

Still Life With Nudes — One Act

George Johnson



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STILL LIFE WITH NUDES

by George M. Johnson

CAST

BETTY DILLIWICK: 82, married to HARTWELL;, painter of gigantic (8-10') Gaugin-esque nudes, growing old disgracefully i.e. lost sense of decorum, outspoken, but kind-hearted.

HARTWELL DILLIWICK: 80, under BETTY's thumb, can be a little scattered, balding, grumpy, gruff, fit (great walker) but eye-sight and hearing poor.

SYLVIA: mid to late 60s, spirited, mischievous, thinks herself sensual, attracted to JAMES.

JAMES: early 70s, British born, dapper, charming, flirts with the ladies, likes his drink.

HELEN ARCHER: early 70s, sturdy build, prim and proper, clipped speech, President of Ancient Acorn Society, member of various charity boards.

MS. MACKENZIE KUMAR-JONES: early 30s, Curator of Blotchley Leisure Center and Art Gallery, sees herself as avant-garde.

DAVIDÉ BOUCHENART: mid-30's, Assistant curator, French origin, mincing, foppish, obsequious.

Place

Blotchley Leisure Center and Art Gallery.

Time

The present. April.

ACT ONE

Setting: Foyer of the Blotchley Leisure Center and Art Gallery, a former water-treatment plant, in Blotchley, one of any number of large towns in North America with big city pretensions. Downstage left stand two stainless steel pillars to signify entrance to gallery. Upstage left stand a rack of postcards and a shelf of goods with a funky chair, to give impression of an Art Gallery gift shop. Projecting into upstage center from back curtain sits a domed structure (resembling a turbine casing) with a door in it--Ms KUMAR-JONES's office. Upstage right an old-fashioned toilet with tank suspended above it can be seen in silhouette behind a translucent screen. Downstage right an artist's statement on a stand, presumed to be in front of a "Fountain of Youth" installment offstage. (If the resources are available, this fountain could be onstage, or back-projected on screen.)

AT RISE: BETTY, HARTWELL, SYLVIA, JAMES, and HELEN at entrance of Blotchley Leisure Center and Art Gallery. Everyone except HELEN carries banners and placards. She carries a large knitted bag. Tied to her wrist, SYLVIA has some balloons, including some black and white ones. Large paintings covered in outrageously patterned packing paper lean up against a pillar, along with a set of collapsible steps that BETTY intends to use to hang her paintings. BETTY sets down her placard.

BETTY: *(whispering)* Go on, Hartwell.

HARTWELL: What's that dear?

BETTY: *(louder)* I said, begin!

HARTWELL: Yes, yes. *(He puts down his placard and clears his throat.)* Betty and I would like to thank all of you Ancient Acorns for joining us today on our mission to the Blotchley Leisure and Art Center. As you know, Betty has worked tirelessly to have her, ah, still lives exhibited here, without success--

BETTY: Until today, dear--

HARTWELL: Yes, yes...and without any satisfactory explanation as to why they were turned down. With your support as pillars *(reaches out to a pillar to steady himself)*, and taxpayers of Blotchley district, we hope to obtain a fair hearing, or at least, a satisfactory, that is--

BETTY: What Hartwell means to say, is that today we will overcome this perversion of justice. (*the others clap*) We will storm this *bastille* of contemporary art, with all of its self-indulgent, inscrutable installations, and install ourselves until the powers that be can no longer refuse us. We're not too old to matter!

(*More clapping. Spontaneous eruption into song: "Forward senior citizens, fighting for our rights" to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers." BETTY gets HARTWELL to fetch the set of steps so that she can be better seen and heard. HELEN, a little ruffled by this outburst, spies the chair, sits, and pulls out some knitting.*)

JAMES: Hear, hear!

SYLVIA: (*flirtatiously*) I didn't realize you were a patron of the arts, James.

JAMES: What's that Sylvia? Oh, well, I just think the old girl's got spunk. All power to her I say. And yes, I do have a collection of car adverts from the good old days when I sold motors for a living.

