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## **GIRL AT HER MIRROR**

**By Alan Rossett**

Olivia

Madame Damiane

1. A bedroom in a French country house. 1955.
2. Madame Damiane's Paris apartment. The present.

Part 1

1955.

A bedroom in a French country house... which marries a sort of exquisite femininity to an artist's formal sense of order.

An easel on which a portrait in progress of a girl gazing rapturously at her own image in a mirror. In her hair - flowers. In her hand - lipstick, waiting to be used.

In front of the canvas, an artist's utensil table. Downstage - the frame of a mirror. Behind it, a chair, and a dressing table with toilet articles, a vase of flowers and scissors.

A closet door, a large bed, a phonograph and a liquor cabinet.

An entry door through which a young woman Olivia rapidly enters, obviously upset.

Her filmy flowery party dress accentuates her charms.

The noise of a party can be heard - music, glasses clinking, a murmur of conversation. Olivia closes the door, faces it and projects her voice:

OLIVIA

AAAAAAA!! And now, my sweet, sweet friends, I can talk yes, say what I think about all of you! And if I address myself to the walls, there won't be a loss of human warmth. In the privacy of my bedroom, I don't have to keep up my hand in this atrocious game you're making me play. Guests who have the nerve to snub their hostess! Dreadful! My husband orders you not to talk to me and you obey him like sheep. Stay on good terms with Jean and he'll let you go on sponging off of us. Night and day! Understandable, he's the only one among the lot who earns a penny as a painter. Ssh, the only one with any talent! Bunch of mediocre... just go to Hell. It will be you, all of you, who'll be forced to mutter the first words to me. I'll just smile like a sphinx, smile mysteriously... (breaks down a bit) There, you've almost made me cry...

(She goes to the table to repair her makeup.)

A drop of mascara, a little powder and everything will be all right again! Ah yes, here I can address myself to my mirror. Oh after three weeks it is good to hear the sound of my voice again. Oh my words, shining, juicy, racing out of the house, down brooks, giving them their sparkle, astonishing birds... Let's enjoy a pleasant little conversation, just you and I. We'll talk about...

My husband. He won't speak to me anymore. Just because I refuse to go on posing for that thing over there. (indicating the painting)

He tricked me with his oily affection. "I must paint you - I must capture the flower of you." It's not that I mind posing really - though it turns out to be tiring, tedious work... it's the picture itself... He could paint "the flower of me" anyway he wanted. I could be arranging flowers in fact, he's painted plenty of girls doing that. Or descending a staircase. I could even be, I don't know, whipping him up a little stew. Yum. Or stark naked, I'm no prude. But no... he... "Sit where you like, Olivia, doesn't matter and I'll begin."

Naturally I sat at my mirror, arranging my hair a little - what woman wouldn't... "Oh, just stay there, the lighting is rather interesting there. Oh yes... Hey, hey, don't move. And you mustn't look at it till it's finished - till your blossom has time to bloom." After several days, who could resist peeking? What a shock.

The first portrait he's ever done of me - his young wife - has to be of hers truly staring at herself in a mirror, applying lipstick like a self given kiss. "Girl at her mirror". He might as well call it "Narcissus at work".

This distorted version of my face will hang in some gallery, be reproduced in folders or tiny books and people will say "So that's his wife. Hmmmph. (snickering) Conceited frump." No! I can't stay here, I'm fed up! He doesn't think I can lead a life of my own. I can! I have my former life, a very full one, before I met him. It's quite simple. I'll return to it and know better than to ever leave it again. Who needs me the most? That's the question! Who?

(At her dressing table, she brings out an aging silk box.)

Oh, you dear thing...

(She opens it and smells it with pleasure.)

And you smell of sachet still...

(Like a child with candy, she takes out a large packet of letters, undoes the ribbon:)

Here are the answers. The day I got married I put you in a box and forgot all about you.

You. My very life. Forgive me.

(She examines a post card.)

