

The Sketch

By

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Fifteen years after the second world war, Jean Gaillot sat by his artist stall and drank red wine. He hid the bottle behind the seat and went back to his easel.

The market square, in a sprawling Paris suburb, was busy with weekend visitors. Stalls of food, cheese, antiques, and plants drew in the crowds. Jean's stall was positioned on a grassy area in front of a low wall which circled a church. Two large umbrellas protected him and his customers from sun and rain. A sign propped against an empty chair declared, 'Portraits 30 minutes 30 Francs'.

Behind him, drawings were clipped onto a notice board taken from the church. The pastor, in exchange for religious themed sketches, allowed Jean to store the chairs and equipment in the back of an outside storeroom used by the gardener.

Jean was a sketch artist with a preference for pencil and occasional charcoal. Working in a quick, distinct manner, his favoured sketches involved scenes of people. A moment caught in time such as a hawker selling goods, a child stealing an apple or the local Gendarme arresting a youth.

When asked about photography, Jean would mutter, "Anyone can take a photo. What skill is there in that?" Tastes were changing, though. While people still wanted sketches, he would often hear, "It's nineteen sixty, a new era." Reluctantly, he created sketches of famous movie stars, copied from photos in magazines.

Jean wore a dark grey jacket, black trousers, and black shoes. Around his neck was a red handkerchief which, together with his beret, gave him, he considered, a Parisian bohemian artist look. His bicycle, propped against the church wall, also provided a certain old-style chic.

As a woman stopped and regarded his work, he wiped his jacket sleeve across his lips. His eyes narrowed as he studied the woman, his deeper instincts questioning her age and purpose. Was she examining the sketches, or him? He considered that if a person was older than his thirty-seven years, then they were active in the war. When asked what he did during wartime, Jean would straighten his chest before speaking. "Resistance. Too many memories. I don't talk about it." Whoever asked, nodded back sagely.

The woman, in her mid-twenties, wore a headscarf and a short lemon coloured dress, in the movie star mode. Jean rubbed his chin as he decided she presented no threat. He went back to the easel.

"Excuse me, monsieur?" The woman said.

"Yes?"

“I would like a portrait.”

“Oh, yes. Certainly, mademoiselle,” Jean said. He stood up and wiped the stool with his hand and motioned for her to sit.

He placed a new sheet of paper on his easel and readied himself. “Mademoiselle, please turn your face a little to the left.”

The woman moved as asked.

“Bon, good. Please be still.”

He held his pencil in front of him and closed his left eye. With the tip of the pencil sighted on the top of the woman’s forehead, he moved his thumb in line with her chin. He made two light strokes on the paper. Soon he had marked the line of her eyes, nose, and chin. With deft movements, he wielded the pencil between right thumb and forefinger like an orchestra conductor.

His grandfather, a butcher, and a talented artist taught him sketching techniques. He would say to his young grandson, “Be proud of your name. Your signature is your identity, never lose sight of that.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jean saw a couple stop to watch his artistry. He coughed as he turned to examine them further. Just onlookers.

After twenty-five minutes, Jean added the finishing touches, then pronounced, “Finished mademoiselle, just the signature.”

He licked his lips. This was the part he relished. With a flourish he signed his initials JG and drew a circle around the letters, all without taking the pencil off the paper.

“Voila.”

The woman’s smiled and nodded as she examined the sketch. Her gaze moved from the sketch to Jean and back again. She diverted her eyes for a moment and smiled. “Bon, good monsieur.”

Jean wiped his hands and thought of the wine bottle as the woman stood up. “Monsieur, I am an actress. I wonder if you could come to my apartment tomorrow to do another sketch? It would be in clothes which I cannot wear here. It’s for my portfolio.”

Jean studied the woman, wondering whether to be concerned about the request? With soft eyes and a sweet smile, her curves were those of an actress. Plus, he had drawn many private commissions over the years.

“I will pay you double. I can pay sixty francs now. Thirty for today and thirty towards tomorrow as a sign of good faith.” She held out a wad of notes.

Jean took the money, stuffed it in a pocket, then tapped a finger to his beret. “Of course.”

He proffered a spare pencil and a rough piece of paper for the woman to write her address. “At midday?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” she said.

He studied the back of her legs as she walked off.

“Hey, Jean.” It was the owner of the antique stall next to him. “She’s a nice piece.”

“Wants me to draw her. She’s an actress.”

“You lucky old dog, eh?”

Jean smiled and shrugged coyly at the comment. The stallholder walked back to talk to a couple of shoppers.

The afternoon passed. Jean sold a sketch to an elderly man and drew two more portraits. It was a good day’s earnings.

