

The Burning of Deyrolle or Losing Hugh

by M. Petrovac

The Prada clad sycophants sip espresso under the Spring green awnings of Les Deux Magots. On the rue de Rivoli Sophia Coppola is being trailed by The New York Times Magazine while somewhere at Maison du Chocolat David Sedaris is buying Hugh a box of rum raisin truffles. An arrondissement away a plaque reads that during WWII 165 Jewish school children were lead to their deaths. An average day in Paris, if you know what you are looking at. Or just know. If you do not pray at the temple of Colette and have just reached for your Wikipedia this story may or may not interest you. But it is for those without famous friends or houses in three major cities that I have decided that Deyrolle, the hothouse of the cognoscenti, the bastion of the urbane and those that sleep with them, must burn. Immediately. And to the ground.

Deyrolle, Deyrolle how do I loath you? Let me count the ways. If ever there was an establishment that causes as much curiosity as disdain it is Deyrolle. Deyrolle, since 1831, the quaint townhouse on rue du Bac that houses natural objet d'arts, entomology prints, framed Lepidoptera and the crème of pretentiousness: taxidermy animals. Not just road kill stuffed by hobbyists but museum quality zebras, tigers and revolting enough a Shetland pony. Children are strongly cautioned when passing the kitten tableaux. Deyrolle, established by the granddaughter of Jean—Babstiste Deyrolle, to house his scientific debris became a Paris fixture. A museum masquerading as a store and when casually mentioned in HG or when it was discovered that David Sedaris was an aficionado the flood gates were flung open. If you thought crossing that red rope at Le Baines Douche was hard then try explaining that \$4000 stuffed pigmy goat at Charles de Gaulle.

Obscure to those who revolved outside the artsy crowd, Deyrolle, along with Wallace Nutting, Farrow & Ball and Magnolia Bakery, became a sort of pass phrase for the snobs that trolled the Marais or ex-pat New Yorkers sharing a flat near Saint Sulpice. Most Paris tourist maps now have a star that marks the spot and tour buses drive by daily. It is not that I don't find the place charming, I do. It was typical for late nineteenth century Europeans to be obsessed with Africa or the Pyramids or whatever exploits were stolen from their resting places by Deyrolle or Jean-François Champollion in the name of science. I just find that being quirky for quirkiness sake intolerable. And the trend elitists, both male and female, that shop at Deyrolle, or the stars that mention it or the writers that collect it should consider what is about to befall them. It is those people that make places like Paris or London so bad for the rest of us. Hording secret places or escalating them to such a degree that if, like I do, know of Deyrolle, they automatically assume I must have read about it somewhere. God forbid my tastes were not cultivated by a blurb in Time Out Magazine.

In the course of my twenty odd years of living in New York City, you would think that it goes without saying that if one chooses to live in the center of art and commerce one would have a measure of taste and individuality to appreciate it. My other discerning friends from San Francisco and Chicago made their moves to New York as well and we all spent time gorging on the possibilities. Most of us worked our way through meaningless support jobs until our careers were solid. One was murdered days before his photography was seen in Interview Magazine. One was in the music industry and I labored for Hollywood East. Some of my circle had quasi famous lovers; people only the elite of the media elite would know. One friend, Hugh, hit the jack pot by pairing up with the then unknown author, David Sedaris. *Who?* Yes, for all of Sedaris's success, there is still a percentage of the general population who hasn't a clue who he is. I, unfortunately, am not in that percentile.

Hugh and I had a nice, rather close friendship. We met when we were in our early twenties one Summer at Northwestern University, reuniting a few years later in New York City. We shared the same sensibilities: the chipped patina on a carved door, the curve of a flea market lamp, the lips of Mick Jagger, fine lines on an Aubrey Beardsley print, the simplicity of a fresh croissant or the bite of good Mexican food. Hugh was a cook, a painter and a purveyor of country music divas I found almost embarrassing but somehow with Hugh it always worked. I met his parents and visited him in France. We spent time in South Beach. I hired him on my jobs and he baked me flourless chocolate cakes. He was my friend in art and beauty. He taught me how to paint a perfect dogwood blossom and told me of his life as an ambassador's son in the Congo of the 1970s. There, he had a monkey named Maxwell. He was bourgeois but bohemian. Smart and talented. I never would have guessed that what held us together would eventually drive us apart.

