

The New Boy 1969

by Sue Hitchcock

“Ssss.”

It’s the new boy attracting my attention. We are supposed to whisper so that the studies of the visitors are not disturbed. Both of our names start with ‘s’, but I prefer to speak normally in a low voice.

The new boy, Stephen, is only eighteen, straight from public school. We have nothing in common but English, though even that is in doubt. Despite a university education, my accent is still tinged with London flavour. His, on the other hand, is incomprehensible. I can understand the Queen when she is on Gaumont British News at the cinema, but the strangulated ‘Queen’s English’ which Stephen uses might as well be a foreign language. It doesn’t help that we have to be quiet, not to disturb the visitors and on top of that, I am supposed to show him the ropes. He knows nothing!

“Sssss, whhrr is gyyah?”

“Pardon?”

He comes over and shows me the ticket submitted by the visitor on his viewing table. We each have our cabinet key, and the Goya prints are on this floor, so I should only need to point to the place, but there are a dozen or so solander boxes containing the mounted prints.

“Ask the visitor which he wants. If he wants all, he has to have one box at a time.”

Puzzlement wrinkles his brow, “Pleeeese, wll yu hlp mee.”

I sigh and get up. We need steps to reach the top box. He unlocks the cabinet and climbs. He is too close and the solander threatens to push him off. He climbs down and gives me a helpless look. I pull the steps back six inches and climb up myself to reach down the box. He almost drops it at the sudden weight, but I ignore it to lock the cabinet again.

Stephen politely takes the box to the visitor and sets up the easel, exchanging a few words, like a curator. Why did he feel so entitled?

My sister says I am an invert snob. Given the number of friends I have who are communist, C.N.D. or protesting against the Vietnam war, I suppose I am. There are a few communists in the British Museum. Maybe it is harmless enough in the museum, and having passed the Civil Service exam, where could we be safely observed?

Hope of any kind of promotion was out of the question. There was a hierarchy. All the curators in the Prints and Drawings department had Oxbridge degrees in French, English, German or Theology, but more important, they had private collections, which they would probably donate eventually.

Stephen settled in eventually, but took the liberty of behaving like a curator, if an acquaintance arrived. He would take them to a private desk and talk with them at length, ignoring other duties. At closing time he would be missing when all the heavy boxes had to be tidied and locked away. Why should I care, when I was about to leave and take my finals in Art History?

Nevertheless, he seemed to be advantaged in a way I wasn't. Later I discovered he had donated a small collection of prints, not of great value, but obviously the tribute required by the museum high priests.

Stephen left the Museum quite soon after me, and though very young was soon dealing in watercolours and drawings. It's amazing what good finances and social contacts can do for you.