(First published in: *Boulevard* No. 67, Vol 23, No. 1)

A Woman Who Touches Fame

by Douglas Unger

The woman reached out her fingertips—long, shapely fingers unadorned by rings, nails freshly lacquered in deep fuchsia pink—and brushed them over the coarse plaster surface of a leg of the famous sculpture by Picasso titled *Man With A Sheep.* It was one of two copies of the masterpiece of a crude peasant figure clutching in his arms a crying lamb. The mouth of the lamb was shaped into a full-throated bleating, tongue stuck out in terror. Critics wrote about the work as a metaphor of salvation, of Christian humanity. After World War II, the bronze original was installed in a plaza in Paris as a celebration of peace.

To the man watching, the sculpture seemed a monstrous thing, twice human size. The eyes of the peasant figure bulged grotesquely and were yellowish from lacquer—bugged out eyes set into a barely fleshed out skull, the facial expression of the peasant as if focused only on slaughter. He imagined the original must have been created with violent spatula slaps of clay, like rough scales, to create a reptilian texture, something alien and inhuman. Critics saw what they wanted to see, he thought, and so often what they wrote had little to do with the artist's intentions.

As the man saw the woman reaching out her hand to touch the sculpture, he felt a sick whirling sensation just below his diaphragm. She would never change. She was a woman who had never respected boundaries or rules. And he couldn't just stand by again and wait for what would happen next. So he turned and fled the main exhibition hall, going out through a smaller side space featuring surrealist paintings—Dalí and Tanguey—avoiding having to pass by Picasso's disturbing masterpiece in black and white surrounded by armed guards, *Guernica*, that starkly horrifying memorial of mass murder which would only depress him more. Though he moved quickly, he went unnoticed. He had become a man able to come and go without too many people noticing.

In the main exhibition hall, the woman's hand was now on the statue's thigh, working its way up level with her eyes, unselfconsciously absorbing the feel of the rough texture right there in front of everybody—

milling tourists, tour guides, groups of uniformed grade school students crowding around the commanding voices of their teachers. At either end of the long narrow hall, two guards—both dark-haired girls in blue blazers, ruffled white blouses, conservative skirts—leaned against the walls, looking bored. They didn't yet see the forbidden liberty, or desecration, this woman was in the process of committing.

It was a summer afternoon, balmy inside the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. Gradually, then all at once, people grew quiet in the main Picasso hall. Even those far away, on the other side of the big space, sensed something. They turned from paintings, most from Picasso's cubist period— those broken-up female figures in shades of blue green. People watched as the woman's other hand reached out, both hands now aggressively feeling up the leg of that seemingly untouchable masterpiece. She closed her eyes and held her breath. She concentrated as in meditation or a trance, absorbing all possible sensation through those boldly suggestive, sexual hands. It was shocking, what she was doing, the way she was so blatantly feeling up such a priceless work of art. Where were the guards? Was anyone going to stop her?

The man glanced back through the doorway with a quick panic then stepped away again, not able to watch. He should have known better than to listen to her, believe her promises, get talked into accompanying her to yet another museum. The sickness and frustration he felt inside clashed through his brain like drumsets kicked off a stage—he heard toppling cymbals, electric guitars smashing to pieces with shrieking feedback. He was the one who had brought her to Madrid. For the past two months, her friends—once they had been his friends, too—harassed him with phone calls as if he were the one to blame: "She's living like a bag lady now… God only knows what she did with all the money… She's heartbroken… She's lost everything… She was thrown out of her apartment… We can't just leave her like this… If we could only get her out of her own way long enough to help her… Do you want her locked up in a psych ward the rest of her life?… Can't you *do* something?…"

He finally gave in, agreed that a few weeks in Spain he would arrange and pay for would help her get over her latest divorce—her fifth—another ending to one of her many relationships with famous lovers. But why did *he* have to be the one to help her? Why couldn't one of her other ex-husbands or former lovers take charge?

He knew it was his own fault. Her other lovers had turned their backs, quit answering calls; then again, he understood by his agreeing to take her on again that they had never loved her the way he had, so totally, so foolishly. He found himself staring into a grotesque painting by Dalí—a mish-mash of lines and smudges of color creating an apocalyptic landscape suggesting industrial waste that gathered into a stark clarity at the center, where some kind of lewd machine like a twisted steam shovel bore down on a ghoulish woman's figure with her legs spread

wide. The effect was not so much like rape as masturbation. Just so, he thought. He deserved everything he had coming to him.

He waited. He listened. In the nearby Picasso room, he heard a rising, outraged murmuring of voices. Hard clicking footfalls and the sharp soprano cries of the guards echoed over the cool stone floors.

Yesterday, in the elegant Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, just across the broad parklike boulevard from the Prado, this woman actually stepped across a faint white line in the parquet floor, reached out boldly and put her hand—all five fingertips—on the thick layers of glowing color, those obsessive strokes of magnetically radiating yellows, blues and greens of the masterpiece by Van Gogh, *Couples in the Voyer d' Argenson Park at Asnières*. Alarms went off. Big male guards came running before she removed her hand. He stepped in to try and fix things. No matter how much he apologized, using his most formally respectful Spanish to make excuses, the bullying guards escorted them both outside and told them never to return. It was all he could do to talk them out of calling the Madrid police. Then again, no one had ever called the cops on her. She had never been arrested, not once in all her years spent crossing boundaries, committing such selfish indulgences.

