

"THE ARTISTS' MODEL"

Piercing her sticky wad of clay, Margo felt a sense of revulsion at the naked male model straddling the large plywood platform, his legs splayed at what she considered to be an unnatural and almost lewd wide angle. His sloping forehead reminded her of an early man in a diorama she'd seen in the county natural history museum, a primitive subspecies that no longer existed. And weren't models supposed to have defined musculature? This model's torso was more Pillsbury dough boy than buff. She quickly chastened herself. She and her classmates were fortunate to have anyone who was willing to pose naked in their exurban enclave. Just one mention of the class in the community weekly paper would be enough to close the class down. When the session ended, Margo lingered at the front of the class, her fingers nervously closing and re-closing the hasp of her plastic art supply box while waiting for the model to get dressed. She chatted with him before she left the class, her small act of contrition.

The model's shortcomings notwithstanding, Margo looked forward to the class with an enthusiasm that bordered on the manic. She was divorced going on six months now. Her ex was in jail, having cheated on both her and his taxes. Their small nineteenth century mansion gatekeeper's house she had lovingly restored was sold at auction, every penny garnished by the

government. At age twenty seven, Margo had begun her new life unencumbered, her only possessions her wedding band, a small suitcase of clothing and a small gold necklace that had belonged to her mother.

Normally not prone to extremes of emotion, Margo discovered lately that almost anything could reduce her to tears -- a stranger's plaintive face, a small but encompassing sweep of someone's hand, the smell of fresh rain. These were tears of happiness, she told herself, an affirmation that all manner of good things existed in the world, if she could only find them and see them as such. But she also felt that these very emotions of elation inhibited her ability to get on with life, for they tricked her into a false sense of well-being.

For as long as she could remember, she had been lonely. From the moment they married, her husband had taken over her life -- she had permitted him to. It was as if he were a vortex she had spun into, but, oddly, she didn't mind it -- it was that very quality that attracted her to him. But after a few months, he receded from her and she rarely saw him. He said he had to travel a lot for business, and who was she to question it? On the rare times he was home, they hardly spoke and when they did she felt anything she said sparked his anger. He didn't threaten her or behave aggressively but on more than one occasion she could feel

his revulsion, thought she saw it in his eyes. When he conducted his business from home it was always behind closed door and she sometimes heard his voice elevating to a scary loud rumble, although she could not make out what was being said. Through time -- they had only been married three years -- she took his silences to mean he was unhappy with her but she had been too afraid to ask him why.

Her husband had demanded she quit working at the small art gallery in the next town over to make their house a home as he put it, and for a short time, she enjoyed the freedom of not working: painting the small rooms, doing minor plumbing, planting a garden of herbs and flowers. Their home was on five wooded acres. With the exception of her husband, she never saw anyone except during her weekly visits to the grocery store. Compounding her rising sense of desolation was that she had no family whatsoever or, at least none she knew about. Her mother had said she was the end of the line, on both sides -- her father had long since died.

Walking home to the room she rented in town over a busy café, she passed nineteenth century historically landmarked houses with mansard roofs, porches and steel weathervanes that shone in the light of the full moon and she forced herself to consider if she had ever loved her husband. She had, even if it wasn't

reciprocated, she decided, and she was glad for it. She kicked up a small clot of dust as she turned down the gravel path that led to the stairway in the alleyway leading up to her room. She wondered if her feelings of desolation had to do with her having grown up on a barrier island. In the summer months, the area swelled and became a clamorous tourist colony. Despite her mother's strenuous efforts to get her outside which included locking her out of the house during the summer, Margo refused to go outside. On days her mother let her stay in, she hunkered out of sight within the shuttered house, afraid of the din. She grew up alone, the crickets and horseshoe crabs her only companions.

Since moving to Rhinetown, she had managed to find a job as a saleswoman in an upscale woman's dress shop, where unfortunately business was slow, and the owner already hinted that she would have to let her go. Margo liked her co-workers, women in their sixties who called themselves girls and were well-coiffed, well-accoutered and who smiled faintly at all times.

