# Marian Chase

A young woman handed me a program soon after I took my seat. People were still filing into the large room and looking around for places to sit, although it was apparent already that there were many more chairs than people to fill them. The scholar in whose honor the convocation was being held, a professor of philosophy named Darcy O'Bannion, took the chair directly behind mine, but I did not introduce myself to him, for I had been only one of twenty students in an Introduction to Philosophy course he had taught in his fourth year at the college. He was being feted on this occasion for having continued teaching for forty-six more, and even now he was going on with it, a tenure and an endurance unprecedented at the college. As I glanced through the program, one name in particular caught my eye, that of Marian Chase. I immediately looked around for her, but as it had been almost forty-four years since I had last seen her, it was to be expected that I would not recognize her, even if she were the gray-haired matron now conversing with two or three other people at the podium. At last all those attending the convocation had taken their seats, and the program began with introductory remarks delivered by the institution's toothy president, who said pretty much what college presidents are obliged to say on such occasions and then excused himself because he had another equally momentous event to attend on the other side of the campus.

The chair of the philosophy department spoke next, a distinguished-looking scholar with artfully coiffed hair. He also hewed close to the pro forma script for such an occasion: that Darcy was an old friend as well as an admired colleague who didn't look a month over fifty-five, which meant that he must have been hired directly out of kindergarten, ha ha, the author of seminal works on thinkers as diverse as Russell, Rorty, and Quine, and on top of everything else a redoubtable opponent on the tennis court.

There were six speakers on the program that afternoon, not including the college president or the chairman of the department, and Marian was the fifth. I saw that she *was* the gray-haired woman I had noticed earlier. She was shorter and broader than she had been as a waif of eighteen, when I had met her at a cast party celebrating the close of a stage play, *No Trifling with Love* (an English version of Alfred de Musset's *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*) in which she had had a minor role. She had not been remarkably pretty, but she had enjoyed more than her share of male attention that evening, for there had been something fresh and joyfully alive about her, and even half a century later I remembered how she had, in a way that had seemed very provocative to me at the time, rested her shoulders on the wall behind her while answering or tactfully evading my questions. She had graduated from high school in Berkeley. Her father had been the football coach. She had had a sickly younger brother who had absorbed most of their parents' attention. She had impressed me then as a girl unlike the others I knew in college, less determined

to be coy and evasive. She had decided to major in philosophy, an unusual choice for a prepossessing girl of that era.

When introduced to the audience of about thirty in the convocation hall—they occupied fewer than a third of the available chairs, but rather than converging in the front rows were scattered, sitting in clumps of three or four, mostly in the middle rows—Marian Chase carried a few pages of notes to the lectern and began reading from them, looking up occasionally at her auditors but without any evident desire to gather their sympathy or make them laugh. She did not relate any humorous anecdotes or even pretend to know the honoree particularly well, though she gave him credit for drawing her attention to Martin Heidegger's work in aesthetics, which she had found at first rebarbative and wantonly obscure. She had written her senior thesis on Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," and Darcy had been the very first to suggest that she might have a career in art criticism ahead of her. His prophecy had been fulfilled more completely than he or she could have foreseen. She resided now on Long Island, in the town of Massapequa. After graduating from college she had moved to New York, and there she had served an internship at a glossy women's magazine for which, in the fullness of time, she had become the arts editor. She had moved eventually to another magazine and, some years further along, to a third, always as arts editor, and she had become—though she did not claim it in so many words—one of the mavens of the New York art scene, or rather say one of its gatekeepers, whose benediction was virtually the ticket of admission for an aspirant to the great

world of art and fashion and whose disapprobation could send the dejected dauber back to the provinces. Marian was not quite the Clement Greenberg of her age, but she was not much less puissant than he had been, and she had been fawned upon by ambitious artists who had become household names (at least in households where contemporary art was discussed at the dinner table). She was not a name-dropper, however, and her paean to Darcy O'Bannion was remarkably free of self-promotion, which could not be said of any of the other speakers. It dwelt rather on the perspective philosophy offers to art. Ideas, she informed us, are more dangerous than helpful to artists, and those whose work bids plausibly for enduring regard are usually only shallowly or errantly acquainted with the philosophical apparatus underpinning art. It was the critic's business, she went on, to trade in aesthetics, not the artist's. The critic spins the concepts in which works of art may be briefly—and loosely—ensnared. The best artists know as little of aesthetics as children learning long division may be presumed to know of calculus.

