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## ***Madame Realism looks for relief***

**Lynne Tillman**

The sultry nights stretched credulity. Madame Realism stood up from the table and pushed her chair into a corner. She had been sitting in one position for too long and had become stiff. Her body was tense, as if it, like a body of work, were on trial. What was there wasn't enough, what might be there was beyond her. She could also be a body of water, affected by an autonomous, distant moon. With tides, not nerves. Her inventiveness was a sponge, and it was rock, scissors and paper too. She wanted to play, but she didn't know which game. Then she turned on some music and danced. In motion, she produced a funny face. She jumped in the air and sang the lyrics: "I make my bed and I lie in it." She was weird, a character. I'm next to human, she supposed.

In an episode on TV Madame Realism hadn't watched, John Hightower played a poet, an educated man who lived in the country. The sun beat down on him. The field and he were parched. He didn't have many lines, and his part wasn't particularly distinguished or profound. Hightower hadn't received much attention as the poet, a kind of straw man, and even in a field where he was the only serious artist, he was overlooked. He took comfort in his uniqueness, he was one of a kind. His agent told him, you're great, an original. No one acts or interprets the way you do.

Madame Realism didn't know Hightower.

It was the second summer the Mets won the series. For Joe Loman it was the single event that made his day, his month, his year. It pierced the doom and gloom. Loman was more than a fan, he was a fanatic. He collected cards, autographs, attended every home game with his season pass. In the next world he wanted to play (first or) second base. He wore a Keith Hernandez pin on his shirt. To earn money Loman was a script doctor and a ghostwriter. He kept his hand on the pulse. Loman was nobody's dummy. He played his cards close to his vest and suspected everyone. He didn't work cheap.

Madame Realism didn't know Loman.

She lowered the volume, but she could still hear herself think. She opened her messy closet. She couldn't throw anything out. There were shelves, compartments, boxes, drawers. A walk-in closet big enough to live in. Inevitably, she would be inundated by stuff, suffocated by the little things in life, submerged under the weight of kitsch and kultur. Madame Realism couldn't decide what was trivial, insincere, fake, inauthentic, frivolous, superficial, and gaudy; she herself was all of these. And crude, rude, stupid, obtuse and mean. And honest, real, prescient, dense, apparent, transparent, smart, and beautiful. In different situations she was different things and to different people she was different people. Reality was a decision she didn't make alone.

(What's real to you isn't to me, she mentioned inadvertently in another story. Madame Realism once found herself in a Guy de Maupassant tale, the one about a man who picked up a piece of string in the road, and because he did, because he saved things, he had a bad end. One thing led to another, what had seemed a nothing operation picking up a piece of string in the road-changed the direction of his life. That's because you never know who's watching or what the consequences are. Life and fiction, Madame Realism thought, are a series of incidents and accidents. Everyone faced the possibility of a stupid end or of being stupid to the end.)

Bending down to save something and place it in her messy closet, Madame Realism wondered if one day she would be destroyed or defeated by her own desires and devices. She accumulated. But if she saved everything, there wouldn't be a place for herself. Maybe she could expand, move or change. But most of her changes were minor adjustments. She was set on her ambiguous course.

What Madame Realism didn't treasure affected her as much as what she did.

Somewhere else Hightower's sweating and ranting:

People tell me, "Hightower, you're not capable of being understood. You expect too much." I don't want to talk to these people because they'll tell me their opinions. I'll be forced into comic book situations worse than the one I'm living. That would be death. I'm sick because I'm conscious. I'm important, but I'm not yet considered a genius. Art isn't recognized by everyone, it's not quantifiable or practical. It's for the fine and discerning. Beauty is the basis of quality. How many people do I need to please anyway?

When Hightower finished delivering his impromptu manifesto, which he performed impeccably and with passion, he looked over the field. He was far ahead of everyone, miles ahead, and heads taller. He raced away, aghast, like Hamlet's father's ghost.

Hightower phoned Loman. They were contentious buddies from way back.

Loman's at his computer, ghosting a self-help manual:

You're asking yourself why you get up in the morning; why you go to the same job every day; why you live alone or with the same person even though you're bored out of your mind; you're wondering why life goes on without the great highs you had when you were a teenager. You were miserable then too. But probably you don't remember. You were doing drugs. You remember that you were young and a lot of life wasn't behind you. But don't think about that. That won't help you. That's why you're down. You can't control this stuff once it gets going. Ignore it. Deny it. Just hang out, exercise, be seen, never say die, diet, don't eat fat, don't admit anything, you're not unhappy, get lifted not uplifted, make money not love. Stop complaining.

