

The Mitzvah

by Daniel Harris

There were only two students in the sculpture class: an 86 year-old Jewish woman and myself. The teacher was a genius from a third world country. He was considered a master and national treasure in his native land, but he had no name recognition in the United States. Since the master's command of English was limited, he taught mostly by example. We could not afford live models, so we worked from his sketches, or from photographic books of classic poses. Beside books of human models, the master's library had many books with beautiful photographs of flora and fauna. The master liked my sculptures because I would sculpt the human figure as an abstract polymorph of a bird, a fish, a flower or a musical instrument. Esther, my classmate, only sculpted female nudes, usually older women in poses of depression or desperation. Esther was remarkably well preserved, healthy, and possessed a sharp mind and memory. But, she was deaf.

Without hearing aids, Esther could not distinguish human speech. Occasionally she would forget her hearing aids. When she did, my job as translator became even more difficult. I would have to exaggerate my lip movements so she could read my lips.

Esther's project was a triptych of three female nudes depicting three stages of womanhood: young woman, middle-aged woman, woman in old age. She would take measurements from her own body for the old age figure; for the middle-aged figure, she used photos of her daughter in a leotard. But she was constantly arguing with the master about the proportions of the young woman's figure. First one then the other would go into sulk, or worse, a black funk. The tension in the studio was palpable. One did not argue with the *sensei*.

After listening to a week of these arguments, I decided to take action.

—Esther, I said, my wife is at Sundance for the film festival, why don't I take you to dinner tonight?

—I have another engagement, maybe tomorrow night?

—Excellent. Give me your address and I'll pick you up at six.

She lived in one of those gated communities that catered to retired college professors. I met Esther at her condo at six. We dined at one of the better area restaurants with a water view.

—Did you bring a sketchbook? I asked.

—No, should I have?

—You will need one. I have a new Moleskine sketchbook for you with a good selection of art pencils and a sharpener.

—Why would I need a sketchbook?

—We are going to draw naked young women.

When I left her at her condo at 4:30 in the morning, she had filled the Moleskine with hips, legs, breasts, shoulders, feet, hands, heads and torsos of young girls who were strippers, waitresses, pole dancers and lap dancers at a half-dozen different clubs. It was a busy and entertaining night. Most of the young women happily posed for her. Esther was a superb draftsman who worked rapidly. She received more attention than she had experienced in decades.

At class on Tuesday morning, she propped up her 3-D drawings of a young woman, cut down the existing figure of the young woman and began modeling the woman in her drawing.

The master gave her high praise for the new version of the young woman.

—Yes, the hips are correct now, he said. And the shoulders and arms are a young woman's. The neck has the right definition. Her posture is correct. You have done some homework.

—You know, Esther said, as we were walking to our cars, I was getting pretty excited looking at all that young flesh the other night. It brought back memories of my wild youth before I was married. I was known as a pretty liberal girl at the Art Students League back in the late forties. I fooled around with a lot of guys. Some went on to become famous artists.

—Well, Esther you looked pretty good to me when I took you home.

—You should have said something. I still know a few tricks.

