



Dear Monsieur
Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin

*...ant a
...é je suis un jou
...sais que vous éte
...an ma voiture et
...vous me receviez
...en plus longue.
...semblerai bientôt a
...ous m'autorisiez à p
...ques photographies con
...avec l'espoir que j'*

Picasso



Dear Monsieur Picasso

As I drove up the high winding road to the Villa la Californie, I thought back over the last few days. It was my last summer of freedom. Next year, I would be a college graduate looking for a job and trying to settle down. I would have to be satisfied with reading about the people and parts of the world that interested me. In the summer of 1955 I had won a reprieve, a stay of adult responsibility until 1956.

I wanted to see Pablo Picasso. I don't suppose that anybody felt less qualified or had less of an excuse than I did. But to me he was a compelling, attractive imaginary companion who had coached many of my dreams about creativity, not excluding a Riviera blue sea, hot sun; and sexual robustness. I had always admired Picasso. He was a rebel, unpredictable, an artist constantly evolving. He and Diego Rivera were probably the first artists I had known about, but Rivera didn't have the attractive physical presence of Picasso. But mainly Picasso represented freedom that had nothing to do with the practical office-bound issues that I would soon have to face. This was my temporary, self-issued license to burst unannounced into Picasso's life.

I landed in Le Havre a month ago, spent time in Paris where I saw a Picasso's Human Comedy exhibition at Le Petite Palais. This had triggered the wild idea of visiting him.

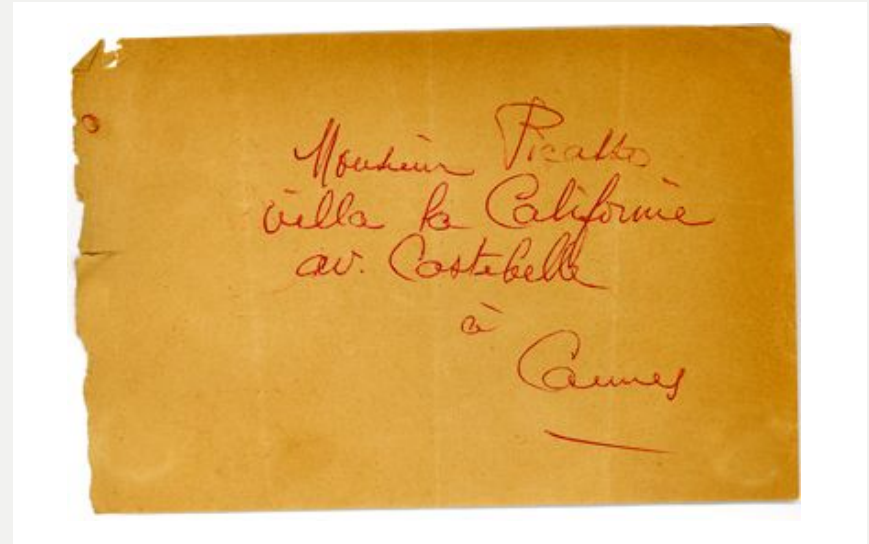
I bought a very used Hillman Minx car. I had no idea what I would do if I did get to see Picasso, but I had to try...

I was hungry for adventure but would the imaginary Picasso be the same as the live Picasso? Why would he put up with a person like me, convinced that he couldn't live another day without coming for a visit? I had to overcome the rational to muster every bit of courage I had to head south toward Vallauris where I heard he lived. Near Vallauris there were billboards advertising ceramic shops and exhibitions. One sign pointed to the Picasso Museum. This must be the right road, I thought.

I arrived at Vallauris around noon and found the village bustling. It was very hot and there were glass-domed tourist buses parked everywhere, the drivers fanning themselves in the little shade they could find. The tourists were being led through the narrow streets from one ceramic shop to another. The buses made it impossible to drive, so I parked in the driveway of one of the ceramic museums. Grateful for the parking space, I bought a ticket and went in.