SYLVIA: Car advertisements? Your collection wouldn't have anything to do with the bikini-clad women they used to drape all over cars back in the good old days, would it?

JAMES: Good gracious, Sylvia, what do you take me for? No, no, the ads have considerable artistic merit.

SYLVIA: Uh huh. Artistic merit. Maybe you could show them to me sometime. And do you think that Betty's work has artistic merit? Sometimes I wonder about her. She seems to be losing her sense of balance.

JAMES: What makes you say that? Her wheels may have spun sideways in the muck once or twice, but she's never lacked an overdrive. Have you ever seen her paintings?

SYLVIA: Not her most recent ones.

JAMES: Magnificently revealing...of the human condition.

SYLVIA: I can just imagine. I've known Betty since our singing days, as Classy Chassis.

JAMES: You are still a member, I take it?

(Pleased, SYLVIA poses as a flapper dancer, kicking up a heel.)

BETTY: *(On steps, more histrionically.)* We shall express ourselves freely. The Ancient Acorns will geyser new life into the Blotchley Leisure and Arts Center!

(BETTY throws her hands up in the air in imitation of a fountain spraying water, wobbles, and tips off steps into Hartwell's arms.)

JAMES: *(shouts)* Nice catch, Harty!

(HARTWELL staggers under BETTY's weight.)

HARTWELL: *(gasps)* Goodness knows I could do with a spraying from the fountain of new life.

BETTY: Oh, Hartwell. You're the fittest eighty-year-old I know. Not many at your age can man-handle a full-sized portrait.

HARTWELL: *(sets her down)* If I could see where I was going with it. The truth is, dear, I'm not feeling one hundred per cent. My heart's murmuring and I can feel the angina coming on again.

HELEN: *(Stands. To SYLVIA.)* I'm sure I don't know where expressing ourselves freely will get us. Humph. I shouldn't be surprised if Betty reveals far too much of herself during the course of this, this folly. She might as well, after painting all those pictures.

JAMES: Dearest Helen, prudishness does not become you. What if Betty does show a little skin to make her point? She might make it into the tabloids, on page three even! It would be a refreshing change to see an eighty-two-year-old displaying her wares.

HELEN: That's a revolting thought, James. You ought to be ashamed.

JAMES: Oh, go on. I put shame in the garbage bin when I turned sixty. Might as well grow old disgracefully. They all expect us to go dotty anyhow. May I be so bold as to ask you why you have joined us if you don't approve of Betty's painting?

HELEN: As the President of the Ancient Acorn Society, I feel it is my responsibility to maintain a moral tone to our outing. After all, our motto is "Acorns hang together," and our aim is to plant the seeds of personal transformation at an advanced age. I continue to hold out some hope for Betty.

JAMES: Ah ha. I see. We wouldn't want to discredit the ancient order, would we?

SYLVIA: Or is it that you just don't want to miss out on the action, Helen?

(HELEN sniffs at her. BETTY smoothes her rumpled smock and ascends steps again.)

BETTY: Bless you dears. Finally, I want to take this moment, just in case we don't have a chance to speak again, to thank you all for giving of yourselves so generously in this higher cause of Art. Your efforts will not be wasted, let me assure you. Now, this is the plan. Am I correct in assuming that none of you have visited the gallery before?

JAMES: Actually, I have, in a manner of speaking.

BETTY: You have, James?

JAMES: Not the art gallery as such. I actually did a stint in the building when it held the rather less imposing title of Blotchley Water Treatment Plant.

BETTY: Yes? Before its remarkable transformation? I see. Well, you will no doubt be of great help to us. I'm sure you'll remember the main features. Not all of the renovations, I am sad to say, have been in the best of taste, nonetheless—

HARTWELL: The plan dear.

BETTY: Yes, yes, Hartwell. We will assemble in the main entrance, near what is called the Fountain of Youth. Remarkably, it's a former water-holding tank, James.

JAMES: The entrance is where the cistern was? I've got to see this.

