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Treated Canvas

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treated canvas

by Kimberly Baer

**Honors Senior Project
Fall 1999**

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senior project

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Let me assure you: I'm not as old as I look. We should get that squared away now, so there's none of that groping sick-eyed mooning stuff that we both have to wade through before I glare at you and yank your dirty-fingernailed hands off my chest and send you home.

There's no use sulking. You'll get over it. The next crop-topped busty fly-by will distract you. Have faith in that.

I smash my fist into the face of the boy before me and his nose pushes up into his eye and messes up his hair. I grab the top of his head and pull up, up, up, stretching that head like cheese on greasy pizza, like watermelon bubble gum on the soles of my converse. Naomi walks over to me then and smiles. "Trouble with the boys again?" I don't answer but I look at her: straight brown hair, flipped at the ends, lands against her collarbone. I wonder briefly what kind of imprint her collarbone would make in my clay if I pressed it against her. I yank the boy's head off his spindly arms and shoulders and roll it into a ball between my palms, working the heat of my hands into the texture of the clay, and begin again.

You're not as strong as you thought you were, see? I'm not your plaything. Remember that. Pass it on. Tell your friends.

Naomi's on the other side of the room now, leaning over Lucy and Moriko, the Japanese exchange students. Lucy always makes weird little animals out of her clay, puppies and cows and ducks and stuff. But Moriko makes these fantastic sculptures that are all curvy and have lots of hollows and shadows. They're huge, but somehow they seem the weight of a beach ball. Moriko says they represent different people, but I don't think they look much like anything. Even so, they're amazing-- so *light*. Like this one she's doing now-- she says it's of her father--but it's just this monstrous path of clay that stretches and winds around itself, running now, then slowing down, and bowing down and around and coming up through the middle and curving towards you again. It doesn't *look* like a person. It looks like a jungle gym of grey string cheese that would float like a bubble right on out of here if the ceiling opened up to the sky. I see it ^{and} I want to grab it and run away, run out of here before anyone can catch me, and throw that string cheese beach ball hard against the pavement and watch it bounce, bounce, bounce, all the way down the street, until it's out of sight. I think sometimes that I could. But it's like six feet high, and wider than I can stretch around, so it's gotta be heavy. Shoot, I can barely lift the headless boy I finished last week, and he's only eighteen inches tall. Besides, I only used a few bricks of clay. Moriko's almost exhausted the entire supply. She even went out and bought some clay of her own so she wouldn't use all of Naomi's on one sculpture. She's totally into it. Me, I'm just here by default, because I'm tired of painting. Dad makes each of us sign up for one art course at the community center every summer and I've always painted--until this year. He makes us take classes "to keep our minds engaged." He says this and I think of a diamond solitaire with a thin platinum band hugging my cerebellum. To thee I wed.

Don't get me wrong--I like the classes. I figure, you gotta pick your battles, and as long as I can choose the course, art isn't much of a punishment. It's not intended to be. Dad's just flexing his Dad Power a little. He likes the sound of his bark. My theory is that after Momma died, Dad decided he better be tough if he was really gonna raise five girls by himself. So he tries. Sometimes, it even works. Thing is, we all know he's soft as a fourth street french fry underneath that tough exterior he puts up. Push hard enough, and you'll find the chewy center.

"Who's that?" Eddie, the forty-something homeless man that sits next to me every Tuesday, peers at my body. That's all it is, too: a body. No face, no mind, no spirit. Just a hunk of rain-colored clay. I carve at the biceps with a thin metal scraper. "Hey." Eddie's voice gets louder. "Who is that?" I shrug. "Nobody." Eddie always thinks I make real-life people, I don't know why. He never even makes people at all. I don't see any point in making anything else. Aren't people all anyone wants to look at anyway? Take Michelangelo's *David*, for example, or all those blasted paintings of Venus. Ever heard of a tree sculpture becoming that famous? Me neither. People, on the other hand, make great objects. Everybody wants to look at people.

Take the whole modeling business, for instance. What a life--sit around and let people stare at you? Right. I remember watching Momma towel dry Claudette's hair after a bath once and she stopped and stared at the little girl's face in the mirror and said, "You're beautiful enough to be a model," and do you know that girl never forgot it? Eleven years

later she *still* prances around in tight dresses with her flat boy chest thrust out, just like she's on the catwalk with all the cameras flashing. Of all the things to hold onto.

