

## Standing Woman

Norm Danzig

I left my studio near the Brooklyn Bridge, walked to the elevated station, took the el to Fiftieth Street to the Krausher Gallery on Fifth Avenue, and as I crossed in the middle of the block, I dodged a red Duisenberg and a black Model T that barely slowed up, squawking at me with their pathetic horns. Up on the sidewalk, I remembered reading in yesterday's Times that as of three years ago there were more cars than horses in New York City.

In the window of the gallery, was a poster for the show that had just opened for Gaston Lachaise's new sculptures. Opening the door, I saw one of New York's art critics, H. Philip Bosworth, standing twenty feet away talking to a woman wearing a large white gardenia on her left lapel. I moved past the figures with their hands raised or outstretched so I could be close enough to Bosworth to hear what he was saying.

"Look what he's doing here: amazing how he has her hands raised; her head is turned up to the right as if waiting for something or someone. The figure is, what, ten inches tall and yet he has put a wonderful amount of detail into her. And this one, the male nude: he embraces another man, what's going on here, is it erotic love or the celebration of the victors? Either way the figures are strong; their muscles ripple in anticipation of the next moment." He moved to the corner of the gallery; he pointed to a nude with a slight bronze patina on the shoulders and upper back, but otherwise dark with a hint of green coming through.

I walked over to them, and said, "Amazing: the contrast between the muscled upper half and the smoother trunk." Bosworth stopped talking; turning to me, "Yes," he said elongating the word.

"I interrupted you. I apologize, but I'm so taken with the power of these figures." He continued, "Look at the way he's fashioned the woman with her right arm at her side, her face is turned in profile and her left hand reaches up. See how the figure flows into the base like roots from a tree going into the ground."

His companion said, "How extraordinary the way the figure flows."

Bosworth said, "And here we see Lachaise at his best. A woman looking away, her arms behind her and her large breasts exposed. Fantastic." They turned to move on. I said, "Last year I had two small pieces: a bust and a nude at the Art Student's League Gallery show," Bosworth nodded looking skeptical. "You wrote about them."

“What’s your name?”

“Ruben Nakian. I’m apprenticed to Paul Manship,” I said.

“Ahh, I remember now.”

“Yes, and you wrote a favorable review. It was the first time my work had been reviewed by a critic and I was quite thrilled.”

“I’m sure you were.” Bosworth looked at the woman, “And you see my dear, worlds intersect.” She looked at him. “Gaston Lachaise was also apprenticed to Manship.” Bosworth reached across me and took the woman’s elbow and guided her away from me.

I followed at a discreet distance and listened to Bosworth, “Did you hear the story of how Lachaise ended his apprenticeship with Paul Manship? They almost came to blows. Manship had picked out one of his sleek lion figures about three feet high and twice as long to be cast that Lachaise had worked on. Lachaise insisted his name go on it with Manship’s. Needless to say the master shares nothing with his student. Apparently, Lachaise pushed him into a wall after Manship refused to put Lachaise’s name along side his. They didn’t talk for two years, but now, rumor has it, Manship will be coming here tonight.”

The gallery had four large rooms filled with Lachaise’s figures. On the walls, of the first room, there were several of his drawings, and beneath each framed drawing was the sculpture Lachaise had created from it. Across the room, a man pointed as if showing someone something that had to be seen. He was tall, in his late thirties, with broad shoulders, and thick black hair. When he turned his head, I recognized Lachaise from the photo in the gallery window. His frame was large; he was solid, muscular, and a few inches taller than my six feet. A small older man with a dark suit and thin mustache stopped and talked to him. Nodding his head at the old man, he bowed slightly and moved on. Someone tugged at his sleeve and when he turned around I saw that Lachaise was dressed in a black suit with a waist coat, had a high forehead, eyes slightly set back that increased the intensity of his handsome face, and had a neatly trimmed and shaped full beard.

He was the sculptor everyone was talking about; he lit up New York. And, more importantly, I knew he needed an apprentice.

