

DRIVING PICASSO

PICASSO CANNOT DRIVE. He finds cars too amusing. I chauffeur him in a lagoon blue open-roofed '37 Fiat Topolino "transformabile" (two passenger, four-cylinder, top speed fifty-five miles per hour). From the sinkholes and mudslides of an unusually wet Hollywood, we make our way south, more or less, toward the Colombian Andes with their terrifying switchbacks (which my boss won't find terrifying; switchbacks amuse him, too).

The year is 1952. I am thirty-two years old and already convinced that I have botched my life. The ad in *Variety* said, "Artist seeks driver for journey of unspecified duration. Should be fresh faced and impressionable. Draftsmanship a plus but not required. Driver's license indispensable. Will provide means." I responded immediately as I'd lost my shoe store to the bank and creditors and groaned at the prospect of going back to work for Morton Cheswick at his Little Red Shoe House. I groaned for the following reasons:

1. I'd worked for Cheswick for eight years, starting in high school at sixteen.
2. The Little Red Shoe House is built to look like a giant saddle shoe, and its clerks wear conical green hats.
3. My father and I lived there, in a small apartment on the upper floor, and I hated the thought of working a flight beneath my home.
4. Cheswick is a cigar-chewing money-grubber who fancies himself royalty because he once sold a pair of white buck oxfords to Jimmy Stewart.

It takes us forever to leave L.A. Every twelve yards we stop and sniff at something. Following six days of rain my hometown is as lush as Rousseau's jungle. Rain drips from palm trees lining the boulevards; the sky is a fuzzy gray blanket. Under my 260-plus pounds the Topolino sags perilously to port.

Under a cloud-stuffed sky Picasso and I set up our easels and paint. One doesn't think of Picasso as a plein air artist. Picasso eats preconceptions for breakfast, and paint outdoors he does, with an amateur's brio and inconspicuous talent, the sort of canvases you'd put your foot through at a flea market. Does it shock me to see the creator of *The Frugal Repast* give rise to Sunday paintings as bad as Winston Churchill's? But I've been with Picasso for three days — long enough not to be too shocked by anything he does.

"Sincerity is not a moral issue but an aesthetic one," he says, putting finishing touches on a view of Hollywood from Griffith Observatory. Having detached the painting from its stretcher, he rolls it still wet (nothing dries in this damp) into a tight tube and

shoves it into the Topolino trunk among a dozen other rolls, some mine. Picasso insists that we paint together, though I'd rather just watch. I especially like watching him mix colors. No one mixes colors like Picasso. Excluding my failed animator father, I haven't known many painters; I grew up in Hollywood. But it's a sure bet most don't mix colors the way Picasso does, the brush a blur as it gathers pigments from light to dark, blending them with a deft twist of his wrist, but never thoroughly.

"The real mixing," Picasso says, tapping his temple, "occurs here. But you know that, don't you, Maestro?"

Picasso calls me "Maestro." At first I assumed that he was calling me Monstro, after the whale in Pinocchio — a crude joke, given my weight. But the real joke is that I am the farthest thing from an artist. I sell shoes for a living, or used to. I had my own store on Gower Street: *Cancellation Shoes, Brands You Can Trust at Prices You Can Afford*. Except for measuring feet, I have no talent (as it is I relied heavily on the Brannock device).

Picasso disagrees. He's seen my napkin sketches and says I have potential. "You have a gift for caricature, Maestro," he told me over a Howard Johnson's breakfast yesterday. "The great ones were all caricaturists. Van Gogh, Daumier, Rembrandt, Da Vinci . . . A good line should carry not only the form but an opinion about the form."

We tear ourselves from the latest swatch of scenery and drive off, my boss singing "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" at the top of his considerable lungs, getting the lyrics all wrong. As a counter-measure I belt Maurice Chevalier songs in my abysmal French, memorized from scratchy albums my dad would play on the Victrola in his bedroom studio while trying mightily to trace Donald Duck's contours to Mr. Disney's specifications.