A card from Papa... when I was in summer camp... Dear little papa. Poor darling, having to be father, mother and brother at the same time... (as if talking to an acquaintance in the mirror: ) I was born premature, you see... near death. Odd isn't it? (She tries to visualise these moments in the past:) My mother has died. It's a hot summer, abnormally hot... heat like an insidious serpent creeps in to make off with my life- My Papa rushes me to our little country house, for 30 days fills the sooty furnace with ice... for Gods sakes get the temperature down! Keep at it, Papa, never stop shovelling! Bravo! I'm going to live! I'll thank you with my enchanting smiles, my feminine charm! According to you I was exquisite from the day of my birth! "Oh Papa I love you"... Hmm from there I suppose it was small matter to believe the only reason I was put on the earth was to charm men in general. What do you know, that must have been it... hmmm...

(Smiling, she raises a hand as if she was a little holding the hand of an adult:)

... Sundays going fishing with Papa... His soft straw hat... blue suit... black tie... Endless walks, just the two of us... Of course that small town existence wouldn't do for me - Papa, the dear, moved his dental practise to Lyon... a city he disliked... just so that I would have a well-rounded education.

(Picks up a sheaf of envelopes.)

What a little vixen I was, even at that age - parties, parties, everybody had to have me at their parties! "Thanks, Papa, I love you!" Of course he accompanied me, it was only proper, How shy he was... when I pushed into the arms of Madame Savard.

She was a rich widow, with a charming little son my age... "Charl-eee"... I kept forgetting things over at her house, he had to keep picking them up. Ah ha!

(Looking at another envelope.)

My first wedding invitation... "Leave my hair alone! Charl-eee!!" As a step-brother, what a brute! "I'm a girl Charl-eee - fragile - shit - you little bastard - Papaaaaa!"

(Opens another envelope)

...Papa... now...? today? back to the country... "Dear Olivia, how are you, I hope you are well, I am well. Mother is very well. Come and visit us if you're tired. We'll go fishing and for walks as we used to. With Charl-eeee. Love, Daddy." Dear one. No, I can't go back there.

(Puts this pile on the bottom, picks up the next bunch.)

Ooh they're still sticky. Your hands were always dirty. I kept telling you to wash them... before you stroked me...

(comes upon a photo.)

Ah, yes... your smooth face caught in time. Your hair like straw... Your nose pressed to my window. I was your world. Oh, it was flattering to receive such passionate letters from a promising young journalist-to-be.

(opening one)

"Olivia, I love you."

(another)

"Olivia, I love you."

(another)

"Olivia..." Such style, such elegance. "You do realize the bad influence you're having on Paul." His mother. "I beg you, he won't listen to us anymore. If you have any affection for him, instead of taking up so much of his time, return him to his neglected studies. Don't see him unless he studies. The result would be a far better proof of your affection than encouraging his self-indulgence."

(dryly folding the letter)

Clever bitch. She flattered me! I never had a mother, I so wanted her respect. It was for her that I played the martyr. I arranged a whole scale of what I would give him in return for better school work. A kiss for an exam passed, a date for a course passed - with the result that he became so absorbed in his blasted studies, he never came back to me at all. Aside from his letter...

(scanning it)

"Do you know that you are hopelessly bourgeois, Olivia. And quite superficial? I feel I've gone beyond you." I'll say! I'd wasted so much energy helping you out, I barely got through high school myself! Ouch, why on earth have I kept it so long? I'll tear it up!! No why bother... Adolescence over, I made my grand re-entry into the world.

I'd learned my lesson!

(dancing)

This time I played my cards for all they were worth. I kissed them, all of them, on balconies, in dark arbors, in tiny sailboats. I danced and I sang and I flirted and one by one I sent them away a little earlier than was necessary so as not to let the situation get out of hand. For that would have spoiled their pretty, sentimental picture of me. They might have caught on to the fact that they didn't know me anymore than I knew myself. I wonder where they are now... God knows...

(She comes upon a little button... inspects it, curiously.)

The little black button of Guy Rombolles. My only reminder of him. He wrote no letters - not a scrap of a word.

(She closes her eyes, tries to visualize the past)

Here I see you... Guy Rombolles... in black and white... Or grey rather, flat as a photo. Your works...? Grey cubes butting into black cubes... setting off dirty grey cubes. Can I still see the walls of your garret room... dirty grey as well? I'm not sure.

Where I went, timidly, one step at a time, feeling that every gnarled board in the floor would break if I stayed, but afraid... that I would be plunged back into a void if I left.

(Her arms open wide apart.)

