

1.

I ATTENDED the famous Armory Show of 1913 on its first Saturday.

It was a miserably cold and gray February day. I would have preferred to go during the week, when it was less crowded, but that wasn't feasible. Also I would have preferred to walk—my flat was in Murray Hill, across from Morgan's house—but the sidewalks were slippery, so I took a taxi the dozen blocks downtown. The streets were slick, too, and my cab nearly hit a horse hauling a coal wagon.

The Armory, a brick structure with stone dressings and an arched roof, stands on Lexington Avenue at 26th Street. I stepped inside, paid admission, from the program familiarized myself with the layout of the various "galleries" laid across the floor—arranged by country of origin—and plunged into the worst. I knew I wouldn't like it. I went because one had to.

I work as a banker, but live for art. Isn't art everything? But art, to my understanding, is the emotive representation of reality expressed through techniques developed over the centuries within historical context in any number of highly developed genres. What lay before me in the Armory was not *art*. It was broken crockery thrown on the floor in tantrums of aggression and dementia.

Is mine too severe a theory? It accounts for the art I love; for Chopin and Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Titian, Goya and Giotto, Palladio and Beethoven. What I beheld, mockingly installed in that misleadingly martial space, gave me no esthetic pleasure—only chills of foreboding.

Nor was I alone in feeling thus. To the contrary; the Armory buzzed with shock and disapproval, and also with a species of fear. People edged past the “art,” keeping as far away from it as possible, tracing serpentine routes with the care of Hansel and Gretel threading their way through the forest.

Every generation faces the challenge—and responsibility—of pushing the traditions of art a little bit forward. I admit mine—I was born in 1875—has had difficulty doing so. After all, Delacroix achieved a kind of perfection; no one can dispute that. But to give up and leap into the cesspool? The graces and values of accurate drawing and observation, of emotional weight, *gone*? The Impressionists, whose blurred glitter was, in its day, so confounding, have themselves been shoved aside by the even more uncouth crew that, embracing chaos and abstraction, created the disassembled, disintegrated, decaying works that at the Armory surrounded me.

When I reached Galleries H and I—*French Paintings and Sculpture*—I had penetrated to what New Yorkers were already calling the *Chamber of Horrors*, for there lurked the dread *Cubists* and *Fauvists*. Awful, but I could at least discern method, albeit a madman’s, to the Cubist ambition of rendering three dimensions on a surface of two, method dependent on geometry and exact analysis. However hideous the work, I could hear Giotto whispering *at last! at last!*

Hung between simpleminded puddles by one Matisse was the show’s *pièce de resistance*, M. Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*—a bird’s nest of lines and angles in thin brown pigments, an abstract rendering *sans* modeling of body mechanics. Spectators sidled past in repulsion, regarding her—*it*—as they might a horse

dying in the street.

But to my eye even more flagrant were the bleeding daubs of a picture near by called *Woman with Mustard Pot*. Really, *Woman with Mustard Pot*? It depicted a female with a scooped-out face melting in blue and orange. She was disfigured; diseased; poxed; boiled alive; opened up on the operating table; ready for the embalmer, or fresh from him; dug up from the grave and anatomized by Dr. Burke. Monstrous, outrageous, a canvas with not a tittle of beauty to it! Every verity lacking!

Yet somehow it presented, and with gorgeous tactility, a personality complete.

It was the work of somebody with the unlikely name of Pablo Picasso. He worried me. If he were not so obviously a charlatan, he could be a master. There was a kind of logic to his picture's curling drips and patches of color; even (my stomach rebelled) a kind of music. A step beyond Piero della Francesca? Surely not. But as to skill? Skill was not lacking to M. Picasso.

This is what upset me, standing there, as others went past, shunning Miss Mustard Pot as they might a deformed beggar. Not an inviting work of art; not a Delacroix around which a crowd could safely gather for enjoyment and edification (there was an excellent Delacroix across the way). No, seeing this woman lean her head on her arm and confidently invite our scrutiny was like watching the burning fuse of a stick of dynamite, and I appreciated that she'd been painted with just that insane, anarchistic desire to blow us all up!

One year later, at Sarajevo, everything did blow—to smithereens—and it's not put back together yet, nor shall it be, not in my time, if ever. And courtesy of MM. Picasso and Duchamp, a glimpse of the fractured future was given me.

I snorted, thinking thus direly, even as a young lady stepped in front of the picture and peered at its expert impasto. A statuesque beauty in the pre-War mode—the corset at (literally) its last gasp—she resembled a bouquet of flowers; ruffles spilled forth at her breast,

and her hat burst into bloom above her flower-like face.

Inclining her head, she remarked to me, "She wants bicarbonate of soda."

"Or a nice dark tomb in which to rot undisturbed," I answered.

She laughed, this girl, and I came to myself.

"Beg your pardon, Miss. I didn't mean to speak with such vehemence."

"I don't see the harm. She's not to your taste?"

