

## DEAD TO RIGHTS: CONFESSIONS OF A CARICATURIST

*... and all the nice people will only  
see the exaggeration as caricature.*

—Vincent van Gogh

### I. EARLY INFLUENCES

In kindergarten, when I presented her with a crayon drawing of the Empire State Building lit up like a Christmas tree at night, Mrs. Decker kissed my cheek, my first taste of artistic glory. By fifth grade I was drawing faces. At the lakeside summer camp where my parents sent me (called Silver Lake, though on the map the same body of water went by “Mudge Pond”), I sat with a nineteen-cent Bic and notebook at a picnic table and “did” everyone, portraits the size of postage stamps. My likenesses may have been hit or miss, but I was a hit. Thanks to my pen, I felt popular for the first time. Heather McGowan even agreed to go out on a canoe with me. (The canoe tipped over. Still, I felt triumphant.)

In high school I drew Mr. Blum, with his manatee nose and audacious comb-over, and Mrs. Standish, my French teacher, with her twisting Carvel cone of white hair. The teachers with a sense of humor praised my talent; the rest sent me down to Mr. Murillo’s office. Since I was of Italian lineage, like him, Principal Murillo found me *simpatico*. Seeing my latest artistic affront, he shook his bald head but could not contain a smile. “Pete,” he said, “in choosing your subjects you need to exercise more discretion.” On the other hand he had to admit that I’d gotten Mrs. Standish “dead to rights.”

To pin someone’s likeness to a page in a few deft strokes, to snatch not only their faces but their souls from thin air, to own them on paper, there was magic in it, something talismanic and even voodoo-like. In sketching them I distilled their essence, and could do with that essence what I pleased. Heady powers for a teenager.

My artistic gods were Vincent van Gogh and Mort Drucker. The first cut off an ear and painted burning cypresses under pin-

wheel skies at night. The second you would know if, like most late baby boomers, you grew up on *Mad* magazine. Drucker drew the movie satires, comic-book-style parodies of the latest films. If van Gogh was the god of color, Drucker was the god of line. What that man couldn't do with a pen and ink. With the faintest thickening of stroke he'd render the shadow under a nose or a shirt cuff. No one, not even Al Hirschfeld—whose style I found too “arty”—could better Drucker's likenesses. His Paul Newman looked more like Paul Newman than Paul Newman. He got their gestures, too: Brando scratching his jaw in *The Godfather*, Burt Lancaster clenching three rows of teeth, Cary Grant leaning ever so slightly, like the Tower of Pisa, Katherine Ross ever on the verge of tears.

Through high school I taught myself to draw just like Drucker, carrying notebook and pen with me everywhere. When friends got sick of my drawing them, I used photos of movie stars. After graduating, not knowing what else to do with my life, I took a job as the helper on a furniture truck and kept my notebook with me as we rode to Wappingers Falls to deliver a sleeper sofa, and to Great Barrington with a grandfather clock. The warehouse guys called me Leo, as in “Leonardo da Vinci,” and didn't mind my drawing them as long as I didn't make their beer bellies too big.

Going to art school felt more like a defeat than a decision. Drawing had been a personal, semi-intimate pleasure, with a tinge of naughtiness about it, like good sex. To expose it to pedagogy seemed a bad idea. My professors swiftly set to work to cure me of my bad habit, as if drawing caricatures were the equivalent not of sex but of nose-picking. My protests—that Leonardo, Daumier, Monet, and Picasso, to name just a few, had all been caricaturists—fell on deaf ears. An unrepentant sinner, I practiced my vice in secret, doodling likenesses of the model's face (we'd been instructed to ignore faces and genitals) on a corner of my newsprint pad, obliterating them with charcoal whenever the moderator came by. Telling me not to draw the model's face was like leading an alcoholic to an open bar with instructions to drink only ginger ale.

I tried to be good, I did, but always the impulse toward swift line and rude gesture defeated me. Blaustein, my painting professor, stepped up behind me one day in his studio and said,

“You know what you are, Selgin? You’re an artistic illiterate. Your paintings are all pat graphics and glib surface. They lack depth, struggle. You’ll never be a fine artist.”

Maybe Blaustein was right. Hell, I’d never even wanted to be a painter anyway. I hated the smell of turpentine and those little nubs in canvas like plucked chicken-flesh. I liked pens, ink, paper. I liked drawing; I liked to draw. For people like me, there wasn’t even a decent name, nothing that carried the artistic panache of “painter.” *Draughtsman? Drawer? Sketch artist?* Such was the prejudice of those who worked in pigment against those who expressed themselves by means of pure line.

