### Galatea

Isaac Asimov

For some reason unknown, especially to myself, I occasionally use George as the repository for my innermost feelings. Since he has an enormous and overflowing fund of sympathy, all of which is reserved for himself, this is useless, but I do it anyway, now and then.

Of course my own fund of self-pity was overflowing at the moment so perhaps I couldn't help myself.

We were waiting for our strawberry shortcake after a substan­tial lunch at the Peacock Alley, and I said, “I am sick and tired, George, of having critics make no effort to find out what it is I am trying to do. I am not interested in what *they* would do if they were I. After all, they can't write, or they wouldn't waste their time being critics. And if they *can* write, after a fashion, the only function their criticisms offer them is a chance to chip away at their superiors. What's more —”

But the strawberry shortcake arrived and George seized the opportunity to take over the conversation, something that he would have done at about that point even if the dessert had not arrived.

“Old boy,” he said, “you must learn to take the vicissitudes of life calmly. Tell yourself, for it is true, that your miserable writ­ings have so little effect on the world that what reviewers may say, if they bother to say anything at all, is totally without conse­quence. Thoughts of this kind will greatly relieve you and pre­vent your developing an ulcer. You might particularly avoid such maudlin speech in *my* presence, as you would if you had the sensitivity to realize that my work is far more important than yours and the reviews I receive are, on occasion, far more devastating.”

“Are you going to tell me you write, too?” I said sardonically, digging into the cake.

“No,” said George, digging into his. “I am that far more important individual, a benefactor of humanity — a berated, unappreciated benefactor of humanity.”

I could swear that a suspicion of a tear slightly dampened his eyes. “I don't see,” I said kindly, “how anyone's opinion of you can possibly sink so low as to be considered an underapprecia-tion.”

“I ignore the sneer,” said George, “since it originates with you and will tell you that I am thinking of that beautiful woman, Elderberry Muggs.”

“Elderberry?” I said, with a touch of incredulity.

Elderberry was her name [said George]. I do not know why her parents should have named her so, though it might well have commemorated a tender moment in their prenuptial relation­ship. It was Elderberry's own suggestion that both her parents were a bit tiddly with elderberry wine during the activities that gave her her start in life. She might not have had the chance for such a start otherwise.

In any case her father, who was an old friend of mine, asked me to be godfather at her christening and I could not refuse him. A great many friends of mine, impressed by my noble appear­ance and by my ingenuous and virtuous countenance, can only feel at ease in church with me next to them, so that I have had a great many godfatherships to my credit. Naturally I take these things seriously and feel the responsibility of the post keenly. I therefore remain as close to my godchildren as possible in later life, all the more so when they grow up to be as supernally beautiful as Elderberry.

He father died at just about the time Elderberry turned twenty and she inherited, as it happened, a substantial sum of money which, naturally, increased her beauty in the eyes of the world generally. I am, myself, above making a great to-do over mere trash such as money, but I did feel it necessary to guard her from fortune hunters. For that I made it my business to cultivate her society to an even greater extent, and frequently dined at her home. After all, she was very fond of her Uncle George, as you can well imagine, and I, for one, certainly can't blame her for that.

As it further happened, Elderberry did not quite need the nest egg her father had left her, for she turned out to be a sculptor of renown, producing works whose artistic value could not be ques­tioned since they commanded high prices at the marketplace.

I myself did not quite understand her output, for my taste in art is quite ethereal and I cannot expect to appreciate the things she created for the delectation of that portion of the crass multi­tude who could afford her prices.

I remember on one occasion asking her what a particular piece of sculpture represented.

“As you see,” she said, “the work is labeled ‘Stork in Flight.’

I studied the object, which was cast in the finest bronze, and said, “Yes, I noticed the label, but where is the stork?”

“Here,” she said, pointing to a small cone of metal that arose from a rather amorphous bronze base and came to a sharp point.

I regarded it thoughtfully, then said, “Is that a stork?”