Oh, I brought you garlands of myself, I opened like a rose at your touch... and you took it as quite an ordinary thing.

Well, that was a novelty at first. I told you that I loved you and you said words to that effect as well. But I was just one more girl passing through your life...

... Unreal months... in your high mean attic... "I wasn't brought up for this kind of life," I used to say. "This". you would reply with your - mockery. "This". You'd mutter

"Spoiled little bitch" or "shut up and"

"Spread my legs?"

"That is what you do best."

"And if I got a job?"

"That you wouldn't do well and you'd be taking work away from a man who doesn't have your step-mother to feed him."

"To feed us."

"Olivia. I did without you before, I can do without you now, you'd think she liked being beaten up."

Papa!! Where was my Papa? My sedate suitors?

You made one big mistake. You took me to the galleries, to museums, and tried to teach feeble-minded me something about "art". After one grand tour, coming back to your room, I looked around and said, aloud, without even knowing you were there (that's the truth), "Some cubist, can't even paint a straight line." One sentence and it was over - after I managed to get out of the place alive!

"Hm I tore off his button... he probably expects me to sew it back on!"

(She sits by the mirror again, staring at herself.)

For hours and days on end stared at my mirror as I'm doing now. Guy had practically convinced me that I had no personal qualities whatsoever. Everything was put under question, even my looks. Had the time come to change? I stopped buying clothes. I annihilated my hair. I stopped wearing makeup. I was a nun in a tailored suit consecrated to

ugliness. (She's become the portrait of a young disagreeable spinster:) "So? What're you staring at? Go to Hell."

Why was I doing this? What was I good for? My face had been my only talent and I thought I'd destroyed it. And if I made a real break? I told Papa there was a class in Gothic art I wanted to follow in Paris... and there was... utterly boring... In Paris, I struggled as well through job interviews... hopeless... I dabbled... I still went to galleries and museums and... somewhere or other... I found a card for this exhibition...

(She holds it some distance from her, inspecting it with a professional air.)

I wandered into it... on a lazy, empty afternoon - and there I finally came across - him. I stood in front of his paintings for the first time... terribly shocked and tingling... those rooms of sunlight dripping with flowers. His women fitted into place among the books and vases and cats... Beautiful women, all sorts of useless kinds of women... just like me. I wanted to walk right into the paintings and take over... tend their plants, order their households... be the radiance of that painter's life. And when the time came, not right away, no rush, be mother to their children.

I left the gallery light-headed, for the first time in months, and laughing, skipped down the street like a mad-woman, helpless with laughter!! And immediately bought four lovely new dresses... with all the accessories. The same day, I found a new hairdresser.

(Bringing out a letter.)

"My dear young lady, I have seen you observing my paintings at the gallery four times this week. Such admiration does not come often so I took the trouble of tracking you down. Perhaps you would care to observe the artist over a cup of tea or coffee, a drink, whatever you like.."

Signed Jean Damiane.

Lady killer! Immediately proposing to do my portrait. I didn't let you have the upper hand, I never let you know that being painted remotely interested me - oh, no, I made you take me to parties, introduce me to your friends. When you attempted to seduce me - always saying

you only wanted to paint me - I'd chirp "Ridiculous! I aim higher! I want to be a married woman, not a model".

(A wedding invitation)

We got married. Then started the pleading - how you must put your love on canvas. I refused, I made you angry, I raised you to absolute heat, until finally - I was good enough to give in. And for thanks I have

(to the painting)

that monstrous painting. That caricature.

So I'm off. I'll carve a life for myself now, something quite new.

(looking intently into the mirror.)

Where to, Olivia? With me you can be honest. Where to this time?

Well, I'm a beautiful woman. Yes! I could easily find someone else... with him I could become...

A prostitute?

Sssh I didn't say that! I'm still beautiful... for the moment. I'm not bad, look at that painting if I need proof.

(She stops.)

Well, why don't you look at it.

(She rises and turns around slowly.)

It's not his masterpiece. Nothing false could be.

But...

(Very slowly, she advances to the painting, searching it.)

I never said that... it was a - bad painting, exactly The skin, the hair... he paints very well.

(She talks to the painting:)

Perhaps if I destroy you, he'll start another, more to my liking.