When Hugh met David all that I represented to him was transferred to David and David's family. Suddenly, all that David liked Hugh liked. I sat speechless at dinner parties while Hugh and his new entourage discussed their projects or flea market finds. David began to acquire taxidermy dioramas of puppies walking down Victorian streets. Hugh gave David a stuffed fruit bat that they hung above their futon bed while my Christmas gifts were ignored. I was not invited to help restore their new apartment in SoHo. When I met David's sister Amy (at a rare lunch with the three of them) she sat at the opposite end of the table and said nothing to me. She hardly looked up and never once looked me in the eye. Though she remained engaged with the boys I saw the power shift and my place in Hugh's life end. As the Sedaris siblings became more famous I became less and less a fixture in Hugh's world. I wasn't famous enough or dare I say gay enough to maintain any association. One

memorable occasion, at one of Hugh's popular Christmas parties, David's sister brought a young man with her: a guy named Grape. Amy waltzed in with Grape wearing an old fashioned ice skating skirt. She was the life of the party until she saw myself and two other female friends of Hugh's. She clammed up and sat reserved for the rest of the night, or, at least until I left. Blood was thicker than water and unless I had a fruit name I didn't stand a chance as the bastard child of "The Talent Family". When Hugh and David actually moved to France that was it.

As Hugh moved forward into David's spotlight and even further across the Atlantic we hardly spoke. Our lives separated. I still have the same interests and see and do things I consider happy and interesting though my interests or jobs or trinkets were always squashed by Hugh. Anything I said or did Hugh insisted on knowing or experienced. He turned one-upmanship into an Olympic sport. Then Hugh began to pretend he wasn't happy, ("Our flat in London is so empty. Just mattresses on the floor.") just to make our lives seem flush. But, to me it seemed my life wasn't cool enough or NPR-ish enough or French enough for him. I lived in New York City but to this new Hugh I might as well be living in Coffeyville, Kansas. After I was diagnosed with a neurological disorder Hugh basically stopped any meaningful correspondence. After almost a three year silence I received a post card from him from Tokyo. He prattled on about learning Japanese and what foods he and David were eating. There was no inquiry on my health. No questions. No love. There will never be another Hugh for me; the young, handsome Hugh I had loved at Northwestern was gone.

The lock-me-tight life of Hugh and David I now only glimpse in the pages of The New Yorker. I keep mum if strangers gush over David's work in a bookstore. Wince if I discover the identities of guests to their home in Normandy and sighed when I was invited at a time Hugh knew I couldn't possibly travel. Along with so many others at the time of my diagnosis I had written Hugh off for good. People who

have no room for the sadness of others in their charmed, silly lives.

I assembled a rag tag team of misfits to carry out my plan: a dealer, a forger, a sculptor and a crook. The symbol of my grief would go down in flames. The disaster splashed across newspapers around the globe. Wallpaper Magazine would print a five page obituary to the bastion of zoological bric-a-brac. The Museum of Natural History would display the burned out carcass of the taxidermy baby elephant. In short, a member of La Société Protectrice des Animaux gained access to Deyrolle one night with a key stolen from an employee. The wiring was rigged, the petrol was poured. My saboteurs blocked the streets with stalled cars and my mission was complete.

Selfish? Perhaps. Pretentious? Hmm. Yes, again. With Deyrolle a blackened carbonized hulk behind me I am able to pursue my own eccentricities without criticism or snobbish indifference. I have not returned to Paris since that time and have not been linked to the event. Besides, who would think a girl like me would even know about such a place? I am nothing to those who mourn Deyrolle because I am not like them in many, many ways.

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NOTE: Some names, addresses and dates were changed for privacy.

NOTE: This story was written before the actual fire at Deyrolle in Paris. This story and the real event, though freakishly similar, are strictly coincidental..