The audience was, I surmised, baffled by Marian's remarks but no less admiring for their bafflement. The applause as she stepped away from the lectern was, I judged, the heartiest of the afternoon. After the last of his former students had concluded the encomia, Darcy himself delivered a short but graceful acknowledgment and wound up the occasion by giving us an abstract of his vocation as he envisioned it. His job, he modestly averred, was to open doors for others, and he was humbled by the praise of a few who had passed through those doors. Again the applause swelled, and two or three in the

audience leapt to their feet, but mercifully the rest of us remained phlegmatically seated. I did not believe that Darcy had opened any doors for me, though he had hastened me through Kant by likening the categories of knowledge to an ice-cube tray: we pour the undifferentiated water of experience into it, and it shapes it into a priori blocks of sense. He had given me an *A*-minus in the course, an act of generosity that sustained my grade average for the semester just above the mark required to qualify for the dean's list, the only instance in which I attained that honor. I should have been grateful to him, I suppose, but I wasn't, for I was unable to free myself from the impression that he was too glib, too charming, and too handsome. No doubt I had envied his lightly held erudition and Ivy League insouciance.

In the aftermath of the scheduled program a knot of flatterers formed around the honoree, and Marian also attracted two or three sycophants. If that sounds a bit sour I might remind my reader that academia is the most august of those institutions in which people make a profession of basking in the glory of others. I used to know a poet who assured me that he could reliably count on getting laid after a public reading on any college or university campus, and the more provincial and second-rate the institution, the better were his amatory prospects. I stood to one side for some minutes as Marian conducted a conversation with a bald professor of art history who would have, his eager expression suggested, run off to Curacao with her instantly if she had touched his hand with her fingertips. At last the bold fellow gave way a little, without completely relinquishing his prize, and I stepped forward and introduced

myself. Marian heard my name and gazed at me without a flicker of recognition. With a self-conscious laugh I added that I had gone out with her several times in college. She shook her head in a self-deprecating way and looked, if anything, slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry," she said. "That was, after all, a long time ago."

Could she really, I marveled, not remember me? Her gaze met mine candidly for a moment, and I realized that she could and did. My name meant nothing to her.

"I was a friend of Randy Swanson," I added plaintively.

This, at least, got a response. With a rueful smile Marian turned to the bald courtier and explained simply: "He dumped me."

An awkward silence ensued. Neither the art historian nor I had a rejoinder to her unexpected candor. I retreated then and let somebody else claim her attention.

A refreshment table awaited us in the courtyard outside. It was covered in starched white cloth and decorated with red and blue paper napkins, and attendees of the informal convocation could imbibe cheap California wines—red or white—and sample an assortment of canapés. I took a plastic cup of the red and a chewy confection with powdered sugar on it, and I made dilatory conversation with a plain young woman in a garish maroon-and-pink costume that gave her the aspect of a circus performer. She turned out to be a professor of philosophy at UCLA and a former student of Darcy O'Bannion's who had driven sixty miles to attend what was billed as a celebration of his

illustrious career. Her name, if I caught it correctly, was Miranda something-or-other. I explained to Miranda—on second thought I think her name may have been Marjorie—that I was present as the guest of Jack Okada, also a former student of Darcy's and the fourth speaker on the program. Jack was a professor of German at USC.

"Oh, yes. I know Jack," my interlocutor vaguely replied.

I asked her if Darcy had really had a formative influence on her intellectual development.

"Oh, *influence* is not strong enough!" she exclaimed. "He is the reason I went into philosophy. I don't think it's too much to say that he opened my eyes to the beauty of the mind."

"Really?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"Absolutely," she insisted. "I dedicated my first book to him."

Reservations for twenty or so had been made at a local restaurant, and thither Jack and I made our way after the refreshments table was cleared by white-jacketed undergraduates. Jack, who has no head for liquor, was already a little drunk, and we tarried for a quarter of an hour on the college's central quadrangle to watch a group of students play with a Frisbee on the lawn. A girl in tight yellow shorts particularly held our attention, as she was lithe and gamine and had lovely long bare legs, and she squealed with delight each time she snagged the sailing disk from the air.

I had not known Jack well at school. He had been the friend of a friend. We had renewed our acquaintance only as middle-aged men after he had come

to USC from a university in the Midwest following the critical acclaim with which his third book had been received. He had since published nine or ten more.

"That cabernet was pretty good," he remarked.

"No, it wasn't."