BETTY: Let us make our presence known. Have your banners, placards and balloons ready. Whoop it up a little. *(Flings up her arms.)* From there we will

proceed to the curator's office, housed in a former turbine. The curator is a fashionable young lady... or what is the word they use these days?

HARTWELL: Eh? I believe it's trendy, dear.

BETTY: That's it. Yes, she's a very trendy young woman, but rather lacking in, well, warmth, you might say. Her name is Miss Mackenzie Kumar-Jones. She will be expecting us, but she will not be expecting us to install ourselves in the vestibule until we obtain satisfaction!

(The others cheer.)

Onward then troops! Don't forget the chant now.

(Excited chatter as the ACORNS enter the gallery foyer with their placards. During the following dialogue they move in and out of the gallery entrance, struggling to bring in the enormous eight to ten by three to four foot paintings, some of which could be set up on the horizontal if visibility is a problem.)

SYLVIA: James, you *are* a man of mystery. I didn't realize you'd been in water treatment.

JAMES: That's not the only water I've been in, most of it hot, let me tell you, my dear. I splashed about at one or two things in my day, so to speak. When I worked at Blotchley WTP I was but a lad, who'd just hopped across the pond. Actually, if the truth be known, I was hoping today to stop into my old watering hole, The Elephant and Stool.

SYLVIA: James, you can't! What about Betty and Art?

JAMES: I'd thought I would do a bit of protest until my lips dry out and then retire there. Don't suppose you'd care to join me?

SYLVIA: You tempter, you.

HELEN: Dear me, I am pleased. They do have a gift shop. Perhaps I'll just have a quick look around.

(From this point on, when HELEN is not engaged in conversation she moves back to the gift shop to look further or she knits, though she is within earshot. Alternately appalled and compelled to listen.)

JAMES: What do you want in there, postcards in case we get arrested? Always handy to have for writing to loved ones from the clink.

SYLVIA: James! That's a comforting thought.

HELEN: I merely wish to see what sort of crafts they stock. Who knows? If Betty gets her foot in the door with her paintings, I might offer them some of my martyrs of the cross broaches, or perhaps the gnome angels for Christmas.

SYLVIA: Aha. Ever the opportunist, Helen.

HELEN: I make them to support the GGDGDDAR.

JAMES: I didn't know you stuttered.

HELEN: I certainly do not. *(She raises her nose and sniffs.)* That's the acronym for the Great Grand-daughters of the Grand-daughters of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It's a thoroughly reputable charity. Don't you try to insinuate otherwise, or-

JAMES: For those who can pronounce it. *(He catches sight of the Fountain of Youth offstage.)* Cor blimey, look what they've done to cistern number two.

(JAMES walks towards offstage right with SYLVIA in tow. Helen turns back to the gift shop in a huff.)

HELEN: Such rudeness.

JAMES: What are those wires all wound together in the center of it with the water spitting out everywhere?

SYLVIA: *(pausing in front of artist's statement on stand)* Sssh, James. That must be the Fountain of Youth. Let me take a look at the artist's statement. They're so informative.

JAMES: Don't get too close. They've removed the protective railing. Workers' Comp would have a field day in here.

SYLVIA: Hmm. (*reading*) This piece negates extrinsic finality--a Kantian legacy revised by the doctrine of art for art's sake. It finds its accomplishment in gestural neo-conceptual abstract studies of the feminine *sans accoutrement*. Here, meaning is manipulated through the arrangements of the materials, which form discourses between them, and inflect contingency against loss.

JAMES: What the blazes does that mean in the King's English?

SYLVIA: I haven't got a clue. It seems that those wires are meant to be people entwined and spurting water out of their mouths. Let's see. The subtitle is "Double Indemnity."

(*SYLVIA unzips her purse and rummages in it for a coin.*)

JAMES: Clear as mud now. Double indemnity? Crime film, wasn't it? Certainly criminal what they've done there. Double rebar more like.

SYLVIA: Here's to us!

(*SYLVIA tosses coin offstage. Sound of it hitting edge of fountain and dropping in.*)

JAMES: Sylvia, what on earth are you doing?