My left bicep is perfect-- powerful, bulging, oppressive. Here's where all those childhood nights spent coloring in Dad's anatomy books pay off. I want to make the man's right arm skinny, weak. It looks boneless. No support at all. Cool. I make him spineless, to match; his body, slumped now, seems apologetic, embarrassed for the power of the left arm that is suddenly useless. I smash a ball of clay on for his head, and tilt that head back, so the man can't even see what's in front of him. He's totally vulnerable--to me, to everything.

See what I can do to you? Just like that. No more power. Stare at the ceiling for a while. See if that's very interesting. See if you feel strong now.

He can't touch me. He can't even see me, unless I tower over him. I push my fingertip into his blank face and it smooshes in around my skin. I push push push, down through his neck, into his deformed torso now. It gets harder to push the deeper I go. I pull my finger out slowly, moving backwards through my destructive path, reveling in that suctioning sound his torso and then his neck and finally his face makes, that complaint of my exit. Nothing left but an asymmetrical volcano. All I need now is the fire.

In order we are: Marcee Claudette Yvie Henrietta Anee. We're all artist babies. I am Anee; my artist is Annie Leibovitz, the photographer. I'm the only photography descendant of the bunch. The others belong to painters--like Dad. I guess Momma finally got her two cents in with me; she was into photography a little-- nothing serious, though. She and Dad thought it would be cool to give us strong starts in life, I guess, which is why they gave us the famous names. So far, no one's made much of it. Claudette painted a six by nine collection of blues three years ago (in summer class, of course) that's hanging over the couch in the living room. She won best in her class for it, which was great considering she was the youngest one there. Dad even took down two of his to make room for the thing. Now *Angry Man* is on the wall in the kitchen next to the sink and *Linea* is stashed in some corner of the studio. *Angry Man* looks better in the kitchen anyway. All those swirling thick striking blacks are richer against the pale cabinets.

My father is a painter of canvas, but the last thing he painted was the bathtub. It's yellow now. We've never had a shower head, just a clunky sunshine-colored clawfoot job in the first room off the kitchen, also known as Dad's Studio. The bathtub used to be upstairs in the regular bathroom, but the story goes that when Claudette was about three she started having a fit every time someone tried to wash her dirty little bod, and Momma just got fed up dealing with her all the time. Dad solved the problem one night by picking up the blasted thing and dragging it down into the studio. Even at that age Claude knew better than to mess with Dad when he started moving major pieces of furniture; she learned real quick to sit there and shut up and take her bath like a good kid. Result? Claudette got clean, Momma got off the hook, and Dad got to keep right on painting while still doing his

fatherly duties. Of course, when Marcee got a little older Momma started making sounds about privacy, and Dad put up a curtain.

Privacy has always been a Big Issue in this house, what with Dad having all girls to worry about. The five of us are divided into two bedrooms, so there's not a lot of privacy to speak of. Marcee and Claudette share a room because they're in high school, and Yvie and Henri and I split the big room; Yvie gets the single and Henri and I have bunk beds. Marcee and Claude take Yvie out with them sometimes, and once they took Henrietta to the movies, but they never want much to do with me. I don't care though; who would want to hang out with those stuck-up girls anyway --always smacking their dark red lips in the mirror and rattling their stringy gel-soaked hair. I have my own friends: Eddie, Naomi, Bobby. Who needs sisters?

Men are hard; girls are easy. That's what sculpture class has taught me. So I've given up on guys-- now I just make girls. "Nice." Eddie is looking at the torso of the girl I am shaping. I'm sure he's wondering who she is. He's working on some weird pyramid constructed out of little clay balls--all the same size, all exactly alike. They look like emptiness. That's money well spent. Eddie's daughter in Chicago sends him three hundred dollars on the first of every month--dues paid for not having to see him or feel guilty, I guess--and he puts down some for the class and spends the rest on pool. He's not very good at either, but that's what he spends money on. "Art and pool are good for the *soul*," he says, and winks at me. He's got short military style hair, kind of blondish-brown,

and big hands that shake when he tries to sculpt details, so he sticks to basic shapes most of the time. I think he just likes the feel of the clay. He's looking at my girl, but I own her. Eddie and I had painting together last year and he helped me mix my colors. He's in this class because I told him I was taking it. So far, he's kept his distance. Smart man.

