



## CHAPTER 1

# A painting of DONKEYS

It was hot in Polderdam.

Usually not much happened in the village, but right now it was so hot that nothing happened at all.

Nick Gust was painting in his shed with the door open and Angus was sitting on a bench in the shade and looking at Dummie. He wasn't affected by the weather at all. He had climbed the tree in the garden and was swaying dangerously back and forth at the top. "Come on up!" he called down to Angus. "Ghere in tree is wind!"

"And down here, it's safe!" Angus shouted back.

Indoors the telephone rang.

Dummie let go and fell smack bang onto the ground, before running inside.

"Dummie ghere," Angus heard him say. "No, not Nick. Wait, I gho look." He came back out holding the telephone and walked to the shed.

At that moment Nick appeared in the door opening

holding a paintbrush and muttering. “Ugly cottypot!” he scolded. Angus grinned. “Ugly cottypot” meant that his painting wasn’t going well.

“There is man in telephone for you,” Dummie said.

“I’m not here,” Nick said in annoyance.

“But I see you,” Dummie said, amazed.

“That man can’t see me. Make something up.”

“OK— Mister, Nick says ghe may be on toilet. Or somewhere else, I can make it up. No, no joke, ghe says it himself.”

Angus burst out laughing.

Nick groaned and snatched the telephone from Dummie’s hand. “Nick Gust— Yes, I’m busy— No, not on the toilet— What?” All of a sudden his face changed. “Yes, that’s right— Really? When? ... This afternoon already? ... Oh, wow— Yes, of course. Fifteen you say? ... Yes, I know where it is. Right. Well, erm, see you later— Goodbye.”

He hung up and stared into space, taken aback.

“Whumpy dumpman,” he muttered.

“What is it, Dad?” Angus asked.

“An exhibition. They asked me to show my work in the old storage depot. Fifteen paintings. They need them this afternoon. Someone dropped out. They got my name somewhere.”

“Then I don’t suppose they’ve seen any of your work,” Angus giggled. He peered through the door to the back of the shed. Nick painted paintings that never got sold. His whole shed was full of them.

“That’s going to change now,” Nick said, suddenly excited. “Give me a hand, we’re going to choose a few.”

The three of them went into the shed. The racks of paintings were near the back wall. They were all different: big, small, with funny landscapes and sometimes just colours. But to Angus they were all the same: very ugly. He looked through them, one by one, his nose in the air. “Are you sure they’re all finished?” he asked doubtfully. “No one’s going to buy this stuff.”

“It’s art, son. You have to learn how to look properly.”

“I’ve been looking at it all my life,” Angus said.

“Then you need to look better,” Nick said. “Here, where can you see a lovely sky like this?”

“A green sky? Nowhere.”

“Fine, listen, if you want to see a blue sky, just look up,” Nick grumbled. He took a couple more paintings covered in big splatters from the rack.

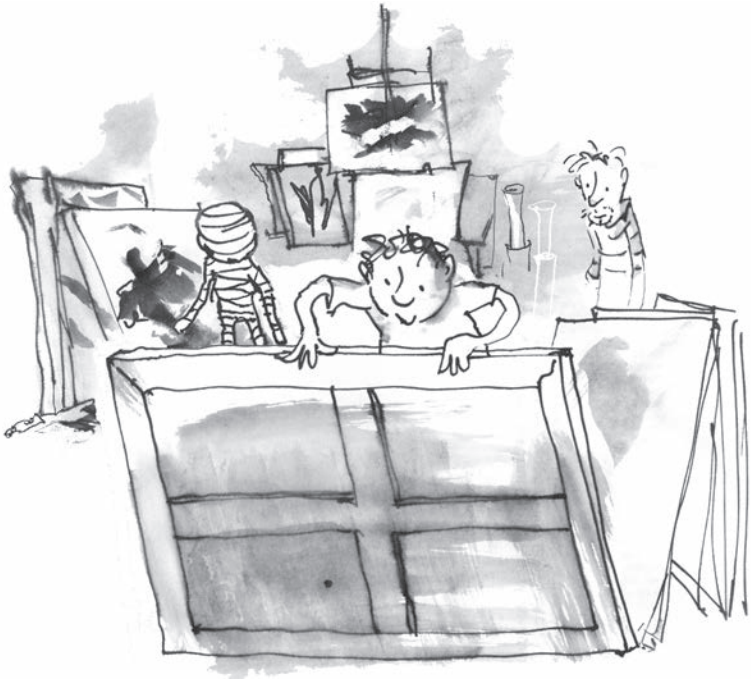
Angus thought about the paintings in the Grobbe Museum which he’d been to the previous month with Mr Scribble. He’d seen paintings there with even crazier colours. And with even more splatters, for that matter. And they were in a museum!