"It wasn't?"

"It was almost undrinkable."

"I guess you're right," he admitted. Jack is one of the few professors I know who do not uphold their own views on any question as apodictic.

We were sitting on a bench, following the girl and not the Frisbee with our eyes but otherwise not moving.

"What a terrible thing it is to be young," Jack sighed at last.

The restaurant in which the O'Bannion party dined that evening had been a coffee shop in our day. Its transformation had come twenty years after we had graduated when an entrepreneur from San Francisco had purchased it, hiring a chef who had apprenticed under Wolfgang Puck. People drifted in two or three at a time, but there was some indecision as to where we were all to sit, and a knot of guests formed at the bar. Jack ordered a glass of Bogle merlot, and the two of us stood slightly apart from the others in the murky midst of the restaurant. Jack confided in me a tale about Merlin Ottinger, the third speaker on the program, who was the scion of one of the wealthiest families in Chicago and had already endowed a chair in ethics at our alma mater. Ethics, as everyone knows, is a bauble of enduring fascination for people the least

hindered by it in practical life. Jack teaches "continental" philosophy at USC, and he is in the German department because members of the philosophy department at his institution have no use for philosophy written in Greek, Latin, or German. I once spent a week in Berlin with Jack, and there I observed that his fluency in German is such that Germans generally take him to be a countryman, though they are undecided about where to place him, as he has no regional accent.

"I saw you chatting with Madeleine," he said. (Or perhaps Melissa was the name he attributed to the quaintly appareled philosopher from UCLA.)

"Yes," I said. "I gather that you two are acquainted."

"You could say that. She's a complete fraud, of course."

"Really? In what way?"

"She panned my last book, but she lacked the simple decency to acknowledge that she has a personal animus against me." He gave me a sideways glance. "She knows less about philosophy than you do."

"Well, I'm glad to hear *somebody* does," I said.

At that point the waiter led us to the back of the restaurant, where several tables had been set aside for our party. Marian was sitting at the end of one of them, and for some reason I impetuously claimed the place across from hers. Jack slumped into the chair next to mine, and a young man of about thirty took the seat beside Marian. Introductions were made all round. The young man's name was Adam Elsheimer. He had been the second speaker on the afternoon's program, and he asked almost at once if any of us

remembered his mother, Polly Martell, who had been in the same class as Jack and I. I remembered then that I had read Polly's obituary in the most recent issue of the alumni quarterly. (I always turn first to the obituaries and rarely read anything else in that slick publication.) Marian disclaimed any memory of Polly, but Jack and I admitted to having known her slightly. She had been active, I recalled, in the glee club and had played in a musical ensemble of some sort. Jack said that he had known only a few women in college, but he had an impression of Polly as a very engaging and cheerful person. Adam told us that his father, now also deceased, had been his mother's second husband. Her first marriage, to another of our classmates, had been unfortunate and childless. Although our recollections of his mother were uncertain, Adam was evidently eager to hear them, and to satisfy his curiosity I rummaged through my memories of college for anything else that might bear on this woman who had slipped through my youth, leaving only a faint trace of her passage. In my four years as an undergraduate, I had probably spoken to Polly Martell no more than once or twice, unless it was in our freshman survey course in Western Civilization, when she and I would have been among a hundred others attending thrice-weekly lectures in Hertzberg Hall.

"Your mother was a lovely person," Jack averred. "I was deeply saddened to read of her passing."

I glanced at Jack, somewhat doubting his bereavement, but I added my own eulogistic comment, saying that she had undoubtedly been a talented musician.

Marian, I observed, was following this exchange closely. She disapproved, I thought, of the way Jack and I were padding our memories of the nebulous Polly. At some point, after it became apparent to all that Jack and I had no more to offer except repetitions of what we had already said, the conversation faltered.

"And how is your younger brother?" I asked Marian, recollecting my initial conversation with her.

"He died a long time ago," she replied evenly.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear it."

"Did you know him?" Marian asked in a challenging tone.

"No, but you told me about him."

"Did I?" She looked skeptical.

I alluded to the cast party at which I had first interrogated her. She evidently remembered that occasion no better than she remembered me. "I don't recall telling anybody about Darin," she said.

We all were silent for a moment or two.

"What is Randy doing these days?" Marian asked.