The sun breaks through clouds. I have only a vague notion where we're going, gained at the top of our journey as we pulled out of the used-car lot on La Brea, where, after days of searching, we discovered our less-than-ideal method of transport under a butter-colored tarp. The Topolino needed only a fresh battery and lubrication. With the top down (it leaks anyway) and the painter of *The Family of Saltimbanques* holding an umbrella over our heads in heavy traffic, I was supplied with the rudiments of our mission, something about an expatriate saint living in a monastery above the equator and below the third parallel, a Sister Maria del Something-or-Other, who once performed on Broadway in her own musical review. This, of course, was before she renounced showbiz, joined the Order of Our Lady of the Andes (a Carmelite order), conceived immaculately, and lost one or both of her legs to a mountain lion — or was it a *Puma concolor*?

Picasso couldn't be sure.

Since then I've been wary of asking questions. Know your place, Son, my father — who could not color or trace within the lines — told me, his only child, always. And I took his advice, genuflecting before my store patrons day by day, applying their knobby, stinking, swollen feet to Mr. Brannock's gauge, squeezing the places where toes should and shouldn't be.

Between song numbers Picasso urges us onward, saying, "Forward, forward! Más allá! Andale!" We leave San Gabriel's mountains behind and make for Joshua Tree National Monument — fine with me, a sucker for deserts, especially one with trees out of the funny pages. Sometimes I think my dad went into animation just to please me, his cartoon-loving son. If not for my love of *Popeye* and the *Toonerville Trolley*, he might have made

a fine carpenter or dentist, or unleashed himself completely and gone abstract, or expressionist — or both. But he wished to please me, his fat boy, to make me happy. Is it any wonder I blame myself for his literal downfall, tumbling back-first down the stairs to my storage room under an armload of shoes?

“You should paint a picture,” says Picasso. “You could call it, ‘Father Descending a Staircase.’”

For Picasso the desert is a toy store, burlesque show, and three-ring circus, all in one. He can’t get over God’s whimsy, his variations on a theme of roots and water. I try to fill him in on some of the cacti’s more salient scientific features; how they are capable of holding more than eighty times their weight in water; how, like starfish and octopuses, their limbs not only regenerate when shed, they form whole new root systems where they fall. When threatened, they spew their needles, sometimes at speeds exceeding those of the fastest major-league pitchers, including Satchel Paige, whose fast balls are said to reach ninety miles per hour.

Picasso’s interest in science is null. He grasps only form.

“God — the caricaturist!” he muses.

When not sketching with pen in notebook or with fingers in the air (conducting a symphony of line), he uses his body as implement. As we soar past barrel cacti, he hunkers in his seat, arms tucked to his chest, compacting himself into a prickly ball. When the saguaros appear, he stands, throwing his limbs this way and that, seizing their forms. Even rocks and sand aren’t exempt. Tumbleweed, jackrabbit, boulder, he apes them all. To ride with Picasso is to ride with all creation in the passenger seat.

From clouds of desert dust the Joshuas leap out at us, puffy branches raised like banditos’ arms as Picasso waves pretend six-shooters at them. We park the goat (Topolino means “little

mouse” in Italian, but Picasso calls it the “goat”) and walk, carrying easels, a blanket, and a picnic basket into the park. As deserts are meant to be, it’s hot. At 260-plus pounds, even in mild weather I sweat like a sausage. We take off our shirts (Picasso wears his trademark blue and white striped *chemise marinier*; I wear a white button-down, tie dispensed hours ago) and tie them around our waists. We come upon a field of purple sage puddled with yellow flowers.

“Ça va,” says Picasso.

We lunch on jug burgundy and spongy slices of Wonder Bread spread to pieces with Skippy. Picasso loves peanut butter, can’t get enough of the stuff. “Es un milagro,” he says, prying some from his teeth. Though he spices his speech with foreignisms, his English is good — too good, I’d say, having bargained for more idiomatic improvisation, that reckless freedom of syntax only strangers can bring to our tongue.

“The problem with life,” he says, his tongue thick with peanut butter, “is that it must be lived in chronological order. That is God’s great blunder, one of his great blunders. Imagine if time weren’t tunnel visioned, if we could approach our lives from more than one direction, if there might be a flashback here, a flash-forward there, as in a good novel. But no: instead we get this one-way journey — as plodding and monotonous as the stretch of road we were just on. To make matters worse, we have to view the road in hideous three-point perspective — as if driving into a tunnel isn’t bad enough! It’s not even a tunnel; it’s a funnel, narrowing as it goes, squeezing us until we turn into a point and die. To hell with perspective, I say! To hell with chronological time! Let us drive backward and sideways; let’s go through life inside-out and upside-down, with our colors reversed, too, while we’re at it.

