

THE GLASS OF WINE I NEVER HAD

Thesis by Anastasia Starostenko, TXT

PROLOGUE

What is an **accident**?

Do we meet people by chance? Do things happen to us unintentionally? Do we create works by mistake? Or are all those things somehow predetermined? Predestined? Predefined? What is the role of accident in our lives? Does accident exist?

When unfortunate accidents happen, is that a result of our actions or the actions of someone else, or is it something that is completely unrelated to anything and is a separate mixed combination of random occurrences and events?

On May 16th I found myself at Bellevue Hospital of New York City with a broken leg, which was the outcome of a motorcycle crash I had been in the night before. Ironically the accident coincided with another event: the end of my exchange semester at Parsons the New School for Design, since it happened only a few hours after I passed my final exams. Apart from physical concerns, this experience evoked a lot of questions. Trying to answer these questions, I was collecting stories and doing research that led me to a more positive alternative, the notion of **serendipity**, which means 'fortunate happenstance' or 'pleasant surprise'.

Erik David, a North American writer, who based his latest book on the research of codes within modern esoterica, says that serendipity lives in the space of juxtaposition, in a space of diversity, the space in which we're more likely to make unexpected connections between subjects. And the perfect example of this space, according to Davis, is the city, which has density and variety of viewpoints, perspectives and memes.

In art, as in life, fortunate accident goes hand in hand with the process of creation. It leads to unexpected discoveries and sets a work free from the control of its creator, offering a new dimension, new feeling, something that can be referred to as a greater sense. Without accident there is no invention, no sense of surprise.

Marcel Duchamp had been working on 'The Large Glass' for almost ten years. In 1923 he declared the piece 'definitively unfinished'. His decision was prophetic, as the final appearance of the work was yet to be achieved. That occurred **by accident** when the two panels were shattered while the 'Glass' was transported back from the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. After Duchamp saw what happened he exclaimed: 'Now the work is complete!' In a conversation with his friend, art historian and writer Arturo Schwarz, he would later say 'Indeed, in my whole life, as you rightly point out, I have done but one work, the Large Glass'. Art historians would call it 'the most influential artwork of our century' and 'the most fortuitous **accident** in the history of art'.

But what is behind the accident of the 'Large Glass'? What led to its creation?

In conversation with Pierre Cabanne, shortly before Duchamp's death, Marcel spoke of two moments that influenced his creative choices on the way to this work: the rejection of his painting 'Nude Descending a Staircase' at the Indépendants, that made him turn away from retinal art and step into the world of ready-mades; and his meeting with Picabia, who revealed to him a new idea of the artist and took him to a performance of a stage adaptation of Raymond Roussel's 1910 novel, *Impressions d'Afrique*, that encouraged Duchamp to begin the creation of 'The Large Glass'.

If art mirrors life and accidents have points of departure, is there a chance to find the cause? Wondering that, I fastened my seat belt, set forth on the epistolary journey and asked Marcel to lead the way.

PART 1. TO BE LOOKED AT (FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GLASS) WITH ONE EYE, CLOSE TO, FOR ALMOST AN HOUR

Friday, 16 May 2014, time 01:06 Documented by Maureen Sarnes, RPA

Trauma Activation Level 2

Arrival 22:30

Communication Ability: Able to communicate

Language Used: English

HPI: Patient is a 29-year-old female brought in by emergency medical services on long board and c-collar status post motorcycle crash. Patient states she was the second rider (seated on the bike behind the driver) and wearing a helmet. +LOC. Patient arrived to the trauma slot in stable condition with left lower extremity deformity.

A – Airway patent, no blood or foreign bodies in oropharynx, able to speak in full sentences

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- Marcel, before going into details, we could tackle the key event in your life, that is, the fact that, after about twenty-five years of painting, you abruptly abandoned it. I'd like you to explain this **rupture**.
 - It came from several things... There was **an incident**, in 1912 which 'gave me a turn', so to speak; when I brought the 'Nude Descending a Staircase' to the Indépendants, and they asked me to withdraw it before the opening. In the most advanced group of the period, certain people had extraordinary qualms, a sort of fear! People... found that this 'Nude' wasn't in the line that they had predicted. Cubism lasted two or three years, and they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it, foreseeing everything that might happen... So, that cooled me off so much that, as a reaction against such behavior coming from artists whom I had believed to be free, I got a job. I became a librarian at the Sainte-Geneviève Library in Paris.

I made this gesture to rid myself of a certain milieu, a certain attitude, to have a clean conscience, but also to make a living... Then the war came, which upset everything, and I left for the United States.

.....

'Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight KL6102 to New York. We are now inviting passengers with small children and any passengers requiring special assistance to come forward and begin boarding first. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready for boarding.'

Strange how complicated it can be to get your needs met if you don't have the right currency sign on the banknotes. It took me a while but I finally found a place to eat that accepts euros, which ironically looked like the most opulent eatery I've ever visited. But after a sleepless night of packing, which knocked me down the moment we took off from Amsterdam and made me miss the plane snack, I did not really care. I had a two-hour layover at London's Heathrow and I could eat for three!

I parked myself on a fancy leather booth and ordered an urgent big cup of black coffee and the nicest sounding (and pretty much the most expensive) dish on the menu – traditional British roast leg of lamb with mashed potatoes. It sounded like the proper meal to celebrate the beginning of a long awaited journey.

Coffee arrived in a minute and slowly sipping the dark liquid, I noticed that things around started to sharpen. Two men at the bar were drinking coffee and trying to knit a conversation...