Bobby Fennel took me to the movies last Friday night to see *Basic Instinct*. He wanted to drive me somewhere afterwards to Look At The Stars, but I said no because I had told Dad I was at Christine's birthday party, and he was expecting me home. He would flip if he knew I was out with Bobby (he thinks thirteen is too young to date), especially if he knew we were at that movie. I don't know what the big deal is though. The stuff in the movie is just sex. It's not like nobody does it. And anyway, Bobby's a really nice guy. He tells me I'm beautiful all the time, and not in that stupid way the boys at school do, chanting, "*hey kitty kitty, don't you look pretty*" and making obscene gestures. Bobby thinks I'm *really* beautiful, like an actress in Hollywood he says, and he tells me all the time how much he loves me.

I just can't figure out why art has to factor in. Last week I overheard a conversation between Dad and Uncle Martin right after Martin had been dumped by this girl he was seeing, Louann, and hit a painter's block. I just wanted to get some orange juice from the fridge and they were there. Uncle Martin isn't really our uncle; he's a Chain Smoker and an artist friend of Dad's from college who used to live in this house with Dad and three other guys before Dad met Mom and kicked them all out. We accept him as family. (Lord knows he needs one.) "Good riddance," Dad had said about Louann, who we all hated.

“Now maybe you’ll finally commit to the *real* love of your life!” he laughed. At the time I thought Dad was referring to Julianne, the mail girl. I’d walked in on Uncle Martin kissing her on the model stand the day before, when I ran home from the park to get my baseball glove. I just thought Uncle Martin was making out with her, though. I didn’t realize he really *liked* her or anything. It wasn’t until the next morning that I realized what Dad actually meant. I walked into the studio to take my bath, and leaning against the easel was a piece of flaxen colored canvas board, decorated with some of Louann’s bras and panties that Uncle Martin had hot glued to the material. He had tied a violet silk scarf around one corner, and painted this very De Kooning-esque form around the lingerie. The whole thing was pretty ugly. Pinned onto the woman’s (if you can call her that) breast was a crumpled note that said, “Be Mine” in Uncle Martin’s handwriting. Okay, Martin. I get it. I was back in my room getting dressed when I heard Dad’s roaring laugh and I knew he had found Uncle Martin’s *piece de resistance*. Apparently he got it too. So much for Julianne.

Who really cares about art, though? Not of the millions of art classes I’ve taken have anything to do with the real world—especially with *sex*. I mean, painting is great and all, but it’s not as great as sex is supposed to be. With art, it’s like there are so many things I want to say in my head, but my hand messes them all up and when they come out through the brush, they’re all stupid looking. Smears of browns and greens and yellows all swirled around and getting into each other and canceling out the rich pigments along with my ideas. What a mess.

It doesn't really matter anyway because I wouldn't have sex with the stupid boys around here if they paid me. Who do they think they are? Girls like Marcee and Claudette mooning all over them make them think they're some big pimps. Those girls would chase a bug if it looked twice at them.

I make my girl chunky and flat-chested, and I give her open, vacant eyes. She stares at Eddie's face, unblinking, challenging. His gaze falls to the almost nonexistent curves below her chin and I feel a surge of protective instinct. I turn her back to Eddie, in what I hope is a defiant way. "She's not finished." He doesn't care. "She's nice," he says. I don't answer, knowing that he will eventually turn back to his clay-ball pyramid. All those stupid balls look like solid grey eyes. Eyeball pyramid. Yuck. Sometimes I wish he'd just do people. Maybe then he wouldn't spend so much time looking at mine.

"Good, Anee." Naomi hovers over me, lowering her glasses to get a better view. "What are you reaching for with this one?" I don't know the answer to that. Naomi knows why I am here; she knows Dad and is familiar with his rules for us girls. She's always pushing, pushing us harder than the others, but she means well. "Anee, what about photography?" "What about it?" I ask. I know where this is going. Eddie gets up to get more clay for his eyeballs and Naomi sits down in his empty chair. "Have you taken a class before?" I remember finding an old Canon in the attic and blowing the dust off of it; unscrewing the lens and staring at the mirror hidden inside. *Am I reflected in there?* Dad bought the camera used when he was in art school and was required to take photography courses. I asked him

about the Canon when I found it and he said I could use it anytime. But I don't know how to take pictures. Anyway, I don't want to. There's not really anything worth recording, not the way it already is. At least with sculpture I can make bodies look however I want them to.