SYLVIA: I always toss a coin into fountains, for good luck.

JAMES: Oh, my dear girl. The supervisor never would have stood for foreign objects in the tank in the old days.

SYLVIA: James, we don't have that kind of prejudice any more. Look, there's lots of coins.

JAMES: Hmm. That's not exactly...but never mind. (*scrutinizing the fountain*) I say, what have those 'figures' got in their claws? Looks like terrorists have planted detonators.

SYLVIA: James, you have too vivid an imagination. I believe they're MP3 players. Look, they've got earphones.

JAMES: What players? MI5?

SYLVIA: MP3. My grandkids have them. They're like portable tape decks.

JAMES: Is that so? Those figures don't look like they're particularly enjoying what they're hearing, all twisted up like that--reminds me of that game the kids used to have--what was it called--Twister?

SYLVIA: We could try and assume the pose--just to see.

JAMES: I don't know about that, dear. We might find ourselves locked together eternally, if my arthritis kicked in.

SYLVIA: Ooh. There's a thought.

BETTY: Attention everyone. Please don't stray from our noble task!

JAMES: Wouldn't think of it Betty! We were just admiring the scenery.

(JAMES and SYLVIA move back to center stage and raise their signs. HARTWELL man-handles a sandwich board.)

BETTY: Oh, dear me, you've all been so creative with your signs. "Betty Dilliwick does more than flowers and fruit with a lot less!" What a colorful banner, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Why, thank you, Betty.

BETTY: Hartwell, show them yours.

HARTWELL: Eh? *(shouts)* "Seniors Seen and heard!"

BETTY: What it lacks in precision it makes up for in poignancy. And don't you love Hartwell's sandwich board? "Still life in Seniors." I think it's marvelous. Can you move in it, Hartwell?

HARTWELL: Barely.

SYLVIA: Lift yours up, Betty, so we can see.

BETTY: I thought you'd never ask.

SYLVIA: (*reading*) "Rejection of Dilliwick's Art Obscene." Now that's forthright.

BETTY: And on the other side I've got "Blot out blot against Dilliwick at Blotchley."

JAMES: That's the ticket, old girl. Bludgeon 'em with it.

BETTY: James, don't be shy. Let's see what you've come up with.

SYLVIA: (*under her breath*) James, you can't carry that!

JAMES: "Dilliwick Deserves Hanging." It's catchy isn't it?

BETTY: Very striking, especially your artistic impression of me. At least, I assume that's me dangling from the rope with my head punched through a painting? I'm not sure the scene conveys quite the intended message though. Never mind.

SYLVIA: Where's your sign, Helen?

HELEN: (*returning from the gift shop with a bag of items*) I am not about to carry a sign like some...some striking laborer.

SYLVIA: Oh well, la di da. Here, take some of my balloons then. Better be the black and white ones. (*SYLVIA unties the black and white balloons from her wrist and hands them to HELEN.*)

HELEN: Very well, but I do need to pay for my purchases. There doesn't seem to be anyone manning the gift shop.

SYLVIA: That's peopling or personing, I think.

HELEN: Fah, for political correctness.

BETTY: Is everyone ready? We'll march around the vestibule first. Let's chant: "Art for the aged! Ageism must die!" (*The others join in.*)

SYLVIA: (*adds*) Hang Betty's Paintings!

JAMES: (*shouts*) Betty be hanged!

(*SYLVIA gives JAMES the eye. BOUCHENART enters stage right.*)

BOUCHENART: Excuse me, but this is a Multi-media installation Center. It's fully atmosphere controlled and sound sensitive. Noise of any kind is not permitted here!

HARTWELL: A what center?

BETTY: Try and stop us! Out of the way young man. I'm dangerous with a placard.

