Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Torso of the Nude in the Sunlight, 1876*

The Torso of the Nude

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I HAVE OFTEN WONDERED IF THE BUCOLIC painting of Renoir's, *The Torso of the Nude in the Sunlight*, which hung on the wall above our marriage bed from 1977 to 1994, was a picture of my life or a vision of my future. Serene and shy, the nude woman contemplates, eyes lowered as if she were watching me in my sleep, sending me dreams and catching the terrors of night as a guardian angel might. I used to worry about everything—the welfare of my children, the stability of my marriage, the stability near the Pacific faultline. I even worried when I saw a dog outside my window having trouble pooping.

I first discovered the print of Renoir's nude in a Parisian bookseller's stall . . . or perhaps I found her at a visiting exhibit at the de Young Museum or the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. I attached myself to her immediately and then bought the exquisite print. She, with round full breasts, holding the seeds within her womb, sat alone in the sunlight of a perfect day. And I, thirty-two, with small breasts, a working mother of two children, ten and twelve, woke up every morning to her eyes in prayer. Serene, not me. On weekdays I rushed home from the special kids I taught, kids in wheelchairs, using communication devices, to the kitchen sink, where before I had even peed, I washed my hands, peeled the potatoes, rinsed the chicken and patted its legs with olive oil, lemon, salt and pepper—all the time holding my legs together.

Raphael, *Madonna of the Chair, 1513*

The beautiful zaftig woman, bare breasted, dappled in sunlight colors of yellow and pink and blue, reflecting the green of the trees behind her, sat in repose as the role model. She'd replaced the other guardian of my childhood, an early Renaissance Madonna and Child who, throughout my childhood until I went to college at seventeen, stared at me sleeping in the old four-poster mahogany bed. She was the perfect mother, the one who was thrown up to me by nuns in Sunday school and by my family. The perfect woman with the plump infant child on her left knee nestled in the full arms of his mother.

Both of them stared down at me as I slept, seeping into me and making me feel I might have to live up to this Madonna image, and not Madonna Louise Ciccone, who sang "Like a Virgin."

The Madonna on my childhood wall was young and wore her hair parted in the middle with a rolled piece of fabric wrapped around her head and down her back. Her pink sleeve fell to her wrist where she wore a gold bracelet. The baby wore a lose fitting sepia shirt leaving his chubby legs and arms bare, one big toe pointed up to his mother. His hands, hidden under the mother's shawl, made him look cozy and merged. The dyad of my youth was not alone, however, a third figure, a child of about ten, hung off to the right side of the painting with hands together in prayer with eyes lifted to the dyad. Was that child me, adoring the dyad?

Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Chair, 1475*

Facing the Nude Torso

Although the nude torso had replaced the Madonna and Child on my early bedroom wall, I still saw the Madonna and child in her. Was it because I became pregnant at twenty, knowing I would never be a maiden again? Was the mother and child dyad an imprint in my psyche? A child's protective dream while sleeping? Wouldn't I have prayed to her each night—*Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women?* After all, above my childhood bed lived a beautiful woman holding the little man who would die and leave her. Did this dyad of mother and child forecast who I would be? Hadn't I experienced the death of the maiden by marrying at twenty? Did I dare not see the single maiden in dappled sunlight because of the responsibility in raising two children lay ahead of me while my husband worked to become a physician.

In my mind there would be no single woman sitting in the sun. By attributing mother and child status to the nude, is it that I would have company? Or was her image a lingering reminder of what was to come? Might I still have time to sit in the sun in my nakedness or stay in the middle ages?

The Middle Ages

These two works of art, one from the Renaissance and the other born from the late 1800s Impressionism in Paris, juxtapose one on the other. I can't say for sure whether Renoir's nude woman was with or without child. Of course, it's possible she was smiling because she knew a seed had been planted within her. No matter, these two artworks of different centuries meld together in my mind's eye. The woman sitting roundly in the grass with the dappled light and the more iconic painting of the mother and child in religious sentiments portrayed on every prayer card in every Catholic Church and on every Catholic girl. Imprinted in my heart and soul—a good Catholic girl who during one year of middle school went to church every day for forty days of Lent. I was a girl who found solace in the rituals. I sometimes think I grew up in the Middle Ages.

Renoir dared to create real people and his work foreshadowed women as joyful partygoers, dancers, and eaters, and nudes quietly sat in their naked beauty in dappled sunlight without the wrath of God in them. What was Renoir hoping to inspire with scenes of boating and luncheons, women wearing hats and flowing dresses, lips pink or red? Their cheeks round and their eyes glowing. You could almost hear the chatter among friends.

What's he saying?

Let's expand the roles for women.

Yeah, let's get them into the garden and paradise of human interaction, not in the garden of Eden and perfection.

Let's make them real.

Was Renoir so different from the Italian Renaissance master Giovanni Bellini, who also managed to get away from the iconic by painting his classic Madonna and Child with luscious blues and vermilion? Each artist in his own way moved generations out of the dark ages, toward the body, embracing beauty and sensuality. How could I move myself out of the dark ages?

