Title: The Met, Mrs. Vreeland, and Me
Storyteller: Andrew Solomon
Episode: Misfits, the MET, and a Nursing Home Switcheroo
Originally Aired: January 17, 2017

My senior year of high school I decided it was time for things to change. My braces were off. I got contact lenses. My skin started to clear up. And my yearbook quote was, "Hi, Ho, the glamorous life." And I needed a summer job. I applied for several jobs including a job in the editorial department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that I didn't think I'd get because I knew there were a vast number of people competing for it. And to my total delight I did get it and I thought, "My intellect is going to change the world and they can tell."

So, I got through my first day there and I went into the office of the woman who had hired me and I noticed that the thank you note I'd sent her after our interview was on her little bulletin board behind her desk. And I said, "Polly, that's so touching that you've put up the thank you note that I wrote to you." And she said, "You know, there were 200 applicants for this job. And, basically, what this job involves is filing, proofreading, and Xeroxing, and any idiot could do it, but your thank you note was on my favorite color of blue paper. So, I decided that I'd give you the job."

Indeed, the next few days were taken up with filing and Xeroxing and an occasional little bit of copy editing, and I was given a desk in a room at the back of the editorial department where there were many other people with many other desks. And because of the architecture of that part of the museum I had a sort of triangular piece of wall space over my desk with a nail sticking out of it. And I thought, "I should hang something up there. I should hang up something in a frame." So, I got home that night to dinner with my parents and I said, "There's a nail sticking out at the wall right above my desk and I really should take something in to hang there, something in a frame."

Well, in my father's bachelor days he had been a great fan of an opera singer named Ljuba Welitsch, and when he met my mother he had a photograph of Ljuba Welitsch as Tosca that was hanging in his apartment. And when they got married she said that she did not want photos of other women all over the apartment, but that he could hang Ljuba Welitsch in the bathroom if he wanted to. So, all my life my parents had a photograph of Ljuba Welitsch in their bathroom. And that summer they were making some repairs in their bathroom and so my father said, "Well, you can have Ljuba if you want to."

So, off I went to the Metropolitan Museum with my picture, and I hung it over my desk and there it was. And three days later the chairman of the editorial department, with whom I had until then had no interaction whatsoever, came back into the room to get something. And suddenly this booming voice rang out, "When she sang Rosalinde, New York laughed. When she sang Dona Ana, New York cried. And when she sang Salome, New York was speechless. Is that your photograph?" he said.

And I said, "Yes," thinking I could carry it off that I was actually the Ljuba Welitsch fan in the family. I said, "Yes, that is my photograph."

He said, "You are coming out for a drink with me after work, young man."

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So, off we went for our drink at The Stanhope, and he introduced me in the course of that drink to all of the big high-powered people in the department. And he said to me, “What are you doing in the department, anyway?"

And I said, "Xeroxing, filing, a little copyediting, some proofreading.”

He said, "That's ridiculous, we'll come up with something else for you to do. I'll know by tomorrow.”

One of the people he’d introduced me to was the head of classical art, a man named Dietrich von Bothmer. And the next day I found myself in the elevator with Dietrich von Bothmer and we had a very pleasant chat, and I thought, “These people aren't so scary. There was no reason for me to be so intimidated.” And the doors of the elevator opened on the second floor to reveal two women who were knocking on a vase, and one was saying to the other, “It's just as I thought. There's nothing in there."

And Dietrich von Bothmer jumped out of the elevator and he said, "What did you expect to find in my amphora? Geraniums? You get out of the museum now!" And they turned and ran.

I got upstairs and John O'Neill, the chairman of the editorial department, said, "You're going to do photo research for the costume institute catalog."

And I thought "Ok, I've arrived." The costume institute was a nexus of glamour, even within the glamorous Metropolitan Museum of Art. And I was all revved up to go down there.

So, I went down and I started doing photo research. I worked with two curators and it was the 80s and there was a lot of jewelry all over the place at that point. And one of the curators was wearing this amazing ruby ring, a kind of cocktail ring with this gigantic ruby in it. And she wore it every day and I'd noticed that. And after about a week she came in one day and I noticed she wasn't wearing it. And I said to her, "Your ring...?"

And she said, "Oh yes.” She said, "I lost it."

And I said, “But that's heartbreaking." I said, "Where did you lose it?"

And she said, "In a caramel custard."

And I said, "I beg your pardon?"

And she said, "It's happened to me before."

Then a few days later the phone rang and I answered it and someone on the phone said that there was one of the curators who owned a necklace that he had and that he wanted to return it and could I ask her to meet him on the steps of the museum at five o'clock.

So, I told the curator about this and she said, in her amazing French accent, she said, "I'll tell you what happened.” She said, “I was at Newport at a party. I was wearing my yellow dress that's like this and like this with the thing. I was there and I saw this man and he was not talking to anyone. And so I thought, well, to begin a conversation, I was wearing that necklace, the one that was my grandmother's, the diamonds. I walked over and I dropped it into his drink to begin the conversation. And then I saw some friends and I got distracted and I walked away and I thought to myself, ‘Well, I do not know who he is, but he will find out who I am.' So, you see, now it has happened." She said, “But I am quite embarrassed about the whole thing. So, maybe you can come and wait with me on the steps of the museum."

