

A Postcard from Picasso

The Pebble

Lewis was thirty years of age. He basked in his own contentment, and was unaware of his limitations. He was self-absorbed, his visions tunnelled, his emotions clipped, his life without colour, and his principal desire, tranquillity, not easily attainable. Noise, he thought, as he sat on the grassy mound beside the stream, was everywhere save beneath the waves of the ocean and the clod of the churchyard. For all that, the noise the waters made as they tumbled over the pebbles was a comforting noise, though he was unable, at first, to comprehend quite why that was so.

Lewis was a man troubled because he believed he had been wronged.

He focused his eyes on an individual pebble that, from where he sat, appeared to cause the current the most turmoil because it protruded above the surface forcing the waters to swirl around it and, every now and again, to tumble over it. It was an angular pebble and one, like so many of the others, worn smooth by the constant passage of the waters. It would have not fitted, with comfort, into the pocket of his jacket, which lay beside him as the day was very warm. It was the passage of time, like the passing of the waters over the pebble, which blurred his reasoning as he sat basking in the stillness. Bearing down on him was the most profound childhood memory, almost a burden, which he had shouldered from his earliest days and carried into manhood. Now, on reflection, he realised he had been led on, only to be cast aside when he expected to receive the benefits. For all her promises she was leaving him, his Daisy was abandoning him without motive, for she had offered no reason.

Some of her promises she had kept—for instance, she had married him, which had been an early promise, and had set up a living home with him. He had thought this reward enough for carrying the burden of a childhood presumption, and had settled down to the certainty his life could not fail to be one of assured, and continual, contentment.

Their setting up of home together had had its origin in the making of dens in the gardens of their childhoods. They had both been ten. He had built and she had furnished. The first had been under the branches of a weeping willow. He had produced the windbreaks his family took when they went to the beach. He had resolutely banged, in a manly fashion, their uprights into the parched earth beneath the tree, and she had brought over a car rug from her house next door. As Lewis sat gazing at the rhythmic wash of the stream's current the memories he had nurtured from childhood swept over him. After the willow it had been under the prickly gorse in her garden. Then beneath an apple tree, from which he had hung blankets that reached the ground creating the geometrical dimensions of a ridge tent. Each den had been an improvement on the one before, more original, better furnished until, like birds, they nested in the maple tree, all planks and plastic sheeting and ascending approach affording them a feeling of permanence and privacy. They had been thirteen years old when they had made this tree house. She had kissed him there, and given him hope of intransigence. She had not asked to, nor had he expected it, but she had pushed clumsily her damp lips onto his. Then she had legs like matchsticks, he remembered. Matchsticks in little white socks.

His mind was treading again on what had suddenly become, and without warning, a weary route through the labyrinth of boyhood—a route he had always remembered as being laden with imagination and happiness. His thoughts had reached that very first kiss when he was disturbed.

Daisy hovered above him, like a giantess with the power to inflict.

'I thought I should find you here,' she said.

Lewis made to stand up, but she, seeing the gesture, motioned him to remain sitting before lowering herself onto the grass at a discomforting distance from him. She tucked her knees beneath her skirt, placed her hands confidently on her lap and stared at him.

‘There,’ she said with a finality that suggested the completion of a mission, or the discharge of a demand, neither of which her presence presumed.

For a while they did not speak: only the sound made by the clear waters scurrying over the pebbles interfered with the quietness. They had never sat so far apart since they were kids. No spiritual engineer had devised a bridge that would span such a gap—this cold gulf, this friendless no-man’s-land that had once been full of promise, one which had never before existed or even imagined might exist, a gap that had been squeezed to extinction by uninhibited, innocent joys and the growing years of childhood. Lewis stretched out a beckoning hand towards Daisy. She made no move; he withdrew his hand.

‘We were too much like a brother and sister and should not have married,’ said Daisy flatly.

‘We were children full of promises who were always there for each other.’

‘We should have found other playmates.’

‘We did not need other playmates.’

‘We denied ourselves choice.’

‘I thought we had chosen ... you me and me you.’

‘Marriage spoilt all that.’