(She goes to the dresser, picks up the scissors and turns to the painting. Her arm raises with its weapon high into the air. There it stays, suspended, for many seconds. Then slowly it drops and crumbles.)

A shame to damage... such a pretty thing. And then... perhaps someone would be stupid enough to buy it... You never know... no harm in that...

What am I going to do with you. I can't go back. I can't go forward...

(She puts the letters away.

Silently, as if afraid to wake someone, she pins some flowers in her hair. She opens the door.

She returns to the painting, sits at her mirror, lipstick poised as in the portrait... she calls:)

Darling, if you'll send all your silly friends home, you may come into the bedroom and paint me. Darling...? I know it's very late but... I'm in the mood! Hurry before I –

MADAME DAMIANE (has entered, echoing Olivia)

- I change my mind!

\*

OLIVIA

I'll pose for you all right!

MADAME DAMIANE

All right –

OLIVIA (slyly)

And if I ask him for... for...

MADAME DAMIANE

For, for... little idiot! A...

BOTH

Pourcentage!

(Change of lighting:

Madame Damiane is Olivia – but 50 years older – and she has held up rather well!)

MADAME DAMIANE

Ten Percent.

OLIVIA

Twelve!

(The present. Spotlights sharply define a pile-up of paintings. Mirrored gestures between the two Olivias:)

MADAME DAMIANE (Olivia, young, mouths her words in playback)

Fifteen! For years and years!

(to the young Olivia)

Scram, Olivia! You no longer exist! I'm Olivia now – 50 years later!

(She gives off one of her “charming” smiles:)

OLIVIA (sarcastic)

“Papa I love you.” Same old guff.

(As Olivia, young, disappears... the older Olivia talks to someone in a television crew:)

A chair! For Gods sakes! (she goes to get one) It's always me that does everything! Am I all right here, I look good, can you see me? hear me? One, two, three, ready to go! I say whatever comes into my head and if I get carried away, you cut me off, we start again, I understand. Shall we start? OK!

(She picks up a canvas, holds it in front of her as to a camera... then away from her:)

Yuk stinks, someone's long gone beef stew got caked into the paint...Too bad, let's go...

("Filmed", she addresses the camera as to television viewers)

Mmmmmmm you're asking yourself how this surrealistic mess got dumped into my sweet little Paris apartment? At least I hope you are! For - if I've accepted opening my heart and living room to a television crew - and throwing in my dainty presence as well! - frankly, you have to stand on your head to get the slightest coverage on a local news broadcast - my purpose is to lure you like the old siren I am - to the Mercier Gallery, as of this Wednesday - 324, rue du faubourg St. Honoré - it's the Jean Damiane Exhibition!

[Www.damiane.dot.com!](http://www.damiane.dot.com)

(to the crew) You will put all this in sub-titles? If not, people are so stupid, how do you expect them to remember? I suppose I've got to start again? No, I talk, you take what's good, OK, good, I get it. My turn.

(to the "viewers") And once at the exhibition, don't hold back: buy buy buy!

Everything's on sale!

And grateful me - rid of this mess - can at last re-find a chair on which to rest my weary little bum... at the same time, I've put some money by for a rainy day! Anything wrong with that? In short, this chaos landed on my door mat two months ago... like that... no warning... shipped from Geneva by Bruchard Fathers and Sons - the name doesn't mean anything to you either...? Apparently belongs to one of those big corporate legal advisors kind of office...

(to the crew) I can pronounce their name, that's not hidden advertising? I'll take it again.

(to viewers) Here I am then, with these two brutes of delivery men on the door step... and all this stuff! For once even I was speechless:

(to the delivery men) "No, you take off your filthy shoes first! that I won't accept!" If I'd turned the delivery down, the whole lot would've gone right to the city dump.

A pity, seeing as - according to the papers they kept trying to wipe my face with - this was my "inheritance", the only one I, Olivia, could hope for as Widow of the painter Jean Damiane. Jean Damiane?... Jean Damiane...

The name means nothing to you? No? Nothing?

I'd almost forgotten the deceased as well - what with his vanishing husband act of over three decades ago!

He did used to be rather well known... Jean Damiane? He had a certain weight... Jean Damiane...?