I'm sick of that blue sky; aren't you sick of that blue sky, Maestro? Let's turn it chrome yellow, or purple, or a combination! Stripes! Polka dots! Why not a paisley sky? Or a Tartan plaid? As for this gravity business . . . *merde*, don't get me started on gravity!"

Lunch over, the colors of the sky deepening overhead, we stab the sunset with our brushes. But we've had too much wine. "To paint a drunken sky one must be sober," Picasso says, putting away his brushes.

Back at the goat my boss takes out one of his "road maps." These are not maps, really, but drawings he has made in advance of our excursion, bright squiggles, loops, curlicues, and swirls of primary crayon color — red, yellow, blue — on Manila construction paper, the kind used in kindergarten. His "schematics," Picasso calls them. He consults them, brow furrowed, tracing a stubby finger along a rosy contour, nodding, saying, "Comme ça." Meanwhile genuine road maps, courtesy of various trusted oil companies, gather darkness in the Topolino glove compartment, appreciated only as visual poetry.

"So, where to next?" I ask, donning my chauffeur cap — a 1948 Sinclair Championship Baseball Team cap — jamming the car into gear.

"Suivez le piste rouge!"

I lift my snakeskin-topped stubby (I've always favored cowboy boots, since seeing Gary Cooper in *High Noon*) off the clutch, floor the throttle. We spin away in an amber cloud. My boss prefers that we drive through the nights and sleep by day, in the mornings with the air still cool. The Topolino's headlights barely dent the night. No matter, with only desert passing and no cars on either side of us. We drive through outer space. My cargo fires up

a Gauloise, thrusts it high into the air, and points to the rearview mirror, where a comet's tail of golden sparks flickers away into darkness.

"You'll set the desert on fire," I warn.

He nods up at the star-dazzle. "Let God play with his own cigarettes!"

We're still headed south: this much I know from the shapes of the constellations overhead. To keep from falling asleep we play Twenty Questions. It's the boss's favorite game, one of his favorites. *Animal, vegetable, or mineral? Does it come in different colors? Can you roll it? Does it have a handle? Is it bigger than a bread box?* Mostly, Picasso dispenses with questions, blurts his guesses into the wind. *Periscope! Aubergine! Platypus!* "Admit it, you were thinking of a platypus just now! Don't deny it — I see it in your eyes!"

At dawn's break we search for lodgings. Picasso has a thing for motor inns, the kind with a dozen or so discrete units or "cottages" arranged in a crescent around the parking lot, or a kidney-shaped pool, in which case we avail ourselves of its overly chlorinated waters as both prelude and epilogue to sleep. My employer doesn't say "sleep." He says, "Let's fire up the dream furnaces, eh?" — though I gather this is only a crude approximation of the Andalusian original.

While carrying luggage into Cottage no. 12 of the Yucca Valley Motor Court, I notice something in the car parked in front of the cottage next door. The big, smooth brown car — a Melmoth, a make unknown to me — looks familiar, and I remember it overtaking us on the highway earlier. Its engine purrs; its headlights are on. A radio plays inside. A shadow moves within, and I peer to see a girl in the backseat, her face tinged yellow from the porch

light (all the cottages have identical yellow porch lights). She sheds golden tears. As she wipes them with a wrist, she catches me watching her; her face freezes into a wet blur. I consider tapping on the glass, asking, is everything okay? when Picasso nudges me with his suitcase, and we press on to our cabin.

Contrary to folklore, Picasso isn't much of a swimmer. When he does the crawl, his arms flail wildly, slapping the water like beaver tails. His kick is counterproductive. If there are born backstrokers in this world, he's one of them, spewing tall jets at morning clouds. Despite my weight, or thanks to it, I'm good in water — better than on dry land, my body its own raft. Doing a dead man's float, I can read the newspaper without getting it wet. While Picasso spews, I do my twenty lengths, trying to swim a straight line — no mean feat in a pool shaped like an internal organ. Finished, I barely breathe hard. This annoys Picasso.

“How can someone so fat swim so well?” he asks, indignant. I think of all the answers I might give, such as that whales swim very beautifully. But I know my place.