“Alright, I suppose you could be right,” he said. “This one then. It’s the least ugly. And this one. And— Hey! I actually like this one!” He pulled out a big painting from behind the others. “This one is very different. Is it your new style?”

“Is by me,” Dummie said proudly. “I made it. Last week, when you were sick.”

“You?” Angus’ mouth fell open.

Dummie’s painting featured three donkeys and men in dresses with clothes on their heads, behind them sand dunes, a couple of pyramids and a low sun. The



long shadows of parched bushes fell onto the sand. Angus already knew that Dummie was good at drawing, but he was even better at painting!

“Shall we take this one too?” Angus asked excitedly.

“No,” Dummie said immediately.

“Why not? Then everyone will be able to see it. Maybe someone will even buy it.”

“No, I want to keep,” Dummie said. “Ghood donkeys.”

Nick burst out laughing. “I think it’s a good idea. You know what? We’ll take the donkeys along. And they we’ll say the painting costs ten thousand euros. Then everyone will have seen them, but they will remain yours. No one would buy a thing like that. It’s simply too expensive.”

“Are you sure?” Dummie hesitated. He squeezed his golden eyes half shut and stuck his tongue out of his dried-up mouth.

“Do I know about art or not?” Nick said.

Angus said nothing.

“OK. МААСНІ,” Dummie said. “Donkeys can gho.”

It took a while before they’d chosen fourteen paintings of Nick’s that they all found the least ugly. Nick put the others back in the racks and rubbed his chin. “They need to have titles as well,” he said. “Erm, this one I’ll call *White and red*. Do you agree?”

“What about that one next to it then?” Angus giggled.

“*Red and white*, I think,” Dummie sniggered.

“Stop it, you two,” Nick said crossly. “I’ll do this on my own.”

He got a piece of paper and listed the fourteen titles. Afterwards, he put the paintings near the door. “We’d better make a quick price list too,” he said.

Soon they were sitting at the computer.

Nick began to type.

Price list for the paintings by Nick Gust.

Number 1: **Red with white.** €1,000

Number 2: **Green sky.** €1,000

“And what’s your painting called?” Nick asked when he’d finished writing down his paintings.

“Is called *My ghome*,” Dummie said. “Painting costs ten thousand.”



And so it came about that one hot Saturday afternoon, Nick found himself carefully lifting fifteen paintings into a trailer. He had put big sheets over them for protection. Dummie insisted on going along to look after his donkeys and Angus went along to look after Dummie. They drove slowly into the city.

The old storage depot was a building with three meeting rooms and a restaurant.

Nick parked in front of the door. No sooner had he done so when a short man came out. "Are you Mr Gust?" he asked hastily.

"Nick Gust," Nick said. "And this is my son Angus, and that's my nephew Dummie."

"Stephen Curl," the man said. He stared at Dummie in disbelief. "Has he had an accident?" he whispered.

"Burns," Nick whispered back. "He has to be fully bandaged for a while."

Mr Curl shook his head pityingly. But he obviously didn't have time to carry on being amazed, because he said, "Well, let's hang them up quickly. The restaurant will be opening in an hour."

They carried the canvases inside together. Nick lifted a sheet from one of the paintings.

Mr Curl looked at the big splatters of paint in surprise. "That's a little, well— erm, wild," he said uneasily. "It would better for my restaurant if it represented something."

"It actually represents lots of things," Nick said. "You

can read anything into it you like. Birds. A herd of elephants. A bunch of tulips.”

“Oh. A bunch of tulips,” Mr Curl repeated.

“Yes. But also landscapes, you see. Here, this one, for instance.”

Mr Curl stared at the green sky with a grimace. “Oh,” he said again.



“Where do you want them?” Nick asked.

Mr Curl hesitated. Then he shook his head determinedly. “I don’t want that one in the restaurant,” he said. “It’ll spoil people’s appetites. No one will feel like eating. And I don’t want this one either. Do you have anything else?”

Nick crossly pulled one sheet after the next off the paintings. Mr Curl shook his head at each one of them. “Nope. Nope.” Then they got to Dummie’s painting. “Aha. Now we’re talking,” Mr Curl said in relief. “At least this one looks like a landscape with donkeys.”

“Yes, is desert with donkeys,” Dummie said.

“Lovely. It will make the customers thirsty. This one

can go in the restaurant,” Mr Curl said. “Do you have any more of these?”

“No,” Nick said. As he tugged away the last sheet, Mr Curl continued to shake his head and in the end only Dummie’s painting was allowed hang in the restaurant. Nick’s paintings had to go in the meeting rooms.

Nick took them to the meeting rooms with a red face.

Angus and Dummie stayed in the restaurant and watched Mr Curl hang Dummie’s painting on the back wall. If you stood at the door, you looked right at it.