Painting the Virgin

While Renoir dared to create real people, foreshadowing women as joyful partygoers, dancers, eaters, and nudes quietly sitting in their naked beauty, I chose to paint the classic Madonna. After all she was my role model. implanted in my psyche. The virgin, the perfectly pure woman. The woman I was supposed to become. Though I had failed, she was still under my skin. I had to paint her in my painting class at City College San Francisco to get her out into the open for all to see. I mixed the rich pigments in the linseed oil and De Mar var-

nish as the masters might have. I mixed colors as rich and saturated as the Giovanni Bellini blues and carmines. I mixed cobalt and ultramarine with phthalo and indigo blues to make an intense mood for the women appearing on the canvases. First I painted the Madonna of Sorrow, then The Pregnant Virgin.

I painted the sad ones—the mothers of sorrow, vulnerability and even despair. Where was the joyous woman in the dappled light? When would I find her? When would I dare to play with pastel colors and the lighter stroke of Renoir's Impressionism.

One of my first exhibits at University of California Extension, San Francisco showed three canvases, each woman in various stages of getting off the cross. It wasn't Jesus with his troop finally taking him down after his torturous ordeal, the one we commemorated on Good Fridays when we walked the stations of the cross. No, it was the artist releasing the woman from her cross. The Christ in my paintings was a beautiful voluptuous young woman hanging from the cross. Her breast exposed, her head resting on her shoulder, a beautiful cloth swirling around her private parts.

At the opening reception I stood back to look with new eyes. Was she dead? Was she me? I could only examine these questions with my brush dipped into the moist, squishy oil paint, and then smeared onto the canvas of my life. It was the only way for me to discover whether she was dead or alive. What had I offered the others to see? Who was she? Was she me? What had she done to be hammered into the structure of a cross? I, the artist, had put her there for all to see. She looked dead and, of course, she was. My question became: could she be resurrected if taken on the cross? Could life be breathed back into her mouth? Was that what I wished for me? Though I wasn't consciously thinking I'd been hanging from a cross, I reflected then on the story that my gramma had told me of my birth scene. She told me I came out of the womb strangled twice by the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck; how my grandfather prayed on his knees to the virgin; how the doctor ably cut the cord. My grandfather's prayers breathed air into my life.

With my brushes and paint I had really painted her hammered to the cross. The cross pointing in four directions: toward the heavens and the hells, toward the sunrise and sunset. Hammered to wood, petrified to planks—once arms of an elm or an oak tree. Limb to limb she stretched across the wooden structure.

If it were up to me to get her down, the task was not enviable. For the life of me I didn't know where to begin. Should I free her hands first? Or unhook her feet—pinned together, contorted, one crossed over the other. Would I then clean her wounds? Wouldn't they have already begun to form scar tissue? Would her crowd of Marys and Marthas be praying at her feet? Mary Magdalene? Would she be there? Or was she only a cohort of Jesus?

And how about the people on the path like Simon of Serene who helped Jesus carry the cross or picked him up when he fell down? And the others, would they help her move toward her freedom? Who would help the artist get her off the cross, pick her up, swaddle her so that she would be the child who could scream out in exultation at being resurrected from the momentary death she experienced, nurtured back to life, and become the artist who would paint herself into freedom.

Writing the Virgin

Wouldn't you know, the first character who came to me while writing a novel, *Anchor Out*, was Frances Pia, an excommunicated nun who, like me, painted a series of virgins—women aware of their despair. Like me she paints, "deep fluid eyes downcast, with shadows of gray daring to cover rosy cheeks. More like the eyes of the Mater Dolorosa, The Lamenting Virgin, the virgin of tears and sorrow than the Virgo Gaudens, the joyful virgin. In Frances' paintings Mary held the infant Jesus close to her breast, but her eyes spoke of the sadness foretelling the loss of her only son. This recognition is stunning for Frances. Her loss of her son was foretold, but she had missed the cues."

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As life would have it, I find myself stopped dead in front of the original Renoir at the Clark. The nude torso woman in dappled light had traveled so far in those years from one museum to another and was still lovely, young, and beautiful. Not a day older, stopped in time, eternal. I ask how, after twenty-five years, she showed up in this moment in front of me so that I would fall in love with her once again at seventy-four.

In silence I stand in front of her. Her eyes downward, not looking directly at me, but still in her full glory, sitting naked with a soft cloth covering her pubic hair; her right hand gently rests on the soft white fabric covering her thigh; her left fingers pinch the fabric covering her other leg. Like me she wears a ring on her wedding finger and a gold bracelet on her wrist. I never noticed. She still sits in the dappled sunlight of a summer day, deep in thought. Full rosy lips, eyes open but downwardly cast in contemplation or shyness? Her brown hair like a crown circles around her head and shoulders and then falls onto the blues and pinks of her nakedness on this sunny day at the Clark.

A sensual beauty, still young, she raises her eyes and tells me that she, like me, is an eternal spring and pregnant with possibility. That's what I was seeing all those years. I swear her eyes meet mine or maybe it's the magic of amazement of seeing her in the original painting once again after all these years. Perhaps it's the dazzling light of the museum that helps me meet her gaze and she mine, to see her clearly, to see behind her eyes into something eternal.

The woman I placed as the guardian of my night dreams during years of travail of mid-life and worries of motherhood and growing children is face to face with me—one hundred years after the death of her creator, Renoir. She is my Eve sitting in the Garden of Eden in all her nudity, still here with me.

Who are you?

She lifts her eyes and says, *I am you*.

Before me, pregnant with possibility, the young woman, *The Torso in the Sunlight*, gazes into my eyes, and nods. A gift for my seventy-fifth birthday.

Thank you, I tell her.