

Christine Poulson

Don't You Hate Having Two Heads?

He came to the Guggenheim Museum every time he visited Venice and it struck him as strange that he didn't remember seeing this sculpture before. It lay at his feet, more like a gigantic insect than the body of a woman. He was fascinated, yet he could scarcely bear to look. There was an arched backbone from which the ribs opened out like petals to the sun. Little breasts like grapes clustered above them. At one end of the spine, pipe-cleaner legs were splayed like those of a limbo-dancer. From the other end sprouted the neck, a long arc of vertebrae ending in a tiny head with a notch for a mouth. He looked at the title: *Woman with her Throat Cut* by Alberto Giacometti. He looked again at the sculpture. A little way down the neck was a second notch. This bloodless bronze was somehow more terrible than the goriest painting could have been.

It was as he turned away that he saw the girl for the second time.

He had first seen her going into the museum just ahead of him. He had admired the swing of her shoulder length hair as she leaned forward to buy her ticket. When she straightened up, he realised that she was half a head taller than he was. He had always been attracted to tall women, particularly to those as elegant as this. She was wearing a fitted jacket in tan suede and high-waisted brown trousers that flattered a slender figure. And now there she was on the other side of the room gazing at a painting by Max Ernst.

He slipped off his wedding ring and pushed it deep into his trouser pocket. She was frowning a little, totally intent on the picture, and seemed not to notice as he drifted over in her direction. He glanced at the title: *The Robing of the Bride*. The painting was dominated by a monstrous figure with an owl's head. Its round eyes gazed out at the spectator with an expression at once enigmatic, melancholy, and predatory. Further down, the rich orange feathers fell into the folds of a floor-length cloak from which emerged the small breasts and the gently swelling stomach of a naked female body.

Guggenheim Museum

kunstmuseum med amerikansk og europæisk kunst fra første del af det 20. århundrede

scarcely knap nok

arched buet

backbone rygrad

petal kronblad

cluster samle sig i klynge

spine rygrad

splay forvride

limbo dans fra Trinidad

hvor danseren går under en stadig lavere-liggende stang

sprout vokse

vertebrae ryghvirvler

notch rille

Alberto Giacometti

1901-1966; schweizisk billedkunstner

gory bloddrypende

fitted figursyet

tan gulbrun

suede ruskind

flatter "fremhæve"

slender slank

Max Ernst 1891-1976;

tysk autodidakt surrealist

in'tent on stærkt optaget af

drift slentre

robe iklæde

monstrous uhyre stor

enigmatic gådefuld

predatory rovgrisk

cloak kåbe

thrill gysen

appre'hension ængstelse

peer stirre, spejle

Roland Penrose

1900-1984; engelsk ma-
ler, historiker og digter

en'counter møde

Ale'xander Calder

1898-1976; amerikansk
billedhugger

mobile uro

twinge stik

Jackson 'Pollock

1912-1956; amerikansk
billedkunstner

"Don't you hate having two heads?" the girl murmured.

Obviously she hadn't realised that he was standing behind her. He cleared his throat. The girl looked round. Her eyes widened. She was a brown-eyed blonde, an unusual combination. He felt a little thrill of excitement and apprehension.

"Has she got two heads?" he asked.

"Yes, look, right there. See that little face peering out?" The girl had an American accent, light, attractive.

He moved forward so that he was standing next to her. He looked to where she was pointing. Just above the breasts, a tiny mask-like face was peering out through the feathers.

"So there is."

"Don't you hate having two heads?' is the title of another surrealist painting," she said. "It's by a British artist, Roland Penrose. It's kind of a joke."

He smiled at her. "I see that."

She was older than he had thought. She must be about thirty, not really a girl at all. He was glad that she wasn't too young.

She pulled a notebook out of her bag. She gave him a brief smile and turned towards the seats in the centre of the gallery.

The encounter was over. At least for now.

He made his way through the central gallery past the Alexander Calder mobile, and pushed open the door that led down to the terrace overlooking the Grand Canal. The heat enveloped him. He hadn't expected the weather to be so good in late September. It was a real Indian summer.

He gave it ten minutes, then he headed back into the museum. She wasn't in the gallery where he had left her, nor in the garden. He felt a twinge of concern, but surely she couldn't have left yet. He strolled around, hoping at any moment to catch a glimpse of the bell of blonde hair, but he didn't come across her. After a while he gave up any pretence of examining the Picassos and the Jackson Pollocks and went through the rooms methodically, one by one. At last he had to admit defeat. She had gone and he had missed his chance. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why hadn't he made a move earlier? It was a bloody nuisance just when he had psyched himself up to it. He had had so little practice, that was the trouble. He would have to mark this down to experience and start all over again.