I pushed my way through the crowd to get close to him. He stopped to talk to a married couple, Mr. and Mrs. James, whom I knew, and it gave me the chance to say hello and have them introduce me to Lachaise. He looked at me; looked me up and down as you would a suit of clothes displayed on a manikin. I nodded to him. He started to turn to the husband.

“Nakian, Ruben Nakian,” interrupting him and extending my hand. “I’m apprenticed to Paul Manship.”

“Lucky you.” Lachaise said with a French accent.

“Gaston,” Mr. James said, “weren’t you apprenticed to Manship?”

Lachaise ignored the remark.

I looked at Lachaise. “Manship has nothing to say.”

“You’re very free with your criticism. How do you know I won’t say anything to Paul?”

“Not after the story I heard about how you left.”

Lachaise smiled at me.

I went on, “Your work is strong and bold. I would love to talk to you about your work.”

“Talk to me about my work? What a marvelous offer.” Without another word, he turned and walked away. I looked down, my cheeks flushed. Mrs. James turned her palms up and looked towards the ceiling. “Artists. Don’t take what he says to heart.”

I watched him as he worked his way around the gallery and then while he was talking to someone, he looked in my direction and nodded his head at me as if pointing me out to the person he was talking to. A while later, one of the waiters came over to me and handed me a card, “Come to my studio on Wednesday at three o’clock. Be prompt.” Signed—Lachaise. I had to read the card twice. My smile smothered my face and as I ran out of the gallery, I yelled, “Now I’m on the trolley.”

Wednesday, I walked to his studio on Broadway and Eighteenth Street arriving fifteen minutes early; I waited downstairs outside of the large double doors. A few people went in or out, I looked at no one in particular. I walked back to the corner so I could see the clock tower to check the time, and when the clock’s bells struck three I ran to the door and went upstairs.

When Lachaise opened the door, he took my arm and brought me into his workroom. Standing by one of the windows, with the sun lighting her face and hair, was a woman a few years older than Lachaise. She wore a light purple dress cinched at the waist, with a white ruffled collar. She had long black hair pulled back tightly revealing her high sculpted cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and a classic hourglass figure. She held her body as someone who knows the value of the jewel in their possession. Nothing was out of place; it was as if she were set in stone standing by the window. I stared at her with my mouth open: she was stunning. Turning to me he said, “This is Isabel Dutaud Nagle, my wife. Isabel this is Mr. Ruben Nakian.”

“I’m, I’m...” I had never seen anyone who made me unable to speak coherently. “Mr. Nakian is one of Manship’s assistants.” I took two steps forward and then stopped; my feet glued to the floor. “Hello, my name is Ruben.”

“Yes, Gaston just said that,” she smiled, laughed, and held my eyes.

“I, I hope to work with your husband.”

“Of course. Please sit down.” She motioned to a small round oak table by the window with four high back chairs with cane seats. “Excuse me a moment,” Isabel opened the far door across from the entryway, and I could see that it led to the living quarters. I sat opposite Lachaise and we both waited until Isabel returned carrying a tray with a teapot and a plate of pastries. She sat down next to Lachaise and said to him, “Have you told him what you plan on doing?”

“Not yet, I barely know him.”

“That doesn’t normally stop you.” He didn’t say anything to her, but turned to me and said, “Do you know what great art is?” Before I could try and answer, he continued, “It’s what the critics say it is. And what do they know? Have they ever created anything? People have no understanding of what goes into making a masterpiece, yet it is the critics and the public who determine it. Why not a board of Masters to determine great works of art?”

Isabel said, “And who would be on the panel? You, or what about your young friend?”

“Don’t be absurd, of course it would be me. Who has the talent, the spirit, the pure knowledge to judge?”

I kept glancing at Isabel; her expression never changed. I couldn’t tell if she was transfixed with him or had heard it all before. I looked around the studio; it was at least thirty feet long with a few chairs around the sides and a wooden base in the middle of the room. There were half finished small sculptures on several benches, and along the far wall was a long table with clay, paints, and sculpting tools.