- ... principle of interdependence.
- What do you mean?
- I mean that each organism and each species makes a vital contribution to the totality of life on earth, and this contribution, contrary to the expectations of standard evolutionary biology, doesn't need to have any direct benefit for the organism itself.
- So we are programmed to give?
- Giving comes full circle. For example, Pioneer species pave the way for keystone species, which provide microniches for other species, which feed yet other species in a web of gifts that, eventually circle back to benefit the pioneer species.
- Or nitrogen-fixing bacteria that don't directly benefit from doing so, except that the nitrogen they give to the soil grows plants that grow roots that grow fungi, which ultimately provide nutrients to the bacteria...
- Exactly! Remove any being and the health of all becomes more **precarious...** In ecology, it's called the principle of interdependence that all beings depend for their survival on **the web** of other beings that surrounds them...

- 'There you go', the waiter put the plate of fragrant lamb in front of me - 'Enjoy your meal'.

By the time I finished my luxurious dish and was ready to pay, the airport speaker announced: *'This is the final boarding call for the passenger Anastasia Starostenko booked on flight KL6102 to New York. Please proceed to gate number three immediately. The final checks are being completed and the captain will order for the doors of the aircraft to close in approximately five minutes time. I repeat. This is the final boarding call for Anastasia Starostenko. Thank you'*

- Dammit!

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- The moment you finished the 'Nude Descending a Staircase', you did the 'Coffee Grinder', which anticipates the mechanical drawings.
- My brother asked me to do a little painting for his kitchen and I did a coffee grinder which I made to explode; the coffee is tumbling down beside it; the gear wheels are above, and the knob is seen simultaneously at several points of its circuit, with an arrow to indicate movement. Without knowing it, I had opened a window into something else. You know, I've always felt this need to escape myself.

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It was the first sunny Sunday of April, a perfect moment to escape from the city, when Noah and Vittoria picked me up at my trailer park to go on our little country adventure. Despite the early hour, we were prepared for the road: I bought a dozen donuts, Vittoria arranged the coffee and Noah... Noah was driving.

We were headed to the Blackberry Hill Farm in a little town called Hudson that was about a two-hour ride away from the city, following the Hudson river up the state of New York, to buy materials and most importantly meet Andrea Tranchita, its owner.

It was hard to say if Andrea found me or I found Andrea. Through my teacher who had connections to the farms in New York State, I have distributed the pictures of the inside of my trailer and a little note saying '1 week of my hard work in exchange for wool to insulate the walls of my trailer' with my phone number and my name on it. In a couple of weeks, I got a call from Andrea, who invited me to come get acquainted to her farm as 'they have plenty of wool to give and are always in need of some extra helping hands'.

After a long journey filled with coffee, donuts and loud music, we climbed out of the car and into the beautiful farmland of Columbia County. From the hill where we parked we could see the field with sheep, horses, llamas and alpacas. The animals didn't pay any attention to us and kept on grazing, trying to find the first young sprouts of spring grass.

Some minutes later, awoken from a mesmerizing feeling, we went to the house, where Andrea was expecting us. We introduced ourselves, gave each other a hug and I pulled out a bag of bagels I brought from the city as a present. She looked at me, smiled and said:

- You know, New York bagel is the only thing I miss about the city...

- How did you live in New York?

- You know, one doesn't know how one does it. It was really *la vie de bohème*, in a sense, slightly gilded – luxurious if you like, but it was still Bohemian life. Often there wasn't enough money, but that didn't matter. I must also say that it was easier back then in America than now. Camaraderie was general, and things didn't cost much, rent was very cheap. You know, I can't even talk about it, because it didn't strike me to the point of saying, 'I'm miserable, I'm leading a dog's life'. No, not at all.

Officially homeless but living in a splendid temporary apartment on the Upper East Side I was scrolling through Stephanie's weekly newsletter, when I stumbled upon the intriguing ad.

'\$650.00 per month, N. Williamsburg/Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Unique DIY Indoor/Outdoor Sublet

This is far from your typical NYC Apartment and is not for everyone. However, it could be perfect for someone adventurous, looking for something different with outdoor work-space. Think DIY artist build involving shipping containers etc.'

Without having any idea of what it was, I immediately wrote back. And in a couple of days, I came out my dwelling 'de luxe' with two big bags full of possessions to perform the last grand gesture in the spirit of the neighborhood. It was heavily snowing. I hailed a cab and asked the driver to take me to my new home. We drove down busy 3rd avenue, turned left, crossed the Williamsburg Bridge and pulled over next to a small metal door in a big fence entirely covered with graffiti.

- That's the place, – said the driver, turning to me and showing no sign of confusion, of 'what would a person from Upper East Side do in the industrial zone of Brooklyn with all her belongings?'

From this quick phrase pronounced with a heavy accent, I knew he was not from New York, just like most cab drivers in the city. My internal radar placed him in the Middle East, probably Egypt or somewhere close.

- Thank you. – I took out cash and handed him the money. – Have a good day.

Without any further communication, I crawled out of the cab and, under the heavy weight of my bags, walked to the metal door through the curtain of falling snow. I turned the key, pushed the door but it did not open. I pushed again.

- Hold on. I'll help you, – said the voice on the other side.

I heard the sound of the working shovel and after about a minute, the door opened and I saw the friendly face of a guy, who was trying to shake off some snow. He put the shovel against one of the trailers and held out his hand:

- Hey, you must be our new tenant. I'm Johnny. Welcome to the trailer park!
-

- Your first American readymade was called 'In Advance of the Broken Arm'. Why?
- It was a snow shovel. In fact, I had written that phrase on it. An obvious association is easy: you can break your arm shoveling snow, but that's a bit simple-minded, and I didn't think that would be noticed. I was hoping it was without sense, but **deep down everything ends up having some.**

PART 2. WANTED: TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD

'From Coney Island to The Sunset Strip
Somebody's gonna make a happy trip
Tonight, while the moon is bright...'