“Certainly it is, you old clotpoll,” she said (for she always addressed me in affectionate terms), “it represents the tip of the stork's long bill.”

“Is that enough, Elderberry?”

“Absolutely,” said Elderberry. “It is not the stork itself I am attempting to represent, but the abstract notion of storkness which is exactly what this brings to mind.”

“Yes it does,” I said, slightly bemused, “now that you mention it. Still, the label says that the stork is in flight. How does that come about?”

“Why, you ninny-puss,” she exclaimed, “don't you see this rather amorphous bronze base?”

“Yes,” I said, “it rather forces itself on my attention.”

“And you won't deny that the air — or any gas, if it comes to that — is an amorphous mass. Well, then this rather amorphous bronze base is a crystal-clear representation of the atmosphere in the abstract. And you see that on this face of the base there is a thin straight line, absolutely horizontal.”

“Yes. How clear it is once you point it out.”

“That is the abstract notion of flight through the atmo­sphere.”

“Remarkable,” I said. “Luminously clear once it is explained. How much will you get for it?”

“Oh,” she said, waving one hand negligently as though to emphasize the nothingness of it all. “Ten thousand dollars, per­haps. It is so simple and self-evident a thing, I would feel guilty charging more. It is more a *morceau* than anything else. Not like that,” and she waved toward a mural on the wall constructed of gunnysacks and pieces of cardboard, with the whole centered about a broken eggbeater that seemed to have something that looked like dried egg upon its lower reaches.

I looked at it respectfully. “Priceless, of course!” I said.

“I should think so,” she said. “That's not a new eggbeater, you know. It has the patina of age. I got it out of someone's rubbish bag.”

And then, for some reason I could not fathom, her lower lip began to tremble and she quavered, “Oh, Uncle George.”

I was instantly alarmed. I seized her capable left hand, with its strong, sculptor's fingers, and squeezed it. “What is it, my child?”

“Oh, George,” she said, “I get so tired working out these simple abstractions just because they represent the public's taste.” She put the knuckles of her right hand to her forehead and said tragically, “How I wish I could do what I *want* to do; what my artist's heart tells me I must do.”

“What is that, Elderberry?”

“I want to experiment. I want to move off in new directions. I want to try the untried, dare the undared, produce the unproduceable.”

“Then why don't you do that, my child? Surely, you are rich enough to indulge yourself.”

And she suddenly smiled and her whole face beamed with loveliness. “Thank you, Uncle George,” she said, “thank you for saying that. Actually, I *do* indulge myself — now and then. I have a secret room in which I place my little experiments, those which only the educated artistic palate can possibly appreciate. Those which are caviar to the general,” she added, coining a phrase.

“May I see them?”

“Of course, *dear* Uncle. After what you have said in encour­agement of my aspirations, how could I deny you?”

She lifted a thick curtain under which one found a secret door that was scarcely visible, so closely did it fit into the wall. She pushed a button and it opened electrically. We passed in and, as the door closed behind us, brilliant fluorescents lighted the win-dowless room we had entered and made it as bright as day.

Almost at once I saw before me the representation of a stork, made of a rich stony material. Every feather was in place, the eyes were bright with life, the bill a little open, the wings half outspread. To my eyes it seemed ready to launch itself into the air.

“Good heavens, Elderberry,” I said. “I have never seen any­thing like this.”

“Do you like it? I call it ‘photographic art,’ and I think it is beautiful in its way. Thoroughly experimental, of course, and critics and public alike would laugh and sneer and fail to see what I am trying to do. They honor only simple abstractions which exist entirely on the surface and which anyone can under­stand, nothing like this which can appeal only to the subtle and to those who are content to allow comprehension to dawn slowly.

After that, I was privileged to enter her secret room now and then, and to study the occasional bit of exotica that formed under her strong fingers and educated chisel. My admiration at a woman's head that looked exactly like Elderberry's own was profound.

“I call it ‘The Mirror,’ ” she said, dimpling shyly. “It pictures my soul, don't you think?”

I agreed enthusiastically.

