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excerpt from the short story **Terrible Beauties**

Through an upstairs window, Martha watches her mother hang laundry. Her back is to her daughter and Martha sees the flare of her hips and long bend of neck, the vertebrae a path into a tangle of pinned hair. Soon, her mother will turn, and present either the beautiful side of her face, or the other. The sheet she raises from her wicker basket billows and snaps in a sudden breeze, transforming into a canvas where Martha assembles the pieces of what happened earlier that day:

During Martha's last class of the afternoon—Studio Art—Miss Alvarez walked between the students' easels. She held a magazine showing a strange, splintery painting done in shades of grey—a horse with a dagger tongue, a ceiling bulb like an eye shattering, limbs of the dead cluttering the floor. A baby. The caption read '*Guernica*.'

"This great artist—Picasso—has shown the world the horror of war in Spain." Usually the teacher wore lacy, low-cut blouses, her dark hair piled high with mother-of-pearl combs. But today, her hair hung lank, and her sweater, pilled and full of static, stuck to her oddly.

"My tio sent me this magazine from Barcelona. He's fighting the fascists in the Basque country. This summer, I'm going to help him drive ambulances." She spoke with a Brooklyn accent, and when she brought *tapas* to class, the boys, in love with the way her blouse dipped, would take bites of salted cod and suck on white asparagus.

Miss Alvarez thumped the magazine before carefully placing it on her desk. She opened a book, showing another picture. "This painting, *Les Demoiselles des Avignon*, paved the way for the brilliance of *Guernica*."

The art room turned airless. There was laughter, and Martha's face grew hot. Five peach colored ladies crowded into the picture, their naked bodies all triangles and edges, upraised elbows sharp as axes. But it was the faces. They were cartoon versions of her mother's. The ones in the middle showed the beautiful side, calm as an eggshell, with a shy rise of cheekbone, and almond-shaped eyes. Two on the far right showed the other side, gorilla forehead, cheekbones bulging upwards, trying to escape the face, and the eye, carved in paint, lodged between the bony ledges.

“When you first witness something so terrible that it creates a new kind of beauty,” Miss Alvarez's eyes lit on Martha and Peter, the boy next to her, “you encounter something *truly* magnificent.” Her hands splayed like starfish, and passing Martha, she smoothed a curl behind the girl's ear, marking a line along her skin that soothed, then itched.

After class, by her locker, Martha wished she'd imagined the laughter, hoping her classmates reacted to the strangeness of the painting, not because the faces resembled her mother's. It wasn't her mother's fault—she'd been born this way. Behind her, the sound of oxfords scuffing the floor. She turned as one boy shoved Peter towards her. He stumbled, his face reddening.

“Bet you like that crackpot art,” the boy behind Peter said. “You already got a piece of it at home.”

“Yeah,” the other boy said. “You could sell her. Maybe Picasso would buy. Or Alvarez.” The two boys laughed and made sounds like they were sucking asparagus. “There's always the circus.”

They fell against each other, swatting, punching. In a couple of years, they would go to war with their fathers. Their mothers would work in the factory where Martha's father was a manager. By then, he, too, would be overseas. Not all the boys would come back.

Martha clicked shut her locker. When she turned, all three were gone. She walked back to the art room. Miss Alvarez was not there. WPA funds the principal had won through a lottery brought her from Brooklyn to their small town upstate. She'd been with them a year and was supposed to teach the juniors and seniors drafting and architectural design. Instead, she taught them how to gesso canvas, scumble paint to make a brooding cloud, how to look at the naked bodies of statues—female *and* male—with a straight face.

The magazine and the book lay open on Miss Alvarez's desk, the Picasso paintings exposed.

Now, from her window, Martha fingers the torn pages, small as confetti, in her skirt pocket. “Ma,” she calls, releasing the paper bits. They drift to her mother like ash.

At dinner, Martha watches her mother put a tin of beaten biscuits on the table, her profile compact and lovely, cheekbone gently curving. She retreats to the kitchen and returns with meatloaf more breadcrumb than beef. When she sets the platter in front of Martha’s father, the other side of her face thrusts into the room like insult: the apish overhang of brow, a craggy scarp of cheekbone, and trapped between, a triangular-shaped eye. Martha sees again the warped faces of the *Demoiselles*. When she was little, the other kids gawked. She knew her mother looked different, but to Martha, her face was as familiar as the kitchen table. Now that they’re teenagers, the girls look away, but some of the boys are still cruel.

Her father kisses her mother’s cheek. They grew up as neighbors, inseparable since toddlers. Tonight, he looks exhausted. No longer able to afford a car, most mornings he walks three miles to the airplane parts factory and layers his shoes with cardboard—Roosevelt leather is the bitter joke. Sometimes, if the timing is right, he hops the rails and rides to work alongside the hobos passing through.