... Louis Armstrong's voice was slipping out of the headphones and on a little TV screen mounted in the chair ahead I saw the opening credits of the inflight movie called Serendipity. Having not much to do, and being wide awake, I decided it was a perfect moment to immerse myself into the comfort of the onboard entertainment.

From the New York skyline the camera slid down the building to the window of Bloomingdale's, where a woman in store's uniform was looking through the pile of newly arrived clothes. Stumbling upon a pair of black cashmere gloves, she passed them on to her colleague, and in a mere moment gloves were carried in a wire tray down to the showroom. As soon as they were hung on a little rack with other gloves of different colors, two people reached out for them at the exact same instant: an American man and a British young woman. And minutes later, sitting in a café they were enjoying a Frrozen Hot Chocolate and talking about a chance that brought them together...

- How did you find this place?
- I first came in because of the name - Serendipity. It's one of my favorite words.
- It is? Why?
- 'Cause it's just such a nice sound for what it means: a fortunate accident...

Suddenly the plane started to shake and we heard... *'Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are now crossing a zone of turbulence. Please return to your seats and keep your seat belts fastened. Thank you.'* *'Cabin Crew, please be seated'*.

Trying to distract myself from the sinking feeling in my stomach, I turned back to the screen and clung to the seat's arms like grim death. On the screen Sara and Jonathan were about to set off on separate journeys. But before disappearing in two opposite elevators of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, each of them took a single glove from the pair they had purchased.

The 'fasten seat belt' sign went off and we returned to the smooth cruising.

An hour later, walking down the busy streets of New York, Jonathan was reading his own early obituary, saying that **'life is not merely a series of meaningless accidents or coincidences. But rather it's a tapestry of events that culminate in an exquisite, sublime plan...'**, when the flight attendant's voice announced:

'Ladies and Gentlemen, we hope you have enjoyed the in-flight entertainment. We are now preparing to land. The bar is closed and we will soon collect your headset and remaining cups and glasses. Thank you.'

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- How would you explain your evolution toward the system of measurements in the 'Large Glass'?
- I explain it with 'The Coffee Grinder'. It was there I began to think I could avoid all contact with traditional pictorial painting. I was able to get rid of tradition by this linear method, or this technical method, which finally detached me from elementary parallelism. That was finished. Fundamentally, I

had a mania for change, like Picabia. One does something for six months, a year, and one goes on to something else.

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The only sound that can be heard from here is the sound of the singing bird. The lawn in front of the house is occasionally used by the deer family that comes here in search of food. I'm sitting on a big white wooden porch of a house bathing in the morning sun. In half an hour Andrea will come to pick me up with her country truck and my farm day will begin.

Our day always starts with feeding the sheep down in the field. A herd of around sixty comes greeting us with the sound of joy and welcome. We give them grain. Soon I realize that one of the most amazing feelings in the world is the feeling of a sheep eating grain from your hand. It's neither licking nor biting but something in-between; **a sign of a connection.**

Then we visit horses, go up the hill to feed llamas and alpacas, and finish at the very top with angora rabbits and chickens. Andrea considers animals as part of her extended family. She knows the name, ancestry and character of every animal. She's so attached to them that she almost never left the farm...

I look at the watch: eighteen more minutes until I hear the sound of the approaching truck... I'm slowly sipping my coffee. Where was I? Oh yeah, Andrea... Third generation farmer, she together with her husband Paul built their little universe from scratch on ten acres of farmland that Andrea's parents gave them as a wedding gift in 1970. But being as strong as she is, throwing bales of hay with no seeming effort, she is also a kind and fragile woman, caring, concerned, worrying about everything and everyone. And in response to these worries she likes to repeat as if to herself: 'Don't worry. Wonder'...

And so I wondered and came here despite my reduced mobility and more than a month after I was supposed to. Andrea picked me up from the station and on the way to the farm when I explained the reason for my delay, she smiled and said: 'You're not late at all. You're right on time!'

'What time is it?' I take a pillow lying next to me and put it under my leg that rests on the chair. It feels much better. I look at the clock again: twelve more minutes, she'll be here soon, yesterday she pulled in at exactly 7:30...

... Yesterday for the first time I got to card the wool. One of the very few activities Andrea lets me do in my condition. I had to mix the fibers of sheep's wool together with llama and a bit of angora to create the soft and strong material that Andrea's farm is so famous for.

I set up the drum carder, put bags with fibers on the table and turned on the radio trying to find an appropriate station to accompany me with my work. Turning the wheel of the old radio receiver, I stopped at the wave that sounded the clearest and started to work. After a piece of classical interlude, two male voices started a dialog...

'... sacred object... special, unique, one of a kind. Infinitely precious... irreplaceable...'

I was methodically pulling out parts of the different animal fibers and feeding them into machine, catching loose phrases of the conversation.

'... we live in a world that has been shorn of its sacredness'
'... mass-produced, standardized commodities, distant origins of our things, and the lack of visible consequences in the production and disposal of goods...'

I was turning the handle of the carder and looking at how different fibers get intermingled on the big wheel, creating a new soft material with different shades of white, grey and brown. The radio went on...

'... sacred object carries a unique essence that can not be reduced to a set of generic qualities...'

I was still turning the handle and looking at this new material being created, and at some point I thought the voice was coming out of the carding machine, as if the wool was speaking to me...

'In earlier times... the products of the human hand ... retain the mark of their origin, their unique place in the ... matrix of being, their dependency of the rest of creation for their existence...'

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the car horn followed by Andrea's voice:

- Are you awake? I thought for a moment you were still dreaming. Do you need some help to get down?
- No, I'm good. Coming. – I put the leg back on the floor, took the crutches and slowly started descending a staircase.

.....

