

ALFRED WARKENTIN

## The Sagging Marx

### I

GOD, TILTON WAS CONVINCED, didn't necessarily dance all over the great painters, but he certainly danced all over every great picture painted. For years Tilton had tried and failed to paint a great work of art. His efforts had ended in failure. Maybe God wasn't with him. Times were so bad that even his women friends told him straight, that he had the rushed look of the born loser: racing here, charging there, never getting anywhere.

In painting, he knew, there was a place for everything with everything in its place. It was fundamental that proper positioning and proper proportion be taken into account, and it was central to the kind of art he did. "Till," Professor Fashton said, "for the kind of limited 'genius' you apply to canvas, there is a spot for what is vital, no spot for anything that is not. Divine what I'm trying to get at and you may escape teaching high school drawing."

Professor Fashton thought Till had one chance in ten to succeed at photographic-type painting. The same professor, who with his ever-ready smile looked like an amiable gorilla, was in fact a nasty one; he'd told another painting-hopeful that if she worked hard she might avoid penury by teaching art in an elementary school where the kids had filthy hands soiled by the dust of smelly streets.

So there'd been hope for Till. He'd avoided high school teaching.

A painter, so far as Till was concerned, had several responsibilities to himself, one of the most important being that he is obliged to not only catch sight of the distant future before it's here, but to give the impression in his painting that he knew all about the latest trends before they arrived; a sort of meeting what lay ahead straight on and declaring it his. Till's beginning had not been good. Ditto for the succeeding years. At the moment Tilton Kingsley considered these things it was late on the morning of November

10, 1989. He slept. Even as he slept, the same thoughts stirred through his head. Again and again. *I have to position things right. I have to get that stomach right. Just right.* Strange. As he tossed and turned in his sleep, he dreamt he was Christ, the nails driven into his sweaty palms ... But what the hell. For hours now his mind had been trapped inside a painting, a painting that would change the world, or, at least, interpret the world. Was he engaged in a psychic phenomenon?

In the dream—perhaps it was a vision—there was movement; soldiers stood about. Lenin and Stalin were there, dressed as Soviet soldiers, slinking into the background. They were not the focus. The focus was the stomach of a fat man, about forty-five years old. He was bearded. And he sagged. *Got to get that perspective right ... Gotta get it right. Show the navel. Gotta show the bulging navel.*

To show the bulging navel all Till, or any talented painter, had to do was put the mind to work. For the artist, the eye was always the best camera. Right now it gave him a wide angle. A wide angle's no good. Focus. Gotta show the bulging navel. In his dream he'd lost focus. He was alone with a tourist group. Whether he was in the Vatican or a German cathedral, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that he looked at a Crucifixion and that he could repeat it, just so, that he could get the rusty nails in the bloodied and twitching hands just right. The guide talked of Titian and Raphael and a thousand other pictures with Jesus as focus. One part of Till talked to another part. *I can do it. I can do it better than anyone. Let Professor Fashton see me now.*

The guide spoke: "Here's a work modeled on Mathias Grünewald's Crucifixion. It's a minor work, but note the composition, the rudimentary gathering of the various elements ..."

There was not the slightest doubt in Till's mind that he was the one to exceed Grünewald, and why not? Besides, it would be a fun thing. He always tried to put fun into his pictures. The key was the stomach. It would have to be an enormous stomach, a fat cat stomach.

"What are you thinking of?" a weird voice shouted in the dream. "A Christ on the cross with a *beer* belly?"

No, no. Till wasn't thinking of Christ at all. Not now ... or, maybe, a pretender Christ. The most important thing was that he knew he could do it, that he was meant to do it. *I'll be famous ... and the idea has significance.* On the other hand, he wasn't interested in ideology. Sure, he thought of Stalin, Lenin, even God, but political leaders came and went and made no difference to him or anybody. (Well, maybe dictator's a difference, but in the long run what did any of that matter?) And, yes, he thought of God, but God as a short term for nature, or the genius that was out there in all

sorts of forms. Even as he drifted into another kind of sleep, the vision fading, Till tried to reassure himself that a thousand years from now they'd still be talking of Kingsley's sagging Marx ... *I'll be a star*. The Sagging Marx! That was the name of the painting. Forget Marx. Marx meant nothing. Just another name like Lenin, Jesus or whatever. It was the painting that was the thing. And if God insisted on giving art a helping hand, why discourage it? But try and explain all that to people. He never bothered. Ideologues, Till thought, had at least two things in common: fanaticism and, more often than not, emaciated looks. His mother, for instance, loved talking head talk, even subscribing to *The Nation* and *National Review*; for balance on stupidity, Till thought. Ah, *The Sagging Marx*. The picture with the stomach.

As he woke hours later, with Titian's, Raphael's, Leonardo's, Caraccio and Veronese's rhythmic lines dancing in his head, Till knew the media would love him. That didn't necessarily mean the critics. It was the feature editors who would love him. The immediate problem was his friends. They'd hate him. They would say he'd sold out. In the shower he wrestled with the problem, concluding he'd show 'em all, that he would refuse to be ignored by the elitists who'd complimented him to death and into near poverty, that it would be insane to ignore the celebrity that would surely be his. He would refuse to be ignored. He would yet mount the ladder of art significance. Of genius itself.

After breakfast in his apartment, next to his studio on St. Laurent, he walked to his artists' supply store to buy the largest canvas he would ever work on in his life.