That's when I see her, the girl, the one who'd been crying in the car. Wearing cutoffs and carrying her sneakers, she walks over and sits by the pool's edge, dipping a scarlet toe in the water, watching the ripples flow. There is that pleading, desultory look again on her face. Seeing me look at her, Picasso winks over his newspaper. His hand says, “Go on and talk to her, coward!” My frown answers, “She's scarcely sixteen, pervert!” Our mute argument is cut short by the man who stands in the doorway to cabin no. 13, wearing a suit, calling to the girl, his voice hypercultivated and vaguely European. With the air of a prisoner off to the gallows, the girl picks up her sneakers and joins him.

With a soft click the cabin door closes. The yellow light goes out.

“Mariquita,” says Picasso. Translation: “ladybug.”

Despite it being daylight outside, Picasso sleeps with the light on and the curtains drawn. He wears silk pajamas, green and gray stripes. Item: Picasso snores. The other night I heard him talking in his sleep. He said, “Proximidad.” He gets up five, six times a night. I hear him emptying his bladder and gargling. Newsflash: the inventor of synthetic cubism has an enlarged prostate.

I know all this because my father had an enlarged prostate and because I’m an insomniac, descended from a long line of sleep-deprived antecedents, including my dad. One night, when I was six years old and both of us couldn’t sleep, my father whispered in the dark from his bed (his wife, my mother, died in childbirth). He told me the story of a noble Austrian family related somehow or other to the Hapsburgs, whose members one by one contracted and died of familial fatal insomnia, an extremely rare disease resulting from — depending on which authority one appeals to — either exposure to cannibals or to ergot poisoning (ostensibly from a contaminated loaf or loaves of rye). The disease, my father said (his whispers slipping and sliding through the darkness into my ear), took between three and twelve months to claim its victims, during which time they suffered spectacularly: precipitous weight loss, loss of concentration and coordination, nervous twitching, deficits of both short- and long-term memory, difficulty distinguishing between reality and dreams, copious tears, murderous rages, despair, depression, delusions, dementia, and — finally, mercifully — death. In the case of the Austrian

Hapsburgs, the victims all hallucinated that they were being eaten alive by white tigers.

No one could convince them otherwise.

They died of horror and exhaustion.

This was my father's way of comforting me in my sleeplessness.

We lived alone in our cramped cold-water studio above The Little Red Shoe House. The smell of shoe leather, with that of Cheswick's cigars, wafted up through warped floorboards. We were as poor as we were not because my father had too little talent but because he had too much. He could not color between the lines or trace them faithfully. With a bulging portfolio and hat in hand, he went from Disney (whom Dad dubbed the Antichrist) to Warner Brothers to Max Fleischer Studios and back. But every time they gave him a chance, my father blew it by "improving" on the characters he was asked to color or sketch, making them in some little way his own despite his best efforts to honor their originators. He did not know his place, my poor father. Others his age would soon march off to the war and would gladly have taken *his* place (like me, Dad had flat feet, though he was not fat); they would have happily marched in step with Disney or anyone else — provided they didn't have to do so through a field pocked with land mines.

One day I stood by the drafting table watching my father draw a whale. Taped to his light board was the model he was to have followed slavishly, but being my father he enhanced the prototype, transforming Monstro from a sober, lumpy sperm whale to a grinning, jovial baleen. When they saw the result, naturally the people at Disney fired him. But when the movie debuted a year later, in 1940 (I was eleven years old), there was my father's

whale brought to Technicolor life on a wide screen: the grinning Monstro children of all ages have come to love.

He could have sued but didn't. He made no effort to claim credit. In the dark, through smells of shoe leather and Cheswick's cigar smoke, my father's whispers found me: *Know your place, Son, know your place . . .*

Eating any meal with Picasso is a tricky business, with some foods to be avoided at all costs. Breakfast, served twenty-four hours a day at most roadside inns, presents particular challenges. Two eggs fried sunny-side up and served with a crisp strip of bacon will send him into paroxysms of laughter, especially should the bacon be placed in a horizontal line at the plate's leading edge to form a straight face. Cornflakes are okay, but never, *ever* with sliced bananas or fat strawberries (Rice Krispies, it goes without saying, are out of the question). I'm also careful to order foods that won't tempt the sculptor in him — ruling out oatmeal and hominy grits. (At first, silver-dollar pancakes were permissible, until my boss discovered he could make mobiles out of them.)