- I think the Duchamp-Picabia meeting largely determined the break that you were in the process of making with the conventional forms you were using before.
- Yes, because Picabia had an amazing spirit.
- He was a sort of awakener... I have the impression that Picabia made you understand that the people you knew were 'professional' painters, living that 'artistic life' which, at the time, you already didn't like, and which Picabia detested. He revealed to you a new idea of the artist.
- Of men in general, a social milieu I knew nothing about, being a notary's son! He went to smoke opium almost every night, even if I never smoked opium with him. Obviously, it opened up new horizons for me. And because, I was ready to welcome everything, I learned a lot from it...

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I open my eyes and look around. Where am I? I can see the big blue curtain surrounding my bed and all sorts of machines and wires connecting them to my body. It's cold. I reach out for the blanket lying at the foot of the bed and pull it up to my shoulders. The movement uncovers my legs and I can see the left leg tied up in a cast. Suddenly my head starts to hurt and I can see the kaleidoscope of images and penetrating sound of the car breaks. I cringe.

From behind the partition I can hear a woman's voice quietly praying. It sounds familiar. All I can recognize from the Spanish narration are the words 'padre santo' and my name that she occasionally includes in her prayer. Slowly things start to fall back into places and I remember why I'm here.

In a couple of minutes, the curtain opens and someone comes in.

- Hi. My name is doctor Gage. I was in the team of doctors operating your leg. How do you feel today?

I nod as if to say that I'm fine.

- We've got your test results back from the lab. Everything seems to be ok, except for the excess amount of opiates in your blood, which comes from the morphine and other painkillers we're giving you.

I nod again.

- Any pain?
- A little.
- Another intake is scheduled in two hours. Will you manage?
- I think so.
- Try to get some rest until then.

He closes the curtain and leaves. I'm alone again. It all feels like a dream. I try to move my left leg but it is so heavy and I have no strength... Suddenly I feel scared. What will happen next? Will I walk like I used to? Will I be able to run? Will the leg ever look normal again? I reach out for one of my crutches and try to open the curtain but it's too far and the wires keep me hostage. I lie back, gather strength and take a deep breath:

- Mercedes

The praying behind the partition stops and I hear:

- Anastacia
- Mercedes, can you sing for me?
- Està claro, niña.

'Hay una fiesta, fiesta, fiesta,
Continuamente en mi
Hay una fiesta, fiesta, fiesta,
Desde que a Cristo yo conoci...'

-
- In the year you met Picabia, you were at the Théâtre Antoine with him, Apollinaire, and Gabrielle Buffet, Picabia's wife, for the performance of Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*.
 - It was tremendous. On the stage there was a model and a snake that moved slightly – it was absolutely the madness of the unexpected. Afterwards, I read the text...
 - Perhaps the way Roussel challenged language corresponded to the way you were challenging painting.
 - It's not for me to decide, but it would be very nice, because that man had done something, which really had a revolutionary aspect to it; a secession. And then this amazing person, living shut up in himself in his caravan, the curtains drawn...
-

I opened all the windows of my trailer to let the fresh air come inside. It was the first week of May, the time when the air starts to smell sweet from the blooming trees and flowers, and you can sit outside in a t-shirt enjoying the warm breeze. Johnny was sitting at the lot, bathing in the sun and murmuring something to the sound of his guitar. I sat in one of the chairs and lit a cigarette.

- It's such nice weather today.
- Yeah, the spring has arrived! – He looked at me squinting from the bright light of the sun.
- It seems like a perfect time for planting seeds, the garden looks quite bold. - I turned back, looking at the pile of pots filled with soil. For some time now I've been collecting fruit and vegetable seeds that I bought to create a garden, and now I could finally start turning my intentions into actions...
- Speaking of bold. When are you going to the farm to shear the sheep? – Johnny asked.
- It's crutching, not shearing. – I specified. – And it's in two weeks, after I'm done with school. Why?
- Just curious. I could give you a ride. I have to go that way soon as well.
- On your motorcycle? – I looked with suspicion at his vehicle parked inside the lot.

Johnny noticed my hesitance.

- Come on. You know what they say: if there is no challenge, there is no change.

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- You seemed to have rather appreciated word play at that time.
- I was interested, but very mildly. I didn't write.
- Was it Roussel's influence?
- Yes, surely, although all that hardly resembles Roussel. But he gave me the idea that I too could try something in the sense of which we were speaking; or rather anti-sense. He tells how, starting with a sentence, he made a word game with kind of parentheses. His word play had a hidden meaning. It was an obscurity of another order.

PART 3. THREE STANDARD STOPPAGES

It all happened so fast that when I think about it now I can hardly remember the details...

I remember the feeling I had when I looked back and saw the bright lights of an approaching taxi. I didn't feel scared, I felt intensely awake. An inner scream got stuck in my throat:

'STOOOOOOOOOP!'

It felt so obviously wrong and extremely strange. And milliseconds later, at the actual moment of collision, came acceptance. There was no immediate feeling of anger, or blame, or accusation. Just great awareness mixed with serenity. Like when you see a big wave coming at you and you realize that you're unable to escape. You accept and let the body be taken by a greater force.

I remember a lot of people around looking down at me. Some people asked me questions; some were looking with interest, watching me like they would watch a crime scene in a movie. Johnny was sitting beside, holding my leg and looking quite shocked. Some guy was calling the ambulance and repeating the street name over and over again: 'the corner of Bedford and Lorimer... the corner of Bedford and Lorimer... where Nassau crosses, next to Five Leaves'... I tried to pull myself up on my elbows to see what happened. Someone suddenly said: 'You broke your leg, don't move...'