No, on the contrary, people sought her out, courted her, desired her, followed her around begging for her attentions, even complete strangers did this, encouraging her in whatever she chose to do so impulsively, no matter how shocking or how disrespectful of others—the more outrageous, the better, as far as they were concerned. And so she had behaved all her life. Whatever she wanted, she took without asking. Wherever she wished to go, she just walked in. She did what she pleased when the desire struck her until she was stopped, a loud warning voice not enough to make her stop. She ignored most voices but her own, playing deaf. And she almost always had an audience, a slavish entourage of friends and admirers, cheering her on in a public scene. No, to stop her, it was like with the Van Gogh in the museum—she had to be grabbed physically by the arms or shoulders by someone in authority, anyone who dared. She had to be turned around forcefully and made to go another way. When this happened, she tipped her head to the side and let loose a derisive laugh, jeering at anyone left behind, after which she would never again look in that direction—it was as if that person no longer existed. She flew off without looking back.

How much longer could she go on this way? Maybe things were changing now, he thought. These days, on first glance, she seemed to be just an older woman of average size and height, dressed in simple, light florid dresses with a gypsy flair, gauzy shawls lifting and falling with her graceful movements like airy wings, common enough for Spain, so it wasn't exactly her appearance, though it once surely was. Most people guessed her age in her 50s now, her hair obviously dyed, tipped to an

ash blond shade covering the gray, but it was clear to anyone with an imagination that she had once been a great beauty. There was an intensity about her, a bottled up strength in her manner and in the way she moved as if made from some natural force. People stepped back, let her have her way. Crowds parted. Security guards, mâitre d's, clerks, hostesses, everyone, so it seemed, took one look at her and let her pass. Years ago, this could be explained in part because she had been so strikingly attractive—especially deferential to her were men in those days. But it was no longer this. She was on her way to dissipation now, her face showing deep lines from so many cigarettes, her middle starting to bulge; her brassy attention-getting manner once so delighting in a young beauty seemed well on its way to becoming distasteful. Still, there was something else about her she preserved—a dangerous quality she projected from underneath that let everyone know this was a person who could cause trouble, who might get loud without warning, a woman who, at the slightest wrong touch or poorly chosen word, could explode. Who in this world liked to risk such loud scenes? Yet most people were attracted to this dangerous quality even as they were stepping aside. They watched. They followed her at a distance. They forgot themselves.

And so they let her pass. She lighted into place at the front of long lines without anyone complaining. At theaters, she flew past ushers without offering tickets. In busy restaurants, she scoped out the best seat, glided breezily in and sat down. She rarely made appointments, reservations, called ahead. She just soared in, went where she pleased, treated as her own whatever she desired. In grocery stores or at produce stands on city streets, she would select the ripest peach and just bite in, letting the juice run with great relish over her lips, turning to a stranger in the aisle or even to the wary produce man to marvel at how delicious it was, saying how much she adored fresh fruit in season. Then how habitual, and how presumptuous, always, that when her own magnetic personality wasn't enough to carry her through it would be whatever current lover was in her life who she expected to take care of fixing things, making up excuses for her, pulling out their wallets when needed to pay not only the outrageous bills but generous extra tips for all her trouble.

Things disappeared—glasses, silverware, ashtrays, salt-and-pepper shakers, candles from tables. Lipsticks, cosmetics, bottles of perfume, display nylons and underwear, all walked out of department stores. It was always little, innoccuous things—odd magazines and obscure books from the most buried racks in bookstores or even from the bookcases of homes she visited. She never took these things hidden in any way, never obviously stole. She behaved as though the object itself were privileged merely by her sudden impulse to possess it, at the same time, it was as though, for the moment, little else but that object existed. She simply carried these things out, held high, in plain view. She would even make a

point of saying loudly how nice whatever it was to the lover she was with, if she was with anyone.

Most people just watched this behavior and let her go by. Others who had observed her doing what she did made their ways to the precise spot in the store where she had shoplifted whatever it was to see for themselves if it might be something they wanted. If any person in authority asked what she was doing, she wouldn't stop, would just continue on her way, her expression breaking into a strangely empowered smile as if directed only inward, as though lost in her thoughts, or in the way of people who are innocently distracted. If an authority finally did catch her by the arm or shoulder in a store or a private home, how she could shrink back with such a dramatic show of revulsion and appear so genuinely, even indignantly surprised—everything about her responses conveying that she was being improperly confronted, rudely, or certainly by error, or as if some gross intruder had dropped down on her like a spider from the dark side of the moon. She would immediately give up the book, the cut glass candy dish—whatever the object was—as if it were something she had only just at that moment discovered in her hands, looking at it in the same way anyone else might regard a turnip that had found its way by mistake into a bag of groceries. Or she would reach into her purse for a messy tangle of money—all smaller bills—holding out the whole handful of them as if she couldn't be bothered with counting. Usually, people just let her keep right on going.

Once, in New York, they were strolling along just off Central Park. On impulse, she ducked in then came hurriedly out of Rumplemeyer's—a posh café and toy shop on Central Park South—carrying a huge stuffed frog as big as a child of ten, almost as big as she was. In about three seconds, she was in and out there with that stuffed frog clutched in her arms right in front of the shocked and immobilized clerks. She laughed—a deep throaty sound all her own—scurrying away across the icy sidewalk, dragging him down the street by the hand with that huge stuffed frog tucked under her other arm. He let her take charge, following her in the adrenaline rush of the clerk just then spotting them and shouting twenty feet behind them. Things always went best when he gave in and took her lead. As she used to say, "With me, Sweetheart, you're the one along for the ride."