Meanwhile Madame Realism left her apartment and her closet. She still had a shelf in her mind, where she stored and catalogued experiences and memory, so she felt safe to walk outside. It was a fantastic night. She pretended she could understand other people. When she entered her favorite bar, her neighborhood bar, Madame Realism saw two characters perched on stools in her usual place. Part of her didn't like being displaced, another part invited the unexpected, unanticipated, and unintended. She wanted to do the inviting, though, and the tables were turned. She was a guest.

What Madame Realism didn't apprehend might be more resistant than what she did.

Hightower and Loman were talking and gesturing, their hands and mouths furious implements. Madame Realism had to shove her barstool around and in, but finally she discovered a place at the counter. She wasn't going to let a couple of strangers push her around. She'd adjust, fight, or hold her own, though she wasn't sure what that was.

Unabashedly Madame Realism listened in. She had decided years ago that if she listened only to herself, she'd go crazy.

Loman growled:

You're too subtle, Hightower. You have to reach more people. Appeal to a wider audience. The umpire behind the plate makes calls, instant decisions. Ball, strike, he stands for the people. You think baseball can be played for one person alone? Broaden your base. You can't expect people to get your performance. You have to deliver. Be obvious. What would a baseball game be like if there was only one person in the stands. What if one player ran from base to base, and no one had any expectations about his getting home, or stealing second, sliding over home base or getting a hit. You have to score.

Hightower glowered:

Obvious? An umpire judges baseball. You want him to judge my performance? You think I should respond to, that's a ball, that's a strike? Not everyone in the stands likes the umpire's calls, there's a minority who argues. And some throw beer at each other. There should be a level of civilization, of civilized behavior we agree upon. Let people use dictionaries. Read the work of James Joyce. Everyone should know Shakespeare. There's excellence, standards, otherwise democracy runs amok. Raise the level, don't wallow in it. You pander to the lowest impulses. Broaden my base! Limit your baseness!

Like a wedge between the two, Madame Realism inserted herself. It was characteristic for her to jump in and sink or swim, and sometimes she did both:

You say umpire, he says critic. You say ball game, he says theater. Who chooses the game? the umpire? the critic? Who decides on the players and the rules? I could go on and on.

Loman and Hightower looked at her. Loman thought Madame Realism struck out. She wouldn't even get to first base. Hightower dismissed her. He decided she wasn't very advanced.

Madame Realism went further:

If I were a sonata by Bach, or a song by Courtney Love or Ray Charles, an antique hourglass or a home page on the Web, a china figurine, or a painting by Caravaggio, who decides what I mean? What makes me valuable or lets me be thrown out in the garbage? My projection isn't yours even when you and I go to the same movie.

They ignored her.

Loman raved:

Your purity, Hightower, makes me sick. You wouldn't know what was great if it bled all over you. We're all just pitching balls or strikes...

Hightower reacted:

You want to please everybody, Loman, anybody. You have no eye. No taste. You know nothing of beauty or the spirit that's necessary for seeking truth and creating art.

Loman bellowed:

For values, I go to the marketplace. You don't have an audience, because you don't deserve one. Elitist!

Hightower countered:

You disregard immutable laws that inspire all great endeavors and enduring work. Vulgarian!

Madame Realism wasn't sure what was really at stake. She'd heard it was western civilization. She displayed her version of the pleasure principle:

I seek pleasure, and I'll do anything to get it. We do anything to please ourselves, but we call it other names. Don't doubt that. I can be vicious in the pursuit of my pleasure. I fill my life with beauty, ugliness, happiness, despair, the cheap and the expensive, things are things. I need them, want them, I encounter them, they encounter me. I play them, they play me. We're all left to our own devices.

Madame Realism hated to feel that anything was insignificant. But her performance might be another exercise in futility.

Hightower and Loman couldn't continue to ignore Madame Realism even though she was obscure to both of them. There they were—three characters in a situation together. They came from different places and found themselves sitting on barstools in the same bar. It was a dialogue or a car crash. Anyone of them could have been the piece of string, the narrator, or the man who bent down. Anyone of them could've been somewhere else or in another position.

Loman slammed his icy mug of Miller High Life on the counter:

I'm through handling you with kid gloves, Hightower. You'll never be major. Face it. You think you're ahead of everyone, but you've lost the race. You're a loser.

Hightower raised his glass and protested ironically:

You have a mob mentality, you're trying to satisfy the lowest denominator. You speak