RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Bluebeard

Kurt Vonnegut

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BLUEBEARD

Kurt Vonnegut

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AUTHOR’S NOTE:

This is a novel, and a hoax autobiography at that. It is not to be taken as a responsible history of the Abstract Expressionist school of painting, the first major art movement to originate in the United States of America. It is a history of nothing but my own idiosyncratic responses to this or that.

Rabo Karabekian never lived, and neither did Terry Kitchen or Circe Berman or Paul Slazinger or Dan Gregory or Edith Taft or Marilee Kemp or any of the other major characters in this book. As for real and famous persons I mention: I have them do nothing that they did not actually do when tested on this proving ground.

May I say, too, that much of what I put in this book was inspired by the grotesque prices paid for works of art during the past century. Tremendous concentrations of paper wealth have made it possible for a few persons or institutions to endow certain sorts of human playfulness with inappropriate and hence distressing seriousness. I think not only of the mudpies of art, but of children’s games as well—running, jumping, catching, throwing.

Or dancing.

Or singing songs.

K.V.

“We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.”

—Dr. Mark Vonnegut, M.D.
(Letter to Author, 1985)

BLUEBEARD

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RABO KARABEKIAN (1916–1988)

This book is for Circe Berman. What else can I say?

—R.K.

1

Having written “The End” to this story of my life, I find it prudent to scamper back here to before the beginning, to my front door, so to speak, and to make this apology to arriving guests: “I promised you an autobiography, but something went wrong in the kitchen. It turns out to be a *diary* of this past troubled summer, too! We can always send out for pizzas if necessary. Come *in*, come *in*.”

* * *

I am the erstwhile American painter Rabo Karabekian, a one-eyed man. I was born of immigrant parents in San Ignacio, California, in 1916. I begin this autobiography seventy-one years later. To those unfamiliar with the ancient mysteries of arithmetic, that makes this year 1987.

I was not born a cyclops. I was deprived of my left eye while commanding a platoon of Army Engineers, curiously enough artists of one sort or another in civilian life, in Luxembourg near the end of World War Two. We were specialists in camouflage, but at that time were fighting for our lives as ordinary infantry. The unit was composed of artists, since it was the theory of someone in the Army that we would be especially good at camouflage.

And so we were! And we were! What hallucinations we gave the Germans as to what was dangerous to them

behind our lines, and what was not. Yes, and we were allowed to live like artists, too, hilariously careless in matters of dress and military courtesy. We were never attached to a unit as quotidian as a division or even a corps. We were under orders which came directly from the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force, which assigned us temporarily to this or that general, who had heard of our astonishing illusions. He was our patron for just a little while, permissive and fascinated and finally grateful.

Then off we went again.

Since I had joined the regular Army and become a lieutenant two years before the United States backed into the war, I might have attained the rank of lieutenant colonel at least by the end of the war. But I refused all promotions beyond captain in order to remain with my happy family of thirty-six men. That was my first experience with a family that large. My second came after the war, when I found myself a friend and seeming peer of those American painters who have now entered art history as founders of the Abstract Expressionist school.

* * *

My mother and father had families bigger than those two of mine back in the Old World—and of course their relatives back there were *blood* relatives. They lost their blood relatives to a massacre by the Turkish Empire of about one million of its Armenian citizens, who were thought to be treacherous for two reasons: first because they were clever and educated, and second because so many of them had relatives on the other side of Turkey’s border with its enemy, the Russian Empire.

It was an age of Empires. So is this one, not all that well disguised.

* * *

The German Empire, allied with the Turks, sent impassive military observers to evaluate this century's first genocide, a word which did not exist in any language then. The word is now understood everywhere to mean a carefully planned effort to kill every member, be it man, woman, or child, of a perceived subfamily of the human race.

The problems presented by such ambitious projects are purely industrial: how to kill that many big, resourceful animals cheaply and quickly, make sure that nobody gets away, and dispose of mountains of meat and bones afterwards. The Turks, in their pioneering effort, had neither the aptitude for really big business nor the specialized machinery required. The Germans would exhibit both par excellence only one quarter of a century later. The Turks simply took all the Armenians they could find in their homes or places of work or refreshment or play or worship or education or whatever, marched them out into the countryside, and kept them away from food and water and shelter, and shot and bashed them and so on until they all appeared to be dead. It was up to dogs and vultures and rodents and so on, and finally worms, to clean up the mess afterwards.

