

Art · *David Ruenzel*

ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON in 1971 a thirty-eight-year-old account executive with nothing to do went to the Art Institute to kill some time. His name was Paul, and in jeans and a shirt he looked like a retired athlete who had let himself go, who ate and drank what came his way. He was generally indifferent to art so that his rare visits to the Art Institute amounted to little more than a stroll through a pleasant environment. All he knew about art was what he had incidentally retained from a required art history course years ago, and he breezed through the galleries saying to himself, "This is Cubism," "This is a Flemish master," "This is Pop Art," and so on. He was a practical man who liked what he liked and didn't like what he didn't like: it was that simple. He didn't like the Abstractionists, the German Expressionists, Jackson Pollock, or anything depicting the Crucifixion so he trotted through these galleries. As a matter of fact, he didn't like much of anything, and after an hour he was ready to take in the Shedd Aquarium or Adler Planetarium. The problem was that he kept measuring everything against what he had seen in that art history class: there colors brimmed in the dark auditorium, and a halo over the Lord's head may have been a ring plucked from Saturn. Consequently, the only thing he studied for any length of time was the Impressionists. He stood before Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" for a full sixty seconds. It was his idea of good art: dots, wonderful dots. The painting reminded him of Ravinia. There you caught everything in great smeary glimpses. A wine bottle was a glorious splotch of red.

Paul was on his way out when he came across a commemorative Edward Hopper exhibit. He ducked in and looked at a painting. It was entitled "Seven A.M.," and the representation of the small town shop so impressed him, so reminded him of something from his boyhood that he rubbed his hands together and said, "I want one!" He spent the next two hours walking the exhibit and studying the paintings, and as he did so he kept muttering to himself, "I want one! I want one!" He seemed to see his life in every painting. He looked at the houses, drenched with the starkest light, slashed by shadow, and thought, "I've lived in those houses." He looked at a woman standing naked in an unadorned room, the window framed by curtains that would smell of dust, and thought, "That was Lil."

He looked at a man staring into the sky while sitting at an uncluttered desk and thought, "That's me." It went on like that, and all the while Paul kept hearing the voice that said, "I want one! I want one!"

At one point he was looking at "Morning in the City" when he said to a woman standing next to him, "That's Chicago, right?" "No, New York," she said. She went on to say that as far as she knew, Hopper had never done any paintings of Midwestern subjects. For a moment Paul was disappointed, then he remembered that great art was supposed to be universal.

At the Art Institute's gift shop he bought everything he could find on or by Hopper. It came to \$279. People stared at him as he walked down the street. He could hardly walk under art's burden.

Walk onto a sunny street after you have just seen a movie, perhaps one of those epics shot from the underbelly of a plane, and you know how hard it is to shrug off its effects. So Paul felt the next morning walking to work along Michigan Avenue. Traffic noise seemed far away. Jewelry looked like lost heirlooms in their glass encasements. A man stood in a doorway, being sucked up into time. Everything was shadow and light, high contrast, explicitly linear, and against this brutal geometry people and things had never looked so sad.

But the day was a busy one at the office, and Paul forgot about Hopper. He had to gather data for an important new business pitch, and he no longer heard the voice which said, "I want one! I want one!"

Time passed, the shaft of afternoon light came and went, and soon it was night: his entire staff would be burning the midnight oil. Then Mary, his secretary, came into his office to search for a report, and something happened. She hunted through a filing cabinet while Paul analyzed some figures, then glanced at him and said, "Do you know where the Klugman report is?" Aficionados of Hopper's work may think that Paul was suddenly reminded of the scene in "Office at Night," but he never made the connection. All he knew was that he had to have one. The desire was strong, and so filled with grief and love that he feared he might weep. "Paul, the Klugman report," Mary repeated. "Mary," Paul said, "there's no beauty in my life."

Paul and Mary went to a diner across the street for a cup of coffee. It was one of those places where the walls are glazed like frosting from the greasy light, and where the huge metal coffee urns look like silos. This time Paul

caught on and the place reminded him of “Nighthawks.” Was the woman smoking a cigarette in the painting? He thought so, and offered Mary a cigarette, saying, “Smoke, smoke.” In the painting there was also a man stacking dishes, and he hoped the old man wiping the counter would soon do that. Then looking up from his coffee, Paul said, “I’ve no wife, no children, no friends.” He so enjoyed it that he said it again. “I’ve no wife, no children, no friends.” He went on to tell Mary of his love for art. Mary was a romanticist from Peoria with no college education, and as such admired any one who loved art. She rested a hand on his back and swore that she too loved art. Finally, the old fellow began stacking dishes, and Paul said to him and a solitary figure at the other end of the counter, “Greetings fellow nighthawks.”