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- I have noted that, up until 'The Bride', your research was expressed in representations, in illustrations of the duration of time. Beginning with 'The Bride', one has the impression that dynamic movement has stopped. It's somewhat as if the means took the place of the function.
 - That's fair enough. I completely forgot the idea of movement, or even of recording movement in one way or another. That didn't interest me anymore. It was finished. In 'The Bride', in the 'Glass', I tried constantly to find something, which would not recall what had happened before. I have had an obsession about not using the same things. One has to be on guard because, despite oneself, one can become invaded by things of the past. Without wanting to, one puts in some detail. There, it was a constant battle to make an exact and complete break.

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- What a coincidence!

I was standing in front of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, which looked even more majestic with all the lights glistening through the darkness of twilight. A friend of mine, Renger, was in town and asked me to pick him up at his hotel to go to an art show. It was early March, the time in New York that is marked with the explosions of all sorts of art fairs. I came inside, went up the stairs and entered the luxurious, spacious hall of the hotel, full of Art Deco paintings and gilded ornaments. Renger was approaching from across the hall.

- So this is where the art rulers are residing now? - I joked giving the usual three kisses on his cheeks.
- The company arranged the hotel. Everything has to fit the picture. Good to see you. How are things?
- Good, moving around, trying to keep up with the city. How are you?
- Overwhelmed. A lot of places to visit and people to meet and I only have a couple of days... I'm trying to combine things as much as I can. So tonight at the show we're also meeting one of my friends - Bert. Very interesting man. He's a pilot for KLM and an art lover too.

- Sounds good. So what is this art event we are going to?
- It's called the Armory Show, ever heard of it?
- Maybe. Something from art history?
- You probably mean International Exhibition of Modern Art in 1913 that had the same name. The one where Duchamp made his sensational appearance with Nude Descending a Staircase, that gained him American fame and sparked his career.
- I believe so.
- This one is called the 'New' Armory show. It has the same name but it's a big art fair. One of the most important annual events for the art world today and quite theatrical, if you know what I mean. I need to perform some handshake acts there and I'd like you to be a part of the picture too. If you don't mind, of course.
- Not at all. I can really enjoy social theater sometimes... So I'd say: let's break a leg!
- Good. But let's take a cab first.

We went down and hailed a cab. The taxi pulled over and we stepped inside.

- Where to?
- Pier 94, 55th street and 12th avenue.

I looked out of the window at the dark streets of New York and said:

- Don't you think it's fascinating to see how glass turns into a mirror at night?

.....

- How did the idea of using glass come to you?
- Through color. When I had painted, I used a big thick glass as a palette and, seeing the colors from the other side, I understood there was something interesting from the point of view of pictorial technique.
After a short while, paintings always get dirty, yellow, or old because of oxidation. Now, my own colors were completely protected, the glass being a means for keeping them both sufficiently pure and unchanged for rather a long time. I immediately applied this glass idea to 'The Bride'.
- The glass has no other significance?
- No, no, none at all. The glass, being transparent, was able to give its maximum effectiveness to the rapidity of perspective. It also took away any idea of 'the hand', of materials.
- It was no longer realistic perspective.
- No, it's a mathematical, scientific perspective, based on calculations and dimensions. These were the important elements. I was mixing story, anecdote, with visual representation.

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On a Saturday morning Andrea said: 'I thought about your open wound and I want to take you to Michael to get his perspective on it'. I didn't exactly understand what she meant by it but decided not to ask. Andrea and I packed into the familiar pickup truck and hit the road.

Michael lived in a little town called Chatham, which was about 30 minutes away from Andrea's farm. Officially he was known as a chiropractor, but in fact he was an enigma. Later I heard stories how he would close his practice for a week and just concentrate on one person, often bringing to life people on the edge of death. He was a man of few words and powerful actions. Two meters tall, he had the kindest eyes and a soft long beard composed of a thousand shades of grey color.

Michael asked us to lie down on the elevated massage-looking beds that were standing next to each other in a sunlit room. First he came to Andrea. He asked her to cross the arms on her chest and hugged her slightly, pulling her upper body towards himself. Something cracked in Andrea's back and he carefully put her down again. 'So, Andrea, you have a new guest' – he said.

'Yes, Michael. She came to visit our farm and has just been in a motorcycle accident' – Andrea summarized the reason for my presence. 'She has this wound on her foot that won't heal and I thought...'

'We'll get there, don't worry. Rest' – he interrupted.

Then he came to me. 'So, Anastasia, you came to visit Andrea from New York.' 'Yes' – I replied and thought 'Did I actually mention I live in the City?... Maybe Andrea did'.

He was standing at the foot of the bed looking at my leg. He put his hand above the main wound but kept silent. 'How long have you been walking without a boot?' – he asked. 'Couple of days', another quick thought ran through my mind 'How does he know about the boot?' and a second later the riddle resolved – 'Everybody here wears these boots when they break legs.'

Michael carefully lifted my leg, holding my heel and calf in his hands. Then he turned it on the side and looked at the little open wound. He looked for a moment investigating the flesh and then suddenly asked: 'Tell me about the man who was driving a motorcycle'.

This caught me completely off guard as I realized I mentioned neither another person involved in the accident, nor that it was a man, nor the fact that I was a passenger. I looked at Michael but he seemed calm and reticent as before. 'His name is Johnny, he is my trailer-mate'. The word 'trailer-mate' did not seem to evoke any kind of questions and he asked again: 'What is your relationship with Johnny?' This question made me slightly angry and irritated, as I could see no point in how describing my relationship with Johnny would help in dealing with my present condition. I took a breath and said as calmly as I could: 'He is a friend, he was a friend, I mean'. 'I see' – Michael replied.

- I heard you're concerned about the wound? – he asked again.
- Yes but not one from the accident. I have an open wound that appeared some time ago on my ankle. It's draining and doesn't heal no matter what I do. It only becomes bigger.
- When did it appear?
- About a month after the accident.
- I see.

