

The Lady from 103rd Street

By Travis Baker

Devin Vogeland slept on a couch at the Williamsburg Art Nexus. He wasn't technically supposed to be sleeping there but the cost of the studio space eliminated the ability to pay rent on even the smallest part of an apartment so he pretended to work late into the night and fall asleep in the exhausted throes of artistic creation. Occasionally he would find himself snuggled against a warm body in a soft bed and, as often as not, it had been the embrace of the mattress he had desired as much as the girl.

He could afford paint but not canvass so he painted on the chunks of wood and metal, glass and plastic he would find abandoned to the streets. Struck by longing, he once dragged a stained and moldy mattress back four blocks and up the three flights of stairs. He leaned it against the wall and began to visualize twisted figures writhing on the surface. Were they fucking or dying? Fighting or dreaming? He didn't know.

"Dude," said one of the guys he shared the space with. "Nobody's gonna buy that stinky thing."

"They'll buy the art on top of it," Devin had said.

"No, seriously. There's health code violations."

He dragged the mattress back down the stairs and dumped it on the sidewalk. His clothes smelled not well. He painted a pig on the back of a toilet seat cover. The mattress was gone the next morning.

"Where are you off to today?" Marjorie Atkin's husband asked as he stuffed a bagel in his mouth and reached for the bag that carried his ipad, his paper, his notes, pens, the book he'd been trying to read and several forgotten cough drops going soft and sticky at the bottom.

"The Met!" Marjorie called out. She was trying to stuff her two-year old Cameron into a

pair of red overalls but he was having none of it.

“I want monster trucks!” he kept saying.

“Not for Play day.” She snapped him in and stood back. His hair had finally come in, curly and red. People pointed to his curls on the street and in stores.

“The Met again?” Her husband careened towards the door.

“There’s a new Italian Renaissance Exhibit!” The Arts Society, as the ladies called themselves, went to museums and galleries, matinees and lectures with the occasional stroll through a botanical garden or historical walk thrown in for good measures all under the guidance of Mr. Williams Scott with his ever present silk ascot and tales of artistic wonder. Marjorie occasionally tried her set of watercolors but these efforts most often resembled tears. She encouraged Cameron with finger paints and play-doh.

The little tyke cried and fought with the snaps.

“Have fun!” her husband said as he pulled the door closed behind him with his foot.

“DAGBLATT!”

Gregg Trout owned the Broadway Used Book Store knew about 10% of his employee’s names. His daughter, Celia, after several trips to Europe, a degree at Sarah Lawrence and one failed marriage had recently returned to the fold and would take over ownership someday. She moved about the six miles of books stuffed into the five miles of shelves with a clipboard and a green pen.

Mr. Trout waved him over. There were more books to go back to Lin to be priced and then more books to be shelved. On the top of the pile was a Lucien Freud catalogue. He gawked at the monstrously obese nude, how she spilled over the cushions, how the rough and gritty surfaces bespoke such a crumbling of aesthetic. Artists no longer painted the gods, he thought, we no longer paint the kings and queens or even the happy children running through water lilled streams. We paint fat blobs on stained couches. He was reminded of the girl he’d spent

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the night with a few months ago. Her bed had been large and she'd taken up most of it.

Marjorie stood before the wide white steps leading up to the small door that gave entrance to the vaulted gallery, the great stair and all the little rooms and grand halls beyond. She no longer took notice of the hot dog cars or the caricature artists that lined the sidewalks or the tourists from near and far that loitered about taking pictures of themselves and all their surroundings. She had a lifetime membership and marched right in.

Devin leaned against the wall that faced 12th Street and rolled a cigarette. He hated rolled cigarettes but he could not afford to buy packs. He smoked and watched people scuttle by. Where were they all going, where were they always all going and when would they all get there? When did they ever stop and let their souls drift deeply away, he wondered? Was it when the coffee stains on their napkins reminded them of some summer night long ago? Heather came out to bum a smoke. She worked in Biography and lived in a hole above a door in Astoria. She'd come over to the studio a few times because he asked her to model for him and slept on his couch. She was thinner than he, flatter than he and didn't shave or wash as much. They'd snuck up to the roof one night and found a hammock which soon led to Devin finding himself inside of her as she swung back and forth, toward him and away as they watched the millions and millions of lights and fire fly lives flicker along the bridge spires and out over the water.

"Doing anything tonight?" she said.

Devin took a drag of his smoke. "There's a group show opening at Carlo's." He wanted to go but he didn't. He knew one of the guys in the show and hoped to get an introduction to the curator, maybe show him some the pictures of his work but he knew the guy from RISD and thought he was a big phony and resented the fact that the guy was in a group show at Carlo's

and he wasn't. "Free food and wine," he said.

