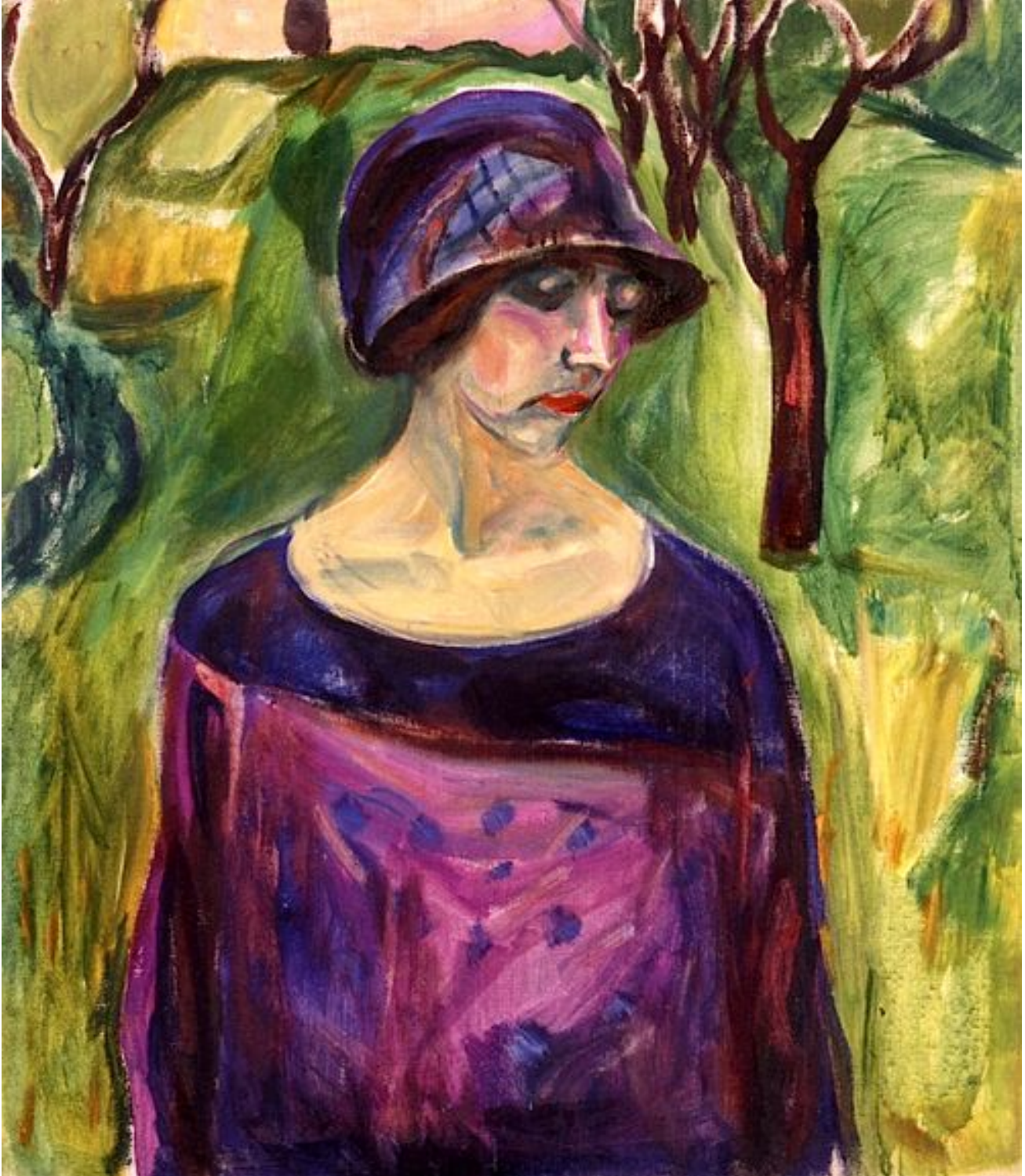


# Mimi & Magda

by [James Como](#) (July 2020)



*Birgit in the Garden*, Edvard Munch, 1924-30

From an outdoor table at The Tavern on the Green, its trees no more than bare ruined choirs lilted against the early autumn cloudscape, Magda, her back to the restaurant, could eye-sip portions of the skyline that she loved so tenderly, as though it were her own giant playhouse. At such moments she felt that the whole island was *her* island, where she was born and had dwelt and had lived through-and-through all her fifty years. A *human* city. None other could matter. With luxurious insouciance she could put aside her anxieties, just as she did her bag and scarf. Though both were Hermes, she knew they would be safe. So, then, why the worry?