My mother, who wasn't yet my mother, only pretended to be dead among the corpses.

My father, who wasn't yet her husband, hid in the shit and piss of a privy behind the schoolhouse where he was a teacher when the soldiers came. The school day was over, and my father-to-be was all alone in the schoolhouse writing poetry, he told me one time. Then he heard the soldiers coming and understood what they meant to do. Father never saw or heard the actual killing. For him, the stillness of the village, of which he was the only inhabitant at nightfall, all covered with shit and piss, was his most terrible memory of the massacre.

* * *

Although my mother's memories from the Old World were more gruesome than my father's, since she was right there in the killing fields, she somehow managed to put the massacre behind her and find much to like in the United States, and to daydream about a family future here.

My father *never* did.

* * *

I am a widower. My wife, née Edith Taft, who was my second such, died two years ago. She left me this nineteen-room house on the waterfront of East Hampton, Long Island, which had been in her Anglo-Saxon family from Cincinnati, Ohio, for three generations. Her ancestors surely never expected it to fall into the hands of a man with a name as exotic as Rabo Karabekian.

If they haunt this place, they do it with such Episcopalian good manners that no one has so far noticed them. If I were to come upon the spook of one of them on the grand staircase, and he or she indicated that I had no rights to this house, I would say this to him or her: "Blame the Statue of Liberty."

* * *

Dear Edith and I were happily married for twenty years. She was a grandniece of William Howard Taft, the twenty-seventh president of the United States and the tenth chief justice of the Supreme Court. She was the widow of a Cincinnati sportsman and investment banker named Richard Fairbanks, Jr., himself descended from Charles Warren Fairbanks, a United States senator from Indiana and then vice-president under Theodore Roosevelt.

We came to know each other long before her husband died when I persuaded her, and him, too, although this was her property, not his, to rent their unused potato barn to me for a studio. They had never been potato farmers, of course. They had simply bought land from a farmer next door, to the north, away from the beach, in order to keep it from being developed. With it had come the potato barn.

Edith and I did not come to know each other well until after her husband died and my first wife, Dorothy, and our two sons, Terry and Henri, moved out on me. I sold our house, which was in the village of Springs, six miles north of here, and made Edith's barn not only my studio but my home.

That improbable dwelling, incidentally, is invisible from the main house, where I am writing now.

* * *

Edith had no children by her first husband, and she was past childbearing when I transmogrified her from being Mrs. Richard Fairbanks, Jr., into being Mrs. Rabo Karabekian instead.

So we were a very tiny family indeed in this great big house, with its two tennis courts and swimming pool, and its carriage house and its potato barn—and its three hundred yards of private beach on the open Atlantic Ocean.

One might think that my two sons, Terry and Henri Karabekian, whom I named in honor of my closest friend, the late Terry Kitchen, and the artist Terry and I most envied, Henri Matisse, might enjoy coming here with their families. Terry has two sons of his own now. Henri has a daughter.

But they do not speak to me.

"So be it! So be it!" I cry in this manicured wilderness. "Who gives a damn!" Excuse this outburst.

* * *

Dear Edith, like all great Earth Mothers, was a multitude. Even when there were only the two of us and the servants here, she filled this Victorian ark with love and merriment and hands-on domesticity. As privileged as she had been all her life, she cooked with the cook, gardened with the gardener, did all our food shopping, fed the pets and birds, and made personal friends of wild rabbits and squirrels and raccoons.

But we used to have a lot of parties, too, and guests who sometimes stayed for weeks—*her* friends and relatives, mostly. I have already said how matters stood and stand with my own few blood relatives, alienated descendants all. As for my synthetic relatives in the Army: some were killed in the little battle in which I was taken prisoner, and which cost me one eye. Those who survived I have never seen or heard from since. It may be that they were not as fond of me as I was of them.