First he would have a coffee. The museum café was crowded. Glancing round for a table, he saw at one end of the long narrow room a shallow flight of stairs and a sign to the Museum shop. He felt a flicker of hope. As he turned the corner into the shop, he saw her standing at the counter handing money to the sales assistant and receiving a small plastic bag, the kind that contains postcards. He breathed a sigh of relief. He moved deeper into the shop and paused by a rack of silk scarves. He looked back. She had moved away from the counter and was browsing among the books. He edged round to the racks of postcards and picked out several more or less at random. Now she was leaning over a cabinet of jewellery made from Murano glass. As he watched, she straightened up and walked towards the exit. He hastened to pay for the cards and followed her out.

At first he thought she was heading for the café, but she turned off into the ladies loo.

He hovered near the entrance to the shop and pretended to look at some books in a glass case. After a while she emerged and he hurried after her. He was just in time to see her sit down at a table. He looked around and felt like cheering. All the other tables were full. It couldn't have worked out better if he had planned it.

He walked over to her table.

"May I?" he said, gesturing towards the empty chair. She nodded and smiled.

He ordered a cappuccino. When he caught her eye again, she stretched out a hand and said, "Jessica David."

There was a directness about her that threw him off balance: he almost gave his real name. Well, the Richard was real enough. But even as the word was on his lips he felt a moment of paralysing indecision. He hadn't prepared a false surname. And now she was looking into his eyes, waiting for him to go on.

"Richard Ford," he said firmly, remembering a moment too late that this was the name of a well-known American writer. Still, it was a common enough name.

"Are you here on holiday?" he asked.

"No, I'm a student, a postgrad."

Ten minutes later they were deep in conversation. She wasn't American at all, he learned, but Canadian. She came from Quebec. He didn't have to feign interest. He had always wanted to go there.

shallow lav

flicker svagt glimt

rack stativ

Mu'rano glass verdens-
kendt venetiansk glas-
kunst

loo wc

hover gå frem og tilbage

cheer juble

paralysing lammende

inde'cision ubeslutsom-
hed

postgrad kandidat på
overbygningstudium

feign foregive

ravenous hundesulten
ravioli italiensk pastaret
insalata mista italiensk
for blandet salat
de'mur gøre indsigelse
dredge grave frem
prime det bedste
cast around lede efter
assas'sinio italiensk for
mord
spread iøjnefaldende
artikel
cheese-cutter osteskærer
ga'rotte egl. henrette ved
langsom kvælning

They reached a natural pause in the conversation. The coffee had been drunk. For a moment neither of them spoke. She looked around. He knew she was preparing to leave.

"Is it too early for lunch?" he asked.

She hesitated and he thought he had lost her.

Then she said, "Not at all too early. In fact I'm ravenous." They decided on ravioli stuffed with cheese and vegetables and an *insalata mista*. When Richard ordered a bottle of wine, Jessica did not demur.

As they drank the first glass, she told him about her research. She was looking at various surrealist artists from a feminist viewpoint.

"There were some women surrealists, weren't there?" Richard said, dredging his memory. "Leonora Carrington, wasn't she one? And who did that cup and saucer lined with fur?"

"Meret Oppenheim. Oh sure, there are some marvellous women surrealists, but there's another side to it. I'm interested in the way women were silenced by surrealists."

The waiter arrived with their food. Richard poured out another glass of wine for them both.

"What kind of thing have you got in mind?" he said.

"There's a prime example here in this very museum."

It was as if he could read her mind. He knew what was coming next.

"I'm thinking of that Giacometti sculpture," she said. "It's called *Woman with her Throat Cut*. There couldn't be a more effective way of silencing someone."

As he cast around for something to say, his eye fell on the newspaper that Jessica had left on the empty chair between them. ASSASSINIO SUL CANAL GRANDE the headline read. Jessica followed his gaze.

"Have you heard about that?" she asked. "I don't read Italian," he said.

"It might not be in the English language papers yet. They only found the second body yesterday. Two in less than a week. The police think it's the work of the same person, so of course the press are making the most of it. There's a big spread about serial killers."

"How does he? - I mean what happens -?"

"Cheese-cutter. They're garrotted with that thin strip of wire that you use to cut cheese."

Richard felt queasy. His head was swimming. He poured himself a glass of mineral water. He told himself that he could walk away at any moment. He didn't actually have to do anything. This was just an experiment.

Jessica began to talk about the fellowship she'd been awarded and the bad moment passed.

"So you've been here for a while?" he asked.

"Three months."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've got a room in a flat. Not far away actually. And you?"

