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## The Anatomy Lesson

THE DREAM WAS becoming more insistent. It would track her down—sleeping at a friend's, in hotel rooms at the other end of the country, even when she dozed off on planes or in buses. Details varied, but the general shape never changed. She was in a tomb (or what she took to be one, never having actually had the experience herself); only she wasn't herself. When she looked down at her arms and hands, they were clearly a man's arms and hands; her legs too: more muscled, and (she could tell even beneath the hose) more hirsute. This puzzled her a good deal less than it might have waking, because she knew right away who it was she had become. The story was one she had used dozens of times in lectures over the years: Michelangelo, under interdict and forced to hide out in a mausoleum, makes good use of his time by performing anatomical inquiries on the corpses around him.

She watched those hands, calloused from years with the chisel, guide the knife first through the burial costumes (vanity of vanities) and then through the no less yielding flesh beneath. She could never make herself look away, which was why she always saw the moment when the eyes of one cadaver, a porcelain doll of a fourteen-year-old girl, fluttered five or six times and then opened wide in horror as Michelangelo's gnarled fingers began to extract her organs of generation.

"Tybalt, liest thou there in thy bloody sheet?" The voice always cracked, like that of an adolescent boy, but the arm that smote her from behind was the practised arm of a warrior already well steeped in gore. There was shouting, a few nicely-turned verses, and the

dream always ended the same: Romeo slew Michelangelo, but the apothecary's drugs were not quick enough, and Romeo was put on life support.

She woke shivering, reaching instinctively across the bed; but there was no head on the other pillow.

"Andrew?" The sound came out as a fresh-from-nightmare croak. There was no point in calling his name, Julia knew: that side of the bed had obviously not been slept in. It was then that she remembered, as she had to fresh each time, that he was dead.

## 2

"I need a studio." These were the four words that had started it all. Mike had said yes, had not even questioned the statement or offered alternative suggestions. Secretly, she was irritated by the lack of resistance; it was symptomatic of the marriage. He had telephoned the next day to make an appointment for them to see (not a marriage counsellor for the disease but) an architect (for the symptom). Andrew.

"Were you wanting to renovate within the existing envelope or to add on an ell?"

Staring at his forearm, transfixed by the tuft of blond curls escaping between candy-striped cuff and gold Rolex, she could not attend to the question. Mike had to prompt her: "Honey?"

"Sorry, what?" She made herself focus on the architrave of the office building opposite.

"Do you want to work within the existing structure or go outside of it?"

Because she knew so categorically the answer to this in every context but the present one, she chose evasion: "Why don't you take us through the options?"

"I like to know something about the client's needs as a starting point."

"I need a studio," she repeated dumbly.

"Musical? television?"

"My wife's a visual artist." (Thank you, Mike.)

"Photography? Sculpture? Painting?"

"I paint." This wasn't so hard. "Nudes, mostly."

"Her subjects are mainly women." (Was Mike afraid that the man was going to pull down his pants?)

"The nude is a form, not a subject." She couldn't resist showing off, throwing out the bait. The guy was an architect; he should understand.

"Not where I grew up." (Mike again. Fuck off, Mike.)

"Watercolours or acrylics?" She couldn't tell whether the question was a response to her emphasis of form or a way of backing out of the obvious impasse between husband and wife.

"Oils. The old way, layer by layer. It's very slow." How could she tell him that she needed much more than a white room with adequate space and privacy for live models, and good light all day?

"Wiping away each new glaze to reveal the form where you want to."

"It takes forever."

"But how fantastically satisfying. I tried it in art school, of course, but I didn't have the patience."

Mike was consulting his appointment book, starting to look intensely bored. Of course she must prolong the interview as much as possible.

"You went to art school?"

"Only two years. Then I got the architecture bug, switched programs. I never get a chance to paint any more. The odd rendering, that's all."

"Maybe that's the best way to proceed" (Mike was obviously dying to get on to his next engagement, and leapt at the opening), "give us some pictures of what it might look like; some alternative treatments, you know—separate building, add on, renovation, all the options." He was getting up as he spoke, fumbling for his car keys.

"Vitruvius," she said, in a tone that made it clear that she wasn't about to move out to the parking lot. "That's who we have in common."

"I don't know...." Mike's voice trailed off though as he realized that she wasn't talking to him.

