

LIFE DRAWING

(wordcount: 3000)

“The first thing I need to tell you is, don’t start with the head. Never ever start with the head. Look for the centre of gravity, look for the source of energy...”

We nod attentively at the classically bohemian teacher; her shirt is long and loose, her jeans spattered with paint. We’ve set up our easels like she says, around the low dais in the middle of this room that I haven’t set foot in for over forty years.

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It’s an Art Centre now, I told Brian when he phoned. I was flipping through the paper, and there it was; a picture of my old school, and an ad for life drawing classes! I’m going to go, I told him; take my mind off things.

Six winding flights of stairs we used to climb to the Art Room: basement to attic. Prefects at every turn of the banister checked the buzzing swarms were swarming straight to class: English, Maths, Geography, History, all the sensible subjects.

I could have used the lift they’ve installed, but that would have been cheating. I used to run up all six flights. Now, I flop, breathless, on to the chair beside the lift.

The double doors are light and shiny, not scuffed and peeling. A sign reads STUDIO ONE; black and white photographs cling to the walls either side. Jools: is that Jools, that girl beside Miss Hunter? No, I don’t recognize her. It is Bunter, though, in that off the shoulder academic gown of hers, brandishing a paint brush...

The lift door slides open. Two silver haired women stride past, push polished doors wide. Meekly, I follow them in.

Afternoon sunlight streams through the attic windows either side. It is exactly the way I remember. Except it’s not of course, it can’t be, I mean, it is a commercial studio now... but still, that magical sense of space, of lift off...

I smile, looking at the walls where the seniors’ murals used to be, at the alcove where bowls and vases were kept: I smile at the corner cupboard, still used for paints, at the stacks of drawing boards in the middle, where the epidiascope used to be. Smile and smile: must look like I’m touched in the head. Maybe I am.

Epidiascopes: they wouldn’t make epidiascopes any more. I remember the pile of illustrated art books beside it, the pink paper bookmarks like panting tongues, waiting to be projected onto the screen. Draw the blinds, girls.

Michelangelo's David: giggle, giggle, nudge, nudge. Hunter / Bunter squinting along one plump outstretched arm at Michelangelo, da Vinci, Caravaggio, nudging sequinned spectacles back up her nose, explaining *chiaroscuro*, *trompe l'oeil*, *sfumato*...

When she died, Mum sent me a clipping of her death notice. Prominent local artist. It's still in my study somewhere. Back in Melbourne. Long gone. Like Jools.

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I bulldog clip my paper like the others and look round. Are any of them real artists?

"This is Carly, who'll be our model today. Some one minute poses first, OK Carly? Thanks. Now: everybody ready? Just remember, eyes on the model, the whole model and nothing but the model..."

The model drops her dressing gown and steps on to the dais. Her body stretches and holds, breasts lifted, belly stretched, legs planted wide. In my hand, charcoal dots a navel, smudges pubic fuzz, angles an uplifted arm... hesitates. I suck my breath in... the timer buzzes.

One minute. Her body crouches this time, breasts pendulous, knees bent, splayed fingers balancing. My charcoal dives, scribbles, hovers. What did she say her name was? Carly; Carly, that's right. I want to start with her eyes, but I know that's wrong. The flex of her thighs twists her away; she's looking... off. That's it: looking off.

Buzz.

Focus on the negative space, says the teacher. Is that like reading between the lines? No, that's like using where she's not to define where she is, shading the space around the body instead of the body. I charcoal out the white, shadow the in and out of elbow and knee bend: *sfumato*. Smoking out a ghost...

Carlton cemetery: walking home of an evening through the curated images of dearly beloveds, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Jew, suspended in the endless negative spaces of marble or granite...

Look for the weight, the centre: the lean, the thrust, the intent. Plenty of intent back then. I can't get no-oo satisfaction blasting out from the transistor radio up on the window ledge. Jools and Jo, otherwise Julia and Josephine: here at Recess, at Lunch, before school, after. Part of the Art Room Set. Except I was always more of an accessory, an accessory after the fact of Jools. Sometimes I just stood and watched her draw; the way her whole body leaned in, the catch of her lower lip in her teeth as the model came alive on her drawing board. The model schoolgirl: we took it in turns to sit. I grin; no nudes then. Not at a College for Young Ladies.

Such swift, sure lines. Whereas I, like I'm doing right now, would hesitate. Look around. Look off. Lose it.

“So stop taking your frigging eyes off her!” Jools flicked an impatient wrist. “Stop making her up! Leave your frigging head out of it!”

I dropped Art in my senior year to take extra classes in Latin so I could sit the Oxford / Cambridge entrance exam. I read Classics and Literature, I even won a prize. That was before Brian. He was on a year's exchange at the John Radcliffe Hospital, just down the road from my digs. So we might have met anyway, even without Jools. At the end of the year I went with him to Terra Australis. And stayed.

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“Here's another exercise: I want you to take your charcoal in your other hand – that's right: sorry, that's correct. So, your left hand. Now do an outline. One minute. Do not let your eyes leave the model, do not let your charcoal leave the paper...”