But even fine art *drawers* looked down upon caricaturists, as they looked down on all those they lumped together as cartoonists: pen-wielding mercenaries, makers of comic strips and cartoons, frivolity for the hoi polloi. The closest thing to respect earned by such low enterprises came in the form of appropriation, with pop artists plagiarizing, blown-up on canvas, the labors of unsung comic book artists. If this was a form of flattery, it was booby-trapped. To accept it was to accept that the originals were anything but art. It took *real* artists to instill such works with a value beyond that of plebian amusement.

Around this time I met my hero, Mort Drucker. In despair of my low artistic status, I had written him a fan letter accompanied by a caricature of myself. He invited me to his home in a Long Island suburb, one of thousands of identical ranch houses clustered into a development, with water sprinklers spitting bows of water over half-acre lawns. Inside his house, in place of the bohemian wit, poetry, and irreverence I’d expected, I was met by the trappings of bourgeois conservatism, down to the framed Normal Rockwell print on the wall. It was the home of a shoe salesman. In Mort’s tidy studio, while I sipped a Coke on ice, he showed me the pens and paper he used, his kid-finish Bristol boards and Hunt crow quills. But by then my disenchantment was already complete. Superimposed over Drucker’s voice I heard Professor Blaustein sneering, *Artistic illiterate!* Later, at the train station as we sat together in his station wagon waiting for my train, Drucker smoked an illicit cigarette and confessed to me how at times he still couldn’t believe his fortune, that he could stay home drawing pictures while others toiled away at dull office jobs. Mort was a decent, modest, hard-working

man, and talented, but not the person I had hoped he would be, someone to legitimize my artistic passions, and I rode the train home feeling betrayed.

A week later, after another dispiriting afternoon in Blaustein's class, I flicked on the portable TV in my room and Richard Burton's pocked face filled the screen. In his deep Welsh baritone, he murmured something about "bergin," "bergin and water." As he murmured on, I kept watching, mesmerized. I watched the whole movie.

The next day at the Pratt Institute library, among its glass-floored stacks, I found a copy of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* There, in black and white, was the "bergin" speech. I sat down on the glass floor and read the whole play. That a bunch of tiny black marks on a page had held me so in thrall astonished me. By the time I turned the last page, I'd made up my mind. I was going to be a writer.

I quit art school and hitchhiked around the country. I still carried a notebook and pen, only now instead of faces I filled the notebook with words. Where drawing had led me only to surfaces, words (I promised myself) would take me deeper.

## II. FIRST COMMERCE

Still, I had to eat. I was twenty-five and had worked all the usual shit jobs—waiting tables and washing dishes in restaurants and driving trucks—when it occurred to me that I could live off my drawings of people. The bar where I was washing dishes down in Soho hired only struggling artists. It had an open kitchen and during slow periods, on the backs of bar dupes, I'd sketch patrons as they sat at the bar. We taped the results to a wall next to the chalk menu. One day a customer asked the bar's owner who'd done the sketches. The boss pointed my way. The man hired me to draw people at a party he was throwing. He paid me thirty dollars an hour, ten times my pearl-diving wage. I made a hundred bucks. A fluke, I thought then.

But then a few months later at a different job, this one at a copy shop, the same thing happened. Out of boredom I'd started drawing the other workers and our regular customers, putting their faces on display. It gave us all a laugh. The boss, Mr. Cheswick, didn't mind. He may have considered it good P.R.

One day a woman came into the shop, pointed to a sketch of mine, and said, "How much?" I turned to Mr. Cheswick, who held up five fingers. "Five dollars." The woman nodded. I did her caricature, put it in a bag, and rang up the sale on the register. Soon the store was making good money on my caricatures, and I felt entitled to a raise. When Mr. Cheswick said no, I got huffy and quit.

I put an ad in *New York* magazine's classified section, under "Entertainers": "THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL: Fabulous Faces by Peter Selgin." With my ex-coworkers' help at the copy shop, and in Mr. Cheswick's absence, I created a brochure to mail to potential customers. Soon I got my first job, at a wedding reception in New Jersey. I had to rent a car and a tuxedo. After subtracting for them, the job netted me fifty dollars. I was launched.

