

Sal y Mae

By Judy Gilbert

Sal felt restless.

The night before, on the phone with a friend, Sal had described his penthouse suite at the Plaza as a paean to sybaritic pleasure. A bit over the top perhaps. Or not. Someone as diminutive as Sal always had to appear larger than life.

He'd wished he could magically project a picture of the suite onto his friend's telephone. Ojala! If only... Someday, he was sure it would happen.

Even a photo, though, wouldn't convey the sumptuousness of a salon with carpets so plush that they massaged your toes and of velvet loveseats that wrapped you in a cocoon. There! He had his next painting: Sal in the human arms of a sofa.

But there was time for that when he returned to Cadaqués. Now he needed to stir things up in the Big Apple.

Why was he so antsy? He closed his eyes and watched as an army of tiny six-legged creatures marched across his forehead and then into his ears. He felt them tingle.

To steady himself, he ran through the list of preparations for his opening at MOMA. No worries there; the contemporary art curators had everything well in hand.

And here? His bespoke Savile-Row suit waited patiently in the armoire; next to it were linen shirts from Jermyn Street in cream, lavender and terra cotta, each with its own color-

coordinated Rothko-inspired silk tie. If he weren't careful, his own magnificence would eclipse that of his art work.

All was in order, but he couldn't stay still; he paced and wondered how many kilometers he'd covered going nowhere. He watched himself paddling up a river: one oar had fallen into the water, and he saw that it had a baby dolly painted on one side. Freud, oh, Freud!

Sal sighed. There were still two days before Gala arrived for the opening, and he couldn't spend them doing nothing but cracking his knuckles and spinning his moustache (as lovely and sensuous an experience though that might be).

Dios! There must be someone in New York he could create a scene with. Almost a week had passed without his picture in a magazine; that would never do.

Sal gave his moustache a rest and twirled the sash of his silk robe. He'd heard that Buñuel and Garcia Lorca were in town. Should he get in touch? No, too much bad blood there.

He resumed walking, searching for some unrealizable concept that only he could realize. He needed to make the tabloids, to be a **boldface** name in the columns. People always needed something to *tsk tsk* at, didn't they? Sal let some "tsks" roll around his mouth and relished their taste of naughtiness.

Stopping at the window, he looked out, hoping the view of the park would settle him, but observing tourists trying to stave off the autumn chill made his Catalonian blood run cold. Que podía hacer? What to do? What to do?

Once in Café de Flore in Paris, an Indian mystic had told him that headstands were the best tools for re-channeling the blood, moving it out of the nether regions, where it merely intensified sexual urges, to the brain. There it got different juices going and invigorated creativity. Now was the moment to see if it worked.

Ruffling through his toiletry bag, Sal located the make-up mirror that he used to keep his facial hair in perfect form and set it on the floor. He cupped his head in his hands, then briefly rested his bent legs on the back of his upper arms before thrusting them into the air. He'd done it!

After a few minutes in the headstand, he was able to cast his eyes into the mirror and see what was lacking in himself. His own image vanished, replaced by a bowl of fat, red, ripe strawberries covered in cream. The letters U-S-N-O-S-T-O-U shimmied back and forth until they found their proper order : "SUNTUOSO" danced before his eyes. That was the ticket: A sensuous hip swinger. Without her knowing it, the curvaceous inspiration for the classic Coke bottle had become his muse.

Mama, Mae I? he punned.

Sal called down to reception and asked to be connected to a suite on the floor below.

Half an hour later, there was knock on his door. The woman who had urged Cary Grant to "Come up and see (her) some time" had come down to see Sal.

"Hey, is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

And she was off, running the gamut of double entendres from A to Zed—her favorite one, she freely confessed, she had stolen from the Bard himself:

“It’s Mercutio’s line from *Romeo and Juliet*:

“Tis no less (a good day), I tell you; for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon.”

Sal, who did not laugh easily and who had heard the entire Mae West repertoire before, couldn’t hold it together. He felt the features loosen on his face; for a second, he wondered if he was turning into a Picasso.