They lapsed into silence. Daisy looked around, and raised her eyebrows. Neither had the experience or ability to temper the awkwardness of silence. And Daisy, with her mind made up, could not be bothered. Lewis was too overwhelmed. He stared at the pebble. He did not want her to go because as long as she sat, just so long as he could see her, he believed there remained the possibility she might not leave him, that he might be able to change her mind and rekindle within her the memories, and wonders, of intimacy.

‘Do I let her just walk away without a defence of our marriage?’ he thought. In his childhood he had been the leader, the one with the practical suggestions and ideas, but somehow the married Daisy had usurped this position so that there was nothing he could do if she got up and did, just simply, walk away. She was poised to do that, and to leave him exposed and inexperienced.

‘We were going to make babies, remember?’ said Lewis apathetically. He was unable to look Daisy in the eye. ‘You remember ... when we knew nothing about sex and not much more about the salutary business of procreation that is what you said to

me. “Let’s make babies when we are older”, that is what you said ... in the maple tree. I remember. To me it was one of those wonderful childlike commitments that had the strength of promise, and which directed our vision to the same horizon.’

Daisy stared down at her hands on her lap and said quietly:

‘That is the trouble, we became old before our time.’

‘No. We made a firm base from which we could mature.’

‘I do not see it like that.’

‘How do you see it?’

‘I have just told you. We became old before our time. Marriage to you was like retirement after years of labour and achievement. You settled down to what you believed were your just rewards. We had been moving house, as it were, every year since we were ten until we finally settled on a house under the umbrella of marriage.’

‘You are saying you are bored.’

‘Yes, I am bored. Worse ... I am trapped-bored.’

‘Can’t we talk about it?’

‘We have been talking since we were ten. We have done all our talking.’

‘Tell me, what has turned you into a cynic?’

Daisy did not reply.

‘Well then, perhaps there is someone else who has turned you into a cynic.’

She did not reply.

The water flowed over the pebble. Daisy raised herself, brushed down her skirt and left as she had arrived, quietly and without another word.

Lewis did not watch Daisy go. He lay down and closed his eyes against the hot, blue, summery sky. Then he suddenly raised his shoulders from the ground, turned on one elbow and facing the direction of her departure, yelled out:

‘It was not an illusion, you know ... our love was not an illusion.’

Daisy had gone, and probably did not hear. He flopped back down, cross with himself. Perhaps he had been wrong, that he had been mistaken, that he had fallen before the fickleness of woman, a female characteristic he had had no cause to take seriously believing his Daisy to be the truer sample of the fair sex. Now he had fallen—his turn, as it were. He could hardly bring himself to believe he had been mistaken, fooled, deceived. He was near to tears.

‘It was not an illusion ... I never needed to measure your limbs,’ he muttered, loosely quoting Picasso.

For a while he thought about the painter whom he admired, in a pedestrian fashion. A print of his had hung on his bedroom wall since his thirteenth birthday. His great aunt, his *arty-aunt* as he called her, had given it to him as a nudge that life was more than building nests in back gardens, but of mining deep in the search for beauty. When he had married the print moved with him into his permanent nest, and presently hung, at Daisy’s suggestion, inconspicuously on a wall on the landing. The claim that his *arty-aunt* had once been a member of Picasso’s coterie; well, if not a member then she had at least met him, a subject often discussed from which the brush of notoriety rubbed off on his family. At the unwrapping of his thirteenth birthday present Lewis’s *arty-aunt* had said to him:

‘I am going to the south of France, and hopefully to Mougins, where I shall get Picasso to autograph a postcard especially for you. Would you like that?’ She had added coquettishly.

Lewis knew little about Picasso, save what he had overheard in the drawing room of his parent’s house, so he said he would like that very much for he was perhaps happier with the prospect of getting an autograph of a famous man than with the print he had received as a birthday present. His mother had said, at the little unwrapping ceremony:

‘That’s your great aunt, the one in the striped costume ... isn’t that so, Aunt?’ she said pointing to one of the three bathers in the print.

‘Yes dear, I like to think it is. Then Picasso knew so many young ladies I could not be certain. I did know him at about that time, that is at the end of the war, in Paris. I am sure he will remember me, if I do get to see him. Of course, he is getting on a bit ... well, aren’t we all! He must be nearly ninety.’