"That's who we have in common, figure painters and architects. Remember the third book? 'Without symmetry and proportion no temple can have a regular plan; that is, it must have an exact proportion worked out after the fashion of the members

of a finely-shaped human body.”

“Circles and squares and hands and feet. But that quote; how did you...?”

“I’m giving a little lecture next week. If you have a few minutes I could tell you about it.”

Mike put his car keys away in his pocket and sat down again, shifting his chair slightly so that he commanded a clear line of sight, through the door, of the soft curve of the receptionist’s calf.

### 3

Andrew had attended the lecture the following week. (Mike had not.) She had not noticed him until the lights came up for question period following the last of her slides. Her first response was to play back rapidly in her head all of the architectural material she had used, wondering if he had found errors and omissions. Her second was to wonder whether he’d already had supper.

A bearded bespectacled toad in the third row had posed a three-part question, something to do with Pythagoras, designed more to exhibit the asker’s own expertise than to engage with Julia’s. There had been two further almost identical questions from opposite ends of the room, asking her to comment on the relationship between Cranach’s distortion of the ideal of Vitruvian man and the configuration of the Gothic arch (child’s play). Finally, after the usual embarrassed pause that succeeded a second plea for questions, there had been polite applause and a small presentation in token of appreciation. She would almost have been sorry that it was over, had it not been for Andrew’s presence. As it was, her one hope had been that he wouldn’t shuffle out through the door with the rest of the crowd before they had had a chance to speak.

He hadn’t. That he had not she interpreted as a very promising sign, since he had had to wait nearly five minutes while she ran the gauntlet of the committee that had invited her to speak. Politely but firmly refusing their invitations for cappuccino, Corona, Cinzano, she started up the amphitheatre steps, her slide projector adding a slight list to her walk. He was perched about two-thirds of the way

up the seating, just where Vitruvius might have dictated a curved gangway, she thought.

"That was very...." he had begun.

"Entertaining? Dull? Obvious?" She had never been able to stand dead air.

"Moving, I was going to say. Inspirational."

She had immediately invited him to have supper. He had already eaten, as it turned out, but they went anyway. There was a great little Italian place just around the corner.

Now, gazing down at the rumpled white sheets that leant to their bodies the quality of classically draped nudes, *mouillé*, she wondered once more whether he had really liked the lecture. The dinner had been fine, although he had not eaten much; and she made it a point never to try to rate any single episode of lovemaking, though he had seemed pleased; but she needed passionately to hear more of what he had thought of the lecture. The problem was that he appeared to have fallen sound asleep, and she knew that she would soon have to return home, to the house she lived in with Mike, the house that was to have her new studio that Andrew would design out of a thorough acquaintance with the client's needs.

Beneath the folds of sheet her right thumb found his left nipple. She walked the hand, thumb to baby finger, across his chest to his left nipple, calculating the span. Then from sternum to navel she did the same, delighting when the measurements proved exactly equal. When she began the journey from navel down, he stirred and murmured in his sleep, then rolled away from her before she could complete the calculation.

She was pulling up her tights, her skirt a rolled belt around her waist, when he woke up. He smiled, and she knew that they would see one another this way again.

"Did I say how much I loved the lecture?"

#### 4

"I'd better phone that fellow about your studio. Andrew whatever-his-name-is. He must have something to show us by now."

"M-m-m-m-m-m-m." And she made an art out of stirring the cream into her coffee in order to avoid looking across the table at

Mike. He'd been out of town at a conference for almost a week, and just yesterday morning Andrew had sat in that very chair, wrapped in a sheet and bright with the afterglow of early morning sex.

It had been five days of a kind she thought she could never have had a right to, not at her age, not in her situation. At forty, married eighteen years, living in a neighbourhood where people noticed if you didn't take the newspaper in by nine, she had invited Andrew to move in with her. For three of the days they did not once manage to get fully dressed, even though twice they had planned to go out for dinner. They had eaten whatever was in the fridge, laughed, made love, slept, and then started all over again. It had taken most of the day before Mike's return for her to clean the dishes, do the laundry, and air the delicious indefinable scent of fornication out of the house.