At one time, long before university, Till had thought he would be another Picasso. That phase passed. He then took after real-life painters and real lifes that were hard to distinguish from photographs. Nothing worked. The critics were kind; they were always kind. The sales were few.

For a month Till worked on his sagging Marx, then decided, quite abruptly, that he didn't know enough. Although he was no longer rich by any standard, he had a brother, Staffield, who carried on the Kingsley family businesses. Staffield came to the rescue. He financed Till's trip to Italy to study the old masters. They and their techniques—their brushes, their other materials, their manner of mixing oils—were essential to his carrying out his great scheme, the painting that would make Till famous. And rich. At least rich enough to pay Staffield back for all the goodness he had showered on him. Till spent January and February of 1990 in Italy, the best months to be away from Montreal if one didn't ski, although Till, like all Kingsleys, skied. But painting came first.

Back in Montreal he hired no models because they were not necessary for the great task. He needed no model to portray Marx. Triumph in

this project would be found in a facial composition that was established, a face known everywhere to everyone. For that he could go to the fiercer Marx of the statues, but he wanted a younger Marx, a Marx closer to the Jesus of the Crucifixion pictures. For that he went to the Soviet consulate and came back with a copy of *THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY*, by Marx and Engels, written between November of 1845 and August of 1846 although it was not published in full in German until many years later. The picture in the volume was of a younger Marx, a virile Marx and a well-fed Marx. The perfect Marx. A Marx probably in his forties, much older than the twenty-seven year old who wrote *THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY*, but the youngest Marx he could find and still work with a Marx who was instantly recognizable as *the* Karl Marx.

For all sorts of reasons the last thing Till wanted was a Marx who resembled the emaciated Christ. Some of the reasons were crassly commercial; how many pictures of a cadaverous Christ on the cross were there? Tens of thousands? How many could the market stand? And while he had no picture of Marx's stomach in 1845, his full, fleshy, sympathetic face demanded a fat Marx. And so it was. Till added anguish and blood into Marx's beard, but other than that he painted the younger Marx exactly as the photographer had seen him, say, in 1859. Fortunately, Staffield's wife was in the seventh month of pregnancy. It was her stomach that he painted.

In April of 1991, at a time when freedom threatened the Soviet Union itself, Till finished his monumental struggle with destiny. He thought *The Sagging Marx* splendid, so sublime he would invite his friends for a pre-showing. Strictly un-official. This would be his night to howl, to let his light strut and exult with the best of 'em. From tonight his flame would rise to fame.



"... Yeah," one of the people at the party said, "my wife threw out the red vinyl and chrome bar stools last week from the rec room. Too Las Vegas ...."

Till hated chrome. The way his party was going he'd soon smash a few bar stools on his friends' heads. No one had offered an opinion on the picture. On the other hand, these amateurs in Renaissance art might be intimidated. That had to be it, he thought. The idea of a party was a mistake. He shook his head, wished he was in his bath, luxuriating, preparing for a papal audience, say around the time of Julius II. That man knew what painting was about.

An hour later more of Till's friends—a lively babble of drones, free-loaders and imaginative originals—arrived in his loft.

“Nice suit, Tilt.”

He didn't pay any notice to the fellow, an art critic who favored the modernists, meaning, in Till's current definition of things artistic, that he didn't understand the conservative art tradition, and, in any case, like most liberals Till knew, the fellow had a scrawny chicken neck. Yet, Till didn't mind the compliment for his suit; like his brother, Till considered himself a man of style. At the same time Staffield was a mere pretender at style. In many areas Staffield's rural roots were far too evident, and perhaps more so because he spent a lot of time on the farm these days. This was unfortunate. He needed Staffield in town, on trips to New York, to get the buzz going on Till's new gem.

“At least,” the art critic said, “I can't write that you don't know Savile Row and Brooks Bros. Where'd you pick up that suit anyway?”

That kind of snarkiness Till could do without; he walked away from the critic.

“Hey, Till.” At last a fellow painter. Carol Banks. “I've been looking at what kept you away this past year. Ah! Your masterpiece.” While Carol didn't laugh exactly, she seemed on the verge of a giggle. “Great sense of form, Till. I see you were in class when Professor Fashton talked about vertical ellipses. And I like that ABC truck. Just like a photo of the real thing.”

Till nodded, but then Carol loved anything theatrical, in life, in painting such as, for instance, the gruesome Crucifixion scenes she claimed scared her as a kid.

“I think I get what you're trying to do,” she said.

“What am I trying to do?”

Over several moments she caressed the kinky blonde hair that hung in elongated ringlets onto her shoulders and beyond. “Well, here you've got Marx—you know me, Till, I do my best thinking with my body and now you've got me thinking.” She gave him a saucy look, quite inappropriate in the presence of Till's sagging Marx. “Let's see. You've got Marx. He's nailed to the cross. Except that the cross is not the cross, but the Brandenburg Gate.” There was a twinkle in Carol's eye and, at least momentarily, she seemed more enthralled by the ferns here than in his prize work. “A perfect crucifixion scene except for the Kingsleyian elements . . . You've botched up Marx's face. *I* wouldn't have had Marx's face frustrated by luxury.”

“It isn't frustrated by luxury. That is Marx. About 1859.”

Wilton Compton, an art dealer with giant, sharply crowned lapels, sidled up to Till. “Till, my boy, the problem is this. Your picture is more of a cartoon than a painting.”