Lewis lay on the grassy mound and recalled that boyhood incident. It was about the time Daisy had stood on her two matchsticks and kissed him in the maple tree. He remembered that, although his great aunt had kept her word and posted a postcard to him with Picasso’s signature on it he had never received it. His mother had said that his *arty-aunt* had been indiscreet not concealing the postcard in an envelope. Someone stole it, was how his mother had put it. Lewis thought about that as he lay beneath the sun, and as he thought about that, and Picasso, and his *arty-aunt*,

and his small print of *The Bathers* it came to him, suddenly—and he sat bolt upright and focused on the pebble.

It was the same shape as one of the pebbles on the beach in Picasso's painting—the pebble in the foreground, the one shaped like a three-cornered hat!

The Estate Agent

The estate agent through whom Lewis and Daisy bought their house wore fine suits, drove an expensive foreign car, and employed minions in his office—all of which raised his status in the eyes of his clients, and in his own eyes. This suggestion of success and power had the quality of ephemerality, which he failed to understand and thus detect, making him vulnerable. Lewis thought him pompous and arrogant. Daisy pretended not to notice this artificiality saying what a nice man he was. Go-ahead she had added, pointedly, seeing about him the hallmarks of success. She acknowledged his fluency of matters to do with houses, their structures, their cavities and bricks, lintels, rafters and joists, and his fondness of pronouncing upon topics that rightfully belonged to the expertise of architects. He found in Daisy the kind of woman he was drawn to—someone attractive and who fawned on him. Being flattered he saw possibilities, which were not endearing. He had mayoral visions, too, that would fall comfortably into place alongside his job. He had implied as much to Daisy at the successful conclusion of the purchase of the house.

The house was Mediterranean-white from which the sun could blaze back, the roof was slate, the whole pretty enough and situated in the country on the periphery of the village. The stream ran through land belonging to the local farmer. It was not an uncomfortable distance from the front porch of the house, beside which stood a bird table fixed to a post, a construction the estate agent had suggested removed from the house's front elevation some of its attractiveness. "Might I advise you to take it down", he had said touching the post with the point of his highly polished black shoe. "Yes, you are quite right. That must be the artist in you to see that!" Daisy had exclaimed. Lewis stated he rather liked the bird table where it was—not that he minded really, but simply because it made him feel uncomfortable to see his wife drawn to agree with a man he considered a popinjay. After he had gone Lewis said to Daisy:

'Best place for him would be in a birdcage.'

‘That is a funny thing to say.’

‘He is a bit like a bird with gaudy plumage.’

‘You do not like him, I can tell.’

‘I don’t like his smugness ... and the way he looks at you. And you agreeing with him all the time. And the huge commission he charges.’

‘You’re jealous, that’s what you are.’

‘You were dabbling with coquetry. When wives do that husbands are entitled to comment.’

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Before Lewis had left the grassy mound he recovered the pebble that had drawn his attention, and which reminded him of the picture his great aunt had given him. He had taken off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers to his calves and made his way into the stream carefully selecting firm stones on which to maintain his balance. This act of daring, this impulse, had temporarily taken his mind off his melancholy, and he had stood in the middle of the stream examining his pebble like a captain of a winning team examining the trophy. He held it aloft for the benefit of his great aunt, and kissed it.

‘For you,’ he said aloud. ‘I should have listened to you when I was a boy. But you were a bit of an oddity dwelling in the past, and dressing in the fashions of the past. I should have realised that three bathers offered a choice whereas one bather did not ... that is what you were trying to tell me, wasn’t it? Well, you have been proved right! So, here is the pebble from Picasso’s painting in your honour, my remembrance of you ... and, see it is the shape of a *corregidor’s* hat!’

