

Esteban O'Brien Córdoba

Hendrickje

The town has history, a university, a little industry, and a self-service restaurant in which you can get a steak with an egg on it, potatoes, a salad, a good hard roll, a bottle of beer, some pudding, and a cup of coffee for about sixty-five cents, if you are thinking in dollars. The fellow who owns it once worked in Detroit. You pick up your food, then sit at a counter. A couple of waitresses bring flatware, napkins, and anything you add to your order later. It's very cozy. Many of the people seem to know one another.

One of the waitresses wears jeans; the other, who is very fat, wears a skirt made of jeans material. She's bent over in front of the artist and his wife. The wife is about to take a bite of steak and eggs. The husband is poking around appreciatively in a stew. Without preparation or exchanging glances, suddenly both break out laughing. The big butt before their faces, the ridged incomplete triangle that shows where the waitress' panties go, remind them both of the manager.

The wife knows that this is why the husband is laughing, knows too that he knows that is why she is laughing. The artist knows two other things as well. One he has not known before: the butt suspended between countertop and stained wall, the complex shape where it tapers off into the girl's upper body, with the texture of the jeans cloth and the strong or subtle patterns of pockets and packed flesh under clothes, is somehow the same shape that he painted, vibrant and looming, devoid of connotation of woman, manager or restaurant, in a big abstract currently hanging in a show of his work in the capital.

Wispy, tall, with long straight gray-white hair, limber, seemingly diffident, the painter never has understood where his visions come from. But he knows that they are often plainly visible to him after bursts of his manager's passion. He then has them before his eye, sees them on the canvas, paints what he sees. It is almost like doing a child's coloring book. A little vaguer, a lot more complex. He never does it, he feels, with enough skill. Yet when he has tried to make "skill" more evident, to be more precise, the clear visions seem dead to him. He throws those slick dead hard-edged versions away.

Except for those his manager finds and has saved. They are her secret stealing. She keeps them in her apartment, hidden when anyone

is around. And sometimes, when she is alone, she spreads one on the bed and rolls her tubby body against it or wraps the loose canvas, slick, cold, lumpy, scratchy, in places smooth, around her, rolls up in it in high excitement, knowing she is damaging the painting, knowing (but not caring?) that the cracks she is putting in its surface are especially bad on these precisionist versions of the painter's work.

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Small, fat, with heavy, greasy black hair, the manager feels multiply grateful to the painter. "But do you really love me?" she says to him again and again when they are alone. The painter accepts all aspects of her, even her mawkishness. Though young, she has heavy breasts that hang straight down over a solid fold of stomach. Standing nude before him, she reminds him of a photograph he's seen of the Venus of Willendorf. It all feels very good under his slender body, his weak-seeming sunken chest. The preparations before they make love are overwhelming. Her excitement excites him. She gasps and pants like a sixteen-year-old necking on a bench in the municipal park. Pearly evidence of her arousal stands in beads on her dense bush.

The lovemaking itself is nothing special for him. It is fun because of her excitement, because, especially at the beginning, it feels good and she feels good to him, but she operates on rhythms completely alien to his. They go on until, after a series of her vague butterfly sighing climaxes, he becomes tired and wants to rest. Then visions come, though he has never sought them.

The manager is fiercely protective of his interests with dealers and with the press. He would like her to be a little kinder. His soft amiability is not hypocritical. He genuinely likes dealers, curators, arts people in general. And he is well-liked in turn. Most of his shows and sales-gallery contracts come because of invitations he has solicited by genially visiting around. The manager then does the following-up, the agreement-making, the nuts and bolts.

Her presence is a great advantage to the artist. Her small salary is paid by a sugar-daddy, his first patron. The artist feels that it is not enough, but he will not ask his patron for more, so he figures a percentage of each sale for her. His wife keeps the books, and calculates the manager's share very generously.

The fat waitress rises. She has been filling a pitcher with ice and bottled water. Now she turns and walks along the counter to fill a glass for a newly-seated customer who, she knows, always drinks water after his wine. Her face seems built on two planes, as if the upper part were held in place by a swimmer's face mask, while the lower cheeks and the

mouth hang loose. Though she wears large earrings, there is no lipstick or makeup. So despite the lumpy rump, she does not resemble the manager. The manager makes herself up carefully but strangely, putting lipstick precisely up to the cleft above her lip, a queer little square that is the same sharply-delineated red every day. She never colors the corners of her lips. Though born here, she retains what the painter imagines is a romantic Slavic notion about art, service and women—"Behind every great artist there is a woman who loves him." "Without sacrifice and suffering there can be no great art."