“That’s silly.”

“I insist. Even if the religiously-inspired elements follow the stars of the Renaissance exactly, stars like Raphael and Titian, you’ve turned Christ into Marx. Where Christ’s stomach was emaciated, you’ve used Raphael-like lines—the exact brush strokes—to show Marx’s robust, even rambunctious, stomach. Who’d you get to model that beautiful stomach?”

“I took old photographs of Khrushchev on the Black Sea and copied it. Exactly.”

“Brilliant.”

“You like it then?”

“It’s a cartoon, Till.” Compton spoke with the crystalline articulation he’d learned from his banker father, an aristocrat of such upper-class traits that highborn British diplomats assumed him to be one of theirs. “A cartoon,” Compton said. “A good cartoon.”

“Not a cartoon at all. This is a Renaissance picture, done in the style of the Renaissance, with Renaissance political motifs adapted to November 1989.”

“It could have gone on the cover of *Time* with the fall of the wall, the fall of communism and all that. I like the ABC truck, though. The broadcaster’s a bit in the dark, though.”

“I followed the foreground of one of the Crucifixion scenes at a Venice church. If you’ve studied Renaissance art you’ll know which one.”

Thereupon Compton, with the clout and say-so of an art arbiter, stepped away from the fifteen-by-twelve-foot canvas. He stepped way back. “I thought so. You have Christ broadcasting the demise of Communism. But the suit and figure is Ted Koppel’s. Was he there? At the wall, I mean?”

“That’s not important.”

“He’s kind of a small Jesus, isn’t he?”

In his extensive studies in Italy, Till had heard Vatican priests, sometimes in envy, talk of American electronic evangelists who had commercialized Christ; here was a dealer who wanted to make a physical giant of the very human Jesus of Nazareth. “Who’s to say, Wilton,” Till said, “whether Jesus’s figure was thin, medium or bloated. I only know how Koppel looks. Jesus’s face is Leonardo’s Jesus at *The Last Supper*, right down to the last brush stroke, except for the fact that he’s speaking into the microphone, in English.”

“Makes sense.” There was a pause. “The lips are different when speaking English?”

How would I know? Till asked himself. “Of course.” How’s that for dazzling Wilton Compton with my ignorance? “How do you like my devil, slinking around the tree?”

“Reagan, with a big grin on his face?”

“Yep. He was in on the fall at the wall. Give him credit. Reagan’s deviant egocentrism beat out Marx’s deviant collectivism. At least that’s how I painted the picture. I personally know nothing about the ideology of the thing, but for the purposes of my art, this time Reagan and Christ won, Marx lost.”

“On the other hand, Christianity was the real winner at Golgotha. Is that what you’re trying to say, Till?”

“What do you think it’s worth, Wilton?”

“Not much? What do you plan to call it?”

“*The Sagging Marx.*”

“*The Sagging Marx?* Why not call it *Three Jews?* That’ll have impact. You already have Marx and Jesus, two Communists, and there, in the corner, in the near darkness of the Palestinian night, you have Freud.”

“Yeah. Freud. He’s an exact facsimile of a Crucifixion that I saw in Paris, except for Freud’s face. The scene—Marx on the cross, Jesus broadcasting, Gorbachev and Raisa in Mary’s traditional place, the Brandenburg Gate at the Berlin Wall—has to be analyzed in terms of Freud, pen in hand, writing.”

Till thought this might be the time to champion the philosophy behind his painting, but then he realized it was all for naught. It would be up to the followers of the higher philosophies at the Vatican, at the universities of Vienna and Jena, to explain what he had done. The result was that he limited himself to the following: “Freud’s putting the event into deep analysis. Wouldn’t you, if you were he?”

“You’ll never sell it, Till. *The Sagging Marx.* If you don’t want to be radical, I’d suggest you change the name to *At The Brandenburg Gate, November, 1989.*”

“If I did that you’d tell me that it was too tame.”

“If you called it *At The Berlin Wall*, people would at least know what it was about. Forget it. It won’t sell. In a year no one will understand what the Berlin Wall meant, or what the fall of communism meant.”

“There are other themes here. Take, for instance, Marx, who, in part, learned about communism from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, from the early chapters of the *Acts.*”

Obliviousness to the world around him was not a Till Kingsley trait and he spoke with knowledge, since he’d learned about these things in school, and dinner table conversations. Sometimes he even read books not dealing with art, although art books most often provided plenty of historical background. But how he hated to talk ideology or history. He’d once told an historian that history was for nitpickers, that art was the thing. That didn’t

mean he was ignorant about what history said happened. Maybe some of it even had.

“Then,” Till pursued, “there’s Marx who put Jesus on the cross in Russia. And now we have Reagan’s Jesus; together they put Marx on the cross in Berlin, November 1989. Take the concept that communism and Christianity come out of the same roots. Yet they fight. Why? This painting explores the paradoxes.”

“Paradox away, Till.”