"A hotel in San Polo." He didn't want to be more specific.

He looked down at the table and traced a pattern in a little puddle of spilled water.

"There's always plenty to do during the day, but it can be difficult in the evenings, can't it?" she said.

He looked up. She was smiling at him.

He said, "I wonder ... Maybe we could ..."

"I'd like that."

"This evening?"

"Why not?"

Now that this was settled, they began to talk of other things. Richard asked her if she'd like coffee. She said she would. He ordered it and then excused himself. In the gent's, he splashed cold water on his face and gazed at his reflection. He tried to see himself through Jessica's eyes. His hair and beard, both worn short, were greying and it suited him. Certainly he was more attractive now at forty than he had been at twenty. All the same he couldn't believe how easy it had been, almost too easy. He found himself feeling annoyed with her for being so ready to go off with a complete stranger. Didn't she realise how dangerous it was?

He went back into the café.

Jessica was gazing out into the garden with her back to him. As he approached their table, her head began to turn. And out of the blue it hit him: a wave of sheer panic. Because the head that swivelled towards him as if in slow motion wasn't the head of a woman. It was the owl-head of the bride in the Max Ernst picture. The feathery hair was made of real feathers, the brown eyes were round and unblinking, the little nose was a beak with a cruel curve at the tip. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Jessica was herself again. She was looking at him with concern.

feel queasy have kvalme
fellowship stipendium
puddle pyt
gent's herretoilet
swivel dreje
beak næb

over'cast overskyet
the heat was building
 det blev varmere
pro'fusely voldsomt
cuttlefish blæksprutte
vapo'retto italiensk for
 vandbus
chug tøffe

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He reached for a chair and lowered himself into it.

"Just suffering a bit from the heat."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

He nodded and she poured one out for him.

"I need to go and freshen up myself," she said.

As she walked away, it occurred to him that maybe it was the heat after all. That and the alcohol. The sky was completely over-cast now and yet the heat was still building. He was sweating profusely. Or maybe these were the early symptoms of food poisoning. That cuttlefish he had eaten last night ...

But whatever had caused that momentary hallucination, he knew now that he couldn't go through with it.

The waiter appeared at his side and laid the bill on the table. He got to his feet, pulled out his wallet, and threw three twenty Euro notes on the table. He snatched up his packet of postcards, and ran out of the restaurant.

Ten minutes later he was on a vaporetto chugging up the Grand Canal towards the Rialto Bridge.

"Got your research done, darling?" Richard's wife asked.

She tossed her handbag and her newspaper onto the bed. It was the following day and she had just arrived from Marco Polo airport. Richard had met her off the bus at the Piazza Romana and they had walked the short distance across a couple of canals to the hotel. On the way they had talked about the children, Marcus on holiday with friends for the first time and Emily at Pony Club camp. The success of Richard's last novel had made both the holiday and the Pony Club possible and had allowed Sarah to join him for a few days.

"Well, I did establish that it would be easy to pick someone up in the Guggenheim Museum."

"I told you it would be. Art galleries and museums are well-known intellectual pick-up places."

Something in the silence that followed made her look round at him.

"You didn't actually pick someone up yourself?" She was laughing. "You did, didn't you?"

"I did have lunch with someone," he admitted.

"Attractive?"

"A lot of men would think so."

"But you didn't?"

"She couldn't hold a candle to you."

"Looks like I arrived just in time," she said lightly. "If you've done everything you need for the new book, maybe we can get down to some serious sight-seeing."

He wasn't going to tell her that for a crazy half-hour he had contemplated taking it further. She might guess, but she wouldn't ask. She wasn't one of those tedious women who insist on having everything out in the open.

"I've found a very nice restaurant just off the Piazza San Margarita," Richard said. "I thought we'd go there for lunch."

"I'll just do a bit of unpacking first and maybe have a shower."

As she pattered around, he stretched out on the bed and glanced through the paper. He had more or less recovered from the day before. As he had alighted from the vaporetto, the heavens had opened. He had been soaked to the skin by the time he got to the hotel and to cap it all he was violently sick. He only just got back to his room in time.

He'd felt better by the evening and had slipped down to the hotel restaurant for a simple pasta. He had chosen a table at the rear of the restaurant. He couldn't rid himself of the fear that Jessica was cruising the hotels of San Polo looking for him. Thank goodness he had never before been seriously tempted to be unfaithful to Sarah. He didn't have the temperament for it. Better stick to fictional adventures and leave the real ones to bolder and more unscrupulous men.

Sarah had put her clothes away and had laid out her toiletries on top of the chest of drawers. Richard's belongings were lying scattered around and she began to tidy them up. Richard found this domestic activity comforting. He went on turning over the pages of *The Guardian* which had travelled with Sarah from East Midlands airport that morning.