It was time for action; Sal wrapped his right arm around Mae’s shoulders and urged her out the door.

“What’s all this now, Sal? You know I’m a gal who likes to take charge. If that doesn’t suit you, I’ll show you the door.”

“Sure, Mae, I just thought we might have some fun of a different kind.”

“Well, I’ve spent years practicing to be the baddest of bad girls, but I suppose a little more practice can’t hurt.”

Sal winked. “I promise to keep you entertained in a way you’ve never been before.”

“This I’ve got to see”

“Just having you next to me stimulates the creative juices, Mae”

“Only the creative ones? I guess I’m losing my touch.”

“ You know, Querida, before the sun sets, I’m going to make you something.”

“ But, Sal, I’m already something.”

She went into a full shimmy and nearly caught her derrière in the revolving door as she exited the hotel. Sal caught his breath; Mae was at the top of her form—and the bottom wasn’t bad either. Momma! Mae’s wordplay was contagious, and he had caught it bad.

Fifteen minutes later, they were at the roller skate rental kiosk in Central Park. Mae allowed Sal to lace up his own skates but insisted that he leave the unlacing to her once they were through.

“ Not a single aglet shall I withdraw through an eyelet, not, at least, until you’ve had your fill of skating,” Sal promised.

“ Not a bad line for someone who wasn’t born in Brooklyn!”

“ I do it all, Mae. I paint. I position people in poses—especially people in high positions. I make puns. I can be punny and funny. Oh, I won’t go on or there will be no skating today. Vamos!”

Without discussion, they decided to bypass the paths of the park and head for the streets.

Spurning Fifth, they headed to Madison, where Sal pointed out the galleries that had displayed his art and the ad agencies that had made him a sensation in commercials and a commercial sensation. At a red light, he popped a bit of Lanvin chocolate through Mae’s luscious lips and then warned her that she’d better not ask for more.

“ Remember, my pretty, what happened when Oliver Twist asked for more!”

His attempt at an ominous warning was accompanied by a swirl of his stache à la Timmy, the top-hatted villain in *Perils of Pauline*.

They offered me that part, you know—Pauline—but I turned them down. Can you see **ME** tied to a railroad track playing the damsel in distress? And doing it without talking?”

Mae pursed her lips and shook her head; though his eyes were trained on the sidewalk, she knew she had made Sal smile.

“ Now pay attention to where we are, Mae. We don’t want to bypass any place where we can create a commotion.

Let’s head over to Fifth and skate into Chanel. The photographer, Felipe, is poised to snap a few pics. From there to Lanvin, where we can rest our legs on their white rug and slip their luscious chocolats down our gorges.”

Sal directed and narrated the shopping spree. In each Maison de couture, he created a tableau, draping Hermès scarves along the length of Mae’s torso, then easing her magnificent hips into a Schiaparelli lobster dress until she shuddered from the sensuousness of it all. Was it real or only a performance? With Mae, it was impossible to tell. The clerks couldn’t. They applauded as Mae skated through the store. When she left, the staff bestowed a bottle of *Shocking* perfume upon her.

At each stop, the shop attendants tut-tutted at the sight of the duo’s skates until they saw who was atop the wheels. At the end of the day, what were a few scuff marks on the floor? Publicity like this couldn’t not be bought.

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When they had disposed of their skates, they headed over to Rumplemeyer's to share a decadent mille-feuille. Mae's lips were soon swathed in cream, becoming the kind of sultry invitation that she was famous for. Sal signaled for the photographer to take the shot. When it was developed, the creamy, white lips would float front and center against a black background.

"So, now, Cara, what else can I do to please you?"

"Build me a house, Sal, and fill it with such beauty as befits a goddess."

"You've anticipated my surprise. Let me call Felipe, and then we're off."