Over several months Till worked hard at selling his picture. Wilton Compton had been ready to take it on, but he’d done so in an attitude of nobility, as if he was doing Till a favour. What Till wanted was commercial enthusiasm. Over several months he convinced himself that he was an aberration as he traveled from Montreal to Los Angeles, from Miami to Vancouver, looking for an art dealer who might want to represent him with sufficient zeal to blast or trumpet Till Kingsley’s way into the art markets of the world. In staid Kansas City he was invited to a rather pedestrian party until an art dealer with spiraling silvery hair, illuminated with diamonds, walked in. Till loved talking to this luminous extravaganza. But it was all talk, no sale. In Boston he met a philanthropist of fable, legend and boast: his voice a blast. No sale. He met other eccentrics, and a host of banal people. Nowhere did he get a nibble. This, he was convinced, was a continent that wallowed in the insipid, that abhorred the radically new.

By the time he got back to his studio he’d learned something: that there was a world of difference between the enquiring mind and the closed mind, that is, the bureaucratic mind. The art world was like a bank. You go to a bank and they’re friendly people, but within a formula of forced congeniality reinforced by banker absolutism. *Outside the box they won’t go, or can’t, or they don’t have the intellectual capacity to do so.* What everyone in the art bank wanted was the same old Picasso, Pollock and deKooning repeated a thousand times.

Oh, there was the woman who’d told him there was nothing radically new about his picture, that in style it was merely a repeat of what the old masters had done. That woman hadn’t understood. She was in the box. Would never get out. The fate of most people.

Disillusioned, Till held a party for all who’d bought his pictures in years past. He then put *The Sagging Marx* up for bid and got a price that was a tragedy: a little less than eight hundred dollars. He had spent many thousands in research, the usual painting expenses and in marketing of



course. Everything was a disaster. And yet, he'd had no choice. He and *The Sagging Marx* had to move on, separately.

Still, he didn't give up. He insisted that he sign a contract with the buyer to the effect that *The Sagging Marx* could not be moved permanently from Montreal, or sold, unless he or Staffield Kingsley approved in writing. And, if sold, fifty per cent of the proceeds from *The Sagging Marx* was to go to Till.

## II

The buyer of the picture was Jack Naylor, owner of a string of Montreal bars and clubs of various types, although for years he had had no fanatic interest in the higher arts, since his main interest had to be profit. He didn't have enough money, yet, to be a philanthropist. For the time being his life was a litany of everything for commerce, nothing but commerce, nothing against commerce. There had been no point, naturally, in telling Tilton Kingsley that he thought the painting had growth potential, but that's why he had bought the thing. The goal now was to market it right. The first thing Naylor did was put a frame around *The Sagging Marx*, the best frame he could buy. It was a gaudy, baroque, thoroughly ostentatious frame. He then began to seek a buyer. By the late spring of 1992 the marketing campaign had been underway for several months and Naylor had not yet made the contact that promised a sale. Things were desperate, and not only with the painting, but in the general economy as well.

"Early on," Naylor now told Eadie Elder, a New York City art dealer in the back seat of his hired stretch limousine, "I went into every business imaginable, even the magazine publishing business, even the book business. Every business except art, my real forte."

The way Naylor had figured it, as he thought of the next brilliant thing to say, everything was in the marketing. Its fizz, froth and foam. But one thing he hadn't counted on from the back seat of the limo was the slick slime of lower Manhattan they were traveling through. It just had to disgust Ms. Elder. But then she herself had suggested these back streets as the fastest way to get to the restaurant he was taking her to. No, he thought, relaxing, Ms. Elder wasn't ignorant of the slick slime; she, after all, lived here. She was in it. She no doubt often saw exuberant degeneracy from the back seat of a stretch limousine. He had hired the limo to be part of the sizzle of his pitch. He personally hoped to pocket at least a hundred thousand from *The Sagging Marx*, and Ms. Elder, in her lavishly baggy pants, did seem impressed with him ... and the limo.

“For years, even when in PR,” Naylor said, “I yearned to get into art. My mistake was that I wanted instant success and instant power. That was the ‘invest in me’ route. At the age of twenty-four I asked for millions.” Again he stopped. “That only works if you already have dough, if you’re risking your own. Now I have enough.” He smiled. “Do you think you can sell *The Sagging Marx*, Ms. Elder?”

“Tell me again. Why do you think Mr. Kingsley was not able to sell the picture at his price?”

“Easy. The fellow’s mind went off on so many tangents, had so many gaps, that it was as twisted and as incomplete as a grade school spelling book once too many students have overused it, bent it, curled its pages, even torn out pages.”

Over several minutes Naylor analyzed what he’d brought to the picture, salesmanship. A salesman had to remain focused, he said. Till Kingsley was not a salesman. Salesmanship was getting people to hunger for what they don’t covet (and wouldn’t until the salesman entered the picture), then turning the hunger into habit. That Naylor knew from personal experience. He told Ms. Elder so, going in detail.

“Mr. Kingsley, Ms. Elder, did not have the slightest idea of how to create that hunger in a buyer. *The Sagging Marx* is a revolutionary idea. Try and sell a revolutionary idea in a tradition-bound society. It’s impossible. Quebec is a tradition-bound society. New Yorkers believe in fabulous vistas. That’s why I’m here.”

“I thought—”

“Don’t believe a word you read about Quebec. Sure there’s been change, but the spring refuses to come. Persistent tracts of snow remain. They block the free flow of the waters. Ideology has replaced religion. The world at twilight.” *Hope she’s satisfied.* “Mr. Kingsley couldn’t sell *The Sagging Marx* in Quebec, I couldn’t. *The Sagging Marx* didn’t stand a chance in Montreal. New York’s ready for change, as you know. You, yourself, create change every day.” Naylor had no idea if she generated revolution, evolution or monotony, but it sounded good. “I had to pay a hell of a price because I believe in the picture. Do you like *The Sagging Marx*?”

