



No Protection

Margot Berwin

The artist was the first man to slap her in the face. Not nearly hard enough of course. In the beginning he was still afraid to hurt her. Maybe he was afraid that she would scream, or tell. After all he did not know her, and he had a reputation to look out for. But after that first slap he knew that she would never scream or tell.

She knew that too. She was pleased. More than

pleased. She felt known. The more frequently he hit her, the more known she felt. She was hopeful that just maybe he was waiting to get to know her even better so that he could slap her more and more without being afraid of the consequences. That was all she could hope for.

She, the girl of the story, her name is Martine. Some people call her Tina, but she prefers Martine. It's a French name given to her by her father who said his family was from Aix en Provence. His family was really from Poland but he had a cousin in Aix en Provence whom he hadn't spoken to in 25 years.

She has always been the child of this father. The child of the liar.

No one challenged the father about his origins. Not Martine or the mother. They both knew. But they learned not to. They taught themselves not to know things. It was the rule of the family, this not knowing. It was the agreement.

So, from the very beginning, from the baptism, the child was what the father wanted her to be. She was French. She was sophisticated. And so too then was he.

The father spoke often to his lovely sophisticated French daughter's body. To its thin planes. To its straight line from her neck to her feet. He spoke to her breasts before they were there. Implanted himself inside of them believing that he could influence their future shape. He was concerned with their future.

He never spoke to her face. He looked at her from the neck down only, giving her the sensation of being headless, or of talking from her stomach. As a very young child Martine came to believe that she spoke from her stomach.

Outside in his garden the father speaks to the arms of his daughter.

"Feel your skin here," he says touching the soft inside of her long thin arms, "while I touch this flower

petal.”

He moves the fingers of his right hand from the shoulder of Martine, inside, to the bend in the elbow. With the fingers of his left hand he cups a rose from the bottom and moving his hand upward he brings all of the open petals together.

“It is the same, your skin and the flower petal. No? Go ahead touch the inside of your arm. That’s it, softly, softly,” he says while pushing his fingers slowly in and out of the soil around the roses.

“See how good that feels.”

She does not answer him. She is lost in the unbelievable softness of the inside of her arm.

“Now tell me what your skin feels like,” he asks the space where her breasts will be.

“Like a flower petal,” she whispers.

“That’s right,” he says to the inside of her thighs, “like a flower petal.”

The mother did not look at her daughter’s body or touch

her at all. It was the father who cared for the body of Martine. It was the father who loved the body of Martine, who bathed the body of Martine, who put the body of Martine to sleep. And the mother who could not because the father did.

The mother, although she was not young, was still a child herself. She used to be the child of the father, and then, after Martine was born, she was not. She had been usurped. She was filled with rage at the daughter for being an even younger child than she. For being, in her youth, irresistible to this father.

Martine’s head became where she lived. It seemed to be the only part of herself which was private. Her body belonged to the family. To the father through obsession and to the mother through hate. It was commented on, touched, photographed, alternately accepted and rejected in all of its various stages of growth. But her mind was her own. Distant and pristine, untouched and untrammled, apart from her body and separate from everyone she knew.

At 10 years old she wrote, “Whole world under glass, young girl stands outside, dreaming.”

Alone, her life became a series of trials and errors. This was how she learned. What tasted good and what made her spit out. What clothes to wear to school and what to wear out to play. And later, at the time of our story, of the story of Martine and the artist, what type of people to spend her time with. Who to let in and who to move away from. Who to wake up next to, who to fantasize about, and who to simply think about.

In an untaught world, her journey is magnificent, but sometimes dangerous.

Sitting across the table from the artist on their first date Martine thought about how his beauty had not diminished since the day she first saw him.

It was a retrospective of his paintings where Martine first met the artist. Her best friend Lisette Ray had wanted to hear him speak and had dragged Martine to the museum too early on a Saturday evening.

Martine made clothes, she was a clothing designer, or at least that was what she wanted to be, and the artist was a painter. She had never seen his work before, had never even heard his name. She was there for Lisette, as a favor to Lisette Ray only.

When she walked into the museum she saw him immediately, only she did not know that it was he, the artist, whom she was looking at. She only knew that she was looking at a man whom she found instantly desirable.