And yet the stranger seated across the table from her this morning was still more familiar to her than the man with whom she had spent the last five days. There was—she could not deny it—something held in reserve about Andrew. He was never completely naked in her arms: there was always a sheet or a shirt; once a pair of socks. Her efforts to map his body, to learn its topography and measure its proportions, were always gently deflected. Even his orgasms were muted, guarded events, while hers had been noisy and athletic to an extent she had not thought possible for the last dozen years. She told herself that he had been shy in her husband's house, a little guilty about the professional relationship, but she knew that these were not the reasons.

They had, in fact, discussed the studio plans twice, the most recent occasion being the preceding morning at this very table. He had persuaded her that sky lighting was the way to go, that the three walls of glass she had envisioned would only make her models uncomfortable and distract her from her purpose. She had countered with a mix of skylights with one large cathedral window, and had prevailed. Andrew had sketched something to take away and work on—she imagined that she could still see the lines of his work worn faintly into the pine table where Mike's hand rested beside the newspaper.

"You still want the studio, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Why?"

"You just seem a little cool on the idea right now, that's all."

"I haven't had time to give it much thought lately. I *need* a studio." It was true, even (maybe especially) in terms that Mike could understand: the lease on her downtown space would be up in two months.

"I'll call the fellow today; see if he can come around tonight."

"Maybe we should go to his office. I mean, wouldn't that be more professional, more business-like?"

"He's going to have to see the house sometime. You want the studio here, don't you? not at his office?"

"You're right, of course. Sure. See if he can come around tonight."

After Mike left for work, she showered and then wrapped herself in a sheet, sitting, aching, in a pool of sunlight in the kitchen till mid-morning. Then she dressed and went to the liquor store so they'd have a bottle of white wine in the fridge. That was what people in movies drank as they discussed plans with their architects, wasn't it?

## 5

The broccoli was limp and the colour of battle fatigues, and there was more food on the oblong plate than you'd ever want to eat, but it was a place where you could have lunch in reasonable certainty that you wouldn't run into anyone you knew. Melissa knew when Julia invited her what the choice of restaurant meant. Nor did she have any illusions about the nature of their relationship. They could not really be called friends. Melissa modelled weekly for Julia, and in those sessions they had often exchanged confidences. It was understood between them that when the artist packed up her paints and the model slipped on her clothes the confidences were locked up and covered over as if they had never been shared. The invitation to lunch looked like an overture to a less defined but nonetheless similar arrangement.

Melissa was not given to painstaking analysis of the characters of others. She believed that people showed you what they wanted to, and the rest was none of your business. That's what *she* did, anyway. It was probably what made her such a desirable model. At lunch, though, as she watched Julia arrange and rearrange the insipid food on her platter, she sensed behind the superficially nervous

gestures a positive energy she had not seen before.

Over coffee, the floodgates finally burst.

"I have to tell someone. It all sounds so crazy inside my head. I need to say it out loud. Do you mind?"

Melissa, who had had no illusions about where the lunch was headed, said of course she didn't, floating a perfect slim hand across the table to rest momentarily on Julia's white knuckles.

When the bills came, Julia pulled Melissa's across the table, muttering that she would look after them both. Melissa did not even put up a show of dissent.

## 6

The bathroom had been remodelled four years earlier in a clinical style that reminded her of scrub-up rooms in hospital shows on television. There were two sinks, a stainless steel whirlpool, and a corner shower. Glistening white tile covered the floor and walls. A central drain in the floor (Mike had insisted; he was terrified of what a flood might do to the Axminster in the hall outside) pushed the illusion one step further to lend an air of autopsy room—all that lacked was a central table with drainage runnels. The lighting was halogen, with a ring of incandescents around the mirror, grouped on a dimmer to allow simulation of any level of ambient light (Julia didn't wear make-up; some mornings she wondered whether Mike had applied a little pancake at his temples and under his eyes).

This morning, only the halogens were on, cooperating with the clouds of steam that swirled about as she opened the door to give the effect of a flying saucer landing. The alien, stark naked, body—hair plastered to his brown skin where he had neglected to dry himself carefully—stood in front of the mirror contemplating a face covered in white foam. It was one of Mike's many vanities that he shaved each morning with a pearl-handled straight razor that he stropped energetically at precisely 6:30.

Neither of them spoke for a minute, but this was not unusual: it was very early. What was unusual was that she had something to say, and that he knew she did. Watching the cold steel cut swaths through the soap bubbles, she found herself, unfairly, hoping that



the hand might slip—not severely, not enough to cut his throat, but just enough to summon up a string of blood pearls on the smooth flesh, to send him howling for a styptic, to force him to wear a turtleneck to the office. Perhaps if she spoke.

