

A literary novel about two young painters in Florence Italy, searching for the key to Pablo Picasso's creativity.

The Secret Sex Life of Pablo Picasso, A Novel

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the secret sex life of

Pablo Picasso

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A Novel by

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PART ONE

Transition

CHAPTER ONE

My mind is playing tricks on me, flashing worrisome past events across my brain. I toss sleeplessly on this hard French bed; a cardboard pillow stiff as steel enjoys torturing me. Overhead, through a ceiling window, a cloudless summer sky rotates brilliant stars as in a planetarium, trying to assuage my restlessness. A nervous twitch assaults my legs; a mind-worm races madly around in my brain (*Star light, star bright*). My landlady is chasing a cricket, cursing in French, "*Maudit grillon!*" She is banging a hammer or a high-heeled shoe that cracks incessantly in my ears; but the tuneful little bug ignores her, its shrill message a trumpet obbligato to her forceful timpani, driving me crazy.

Why have I come to Europe? What mad idea drove me out of New York City? True, I had exhausted studying painting with Max Schulman and his criticism was getting on my nerves. I knew that I had reached a plateau in my art, but he didn't have to rub it in! And modern art -- at least in the city today -- seemed pretentious to me, out of touch with humanity. I wanted to run away, to escape the city's chaotic madness; Europe felt right; masterpieces might happen. But after my Dutch freighter docked in Antwerp, I made a dash through Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, and down here to Vallauris. I tried to work along the way; did a little sketching here and there; but the idea of doing anything serious was impossible. Perhaps my dad was right. After all, I had a degree in architecture, and had some talent for design. But my creativity demanded more than sterile building designing, and I turned back to art, a youthful passion. When I told dad during a telephone conversation that I was giving up my career and would do art seriously, he exclaimed: "Don't waste your time on that art nonsense!" Nonsense? All the more reason to prove him wrong! Mom was more forgiving, always ready for the unexpected from her April child. I was pleasantly surprised when they scraped together a little money they could ill afford, and sent me a kind note requesting post cards. I left America with the feeling that travelling in Europe might point me in a new direction. Has it? Not yet, but...

What convinced me to make this drastic change? My artistic problems (stylistic confusions); my living problems (tedious work as a draftsman); my love problems (Mary Cartwright wanted to get married). It was true that the stunning Mary had inserted joy into my dull artistic life. I first saw her flipping through a book in the library and was struck by her stunning beauty. It was not characteristic of me to approach such a pretty woman, but I did. She was fascinated with my rebellious life, which I expanded into a romance novel (lacking a heroin, implying that she was the most likely candidate). And she agreed to a date which led to a relationship. I grew to love her, and she seemed to reciprocate. But with her repeated hints, pleas, growing to an insistence, that we get married (the requisite for my getting her into bed), my amorous fancies dulled until they died a natural death, the marriage criterion arcane. One day she walked into my studio unannounced and took one look at the nude painting I was working on and screamed: "Who the hell is that?" her face furious. I explained that I was trying to emulate my art professor Max Schulman, who was searching for ideal naked beauty. "Ideal sex, you mean!" She dashed around the studio picking up some of her belongings, and yelled as she left: "That's it, Jeff Bianco! I'm out of here! Enough of your shit!" I had not heretofore detected prudishness (she had seen many of the nude sketches I did at class, and

admired them), nor ever heard a scatological word, so her reaction was a real shocker. Our long relationship ended at that instant. I was very discouraged: bad art, no more love life!

Working at my menial drafting job I felt like I was back at school, pushing 4H pencils across straight edges. To what end? Am I a draftsman or an artist? I resolved to change my life; I reasoned that quitting the city once and for all would settle things; Europe seemed the obvious solution. My only support came from Trudy Lavine, a young woman I had met in Max's private art class, to whom I frequently poured my heart out. We had developed a great friendship, with little emotional baggage; we bummed around together, went to galleries and museums, and generally enjoyed each other's company. I told her that I had saved enough to spend a good year abroad (if I was careful). "I am so jealous!" was her ecstatic response, her plain face turned half pretty with cheer. "Let me help work out your itinerary." Trudy had given up on her own art, but enjoyed following my development (which she characterized as 'super'); she supported herself as a catering jockey, but suffered her work badly (as I did mine). "I have always dreamed of going to France. Live as an ex-patriot. Do the Grand Tour." Her enthusiasm made her prettier than ever, her encouragement transforming. "Oh, I'm so jealous. You must send me a bushel of post cards!"