But Dad's been getting pushier about the photo thing. He leaves magazine cutouts of cameras pinned to my bulletin board and Polaroids under my pillows. He's got this great theory that we'll all follow our namesakes. That's great for the others, who are all painters, but me, I'm different. Why should I have to be different?

I don't want to be different.

Naomi is holding my girl's body now, turning it around and around in her hands. She says it's a good beginning; the craftsmanship is good. "Anee-ee..." She looks at me, her voice sing-songy. I look at the clock. Four fifty-nine and thirty-two seconds. "Your eye for composition is excellent." I give her my "go no further" look, but she continues. "How about stopping by the darkroom, just for a tour?" I want to be free from here. Eleven more seconds. Naomi sets my girl down. She tilts her head at me. "Anee?" Bam! Five o'clock. Time to get out of here. I toss my girl in the metal locker underneath the butcher block table and clamp the lock shut. No more for today.

I'm standing out on the curb when I hear footsteps. I can tell without looking that it's Eddie; I know his *feeling*. He stops somewhere behind me. "What?" I ask. I know he's not waiting for a ride; he has nowhere to go except back down the block to his corner on third and Houston. He doesn't answer me for a long time. I can hear him breathing back there. He still doesn't answer and I stare into the sky somewhere. It looks like the sky from El Greco's *View of Toledo*: dark, patchy, ominous. Maybe a storm is coming in. Maybe it will hit tonight.

Dad's dumpy old pickup truck rattles into the other end of the parking lot, jolting over the speed bumps. I can hear him coming closer. "Anee..." I spin around. Eddie's face is right there. He's remarkably clean shaven for a homeless guy. I don't know why I never noticed that before. No stubble at all. He smells like peppermint. He's looking at me. He's not saying anything, just looking, looking, looking. "What?" I say again. Dad's truck pulls up alongside us then, the engine shaking the entire vehicle on every third beat, the once-bright orange paint now dulled and flaking from the weather. I blink my eyes at Eddie, turn away from him, and climb into the truck.

As usual, Dad asks about class. I tell him Naomi's been razzing me about photography again. He gets this big old grin on his face. "Anee," he booms, "didn't I say you'd pick this up eventually?" That's what he thinks. "I'm not doing it, Dad. Photographs are stupid. What's the point of showing someone something they can see everyday? People look too much as it is." I cross my arms over my chest. He doesn't listen but reaches

across the gear shift to slap me enthusiastically on the leg-- several times. "Sure, sure. Let's go out right now and get you some film. It'll be great. You'll do great." Great.

Most of the kids at school know about Dad. All of the teachers do--of course they would, with five of us moving through the ranks. They know he's an artist, a single parent, a little eccentric, blah, blah, blah. They say he drives us hard "because he loves us." All I see is that none of the other kids go to class in the summer. Not that I mind not having to put up with the no-brain comments and stupid games, though. Like those sisters of mine. Jeez. Thank God I don't have to have class with them. The luxury of multiple course offerings. How so many girls can have so few brain cells is beyond me.

Marcee had sex with Pete Smathers when she was fourteen, I know because I read her journal. Not that I had to, though; she's such a bragger. Pranced around the bedroom preaching "Pete this" and "Pete that," shoot, you'd think she was even in *love* with the guy, but I know better. She only had sex with him because Claudette told her she was an ugly old cow who couldn't get a man if she paid him. Well, Marcee sure showed her--she went out the next weekend and crashed all the high school parties until she found some guy--Pete--who would lay down and do the deed so she could go back to Claudette and gloat.