It was that, I think, which finally induced her to allow me to see the innermost secret of all.

I had said to her, “Elderberry, how is it that you do not have any —” I paused and then, scorning euphemisms, completed the sentence with “any boyfriends?”

“Boyfriends,” she said with a look of deep scorn, “Pah! They flock around, these would-be boyfriends you speak of, but how can I look at them? I am an artist. I have in my heart and mind and soul a picture of true manly beauty that no mere flesh and blood can duplicate and that, and that alone, can win my heart. That, and that alone, *has* won my heart.”

“*Has* won your heart, my child?” I said softly. “Then you have met him?”

“I have ... But come, Uncle George, you shall see him. You and I shall share my great secret.”

We returned to the room of photographic art, and there an­other thick curtain was pulled aside so that we stood before an alcove I had never seen before. There in the alcove was the statue of a man, six feet tall and nude, which was, as far as I could see, anatomically correct to the last millimeter.

Elderberry pushed a button and the statue slowly turned on its pedestal, its smooth symmetry and perfect proportions evi­dent from every angle.

“My masterpiece,” breathed Elderberry.

I am not myself a great admirer of manly beauty, but reflected in Elderberry's lovely face I saw a panting admiration that made it clear she was suffused with love and adoration.

“You love that statue,” I said, cautiously avoiding the imper­sonal ‘it.’

“Oh, yes,” she whispered. “I would die for him. While he exists, I find all other men deformed and hateful. I could never let any man touch me without a sensation of disgust. I want only him. Only him.”

“My poor child,” I said, “the statue is not alive.”

“I know. I know,” she said brokenly. “My poor heart is shat­tered over that. What shall I do?”

I murmured, “How sad! It reminds me of the tale of Pygma­lion.”

“Of whom?” said Elderberry, who like all artists was a simple soul who knew nothing of the wide outer world.

“Of Pygmalion. It is a story of ancient times. Pygmalion was a sculptor just like you except, of course, that he was a man. And he carved a lovely statue as you did, except that, because of his peculiar manly prejudices, he carved a woman, whom he called Galatea. The statue was so beautiful that Pygmalion fell in love with it. You see, it is just like your case, except that you are a living Galatea and the statue is a graven —”

“No,” said Elderberry energetically, “don't expect me to call him Pygmalion. That is a rough, crude name and I want some­thing poetic. I call him,” and her face lit up with love again, “Hank. There is something about the name of Hank, so soft, so musical, that speaks to my very soul. But what happened to Pygmalion and Galatea?”

I said, “Overcome by love, Pygmalion prayed to Aphro­dite —”

“To whom?”

“Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. He prayed to her and she, out of sympathy, gave life to the statue. Galatea became a living woman, married Pygmalion, and they lived happily ever after.”

“Hmm,” said Elderberry, “I suppose that Aphrodite doesn't really exist, does she?”

“No, not really. On the other hand —” But I went no further. I didn't think that Elderberry would be able to understand me if I spoke of my two-centimeter demon, Azazel.

“Too bad,” she said, “because if anyone could bring Hank to life for me, if anyone could change him from cold, hard marble to warm, soft flesh, I would give him — Oh, Uncle George, can't you imagine embracing Hank and feeling the warm softness of his flesh under your hands — softness — softness —” She kept murmuring the word in an ecstasy of sensual delight.

I said, “Actually, dear Elderberry, I don't wish to imagine doing it myself, but I can see that you would find it delectable. But you were saying that if anyone could change him from cold, hard marble to soft, warm flesh, you would give him something. Did you actually have some specific something in mind, dear?”

“Why, yes! I would give him a million dollars.”

I paused, as anyone would, out of simple respect for the sum and then I said, “Do you *have* a million dollars, Elderberry?”

“I have two million lovely bucks, Uncle George,” she said, in her simple and unspoiled way, “and passing out half of them would be fine for me. Hank would be worth it, especially since I could always make more by grinding out a few more abstrac­tions for the public.”

