Arts & Humanities

Madame Bovary, C’est Moi

Fiction

By
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|
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A. Orama

Saturday morning and we are racing down the steps to the 50th Street C/E train. We hustle through a half-lit corridor and come to the turnstiles. In one practiced motion, Susan tucks her book under her left arm, removes the MetroCard that marked her place on page 338, and swipes cleanly through. My own card is bent slightly along the magnetic strip and it must be swiped again, and swiped again, and as I frantically try to de-crease it, Susan tugs her navy-blue skirt down where it has ridden up and shouts that she can hear the train coming, and as the people behind me surge to my left and to my right, I swipe one more time and I pray to the MTA gods to please make it work, and then, miraculously — I am permitted through. We dash past dawdling children and dodge a guy playing a full steel drum, because the

train is there and the doors are closing, but Susan lunges forward in her flip-flops and jams an elbow in between the closing panels, which protest and then thunk open again as we each squeak in just as the doors slam angrily shut and the whole thing begins to move.

The car is packed tight, but Susan expertly threads her way between the sweaty tourists and locals to an open seat. She wedges herself between an obese, snoring man and a little girl who is dribbling apple juice on herself. Everyone mutely adjusts their bags and hair and elbows to accommodate us. Susan opens her book and begins to read. She is precisely aware of her borders. Those around her must believe that she is yogic in her calm, but I can see exactly where her jaw is clenched. They think she wears navy skirts like this all the time, and the eye shadow, and the round, tortoiseshell glasses, but I know that these are all just for today. Just for show. She starts to skim the final fifty pages of her book, and I grab the bar and hold on tight.

We are late for book club. More accurately, *she* is late for book club. It is a girls-only book club, and so while she talks about Flaubert, and drinks wines specially selected from the Normandy region, and eats meltingly moldy cheeses, I will be in the next room with the husbands and boyfriends, pretending to understand the rules to darts, and drinking Bud Lights with limes, and feigning knowledge of the Yankees. I hover near the doorway most of the time so I can catch little snippets of the discussion from the kitchen. None of the other boys mind this exile. They have never read (nor could they be forced by bodily torture to endure) *Madame Bovary*, which I kept stealing from Susan at night and during her long phone calls with her mother and during trips to the bathroom. Which I finished four days ago and have been waiting to discuss. Susan does not want her opinion affected, or infected, by mine, until after book club (or preferably ever).

I am getting my earphones in and turning on some old Green Day when I notice a girl on the platform at 42nd Street. The doors open and tourists surge off as the girl squeezes on, inside, past me. An electric-yellow-and-black-checked dress. Brown hair split neatly into pigtails. Those leggings that everyone seems to be wearing now.

She grabs the bar directly ahead of me and pulls a book from her bag. Don DeLillo. *White Noise*. In hardcover, with those weird unevenly cut page edges, which I hate and Susan loves. Did she buy it used? From the Strand, maybe, or some random stoop sale. Unless maybe she had a literary parent, or older sibling. Unless maybe