“Stop staring,” her mother tells Martha. She sits and takes a bite of meatloaf, dabs her mouth with a checkered cloth. “I think she’s lost her mind,” she says to her husband.

Her voice has a lilting quality, a way of turning the usual into the amusing, sometimes making Martha the butt of a joke. Lately, her words bite like gravel into Martha’s ears.

“She threw pieces of paper down on me this afternoon. Out of the blue. What *normal* girl does that? I was hanging laundry. I looked up and thought it was snowing. In June!”

Her husband looks blankly at her, and says, “War’s coming,” as if this has some connection to the torn paper.

Her mother tilts her head, eyes narrowing, and Martha shares her confusion.

“Talk around the factory is that it’s coming,” he says.

“What’s that got to do with us?”

His mouth droops, his knife squeaking against the plate as he cuts into his meat. “Why do you think we’re still in business? War’s coming and we’re getting into it.”

Martha thinks of Miss Alvarez, of Spain, of the terrible painting.

“Hogwash,” her mother says, and leans towards Martha. “What does Miss High and Mighty think?”

Martha wants to rub her eyes as if that might erase her mother’s face. The boys are right. Her mother *does* belong in a circus. Or in a Spanish painter’s nightmare. Instead, she stays home and *behaves*: bakes bread, cans, cleans, throws meal to chickens then wrings their necks, strings up pole beans and wet sheets. Like every other mother in town. But her face looks like something mad or evil is erupting inside and pressing against the bones of her face, the way something now presses inside Martha. She runs her fingertips hard along her own cheekbones until her skin stretches, wanting to feel reassured by her symmetry.

“Get an operation’s what I think,” she says. “Or wear a mask.”

The wedge-shaped eye glints; her mother’s hand raises to slap Martha. Her father’s mouth opens, but before he can say anything, Martha flees.

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“It was the boys. Gregg and John”—Martha hesitates, throat tight— “and Peter.” In her mind they rip the images to bits even as what’s left of the picture clings to the inside of her pocket.

“Peter?” Miss Alvarez asks. It’s the next morning and her pilled sweater looks as if she slept in it. Ruby-drop earrings weight her earlobes but do nothing to brighten her look. And Martha wonders if this is how fighters of fascists dress.

“Yes, Peter.” Martha says. He’s Miss Alvarez’s favorite, the best artist. His father, gone to look for work last year, hasn’t returned. One of the poorest boys, he’s in school only because there are no jobs for a seventeen-year old. Now he hangs around the hobo camps by the river, drawing the men. The figures spring from the page, but the raw strength of his line ropes them back to the center, imprisoning the men. Martha overheard him tell Miss Alvarez the drawings were a way of looking for his father. She didn’t know what he

meant, but Miss Alvarez's face radiated understanding, and Martha wished *she* had the power to make her teacher glow.

“Are you sure?” Miss Alvarez sits, one knee knocking against the other.

Martha hears again the boys' laughter as they stood by her locker. “I saw them from the hallway.”

“I don't understand.” Against the dark fabric of her sweater, Miss Alvarez's complexion is wan, her eyes too blue in the pale skin. The bell rings and students file into the classroom. Martha walks to her easel, peeking around it as Peter and the other two enter. Abruptly, Miss Alvarez scoots her chair back. The legs squawk against the linoleum. She calls their names, tells the class to get to work, as she and the boys leave.

The buzz of speculation fills the room. Martha feels sick, as if the paper bits are bloating inside her like seeds. On the canvas, her hand works independently from her mind, her eye, and helps to empty her. Soon, Miss Alvarez returns without the boys and circles the room. Behind Martha, she speaks her name with such intensity that Martha's eyes focus on what she's drawn. Jagged angles spear inward, a large squiggle chased off the page as if the eye could follow its path across the room and out the door.

“Strange,” Miss Alvarez murmurs. “And magical. I know you listen, Martha. I know you see.”

See *what*? She wants to understand the terrible beauty of *Guernica*, of *Les Demoiselles*, but sometimes she wishes Miss Alvarez would stick to the practical skills she was hired to teach.

After class, the lie still makes Martha queasy. She did this to the boys, to Peter. Later she'll learn they were banned from art class for the remaining weeks of school.

Once the last student is gone, Martha approaches her teacher. “Will it be dangerous? In Spain?”

Miss Alvarez frowns. As if her student's new way of creating art has made her more adult, sophisticated, she says, “Yes. But I'll have the protection of my *tio* and his *hijos*.”

“Can you paint when you're over there?”