

Peggy Guggenheim Visits Picasso's Bathroom

by Sean Lovelace

Eggplant. Cur. Lump of Gouda. Doorknob. A large rosy oval with a coral fringe and then a reddish speckled border and a thin dusting of coralline, another selvage fading into lotioned whiteness. Nectarine pit. Blob.

The Guggenheim nose.

She wanted to look away, to leave the mirror, the bathroom, stroll past the artist and his two models (both naked, fat, messy-headed and glowing with insouciance) without eye contact and then call a taxi for the ride over to Boulogne-Billancourt, to a garage behind a country house, the residence of a man recommended by her American contacts, a draftsman who'd been loyal to a habit and run out of money and would sell anything at any price—at her price, which would be reasonable but clearly unfair. She would then visit three further *arrondissements*, *two sculptors and collector with a genius for oversized still lifes*. *She would offer cash, show a wad of colorful bills; would be sure to drop the word Germany into any negotiations. She would close the deal, once again; she would stumble upon the finest Cubist Braque in Paris and get it for cheap and spend the rest of the evening sitting cross-legged on a Persian rug and sipping dry champagne while staring into the heart of the painting, clearly, clearly, clearly happy.*

But she didn't look away.

Lips tight and symmetrical. Lipstick arterial red, as the nails. Hair starchy and brown, swooping back, a dense halo-cloud, tint of gloss. An expression of comfortable resignation, pupils shimmering, eyes slightly aglaze, the results of three breakfast mimosas and the artist standing one wall away.

The goddamn artist. This was her fourth inquiry, first visit. Her eyes fluttered shut as she leaned against the cold porcelain. She

pressed her fingertips into her eyelids and watched the tracers weave and dodge in the glittering dark and she was outside *this* world, inside *her* world, drawn into its simple core, and she was startled by the ease of her acceptance, by the way she slid into darkness, its warm embrace.

She would break away from the mirror. She would open the door. He wouldn't glance up from the models. He would be asking their opinion of a large triangular canvas that leaned against the wall. (He hadn't asked hers.)

"I buy a painting a day," she would say, loudly.

He would turn, squint at something above her head. "So I've heard. We've all heard." A nod to a glass wall clock, its hands a feather and a silver spoon. "You had better get started."

"I have an inheritance."

"I don't want your inheritance."

"I want to buy a painting," she would say, tacking to the center.

"You bore me, Miss. Guggenheim. Tell me one thing interesting about yourself."

She would blink, sensing an opportunity. "My father died on the Titanic."

He would turn away. "Pick up a newspaper, Miss Guggenheim. Death is no longer interesting."

She would look to the floor, grind and crinkle the toe of her shoe into the wood grain, and let silence fill the air.

She would say, "And the Nazis, when they are reading our newspapers . . ."

He would stop; turn slowly, lowering a brush he'd been biting the end of. It would be the first time she'd truly had his attention and she would pause for several minutes, listening to the faint buzzing of her inner ear. Finally, she would say, "What will they think of your paintings?"

He would smile, directly at her nose. "What will they think of you?"

Portobello. Wet sock. Fireball smoke cloud. Waxes and liners and moisturizers and creams and glosses and surgery in the 1920s

manner—unpracticed, inexact, more scientific experimentation than cosmetic routine. Dirt clod.

She opened her eyes but didn't look away from the mirror. Her head swam and she tilted against the sink and rummaged a pint of scotch from her purse and took three long draws and squinted into her face and thought about throwing the bottle into her face. Instead she slumped to the floor, the tiles comforting against the leg's pale skin, the wall solid against her head. She listened to her hair crackle as she leaned back, so alone, within herself. She thought of childhood and necessary hidings and knees pulled up to chin. The dregs of the scotch she swallowed; then knelt forward on the broken tiles and wedged the bottle beneath the bidet, into the shadows.

A door slammed and someone entered the apartment, a male voice, talking loudly. More doors slamming, laughter, a cough, a sound like coins rolling across the floor. They hadn't even checked on her, she told herself; they're probably having a party. A plane buzzed overhead, and her mind went off to some sunny day in Central Park, clouds glinting off a dark green pond, one of her nurses shaking her, shaking her shoulders, for grasping the fluffy top off a cattail—one of her nurses, the tall one who threatened daily to cut out her tongue.

Fuck the Germans, she thought.

Gripping the edge of the sink and pulling herself up, she looked again to the mirror, straightened her hair, the edge of her blouse, turned to the doorknob, her hand missing once and then clamping hold.

Fuck the Germans and fuck Picasso.

She stepped into silence. The paintings gazed at her, tall, silent faces, curves and glow, orbs and angles, and she had an impulse to take one, the large blue and yellow one, right there and then. But she didn't. She let go the doorknob and stepped into the center of the room.

"Hello?" she called out.

Silence. Dust motes spun in the wide light of the studio.

“Hello?” she whispered. She frowned at the ceiling, a skylight of glass, the murmur of pigeons. Her feet ached in her tight shoes. She wrapped her purse tight against her hip, bandolier-style, the strap digging into her shoulder, her breasts. A dull thudding; dust from the ceiling. A distant siren. She listened to the pigeons, scraping, cooing, cooing...She went to look for the artist.