Most nights, Margo lay awake for hours, her worry gripping her vise-like. She was earning next to nothing. She ate very little due to her lack of funds -- soup and some crackers mostly -- and she feared she wouldn't have enough money to pay the modest rent. She knew she shouldn't have enrolled in an art class, that it was an extravagance. Finally, she was lulled to sleep by the

restaurant patron's conversation that seeped into her room through her wide oak planked floor.

The following day, she attempted to explain to her elderly art teacher, Mr. Suarez, why she hadn't paid the latest installment of her art class. He told her not to worry, that she could pay "whenever." Something about Mr. Suarez's explanation made Margo highly uneasy, weak-kneed almost. She felt he wanted something from her.

"I appreciate your flexibility, Mr. Suarez. They stood alone in the center of the empty high-ceilinged room, which smelled of wet clay and pine sap. Margo wrapped her arms closely around herself, cradling her elbows.

"You seem to be having money problems. Could you perhaps use a job?" he asked, a benevolent smile rising from the small film of saliva around his lips.

"Yes." She tried to tamp down her enthusiasm. Desperation is seen as weakness, her mother had once said.

"The county museum sponsors a Drawing-the-Nude class. It's a strange beast. It has no instructor. The students come twice a week. Some sketch. A few paint. Some are quite good. Mature people. Mostly women. Their last model just had a baby and moved. If you're interested, you'll do," he said, his eyes sweeping

across her as if she was a display of blood red oranges at the supermarket. "The payment is \$100 a sitting -- which is good for this kind of work. The class meets for two and a half hours, with a six-minute break every forty minutes."

"When can I start?"

"Tomorrow."

That afternoon, Margo went to the secondhand clothing store and bought a blue terry cloth robe with dolman sleeves. She had taken several drawing-the-nude classes over the years and she remembered the models wore robes during breaks. Of the seven students in the class, there were two divorced women, two widows, and two couples, the Zimmers and the Lowenbruns. All were in their late sixties to mid seventies. One woman talked about her deceased husband's Great Golf Obsession, as she called it. Others spoke about books and world events. With the exception of one of the women, the women had trim athletic bodies. In their form-fitting European jeans, the women seemed decades younger than their years.

Everyone knew everyone for years it seemed. Two worked as volunteers at the local hospital. Two were best friends from childhood. They were all cheerful. They had hobbies and grandchildren they doted on and children with good careers. Sometimes, her hands on her hips, her eyes deadened and heavy and

pulled to the side, Margo wondered what her life might have been like if she had had parents like these.

"Would you mind frowning a little like you did the last pose?" Mr. Zimmer asked. She complied although she hadn't realized she had been frowning. Her eyes caught Mrs. Zimmer's, who smiled an appreciative smile.

Much to her surprise, Margo discovered she had an aptitude for modeling. At first, for the first few sessions or so, she felt uneasy under the unflattering fluorescent light. She worried that her nipples would grow rigid and that someone might get the mistaken impression that it was the result of arousal rather than from the cold air that flowed across the room every time the door opened. For the first few sessions, she did not know where to look after she affected a pose. She tried looking straight down, but it made her neck feel leaden. After a few sessions, she discovered it helped to hinge onto someone's kindly gaze. One such person was Mr. Lowenbrun, a genteel courtly man who always greeted her upon entering the room, and who always said goodbye to her by name when he left the class a few minutes early each week for what he apologetically explained was a "previous, long-standing engagement."

During class, Margo noticed that certain unstated rules were strictly observed. While the students might remark about Margo's

hair or face or their inability to draw Margo's fingers or toes to their satisfaction, they did not speak specifically about her body. Although the students were allowed to move freely about the room so that they could sketch her from different angles, they did not sketch her from behind.

"I was wondering if you were named after Dame Margot Fonteyn, the dancer," Mr. Zimmer asked.