She stared at him. At his tallness and his thick wavy black curls. She was riveted by his creamy honey-colored skin and his full mouth.

Very red, very tender, like it was used to being kissed, or bitten.

Yes. He is still beautiful, Martine thought sitting across the table from him nine days later at the Mexican restaurant on their first date.

In the past Martine had occasionally been surprised by her dates. When they arrived at her door she found

that they did not look at all the same as when she had met them. Sometimes shorter or plumper or less blonde or less dark. Somehow less, or even sometimes more. But not the same. Martine could never account for these changes. She simply decided that she had a strong imagination and that it went to work somewhere in between the first impression and the first date.

But he, the artist, he looked the same. Even her imagination could not enhance him. She was still excited by him. She was excited by everything in those days before him.

When the waitress came by she ordered alcohol. A greyhound. Vodka and grapefruit juice. It reminded her of the summer even though it was the middle of the winter. Drinks were good for that, bringing up memories even before the first sip, just by the order itself. She remembered herself just months before. Carefree. Her toes in the sand. Lisette Ray at her side, making sure, as best friends do, that she protected her pale skin from the rays of the sun.

So she ordered alcohol. He did not. She was disappointed. She did not know what to do with a man who did not order alcohol.

“You don’t drink?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

A moment later he got up, walked over to her, leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. She was surprised by his kiss and she spit on his lips trying to push his mouth away with her own. He enjoyed her surprise. It did not matter to him whether she kissed him back, or even whether she wanted to kiss him at all, ever. Those thoughts did not even occur to him. He was just checking to see how easy it would be. To see if she would let him. For him it was as mundane as checking the time.

He sat back down.

“What are you wearing underneath your skirt?”

He did not wait for an answer. He put his hands

on top of her thighs underneath her skirt to find out for himself.

“What are these, tights?”

Martine thought about the beauty of his lips, their deep redness and their perfect bow, and then she managed to separate them from the aggressiveness of his act. That seemed to work for her. This is not a schoolboy fumbling, thought Martine. This is not a schoolboy hoping to get the girl in bed. Hoping that the girl in her girl role will be unable to say no to what is clearly beneath her. No, she thought, this is something completely different. Something so sure of itself that the self-assuredness itself is a point of fascination. As far as she could see, there were no leaks. No cracks in his confidence. In fact, he was so confident that Martine wondered whether or not he was bored. There did not seem to be any excitement in it for him as to which way the evening would go. He seemed to already know even before the dinner had arrived at the table.

When the waitress came back Martine asked for

another drink. They argued in front of the waitress.

“I don’t want you to drink anymore.”

“It’s just one more.”

“I have no interest in being with you if you are going to be drunk.”

The waitress stood over them looking annoyed and waiting for the order.

He spoke clearly, enunciating each word as if the waitress were not there.

“I want you to know exactly what you are doing tonight. Exactly what you are going to be doing.”

“I guess I won’t be having another,” Martine said. Inside of herself she felt good that he wanted her to remember the night. It was a strange turn of events that a man did not want her to drink. Most of the men she had met began pouring alcohol into her before they even asked what her name was.

“Are you coming home with me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Let’s go right now. I have a big day

tomorrow.”

She was not sure why she had said yes, she only knew that she could not say no. She could not say why she could not say no. Her mind made up some vague idea that they would talk and not have sex. She believed her mind.

Leaving the restaurant, her thoughts drifted back once more to the night they had met.

Laughing, she and Lisette Ray had linked arms and run up to the top floor of the museum to make a plan. She had decided on a note. She would write the artist a note with her phone number on it. She took an ATM receipt out of her purse and wrote on the back, “I think you are very handsome. I would like to take you out for a drink.” She left her name and phone number on the slip of paper.

In part it was Martine’s clothing that had given her the courage to write the note to the artist. On that night she was wearing her favorite rose-colored silk dress. The one that made her feel good about herself. The one

that accentuated her thinness by way of its largeness.

It has been so drummed into Martine that her body is what matters, is what is important about her that she ended up cultivating an extraordinary visual self. A self that could not be missed when it walked down the street. Martine’s clothes for instance always looked as if they could fall off. Any sudden movement and they could fall. They always had the potential to reveal the body underneath. Her clothes were much too large and she was too thin, giving the impression that her nudity was only moments away. That if someone were to follow her long enough, walking behind her down the street, her clothes would fall to the ground piece by piece until she was naked.