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The painting. It is large and strong. There is a yellow field, on which are both blue and red squiggles, like what you see when the sun hits your eyes too suddenly. You open the door and the painting is there, and the big, complex, bright looming shape hangs between you and that field. Many of the artist's works have this alarming ambiguity. The shape seems three-dimensional in parts, flat in others. But there seems to be space between it and the field. Wheels, cubes, planes, triangles, textures, colors have bulk; areas interpenetrate in ways which are sometimes irrational.

The critics. He tells them "vision"—frankly—but they see art movements, praise him for his daring, his willingness to explore, to avoid painting one thing over and over the way so many big names do. (Yet you can always identify his work.) "But I do," he knows—his Thing is exactly what he always paints, over and over.

The manager tries helping an art professor write copy for a catalogue. "Like tantric art," she says. The scholar throws that in, but his main point has to do with connections to Calder, de Kooning, Pollock, Klee, Motherwell, Graves. This scholar, though, does react sensually as well. He likes "the resounding thwack of paint on canvas" in the artist's recent pieces.

His wife. He loves her wildly. They don't understand one another at all. She is a small woman with hair just light enough for her to be called *una rubia*, though her skin is not light. He sees the strength in her Indian-looking cheekbones and her tightness. She knows exactly what his paintings mean, and doesn't find that remarkable. For her, her own music has the same qualities, though she won't learn to play piano well enough to perform it. She hears it and writes it down. She hardly tells him about it.

She works hard. Her education includes more science than it is customary for a woman to know in this country; her parents had wanted a boy. She did not have a degree when she married the artist.

She took a job as an administrative secretary in a large chemical firm in the capital; her work used to support them. Now she is a vice-president, the main voice of central administration in her firm's large operation in this town. The work is no longer challenging, though it is complex and hard. She does it now so there will be some office smells to wash off before she makes dinner or makes herself ready for loving the artist.

They cannot explain their passion. They have never looked like a couple. She seems firm and tightly contained; he seems made of flakes. She has an administrator's directness; he seems vague, though always "nice." Her skin fits well. He loves the tightness of her small tits, taut despite her age. He is somehow both skinny and flabby. He looked old when he was young. They are very private in their affection, but alone they have never been able to keep their hands off one another. The manager has never been a threat to the painter's feeling for his wife.

The manager knows this. If the wife knows of the love between the manager and the artist, she has never let on. If the wife and the colleague of hers who has made her years of bureaucratic push and pull tolerable, nearly pleasant, have ever been more than good friends, she too has been very discreet.

The painter and the vice-president have come to love this flat provincial town. Well-known all over the world, he is not too famous here, except among a circle of art teachers and students. So he and she can just live here. They never ate lunch together when they were in the capital. Here they have a round of favorite lunch places. Neither came from a family which celebrated the regional massive wine-washed midday meal. Capital business lunches had accustomed the wife to a drink with her food. The beer here is delicious, but the artist is not used even to a beer with lunch; he feels giddy as she spreads a couple of sheets of paper on the counter while they sip their coffee.

Although the manager manages, the wife keeps all the books. This is a family business lunch, and they go over a large number of items. They always come into this plain restaurant a little late for lunch on days when they want to talk budget so that they can take time for such work without inconveniencing other customers. They would not do it if there were people waiting for places at the counter. As he sometimes does, the owner walks over behind them as they are working and puts a hand on each of their shoulders. They chat about their grown children, and about the owner's years in Detroit.

Last night's dinner was a business dinner, too, in a way. (Is the dinner last night the action? Or is this business lunch the action?)

Lamb, chopped, spiced, with diced fresh vegetables mixed in, wrapped with a grape leaf from the disastrous grape arbor behind their house, prepared by the artist himself, was the main dish.

The grape arbor had come with the property when they moved to this town. Labor for things like gardening was very cheap, and both loved the idea of having different varieties of grapes available for eating or for wine, but they had never done anything with the grapes beyond some desultory cutting back, some pleasant times spent sitting in the arbor when the insects weren't so thick there as to make sitting unpleasant, and a lot of random eating of grapes meant for wine. Neither of them knew anything about grape varieties, and they suspected that the various strains which grew in and around their arbor were gradually interbreeding themselves back to some generic wildness.

The painter, however, loved the arbor, and always carried a finished painting out to it, and propped it up on one bench, then sat himself on the other to stare at it in the dappled light. He told himself that he did this to be sure he liked it, but the truth was that the pattern of leaf and lattice shadows, when there was a clear enough sky to make shadows, or even the vague shade of trellis and skeletal vine in the chill of a hazy winter day, made his work look better to him. The sessions with the paintings in the arbor were better than anything in the studio, better than seeing his work in even the nicest galleries, better even than visiting those which had been acquired by museums.