They hailed a horse and carriage and headed downtown. Among the rows of book at the fabled Strand, Sal and Mae frolicked, playing a game of Hide and Seek such as had never been seen before. A telltale moustache was spotted by a clerk at the corner of the aisle of interior design books. Mae's lips disappeared behind a collection of Greek myths. A few minutes later, she was darting in and out of the aisle of erotic art books. Sal poked his head out of the Surrealism section. Felipe developed the shot to make it look like Sal's eyes and nose had switched places. Once all the carts in the store had been filled, they arranged to have the books delivered to Mae's suite.

By the time they arrived, the books had been neatly arranged in piles, according to theme.

"Muchismo gracias!" Sal bellowed as he dropped a sign of his gratitude in each staff member's palm.

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the adulation that was to come; he'd no doubt his newest creation would land him in *Architectural Digest*.

"Now, Mae, while I'm erecting your new domicile, why don't you entertain us?"

Would her famous rendition of Salome's *Dance of the Seven Veils* done Hollywood style do?

It would.

Mae knew that Sal was firmly convinced that all her wiles would be lost on him. HA! She'd have both his head and tail on a silver platter before the night had ended.

On her way to her dressing room, she lingered at the window, mesmerized, as she was every night, by the moon and its power to draw the gaze of everyone who stopped to admire it. It frightened some, she knew, but not Mae. It was the source of her strength and her allure. And it sure made those wolves howl.

Sal spent the days leading up to the opening erecting "Casa de Mae West," out of books from the Strand. Mae danced and entranced.

When Gala arrived, she insisted that Sal take a siesta. Mae was easily persuaded to lay her lovely locks on a nearby pillow.

It is well-known that even gods and goddesses require periods of repose or as Mae put it, "I may look like Salome, Sugar, but this mortal needs her forty winks"

It took only seconds before Mr. Sandman worked his magic.

By the time Sal and Gala returned from MOMA, Mae had been up for hours. When they walked through the door, she embraced them in such a tight squeeze that it took them more than a few minutes to extricate themselves.

"Mae, we can't breathe."

“ I only wanted to show my gratitude for my beautiful house.”

Sal sighed with relief. He'd been nervous that when she awoke, Mae would demand his head. He'd practically forced her to dance for hours, and, as gorgeous as she was, she was no longer a spring chicken.

You forget, Chéri, I've been on stage since I was five, and I'm still packing houses. Even now, no one utters the words “ sultry, “sexy” “seductive” without the image of yours truly coming to mind--- and a few other places too.”

Sal and Gala grinned.

The next day, they bestowed upon Mae a gift befitting a Hollywood legend: the adventure of a lifetime—even a lifetime such as Mae West's had been. In front of the Plaza, a limo was waiting to take the screen star and her two attendants to the airport. Once there, the driver left them at the heliport, where the reigning King and Queen of the roller derby were waiting for them with boxes of custom-made skates. On bended knee, the champions eased the skates onto the three pairs of feet before them and waved them toward the tarmac.

It crossed Mae's mind then that Sal's plan was for them to skate to Spain. She steered her baby blues in his direction and silently asked, “ Can you really do this, Sal? Well, you melted watches, so maybe you can.”

He merely winked and beckoned her to follow him and Gala to the far end of the heliport. There, on the pad, a hot air balloon was being fired up for take-off. Inside was a picnic basket specially prepared by 21 and, next to it, the balloon pilot from Mike Todd's *Around the World in 80 Days*.” Sal and Gala, accompanied as they were by a timeless beauty, made the trip in two.

Sal/10

The threesome arrived at Sal and Gala's home in Cadaqués, and, there, Mae found herself, the essence of who she was: her lips had been transformed into a sofa of lipstick red, her nose, the source of her charm and warmth, had been fashioned into a furnace, her nostrils spaces for storing wood. Two landscape paintings on canvas formed her eyes, undeniable objets d'art. And her glorious locks were displayed as a blonde wig framing her face like the curtains on the stages she had graced. Facing her face left Mae speechless, a condition in which she had never before found herself. Well, she had found herself now. She took herself to the sofa and was soon dreaming dreams of the Wild West.