

One

One must care about a world one will not see.

—Bertrand Russell

IN 2115, unbeknownst to the world, a savior was born unto the future...

ANTANAS SITS AND WATCHES ENTRANCED, his drink untouched, as the young woman, a natural exhibitionist, dances on the table before which he sits. Bathed in the bright spotlight affixed from the ceiling half a room away, her face bears the beauty of her Estonian descent, and her body is that of a goddess. He admires, with his artist's eye, her well-sculpted glutes, her narrow waist and full hips, well-proportioned breasts and, especially, her legs—lush, rounded thighs, taut hamstrings and curvilinear calves.

Antanas has had success finding subjects at several other similar clubs where women dance, nude, for tips and drinks. He is eighteen and already well-known in Lithuania for his work in clay. Several of his pieces, all nudes, are on display at the Kazys Varnelis House-Museum in Vilnius. Varnelis had spent the second half of the twentieth century in the United States and was renowned for his abstract paintings of optical illusions. Before the fall of the United States in the latter half of the twenty-first century, his work had been on display at the Guggenheim

Museum in New York City and the Art Institute of Chicago. Antanas will likely never travel abroad, as the airline industry succumbed (for myriad reasons, not the least of which were acts of terrorism against refineries as well as a lack of qualified pilots) long before he'd been born, so he has no idea whether any of Varnelis's work overseas have survived, although rumor has it that much of it—that which has not been brought home to Lithuania—now belongs to private collectors.

When she finishes her routine, Antanas tips the woman generously and asks, in her native tongue, that she join him. If she is impressed by the size of his tip or that he speaks Estonian she doesn't show it; she merely leads him by the hand to a more secluded portion of the club where she begins quoting him her prices. Antanas offers two bills and asks that she merely sit and enjoy a drink with him. The woman accedes, betraying mild surprise that nothing more will be required of her. After her drink arrives—vodka with water on the side—Antanas introduces himself as an artist, one of Lithuania's most promising young sculptors. The woman looks unimpressed.

"I want you to sit for me, nude," he says and watches the woman's esteem rise with the posturing of her head. "I'll first need to make several sketches in various poses, and for the clay I'll require several sessions of no more than a few hours each over several days. I'll pay you, for each session, whatever you earn for a good night's work dancing."

"Nothing else will be required of me?"

Unaware, in his youthful naiveté, of what she is intimating, Antanas shakes his head and watches the woman consider his proposition.

"How do I know you are who you say you are?"

Hurt by her accusation, Antanas shows the woman his identification and tells her a phone call to the Kazys Varnelis House-Museum will prove the validity of his claim.

The woman nods and Antanas wonders if she is considering the notion that she is to be immortalized in clay or simply allowing her self-image to run away with itself, the result of what she may perceive to be, like the other patrons of this establishment, his obsession with her body.

“My name is Loviise,” she says. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow morning,” he tells her, and gives her his address.

For the remainder of the night Antanas watches Loviise dance. She seems to prefer the sensuous as opposed to the overtly provocative, but she indulges in whatever each patron demands to maximize the size of her tip, and Antanas, his creativity inflamed, imagines a variety of poses by which he might denote Loviise’s incredible anatomy for all time—what little of it remains in the world of man.

TOMORROW ARRIVES AND WITH IT LOVIISE TO ANTANAS’S studio. After two hours Antanas has four sketches: one with Loviise, on her hands and knees, looking back over her shoulder; another in a reclined position on a bed; a third showing Loviise standing, her right leg bearing most of her weight, hands on hips with feet widely spaced; the fourth her feet again apart but with toes in and knees together, with Loviise bent at the waist, torso nearly parallel to the floor, to show her backside, her right hip thrust in that direction and slightly higher than the left as she peers back at the viewer.

When he is finished Antanas bids Loviise to inspect his work. She seems disappointed.

“These look nothing like me.”

Antanas smiles. “No, I suppose they don’t. For my sketches I focus on your musculature—what makes your anatomy do what it does.”

“Draw stares wherever I go.”

“Yes, I imagine it does that,” Antanas says with a laugh.

“Will the sculpture look like one of these?”

“No, it will look more like the real you.”

“Which will you choose?”

“I don’t know yet.” But already Antanas is torn between two—the one that shows Loviise in seductive repose or the one with her bent at the waist; the latter draws the viewer to her backside and best showcases her legs, the stretched hamstrings and graceful curves of her calves, and he likes her asymmetrical posture. While the former, a more traditional pose, shows elegance, Loviise’s open legs indicative of trust. Antanas begins to consider the necessity of a second piece.

