

# **Mademoiselle Bovary in New York**

By Sabina de Rochefort

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Berthe Bovary is getting ready to go on a trip from Paris to New York with a clear purpose: to meet George Downlake, the famous American writer. You might ask how the daughter of Madame Bovary, who at the end of Flaubert's novel was poor and worked in a factory, has such grandiose plans. The answer is that Monsieur Lhereux, who brought Emma Bovary to bankruptcy and suicide, was very wealthy when he died. His will was simple – his whole estate, valued at well over ten million, was left to Mademoiselle Berthe Bovary. Whatever his reason for leaving everything to Madame Bovary's daughter, whether guilt or remorse, his bequest left Berthe rich. Young and beautiful, without any worries, she has never slept with anyone. Not because of moral considerations, but she's never found a man interesting enough and, of course, she's had plenty to learn from her mother's life. After she became rich, the number of her admirers suddenly increased exponentially, but none had any real success with the young woman.

Her trip had its roots a few years earlier. When she first arrived in Paris she was as lonely as a poor orphaned girl would be in such a big city. She'd had enough of rural life and in Paris she finally found a job as a secretary in an American munitions company. She was told from the beginning she had to learn English as soon as possible. Sharing her mother's talent for foreign languages, in a few months Berthe managed to learn English. It is widely known that most French people are reluctant to learn any language beside their own. Even if Berthe was an exception, in order to improve her new language skills she needed someone with whom she could converse. One day, while Berthe was taking some English books from the library, the librarian, an elderly woman with dyed red hair, asked her how she had learned the language. One thing led to another and soon they were sharing their whole life stories. Within a few weeks, they became good friends despite the difference in their ages. Lily Monroe, the librarian, had come to France a long time ago. In her youth she was a famous stripper in New York and her legs had been insured for a small fortune. One night, a young writer named George Downlake, stopped by at the club where she was working, to have a whiskey and see for himself if Lily's legs were as great as his friends had told him. More than pleased with what he saw, he invited the dancer to join him at his table.

Looking back years later, Lily was unable to say whether it was fate, his green eyes or his impertinence that made her invite this client to her place, a very nice apartment on 56<sup>th</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. She had never before brought a man home.

Like many artists looking to impress the people around them, Downlake took out of his pocket his first novel, "*The Rich House*" published just months before and showed it to the young woman, who never before talked with a real writer. But as the intellectual seduction moved towards the bed, the room was suddenly engulfed in flames from a fire that was raging through the small building. In an instant, Downlake grabbed his clothes with one hand and his whiskey glass with the other, and ran out the door, down the steps and into the street. On his way out he blocked the door, and Lily couldn't get out in time. Fifty minutes later firefighters arrived and rescued the nude Lily Monroe whose legs had been badly burned. In his hurry to escape, the writer had left behind his novel. The stripper arrived at the hospital with the book clutched in her hands.

During the long and painful months of recuperation, she read it at least ten times, virtually learning it by heart. In the years that followed she developed a small obsession with Downlake, who eventually became a famous writer. She knew that because of her scarred legs, she lost forever the chance of sleeping with him. "*In bed with George Downlake*" - what a great novel title! Unfortunately, she could not be the main character anymore. Without ever knowing it, Downlake was the last man to see those superb legs in their sublime shape.

As the time passed, the two women become closer and Berthe learned more and more about what had happened to her friend. As she devoured Downlake's books, she began to think how she could avenge Lily. The two women built a plan for how Berthe could meet with the now renowned writer. The only problem was money, since neither had enough to finance a trip to America. It was not enough for Berthe to arrive in the United States as a poor woman wishing to see the great celebrity. No matter how interested Downlake might be, he would know that an attractive but poor young woman could mean nothing but trouble, the type of character to be avoided.