I've nothing against watching the master work; on the contrary, I wish my dad, who kept a print of *Night Fishing at Antibes* above his drafting table, were here to see it. But Picasso goes too far; he can't leave anything alone; he's an engine in need of a governor. He reminds me of my father, though in my father's case not sketching within the lines did him in, while it has made Picasso a legend. This angers me.

For myself I order the Hungry Man Breakfast Special. I know I'm a glutton; I can't help it; I feel safe within my layers of fat. For Picasso I order an English muffin, resigned to his doing some-

thing outlandish to it. Sure enough, with the grape jelly he paints an equestrian Don Quixote into the nooks and crannies.

“Stop playing with your food!” I say.

“Pourquoi pas?”

“Because — restaurants are for eating,” I say with a mouthful of pancake.

A smirk breaks over Picasso’s bad-boy face, lights up his binocular eyes. He likes getting me angry. Thanks to him, I’ve broken my code; I have forgotten my place.

“Eating is your *métier*, Maestro, and one at which, may I say, you are clearly as prolific as you are accomplished!”

Just this side of the border we encounter the Melmoth again, this time at a Texaco service station. Have they been following us, or are we following them? As I pull alongside it the girl plunges a finger deep into her mouth and with its glistening tip writes “Help!” on the window, the *e* and *p* both backward. I’m now convinced that she is in serious trouble, and just as convinced that I am the one to do something about it. But I am a fat former shoe salesman and know my place. With its tank full and the girl’s pleading face pressed to the glass, the Melmoth mumbles off down the highway.

Attracted by colorful serapes flapping in the breeze, Picasso has me pull into one of the countless Mexican tourist shops. He buys us both ponchos and sombreros, the latter doomed to blow off our heads on the highway. From tavern doors music blares into the *zocalo*, to mix with the dust and wind dancing there. My employer insists that we dance in our ponchos, taking my arm and salsaing me as tourists gather to watch, along with a group of tawny teenaged boys, barefooted and twirling strands of straw

in their mouths. The crowd thickens. Choosing a woman from among the spectators, Picasso makes me dance with her. I don't like dancing; I've never liked it. I sweat too much, for one, and even squeezed into pointy, high-arched cowboy boots, my feet are too big and flat. My partner is likewise obese, which I'm sure was planned. She's also drunk and wears great gobs of perfume and jewelry, so many bracelets she rattles. She leads, probably because I can't, making it no less humiliating. She sweats more than I; her breath stinks of garlic and alcohol and something bacterial. Picasso watches, clapping his hands and shouting, "Olé!" like he's at a bullfight, with me the toreador. Why doesn't the SOB dance himself? I wonder, grown dizzy. Must I do this for him, too? Why? So he can laugh at me? So he can find *me* amusing? Dust clouds eddy and swirl, rising to mix with the sweat on my limbs. Every time I step on her toes, my partner cries, "Aeyaaa!" provoking peals of laughter from the crowd and especially from my boss, who throws back his cannonball head and laughs louder than anyone.

As I collapse into the sidelines, Picasso grabs a girl from the crowd, sweet-faced in rolled, tight pink pants, brown hair avalanching to an impossibly slim waist. In my dizzy state it takes a moment to realize it's the girl from the Melmoth. For once she's not crying; she's laughing, thrilled to tango with Picasso — though for sure she has no idea who Picasso is. With a metal-bending glare in his eyes the father of *Demoiselles D'Avignon* toggles her back and forth across the dusty square. He's showing me up, proving he's got bigger *sopladores* than I, swinging his bull balls in my sweaty face. When the hypercultivated European reclaims his quarry — thundering across the impromptu ballroom and, with a perfunctory curtsy, snatching her off — I expect the adamantine

Spaniard to put up a fight. But no, he goes on tangoing himself, the stubby prick.

Disgusted, I buy oranges at a stand and head back to the Topolino, where, a few minutes later, Picasso finds me peeling one and offers his assistance.

“Thanks, I can manage.”

With a shrug he takes another orange and peels it, all of a piece, the rind spinning away in a bright, leathery zigzag. He spreads the segments like petals, turning his orange into a juicy sunflower. In his hands nothing maintains its integrity. Will I maintain mine? Have I got any to maintain?

I toss what’s left of my orange into desert shrubs.

“Are we going to find this saint, or what?” I say.

“You mean Sister — ” He says the name again, and again I forget it. “We will get there, Maestro. Patience!”