And grape leaves not too eaten away by bugs he knows how to use as wraps for little lamb balls which had begun years ago in the capital as a real recipe, but had now become very much his own through years of culinary forgetting, tinkering and revising. Working on them in the early evening could not keep his mind away from what he was to say to his manager that night, but it could fend off his emotions. He was pleased that his wife had suggested this dish, pleased that unlike their friends, they did not employ a cook, but just a nice woman who came in mornings to clean for an hour on her way to another job, and a laundry lady once a week. Domestic help struck people here as exorbitantly expensive. One had to keep raising salaries because of the nation's ungovernable inflation. The artist and his wife had learned not to let the fall of their daily currency frighten them. They had been protected from that fear since that time, long before the manager's coming, and during the years when he had still arranged most of the details himself, when his work began selling in countries with more stable economies. They thought of their income now in dollars and knew that most prices and salaries were very cheap in dollar terms.

The inflation was spirit-wounding, and it seemed to both of them a little unfair that their spirits were so little affected.

Their trip to the United States and to Europe they had planned over lunches during the last week. His light duties at the university would be finished in a few days; two of his best students had already arranged to leave town early. His wife's firm so needed her that she was permitted to write her own schedule. The painter and his wife had made arrangements with the housekeeper, who was perfectly capable of keeping their place in good shape should the impulse strike them, as they thought it would, to spread their stay abroad beyond the few weeks needed for work and visiting galleries and dealers.

His resolve to make a sharp break had come at an intimate time with the manager. She was sprawled near the foot of the enormous imported waterbed she had bought herself. Both understood that it had really been a present for him. She was in fact asleep, her torso like a sack of vegetables, an arm dangling to the floor, a chunky leg half over the bedframe, her mouth distended to one side, and her great rump pointed toward him where he sat with his back against the bookcase-headboard in one of those dazes which seemed so important to his well-being and his creativity. He looked down at the awkward mound of her and felt a pang of such startling love and tenderness that it snapped him from his daze and made him think that he must leave or send her away. He knew also that she would never understand, would somehow feel that he was rejecting her or was tired of her or had found someone else or wanted to look for someone else.

No, he wanted no one else and was more perfectly happy with his manager, his life and his wife than he had ever expected it was possible to be.

After she awoke she sat down in her robe to the strong coffee he had ground and made for her. They were seated where they best liked to sit, elbow to elbow at a corner of the low table in her dining room, and then he had told her that it was important that she see other men, that she broaden her art management practice for her own sake so that she would not be psychologically and economically so dependent on him. He even told her that it was all right with him if she chose to interpret this as a rejection, because he thought the anger might help her to rationalize matters and make the adjustment. He only hoped she would not badmouth him, though he figured he could forgive that.

Her first reaction was to cry, without sobbing, fat tears going down her fat cheeks. What he said was true enough: she knew enough to be extraordinarily valuable to a major world-class art dealership, or to

practice herself independently. A push from working exclusively for him, out into the larger market, would be professionally good for her. There would also be the possibility of marriage and family. And income would not be a problem. He was perfectly happy for her to go on as his manager at the same salary and commission but with reduced duties unless and until she found working on his account unpleasant, or found herself unable to do a conscientious job, or was so involved in some new work that she wanted to give him the opportunity to hire someone who would pay more attention to merchandising his products. He did not tell her how far advanced his and his wife's travel plans were. Later there came the idea of the dinner for all that, a dinner like the many the three had had together since the manager began to work for him.

To his wife he had spoken honestly of the professional side only, and she had agreed, although she hated to have the artist lose the exclusive services of someone who believed in his work so deeply that she convinced dealers that they were handling the work of some sort of creative saint, who was, moreover, so good a friend of hers. The artist did say that he had some concern that the manager's attachment to him had come to run deeper: "I think by now there's an emotional side to it. I think in her crazy Slavic way she thinks she's making a great sacrifice at the altar of art." And so they had planned the dinner, and so he had known as he turned the ground lamb and egg round in the mixing bowl beneath his fork that he was in part just keeping busy to keep himself from thinking of his own terrible loss and of the terrible thing he was doing to her.

An unbidden memory had come when he emerged from the dusty stone shed at the back of the house which served as home to their big gray cats and as wine cellar, bearing for the dinner a dirty bottle of Chilean wine of undistinguished name and vintage but which the three of them savored. He remembered that on the day when he had first impulsively pressed his arms down around the manager's soft shoulders and bent down his head to kiss her that she had said some very odd things. Over-dramatic: "I said to myself when I arrived here to work today, 'Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen.'" And then she said, "This will be wonderful and we will never do anything unkind to one another and I will never hurt your wife and someday you will hurt me and I won't mind because I would have had it coming and we will have been better for what we had than I would have been if we had not had it." And finally she had said, "And your

paintings will change, and though I am not Hendrickje and you are not Rembrandt, I will be in them."

