

# *Voluptuous Pleasure*

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WRITING LIFE

Marianne Apostolides

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*It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself. The noeme of language is perhaps this impotence, or, to put it positively: language is, by nature, fictional.*

– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

## *Layers*

Red ants and rain; stained skin and rough hands; a man's voice, a woman's moan. These are my memories of that day. They wouldn't become a story for twenty-five years.

MAY 2007.

18 GRENADIER ROAD, TORONTO.

ON THE PHONE TO GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK.

"He was such a shit," she says.

That conversation leads back, then, into this: the memory I'd recalled, on occasion, over the course of three decades.

"It's more complicated than that," I say.

It wasn't a coherent memory – not exactly. It was more a series of dense sensations, feelings whose meaning I wouldn't grasp until I was older.

"Perhaps," my mother replies.

My mother: she is the one who controlled the facts. She revealed them to me at certain, specific moments in our relationship. These moments, with her, traversed my memory of that day, animating the elements.

"It's always more complicated, mom."

And that's how it all came together: confusions and questions, sensations remembered in physical detail, a fact strategically disclosed – *this* is how I come to know the story in its fullness.

MARCH 1989.

71 THIRD STREET, GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK.

IN THE BREAKFAST ROOM.

“Hey – did you hear me? I said I'll be back by dinner....  
Hey!”

She pokes me.

“What.”

“I'll be back by dinner,” she repeats.

“Fine,” I say limply.

“Fine,” she rejoins.

She hovers beside the couch where I lie, reading a novel. The cushions are askew. I turn the page.

“Okay...” She gulps a glass of water. I can hear the clunk in her throat as the liquid goes down. It disgusts me.

“I'll be back by dinner but I probably won't be hungry. They always serve food at these functions, although nobody ever eats. Who wants to eat after seeing that? Huh?... Marianne?”

“I wouldn't know,” I say, aware of the bulge beside me, where I've hidden bread and muffins beneath the cushions. I will binge-and-purge as soon as my mother leaves.

“Huh? Marianne?”

She shoves and I look up. Her eyes seem misshapen, the lids peeled back from her raging emotion – either anger or anxiety, I'm not sure which. Not that it matters with her. Anger, anxiety: one becomes the other becomes the cause of a fight between us. I am sixteen years old. She doesn't have a

job, except to raise me. I have an eating disorder that we don't discuss.

"Sure," I say. "Fine."

"Fine. Well," she says, shifting her balance. "Well, I'll be back by dinner, regardless. The internment should be done by three."

"The what?"

"The internment," she says. "The burial? Do you remember Mr. Fischer?"

"Who?"

"Elizabeth's father."

Yes.

"He died?"

"He did," she says. "Another one dead of cancer. And he was so young." She snaps her purse open and shut, removing a handkerchief. "But you wouldn't remember him, from that weekend we went up there. That day – it wasn't even a weekend, it was just a day... but what a day... but you wouldn't remember it," she says. "You were just a kid."

I remember.

She talks about how young he was, Mr. Fischer, a social worker at the Y M C A in Manhattan – in Harlem, no less – an extraordinary man, she says. As she talks I stare at the book, pretending to read. But the story I construct is the memory of that day: he put his hand on my back as I crouched on the stone; my arms were wrapped around my knees. I was listening to the argument while watching the ants. The stick was wet in my hand. I gasped.

It hurts, doesn't it, he said. He stood in the doorway.

It does, I whispered.

It stops, he responded.

The sting on my calf swelled.

He came to me then, put his hand on my back. It's okay, he said. He pulled me to him, scooped me onto his lap. I remained in a ball. It's okay, he repeated. It's okay, my sweet girl, it's okay. He kissed my hair. I felt his voice, a soft-edged vibration that took away the shrill sound of the woman's scream. It's okay.

I looked through the window, into the kitchen where the women stood. The kettle was spewing a cloud of steam; it parted, disturbed, as my mother stepped toward her friend, who was trembling.

"And Elizabeth is devastated, just devastated." My mother starts to cry. "He was such a good man. Such a good father. He never judged Elizabeth – never once, and she told him *everything*. Always, he was there for her – even at the very worst of times, he was there – and now Elizabeth has no one. No one!" My mother reaches blindly through her tears to hug me. She clutches at my arms, leaning onto the cushion that conceals the hidden food.

I stiffen.

I tell her that the snot is going to fuck up her makeup if she keeps crying.

My sweet girl, he said. I nuzzled into his chest. My sweet girl, it's okay.

MARCH 1995.

1000 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, AMERICAN WING.

I follow her through unfamiliar empty rooms, past smooth-

bosomed goddesses and the sloppy hearts of Jim Dine. With every gallery we enter, my mother flashes her badge and I examine a poster – yet another poster – for the retrospective of Dali.

“This wing is closed to the public today,” she says as she strides past a guard. “It’ll be nice and quiet.”

She’s been working as a docent for the past five years, ever since I left home to attend university. I’ve now signed the contract for my first book, a memoir about eating disorders. This is to be our celebratory afternoon.

“How will Elizabeth find us?” I ask, trailing behind my mother. “If this wing is closed...”

“Elizabeth can’t come,” my mother replies.

“But – !”

“What?”

“But this whole thing was her idea!”

“Well, she’s been detained by a work emergency,” my mother says and strides by the Tiffany windows. She does not pause to admire these scintillating scenes; she knows they are too primly lovely for me. She turns into the next gallery.

“Some of this stuff is dull,” my mother declares. She gestures toward the huge canvas of Washington crossing the white-frothed Delaware. “Very heroic. Mythic even – historic – but *I* like it because *I’m* an historian.”

“Right,” I say.

“Let’s continue.”

My mother is not really a historian. She had *intended* to be a historian; she went to Harvard to *become* a historian. But she quit after her master’s degree, then taught history in high school in a rich suburban town, then got pregnant. Then she



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