“I’m in no hurry,” I say. “I thought you might be, that’s all.”

“Why? She is an exiled nun living in an abbey with one or both of her legs missing. She will wait.”

“What will you do when you find her?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask just that. I’m going to paint her portrait. She is said to be the most beautiful of all women. She makes the Mona Lisa look like a pig. And yet she has never had her portrait painted. Can you believe it? Only from memory and imagination, since she refuses all requests to sit for her likeness. Many artists have tried; none have succeeded. Picasso will succeed. He has painted the ugliest woman in the world, and now he will paint the most beautiful. It is destined.”

Zooming (if forty-five miles per hour qualifies as “zooming”) down the Central American coast, blue mountains to our left,

blue ocean to our right. I white-knuckle the steering wheel, chewing on my silence, seeing my father's face as he climbs up the stairs of the storage room in my shoe store. His eyes go blurry, then blank. He stares at me, his irises twin polished buttons of lapis lazuli. The stack of shoe boxes teeters. For three months he's been working for me, doing his best while draining the dregs of dignity. He's only fifty-five. The shoeboxes fall, but not before my father, back-first down the stairs. I cry out, *Dad!* At the bottom of the stairs I find him crumpled and covered in shoes, attacked by them, kicked to death, clobbered by brown, size-12 wingtips. Dark blood trickles from his right ear — or is that (I hope against hope) shoe polish? From here on (I don't say or think, but *feel* as I kneel close by him) life will be different. I'll have to take care of him, to dress and feed him, to walk him to the bathroom and back, to change the bedsheets when he soils himself. I'll read to him from books that he may or may not understand; I'll draw pictures, search for signs, see nothing. The shoe store will go on the block. At first I'll try to keep running it, but then I've got to find a nurse for my father, and deal with managers who screw me and can't keep inventory worth shit, and soon it's all too much. I don't sleep. I'm short tempered with customers, who stop coming. The store loses money. My creditors write, telephone, knock. I find that I can no longer tolerate people's feet. I put the store up for sale and get one offer, from Cheswick. I let the bank foreclose: a mistake; Cheswick buys it from the bank, and at tremendous savings. I find work as a counterman at Schwab's Drugstore, the job Lana Turner supposedly held when Mervyn LeRoy discovered her. No one discovers me, the sweatiest soda jerk in Hollywood. My new vocation lasts exactly as long as my father: three and a half months.

“He died in his sleep,” I say to no one, Picasso himself having fallen asleep in the passenger seat. He murmurs: “The universe has no edge and no center.”

My “other” life recedes, a giant seaborne Brannock device that looks, for all the tea in England, like the deck of a calibrated aircraft carrier. The sky turns the scumbled red of ground beef; the earth below is bruised to grape skins. Fingers entwined over his belly, nostrils flaring, Picasso snores, bull-like in his dreams, though he looks like a baby, that soccer ball head, those over-stuffed eyes. I feel protective of him, a mother pushing her pram. The farther we drive, the younger he looks: the older I feel.

A Panamanian lagoon. Picasso slathers ointment on my burned shoulders. Against my skin his fingers are bear claws. The beach is a frying pan. I’d go indoors and read, but our cottage is too depressing, with the ratty rattan shades, squeaky ceiling fan, and cockroaches skittering. Instead I cool myself in the lagoon, hoping Picasso won’t join me.

No such luck. “Attendez!” he cries, splashing after me.

We swim out past the barrier reef, me doing my Aussie crawl, smashing through elephant waves. In his competitive fervor the instigator of *Guernica* and *The Pipes of Pan* swims into my kicking foot; my heel collides with his face. When I look back, he’s treading water, holding his nose. Part of me thinks, “Serves him right.” Another part is horrified, beside myself.

“You okay?” I say, treading.

He doesn’t hear. Or does he? He starts back to shore, doing a sidestroke while holding his nose, a thin ribbon of blood trailing him, reminding me for some reason of my father, who fell for me.

As I wobble out of the surf, he's toweling himself, his back a giant scallop.

"Pablo? Mr. Ruiz?"

With the towel flung over his shoulder he walks up the path to our dreary digs. I shout, "It's your own fault! You swam too close to me!" The cottage door slams. It's painted the same blue as the lagoon, the same blue as the Topolino. I see a brush mixing that color, the bristles picking dabs of lead white, cerulean, and cobalt off the palette. When the mental camera pulls back, the hand belongs not to Picasso but to my father.

