



MEETING BRIAN SEWELL

It was a warm sultry July evening on Hampstead Heath. My resting place was a picnic rug laid out on a grassy knoll and not too near my fellow concert-going neighbours. Across the small lake, stage sound checks had been completed. The occasion? The return to London of Art Garfunkel.

The concert began soon after half past seven and whilst I tucked into a sumptuous picnic, so Garfunkel sang. From *Bright Eyes* to *A Heart in New York*, we the crowd backing singers harmonised with appreciation from Garfunkel. Following a recital of poetry dedicated to Hampstead Heath in the 1960s, so Garfunkel closed the first half with *I Believe When I Fall In Love*.

‘My goodness, you knew all the words,’ came a voice from in front of me. The man turned around to face me. ‘Very impressive I must say.’

‘Oh, I was only singing like the rest of us. Say, don’t I know you? Your face is very familiar. Have we met before?’

‘Possibly. I shouldn’t really be here. A friend had a ticket but couldn’t make it so gave it to me. My sub-editor has been chasing me all day, but I’ve rather got bored with her. She taunts me before deadline, so I am keeping her at arm’s length.’

I looked at the robust flushed face once more. ‘Your name is Brian, isn’t it?’

‘Shh! Not today! Call me Robert or something like that. Don’t wish to draw attention. You never know who is close by.’

‘I guess.’

‘I mean the features writer for the bloody newspaper could be here. Scooping around for Monday’s edition. He’d be only too pleased to report that he had seen me swanning off when I should have put to bed my latest submission.’

‘This features writer would be that interested in you taking an evening off to enjoy strawberries and, I’m assuming wine, on Hampstead Hill?’

‘Well, possibly not; but, you know these know-alls who think they’ve made the grade with editors after one exclusive.’

‘Indeed. I try not to pay attention to them to be honest and just get on with the job.’

‘I like your approach. You are a writer? All we get in Hampstead are writers!’

‘Less critique, more art history. And astronomy.’

‘There’s a good Francis Bacon exhibition planned for next year. I suppose one must write something impactful?’

‘I have been commissioned by Art of England to write a profile focusing on his main strengths.’

‘He wasn’t at all my cup of tea as a person. Jealousy and drink. A virile cocktail. However, as an artist he was of his time. Right in the moment you might say.’

‘May I quote you on that, Brian?’

‘Robert!’ ‘Oh, bloody hell, no, you cannot quote me on that,’ chuckled Brian.

Art Garfunkel took to the stage and the applause rang out across the lawn and hillside. The privileged took their seats in the front enclosure. Deckchairs and sunhats comfortably merged.

After the concert, I walked with Brian slowly back down the hill.

‘I’m writing an autobiography,’ said Brian. Spilling the beans on my life and people. I have a working title of *Outsider*. Rather fitting, don’t you think?

‘For whose benefit is the autobiography?’

‘Call it therapy. I have a lot to say and I have some big dark secrets to divulge.

We reached Hampstead village and I had to head down to the Northern Line.

‘Thank you for chatting. At least you didn’t walk away knowing who I was!’

I shook Brian’s hand. We met again, two years later, at the Francis Bacon exhibition held at Tate Britain.