She made their escape into the hotel St. Moritz, rushing through the bar then into the lobby and down the stairs into the basement restrooms. On this cold winter evening, the place was deserted. She pushed and pulled all three of them—the frog seemed like another person by then, it was so big—into the large and empty women's room. She locked them into a toilet stall. Once they were in the stall, she threw her arms around him. She hugged him tightly, pulling his body to hers. He was caught between her body and the frog, her body moving hotly against him. She reached her lips to his ear and whispered, breathless, "*Now*."

In carefully groomed parks or private gardens, she often dropped to her knees and pulled out a small red clippers she carried in her purse. While pushing her face into the roses or fragrant beds of petunias or tulips or violets, she inhaled deeply, then she quickly clipped off however many colorful blossoms she wanted, a generous bunch always, proclaiming to anyone within earshot how gorgeous they were before carrying them away. He remembered how she often did this at parties, offending her hosts. Once, she strode through Gracie Mansion like this, clipping flowers out of their vases at a charity fund-raiser put on by the Mayor—the mansion rang out with loud celebrity parties during that administration. She strode along through the swank elite crowd smelling her purloined flowers with obvious joy until, quickly, by compulsion or snap decision or as if they were all used up, she tossed them scattering away. Nobody said a word. People looked on with either envy or amusement. At one point, drink in hand, the Mayor himself followed her lead, picked up a rose bloom and made a show of tossing it over his shoulder with a careless chuckle. Thinking of this now, he could still see the chaotic picture of those crushed red roses in a messy trail down the mansion staircase, and he saw her whole life as a set of carpeted stairs sadly strewn with cigarette burns and wasted blooms, her high-heeled footsteps and perfectly shaped ankles still on their way floating carelessly down them. At Gracie Mansion, of course he wrote out a check for the fundraiser. That took care of things. Still, she behaved—did all these things—as if this were her right. This was what life owed her. Anything she wanted, she deserved. And for most of her life, she had been so privileged by the world.

On the other hand, she gave everything away. She was capable of unclasping an exorbitantly expensive necklace or bracelet, a present from one of her famous lovers, then making a spontaneous gift of it to a woman who admired it at a party, especially to someone she hardly knew. He still cringed inside remembering an amber and gold necklace he had given her, a heavy, antique Persian piece worthy of a museum—two middle-class Americans could have lived for a year on what it cost him, it might have fed half the starving kids in the Congo for a week. He gave it to her with a Valentine, a token of his love. Two weeks later, he saw her drape it around the neck of a weeping, girl-child groupie, at the end of his band's last tour.

That was just her way. She regularly emptied her shelves of valuable objects and cleaned out her closets filled with designer clothes, handing off everything as presents to people both close and unknown, or she sent it all to Goodwill. Money was no different. There was no accounting for all the "loans"—fat bank-rolls she went around awarding to every conceivable acquaintance like unexpected prizes. She used cash or checkbooks. She had never been able to keep a credit card without running it up to its limit within the month. "Darling, don't you know I could cash a check in China?" was one of her frequent sayings. She

would laugh that deep throaty laugh that was only hers, pull out her checkbook and jeweled Cartier fountain pen and prove it was true.

Rarely, late at night, in intimate bedroom conversation, she made the excuse of her deprived childhood, her violent parents. It was hard to believe she had been raised out West, on a failing hard pan ranch, with no money and little education. She was a victim of beatings. She had been locked in closets. A stepfather had sexually abused her after her parents' marriage broke up. These traumatic experiences might explain a great deal. Then again, how many people didn't have troubled childhoods? What made *her* so special? Still, her close friends who knew of her upbringing could only marvel all the more that she had made it as far as she did, into what still could be called "society" or—what served in its place in America—into such intimacy with money and fame.

Something of her secret was in her friends, the fact that she had so many, circles within circles of them, not counting her many lovers, and she kept adding them and dropping them like a sudden shift in the winds. Her friends—the same ones who kept phoning until he finally agreed—took her care on like a kind of community project, their social service, in return for which they used her as wellspring for gossip and conversation, feeding on her peculiar energy, and on her closeness to celebrated people. They spurred her on, encouraged her many outrages. They helped her believe she could get away with anything, and so she had for most of her life. Still, in the end, he thought, how was she anything more than a clown for their circus? Something they could talk about among themselves, keep track of in the crowded photos of the tabloids then cheapen and deride and gossip about meanly behind her back, as they always did, not content enough or whole enough in their boring lives without her kind of scandal and adoration to distract them from themselves. It made him sick to think about this, even years later, after he had gone through no little suffering getting over her even to the extreme of running off to another continent to get away.

In Madrid, after the ugly incident with the Van Gogh, while she was dressing for dinner, he angrily paced up and back in his nice—and separate —room at the Hotel Liabeny that now felt like a cage. He glanced out the window overlooking the Calle de Carmen in the older part of the city. The narrow street was crowded with happy milling pedestrians streaming past the orange and blue uniformed work crews still laboring behind police barriers to clear away piles of rubble. Basque ETA terrorists—separatists gone murderous and insane—just three weeks ago had exploded a car bomb in the shopping district of the Puerta del Sol, just before dawn, when it was almost deserted. He found himself wishing they'd blow one up right now, just wipe it all away, once and for all, himself especially. He was out of his mind with rage and regret, and with self-recrimination that he had been so stupid to put up with this woman. How had he ever loved her in the first place? He must be crazy.

