

Transcription of Audio: Meeting with Miss Jewel Eppinette

by Nonnie Augustine

No one has touched me for a long, long time and I believe that is why I am dying. This is a notion that is new to me but it has persisted over the last few weeks and I believe I finally have apprehended the truth. There was a time, I remember all too well, when I might indeed have died from being touched too often, too deeply, and too profoundly but the dangers present at that time in my life have certainly been gone for some time. My insides down there and my outsides all over my body are becoming numb and will, I feel sure, soon cease to carry on with their intended purposes. The skin on my arms and shoulders has not been kissed or caressed and my navel has continued without attention or admiration for a fair number of years. I do touch myself and of course my dear cat will sit on my lap but I do not see that these touches are adequate. Neither am I speaking of the tactile attentions of doctors, servants and so forth. They are in my pay. No, I am dying because there is no longer anyone who desires, with passion or even warm affection, to touch me. I have lost this pleasurable experience, and, yes, I believe its loss is what is killing me. Maybe I should consider an encounter with one of those Burmese pythons that are overwhelming our Everglades and let his intense squeezing kill me quickly. I wonder how I might obtain one?

Dr. Lyle has determined that heart failure is in progress within me and I agree with him. My heart *is* failing, but as I've explained to him as emphatically as I could during our brief consultations I do not believe he perceives the true nature of this unfortunate

circumstance. Hearts wither when we require nothing from them other than the maintenance chores they perform for us as a matter of course. For a heart to remain in good health it needs to be exercised, challenged, torn, pulled this way and that and above all enlivened by engagement with robust humanity. I follow my doctor's instruction in every possible way but I continue to weaken and have come to rely on my own assessment of my dilemma. Although I am often alone, when I am in the company of others they are invariably unwilling or unable to penetrate this sphere that surrounds me. There is a barrier that neither they nor I can see but I feel it and I believe they do, too.

For some time now all I've encountered in my life is respectful or indifferent behavior. I am thankful that I at least have memories of lusty men who used me as thoroughly as I did them and who felt free to express themselves with uncensored speech. I also cherish those women who laughed and cried with me and who revealed themselves in conversations on thousands of occasions. I remember people who sought to know me and that is a fine thing indeed and one which I failed to appreciate until fairly recently. I can't name anyone now who I think of as more than a polite acquaintance. No one has raised their voice to me or employed rude language in years! It is no wonder that I am becoming deaf. Hearing is a sense that needs to be stimulated by vigorous conversation between people who want to damn well be heard. I have given up alcohol, but I might consider going to a tavern in order to hear the boisterous, belligerent and morose or the gleeful, silly, and inane talk from people who have lost their inhibitions and damaged their judgement through over-indulgence in consumption of their preferred drink.

My vision at least continues to serve me well, I feel sure, because of my collection. As you assuredly already know, my parents were friends of Georgette and René Magritte and were excited about the artistic direction he was pursuing during the time they were all together in France. Monsieur René painted me dozens of times and

my parents then bought the paintings which of course was of great benefit to both my family, as it later developed, and to the Magritte household at the time. I continue to spend some part of every day with these images and this study has kept my vision and I believe, my mind sharp.

Here, in this painting, as you can see with your no doubt excellent young eyes, I am depicted as a pretty seven year old girl, dressed typically for a well-off child in 1927, but I ride my hobby horse on bare floorboards. The room, with its large windows, was unlike any room I had ever been in whether in Paris or anywhere else I traveled with my parents. The views were so strange to me-- stormy seas, dark streets lit by street lamps that have eyes peering from them, rolling hills and meadows seen from a very high perspective as if my room were in a tower. Or are all those scenes paintings within the painting, I wondered. (I was a precocious child.) And who are those formally dressed men who stand around me but steadfastly ignore me and my wooden pony? This was the first painting with my image in it that I beheld of Monsieur René's and it frightened me. Madame Georgette smiled and told me that her husband (who was in Germany for an exhibition at the time) was a man who adored mystery and that he also adored me and would not want to make me cry. She said she would ask him to talk to me about the painting when he returned, but we never did have that talk.

However the suited gentlemen in the painting did talk to me and they explained to me how I could climb out of the window onto the street scene. I did this four times, and although the sidewalk was always empty of people, I did hear voices from inside the various buildings, dogs barking, and cats yowling. My walks in the painting were always at night, of course, so I never did hear any birds. Even though I was very young, I intuited that this was something I had better not share with my parents. Then, after my last exploration of this kind, my father happened to walk into the library, where the painting hung on the north wall, and saw me climbing down the

library stepladder. Daddy was upset because he found me out of bed late at night, my skin felt icy to his touch, and there was dirt on my slippers. My father didn't often get angry with me and every time he did I would cry, which is how I responded to his anger that night, but unfortunately I pointed to the painting and said it was not my fault, it was the fault of the gentlemen in the painting. My parents removed the oil and kept me from seeing the other paintings in which I appeared until I was in my teens. When they hung the Magrittes in this house, which they built in 1934, I discovered I had lost the ability to visit "my" street or converse with those mysterious men. I believe that loss was due to my having gone through puberty. Even when I could only enjoy the paintings in an ordinary way, they have been a wonder to me and, as I may have said, I've continued to ponder each of these canvasses every day even now, well into my 94th year. I have set myself the task of finding a good home for them and you will have to persuade me that you will take care of them, ensure that they will never leave the South, and make them freely available to others, especially children under the age of fourteen.

Please, have another piece of my cook's lemon cake. I envy your apparent enjoyment of it. I have lost my sense of taste and my sense of smell--losses which are abominable to me and I am glad I didn't know these senses would disappear with prolonged survival or I might have surrendered to death a few years back. I do not wish to linger on in life much longer, however. I have several more curators to interview and once I have made a decision and seen that my collection has found its proper home I will depart this diminished life of mine in a fashion of my own choosing. I do miss being touched and the feeling of another's warm flesh under my fingertips, perhaps more than I regret any other loss that has come with advanced age, but I suppose finding someone to furnish me with a Burmese python is rather eccentric, even for me. Once the python squeezed me to death with his nasty, forceful pressure I would be gone and unable to protect my cat, or much less cherished neighbors, as I'm sure a python could slither over my walls, from his or her--the females are

larger I've read--aggression. I will abandon that line of thinking altogether.

