

# Vincent's ear—and Gaby's arm

John Launer

Two nights before Christmas, close to midnight, a 19-year-old woman called Gaby was summoned down to the foyer of her workplace, in the southern French town of Arles. A skinny, red-headed man was at the front door, asking for her. He had brought her a gift, wrapped in newspaper. She recognised him as a regular client of the place. He lived around the corner in a rented house, along with a large, boisterous friend. They were both painters, and the red-headed one was a foreigner. He spoke French well, but with a strong accent that some of the locals thought was Polish, although it was in fact Dutch. As he handed over the gift, she may have noticed that the left side of his face was injured and bleeding. On unwrapping the paper, she would have realised why. He had given her his left ear, which he had sliced off with a cut-throat razor earlier that evening. She promptly fainted.

The artist, Vincent van Gogh, was unknown at the time, although after his death he became possibly the best known painter in the world, and one of the most valuable. His housemate was Paul Gauguin, who later became almost as famous. The story of their brief and turbulent friendship during these 9 weeks in 1888 has been the subject of many articles and entire books, detailing their immense artistic creativity, their drunken arguments and their catastrophic falling out.<sup>1,2</sup> Everyone knows that he cut off his ear (see figure 1), but the young woman to whom he presented it has disappeared from sight. Along with so many women who happened to be third parties in the stories of famous men, history has assigned her the very smallest of walk-on parts.

For decades, the woman was known as Rachel, as a newspaper at the time reported her name incorrectly. Decades afterwards, it turned out that she was really called Gabrielle, or Gaby for short, and her family later ran a local garage. More recently, a writer called Bernadette Murphy did some painstaking detective work and managed to track down her living descendants.<sup>3</sup> Another historian then discovered more facts about her and disclosed her full name.<sup>4</sup> We still know only a fraction of what we do about the two men, but the information makes it



**Figure 1** Vincent van Gogh: Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear.

possible to redress the imbalance in the story a little.

## RABIES VACCINE

Gabrielle Berlatier was a farmer's daughter. The encounter with van Gogh was not the first dramatic incident in her life. Around 2 years previously, she was attacked by a neighbour's dog and bitten on her left arm. The dog was shot, and discovered to have rabies. Her wound was cauterised, but her family realised that her life was in danger. They had heard that Louis Pasteur in Paris had recently created a vaccine against rabies, made by attenuating the virus in rabbits and extracting it from their spinal cords. The day after she was bitten, they took Gaby to Paris. Over the course of the next couple of weeks, she had 20 injections of the rabies vaccine. While in Paris, her family took her to a spectacular play by Jules Verne, with live horses and mirrors creating an impression of an army on stage.

Not long after her return home, she found work in town. Possibly this was in order to pay off her medical bills. She may have served for a while at an all-night cafe that was a favourite for van Gogh and Gauguin, but she definitely worked at one of the 'Houses of Tolerance' on the Rue du Bout d'Arles. It operated as a legal brothel, catering for the soldiers in the town's garrison and other single men. Van Gogh and Gauguin were often visitors, and

wrote openly about their brothel visits, as well as depicting them in their paintings (see figure 2). This was the place where van Gogh brought his notorious present.

Bernadette Murphy has made a case that Gaby only worked there as a cleaner, but the evidence is not entirely convincing. Murphy formulated the theory after she met the family's descendants, who were understandably shocked to hear about Gaby's workplace and the van Gogh connection. It seems reasonable to suspect that Gaby and van Gogh had previously had sexual encounters there. We do not know whether she had any kind of personal friendship with him, or if he was a customer she barely knew who developed a fixation on her. Both are possible: he had previously lived with a sex worker and her child, and was also prone to infatuations.

## SEX AND VIOLENCE

Van Gogh offered no explanation afterwards for what he did, beyond saying he had 'lost his mind.' Historians have proposed dozens of theories, from the plausible to the far fetched.<sup>5</sup> Murphy has come up with a new one, namely that the ear was an offering to bring succour to a 'wounded angel', compensating for her scar from the dog bite and cauterisation—but this suggestion probably falls at the less plausible end of the spectrum. What we do know is that, in the weeks van Gogh and Gauguin spent together, their minds and conversations were taken up not only with the technical details of their art but also with sex and violence.<sup>6</sup> The focus of these included a recent novel by Zola in which a protagonist has his ears cut off, and two sensational trials in Paris, both relating to the murder of sex workers. Van Gogh claimed these had been plotted in a cafe owned by an ex-lover of his, and Gauguin thought that one of the accused had been framed.

On the day van Gogh mutilated himself, his distress was heightened by a letter announcing that his brother, on whom he depended emotionally and financially, had just got engaged. This was followed by an altercation with Gauguin, so fierce that the latter moved to a hotel for the night, in preparation for leaving Arles altogether. Putting all of this together, along with van Gogh's earlier and subsequent psychiatric history,<sup>7</sup> it seems likely that the impulse to cut off his ear and take it to Gaby was triggered by a convergence of many disturbing influences, along with others we may never know, possibly including fantasies about Gaby.

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Figure 2 Vincent van Gogh: The Brothel.

The impulse may also have come from an auditory hallucination.

Bizarrely, when Gauguin returned to Paris a couple of days afterwards, he attended the execution by guillotine of one of the convicted murderers they had



Figure 3 Paul Gauguin: Jug depicting a severed head.

discussed. He then fashioned an extraordinary ceramic jug, representing his own severed head, streaming with blood, and shorn of its ears (see figure 3). He and van Gogh never saw each other again. A year and a half later, after a prolonged spell in a mental asylum, van Gogh shot himself. Gauguin lived for another 14 years but died alone on an island in the south Pacific from syphilis.

#### 'NOTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY'

As for Gaby, it appears she was not disturbed for very long by what had happened. When van Gogh visited the 'House of Tolerance' 5 weeks later to try and see her, the proprietress reassured him that the girl had quickly recovered her calm, and that such events were 'nothing out of the ordinary in this part of the world.'<sup>1</sup> Within a couple of years, Gaby had left the place to marry a butcher from nearby, and had given birth to a daughter. She lived into her 80s, becoming a much-loved grandmother.

It is interesting to speculate what Gaby would have said about her time at the 'House of Tolerance' if she had been willing to speak about it. Perhaps she would have

remembered the skinny red-haired artist because of the shocking Christmas gift he brought her, and possibly for other reasons, too. However, it is tempting to imagine that she might have dismissed her memories of that time with a Gallic shrug, to express the general folly of men and their lusts and madneses, whoever they had turned out to be. She would certainly have had other events from her life that she wanted to talk about, including the dog bite that left her with a scar on her arm, and her visit to Paris for the miraculous medical treatment that saved her life.

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