"Okay." Heather pulled a thread of tobacco from her lips. Her hair hung limp and smelled of glue. Her eyes were sunken hollow and her teeth were like tin.

"Why there's my own son!" Marjorie exclaimed and it seemed very much as if she were looking at her very own Cameron. As if Lorenzo Lotto (Italian, Venetian, ca. 1480-1556) had travelled in time to make a painting of a particularly mischievous young boy with curly red hair and a penchant for running naked out the door.

Rose Goldstein adjusted her viewing glasses, observed the boy, glanced at the marker on the wall and then back at the painting. She took two steps back and bent her head first to the right and then to the left. "He looks like he's about to pee on his mother," she said.

Marjorie stepped back with her. Indeed, the little cupid was holding his little wee-wee in such a way that would suggest to anyone with any experience with the male ability to pee nearly anywhere that he was about to unleash a gleeful stream of golden rain upon his mother, Venus, lying in repose upon a blue silk bed, cupping her left breast and holding a golden bell surrounded by a Christmas leaf up to her laughing child. Nearly the exact same thing happened to Marjorie a week earlier. Cameron was napping and so she allowed herself the indulgence of a bath. She had drawn hot water and used rose scented bubbles. She felt unburdened of weight. Only her eyes grew heavy and then, as she half-consciously contemplated the pink and freckled surface of her knees Cameron had marched in, announced he needed to go wee-wee and pissed all over everything.

Devin sat on the toilet earning a few more minutes of break time.

What Marjorie found most engrossing about the Italians of the Renaissance were their women. Voluptuous women of fine skin and pleasing smiles forever being courted by demi-gods and satyrs, they lounged in Roman baths on silk cushions, they played in the flowered beds of Elysian fields and ran naked through the woods with unicorns. As Mr. Williams Scott narrated their passions and exploits, Marjorie ran naked with them. She cavorted and gamboled, she giggled and she gave in to the wild animal roars of Hercules.

“Are you all right, dear?” Alice Cormier asked. “You look a bit flushed.”

That Alice Cormier should remark that she looked a bit flush was quite an alarm to Marjorie. Alice Cormier’s husband was under indictment for securities fraud and this knowledge made everyone anxious for her and her, in turn, quite anxious for herself. It was not until Marjorie tried to speak that she realized that her breath had gone short and she felt the tingle of perspiration between her bosoms. “I’m fine,” she said. “Art!”

“Oh, yes,” Alice said. She stole a glance at the final painting of the exhibit, Primavera by Sandro Botecelli (Italian, Florentine, ca. 1445-1510), and the young man picking the apple oblivious to the beauties behind him. “Yes.” Marjorie and several others suspected she was having an affair with her tennis instructor or, at least, they hoped she was.

They entered the gift shop at the end of the exhibit and Marjorie watched as Rose flipped the tome open and turned the pages in great hunks, flashing through the collected works printed in lush color and accompanied by rich text. Rose let the volume thump back in place and then opened just the heavy cover. The Metropolitan Museum of Art placed the value of the book at \$127.89 and that was with the membership discount.

“You know,” Mr. Williams Scott interjected as he touched each lady in delicate turn upon the shoulder and then let his hand fall lightly to the glossy cover that featured Botticelli’s mystical central figure. “You can always go down to the Broadway Used Book store and find these catalogues for half or sometimes a quarter of the price.”

“Oh, it’s such a bother,” Rose said. “Such a long way to go and the types that crawl around that place. I’ve only been once, of course, but once was enough I think.” She hoisted

one of the catalogues in her arms and carried it with an air of grand ceremony to the register.

Alice Walker sighed and picked one up for herself. Marjorie was left standing next to Mr. Williams Scott, not daring to reach out and touch the book for fear that she would clutch it to her chest and run into the streets with it. \$127.89 was simply too much to pay for a book. It was fine for Rose or Alice to indulge in such extravagences. Rose would be dead soon and Alice was in the midst of a crisis but for a practical woman who paid close attention to the family expenses and whose husband kept both a boat and a set of golf clubs in Noank, CT the cost was too high.

“No?” Mr. Williams Scott inclined his head toward her. “Well, not all of us are millionaires.”

The guy that Devin once knew had become deeply fascinated with shapes and color. He had painted various shapes with various colors and put a price tag on them. It was nothing new but what is? And isn't it sad that someone so new to the art world should look around himself and see only variations on the same? These were the same people saying the same things as ever stood around in a lofted ceilinged hall ignoring the art and enjoying the cheese.

“Doesn't anyone paint anymore?” Devin asked the girl he knew blogged for ArtSpeak.

The girl cupped her little plastic glass of white and shook her hair around her glasses. “That died from AIDS in the 80's,” she said.