She did not fret over the five pounds she had put on. What was so wrong with one thirty? Her trainer was nearby, her therapist, her surgeon. When she visited the Dalton School as a distinguished alumna so adept at fund-raising, she still turned male heads and turned female contemporaries—and younger women, too—green with envy. On top of that her conscience was clear. As a life coach she did much good, in private practice *and* pro bono.

It had to be politics. This president. He could win, again, compromising all she had worked for, longed for, her whole life. Open borders, abortion-on-demand, compulsory union membership, public education not threatened by school so-called choice, universal health care, social justice for the blacks, the Hispanics, the gays, and of course for women—all the invisible, the unvoiced, the defenseless—the taming of American exceptionalism—its militarist expression, its capitalistic expansion, its diplomatic aggression.

Never a capable public speaker nor anything close to a “people person,” and thus incapable herself of political candidacy—she knew that! —she nevertheless could do good. She would donate more time and raise much more money for the Party, because . . .

She believed deep in her bones that people were

fundamentally decent, that those who seemed evil were actually ill. Even—especially—the president (whom she had found *five times* in the *DSM*). In fact, that faith in decency was her foundational value, the closest to religious belief she cared to get. But she knew also that whereas she could have gotten angry at evil people, about sick people she could only get . . . anxious, or feel pity, empathy, as members of the community that she embraced. And try to help, in her way.

This dilemma required what she called emotional displacement. Feelings mattered, of course, even above all, but that didn't mean you couldn't control them, make them conform to who you really are, or wanted to be, by switching them around, or at least saying as much. "Fake it till you make it, right?" she often thought.

Mimi would help. A good listener, and analytical. For example, during the crossing on the Queen Mary she had shown Magda that her marriage was over, had been for a long time. That enabled the divorce. Why should she throw the twenty good years she had left after the twenty bad ones she had survived?

"You have a right to happiness," Mimi insisted. "You've been a victim," which Magda had intuited for a very long time. And though the divorce had not made her happy it prevented her from becoming more unhappy. She had recovered a modicum of self-esteem, though she was puzzled by Edgar's ready compliance with the whole process.

At that point in her musings Mimi materialized in the seat opposite. If Magda was *tres chic*, Mimi was *plus*. The cheek bones helped, with those wisps of blonde tendrils framing them, though never intruding upon the gaze of her large, glowing gray eyes that outshone even the brilliant teeth within her plush lips. Never married, her inherited wealth helped fund animal shelters. That and Party politics were her causes, both pursued with religious fervor.

“Those fucks want to defund Planned Parenthood!” Magda knew whom she meant.

“I’ve already ordered for us, Mimi. Waldorfs and Bellinis.”

“Oh, thank you dear. I’m sorry. There is no excuse for rudeness but I’m just so upset.”

“You’ve read my mind, *cara mia*. As always. Rights must be woven into the fabric of a culture.” Magda probably didn’t realize she was quoting Mimi, who smiled.

“Exactly! Not cherry-picked, some defended, others discarded.”

“The whole tapestry is torn if you do that.”

Mimi was flashing her impossibly irresistible smile. “And what right is more basic than one’s right to one’s own body? And what bodily function is more basic to the continuation of the species than the one that reproduces, or not?”

Lunch arrived. The terrace was filling up. Their conversation became desultory, recreational. A breeze rose. Mimi snapped her fingers in the air. “*Garcon*, we need more water here. Pay attention. And take away the bread. We didn’t ask for it.” The waiter actually bowed his head, then trotted off.

A very young couple at a nearby table looked over.

“*Ragazzi*, mind your own business.” Mimi would not tolerate nosiness. The young people turned away, back to their own conversation.

Magda sneered, “privacy in public space matters. Like speaking softly on your phone when people are around. That, and at least the pretense by others that they are not

listening. That's why—"

"Is Edgar living up to the terms of divorce?" Mimi interrupted. "If not you must not stand for it."

Taken aback, but only slightly, Magda displaced her pique at Mimi's condescension. "Oh, that and more. You'd think he was eager to keep me more comfortable than the settlement requires."

"He's afraid of you, dear. As well he should be." Mimi glanced over to the young people. "As he should be of her."

Magda looked over. There was a squall rising there for sure. "She's pregnant. I'd say a good five months."

"She's drinking, and she has a pack of ciggies on the table." Then, in a slightly louder voice, "you go girl! Own it!"

The young man's head snapped around. "Now it's your turn to shut the fuck up."

Magda stared, then said, "what did you say?"