She found her favorite dress, the dress she was wearing on that night of the retrospective, in a secondhand store. The dress was out of style in that it was wide at the bottom, A-line shaped, and not tapered. It was a

soft rose-colored silk that landed just below her knees. The neckline was off of the shoulders and the cap sleeves were too wide for her thin arms. Her breasts looked as though they were too small to carry the shoulder-less dress, but they did, just barely. No one at the retrospective seemed to think that they would, and the tension it created when she walked around the paintings was visible. She wore dark red lipstick with her favorite dress, and pink eye-shadow, to create a contrasting look. An unsophisticated face next to a dress of old and refined silk.

Her hair was an item of clothing in its own right. Dark and thick and wavy and most important, down past the waist, just brushing the bones of the hips. When Martine wore the rose-colored dress, as she did on that night, she gathered her long hair to one side and then wrapped it around her neck like a scarf, accentuating the chest that the dress could fall off of and also further separating the head from the body, although she was unaware of that particular effect.

Her hair was black brown and her eyes were black brown and her skin was opalescent. She had the courage to go up to the artist.

Martine walked over to him and told him how much she liked his paintings. He did not seem to want to talk about himself and so she thought that he was humble, but really he did not trust anyone.

“I wrote you a note, but I don’t want you to read it until I leave.”

“What does it say?”

“It’s embarrassing. Don’t read it until I leave.”

She walked away. She could feel him watching her. She felt beautiful and powerful and daring. The writing of the note made her feel that way.

The artist let her feel that way. There would be more of her to tear down later.

She remembered the difficulty they had in arranging their first date. The work and the strategy involved had somehow made the date more valuable to her. Had made her take the date more seriously than she might

have otherwise. She remembered clearly the first time he had called her.

“How come you’re home on a Friday night,” he had asked, immediately creating an aura of intimacy. A premature intimacy considering the fact that he had never spoken to her except for the brief moments of their first meeting in the museum.

“It’s only eleven o’clock,” said Martine. “I haven’t even gone out yet.”

In truth she had been sitting in her apartment with a man she was seeing at the time, eating Lebanese food out of plastic containers. “What night would you like to get together?” he asked.

“How about Monday?”

He had been surprised by her choice of nights. At the very least, he had expected her to suggest a Thursday. He was pleased with Monday. Very pleased. Because of Monday he had assumed she had a boyfriend for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. That made him very happy. Less responsibility for him.

She had chosen Monday night fearing that he would not see her on a Friday night, a Saturday night, or even a Sunday night.

Hanging up the phone, Martine had smiled at her date while watching him eat. His manners struck her as disgusting. He ate the Middle Eastern food with his hands and used his bread as a napkin. Suddenly she hated him. He spent the next two hours massaging her body from her feet to her head. She could not wait for him to stop massaging her so that they could finally have the sex and then it would be over with and she could get him out of her apartment as quickly as possible.

On Monday night, the artist called her at six o’clock in the evening.

“I won’t be able to see you tonight. There are some collectors coming to look at a painting. Is there another time we can get together?”

“How about next Wednesday?”

“That’s more than a week away.”

He cancelled the date to make himself more

desirable to her. She made the next date so far away to keep her enhanced desire hidden from him. Both strategies worked on both people.

So they were in a taxi on their way to the apartment of the artist. Martine was glad they were going to his place and not to hers. She remembered returning a phone call to him after they had met. She had reached his answering machine. The voice on the other end sounded muffled, like someone had tried to make it inaudible on purpose. She had been able to make out the artist's name and the name of a woman and she had spent some time wondering whether or not he was living with a woman.

Although it had been difficult to talk into the machine with the woman's name on it, Martine had left him a message anyway.

That evening he called her back from a noisy cell phone. She was so happy that he called her back that she was able to ignore the woman's name on his answering machine. She did not bring it up. The artist

was surprised that she did not, but also happy not to have to explain.

Inside of the cab, he took her hand. To Martine this gesture felt private, intimate, and kind. Just as he had intended it to.