“I’ve been having an affair.” The words sounded so trite, so distanced, not at all descriptive of what she felt for Andrew.

His hand did not falter, but he finished the stroke before he responded. “One of your models?” The casualness with which he asked it hurt her. Like most people, he had always assumed that a kind of erotic bond between artist and life model is inevitable; they had often argued about it. But today it was not that assumption that upset her, only that her love for Andrew should be mistaken for a commonplace. Mike went on, “Do you think you love him? It *is* a man, I imagine.” She could see him labouring to make the whole matter a cliché.

Unwilling to meet his gaze in the mirror, she cast her eyes down. His buttocks were tense, a clear indication that he was not actually taking this as easily as he pretended. She spoke directly to them. “I wonder whether I shouldn’t move out for awhile, till I, till we, know for certain.”

His voice said, with perfect calm, “whatever you think best,” but his bum told the real story. He had finished shaving (or given up? she had not watched closely enough to tell) and leaned over to rinse his face; she looked away, lower. The steam had cleared and she could see a tiny ring of water around the floor drain (perhaps he always just dripped dry; she was unaccountably embarrassed not to know this minute detail about him; she could not for the moment remember whether his bath towels were ever wet).

He reached for a face towel, blotted his cheeks and chin, and then the room was full of the scent of his cologne. It reminded her of freesias and bay leaves and of weekends almost twenty years ago. Frightened by the flutterings that washed over her, she turned for the door.

“We’ll put the studio on hold for a bit then, shall we?” he called after her as she fled the room.

The fleeting sense of residual lust left her then, and she willed him dead on the cold tiles.

She was not there when Andrew collapsed. He was on a site; she could not have been with him, but she would always blame herself anyway. They had not called her, had not known to call her: she did not hold that official place in his life. It was only when, that evening, he was sufficiently recovered to tell them her number (his number; she had moved in with him by then) that she heard.

"I'm fine now," he had said when she entered the room. "The damndest thing. Too much coffee, or not enough coffee, my hard hat too tight, something. Sorry to worry you. I'm fine now."

The crisp hospital linen allowed only the faintest relief to his body beneath it, and wrestled with her memories of him classically *mouillé*, a Greek nude reluctant to drop the folds of cloth that accentuated his lines. She tried to see him as Vitruvian Man, but the context conjured up only Disease Man from the early anatomy studies, and she had to shut her eyes tight.

"They want to watch me for a few days." He tried to make it sound like a mildly annoying piece of over-protectiveness, like they had insisted he wear rubber boots because the grass might be wet.

"That's probably best. Look at it as a little enforced rest." She heard herself say the words, but knew it was not how she saw it either.

"What did you do today?"

"Worked on the lecture. You know."

"Remind me."

"The one on anatomical printing." (Had he really forgotten?) "I've found a new focus, I think."

"Tell me."

"It's something about the difference between labelling directly on the body and labelling in the margins with lines to the appropriate parts."

"And what is the difference?"

"That's what I haven't figured out yet, the significance."

"Never mind. You will. No painting today?"

"I have to start packing up the studio. The lease is up next week. It's funny: I can't seem to work there just knowing that soon I won't be able to."

"You'll find someplace else."

When she left an hour later, she couldn't stop wishing that he had said "we" and not "you."

## 8

"I'm sorry your boyfriend's so sick." Melissa didn't know what else to say. For an hour she had been posed as an Amazon, one breast defiantly bare, the other battened down tight by a band of fabric, and Julia had not seemed to have touched her canvas. It was unusual for their sessions together, this kind of studied allusive work. She much preferred the more free-form expression of self that Julia normally encouraged. In fact, they hadn't been scheduled for a sitting at all this afternoon. Julia had telephoned in the morning asking her to help pack up the studio, but when she'd arrived the plan seemed to have changed.

"I want to do a series on disfigurements," was what she had been greeted with, "people with parts missing." Something in the tone had immediately persuaded her to comply, and she had flattened herself into the waiting costume. But now her right breast was aching and she needed to pee.

"Can we take a break?" (It seemed kindest to put it this way, although Julia had obviously not yet done anything to break from.)

"Sure, sorry."