“Enough to think about it.”

“To repeat what I said on the phone. If you agree to buy it or represent it or whatever you choose to call it, in the end I will insist on two hundred thousand clear for me, personally.” He then told her about the arrangement with Till Kingsley.

When the car stopped at a traffic light Naylor waited, but Ms. Elder did not respond, although he thought he deserved at least a stare. Blood rushed to Naylor’s temple. *I hope she believes me.* From the concentration of

her eye on the back of the chauffeur's head he was convinced she believed. "I've changed my mind. If you take it on I'll want three hundred thousand absolutely clear and I can only let you have it for a little while."

"You can't change your mind just like that?"

"I just have."

"You're not credible."

"Tell me where you want me to drop you off."

Hours later the limousine came to a smooth stop on the crushed gravel driveway of Ms. Elder's country home far into the wooded domains of deepest Connecticut. In the garden in back Naylor saw the manicured lawns and the type of carved flower beds he loved. He had lots of flower beds in his suburban garden on Montreal's West Island. "I only ask one thing, Ms. Elder. Do not cross me. Damaged ego, you know."

"Cross you?" Ms. Elder took her glasses off. "Would I dare?" She chortled. "Have a good ride back to town, Mr. Naylor and, oh, Mr. Naylor, don't take up the cry of damaged ego too often."

### III

On the caprice of a moment—actually when Jack Naylor showed her the full picture, quite unsuitably framed and delivered to her gallery from the back of a truck—Eadie Elder had agreed to see if she could find a buyer. She refused to take out an option. It was not that kind of picture and Till Kingsley was hardly the kind of painter to cause a storm in the New York or London art markets, although he did have a minor reputation for quality. She hoped to sell *The Sagging Marx* for ten thousand, leaving a few thousand for Naylor. She thought he and Till Kingsley would have no choice but to agree. Naylor had visions, like everyone had visions, but she was certain that he'd be, well . . . relieved, when—and if—she found a buyer. Any buyer at any price. *He probably paid no more than a hundred bucks for the damn thing, even if, by a fluke, it had potential.* In the meantime she had her assistants put the picture into a simple steel frame.

In the past Eadie's instincts had served her well. *Do I have the impulse to get into this?* After that came business acumen, from which flowed profits. The successful businesswoman, and she was enormously successful, thought instinctively, then acted with calculated premeditation. Sometimes she saw herself on the high wire, sometimes on a speedway trying to cross on foot, in spike heels. But even then, to her customers, she had her feet firmly placed, set wide apart on the floor of her showroom broadloom, where she now stood. She had a plan. She had already called Hale Bartholomew, an

art critic for *The New York Times*; she'd invited him to lunch. Lunch was an excuse to tell Hale what several of her clients were up to. She'd slip in *The Sagging Marx*.

On lunch occasions, Hale came to pick her up at the gallery and this morning was no different.



For minutes now, while she talked to a client, Bartholomew had looked at new pictures. He took notes every now and then, then passed on. Elder watched. He came to *The Sagging Marx*. His neck craned as he stared at the august, grandiose and majestic attempt. This was her plan: Hale would write about *The Sagging Marx* and Kingsley; perhaps he would condemn it, but he would write about it. Since Hale was the leading critic in the city others would pick up the drum, or poison pen, but they would pick up something.

After her client had gone she walked over to Hale, a fellow smart enough at delicate moments to be a fence-sitter, but rarely that. She asked: "What do you think?"

"Of what?"

She mentioned several paintings, then alluded to *The Sagging Marx*.

"It's awful."

"Sure it's awful. Awful and magnificent."

"It doesn't work. An amateur's attempt at bombastic grandiloquence ..."

*If he wrote that it would be a great help.*

"Who really is this Kingsley? I mean, I'm aware of him, but ..."

"He's a young," (he was fifty) "fast-rising Montreal artist obsessed with a great idea."

"I don't see it. Beyond that I'm not interested in the play of cubs. Bear, that's what I'm interested in. Big Bear. When you land the new Wyeth let me know. My spirit insists on it. I'm not interested in the play of Marxists and Christians."

"The picture's a revolutionary concept."

"A sordid attempt to bring back the Renaissance. Nostalgia never works."

She wanted to turn on Hale and demand what right he had to be so cavalier about a painting that Elder hoped might—under the most favourable circumstances—score big, but she didn't. Although a good judge of what worked in painting she was an even better manager. And a brilliant

packager. Since she would need Hale Bartholomew again and again she spoke calmly: “It’s about the values of Middle America. Jesus won, Marx lost.”

“Americans stopped believing in values a long time ago. Results are the only things that count these days. Ask the evangelist who totes up the cheques for that day’s mail. Now don’t get me wrong.” An arm and finger raised, along with his voice. “I and critics through the centuries have been interested in psychological conflict and tragedy, of the struggle between Marxists and Christians. Both were born in the womb of the Sermon on the Mount and the ‘they held everything in common’ chapters of the *Acts*.”

Outside a taxi nearly ran over a helpless pedestrian but Hale, whose eyes took in the scene, was oblivious. He spoke as if on a mission. “With Dostoevsky I’m interested in builders of the moral life. If, instead of Freud, your painter had put in Dostoevsky—”

“No one would recognize him.”

