**Arts Appreciation**

Of course, I live alone. It was not easy coming back to an empty apartment. I mean, I wasn’t totally on my own, not completely as an old maid; I was more like a widow. Malik was missing but remained a presence, a shadow figure, like a gangster boyfriend. Otherwise, what the hell was I doing? Nor did I always go out as myself, as Del, because I didn’t feel safe. In some places I was afraid, not because I wouldn’t pass as a woman but that I might. Women are much less safe than people would like to believe, and not because we are so alluring. It is because men hate us. Lots of men want to hurt women, and not only in America. It is worth considering that Jack the Ripper was a man and he liked to kill women. Not that fags have it easy, mind you; but fags, whatever else one may say, are still men. A lot of gays work out and can take care of themselves. They could handle a bunch of punks, theoretically, but that is not my point. It is my contention that men go after the most vulnerable, and women remain a target. Ladies first.

The media is right to take up the cause of gay bashing and homophobia; it is a real thing, don’t get me wrong, but I can’t help noticing from a different angle that some men have it in for women and it is that that often encourages the hatred of gays. I mean, there may be a link between misogyny and homophobia that is worth further study. There is, after all, no greater insult for a man than being called a pussy. At least in America. Gay bashing, wife beating, and trans attacks share a psychic thread. What I discovered to be one of the greatest fears of trans men and women is the wrath of men who have been made to feel their own masculinity questioned, undermined, or threatened. The mere existence of another man who dares to reimagine his own sexuality may set them off. For some, there seems to exist an invisible tripwire between trans passing and trans disclosure which may set them off. The slightest disturbance can do light the fuse. I have been with men, and I think most women have, too, whose psychic equilibrium is as delicate as a timebomb. As my mother used to say, you can step on their balls, but you had better learn to tiptoe.

Be that as it may, I am determined to go out on the town, but not to spend the evening on my knees. There is a time and a place for that. No, I wanted to see Edward Albee’s new play, *Three Tall Women*, and Houston has a very good theatre. A famous theatre.

I bought a new frock for the occasion and am dressing up. My weight is down so I am able to fit into the little number I found in River Oaks. I still have some Saudi money. I wouldn’t dream of shopping in River Oaks on my teacher’s salary. I barely make as much as the clerks at Neiman Marcus. If that was all I had, I’d have gone to TJ Maxx and spent hours combing through the racks looking for something on discount.

My first order of business is to get my ears pierced. I could leave with just a little thread to keep the holes open, but I plan to splurge. I’ll buy a pair of gold studs, very simple and, the sales clerk insists, elegant. It is important for me not to appear to be too extravagant when I return to school, so I pick up a cheap set on sale at Nordstrom Rack. One big difference I’ve experienced lately is that when I go back to the dressing area, nobody so much as blinks an eye. As a man I used to be followed and watched by Security.

The Alley Theatre is always full of women with money. Tons. Theatres in America have circular drives for the Cadillac set. I feel safe among the minks. Lots of widows, lots of blue hair. “The jungle is dark and full of diamonds.” The last time I attended the theatre was a while ago with our rowdy students. Never that, again. I’d rather take them on a tour of the sewers. I quite simply do not believe ghetto kids need Edward Albee. I don’t care what they say. It’s a noble thought but fallacious. Albee, whatever else one might say, is all about elitism. Rich snobs. Delicate, brittle humor. The unhappiness of the elect.

That play. I agree with that New York critic who said it looked to be a dull evening well into the first act, just pretentious blather, until something finally happened, and the thing took off in the second. Clearly, the high point is when the husband offers his wife a sapphire bracelet by draping it over his erect penis and approaches her dressing table. In this scene she refers to it with a look of disgust as his “pee-pee.” He walks over to her and gives her a little poke in the shoulder. “Go ahead,” he says, “Take it.” I could just picture the whole thing.

“Oh, no, I can’t do that!”

She breaks down over this memory, cries. Hubby is long gone. So is his erection. She refuses to take it, the cock, not the bracelet, so he lets it drop, and the bracelet slides off into the oblivion of her naked lap.

I had the impression the girls in the auditorium would have done anything for that bracelet. But the old ladies in the audience understood her scruples. They cheered her on.

By the end of the evening, my head was spinning. Why did women of that generation insist on making their husbands feel bad for wanting oral sex? The play is all about sexual repression and misery. A celebration of both.

The play points its disapproving finger at the old lady. She is racist, an anti-Semite. She married for money. She is a grotesque materialist who loves horses, diamonds, private schools, and golf. The audience looks down its social warrior noses, but at the same time identifies with the old bitch. I certainly did. (You go, girl!) Albee has his finger on the pulse of the American theatre audience that collectively clucks its tongue while looking forward to talking about oppression over dessert at the Four Seasons. It is not that I don’t disapprove of the old hag. I just don’t get why everyone has to feel so superior to her, including the playwright, who is said to have written the play with his own mother in mind.