"I said, mind *your* own business. A paraphrase."

Mimi said, "your partner knows full well what she's doing. It's her choice. You've heard of choice, haven't you?" By now the four were facing each other, diners nearby leaning in. Who could resist a New York confrontation? Mimi's sneer alone was worth the look.

"Choice! Oh yeah, I've heard of it. You know who hasn't yet, but should have the chance?"

"Oh please," interrupted Magda. "People choose, not fetuses."

"Really? Well, here's some science for you. People are made of nervous systems that feel pain, of brain waves, of

fingerprints and all the DNA they'll ever have—like my baby, right there.” He pointed to the woman’s belly.

“Oh my God.” Mimi moaned and rolled her eyes.

The woman stood and took two steps towards Magda, who was closer than Mimi. “It makes no difference. If it did I wouldn’t smoke or drink. But it makes no difference. Tomorrow they’re killing it.”

“*It? It*, Ethel? What’s *in* there? A rock? A plant? Maybe a goat? You know how many woman have given birth to goats, right?” The young man’s neck tendons were bulging.

Mimi said, “oh, get a grip—”

“*What?* What did you say?” He seemed genuinely perplexed. Then he straightened himself. “Lady, imagine it’s a tree from a rain forest, or a baby whale—”

Ethel was trembling. “I know what it is, Tyler. I know what *he* is. I know I’m having a human being killed. Or don’t you think I know that?”

“What I know,” he said softly, “is that for you it’s always me me me.”

Magda looked at her friend, who said, “don’t engage, Magda. That’s what he wants.”

Tyler left Ethel, who slumped into her chair, and walked to the other table. He sat down. The women stared. He said, “ah, Mimi? You know you must engage, right Mimi?” And then he sang, “you funny little good for nothing Mimi.” After a pause, he almost whispered, “and it’s not really about abortion, is it?”

“Fuck you,” she said, having recognized the old Maurice Chevalier tune. “You don’t scare me.”

“Well then,” Tyler spoke slowly, with a smile, “we’re not even. Because you scare the shit out of me.”

“Really? Mimi scares you?” said Magda. “A tough guy like you? Why?”

The three of them turned to Ethel when she said, “Tyler, the club sandwich is here. I’m starting without you.”

Tyler said, “you go girl. Own it.” Then he turned to Magda.

“Your friend scares me for four reasons. First, she is a reductionist. The world comes down to rights, which are abstractions, and further down to one right. And not one about her body, or abortion, but about the expansion of the royal self.”

“Spoken like a real man!”

“Do you know it’s illegal to take money for appearing in a snuff film, especially as the snuffee, you know, for the money to go to some loved one?”

“That’s grotesque!” Magda shouted. “You are just foul. You really are deplorable.”

“Second—”

“Oh no you don’t. No second or third or fourth!” Mimi stood as she shouted. Knives and forks dropped to tables all around them. Ethel took her first bite, oblivious.

“Sit Mimi,” Magda said. “Let’s hear him out. A fair deal and no fear. Second?”

The two women exchanged glances and seemed to nod.

Mimi sat and Tyler said, “second, actual human strife—concrete and proximate, tangible and visible, audible and fragrant, you turn away from. Oh, maybe with a slight

lamentation but with no real sorrow. Rolls off your back. Public, social, even personal. Gone. You see? The past is gone, even if the past was mere minutes ago, sliding right through you."

"That's ridiculous" Mimi sneered.

"Oh really? Go over to Ethel and feel her belly, put your ear to it, stroke it. Get close."

At the sound of her name Ethel looked up, still chewing.

Mimi was open-mouthed. Magda said, "and number three?"

"Ah. That's easy. You've aborted your natural human sympathy for concrete suffering, and to do that you've aborted what even Freud said we all need—or rather displaced it."

"*Freud?*" shouted Mimi. "You presume to quote Freud to *me?*"

"Yeah, no matter your years of analysis. Even a broken watch is right twice a day, and he was right when he said everyone needs a religion, it's just a matter of which one you choose. You've chosen against the creator God and all that comes with him—"

"Or her." That was Magda.

"Or both," Tyler said. "So you've replaced that belief with the high life of sanctimony, in your case political sanctimony, decorated by . . . well, I must admit it, decorated by real good taste and personal beauty. And so you are not to be doubted, especially by yourself. The mirror, and all your friends, like Magda here, say so."

Mimi looked at Magda, who looked at Tyler, who looked at Ethel.



“Anything to say, love?”

Ethel pushed away the table clutter—condiments, napkin holder, silverware, unnecessary glasses, water pitcher—looked at her sandwich, turned it around, and took another bite.