“—I’d have been more interested. Nostalgia is passé. At least with me. The style’s uneven, the thought immature. Marx wouldn’t like it. Neither would Jesus. If this newcomer were brilliant in his imitation naughtiness, in his unworthiness, I might write about him.”

As if suddenly tired of life, tired of strife, Hale’s shoulders sagged, just like Marx’s stomach. It took a few seconds, but he recovered. “Fortunately, Eadie, you’ve got many other painters you can promote.” He grinned, then took her by the arm. “Which eatery today, my lovely?”



By noon the next day the picture, together with the old frame, had been shipped back to Jack Naylor’s office in Montreal. Naylor’s moment of raucous rapture, when, with the hoped-for sale of *The Sagging Marx*, he could hope for glory and profit, appeared out of reach. More disappointed than Naylor was Till Kingsley. Still, Naylor recovered. Till wasn’t sure he ever would, except in death of course, when, as Till told Naylor, the painting would become so famous a new Sistine Chapel would have to be built to house it. Naylor was discouraged, but was glad Till was hopeful. Why, Naylor thought, Till Kingsley was obsessed, a man who refused to give up. Naylor liked that. Why Kingsley seemed as if propelled by the kind of ornery ardor that befitted a Napoleon.

## IV

After more setbacks, Naylor took the picture, without the frame, to Berlin, on location as it were. There, through the good offices of the Canadian Embassy, he met Wolfgang Spitzmann, a collector who after the war had served as a German diplomat in Ottawa and Washington. Naylor and Spitzmann got along well. For a reason Naylor was unable to plumb, the German took Naylor to Cracow and one of Spitzmann's favorite structures, the Cracow cathedral. As they entered the great edifice Spitzmann, in his eighties, a junior in Canaris's secret service, took off his immaculate straw hat, out of respect, perhaps, then told Naylor of his hope that they wouldn't meet more priests. "But no matter." It was Spitzmann speaking. "Priests or not, let's enjoy our visit. No doubt you've been forced to share in their holy gossip."

"I have known few priests. I suppose, ha! there were times when you were tempted to shoot them, in Italy, say?"

The old Nazi chuckled. (At their first meeting he'd explained that he'd been a Nazi for the same reason that an upwardly mobile American businessman registered as a Republican: to get ahead). "At university in Jena, Marx's school, I took courses in law and theology." Spitzmann's face, full of the disciplined exactness of the Prussian and the gilded, albeit mental miseries, of a lifetime spent in hell, radiated confidence. He laughed softly. "Had I been there in the early years of the last century, my favorite, I could have had Schiller and Hegel as teachers. You went to university, Mr. Naylor?"

With a head nearly the size of a Halloween pumpkin, minus the jagged teeth to match, Naylor could have put a lot of learning between his ears. But that was not the case. He shook his head. "My head's banged against a lot of life," Naylor explained, "but, unfortunately it's been life outside the academy. I took a few extension courses, though. You see in front of you, Mr. Spitzmann, a true son of Marx"—now Naylor allowed himself a little laugh—"a true son of the people. You mention Jena and Marx. There is this unique tie between communism and Christianity, between Marx and Christ."

"All as per your slumping, slurping, or, rather, sagging Marx?" There was a smile.

"Exactly. In the early days the Bolsheviks, Lenin and Stalin included, had had a lot of former theology students around. With the Sermon on the Mount in mind"—to increase his chances for success Naylor always briefed himself before going on a sales trip—"the leap from New Testament theology to Marxist ideology could be managed, easily." Perhaps this was the time, Naylor thought, to pounce. "I got a call from home today. There's a crisis brewing."

The latter was true. A believer in planning every move—appropriate presentation was paramount—Naylor made sure his half-moon glasses were eruditely and determinedly placed near the end of his overtly proletarian nose. One of his extension courses had been sales training: assertiveness training long before the word was coined. “My office manager,” said Naylor, “is pressing me to come back. One of my possible prospects for a sale on *The Sagging Marx* has upped his bid.” This wasn’t the crisis, exactly, but someone had asked how Naylor’s European trip was going ... If the Nazi didn’t bite now, Naylor thought, it was game over, time to go home and give up.

Spitzmann didn’t bite. Instead a tiny fold on his otherwise icy cheek threatened to crack another smile. But there was no smile. With leisurely abandon the German’s cheek continued on its way, indifferent. “I spent time in Siberia,” Spitzmann said, gazing up at the great flying buttresses that formed the cathedral ceiling. “That was in the camps, after the war. I met Orthodox priests. Enough to fill a village. I know priests and crosses. All these great men on the cross. Jesus. Marx. Nixon.” A smirk was stifled.

Deep inside the cathedral the old Nazi broke off on Nixon, then took a certain joy in divulging that the cathedral had been rebuilt along Gothic lines over an earlier building.

Naylor tried to smile sweetly. I was born to make this sale. Born for it ... When would they get back to *The Sagging Marx*? If he knew how to connect Gothicism to Marx this would be the time ...

“Now, take your painting. In it Marx comes back as savior and, frankly, I don’t like it. If, in his genius, your Mr. Kingsley had put Dick Nixon on the cross in exactly the same way and, perhaps, had put Luther in there somewhere ...” Ever so lightly Spitzmann, facing Naylor, grabbed hold of one of Naylor’s lapels, then let go. “You must understand, Mr. Naylor. There are those who say Orthodoxy has made Russia Russian and, likewise, it is Luther who made Germany German. I too feel the tug of our German earth and, if in his genius, Kingsley had put in Luther it would make everything so much more understandable.”