It's like writing from right to left: or what's that Bible quote? Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth... let it not have any bloody idea...

Buzz.

I look at the mutant amoeba slithering off my sheet of paper and laugh out loud. The curly haired young man at the next easel grins and rears clawing hands.

“The thing from the black lagoon,” he snarls.

We laugh together. His drawing, I notice, is recognizably human.

Normally I don't like the stubbly look, but it suits him. The only two other men are slack bellied and balding. Retired. Keeping their hands in. Like me. Hands in, heads in. But my neighbour... twenty? Twenty one?

“Five minute pose now. Concentrate. Keep your eyes on the model, keep that charcoal moving ...”

Charcoal. Carbon. What we all are, finally. When we stop moving.

I like this pose. Legs planted wide, hands on hips, braced, scowling. Except I want to let her hair out of its plaits, to grow her pubic hair thicker, curlier, more rampant... not here. Could take it home, I suppose. Pull out Dad's old pastels.

“Hey, that's way better!”

Nice boy!

“Nothing like as good as yours, though.” I smile, gesture toward his drawing.

She is fierce, defiant... and young. Defiantly young. He shrugs.

“Bit depressing, when you think about it. The way the negative emotions are so much easier to draw.” He flashes a smile. I smile back.

“Like Satan.”

“Satan?”

“Milton’s Satan. So much more convincing than God.”

He raises his eyebrows. I’ve lost him.

“Fifteen minutes this time. Same process; get the weight, the heft of the body first ...”

The heft: I like that. I hold my charcoal out, squint at my thumb. Ground line, gut line... go.

There’s a scar on Carly’s thigh. An old one, just an indentation, really, a small white zipper of flesh. What’s in a scar? Maybe she broke her leg and had to have a pin put in like Jools did when we went skiing and she fell in a heap at Brian’s feet. In the ambulance, she told me she did it on purpose to meet him. Break a leg, she laughed, grabbing my hand and sobbing at the same time.

In the hospital, I drew her. She was asleep; I picked up her sketchbook and drew. For once, I got it right; I was really pleased. She took one look, then reached for my pencil. She drew the vertical bars of the hospital bed in front of her face, tore the page out and handed it to me.

“Well done,” she said. “Now get me out of here.”

I had it framed; it’s on the wall of my study.

Carly’s scar could be from a fall like that. Or a car accident, maybe. A bullet, even, being Northern Ireland. Wrong place, wrong time, caught in the crossfire, lucky to get off so lightly. Crazy, said Brian, the first time we went through security at Belfast airport.

It’s just a scar, for chrissake. Just a scratch, just a scribble.

“Thanks, Carly, take a break. Class, have a stretch, a look around while Carly has her break.”

My neighbour has turned Carly’s scar into a tattoo. Two tiny masks, tragedy and comedy, looped together with elaborately curling ribbons. We set off around the room, he one way, I the other.

Mostly, it’s reassuring. I’m not the worst. Most of the bodies don’t fit. Like Alice in Wonderland, they spill over their paper, all elbows and knees, or else huddle, peering timidly across empty white space. His does, though; his fits. I lift his top drawing, then the one underneath, then the one underneath again. Always the same face: he coughs. I spin around.

“Sorry! Sorry, I shouldn’t have, I know, I just wanted to see... they’re so good!

I mean, seriously good!”

He shrugs. “Thanks.”

“You’re an artist?”

He shrugs again. “Working on it. Keeping my eye in over the break.”

“Yes, it’s all in the eye, isn’t it? Knowing how to look...”

Fifteen minutes. Keep your eye in: Jools used to tell me that too. When the teacher comes round, she steps me back and points. Where does the curve of the back actually start? There, see? Now, where does the angle of the elbow come in?

Rub, rub. Erase. Erase. Look again.

Look again. I've been doing nothing else for days. Looking at old papers, old books, old photographs. Old wardrobes, old pictures, old clothes. The certificate Dad got from the Post Office for years of service. His box of flies for fishing: Greenwell's Glory, Ginger Quill. Mum's rosettes, her silver cup from Dublin Horse Show. All the things she kept because they meant something.

What's the sense of them now? Who will I come back to see now? Mum, Dad, Jools, all gone: how do you justify flying round the world to look at headstones? And no Mum to go with me to Jools' grave, to shake her head over the waste of a life, to tell me for the umpteenth time that I mustn't blame myself.

"It could have happened even if you had gone dear; and then what? We might have lost you too." Patting my arm. "To go out on the lough at that time of night... I don't care how experienced he said he was. I mean, she'd only just met him, hadn't she? Headstrong, that girl, always was. But you couldn't tell her; you could not tell her!"

But it wouldn't have happened if I'd gone. Because I'd have gone with Brian; Mum didn't know that, I hadn't mentioned my new boyfriend yet. I'd met Brian again in Oxford. It was amazing: I turned from an O week noticeboard, and it was him, the guy from the ski slopes. By the end of first term, we'd moved in together. When I hung Jool's portrait of me on the wall in our room, he asked who the artist was, and his eyes lit up when I told him. 'The crash through or crasher', he said. I smiled and nodded. In my head I replayed the scene where he carried her to the ambulance, re-heard the tone of his voice farewelling us at the airport; imagined the scene where he slow motions across some gallery, the swirl of her hair as she turns, that smile of hers...