“So my young friend, I ask again, do you know what is great art?”

I stared at him, shifted my eyes to Isabel and then back to him not knowing what to say.

“Stand up. Move.” He said and pulled me towards the corner of the room where, to the right of the door, was a three-foot high clay leg. It was different than anything else in the room. It was lifelike. The thigh was thick, not fat, nor muscular, but meaty; the calf muscle was well defined, and the foot was small and delicate. I didn’t want to say how much I thought of this, but I was amazed at how he had created this leg, and that while it was only a piece of a body, I could imagine the rest of it. I had studied pictures of Michelangelo’s “Prisoners”, and I felt this could approach it.

While I walked around the leg, he paced around the studio with his hands behind his back talking to himself. This went on for several minutes. He would mumble, then he would shake his head, put his hands out in front of him, and then behind him. He stopped and started pacing. I caught a glimpse of Isabel who had turned and was looking out the window. Then he stopped

inches from me and I started to back up. In a clipped voice he said, “I need to find a way to begin a monumental sculpture. I can see her in my mind, but I haven’t been able to start.” He walked over to the leg and as he ran his hand over the leg, he described to me every detail—how he had packed the clay onto the armature, and with long strokes smoothed out the clay on the thigh. He had molded the kneecap and formed the ridge of the front of the tibia. For the calf, he had cupped the clay and slowly added definition to the muscle. Each toe was set into the foot with his thumbs and then he worked the clay into the ankle. The foot took him ten days until he had it just the way he wanted it. In all, he had worked on the leg for six weeks during the past winter.

“It’s wonderful,” I said.

“Of course it is, this is what America has been waiting for,” he said stroking the leg. He looked at me. “And you, what are you working on?” As he asked me this he turned to look at Isabel.

“A head. It’s going well and should be done soon.” My lie was quick and I wasn’t sure why, but I was pleased I hadn’t told him how much I was struggling with the piece I was working on.

“How nice.”

Turning back to me, “So you know about my fight with Manship?” He took my arm and led me around the studio. “Manship was difficult to work for—it ended when he refused to put my name on the sculpture I created.”

“But you were his apprentice?”

“So what. It was my work. I should have gotten the recognition.” He paused, “That’s all in the past. It was difficult for the first few years, but then, Mr. Auberchon, the old man you saw me talking to just before I met you, wanted to be my patron. He opened doors for me I couldn’t budge. Now the world will see what the name Lachaise means. I need to take the next step of expanding my studio. “And,” looking straight at me, “I need to hire an apprentice.”

The moment was right, “I can help you.” I tried to continue, but he cut me off.

“I know. After you left the gallery Manship came in and while we were talking, I asked him about you,” Lachaise said.

“You what?”

“Surprised? You shouldn’t believe all the gossip you hear in the art world about who’s not to talking to whom. I wanted to find out what kind of fellow believes that a sculptor, of Manship’s stature, has nothing to say. You are well regarded.”

I stood there, my mouth open, looking at Lachaise. “He thinks you’ll be a great sculptor,” Lachaise paused, “someday.” I tried to keep my smile from smothering my face.

“But then, there was something about discipline, about a wild streak.” He winked at me. “He reminded me that I had seen a piece of yours last year at the Art Student’s League Gallery. It was a figure of a nude woman lying on her side. It was sleek and slender. A woman who would not turn a man’s head. Nothing like my work.”

“I’m pleased with it. But, as yet no one has purchased it.”

“Bring it over I’d like to see it again.” He paused, “Do you think New York has the greatest sculptors?” I looked to see if he was really asking me. “No. Before I left Paris, I studied at L’Academie Nationale des Beaux-Arts with geniuses. Sculptors whom you haven’t heard of: Richer, Desruelles, Coutan. Do you know what Coutan did?”

“No.”

“Of course not. Look at the top of Grand Central Station; it is his sculpture with Mercury, the deity of commerce, as the central figure that is at the top of the station.”

