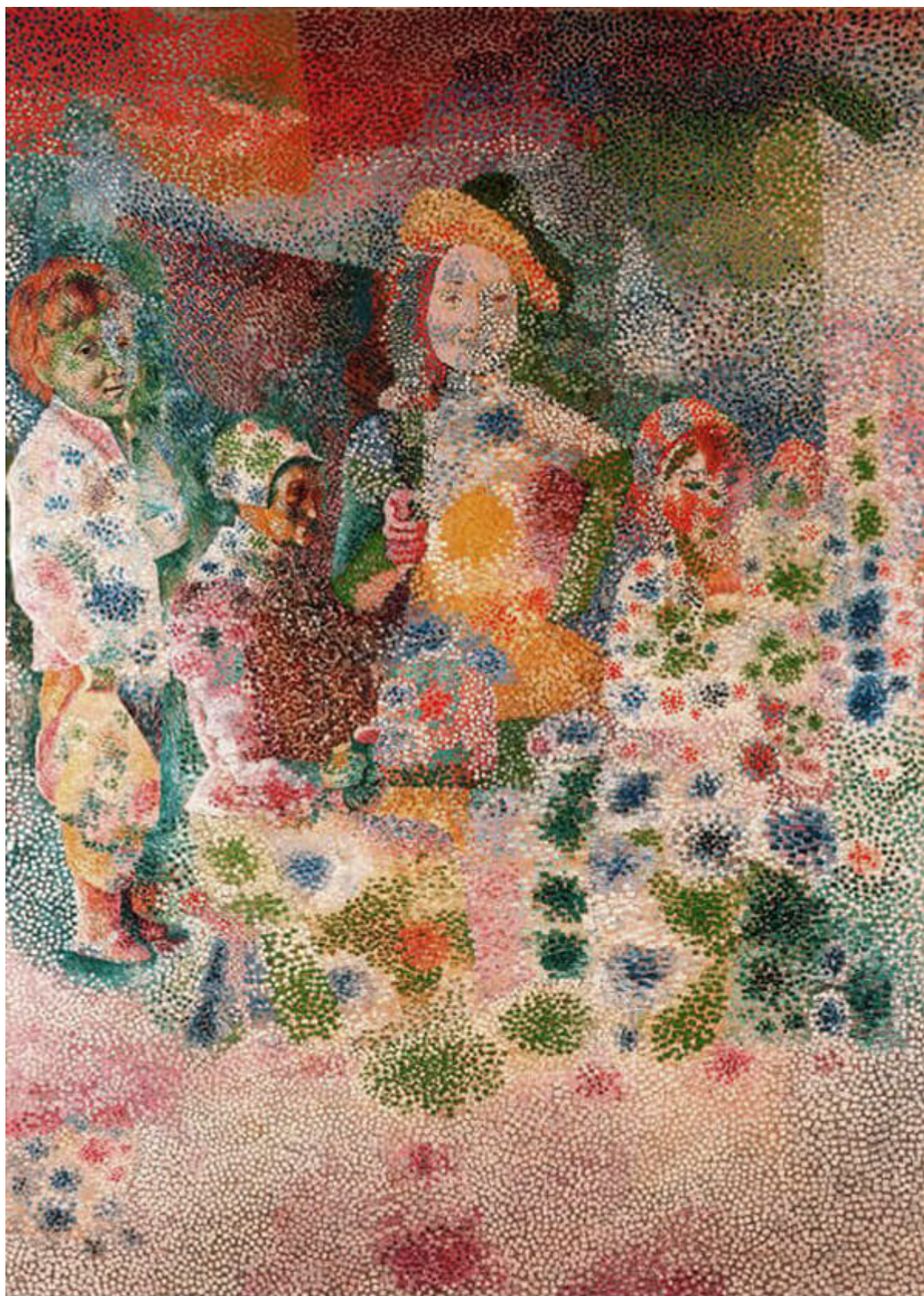


Dali's Second Call

by [Kirby Olson](#) (May 2020)



The Peasants' Repast, Pablo Picasso, 1917

Early the next morning, the phone rang. I looked at the clock. It said 5:15 am.

“Norm, Herculeana died, and I have thought about it. It’s your fault. I kill you and your baby.”

“Dali, settle down.”

“No, you settle up. What was the idea of getting pregnant on top of my child, crowding it out of your wife’s womb? Did I not pay rent on that womb?”

I never liked the surrogate-parenting project. The phone burned in my hand. I was in the kitchen in my underwear. I pinched myself, but I was awake. How did he know what we had done?