As the crowds disappeared, Jean began packing up. He took some items to the pastor’s storeroom and then loaded up his backpack. Leaving an empty bottle of wine along with other rubbish, he sat on his bicycle and lit a cigarette. Then he pushed off with his foot and began the journey home.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived in his arrondissement. Occasionally, he slowed down and turned his head to check behind him. Stopping by the local shops, he purchased the ingredients for a beef stew, then went to the tobacconists. As the store owner leant to one side to place the money into a drawer, Jean coughed as he grasped a packet of sweets and swiftly put them in his jacket pocket. With his purchases stowed, he rode the last part of his journey.

The tenement was old, dirty, and damp. Its occupants often wished the Germans had blown it up during the war. Jean stopped in a narrow-cobbled alley. A dog tied on a lease barked while a baby’s cry sounded from an open window. With a hand on the brake, he led the bicycle down the steps into the basement.

His room was windowless and smelled of stale cigarettes and drains. There was no toilet or bath, just a sink with water drawn from a communal tap on the ground floor. Ablutions were performed in a shared bathroom.

He set his bicycle against a wall and went about lighting the stove. Strips of newspaper were lit and positioned next to wood chippings. Small lengths of wood, stolen yesterday from a neighbour, were placed by the flames. He lit a cigarette and hummed as he filled a large pot with meat and vegetables.

Later, he sat in a chair near the stove, underneath a bare light bulb and read a newspaper while his radio played light classical music. With his wine glass re-filled, he became maudlin. He pulled out an old valise from under his bed and took out his sketches made during the war. A man lying dead on a cell floor. The execution of two people who hid members of the Resistance. A hanging. Resistance members attacking a police station. Swaggering German officers. Jews standing in a line at a rail station guarded by the French Milice. The Milice, the French traitors who threw their lot in with the German invading force.

He shoved the pictures back into the valise. With the wine finished and the radio still playing, he fell into a stupor, muttering to himself.

The following morning, he spent longer than usual washing, despite the knocking on the door from the next person in line. He brushed down the same clothes he wore yesterday and secured his equipment to his bicycle. It was a pleasant ride as he cycled up and along narrow streets which gave way to wider tree-lined boulevards. The air became fresher as he left the inner housing area.

After asking for directions, he found the road. On each side were apartment blocks of a better standard and quality than his own. He found the entrance and tied his cycle to a stair spindle on the ground floor. As he walked up to the top floor, he noted there was no sign of other inhabitants.

The door was opened by the same woman as yesterday. Wearing a white top and yellow slacks, her blonde hair, unrestrained by a scarf, reached her shoulders. Jean walked inside and placed his equipment on the floor. His first action was to examine his surroundings. It was a large open loft apartment, which was spotless with no evidence of anyone living there.

“Are you here on your own, mademoiselle?” Jean spoke in a matter-of-fact voice.

“My sister also lives here. She will be back soon.”

“Ah.” Jean nodded. Two young women provided little threat. “The light is good, here.” He pointed to a position in front of a sofa.

“That’s fine. I’ll get changed into my costume.”

Jean set up his easel and checked his pencils. A few minutes later the woman appeared from the back wearing a dark jacket, a white shirt, dark trousers, and black shoes. Her hair was pulled back and secured with hair grips, making her forehead prominent on her plain face. Momentarily, she locked her gaze on Jean.

He pursed his lips; it was not what he expected. A medieval costume or a modern piece, but not dressed like a man.

“This is for my audition portfolio. I am a woman working undercover, dressed as a man. I prefer a sketch, for this. Everyone brings stock photos these days.”

“That is good. Anyone can take a photo. It’s so easy these days.”

Jean examined the woman again. The clothes were similar to those he wore during the war. The woman brushed her hair, then slipped on a flat cap.

“Full body or closeup portrait?”

“Full body standing,” she said.

The woman pulled out a pistol from her jacket pocket and levelled it at Jean. He reacted in shock.

“Mademoiselle?” He threw his hands out defensively.

“This?” She regarded the revolver and grinned. “An old prop from the war.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Aha,” he said, studying the weapon.

Jean felt uneasy. Two war references, the clothing, and the pistol. He could do with some wine. She stood with her feet apart in an action pose. The revolver, clasped in her right hand, pointed forward, while her left arm remained at her side.

Jean sighted his pencil in the usual way to gain perspective. The outline of her body shape was drawn first followed by the clothes. Before adding facial details, Jean paused; he was uncomfortable. The clothes, the woman’s expression and the gun still unnerved him. It showed in the number of mistakes he made.

“This unsettles you?” she said.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” Jean said as he hovered his pencil above the paper.