Claudette actually just started seeing a new guy named Ernie. I heard her telling Marcee that they're In Love and they'll probably elope next year after her eighteenth birthday, but I don't think she even knows his last name. Another thing she doesn't know is that on Friday afternoon, when I walked into the studio in a towel to take a bath before going out

with Bobby, Ernie was there. I guess Claudette was still upstairs getting ready. Ernie grinned at me and started saying all these things about how he wished he would have known Claudette had an older sister, and hey, what was I doing tonight? I told him I already had a date and he said that was too bad. Just then Claudette hollered from the front hall that she was ready, and he beat feet outta there. *He's a winner, Claude. Better hold on tight.* I climbed into the tub, which still smelled like new paint, and scooched down so that only my nose and eyes were above water. From this angle all my curves flattened and stacked on top of each other. *Lina* stared at me from the corner, where it was pushed among the shadows. The title means "linen thread"; the painting is a nude of my mother. Dad painted it from behind and her face isn't visible, just the long, long, curving hollow of her spine and those legs, those fantastic endless legs. She had brown hair that was straight and smooth and Dad seemed to have painted every strand individually, painstakingly, methodically. The strokes go on, and on, and on. I stared at her that afternoon until I fell asleep.

I dreamt last night that I was alone in the studio. I was standing in the middle of the studio, naked, not moving, just standing with my arms straight up above my head, trying to be perfectly straight and still. The room was all shadows, but I wasn't afraid. I saw my mother out of the corner of my eye and moved towards her, but she moved away, into the darkness. All I could see was her back, and it wasn't even her real back, it was my father's representation. Her whole body was made out of paint-- I could see the strokes of the brush. I remember thinking that my father must have loved this woman an enormous

amount to create her so beautifully. At the same time, I wanted her to be *real*. I knew if I touched her she would be real. I stretched out an arm towards her, and realized that I was all paint too, only my strokes were not beautiful, they were jagged, and I pulled my arm back quickly, into my body, covering as much of myself as I could, clenching my eyes shut tight so I couldn't see the brush, curvy strokes my father had given me. With my eyes shut I was safe-- but I couldn't see my mother. I counted to seven and opened my eyes again and blinked, but she was gone.

"I don't know how to use it." "Doesn't matter. Try." Metal and plastic everywhere; buttons that I don't know how to operate. I peer into the little window and see the planks of the floor I am standing on. They look a million miles away. "I don't know what to do." I look at him and he looks back at me. "Go."

I walk to the playground at the nearby elementary school to take my first roll. Dad bought me T Max 400, knowing that the enlargers I would be using at the center were for black and white film only. The playground is deserted because it rained earlier and the clouds stayed dark all day. Even Marlo's dugout looks bare and abandoned; water drips from a hole in the corner of the overhang and makes a puddle on the concrete that looks like Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. All those girls, all smashed together. All being stared at by anyone and everyone. *Don't you want to be set free?* I photograph the prostitutes in the puddle carefully, wanting to treat them with respect, immortalizing them more with every click. I stoop down for a close up, the heavy camera hanging around my neck, focus the

lens, and snap the shutter. "What do you think you're doing?" I almost drop the camera. I know that squeaky voice. Emily Clamen and Jonathan Apiscatelli come out of the shadows of the dugout. Jonathan grins at me and shoves his hands in his pocket. Emily's busy adjusting her bra--white cotton with blue flowers, front closure. I should know by now, she flashes it around like every other Tuesday. I smile. "What were *you* doing?" "Wouldn't you like to know," Emily sneers. She's just mad because Bobby Fennel broke up with her to go out with me. I don't blame him-- Emily Clamen is stuck up and she lies. She told everyone at school that she dumped Bobby because he's a bad kisser, but Bobby told me he really dumped her and I believe him. I wouldn't want to be near that crazy girl either. Jonathan's staring at my shirt. Emily notices the same time I do and smacks him, hard. What a pair. I don't have to be here. They don't even notice when I leave because Emily starts sputtering to Jonathan about how some day she's going to look just like Pamela Lee Anderson and her mom already said she can find a doctor to do it as soon as she turns eighteen. "Anyway," I hear her say, "Anee stuffs." I shake my head. That girl should get brain implants instead. I stop and watch them. Emily's waving her arms around and Jonathan's not saying a word; he's just trying to grab at her and she's pushing him away. I put the camera up to my eye. *Take that, Emily Clamen, and that.* I take a picture of the two of them, of just Emily, of just Emily's body--no head. *Now how big do you think you are?* Instant decapitation. Cool. They don't even notice. It starts to rain and within seconds Emily's black mascara is running down her face, making her look like a monster out of The Swamp Thing. I take a couple of those, too, then slide the camera into its case. Water runs down my neck. *Time to go home.*