

Leave Monsieur to his pleasure

by Rochelle Mass

A small man with wide shoulders held an umbrella under his arm and asked for the Braque book. "From his last exhibit," he said sharply. The umbrella stretched out so far the woman behind him had to step away. The man wore a striped vest with no shirt, tennis shoes with no socks, knee-length shorts so wide they balanced the space the umbrella required. He looked through the book, turned one page after the other then slammed the cover closed.

"That's mine, I told them - it's mine. Only I have a guitar, Le Monde and lemons over a mahogany table in evening light. And a cigar and a dish for fruit. It was I that moved it all around. Placed it that way. I taught him how to kaleidoscope."

As he brought his hand down on the portrait of Braque, the shopkeeper asked if he wanted the book wrapped. The small man swore carefully, tugged the umbrella out from under his arm, held it as a cane and stalked out of the shop.

"Monsieur Picasso," the shopkeeper called. "I didn't mean...I wouldn't have... perhaps..."

The umbrella lifted over the small man, counter-striped his vest.

"Ah.." said the woman who had reached the counter. "Monsieur Cubist... Ah..." she repeated as the shopkeeper lowered his head.

"I was going to buy the Braque," she admitted. "But now - I can only ask for the latest Picasso."

Queried the shopkeeper: "His ceramics? Sketches? What will it be?"

Sensing that the shopkeeper's patience had left with Monsieur Cubist, she quickly offered: "Of course, the sketches. The sketches - the basis of his work."

"Of course," the shopkeeper muttered – "*Je Suis Le Cahier.*" He wrapped the album without a ribbon.

"The young girl - his daughter, you know," said the shopkeeper.

"What?" asked the woman.

"She grew into a dreamy teenager. So spoiled. A brother from the first, two sisters from the second, a third he didn't marry and then this child. No surprise the girl

had dreams. That's all her father really did. Dreamt of women, turned them like they had limbs of clay. Added breasts, twisted heads, turned fronts into backsides so he could have them all, have all of them."

"*Ooh la la*," wheezed the woman.

The shopkeeper tapped his fingers on the wrapped book of sketches.

"Monsieur Picasso! Every Tuesday he comes in to wage war with Braque. In my shop." Color had returned to the shopkeeper's face. "*Très desolé* for the fuss. *Un tragedie* such a great man should turn the pages of another man's book looking for justice. *Très desolé*, Madame." He cut off a snip of blue ribbon. Turned it one way then another, pasted it just off center. "That's how he does it, Madame," he said raising his eyebrows.

"Who?" She asked, looking at her purchase.

"Monsieur Cubist," the shopkeeper said. "That's what he does to women."

"I saw him once at the shore," said a voice from the back of the shop. "A young woman held that very umbrella over him. Her hair was pulled into a plait, black as her eyes. He held the baby against his chest. They say the girl at the edge of his shorts was her child, but that the baby was his, from a housekeeper or a Spanish model - they say she's got wide thighs, the kind he twists over the lover's lap. They say she's got eyes like squab eggs, pale as almonds."

"They say ... they say ..." the shopkeeper repeated, leaned back, took up his pipe. "When I was young," he said, "I was a painter. We went to Monsieur's studio every Friday to watch him work - that is watch him stroke his models, eat his *petite déjeuner*, and scold his wife. He tore up sketches, slashed canvases, smashed pottery. I got naked with a lot of people once, and that's when I really saw him work - saw him pull out of the pile of limbs, lips and penises - he called it no. 38 - then turned it into the 'Massacre of the Innocents'. 'Sex, rape - its all the same.' That's what he said.

I don't remember how it ended that time, but other times it was Sangria and sharp cheese, then he'd call to his model, take her on his lap. We'd wait a bit, then go. Leave Monsieur to his pleasure."