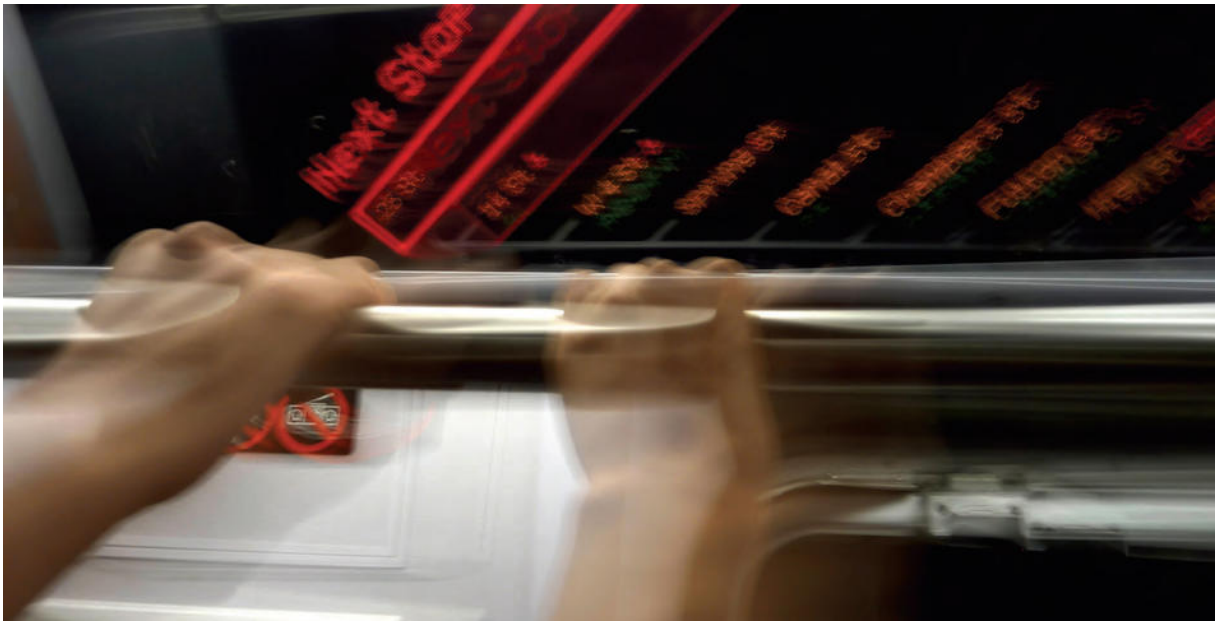
she stole it from the bookshelf of a friend, no, maybe a one-night stand — some guy with a bookshelf made out of wooden planks and cinderblocks. Or milk crates. Overgrown spider plants serving as bookends. Several John Irvings, that first Richard Ford, some picked-over Tom Wolfes. A very not-dead-yet, white-male-heavy bookshelf. Justifying, perhaps, the purloining of the book. Momentarily I wish that she could see my shelf — our shelf — with its intentionally diverse selections. Susan's book-club classics balanced out by my NYRBs and Europa Editions. With a couple of African writers, and not just the obvious ones. She wouldn't steal a book from that shelf is all I'm saying.

There is something familiar about her. A few years younger than I am. Enough to rule out her being an old classmate or a friend's former roommate. She is reading the first chapter (my favorite part of the whole book, I want to tell her) and periodically letting go of the subway bar to roll her wrists around in little circles. They are covered in star tattoos, yellow and pink and green, and now I'm sure I've never seen her before because I am sure that I would remember these stars. My eyes keep zipping back to them. I try to stare up at the whiskey ads repeating at the top of the car.

Star-Wrist Girl is not the most beautiful girl in the car. There's a blond in a white sundress on the far edge of the bench. And there's Susan, who beats the rest by a mile. She'd want me to say that she looks just like she did the day we met, five years ago, at a friend's going-away party. But the truth is that these years have done a great service to the girl who'd been nervously digging tomato bits out of the guacamole with the edge of a chip. Now I am the nervous one and she seems steely-sure of everything. It makes me ache, the way she furiously reads the final pages now, her face firm and determined. Star-Wrist Girl — really she needs a name — maybe Donna or a Zoë? Alex? Alex reads more timidly. Jumping back a line or two; sometimes flipping ahead. She gets to the second page of the first chapter, where the narrator first mentions he is the chair of the Hitler Studies Department at the college where he works, and emits sort of a rough giggle. I smile and wish she'd notice.

The Green Day song ends, and it is followed by a techno version of "La Bamba." Why did I download this? It must be stopped. But just as I move to pull out my iPhone, she glances at me. Sidelong. No eye contact. But definitely at me. I worry that she is getting the wrong impression of my pink Ralph Lauren polo shirt and madras shorts. I want to tell her that I'm in disguise. I am going underground into a room full of frat

boys and darts and bad beer! Normally I wear appropriately tight jeans and carefree, gentle-rumpled button-down shirts! The “La Bamba” is unbearable, and so I extract my iPhone and quickly shuffle the music to something — anything — else.



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And the shuffle gods smile upon me. *Solo* Lennon. I discreetly angle the tiny screen so that Alex can see John and Yoko kissing in black and white. And Alex seems to smile out of the right corner of her mouth, just momentarily, before turning the page. The relief that I feel is incredible. Yuppie douches do not listen to vintage Lennon. No, this is the iPhone of a *connoisseur* — someone who, yes, has a nice phone but also collects vinyl records and hangs yellowing CBGB posters on his exposed-brick walls. In fact, I don’t, but only because of all the books, and because Susan’s best friend is an artist and we’ve gotten several prime pieces from her over the years, which take up a lot of wall space.