I was relieved to turn to another—if not happier—topic. I told her that Randy had taught music at a high school in San Diego for many years but was now retired. His second wife, twenty years his junior, was still teaching at the same high school. Marian did not pursue the subject, and I was able then to draw her out on her own career. She talked a little about how, after graduating from college, she had at first purposed to earn a doctorate in philosophy, but

after one semester of graduate study at Northwestern she had abandoned academia to accept an internship at a women's magazine in New York. Her editor perceiving that she possessed some substantial knowledge of art history, she had been encouraged to write frothy articles about contemporary artists and their amatory adventures. After a year or two of this she had, on the retirement of the journal's arts editor, been designated as her replacement, a rare honor for so young a woman. This was in the period when women's magazines had been struggling to keep pace with the movement away from an exclusive concern with traditional women's issues—dating, fashion, and homemaking—toward a broader conception of women's roles in society. Marian was an admirer of Janet Malcolm and her writing for *The New Yorker*, and she applied herself to bringing a similar maturity to the coverage of art in her publication.

I could have told her, but elected not to, that I too had made my living as an editor. . .for fourteen years the city editor of a small-town daily newspaper in central Texas, *The Inchblade Sentinel.* I didn't think she would be much impressed. I had spent too many years in Texas to be au courant with contemporary art, but I asked Marian to comment on a few living artists whose work—or at least whose names—I had encountered one way or another. In each instance her commentary was succinct. Chris Burden: a stuntman. David Salle: a Daliesque surrealist who had missed his time. Cindy Sherman: caught her wave and rode it as far as it would take her. James Turrell: author of a few of the most uncompromisingly abstract projects of the past half

century. Judy Bartman: a miniaturist. Gerhard Richter: pretentious and imaginatively sterile. Julian Schnabel: a caterpillar who, abandoning one medium for another, emerged as a butterfly. For a few minutes Marian and I constituted ourselves as a sort of vaudeville act, I in the role of the straight man, for the amusement of an audience of two.

Jack joined the act with a question of his own: "Who would you say is the greatest artist of our time?"

Marian shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of saying. Anyone who would answer that question is an idiot."

"And somebody who would ask it. . . ?" Jack shrugged. After a pause he added: "I met James Turrell a long time ago. I like his vision."

"Art isn't a matter of liking or not liking," Marian replied sternly. "It's not a popularity contest, or it shouldn't be."

"How else can you judge?" he pursued.

"Arthur Danto answered that question better than I can. It's like asking how we can know that God exists, or doesn't."

I had read somewhere, a few months or years earlier, that Arthur Danto and Jack Okada were the two most lucid English-language writers in philosophy. Now, with Danto dead, Jack presumably was the sole bearer of the title. I wondered if Marian had read any of his books or if she even knew that he had published any. Aesthetics, after all, was not his bailiwick.

"You mean," Jack continued, "that judgment has to be systematic, not intuitional?"

"Yes, in a way," she said, "but judgment in art is more a dialectical process than a system."

"What do you mean?" I asked, as the exchange was rapidly becoming too Hegelian for me.

Marian regarded me askance for a moment, as if considering whether my question deserved an answer. "Well," she sighed, "judgment is discursive, not analytic, because art itself is discursive." She gave me an indulgent smile.

Jack was frowning down into his wineglass. He looked as if he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

Adam, meanwhile, was not attending this platonic exchange and had turned his head to look at people engaged in lively discourse at another table. It occurred to me that Marian would have preferred to talk to Jack apart from the rest of us, and I would have been willing to let her do that, as it was apparent that she regarded herself and Jack as the only two conversationally adept people in the room.

Adam, as if waking from a reverie, smiled deferentially at Marian. "I wanted to go into philosophy when I came here," he said. "Professor O'Bannion told me I wasn't cut out for it, so I changed majors in my sophomore year, but we remained friends, and he was sort of my unofficial advisor. It was his idea that I should major in government."

"I never encourage my students to go into philosophy," Jack said. "There's not much future in it."

"Don't you teach philosophy?" Adam asked.

"Yes, but I'm in the German department," Jack explained. "I teach German philosophers, but in the context of European studies. Most of my students go into business or law, where they can sometimes make an honest living." With a glance at Marian, he added: "The smartest ones end up teaching art history, of course."

Marian nodded a benediction. "Philosophy is best used to give perspective on other disciplines."

"Precisely," Jack agreed. "Only one out of twenty people with doctorates in philosophy teach it at the university level, and most of those are analytic philosophers." He looked at me. "Like that woman you were talking to at the reception, Melanie."

"So philosophy is dying out?" Adam asked.