The main difference between the museum and shops was that the museum charged 100 francs to let you see what they had for sale whereas the shops were free. Lots of pretty girls wearing shorts, tight sweaters or low-necked blouses and sandals with long leather thongs wrapped around their legs walked around and were friendly and helpful about ceramics. One beautiful girl sold perfume. She came up, gave me a squirt and said in English: "You like that?" She could deliver this line in four languages. She wore a ceramic disk on a rope around her neck. It was also for sale. I chatted and mentioned that I had never smelled a museum like this one and got directions to the Picasso Museum.

The Picasso Museum had plates, pots and vases decorated with animal and fish designs, ceramic birds, and heads all done by Picasso. The attendants, however, didn't measure up to the standards of the other museum and nothing was for sale. I inquired about Monsieur Picasso's whereabouts to the museum director, a middle-aged woman, who



Picasso address

told me that she didn't know if I could see Picasso or not. She explained that people were always bothering le maître and after all she wasn't his wife. He was a busy man and how was she supposed to know these things? After persisting in stumbling French, I found that Picasso no longer lived in Vallauris but in Cannes. Ten more minutes of smiling and saying "Thank you ever so much" produced Picasso's address. I was truly grateful and retired quickly under another broadside of "Je ne suis pas Madame Picasso," etc. I tucked Picasso's treasured address into my wallet in a place of honor, next to my last remaining ten-dollar bill and took off for Cannes hot on my hero's trail.

In Cannes I made many stops asking for directions to Picasso's villa. It seemed to me I was becoming a new person. The magic paper with Monsieur Picasso scribbled in red letters above the address, gave me new status. Sometimes I got a surprised look, a respectful look, but it was always a polite look. Every inquiry seemed encouraging and got me closer. Too soon there were no more people to ask. I was there.

Villa la Californie is situated high in the hills on the outskirts of Cannes. Big trees surrounded the villa, a huge white limestone mansion with elaborate iron balconies and high windows. A gravel driveway led to a garage on the left and there was the hulk of front fenders, headlights, the hood ornament and radiator of an enormous black Hispano-Suiza touring car. This grand hand-made vehicle, built with pre-war European technology, was the work of thousands of hours of intricate craftsmanship. Autowise, it was a Faberge egg scaled to Zeppelin-like proportions. It reeked of old world privilege. I recognized the classic monster immediately as I had seen photos of Picasso in it.

To the right, there was the front door with a small bell hanging on a sprung piece of metal. Heart beating, I gave the bell a pull. The metal bowed, recoiling back and forth, ringing. In a few moments an old woman came to the gate. I asked whether Monsieur Picasso was in. She told me that he wasn't expected until late that night and wouldn't see anyone. I inquired about the next day and she said that she didn't know, "I will be back at nine in the morning" I told her. She said I could try.

I fretted around for the next twenty hours, walking all over Cannes and driving my car as little as possible to conserve gas. I could still make it to the Italian border where I could use my gas coupons. Then it was only a day's drive to American Express in Florence where money was waiting. Toward evening, I went in search of a place to cool off. I found a deserted road near Palm Beach and went for a swim. The sea had a wonderful effect after a confused and active day. I was hot and tired one minute and next moment, I was cool, floating. Each event became unstuck. The hot sweaty walk, Villa la Californie, the museum, the girls, Madame Directress de la Musée Picasso, the road to Vallauris -- these spiky tensions dissolved into softer moments as I slipped into the cool water. Last night seemed

a week ago as I paddled around, splashing and floating, bringing back to the surface of my memory the day's most savory moments.

It wasn't long before I swam back to the beach, dried off and went to buy food – a baguette, a chunk of mildly acidic Porte-Salut cheese, and dark chocolate, which I washed down with red wine. After my feast, I relaxed happily in my car for a good night's sleep.

Sleeping in a Hillman Minx requires persistence and commitment. The right hand front seat was folded forward and I reclined "L" shaped, draped across the back seat, resting partially on the portable typewriter and a five-gallon gas can that bridged to the front seat, giving my 6 foot 3 inches some degree of horizontality in the little English car.

The flies and the sun woke me up at 6 A.M. but the laundry bag over my head gave me a few more hours sleep. I found a café on the harbor and ordered coffee and rolls. I washed and brushed my teeth in the men's room but didn't shave. My face was too sunburned to scrape a beard off with cold water. I bought a postcard and addressed it to my mother. "Dear Mother, Today I am going to see Picasso." Then I tore it up. I couldn't face having to write tomorrow saying that I hadn't made it. I didn't eat much breakfast. I sat there fidgeting with little lumps of bread, dissolving them in my coffee.