Lewis had sat back down on the grassy mound and let his feet and legs dry off in the sun. He was pleased with himself. It takes a knowledgeable person to have made that connection: but he knew his Daisy would not be interested, and would exchange his enthusiasm for this observation for whims of her own. He had been right. The day after the scene at the stream Daisy had not left home. It seemed that she was either having second thoughts or biding her time. Moreover, it seemed to him that she had changed her character, overnight. There was something flamboyant about her, in the way she dressed, and in her behaviour. The sun blazed down from the white wall, and she drifted from one unnecessary chore to another. No doubt existed she was bored, and waiting, yet Lewis had never seen her looking so devastatingly

attractive. He had placed the pebble on the bird table, and every now and then Daisy would, mockingly, circle the bird table. When Lewis told her that the pebble brought back memories of his great aunt she straightway threw back her head and burst into exaggerated laughter, without enquiring why it reminded him of her. Lewis had drawn up a deck-chair, and settled himself beneath his panama hat with a book. Daisy was wearing a pink skirt flounced with black that reached her ankles, and a blue shawl over a white blouse. Lewis had never seen that rig-out before. While he read Daisy danced before his eyes doing the least menial, and unnecessary, jobs provoking him to give her attention, showering him with audacity so that he found it difficult to concentrate on his reading. His eyes followed her: and she knew it.

‘You see, even after all these years you cannot take your eyes off me.’

Lewis ignored this.

‘I have not seen that creation before,’ he said, trying to change the subject.

‘What creation is that?’ replied Daisy, knowing well enough to what he was referring.

‘Your outfit. It has a Spanish flavour.’

‘So you noticed! Well, I made it myself, so there.’ And Daisy danced around the bird table lifting her skirt to show a pretty ankle, and an extent of her leg, to the icon that reminded her husband of his great aunt.

At this moment an expensive foreign car had pulled up outside the house, and the estate agent, swathed in a suit of the sharpest quality, alighted.

Without further ado, and paying scant attention to Lewis, he presented himself before the cavorting Daisy who adjusted her skirt in a pronounced show of sham modesty.

‘My ... whatever will my husband say if I allow myself to be compromised by exhibiting my pretty legs?’ Daisy exclaimed loudly so that her husband who watched from over the top of his book, could hear,

The estate agent glanced artfully at Lewis before returning his gaze onto Daisy’s cheerful antics.

‘You see, I pay homage to my husband’s great aunt!’

‘No, I see you dancing before the bird table, and that is not the same thing at all.’

‘Now you are being pedantic.’

‘Then I apologise wholeheartedly. But I see no great aunt.’

‘On the bird table, see! The pebble, it reminds my husband of his great aunt.’ With that Daisy broke into fits of laughter, lifted her skirt dangerously high before the pebble in a magnificent show of disrespect.

With that, the estate agent had opened his brief case and let drop, intentionally, a sheet of paper hoping that the object of his desire would retrieve it for him, thereby confirming an urge to ingratiate herself before his polished person. However, she did not. Merely did she tease him by putting a foot on it, which was not the reaction for which he had hoped, but one nevertheless he turned to his advantage by bending down and tapping with the fingers of his pristine hand the obstacle that had trapped his sheet of paper; that is Daisy’s graceful ankle. From the feet of his fancy the estate agent looked up and said:

‘It is for your husband to sign. It would be convenient, most convenient, if he could return it to my office at twelve noon tomorrow.’ He gave Daisy the most outrageous wink, and before there could be any reaction to this request he had tripped lightly back to his expensive foreign car and was gone as swiftly as he had arrived.

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At noon the next day Lewis presented himself at the estate agent’s office. At the same time the estate agent presented himself at Daisy’s white, sun-drenched home. Lewis was not greeted cordially; in fact, he could have easily doubted he was expected because he was kept hanging about while office staff checked the signed paper he had handed to them, refusing to accept it into their keeping until satisfied of its necessity. They asked him to come back in an hour by which time, they assured him, any confusion would have been set aside.

The estate agent, though uncertain that Daisy had understood his devious plan to get her husband away, soon played wooer to the bored and mischievousness lady of his desire who acted the innocent partner with mock surprise at his arrival. He wanted very much to believe she could well have been expecting him for she was dressed in the same gay and capricious attire as she had worn the day before.

‘My husband is at your office, didn’t you know?’ she drawled in a playful American accent trying to keep a straight face. ‘So if it is on his account that you call, why I’m just so sorry your journey has been wasted.’ Then, she threw back her head and burst into laughter.