“She’s eating for two.”

Magda said, “you know you can’t stop her.”

“I do,” he said. “And I know you and your ilk would force her. It validates you. I cannot abort a choice, yet you can abort a human life.”

Magda looked coolly at Tyler, holding his gaze. “But we’re not discussing abortion, right? The fourth point?”

Mimi had had enough. She stood slowly, graceful and stately. “Magda, fair is one thing, claptrap another. This cretin has invaded our space. My space.”

But Magda did not move. “And mine,” she said, “and now he must deliver.” Mimi sat, a very rare instance of her compliance with anyone else’s preference that she did not share.

“Last and most.” Tyler spread his arms, looked up, and sighed. “Last and most is inauthenticity. You—that’s plural, not for you two but for many—you have re-stitched a value system from threads torn from that tapestry you claim to treasure—you see? I *was* paying attention—rent it for one purpose only, to suit your convenience, your minted morality of convenience.”

Magda arched a brow and leaned forward. “What you fail to see, Tyler, is that that morality is shared by many—even by most people, these days—and does them much good.”

“*Good?* No. Not good. Gives many of you much ease, pleasure, fun, and *relief*. But not good. You know, Magda, I’ll

bet you and your friend once knew what you were doing, but it was a slippery slope, like 'just one drink can't hurt'. Then, before you knew it, your real self, your authentic self, was gone, banished, abolished, buried under this tinselly persona. You had faked it until you finally had made it—your altered self. You haven't been genuine since puberty."

"No matter. Tomorrow that fetus will be gone, too." Mimi was grinning now. "Like a used Kleenex."

Tyler, pointing at Magda, turned to Ethel. "There's your future, love. Beautiful on the outside."

Ethel stood and walked to Mimi, who rose from her seat not knowing what to expect. The younger woman hugged the older, took her arm, and steered her away from the table, from the terrace, into the trees. "Will you tell me more?" she asked.

Mimi beamed a glance towards Magda, who glanced back. Then she stared into the air as it blurred and shimmered, like the air over very hot blacktop on a scorching day. But this day was bright and cool—That Autumn cool—trees seeming to sway from their roots. She slouched onto the table facedown.

Tyler walked to her, put an arm around her shoulder, a gesture more daring than he knew, and asked tenderly, "will you be all right?"

Some fifteen seconds passed. Then, lifting her head, she said "I have fugue states. Spells, I call them. I take medication but it disorients me."

"I'm sorry, Magda. I never would so trouble anyone as you seem to have been." He stood straight to leave but Magda grabbed his arm.

"Will you sit a while? Or must you go after Ethel? You're a good person"

"I can sit. Ethel can take care of herself. Insists upon it, actually."

"You really see a baby there, don't you?" Magda sobbed gently. Tyler looked away. After a while she said, "tell me more."

Tyler watched, and waited. Then he caught the waiter's eye. "One Peach Melba, two spoons, two espressos." After a long while they would leave together.

Two days later Mimi and Magda met again at Tavern on the Green. The day was balmy and bright, somehow out of kilter.

"How was your cry and pry with Tyler?" Mimi looked better than ever.

"Tyler? He's full of shit. When he came over and touched me I was . . . displaced. I thought, you know, I might take him home, for *un après-midi*. But all he wanted to do was talk, all the way through the park. I played and plied along, but, shit, there was no displacement for him. Finally he went his way. Walked away. Needed to find Ethel, he said. No fucking imagination. He had picked up the tab though. How about your walk and talk with the indelibly plain twerp?"

"Hah!" Mimi almost cackled. "Also full of shit. She didn't go through with it!" She snapped her fingers in the air but no waiter showed up.

"Shit," murmured Magda, "another little deplorable coming into the world."

"Doesn't matter. We held our ground. And with Anna at the next fundraiser—"

"Not to mention your your Jimmy Choos! "

They chuckled and chatted on, planning a Party party on

behalf of all the invisible, unvoiced, defenseless people. Because Mimi and Magda, like all people, are, basically, decent.

A waitress arrived. Though no longer young she seemed preternaturally fresh, like a first garden in full bloom. It seemed she would never age.

“Where were you hiding?” Mimi dripped out the words.

“Oh, Sorry. I . . . I was distracted, by the skyline.” She was looking to the clouds. “It points up and up, as though there were another city, even higher. And the sky itself is so . . . so lambent.” Slowly she looked down, directly into Mimi’s eyes. “How may I serve you?”

«[Previous Article](#) [Home Page](#) [Next Article](#)»

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