"My mother once told me I was named after a famous dancer."

"Too bad you're too young to have seen her dance with Rudolf Nureyev," Mr. Zimmer offered. "Something fantastic. He could jump higher than the overhead valence, or at least that's the way it looked. Right, Phyllis?" His wife nodded her head in agreement. Mrs. Newman, one of the divorced women, especially admired Margo's hair.

"It's fine, like a baby's. And healthy. A gift from G-d." Margo felt exhilarated just being in the same room with this fine group.

Usually, Margo stood for most of the evening, her legs slightly parted, the right leg bent and in front of the left. Her right hand rested on her thigh, firmly planted and closed, as if to say, I still have my secrets. When she posed sitting down, she kept her legs together. The last pose of the evening was always the hardest. She felt a cramp forming in her lower left leg and

knew she could re-adjust her leg, but she didn't want to. She took great pride in her ability to stay perfectly immobile, transfixed, breathing shallow breaths that hung in her throat like smoke.

After about two months of classes, Mr. Suarez came to visit. "May I have the attention of everyone," he said, clapping his hands together ceremoniously. "I am very sorry to announce that the county has cut back the cultural arts budget and this course was eliminated. I am very sorry."

During the break, the students clustered together and bowed their heads, deep in conversation. Mrs. Evans, a small handsome finch of a woman and the oldest person in the group, approached Margo.

"You're a terrific model, Margo, and we don't want to lose you. So we decided, if it's agreeable to you, that is, that we'd pay you \$150 a session for two hours twice a week. We'll meet in our houses. Would that be acceptable?"

"It would be fine, thanks." Mrs. Evans gave Margo's hand a small squeeze. Her hand felt soft, like a baby's. But it also felt bony, like a large dog's knuckle.

The days preceding the new class passed rapidly. Margo found a new part-time job at a bookstore down the block from her apartment.

The first session at Mrs. Evans' house found the group in an almost giddy state. They reminded Margo of young children on a school field trip. Mrs. Evan's housekeeper, a portly black woman, had rigged up a platform from a low thick packing crate. A gold lame chaise lounge which smelled faintly of mothballs was to be Margo's seat. The housekeeper spread a white silk sheet across the chaise to provide the required draping. At first, Margo worried that the mothballs had penetrated the chaise and would irritate her sensitive skin, but it didn't. But the mothball smell bothered her, pervading her, making her feel she was a captive of sorts. She felt slightly unhinged. She tried to shift her concentration, summoning every ounce of her strength and attention to the task. She noticed that the class seemed louder and more chatty than normal. Mr. Zimmer, whose medium was watercolor, spilled his paint dish onto the highly varnished wood floor. The housekeeper mopped up the paint, frowning slightly. Margo couldn't decide whether the housekeeper was frowning at Margo's unclad form or the small azure puddle.

When Margo arrived at the Bath-like landscaped grounds of Mrs. Piven's large center hall colonial the following week, she was dismayed to observe that there was no wall near the platform and thus her buttocks would be visible to the artists if they

moved anywhere greater than a 45 degree angle to her. Margo did not say anything, however, because she believed they would obey the unwritten rule of not coming behind her. And no one did until her last pose of the night. Mr. Lowenstein, who usually hung the farthest back while sketching, now moved directly behind Margo and close to her. When she turned ever so slightly toward him to cast a baleful glance, his eyes seemed to bore into her pubic region very specifically. She felt violated and humiliated. Her anger simmered. She could do nothing. She was getting paid to pose.

When the session ended, the atmosphere seemed almost festive. She noted to herself that no one had chatted with her during the breaks, as they always had. Suddenly, Mr. Lowenstein materialized next to her.

"I hope you didn't mind I was sketching you from behind." Margo was about to say that yes, as a matter of fact, she did mind, but then Mrs. Piven approached.

"Did you like the scones, dear? I baked them myself in your honor. Last week you said you'd never eaten a scone that you'd like. Well?" Mrs. Piven's voice was bell-like and girlish. If Margo closed her eyes and listened to her, she would guess her to be thirty years old.