Antanas asks Loviise to arrive the next day at the same time to commence work on the clay, and she leaves, seemingly taken aback that nothing more is required of her.

With Loviise gone, Antanas, still chaste at his young age, is acutely aware of the desire with which she’s left him.

ANTANAS STANDS BACK TO ADMIRE, for a moment, Loviise’s lovely body, which he’s just finished posing for their morning session. She lays on her back, left leg upright but bent at the knee just so to flatter the gentle swell of its calf, foot balanced on a fifteen-centimeter stiletto; her right leg, also bent at the knee, lays flat on the bed at a right angle to the left, its thigh taut, the point of her stiletto-clad right foot nearly kissing the point of its counterpart; her back slightly arched with her right hand rested lightly on her ribcage, nearly in support of her breast, while her left arm falls above her head, where her long brown hair is carefully arranged to look natural on the pillow upon which her head rests. The stilettos are all Loviise wears.

Antanas allows his desire to wash over him for a moment as he drinks in Loviise’s nude form, prone on the sheepskin blanket, his eyes linger on her legs, her rose-tipped breasts. She smiles at him, perhaps guessing his thoughts. Antanas blushes and turns

his attention to the mound of clay before him.

“I’m surprised you chose this pose,” Loviise says from her reclined position. “I had taken you for an ass lover.”

Antanas laughs but is unable to mask his embarrassment at her accusation. He briefly considers letting her in on his wish to do a second piece but decides to wait. Instead he says, “You have a beautiful body.”

Loviise sighs as if his assessment were something she’s heard countless times. “They are just body parts.”

Antanas wonders, as he picks up a chisel and sets about sculpting the clay’s shapelessness into the semblance of Loviise’s form, if this were Loviise’s way of telling him she tires of hearing such praise. “You are right,” he says, “if you consider only their basic functions—legs as a means of perambulation, breasts a source of nutrients for infants, the breadth of a woman’s hips to accommodate child-bearing. But there is something artistic in anatomy. God must have been a sculptor when he created Adam and Eve.”

Loviise laughs. “God created all creatures, great and small—the colorful and the graceful as well as the unsightly. To propagate their species, a toad must copulate with a mate. Surely they are not driven by their attraction to another toad?”

“Who can say what attraction exists between genders of another species—perhaps toads perceive the human form hideous. I suspect it is only instinct on which they function.”

“Which is no different than any man I’ve known,” Loviise says with a smile designed to distract Antanas from her callous tone. “At least that’s been my experience.”

“Beauty can be found in many places: in a song, a poem, a glade, a panorama, a woman’s body. That’s not to say such beauty speaks to everyone, but to those who seek, such beauty exists.” Loviise says nothing, so Antanas adds: “Even a baby responds more favorably to a beautiful face.”

“What can a baby know of beauty?”

“Infants are very perceptive. Symmetry is the basis for much beauty. While a baby certainly is incapable of reasoning, it responds more favorably to aesthetically pleasing features.” Antanas works his chisel through the soft clay that will become Loviise’s left leg, removing portions of unwanted clay as he goes.

“But getting back to your comment regarding body parts,” he says. “The history of art is a catalogue of beauty at any given moment of the past. Consider that Peter Paul Rubens, a Flemish painter in the seventeenth century, portrayed his nudes as pear-shaped and somewhat full-figured—by today’s standards they would be considered overweight, even obese. But in Rubens’s time, such images depicted the very wealthy aristocrats. To be slender, waifish, betrayed one’s status in society as underprivileged. Yet in the mid- to late twentieth century, the standard for female beauty in print, film and fashion was astonishingly slender—the latter, I suspect, was to allow no distraction from the clothing the model wore. Many women succumbed to anorexia.”

“Which only serves to prove that women have, for centuries, been objectified for their bodies.”

“Yes,” Antanas says, admiring Loviise’s body in its prone position on the bed. “But you allow it, no?” Not an accusation; merely observation.

Loviise seems startled by Antanas’s perceptivity but quickly recovers. “It serves me,” she says. “It provides me a better living than I could otherwise hope for in this dying world. Even if it has left me handicapped in many ways.”

“Handicapped?” Antanas watches Loviise consider her reply.

“I am pleased the world will not outlive me,” she says. “In time my beauty will abandon me and where would that leave me?”