It makes me feel foolish. It makes me wonder if these people had been with Eisenhower as he entered Buchenwald back in 1946, that, instead of becoming sick to their stomachs as Patton did, they might have broken out in a little self-congratulatory jig. This applies to everything. Moral superiority is killing us. This is why we are required to call the students little scholars without a trace of irony. It is frankly all too Bolshevik for me. Sanctimony sends people into a whirlwind of excitation. I just think at every turn American smugness is nauseating.

And then there was the field trip arranged by the Menil Foundation to its famous museum and their chapel which I’d recently been to on my own. We would be going on a pupil-free day, as part of our annual staff development. Couldn’t have picked a nicer day. The Menil is mind-blowing and I am more than happy to return to the world-famous Rothko paintings hanging in the chapel built specially for them. Of course, the place will be empty, as ever. The room is nothing, just bare concrete like underground parking. No postcards, no sliced brie or exotic beverages. It is all about the paintings.

Our principal is on a campaign against stragglers, so we are being assigned partners like little kids. We’d have to develop a lesson plan for our day back. I am partnered with a young math teacher from Chattanooga. I’d say she is a bright woman with a chip on her shoulder the size of a magnolia. She talks non-stop, even to the docent, a little blue-haired lady who, admittedly, makes all sorts of absurd statements, but Keisha seems determined to keep up a verbal battle with anyone and everyone she meets. Except me. I seem to have won her over by agreeing with every word she utters.

“It’s all about the money, not the population.”

The docent said something about outreach. Oh, boy, there is no point in that. Black kids don’t need to see all this, Keisha insists. I turn away to hide my smile.

“Let’s revert to the campfires. We’ll take up flints and arrows. We’ll make spears and pierce the heart of this so-called art. Smash it all; shred it; throw it into the sea.”

After a while, I start to hum along. The only time I say anything is to ask Keisha why it is that rich whites give their daughters names like Fanny. Her answer was priceless.

“Say what?”

“No. My aunt… My mother’s sister: Aunt Puss. When we were kids…she was our beloved Aunt Pussy.”

“Stop.”

This time she laughed.

“Speaking of campfires, I wonder if you caught the exhibition here last month of multi-cultural campfires from all over the world.”

“Just hush.”

We were getting along. I wasn’t a bit surprised. Southerners, blacks and whites, have a lot in common. We understand each other.

My new friend Keisha McCormick took one look at Mark Rothko’s Void #3 and wanted to vomit. She redoubled her gaze.

“I look at this painting but can’t find my people. I only see you. Where,” she demanded, “are my African-American brothers and sisters?”

I held my tongue.

“This is not part of my people,” she goes on. “We’re not at the center; we’re not even at the side. Why must I study this perversity?”

If she had spoken without humor, it would have been a grind, but to be fair, she said it while nearly doubled over. She just hated it.

“This is not Mississippi. The sexes may be mingling, but the races are splitting. In the future, Kanye West should be shown at the side of Mona Lisa.”

I am not sure my father would have agreed, but by habit I kept most of my thoughts to myself. Not so Keisha. She had me in stitches. She had the most vibrant manner. Her cheeks shone. She had one of those eggplant complexions. She was lovely, but she was over the top.

“If I can’t see my people, Del, I want my money back. You see what I’m saying? Get rid of it. Why should a museum be a sanctuary? It’s shit. Burn it, dump it. I don’t really care.” She, obviously, didn’t feel comfortable in a museum. In fact, Keisha, I couldn’t help observing, was not likely to have been a theatre-goer. Perhaps, like me, she preferred porn shops. Who knows?

What amazed me was how pleasantly she expressed the contempt she had for what I guess people still call the establishment, for want of a better term. But she graduated from Southern Methodist, that snooty college in Dallas; she is the product of the very things she claims to despise. I mean, it has to be the most expensive college in Texas, pure sorority, pure gentry, pure Southern belle. She’d never admit it, I know, but Keisha is just a snob. No less than Barbara Bush.

“We are radical practitioners of right thinking, determined to destroy Western Civilization. We must step back to move forward: first go the arts and the decorations, then the courts, the laws and institutions.” Her flippancy made me think she’d been talking like this since her freshman year in high school. Did she mean it? As long as she would get to keep her Subaru sports wagon, I suspected so.

By the time they’re through, I thought, there’ll be nothing left but vaginal jelly and sawed-off shotguns.