"Mrs. Piven, you have a lovely voice. Did you study with a voice teacher?" Margo asked.

"My dear, you have a very good ear. While I slaved away in Manhattan before getting married, I took voice lessons with a woman who was quite famous at the time, a Mrs. Ware. I skipped lunch for many a month to pay for the lessons." Listening to Mrs. Piven, with her crisp "p's" and incisive "s's" and "c's" was enjoyable, Margo thought.

The following morning, Margo began her job at the bookstore. Stuart, the owner, was disorganized in the extreme. Book catalogues and boxes were piled haphazardly around the room. He seemed happily content in his chaos. There was a large stack of what appeared to be newly-arrived books, which, upon closer inspection, revealed a thick layer of dust.

"Would you like me to classify and shelve them?" Margo offered.

"Classify? Oh, yeah, sure." He confessed to her that he organizing was not his strong suit. Margo imagined that Stuart had some rich aunt or uncle somewhere who was subsidizing him in this venture solely in the interest of his mental health, and whether the store made or lost money was largely irrelevant to both of them.

The third session of the art class was held at the Zimmer

home, an expansive L-shaped contemporary house whose wood floors were the color of eggshells. Mr. Zimmer's logistical arrangement for Margo was even more unsuitable than the previous week. He placed Margo's chair in the sun room. The jalousie windows of the enclosure had been cranked open to their full extent, giving the room the aspect of a glass Sherman tank. Mr. Zimmer had placed low beach chairs around the room. When the group sketched her, they would be peering up at her, into her, as it were. Even more disturbing was his choice of a chair for Margo. It was entirely clear, plastic lucite, and there was no draping on it. Everyone greeted her warmly, and no one seemed to notice the unsuitability of the chair or its placement. Margo braced herself. No, this would not do. She walked over to Mr. Zimmer and smiled sunnily, her heart racing like a souped-up car.

"May I speak to you? Mr. Zimmer?"

"Call me Lou." He grinned.

"No. I'd prefer to call you Mr. Zimmer, if you don't mind. Could we have some privacy?"

"Sure, let's go into the kitchen." The kitchen was white throughout with the exception of the stainless steel light fixture. The sunlight streamed in profusely, creating a blinding glare. Margo squinted.

"The arrangement where I'm supposed to sit just won't do. The

The chair is lucite."

"So?"

"It's see-through." He smiled. Margo wasn't sure if he was pretending not to understand or if he really did not understand.

"Oh. Oh! At first I put the summer upholstery, the chintz, on your chair, but then I figured, it's all dusty and it's probably not that clean. And then everyone walked in and I forgot. . ."

"Could you bring me a clean blanket?"

"Sure, sure," he said.

It was then that Margo realized that the alternating-home arrangement wasn't working. Just as she was deciding what to do next, Mrs. Evans informed Margo that the group would not be meeting for two weeks because of the Christmas holidays. And then the group presented her with a gift.

"This is for you. We made it. All of us women." She pecked a dry kiss on Margo's cheek and handed Margo a small brightly colored Afghan quilt and a check for two hundred dollars. Margo had planned on telling the women that this would be her last day, but looking at everyone's smiling faces, Margo couldn't do it. Not yet, anyway. Her job in the bookstore barely covered her rent. And besides, she genuinely liked the women.

For the first week the group was away, Margo agonized over what to do. She had so enjoyed modeling for this cultivated group

when they met in the county art center. But something had changed when the class moved from house to house, room to room. She felt humiliated. Did some of the people view her with disdain? But still, on the other hand, one hundred and fifty dollars twice a week for four hours of work was good money. But she didn't think she could do this any more. She decided to reach out to Mrs. Evans, who seemed the wisest and the kindest of the group.

Two days before the group was supposed to meet at Mrs. Evan's house, Margo called her.

"Margo, We're all so looking forward to seeing you."