### III. DRAWING AN INCOME

For the next ten years I drew people at birthday parties, weddings, anniversaries, corporate events, and bar and bat mitzvahs. I worked at Sardi's, the Rainbow Room, the Four Seasons, 21, the Tavern on the Green, and Windows of the World. I was flown first-class to cities as far as Los Angeles, where, at a pool party in Beverly Hills, stars lined up for their likenesses. I drew my way across the Atlantic and back on the QE2, where I sketched the officers on duty on the bridge. When I sketched the captain standing in water up to his waist, he said, with a stiff British upper lip, "Hmm, don't like the look of that." In gratitude the navigator flashed me the secret coordinates of the freshly discovered *Titanic* wreck.

I averaged fifty gigs a year, booked mostly between November and January first. In those weeks I would make enough to carry me the whole year. I worked on yachts, trains, planes, and once on a private Learjet. I charged lawyer's fees, a hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour, sometimes more. I insisted on being treated not as an entertainer, but as a special guest. Once, at a party thrown by a young Wall Street trader who'd just banked his first million, I arrived at the front door to be told by a butler that I had to use the servants' entrance. "I'm not a servant," I informed him. "I'm a guest."

“All servants must use the servant’s entrance,” he repeated.

“In that case I hope you can draw,” I replied and handed him my kit bag.

He let me in.

Five minutes, that’s how long it took me to draw a caricature. Any longer would have been too slow. Like parts on an assembly line, the faces came and went. One face every five minutes, ten per hour, five hours per average gig, fifty caricatures per event. Times fifty events per year is twenty-five hundred faces; times ten years is twenty-five thousand—roughly the population of Aspen, Colorado, during high tourist season.

Some jobs were strange. Once my services were engaged by a guy who sought a novel way to propose to his girlfriend. Dressed up as a stereotypical French artist (striped shirt, beret) I sat, sketchpad in hand, on a bench in Central Park waiting for the couple to walk by. When they did, I all but assaulted the girl, saying, in my miserable French accent while framing her with my thumbs, “*Pardonnez-moi, mademoiselle*, but you have such a *magnifique* vision. Please to allow me to draw it, *s’il vous plaît*.” She demurred, but at her boyfriend’s insistence she eventually gave in. What she didn’t know was that the sketch had already been started and included a likeness of her beau genuflecting on the pavement in front of her. The image had scarcely registered when she turned and saw the real thing presenting her with a diamond ring. Since then I’ve often wondered, What if she had said no? What would I have done then? Given the money back?

Among the strangest events were what we called caricature “orgies,” at which a dozen party caricaturists, the best in town, were herded into a ballroom at the Ritz-Carlton or the St. Regis. We’d set up individual work stations, then the floodgates would open and our subjects would pour in by the hundreds, Japanese businessmen, usually. They’d spend the entire party going from station to station getting their caricatures drawn, collecting as many as possible.

#### IV. HOW TO DRAW A CARICATURE

To draw someone’s caricature is to grasp their essence, a Zen-like undertaking, archery with a pen. People would ask me:

What do you look for? Which parts do you emphasize? My answer: All, none. The whole, the gestalt, is what matters. As Max Beerbohm, who wrote as beautifully as he drew, said in his essay “The Spirit of Caricature”:

The perfect caricature (be it of a handsome man or a hideous or an insipid) must be an exaggeration of the whole creature, from top to toe. Whatsoever is salient must be magnified, whatsoever is subordinate must be proportionately diminished. . . . The perfect caricature is bold in its execution, simple and ingenuous to its beholder as a wild flower.

With caricature there’s no separating the parts from the whole, no chin except in relation to the jaw, no nose except in conjunction with lips and brow, no eyes without sockets, no hair without a skull grinning under the scalp. If someone sat before me with a jaw like an anvil, eyebrows like Lincoln’s, or a nose like a toadstool, there would be that moment of isolated appreciation—as one admires a single character in a novel—but then one steps back to take in the story as a whole. No caricaturist worthy of the name draws parts and then, like Dr. Frankenstein, stitches them together; everything exists as a fraction of some total. A good caricature never exaggerates or distorts for distortion’s sake but to get at the truth. Some of my subjects asked me to lie. “Leave out my freckles,” they’d say, or “Give me more hair” or “Don’t draw my double chin.” Such requests I never honored. It was like asking a surgeon to amputate a perfectly healthy limb. I, too, was bound by an oath, one best expressed by Picasso: “Art is the lie that tells the truth.”

