

# Peggy Guggenheim Visits an Operation

*by* Sean Lovelace

I sit outside the door and wait for John but I'm not stupid. I know all about operations, the steps. I know all about the doctors—generalist, anesthetist, surgeon—I've seen their type before: scientists. I know all about *progress*, its absurdity. John instructs me, says to me, "Look at our century. What we've done with our thinking. It was impossible to kill like this, on this scale—think of it! Men went to war on horseback, swords, rifles, but now, now we kill millions, millions! With artillery, tanks, machine guns, gas, seeping into the trenches, finding us."

*It was local anesthesia; she was awake, dawning into pain. Agony's confetti, bolts of spider-filament, cost of blinking, probing electricity, crescendo of feeling. It was local and so she was able to say, Stop. Able to say, You're killing me, you bastard quack! Able to think, Am I the first patient to ever halt her own surgery? Still, she paid half his ludicrously high bill. And she kept her nose, half done.*

John is in there, in our bedroom, on the bed asleep but not truly asleep, with us, yes, but somewhere distant, somewhere dark, the rustling thicket of anesthesia. I'm sitting outside, dazed to see the hallway, but it was I who held his hand as he went under, and I who let it go, to sit outside. I fill my lungs with the cool air rising off the tiled floor, and I count the tiles, forty-seven, and you know how the mind wafts away while counting, and it hits me suddenly, like a thrown vase against my chest, *The only man who really loved me is in that room*, but I don't open the door. I sit quietly, lifting my head and listening. Surgical tools clink together, a muffled cough, the doctors mumble into their masks—the doctors, led here.

*All that flat beeping. It sounded red. She was horizontal, legs in stirrups. She was asleep but her ears became organs of swallow. Ingestion. She could hear the widening. The suction. In the empty minutes she saw herself walking cobblestone alleys, searching an address. The curette made a scraping sound. Clack of smallness, no solid place, chair-propped door, flue leaking steam.*

John is rarely sober and likes to hear his voice when drinking and I listen. I've come to see him as my Virgil—he shows me things: literature, culture, politics.

“None of this is over,” he shouts, “nothing solved!”

He thinks we are heading for another war. Act two of this dark tragedy, and then curtains. He says, “The War to End All Wars—ha! A slogan for fools.” I don't reply. I prefer to listen, silently. To me, his words are water and I'm a sponge. I like to fill my mind, to overfill, waves over sand, wiping away.

He taught me how to locate clams, off the south of France. You wade slowly, whisking your feet along, probing with your toes, and then you feel it—a cool, ridged dome—the clamshell. John told me how to steam them—something about garlic, I can't remember.

Still I listen.

*Pitch of baby's cry, a holding. Images of a head held in warm hands; of a head crushed. A squeezing. How can she want it to live? How can she want it to die? First grip struggling, owl-in-the-throat, insomnia, hypersomnia, loss of appetite. Thrumming daylight, sigh of hold-me. Pitch is for the inner ear, a certain tone, attention! A baby cries, a mother cries, a black Laughing inside the Love.*

John is an athlete, when sober, tall and natural and the way he carries himself. He taught me to ride, efficiently, with the horse, saying how man and beast were once akin, a sacred bond, now broken, but could be fused again, with patience, awareness, riding with a halter, no bit or bridle.

“The Galapagos animals aren't frightened,” he told me. “Darwin walked right up to them. We hadn't trapped or clubbed them, or taken their skins, so they welcomed him, or ignored him, no fear.”

And then he showed me horse-jumping, the technique, this without bit or bridle, the five stages: approach, takeoff, the getaway...I forget the others. John rode with me, arms around waist—“look ahead, back flat, lean forward”—but I can't remember all the words, only the feeling.

Stomach in my throat.

Hands gripping, tight.

And now John is in our bedroom, our bed, his infirmary. Sixty-one days ago, in the moors behind Hayford Hall, his horse stumbled into a rabbit hole, and he fell, his wrist fractured. A small break, nothing serious, but it never healed properly. I would see him, staring at his forearm, tightening and releasing his fist, his head cocked in wonder, an athlete questioning his former ally—“How could you turn on me?” And he could no longer handle it, the pain, omnipresent, pulsing, and he drank even more, which is something, truly.

“It's like a brick, a heavy brick,” he said, “affixed to my wrist.”

He desired an operation, the wrist re-broken, anything but the pain.

*Mother kept spitting up this green fluid, almost black, and then tinged with a lighter border of lime peel. She held her hand. Skin dry and hot and bruised. Swatches of black ice. Ground-thumped plum. Jaundice scallop. Looked away to the IV pole, stainless steel, polished stainless steel and she could see herself, long and thin in the drawn reflection, and supposed it was someone's job to polish the IV pole, and they had no cause or cure or treatment for mother, no cure that wouldn't kill her.*

The surgeon swings open the door and avoids my eyes and disappears into the cubbyhole where we keep the telephone. I feel a stirring, a chill rippling through my chest. He seems to speak

quickly, his voice crinkly in my ear, metallic. I sit there re-counting the tiles.

He reenters the room and they exit, together, three of them, standing, a semicircle of starched white coats. Their black shoes cover the tiles, the grouting in-between, so I lift my head, to their stethoscope nooses, pale necks, mouths, phrases falling from their lips.

The anesthesia.

It was his liver, most likely enlarged.

...an inexact science.

Forty-six tiles this time, not forty-seven. Inexact science, all of this counting. I laugh to myself, inside, a vibration, a low hum, a crumbling. Nothing is very funny. The stock market falls, leaders rise, and we count everything, meticulous, our records and tallies and statistics, our progress, and a rabbit kills the only man I really loved. Who loved me.

It is no longer cool in the hallway, but cold, sixty degrees, fifty degrees, I don't know, and I wish these men would melt away, float away, leave my hallway, my house, everything I know about men and their lab coats and their serious black shoes, and nothing is solved, nothing, and I reach for my purse, and the generalist leans down to offer a handkerchief, white, edged with lace, a canary stitched in the corner, and I wave his canary away and dig inside my purse, because I want them all to go, to disappear, far away, so I dig, dig further, for my checkbook—to pay the bill.