"That's what I called about. I can't do it."

"Is everything's all right."

"The logistics are not working out. I feel . . ."

"Is it the money?"

"No. I feel cheap, as if people are testing me"

"I'm not sure what you mean. I have an idea. Why don't you model for me at my house? It will be just the two of us. You tell me what you need. And I'll let you take care of the logistics, as you call it." Margo felt instantly relieved.

"But what about the other women?"

"I'll take care of it."

"How much could you pay me?"

"How does one hundred dollars a session sound? A session will last an hour and ten minutes?"

"Fine." Great. Oh, and Mrs. Evans?"

"Call me Mildred."

"Could you please pass on this phone number to the rest of the women? It's the phone number of the cafe beneath where I live. I don't have a cell phone and I could really use the money if they can individually accommodate my requirements."

"Certainly. Is there anything you want me to have for you when you arrive?"

"Just a chair and draping."

Before going over to Mrs. Evans house, Margo splashed some after-bath lotion on her body. She combed and re-combed her hair. As she walked across the large circular gravel driveway, she remembered that Mrs. Evans mentioned she had several works of art by famous artist. Sure enough, there were a Kandinsky painting and a Calder mobile.

Mrs. Evans medium was charcoal. She used an English charcoal, Willow, which she had complained during class was always breaking. The two women sat in a large sunny curtainless window seat. Margo did not mind the absence of a wall behind her. Mrs. Evens lived on a deserted street. Margo felt secure.

"Do you mind posing here? I'm not expecting any guests today," Mrs. Evans said.

"No." Margo let her robe slip from her shoulders slowly. She wanted Mrs. Evans to feel that she was putting forth a great effort. Mrs. Evans asked Margo to tilt her head back as far back as she could comfortably.

"You have a lovely neck, like a swan. If you don't mind my saying so, you are the loveliest model I've ever drawn," she said.

Margo suddenly felt her insides contracting and her nipples tighten. She hoped Mrs. Evans didn't notice.

"Thanks." With her head and neck raised to their full extent, her voice seemed outside herself, tight and thin, as if it were coming out of a long ancient instrument.

During the breaks, Mrs. Evans ladled hot cocoa into the Margo's 18 carat gold-rimmed Lenox china cup.

"So you never had a secret bank account?" Mrs. Evans asked, after Margo explained how she had come to be in her dire economic state. Margo bowed her head, slightly embarrassed. "Well, we all learn from our mistakes. And you're still young."

Mrs. Evans asked Margo if she would mind standing on the window seat. Margo said she did not mind, even though Mrs. Evans was now sitting cross-legged on the floor beneath her, looking up at her. The effect of the girlish conversation coupled with the

touch made Margo feel giddy. She was suddenly seized with the urge to tell Mrs. Evans that she would be prepared to do anything she wanted, would be glad to. She felt she loved this cultured pearl of a woman, with her button nose, soft perfect white skin and light green eyes flecked with yellow the color of daffodils.

The feeling intensified. Margo wanted to jump off the window seat and rush into Mrs. Evan's arms. She wanted to laugh and she wanted to cry. She wanted to feel all of the emotions Mrs. Evans seemed capable of feeling. And Margo realized that she would not be going to the other women's houses, would not be able to accommodate herself to both them and their rooms. But at that moment, she concentrated her utmost energy on one aim: being entirely still.

"Can I ask you something, Mrs. Evans?"

"Are you certain you can't call me Mildred? I feel we know each other well enough." The older woman's voice sounded flirtatious. Margo wondered if it was perhaps possible that Mrs. Evans was attracted to Margo? And if she was, what was Margo to do? There was no precedent for Margo to follow.

Mrs. Evans charcoal suddenly snapped, making a thick slurry line on her sketch pad.

"This picture is not coming out right. I know it's not time yet for you to change poses, but could you? I'm getting

frustrated," she said, as she rubbed the charcoal in with the side of her palm on the sketch pad.