How to draw a caricature? You start with mechanics, the basic forms: square, cone, cylinder, cube. Using these, you plot the basic features (using the eyes, or their positions, as guideposts: the double hubs of the wheel of the face), the head reduced to a set of geometric possibilities. From there you refine these basic shapes, ignoring superficialities like hair.

Then comes what I call *the moment*, and here no mechanical reductionism can penetrate. What happens then can be explained only by vague words like *magic* and *instinct*. As a horse knows its way back to its stable, the pen finds its way deep into the subject’s soul. It does so through the eyes. At first

the eyes are dead. But then, suddenly, if things go well, they flicker to life, and there on the page is someone looking back at you. Meanwhile the light has left the sitter's eyes—transposed, smuggled into the sketch.

As with the pianist who is only vaguely aware of his fingers, which seem to find the keys on their own, propelled by the notes that leap from the keyboard into his body—as if the piano were playing his fingers—so, too, with the caricaturist. Using the caricaturist's hand the subject's face “draws” its own likeness. All I had to do was find it on a sheet of paper with my pen, as Michelangelo found his David in a block of Carrara marble.

I'd start with a pencil—a mechanical one (no time for sharpening). In less than a minute, I'd have the proportions roughed out. The next four minutes were given to inking, using smelly felt-markers with wet, flexible, V-shaped nibs, working swiftly but with a jeweler's precision; at this stage blowing a line would shatter the diamond. Done inking, I'd wipe away the traces of pencil with a kneaded eraser, an object of fascination to adults and children alike, who assumed it was a dead mouse or some sort of talisman with which I waved the pictures to life. (I never disenchanted them.)

Then I'd show them the result. This was my favorite part, seeing the faces I'd just drawn light up first with surprise and shock and then—hopefully—with a smile as they recognized and laughed at themselves. To see people laughing at themselves is to see them truly happy, free from the weight of self-importance that bears down on them through most of their days. One thing I learned from doing caricatures: *nobody really wants to be taken seriously*. In fact they yearn to be relieved of their seriousness. This lofty goal I helped my subjects achieve.

#### V. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL

The hardest faces to draw were the dead ones, the ones with no light in their eyes. I mean faces with no trace of wit, the kind that Hollywood and Madison Avenue churn out like widgets and that so many sixteen-year-olds crave, with the same pouty lips, the same high or sucked-in cheeks, the same stingy nostrils. When one of those faces sat down in front of me, I'd let out a si-



lent groan, knowing I had my work cut out for me, and that the result was doomed to arouse only contempt and confusion in the wax figure whose insipid features I would soon replicate.

The best faces belonged to old men. Old faces, with plenty of nooks and crannies for me to dig my pen nibs into—if only they would sit for me! But I rarely got to draw them. I'd see them out of the corner of my eye while sketching someone less inspiring. Sometimes I'd see someone so irresistible I'd chase after them, wanting to taste some wine after guzzling gallons of tap-water-bland faces.

Drawing beautiful women was a challenge and a luxury. What better excuse to look into their lovely eyes? They weren't easy to draw, true, but for all the right reasons. Not because their features were model "perfect" (read: symmetrical), but because their features were less easily pigeonholed into geometric shapes, and soft skin lends itself far less well to hard lines; it would rather be brushed or blurred. I had to coax the beautiful ones to smile, they took their beauty so seriously. And though intrigued and aroused by some, I knew better than to ask for a date, since to them I existed only as a human drawing machine, a life support system for their likenesses.

I could tell much about people from drawing them. In five minutes, without their saying a word, I knew if they were happy or sad, content or frustrated, witty or dim, sensitive or numb, earnest or sarcastic. I knew them in ways their spouses and lovers might never know them. Their spouses and lovers had never drawn them.

## VI. ROOTS

The roots of caricature stretch back beyond written history, to the bovine drawings in the caves at Lascaux, drawings that certainly satisfy Baudelaire's definition of caricature as "a double thing; . . . both drawing and idea—the drawing violent, the idea caustic and veiled," and that anticipate Picasso's bull etchings by seventeen thousand years.

The walls of antiquity bristle with caricatures, the legacies of idle or confined men. In AD 79, a bored Roman soldier sketched a rudimentary but effective likeness of himself or a fellow sol-

dier on the wall of his Pompeii barracks. On jars and vases the Greeks caricatured their gods with as much vinegar as some of the amphoras themselves held, turning Apollo into a quack doctor and Chiron into a blind old beggar struggling up a rickety ladder to be cured by him as nymphs survey the scene from Parnassian heights.