A big passenger liner cruised into sight. I sat fascinated by the huge ship maneuvering alone in the middle of the harbor. It was too far to hear them but I could see the sailors on deck and the noiseless churning foam under the stern as the great ship backed down. Then a big white splash followed a moment later by the hollow metallic roar of the anchor as it took tons of chain to the bottom of the harbor. More tourists landed in France. What were they going to do today? I drank another cup of coffee and left for Villa la Californie.



Famous goat on the terrace of Villa la Californie

In a way I wanted to get it over. Having committed myself, I had to go through with seeing Picasso. But today wasn't the fun it had been yesterday. In fact it wasn't fun at all. I felt uncomfortable and ridiculous but I kept on, making the mechanical motions of driving to the villa with part of me feeling a little sick. I got there at nine o'clock sharp and again I was told that Monsieur Picasso was not to be disturbed. He'd returned late, tired and could see no one. I asked if it would be possible to come back later. The old lady was very nice and smiled saying that perhaps I could try at eleven o'clock. I told her I was an American journalist and had come all the way from the United States to see Monsieur Picasso. She promised to tell him and I felt a little more encouraged.

The two hours between nine and eleven dragged painfully. I couldn't get interested in the scenery or sight-seeing. Eleven o'clock finally crawled around I was back ringing Picasso's bell hopefully. The old woman said that Monsieur Picasso was exhausted and left orders not to receive anyone. She had told him that an American wanted to see him but his response wasn't cheerful. Fatigue, too much work, too many people.

I went back to my car very depressed and sat there for a while reviewing the situation. My money was almost gone, but if I conserved what remained, squeezing a meal out of a couple of pieces of bread, a square of cheese and the remaining five swallows of wine, I could last one more day in Cannes. I decided to take the chance and try once more to see Picasso. Tomorrow morning would be the big final effort, and in the meantime I had to work on a new plan. The American journalist story was getting me nowhere. It had become a ridiculous idea even to me.

Another long walk served to break the monotony of waiting. I found a bookstore with a collection of Picasso drawings in the window, and I searched for clues on how to approach this man. I was looking

for inspiration everywhere -- in the trees, in the streets, in people's faces. My brain was alive with uncontrolled fantasies. I would find Picasso's wallet...Bump into Picasso...Run over him in my car...Pole-vault over his wall saying "Bonjour, I just HAD to drop in, Je suis JOURNALIST AMERICAN" -- Ugly shriveled-up men and beautiful classic women, monkeys and cupids and midgets holding masks over their faces, peering lewdly at naked ladies? -- Articulated fantasies? To me they were profoundly ridiculous, comical and compelling. Just like me in my Hillman Minx. I couldn't get these images out of my mind.

I spent the night again in my car parked just across from the villa on Picasso's doorstep. I didn't get much sleep. I kept waking up hearing little noises, half expecting to see Picasso's face peering at me through the car window. The reliable laundry bag over my head only resulted in further breathing difficulties. I decided that neither sleep, inspiration nor intervention was possible at Villa la Californie, so I went for a drive before dawn.

I left Cannes on the road to Grasse. It was still dark and the air was cool. There were little pockets of mist collected in the low spots along the road. My windshield wiper collected and pushed the moisture away from the glass clearing a vision of the new day that was just beginning to cut deep valleys of light into the greenish black hills. Around each bend I caught tantalizing glimpses of shimmering light, silhouetting the cool dim shapes of the hills. The road finally climbed out of the valley to a point where I could see far ahead. To the northeast there were long feathery clouds, the highest in the sky. Their colors constantly changed as they caught the first orange light of the coming day. Below them, cast over the horizon in somber piles, were layers of gray clouds. As the morning grew older these clouds took on a warm amber color. Then for a short minute they opened and the whole skyline was diffused in a soft golden hue as the mighty snow-capped Alps were gilded briefly by the rising sun.