We walked back to the table and he talked very quickly tripping over his own words and rattled on for another hour. I sat there trying to listen.

Lachaise looked to me, “What are your dreams?”

“I, I, I want to sculpt till I’m ninety.”

“And, what else?”

I didn’t know what else to say.

With a shrug, he turned to Isabel who was smiling and nodding her head, and said, “I wonder what the Academy back in Paris will say once they see my new sculpture?”

Isabel said, “Surely, Gaston, you must first create it in order for them to praise it, yes?” He cocked his head to the side and wrinkled his forehead. “Not to worry my dear.”

“I’m not worried, but you promised me I would be known as the wife of the famous Gaston Lachaise.”

“In due time.”

Then turning back to me he said, “You’ll hear from me.”

Not knowing what to think, I thanked him, turned to Isabel, and nodded.

I decided to walk home and enjoy the beautiful fall day. There was the first hint of the cold that would envelop the city in a couple of months and I wanted to make it last, so at Union Square I turned right and at Fifth Avenue walked down to Washington Square Park. I sat and watched the sun creep behind the buildings and the sky turn pink in the West and as it turned dark, I headed home.

The next day, a messenger came to my door with an envelope that looked like the one I had received the week before. In it was a note: "Kindly accept my invitation to work as my apprentice. Particulars to be discussed, Lachaise." I ran downstairs and bumped into my friend George, a fellow student at the Arts Student's League.

"He wants me." I said right in his face.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"Lachaise, I'm to be his apprentice." I turned running and walking uptown, dodging horse drawn carriages, an overcrowded streetcar and all the new cars that seemed to go down both sides of the street without regard for a, soon to be successful artist, until I came to Lachaise's studio. I was out of breath when I got to his building and I waited until my breathing was more regular before going up.

"You will work from 8 in the morning until 6 in the evening, six days a week doing what I tell you to do. I will pay you twenty dollars a week."

He extended his hand which I grabbed, "Thank you very much, you will not regret this."

Isabel walked into the studio, "The new apprentice, welcome." Again, smiling, she looked directly at me. Her gaze was intense. I looked away. She turned to Lachaise, "Does he know what he's in for?"

Lachaise didn't answer her and took me over to the leg, "I want to create a sculpture worthy of this, eight feet high, dedicated to an unfathomable woman."

I opened my eyes wide and said, "A woman?" Isabel laughed.

"Yes of course. You didn't think this was a man?" Lachaise said. He looked at Isabel and sighed as he slowly shook his head. "This will begin the next phase of my life as an artist. Do you know that all the great sculptors from Michelangelo to Rodin created larger than life figures? Here in America I am the one to continue this tradition, I will bring sculpture to a new height."

As he continued talking, I stopped listening and drifted off thinking of the bust I was working on and how I could fix the problem I was having with the eyes, and then he raised his voice, "My show that will be in Paris will be the hit of the season." He looked at me, "We start tomorrow."

During the next few days, we started making preparations for sculpting the larger than life size figure. We built an armature eight feet high in the middle of the studio opposite the large slanted windows. With the preparations underway I said, "Who will serve as your model?" He pushed the question away with his hand. "I know one of the models at the Art Student's League, I could ask her."

"You would do that?"

"Yes, of course." I said.

I'll be able to solve that problem, but I am so appreciative of your sophomoric attempt to try and help me."

"Excuse me, that really was an attempt to help you—the great sculptor. Obviously, I was wrong. A man with your talent needs no help." I looked down and quickly walked around the armature.

"Bravo, the apprentice finds his voice. Now get me some more wire to finish the armature."

I did as I was told and I realized saying more was futile. Isabel opened the door from the living quarters and walked into the studio, "What's going on? I heard loud voices?" she said. Lachaise didn't say anything. She walked over to me, and stood very close to me, "I know you can help him," she took my hand, I stopped breathing, "don't be offended. He gets a bit excited about his work."

Looking at her, I said in a high-pitched whisper, "Alright."

She smiled and slowly let go of my hand.