Long before the Greeks, Egyptian caricaturists drew powerful men as beasts. One famous papyrus scroll shows a fox sitting on a throne, with a second fox waving a fan behind him, and a third presenting him with a bouquet of roses. Centuries later, in India, on the pages of the *Hindu Pantheon*, the god Krishna is presented as the jolly Bacchus, Don Juan of Indian deities, riding a palanquin formed by the bodies of his obliging female attendants.

The impulse toward caricature belongs to our most primal urges. Give a child a crayon and the first thing she draws isn't the sun or a house or even a picture of her mother or father, but a *caricature* of these things, an image so conceptually laden it's more symbol than duplication or representation. The word "caricature" derives from the Latin *carricare*, meaning "to load." Children's art is almost always "loaded" with their emotional responses to things at the expense of what their eyes actually see. Picasso dedicated his artistic life to recapturing and exploiting, often to shocking effect, the spiritedness of a child's loaded response to the physical world.

But long before Picasso, caricature informed the works of fine artists, from Leonardo da Vinci, whose improvised grotesque faces had toothless jaws and melting noses, to Hieronymus Bosch, whose surrounding figures in "Christ Carrying the Cross" echo Leonardo's grotesques. Near the close of the sixteenth century, Annibale Carracci applied Leonardo's exaggerations to true portraits, creating the first bona fide caricatures, inventing a new type of art to which he lent both his name and this bold defense: "A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself."

From Carracci, through Gian Lorenzo Bernini and others, the new art form reached Paris, where, in the mid-1800s, Daumier's indignant lithographs of pear-headed monarchs filled the pages of *Le Charivari*, a radical journal with a disgruntled bourgeoisie readership. Simultaneously caricature found its greatest ex-

ponent in Baudelaire, who, in his famous essay “On the Essence of Laughter,” called caricature the common currency of an advanced society and praised it for revealing the essentially contradictory nature of men, who are both divine and grotesque:

The laughter caused by the grotesque has about it something profound, primitive and axiomatic, closer to the innocent life and absolute joy. . . .

As I once emulated Mort Drucker, Claude Monet, long before he became the great painter of cathedrals and lily pads, emulated Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) and Etienne Carjat—the best caricaturists of his day. From Monet the technique spread to the Expressionists, to Max Beckman and Edvard Munch, whose “The Scream” is by any definition a caricature. From Munch one moves swiftly through Picasso to Miguel Covarrubias, whose caricatures enlivened the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* in the 1920s and ’30s, to Al Hirschfeld, whose drawings of Broadway stars graced the theater pages of the *New York Times* for seven decades. From Hirschfeld an even swifter stroke of the caricaturist’s pen leads us back to Mort Drucker and *Mad* magazine.

## VII. FAME

To make it as a party caricaturist you had to be not only accurate, but fast, *very* fast. People stood for hours waiting to be drawn by me. My popularity made me feel like a celebrity. And I dressed the part, in dazzling vests tailored from elaborate silk brocades, some costing more than a hundred dollars per yard, with buttons of ivory and gold, worn Tom Jones-like over a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. You would have thought that I was a faith healer, or the pope, the lines stretched so long. And I had nothing to offer my supplicants but their own faces.

When at the end of a long night I’d switch off my work lamp, the stragglers would beg me for “one more.” They’d throw money at me, twenties and fifties, even (if the straggler was rich and drunk) an occasional hundred. “Please!” they would plead. Occasionally people grew belligerent. One guy grabbed me by

the collar of my brocade vest, pulled me into his cigar-and-whisky-reeking breath, and said, “You gonna do me, or *what?*” Through constrained vocal cords I answered, “No, sorry.” I thought he was going to hang one on me. But he let me go and, with a look of resignation so absolute I could only pity him, slumped away.

Such power over doctors and lawyers and Wall Street financiers. I remembered high school and how, with a few flicks of my Bic pen, I had so easily unhinged my teachers. It was that same power now but in reverse. Now my *unwillingness* to sketch people unhinged them. My drawings had evolved into a sought-after commodity. What Mrs. Decker stole for a kiss in kindergarten, these high rollers now begged me for.