I thought more questions will follow but instead Michael came closer to me and said: 'Please cross your arms on your chest and lean towards me'. He hugged me and squeezed my chest with his arms. My back cracked.

-
- Did the break with painting ever bother you?
 - No, never. I kept working on the 'Large Glass', working on other things in the meantime. I had already abandoned **stretchers** and canvas. I already had a sort of disgust for them, not because there were too many paintings or stretched canvasses, but because, in my eyes, this wasn't necessarily a way of expressing myself. The 'Glass' saved me, by virtue of its transparency.

I had worked eight years on this thing, which was willed, voluntarily established according to exact plan, but despite that, I didn't want it – and this is perhaps why I worked such a long time – to be the expression of a sort of inner life. Unfortunately, with time I had lost my fire in regard to its execution; it no longer interested me, no longer concerned me. I returned to France from America, leaving the 'Large Glass' unfinished...

- SORRY, I'M LATE!

I was the last one boarding. AGAIN. Luckily they let me in and by the time I was passing the flight attendant with an apologizing face I heard...

*'Ladies and gentlemen, my name is **Heather Davis** and I'm your chief attendant. On behalf of our captain and the entire crew I'd like to welcome you onboard flight KL0642 traveling directly to Amsterdam...'*

I finally found my seat and looked around collecting some angry faces and trying to radiate 'sorry, I'm late' in all directions.

Once I read that delay is a chain reaction among forces that shows a sequence of interactions, suspended in time; and it involves two components, which occur simultaneously and intersect. One of them is intention and another the influence of chance and destiny. Thinking back of the reason that made me almost miss my plane, I couldn't agree more...

I calculated the perfect time of departure. Everything was done. The trailer was clean and prepared for its next owner; last goodbyes were said. The only thing I still needed to do was to pack my wool that I got from Andrea - five bags of cormo sheep fleece and one soft llama. I never managed to use the wool for the walls of my trailer as I had intended, but in the meantime, connected to all those stories and experiences, it came to be the only valuable possession I had. And since the place in the suitcase was limited, I decided that these six fleeces would be the only baggage to travel back to Amsterdam with me. So earlier that day I got rid of all my belongings by putting them outside my lot on the street in crates for people to take away...

'Cabin Crew, please prepare for gate departure. Door on automatic, cross-check and report.'

By the time the wool was packed and I was ready to go I suddenly heard Nicole's voice:

- I just saw all the crates outside. You're not taking anything back?
- Just the wool that I got from Andrea.
- You'd better check that, because as far as I know you're not allowed to take it on the plane...

Quick research and I knew for sure that unprocessed wool is considered raw animal material and therefore forbidden from carrying on the plane. In a panic I ran to the post to arrange the shipment but when I saw the calculations for shipping six wool fleeces to Amsterdam I had to give up this option, as paying three hundred dollars sounded like an unaffordable affair...

'The Captain has turned on the Fasten Seat Belt sign. Please make sure your seat belts are securely fastened, your seats backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. Also, we ask you to switch off all personal electronic devices during takeoff and landing. Your carry-on luggage must be stowed in the overhead compartments or underneath the seat in front of you. We would

also like to remind you that this is a non-smoking flight. Smoking is prohibited for the duration of the whole flight. Thank you for choosing KLM. Enjoy your flight.'

Being very close to late for departure I felt completely helpless. I had to leave the wool behind, because searching for other options would definitely make me miss the plane. The gift became a burden... Nicole appeared at the lot again:

- Did it work out with the post?
- No, I can't afford it. It's too expensive...
- What are you going to do with it? Are you sure it's worth the trouble?
- I thought so...
- I can keep it for you here for a while until you find a way to collect it.
- You can? It won't be in the way?
- I'll walk around it. And now go! You're late as it is!

I hugged Nicole, picked up my carry-on bag and hurried to the metro...

'Cabin Crew prepare for takeoff'.

- You called 'The Bride' a 'delay in glass'.
- Yes. It was the poetic aspect of the words that I liked. I wanted to give 'delay' a poetic sense that I couldn't even explain. It was to avoid saying, 'a glass painting', 'a glass drawing', 'a thing drawn on glass', you understand? The word 'delay' pleased me at that point, like a phrase one discovers...

PART 4. PULLED AT FOUR PINS

- It looks like everything is healing well!
- It does. I feel much better.

I was lying on one of the massage beds; Michael was examining the wound. Four days ago, after we met for the first time, I noticed that the leg got stronger and my wound started to heal. Michael asked me to come back again. The same request followed the next day and the day after that. Every time he was giving me treatment, which consisted of manual therapy techniques and a lot of questions.

Some of the questions were related to the accident but most not at all. However, all of them evoked stories, and brought back by telling, they started to form some unclear picture, meaning of which I could not yet explain.

Today was my last treatment day and this time I had some questions of my own.

- Michael, I was wondering... this wound that appeared...
- Yes?
- I was searching for its cause...

Michael put my leg down and looked at me.

- Yes?
- ... and I found its name.

I got up and sat on the bed. Michael kept on looking with much attention.

- Continue.
- In the medical world they call it 'second intention'. It's a delayed healing of a wound, in which the edges do not meet and the new epithelium must form across granulation tissue.
- Peculiar word for a healing process, don't you think?
- It is.
- And did you find the cause? – He squinted his eyes a little.
- Maybe the cause is lost...
- A lot of wondering these days, huh?

We sat in silence for a moment.

- Michael, do you think accident exists?
- I believe the story does.
- And do you think mine is complete?
- I think there is still a line missing...

