

Observer

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"Just so long as you know," the model said, "I charge twenty-five dollars each for those."

The guy lowered his phone. "You've got to be kidding," he said. "I've been coming to these sessions, eight, nine months, you're the first one's got a problem with it."

A woman chimed in. "We use the photos so we can finish the paintings accurately, back in our studios. That's all it is."

The organizer, an older guy with a beard, said, "I do have to admit, I can understand it if this were nude. But clothed, are you sure?"

"I'm sorry," the model said. "Feel free to take all the pictures you want, but that's how I work it."

"Okay fine," the first guy said. "Can I at least keep the one I took? I didn't know your policy."

Finnegan, who was set up in the back where he figured less people would see his painting, said, "Not sure what part of it you don't understand. Delete the photo."

The dozen or so artists turned from their easels. Finnegan gave the guy a little nod and after a moment the guy pushed a couple buttons and everyone got back down to business.

At the break, the model walked back and said, "Thank you for defending me on that. It's Aimee."

"Chris. Lot of 'em aren't serious artists is my guess, their pace is slow, they're not used to having to finish it in one session."

Aimee was studying Finnegan's. "That's not much of a rendition," she said. "There's a freshness to it, but really, it's pretty bad."

"A question of taste," he said. "Maybe I'm trying to portray the Nordic in you, the severity with which you dish out regulations."

"I'm Italian," she said.

"Fine," Finnegan said. "You got what, another forty-five minutes? Then I know a good restaurant, it's walking distance."

"Sounds complicated," Aimee said, "but I guess I could handle coffee."

They went to Peet's on Ellis Street, which Finnegan regretted because it was crowded and they had to stand

at one of those high round tables. Aimee had changed into jeans and a baggy sweater.

Finnegan said, "I liked the pose outfit better."

She said, "So that's what it's all about."

"What do you mean?"

"I get that sometimes. Guys just want to look, they put a few a marks on the canvas while they're at it. Especially when it's a nude."

"Wait a second, you do those too?"

"I do. Tuesday nights at the College of Marin. Painting and Composition II."

"Jeez . . . So you're okay with that then. I'm trying to picture it."

"The first time, I'm not kidding, I needed two glasses of wine before I got out there, and it was a 10 am class. Now it's just a job."

"So what do you do? Otherwise."

"Well my boyfriend and I, we'd love to start a restaurant. I know that sounds out of bounds."

"Not at all. The Marina Safeway, everyone used to run around with overflowing shopping carts. Now they're picking up a specialty item here and there, because they all eat out . . . He good with you going nude, and what not?"

"Of course he is."

"No he's not," Finnegan said.

"Maybe you're right," Aimee said. "You can come Tuesday if you want. No one'll know, you'll just blend in."

That night at Weatherby's on Chestnut Finnegan said to Mitch, the bartender, "You think it's okay that I go to art classes essentially to enjoy the female models?"

"Gee," Mitch said, "I didn't know you had a background."

Finnegan said, "In junior high school we had a woodshop teacher who liked to incorporate art. I tried to do a drawing of the tablesaw. You couldn't make out that it was piece of machinery, but the guy came around put some touches on it, and it won an end-of-the-year award."

"Are they attractive?" Mitch said.

"Not classically, the ones I've seen. But there's something about the situation."

"I know. Presenting themselves. There's gotta be a subliminal aspect to it."

"That, or they don't have a better way to pay the rent."

"But the other thing too," Mitch said.

The College of Marin session was in a regular classroom except with the desks pulled out of there and replaced by easels. There were deep sinks in the hall and storage racks overflowing with paintings on stretcher bars.

Finnegan was surprised that the door was wide open, thinking Jeez, people on their way to other night classes could look in and see a naked woman unless they closed it before they got started, and even then you had that little window.

He was five minutes late, which was the idea, and he found a corner spot and unpacked his stuff. Everyone was talking, even the ones fiddling with their phones, which was about half the class, until a young-guy teacher cleared his throat and announced that tonight the emphasis was on color and value, specifically integrating the backdrop with the figure.

A woman in a white terrycloth robe who Finnegan hadn't noticed climbed onto the little platform up front and took off the robe. She had a feathered Indian headdress on and a minimal black wrap down below. Finnegan assumed she had nothing underneath that

because the side of her leg was pretty much showing all the way up, but she left on the wrap, shifting through a series of topless reclining and standing poses over an hour and a half.

He did his best to keep up with the fast pace, not trying to depict the model with any clarity because he couldn't, especially in these ten-minute poses, though he wouldn't have been able to anyway.

A timer went off and the model put on the robe and a pair of running shoes and went out into the hall carrying her bag. The young professor came around, rapidly assessing each student's work. Finnegan had his final piece still on the easel and the rest laying on the floor, all 16 x 20 inch sheets of thick art paper.

The professor scanned Finnegan's efforts, pointed to one and said, "That one's good", and moved on. Finnegan studied the painting and couldn't see anything that separated it from the rest of his group.

People started packing up and Finnegan said to a middle-aged woman in the row in front of him, "Wait a minute. There's going be another model, right?"

The woman smiled and said, "You certainly have plenty of energy. As it is, it takes me a couple hours to unwind. Nope, that's it."

"Wow. I was told a model named Aimee would be here tonight."

"Hun, to be honest," the woman said, "I probably know who you're talking about, but I can't keep any of their names straight."

"Blonde hair probably pulled back, long legs, no nonsense?"

"Oh, yes. We have her frequently."

