

## **Tales of the Superficial: *Flogging Yoghurt***

**Amalthea Bernard** sat uncomfortably in her dressing room chair facing a large mirror that reflected a disquieting truth – her career in the celebrity spotlight was on a seriously downhill path and its nadir was about to take place. A callow make-up girl buzzed around her like an irritating fly, trying to make the best of probably the toughest cosmetics assignment she had ever had.

In a few minutes time, Amalthea was due in front of the camera for her debut as the face and voice of ‘Vigour’ bio yoghurts. It was a day that she had been dreading but, due to the downhill career mentioned already, it was a day she was forced into confronting for purely financial reasons. Artistic credibility would have to take a very distant back-seat for this performance. Ten minutes beforehand, she had tried the product for the first time – the experience had been as pleasurable as she imagined swallowing cat vomit would be.

Amalthea of course was not her real name. Tracy Bernard had been born 34 and a bit years before this distressing day, and had adopted the stage name, for no particular reason other than she heard it mentioned by a celebrity presenter on a ‘hey kids, isn’t science fun and groovy’ type show discussing the wonders to be found in the solar system, on which she had played a very minor role once upon a happier time. She had embarked on a brief fling with said presenter, but it soon transpired he knew more about astronomy than he did about satisfying a woman of her substantial needs.

“Miss Bernard, on set in two minutes, repeat two minutes,” the studio tannoy taunted as the make-up girl drew a line under her efforts and left the sad, fading starlet to her thoughts. She rinsed her mouth out to try to get rid of the unwelcome taste of ‘Vigour’ and audibly, yet out of earshot of the technicians busying themselves around the studio and the yoghurt company PR executives gathered for this momentous occasion, she muttered resignedly, “Jesus, for what I am about to do, please forgive me.”

The fault that she had plumbed such depths of course was not her own, she desperately tried to console herself with as she made her way onto the studio floor where an over-excited young Scorsese wannabe was waiting to issue instructions. Changing fashions and trends in the industry were largely to blame in her eyes, but also her agent, **Seth Porter**, was culpable in this regard. She should have fired him years ago and employed someone with more drive and comprehension of her talents, but her nerve had failed her on a number of opportunities. Despite his many failings, her long-suffering agent was a highly persuasive man even when faced with seemingly indefensible results. As soon as this yoghurt farce was ended, Porter would be the first person she would be speaking to, both for a reaction to the commercial and her performance in it, and also to berate him for persuading her to rent out her talents for such a demeaning, if monetarily rewarding role.

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“You sadistic shit Seth,” the ensuing telephone conversation began. “I hope you sleep well knowing that I am selling my soul in the name of this disgusting sludge. For God’s sake, have you actually tried the stuff?” Amalthea enquired, knowing full well that he hadn’t.

“Darling, you know that my concept of breakfast is a pot of coffee and handful of cigarettes,” the agent calmly replied in an attempt to defuse his client’s obvious displeasure.

“You also know that at this stage of your career, a few principles have to be sacrificed on the altar of cold cash. It’s not as though you are contracted to eat it. By the way, I thought you were fantastic.”

“I really don’t know if that should be taken as a compliment or not. To think, I once had ambitions to front my own TV prime-time show, rubbing shoulders with the great movie stars and musicians of the day,” Amalthea pondered. “Whatever happened along the way to bring me to this yoghurt flogging gig?”

“I’ve got other clients who would kill for this job,” Porter pointed out. “We go back a long way, so I put my heart above my head for you. As painful as it may be to your self-esteem, it’s a solid pay day which we are both in need of. The yoghurt people were delighted with you. They said you have the face to fit their product. They are looking to attract the older and richer market.”

Such cold, unarguable logic brought no comfort to the new face of ‘Vigour’ bio yoghurt. She abruptly ended the conversation with a pointed expletive, slammed the phone down and sought solace from a bottle of red wine sitting on her kitchen worktop. Amalthea of course never did any work on the worktop. That was left to her housekeeper, Nadine who had been struck down with a heavy cold – otherwise, the opened bottle of wine left over from the previous night, would normally have been tidied away. It was breakfast time but that made no difference - pouring a glass, Amalthea opened up her appointment diary to assess what was in store for the week ahead. Other than an appearance on ‘Pro-Celebrity Carve Up’, the latest depressing spectacle of very minor celebrities racing each other to the metaphorical death around a fading and remote racetrack, all that confronted Amalthea’s weary eyes was the entry for the follow up commercial for the dreaded dairy product that she was now so closely associated with and which

would probably form her epitaph. She slammed the diary shut, downed the wine in one gulp and headed for the soothing waters of her freshly run bath.

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One month later, despite the ongoing yoghurt gig, Nadine had to be laid off and Amalthea forced to downsize to a more lugubrious part of town. The driving show had been a bit of a blast – the adrenaline rush had temporarily taken her mind off her financial problems, but being in a weekly knockout format and being paired with the least capable of the professional drivers, Amalthea’s hopes of a prolonged stay on the show and exposure on national TV were quickly dashed. She had embarked on a brief fling with said driver, but it soon transpired he knew more about cars than he did about satisfying a woman of her substantial needs.