All right, so he was never Van Gogh. And a good thing! Seeing as Van Gogh while alive was treated like a titbit of shit by everybody but his kid brother; between the two of them, they never managed to sell a single painting!

While my Jean-Jean was more than appreciated, he sold rather well!

Obviously - the other side of the coin - the growing jealousy of certain colleagues. Jean's "decorative" style was disapproved of after a while. It's stupid, has nothing to do with what one's painting but that's the way it is.

By the 1970's, we'd been catalogued "ghastly pair of squares getting in the way of today's youth". Me more than him, I was the bitch-guardian of his piggy bank. Jean, you see, with his inborn hypocrisy, exuded a kind of "nice granddaddy" image... "uninteresting but inoffensive"... while I... Like many wives of artists... with no real profession... and the children grown up... with too much time on our hands and not enough to do... above all, so much part of our spouse's creative impulses... that I became his "artistic sales manager". And for other artists as well... I arranged exhibitions... was invited to all the vernissages,

asked to be on the committees of "experts" who grant or refuse subsidies to poor little things... even to give lectures. Didn't bother me, I say what I think and I can be very talkative! Eh? Today I'm a little old lady, I have nothing more to hide, so let's admit that in the art world... in the world in general... one sails along on waves of manipulation and backwashes of dirty dealing. Well, in certain periods of one's life. Over here, Mister Judge! I plead guilty! I was an authentic horror! And no worse than so many others, oh that I can assure you! Oh yes! Jean! You weren't at first displeased at finding your Olivia transformed into a business pimp. Far from it! My "help" allowed you to concentrate more fully on your art! What right then did you have to start accusing me of besmirching your name? Blaming me for your loss of popularity?... He was simply no longer fashionable, frankly that happens to everybody. His paintings still sold, but less so, he did some teaching, gave lectures, we hardly lived in misery... but our day to day routine wasn't quite as posh.

I'm not the sort to accept things going wrong! Not without a good fight! Touch my Jean-Jean and watch out, Olivia becomes a tigress!... even when the worst attacks are coming from one's own children. Predictably so: when you're young, your parents are the most accessible target: they live in the same house! As our tots were already part of what was labeled the "protest generation"... they gleefully romped into the pack of bloodhounds snarling at their papa. Jean's good qualities - Gods knows he had a lot of them - the kids took for granted... He was a very nice father, you know... if you like, read "nice" as inexistent.

He'd paint away, paint this old hat stuff - giving it far more importance than his children. (directly into the camera) Yooohoo Bertram! Yoho Marisa!

Watching television tonight? Now that you as well will never see 40 again - what have you done better with your own lives?

Think back, Bertram, on all those college entrance exams mucked up... how we had to buy your way into an expensive American university... this followed by a good executive position... in my father's second wife's family business. And little Marisa... blithely diving into the boiling waters of that era's social contestation - to find herself doing the wash

there of assorted Parisian Chi-chi Gueveras simply because she wasn't a man like them... Hopping mad, she's off to Hash-mandou... obviously I was the one to sponge up that mess... while Jean, impassive, painted, painted, painted.

(directly into the camera) Your own Mama Olivia really loves the two of you. As well as your children and their children... kiss kiss kiss... but if one can't tell the truth on television, for Gods sakes where?

At the time, though I listened attentively to all their bullshit. I was really trying to understand the hostility whirling around Jean. Day after day... I'd climb the stairs leading to his skylit studio... his ivory tower... Like a St. Bernard, I would lay at his feet the unctuous diversity of attacks against him... to help him out of course! He could go on about my being a sadist, no, all I wanted was for his style to reflect a pinpoint of the turbulence of the times. It bothered me, my husband being pigeonholed as an old fuddy-duddy. And, why not admit it, he was selling less and less! The last time I posed for him... between two commissioned portraits, he still wanted Olivia to pose for him... I was exposing my point of view... During such moments, he would invariably paint my mouth. "Olivia, my dear, shut your mouth."

"On the contrary: it should be in a permanent flap. Like that nude Marcel Duchamp painted - sixty years ago already Jean! - all rippling movement going down a staircase! The very sight of it still makes the rest of us reverberate. You're a genius, Jean, nobody denies that. But in today's world, is genius enough?"

Ouch! "Genius", for him was the cliché word meaning nothing.

