

The Courtship of Gertrude Stein  
*in which one myth supercedes another*

It was the Saturday Salon at 27 rue de Fleurus,  
slim young men, Hungarians and Americans, admiring the paintings, admiring  
Gertrude Stein (and if they did not admire Gertrude Stein, a bas!), admiring  
the apartment, admiring each other –  
in sum, the usual weekend hustle and bustle of gabbling boys, complimented  
by the earnest presence of Bryn Mawr girls in hats, the baffled presence of  
Boston matrons, also in hats, and, striding across the room in a long black  
cape lined with scarlet satin, the dramatic presence of a tall, thin, middle-aged  
man whom a young Hungarian introduced as Count Vladimir Drakola.  
Such a plump, pretty neck, the count remarked to Gertrude Stein. Then, before  
she could slug him, he took her hand and kissed it.  
What in the world was wrong with her? The count's compliment, the touch of his  
lips, had imparted to Gertrude Stein: a frisson.  
Solidifying herself in grandeur, she inquired where the count came from  
anyway.  
Transylvania. Where the wolves howl by night. I do not know what happens by  
day. I sleep by day.  
Do you now? said Gertrude Stein. I work at night myself. I write. What sort of  
work do you do at night, Count Drakola?  
I feather my nest, gnädige frau. I protect my livelihood. I do what needs to be  
done. His eyes grew beseechful. Let me come to you tonight, Miss Stein.  
When the moon is full.  
From across the room, Alice B. Toklas blew a kiss to Gertrude Stein.  
You've got me wrong, Buster. The only men I see are the butcher, the baker, and  
the candlestick maker. *In the afternoon.*  
Then let me come for tea. Tomorrow. Shall we say at five? When the sun has  
gone down?  
Listen here, fellow. I'm the boss. I set the time.  
The Count bowed low.  
Five-fifteen, said Gertrude Stein. I have to pretty up first.



Gertrude! cried Alice B. Toklas. That man wants to have his way with you!  
It was Sunday evening, the count had come and gone, and in his wake 27  
rue de Fleurus gave off the mingled scent of honeysuckle and japonica,  
a sweet sticky fragrance that slithered around the doorjamb like an  
amorous panther.  
Men don't have their way with you, Alice advised.

Lovey! *No one* has their way with me. You should know that by now. I am a law unto myself. My own reference. My own definition. My own epitome! *I* often have trouble having my way with me. I am hell on wheels.

Nonetheless, continued Gertrude Stein. The count does have presence.

Authority. It may be that he has genius, too. However, I have not yet discovered what that genius is.

As far as Alice was concerned, the count was as full of himself as Gertrude Stein was full of herself. But Alice remained humble in the presence of genius.

Humble but cautious.

Gertrude, said Alice. Don't you think you might be playing with fire?

Alice. Fire would not dare burn me.



The man was relentless. No, Gertrude Stein would not dine at the Brasserie Lipp.

No, she would not take a buggy ride through the Bois. No, she would not play Parcheesi in the count's suite at the Ritz. Who did he think he was anyway? La Belle Otero?

As fast as the count's petits bleus arrived at 27 rue de Fleurus, Gertrude Stein sent back her refusal. There were so many roses in the pavilion that it looked like a funeral, so much chocolate that she and Alice felt the need for fiber.

This is ridiculous, Gertrude Stein declared on Wednesday. We must go away.

As you please, Gertrude. Where do you please?

Je m'en fou! Provence. Spain. Amsterdam. The Alps! Anywhere that man is not.

That man has become a pest!

Whereupon the maid handed Gertrude Stein a petit bleu. She read it aloud.

I cannot live without you. V. D.

Yeah, sure, Buster. And I can't blow my nose without *you*!

Two hours later, a sleek black coffin arrived at 27 rue de Fleurus. Inscribed in purple ink, the note nailed to the top read, My heart knows no home but yours. V. D.

Well now, said Gertrude Stein. The count's fate could well attest to my genius.

Bring in the coffin, she told the porters. Open it up. We're Americans. We can face the facts.

Inside the coffin, dressed in white tie and tails, Count Vladimir Drakola lay waxen and still upon a bed of mauve crêpe.

That's that, said Gertrude Stein. I'm sorry he's dead. But I'm glad he's gone.

Close him up. We'll send him off tomorrow.

But first there was the night to come.



At midnight a fluttering distracted Gertrude Stein in her studio.  
Bat, Basket, she said.  
Leaping from the daybed, the big white poodle caught the flying rodent in  
midair.  
Icky-poo! said Gertrude Stein as Basket chewed his prey. Icky poodle! she  
laughed as Basket swallowed the bat. Icky-poodle dog!



In the morning, the late morning after Gertrude Stein had risen, Alice B. Toklas  
led her to the count's empty coffin. Gertrude Stein was always proud that she  
kept her sangfroid.  
I daresay stranger things have happened, she said to Alice and the maid. But  
I shall have to consult with Professor James before I make my conclusion.  
Professor James is more acquainted with what is not than I. For now, said  
Gertrude Stein, send this coffin to the Lapin Agile. Picasso and his reprobates  
can have some fun.

And then it was time for lunch, Alice's chicken fricassee and the cook's pea  
soufflé, served with a sweetish Riesling and gingered peach preserves.

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