

brace was for and he said, "To protect."

"Who?"

"Me," he said.

On the ride to the hospital, he was fine, but it started raining and my partner slowed down and that's when the anxiety took over. Long story short, the patient hit me in the face. Or to be more exact, he elbowed me in the cheek. Or to be even more exact, he gave me a lateral epicondyle to the zygomatic.

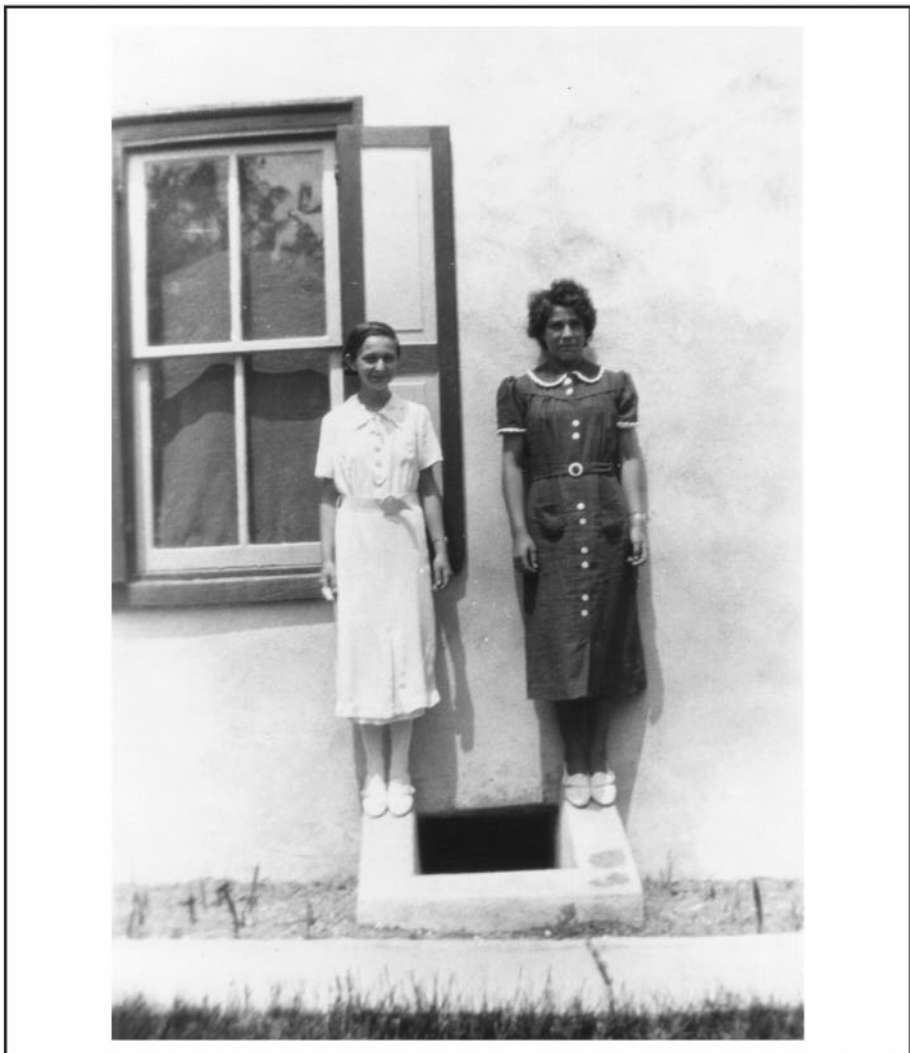
I wanted to say all of this when we got to the dinner table, but Zineb wanted to know where the sheep was. Her father told her that he'd decided to give the money to charity, that charity is better than anything. With Zineb's newfound fervor for Islam, you'd think she would be interested in that concept, but instead she got angry, wanting the tradition from her childhood. Her father ordered halal by making sure everything was vegetarian, which was even further away from the lamb that Zineb had expected. In the quiet, I had a feeling that sharing a story would help, so I started to explain about the sex offender but just those two words alone immediately sent a shock through me, alerting me that I should talk about something else, but I'd already started the story so I thought I should finish it, and then Zineb stormed out, leaving me with her parents. I hadn't even been elbowed yet in the story, which didn't allow me to explain why my right eye might be discolored. Zineb left me with the sex offender sitting in the room with the bad music. Her mother looked down at the table as if there was something important there. Her father looked directly at me, stern, studying me, the feel that the story had ended permanently.

Sometimes I remember that moment as her father speaking to me. Sometimes I remember that next moment as a remembrance of something her father had told her that he liked to say, but in my mind I can see him looking directly at my body, as if he wanted to speak to every part of me, and saying calm and steady, "The prophet said, 'There will come a time when holding on to your religion will be like holding a burning coal.'"

I excused myself, got up, and ran out of the restaurant. The sun was wearing its good clothes. It was warm and awake. The streets were the same, busy with the little suicides of traffic. I ran in the direction I knew she was heading, as if I could feel where she would want to disappear.

When I tugged her to me and kissed her under the clock tower, you could almost hear the bells before they'd even started. For a moment, you could feel gravity fading away.