"Are you scared?"

"No." She smiled at him. "I'm not scared."

"That's good. That's very, very good. Do you like cats?"

"Yes," she said. "I used to have one as a child. His name was Diamond because he was black with a white diamond-shaped patch between his eyes. Do you have a cat?"

"Not as exotic as your Diamond I'm sure, but yes, I do have a cat."

They got out of the cab in an industrial section of town.

"Do you have any money for the fare?" he asked her.

Martine was surprised that he was asking her

for money, but she stuck both hands into her pockets and pulled some out anyway. She did not count it, she simply handed it over to him in two fistfuls. Her habit of keeping her money loose in her pockets served her well at that moment. It helped her to pretend to him that she cared nothing for money. Mostly, she didn't, but recently she had begun to care more because she had stopped working in order to design clothes at home.

She did not tell him this. Nothing to break the mood. Nothing to make him change his mind.

He had already guessed that she had no money and liked the fact that she would give him the last of what she had.

Once out of the cab, they had to cross a highway in order to get to his apartment. The artist took her hand and they ran across the road as fast as they could, making it to the cement island in the center before being stopped by the traffic.

Standing on the island he grabbed her around the waist. He pushed her out, but held onto her tightly and

drew her back in, at the last possible second.

The driver of the oncoming car was upset and leaned on his horn.

“Fuck you, asshole,” he yelled out his window.

The artist laughed and Martine laughed with him. She was not scared. It happened too fast for her fear to catch up.

They entered his home. It was remarkable. Astounding. She had never seen anything remotely like it. Of that she was sure. For once in that evening, she knew something right at the moment it was happening.

The first light he turned on cast an eerie yellow glow across a small front room, its walls lined with red velvet.

“Come in here, I want you to meet my cat, Amber.”

She stepped inside and came face to face with a black Siamese cat with pale blue eyes. It sat on top of a marble pedestal. It was stuffed.

Pedestals of varying heights circled the red gold

room, each one home to a taxidermist's delight. There were stuffed monkeys and bats in jars. There was a human brain in formaldehyde and white rats standing on their hind legs. From the ceiling hung dozens of tiny stuffed hummingbirds with blue stomachs and black and white wings. This menagerie took up the entire front room. It turned out to be the least interesting room in the artist's home. Almost clichéd compared to the rest.

Martine passed through the room slowly.

"Can I look around?" she asked, already in the next room.

He was a little surprised by her lack of fear.

She guessed by his surprise that the kind of women he most often dated were hair-sprayed blondes—prissy, rich, and easy to scare or disgust.

She knew that her own lack of fear would charm him.

She moved into the next room, also painted a blood red. This room was lined with church pews.

"Those are for praying before sex."

"What?"

There was a confessional booth draped in blue velvet curtains encircled by rows of thick black candles, and long thin white ones too.

Martine continued to move from room to room. Everywhere there were crucifixes. Tiny ones in unexpected places. Nailed under antique dressers. Dangling from chains that pulled down to turn on lights. There were wooden statues taller than herself with skeleton faces and bony hands holding out huge crosses.

She lifted her head to see sheer white-winged angels floating on ceilings of baby blue sky with clouds of spun gold. And eastern-facing windows of blue stained glass that held red stained glass crosses in the middle.

She moved to the kitchen. Its walls were matte flat black and covered with upside down dead flowers. Their muted, dusty tones lit by the long white candles of a wildly branching chandelier of floral decorated glass.

Huge heavy medieval brass cups and bowls filled

the sink.

The bathroom walls were covered with the largest collection of crosses she had ever seen in one place. There was no wall space, only the covering of the nailed crosses. INRI. Those letters were etched into every cross. Later that night Martine would lie in his bed thinking about INRI. She would think of meanings for the letters. In newness resides ignorance would be the first sentence that came into her head. She would ask him what the letters meant, and he would say that he did not know. He liked the idea of pretending to have a room full of images that he knew nothing about. It was a fun idea for him. One that would deny conversation. One that would separate the two of them instead of bringing them together.

On the ceiling in the bathroom was a chandelier. Hanging crystals of dim tiny yellow lights and real candles.

