

## Life Drawing

I took art classes at UCLA, mostly painting and drawing. There was an old teacher at the school named Richard Lack. He taught classical realism and he really liked my work. He said when I painted it was like watching silent movies, and if I sketched a tree he expected the leaves to drop off the canvas come fall. That was a generous statement. I think he had a little crush on me.

I also did some commercial jobs on the side, anything for a buck. For example, I negotiated with a local riding stable to paint a horse's ass onto the back of each of their horse trailers – appaloosa's, wild mustangs, Lipizzaner stallions – it was a fun little project. I painted murals around campus and designed a few greeting cards, but I was always just getting by. When Professor Lack asked if I would consider working as a figure model for his life drawing classes I said, "Where do I take off my clothes?"

That summer I stayed on campus and Lack hooked me up with the Burbank Community Art Association. He described the group as a bunch of senior citizens all drawing to keep their arthritic hands loose. I didn't mind, as their modeling fee was twice what Lack paid for his college classes.

A guy named Barclay picked me up for the first summer session. He drove off toward the Creative Arts Center, where the drawing class met. Along the way he asked general art questions. I explained my own work: acrylic on canvas, painted from photographs, life-sized, sometimes larger.

Barclay listened attentively. He told me about his recent interest in art. He used to belong to a Scrabble club, but as he got older he forgot how to spell. Art was different.

“Consider the Masters: Picasso, Dali, O’Keefe, artists much older than me.”

We were stopped at a traffic light and he sat with his eyes closed, ancient face uplifted to the heavens, channeling his muse, or something. I turned on the radio. When we reached the CAC Barclay pulled into a back lot and parked. I was glad to get out of his stuffy car. I figured Barclay kept his house hot like that. There was a brisk wind and it felt good. I hoped for a warm drawing room though. Normally I could sit perfectly still, but one time at school I got chilled and couldn’t stop shaking. Lack had to cancel the class. Barclay called to me from inside the car.

“Marinara, would you help me please?”

I looked in the car and saw Barclay reaching for a pair of crutches in the back seat. It was early evening and the fading sun graced his body. I looked closer and saw that one of his trouser legs was empty, the fabric splayed flat against the car seat. This sudden observation caught me by surprise. I felt the breeze blow through my shirt and stay there.

“I just have trouble getting in and out,” Barclay was saying.

I took the crutches from his lap and leaned them against the car. Then I pulled on his arm. He was heavy and it took all of my strength. Barclay knocked the crutches over getting out. I picked them up and held them while he adjusted his hat.

“There we are,” he said. “Thank you.”

We made our way through the parking lot. I stayed close to Barclay, thinking all the while that he was about to fall, limping slightly myself. We stopped at a green metal door with the letters STAFF ONLY painted on it. Barclay produced a large janitor-style key ring, and like a janitor, went right for the correct key.

“We have to use this service door,” he explained. “There’s an alarm system around the other doors.”

He flipped a light switch. We were in a large garage. Two panel vans were parked in tandem next to a long workbench. A battery charger was hooked up to one of the vehicles and some tools were scattered across the floor. Boxes filled shelving along both side walls. There were stairs at the far end of the garage. I made no sound in my sneakers. Barclay followed with his slow, awkward shuffle. I thought of an old movie I’d seen where the trap had been set in such a place. I wanted Barclay to run with me to the stairs, just get to the main floor where there would be bright lights and people. Barclay spoke up.

“I hope we have a nice group tonight.”

He stopped at the stairs.

“Do you need help?” I asked.

“Just take my arm, dear. Thank you.”

Barclay had trouble with the stairs. I opened the heavy door and looked into the lobby. The only light came from a skylight, a dull blue glow.

“Where is everyone?”

“I get here early to open up the building.”

He pointed down one wing.

“Our room is the second door on your right. They use it for daycare. Go in and snoop around. I have to open a side door for the others.”

Barclay went around the corner. I listened to his offbeat gait recede down the tiled hallway. There was a rattling of keys and then another door being unlocked. Suddenly all of the hall lights flooded on. That took the edge off and I laughed out loud.

The classroom was open so I went in and looked around. For a magical moment the whole room came to life. Color spilled from everywhere, like crayons emptying out of a big box. There was music, and the smell of cotton candy. I held my breath.

Toys were spread across the floor, suspended in various states of play: rocking horses, huge clocks with painted faces, blocks, balls, big-wheeled tricycles. There was even a sandbox in one corner. Only the children were missing.

I walked to the middle of the room where a small wooden modeling stand was set up. Blackboards ran the length of two walls, chalked with stick men and large capital letters. A felt board hung from another wall. Little boys and girls, farm animals, and houses were stuck to the felt in random fashion, some upside down and others arranged in pastoral scenes. Purple drapes covered windows along the far wall.