“But Dali, it was an accident—”

“You—you killed wife and now daughter,” Dali said. “We ordered a boy, and you had a girl. Therefore, you cheated on us.”

“Dali, what do you mean, I—”

The phone banged down on his end. Then it rang again. I picked it up.

“You will hear to me.”

The phone banged down. It rang again.

“I intend to get you be murdered.” The phone slammed down. It rang again. I quickly connected the taping device, and picked it up.

“You ready to die?”

“Dali Dallitson, are you bats?”

“What sound like? I kill your wife and child so that you know what it feels.” He began to blubber.

I had it on tape. In and of itself this would constitute assault and get my friend Dali a misdemeanor. Many think that assault must be physical, and must be done with a blunt instrument. But even a verbal threat made in a sufficiently serious context constitutes assault. Battery can be spitting on someone, or grabbing them by the arm. Such torts carry penalties as heavy as thirty days.

“Dali Dallitson,” I said, trying conclusively to pin his name to the assault, “What are you talking about? Your wife was ill, and your baby? Do you realize she was ours?”

Dali wept. “Of course what I said was premature. You would made such a nice friend. What’s the matter with immature?”

Why had we gotten involved with this psychotic?

Mari came out of the bedroom.

“Who is it?” She asked through squinty eyes, with Helena draped over one shoulder.

“It’s Dali,” I whispered, putting my hand over the receiver. “He blames us for his wife’s death.”

You can’t keep people alive against the laws of nature. It hadn’t been Mari’s fault. Herculeana was none of our business. As for Helena, our baby might have edged their baby out of the womb, but how can you hold the unborn responsible? We had given Dali and his wife a chance. Were we procreational slaves just because we were poor?

Mari went back to bed, but Falstaff peeked around the corner into the kitchen.

“Dali, have you contacted a lawyer?” I asked.

"He said that I not the pie called a tort."

"Dali," I said. "Why don't you take a stiff drink and call a shrink? Lou Gehrig's is no picnic. Your wife was due to expire."

"Norm, I have an incoming call. Can you hold?"

"OK," I said.

Minutes pogo-sticked as I thought of ways we weren't responsible for Herculeana's death. I also worried about his change from weird to acceptable English and back. Who was he? Who was anybody? Even the dog appeared to have hidden depths.

Dali got back on the line. "Give me that baby. We call it even."

"But it's *our baby*," I said.

"You *killed* my baby. I want *your* baby."

I thought of the international post and the days of horse and buggy. But in this intolerably speedy world of gadgets pain could be delivered through the phone across a thousand miles. Dali lost his wife and with it all reason. Typhoons and earthquakes. A great number of people in Thailand had been swept out to sea by tsunamis. After a few days or months at sea some were rescued, perhaps by a passing shrimp boat, and brought back to the shore. Thousands of birds lost in the Gulf due to the BP Oil spill. Accidents of God, or culpable negligence? Certainly no judge would penalize us for culpable negligence in the case of Herculeana's death.

"Dali, have you had breakfast?"

"Coffee."

"Go to McDonald's and get yourself two Egg McMuffins and read the funny pages."

To my surprise, he said in a reasonable voice, "Ok."

He hung up.

I went to tuck Falstaff back into his bed.

"Is Dali dangerous, dad?" He asked.

"No," I lied.

He seemed relieved, and closed his eyes. He held Elliot, who licked his cheeks before settling down next to him.

I went back into our bedroom. Mari said, "What was that about?"

"Dali misses his wife."

I did want to say something about the baby, but decided to hold off. I snuggled against my wife's back. I put my arm around her. Could Dali really Rumpelstiltskin our baby? Perhaps it wouldn't come to trial. In documentaries on the Bio channel junkies killed whole families for fifty dollars a head. Maybe it would be half price since we were rural. Think of the goof that shot John Lennon. Hamlet couldn't tell a hawk from a handsaw. I thought of the children of Beslan, a community in Russia. I couldn't remember the details of Beslan. How many kids dead? Had Dali reached the point where pain obliterated reason? Some Chechnyans killed a whole village of children in Beslan. I went back to sleep but woke with a headache. People are so callous now, the only way to make them feel anything is to take their child.

The phone rang. I ran to the kitchen. Falstaff had already gotten the phone. "Dad, it's Dali." He handed me the phone.

"Norm, I had the Egg McMuffins. I had coffee. I walked around the block. I read the funny pages. That *Dilbert*

really gets me. I need your child.”

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Kirby Olson is a tenured English professor at SUNY-Delhi in the western Catskills. His books include a novel (*Temping*), about an English professor who starts a circus in Finland; a book of poems entitled *Christmas at Rockefeller Center*