

Of Pearls and Garnets

The toe of a flat red shoe appeared on the doorsill, along with a bent knee covered in a denim skirt ornate with lace. A girl in thick black braids sitting in front of me pointed at the door. The other students instantly hushed; only a whisper, “perfect teacher,” disrupted the expectant silence. The teacher then leaped into the classroom, her slight body hovering over the floor while her sequined bell sleeves swirled around her torso like outspread wings. Flashes of red and pearly white glimmered against her wrist. Whirling, her long blond hair sprayed around her head in all directions like sun rays. “Ta-da!” she exclaimed as she landed.

“Please call me Bella and I will do the same for you.” She was the only one of our professors who allowed us to use her given name.

She then distributed the syllabus to each student, with her full name, R. Bella Rabinovitch, printed at the top. I wondered why she chose to use her middle name, rather than her first. It would take me all year to discover that R. stood for Rachel, her Hebrew name.

As I got to know her, I learned that her Jewish heritage was an important part of her identity, even though she led a completely secular, bohemian lifestyle with her French-Canadian partner, Aurèle. Bella had chosen to make her home in the Plateau Mont-Royal, which houses both Hasidic Jews and the highest concentration of artists in all of Canada. This may have been her way of reconciling her artistic soul and Jewish spirit. She had been renting that house ever since moving out, twenty years earlier, of her sister’s basement, where she (and her sister and her nephew) had contracted lung cancer as a result of their exposure to radon gas.

Bella dragged the trolley with the slide carousel and projector from the doorway to the middle of the classroom. She flicked on the power button. “Wheeeeeze,” sounded the machine as it warmed up, echoing the wheezing emerging from her own constricted lungs.

She then rummaged through her blue slide box and chose Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing*. Pigment by pigment, pixel by pixel, an image of an elegant woman swinging in a lush garden appeared on the white screen at the front of the classroom.

Bella ran up to the front of the room, threw her head back and lifted her leg in the air, imitating the woman's pose on the swing.

"It's an intrigue painting. The Bishop swings her as her lover hides in the grass, looking up her skirt. He has a perfect view of her private parts," she chuckled. I had never heard any teacher speaking this way in class before.

"Women didn't wear underwear back then," she continued, "so they could pee squatting in the grass with outspread legs. The flowers would conceal the scent of urine. That's why French gardens were so elaborate," she remarked in her best French accent.

"Notice the little Cupid covering his mouth with his finger, as if saying 'ssshhhh,' don't tell. The priest thinks it's an innocent scene, but it is a parody of religion. Meanwhile, the poor beyond the garden gate are starving, but the aristocracy is concerned only with its own amusement."

Bella knew all about rebelling against coercive institutionalized religion. Her parents had sent her to an Orthodox Jewish school to protest against Québec's Silent Revolution, but she was expelled because her skirt was too short and her tights full of holes.

"The women sometimes wore twenty crinolines made of horsehair under their skirts to give them volume," she continued her vivid description of the painting on the screen. "And push-up bras. Notice that her breasts are all the way up to her nose! I remember the last time I wore a ball gown, I could barely get through the door, my friend had to help me go to the bathroom. Think back to your own prom dress."

*

I never wore my prom dress, even though I spent months designing my dream gown during my last year of high school. Though I had anticipated the prom all year long – that all too significant rite of passage for North American adolescents, when they attend a fancy party in a hotel ballroom, dressed in tuxedos and ball gowns, and arrive at the venue in limousines. In the end I decided not to attend, shaking with fear at the thought of the bullies who had threatened to throw me into the pool.

I had spent many months during my last year of high school envisioning and searching for my ideal prom dress, perusing one fashion magazine after the other. I had never before spent so much time looking at fashion magazines, but would do so again at the end of the semester in Bella's Modern Art course, when she had us look for advertisements that appropriate known artworks and analyze them for our final assignment.

I had made numerous drawings of the ideal dress – silver satin with black floral lace, a strapless bodice and a puffy skirt – and was amazed when the dress of my dreams materialized before my eyes on a shopping expedition in downtown Montreal.

Even though the neon lights illuminating these shopping centres make everyone look green when trying on clothes, I felt glamorous in this elegant gown. Like the lady's dress in *The Swing*, this one, too, was puffy with many layers of sturdier lace underneath the embroidered silver satin.

At the end of that semester, I once again found myself perusing fashion magazines at Bella's behest. As a final assignment in her Modern Art course, she asked us to find

advertisements that appropriate famous artworks and interpret their use of art historical references. Though it was supposed to be easy and fun, it was the most difficult assignment of the term for me. I spent hours at the Marianopolis College library looking through magazines in vain, until I found a Givenchy perfume advertisement featuring a woman on a Paris rooftop overlooking the Eiffel Tower.