Then again, he thought of the old Spanish proverb, *todos somos locos, los unos a los otros*—everybody's crazy to somebody else.

She *was* crazy, and she was irresistible. She radiated a bold quality that was both sensual and a challenge, like a slap, then there was another, harder slap if she were ignored, and that drew her lovers to her. He recalled when he had lived with her how a stack of clippings from gossip columns and tabloids four-inches thick was proof, all collected in a leather-bound scrapbook that sat open on their coffee table like a trophy for her friends to page through, marveling at the photos of so many famous men, and women, too, and of her own progression over the years perched at their sides and on their arms. How he had hated that scrapbook! He very loudly, drunkenly started calling it *Starfucker on Parade*. That was toward the end, when things turned ugly. But he got her point, why she left it on display, like evidence of her claims right there for any doubters to see. That pitiful worn scrapbook told the story of her life.

She had been married or had had affairs with so many celebrity lovers, starting with a Hollywood film producer from the old studio system when she was barely out of high school. Then it was on to a boozy southern poet who became famous overnight by writing an adventure novel made into a popular film by that same producer. The next and possibly most famous lover was an African-American actor with a deeply resonant voice who must have made two hundred feature films and who had transformed the role of Othello into something like his trademark for a generation. After him, there had been a quick succession of noteworthy others—a Manhattan real estate tycoon on his way up, a leftist political activist later elected to Congress, a fashion designer whose only known heterosexual relationship had been with her. Next were three women—her lipstick lesbian phase—a screen actress who ended up with her own TV show in syndication, their affair all over the supermarket tabloids for a year; then an uncharacteristic foray up to Yale and back dragging a physically very ugly rhinoceros of a world-renowned intellectual behind her through the parties of New York; then she moved in with a notoriously wealthy hotel executive whose elderly husband suffered from Alzheimer's complete with hospital bed and full nursing staff tucked away in the back bedroom like a private intensive care ward in her Park Avenue penthouse where anybody who was anybody in those days dropped by for late night parties after the clubs. She switched back to men then as capriciously as she had turned away from them as lovers—starting off with a coke addict magazine publisher, the wealthiest of them all. That one had led directly to him, the rock musician, and how, years later, he was eating his liver out with rage at his hotel window in Madrid, waiting, as he so often had, for her to costume herself up to her own peculiar standards enough to go out for the evening. How ridiculous that seemed now! No photographers were stalking in the lobby anymore, not for her now, and surely not for him.

He remembered how they met, at a drug-filled party one sunny evening in San Francisco, on the tall-masted schooner *Balaclutha*. It was at a big bash full of famous people gathered to launch her very rich publisher husband's newest magazine. At the time, he was considered one of the best bass guitarists in the business—a master of slap technique—and he had risen to his brief but intense experience with fame in the background of a Heavy Metal band called *Earth Raiders*, known for their big hair and their spectacular pyrotechnic touring shows. They had made it to the top ten with two songs for which he shared credit, "Plutonium Love," and "Wake Up And Scream," classics of their kind—still on the oldies charts earning royalties—before that trend in music crashed and the band disintegrated. Fame left him. Looking back on things, he was glad enough to see her leave before she killed him.

That evening in San Francisco, the band stomped around the boat in big boots and studded gold lamé dusters. They were highly paid features of the scene, living stage props for the publisher's show. They did their usual pushing and shoving rehearsed routine, including their thuggish lead singer tossing a planted shill guest into the bay—what a stupid way to behave, he always thought, grown men like some adolescent gang, everything they did choreographed and stage managed by the producers like the musicians were nothing more than a pack of organ-grinding monkeys. He felt embarrassed whenever he thought about it, and how all he had ever wanted starting out was to play his guitar, be a musician, get paid enough to do little else.

He would never be sure just how she made the first move, but she was suddenly there, beautiful in her mature, centered way, and in her womanly prime—that stunning red dress cut all the way down in back, her dark hair up, her throat alive with diamonds, her voice like a happy chattering music. There was a confident boldness in the way she just took him by the arm, steering them both out of the way of the photographers, ducking with him for cover below the decks. His memory was still overwhelmed by what happened next—just like that, her hands were all over him, reaching deep into him, like rearranging his bones. She kissed him like breathing him back to life. Girls had been easy and everywhere then, but he soon learned how the fucking wasn't nearly worth the hassle he went through getting rid of them. This was different. They spent the rest of the party making love below decks, first under the glowing copper kettles in the galley roped off like a museum display, then in the forecastle they found a big locker like a closet. He had never felt anything like this, never so much on the edge, never so free of anything but desire for this woman as he spread her hips, hard, against the bow.