Seth Porter had been noticeable by his absence from her life over the past month, not even returning her evermore frantic calls. The relationship between herself and the yoghurt commercial director had become increasingly tense – Amalthea was not one to take acting advice well from someone considerably younger than herself. She needed a friendly face and a sympathetic ear, so she called her old friend Celestine Michaels (real name Shirley Simmons) who had embarked on her celebrity career at the same time as Amalthea. Miss Michaels star had faded even more spectacularly than had Amalthea’s over the past decade, a fact that Amalthea was well aware of. They had decided to meet up at ‘Rolando’s’ – a restaurant of little renown but more mutually favourable prices than they would both have been used to in more successful times.

“Darling, how lovely to see you,” Amalthea opened with as her lunch companion was shown to the window table where her friend had been waiting for twenty minutes.

“So sorry to keep you,” Celestine apologised unconvincingly and without further explanation. “You look great,” she added with even less conviction. “I love your latest yoghurt commercial.”

The lack of detail for Celestine’s lateness and weakly delivered compliment were instantly forgotten in the face of the last statement which Amalthea took as an insult rather than an accolade. “It pays the bills,” she chirped.

“I bet it does you lucky bitch,” Celestine replied as she scanned the slightly tatty menu that had been handed to her by an overly tanned waiter who did his best to draw their eyes to his rippling muscles.

As he walked away to give their orders in, Celestine said what Amalthea had been thinking but had decided to keep to herself; “I could do with a couple of hours of those muscles.”

Both had chosen grilled fish and green salad, washed down with house white. The conversation revolved primarily around issues of decreasing career prospects and agent angst. This mutual lunchtime catharsis continued through to dessert, a fresh fruit salad (no cream).

“I’m on the advert gravy train myself,” Celestine said with no measure of shame.

“Oh really,” Amalthea replied, somewhat buoyed by this revelation. “I haven’t seen it, what are you putting your face to?”

“Voice dear, not face. It’s a voiceover for ‘Bouncy’ dog food, I’m sorry to say,” Celestine revealed as she spooned in some fruit salad. “I won’t pretend it is what I’ve always aimed for in my career, but there comes a time when facts have to be faced and pride tucked away in the cupboard.”

“Gosh, how grim,” Amalthea sympathised. “I’m in very much the same sinking boat, but at least my product is for human consumption. I say human consumption, but having tried it

myself, I'm not sure I would feed it to one of your dogs. Can I be rude enough to ask how much you're on?"

Unable to bring the figure to her lips, Celestine took a pen from her purse, scribbled the figure on a napkin, and slid it over. Amalthea's eyes widened and the urge could not be resisted. "Gosh, that's harsh. That's less than twice what the yoghurt people are being good enough to remunerate me for."

After this bombshell, conversation became more awkward and deviated away from career chat to mundane topics of hair colour and manicure.

Amalthea sensed that her revelation had been slightly incongruous and paid for both meals. Celestine was only too happy to receive the charitable offer, patronising as it was. Stepping out of the restaurant into the bright sunshine, both placed large dark sunglasses on their faces, exchanged fake cheek pecks and assured each other that they must do this again sometime.

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Amalthea's relationship record was somewhat patchy. She had once embarked on a marriage with a tennis instructor which had moments of passion, but within a year, his forehand began to merit more attention than her, and rumours soon spread of his 'out of hours' activities with some of his more youthful female clients. The split had been inevitable and at the time, Amalthea had taken it as an opportunity to focus on her celebrity career. As that began to wane, she dabbled with affairs with both men and women who crossed her path but they had all fizzled out; a fact that like her career, Amalthea put the blame for squarely at the feet of the other person. The latest dalliance had been with the showy, tanned and heavily muscled waiter from Rolando's. After bidding Celestine farewell outside the restaurant and waiting for her to disappear around the corner, Amalthea had slipped back and slipped her address in his hand.

Unbeknown to her, the waiter was also seeing Celestine who had surreptitiously slipped her number to the Adonis on the way back from using the restaurant's rest room. Both of these affairs lasted a short while. Right now, the only man who was on Amalthea's mind was her shit of an agent who had still not made any contact with her since the brief reaction to her first yoghurt commercial.

She was contracted to make three commercials to begin with, with the option of a further three if mutually satisfactory to all parties. The last of the initial artistic gems was in the can, but only after she had had a blazing row with the director and thrown a pot of 'Vigour' at the dressing room mirror with all her might, shattering it to the bewilderment of the callow make-up girl who was still employed to smooth over the rough edges of Amalthea's increasingly lined face. Amalthea saw nothing inappropriate with such outbursts. She was content that it was a reflection of her artistic talent and that she had done the director a favour by 'grounding' him in the rigours of handling star talent. The director as it happened did not see the merit in her tantrums and on his advice, the yoghurt company had decided not to take up its option on a further series of commercials with this petulant diva. They had taken the decision to rebrand the product using a new face and voice. Seth Porter had not yet broken the news to his temperamental client, being too busy looking for the next option to offer up to her whilst juggling the needs of his other, generally younger and less feisty clients.