“So you can,” I muttered. “Well, you just keep your chin up, Elderberry, and we'll see what your Uncle George can do for you.”

It was clearly a case for Azazel, so I called up my little friend, who happened to look like a little two-centimeter version of a devil, complete with little nubbins of horns and a twitching spiked tail.

He was, as usual, in a bad humor and he insisted on wasting my time by telling me in rather boring detail just why he was in a bad humor. It appears he had done something of an artistic nature—artistic, at least, by the standards of his own ridiculous world, for though he described it in detail, I couldn't understand it — and it had been frowned on by the critics. Critics are the same the universe over, I should suppose; worthless and vicious, one and all.

At that, though, I think you should be grateful that critics on Earth have *some* minimum dregs of decency about them. If Azazel may be trusted, what the critics said about him was far be­yond anything anyone has said about you. The mildest adjective would call for the horsewhip. It was the similarity of your com­plaint to his that helped bring this episode to my mind.

It was with difficulty that I managed to stem his vituperation long enough to interject a request that he bring a statue to life. He squawked with a shrillness that hurt my ears. “Bring silicate-based material to carbon-and-water life? Why don't you ask me to build you a planet out of excrement and be done with it? How can I turn stone to flesh?”

“Surely you can think of a way, O Mighty One,” I said. “Con­sider, that if you achieve this enormous task, you can report it to your world and then wouldn't the critics feel like a bunch of silly asses?”

“They are far worse than a bunch of silly asses,” said Azazel. “If they felt like silly asses that would exceed their worth by a great deal. Such a feeling would *reward* them. I want them to feel like a pack of farfelanimors.”

“That is exactly what they will feel like. All you have to do is turn cold into warm, stone into flesh, hard into soft. Especially soft. A young woman I think highly of wants to embrace the statue and feel soft, elastic flesh under her fingertips. It shouldn't be too hard. The statue is a perfect representation of a human being and you just fill it with muscles, blood vessels, organs, and nerves and cover it with skin, and you'll have it.”

“Just fill it with all that, eh? Nothing more, eh?”

“But think, you will make the critics feel like farfelanimors.”

“Hmm. There's that. Do you know what a farfelanimor smells like?”

“I don't, but don't tell me. And you can use me as a model.”

“Model, shmodel,” he said peevishly (where he picks up his expressions, I don't know). “Do you know how complicated even the most rudimentary human brain is?”

“Well,” I said, “you don't have to go very far with the brain. Elderberry is a simple girl and what she wants of the statue does not very deeply involve the brain, I imagine.”

“You'll have to show me the statue and let me consider the case,” he said.

“I will. But remember. Arrange for the statue to come to life while we are watching, and make sure that it is terribly in love with Elderberry.”

“Love is easy. That's just a matter of adjusting hormones.”

The next day I managed to get Elderberry to invite me to view the statue again. Azazel was in my shirt pocket, peeping out and emitting feeble high-pitched snorts. Fortunately Elderberry had eyes only for her statue and would not have noticed if twenty full-sized demons had stepped up next to her.

“Well?” I said later to Azazel.

“I'll try to do it,” he said. “I'll fill him with organs based on you. You are a normal representative of your foul and inferior species, I trust.”

“More than normal,” I said haughtily. “I am an outstanding specimen.”

“Very well, then. She shall have her statue entirely encased in soft, warm, palpitating flesh. She will have to wait till noon tomorrow, your time. I can't hurry this.”

“I understand. She and I will be waiting.”

The next morning I phoned Elderberry. “Elderberry, my child, I have spoken to Aphrodite.”

Elderberry said in an excited whisper, “Do you mean she *does* exist, Uncle George?”

“In a manner of speaking, dear child. Your ideal man will come to life at noon today under our very eyes.”

“Oh, my,” she said faintly. “You are not deceiving me, are you, Uncle?”

“I never deceive,” I said, and I never do, but I will admit I was a little nervous, for I depended entirely on Azazel. But then, he had never failed me.

