

Peggy Guggenheim Visits her Favorite Question

by Sean Lovelace

Q: "How many husbands have you had, Mrs. Guggenheim?"

A: "D'you mean my own, or other people's?"

There is one privately owned palazzo along the Grand Canal, and only one privately owned gondola left in the entire city. Mine. It spent the morning picking up an American graduate student from the train station at Santa Lucia. She's not here for the city, so dazzling it seems to belong to a better, truer, deeper blue and green planet, but rather to interview me, for her dissertation, something about gender studies and modern art, which I find flattering, and then again frightening: I am a relic, something to see, like my paintings.

She refuses a drink, noting the early hour, but maybe later a vodka martini. I tell her there is no such thing as a vodka martini. She compliments my dogs, but not individually, only as a group, something about their energy. She's pretty; all the young American women are pretty now, and I feel a melting ice of jealousy in my stomach. I should be over that but I'm not. As I discuss the canals and viaducts of Venice, she nods and smiles, but not with her eyes. Her eyes don't smile . . . and so? She is perfectly nice, is what I'm saying.

I mix my drink, my movements practiced over the slender glasses (high art, in my opinion), the crushed ice, and tell her about how my first husband thought preparing a martini was some great life metaphor, the proper portions, the presentation—it's one of the reasons our marriage didn't last. While he drank for philosophical reasons, I drank to get tight.

“Wait, wait, wait, say that again,” she says, fumbling with her purse, a Gucci the color of wet sand. She holds a tape recorder, sleek and black like a packet of French cigarettes.

I don't say it again.

She sets up her recorder and asks of Picasso and I answer: *technical, difficult, invisible inside*. She continues, and I see the only way of nudging her from subjects I find nauseating is to create discomfort. And so I say loudly, “He found me stupid and rich and stupid.”

She asks of Pollock and I tell two of the five usual anecdotes and then, “He would urinate most anywhere, including my fireplace.”

She mentions my sisters, their renowned beauty, and I reply, “It only made me feel more repulsive.” Emboldened for a few intriguing seconds, she digs deeper, and I follow up with: “One died while giving birth, the other dropped her two infant sons sixteen stories from a New York rooftop.”

There are no further questions and she has a bowl of Brusciuvia, three buttery slices of Semolina bread, and finally a drink, a martini—as in gin, darling. I mix two, smiling as she bird-sips and shoulder-shudders her way along. She glances about the room, at my paintings, and I give her a few general details, names, dates, a Plexiglas placard at a museum.

Then she asks about sex.

“I like the word *fuck*. I do, and I like to *fuck*. I can't say why. Something about incursions, expulsions, the mixing of faces, sexes, all the grappling. . . there's something in the falling, the utter dark falling of the orgasm. I dedicated so much of my life to it . . . I really can't say why. Maybe it's everything modern, all of it, its toll—alienation, analysis. Exhausting self-analysis . . .

What I mean by alienation is how I've felt alone. You understand? I have money so I can always have people, but they can't be *me*, think like *me*, these nights when I can't sleep, when I have Pietro, my gondolier, take me outside, out there, floating the canals, listening to the moon crackle . . . or sitting here and thinking about

my death-day. The way it marches down the calendar, marching, like the Nazis . . . We all have a death-day, you know, dear, like a birthday, but, well, rather different . . . I mean with sex I feel—or I felt—immersed, in the Other, fucking the Other, and all those whirring darts of pleasure/pain/whatever you want to label it, were maybe me, collecting myself, gathering up—not being alone, for once, a few seconds . . . the orgasm . . . or maybe I'm crazy.

Or drunk. You've done your reading and you think here she is, drunk. Talking rot. But I'm not drunk, and I don't think you know anxiety. I'm not talking about late night studying for some little exam. No. I'm talking about marriage as a tedious, suffocating cage; about outliving your daughters; about every artist that takes your money, all of them waiting to get a name so they can never mention yours again. Yes . . . I'm talking about suicide and murder. About Nazis. Nazis, for God's sake, and why? . . . Don't be fooled—Yes, I'm a Venetian, now, but always an American. I fled Paris. Fled acquaintances, people in trouble. *Serious* trouble, if you understand me. I flee my anxieties, you see? With drink, sex. . . you know, with money.

But, no, I'm not drunk. And I'm not feeling sexy anymore. I suppose similarities exist: you do it for years, decades swim by, and you reflect on it all, for some pattern, some daily motivation for pouring a drink, for finding someone, someone to fuck, someone different than who you are fucking. Who knows why? A gear or cog inside just slips its, its what?—its bearing? I don't know the word. Maybe I don't know what I'm saying. Maybe. Well, there's analysis for you—the world's largest *I don't know*.

I mean what are we doing here, dear?"

No reply, from either of us. She stares at the recorder, tilts it in her fingers, frowns, presses a button, mumbles something about the tape. I beckon her to the window, a wide glass wall, the sun a smeary ball of orange, melting, splintering into canals, glinting off the byways and eddies and cross-running tides of the lagoon, light thrown awry, refracted, diamonds tossed across a fractured jigsaw of bluish green.

“What do you think?” I say.

She shrugs. “It's like a picture.”

I see our reflections in the window, a gull wheeling nearby, the sun, and feel a softening inside. Strange: I feel an urge to see myself in her. But why? I glance down to the quay, to the gondola being readied—soon my visitor must return to her hotel, and then to Milan, to interview a young lady who makes art from discarded automobile engines.

“And what do you think of Pietro?” I ask her.

“Who?”

She turns from the window and yawns, immediately apologizing, pleading the heavy bread and the late martini, and then, while collecting her things, tells me of her recent readings of Venice, about how the city is doomed, always was doomed to sink into the sea, and this the citizen's fault, their negligence, building on shifting sandbars and precarious wetlands as if it were *terra firma*—creating their very lives on sand, like so many—

“*Goodnight*,” I tell her, and her eyes flicker, her face losing a bit of glow, its symmetry, and from her lips an uncertain mumbling as she heads to the doorway. In silence I watch from the window as Pietro takes her hand and guides her into the gondola, he smiling, she clearly not smiling, not smiling at Pietro, and she turns for a last glance and I am across the room, mixing a martini, stirring it slowly, slowly, so as not to bruise the gin.