Yes, Europe was supposed to be important, and critical to my development. It was almost immoral to give Paris such short shrift: five days! I slept at the Paris youth hostel, but spent two days virtually living in a Pigalle brothel, where I suffered my first whore encounter – *suffered*, because it was a total disaster! I had trouble getting it up -- not a pleasant experience! The prostitute was a sweet youngish Parisian girl who tried, and tried, and tried – the look on her face went from determined, to benign, to utter disgust! It was almost comical, my encounter with bought sex, if it were not so tragic! The remaining days I spent sketching nudes at the *Academie de la Grande Chaumieri* where you paid an admission fee to sketch nudes. They were generally plain older women, not very appealing, which allowed me to concentrate on the drawing without worrying about sexual excitement (and ruminate as I worked about the sorry state of my masculinity). The Paris fiasco sent me south, probably due to the precedent set by Van Gough and Gauguin. But why did I end up here in Vallauris? The reputed location of Picasso? Vallauris was not in the itinerary Trudy and I had planned. So what if Picasso lived here? what did I expect to gain from staying near him? Stupid, foolish idea – the proximity of genius doesn't alter mediocrity!

I crawled out of bed, my legs stiff, and took three aspirins. The landlady had given up her vendetta and the cricket blared triumphantly. Back in bed again I tried to sleep, but my mind drifted far away from France. I wondered what Mary Cartwright would be doing (who would she be trying to entice into marriage?). What about my painting teacher, Max Schulman? Was he still walking the globe half way around the world from me and like Ahab stalking his white whale, in his case the ideal beautiful naked woman? Should I have left New York City? Yes. I am the perennial optimist, especially when it comes to art, which is like a jinni in my chest waiting for the right rub to escape. Europe will provide friction that sparks the creative fire in me. I am certain!

I spent a good nine months slaving away as a draftsman and living like a hermit. When I was pregnant with two thousand dollars I booked a round-trip ticket on a Holland-American-line freighter to Europe. One day I walked into Max Schulman's class and announced like a challenge: "I'm going to Europe!" He smiled, unmoved. "I want to see where easel painting started -- how it all began." He did not try to dissuade me. In fact he seemed resigned; he probably realized that I had exhausted the master, and had resisted telling me so -- because of

my fee? or because he treasured our friendship? Certainly the latter: we spent many hours drinking at the Cedar Tavern discussing art and society and aesthetics.

“Good idea, Jeff. You’re one of my most talented pupils.” (*One* of his most talented – not *the* most talented?) He added flippantly: “Go get ‘em! I expect lots from you.” So I left the city, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, as Max joked.

On the day before I was to disembark I was pleased to see Mary Cartwright happily walking down the street with a pleasant looking young man on her arm: clearly I was ancient history. Good for her! I was nevertheless a trifle envious. Why had I lost the love of this blatantly beautiful young woman? What did I do wrong? Why did she not fight to keep me on her leash? She was bright and had considerable womanly wisdom; she had the skill to inveigle into my brain and reverse my feelings about marriage; so why did she not work her wily ways harder? Had I made some unknown but egregious mistakes I will regret to my dying breath?

The other woman in my life -- just a friendship to be sure, but a very close friendship -- was Trudy Lavine. She had a passion for art and enjoyed going to the Met or the Modern with me; she liked my analyses and art historical perspectives. She saw me off at the Holland-American pier and at that instant struck me in a different way: she seemed unusually beautiful. I thought she shed a reluctant tear -- what was I leaving behind?