Antanas is silent. He knows opportunities, for men and women alike, are dwindling along with the planet’s resources. For

a woman like Loviise, like the women of biblical times, she is surviving the only way she can. *The world's oldest profession*, he thinks sadly. Loviise intrudes:

“Would you deny you would like to fuck me?”

Antanas blushes and thinks about admitting that he’s never been with a woman, but he doesn’t wish to betray his naiveté. Instead he merely says, “I’m very attracted to your form, for my art.”

“You’re a liar,” Loviise says with a sarcastic laugh.

“I find you very desirable—as you’ve already told me many men do. Your profession invites it, even if your reasons for choosing such a profession are a matter of survival. I would never force myself on you, nor would I pay you for sexual favors.”

“No? Why not?” The woman who professed to abhor being judged for her body parts sounds disappointed. When Antanas doesn’t reply, Loviise adds, “Perhaps you are a pervert and will tend to your own pleasure over that statue you create, when I am gone for the last time.”

“No,” Antanas says. “That is not my purpose.” The thought that he, or anyone, would find his work pornographic is unconscionable.

“Then why do you create it? You wish to immortalize me in the eyes of men for all of twenty years?”

“This statue will endure for centuries.”

“What good does that serve if there is no one to appreciate it?” Antanas can say nothing to rebut Loviise. Then, perchance wanting to hold on to some ideal of her own she would in all likelihood deny, she adds, “Then maybe it is because you are young, idealistic. Could be you still believe in love.”

“I’ve always believed in love,” Antanas says.

“Then you’ve not yet had your heart broken.”

Antanas thinks a moment of Giedre, the girl who’d done just

that, broken his heart, two years ago when her family moved to Finse in Norway. Even though they'd never consummated their love, Antanas remained in touch with Giedre for nearly a year, and then her letters to him became fewer, finally stopping altogether a few weeks ago, and Antanas was forced to consider the likelihood that she'd met someone else. He sighs aloud, which prompts a laugh from Loviise.

"From your sigh it seems you believe otherwise." When Antanas says nothing, Loviise asks, "What was her name?"

"Giedre." Antanas's hands stop their work; he feels Loviise's eyes upon him. "It was perhaps only puppy love," he says to hide his embarrassment.

"There is something to be said for young love," Loviise says. "Innocence lost can never be regained."

Moved by the sorrow in her voice, Antanas looks up, sees pain in Loviise's countenance, and grieves for her. Not wishing to intrude on her discomfort, he is quick to look away.

"Where did Giedre go and why did she go?"

"Her family moved to Finse, where a greater supply of fresh water exists, thinking to buy a few more good years before—"

Loviise nods to show she understands. After a moment, she asks, "And you? Why did you not follow her?"

"I'm Lithuanian. I was born here and don't wish to die in some foreign land."

"Perhaps you did not love her so much as you thought."

"Or she, me," Antanas is quick to add as he works the cool, moist clay of Loviise's left thigh, such a contrast to how he imagines her real flesh would feel to his kneading hands—smooth, like the clay, but warm, soft like a pillow, velvety.

"A young man should pursue his heart's desire," Loviise says, as if she is taunting him. Antanas ignores her.

"And you?" he asks. "Will you return to Estonia?"

Antanas watches Loviise consider several replies before she

settles on: “There is nothing for me there. I will remain here, where in all likelihood I will die alone.”

“Surely you must have family, friends, a lover.”

“My mother is dead, and my father molested me when I was but a girl. I have no siblings and my friends, if they can be called that, work with me, and they see me as I see them: competition, a hindrance to making a living. As for a lover... I have as many as I wish.” Loviise sounds proud, but Antanas wonders if her pride is manufactured, a mask to cover up some inner damage. “They provide me pleasure and distraction, but little comfort. But at least they cannot break my heart, as I do theirs when I tire of them.”

Antanas looks at Loviise’s magnificent body on the divan before him, tries to bring to mind Giedre’s much more girlish figure (she’d been nineteen when last he’d seen her), and wonders how she might appear today—softer, rounder, fuller. Her name means serenity, and she had provided much comfort to him in these troubling times. Still, her form had not inspired him in his art. No sculptures of her nude body would ever grace the halls of museums—not that she ever would’ve agreed to pose for Antanas; she was much too shy. Still, he’d loved her, for her shyness, her sweet innocence, kindness and compassion, her keen business mind (she’d been instrumental in getting his work into the Kazys Varnelis House-Museum), and perhaps most for her ability to find hope where little existed. In return she had loved Antanas, and seemed secure in her place. And here before him is perhaps the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen; yet she is cold, insensitive, indifferent, perhaps incapable of love. Perfect as her flesh is, inside, despite her arrogance (or because of it), she is broken. Lovely as she appears, Antanas knows he could never love Loviise.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Loviise asks.