He and Mary walked home with their arms wrapped around each other. They were like two drunks. “I want one!” Paul shouted. Mary too shouted “I want one!” though she didn’t know what he wanted.

A month later Paul and Mary married. Their lives were transformed. One night they went to the ballet, the next to the theatre. She began to collect classical music, and every Saturday evening the following summer they went to Ravinia, staking out their small plot of land and civilizing it with fruits and bottles of fine wine. They held hands during the performances and felt very much in love. Soon Paul learned about such things as counterpoint and liked Mozart and string music. He didn’t like the winds because they never seemed to go anywhere, and he dismissed them as air given a bit of lung. Mary liked Mahler and took a course on his music at the Conservatory. Sometimes they had arguments about what constituted good music but Mary always won.

Paul, always a reliable employee but a bit of a plodder, became inspired at the office. He would hold up storyboards at meetings and say to the client, with lyrical intensity, “This, sir, is what you want.” He worked out regularly, lost weight, and everyone thought him handsome. By 1973 he was a Vice-President, a year later a Chicago Symphony Board member. Occasionally he and Mary attended parties at the Solti residence. His income soared into six figures, and he and Mary moved from their apartment in North Chicago to a Tudor home in Winnetka, where she raised orchids and he played tennis on their clay court. Mary, now able to discuss the work of everyone from Botticelli to Lichtenstein with some fluency, opened a successful gallery. She was fond of saying to Paul, “Now I have

what I want.” Paul, though, still heard the old voice. He’d be standing in his bay window looking out into his manicured yard when he’d suddenly find himself whispering, “I want, I want.” He was prone to fits of melancholy, which Mary thought was apropos for someone so sensitive.

Months went by. It was a Saturday in October of 1975 when Mary came home to find an original Edward Hopper on the living room wall. It was “High Noon,” a painting of a partially undressed woman standing in a doorway and looking very lonely. Paul was sitting on the floor sipping a glass of champagne. He was very drunk. “I have one,” he said, and tears came to his eyes.

“My God,” Mary said. “You didn’t.”

“It’s a genuine Hopper. I—we—have one.” He was so happy he had to choke back sobs.

“What a terribly depressing work.” she said.

Paul held up the bottle. “Make merry,” he said.

Mary sat across from him. She asked him what he paid for it. She was terrified.

Paul smiled as he spoke, because he knew he would never again say, “I want!” “Car, house, yard, savings,” he said. He took a breath and continued. “Chandelier, Chippendale, Weber, boat, khaki shirts,” and so on.

Mary had just seen Ingmar Bergman’s “Persona,” and now she pulled a Liv Ullman. She bit her fists, hunched over in the fetal position, and began to rock. Her cries were those of absolute primal anguish.

“I thought you liked art.” Paul said.

Ten years later in 1985 Paul was remarried, and the father of two children. He lived in a middle-class neighborhood where his kids spent the summer months splashing in a backyard pool, and earned his living as a claims adjuster. He liked to take his children to sporting events and the Museum of Science and Industry. He was a shy but kind man, though inwardly full of self-hatred. He never forgave himself for buying the Hopper painting; his folly had ruined a charmed life. No longer did he hear the voice saying “I want,” for such longing had departed from his life. In 1980 he had resold the painting at a considerable loss, and with the proceeds he bought a cottage in northern Wisconsin.

One August day he was driving his family up to the cottage when they stopped for gas on a wooded two-lane road. It was an old Mobil station, a cultural artifact, the kind of thing hardly found in even the remotest areas.

The pumps were a brilliant red and on the round disks above the pumps were the red horses with wings. The station itself was nothing but a little house, with a cupola on top.

Paul stretched by the car, and then went inside to get a cola. When he came out the attendant had filled up the car and was putting the nozzle back on the pump. "Check your oil, sir?" he said. Paul realized right then and there that he might have been looking at Hopper's "Gas," and for the first time in years he found himself singing, "I want, I want."

"Don't move," he told the attendant. "Don't move."

The attendant looked up at Paul, but Paul wasn't looking at him. He was looking at the woods behind the man. They were dark and shadowy. In them, he thought, deer must roam.