Why him? He would never be sure. He was just the bass player, the big-haired pro-musician in the background. The little-girl groupies used to list his name third or fourth. Still, she made her decision. She tossed aside her marriage to that genuinely nice even if famously fucked-up billionaire publisher just like that. She dumped her husband and

stuck close to him that same night, all the way into the limousine to the hotel, then every night afterward, she was there, waiting in his bed, and he wanted no one else. Their sensual love was like an infinite forgetting, with peak instants of release that reached far beyond their bodies, followed by that sense of coming to afterwards into a completely revised reality—nothing he had experieced before her could ever compare. They married on tour, in Las Vegas, sneaking off in T-shirts and shorts, eluding the photographers. They found a corny wedding chapel decked out like Graceland and with a minister dressed like Elvis. They exchanged vows like tourists who just walked in off the streets crazily in love.

Their marriage lasted three years—three hard winters in New York—and through two chaotic, disintegrating, drugged-out tours with the band. She stuck with him when the band blew apart. She coached him through a long winter of suicidal depression. Then she finally left him for someone else—a younger man she found more promising, just starting to pursue his fame, at least for a time. And now that, too, had fled away.

He wondered—was it her or was it her lovers always leaving? She was usually the one to make the obvious legal moves. She was always ahead of them, sensing before they did that whatever it was they had together was already gone. At the time they broke up, he thought of her as leaving him. He blamed her, bitterly, for years. His story was that she kicked him out when he was at his most down. She had left him emotionally devastated, wrecked, enraged. Living on rage almost caused him to become another cliché of his peculiar business by drugging himself close to death at the loss of her, which felt so much worse than losing the band.

Gradually, after two rehabs, he came to his senses, got sober, retired on small investments. He removed himself to a more settled life in Europe, in the south of Spain. He married a much younger woman—a Guatemalan girl, the daughter of exiles—who offered him the simple fulfillments of a traditional marriage, with stability and children. He embraced this second chance. He had a family now. They were living comfortably in a modest stone house near Mojácar, in Andalucía, on the only fairly unsettled stretch of coast left on the Spanish Mediterranean. From time to time, he traveled to London, Los Angeles or Madrid, when he was called in by old friends for the occasional studio recording job. He had no further ambitions. He went to Sevilla once a month or so and took classes with craftsmen, tinkering around at building guitars. Climbing down a rocky trail to the warm sea on hot summer afternoons, he considered himself a contented man. He sat on a blanket with his two babies—both chubby, giggling girls—watching his young wife's statuesque hips entering the foaming water. What more could any sane man desire?

Still, on this trip, he had lied to his young wife, taking his guitars with him on pretense that he had been called to Madrid for a last-minute, union fill-in job. Why had he lied? The fact that he had lied struck him with new certainty that he had never really gotten over her—maybe he never would—his only ex-wife. He wasn't sure any of the lovers in her life ever had. He remembered how he used to answer their phone calls late at night, hearing what he used to call their "lost dog" voices. He passed the phone off to her, then he sat listening in a tortured, illogical jealousy to what he understood was her past now, over and done with, still, hearing her side of those long nostalgic conversations with her ex's made him want to start smashing the furniture. Her deep, throaty laughter with them felt like cat claws on his skin. Her dripping terms of endearment—darling this, sweetheart that—forced him out of their apartment, sent him prowling like an angry starving animal through the streets. After a legally convenient divorce—she always made it easy, wished no court fights, cared little for property settlements, and this was no doubt one element of her continuing charms for her former husbands and lovers—he was guilty of numerous phone calls himself, in those days expensive calls from Spain, especially after she married this last husband. Sometimes, late at night, he had dialed her up just to hear her laugh.

Her last husband turned out to be a not-so-famous younger man, younger than she was by twenty-two years—a mere boy she bragged she was, "trying to raise into someone interesting." He cringed at this. He was twelve years younger himself. This new, even more youthful husband she had met in New York—a talented Princeton intellectual slumming in the rock journalism scene. The boy's first book was published, a critically acclaimed essay on pop culture that landed him on talk shows and best-seller lists for two seasons. She filed for divorce and married this boy just as he accepted a prestigious chaired professorship in something called "Cultural Studies" at a big Midwestern university known mainly for its athletic teams. After six years—her longest time with any of her lovers—and his lackluster second book, her friends started telling her this new husband was failing to fulfill his youthful promise. She was the last to voice this conclusion. Her story was that she had grown too bored, so she finally left him, besides which, darling, she never could stand the dull social life at universities, never mind how much she hated most sports. Finally, she just didn't return from one of her frequent trips to New York—that city full of famous people—her most stable home. In his meaner moments, he would say New York was never so much her home as her hunting grounds.

He was mean, more than he needed to be, when her friends had started calling. "How did you think she would end?" he asked. "As far as I'm concerned, she's just another aging whore on the champagne trail."

Then he regretted what he called her, speaking badly of her in any way, something she would never do—like her moral code—about anyone

who had loved her. Still, what *was* it about her? And why him? Why *should* he be the one responsible?