I pace in front of the blue door, a swimmer afraid to dive. What else can I do? No prolific master of twentieth-century art has ever been sore at me before.

I knock. The door opens. Picasso wears a white terry-cloth robe. With a nod he motions me into the cool, rattan-shaded space. On the desk: papers spread out under scattered crayons. He's been sketching. On the topmost sheet figures float in a sea of childish waves, blood arrows wheeling like gulls around them. He has mapped our collision, charted its course, latitude, longitude, vector. Annotations filigree the margins, state's evidence: the geometry of disaster. A heavy *X* marks the point of impact. I recognize my foot. Where it strikes Picasso's Minotaur head the sketch is animated with a series of pulsing slashes. For the rest of me Picasso has drawn not man but whale: precisely, he has drawn Monstro, the grinning leviathan that swallowed Pinocchio and his toy-maker father, Gepetto. He's signed the goddamn thing.

"What's all this about?" I say, picking it up.

He seizes and crumples the sketch into a ball, then lies back in

his bed with a wad of tissue pressed to his nose. The ceiling fan squeaks.

The road narrows; the lines of perspective converge. Peripheries are nullified as the geometry of death reasserts itself. We plunge into a funnel. I've grown suspicious of our destination, wondering if we'll ever get where we're going, supposedly.

"Don't you have to be dead to be a saint?" I ask.

"It helps," says Picasso. "But unless one has the goods, one may drop dead forever and it will get one nowhere."

"It would be a shame to drive all this way for nothing," I say.

"You are a skeptic. And anyway can you not simply enjoy the ride? Why does a journey need a purpose anyway?" says Picasso. "For the same reason a picture needs a subject: merely as an excuse for the paint, to have something to hang shapes, colors, and textures on."

"Are you sure you didn't make her up?"

"Who?"

"Sister Whatsherface, the saint."

"The saint, the saint!" Picasso throws his hands in the air. "Is that all you can think about? Such a hopelessly narrow mind for such a broad body! With that sort of mentality how do you expect to get anywhere?"

"She doesn't exist, does she?"

"You will never be an artist, that's for sure!"

"It's all a bunch of bullshit, isn't it?"

"You will be one of the countless poor sods who dream of painting but end up only making pictures of things."

"Does it occur to you, Mr. Picasso, that I don't *want* to be a painter?"

Picasso says nothing. He sits with arms folded, bottom lip pugnaciously pursed, steaming like an espresso pot. We ride in silence for a mile or two. Then he blurts:

“You want a purpose? Fine! Pick one! Whatever strikes your fancy. Say you want to go mushroom hunting, or mountain climbing, or spelunking with those big, fat, flat feet. Maybe you and I will track down Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman — the South American one! Don’t like my suggestions? Come up with your own. Whatever you pick, I will happily accept. And if you can’t come up with a purpose, come up with a texture, or a color. Call it a brown journey, or a blue one. Whatever you say, Maestro, Picasso will back you 100 percent!”

We reach the Andes, which shed their cool color and their charm as we transgress them. The Topolino struggles. Now I know why Picasso calls it the goat. Wishful thinking! A goat would chew up these hills! But our little mouse quakes in fear. Halfway up a near-vertical grade, with a gouge of smoke the engine dies. Soon we’re side by side, backs to the bumper, pushing.

“Fucking Fiat,” I say, forgetting myself.

“It was just so with me and Monsieur Braque,” says Picasso. “Two mountaineers roped together, scaling the heights!”

“I told you it was underpowered, but *no*, you had to have it. You and your goddamn *artistic* choices!” It must be the altitude; I can barely breathe.

“That said, were it not for your being more than a little *pasado de peso* . . .”

“Fuck you, you Spanish ape! If you think I’m too fat, then why didn’t you pick some pretty little girl to chauffeur you around? Why me? I’ll tell you why: because you need someone you can

dominate, someone who'll put up with all your Spanish bullcrap, that's why! Well, I'm not taking it anymore. All my life people have pushed me around, making me kiss their fucking feet! Well, I'm goddamn sick of it!"