I crawled back into my torturous bed and tried to sleep. Life is too short to spend it worrying; get on with your life, escape the dreams of fantasy, let reality work its magic. I must have more patience with myself. Sleep! But an instant later my limbs again tingled intolerably. My past seemed wrapped up in a neat package: now I must disgorge disagreeable past memories; prepare for a fertile European future; look forward to building a brilliant artistic closure....

CHAPTER TWO

In the still night I heard nasal echoes in the street, the boisterous, argumentative sounds of a drunken group. Their reverberating voices made a mockery of the night; like beastly lions coughing fatuously in the shade of a sheep pasture. Probably drunk locals charging out of the nearby bistro -- at least they were having fun, the high-pitched giggles of girls intrigued. Shouldn't I join them? No. They trailed songs drunkenly into the distance and my senses followed them forever, as if my raw nerves were stretched to infinity. The world was conspiring to open the gates of my confusion and discharge oceans of discontent. Yet, I thought, Picasso, too, must be listening to these same sounds, across the street, in his villa. Or was he sound asleep like a baby?

I must have fallen asleep a little; later a burst of ambiguous laughter startled me awake. Someone very near. I blinked into the eyes of a full moon overhead, marching like a critic into my overhead planetarium. The last traces of the mistral noisily puffed against the windows. I got up and went out on the balcony. Was that Picasso laughing? Or was I dreaming? I had had a dream -- what was it? Yes. I was working...somewhere...somehow. Well at least I was working in my dreams!

Suddenly I knew what I had to do: first thing in the morning get on my bike and leave this unsettling place! I went back to bed and with near hypnotic intensity I forced myself asleep. After that void that clears all concerns (if you can let it) I awoke to a new reality, only a little upset by an immediately-forgotten, dream. I washed up; got dressed; prepared my gear; pulled

my bicycle off a high hook, and placed it out in the hall. Then with great determination I went down to the front desk to check out.

"*Bonjour, m'seur.* Leaving already?" the concierge asked me. Madame Lozier was a very pleasant youngish woman who had welcomed me in her little boarding house like a member of her family. She looked perplexed and complained: "But you've only been here a few days!"

"It's been a month," I objected, leafing through traveler's checks out. I was fascinated by the woman's motherly attitude; but also a little annoyed (hadn't I left mom behind in the states?). "I have to move on."

"But we have barely gotten to know you," she continued, her words delightful and heavily accented in the Italianized intonation of *Le Midi*. "Don't you like your little studio? Was there anything wrong with it?"

"Oh, no, thanks, it was perfect." Why do I have to explain? "I can't seem to work here in Vallauris. How much do I owe you?"

"Let me see," she said, referring to a ledger. Her voice had a birdlike quality, some kind of a finch, a diminutive pop-eyed finch. "I'm sorry you're leaving. Won't you change your mind? Have you used the studio at all? I could get you one of Picasso's models. He frequently uses Josette Bousset. Her mother and I are good friends. She's a very lovely girl -- "

"Oh, I worked a little," I said defensively (lying). "But I wish you had told me about a model sooner!" I smiled, imagining falling in love with a beautiful French girl, whisking her off to America, and living happily ever after. "I have decided to go to Italy. At least I can speak a little Italian. I think I'll go to Florence. Where painting began."

"To Italy? *En bicyclette?*"

"Oh, no," I smiled. "I'll bike to Nice and catch a train there. To tell you the truth," I confided, "I had planned on biking everywhere in Europe. Americans have this dream. But I found that my legs could only survive short hops. Short picturesque hops."

"Hops?" she mouthed, which came out 'ops.' "*Oh, oui, m'seur.* There are some very pretty 'ops, as you say, between here and Nice. Especially at this time of the year. The fall colors are *ravisant!* *Alors,*" she said, shrugging her shoulders resigned, "perhaps Italy is better for you. We are a little isolated here. Not many young people come to Vallauris. Just tourists to see Picasso."