When she rang to invite us to join them that weekend, I told her we couldn't. I told her I had a thesis deadline. When Brian asked who'd called, I said it was a wrong number.

The boat didn't fit four. We would have gone somewhere, done something else. We would not have gone out on the lough. They would not have drowned.

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That's better. Actually, quite a lot better. Her chin resting in her hand, the lifted eyebrows: same sort of pose as Jools' portrait of me. Which is on Brian's desk. He might be looking at it right now, might be thinking about me; what is Oz, ten, eleven hours ahead?

“Hey, that’s not bad, not bad at all.” My neighbour nods encouragingly.

“See? You just have to get your eye in.”

“Thanks. Thanks.”

Suddenly, I badly want to keep talking. I’ve hardly spoken to anybody for days, only Brian over the phone.

“The Thinker,” I say.

“What?”

“Carly’s pose. The statue: Rodin’s Thinker.”

“Hey, yeah; yeah, you’re right.” He nods, grins, goes back to his own sketch. So much better than mine. As it should be, after all. I smile, watching it come to life.

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“Last one. Half an hour. OK with you, Carly? OK. So you can take your time, all right? Take your time and look. Don’t even make a single mark for... at least three minutes? OK? At least three.”

Time it takes to boil an egg. Or to drown; how long does that take?

“We’re the only ones who drew her scar, did you notice that?”

“Guess they didn’t notice.”

“The masks: tragedy and comedy. Do you act as well?”

“Me? Shit, no. My girlfriend does. She’s pretty good. I get to paint the flats.”

On the dais, the model circles, then sits, draws her legs up, and looks over her shoulder.

“The Little Mermaid.”

“What?”

“The Little Mermaid. You know, the statue.”

“Right. Right again.” He grins. “So if we get her legs wrong, we can turn them into a tail.”

A tail. Not Wellington boots. They found one floating.

We were in a school play once, Jools and me. Romeo and Juliet. She couldn’t be Juliet because she was too tall, so she was Tybalt. On opening night she produced a hip flask from her breeches; to get in character, she said. And we did. I was the Friar and everybody laughed.

“Find the line, the through line,” he says. I gasp. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you...”

“That’s OK, I was miles away ...”

“Yeah: know what you mean.”

Damn. Through line. Concentrate.

Finally, I lose myself; when the timer buzzes, I literally jump.

My neighbour doesn't stop, doesn't even look up. When he finally steps back, rolls his neck and shoulders and shudder-sighs, I can't help it. I put my hands together and clap.

"That is so good!"

"It's OK. It's what I meant."

"I lost it. I had it, but then I lost it."

He glances across. "It's not so bad ..."

"Not so good either. Not next to yours. Will you give it to her? Your girlfriend, I mean?"

"How did you know?"

"Well, it's not Carly, is it?"

I can't believe how exhausted I am. Three hours. Standing. Looking. Hefting. The teacher says we can take our drawings home. I shuffle mine together and look for the bin.

"You're not going to throw them out?"

"Why not? They're no good."

"Doesn't matter. Put them away for a bit, then take them out and have another look. You'll see what needs changing. Or turning into something else. Maybe not all, but some are OK."

"I fly back to Australia tomorrow. I've got enough weight as it is."

"Really? OK: but at least take one. To remind you." He pulls out the fierce one with the pubic hair.

"Stick it up. In your study or wherever."

"All right. All right, then. I will."

Packing up, I realize I haven't asked his name. But he's gone. Dammit. He could at least have said good-bye.

I take the lift down. When I step out on to the street, he's there on the kerb, mobile clamped to his ear. The girlfriend, of course: the face of his drawings. He's talking, smiling, stepping off the kerb... car... I yell, I lunge...

We stagger backwards and fall. His phone skitters across the pavement. I push myself up and glare.

"You stupid bloody idiot!"

"Her tests are clear." He smiles loopily. "All clear!"

"Oh, great! That's just great! So glad you're not too dead to celebrate!"

I reach for his phone, throw it at him. "Look where you're going, for chrissake! Look where you're bloody well going!"

He stares at me. His jaw drops and he swallows, hard.

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Brian listens patiently.

“Wait till you see the drawing he gave me. Bet you what you like he’ll be famous one day.”

“If he lives that long.”

“Hey! That’s not very nice!”

“Well, it’s only thanks to you the car didn’t hit him, isn’t it? Bloody artists: can’t see for looking. Or can’t look for seeing. One of those.”

“Negative space. It’s the negative space.”

“The what? Look, are you sure you’re all right? Dammit, I should have come with you...”

“Don’t be stupid, we’ve been through this. Not a thing you could do. Mum’s dead. They’re all dead. I’ve done the needful. I’m OK. See you at the airport.”

Last evening, I dig out Dad’s pastels, unroll my drawing, look again.