These things happen.

The members of my other big synthetic family, the Abstract Expressionists, are mostly dead now, having been killed by everything from mere old age to suicide. The few survivors, like my blood relatives, no longer speak to me.

“So be it! So be it!” I cry in this manicured wilderness.

“Who gives a damn!” Excuse this outburst.

* * *

All of our servants quit soon after Edith died. They said it had simply become too lonely here. So I hired some new ones, paying them a great deal of money to put up with me and all the loneliness. When Edith was alive, and the house was alive, the gardener and the two maids and the cook all lived here. Now only the cook, and, as I say, a different cook, lives in, and has the entire servants’ quarters on the third floor of the ell to herself and her fifteen-year-old daughter. She is a divorced woman, a native of East

Hampton, about forty, I would say. Her daughter, Celeste, does no work for me, but simply lives here and eats my food, and entertains her loud and willfully ignorant friends on my tennis courts and in my swimming pool and on my private oceanfront.

She and her friends ignore me, as though I were a senile veteran from some forgotten war, daydreaming away what little remains of his life as a museum guard. Why should I be offended? This house, in addition to being a home, shelters what is the most important collection of Abstract Expressionist paintings still in private hands. Since I have done no useful work for decades, what else am I, really, but a museum guard?

And, just as a paid museum guard would have to do, I answer as best I can the question put to me by visitor after visitor, stated in various ways, of course: “What are these pictures supposed to *mean*?”

* * *

These paintings, which are about absolutely nothing but themselves, were my own property long before I married Edith. They are worth at least as much as all the real estate and stocks and bonds, including a one-quarter share in the Cincinnati Bengals professional football team, which Edith left to me. So I cannot be stigmatized as an American fortune-hunter.

I may have been a lousy painter, but what a *collector* I turned out to be!

2

It has been very lonely here since Edith died. The friends we had were hers, not mine. Painters shun me, since the ridicule my own paintings attracted and deserved encouraged Philistines to argue that *most* painters were charlatans or fools. But I can stand loneliness, if I have to.

I stood it when a boy. I stood it for several years in New York City during the Great Depression. And after my first wife and my two sons left me in 1956, and I gave up on myself as a painter, I actually went looking for loneliness and found it. I was a hermit for eight years. How is that for a full-time job for a wounded vet?

* * *

And I *do* have a friend who is mine, all mine. He is the novelist Paul Slazinger, a wounded World War Two geezer like myself. He sleeps alone in a house next door to *my* old house in Springs.

I say he *sleeps* there, because he comes over *here* almost every day, and is probably on the property somewhere at this very moment, watching a tennis game, or sitting on the beach, staring out to sea, or playing cards with the cook in the kitchen, or hiding from everybody and everything, and reading a book where practically nobody ever goes, on the far side of the potato barn.

I don’t think he writes much anymore. And, as I say, I don’t paint at *all* anymore. I won’t even doodle on the memo pad next to the downstairs telephone. A couple of weeks ago, I caught myself doing exactly that, and I deliberately snapped the point off the pencil, broke the pencil in two, and I threw its broken body into a waste-basket, like a baby rattlesnake which had wanted to *poison* me.

* * *

Paul has no money. He eats supper with me here four or five times a week, and gobbles directly from my refrigerator and fruit bowls during the daytime, so I am surely his primary source of nutriment. I have said to him many times after supper, “Paul—why don’t you sell your house and get a little walking-around money, and move in here? Look at all the *room* I’ve got. And I’m never going to have a wife or a lady friend again, and neither are you. Jesus! Who would have us? We look like a couple of gutshot iguanas! So move in! I won’t bother you, and you won’t bother me. What could make more sense?”

His answer never varies much from this one: “I can only write at home.” Some home, with a busted refrigerator and nobody ever there but him.

One time he said about this house: “Who could write in a museum?”

Well—I am now finding out if that can be done or not. I am *writing* in this museum.

Yes, it’s true: I, old Rabo Karabekian, having disgraced myself in the visual arts, am now having a go at literature. A true child of the Great Depression, though, playing it safe, I am hanging on to my job as a museum guard.