"Yes. I know." I had seen many tourists ogling the great man at the beach of La Garupe; standing around him as if he was a tiger in a cage; but he was oblivious to the world peering into his life; he went on playing with his children; kissing his wife; swimming as if they were all on a desert island. "But the truth of the matter ..." I began, but stopped, realizing I was repeating what I had written home to mom and dad. "... Picasso intimidates me. You know what I mean?"

"*Mai oui,*" she commiserated, her blue eyes understanding. "*Je peut comprendre ca. Intimide.* He certainly is -- how you say? -- *une grand imminence!*" She took my travelers checks, and gave me change in Franks. "Well, *bon chance, m'seur.* I hope you will find Italy more *sympatique...*"

I went back to my studio on the second floor to get my backpack and bike. I looked around the large room and sighed: it was a perfect place to work; what a fool I am! The concierge had loaned me a professional easel a previous tenant had left behind; a broad skylight provided good north light, despite being broken into tiny hexagonal panes like a bee's eye. I had a perfect view of Picasso's compound across a tree-studded square (which should have provided inspiration for many pretty pictures). I had no excuse for not working, but I had goofed off and

accomplished nothing! The mistral wind teased the trees alive and seemed to separate my haunt from Picasso's with a rushing space of infinite disquietude. Him ever industriously painting, me always lazily fantasizing Gedanken-pictures galore! Since leaving New York City I had barely touched my sketchbook (a few drawings of rough Dutch seamen on the freighter), much less painted anything. I knew I had better get to work. What the hell! Do I call myself an artist? I stood there looking mournfully out the window, my mind wandering. I recollected the many erotic pictures Picasso had painted. He equated sex with art; he said that eroticism powered art; he unabashedly painted phalluses and vaginas as he painted asparagus and bananas. Had I stayed and employed Picasso's pretty French model, I might have painted a few good pictures, or even gotten her into my bed...

Suddenly I remembered a dream that had snuck into my brain between concierge's bouts with the cricket and the noises of the locals. I was painting a very ugly Grand Chaumier nudes on glass; then on black velvet; my nose filled with odors of Jasmine and cognac. A skeletal man began criticizing my work. It was Max, my art teacher, lecturing me pedantically. The model, a she-wolf like woman with pendulous tits, joined in the criticism. I painted frantically; nothing pleased. More whores surrounded and began laughing. It was horrible! But at least in my dreams I was painting! Working!

Standing by the window absent mindedly I something flicker in the corner of my eye; then I thought I heard laughter, soft sardonic laughter. I looked closely and realized that there was a person precariously draped over a tree branch quite high up. I realized that whoever it was could probably look right down into Picasso's compound. He continued laughing -- no, more like a snicker. I made out a youngish man in a white beret and wearing short leather pants over stick-like legs, either an Englishman or a German. He kept chuckling, and seemed to be making notes in a tiny notebook. Some gall, I thought, people want to get close to Picasso, but this takes the cake!

Well, hadn't I come here for my own stupid reasons? Just to be near the man: as a satellite is attracted to the emblazoned sun of art -- or something equally fatuous. A student had told me he saw Picasso on the beach, wearing a bright yellow hat with pink flowers tucked behind his ears, surrounded by an entourage of spoiled children, with a smart young woman nearby, he looked just like an ordinary grandpa (wasn't he their grandpa, or were these his children?). But I found out that his last young wife Françoise Gilot had left last year, along with their two children Claude and Paloma. So who was it that this man expected to see in the Picasso compound? Picasso might be there, with another young woman (as was his compulsive wont). The man was, after all, just a man, a very ordinary man. Well, maybe not 'ordinary.' A powerfully sex-driven man who had to fuck, play, swim, sun, eat, drink, shit, just be. Picasso simply existed in this world, like the rest of us human beings. At that instant the myth vanished: poof! I realized that I could pursue the true essence of Picasso in museums, books; what could the man tell me in person, teach me? Even if I had the guts to approach him, to strike up a conversation, what good would that do? I could not get up the courage to interfere with his intimate family group. Certainly I could never insert my silly self into his regal life and expect his greatness to wear off on me! It was impossible! So what the hell am I doing here?

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