



Chapter 6 LIFE DRAWING

They had no hands. That was what made the images catch, sharp as fish hooks, in Lourdes's imagination so she didn't know who was doing the pulling, who was doing the resisting. She couldn't let them go without losing something of herself in the process.

But it was their scale that filled her with a tenderness so deep and instinctual that Lourdes couldn't separate it from the need to touch. They were three-quarters scale, all the baroque statues she saw in the churches and the museums that she had begun to frequent when she could no longer stand staring at her blank canvasses or her own blank mind.

It was Peggy who had gotten her started, surprisingly. When she had come for coffee, Lourdes had given her a tour of the apartments, beginning with the bottom floor. Peggy had exclaimed at the space, the plethora of showers, the rustic stone wall. Lourdes had led her upstairs, and, while the water for coffee was coming to a boil, showed her the bedroom and then, startling herself, she'd opened the door to the room she was using as a studio.

"There's nothing here but good intentions," she said, leaning against the door and staring at the canvases canted against each of the walls.

"It may be too soon," Peggy said after she had looked with a smile at all this raw ambition. "It seems to me you'd need to be absorbing your new

environment—and that takes energy. It would be sort of a shame, though, to make exactly what you'd planned before coming, as if this new place didn't have the power to affect you. But what do I know about being an artist. I'm just a schoolteacher—or was. I always had trouble with making out my lesson plans before I'd met my students each year. How could I know how to proceed without taking them into account? To placate the authorities I'd draw up these pristine, generic plans, and then, the first two or three weeks of class, I'd spend most of my time just absorbing my students' personalities, their character as a class, and then I'd go back and revamp my plans completely.

"I know it was this second quality, not the first, that made me a good teacher. Learning about my students was where the life, the pleasure, were for me. When you have an idea for a painting, does it always come from inside you?"

Lourdes had looked again at the empty canvases, then looked at the small woman beside her as she closed the door. "I can't remember," she said.

But even as she spoke, it was as if the room she'd just shut the door on had entered her imagination. Empty Wishes might be its title. She felt a sense of pleasure as she began to imagine how she might paint it, the light of a vivid tropical morning making the canvases dissolve into glare.

"I guess that aversion to planning applies to travel too," Peggy continued. "I'm always surprised at people who take package tours, let someone else set their itinerary. Traveling for me means letting myself get a little lost, a little disoriented. Sometimes when friends come back from trips, I have this feeling that they went, snapped a photo, and came back. Nothing changed inside them. None of their preconceptions were challenged. I always come back a little hazy—like I'm carrying the sense traces of a dream back with me. The experience remains immediate, sensorily intense, not always comfortable—and not exactly real. Different smells, different colors, a different language. Different self."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't traveled very much. But what you're describing sounds a little like what it felt like to me when I discovered painting," Lourdes had answered, handing Peggy a cup of coffee and leading the way out to the upstairs patio where they could take advantage of the

morning sun.

And Ben, the voice said. You felt the same when you discovered him.

Peggy segued, as if cued, into a description of her marriage to Kevin, something that had taken place fifteen years earlier, when she was in her early forties. “After all these years,” she said, “it still feels surprising to me when I see him sipping his coffee across from me at the breakfast table.” She glanced at Lourdes’ ring and paused. “Would you like to walk?” she asked when Lourdes had not responded.

She’s a gift, the voice had hissed. Accept it. Lourdes had risen so quickly she spilled her coffee.

Peggy took Lourdes to a small museum of colonial art that adjoined one of the fancier hotels in town, constructed on the ruins of an old monastery. It wasn’t until later that Lourdes registered what she’d seen, when her dreams were filled with beckoning figures, their hands severed, small holes indicating where they could be attached again to the wrists, or their fingers all broken off at the first joints. The first morning, she had woken weeping, not just at the lost hands but at the clean look of anticipation on the woman’s face. Was it Mary Magdalene? Some other saint? Mary, Mother of God? The Virgin of the Sorrows?

Lourdes suddenly knew what she needed to do, so every morning she went to one or another of the churches in the town to study the statuary. But it was the museums, with their old, maimed statues that really spoke to her, especially the first museum she visited with Peggy. She had such a craving to return, she felt almost naked. Certainly, after her third visit, the guards began to look at her a little askance. It was such a small museum, one visit would have been enough, they implied. So, she began to bring her sketch book although sketching wasn’t what she really wanted to do. She wanted to touch.

The first time Lourdes left marks on her environment was when she moved into a one bedroom apartment near the art school after the boys had gone to college. She stopped being the sponge, the ear, the absorbent mother

and began to express herself, to become the active principle.

Marking the walls in her first apartment was a similar process. Most of her sons’ furniture and belongings were now in the apartment they were sharing in Amherst. This had been done at their own insistence, but Lourdes had raised no objections. Lourdes had, unknown to them, been fantasizing for much of the past two years about a single nearly monochromatic room with white rice paper shades, a futon, an easel, a small, low bureau, a low table with pillows to sit on. Even this kind of imagining was new to her. Lourdes listened so much—for her work, for her sons, she had had no idea what it meant, what it might feel like, to listen to herself. That was why the process, when it started, was so astonishing to her. There was something in there, full, incisive, enormously attractive to her. But she waited to begin living it out until her sons were in an apartment of their own, something enough like a home they wouldn’t feel displaced.

She had ended up with a one bedroom apartment, rather than a studio, because she thought it would be better when Evan and Seth came back to visit. The apartment was on the fourth floor, tedious to walk up to, but with a wonderful view of the Fenway. The first thing she decided when she entered was that after she painted the walls stark white, she needed to paint every piece of furniture the deepest hues she could find for the pure pleasure of exploring color. So her minimalist vision immediately began to be compromised. But she didn’t mind.

After having painted the walls and furniture, she pulled out her drawings and began to tack them to walls of her bedroom so that she could go to sleep to them, wake to them. When she did this, she felt something deeply exhibitionistic in her nature, some desire to be caught out, known. She also felt deeply comforted, clothed by their presence around her. She could keep the door closed, she assured herself. She could take them down. She wasn’t so sure how a world of nudes would go over with her testosterone gorged sons—or their friends.

Instead of taking down her drawings, Lourdes for the most part chose to keep people out of her apartment. She socialized with old friends at their houses or at restaurants. Had coffee with people she met in the art school in the cafeteria or local coffee houses.

What was it that had driven her, finally, to mark the walls themselves, to start creating a world that couldn’t be squirreled away in the back of a closet, couldn’t be shrugged off as a hobby? The impulse had been half