‘I think not wasted. Why, I have in mind an idea that would fill the time most congenially ... until his return that is.’

‘His return! Why now, is that expected soon?’

‘I would doubt it since my office is most methodical, to the extent of obsession with correctness that clients can often find exasperating.’

‘Often find exasperating! And how is that, I pray?’

‘They are kept waiting ... unnecessarily.’

‘Kept waiting ... unnecessarily,’ repeated Daisy.

‘Why yes, is it not prudent that every effort must be made to minimise the possibility of ... of ... of, shall I say, inexpediency?’

‘You may well say ... inexpediency, but surely you mean being caught out.’

‘Exactly.’

With that, Daisy crossed herself before the icon of her husband’s great aunt, dance a happy little gig, gathered up her estate agent and led him, much to his delight, towards the grassy mound by the stream that was not an uncomfortable distance from the front porch of the house presently bathed in the most delightful sunshine. At the grass mound she did not sit down, although the estate agent very much wanted her to do so.

‘Admirable place,’ said the estate agent, looking around at a site pleasantly situated and convenient for what he had in mind. ‘Quiet, with little fear of interruption, I wouldn’t guess. Yes, yes, indeed, a very nice piece of property.’

‘My husband,’ began Daisy in a manner betwixt teasing and staidness, ‘would agree with you. I have often found him here when he seeks tranquillity from his wilful wife. Why, the last time I found him here was after I had threatened to leave him, would you know?’

‘Indeed, I would not! You being such a fine woman, I find that hard to believe a man could manoeuvre himself into a position when someone so comely as you should have to seriously consider her position.’

‘Now, you must not flatter me, or I may just have to reconsider my position with you as well! You’re a dangerous man, I can tell. No woman is safe with you, I bet.’ And with that Daisy slipped away from the estate agent’s outstretched hand, lifted the flounces of her skirt and skipped off towards the stream. The estate agent followed her, pursued her, looked at his watch.

‘I do believe I am quite attractive, in a manly sort of way. And you, of course, are considerably more attractive in a womanly sort of way,’ said the estate agent making a desperate bid to clasp one of Daisy’s wrists.’

‘Come now, that would never do! And even if it would my husband is sure to return shortly, his inexpediency running out.’

Nevertheless, the estate agent persisted, and Daisy darted away from him each time she sensed he was close to taking the liberties she dangled before him.

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Meanwhile, Lewis began to while away the minutes of the hour prescribed by the minions in the estate agent’s office. For a short while he roamed the streets of the town before settling down with a coffee in the shade of a parasol belonging to a continental-style coffee bar that served light refreshments outside its premises. There he thought—and there, at last, the penny finally dropped. The estate agent was absent from his office. The paper he had signed had little relevance. The paper hardly required to be pored over for an hour. He had been duped. Worse, there had been a conspiracy.

So, without finishing his coffee, and being fearful he was already too late to stop his wife absconding with the estate agent, he hurried back to his sun-drenched home about which he had dreamed since adolescence.

The expensive foreign car was, indeed, parked outside. He scurried passed the bird table on which the pebble still rested. No thoughts of his great aunt crossed his mind. Finding the house empty he calmed, and as he calmed he heard, coming from the direction of the stream, laughter, and towards this he set off at a steady pace.

There he saw Daisy standing with her feet apart and her hands on her hips, much like a rustic cowgirl, looking down into the stream in which sat the estate agent at the place where, a few day’s before, the pebble shaped like a three-cornered hat had been lodged.

‘You deserved that!’ exclaimed Daisy, to the forlorn man.

Then seeing her husband looking down at her from the grassy mound called out to him:

‘You see, I shoved him in, and doesn’t he look too ludicrous for words.’ And rocking from her hips she burst out laughing again at the sight of the estate agent sitting in the stream, his suit not looking as nearly as sharp as when he arrived.

Lewis stared at his wife, and thought how she had once been with her matchstick legs poked into little white socks. He wondered whether some of the credit for Daisy's transformation from schoolgirl to doughty woman could be his, for surely it had happened under his watch.