Berthe's unexpected inheritance solved the money problem. In a few weeks the preparations were made. Together, the two friends wrote a letter that was to be sent to the writer. Every word was analyzed and changed several times. His interest had to be aroused without any suspicion and, most importantly, he had to agree to see her. While Berthe was sure that only her name would arouse his curiosity, Lily still had her doubts. Besides Berthe famous last name, her beauty had to be handed over on a plate and served hot. A letter wouldn't be as interesting as a picture of a pretty young woman. So they hired the famous American photographer Danny

Leikavitz to come to Paris. Three days and a lot of money later, thirty photos, one more beautiful than the other, were lying on the table in Berthe's apartment. They finally decided to send the one that had Berthe looking slyly over the ocean like a hungry cat with big, wild, eyes.

On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, the envelope left Paris heading for New York, the following letter and the picture in it:

*"Dear Sir,*

*I am the daughter of Emma Bovary, the character of Gustave Flaubert. Before she died, my mother gave me a notebook, her diary, that I think you will find very interesting. It is of utmost importance that I show it to you in person. I will be in New York City at the Blue Cloud restaurant on Monday, December 2nd, at 7pm. The attached photo will make it easier for you to recognize me.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Berthe Bovary"*

The day after the letter was sent, Lily Monroe had a heart attack – the doctors could not do anything – and so she died. Berthe paid for everything and arranged for a cremation to take place the next day. The date for her departure was closing in and she knew that Ms. Monroe would have wanted her to go ahead, no matter what happened.

The trip was pleasant, Berthe spending most of her time sipping champagne and reading Downlake's most recent novel, *Looking into My Face*. Upon arriving in New York, she took a cab to the Plaza Hotel, where she had reserved a room weeks before. A large beautiful bouquet of flowers was on the glass table in the living room with a note from the general manager wishing a pleasant stay to Mademoiselle Bovary.

The great city was full of life, and Berthe felt like a small fish swimming happily in a mountain's stream. She could not explain why New York was more interesting than Paris to her. Both cities were noisy, filled with rhythms and people of all nations and colors, with restaurants and jazz clubs into which a woman could walk alone without any problems. Both were worlds in which nobody cared who or what you were or what you were doing. It was maybe the architecture, or the people, but she now understood why her mother had liked so much being taken through the streets of Manhattan by that snobbish Woody Allen.

But that little, neurotic man had sent her back into the novel, where he thought that she belonged.

The diary - the real Emma's life, not the one imagined by that sick Flaubert - those pages covered in Emma's shaky writing, could finally tell the truth about Emma Bovary's life. As a revenge for everything her mother had suffered in France, maybe she would publish it here in America. "**Madame Bovary Diary to be published in the United States!**" A good title for the French newspapers, indeed. After she found the diary, Berthe had read it many times and memorized every line. In there was the last trace of her mother, the woman despised and humiliated by so many men and women because she dreamed of more than they could. Berthe could never forget the smell of death that was in the air when she entered the room where her mother was lying on the bed. Too young to understand what was happening, she knew that something was wrong with the way her mother was sleeping. She had slowly opened those long fingers, which she always dreamed of caressing her, taken the notebook and quickly hidden it in her blouse.

Only years later did she gather the courage to open it. By then the scent of her mother's perfume - a mixture of green apples and geranium leaves - had almost disappeared. And the words on the first page... *Il n'as pas dit toute la verite ..... He never said the whole truth....*

Who was he? No matter how many times she read it, she didn't find a response in the diary. Oh, Gustave Flaubert! A gentleman never tells. But who would ever say that Flaubert was a gentleman? Not even his own mother. And his lies! Read by thousands of people who analyzed Emma Bovary, judged her. A subject for college examinations! Never left to rest in peace, not even after death - never. All because of that fat, unwashed man with a sick mouth smelling of bad wine and cheap cigarettes, who thought of himself as an artist - Gustave Flaubert.

The truth is in her mother diary, in the pages full of small words written with purple ink, the color of Emma's eyes. Even Ms. Monroe believed the diary was just an invention, as if she could lie about her mother!

And now, Downlake, the famous writer, might hope to get the diary and even to sell it at an auction. *The Holograph Diary of Emma Bovary!* She can see the newspaper titles! She could have sold it a long time ago, especially when she was working at that miserable factory. But sell her mother's words? She would never do it.