“That’s the best place,” Angus whispered to Dummie. “Everyone who comes in will see it straight away.”

After a while, Nick reappeared in the restaurant and reluctantly handed the price list to Mr Curl.

“Which one is *White and red*?” Mr Curl asked.

“It’s one of a pair,” Nick growled. “And the other’s called *Red and white*.”

Mr Curl shook his head for the thousandth time.

“Very clear,” he muttered. “Well, I’ll call you when you can come and pick them up again. Erm... thank you. See you soon.” He shook Nick’s hand and walked off.

“Whumpy dumpman! I’ll never have another show again!” Nick roared when they were back in the car. “That man knows nothing about art. Brainless baldy Curl with his nonsense about appetite.”

“My painting goes in restaurant,” Dummie said proudly.

“As if donkeys will make people hungry,” Nick snorted.

“And thirsty,” said Dummie. “Is ghot on donkey.”

“Oh, whatever. It’s hot everywhere!” Nick put his foot



to the floor and the car accelerated.

“Have you ever sat on a donkey?” Angus asked quickly to distract his father.

“Yes. I ghad own donkey. Donkey called *AHILA*, name means clever. But ghe do what ghe want. Always walking wrong way. Donkey of my dad called *ZUBERI*. Also do what ghe want. All donkeys do what they want. *AZIBO, OLABISI, KASIYA...*”

“Shall we give your car a name too, Dad?” Angus asked.

“Yes. Stephen Curl,” Nick growled. He turned onto their driveway and stamped so hard on the brakes that the car hurtled to a stop. He got out and stormed into the shed without saying anything else.

“I feel a bit sorry for him,” Angus said.

“I don’t. My painting is in restaurant,” Dummie said.



That evening Nick made potatoes and broccoli for dinner. Angus set the table. As he and his father ate, Dummie played with his scarab. Luckily Nick had already calmed down. He’d even been able to paint away his ill feeling, he said. There were paint stains on his trousers and his forehead was green.

They’d almost finished when the telephone rang.

“I ghet it,” said Dummie. “Ghello?” He listened and then looked at Nick. “Mister Curl from Storage Depot is in telephone again,” he said.

Nick got up and grabbed the telephone from Dum-

mie's hand. "Nick Gust speaking," he said. "Yes— no— What? I don't think I've understood. What did you say? Really? Wants to take it now? Yes. No. I— Yes, of course. That's fine. And the money? ... OK, well, thanks very much." He put the phone back down, shook his head, scratched his chin and plopped down into his red chair.

"What's happened?" Angus asked, concerned.

"Something crazy. Something quite extraordinary. Something—"

"Tell us then," Angus insisted.

"The painting's sold," Nick said.

"You sold a painting? Dad! That's fantastic!"

"No, not me, Dummie. Someone bought Dummie's painting."

"What? But that one was ten thousand euros!"

"Quite right," Nick said. "Ten thousand euros. The buyer has paid up and is taking it with him."

Dummie jumped up. "Ghe takes painting? Where?"

"Home, I guess," Nick said. Then a broad smile appeared on his face. "Dummie! Your painting has been sold! Now we've got ten thousand eur—" He shut his mouth and looked at Dummie's furious face. Dummie's golden eyes were spewing fire and his brown teeth were clenched. "You said no one want for so much money!" he screamed.

"Yes, that's what I thought," Nick said, taken aback.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"No! I want back!"

"Then just paint a new one. We've got ten thousand euros now. That's ten times one thousand!"

“So what. Painting was of my ghome! I want to ghang it, my ghome on my wall!”

“Hmm,” Nick said. He scratched his chin. “But that money... do you realize all the things we could do with it?”

“Is money for me?” Dummie asked.

“No. For all of us. That’s the way we do things here.”

Dummie’s eyes became fiercer and he clenched his fists.

“But...” Nick added hastily, “since you painted it, you can choose a present for yourself. Pick anything you want, is that alright?”

Dummie was quiet for a moment. “So I can choose everything?” he asked.

“If it’s not too expensive,” Nick said. “Well?”

Dummie looked outside. All of sudden a smile appeared on his face. “I know what I want,” he said.

“Phew,” said Nick. “Tell us and we’ll buy it. And after that you must make more paintings and sell them. Dummie, we’re going to be rich! Alright, so what do you want?”

“I want to gho to my country,” Dummie said decisively.

“What?”

“To Egypt. I want to gho back. Is my ghome.”

“Back to Egypt?” Nick and Angus looked at each other in shock.

“I want to see. When can we gho?”

“Well, erm... we can’t,” Nick said. “We can’t go to your country, it’s not possible.”

“Cannot?” Now Dummie was furious. “You said I