When I left that evening, I took a streetcar downtown and felt her holding my hand—excited by the possibilities I imagined.

The next morning the clay was delivered on three large pallets that we placed on the long wall of the studio. Lachaise pried open the first can of clay, took a few handfuls, and started covering the wire mesh. He stood there breathing in the scene, "Get your hands dirty Nakian, put clay on this wood. Let's build her up and bring her to life."

While I put clay on the armature, Lachaise followed me around, smoothing the clay into shape. When we broke for lunch there was a rough outline of what, if one squinted, could be described as a figure. We ate in the living quarters one of our usual lunches: chunks of cheese, salami, and dark bread; Lachaise finished his meal, cleaned up, and went back to the studio.

When I returned to the studio, I stopped in the doorway. Standing next to the rough vertical mound of clay, in a red silk robe, on a foot high platform was Isabel Dutaud Nagel. One hand was on her right hip, her other hand was on her left hip lower down. Her feet were a foot apart



with one foot pointed a bit to the side. Her head was tilted back slightly and turned towards her left shoulder. She stared off into the distance as if waiting for a ship to find its port. She untied the sash and rolling one shoulder and then the other, the robe fell to her feet: she stood naked. I walked closer barely able to breath, my face flushed and my skin electrified. Her breasts were large and round. They stood out fully with only the slightest hint of the sag that would be gravity's victory. Her waist was narrow and her hips were wide and full. I blushed at the thought of standing in front of her with my hands on her hips. Here was the model for the leg I had admired two weeks before.

“Get to work and stop staring at my wife.”

I hurried over to the armature and started smoothing and shaping the clay. In a few minutes we were both breathing heavily; my hands shook and my mouth was dry: I tried not to look at her. Lachaise was busy modeling the rough outline of a woman's shape. I brought him clay and tools with different size wire loops for him to work with.

He stopped for a moment and I turned to look at her. She stood there, head up, jutting out. She turned her head and I swear for a fleeting second I thought she had smiled at me. Lachaise saw her move and cleared his throat. “The pose, keep the pose, Isabel.” I had seen her look at me and knew that she meant for me to see it. I tried not to look at her again, but I turned my head towards her whenever I thought she wasn't looking.

I went to the sink to bring back damp cloths to keep the sculpture moist while I saw Isabel's body in front of me. “These are too wet, what's wrong with you?” Lachaise said.

I took them back to the sink and, this time, carefully wrung them out. “Sorry.” He said nothing, glared at me, and went back to work. His pace was steady at first. And then, over the next hour he moved more quickly. His breathing was hard, he stopped, his hands fell to his sides, and with his arm in front of him, he flicked his hand up and slumped into a chair. Isabel moved her head side to side and up and down. She flexed her hands and rubbed her legs. Bending down, she picked up her robe. As she stepped into her right slipper, she lost her balance and I reached to steady her. My right hand grabbed her shoulder and my left hand held her hip. She turned her head.

“Thank you.”

I smiled and I held her hip two seconds too long, as a man would hold onto a warm coat on a cold winter's day. Her hip was smooth and round. I felt I could trace my fingers along the curve of it and divine the essence of her world. I wanted to follow the curve of her hip towards her back and I glimpsed the light colored hairs on her hip and felt it would be easy to brush them with my fingertips: first vertically then horizontally, as if they were a blowing wheat field in a landscape painting. As I let go I could still feel her in my hand. She looked at me with a tiny smile; my heart raced.

During the next few days, the work proceeded at a furious pace. We worked on her body and started refining her features. One afternoon Isabel walked into the studio and said to Lachaise, "Aren't you due at Mr. Auberchon's at three o'clock? You told me he has a potential buyer for some of your work."

"I lost track of time." He turned to me. "Keep working on smoothing the clay. When I come back I'll fix her left hip."

Isabel stood looking out the window. I looked at her and wanted to say something, but she seemed lost in the view. Instead, I stood back from the sculpture, and picked up one of the modeling tools. Hesitating, I went to the left hip and started smoothing it by hand, gently massaging the clay to find the right curve. After a few minutes, Isabel moved next to me, "Yes, you're starting to get it now; think of my hip." I turned to look at her and slowly I took in her body and stopped at her hip. Her gray cotton dress hid her fine contours; I looked up at her.