"Certainly," Margo said, attempting to parallel the formality of Mrs. Evan's speech.

Margo thought about her next pose. She decided to arch her back so that her breasts pointed up, like tiny erect sprouts. There is something brave about being able to model naked, she thought. She wondered if Mrs. Evans felt she was brave.

Margo placed her feet toes out, like a Degas dancer. She gazed down shyly at her thighs, which undulated slightly at the uppermost recess, her body's only softness.

"May I ask you something? Margo asked.

"Yes?" Mrs. Evans asked, slightly eager, Margo thought.

"Do you promise you won't be angry at me?"

"How can I promise if I don't know what you're going to ask? I know you well enough to know you are incapable of being unkind."

"I want to kiss you, Mrs. Evans. I think I'm falling in love with you."

"I strongly doubt that."

"I find you very attractive."

Mrs. Evans put her charcoal down on her pad and placed the pad on the floor. She shoved Margo's robe into her hands, her arms

fully extended. Margo didn't put the robe on. She was too shocked by Mrs. Evan's reaction to move.

"You're lonely, and I understand that. And you're all alone. You and I have something in common, although not to the same degree. When my husband left me, I felt I'd never experience another intimacy ever. I felt neglected, stripped of my femininity. But something funny happened. I found out things about myself, things about my inner resources." She pursed her lips and frowned."

"You're not attracted to me, then?"

You're not listening to me."

"Well, what do you mean then, Mildred?"

"I want you to express yourself in a positive way. I want you to be brave, to believe that you can strike out on your own."

"I thought I did."

"Not yet, dear. You haven't yet."

"Well then, if, as I believe, you are attracted to me, I really am in need of the money. As we both know, modeling, this kind of modeling is not exactly a career. But I had an idea . . . because . . . because there's something about you that I can't explain that is attractive to me and I thought . . ."

". . . that the way you express it is to proposition me? You are asking me to pay you for . . . ?" her voice trailed off.

Margo jumped off the window seat and collapsed, sobbing, into a small ball on the floor.

"I don't know what I was thinking, or saying. It was just something that came from me out of nowhere. Forgive me. I'm sorry."

"I think you have a lot more to offer people than you think you do, Margo."

"Can we be friends, then?"

"No, I don't think so. It would only give you the false expectation that you would become my foster daughter or something. I have family enough, and while I'm not exactly the most conformist type, having a female gigolo holds very little appeal for me. It's tawdry, frankly. I don't mean to scare you, Margo, but your offer to me, it might be illegal."

"What?" asked Margo, a bubble of hysteria rising in her throat.

"Please leave. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone what happened today. You can let yourself out when you're done dressing."

And with that, Mrs. Evans closed the louvered doors firmly as she left the room. Margo threw her tee shirt over her head and poked her arms and head in rapidly, as if she were creating a vital blowhole. She ran from the house barefoot, the gray gravel and bits of twigs pricking hard at the soles of her feet. She ran

rapidly, almost recklessly to the goodwill store and sold them her last remaining item of any value: her wedding ring.

Struggling in her purse to find her key, she wondered why she even bothered locking her apartment. It contained nothing of value except perhaps to herself: two of her own sculptures. She had left the eye-area empty on each of them, except for two almond-shaped slits. Now those slits seemed dull and ominous to her, a foreboding.

Inside her apartment, she suddenly knew why all the art and sculpture she had ever created had coursed out of her like an unruly river. They were life, her insipient understanding of the vast rich concatenation that life is. And she suddenly knew -- perhaps for the first time that even though she could survive on very little, it would no longer be enough. She would become a part of the world, and wanted to.

Sitting down on her bed hard with a child's bounce, she took one of the sculptures into her lap. She pressed some excess Plastolene from the Formica base into the two gulfs, the eye-socket voids. Reaching into her art supply box, she grabbed at her X-acto knife. And she incised two eyes, the pupils small, alert, sharp. When she was done, she went down the stairs and for the first time ever, she entered the café and joined, joined in.

END