She had never seen a chandelier in a bathroom. She had never seen anything like any of this.

The bedroom was glorious. The bed covered with a burgundy velvet spread embroidered with a large gold cross. Marble angels held an oval headboard with a carved pastel Madonna. Dragon's mouths breathed low light onto the pillows. Rose and blue and ancient oriental rugs held pale pink Louis Seize loveseats. Daylight and street lamps obliterated by thick velvet curtains with gold tasseled ropes.

He waited patiently while she traveled through his home. Through his masterpiece.

He waited for the sensuality of his vision to sink into her senses.

And when it did, and when she looked upon him as a romantic without equal, and when she looked up at him, happy to have been brave enough to come back to his home, he undid her buttons and shoved his hands down her pants.

She was momentarily startled by the discrepancy between the lush, old-fashioned slowness of his home, and the speed of his hands.

He removed her jeans and smiled at her thighs. He stared straight ahead as he began to undo his belt. His moves, his expressions, seemed rote to her, as if he were in a long running play that he had long ago lost interest in.

She went immediately from feeling special to feeling like one of many, many women in his life. She did not care. The room itself softened that particular reality.

The visual impact of both him and his home had succeeded in overwhelming the feelings inside of her. Her sense of adventure helped to do the same.

With that man, in that room, in that home, whatever was left of her gut instincts had no place and no chance.

The artist took off his belt slowly, and let his pants fall to the floor. Martine sat on the bed and stared at him while he undressed. He was not at all uncomfortable under the gaze of a curious new woman. He had no reason to be. The rose glow of the room made him even more beautiful than he already was.

“Take off the rest of your clothes,” he said.

She did so without embarrassment because the tone of his voice was so commanding that it did not leave room for thought before action.

“Now turn around.”

Just then, his voice became very soft. Very gentle. Almost parental. His voice made his words sound like love.

He pushed firmly on her back until she was on her knees on the bed, and then he went inside of her from behind her.

“Lift your head,” he said gathering up her long dark hair and gently pulling on it, forcing her to look up. “Look at yourself. Look into the looking glass. You look so natural on your knees.”

She could not help looking into the large antique gilt framed mirror in front of her. She peered through the dim light and into her own dark eyes. They seemed to speak to her from behind the glass. They told her with great warmth that she looked beautiful indeed on her

knees with the artist behind her. She stared at the two of them together; his hands holding her hair like reins. His honey-colored skin on her whiteness. His largeness on her smallness. His beauty on her beauty. They were the most entrancing sight she had ever seen. They looked made up. As if the mirror itself had created the scene for all of their mutual pleasure.

“It would be lovely to have two of you here with me,” he whispered in her ear in the mirror. “I would like that very much. Would you?”

“Yes, I would,” she said even though she knew that sharing him was already out of the question for her.

“Stay here, just like this,” he said, moving off of and away from Martine.

The artist walked across the house.

She could hear his footsteps stop and then his voice on the phone. He was gone for a full hour.

Martine lay back and closed her eyes.

She had been caught. She had been lighting matches in the basement. Throwing the little wooden

sticks into the bathroom sink.

“Just wait until your father gets home,” said the other child, the mother, “you’ll really be sorry then.”

The mother always let the father punish the child. It was how she took her pleasure. It pleased her to watch the father hate the child. But the child had a weapon. She knew that the body, her body, would quiet the father down, making him speechless and taking his hard words away.

“I’m home,” said the father, strolling in through the front door, taking his jacket off and handing it to the mother.

The little girl Martine stood at the top of the stairs and listened as the mother told the father about the matches. Slowly and naturally she began to strip off her clothing. She removed all of her clothes so that when the father looked up at her at the top of the stairs, she was naked.

“See, Daddy,” she said.

It was all she needed to say. The impending

punishment was warded off. The battle was over and the daughter had won and the older child, the mother, had lost. The hatred, deepened.

“My wife,” the artist said when he came back to the bed. “We don’t live together anymore.”

“Are you still married?”

“Yes, we are still married, and we always will be.”

She was not angry that he hadn’t told her this sooner. Instead, she was relieved to know that the other name on his answering machine was the name of a woman who was not his girlfriend.