Alex lifts her book up to turn the page again, and this time I make a little show of noticing the cover. I smile widely, indicating that I know the book well. She smiles back. All of this we do without ever looking directly at one another.

Suddenly I wish that I had something to read — the Kenzaburō Ōe stories I left in the bathroom, or the Juana Inés de la Cruz poems that are in my other bag ... and then it hits me that Susan has a *New Yorker* rolled up in her purse. I could lean down and ask her for it. But I don’t. Because I don’t want to disturb her? Or because I don’t want Alex to see that we are together? A sludgy guilt moves through me. What exactly am I doing here? We slide into the 34th Street station and there is some

jostling, but Alex remains, thankfully, just beside me.

Madame Bovary, in the novel, allows herself to be seduced in a carriage — an affair that drives her to suicide and which later got Flaubert into tons of trouble with obscenity trials. Adultery never seems to end well in fiction. Nabokov called it “a most conventional way to rise above the conventional.” But it isn’t like I really want to grab this “Alex” and kiss her. Not like I think we’re going to rush off the train together. No. Honestly, I have zero desire to actually speak to her. All I want — and this, I realize, is terrible, but all I want is for her to *think that I am interesting*.

The train brakes sharply coming into 23rd Street, and this sends Alex thudding into me. Without making eye contact, I mouth a soundless apology. She wordlessly accepts. We straighten up again. I wonder what stop she will get off at. Is she 14th Street bound, like us? Or is she a Brooklynite? Perhaps just returning home after a night on the Upper West Side with the cinderblock-bookshelf guy? They met last night, each sneaking into that Isabelle Huppert retrospective at Film Forum. After, they had pancakes at the Hudson Diner. After, some not very great sex. Fingers still tacky with syrup, bellies still leaden with pancakes. This morning she grabbed the book from his shelf as she tiptoed to the door. Something for the long ride home. Something to keep her from having to decide whether or not she will answer his texts in two days or three. She thinks right now that she won’t, but she knows that, based on past experience, she has a 50 percent chance of changing her mind.

John Lennon stops and I frantically skip over a series of others, embarrassed as I feel her eyes darting over to my screen. Belle and Sebastian? Too obvious. Deftones? Too Goth. The *Grey’s Anatomy* soundtrack? (She giggles.) Modest Mouse? I can’t remember if they are cool or not anymore. I think I see her eyes rolling. Finally, I settle on, yes! A Nirvana demo track. I sense mute approval from Alex as she turns her book to skim the back cover — perhaps wondering where it is going. Where is this going?

We are approaching 14th Street and I hope Alex will get off with us. Maybe she lives with three other girls in a badly lit apartment where the stove burners don’t work and the toilets are constantly clogging. They don’t cook, but she eats a lot of raw vegetables. No. She is a raging meat eater. She watches a lot of television but feels generally bad about it. Once upon a time she painted with oils, but they got expensive. Her roommate’s bulldog puppy is currently chewing on her other pair of Converses.

The train slows down as we come into 14th Street, and I see Susan racing through her last page because we have to get off now. The Bud Light awaits me. Susan gets to the final line and slams the book shut triumphantly. The little clap makes Alex look down. She begins swiveling her wrists again. Suddenly I wonder if maybe I've had her all wrong. She's temping as a data processor, down in the Financial District. She's been called in on the weekend to tap numbers into an Excel spreadsheet. She's dressed up from brunch with her mother. Alex makes no motion to put her book away, and I realize that she is not getting off. I realize that I will never know — not where she's getting off, not where she came from. Not if she likes the book and not if her wrists are all right. Not even her name. "Alex" feels wrong, suddenly. Suddenly she seems much more Katherine, or Casey.

Susan gets up and begins to edge her way over to the door. Without thinking, I hook my arm around her and kiss her forehead. She twists away because she thinks she is a sweaty mess, but my mind is on Alex/not-Alex. She can see me out of the corner of her eye and I want, horribly, to break her heart before she breaks mine. As Susan and I slide away, I wonder why. This is the end of the seduction in our modern-day carriage. As the doors open, I am already beginning to imagine her telling her roommates about this guy that she spied on in the train. About his surprising taste in music. About how he seemed to know what she was reading. About his girlfriend, who had been reading *Madame Bovary* right there, the whole time.

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