December 2<sup>nd</sup> was a day colder than the glass of champagne offered to Berthe by the man sitting at the Plaza's bar. The rich looking American thought that the young woman with a strange accent was naïve enough, like a goose overfed to produce the famous *foie gras*, to let herself succumb to his charm and money. But Berthe emptied the flute, thanked him nicely with the voice of a shy high-school girl who forgot to do her homework, got down from the high barstool that emphasized her long legs, and left the bar before the man realized what happened. He remained with his mouth opened, no words coming out, *bouche-be*, as the French say.

Wearing a red fox fur coat, Berthe was now heading towards the Blue Cloud restaurant humming an old song, "Bitter Gardenias". It was already past seven, but the wait would make Downlake slightly nervous, thus more vulnerable.

The *maitre d'* took her to the table where the writer was already waiting. He got up as the waiter seated her. Many years had passed since the night when Lily Monroe was scarred for life in the fire. Downlake was now an elderly gentleman with white hair and brown spots on his hands. He even had a small belly! Only his eyes, of which Lily had spoken on numerous occasions, were still as lively as they ever were and had already undressed Berthe. Too bad for him, she would still be at an advantage - even more so.

Asked what she wanted to drink, Berthe chose a Martell cognac. When it arrived, she took a big sip to gather up enough courage. She bent slightly over the table to feel him at closer range. So many years of wait – who was this man?

*"She touched her glass to his and raised it to her mouth. Because it was almost empty she had to bend backwards to be able to drink; and with her head tilted back, her neck and her lips outstretched, she began to laugh at tasting nothing; and then the tip of her tongue came out from between her small teeth and began daintily to lick the bottom of the glass."*<sup>1</sup>

At that moment, George Downlake decided to forget about his doctor's recommendations and ordered a second whiskey and lit up another Cuban cigar. Berthe realized that her mission would not be as hard as she had expected. You could still live in this world if an old Nobel Prize winner reacts positively to feminine innocence.

"What do you do for a living, Mademoiselle Bovary?"

“I read.” she responded, taking a deep drag on her cigarette, “and I smoke. I read your books and most of all I would like to tell you that you are a great writer, Mr. Downlake.”

Her scent, a mixture of green apples and geranium leaves, engulfed the man all over, down to the bottom of his lungs.

“You spoke of a diary by Madame Bovary?”

“Of course, Sir. I have it back at home, I mean, in the apartment of a friend that I’m staying with. I heard so many things about New York. I was afraid to take it with me...you know how it is, a single woman in the night...although now, here, I should feel safe.”

“Afraid, Mademoiselle? I hope you are not afraid of me!”

“The streets, Sir. I heard that at night it is dangerous and I don’t like to walk alone. I usually stay home and read your books - you are such a good writer. Anyhow, let’s go to my place and you’ll see the diary. It has been waiting a long time for you...”

*“Her eyes with their long curving lashes looked straight ahead: they are fully open, but seemed a little narrowed because of the blood that was pulsing gently under the fine skin of her cheekbones. The rosy flesh between her nostrils was all but transparent in the light. She was inclining her head to one side, and the pearly tips of her white teeth showed between her lips.”<sup>2</sup>*

Downlake had the impression that he was re-living this scene, but he just could not remember where, with whom. It was hard remembering, especially when, as a writer, he met so many women, he’d had so many experiences.

“I would like another cognac, please.” whispered Berthe melancholically.

The cognac and another whiskey for the writer were drunk like glasses of water by two thirsty people.

Berthe got up, Downlake helped with her coat with an intimate gesture and he almost felt her entrapped in his arms. He stopped in time and made sure that the waiter was more than well tipped. As they left the restaurant, Berthe whispered:

“It’s only five minutes away, on 56<sup>th</sup> street.”

She took the arm of the tall, wide shouldered man, and in the cold air their bodies moved closer to one another, trying to fight the chill. As they arrived in front of the apartment building on East 56<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, Berthe remembered suddenly that she had forgotten to buy something from the pharmacy.





*1, 2- Excerpts from “Madame Bovary” by Gustave Flaubert. Translated by Francis Steegmuller. The Modern Library. New York. Modern Library Edition. © 1957 by Francis Steegmuller.*

The End