-
- You have also said that the artist is unaware of the real significance of his work and that the spectator should always participate in supplementing the creation by interpreting it.
 - Exactly. Because I consider, in effect, that if someone, any genius, were living in the heart of Africa, and doing extraordinary paintings every day, without anyone seeing them, he wouldn't exist. To put it another way, the artist exists only if he is known. Consequently, one can envisage the existence

of a hundred thousand geniuses who are suicides, who kill themselves, who disappear, because they didn't know what to do to make themselves known, to push themselves and to become famous.

I believe very strongly in the 'medium' aspect of the artist. The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can't stop that, because, in brief, it's a product of two poles – there is the pole of the one who makes the work and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.

.....

He was the only face missing in the whole story. I never saw him but I've asked myself so many times: Did he come out of the car? Did he come to me when I was lying on the street? Was it him who called the ambulance?

Later I found his name written on the police report. It said Ahmed Mohamed Soohar or Souhar or Soofar. Due to the confusing handwriting of the police officer I could not even tell for sure. I have his address as well. 14/6 30th rd., apartment 4, Astoria, New York. He lives in Queens, which takes me from 35 to 42 minutes depending on the kind of public transportation I use to get there from my place in Brooklyn.

I leave my trailer park, turn right. Walk for a couple of minutes passing the CUP. There I get my coffee and travel further to Manhattan Avenue. Enter the Metro at Nassau Ave. Take a G-line. It's a known trajectory, I've been doing it almost every day since I live here. I enter the metro car and sit in a chair. Somewhere between Greenpoint Ave. and 21st Street stations I read on the poster above the chair:

'I remember my mother toward the end,
Folding the tablecloth after dinner
So carefully,
As if it were the flag of a country that no longer existed,
But once had ruled the world.
Jim Moore, b.1943'

I travel 2 more stops until Court Square and get off the metro. From there I take the bus Q69 towards Jackson Heights 82nd St. The bus ride takes 12 minutes and 14 stops. I'm still sipping my coffee but it's almost finished. I get off at 21 St / 30 Drive.

It's sunny outside. The neighborhood looks like one of those semi-industrial sleeping areas with low buildings and parking lots surrounded by fences. A couple of blooming trees alongside the road are the only sign of nature in this place. I go straight for a minute and turn left at the crossroad. 30th Road. Industrial buildings slowly give way to two-store houses. Cherry blossoms on the right, neat front gardens on the left. The only people here besides me are a man jogging and a young mother carrying her baby in a stroller. Idyllic afternoon. As I walk I count the numbers of the flats: 32, 28, 20, 16, 14... 14-11, 14-7, 14-1. I'm at the end of the road but there is no 14-6. I turn around and look to the other side. It's a big building compared to the rest on this street. Three floors with a little addition on top the size of a room. Maybe that's his place. On the document it said apartment 4. If it's connected to the floor then this might be his window.

My heart is pounding somewhere in my throat. I come closer to the brown door and press the button of the bell. No reply. I press again.

- Are you looking for something? – An old man approached me from behind.

- I'm looking for a person who might live in this building. Is this the address: '14/6 30th Rd., apartment 4'?
- Yes, this is 14/6 30th Rd., but there is no apartment 4 in this building. It's a warehouse.
- And Ahmed Mohamed Soohar or Souhar or Soofar? Do you know him?
- No, sorry, never heard this name before.
- Are you sure this is the address that I mentioned?
- 14/6 30th Rd., right?
- Right. Thank you...
- No problem, miss. People often do it here, mention some random address on papers...

The man disappears behind the door. I am still standing next to it, unable to move or go away. My thoughts turn into a big mess and I cannot come up with any viable deed. Why am I here? What did I think I was going to find? My heart is still beating hard but it has migrated to its usual place in the meantime, leaving my throat very dry.

I press the bell again.

- Hi, it's me again. Sorry for the intrusion. Do you mind if I use your bathroom?
- Sure, go ahead. It's straight and then to the right, by the staircase.

I go inside. The warehouse is almost completely empty with only a couple of boxes standing by the wall on the other side of the space. I walk towards the staircase and turn left at the door that says 'WC'. Enter the small bathroom with nothing but a sink, a mirror, and little urinal. The light is dimmed and it is hard to see. Almost by feel, I take a glass bottle out of my purse. I am still a bit nervous and incredibly thirsty from all the coffee and stress. My hands are slightly shaking. I look at the mirror and see my own pale face in the darkness of an unknown bathroom; and at this moment the bottle slides out of my hands and falls on the floor, shattering into a thousand pieces.

-
- Nineteen twenty-six is the year that the 'Large Glass' was cracked.
 - While I was gone, it was shown at the international exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. The people who sent it back to Katherine Dreier, to whom it belonged, weren't professionals; they were careless. They put the two glasses one on top of the other, in a truck, flat in a box, but more or less well packed, without knowing if there was glass or marmalade inside. And after forty miles, it was marmalade. The only curious thing was that the two pieces were one on top of the other, and the cracks on each were in the same places.
 - When one sees the 'Large Glass', one doesn't imagine it intact at all.
 - No. It's a lot better with the breaks, a hundred times better. It's the destiny of things.
-

Andrea lit up a cigarette.

- You know, the actual reason I never left my farm?
- No.
- I'm terrified... of flying.

We were standing outside her track at the station that would bring me home. The farm experience was over and it was time for the last goodbyes.

- Why are you saying this now?
- I watched you for a week... Sometimes we blame external factors, because we prefer hiding behind an illusion.

I reached out my hand...