By five-fifteen the most beautiful part of the sunrise was over, but I still sat for almost an hour watching, fascinated by the approach of daylight. For the first time in three days I had forgotten completely about the struggle to see Picasso. I drove down to a café and ordered a huge cup of café-au-lait, half-thinking about the day ahead and half reflecting on what I had just seen. The deliciously sharp scalding French roasted coffee calmed and smoothed by hot frothy milk cooling toward a first perfect sip set the scene, the first elements of a plan were born, an exciting, implausible, perfectly crazy plan. I would write a letter to Picasso telling him about my plight in pictures.

I knew Picasso was full of humor. It was in his drawings. If I could make him laugh, appeal to his sense of the ridiculous---the effrontery of my approaching the great artist with my drawings -- it might work. I started on a first draft but my French wasn't up to it. I needed a translator so I jumped into my car and tore down to Vallauris.

Too much coffee? Too much plan? I almost killed myself racing down the mountain. The museum was open. The perfume girl's English didn't go much beyond "Do you like this perfume?" but between the two of us we translated the letter. People in the museum, curious, began to gather. Pretty girls made suggestions and told me things that I couldn't understand. The proprietor came and returned my 100 franc admission, telling me that they couldn't charge the press. It was a party, and when I finally left everybody shook hands, hugged, wished me luck, and kissed me good-bye.

Over coffee and alone, I illustrated the French translation of:

July 28, 1955

Dear Monsieur Picasso:

*I am a student at Columbia University and this summer
I am a free-lance journalist. I know that you are very
busy but I am here in my car and each day that you
won't see me, my beard grows longer and longer. I
will soon look like Moses. If you would let me take
some color photographs then I could go to Florence
where I have some money and cut off my beard.
With hope I am.*

Fred Baldwin

Cheer Monsieur Picasso.

28 Juillet, 1955

Je suis un étudiant à l'Université de Columbia et cet été je suis un journaliste indépendant. Je sais que vous êtes très occupé mais je suis ici dans ma voiture et chaque jour qui passe sans que vous me receviez, ma barbe poussera de plus en plus longue.



Je ressemblerai bientôt à Moïse :
Si vous m'autorisez à prendre
quelques photographies couleurs,



Je pourrai partir à Florence ou
J'ai mon pécule pour couper ma barbe.

Avec l'espoir que j'ai,

Fred Baldwin



Intense excitement, exhilaration, propelled me through my self-doubts, but dread still lived in my stomach. I parked my car at ten o'clock in front of the villa, took out my camera bag, checked the equipment, loaded the Rolleiflex with color film and rechecked, convinced that something had been forgotten. My pockets seemed full of things falling out. I kept stuffing them back, handkerchief, keys, coins, pushing little balls of French money into the bottom of my pants pocket. I slung the strap of the camera bag over my shoulder, got my loose-leaf journal and the Picasso book and two posters that I had bought in Paris. I got ready for my final assault. I gave the bell a good hard pull and hoped, hoped for the best. In a moment, the old woman came and I gave her the letter, asking her to deliver it to Monsieur Picasso.

While I was waiting, the postman arrived, and then several other people. This was a good sign. In a few minutes a young girl opened the gate, looked around and everybody began to talk at once - except me. I didn't know what to say even if I had known how to say it. She was attractive. Her hair, bleached by the sun, hung around her shoulders. I wondered who she was. I thought perhaps she was Picasso's wife or mistress---or something.

The girl looked around again and asked, "Who is the American?" "Oui, oui, c'est moi," and I was through the gate and on my way to the house before I realized that I had finally made it.

The girl and I went inside. It was cool. The shutters were closed and there was no furniture, just large wooden crates piled one on top of another. The entrance hall was a storeroom. The crates contained sculpture and some of the flat ones contained paintings. This hall led to a spacious light-filled room with high French doors opening onto a garden.



Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire is smoking while Maya, Picasso's daughter, plays with the boxer

Dear Monsieur Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin

The white walls of the room were decorated with details of grapes, leaves, flowers, swirls and twirls cast in elegant plaster designs, in the high style of the French Rococo. It was the sort of house that you might expect a French industrialist or an American millionaire to own. One elaborately carved marble fireplace stood under a ceiling-high mirror that was at least ten feet tall. It was fitted into the wall, edged by long narrow fluted columns entwined with plaster leaves. The furnishings were in marked contrast to the architecture. In one corner an unpainted wooden table, contained dozens of carved figures stacked like cordwood.