“Like what?”

“As if you pity me.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that... it hurts me to hear you speak of love as you do. Love is all that matters in the world. I believe it is what we are put here for.”

“There are many forms of love we seek, all of them for selfish reasons. We want it, of that I have no doubt. But few are willing to give it in order to receive it, preferring instead to take. Then there is love of money—which has made the world what it is today. Many love and covet my body—”

“Even as you loath it, for what it has failed to bring you.”

Loviise falls silent a moment, perhaps taken by Antanas’s vision, before saying: “A love of flesh is not the same as love of a person. This flesh I wear is not who I am, inside.”

Antanas nods. “What were your dreams, as a child?”

“Dreams? What good are dreams? They are but a momentary escape, in repose, from the harsh truth of reality.”

“A wise man once wrote, ‘Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future.’”

“My father dashed my dreams, left me with only nightmares of my past. As for hope, what optimism can be had in the face of what lies ahead?”

“Which makes love all the more important,” Antanas says. “Men and women have been dying for centuries. The man who is told his days are numbered the result of some incurable disease often finds purpose and comfort in love. That our days as a species are limited has always been true; that they now have been given a fixed number makes love imperative, the only thing that should matter.”

“You are young and...” Loviise trails off.

“Foolish?”

“Idealistic.”

Antanas smiles. “If I weren’t I’d long ago have ended my life.

I'm sorry you have no hope in finding love."

"You hope to find love?"

"I find it where I seek for it—at present in my work."

Loviise thinks a moment, says, "As a girl I dreamed of making scientific contributions to prolong man's existence."

"A worthwhile vision."

"A child's foolishness. How could I expect to undo man's centuries of folly?"

"Many have turned a deaf ear to ridicule to accomplish great things. Not all have contributed to man's demise."

"Do you also hope to find love with a woman?"

"I do."

"Then hold onto your hope, and dreams."

"I despaired, after Giedre left, that I would ever again find love. But time is mending my hope. Perhaps it will mend yours, too, if you wish it."

"I give hope to others," Loviise says, "of finding love, even if their love is misplaced in their hatred of me or in their desire for my body."

"Everyone wishes to be loved, even you, Loviise. You may be broken, the result of what your father did to you, but you can mend, perhaps not as good as new, but well enough to find your heart's desire."

"My heart is closed."

"That is a choice." Antanas looks up from where he is working, on the clay that is to become Loviise's right leg, sees Loviise studying him. Rather than acknowledge his wisdom, she deftly changes the direction of their discussion:

"Giedre left before you consummated your love."

Blushing, Antanas looks down to where his hands shape the clay.

"Nor have you known the pleasure of a woman's body."

Antanas sighs but refuses to look up from where he molds

his hands to Loviise's right thigh.

"You fear me," Loviise says. "Or perhaps you fear your desire for me, because it is not love."

Little more is said during the remainder of the session; when Loviise leaves, Antanas looks at the clay he's formed—two legs and a portion of a torso—and he considers the remainder of the sculpture as well as his subject. He recalls the sculptures of the great artists of the past he's studied. Beautiful renditions of beautiful women; great works of art. It was said that Auguste Rodin had often molested his models, leaving Antanas to consider whether something of beauty could be created from vulgarity. Had Rodin's models, too, been broken inside, as Loviise was? Perhaps brokenness was a prerequisite for such women—women willing to take off their clothes for the sake of art. Suddenly he finds it difficult to separate Rodin the man from his art.

Antanas recalls a class he'd taken that presented the history of art. There'd been a discussion about a Canadian woman of the mid-twentieth century who'd voiced her disdain for paintings depicting the beautiful Canadian landscape, which an artist of the time had defined as made for the canvas. The woman had said, "It's bad enough I have to live in this godforsaken country, why would I want to hang pictures of it in my house?" *It's true*, Antanas considers. *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder—which is just another way of saying beauty is based on perspective. One man's art is another man's pornography.*

Antanas sighs as he ponders the lie of his own creation. He envisions the finished piece as beautiful, perhaps his best work to date. Yet for all its beauty, it would not, perhaps could not, reveal Loviise's tormented inner self. It could show only what she was, never the who: the dashed hopes, the broken dreams, the heartache that all combine to make this woman unique and something more than the shell he endeavors to immortalize in clay.