Ha! That was it, or that was a large part of it! It was part of her ambition to be model and mistress. She had had him in her plans from the start. And if he had painted *Bathshebas* or *Woman Bathings...*? Well, pity the mistress of an abstract painter.

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The dinner was delicious and went very well. His wife knew a wonderful recipe for marinating chunks of the meat of the local rabbit-like animal you could find in the stalls of their favorite country marketplace a couple of kilometers north of town; that made the cold meat course. Then came his lamb dish in grape leaves served in a curved platter on bright, broad shiny leaves of the sort used for wrapping meats in the rural markets. It tasted fine with a rice dish the wife had made. Dessert they had not fixed themselves except to push toothpicks into the tiny balls of local confection which the three of them liked and which were native to the place, sold to school children by peddlers in the street, and reputed to contain not just sweet goo, nuts and fruits chunked together and formed into gummy balls of satisfying texture, but also a little of the mildly hallucinogenic liquor of the local weed that country children chewed on as they walked home from school or sat by ponds fishing.

While the manager had chased down the last bits of lamb and rice on her plate, they, speaking alternately as though they had rehearsed, told her of their plans for the long trip and their thoughts about her independence and her career. But they had not planned it as that kind of an act, any more than they had planned the collaboration on the main dish: the wife had had a craving for steamed onions, and had pulled little wild ones from the stony meadow out behind their house where their once-a-week laundry woman tethered her goat when she came over on Tuesdays to work on their wash. The wife had steamed these little onions for the rice, along with a tiny, very sweet, hard variety of local pea which she bought already out of the pod from a push-cart she passed each day returning from her office. The old woman who ran the cart poured the peas into a neat cone made from the pages of the last surviving Trotskyite daily newspaper in the Western hemisphere, then folded down the top of the cone to make a tight seal and scratched her hairy ear before putting out her hand to take the money. The old woman loved coffee, but coffee from the coffee shops on the avenue was expensive, and so some days the painter's wife would bring her down a cup from the office in a white

styrofoam cup of a sort one seldom saw in this part of the world, and which the old woman would carefully clean and save for future use at home after she had drunk the coffee.

So is this the action? Is the main point that rice and peas and onions went so well without planning with the artist's lamb and leaves and herbs that their speech to the manager about their trip, all unrehearsed, came out like some smooth vaudeville routine? The manager—poor lady, her heart thumped, her eyes bugged out of her face, but she finished the lamb, finished the candy-balls, finished the coffee—and, dear reader, you who know my work know that I do not believe in cheap suspense—I will tell you that later, the manager did two very mean things—but professional things, not personal things—to the artist—which hurt him terribly—which made him bleed within—but which he of course survived since he was strong and his art was true—and that she, the manager, retained, despite all this, her gratitude for the artist's time and for his great love for her, and that she had a short but very successful career on her own in art after she moved from that flat provincial city, and that she then, to her surprise, involved herself in a very conventional marriage, and spent busy years raising unaccountably slender and handsome children for the service of humanity and her affection—or was it love?—for a good, quiet, somewhat cynical husband. But she also knows, though she does not understand, that, at the moment of hugging the wife good-bye at the end of that meal, and once again a few weeks later while helping her with a recalcitrant zipper, caught in a pinch of slip at the wife's hip, and yet a third time, giving her an awkward hug as the wife and artist stood above her on the metal steps leading up to the old DC-3 on which they were flying out of this flat town, leaving her to close things up and tend to her own career, that she, who had never even thought seriously of such feelings, and would never have them again toward another woman, with her fat cheeks pressed against the white blouse of her old friend, had felt a knife-thrust of pure lust.

And the artist? He remains, as you know, successful; he remains inventive; he does not fall into one formula and continue producing his kind of product, with merely fashionable variations, for decades. But his work, to tell the truth, has never again shown those great ungainly forceful forms, the inter-linked planes and patterns holding together by a logic which seems powerful but ungraspable, tantric in complexity, childlike, visionary, and somehow floating as though you opened a door and one was hanging there, looming before a silent field of sky and earth.

The front of the restaurant is marked by a screen of strings of hanging beads. Just inside it is the low booth, separate from the food-line or the eating counters, where the owner acts as cashier. The painter walks over and pays his bill. He and his wife push through the beads and out onto the broad sidewalk. As they turn east to walk toward the part of the university where he has given classes, his wife, unexpectedly—she has never done such a thing before—reaches around him from his left, where she is walking, and puts her right hand in his right hip pocket, the way she has seen American teenagers in jeans do.

translated by Matthew Fleming