Treasures were stacked about the downstairs



Portraits of Jacqueline

Underneath the table there were more of them – weird African sculptures, wooden dolls, some standing, others buried under piles of animal figures: primitive masks, brown wrapping paper, heads, jars and even an empty bottle of ink with no cap, the dry ink crusted on the inside. At first glance this part of the room gave the impression of a junk shop.

Dear Monsieur Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin

There was also an adjoining room to the right and there, sitting at a round table talking to a man, was Picasso. He was dressed in a pair of faded blue shorts and leather sandals. He wore nothing else. Picasso was tanned from the top of his bald head to the leather sandals. Except for what was left of his white hair and a few tufts of white on his chest, he was brown all over. The skin on his body was finely wrinkled at the joints but it didn't hang. The seventy-four-year old Picasso had the physique of a man of fifty.

While he talked he leaned forward, speaking clearly but softly, moving his hands and his face as well. Hundreds of tiny folds and wrinkles radiated from his eyes giving his look intensity and at the same time mobility, which changed his expression with the course of the conversation. His eyes had a whimsical look but his stare was as uncompromising as the lens of a camera. When his companion, Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire, talked he sat back in his chair, relaxed with his knees crossed. They looked at a book and Picasso put on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. In a few minutes after their discussion ended, Picasso got up, took his glasses off and looked around.

He saw me and immediately asked me where my beard was. I explained that it was kind of an imaginary beard and that my real one was very light, and this was all I could muster in three days. He laughed and told me to take as many pictures as I wanted. Then he sat down at the table with another man and began a discussion about the book he had been looking at before. This turned out to be Monsieur Ilizzard; an old friend of Picasso's who was publishing a poem about a boy who died several years ago. Picasso was illustrating the book with line drawings of horses.



Picasso's eyes could be as uncompromising as the lens of a camera

Dear Monsieur
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Monsieur Illizzard discusses book with Picasso



Picasso smoking

In the meantime I photographed, trying as much as possible not to disturb Picasso while I photographed him. I was having flash problems and was relieved when Picasso moved to the other room where the light was much better.

He sat on a little wicker chair and everybody got up to offer him a more

comfortable seat. I began to remove my camera equipment from the couch but was told to leave it there. Everyone was on their best behavior. The group revolved around Picasso but he was quite relaxed. He got up and began looking for a light. Three people scrambled for matches. Monsieur Ilizzard lit his cigarette and Picasso sat back in his wicker chair chatting amiably with everybody, using an ash tray which was made in the form of a Michelin tire.

The group was informal. Monsieur Ilizzard was dressed in a pair of blue bathing trunks and a flowered sports shirt. The girl, Maya who brought me in, turned out to be Picasso's daughter. She had on checked slacks and a white shirt. Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire was the most formally dressed. He wore a baggy suit but no tie.