What has inspired this amazing career change by one so old? *Cherchez la femme!*

Uninvited, as nearly as I can remember, an energetic and opinionated and voluptuous and relatively young woman

has moved in with me!

She said she couldn't bear seeing and hearing me do absolutely nothing all day long—so why didn't I *do* something, do *anything*? If I couldn't think of anything else to do, why didn't I write my autobiography?

Why not, indeed?

She is so *authoritative*!

I find myself doing whatever she says I must do. During our twenty years of marriage, my dear Edith never *once* thought of something for me to do. In the Army, I knew several colonels and generals like this new woman in my life, but they were *men*, and we were a nation at war.

Is this woman a friend? I don't know what the hell she is. All I know is that she isn't going to leave again until she's good and ready, and that she scares the *pants* off me.

Help.

Her name is Circe Berman.

* * *

She is a widow. Her husband was a brain surgeon in Baltimore, where she still has a house as big and empty as this one. Her husband Abe died of a brain hemorrhage six months ago. She is forty-three years old, and she has selected this house as a nice place to live and work while she writes her husband's biography.

There is nothing erotic about our relationship. I am twenty-eight years Mrs. Berman's senior, and have become too ugly for anyone but a dog to love. I really do look like a gutshot iguana, and am one-eyed besides. Enough is enough.

Here is how we met: she wandered onto my private beach alone one afternoon, not knowing it was private. She had never heard of me, since she hates modern art. She didn't know a soul in the Hamptons, and was staying in the Maidstone Inn in the village about a mile and a half from

here. She had walked from there to the public beach, and then across my border.

I went down for my afternoon dip, and there she was, fully dressed, and doing what Paul Slazinger does so much of: sitting on sand and staring out to sea. The only reason I minded her being there, or anybody's being there, was my ludicrous physique and the fact I would have to take off my eye patch before I went in. There's quite a mess under there, not unlike a scrambled egg. I was embarrassed to be seen up close.

Paul Slazinger says, incidentally, that the human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word: *Embarrassment.*

* * *

So I elected not to swim, but to sunbathe some distance away from her.

I did, however, come close enough to say, "Hello."

This was her curious reply: "Tell me how your parents died."

What a spooky woman! She could be a *witch.* Who but a witch could have persuaded me to write my autobiography?

She has just stuck her head in the room to say that it was time I went to New York City, where I haven't been since Edith died. I've hardly been out of this house since Edith died.

New York City, here I come. This is terrible!

* * *

"Tell me how your parents died," she said. I couldn't believe my ears.

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

"What good is 'Hello'?" she said.

She had stopped me in my tracks. “I’ve always thought it was better than nothing,” I said, “but I could be wrong.”

“What does ‘Hello’ mean?” she said.

And I said, “I had always understood it to mean “Hello.’”

“Well it doesn’t,” she said. “It means, ‘Don’t talk about anything important.’ It means, ‘I’m smiling but not listening, so just go away.’”

She went on to avow that she was tired of just pretending to meet people. “So sit down here,” she said, “and tell Mama how your parents died.”

“Tell *Mama*!” Can you *beat* it?

She had straight black hair and large brown eyes like my mother—but she was much taller than my mother, and a little bit taller than me, for that matter. She was also much shapelier than my mother, who let herself become quite heavy, and who didn’t care much what her hair looked like, either, or her clothes. Mother didn’t care because Father didn’t care.

And I told Mrs. Berman this about my mother: “She died when I was twelve—of a tetanus infection she evidently picked up while working in a cannery in California. The cannery was built on the site of an old livery stable, and tetanus bacteria often colonize the intestines of horses without hurting them, and then become durable spores, armored little seeds, when excreted. One of them lurking in the dirt around and under the cannery was somehow exhumed and sent traveling. After a long, long sleep it awakened in Paradise, something we would all like to do. Paradise was a cut in my mother’s hand.”

“So long, Mama,” said Circe Berman.

There was that word *Mama* again.

“At least she didn’t have to endure the Great Depression, which was only one year away,” I said.