“It’s so quiet in here,” I thought, “like that still, hollow feeling you get when you’re hiding from someone.”

Barclay hobbled into the room.

“What do you think of our space, Marinara?”

“It reminds me of the playroom we had at church school, when I was little.”

“Yeah, well, it sure gets cluttered. Can you help me with the chairs?”

He went over and started placing folding chairs around the modeling stand. I stood and watched the man work. Barclay had propped his crutches against a table. Using a chair for a walker, he moved all around the room, arranging easels, getting materials out of drawers, checking tape marks on the floor. After a while he sat down. He was breathing hard.

“It’s still early, Marinara. Do you want some coffee? I turned the pot back on. It’s in the lobby, behind the main desk. Just go and help yourself. They keep some Styrofoam cups in a drawer next to the sink.”

The coffee tasted stale, but at least it was hot. I walked over to the front door and watched the traffic on West Clark Avenue. An elderly couple shuffled slowly up the sidewalk toward the CAC. The woman leaned heavily on the man. They paused out front, reading flyers taped to the glass. I waved when they noticed me and they stepped back, startled. The woman said something to the man. They turned and hurried away.

I went back to the toy room Barclay had a drawing board set up and he was busy arranging paper, pencils, and charcoal. He sat up to the board, with his one empty pant leg dangling off the chair. After a while he checked his watch.

“They should be here by now,” he said.

I went over to the modeling stand and sat on the edge. There was a hum from the wall clock and a different hum coming from a bank of florescent lights overhead. Barclay looked at his watch again. Then he went over and opened the drapes. I looked across an ornamental courtyard, with just the outline of patio cement and redwood benches discernible.

“We’re private here aren’t we?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “there won’t be anyone here that shouldn’t be. There’s no outside access to the courtyard, if that’s what you mean.”

Barclay situated himself again. We waited. His slow, unsteady movements unnerved me. I could only see the top of his head and his one good leg from behind the drawing board. He seemed far away, out of focus, with the rest of the room sharply defined. I wished something

would happen to offset the scene, speed things up. I tried to imagine the room full of children but it was too quiet.

“How many people show up each week for your class, Mr. Barclay?”

“That depends. Six, eight, we’ve got fifteen enrolled.”

“Well, it’s almost nine o’clock.”

“I know, and we have to be out of here by ten. How would it be if we got started?”

I sat up straight.

“You mean just you and me?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind. The others can set up when they get here.”

I thought for a moment, confused.

“I’d still get the full payment?”

“Of course you would sweetie, no worries. The money has already been budgeted for this year.”

I didn’t like the pet phrases he tossed out like parade candy, but at least he reaffirmed the cash deal.

“OK. Just tell me what you want.”

A big smile spread across Barclay’s face.

“Splendid. Let me warm up with some quick sketches. You can leave your clothes on. Give me some gesture poses please.”

I reclined on the modeling stand. The window was in front of me and I saw the courtyard with more clarity. There were ceramic statues and flowerbeds, with a fountain in the middle. Dusk was settling across the valley and a restless moon stretched and yawned.

Barclay worked away, shifting in his chair occasionally, scratching on a tattered sketch pad. I tried several positions. When I sat for college classes I used to practice total relaxation, had even fallen asleep once. Professor Lack said it was the best pose he'd ever seen. Barclay stopped drawing.

"Would you like a break, Marinara?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Swell. Then let me get situated here."

Barclay taped a large sheet of drawing paper to the board. He sat back and looked at me.

"Would you take your shirt off please?"

"Don't you want me to undress?"

"Not yet. Please leave your slacks on."

I hesitated. Clothing was never negotiated. It was either all on or all off.

"I'd like a dressing screen."

"I'm sorry, but we don't have anything like that here."

I stared hard at Barclay. He looked back patiently, with a piece of charcoal gripped firmly in one hand.

"Fine," I said, frowning. "I don't mean to act like a diva, but it's really inconsiderate to not have a dressing screen available."

I turned away from him and removed my shirt and bra, placing them on a chair next to the stand.

"Now how do you want me?"

"Turn around and face me please. Take one big step forward. OK, try dropping your right shoulder a bit, that's perfect."

I watched Barclay closely. He drew steadily, rarely looking up.

“Stretch your arms over your head please. Can you hold there?”

Barclay made several more sketches, asking me to shift a little here, and then bend way over.

I thought how different his drawing style was from his lethargic movements. He drew with an incredible confined energy.

“Would you take your slacks off please?”