It's official: I have broken boundaries, infringed, encroached, gone over the line. I have lost my place because I never knew it. Picasso burns me with his Mussolini stare; for a moment I think he might even spit on me, strike me with his draftsman's fist. But then a Disney twinkle lights those Andalusian eyes, and there's that tight little mischievous grin, the same grin that swallows his face when he does something naughty with a brush or pen. All this time we've been pushing the car uphill. Were I to let go now, it would roll backward, flattening the greatest of all living painters.

We reach the crest. Breathless, Picasso bows to me.

"Very well, Maestro." He snatches the chauffeur cap off my head and puts it on his. "What is your wish?"

That's when I see the brown car pulled over to the curve. A man in dress slacks and undershirt works a jack under a rear tire. She's in the backseat. I must act now or forever know my place. This is for you, Father, this breaching of the rules while bowing to them. For once art will serve us.

I sketch out the rough plan; Picasso, with his brain like a brush full of paint, fills in the details. By what we are about to do my boss is so greatly amused he smothers his titters with his hand. Our collaboration has about it all the wit, charm, and spontaneous simplicity of the best animations. Now I see why I love cartoons: they give us the world minus gravity and suffering, a world of primary hues, unambiguous outlines, unbridled possibilities,

without weight, subtext or, sophistication. For all his worldly fame I realize now that Picasso is really a cartoonist at heart, a child with his Crayola box, as naive as he is diabolical, prepared to do his bidding for me, his Walt Disney/Antichrist.

“Ready?” I say.

“Rescatar la Virgen de los Andes!” he says, with steely enthusiasm.

Sticking to the plan, I ask the man if he can use some assistance. He seems suspicious and relieved as he hands me the tire iron, wiping his hands on his shirt and saying, as I bend to the task, “I’ve always marveled at the curious conceit that keeps men floating down freeways on bladders of air.” For appearance’ sake I give a few turns to a lug before braining him — not quite hard enough to send his gray matter showering down the mountainside but no love tap, either. He falls into Picasso’s arms. As the girl looks on with indolent curiosity, we stuff our scoundrel into the Topolino’s passenger seat, but not before relieving Mr. Humbert of his wallet, passport, and other forms of identification. Before sending the blue goat to its final pasture, we grab our luggage — including two dozen tightly rolled canvases — from its trunk. With a series of grunts and our damsel still watching (her sleepy eyes only slightly aroused), we heave the Topolino over the side. When on the sixteenth roll it bursts into flames, Picasso clasps his hands and notes with glee how the colors match perfectly those of the sunset that has meanwhile spread itself, like a knife loaded with Skippy, across the horizon.

You would think our rescued nymph would show some gratitude to her saviors. You’d be wrong. She chomps her chewing gum, her frown as fixed as the stars that begin to appear just then

in the sky. We drive through the night with no words from her. In our cut-rate motel room the next morning we force her to sit for us next to a bowl of bananas: the least she can do, the gum-popping twit. Picasso titles his portrait *Still Life with Virgin*. Though I daresay mine is the better likeness, our subject is equally untaken with both our efforts. “They don’t look a thing like me!” she squawks.

“Don’t worry,” Picasso and I chime. “They will.”

Touched with an artist’s brute fearlessness, I guide our considerably more powerful vehicle to Bogotá, where we drop Dolores off with the proper authorities, who assure us that they know just what to do with her.

From there all roads lead to glory, or close enough. We are a brush loaded with pigment, sweeping across a primed, gessoed landscape, the world our blank canvas. All boundaries have been erased, all outlines eradicated. Wherever we go we spill color; we spew, splatter, and scumble it, improvising subject and form as we please — improvising but also obscuring, demolishing them. Is there a Virgin of the Andes? Who *cares*. If we put her on paper, there she is. If not, not.

From here on, what we say — or paint — goes.

Plaza des Armas, Cuzco, Peru. The fountain sprays as high as the budding trees. We arrived in time for the annual art fair, with Pablo in sunglasses and sombrero, me in a green-visored boating cap. We’ve nabbed an excellent spot, in the shade of the triumphal arch. Thus we intend to raise gasoline money for our journey back north.

So far, the painter of *Three Musicians*, *The Weeping Woman*, and a thousand etchings of bulls hasn’t sold one of what he calls

his “Topolino Landscapes.” I, on the other hand, former shoe salesman and child of a failed, insomniac cartoonist, have sold twelve.

Picasso’s pissed.

“Beginner’s luck,” he says.