- May I? – and took a cigarette from her hands.
- You know the story of the American Indians and the salmon?
- Tell me.
- The American Indian tribes that were famous for the potlatch once occupied the Pacific coast of North. All of them depended upon the ocean to provide their primary sustenance – herring, candlefish, whales, and, salmon that annually entered the coastal rivers to swim inland and spawn. It was their belief that all animals lived as they themselves lived – in tribes – and that the salmon, in particular, dwelt in a huge lodge beneath the sea. According to this mythology, the salmon go about in human form while they are home in their lodge, but once a year they change their bodies into fish bodies, **dress themselves in robes of salmon skin**, swim to the mouths of the rivers, and voluntarily sacrifice themselves so that their land brothers may have food for the winter...
- Like a sheep sacrificing itself to the wolf.
- Yes, only sometimes the wolf appears to be in sheep's clothing...

I heard the sound of an approaching train.

- Are you sure you'll be able to bring this entire wool home by yourself? – she asked pointing at the metal trolley stacked with plastic bags full of wool - You just started to walk normally again.
- I'll be fine. Thanks to Michael!
- Oh, almost forgot, he left a little note for you. – she took out a little folded piece of paper out of her pocket. – You can read it in the train.
- I will.
- Have a safe trip! And please keep in touch!

I stepped in the train and waved to Andrea for the last time. Opened the note from Michael that in little accurate handwriting said: 'Men can be blind in their own cause'.

And lower in the same little letters: 'More streamlined. Crossing thresholds. Forgiving all'

.....

- Several interpretations of the 'Large Glass' have been given. What is yours?
- I don't have any, because I made it without an idea. There were things that came along as I worked. The idea of the ensemble was purely and simply the execution. It was a renunciation of all aesthetics, in the ordinary sense of the word...

.....

I shut the windows and closed the curtains of my trailer. Even though it was the middle of May, the evenings still felt a bit chilly. I put on a woolen sweater and prepared to go outside. After a sleepless night of getting ready for the final day at school and eating close to nothing for the whole day, I was tired and enormously hungry. I came out to the lot and into my little garden. A couple of weeks ago I started to plant seeds and now I could see the first sprouts. The front door squeaked and someone came inside.

- Hey. How are you? – Johnny was calling me.

I turned around.

- Hey. Good. Tired actually. Just had the last day of school so I'm going to eat some dinner and go to bed.
- I see.
- Are you hungry? Do you want me to make some for you as well?
- No, thanks, I'm just here for a second. Had to pick up some extra cash. I'm on my way to get a drink. Hey, do you maybe want to join?
- I don't know if that's a good idea... I'm quite tired and barely ate today...
- You sure? We could celebrate your school finale! It's just around the corner, at Five Leaves. I'm not planning on being there long either; have to wake up early tomorrow. But I need a little drink; it's been a rough day. And I would love some company.

I pondered for a moment.

- Yes, sure, why not. Just one short celebration drink and then we come back, have a quick dinner and go to sleep.
- Sounds like a plan!

In a couple minutes the door squeaked again and we came out into the night.

- Should we go by bike? It will be faster. – Johnny pointed at his Harley Davidson parked outside the lot. – I will take you for a winner's round.
- Yeah, what the hell! I'm a bit scared of these things though, so after a ride it won't be a small drink, I'm gonna need a large glass of wine...

-
- When you were young, didn't you ever experience the desire to be artistically cultured?
 - Maybe, but it was a very mediocre desire. I would have wanted to work, but deep down I'm enormously lazy. I like living, breathing, better than working. I don't think that the work I've done can have any social importance whatsoever in the future. Therefore, if you wish, **my art would be that of living**: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It's a sort of constant euphoria.
 - That's what Roché said. Your best work has been the use of your time.
 - That's right. I really think that's right.

EPILOGUE. HERO WITH THOUSAND FACES.

- Peculiar how we meet again in the presence of Duchamp's ghost...

Two months after my return, I'm at Centre George de Pompidou in Paris, at the exhibition dedicated to the paintings of the man who, in common modernist opinion, killed painting. Standing in front of his 'Nude Descending a Staircase', the work that marked the beginning of Duchamp's break with retinal art. I turn to Bert.

- The real version looks nothing like the reproduction, don't you think?
- It almost radiates the movement. It's hard to catch it in a photo.
- Just to think how much things had changed after that in his life.

We go further, looking at other works on the way and stop by the portrait of Rose Sélavy by Man Ray, depicting Duchamp as his female alter ego. I look at Bert again.

- Did you know Duchamp created Rose Sélavy in 1920, when he was working on 'The Large Glass'?
- Maybe it was another attempt to escape himself?
- Or maybe he was just playing a different part in his own story...

We walk inside the last room dedicated to 'The Large Glass', which is standing in the middle as the quintessence of a change Duchamp was undertaking. The work presented at the exhibition is not original; it lacks its most important feature – the accident. The glass is whole, unbroken, undamaged, untouched.

- So this is how it was meant to look without the accidental break... A pure execution of the intended plan. - Bert says going around the glass to the other side.

In limbo, I look at him through the thick layer of the glass. - Do you think the accident was needed?

- I think it made the work unique, forced it to break through limitations and go beyond...
- ... beyond its first intention.
- If you like.
- So intentions can be deceiving?

Bert suddenly looked somewhere behind me.

- I think you can ask Marcel himself. - and pointed to the wall behind my back.

I turned around and read one of the quotes on the wall:

'My intention was to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between "I" and "me".'

SESSION ON 'THE CREATIVE ACT' by Marcel Duchamp,
Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Huston, TX, USA. April 1957

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing. If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay on "Tradition and Individual Talent", writes: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."

Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Artist History.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act – yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words, how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble.

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word 'art' - to be sure, without any attempt at a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to 'art coefficient', it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in the raw state – à l'état brut – bad, good or indifferent.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work.

In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this 'art coefficient' is a personal expression of art à l'état brut, that is, still in a raw state, which must be 'refined' as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.

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