"Jean, your women - us - me - you're still stuffing us into gilded cages... with all these cats taxidermed onto our laps. Our faces! Faces! Nothing but faces! Year after year! You've got paralysed, Jean! While the rest of us are ready to dance!

(as Jean; brush in hand)

"Yes, down the staircase of the Folies Bergère, in a flap, stark naked, reverberating your behind.

Olivia. Do you think it's easy for me to capture your face in the midst of the torrent spewing out of it? It's already far more difficult to paint than 20 years ago."

(Olivia) "You see! You've said it yourself! my face is dated."

(Jean) "No: wrinkled."

(She pauses to digest that. "He" presses his advantage:)

(Jean) "Obviously, all these wrinkles give me a lot more to paint. I've been thinking of hiring a house painter to help me out. Look at this portrait...and this one...

(like Jean searching through his paintings...)

... done in 55? Now there's a less complicated lady. You're marked, my dear. So am I.

Normal. I can't have the same way of looking at you as before.

What makes you imagine you have the right to tell me how to paint?... Oh I know, we're a couple. For you, two heads on one body...? Look at my neck, Olivia... it isn't yours. Mine would never bend over in servility. Least of all to you... great "Expert" lady... thanks to me! You expect my paintings to move? How? Graphic art is immovable. The best it can hope for is to capture the truth of a fraction of a second - for all eternity. This microscopic timeless fragment can indeed reflect all that's in the air at the time. But by its absence! While Papa Duchamp was cramming the swinging hips of his nude onto one sticky piece of canvas, in the real world outside his window, the germs of Sarajevo were growing... I like Duchamp well enough... There's an indefinable aroma of that epoch in his nude... "Girl at her mirror"... 1955? Wasn't that the Warsaw Pact?... Remember it, Olivia?... I know you: you don't. If there's the slightest trace of "current events" in my Mirror-girl, my subconscious must've slipped it in behind my back!... So what, the girl's still here, right in front of us, as palpable as you. And with an indefinable something of that era... I believe it's the complete unawareness in her eyes... I never wanted to sell that painting, don't know why... Perhaps to cherish the shreds of your youth..?

... Following which I painted portrait after portrait, Olivia, her children, her cats, and certain well-heeled ladies whose commissions kept up Olivia's standard of living. And the Algerian war was raging around us. Where is that war in the trivial beauty that oozed out of my humble fingers? Quite a few people did ask me that question as they condescended to look over - and down at my work. For me, that's the proof that it did bring the real world to them. By its absence!! I know, a pretty slim achievement - My way of stating I achieved a thing or two. We can't all be Goya or Picasso: I'm a minor talent. But with this minor talent the good Lord gave me in a moment of confusion... I've done what I could. I like to paint women, what's wrong with that? Ever since I was 8 years old... Tra la la, wasn't I ever a precocious lad!! ("bawdy" laugh)

(Madame Damiane to the television viewers:)

Then, like all husbands, he confided to me for the umpteenth time a story I knew by heart! As a child, Jean would sit in class drawing women's faces. A nasty teacher confiscated them. "My little Jean, the day will come when I'm going to ask the class to draw a factory, a worker and his robot. I advise you to start planning them right away." The day did come when he asked his students for their Images of a factory-worker-robot. He collected the papers without looking at them. Jean had drawn three women. Stark naked. A little fearful, he pretended to be ill and skipped school for two weeks. Why all these women? What was his "mo-ti-va-tion" as people now call it.

(Imitating Jean's mockery:)

"And this was well before Women's Lib had shown us your importance! I paint to pick women up, Olivia, only for that! It always works! Most women are so flattered to refind themselves as a work of art, in gratitude they throw themselves into the artist's arms!! And other places... Didn't Da Vinci write a treatise on this subject? "Paint-a-Them Up-a to Pick-Them-up-a"? Or was it Lucas Cranach? Ach yah! Schönstes frauleins...! You do take me seriously...? That's your problem. While I... all I want is from you is to be quiet... look beautiful. And SHUT UP!"

(Madame Damiane)

... He was staring at me intensely... in order to transfer my essence into goo on his canvas... Always with the ironic Jean smile. But in his eyes, I read reflections of such... hatred? Toward me...? That's what it was!