Martine was used to people like the artist. People who were gone before they were gone. The people in the middle who played the middle to their advantage. The people who made it obvious that they were not there but who also made it obvious that they were. The ones who never dared to let you know where they stood, afraid that if they let you know then there would be no more movement in their life. Their freedom forever gone. Her

mother had been like that. Sitting, drinking her endless gin martinis on the couch in the living room. Gone long before she packed up and left the world of the child and the liar. Gone before she was gone.

The mother before she left had been a woman in shock. Shocked by the words of her husband. Words so painful that she would sit with her hands covering her chest as if her heart hurt. As if the pain were physical. Words about the bigness of her body. The ugliness of it. The embarrassment it caused him, the father.

“You’re so fat, no one but me could ever love you. You are so fat, you still look like you’re pregnant.” Her big blue eyes were always wide open even while she lay down on the black couch in the living room with the black furniture and the black rugs. Even on that couch where the gin was enough to make anyone sleep for days, her blue eyes stayed open. Shocked that way. Glued, thought the child Martine, the lashes to the forehead.

This father, husband, who lied about where he came

from, this father who lied, his lies were not the worst of the pain he caused. His truth-telling was a weapon far more potent than his lying, and with it he had murdered the mother of Martine. And she, the child Martine, had watched the liar murder the mother with truth.

“I’ll bet you get really horny sometimes, don’t you? What do you like to do about that,” he asked stroking the soft inside of her thighs. “Do you like to touch yourself like this?” he asked as his fingers went inside of her.

“Sometimes.”

“How often do you like to touch yourself? Everyday?”

“Yes, everyday.”

“Like clockwork, I bet.”

Playfully, carefully, and in the middle of a sentence, the artist reached out and slapped Martine across the face.

She raised her arms in protection and jumped back, away from him.

Surprisingly and immediately she wished he would

do it again so that she could register how it felt.

He smiled. He knew that she liked it even though she tried not to show it.

“No one has ever done that to you before?”

“No.”

“Good. Would you like to spend the night here with me?”

They had sex three more times during that night. He slapped her face twice more during sex. Each slap brought her closer to herself. Made her feel smaller and less powerful, and more sexual. Made her feel as though she were floating. Made her feel the way she had always thought a man and a woman should feel. It was strange to her how something so sharp and direct could make her feel like she was dreaming.

Toward the morning, half asleep, she put her arms around the artist. It was the only thing she could do to make the night okay.

She woke up under the angels, to the sun coming in through the blue stained glass. The big gold cross on the

velvet bedspread fell right on top of her like a reverse crucifix.

She thought that maybe she could love this man. At the same time she thought that in the light of the morning his room with all its old wood and cold marble looked somehow dead. She thought about loving him to cover up the thought that he might be dead inside. She had never been so excited by anyone.

Martine sat up in bed. "I have a headache," she said. "Do you have any aspirins?"

This was the first time she had asked him for anything.

The artist propped himself up on his elbows and looked at her hesitantly. For a moment he said nothing. He seemed to be deciding what to do.

"I'll be right back," he said.

He got up off of the bed and walked into the kitchen. When he came back, he handed her a packet of powdered aspirins and a brass bowl filled with water. Martine was slightly wary of the powder as she sprinkled it into the

bowl. As she brought the water up to her face she could see that the bowl was dirty. It smelled of soup. Martine realized that he had taken a dirty dish from the sink. That had been his solution to the dilemma of being asked to serve her. He would bring her the aspirins, serve her, but only out of a dirty bowl.

She said nothing. She was not sure if he knew that she knew or not. But he did know. He had carefully chosen the dirtiest bowl in the sink so that she could not possibly mistake it for a clean one.

On her way home from the artist's house, Martine began to think about a little girl she had seen on the street some weeks before. The girl had been wearing a ballerina costume. A pale pink satin bodysuit with a tutu made of pink tulle. She had long straight brown hair down to her waist. She was on her toes, turning around and around, her long hair following her as she turned.

At first she had felt envious of the little girl. Of her freedom to turn round and round in the street, and of her

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unselfconsciousness too. But then, very suddenly, her envy had turned into fear. It would be so easy to take advantage of her, she had thought. So very, very easy as she turns around in the little pink wonderland of her mind.