“They’re not slacks, they’re jeans... Lucky brand jeans, imagine that.”

Barclay looked back at me with a blank expression and I realized he probably wasn’t schooled in fashion or sarcasm, so I just folded the jeans and started to pull down my underwear.

“Wait. Leave your panties on.”

I flinched. The way Barclay said panties was creepy, like he’d never said the word before and didn’t like the sound of it. I put my hands on my hips and glared at him.

“Terrific! Don’t move a muscle.”

Barclay worked hunched over, drawing with passion. The easel shook and rattled on the hardwood floor. My mind raced. I scanned the room, certain Barclay had all of the daycare children hidden somewhere, watching. I looked for a row of noses pressed to the window, or an eyeball in a knothole, but saw only a scatter of listless toys. Barclay sat up suddenly. He wiped his forehead, smudging it with charcoal.

“That’s a good one,” he said. “Now if you’ll get undressed?”

I placed my underwear with my other clothes. Barclay got up and hopped around.

“Can I have you on your back please? Yes, and lift your right knee to about a 45 degree angle.”



I stared into the lights. There was a small yellow dart stuck into the ceiling tile. I imagined a playroom where the children ran wild, blowing darts at each other. And in the sandbox were their teachers, tied up and stuck full of darts.

“Would you raise your other knee and keep both feet flat on the floor?”

I followed Barclay’s specific instructions, wishing I could see him better.

“Move the left leg more to your left, Marinara. Thank you.”

I focused on two sensations: the sound of Barclay’s pencil scraping against coarse drawing paper, and the bright light overhead.

“Move that left leg a little further to your left, just like that.”

I closed my eyes.

“Just a pinch more to your left...?”

Suddenly I was cold. I felt a draft on my face, as if a window had just been thrown open. I looked down and saw how wide my legs were spread. The drawing board loomed, with Barclay’s arm pumping up and down. He was drawing furiously, closer to me than I remembered, almost on top of me, and now he was in focus, with everything else blurred. I listened and heard wind. Or was it Barclay’s raspy breathing? No, it sounded like children whispering to each other. I sat up and the room went dead quiet.

“Marinara? What’s wrong? I almost had you.”

“I don’t know. I got dizzy all of a sudden. Can we stop?”

In the courtyard, everything appeared calm. I took a deep breath and tried to compose myself. The rocking horses were in place, motionless. I looked up and saw the yellow dart still stuck in the ceiling. Barclay seemed far away again. His voice drifted to me.

“This is wonderful, Marinara, really nice. I wish the whole class were here.”

He got up and hopped over to his crutches.

“I’ll get us some more coffee.”

When he left the room I went over to the drawing board and leafed through his sketches. They were little more than shaky lines. I glanced at the blackboard where the stick men characters were drawn, images that rivaled Barclay’s drawings in every way. I’d never seen such awful work. This man was not an artist.

I could hear Barclay dragging himself back down the long hallway. I looked about frantically. I wanted to run, just grab my clothes and run into the night, hide in the courtyard, then scale the cement wall and race home.

Barclay appeared in the doorway with both coffee cups clutched in one hand. He held his crutches in the other hand and he was mumbling to himself.

“Of course, the Orange County Fair opened tonight. There’s an art exhibit next to the swine barn. I’ll bet everyone went to the fair.”

“Mr. Barclay, I want to leave. I can’t model anymore tonight.”

Barclay stopped, sagging on his crutches. He looked so old. Coffee stained his shirt.

“I could draw just a little more? Some poses with you sitting in a chair perhaps?”

“No. Please. I don’t feel well. Take me home.”

I walked over to the stand and dressed. Barclay set the coffee cups on the floor. He took down the drawing board.

“Would you mind helping me clean up, Marinara? I’m so tired.”

I watched Barclay put his materials away. He moved as though he had no strength left. After a while I helped. Chairs were put back and the curtains pulled shut. Barclay rolled up his sketches and tied them with a piece of string. He glanced around the room.

“I guess this will do,” he said.

We stood and looked at each other.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ll get the lights.”

Barclay chatted all the way back to my apartment.

“I don’t understand it. I thought Mabel Brink would be here tonight, and Ronnie Moley...they never miss.”

I stared out the window. When we reached my building Barclay leaned over and touched my hand.

“It was a fine evening, Marinara, and such lovely drawings. You are the reincarnation of Aphrodite.”

He winked at me as I got out of the car.

“Let’s keep in touch,” he said. “Maybe next month, we’ll put a good group together.”

I stood on the lawn and watched the car float away from the curb.

“Give it some gas!” I shouted. “Just get the fuck away from me!”