#### VIII. DISILLUSIONMENT, DISSOLUTION, DISEASE

To all this glory, however, there was a dark underside. Bringing up the rear of those endless lines of people wanting to have their faces drawn was the rest of my life, with all its deficits and failures, including a file cabinet stuffed with rejection letters for four novels and dozens of short stories. Writing—that was my *real* vocation. The caricatures were but a gross means to that noble end. I drew people as other would-be novelists drove cabs, washed dishes, and taught middle school English classes, to pay the bills. The brocade vests would come off and with them all the sparkling frippery of a music hall humbug. I hated being equated with gypsy palm and tarot readers, magicians, face-painters, and other so-called “party performers.” I was a writer, damn it. Only no one knew it but me.

Drawing people at parties took a physical toll, too. Among the hazards of the caricaturist’s life, in addition to eye-strain, deafening music (how I learned to *hate* DJs), sore backs, performance anxiety, and spending hours in a cloud of other people’s cigarette and cigar smoke, is the availability of free booze. I’d start with a glass of wine, a little something to thaw the ice on that first drawing, which was always a ball-buster, with the wait before Subject #1 sat down equivalent to the actor’s purgatory in the wings (though the wings of a stage don’t come with an open bar). And since I didn’t work well with food in my gut,

I'd restrict myself to a liquid diet, with wine giving way to gin and tonics, then to martinis, then to straight gin with some olives plunked in, my only solid food.

As the lines grew longer and longer, or seemed to, I found myself drinking not only to loosen my drawing arm, but to numb my senses. I was up to my third martini one night when a silver-haired, elderly gentleman sat down in front of me.

"So," he asked me as I sketched. "When you aren't doing this, what do you do?"

When I told him I was a struggling writer, he shook his head. "Oh, don't tell me. So was I. God, what misery! Do yourself a favor: give up now, while you still can!"

He took his caricature and left. But later, toward the end of the party, he returned, looking sheepish. "I take it back," he said. "Years from now, when you're my age, what would you rather say to your grandchildren? That you tried to write novels and failed, or that you were a stockbroker?" And he walked away as quietly as he'd come.

I drowned in my sense of failure, which I in turn tried to drown with free booze. I had reached the five-martini mark when my guts, already weakened by performance jitters, gave out on me. It wasn't just my stomach. I had started waking in the middle of the night with headaches that had me squirming on the floor. My ears squealed—a sound like rushing water—so loud at times I couldn't hear myself in speaking to others. My vision swarmed with amoebic floaters. It was hard to read, let alone write. Still, I kept drawing.

I was diagnosed with a peptic ulcer, anemia, and several vitamin deficiencies. My bowel movements turned mucoserous and bloody. A doctor ordered an MRI and a colonoscopy. The MRI was negative; the colonoscopy wasn't: ulcerative colitis, a supposedly incurable disease of the large intestine, a precursor to cancer.

I cut out the booze. But my symptoms persisted and multiplied. I suffered panic attacks. As in the movies where the dramatic scenes are often accompanied by loud violins, these attacks were accompanied by a little voice whispering to me, over the squeals and hissing of my ears, "*He took his life*"—not a bulletin, a suggestion. The gentle matter-of-factness with which my unconscious dispensed this advice, like a doctor prescribing

a pill, was as upsetting as the prescription and the little voice itself, a voice I grew to hate the way a rhinoceros must hate those pesky little birds that flit about its great head.

#### IX. XYLENE

During my last holiday season, at a party at the restaurant 21, one of my subjects suggested that something other than stress, booze, and cigarette smoke might be to blame for my deteriorating condition. As I sketched her, she waved a polished hand in front of her face and said, “God, how can you stand it?”

“What?”

“The *smell*. It’s so *strong!*”

At first I didn’t know what she was talking about. Then I realized what she meant: the sweet, pungent aroma of xylene, a chemical solvent commonly used in felt marker pens. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d smelled it. For ten years I’d been sitting in a cloud of the stuff, pumping my lungs and blood full of its toxic fumes.

The next day I consulted a book called *Health Hazards Manual for Artists*, in which I read that xylene exposure, even for short periods, is known to cause headaches, dizziness, lack of muscle coordination and confusion, and even to affect one’s sense of balance. Short, concentrated periods of exposure can irritate the skin, eyes, nose, and throat, and can lead to respiratory problems, memory lapses, digestive ailments, and changes in liver and kidney function. Repeated, frequent exposure over a period of years can have drastic and permanent effects on the nervous system, with symptoms including but not limited to fatigue, poor coordination, difficulty concentrating, loss of memory, and personality changes (increased anxiety, nervousness, irritability). At high levels, xylene has even been known to cause unconsciousness and death.