"No," I declared. "But she disturbs me because in fact she's telling me that my taste isn't up to understanding her. A most sophisticated work, and see how *beautifully* painted. She thinks herself a masterpiece! So it won't do to sneer. No, with the assurance of a Leonardo this picture *insists* on engaging me—assumes I'm prepared to come to grips with it."

And the young lady paid me the compliment of looking again at the mess, trying to penetrate it. This while spectators wound past Indian file, careful not to get close lest they catch its germs.

"Is it, then, great art?" she asked.

"If great, it's a greatness that brings no comfort."

"Cold comfort, then, without padding against the pain of life? But is that padding what we should most value in art?"

It was this remarkable speech that caused me to forget M. Picasso's pigment debauch and really look at her. Not only was this young lady tall, she was lovely; pale, with excellent features, blue eyes, and a high and delicate voice. She was exquisite, in fact, but possessed definite personality. The oldest verity expressed in new form.

"Indeed," I answered, "but when one's face is shoved into a dung pile—"

"*There you are, Dora,*" rasped a harsh voice whose accompanying bright eyes lit into me fiercely.

I recognized the older woman who swept in to claim the girl: Mrs. Jenny Brase, the *Honourable* Mrs. Jenny Brase, wife of the Hon. Lionel

Brase, former wife of the copper magnate Jed Jessup, and herself the daughter of Fred Sweet, newspaper publisher and Lincoln's Minister to France. An illustrious figure, encased in the gray-haired frame of a woman only some ten years older than myself.

"Yes, Mother," said the young lady — giving me a shock as great as Picasso's.

I hastened to introduce myself. The mother reared back dismissively, but Miss Dora Jessup grasped my fingers warmly.

I understood Mrs. Brase's behavior — that of the mother of a most eligible young woman. Her daughter was a great heiress, and known to be a handful. Two years earlier, she had fled her family, then sojourning in London at Halliwith House, the Hon. Mr. Brase's father's Mayfair residence — his father, formerly the richest commoner in England, having been elevated to Viscount Halliwith — and weeks later been discovered (by an excited popular press) living in a theatrical boarding house, and in fact to be playing a part in the suburban revival of a Pinero play. I remembered the headlines.

Mrs. Brase reached to pull her daughter safely past the next monstrosity, a chromium combination of, I believe, *breast* and *chair* by one Brancusi; what one might expect to come across in the ruins of a burned-out hardware store.

"Miss Jessup, may I see you again?" I called.

"We're at home on Thursday," she said before Mama could yank her away.

2.

THAT THURSDAY I left the office early and went uptown, walking so as get oxygen in me, for I was nervous.

The Brases lived, in town, in Mrs. Brase's late father's old mansion on the south side of Gramercy Park. The neighborhood was a generation out of date for Society, but that was all right, for the Hon. Mrs. Brase was unconventional.

The calculus of unconventionality is difficult for me to parse, being rather foreign to my character. I imagined that it could not have been entirely convenient to stay in Gramercy Park when fashion had swept far uptown. But essential to Mrs. Brase, I understood, was the pleasure of proclaiming herself socially secure in the New York waters so treacherous to mere mortals, and therefore to do something different, something *unconventional*—staking a place, not in the avant-garde, certainly, but within view of the avant-garde's rear guard. Thus she maintained her old-fashioned mansion in a neighborhood fashion was passing by.

Socially secure she was, of course; aside from the Dutch families who still own so much of the ground underlying the city, no one more so than the daughter of Fred Sweet; ex-wife of Jed Jessup; spouse of a Viscount's son. Though some of her childhood friends

were now *Lady This* or *Lady That*, the mere *Hon.* suited Mrs. Brase; her lack of a title was itself a kind of boast that in herself she possessed such a superabundance of prestige that she could do anything she liked, even live in Gramercy Park. That she was even given to rubbing people's noses in it was attested by her scandalous later career lecturing on *Galvanic Union*.

The Brases' summer residence, considerably grander, was a château on the St. Lawrence River in Quebec. They also passed much time in England, in London and at Halliwith Hall in Hampshire, Viscount Halliwith's great new house built to the best 16th-century models, and at their own manor on the Sussex coast. It was universally agreed that, though a divorcee, the *Hon. Mrs.* Brase was blameless, and also that she had wrung from her errant first husband the full price of his wronging her.

I rang, and the butler admitted me along with two glistening children who arrived at the same moment. Lustrous youths, their unformed features were suffused with humidity—eyes wet, lips moist and red—and their flesh gave off a rank nursery odor.

Mrs. Brase's drawing room looked onto the square, which was itself overlooked by the Metropolitan Life tower lately erected several blocks to the north. Large paintings of the Hudson River school made the room gloomy; one depicted her father's place at Highland Falls (next door to Morgan's). A Steinway grand piano stood near the windows, and a child at its keyboard was tinkling some fragile popular tune.