At noon we were both at the alcove once more, looking at the statue, which stared stonily into space. I said to Elderberry, “Is your watch showing the correct time, dear?”

“Oh, yes. I check it with the Observatory. We have one min­ute to go.”

“The change may possibly be a minute or two late, of course. It's hard to judge these things exactly.”

“Surely a goddess ought to be on time,” said Elderberry. “Otherwise, what's the good of being a goddess?”

I call that true faith, and she was justified, for on the second of noon, a tremor seemed to course through the statue. Slowly, his color changed from a dead marble white to a warm flesh pink. Slowly, motion animated his frame, his arms lowered to his side, his eyes gained a blue and glistening life, the hair on his head darkened to a light brown and appeared wherever appropriate elsewhere on his body. His head bent and he looked at Elder­berry, who was hyperventilating madly.

Slowly, creakily, he stepped down from the pedestal, and walked toward Elderberry, arms outstretched.

“You Elderberry. Me Hank,” he said.

“Oh, Hank,” said Elderberry, as she melted into his arms.

For a long time they stood frozen in the embrace and then she looked over her shoulder at me, her eyes shining with ecstasy, and said, “Hank and I will remain in the house for a few days as a sort of honeymoon, and then, Uncle George, I will see you,” and she twiddled her fingers as though she were counting money.

At that my eyes shone in ecstasy, too, and I tiptoed out of the house. Frankly, I thought it rather incongruous for a fully dressed young woman to be so warmly embraced by a naked young man, but I was sure that almost immediately upon my leaving, Elderberry would manage to correct the incongruity.

I waited ten days for Elderberry to phone me, but she never did. I was not entirely surprised, for I imagined she was other­wise occupied. Still, after ten days I did think there would be a pause for breath, and I further began to think it only fair that since her ecstasy had been fulfilled, entirely through my efforts — and Azazel's —it was only fair that my ecstasy be fulfilled, too.

I went to her place of abode, where I had left the happy couple, and rang the bell. It was quite a while before there was an answer, and I was having an unpleasant picture of two young people having ecstasied each other to death when finally the door opened a crack.

It was Elderberry, looking perfectly normal, if you count an angry look as perfectly normal. She said, “Oh, it's *you.”*

“Why, yes,” I said. “I was afraid you had left town to con­tinue and extend your honeymoon.” I didn't say anything about honeymooning themselves to death. I felt it would not be diplo­matic.

She said, “And what do you want?”

It was not terribly friendly. I could understand that she might not like to be interrupted at her activities, but after ten days surely a small interruption was not the end of the world.

I said, “There's a little matter of a million dollars, my child.” I pushed the door open and walked in.

She looked at me with a cold sneer and said, “What you get is bubkes, fella.”

I don't know what “bubkes” are, but I instantly deduced it was a good deal less than a million dollars.

I said, puzzled and more than a little hurt, “Why? What's wrong?”

“What's wrong?” she said. “What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. When I said I wanted Hank soft, I didn't mean soft all over, permanently.”

With her sculptor's strength, she pushed me out the door and slammed it shut. Then, as I stood there nonplussed, she opened it again, “And if you ever come back, I'll have Hank tear you to pieces. He's strong as a bull in every other way.”

So I left. What could I do? And how do you like that for a critique of *my* artistic efforts? So don't come to me with your petty complaints.

George shook his head when he completed his story and looked so despondent that it really touched me.

I said, “George, I know you blame Azazel for this, but really it's not the little guy's fault. You emphasized the bit about soft­ness —”

“So did she,” George said indignantly.

“Yes, but you told Azazel to use you as a model for designing the statue, and surely that would account for the inability —”

George lifted his hand in a stop gesture and glared at me. “That,” he said, “hurts me even more than the loss of the money I had earned. I'll have you know that, despite the fact that I'm some years beyond my prime —”

“Yes, yes, George, I apologize. Here, I believe I owe you ten dollars.”

Well, ten dollars is ten dollars. To my relief. George took the bill, and smiled.