“Well, perhaps I can speak to Mr. Kingsley.”

“*Wasz? Wasz?*” Spittle flew from the old Nazi’s mouth. “That would be blasphemy! It would be cheap ... ungentlemanly. One cannot redesign genius at a whim! Am I, at a time when a sigh in space may one day blow our world away, about to ask a painter to descend to trade? *Wasz? Wasz?*” Still in full flight, Spitzmann nevertheless appeared to want to soothe the righteous pharisaic in him for he offered a grin, albeit that it was a repressed, highly provoking grin. “Am I to ask a painter, blessed by the gods of space,

skill and genius, to paint to order? *My* order? You do not understand, Mr. Naylor. It is God who makes art.”

After that Naylor wanted to snarl, and if he could have he would have lifted the just as tall Spitzmann by the scruff of his brassy neck. Everything seemed lost. Spitzmann left Naylor stranded in the cathedral and, days later, in Montreal, Naylor knew the end was near. The worst thing was that he had spent so much time promoting *The Sagging Marx* that he'd run into perilous financial problems at his sundry bars and clubs. Key to their success was his personal involvement. Now he feared being brought to his knees. He aspired to philanthropy and here he was being forced against the wall. In his heart he wanted to be the great philanthropist and it looked as if he'd never be able to prove it.

Winter began and there were days when Naylor knew he could not last another day. But he did. He feared tomorrow. Tomorrow came. At noon on the fateful day Naylor declared bankruptcy. One of the bankruptcy trustees asked him to at least see Till Kingsley. Perhaps something could be done. “I was going to see Mr. Kingsley anyway,” Naylor said. “I am obligated and I want to.”

In a little garret, crowded with broken door guitars, dusty pictures and even dustier art books, Naylor met Kingsley. Sitting on stools and halfway into their meeting among discarded pictures, Naylor casually commented: “One fellow in Europe told me that great men ought to stay on the cross as long as possible, that there ought to be a certain dignity to it.” This provoked no response. Naylor tried a different spin: “Have you noticed, Mr. Kingsley, in your *Sagging Marx*, Gorbachev has dishpan hands?”

“They're masculine hands,” Kingsley remonstrated, agitated. “And besides, Gorbachev is not on the cross.”

“Well, you might want to consider putting him there, and make sure his hands are masculine. One buyer told me—”

“Buyer of what?”

“Art. He told me he just didn't want a Chicago housewife's dishpan hands masquerading as masculine hands in his library. Does Nixon have dishpan hands?”

“I have no idea. And why would I change *my* painting for a fool idea like that?”

“I'm sure painters have done worse when confronted with a possible sale.” When Kingsley said nothing, Naylor added: “Maybe you might want to find out? Perhaps put Nixon on the cross?”

Relaxed now, the painter poured himself coffee from the container beside him, then stirred it with a spoon. He made no move to offer Naylor any. Kingsley stirred his coffee again and again. He smiled. He stirred his



coffee so long that to Naylor it seemed as if the coffee was already cold. He spoke: “Mr. Naylor, I just couldn’t care less. *The Sagging Marx* no longer has a hold of me.”

“That’s a lie. I’ve gone over the world trying to sell the painting the way it is. It hasn’t worked, even though I believe you have the potential of a Picasso.”



In his youth Till would have killed to be complimented as having the potential of Picasso, to be seen as a man with galloping ability, a man, in fact, of consistently escalating genius. Now? Till guffawed dutifully. Of course he had heard this silliness before, although not for a while. These days people rarely showed an unseemly haste to get along with him and so there were times—in fact, most of the time—when he thought conversations with anyone, even an admirer, demanded extra effort. He breathed in deeply. “You’re right, Mr. Naylor. That was a lie. I refuse to give up on it. I’m obsessed with the painting the way it is. I won’t change a thing. The instant I change anything I won’t believe that God danced all over it, giving it life, not for now, but forever.”



Months and years passed and, after recurring nightmares and other disasters, Naylor, in a spirit of utter hopelessness (there are times when courage takes guts), advertised a giant front lawn sale for many miles around his West Island home. On the principle that one never knew who might come he put everything up for sale, even *The Sagging Marx*, although with Kingsley’s agreement that the new owner would have to agree to the same terms as Naylor had.

## V

When you whistle a merry tune on the way to see your wife, you’re happy. That was Dex Winner. He was satisfied. He’d made a terrific deal that Saturday afternoon in May of 1998. He’d bought another company.

As he drove home that Saturday he had no thought other than to greet his wife, have dinner, then go to bed and create another child. Their third. And then he saw it, the painting, laid out on the lawn. He stopped the car, ran over, concluded that it was fantastic, just what he wanted. In

matters such as this intuition ruled. He paid Jack Naylor five hundred dollars, half to go to Till Kingsley. And he agreed to give Kingsley half of any amount if he ever sold it.

Winner's wife didn't like his intuition. Winner then lent the painting to his retired lawyer father in Darien, Connecticut. He had the perfect study, just made for this immensity.