Some six or eight other children—*boys*—infested the room. They were Dora's age, 20 or 22. For all that persons that age move constantly and fast, their locomotion is a species of somnambulism: They are not awake. The process of waking up to life is painful, and one our civilization feels it best to postpone, and which children themselves are happy to push off as long as they can. So although the young people strewn about Mrs. Brase's drawing room might have been on the verge of yawning, propping themselves up on their

elbows and looking around, to find out how life in actuality bears the same relation to their slumbrous upbringing that fairy tales do to newspaper headlines, they were not there yet. They napped still, entirely taken by themselves, even as, snickering, they tapped their feet to the music's jerky rhythms or looked longingly at Dora as she poured tea, with equal longing at the cakes piled up in front of her. Clearly they were there to woo her. The dreaming youths wished to wake up affianced to Miss Dora Jessup!

Dora! Striking, tall even as she sat, Dora was torn from another page entirely — fully awake. Although one saw her the pastmistress of New York's every haughty tribal custom — expert at the tea table, for instance, in Society at that period involving a ritual more elaborate than that of the Japanese Imperial Court's — clearly she had surpassed that world, found somewhere a more accurate consciousness of life than any taught her at the Brearley School or McGill University. I found her fascinating.

"Mr. Berlin!" said Mrs. Brase. "You came!"

There was no joy in that voice. I pressed her fingers, smiled at Dora — Dora's answering smile, I must admit, a mere convention — and went to the piano.

"May I?" I murmured to the child at the keyboard and, when he craned helplessly up at me, sat down and shoved him off the bench with my hip. My fingers hovered over the keys and played. . . yes, *Chopin*. My fingers chose Chopin.

Too early for a nocturne, so the *Fantasia Impromptu*, in C Sharp minor, Opus 66. Taxicab clarions punctuated the more intense passages. Though seldom given credit for it, Chopin is purposeful. People prefer to imagine his music dreamlike and evanescent, product of the fairy culture that so enamored 19th-century Europe. But Chopin has a spine of steel. His is music fully, tragically awake, gleaning its beauty from life's real circumstances.

I paid no mind to the room as I played; never can. I must watch my fingers range up and down the keyboard, participating in this

life to which I have so little conscious entrée. But as the last notes died away, and my hands lifted from the keys, my foot from the pedals, I was aware of a hush.

Looking up, I saw the blank faces of boys astonished into muteness, and Mrs. Brase's features a cauldron of dawning apprehensiveness, and Dora, still and composed, looking at me steadily. Only now did I notice the Hon. Lionel Brase, sitting in a chair near by, knitting, the needles clicking steadily.

Mrs. Brase led ironical applause and said, accusingly, "You *play*, Mr. Berlin."

"I try, Mrs. Brase."

"You play beautifully," Dora said. "So *beautifully!*"

"Thank you."

"But you are not an artist?"

"Alas, no, Miss Jessup. As a boy I hoped to be, but Mr. Paderewski one day kindly permitted me to play for him, and even more kindly advised me to view music as a private joy, and to enter the law, or some such."

"So you—?"

"Entered the law."

Mrs. Brase put in, "Are you not on the Street, Mr. Berlin?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm at Dillinger Muenster—my mother was a Muenster, you understand. But I started in the law."

"Tea?" asked Dora with beautiful simplicity.

"Yes, please."

Her mama asked, "Mr. Berlin, where were you educated?"

"Here in New York, ma'am, privately, until at 16 I entered Harvard College and, later, New York Law School."

"And what is your position at Dillinger Muenster?"

"Senior partner, ma'am."

"What do you *do?*" asked Dora.

"I try to make myself useful, Miss Jessup. You know corporations come to the Street to find capital. We make it available to those with

solid prospects for growth. I serve on the boards of some half dozen. Also we underwrite bond offerings, making rather a specialty of railway bonds, and provide banking services. Of course, we own a seat on the Exchange as well."

Mrs. Brase blushed, her features hardening. "If it's not too personal a question, Mr. Berlin, what faith do you follow?"

"I'm Episcopalian, ma'am, a parishioner of St. George's Church, on Stuyvesant Square. In fact, I'm an usher there."

"We attend Calvary," said Dora.

"Such a beautiful church!"

Mrs. Brase persevered. "Were you *born* into the Episcopal Church?"

"My mother was. I was baptized at the age of seven, ma'am, the year after my family arrived from Germany. Jesus Christ is my savior, Mrs. Brase."

"Ah," she remarked, with no note of satisfaction. But, balked, unable to brand me, as she clearly wished to, a Jew, she receded.

The boys began to take their leave, disappointment heavy in their faces, for Dora, combining money and beauty, was the catch of that season, or any other. But they would live.

Meanwhile, as her mother watched with lips pressed flat, Dora turned to me and said, "Mr. Berlin."

"Yes, Miss Jessup?"

"Would you care to attend a concert with me? Or perhaps see a play? You see, we're in town only until May. If we wish to improve our acquaintance, we must set about doing so."

We improved our acquaintance.

Thus it was from a mess of broken pottery—the 1913 Armory Show—that I came away with the substance of my whole life since.

Merci, M. Picasso!

My Mad Russian: Three Tales

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