

Bowl of Fruit

It's ten after seven at Thursday night life drawing, and I'm the only one to show up. Besides the model: a man, probably mid-sixties, wearing a brown robe and a knee brace. Many of the students have already left campus for winter break. There was a snowstorm last night, and they haven't finished clearing the roads yet. I'm frantically texting my friend, the real artist, who invited me here, "Where are you?"

I've done life drawing and painting several times before, but the model has always been a woman. I didn't know there were men willing to volunteer this level of vulnerability.

"Welp, I guess we'll get started," the model says. He sounds like the middle management type who likes to make friends with his employees. Like he wants to be relatable but also for you to notice his car is way better than yours. I think, how has a guy like this ended up in a robe with a stranger who doesn't plan to sleep with him on a Thursday night? And then he's naked. I wriggle down in my chair, hiding behind my easel, and open my box of drawing utensils. I begin with pencil. His first pose is with one foot on the seat of a chair and one hand on his waist. I make wide strokes for the most prominent lines, as my drawing teacher instructed me years ago. But then my eyes go where I feel they shouldn't. Suddenly my pencil is too fine-tipped, insisting on too much detail. I switch to charcoal. Clear my throat. "So, um, what happened to your knee?" There's nothing else for me to go off of in terms of a conversation starter besides his knee brace. He begins talking about tennis. He lifts his arm and motions with his hand. "Oh," and puts it back down. "I'd better not talk tennis or I'll gesticulate."

"Excuse me?" I squeak.

The door opens and it's Christine.

We whisper for some reason as she tells me her usual parking space has been used as a place to pile snow. I cut our conversation short, feeling it

rude. Then I remember how easily I'd drawn the last model as though she'd been a bowl of fruit.

I smudge the charcoal around his crotch and notice his pubic hair is graying. A moment from a '90s Adam Sandler movie pops into my head, when Adam Sandler is saying "old balls" in a comical voice. I move up to his face, switch back to pencil and work on his eyes, but now Adam Sandler won't get out of my head, and he keeps repeating, "old balls," "old balls," "old balls."

I remember the first life drawing session I attended my freshman year. The model stood beside a platform and we encircled her with our sketch pads. She held the posture of someone who hadn't done this before. My professor brought a chair on the platform and set it with its back to me. A group of eighteen-year-old boys lined up in front of the chair where the model would sit. The professor sat on the chair to demonstrate the pose she should hold first. He spread his Wrangler legs and held his face to one side. The model climbed the platform naked and mimicked him. When she spread her legs I saw, over her shoulder, the boys' eyes widen and then quickly squint. I'd previously liked my professor, who asked us to call him Bill. Then I wasn't so sure.

I glance at Christine. Her eyes flick back and forth between his body and the paper. She holds her charcoal like a dart. The image on her paper is starting to look like him. I return my focus to my own sketch pad and fill in the scenery—ceiling tiles, the crumpled cloth on the floor, the bolts that hold the plastic seat to the metal legs of the chair. No one else shows up.

After class, the man dresses. When he gets closer, I notice the scent of cigarettes and old alcohol seeping out of his pores. His jean jacket has holes at the elbows. He asks to see our work and stands behind us as we reopen our sketchbooks. He says Christine got his eyebrows right. He puts his hands on our shoulders—his left hand on mine, his right hand on Christine's. "Do you wanna smoke some dope?" His breath between us. I don't have the heart to tell him that that slang no longer means what he thinks it means. Though it's possible I'm the one who's wrong, as I seem to be every time I get too sure of myself. Christine rolls her shoulders so his hand drops off. She says she has to study.

He looks at me, "You?"

I hesitate.

"Listen, no pressure. I'm not trying to corrupt anybody here." He laughs. I chuckle, stand, and put on my jacket. "But could I trouble one of you for a ride?"

“Oh, sorry. I took the bus,” Christine says, lying.

“I could give you a ride,” I say. Christine gives me a look, with her eyeballs bulging, a ring of white exposed. I don’t know why I agree. It isn’t something I’d normally do. But I feel ashamed of how uncomfortable I’d been alone with him before. I want to prove to myself I can be an adult, alone with another adult, without feeling so shaken.

“Aces,” he says.

It’s snowing as we walk to my car. We don’t speak. The air is quiet, and I think—like I have before—about whether it’s quieter when it snows because of the lack of people on the streets or if it’s because of some scientific reason. I wonder if the snowflakes muffle passing sound waves. I consider saying this to him, but he seems content just walking, trying to stay warm.

When I turn on my car, a suggestive hip-hop song blares. I turn the volume down and the heat to defrost. Dave rubs his palms together and blows on his fingertips. I turn the radio to a classic rock station. He explains how far I should go down the main road that runs through campus. He mentions a street I’ve never heard of. In a few minutes he directs me toward a freeway on-ramp. In my small college world, I’ve never had to leave campus, so I stupidly assumed this man wouldn’t need a ride outside of my bubble.

It’s another ten minutes before he points out the exit. He has grown chattier again since giving me directions. He’s told me about how he studied art in college. How modeling is now his way of “staying involved in the community.” Dave says nothing of his payment. A sign proclaims we’re entering Earlysville. I’ve never been to this town before. I’ve been so focused on driving in the ice and slush, both hands clutching the wheel, that I haven’t had the brain space to feel angry at him for endangering my life on these treacherous roads.

Finally, on a residential street where we pass several shopping carts adorning front lawns, he points to a house. I pull up at the curb because the driveway is covered in snow.

“Thank you, Haley. You’re a kind soul,” he says and reaches into his jacket.

A pang of panic finally hits me. I feel around for the nearest weapon. I grab a tube of lipstick. I hold it like I’ve seen women hold mace in the movies, my finger hovering over the top—even though I have a can of real, police-grade pepper spray tucked at the bottom of my purse and that isn’t how you hold it at all. Dave looks up to the lipstick aimed at his face and jerks away. His head hits the window with a loud *thunk*.

“Oh, no!” I drop the lipstick in his lap. He cradles the back of his head with one hand and holds a tightly rolled joint out to me with the other.

“A token of my gratitude. That’s all I’m trying to give you,” he sputters, his eyebrows knitted.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” I click the button on my seatbelt and the strap releases. I notice he hadn’t been wearing his seatbelt. Dave sets the joint in the cup holder between us.

I don’t know what to do with my hands and body, now that they are free. So I turn around and grab my sketchbook. I rip out his nude portrait and roll it up.

“Can I give you this as a peace offering?” I ask.

He chuckles anxiously and rubs his head. Dave takes the scroll from my grasp and opens the door. Without making eye contact, he nods at me and flips the handle. He shuts the door behind him, his palm pressed, foggy, against the glass.