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So, at 5 o'clock I went with her and we waited on the steps of the museum and a gigantic car drove up and a driver helped someone out of the back seat. And he came up and he presented this diamond necklace in a box and there was an exchange of pleasantries. And I thought, “This is really my life.” And he got back in the car and drove off, and she turned to me and she said, "I tell you what, my dear. I must have been very, very drunk indeed to drop my diamonds in that glass of scotch."

So, then I went back up to the editorial department and they told me, "We've decided that you should be the one to edit the introduction to the catalog by Diana Vreeland." Diana Vreeland who had been the editor of *Vogue*, who was now the consultative chairman of the Costume Institute, who was the most glamorous person in the most glamorous department in the most glamorous institution.

I was incredibly excited and I thought they really realized my editorial voice can do anything. So, off I went for my meeting with Mrs. Vreeland and I got downstairs. She didn't come in all the time, but she came in that day and she walked in and there was someone who answers the telephones who'd sit behind a big glass desk in the Costume Institute. And Mrs. Vreeland walked in and looked at her and said, "So, you're the new receptionist."

And she said, "Yes, Mrs. Vreeland, I am and I'm very excited to be here.”

And Mrs. Vreeland looked her up and down and said, "You'd be a lovely creature if you could grow legs."

And then she walked over to where some other curators were looking at images of what was supposed to go in the exhibition, and one of them had just picked up a picture and said, "My mother used to have a dress just like this."

And Mrs. Vreeland said, "That's the most bourgeoise outfit in the entire exhibition."

And I thought, “Right, editing. Here we go.” So off we went into the room and I said, "Well, Mrs. Vreeland," I said, very nervous. I said, "I've made some edits and I just want to show you what they are. I've worked from your draft and here's the first one.”

And she looked at it and she said, “Why did you change that word?"

And I said, "Well, Mrs. Vreeland, it's...it's the verb, and it doesn't agree with the subject in the sentence. So, I was just making it agree."

And she said, "Does it have to agree?"

And I said, “It is Museum policy that the verb agree with the subject.”

And she said, "Young man, that seems to me to show an exceptional lack of imagination."

So, by the time we got done I was virtually in tears and I went back up with the somewhat edited version of it that I had. And I said, when I got back upstairs, “That was hard,” to the person who'd sent me down.

He said, "I know. None of the rest of us could bear to do it. So, we sent you."

Well, a few days after that Mrs. Vreeland and I had managed to hatch some little version of a reasonable relationship. She came in and the exhibition was almost ready to open, and she walked through the exhibition and she pointed at each of these mannequins in the exhibition, which I thought looked fantastic. And she said, “Her head has to be moved to the left. You have to change the hat on that one. This one is awful, it shouldn't be here at all. That one..." and she went on and on.

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I thought, “This impossible old woman is making everyone's lives miserable.” But when she was finished the exhibition looked about a million times better than it had before. And she and I then went upstairs and we were walking through the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum and she put one of her small claw-like hands on my arm. And she said to me, “Young man, stop for a minute.”

So, I stopped and she said, "I want you to look around this room and contemplate the fact that every one of these people went into a store in which other things were available and selected what they're wearing right now."

I looked down. I looked down at her hand on the sleeve of my blazer, which I believe my mother had selected in a store where other things were available, and hope that I was passing muster.

About a week after that, shortly before the exhibition was to open in its final form, she came in one day and one of the curators had hung over her desk a photo. It's an amazing photo, some of you may have seen it. It's a Richard Avedon photograph of Nureyev, naked, leaping forward with his arms up in the air. And Mrs. Vreeland walked in and saw it there and said, "I see you have my photograph up over your desk."

And the curator said, "Your photograph, Mrs. Vreeland?"

And she said, "Of course.” She said, "I had it done when I was at *Vogue*. They thought it was an extravagance. We had to fly that Russian boy. We had to fly him in from Paris. But I said to them, ‘You wait and see. This will be the apotheosis of the dance.’ And indeed, it is.”

And the curator said, “Well, that's... that's very fascinating. What happened?"

She said, "Well.” She said, "I was with Dickie Avedon and we went to his studio which is like a cathedral. And we got ourselves settled in there, and I had my assistants, and Dickie had his assistants, and we were all making plans and figuring things out. And then the Russian arrived off of his airplane and he came in and he said he needed to warm up. And he began to dance in among us! No music, he just danced right in between everyone! And, my dear, I must tell you it was very strange, but it was rather beautiful. And then I said to Dickie, I said, ‘My goodness.’ I said, ‘This has to be a private moment.’ And so, we sent all his assistants out, and we sent all of my assistants out, and it was just Dickie Avedon and me and that Russian and he went behind the screen to take off his clothes. And what happened,” she said, gesturing vertically up from her crotch, she said, “You know how it can be with men in the mornings…” She said, “When he came out it was like that, and we had to wait half an hour for it to go down! And I must tell you, my dear, it was very strange, but it was rather beautiful.”

I had gone from my family, where there was a picture of Ljuba Welitsch on the wall, where we had windows that looked out on glamour; I had found the door and I had finally walked out into glamour itself. It was very strange and it was very beautiful, except that it was also often very ordinary and quite ugly. It wasn't much of a safe haven, but it felt safe to me even though it was treacherous, because it seemed as though, finally, I might escape from glasses, from braces, from the tyranny of insecure anxiety that had ruled my adolescence.

Thank you.