'You would be safer with me,' he called to her, pleasantly.

'Ah! But I have so much enjoyed myself,' she replied.

Renaissance

Days passed and Daisy remained. The pebble resting on the bird table was a reminder that there had been a time when not all was what it should have been in the Mediterranean-white home onto which the sun blazed in fine weather. Daisy had decided not to leave her husband realising that the man she had acquired in childhood, although selected from a choice of one, had proved not to have been such a bad selection.

Immediately after the ludicrous estate agent had raised himself from the bed of the stream and driven his wet self away in his expensive foreign car, Lewis boldly, and in triumphant manner, scrawled in black paint on one of the white walls of his sun-drenched home for all to see: *When we love a woman we don't start measuring her limbs*. Daisy accepted the graffiti as proof that love can manifest itself in many ways, and allowed it to continue to decorate the wall to the amusement of passers-by explaining her husband's persistent, almost irrational, interest in Picasso. She maintained her attractiveness, and Lewis slipped back into the habits that an assured contentment can generate in a man. With a peace of mind that was further nourished whenever he passed the bird table on which the pebble rested came thoughts of his *arty-aunt* and the postcard she had sent to him from France. A contented man with time on his hands can easily take up a challenge that does not put at risk the sufficiency of his life. So, having no positive strategy to fill his slippared time, he set himself a challenge:

To find his postcard.

The Search

When he asked Daisy where he should start she told him, quite bluntly, not to bother, and referred him to needles in a haystack, and pebbles on the beach! Lewis liked that.

Pebbles on the beach. He wanted to believe this reference to the pebbles was Daisy's acknowledgement, indeed her acceptance, of the three-cornered pebble icon that roosted on the bird table; and this belief greatly satisfied him.

He wrote to the world's great auction houses asking them to send their catalogues whenever Picasso memorabilia came up for sale. And he pestered them with letters.

The years passed, and occasionally catalogues arrived, but never with a suggestion of a signed postcard amongst the lots to be auctioned.

The white walls of his house, now no longer Mediterranean-white, blazed back less heat from the sun.

The graffiti on the wall faded.

The hairs on Lewis's head began to turn grey.

Attractiveness clung to Daisy as a child does to its mother.

When the tired dream became unbearable Lewis asked Daisy whether the time was right for him to switch to another challenge, since the original had become dispiriting.

'What do you have in mind?' she asked.

'To search for the stage curtain that Picasso designed for the original production of *The Three-Cornered Hat*'.

The long-suffering Daisy exploded.

'You're mad! Did you know that? I'm married to a madman!'

'No you are not! You are married to man with imaginative goals.'

'Goals! Searching the world for a thirty-year-old postcard, a goal? Searching the world for a stage curtain God knows how many years old ...'

'... about eighty,' interrupted Lewis.

'About eighty! In that case the moths have definitely had it. Can't you be like other men? Collect stamps, or engine numbers. Some, I've heard, spend days on airport roofs clocking aeroplanes in and out. Now that would you suit ... and me.'

'Why you?'

'Because you would be out of my hair for hours, days ... who knows maybe even for weeks at a time.'

'And then what would you do?' Lewis asked scornfully.

‘I would find myself a man without an ounce of indigestible imagination ... and who hated Picasso.’

Lewis thought about that.

‘Well, in that case I had better not have a hobby that takes me away from home ... like train spotting or aeroplane spotting. That leaves stamps.’

‘Have you ever collected stamps?’

‘No.’

‘So then, now is a good time to start.’

‘I have never collected stage curtains, either,’ said Lewis.

Lisa

Not long after Daisy had disparaged thoughts of stage curtains, and when Lewis felt the contentment he had fostered on himself was once more in danger of fragmentation, he received the telephone call he had long waited for.

It came from a London auction rooms.

It came from Lisa.