Picasso goes over his horse illustrations for Monsieur Ilizzard's book

Dear Monsieur
Picasso

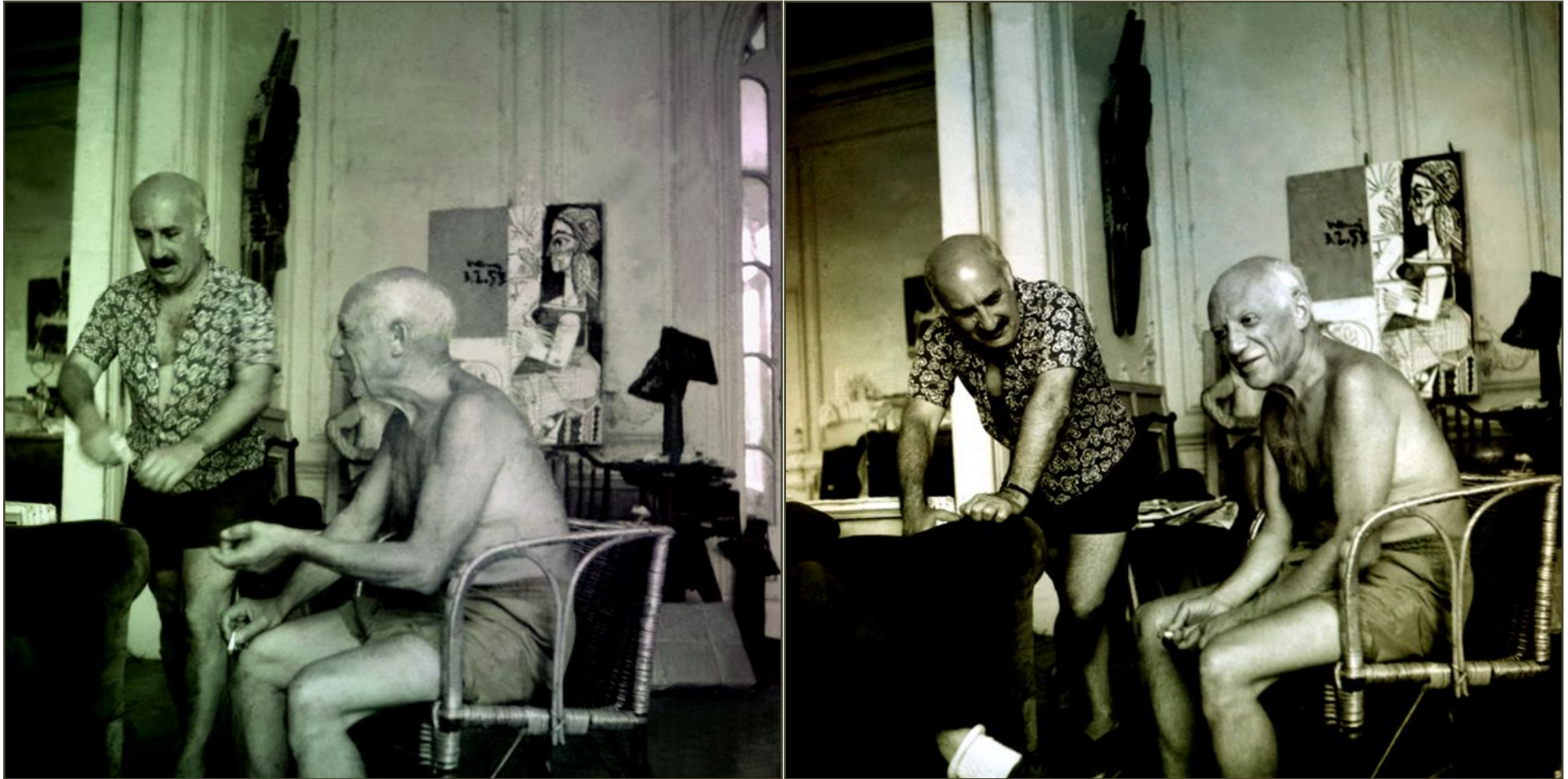
By Frederick Baldwin



Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire and Picasso.



Picasso, Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire and Maya



Monsieur Illizard rushes to light Picasso's cigarette

Maya played with a young female boxer, throwing a rubber bone onto the porch. Picasso was amused and watched the dog race outside to get the bone. Everybody looked and the conversation temporarily stopped. Then it began again as Picasso read aloud a letter from an unknown female admirer. He seemed in high spirits but didn't make fun of the letter. There was laughter, for the letter was intimate in a highly complimentary way to Picasso. Maya told me that her father got regular fan mail from women who found him irresistible.

I had brought a Swiss book of Picasso's graphic art with me, hoping to get it signed and he saw it sitting with my photo equipment.



Maya and the boxer



Monsieur Guingot-Nolaire, wife Jacqueline smoking, Picasso and Maya

He looked through it, for he hadn't seen this particular edition. Maya pointed out and marked all the drawings of her mother in the book and Picasso signed it for me and also the two posters that I had brought from Paris. While Picasso autographed the posters, I balanced the Rolleiflex on the arm of a chair, as I didn't have a tripod, and set off the self-timer. The self-timer took ten seconds and I was quite nervous about the camera falling off the chair before it snapped the picture of me talking to him. Our conversation didn't make sense but this didn't seem to bother him.