After she bathed Cameron, stuffed him into his special blue airplane footies, brushed his little teeth, read him three books, tucked him in, turned out the lights, told him a story, gave him pat-pats, sang him a song, gave him one more story and a few more pat pats, Marjorie went downstairs and enjoyed two glasses of a robust Italian red with her husband as they watched their favorite crime drama. When the killer had been captured by the dedicated and wise-cracking team of investigators she went upstairs and prepared for bed while her husband

checked the market and answered some e-mails. Before she washed her face and brushed her teeth she changed the bed sheets, deciding on the purple silk ones.

Devin stepped outside and found Heather sitting on the steps ignoring whatever it was the two Norwegians were saying to her. It was a cool black night in the city. The asphalt glistened and the steel beams hummed. On the train they stared at the floor, their hands, their phones, the advertisements on the walls, some red sneakers, some flat brown shoes, a cane, a pair of headphones, a little baby girl sleeping in her mother's lap and a bottle that kept rolling back and forth.

Marjory pulled her husband into her and brushed her fingers through the forest of hair upon his back. She closed her eyes and thrust her hips, spurring his sides and calling him her Minotaur.

"What?" he said to her.

"Keep going," she urged.

"Yes, dear."

After several passion filled minutes, maybe three, he eased himself from her with breath ragged and testacies empty. She stretched her arms over her head, wringing one last tingle up from her spine.

"Can I draw you first?"

Heather let the weight of her long, flat, unwashed hair draw her head down. "Sure," she said and slid off of him. "Naked or what?"

Devin stood and scrambled towards his stash of newsprint. His feet were bare and cold

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on the dusty concrete floor. "Nude," he said. He pulled the large pad out from under some old attempts as a sculpture study done in Styrofoam and re-buckled his pants. "I love your bones."

"I'm not taking my socks off," Heather said. Her top was already hanging off the end of the couch so she only had to slither out of her jeans and panties as Devin hunted around for his charcoal box. He found it next to an empty soda can and under a mostly all the way eaten bag of corn chips.

"That's fine," he said, dragging a stool towards the couch.

Heather lay down on her right side, folding her arms under her head. Her eyes were large and dark. Her nose looked like it had been ever so gently smushed. She was a collection of bones and fur modeled in skin.

"Why do you look so sad all the time?" he asked her.

"Things," she said. She closed her eyes. "You know."

Marjorie couldn't sleep for the longest time and it wasn't just her husband's snoring. Her skin tingled. It felt like it had been wrapped in wax paper like a pound of pastrami. She stared at the diffuse darkness, at the pale glimmer of the ceiling above, listened to the garbage trucks rumbling by and the occasional after-hours conversation that shouted and died and wondered sweet wonders of what it must have been like to be one of those women in one of those Italian Renaissance paintings. How must it have been to be, if only for a time, if only for a month, if only for a moment, the sole occupation of such artistic concentration and then to live forever as a nymph in the woods, a goddess of the sea or the mother of God?

Devin lifted a rolled up cigarette to his lips. Heather was asleep. He stared at the drawing he'd done of her. It was her but more so, flesh made from shading and line. It was the eternity of her, her form without breath, her self without blood. She was hers but this was his.

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Marjorie dreamed of little angles peeing all over everything.

When Devin woke up Heather was gone. His studio-mate was standing over his drawing, one arm tucked under the other, the other holding a steaming cup, a tea-bag tail dangling off the side.

"You could totally sell this," he said.

"Thanks."

"You know what you should do is...is take this down to the copy center and get it blown up really huge and then paste in on a building down in SoHo somewhere and everyone will be like what is that and who did that and who is that and you should just post more of them up all over like that guy did with Andre the Giant except that's Andre the Giant and this is a naked chick so what's better? You'll be famous in a week if you come up with a cool artist name."

"Where are you off to today?"

"The Village!"

"Be..." Marjorie's husband took a bit of his bagel, slipped on one sleeve of his coat and grabbed his office keys off the front mantel, "careful."

"VEDMIN!!!"

Devin looked up. A big red-headed woman with a stroller was standing in front of Mr. Trout.

"Art question!"

Mr. Trout muttered something and pointed the woman towards Devin. She shoved the stroller with a fat little red-headed kid in it towards him.

“Hello!” the woman said. She had a smile as broad as her hips and a feverish light in her green eyes. The child in the stroller was sucking on a candy and trying to get the sticky off by wiping his chubby little fingers on his coat. “We’ve come all the way from 103rd street for the new Italian Renaissance book!”

“We don’t have it.”

The young man that stood before her with his earrings and greasy hair stuffed the paint and tobacco stained hands that stuck out of his rummaged sweater into his raggedy baggedy pants. The air between them began to heat and she could feel the oxygen and nitrogen molecules beginning to snap and crackle.

“Well,” she said, “I came all the way from 103rd street and I think we can do better than that.”

“Lady,” he said. “The distance you traveled in no way effects whether or not we have the book. We have people who come here from South Korea and sometimes we don’t have the books they want either.”