Lisa was the sporty type—bubbly, bouncy and full of fun. And she was not averse to exposing to the sun as much of herself as was reasonably decent whenever she went on holiday, usually with her girlfriends, to the Costas of Spain. Her boyfriend was not too keen on that, but he put up with it as long as she returned to him spiritually and physically restored, about which she was at pains to assure him. Lisa could be everyone’s party favourite. She was wired for fun. She enjoyed herself, and she smiled a lot. A little cracker might adequately describe her. She often wore a short leather jacket with a mini skirt, bore tattoos placed with little regard for discretion, and her hair was invariably bunched in a ponytail. From her shoulder she swung an imitable designer bag. She seemed very much to embody the modern little Anglo-Saxon, yet Lewis would witness she could bring forth a persuasive passion found more frequently in those brought up in countries bordering the Mediterranean. She could click her heels too, and fly a kite with precision! She was employed in the offices of the auction rooms as a secretary, a job she took seriously for she sensed that therein lay opportunities about which she dreamt. She was responsible for dispatching catalogues, placing clients’ letters into clients’ files, and bringing to her superior’s attention matters that might, in the frenetic atmosphere within the offices of the

auction rooms, be overlooked. The job was not onerous, but Lisa worked at it with method, and could be relied upon.

She had spotted, amongst some Picasso memorabilia that were being catalogued for sale, a signed postcard and she immediately remembered a client who occasionally telephoned and wrote meticulous letters of enquiry about that very matter. Should she telephone him, she asked her superior, believing it to be a courtesy towards a persistent enquirer, and maybe beneficial to the auction rooms. The superior checked the file and the postcard, and agreed there was merit in this approach for the names did appear to correspond.

Straightway Lewis went to London, where he smiled benignly upon Lisa whom he sensed, wrongly, stood alone between him and his grail.

‘Might I see the postcard?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid that would not be possible, Sir: not until it has been catalogued and displayed for public view,’ said Lisa politely, and with an accent accredited to those whose work in the auction rooms was of an academic nature, that is with an air of knowledge outside the domain of Mr Everyman.

‘I could tell immediately if it is the postcard I seek. Why, if it is not then I need trouble you no further.’

‘How might that be, Sir?’

‘By the address on the postcard ... the address of the addressee.’

‘Quite so, Sir.’

Through the reception passed men in lightweight brown coats carrying goods big and small, and some with carefully packaged pictures whose value Lewis could only guess. Without exception, all the men eyed Lisa. Well, her skirt was so extraordinarily short that even Lewis’s mind, which was engrossed in his own thoughts, was vulnerable to distraction.

‘If I am not allowed to view the postcard could you tell me the address on it? I have come a long way. Of course, I do not wish to trouble you because already you have been more than helpful. And so observant. Would that have been you ... who was so observant?’ Lisa beamed her gaze at Lewis, acknowledging with a show of tempered modesty that yes, indeed the credit should be hers.

‘If you would excuse me I shall make enquiries if we might be a little bit more flexible in this matter,’ said Lisa who then clattered off across the polished floor of the reception and disappeared into the wilderness beyond.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, when she returned, ‘it is our policy to restrict all viewing and dissemination of lot information ... in the interest of security, insurance and our contractual arrangements with the owners, until the cataloguing has been completed.’

‘What about the provenance?’ asked Lewis.

Provenance! A whispered word, the dulled echo of which was capable of sounding alarm bells within the hallowed halls of the auction rooms.

Provenance! Poor Lisa. A word so cogent that hush descends as softly and automatically as a sprinkler on a fire, then only to hiss as it sets about its business. Lisa led him, tucked him away so to speak, into a lobby adjacent to the reception before disappearing again, with slightly less clatter, into the wilderness beyond. She emerged trailing behind a very superior-looking gentleman to whom Lewis addressed his concern, to note—he was probably the lawful owner of the postcard and, under the circumstances, it would be inappropriate for it to be auctioned since he had not sanctioned it. The lot should be withdrawn until its provenance had been clarified, he added. Further, one way to begin to clarify the provenance was for him to view the postcard, or at least for the address on it to be checked against where he lived when he was thirteen years old. The superior-looking gentleman produced paper and pencil and asked Lewis if he would be so kind as to write down that address so that he, personally, would check it. Unfortunately, it would not be possible for him to see the postcard, and he understood he had already been informed of the reasons. Lisa gave Lewis a wink, which could be interpreted as a sign of victory for both their endeavours, or a wink more meaningful in the ‘this-could-turn-out-to-be-fun’ fashion.