Amalthea was fed up with waiting for the phone to ring, and decided to drop into Porter's office to find out what the hell was going on. As she greeted the receptionist outside Porter's office, the door opened and out strode model-like, a stunning brunette clearly brimming with the confidence and swagger that Amalthea had once possessed. Their eyes briefly met before Seth Porter beckoned Amalthea inside.

“Darling, what a pleasant surprise. I was just about to ring you,” Porter lied. “That was Jane Fielding. We’ve recently signed her up, she’s an exciting find.”

“As opposed to this old fossil you mean,” Amalthea blurted out in disdain.

“Whatever do you mean dear?” Porter replied, initially taken back by her opening gambit. “You know how much I value your talent and experience in the business.”

“Don’t try to butter me up you shit. If my talent and experience were so valuable to you, I wouldn’t be reduced to flogging yoghurt and getting the silent treatment for weeks on end.”

“Firstly, I apologise for not being in touch. I’m not using it as an excuse but things have been hectic,” Porter began. “I’m afraid it’s not good news on the yoghurt front, or maybe it is to you if you feel so antagonistic towards ‘Vigour’?”

“I suppose that pup of a director has been whining,” Amalthea said as she slouched into Porter’s leather guest chair.

“Well, apparently that did play a part in the company’s decision not to extend your contract,” Porter delivered with an unnerving calm.

“Bastards. It’s their loss more than mine,” Amalthea feebly replied.

“I somewhat doubt that,” Porter ruefully reflected. “Fear not my dear, I have been assiduous in my duties and found you the next job.”

Mildly encouraged by his jaunty tone, Amalthea brought herself out of her slumped position. “That’s great, what is it?”

“‘Bouncy’ dog food voiceover,” Porter replied.

“Fuck the hell off,” his agitated client exploded. “Is that the best you can do?”



“It’s the only thing I can do. Face reality darling, the dreams of panel shows and movie roles are folly. You are now at a stage of your career where you have to take whatever’s going and bite the bullet of pain that fact may bring.”

Amalthea stormed out of the office. Porter knew she would take the job. Amalthea knew Porter knew that she would take the job. They knew each other well enough to understand that her explicit, vocal agreement was not necessary.

Bolting out onto the street, Amalthea was almost dizzy with anger and frustration. She really had screwed things up. “Fucking dog food,” she shouted at a bemused passerby. “Still,” she thought to herself, “that must mean Celestine has blown her contract. What the hell is in store for her? How do you get lower than dog food voiceovers?” At this thought, perversely Amalthea cheered up and made for the salon where she had a pedicure booked.

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Amalthea Bernard at last had come to accept that a glitzy, Oscar-nomination studded career was as realistic a goal at this stage of her life as ‘Vigour’ bio yoghurt becoming universally popular was. She was glad to be shot of the association with the cursed dairy product and fairly quickly settled into her new role as the voice of ‘Bouncy’. The reduced money was a hit but at least, no one outside of the studio would know that the voice belonged to her. Almost without precedent, she got on well with the director of the commercials, indeed embarking on a passionate and serious relationship with her. Dog food and lesbianism: a combination that her long dead, straight-laced, bible-thumping parents would have been truly distraught at, but what the hell. She was happier now than she had been for a long time and Seth Porter had promised her that other ‘projects’ were already under negotiation. She trusted him enough to know that he wouldn’t directly lie to her, if not exactly tell her the full gory details until absolutely necessary.

Reclining on her sofa with a glass of red wine, Amalthea pondered her lot with mild amusement. The phone rang – it was Celestine Michaels.

“Darling, hope I’ve not called at a bad time?” Celestine enquired.

“No, I’m relaxing at home. What are you up to these days?” Amalthea asked, suspecting her old ‘friend’ was in need of her help since blowing the dog food gig.

“That’s great. Let me treat you to lunch at Rolando’s this week. I’m celebrating my new job. Would you believe I’m the new face and voice of ‘Vigour’ bio yoghurt? I’ve just had my first stint in the studio. That young director is a peach isn’t he? The product has really taken off apparently thanks in part to your efforts and they are paying me twice what they were paying you!”

Amalthea’s jaw was dropped. The glass of wine was dropped. Seconds of awkward silence ticked by as the stunned ‘Bouncy’ dog food ambassador’s bile began to bubble. What remained of her celebrity status flashed all too rapidly before her eyes as she realised the depressing consequence of this bombshell – it was she who was now staring at the fame barrel bottom, whilst her ‘friend’ was on a distinct upward curve. At this fading juncture of her career, the goddamn yoghurt gig had been the Holy Grail after all.

“Darling, are you still there?” came the disembodied voice at the other end of the phone.

“That’s just great,” Amalthea managed to purge sarcastically through gritted teeth. “I’m afraid my diary is full. Goodbye you lucky bitch.”

**THE END**