We walked and she told me that her best friend Jade had texted her from Nantes. She was going to med school, doing final residency in ob-gyn. In France, they have something they call baby X, where mothers can give up their baby and the child has no right later to find out who the mother is. The mother is protected by law to remain anonymous. We sat on a bench, its strange carvings of what looked like a boy trying to shade his eyes from a nuclear explosion and next to it what looked like a thick flower trying to swallow the sun. She told me that they'd just had a baby X at the hospital and Jade pulled her shoulder area down on her scrubs to expose her bare skin and she held the baby to her like that. She said they would alternate for an hour or so, with nurses and even the doctor holding the baby, to protect it, to make it feel like it had people who would keep it safe, for its sanity, so that it would know it was loved. Zineb said that it was a moment where everybody felt on the same equal ground in the hospital, that the doctors and nurses gave the baby the same level of care because they knew how important those moments were, and, saying this, Zineb acted as if she had a baby in her arms, holding it close to her. I reached out to touch the baby too. □



FILM

Not All Artists Are Jerks

Javier Marías

A FEW DAYS ago, I caught a movie on television about Picasso, played by a good actor (Anthony Hopkins) and directed by a sensible director (James Ivory). And so I tried to watch it despite the ghastly dubbing (only now do we appreciate how good the old dubbing actors were), but after a quarter of an hour, I ran out of patience when I realized, yet again, that there are no films about artists in which the artist does not emerge as a cretin, a bore, a nincompoop, or an utter bastard, and often all of those things at once. I have often asked myself: are artists—we—the unbearable creatures who appear on the screen, or is this an unfair portrayal of them—us—intended to discredit them/us? Because it makes no difference whether it's a painter or a novelist, a composer or a movie director, a sculptor or a poet, an actress or a playwright, a dancer or a singer, a choreographer or a pianist or a conductor, or even, by extension, a scientist, a philosopher, or Dr. Freud himself. In these portraits of their lives, they all appear to have been either thoroughly unpleasant individuals or just plain tedious, and had we known them, we would never have read a single page they had written or looked at a single painting, or listened to a single note of music, or watched even one pirouette, because they were such irritating, idiotic jerks.

The few minutes I spent watching that version of Picasso made me hate the man: an arrogant, empty imbecile, a fairground iconoclast, a dim, fatuous buffoon, a loud-mouthed, sententious fellow, a "force of nature" (a category of people I particularly loathe), an aging and far from subtle satyr, a professional "fascinator" who failed to realize that no one found him fascinating. In short, a fool, someone to run a mile from the moment you spotted him in the distance, and whose empty brain could never have produced an intelligent brushstroke. And he is just one of many: I remember a tearful, hysterical Tchaikovsky played by Dr. Kildare; a brawny, bad-tempered Michelangelo played by Ben Hur; an incandescent Zola—ablaze with indignation—played by the man who was Al Capone, the great Paul Muni; a very sulky, violent Van Gogh with the dimpled Viking or Spartan chin of Kirk Douglas covered by a beard, accompanied by a Gauguin played by Zorba the Greek (Minnelli's movie was, nonetheless, magnificent); a limp, irksome Scott Fitzgerald played by Van Johnson, a part that fitted him rather

as a glove might fit a hoof; a Gaudier played by an actor who never really made it, but who had clearly studied drama at a center for epileptics; an Isak Dinesen with the accent of someone with her mouth full of cupcake; a dim, flabby Schumann, a rather grumpy, doltish Brahms, a flaccid, tearful Schubert, a Thomas More with the face of a jail-bird (which, after all, he was), and that poor Mozart called *Amadeus*, a long American nightmare—copied, moreover, from poor Pushkin—who, to add to his facial contortions, really should have been chewing gum; various cloying, not to say effeminate Chopins, some irascible, stupid Goyas, poolside Casanovas (although Casanova had more luck, being played magnificently by Mastroianni and Sutherland), a terrified Diaghilev and a demented Nijinsky, a Lorca like a flamenco *palmero*, proud or melancholy depending on his mood, a Hans Christian Andersen identical to Danny Kaye... In short, you felt like slapping them round the face right at the start of the movie, just to see if they would calm down and stop shouting. (To be fair, though, I do remember an excellent Toulouse-Lautrec played by José Ferrer.)

I know that many artists are or were unbearable. Some were mad (but no more than the members of any other trade, it's just that shoemakers tend not to be in the spotlight) and quite a few committed suicide. I know of one contemporary Italian novelist who gets up in the middle of a meal and flounces off, exclaiming, "I'm going to create." And I did once write about the very busy and overpopulated souls of artists, which, according to what they themselves say, contain creases, wrinkles, crannies, geographies, landscapes, abysses, precipices, children, rebels, stage sets, anarchists, ghosts, demons, and so many other things that I wonder how they all fit in or how they avoid colliding. I don't honestly know what to make of it. I can assure you that I don't tend to scream or succumb to hysterics, I don't suffer unspeakably (not even when I'm "creating") nor do I beat anyone up or attempt to pervert them, I don't make scenes or lie tossing and turning until dawn, nor do I insult my readers or those close to me. And given that movie directors are also artists and would not, one assumes, wish to denigrate themselves, I can only infer that I am simply not a proper artist. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)