“War time memories?”

“It was fifteen years ago, all in the past. It’s nineteen sixty, a time of change, no?”

“I was a child then. What did you do?”

Jean concentrated on the canvas as he replied. “Resistance.”

“Oh. Where?”

“In a small place outside of Toulouse.”

She paused before speaking. “I grew up near Lyon in a farming village. Have you ever been there?”

Jean’s pencil moved sideways. “No, mademoiselle.” He pulled at his shirt.

“Are you a little warm?”

“I’m fine. The gun. Reminds me of things I want to forget. Resistance members caught, you know.”

“Ah yes.”

They fell into an uneasy silence, but at last, the sketch was complete. He drew his signature.

“There,” he said as he stood up and took the sketch over to the woman.

She placed the revolver into her jacket pocket and held the picture.

Jean waited.

She moved it in the light, her gaze straying over every line, then finally down to the bottom of the paper. “You have a certain style and signature.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle.”

The woman went to a handbag and fetched out an old rolled-up picture. “Is this one of yours?”

Jean took the paper and unrolled it. It was a family scene, a mother and father with a girl either side of them. They stood by the side of a barn.

“Do you remember this?”

Jean did not need to see the signature to confirm it was his work. He swallowed first before speaking. “No. Similar, mademoiselle.” He squeezed his face as if in pain. “I have another work to complete. I need to get on, you know.”

“Your payment? Of course.” She went to her handbag again.

Jean nodded as he took hold of the money held out in front of him. The job was finished, all he needed to do was pick up his equipment and leave. As he began collapsing his easel, he felt a prickly feeling in the back of his neck at the sudden silence.

The woman was aiming the revolver at him. The stare in her eyes was enough for Jean to drop the easel. He stepped back. “What’s this?” He glanced at the door.

“It’s locked.”

“What do you want?”

“Jacques Girard. Lyon, nineteen forty-three.”

Jean put his hands in the air. “Mademoiselle, I don’t know what you talk of.” His gaze moved from side to side as he tensed ready to attack.

“Sit down.” The woman said sternly and motioned with the weapon. “Perhaps you can explain yourself.” Sensing his intentions, she stepped back to create a larger gap.

Her grip on the weapon was confident, showing little sign of nerves. He threw his hands in the air and took a seat.

“We were a farming family,” the woman said. “Despite the deprivations and rationing, we kept going. My father wanted a portrait, not a photo. He was old-fashioned in that way. There was a young man in the village who was a talented artist. The man came along and made the sketch. My father mentioned about breaking open a bottle of wine from the hidden underground cellar when the war ended. Loose talk perhaps, but we trusted this man. His family had been in the village for generations.”

“I know nothing of this. I was in Toulouse,” Jean said.

“A week later, the Milice arrived. They searched the cellar, found some clothes, then accused my parents of hiding members of the Resistance. They beat them both as myself and my sister were forced to watch. Then the Germans arrived.”

Jean took off his beret and began wringing it between his hands.

“Father and mother were pushed back against the barn wall. The one we stood by in the sketch. They were shot, not by the Germans but by the traitors. By you.” The woman’s voice broke. “Jacques Girard. The same man who a week before had drawn our portrait.”

Jean jumped up and ran towards the door. The woman fired. At the unexpected crack of a shot, he stumbled, and fell to the floor certain he had been hit.

“I shot wide. But not next time,” the woman said.

Jean’s mind whirled in disbelief as he shuffled backwards to rest against the sofa. He patted his legs to check there was no injury as the woman stood firm, still holding the gun.

“I was ten when I watched you shoot mama and papa and I swore my revenge. My sister sadly died a while back from tuberculosis, but she is with me in spirit. Like others, you ran like a rat to save your skin, as the allies swept through. I helped track down the traitors, always looking for you. I learnt weapon skills as well.”

“Help, help.” Jean shouted out. “Help, mad woman.”

“No one will help you here. I rented this room carefully. The room downstairs is vacant.”

“I’ll call the police. You have the wrong man.”

“I knew you would start drawing again, a man like you.” She spat on the floor. “Someone looking to continue their life as if nothing happened. Saying they were in the Resistance rather than the Milice.”

Jean broke down as much in relief as surprise. After all these years, he was discovered, not by a war veteran, but by a woman. A woman who was a youngster in the war. He shook his head. “They promised not to send me to Germany, to the labour camps or the Front. I was hungry. I tried to join the Resistance, but they rejected me.” Jean looked up to emphasize his point.

“So, you told them about our family?”

“If I didn’t give them any information, they would, you know...” He wiped a hand over his eyes. “I had no choice.”