Sheer hate. The other side of the coin of the beautiful love with which his soft brush had so often smoothed my outlines. (pause)

(Olivia)

"If you're set on finishing the portrait, Jean, find another model, I've had it. (She looks at it.) Maybe it's finished already. Maybe... if you leave it like that... it could be interesting. Something between realism and non-figurative. A bridge from youth to age. A little like the unfinished Manets. I've wondered if he didn't abandon them on purpose... was it his way of inventing abstract art? Yes, leave it like that, it'll be more modern. You'll've finally stepped into the present! Maybe. Me as well..."

I left his studio.

He didn't come down for dinner that night. I didn't go up to get him. If I had... would things have been different?...

The next morning... not a sign of Jean... Not a word.

The day after... I made a few phone calls... discreet, evasive... to friends... "Jean wouldn't be there, would he? No no, it's not important, I'll see him tonight!..."

I knew, I knew I'd never see him again.

I sensed, coursing through me, some... venomous substance... A gangrene...

A. Silence.

Total silence.

I was climbing to his studio... feeling myself so... how to put it... fuzzy... as if it wasn't myself but some formless thing ascending... step by step...

After a moment... perhaps hours later... I sat. What did he take with him?... not much... Poor dear... He was going to need that that and that... He should've asked me to help him pack his bags before fleeing from me like the plague... Ah, men... I stayed there... in a zone out of time... My fingers vaguely playing with his old scarf... "Olivia Olivia" I said to myself "You were too hard on him! Admit it, you do lack diplomacy!"

Undone threads of the scarf... strangely pressed into my fingertips the feeling of despair that must have been smouldering inside him. Because of me...? Partly... at the same time, it had nothing to do with me... You can't fathom the mystery of a man. Anyway, it had to happen - for the son of a bitch had planned it in advance! Very precisely! Two days later, I was informed of certain subtle and comforting arrangements he'd made so I wouldn't have any financial worries. That made it official.

At the beginning it pleased me to pretend that he'd run off in a snit and when he came back, oh boy, would I make him pay for it!

But I knew my Jean so well. I loved him. Deeply. For him, when something was over, it was over. Inside me, lapping waves of an understanding tenderness - I was really worried about him - crashed into indescribable storms of fury! I would've destroyed all his paintings. (She refinds scissors and nearly... then...

Well... that is... If...

(She pulls herself together... changes her speed and mood)

If my practical side hadn't suggested that, even on his way out, Jean's work could have a certain value! Sure, why not, we all have such considerations.

Finally, wasn't it best to be philosophic? I had a roof over my head, a bank account, two children no worse than most... young adults in fact leading their own lives. Above all I still had enough energy to reshape my own life. I've never held much sympathy for losers: no question of becoming one!

To my hard-earned profession of "artistic counsellor", I added a genuine flair for decoration... interiors, in general. With the help of a few friends, I began and, why not say it, very well succeeded a career in real estate. Thus, in turning the page on the fine arts, I turned the page on Jean. And a good thing!

This elegant apartment in which I've invited you to be my guests... a quarter of a century ago, it was I, the real estate agent, who sold it to a charming man... A considerate one! So much so that... I moved in with him! He was divorced, the lucky dog!

This time I asked no questions as to the business of this particular businessman! But I poked enough into his papers... while he was alive... to be able to make off with the title to this apartment once dead! Sorry, Gertrude, his sister! (maliciously) Just in case she's watching me tonight as well!

Marry Godefroy? No, no, that never interested me. At all events, I was still married to Jean - and I had no intention of playing Sherlock Holmes to track him down, give a good shriek and make him sign papers!

On a certain level, I almost find it reassuring that in our present-day world - dominated by high tech, internet, Interpol, the global invasion of privacy... a man like Jean could disappear as he wished! Pfft! Bravo, Jean! What's your opinion, ladies and gentlemen?

I'm sure you'll understand, I am very curious to know a bit more, well anything at all, as to what my husband had been up to since our last meeting in 1974 to be precise. Bruchard Father and Sons - you remember, the big corporate Swiss cheeses - the legal advisors - ? They don't know any more than me. Nobody there ever met him. He's just an account among hundreds of others.