His eye was caught by a headline. "Death in Venice." *Venetian police are denying that they have a serial killer on their hands, he read, even though the killer seems to have used the same modus operandi on both victims. Apparently they were garrotted with a length of cheesewire. In both cases something was*

hold a candle måle sig
 med
contemplate overveje
tedious kedelig
potter around nusse
a'light stige ud af
soaked gennemblødt
to cap it all oven i købet
un'scrupulous skrupel-
 løs
toiletries toiletsager
chest of drawers kom-
 mode
do'mestic huslig
modus ope'randi frem-
 gangsmåde

dis'count udelukke
moue (fransk) sur trut-
mund
gruesome makaber
baffled forbløffet
René Ma'gritte
1898-1967; belgisk sur-
realistisk maler
counterpane sengetæppe

left behind by the body that leads the police to suspect that the killer is a visitor to Venice.

"Really, Richard!" He looked up to see Sarah holding a plastic bag in one hand and a postcard in the other.

"Sorry – just let me –" His eyes went back to the newspaper. 5

Both men were around forty and of a similar type. Both were below average height. Both were married, but police do not discount a homosexual motive.

"My God! They weren't women, they were men!" 10

"Richard!"

And now he did focus on what Sarah had in her hand. It was a postcard of *Woman with her Throat Cut* by Alberto Giacometti.

"Why did you buy so many of the same thing?" she said with a moue of distaste. "There must be a dozen of them. They're really gruesome." 15

For a moment he was baffled. How had they got into his room? Then he understood. In his haste to leave the restaurant he had picked up the wrong plastic bag. Jessica had his Magritte and Alexander Calder postcards. He had ... these. 20

"And that's not all. There's something else in here," Sarah said.

She turned the bag upside down above the bed.

Richard knew what would be in there even before the gleaming, tightly-coiled length of cheese-wire landed on the counterpane. 25
(2006)

Pre-Reading Tasks

1. What is your first reaction to the title?
2. What is Surrealism?
3. Find Alberto Giacometti's sculpture *Woman with her Throat Cut* (1932) on <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/surrealism/images/womanthroatcut.jpg>. Describe the sculpture.
4. Look at Max Ernst's painting *The Robing of the Bride* (1940) on p. 20. What are your associations?
5. Find Roland Penrose's painting *Don't You Hate Having Two Heads* (1949) on www.rolandpenrose.co.uk. Describe it.
6. See Meret Oppenheim *Fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon* (1936) on http://www.sapdesignguild.org/editions/edition6/ms_visual_des2.asp. What are your associations?
7. In one minute write down a list of why people visit art museums.

Questions

1. Describe the plot of the story. How does the story unfold? Where is the climax of the story?
2. Where and when does the story take place? Describe the atmosphere.
3. What is the story's point of view? How does it affect the reader?
4. Characterize Jessica David. Why is Jessica referred to as "*the girl*" in the beginning? (p. 11) Comment on Jessica's strategy to get Richard hooked. What are her motives?
5. Analyse the interaction between Richard and Jessica. You should comment on, "*He felt a little thrill of excitement and apprehension*" (p. 12). Why does Richard slip off his wedding ring when he sees Jessica? (p. 11)
6. Explain what happens in the paragraph "*Jessica was ... concerned*". (p.15, ll.33-41). What happens after Richard has had this vision? Can you explain his reactions? What are the deeper implications of Richard's experience at the museum psychologically speaking? Try to use Freud's three-level model of the human mind (the superego, the ego and the id). Is Richard a sympathetic protagonist? Discuss.
7. Characterise Richard and comment on his relationship to women. What is your impression of Richard's and Sarah's marriage?
8. Comment on the title.
9. Consider the gender issues of the story. Is there a possible gender motive behind a female serial killer's strangling of men? If yes, how is it shown in the text?
10. There are quite a few references to surrealist art in the story. In what way does sexuality play a role in Surrealism?
11. Is the story a classical crime story? If yes, give examples. Are there any modern characteristics?

Creativity

1. Act out the dialogue between Richard and Sarah after the cheese-cutter is disclosed in their hotel room.
2. Write Jessica's entry in her diary for the day she met Richard.

3. Write the report (max 200 words) which the detective writes after Richard has informed the police of his experience.
4. Compare the painting *Birthday* (1942) by Dorothy Tanning, http://sauer-thompson.com/conversations/archives/2004/01/surrealism_sexuality4.html to *The Robing of the Bride* by Max Ernst. Comment on composition, colouring, symbolism and genre.



Max Ernst, *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940.