I am aware she was trying to get a rise out of me, but I knew not to say anything other than “right on.” I was no fool. I grew up with sulky tyrants. I didn’t believe in jeopardizing friendships over theoretical grandstanding. Politics in America consists so much of making pronouncements and doing absolutely nothing.

“We demand our thirteen percent. That’s how many of us there are. Thirteen percent or we’ll burn the art, set the museums to flame. We’re kind-hearted, loving and caring, all that, sure, but you give us the sculpture, or we’ll cut their necks. Oprah goes right up on that Sistine Chapel with, say, Brother Farrakhan and Michael. Until that day, it’s nothing but another ugly ceiling. This country needs new art. How about renaming the Grand Tetons after Malcolm? Or Michelle and President Obama, what about that? Both naked, in a golden chariot? That’d look cool next to Lady Liberty. That’s what I’m saying. Where is the people’s eternal flame?” I made a few weak statements. I mainly said I supported her right to request a refund.

“It’s all about the money, not the population.”

Thus, spoke Keisha. Her generation positively seethes with anger, directed, misdirected, and undirected. She’d say she couldn’t sleep as a child knowing there was injustice in South Africa. I didn’t believe her, but perhaps I lived in my own cynical bubble. Of course, Keisha might say I had been born with a silver spoon in my mouth. If true, that spoon was full of Campbell’s soup, more than likely chicken noodle, my all-time favorite.

I nodded in agreement as she ranted, figuring we still had the year to work together, but I was not persuaded. What was her final pronouncement? That the end of art is peace? This struck me as very American and, especially, Southern. It reminded me of Dallas, among the whites. Now it was here in Houston, voiced by a woman of color. I recalled as a boy noticing how they put boxer shorts on the Greek statues on display at the city museum, in a private collection on loan from a prominent family. Church leaders had objected to the sight of foreign genitals in the shape of a Greek’s uncircumcised penis. Just a few objected, but that was enough for the city fathers. They didn’t want nudes on display in repressed Dallas.

They figured gods and goddesses must have been up to no good if that’s how they dressed. The imagination ran quickly to debauchery. The city commissioner recommended that the Greek nudes be replaced by Native American artifacts found in Texas or Oklahoma, from Apache or Wichita plainsmen. Find something the kids can enjoy was the advice one frequently heard from arts bureaucrats with backing from big oil.

Meanwhile. the statues on display would remain clothed in appropriate attire selected by the Arts Council, said the mayor. Those involved seemed to have embraced the Nazi fear of art. This time I was hearing ideas expressed not by Southern whites but by an African American woman. She seemed to have adopted the aversion to self-expression found so often among Communists in thriving capital cities like Bucharest or Havana. Although, to be fair to Keisha, I recall that her objection had not been that Rothko painted cocks, which he didn’t, but to the fact that, if he had, they would have been white. I made a note to notify Keisha the next time the Menil scheduled a Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective.

Looking at art makes me horny. I found out about a little porn theatre not too far away and decided to drive by. I had been by before, but it was closed. I wasn’t too interested in the new department stores of depravity. Butt plugs on aisle eight? Please. I wondered about their returns policy. I found the small shop off the Hempstead Highway, an unfortunate distance from my usual stomping grounds. I hated to drive, so I doubted I would be back, but I was dying to check it out. Does one say low scale? Down scale? Sleazy? That would be just about right.

What I was wondering was what all the trucks in front of the store were doing. There

were too many big rigs for a lot this size. I wondered if the drivers were using the place as a rest stop. I felt nervous. I was becoming such a sissy. I was squeamish, I could feel it. I had to listen to Lou Rawls to stay cool. It was the makeup. I liked the idea of passing with a straight guy but not if it meant getting raped. Part of my femininization. My low testosterone. I felt vulnerable. One thing I missed was male fearlessness. I could take care of myself, but I hated the way women were treated, especially in parking lots.

My big surprise has been how much easier men have it than women, and that includes gays. Lots of men *hate* women. Hate. They object to the mere fact they exist. My favorite commentator Camille Paglia talks about the need for women to learn how to fend for themselves. She is absolutely right. The kindergarten school of thought takes as its premise the belief that if you are nice to men, they will be nice to you. It is Captain Kangaroo for adults. I have a fundamental difference of opinion from anyone who thinks like that. We both might begin with the assumption that the guy standing in the potato chips aisle at 7/11 is carrying a razor, but the *Romper Room* set believes that if you speak softly and let him by, he’ll put away his weapon. Where I come from, it is assumed, the closer you get, the more likely you are to get stabbed. You can try to cheer him up with a smile, but nothing would thrill him more than the moment he slits your throat. What was Camille’s famous line? “There is no female Mozart because there is no female Jack the Ripper”? We have to teach our daughters to watch out. Women used to know how dangerous men can be.