Quietly she said, "Wait." I wasn't sure what she meant.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." What was going on? My fingertips could feel the cool air as I waited for her to return.

She returned wearing her red silk robe staring straight at me, silencing any possible comment, but not thought, I would have. Walking towards the sculpture she took off the robe, letting it fall as she walked. I put my hand to my face and pulled the skin towards my jaw. Then she placed herself slightly behind the sculpture with her left hip showing as if draping herself with the nude sculpture. I took a few deep breaths and I looked at Isabel's hip and the sculpture. My fingers stopped tingling and I took a few small strips of clay and added them with my thumbs, slowly working the clay in; adding to it; stroking it; making sure the curve of the hip fit perfectly. I worked slowly. I looked up; Isabel had moved out from behind the sculpture in order to see what I was doing. I kept working, looking at her hip, smoothing and fitting the clay to match her shape. I have no idea how long I worked like that until, exhausted I said, "Yes I think that's it." Isabel relaxed, put on her robe, and came over to view the sculpture from the front. She nodded, "Yes that's much better." She came closer to me and put her hand on my shoulder, "I like that."

"Thank you. You are an extraordinary model and my God your skin is perfect." I stopped, looked around hearing someone on the stairs. "Best you get dressed." As she nodded Lachaise came in and swept the scene in with his eyes.

"What are you doing?" He barked.

"I've worked on the hip. Take a look."

His face set, he moved and examined the hip while I stood behind him holding my breath. He grunted, "It will do."

It was the closest thing to a complement he had paid me since I began.

Isabel looked at Lachaise, "It's quite good. He's made it better." She tilted her head to the side, furrowed her brow, and walked back to the living quarters.

"Now my wife believes she is an art critic. There is a surprise every day. The life of an artist is never easy. Remember that Nakian, remember that."

I pulled the ladder around as he watched me, he said, "Where are you putting that?"

I took a deep breath and turned to him, "I'm going to work on the eyes."

He took two steps back, "Very well, but be careful of the set of the eyes, they are correct."

I scrambled up the ladder with a few tools in my rear pocket and started to enlarge the left eye by a half an inch. I had thought that one eye was bigger than the other ever since he finished the face. Now I saw that the problem was actually the shape of the eyebrow, not the eye itself. I took a wire tool and removed a sliver, smoothed it down, and ran my finger above the eye. Lachaise watched me for a few minutes, grunted and walked around to work on the right calf.

The eyes stared straight ahead. They set back a bit further than normal, but by doing this he had achieved a reserve in her face that matched her gaze. The eyelids showed the slightest wrinkle and each hair of her lid was finely drawn out. I added more clay on the sides of the brow as a way to increase its depth. I came down the ladder to get a better view. Lachaise came out front and looked, "A little more and you'll have it."

I nodded, "I think you're right." I worked on the eyes and forehead for the rest of the day whistling and humming "Swanee" and "St. Louis Blues" until the light, and my stamina gave out. When I left, I knew I had done a good day's work. I felt I was starting to know how to finish the sculpture; the more I worked on it, the more clearly I saw it. I took the subway home and went to bed exhausted and happy.

The next morning I let myself in with a key Lachaise had given me. It was seven a.m. and I wanted to get an hour's worth of work done before Lachaise came in. I wanted to work on this piece by myself. I took the time to work on the left calf. I kept thinking it didn't work, but couldn't figure out why. With no one else there I was able to concentrate and see that the problem was that the calf muscles didn't line up with each other; the right calf was a little too big. The calf was a dancer's calf; showing the muscles that had been developed with years of dance practice. I saw that the trick would be to reduce the right calf muscle to match the left without losing its strength. After staring at it for a while, I saw how to fix it, but when I moved to the table with the tools, Lachaise came in from the back door.