The only way to find out more... maybe... would be to visit the country from which these paintings were originally shipped... the Congo... there apparently Jean went in search of peace... Yes to that lovely country... where political foment runs rampage night and day... I

could track down Jean's life... probably into the middle of a jungle! And plead with a tribal chief for any information about an old Frenchman who, one day, might have just happened to amble through his brush. Finally there are limits to my curiosity!!

Might there be anybody watching this program... one never knows... who ran into Jean Damiane in the Congo between 1975 and this year of grace?

(to the crew) Here's where you flash a photo or two of Jean, right?

(as waiting for an answer from out there) No.

At the same time... aren't all the answers about his life right here before us in his paintings?

These are of course portraits of women...

Still caught in moments of idleness.

No definable class, all ages. Very human as a whole.

Obviously, since Jean went to the Congo, he changed the skin color of his beauties. The fine French porcelain and house cats have been replaced by strange birds and monkeys.

If Jean had flown to the moon, I'm sure his brush in no time would've picked up alluring aliens.

(to the crew) Camera effects here... Faces... Superimposition...!

(to the viewers) They are beautiful, eh? On sale! Every last one of them! Galerie Mercier!

Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré! 132! [Www.damiane.dot.com!](http://www.damiane.dot.com)

You won't regret it, there's a lot of money to be made here. Jean is completely forgotten today - can't deny that. But I feel in my bones that the price of his paintings is going to soar!

What an investment, think of it!

Not that you can't, if you wish, keep them for yourselves! Gentlemen! At the breakfast table, rather than having to look at your wife mouthing her cereal... you can let your gaze wander to the wall cradling a limpid black Venus of Jean Damiane! Lovely...!

(She stops... Takes a moment to stifle a fit of mad laughter! To the crew) Sorry, boys... I was thinking... I'm not serious of course... obviously you'll cut this out... but if here we insert an ad for corn flakes...?

(The laugh becomes uncontrollable) Forgive me, all these paintings must've stimulated my saleslady side!... Unless it's emotion... Finally it is emotion... This has been very hard for me... this voyage into the past... (She's bursting with laughter) Very hard... Olivia, Olivia, where's your dignity?! Forgive me everybody! (she gives herself a little slap, winks to the crew. Manages a straight face... to the viewers) Personally... I find these women as pretty as I was. That's saying a lot seeing as - when I was young - people did go on and on about my ravishing looks. Non-stop, it wore me out after a while!

There's one white lady in his last works. A single one.

A young girl actually.

In rummaging through his portraits to work my way back into his life after he left me... I thought I recognised a face that Jean must've taken with him during his travels...

The girl is at her mirror.

(dreamily) He had done another like it, very similar...

(Her memory brings back Olivia, young...) I would've liked to compare the two of them...

For no reason really, just to see what changes and what remain the same in the memory of a man...

(Madame Damiane approaches herself, young. She has an impulsive reaching out to her past... which is no less than a mirrored gesture between the two women.)

OLIVIA

But Olivia, you know...

MADAME DAMIANE

... that the first portrait of

OLIVIA

Olivia Young

MADAME DAMIANE

Seen by Olivia

Not so young

The TWO WOMEN (joyous slashing)

Was destroyed

By all the Olivias

The day Jean walked out on me!

(They shake hands...

This turns into a tug of war between the two Olivias;

Each tries to pull other their way.)

OLIVIA

Old idiot....

MADAME DAMIANE (with tenderness toward her  
younger self)

Little idiot.

(Triumphantly, Madame Damiane manages to free  
herself of the young Olivia.  
She freezes behind the framework of the mirror.  
The young Olivia looks at this "portrait" of her entire life to  
come.)

OLIVIA (almost without voice)

... My God...

MADAME DAMIANE

My God...

End

Performance rights must be secured before production. For contact information, please see the *Girl at her Mirror* information page (click on your browser's Back button, or visit <http://singlelane.com/proplay/girlatthemirror.html>)

Author's note: I feel an author who directs his own works should not impose his production on another director. However... the text above was done before the play was performed. I wound up doing it quite differently. Mainly, all the paintings described are on stage right from the beginning – but with their backs to the audience. This way their faces do not compete with the live actresses. And also I can thus go into the second part of the play without any time-wasting set adjustments. We are rather in an area where past and present melt and Olivia relives her life in dream-like fragments, rather than telling us about it.