Probably not coincidentally, around this time the pens I’d been using were suddenly withdrawn from art store shelves, replaced by alcohol-based markers with similar felt nibs but that dried out twice as quickly and were less versatile. I couldn’t draw with them. Before I’d read about the xylene, and thinking that I was doing myself a favor, I bought up as many of the

discontinued markers as I could find, over a hundred of them. After discovering that they were poisonous, I wasn't sure what to do. I hated to waste them. But then it dawned on me that a good caricature may have been worth many things, but dying wasn't one of them.

#### X. THE LIE THAT TELLS THE TRUTH

It was an old woman who looked like Winston Churchill gone bad, not a chemical solvent with the name of a far-off galaxy, that made me throw in the towel. God, was she ugly. Her face was baggy and bloated, with a glistening, rubbery lower lip and cheeks filigreed with capillaries, a thinning scalp, and rheumy, cataracted, crossed eyes. A wart sprouted from the tip of her nose, its hairs as white as corn silk. I loved old people's faces, so craggy and character-suffused, but this was too much of a good thing. For the first time in ten years, I panicked. I didn't know what to do. Usually, I could find something redeeming in a face, some trace of warmth or joy or humor or wit, something affirmative to lubricate my pen. But when someone's face simply repulsed me, my drawing arm would grow cold and stiffen and my pen nib would run dry, or seem to.

In his "Christian Morals," Thomas Browne writes, "When thou lookest upon the imperfections of others, allow one eye for what is laudable in them." As soon as this old woman sat down, I knew that I was in for it. With a million eyes I'd have found nothing laudable in her looks.

There was only one thing to do, something I'd never done before. I had to violate the Caricaturist's Oath; I had to lie. I deflated that balloon-like lip, realigned those rheumy eyes, snipped the hairy wart off her nose, wiped away the web of capillaries staining her cheeks. I traded in my caricaturist's license for a set of diplomatic plates. Finished, I forced a smile and showed her the result.

The old woman's face, ugly to begin with, turned hideous. "That doesn't look one bit like me!" she snarled. And though I'd heard those words before, many times, this time was different; this time I knew they were true. My lie had succeeded only in exposing the truth: that I found her so ugly I couldn't bring

myself to be honest. The woman had seen this and been rightly offended by it. For that reason alone I should have liked her; I should have begged her forgiveness. But now it was too late. She refused her portrait and walked off, shaking her mangy head.

At the open bar I ordered a martini, my first in two years. I was celebrating.

I'd drawn my last caricature.

The next day I threw all my markers, xylene- and alcohol-based alike, down the compactor chute. I folded my brocade vests into a trunk. I swore I'd never "do" another face. I took a job teaching creative writing at a Manhattan school known for its ubiquitous yellow plastic promotional kiosks. I went from earning lawyer's fees to earning a teacher's pay. Except for a doodle here and there, I've kept that vow.

#### XI. ON NEVER FORGETTING A FACE

Little evidence remains of those years. The few drawings and brochures I've kept from then are tucked deep in dark closets and drawers. I never show them to anyone, nor do I speak of that career, not because I'm ashamed of it, but simply because it no longer feels like anything to do with me. Someone else wore those glitzy vests and sucked those heady marker fumes. The twenty-five thousand plus caricatures I did? Gone into cheap frames or photo albums or garbage cans—or just plain gone, Tibetan sand paintings, swept away.

I loved doing caricatures, but it was the kind of love slaves have been known to feel for their masters. As talents go I didn't own that one; it owned me. It was like some bright bird of exotic plumage that had flown into my window and that could be kept alive only by feeding it bite-sized chunks of myself, starting with my soul and ending with my liver.

Now and then I run into a past subject. Having drawn a face, you never forget it, any more than you forget the face of someone you've made love with or been intimate with in some other way. They don't forget me, either. "I remember you!" they run up to me saying. "You drew me at a party once, remember?" We shake hands, or hug, even.

I have no idea where or when the party was, or what the oc-



casion was, or what—if anything—we may have talked about. I have no idea, really, who they are. But I remember their mouths, their noses, their ears, their cheeks, the clefts in their chins, the slope of their foreheads, the way their earlobes join their jaws, and their eyes. Mostly, I remember their eyes.