"What are you doing here?"

"You gave me a key to come in and work, so here I am."

“Quite dedicated, aren’t we?” he said.

“No, I’m just trying to get some work done.”

“Not enough hours in the day, or you just don’t have anything else to do?”

I clenched my teeth, “I’m working to make this the great sculpture you keep talking about. You don’t like that I’m working on this alone, isn’t that it?”

Isabel walked in, her hair resting on her shoulders, wearing a cream colored silk robe over her matching pajamas. “Nakian, how nice to see you this early in the morning.”

I nodded to her and as angry as I was, when I looked at her in her dressing gown, with her hair down, I could barely speak. “I’m going to work on the calf.”

Isabel said, “You see Gaston, he cares about your work. If you cared as much, you’d get dressed and help him.”

“My dear, I and I alone have conceived this piece, thought it through, created it out of nothing,” and raising his voice, “and no one else.”

“That’s all well and good my dear, but your fame needs to come a bit sooner than your work ethic allows.”

He snapped, “Isabel.” I jumped. His face was contorted and in a voice that hissed, “Nakian, please leave us.”

I put my tools down and wiped my hands on a nearby rag. I nodded to them and walked out the door. As I started to walk down the stairs, I tried to catch what they were saying, but I could only hear the sound of her voice over his.

I waited across the street for half an hour and when he didn’t come out to get me I decided to go home. It was a mild fall day and the walk in the early morning felt good.

In my studio I went back to the head I had been struggling with. The features started to find definition. The longer I worked for Lachaise the more the face had changed. I worked on the set of the eyes and the thickness of the nose. When I shaped the beard, I stepped back, laughed, and said to the head. “Well Gaston, genius sculptor; can’t seem to get away from you.”

Returning to the studio the next day, neither of us said anything about the day before. I worked on refining her face, neck, and shoulders. He no longer got on the ladder; only I did. He spent hours walking around the sculpture, smoothing a line, and checking proportions. And, as if he had a magnifying glass, he examined every inch of the body. I spent hours on the ladder working on her neck and head. After days of minute work, Lachaise stepped back from her, “She’s finished. I’ve done it.”

He came over to me and slapped me on the back. As he talked about the piece, I couldn't stop thinking, "Look what we've done." Then Isabel walked in. She stared at the face, as if trying to figure out if this sculpture really captured who she was. I looked at her and saw that her face, and the face of the figure were related; I liked that.

The forehead was high and the neck was long. Her neck was exaggerated, and that increased the height and strength of the figure. I had given the nose a fine line and the chin a slight dimple. Her hands were on her hips; the right hand higher than the left. Lachaise had increased the size of her well-shaped breasts and her wide hips while shrinking her waist. Her pubic patch was raised slightly. The classical lines gave way to a lusty vision of his wife. I stared at the work. I had watched him every day, worked for hours and days on the piece myself, but never saw the magic that created this. Maybe it happened overnight? Maybe, she created herself?

Isabel stood between us and hooked her arms in between ours. "Gaston, the two of you together make a wonderful team, don't you think?" Lachaise said nothing; Isabel turned her head to me and winked. I hid my smile with my hand.

"This is reason to celebrate," Isabel said.

"Quite right," Lachaise said, "join us this evening for dinner at Café du Monde on Twentieth Street with a few friends." She dropped our arms, Lachaise took Isabel's hand, they turned, and walked into the living quarters. I let myself out and when I was on the street I took a deep breath and relaxed my shoulders. I walked to the subway smiling.

At home I changed my clothes and thought about the sculpture and how much I had done to make it great. I whistled as I got ready for the evening and at seven thirty I headed back uptown.