"In this country, yes. It's not a practical field of endeavor."

Adam appeared distraught to hear this. "Heidegger was a Nazi, wasn't he?"

"That's right," Jack said. "*And* he was a midget." We all laughed at this, although I don't know why.

"What is your profession, Adam?" Marian inquired.

"I'm still trying to work that out," the young man confessed. "I went to law school after college, and I got my degree, but I've never practiced. I work for a natural resources conservancy, but it's a sinecure. I get a nominal salary."

"Your mother must have had some money then," Marian observed.

"Well, my father did."

"So you belong to the one percent."

"Or maybe the two percent," he said with a modest smile.

We all realized, at that point, that Adam, like Merlin Ottinger, the third speaker at the convocation, probably was a major contributor to the college. That would explain his being asked to speak at the O'Bannion affair that afternoon.

As the dinner was breaking up, Adam was the first to rise from our table. One of the college's vice-presidents drifted over, as if casually, to buttonhole him for a minute. Marian, Jack, and I exchanged knowing glances, our shared surmise about the young man's financial assets having apparently been confirmed. Jack, when he stood, proved to be a little unsteady on his feet. During the meal he had begun to slur some of his words, but only slightly on sibilants. We stopped at the bar on our way out of the restaurant, he and I, and Marian remained with us. Jack ordered a glass of merlot, Marian a gin and tonic. When the bartender looked at me, I held up my hands, palms outward and fingers spread, closing my eyes briefly in the internationally recognized signal of non-participation. "I'm the designated driver," I unnecessarily explained to the bartender, who wasn't in the least interested. We took a table, Jack and I on either side of the lady, and they discussed the philosophy of art, or something equally as abstract, while I pretended to listen.

In my junior year of college I had once conducted Marian to my grandparents' beach house at Laguna, a distinction I had conferred on only

those young women about whom I was "serious." (In my vocabulary of that era, *serious* deserved scare quotes because of its heightened ambiguity. I myself had not been sure what I meant by it, although another of my dates had said that I was the most serious young man she had dated, and I had known better than to take this as a compliment.)

Jack and I accompanied Marian to the parking garage at which she had left her car, Jack weaving a little as he walked. He stumbled so badly on a curb that I expected him to fall. All the while, though, he continued talking about one thing or another: the town had changed, outrageous college tuitions, never was a good bar in the vicinity, Hannah Arendt and Heidegger. . . . At the garage Marian concisely shook our hands, said goodbye, and walked away. My own car, fortunately, was nearby.

The bulk of the San Gabriel Mountains weighted the night on our starboard side as we sped westward toward Pasadena. The colorful lights of shopping malls spread across a broad suburban marsh on either side.

"What an intelligent woman!" Jack exclaimed as I settled my Prius between two heavy trucks. "I'm only sorry I didn't know her better when we were in school together. Maybe I would have lost my virginity sooner."

"Well, I knew her," I pointed out, "but she was no help to me. She doesn't even remember going out with me."

"What was she like then?"

"Much as she is now, I think."

"Though somewhat younger, I'm guessing."

"I thought she was very sexy."

"She's very sexy now!"

"How could she have forgotten me?" I wailed. "We came *this* close to being lovers!" I held up my right hand to show with index finger and thumb the degree of intimacy that had not availed me.

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," Jack scoffed. "I personally never got that close to any woman in college. It might have been different if I had been Caucasian."

One warm spring night I had dreamt that Marian was in bed with me, lying on her side and showing me her bare shoulder and back. I had placed my hand on her arm, and she had rolled over. Only then had I seen her face, and she turned out to be. . .Broderick Crawford! I had flung myself into panicked consciousness, aware—for I had read *The Interpretation of Dreams*—that this nightmare must betoken closet homosexuality.

"When did you finally lose your virginity?" I asked my philosophical friend. "And who with?"

Jack shook his head. "A gentleman doesn't discuss such things," he said reprovingly.

Between the freeway and the mountains slumbered an amorphous commuter community, just beyond the ghastly effulgence of shopping malls, furniture stores, and traffic lights. People residing on that alluvial slope survived, if at all, as names on the tax rolls of the state and county or, in some cases, sheriff's department files, but otherwise they were anonymous, missed

only when they failed to appear at high school reunions or when called to jury duty, names writ on water, faces in crowds. Not even the names of their towns signify on the scale of a human life. Azusa, Duarte, Monrovia. These are names on maps. Nowhere in the singular world do they persist.