The prom gown would remain unused until my CEGEP graduation ceremony at the end of that year. When I emailed Bella to ask if she'd be coming to graduation, she apologized that she'd misplaced the form and forgotten the date, so she was having dinner guests that night: "I've become so disorganized," she wrote. I still did not know the reason why. "Maybe I can send my teddy bear to wear my gown."

Two decades later, when I try to figure out what made Bella such an exceptional teacher, I know it was not only her passion and enthusiasm for the subject, as demonstrated by her dramatic enactments of the artworks, but also that she taught in such a hands-on way, making the art historical material relevant to our day-to-day lives in the early twenty-first century – just as she had compared the dress worn by the lady on the swing to our own prom gown.

*

Bella called me a few days later and proposed a graduation reenactment: "I just bought long white gloves. It will be the embarrassment of the century."

And so I wore my prom gown once again to my meeting with Bella. It might not have been a formal prom with all the glamour of a hotel ballroom and a handsome

date, and I walked there rather than arriving by limousine, but it was well worth waiting to wear the gown until my college graduation and its reenactment with Bella, whose two short fifteen-week courses would shape the rest of my life.

When I arrived at the café, Bella was already seated at a small outdoor table sipping soda water with a plastic straw. As I slipped into the chair across from her, she showed me the polaroid camera she had brought and asked a passerby to take our picture.

In the photograph, Bella and I are standing in front of a shop window lined with purple and white flowers. I'm wearing the silvery satin ball gown skirt covered in floral black lace that I never wore to my high school prom. Bella wears a cream-coloured linen dress with four buttons down the front, dangling pearl earrings, and a straw hat with an artificial pink rose. I wonder if she wore the straw hat that day because she was already starting to lose her long blond hair in chemotherapy treatments? Though by then her body must have been considerably ravaged on the inside, externally it looks intact.

When Bella examines one of the prints that instantly comes out of the camera, she remarks: "our smiles are similar, so wide and genuine." Bella's facial expression is playful, mischievous, full of life, laughter in her bespectacled eyes. Looking at her like this, you'd never know that she was essentially a "living dead" – that the doctors had predicted she wouldn't even be alive by that date, June 25th 2003, when they told her on February 14th that she only had four to six months to live, that her lung cancer was terminal and inoperable. No external observer could have known that she was facing the abyss, that she was on a steep decline.

It was then that she almost revealed the truth about her condition – which she had managed to conceal from us students for that entire year as she danced before us and celebrated the joys of art and life. "A person exists so long as someone remembers

them here on earth,” she said. I thought she was talking about her sister. But she continued: “And now...” She stopped herself short and did not tell me that she was about to die. But she did warn me: “if you ever build a house of your own, make sure to have the ground checked for radon gas.”

*

Bella loved pearls. She bought a few strings of pearls at the Museum of Natural History in New York, when she travelled there for a conference soon after 9/11. I can picture her prancing into the museum shop, her eyes growing large as she spots the strings of pearls, picking one up and caressing the glistening surfaces, sticking it into her mouth and biting down for texture and taste. “Yummy!” she’d exclaim, to the horror of the customers standing around her. “Tastes like caviar!”

She later had the pearls restrung into bracelets, including the one she wears in her wedding picture from November 2003, just two months before her death. A few years after, Aurèle would tell me that she had worn her pearl bracelet whenever she needed courage and strength.

We were sitting at a French patisserie downtown sipping lavender tisane, when Aurèle reached into his bag and pulled out a small organza pouch. “I’d like you to have this,” he said. Loosening the strings, he pulled out a bracelet. “These are garnets, I believe,” he said, pointing at the bright red semiprecious stones interspersed between the pearls.

“They’re my birthstone,” I responded, my eyes brimming with tears. “I’m so moved that you chose me.”

“I know Bella would have been pleased for you to have it,” insisted Aurèle.

He reached across the table and, undoing the clasp, held the bracelet around my wrist. “Bella wore it whenever she needed strength, she was quite superstitious in that way; for instance, on the first day of each semester. I hope it gives you courage.”

Closing my eyes, I recalled the strand of pearls and garnets glimmering against Bella’s wrist, sliding up and down her forearm as she pirouetted into class on the first day of the semester, raising her hand above her head as she spun and twirled across the threshold, dragging the trolley with the slide carousel behind her.

I, too, wore that same bracelet on my first day teaching art history at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia – halfway across the world – exactly twenty years after sitting in that classroom at Marianopolis College, observing Bella’s grand entrance.