

The image is a reproduction of Vincent van Gogh's painting 'Sunflowers' (Version O). It depicts a bouquet of sunflowers in a woven basket. The sunflowers are in various stages of bloom, with some showing dark brown centers and others being more vibrant yellow. The basket is made of light-colored, textured material, possibly straw or wicker, and has the name 'Vincent' written on its side. The background is a light blue-grey color with a visible brushstroke texture. The overall style is characteristic of Impressionism, with visible, energetic brushwork.

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«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

2020

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The Florist / A. Nom — «ЛитРес: Самиздат», 2020

A failed artist wandered around a flea market in search of cheap brushes and paints. He had lost faith in himself and thought faintheartedly of suicide. His eye was caught by a flower which looked like Van Gogh's Sunflowers. "What does it cost?" "Nothing. Mind you though, it's not easy to keep." And it was not easy...

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A hangover-looking man in crumpled clothes was wandering around a huge flea market. Without much zeal, he was browsing, on the lookout for paints and brushes which sometimes were sold on the cheap here by failed artists same as himself.

Also, a part of his mind was wondering whether he should better spend what money he had left on some poison pills or a gun, to put an end to it all. He would never hang himself or jump from a height onto pavement – the body looking unaesthetic in such cases, – but a poison or a bullet could do the job just nicely.

His eye was caught by an odd composition – aside from the other vendors, a respectable-looking individual was sitting gravely on a folding chair. A suit of expensive fabric, hand-made shoes, a Swiss watch and a tie whose price would make the artist's monthly living... Towering behind his back, was a broad-shouldered guard.

What could this alpha male be doing in a flea market where rows of pensioners were displaying time-darkened silver cutlery and chipped faience figurines while drunkard astronauts were trying to palm off their moonstones which were no more exciting than rocks from the nearby quarry?

The artist approached.

In front of the suited individual stood a wooden box used as a table, with a potted flower on it. Not really beautiful, the flower had a catching quality to it. On taking a closer look, the artist realized what it was: the flower was the spitting image of the Sunflowers by his beloved Van Gogh.

“What's it called?”

“There's no name. If you take it, you can give it a name to your liking.”

“I would call it Van Gogh.”

“It's your business.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Nothing. There's no price. But, mind you, the bastard is not easy to keep. What are you, anyway?”

“An artist.”

“You look more like a bum.”

“I've hit a bad patch,” admitted the artist.

“I see,” the man responded indifferently.

“I've never seen anything like this. Where did you get it?”

“Why, in this very market, a year ago. At that time I was... No matter, forget it. So, you take it or what?” The man glanced at his Rolex. “Make up your mind, man, I don't have all day.”

“I take it,” the artist found himself saying.

“Then this is for you.”

The man thrust into the artist's hand a shabby brochure titled, ‘Flower Care Guide’.

“And here's another thing,” the man said, rising. “If you decide to get rid of it, don't just throw it away but come here and give it to someone.”

The care of Van Gogh was indeed a demanding job. Firstly, the flower did not tolerate dust. The artist's studio, where he slept, ate, drank, and occasionally did some painting, was in a dire state of neglect. Now he had to throw out trash and do a thorough wet cleaning.

The room had to be constantly aired, but without overcooling.

And – the light. Van Gogh required a lot of light, so all the windows had to be washed.

In the bright light, the painter saw anew his creations of the recent years. He felt dismay, struck by his own professional and artistic degradation.

Luckily, he had no time to grieve over that, his mind full of concerns about Van Gogh.

The flower could be watered with pure spring water only. The guide contained a warning that there was a lot of counterfeits on sale, and instructions on how to test the quality of the product. Finally, with difficulty, the painter found genuine spring water. Once he started using it on Van Gogh, the flower revived noticeably, its color getting brighter. The painter took a sip of that water himself, and he liked it. From then on, he drank it constantly.

The leaves required spraying and the soil required the application of fertilizers strictly according to the list – phosphate, nitrate, potash, and a dozen other chemicals.

But the main problem was the mysterious gravicola. The brochure said, “Once a week, introduce 40 drops of gravicola to the soil at the base of the stalk.”

There was no indication as to what in the world that gravicola was, and where it could be found. The web florist sites returned no answers.

After a week, the gravicola-deprived Van Gogh began drooping and wilting, even shedding its leaves.

The artist went to the market and started harassing the old ladies who were selling cactuses and geraniums. The old ladies shook their heads and shrugged in bewilderment.

“Hey, wait! Did you say ‘gravicola?’”

Beside another old lady, an unshaven guy in a jacket with a NASA chevron was sitting. An astronaut.

When engines were invented that enabled flying to faraway planets, the world was swept with an astronautics craze. However, it soon became apparent that space flights, while burning huge budgets, did not bring any substantial gain. The projects of exploring deep space were cut down. Thousands of jobless astronauts had a hard time re-adapting to Earth – bitter and depressed, they could be seen everywhere including flea markets where they were bargaining off their souvenirs to make a little money for booze.

“Did you say ‘gravicola’? Why do you want it?”

“It’s for my flower. Do you have it?”

As it turned out, ‘gravicola’ was a slang word which in the language of astronauts referred to some product of high chemistry. The substance helped astronauts cope with the transition from a high gravitation to the zero space one, and back.

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