insistence of a vigilant seagull.

“Look at all of you,” he shouted, “Fabuloso!” Kissing Mum and me, shaking hands vigorously with Dad and Paul, laughing and talking incessantly: the complete antithesis to Dad who just stood there, smiling. Unlike Brian, who although extrovert, had been much lower key, Elwin was like a sixties DJ who’s spent too much time alone. It was difficult to imagine how the two men got on.

Mum, of course, had met Elwin before so I guess she was comparatively immune to him whereas Paul and I were unprepared for the power of his personality. Of course, I was familiar with the expression “he fills a room” but meeting Elwin, I now understood what it meant. Although he wasn’t physically large, he seemed to suck the impetus out of everyone, leaving them – us – acting as fawning minions. Not that he was unpleasant. Far from it. As Dad had said, you could see why he was so good at winning and retaining business. Watching him in action, endlessly circulating, chatting, laughing, complimenting, teasing, pressing the flesh - his impact was irresistible.

And yet, and yet... There was an air of superiority about him. A sense of patronising supremacy in his manner that even played peek-a-boo when he spoke to Dad. Nothing you could put your finger on, and knowing Dad - who although laid-back is nobody’s fool - there would have been trouble already if it’d been too obvious.

In the lull following dessert, the MC put out a reminder about the auction prompting those who hadn’t settled on their level of commitment to flick anxiously through the catalogue.

“What are you going to bid for?” Mum asked Dad.

“Lord knows. Nothing we want, is there.”

“Oh, I don’t know. One of the holidays, the wine... You’ll have to make at least one bid and a good one. You are one of the hosts, after all.”

“I don’t think that matters. The best tactic is to bid low for everything thereby pushing up the amount that someone else pays who actually wants the thing. Then everyone wins.”

“That’s a classic accountant’s view. Typical you.”

“But true -” he laughed.

At that moment, Elwin descended, touching down once again like a predatory bird in a pool full of sprats.

“So what have you got your sights on tonight, old bean?” he asked, punching Dad lightly on the arm. “Not likely to be you scooping the biggest bid of the evening award though, is it? Not with the moths in your pocket.” He laughed, loudly, but quite fondly, at his own summation and we all smiled politely. It was difficult to tell exactly how serious he was, but a glance at Dad showed that this was part of an ongoing commentary, a running joke wearing more than slightly thin.

Dad snickered, nevertheless. “Yes... but the most moths are often found in the deepest pockets, so don’t base your economic predictions on unreliable evidence –“

“Very Zen, Dad,” I interrupted. From a lifetime’s experience I knew, like Mum, that you could push Dad too far, especially when drink was involved, and this was no arena in which to stage the new partners’ first falling-out.

Once started, the auction proceeded at a brisk pace. Paul and I had decided to bid for a day’s spa treat, not something we yearned for, but we felt it showed willing. We were well outbid.

One by one the lots fell. A few went to senior employees, but in the main the successful bidders were clients. “Nice to see that your agency doesn’t bill you so much that you can’t afford to treat yourselves,” the auctioneer, himself a client, quipped at one stage.

Elwin made his presence felt in most of the big-money lots, driving up the bidding with goodwill and determination. In almost every case, once an eye-watering figure had been reached, he conceded to the other bidder in a way that suggested that they’d both been eyeing up the last biscuit on a plate: *No you have it, please, your need is greater than mine.*

A few times he won, whooping with delight, even though he’d paid dearly for something which one suspected was neither novel nor particularly desirable. However, he was playing the game and playing it well.

Dad, however, was still following his stated strategy. He played around when the bidding was low and then withdrew. From his body language alone it was obvious that he had no intention of participating seriously.

When the last lot came up, Elwin was in line to have made the highest bid of the evening – twelve thousand, two hundred pounds - landing him a diamond bracelet, presumably intended for his decorative, number three wife. The final lot on offer was a painting, an abstract which the catalogue described as “an outstanding study of the human condition by one of this century’s most visionary new artists”. The artist’s name wasn’t familiar to me – and I suspected many others might not have heard of him either - so I was intrigued as to whether the merits of the piece as it stood would be enough to generate some significant bidding.

The work was large and colourful and not at all the sort of thing my parents liked, so it was no surprise that Dad continued to look uninterested. I’d pretty much lost interest myself until - just as Elwin bid thirteen thousand and it seemed it was all over - Dad raised his hand. Mum and I looked at each other. “Bugger me,” said Paul softly.

The bidding between the two of them, jovial and good-natured to all intents and made even more so by the auctioneer’s sardonic commentary, continued to a breath-taking level. Fifteen thousand, seventeen, twenty, twenty-three... At twenty-four thousand, nine hundred pounds, Elwin shook his head. “Yours,” he said to Dad, and grinned. But his smile was forced, weary, and bore every sign of it having been a long night.

Dad, as usual, looked unruffled as if this was something he did every day.

Twenty-five thousand! What were you thinking of, Dad? We all three thought it, but unlike the crowd who surged forward to congratulate him, we were silent. Even on the way home no more was said. Undoubtedly Mum was furious, and Dad – well, sometimes with him it’s best to keep quiet.

“He did it to show Elwin that he is still top dog,” I whispered to Paul later that night as we lay in bed contemplating the evening’s events.

“I don’t think so, that’s too simplistic. I reckon it was an act of support, a public acknowledgment that he accepts Elwin and trusts him. After all, to spend twenty-five grand just like that, he’d have to believe that the agency was pretty soon going to earn it back for him.”

“Maybe... but I don’t believe that Dad would have been that subtle – besides, would Elwin even have recognised the gesture?”

“You could ask your Mum...?”

“Mmm.” We left the conversation there, and I drifted off into a fitful sleep troubled by thoughts of how much we ever really know other people.

The next morning Mum’s response was unequivocal. She shrugged and cast her eyes heavenwards. “God only knows - mid-life crisis probably. ‘Because I wanted to’ is all he’s said to me.” And with that she left the room, underlining that from her perspective the episode was closed.

So no help there and since then, the incident has assumed the mantle of an elephant in the room. Not that it is in any room: apparently the painting is still in its packing, stowed in the loft where it’s been for the past five years.

A few days ago, when I last spoke to Mum, she told me that earlier that day Dad had pointedly left the newspaper on the table next to her breakfast plate. *Record price achieved by Turner Prize finalist* the headline said. Unsurprisingly, she immediately recognised the artist’s name. *But I haven’t said anything*, she reported. *I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.*

So it turns out that the once fairly obscure artist may have been an excellent bet. But to expect Dad – the bean counter – to have known that *and* to have taken that risk? Surely not. Although once upon a time he had taken a huge risk by investing all he had in setting up the agency and then, of course, throwing in his lot with Elwin ...

Perhaps a leopard never does change its spots? **SLQ**

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