In August of 2002 *The Sagging Marx*, after many setbacks, including the need to redesign, rebuild and redecorate Driscoll Winner's study, was in place. For the painting that had journeyed so long and so far, Driscoll Winner, once a leading member of the New York bar, once a director of corporations too numerous to mention, had insisted on only one change, namely that there was to be no overt ostentation. The result was that the showy frame that had so impressed Jack Naylor was dismembered and replaced with an unadorned stainless steel frame. The focus now was the painting. Or, rather, Marx's glossy stomach. Satisfied, the senior Winner invited his legal and business friends, as well as strictly arty friends in the art world, to cocktails. Hale Bartholomew was invited. He came.

The other guests drank and laughed and chatted, but Bartholomew, looking at *The Sagging Marx*, was absorbed and, for a noted art critic, quite amazed at the audacity of this new painter, Tilton Kingsley. He thought he remembered the name from somewhere, but he wasn't certain. But he knew he had seen the picture before, perhaps in Paris, or Italy. It so reminded him of the best of Renaissance art. What bothered him was that Driscoll Winner, perhaps as pedestrian a New Yorker as there was, a man addicted to Babbitry—why he may even have supported Ross Perot—was the owner of this extraordinary work.

What annoyed Bartholomew most was that he had seen this painting before. The question: Why didn't I write about it the first time, then? There were many answers, including the probability that he'd had too many martinis the first time he'd seen it. There was also the possibility that he'd changed his mind. These things happened. Despite these regrets, Bartholomew wrote in the *Times* a week later :

For most of American art our stones are our soil. We have produced some great artists and are fortunate that lovers of American art have the opportunity to see some great artists at work, even today. This week I visited a home in Connecticut (that, by request, must remain nameless) and saw a great painting by a great artist, previously unknown except to dealers and a few lucky connoisseurs. The picture is called *The Sagging Marx*. The painter: Tilton Kingsley. Remember the name.

Over several days Bartholomew had tried to reach Kingsley, but the chase was fruitless, so far. He'd done an Internet search and came up with several hits of little consequence on Kingsley. There was no mention of *The Sagging Marx*. Kingsley was a Montrealer, but there was no response at his studio, or at his brother Staffield's office, country place or at the tennis club where a Montreal reporter on the art beat thought Staffield Kingsley might possibly be. Nor could the previous owner of *The Sagging Marx*, a Jack Naylor, be reached. He had, apparently, moved. Bartholomew did an Internet search on Naylor that produced one or two items on Naylor's financial troubles, but nothing else. Montreal reporters who covered the club and bar scene knew Naylor, but no one knew where he could be reached.

Except for the replacement of key personnel, *The Sagging Marx* could be a Crucifixion in any of the great cathedrals. Here, instead of Christ, you have Marx, and instead of the cross, you have the Brandenburg Gate. Altogether it is a brilliant strategy. I love that ABC truck! I have long contended that the banality of American television is exceeded only by its slickness.

A photograph of the painting accompanied the article.

Here is the American answer to banality. When the need was for a prophet, America produced one in Tilton Kingsley. Here are the nails, the trickles of blood. Death is always a terrible ordeal.

A week passed and by this time *Time* and *Newsweek* were onto the story of *The Sagging Marx*. *Time*, allowed a private viewing, liked its "soaring brilliance." Other media, relying on the photograph in the *Times*, commented as well. *Newsweek* liked the picture's "deference to the ancient masters," and *The Toronto Star* damned "the assumption of Hale Bartholomew that Tilton Kingsley is an American." Criticism there was. "The muck of all the ages dwells with us tonight," began a *Boston Globe* critic. More criticism arrived in a *Village Voice* article which said that "*The Sagging Marx* is one of the most beautiful pieces of exploiting shit ever to be seen in America."

An independent German critic flew the Atlantic and through top New York legal connections was also allowed a private viewing. On his return to Germany he wrote a long analysis of the picture's symbolism for *Der Spiegel*. The final sentence of the article read: "The owner of the picture is known to the writer, although we are requested to maintain secrecy."

*Der Spiegel's* entertainment editor, ambitious for tangible excitement, then sent a reporter to New York to locate the owner. In time she located Driscoll Winner. She wrote:

In the phantom world of superstition and ritual time moves in centuries, but, only a year after the fall of the wall Tilton Kingsley saw far into the future and produced a masterpiece.

*Der Spiegel* then published an interview with Wolfgang Spitzmann, who claimed to have been the first to discover Kingsley, then sent an investigative team, including political reporters expert in Russia and the fall of communism, to every Kingsley hangout in Montreal and beyond. The Staffield Kingsley home was located. He had suffered financial setbacks in the recession of the early nineties and in its wake had moved into a tiny house in the Laurentians. There he had gone into small-scale house building. Of late he'd taken Till Kingsley on as his partner. "But where is your brother-in-law now?" a *Der Spiegel* reporter asked Mrs. Staffield Kingsley.

"Thinking. Somewhere up north."

"Of what?"

"North of us."

"I meant, what's he thinking about?"

"Of going back into the dream business. He likes the fact that his picture, despite being in Mr. Winner's hands, is now valued at upwards of two hundred thousand dollars. He dreamt that picture, you know. Every bit of that painting is a dream, except Marx's stomach. That's mine."

"Yours?"

The German reporter took a close look at Mrs. Kingsley's mid-section. "It doesn't look like yours."

"I was pregnant, then."

"Would you get pregnant again if Till dreamt another Marx stomach?"

"If Marx wouldn't mind too much."

"He hasn't said anything about the first stomach. Why should he mind now?"