And at least she didn’t have to see her only child come home a cyclops from World War Two.

“And how did your father die?” she said.

“In the Bijou Theater in San Ignacio in 1938,” I said. “He went to the movie alone. He never even considered remarrying.”

He still lived over the little store in California where he had got his first foothold in the economy of the United States of America. I had been living in Manhattan for five years then—and was working as an artist for an advertising agency. When the movie was over, the lights came on, and everybody went home but Father.

“What was the movie?” she asked.

And I said, “*Captains Courageous*, starring Spencer Tracy and Freddie Bartholomew.”

* * *

What Father might have made of that movie, which was about cod fishermen in the North Atlantic, God only knows. Maybe he didn’t see any of it before he died. If he did see some of it, he must have gotten rueful satisfaction from its having absolutely nothing to do with anything he had ever seen or anybody he had ever known. He welcomed all proofs that the planet he had known and loved during his boyhood had disappeared entirely.

That was *his* way of honoring all the friends and relatives he had lost in the massacre.

* * *

You *could* say that he became his own Turk over here, knocking himself down and spitting on himself. He could have studied English and become a respected teacher there in San Ignacio, and started writing poetry again, or maybe translated the Armenian poets he loved so much into English. But that wasn’t *humiliating* enough. Nothing would do but that he, with all his education, become what his father and grandfather had been, which was a cobbler.

He was good at that craft, which he had learned as a boy, and which I would learn as a boy. But how he *complained*! At least he pitied himself in Armenian, which only Mother and I could understand. There weren't any other Armenians within a hundred miles of San Ignacio.

"*I am looking for William Shakespeare, your greatest poet*," he might say as he worked. *"Have you ever heard of him?"* He knew Shakespeare backwards and forwards in Armenian, and would often quote him. "To be or not to be . . ." for example, as far as he was concerned, was, "*Linel kam chlinel* . . ."

"Tear out my tongue if you catch me speaking Armenian," he might say. That was the penalty the Turks set in the seventeenth century for speaking any language but Turkish: a ripped-out tongue.

"Who are those people and what am I doing here?" he might say, with cowboys and Chinese and Indians passing by outside.

"When is San Ignacio going to erect a statue of Mesrob Mashtots?" he might say. Mesrob Mashtots was the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, unlike any other, about four hundred years before the birth of Christ. Armenians, incidentally, were the first people to make Christianity their national religion.

"One million, one million, one million," he might say. This is the generally accepted figure for the number of Armenians killed by the Turks in the massacre from which my parents escaped. That was two thirds of Turkey's Armenians, and about half the Armenians in the whole wide world. There are about six million of us now, including my two sons and three grandchildren, who know nothing and care nothing about Mesrob Mashtots.

"Musa Dagh!" he might say. This was the name of a place in Turkey where a small band of Armenian civilians fought Turkish militiamen to a standstill for forty days and forty nights before being exterminated—about the time my

parents, with me in my mother's belly, arrived safe and sound in San Ignacio.

* * *

"Thank you, Vartan Mamigonian," he might say. This was the name of a great Armenian national hero, who led a losing army against the Persians in the fifth century. The Vartan Mamigonian Father had in mind, however, was an Armenian shoe manufacturer in Cairo, Egypt, to which polyglot metropolis my parents escaped after the massacre. It was he, a survivor of an earlier massacre, who persuaded my naive parents, who had met on a road to Cairo, that they would find the streets paved with gold, if only they could find their way to, of all places, San Ignacio, California. But that is a story I will tell at another time.

"If anybody has discovered what life is all about," Father might say, *"it is too late. I am no longer interested."*

"Never is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day," he might say. These, of course, are words from the American song "Home on the Range," which he had translated into Armenian. He found them idiotic.

"*Tolstoi made shoes*," he might say. This was a fact, of course: the greatest of Russian writers and idealists had, in an effort to do work that mattered, made shoes for a little while. May I say that I, too, could make shoes if I had to.

* * *

Circe Berman says she can make *pants* if she has to. As she would tell me when we met on the beach, her father had a pants factory in Lackawanna, New York, until he went bankrupt and hanged himself.

* * *