Picasso and unknown guests



Picasso, Monsieur Illizzard, Polly Weil and unknown smoker

Dear Monsieur
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Picasso gathers posters, larger versions than the ones I had brought from Paris for his signature

Dear Monsieur
Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin



Monsieur Illizzard and Fred Baldwin during a 10 second discussion with Picasso

More people arrived and Picasso got up to greet them. One newcomer was Polly Weil, a young American from St. Louis. Polly was just as surprised to be seeing Picasso as I was. She had arrived in Paris with an address book full of friends look up. One of these names turned out to be a girl who worked in an art gallery and through this friend Polly met a young Spaniard, Javier Vilató Ruiz. As Polly was interested in painting, the trio spent much time going through galleries. Vilató learned that Polly's tour went through Cannes and he asked her whether she would like to look up his uncle who lived there. Polly said that she that she would probably be too busy. Later, at dinner at Vilató's



Art and the lights for Picasso's movie



Villa la Californie held a creative feast

house, Polly commented on the interesting design of the dinner plates. His uncle had made them. "He likes to do that kind of thing," Polly thought they were very pretty and asked whether his uncle sold any. Vilató said, "Yes, if people will buy them." After dinner, Vialto asked if she would have time to deliver an engraving to his uncle. Polly knew that her tour to Cannes was short but Vilató had been so kind that she finally gave in. Vilató wrapped the engraving and wrote Polly a letter of introduction. She was stunned to find the letter addressed to Pablo Picasso. After meeting Picasso, Polly wandered around, a little dazed, still not quite believing that she was really in his studio.

Dear Monsieur
Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin



Million dollar junk pile

Dear Monsieur Picasso

By Frederick Baldwin

By now Picasso was very busy and I began to take pictures of the studio. It was difficult to tell what was studio and what was not. In one corner, sitting on top of bent and crumpled papers, some of which had sketches on them, was an old bowler hat. In another corner were flood lamps, the type used in a photographer's studio. Maya explained that her father was making a movie. He painted on a silk screen which was illuminated by the lights, making it possible to catch each brush stroke as it progressed without Picasso himself being visible. The effect was one of seeing a picture paint itself before your eyes.

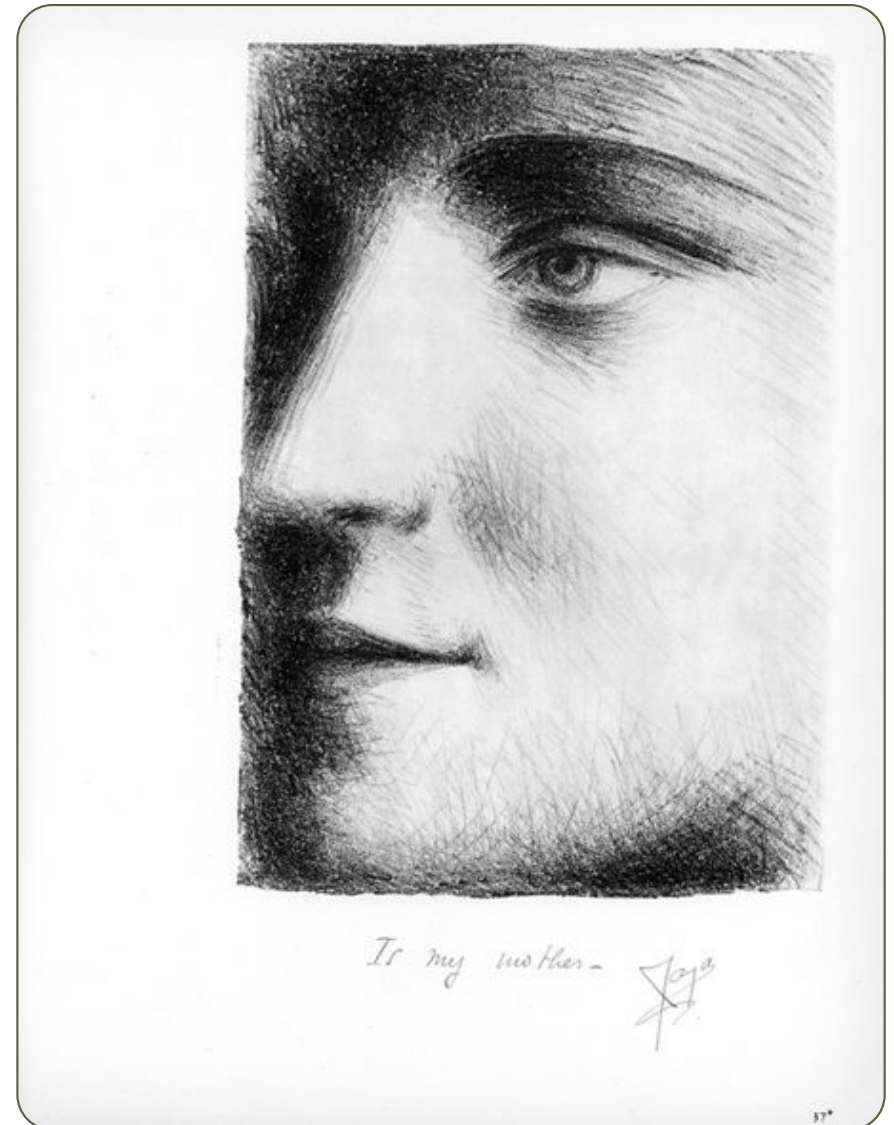
Maya told me that living in Villa la Californie was like living in a railway station. People were constantly pouring in, those that had business and those who did not. Maya said that her father was not always in such an expansive mood. She was getting a little impatient with him, as it was way past lunch time and the guests still hadn't left.