(*BETTY walks toward curator's door upstage center; SYLVIA continues to picket with her sign; HARTWELL struggles out of his sandwich board; and JAMES discreetly moves stage right. While the ensuing conversation takes place JAMES happens upon a toilet stall upstage right. While at first puzzled by the toilet's location, soon nature's call cannot be ignored and he takes advantage of its convenience. The arc of his urine could be shown in silhouette, perhaps using a water pistol for comic effect.*)

BOUCHENART: Wait just a minute Madam. You can't go in there.

(*BETTY raps on the door.*)

BETTY: Ms. Kumar-Jones? Betty Dilliwick here again. We've brought along more of my paintings to help you in your decision, as well as a few supporters.

KUMAR-JONES: (*Stepping out into the foyer.*) What do you think you're doing? You can't just march through here like it was Pride Week!

BETTY: We *do* have pride in our work. That's why we've come.

SYLVIA: (*Under her breath.*) She is trendy--all in black. How funereal.

HELEN: Shush. Perhaps she's in mourning.

KUMAR-JONES: I meant Gay Pride week.

BETTY: We are gay as well. Positively brimming with brightness as a fleshly reflection of my paintings.

KUMAR-JONES: Excuse me?

BOUCHENART: They've been creating a horrible disturbance in the Center, Ms. Kumar-Jones. If the directors get wind of this—

BETTY: Thank you for keeping such a close eye on my dangerous subversives. Who is this young man?

KUMAR-JONES: This is the assistant curator, Davidé Bouchenart. Ms. Dilliwick, why—

BETTY: Bouchenart. Ah, a Frenchman. Well, you should have more sympathy for our cause. Remember how your country first reacted to your Impressionists. And where are they now?

BOUCHENART: (*puzzled*) Dead?

BETTY: Their paintings are everywhere, from fridge magnets to fanny packs to, to...lingerie! And by the by, it's Mrs., dear. Hartwell and I have been married now for fifty-eight years. And yes, I still know my lingerie.

HARTWELL: You're drifting dear. The point.

BETTY: Yes, yes, I was just getting there. (*to KUMAR-JONES*) You can call me Betty.

KUMAR-JONES: Yes, well Betty, it's very nice that you and your friends have made the trip to our Leisure Center and Art Gallery at your age...that is, stage in life, but you might have saved yourselves the trouble. You see, Mr. Bouchenart and I, in consultation with the Board, have made our decision that your representations do not align with the current direction of our program here. Your project will no doubt find a more suitable space elsewhere.

(*HELEN crosses her arms, looks pleased and mouths, "Told you so."*)

BETTY: What you mean is that you don't want to hang my pictures. I did manage to decipher as much from your letter. Then I felt guilty that I had not given you a fair chance to assess the full range of my work, since I had only sent in a few smaller pieces, you see.

Still Life with Nudes

KUMAR-JONES: We felt we had seen quite enough to make a decision. You did send us fourteen pieces...

BETTY: Oh, but the large canvasses are so much more breathtaking.

KUMAR-JONES: If they're also in oil and also, well, still lives with nudes, then they wouldn't change our decision. Our policy is to feature the most cutting-edge multi-media installations.

JAMES: *(returning from stage right)* You mean like the one I just visited?

BETTY: *(miffed)* James, I didn't realize you'd been touring the gallery.

JAMES: Sorry, old girl, but I can't hold water in my tank like I used to.

HELEN: Surely, you're not suggesting...

SYLVIA: James, really!

JAMES: Well, it's true. Anyway, the installation, as the lady called it, was titled "Toilet, born free and everywhere with chains and light pull." Haven't the foggiest what that's supposed to mean.

KUMAR-JONES: *(enthusiastically)* That's one of our newest pieces, by the Hungarian, Foudra Byzrka.

JAMES: Foudra Byzrka? He must be berserk-a if he's claiming his piece is new. Blimey, I could have sworn it was the same old loo--re-glazed mind you--that I used when I worked shift here forty-five years ago. You know the type I mean, a real W.C. with the tank hanging from the wall above the bowl, and a chain that you pull to flush.

BOUCHENART: *(mincing)* I believe Mr. Byzrka did incorporate found art.

END OF FREEVIEW

You'll want to read and perform this show!