

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

MAN AND BOY

BY TONY PARSONS

Note:

Cliff is an environmentalist who has chained himself to a tree to protest against a new airport terminal. He has been invited to ‘The Marty Mann Show’, a successful live television programme. Harry – the narrator and one of television people – observes the show from the galleries

[...] [L]ike all television people, what we worshipped above all else was authenticity. Apart from genuine, high-octane celebrity, of course. We worshipped that most of all.

We were sick of junior celebs pushing their lousy product. We
 5 hungered after real people with real lives and real stories – stories not
 anecdotes. They offered us great television at rock-bottom prices. We
 offered a therapy, a chance to get it all off their chest, an opportunity to let
 it all just gush out over a million carpets.

Of course, if Jack Nicholson had suddenly called up begging to appear
 10 on the show then we would have immediately called a security guard to
 escort all the real people from the building. But somehow Jack never did.
 There were just not enough celebrities to go round these days.

So we revered real people, real people who felt passionate about
 something, real people with no career to protect. And someone up a tree
 15 with police dogs snapping at his unwashed bollocks sounded about as
 real as it gets.

[...] A shiver of panic ran through the gallery.

‘The fly’s back!’ The director said. ‘We got the fly!’

There it was on the monitor. The studio fly. [...]

20 On a close-up of Marty reading his autocue, we watched the fly lazily
 circle our presenter’s head and then bank off into a long slow climb. [...]
 Apart from the fly’s aerial display, Marty’s interview with Cliff was going
 well. The young green started off nervously, scratching his stubble,
 tugging his filthy dreadlocks, stuttering his way through rambling
 25 sentences and even committing television’s cardinal sin of staring directly
 into the camera. But Marty could be surprisingly gentle with nervous
 guests and, clearly sympathetic to Cliff’s cause, he eventually made the

young man relax. It was only when Marty was winding up the interview that it all began to go wrong.

30 'I want to thank Cliff for coming in tonight,' Marty said, unusually solemn, brushing away the studio fly. 'And I want to thank all his colleagues who are living in trees out at the airport. Because the battle they are fighting is for all of us.'

As the applause swelled, Marty reached out and shook his guest's hand.

35 Cliff held it. And continued to hold it. Then he reached inside the grubby, vaguely ethnic coat he was wearing and produced a pair of handcuffs. While Marty watched with an uncertain smile, Cliff snapped one metal ring around his own wrist and the other around Marty's.

'Free the birds,' Cliff said quietly. He cleared his throat.

40 'What – what is this?' Marty asked.

'Free the birds!' Cliff shouted with growing confidence. 'Free the birds.' Marty shook his head. 'Do you have the key for this thing, you smelly little shit?'

Up in the gloaming of the gallery we watched the scene unfold on the
45 bank of screens shining in the darkness. The director carried on choreographing the five cameras. – 'Stay on Marty, two...give me a close-up of the handcuffs, four ...' – but I had the feeling that you only get when live television is going very wrong, a feeling which somehow combines low-grade nausea, paralysis and terrible fascination, as it sits
50 there in the pit of your stomach.

And suddenly there was the fly, hovering for a few seconds by Cliff's hair, then executing a perfect landing on the bridge of his nose.

'Free the birds!'

Marty considered his arm, unable to quite believe that he was really
55 chained to this scruffy young man whose make-up was starting to melt under the lights. The he picked up the water jug that was on the table between them and, almost as if he were trying to swat the studio fly, smashed it into Cliff's face. [...]

Source:

Parsons, Tony. *Man and Boy*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000, 26, 35-37

Annotations:

- l. 2 high-octane – very powerful, high-quality, top-class
- l. 9 Jack Nicholson – famous American actor, director, and author

- I. 13 to revere – to admire, to pay homage to
- I. 20 autocue – screen that TV presenters read their texts from
- I. 23 green – *here*: ecological activist