All right, he had to admit they had made love with a nearly mythical power of attraction, in the beginning, it was true. He believed that had faded, as it always did in time, or so the blues numbers said. He was still in some way grateful to her—the way she had once been his champion on the road, keeping him together in mind and body in a lifestyle in which that was nearly impossible to do. At the same time, she was the person the band all counted on to grab up the telephone—she called it "getting on the horn"—and easily make a different kind of party happen, one that did away with the usual groupies, bikers, drug addicts, criminals and low lifes that started hanging around the heavy metal scene, replacing them with what she called "fine minds, the finest people," wherever they went. They started seeing the insides of posh apartments and V.I.P. rooms filled with a different crowd, in which they themselves—a top-ten band, after all, on the covers of magazines — served as mere mid-level curiosities among the famously rich and trendy and talented. In this, she showed her paradoxical mastery of social skills, considering how she lived—she knew all these fancy people, and they knew her, and it was a like a full-time job for her to keep track of them. It was amazing how she took over the corner of a hotel suite in whatever city where they were touring and set it up so efficiently with her many address books, her calendars, her telephone, her pot of coffee, her ashtray, her little note cards she had designed and had printed up then filled with her perfectly flowing Sepenserian handwriting and sent out by the dozens every day via private messengers—he spent a fortune on her messenger services, enough some months that her bills matched the payment on a Ferrari. While he was off working with countless set-ups, rehearsals, managers, attorneys, photographers, or doing whatever with the band, she was "getting on the horn" putting all the rest together for them. "Let me get to my office," she said, lifting off out of their bed around noon. "Sweetheart, I am my own commodity," she said and laughed.

He didn't miss or need that part of their marriage. He had grown to hate it, in fact—her whole social scene, all that trivial talk and noise, the people whose names he could hardly recall coming in and out at all hours, and in all conditions—most especially he detested the lack of any blessed solitude. Still, even now, years later, the residual power of their sex life sometimes woke him up from dreams in which he was with her at that incomparable peak making love only to wake up with a start and find the body of his young wife asleep in his arms. And he understood to the degree that he could still think and say such mean things about his ex-wife that he suffered from an unresolved conflict, and a true paradox—he both didn't love and still loved her, because everything alive has two sides.

She wasn't like a problem he could ever work out, keep trying at, practice at until he succeeded, the way he had learned to stretch six frets from the first position on a bass guitar. When he phoned to invite her on this trip to Spain, he was caught in a moment of pity, or nostalgia, or both at once. Or maybe he was just naïve, thinking only of her fantastically romantic side. He had forgotten she could be so insufferable. This woman who, as she had done again, so often caused him embarrassment and pain. No, he couldn't reason his way through the progressions. And he didn't have to anymore, damnit, he didn't, that had ended years ago. He resigned himself to never knowing why.

He watched out the window of the Hotel Liabeny, the street below growing more crowded as the sun went down—that bustling Spanish hour of commerce arriving before the shops with their colorful window displays closed at nine. The outdoor tables of the cafés were filling with tired tourists from all over Europe and the Americas, a crowd settling in for drinks with their packages and shopping bags. They seemed happy enough, even as, behind them, toward the broad boulevard—as if it were any normal street construction—a large yellow backhoe shovel reached out then plunged into a heap of cobblestones and wreckage with a crash that vibrated all the way up through the hotel window.

He watched the big shovel lifting up, teeth trailing strings and tangles of metal and concrete, the crew standing back as it dumped its load into a waiting truck. The shop windows were new on that side of the street, most of the new sidewalk tiles already laid, only here and there a white splatter of a patch job left to cover over. He remembered reading in the papers three weeks ago about the man who had been killed, the terrorist car bomb going off about five in the morning to cause minimum casualties. The victim was a homeless man, an Israeli citizen, as it turned out, who somehow landed in Madrid years before to become a street person, and who just happened to be drunk and asleep in a doorway when the bomb exploded. He marveled at how efficient the Spanish government had become at cleaning up after these things, rebuilding afterwards, controlling the news and sheltering its tourist trade. It wouldn't be long—a week, two at the most—before no one would be able to tell any horror at all on this street had ever happened.

Later that night, she made an effort to explain herself at dinner. She knew how irritated he was at what she had done. She seemed even a little freshened at his annoyance—like a person can enjoy a bickering comedy. She was dressed in black, orange and earth-toned gauzy drapery, a long skirt, gold jewelry, something like a gypsy affectation her friends must have helped her plan for and buy—plotting with her, he thought—for this trip. All attention fixed on them as they marched out through the lobby. He had to admit to himself that her striking costume

job was working. He felt a memory of the thrill he had known once just having her on his arm.

With all the authentic cuisine of Spain at her disposal, her off-beat choice was a posh Italian place called *Farinelli's*, near the plaza Santa Barbara. She was full of high energy, as if she had pulled off a triumph, not an outrage, in the museum. "Don't you see, darling? The painting is of a couple in love… The man in pale blue wearing the yellow hat offering his hand, the woman in the pink blouse grabbing on for all she's worth?"

She was pleased with herself, celebrating over the elaborate meal which she wasn't eating, preferring to drink wine and smoke cigarette after cigarette as each new plate of five rich courses went barely touched, removed by the courteous, then quizzical, then finally irritated waiter. He couldn't enjoy his food. He white-knuckled his tonic water. "Besides, darling," she continued, "who *hasn't* wanted to do that with a Van Gogh? I mean *touch* a Van Gogh like that? Feel how all that thick paint feels? All those obsessive, tortured pallet-knife strokes… The *texture* is truly *amazing*," she mused. "It was like touching his life."

He didn't say that civilized people don't do such things. He knew better, from long experience. He listened, reminded of how uncomfortable she had made him, sure now that the fire he still kept for her had gone mercifully cold. Also, he didn't inform her that Van Gogh only rarely painted with a pallet knife—he used the squared-off wooden end, the stick part of his brushes, which applied paint strokes more thickly and evenly. It pleased him like a kind of revenge to keep quiet about her misconception. Still, why *did* people let her get away with such things? What made *her* so special?