Well, whatever this wink suggested it did signal the end of Lewis’s search for his postcard for the address did correspond, and it set in train an excursion into a sense of fun that Lewis had never before experienced.

One happy afternoon a few weeks later Lewis returned to the auction house to collect his postcard, and to pay some auction house expenses. There, indeed, was Picasso’s signature beside the postcard-clipped words written by his great aunt. *I am sure you are old enough to appreciate this*, she had written referring to the picture on the card. The République Française stamp looked insignificant compared to the

magnificence of the whole treasure. Lisa escorted him to the framer of pictures for the rich and famous, whom the auction house used. She clung to his arm in Mayfair, took him to a café catering very much for the bright young things, and generally made him feel light of foot and very much younger than he was.

‘When the postcard is ready I’ll collect it and bring it down to you,’ she said gaily as they parted.

‘Is that part of the auction house service? It would certainly be very kind of you,’ he replied formally.

‘Now, don’t you be so boorish, Lewis,’ Lisa rebuked. ‘When you see me next I shall be carrying success ... your very own postcard from Picasso, and framed beautifully. Why, as we shall have something to celebrate, we shall.’

She raised herself, gave him a kiss on both cheeks, and was gone.

The Jota

It was sun-baked and evening cooled when Lisa came. She was wearing a long, swirling, red dress, from which, with a subtle lift, she exhibited her legs in the most openly flirtatious manner. Paste jewellery swung from her ears. She was flying a magnificent kite that trailed colourful streamers, which she tethered to the bird table from where it cavorted in the slight breeze above the icon to Lewis’s *arty-aunt*.

‘We shall dance like the kite,’ cried Lisa. She held the framed postcard aloft, and applied herself to performing, in the Spanish style, a few neat little steps.

‘There now, Lewis, see how easy it is, put on a waistcoat, look the part, and come and dance with me. We are celebrating, are we not?’ And she twirled frivolously the framed postcard above her head in a manner that seemed quite irresponsible considering the length of the undertaking to retrieve it.

‘At long last, the postcard from Picasso,’ she cried. Now and then she would lower it to the level of Daisy’s eyes before snatching it away from view before Daisy could have a good look at it. Oh, yes—she teased Daisy, taunted her, and distracted her husband before her very eyes.

‘This is the *jota*,’ she called out to Daisy as she executed bouncing steps as if accompanied by a guitar, all the while clicking the frame of the postcard with her fingers. Then she gathered up Lewis and made him follow her dance routine as best he could.

‘Hands above your head, lightly close your fists, thumbs separate. Watch my feet!’

Daisy had never seen her husband behave like this. Dancing, dancing, dancing. He was letting his hair down! This smidgen of a girl was doing to her husband what she had failed to do since she was a teenager. She was bringing him out of himself. She was making a man of him right before her very eyes. They danced down the garden path all the way to the grassy mound by the stream, which as the reader will remember is not an uncomfortable distance from the front of the house and where now fluttered a kite. There Lewis fell over his own heels from excitement and exhaustion, and pulling Lisa down with him they both lay on the grass beneath the voluminous folds of her red dress panting and laughing with merriment.

Daisy looked on. She took little pleasure from the high jinks she was witnessing, and her spirit was not moved upwardly seeing her husband making a spectacle of himself with a woman so much younger than he. It was as if he was a young man again, and still attractive to the opposite sex—which he could not be, surely!

‘Whatever sort of dance is that, now?’ Daisy called out derisively above the shrieks of laughter.

‘It’s a fertility dance,’ Lisa called back from under the giggling mass of writhing red.

‘Not with my husband, it isn’t,’ replied Daisy, crossly.

From under the red folds Lisa pushed the framed postcard onto the grass so that Daisy could take hold of it. It showed a provocative French pin-up girl in a red dress, in dishabille. Printed in italics was: *Une rouge robe, quelques bijoux ... et je vous suis*. ‘Look at the postcard. See! A red dress, some jewels ... and I am yours. It’s me, me, me! Little Lisa from the auction rooms.’

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