It was obviously time to go. I offered Monsieur Ilizzard a ride home. We were the last to leave and Picasso waved us off with a friendly good-bye. On the way down the hill Monsieur Ilizzard said, "You were very fortunate to see Picasso". I didn't disagree. "This was apparently one of his good days". We stopped for cigarettes and I bought a postcard. This one was easy to write:

Dear Mother:

I'm in Cannes and having a wonderful time. Just spent the morning with Picasso. Could stand some money.

Love, F.



Portrait of Maya's mother

Epilogue

The Picasso piece was excerpted from the diary that I kept during the summer of 1955.

I had just completed my junior year at Columbia College in New York and sailed for Europe to do all the things that I thought I would never have a chance to do again. I was not yet a photographer and borrowed a friend's Rolleiflex to make these pictures. I was totally inexperienced. I had no light-meter and was using Anscochrome film. The unstable Anschrome transparencies eventually faded away and I forgot about them until I rediscovered them in August 2005. I scanned them to see what might be recoverable. The results amazed me. I liked the look of the time damaged images better than the originals.

The manuscript was also lost, but the experience was very important in my life. When I found it I was afraid to read it, embarrassed about its youthful flaws. The story it contained has served me well over the years. It has a solid core. Like bare wintered trees, it has life even as the details fell off over time. As a teacher, it was a good classroom booster and always a reserve back-up - - also a story at run-out-of-conversation dinner parties. It was also my mantra about achievement, commitment, and creative possibilities - so I didn't feel a need to write it down. But when I started working on the diary, the writing turned out to be interesting. As I typed, I relived the three-day experience line by line.

I had long decided that loosing the Picasso images was not important because nothing could compare with the memory of the event. The artifacts from the occasion were insignificant compared to the decisions that I made during the three-day assault on Picasso's privacy

and its impact on my life. It provided me with powerful stimuli to my life and career. It affected the course I would take for the rest of my life.

After college, I sought to replicate the Picasso experience professionally and control my agenda. Consequently, I never took a job where I was not making my own decisions. This attitude has caused trouble with my family, particularly my six-years-older successful businessman-brother, who took another path and, for a long time saw me as an irresponsible non-dues paying world roamer. This was somewhat justified as I couldn't deliver the inherited lifestyle that I was expected to seek.

Now suddenly, 52 years after I took them, the Picasso images have appeared, along with a detailed memory boost in the form of a written record.

It is an astonishing illustrated tale of successful self-motivation, and the magical properties of good luck, timing, kindness, humor, art, and generosity, not to mention the restorative possibilities of natural beauty, cool water, and let's give mosquitoes a little credit as well.

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EXIT