"Don't take life so *seriously*," she said. "Sweetheart, that was *always* your trouble."

"I'm not the one in trouble here," he said.

"I'm just fine, thank you," she said. "I'm always fine."

He thought he saw her flinch. Maybe not. But at least her air of celebration was momentarily gone. She recovered, blowing smoke into his face. "All right then, I *promise*. I'll be a good girl. We'll do the palaces, the museums, the flamenco and flea market just like you said. I'll be*have*," she said. Then more seriously, looking away, and with a hollowness in her voice that suddenly frightened him, she said softly, "I promise."

They were silent for a long time. All his rage turned to pity. What had happened to that brassy show he remembered? She never would have promised to behave before. Was something else going on? Was she ill? Was it terminal? He wondered, knowing better than to ask—she would never admit to any illness, especially if it were serious. And it was incalculably sad, suddenly, to see her this way—even the smallest flinching at his words. What would happen to her from now on seemed clear to him. Her physical beauty was gone. Her other stimulating qualities were losing their allure. Her friends would abandon her, replace

her with some other exotic bird they anointed, fresh and new, as would all of her lovers. As careless with money as she had been, still carrying on the way she did, she actually might end up caged away in some psych ward. Without further rescue, she really could become one of those oddly striking old bag ladies pushing her stolen shopping cart down a street, muttering to herself, lost, sadly, in her glamorous memories.

Or maybe not. Her luck just might hold. After all, she possessed a talent exceedingly rare in this world—she could make the small seem great and the great greater. She was still alive with this talent, it still shone from within her being like the mysterious quality of a work of art. Who knew but that this was the reason she felt such an obsessive compulsion to touch works of art she was drawn to, the same way she had always needed to touch so directly the lives of artistic and talented people—as though by this rare intimacy to receive in turn that quality from them and so recharge that art that was all her own. Who knew but this very week, in Madrid, she could find herself sitting at an elegant outdoor table under the trees—at the Café Gijón, say, on the parklike median of the Paseo Recoletos. Some elderly gentleman might catch her eye and she his—a vacationing European who had lived too long past his fame, who was just at that moment in need of a resuscitation back to life in her expert hands. As she always had, she would make the first move. She would pick up her double espresso, boldly join him at his table, begin their conversation. She would admire him. She would make him laugh. She would accompany him back to his hotel. For them both, this might begin their most joyous possible ending. He imagined a palace with a thousand windows on a green forested hill overlooking sunny villages and alpine lakes, a gold-plated telephone next to her bed. How ridiculous, he thought—this fantasy to feel less pity for her condition. No matter how hard he tried to imagine any comfortable ending for her, he knew this was unlikely. Like most works of art that survived past their era, she would be abandoned, at least for a time, neglected until someone rescued her, or remembered.

"You always said that once you left, you never come back," he said.

"That's right. Once I've done with it, I'm done."

"Why me?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

"All you ever needed was someone to believe in you," she said. "That's what they *all* need. That's what I *do* for them. Just when they're ready to quit believing in themselves, I step in. You've quit believing in yourself."

"Bullshit. I'm happy. I'm happy the way I am."

"You used to make music, *loud* music," she said.

"I like the kind of music I'm making now much better," he said.

"With you, I always thought I might come back. You're the only one. It might not seem like it, the way we lived, you know, in hotels and all over the place, and all that tacky leather in the crowd, but you're the one who I think of most when I need rest. You were always so quiet

inside, so solid, so *there*. Maybe I just need rest. I'm not fooling myself, I know you've gone out and made a new life. Even so, you still need what I have to give. Look at yourself! And I… I still have a lot to give, you know," she said.

She waited for his answer. His mouth went suddenly dry, puckered up with the sour aftertaste of his tonic water. He said nothing, shifting uneasily in his chair. He stared off at the brick wall he was facing—hanging on it was an arrangement of black and white photographs of the opera houses of the world.

"Well then, fuck you," she said softly. She reached in her purse and pulled out the pair of small red clippers she carried. They fit perfectly into her hand, fire extinguisher red, just the sharp jaws sticking out past her thumb. She reached for the flowers on the table—an artful arrangement of deep purple heliotropes. He watched, uncertain, uncomfortable, as she clipped off a small handful of blossoms and leaves. He aimed a look of disapproval at her as she fastened them in her hair. The effect was a touch exotic, and comic, just what she intended. She put her fingers at the edges of her mouth and stretched her lips into a grotesque clownish frown aimed right back at him. He couldn't help but laugh. She smiled in celebration, warmly and lovingly across the table.

"Jesus… I have to have a talk with this new wife of yours," she said. "Whatever made you so *dull* all of a sudden? Whatever happened to your sense of *fun*?"

The next day, in the exhibition hall at the Reina Sofia, she laid her cheek against the yellowed plaster waist of Picasso's statue of the crude shepherd, her eyes still closed. She had blackest brown, hooded eyes, with slightly oriental lines. By now, one of her arms was feeling its way completely around the trunk of the body of the statue, like preparing to hold a dance partner closely. The other arm reached higher. Her fingers stroked the bleating lamb between the sharp calcium fragments of its ears.