“Mommy! Sticky!” Cameron held his hands up for his mother to inspect his little fur covered claws.

“Mommy will get you a wipey while this young man checks for Mommy’s book,” she said down to her son while shooting a look up to the boy.

The boy shook his head and pulled one of his stained hands from one of his dingy pockets. He waved at a table next to him. “If we had it,” he said, “it would be right here.”

The woman extracted a moist toilette from a packet stuffed into a pouch on the back

pack slung over the back of the stroller.

“Well,” she said, standing and crushing the toilette in her hand. “I think we can do better than that.” She grabbed the handles of the stroller, wheeled her slobbering child around and headed back to the main desk.

Devin shrugged and meandered to the art table. He ran through the shelves in his mind. It wasn't on the New Acquisitions table. There were plenty of books about the Italian Renaissance in the Italian Renaissance section but none of them were new either. Lin had the day off but the assistant art department manager, Ryan, was pricing paperbacks.

“We don't have the new Italian Renaissance book do we?”

Ryan snapped a \$2.50 tag on a Christie's catalogue. “Nope.” He snapped another tag on another catalogue with his pricing gun.

“DEVILFLISH!”

Marjorie watched with satisfaction as the owner harangued the greasy young man. Apparently he had not checked downstairs or whatever the reviewer stacks were, or with a man named Bob who ran the warehouse upstairs. After the young man was sent off to check those places the owner expressed his apologies and directed her towards the art section if she liked or the children's section towards the back to peruse at her leisure while they checked to see if they had the book.

She could tell the boy was angry as he stomped away but really, she'd come all the way down from 103rd street which may not have been South Korea but had taken two trains which involved hoisting Cameron and his stroller both up and down stairs without any help except for the kind black man at the 14th Street stop but then it was still several blocks to the store and he really could do better than standing in front of her knowing everything.

She rolled Cameron down the tight aisles of the art department and stopped at the crowded little shelf labeled Italian Renaissance. None of these books were hers. They were thin

or old or torn or smudged. Some were in black and white. Some showed her the images she sought, the laughing women in sheer silk and the sneering gods groping at them but they were like a half-hearted promise of grander possibility. She glanced at the young man slumped in a chair, his hand running through his hair, mumbling into a phone. She wondered how much of his parents hopes had he already wasted.

Devin watched the woman enter the children's section. He saw Mr. Trout hunched over his figures and Celia slithering towards him with her clipboard. He hopped off the chair and weaved his way through the main aisles and down the back stairs. He darted down the remainder stacks and shoved his way through the galley trolls and then he checked every single row and shelf and hidden spot where books sometimes fell and found, as he knew he would, not the thing he was sent to find.

He went back upstairs. Celia was waiting for him.

"We don't have it," he said.

Celia Trout had lips as hard as teeth.

"I looked downstairs, I called upstairs, I checked the stacks three times. We don't have it."

Celia sent strangling wires out of her eyes. They slithered through his tear ducts and dug into his very core. She retracted them with a curt nod.

"Tell the lady from 103rd Street," she said. "Tell her you looked everywhere and apologize." She took her clipboard and herself away to go tell her father how Daglish son of Dragbart had failed them so utterly.

Cameron slept as Marjorie learned how dinosaurs say goodnight. The illustrations were large and lovely and in the end the Tyrannosaurus Rex gave his mother a kiss and one hug more

before pulling up his covers and dozing off.

“Mam,” he said to her.

She looked up. He did not carry her book. His hands were stuffed into his pockets.

“I looked everywhere. I’m sorry. We should get it in soon.”

“When?” She said.

He shrugged. All the world was a shrug to him, she thought. Every trouble in life wasn’t worth a care. “I don’t know. I can take your name and number and we’ll call you.”

Marjorie straightened her back and placed her large hands on the handles of the stroller. “I came all the way down from 103rd street,” she said. “And I don’t plan to do so again.” She left him in her wake, to the well-deserved destitution of his life.

Devin watched her go. He watched her backside roll down the aisle. She reminded him of those women in those paintings except her face was too large and too round. As big as their bellies and butts were, the women in those paintings had soft faces, young and pouty. He thought of his drawing of Heather. He thought about charcoal shadows on cheap paper.

The End

Travis Baker bio: Travis G. Baker lives in Orono, Maine where he writes plays and short stories and a blog about youth sports. His work has been published in Spry Lit, Masons Road, Stolen Island, Puckerbrush Review and Hawk & Handsaw among others. He’s won a Berrilla Kerr Award and a Clauder New England Playwrights Prize. He wrote a novel, *Night and the Texas Sky*, and his play, *Hair Frenzy*, will debut at the Penobscot Theatre Company next season. He received his MFA from Fairfield University and teaches composition and creative writing at the University of Maine