“There was a choice, Jacques, and you made the wrong one.”

To his surprise, the woman produced a bottle of wine, which she proceeded to uncork. While pointing the pistol at him, she placed the bottle on the floor by his leg and withdrew. Three long gulps later, he put the bottle down and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, grateful that the wine was strong.

A thought came to him. “How did you find me? I was careful. I...”

“Paris is the place for artists, is it not? I have visited countless artist stalls over the years searching for you, an artist drawing in pencil, in a particular style. The style used in the drawing of my family. Then yesterday, there you were. The same man, but older.” The woman smiled. “Actually, you gave yourself away.”

Jean furrowed his forehead. “I’d been careful. Gave myself away? How?” He tried to follow that thought, but it slipped from his grasp. The shock of discovery collided with wartime memories. He took another long swig of wine and slumped as the alcohol sloshed into his brain and stomach. Its soothing effect would suppress the inevitable violence and retribution.

The woman watched him carefully. “That was a bottle of wine from our cellar. Drunk by the traitor.”

The woman approached him, pointing the weapon at his head.

“Get on the floor. Lay face down and ready yourself.”

There was no point in fighting, it was over. He lay on the floor, placed his arms by his sides and wondered what people thought about in their last moments. An object clunked onto the back of his head. Overcome, he fell into a drunken swoon.

Later, Jean's awareness returned. He found himself laying on his back staring at the ceiling. He belched and curled his lips at the hot unpleasant taste in his mouth. Once his thoughts cleared, he realised he felt pain and discomfort around his head. What had the woman done?

His fingers went to his scalp; it was bald. Perplexed, he rolled himself onto his knees and stood up. In doing so he noticed tufts of hair on the floorboards. As he stumbled about to find a mirror, it was apparent that the woman was no longer there.

She had not been gentle. It was a crude cut with hand worked clippers, as evidenced by the abrasions and blotches of dried blood. Jean looked away from the mirror.

It was the haircut of a traitor.

Stiff, in pain and with his mind reeling, Jean grabbed his easel and pencils and made it down the stairs. His bicycle was where he left it.

The journey home was hard. Despite stares from neighbours, he went into the washhouse, stripped off and washed himself all over. On entering his apartment, he rubbed butter into his head wounds and sat down.

The woman's account came back to him. He remembered that after completing the family sketch, he told his Milice section leader about the cellar. He was given two bottles of wine as a reward. A week later he returned to the farm as part of the interrogation team. Two Germans arrived and after a few questions, ordered the execution, to send out a warning message. His section leader turned to him and patted him on the shoulder.

Jean reached under the bed, took out the valise and found the sketch he drew of the event. The two girls, held by his colleagues, looked on while he aimed his pistol at the parents. It was, he considered, the moment before he shot them, not afterwards.

He shook his head, wiped away tears, then set the sketch alight with a match. After watching the paper curl into ash, he scooped up the other sketches and stuffed them into the wood stove.

“There,” he said. “It’s done.”

A shaven head and harsh words were all the woman could manage. He would lie low for a couple of days, then return to his stall to earn some Francs and move on. He fetched out a stale piece of baguette, a slab of cheese, and opened a bottle of wine. It was just a bump in the road of life.

Two days later, he cycled to the market square. Other stall holders, he noticed, stopped working and stared at him. One of them raised a fist. He continued on. At first sight it appeared as if wind-blown sheets of paper were strewn over his pitch, but then he realised stones weighed the paper down. Not only that, but they contained identical photos of someone.

Him.

In disbelief he let his bicycle fall to the ground. His chairs and umbrellas lay broken on the grass. The Pastor stood on the other side of the church wall with arms folded. Stall holders grouped around, shouting and spitting. One grabbed Jean’s easel from his cycle and smashed it on the ground. Another kicked down on the wheel spokes. Someone went to punch him but was pulled back.

“Where does he live?”

“My family died at the hands of the Milice.”

“I was Resistance. This man is scum.”

Jean zoned out of the rabble and picked up one of the papers.

It was in the style of a poster. Across the top was the word ‘Traitor’. Below that was a photo of Jean taken laying on his back, with shaven head, comatose on the floor. With eyes half closed and mouth open, he looked deceased. The woman had laid her family’s sketch on his chest. Underneath the photo was a set of printed words.

1943 Jacques Girard

Milice Murderer Traitor

Something hard struck the side of his head. Blood trickled down his brow, making him blink repeatedly. Swaying, he examined the poster still clenched in his hand.

JG his original initials. JG his alias.

Someone punched him to the ground. His grandfather’s words returned to him as he slipped into a veil of unconsciousness.