The museum guards were just moving into action—two dark-haired Spanish girls in their blue blazers and modest skirts who looked like university students working summer jobs. Their pump heels clicked loudly across the stone floor, marching rapidly toward the sculpture from different regions of the hall as they called out in their scandalized voices, "*¡Señora! ¡Señora! ¡Por favor!…*"

The pantomime that ensued suggested incomprehension. They saw she was an American, so the guards quickly switched to English, scolding her, "*Not to touch! Do not touch the art!"*

Before either girl actually had to grab the woman, she was disengaging herself from the statue, nodding her head with a sleepy, contented expression, playing innocent now that she had had her way.

She started with bad attempts at Spanish, "*Ah! Perdone… Sí… Perdone…"*

She stepped back as if overwhelmed by the power of the sculpture. She took her place passively between both guards, still looking up at it as if what had happened were due to an extreme form of appreciation, pointing toward it, her fingertip only a hair away from touching it once more. One of the guards started to grab at the finger then stopped—this woman was nodding her head too quickly, and she projected too much manic energy as she said, "*Forte! Picasso muy forte! Forte! Muy forte!"*

The guards exchanged uneasy glances as if deciding what to do—should they let this go, just one more crude American? Or should she be escorted at once out of the museum? This was the direction their decision seemed to be heading in just as a well-dressed man stepped toward them and interceded—a man in a light linen sports jacket, designer polo shirt, pressed slacks, expensive shoes, all European, though he obviously wasn't. There was something self-consciously artsy in the way he wore his long graying hair in a pony tail fastened with an elegantly carved silver clasp. He looked like just what he was—an aging, passé rock musician now living in Europe. More important than his appearance, he spoke a very cultivated and articulate Spanish, hard to say exactly with what accent, Latin American, maybe, and with nothing of the loud, openly rounded vowels and throaty r's of so many comical sounding American tourists. He knew this American woman—at least she looked toward him with relieved expectancy at his approach—so he was able to distract the guards' attention as she stepped off from between the two girls then casually strolled away as if to continue normally around the hall to see the paintings.

This man was charming to the young girls. He had a way about him, and a tone in his voice, they vaguely recalled. "Pardon me, this is my fault," he said with sincere embarrassment in his near perfect Spanish. "The woman… she can get like this," he said. "She's not well. She's my ex-wife, so I know. Please forgive me." He said this with such sadness that they actually felt sorry for him. "She'll be all right now," he said. "We're going soon anyway. Let me assure you, my promise to you and the staff, that I'll take care of her. This won't happen again."

After a few protests from one of the guards—the older one, though they could have been fraternal twins, a matched pair of Spanish dancers—the incident was settled by repeated assurances and apologies from the man with the gray pony tail, this man who was taking charge now, who was accepting his masculine responsibility with all the proper decorum and graces of a Spanish gentleman. Still, the guards thought it best to follow a few paces behind the couple as they continued around the exhibition.

The girls watched them closely. At times, this man had to put his hand strongly on the woman's arm, as if holding her back from stepping too near or from reaching out toward a masterpiece. There was a threat

in this. And she didn't like this, not at all—it was clear how they were both struggling. Still, the couple hardly said much to each other but a few whispers, harsh sounds which seemed to be about anything except the art they were seeing. And they didn't stay inside the exhibition halls very long.

The two girls were very relieved when they saw these Americans—what an odd, shocking woman—finally leave the exhibition halls and move off toward the inner courtyard of the museum. The guards trailed the strange couple until they could see they were all the way outdoors and well into the garden. They watched the woman light a long slim cigarette then rummage for something else in her purse. They saw a glint of something red. She fit this in her hand. The man started to argue with her but she turned her back on him, smiling, as if only to herself—later, one of the girls said it was the way pregnant women smiled, happy at their inner secrets.

The man threw up his hands and followed. The guards watched the couple move off out of view, still acting out their strained pantomime of a marriage dance. This strange American couple disappeared in the direction of the stone benches and central fountain of the gardens of what used to be the old convent. The girls thought they could breathe easily then, relax their tension. They strolled, leisurely, back toward the exhibition halls, counting off the hours until their shifts ended, when their boyfriends would be waiting for them. Behind them, the lush gardens of the Reina Sofía were in full summer season, resplendent with flowers.

As the couple vanished out of view, the guards, these girls, didn't know the man was telling the woman he was finished, that it was truly over now, once and for all. No one could be expected to put up with what she was doing, with how she chose to live. His plan was to take her back to the hotel and leave her there then get in his car and take off immediately for the coast. He would either see to it her ticket was changed and she could fly back to New York in the morning, or she could finish out her two weeks on her own, damn and to hell with who paid the bills. Well then, OK—he'd leave the room charges paid at the desk for the planned length of her stay, and some pocket money. He felt he owed her that much, though he could never explain to himself just why. That didn't matter anymore. In a few humiliating hours—if he could stand her even that much longer—he would drop her like a bad habit and make his escape.

At one point in his list of complaints, during an enraged pause, she stopped clipping flowers. She stood forcefully up and grabbed his pony tail. She pulled his head down toward her, reaching her lips up to his ear like a kiss. "It was like a runaway horse. Frightening. But I stayed on, didn't I? Like I always did with you," she said. Then in her most excited, hotly sensual whisper, "You'll always love me, always," she said. "And

you'll always run away." She let him go then, laughing with her brassy music—that sleek, arrogant music he would miss for the rest of his life.