When she came back from the bathroom (she never bothered with a robe even though it was across the hall), she had removed the bandoleer, and Julia could see where the elastic had cut cruelly into the soft flesh and angered the nipple.

"Let's try something a little more in our usual vein," she relented. She could not bear to think of herself inflicting such pain on her model.

So Melissa had wandered about the studio, a confident Aphrodite, performing a peculiar medley of ballet positions, T'ai Chi moves, and runway poses until they agreed on one and she froze in it. Julia felt, at first, an embarrassment at how easily she began roughing something in on the canvas. Andrew was racked with pain on a hospital bed, and she had felt somehow that her painting needed to make a serious response; and now here she was reverting to the old formal informal studies, loving the perfection, the potential, of the lines of Melissa's body. Its surfaces

were enough for her for the moment, and she worked feverishly, *alla prima*, all at once, in a fashion she had always resisted. The result was a painting made by building up rather than by the painstaking wiping away of successive glazes; the significance was not lost on her, and even Melissa sensed that some kind of a corner had been turned.

"So what can I do to help you pack up?" she asked when they were finished and she had slipped back into her clothes. "Do you really have to pack up now? Your lease isn't up until next week, is it?"

"I have a lecture to give next week. I'll be too busy with that."

"It was good today, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I had forgotten what it really meant: life drawing."

"What's the lecture on?"

"Anatomical prints, engraved maps of the body's insides."

Neither of them said, though they both thought, 'death drawing.'

## 9

Andrew had aborted her plea to accompany him at the MRI before she could make it to the doctor. "It'll give me something to tell you about when you ask how my day went," he joked, but she knew it was part of the old reserve, a garment he could retain against her seeing him completely naked. True to his promise, though, he had talked enthusiastically about the experience: "It's like being fed into a cannon; I kept waiting for a clown to light the fuse." "It really puts all that anatomical print stuff you write about in perspective; maybe you should add computer imaging into your next paper." "This is the real thing, live photos from planet Andrew, the truth about what's going on in there."

It was because it *was* the truth that she longed all the more for the early Renaissance anatomists whose renditions of the body had been schematic, deductive, preferring textual sources to observed fact. If links that were known to exist were not seen during dissection, they were nonetheless drawn into the picture. One of her favourites was the line from testes to heart, a sermon, it seemed to her, against sex without love. She longed to draw

Andrew's insides on the premise that he would live forever, omitting the spots and shadows that marred the perfection of the picture.

"They're immortal, you know. Cancer cells. Virtually immortal. That's the problem with them: they don't die off like normal cells. Ten million cells die off every second, but not the bad ones—as cells, I guess you'd have to say they were the healthiest ones there are. Ironic, hunh?"

Julia had no adequate response to this, so she sat in silence rubbing his hand below where the IV tube had been.

Less and less in the days that followed was he able to draw her into any kind of conversation. Once, on the day before the pain had become so acute as to silence him forever, he had gotten her to talk about things they both knew. He had asked to borrow her copy of *De Architectura*, and he got her to read the passage she had cited months earlier at that first meeting in his office.

"Harmony, proportion, balance," he had said. "That's what these little buggers cannot understand. Normal cells, if you look at them under a microscope, appear in highly organized and ordered patterns. Cancer cells are chaotic, disorganized. They don't know sweet-fuck-all about order." He paused. "So who's more to be pitied: me or them?"

That was the second last thing he had said to her. The last was not "I love you," or "remember me," but about a canvas she had brought in to show him. It was the *alla prima* study of Melissa she had done that day when she planned to begin her now abandoned series on disfigurement. "Do more of that," he had said.

## 10

"Annually, in the city of Florence, the university would procure two cadavers for anatomical study: one male and one female. Typically, they were executed criminals, and would be laid out for inquiry on tables in a large theatre. In attendance at the opening, as it were, would be both medical students and artists. Alberti, in *De Pictura*, remember, had advised the painter to begin with bones, adding sinews, and muscles, and then, finally, flesh and skin. It seems that many took him quite literally. Between the occasions of the annual anatomy, it is clear that there was a significant black

market in corpses for study. Grave-robbers, physicians, and artists had a brisk working relationship. Not all, after all, were as fortunate as Michelangelo had been in finding in his hiding place a way of continuing without interruption his artist's work."

Julia waved off the ripple of applause and hurried her way through the four perfunctory questions. She was anxious to get back to the studio where she knew Melissa would be waiting.