Tonight's model was back in the room, changed and wearing a ski jacket, wrapping it up with the young professor. Finnegan waited and followed her out the door.

"Pardon me, was this Aimee's night?" he said.

"It was," the model said, friendly. "Why, it didn't work with me?"

"Well, I guess one of mine worked, at least better than the others. I realize now I made you darker than you are."

"Aimee asked me to sub. I'm on the list."

Finnegan said, "Would you happen to have her phone number?"

The model took a good look at him. "You're not like a pervert or something, are you?"

"Aimee invited me tonight is all," he said. "I don't really know her, I just met her in the city."

"I don't know why I believe you," she said, rifling through her phone. "Here. Just don't tell her where you got it."

Traffic was stop-and-go coming up Waldo Grade toward the bridge, so Finnegan called Aimee. "That class you directed me to, in Kentfield," he said. "What happened?"

"Ooh, sorry about that," she said.

"That it?"

"Well I got it covered didn't I?" She sounded like she might be drinking.

"You did, it was all good, I enjoyed it," he said, thinking what the hell am I doing here.

Aimee said, "Something happened."

"What do you mean?"

"How about I meet you?"

"Not sure that's the greatest idea at this point . . . But if you need to, I live in the Marina. I'm not doing any more driving tonight."

"How about that place Mel's?" she said.

"On Lombard? I guess," he said.

Aimee's hair was down and messy and it looked like she'd been crying.

"I'll be honest," Finnegan said, "you look and also sound kind of fucked up."

"I got in an argument with my boyfriend," she said. "It was a bad one, loud. I was scrambling around the apartment closing windows to keep it down. Then he hit me."

"God damn it."

"It's over. He grabbed some clothes and left for the night. I'm not scared or anything."

"Where is he now?" Finnegan said.

"Probably his friend Hal's. We've argued before, but it's never been this intense. It had to do with the sessions."

"Keep going."

"Well I asked him point blank, are you sure you're okay with me taking my clothes off for strangers?"

"And what?"

"He wasn't happy. Not about me taking the clothes off or not, that wasn't the issue, but me questioning him about it again. For some reason that set him off."

Finnegan said, "Where does Hal live?"

"On 24th Street."

"What's the address?"

"Oh no," Aimee said. "It's not like that."

"Here's the thing," Finnegan said. "You want me sitting up all night in front of the TV mad, or you want me to let him know someone knows, is all?"

"Unh-uh, sorry. I'm not sure what I was looking for, meeting you, but you aren't going there."

Finnegan said, "Either give me the address or I'll file a police report."

"Oh my God . . . I don't know the address . . . It's a white building on the Mission side of South Van Ness . . . There's a dumpster in front of the one next door . . . Jesus."

"What apartment?"

"You figure it out . . . Holy Crap."

"Where'd he hit you?"

"Right here. But why, does it matter?"

"Maybe it's the light, I'm not seeing much."

"I've been icing it," she said.

Whenever Finnegan was driving on South Van Ness he thought of the movie American Graffiti, that they filmed parts of at a drive-in that was no longer there. In

fact it was actually the original Mel's. The surviving Mel's locations played up the movie, going all out with black and white stills and memorabilia, but where Ron Howard and Richard Dreyfuss pulled up and went inside in fictitious 1962, where the camera angle shut out the rest of the city and made you think it was a small town in the Central Valley, was the one on South Van Ness.

Parking was brutal and he squeezed into a spot three blocks away. He rang some bells at random and after a minute one guy opened a second-story window and Finnegan asked which apartment was Hal's, and the guy said he thought it was 6 and buzzed him in.

Hal opened the door wearing boxers and a t-shirt and rubbing his eyes. Finnegan said, "I don't like to bother you, but Hal, right? My name's Chris."

"Yes?"

"You know an Aimee."

The guy froze. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, nothing like that. I wanted to speak to her boyfriend though."

"Well that's me," Hal said.

"Oh."

"You might as well come in. Ignore the mess. I don't last too long in the evening, as you can see. With global trading and shit, they got me going in a lot in the middle of the night."

"They're an investment bank?" Finnegan said.

"Yeah, Piper Jaffray, on Clay. Don't get me wrong, the pay's great, but now and then you do question the MBA route."

"I read something though, right? Wall Street's supposed to be cracking down on that, piling the hours on the young guys."

"They'll work around it. Just like playing football in high school, they have optional summer practices but if you don't show up you're in the doghouse. What about Aimee?"

"Nothing, except I met her at an art class and she said her boyfriend hit her today."

"She said that? You sure?"

"I don't know. According to her, the boyfriend went to Hal's."

"Fuck," Hal said.

"What?"

"We did have an argument, but I was at work. She called me all bent out of shape, asking should she quit her modeling gig."

"What'd you tell her?"

"That I didn't care for it. I mean I had sort of liked it, the idea of it, until we'd been going out for a few weeks . . . What, you came over here to punch me in the face?"

Finnegan said, "Not exactly sure. It just hit a nerve."

"Well I haven't even seen Aimee for a couple of days," Hal said. "Frankly, she scares me sometimes. She distorts things."

There were footsteps in the hall and the door opened and an unshaved kid came in wearing a backpack and a Carolina Panthers hat. "You mind if I crash here tonight?" he said to Hal.

Hal said fine. The kid extended his hand to Finnegan, "I'm Kenny, by the way."

Finnegan took a moment to visualize it in slow motion, the way his uncle had taught him, the compact extension and the clean follow through, before he reared back and caught the guy flush on the chin, the guy on the ground as he got out of there, not flying but fast enough.