When I walked into the restaurant, I went past the regular dining room, with red banquettes and tables with red and white check tablecloths, to the back room where the liquor was served. Near the rear wall were several tables pulled together in a square, covered in white linen tablecloths with four people on each side, except the side where Lachaise and Isabel sat. There was one empty chair next to Isabel and I hurried over to it. The tables were covered with dishes, glasses, bottles of wine and champagne, olives, nuts, and baguettes. There were fifteen people sitting at the table; Isabel sat next to Lachaise as he filled glasses with one of the bottles of Moët & Chandon. She wore a black chiffon dress that flowed down from her neck and accentuated the curves of her body. A single strand of gleaming white pearls was on her neck and her hair was pinned up. As she sat back she looked over everyone's head into the distance.

She poured me a glass of champagne. I was happy to be next to her. Lachaise talked to everyone and no one at the same time. Then he stood up with a full glass of champagne. Everyone stopped talking and filled their glasses. He looked at Isabel and raised a glass to her. "Without you, none of this would have been possible. Without you, I would not be the artist I am. Without you, there would be no love in my life." Isabel smiled and took her glass with a

gloved hand and acknowledged the toast. I nodded to Isabel, drank the champagne, and under my breath said, “For once he didn’t talk too long.”

Isabel turned her head to me and her smile was gone in an instant. My face flushed.

The waiters brought out beef Carpaccio, Roquefort flan, and salmon mousse: everyone passed the dishes around sampling the appetizers. More bottles of champagne were opened, Lachaise was expansive. “Isabel is a brilliant model, but truth be told, only I could capture her essence. Soon my friends, once she is cast, you will see for yourselves the power and the magic of this sculpture.” His friends sat at their tables, staring at him and murmured their assent. I watched Isabel to see if she would say anything about how this was a joint project. She said nothing. Her left hand was below the table and I let mine drop and found her hand, gently put my hand over hers, her thumb lightly caressed mine and then she shook my hand off, brought her hand onto the table and looked up at Lachaise.

“But of course all of this,” he continued, waving his hand at all the food and nodding to his patron, “is the generous gift of my dear friend, Monsieur Auberchon. After all one can’t pay for all this until after the sale is made.”

I was thrilled to have touched her hand. It all seemed possible now. And as the waiters in starched white aprons over their formal black suits came out with roasted turkey and rare roast beef, the aroma of the food convinced me I was hungry. It was wonderful—the turkey moist and buttery, the roast rare and juicy; bottles of dark French burgundy and dry champagne crowded the table. The flurry of food and laughter rushed over me and by the time the Courvoisier arrived, I couldn’t remember how much I had to drink.

“What will you do now?” Isabel asked me. “My husband will not work on a new sculpture for some time.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” I leaned into Isabel and touched her hand. She lifted up her arm as if to take her napkin and dab her lips, but the reproach was clear enough. I started to mutter an apology, but she snapped her head towards me and cut me off.

“Do not take liberties with me. You’ve seen me naked, but don’t assume that affords you any familiarity.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you and I thought you liked me.”

She wrinkled her face, “Like you? You are my husband’s apprentice and you have a lot to learn.”

My face flushed. I stammered, “Yes, but look at all the work I’ve done. You’ve even said I’ve made the work better.”

Isabel closed her eyes, shook her head, and said, “You think that much of yourself?”

Lachaise turned to us to listen.

“It’s not that. I know what this sculpture means to you and how much work I put into it.”

“You know nothing about what it means to me.”

Lachaise sighed and said, “You’ve had too much to drink, go home; sleep it off.”

I looked at Isabel, “OK, you don’t care about me, but,” turning to Lachaise, “let’s be honest about all the work I’ve done.”

“Nakian, what’s wrong with you? I take you on as my apprentice and now it is you who is the maitre.” Lachaise said his voice rising. Everyone was looking at us.

“No of course not,” I said, “but you must admit that without me you couldn’t have done what you did.”

Lachaise’s face flushed and loudly said, “You are quite filled with yourself, and you know nothing. Tell me who were the apprentices and assistants to Michelangelo when he carved the tomb of the Medici. And Rodin’s apprentice, she was even his mistress, tell me exactly what was her contribution to the Gates of Hell?” Isabel smiled; I pushed my chair back and stood up looking down at him and said, “Tell me exactly what was your contribution to Manship’s work when you demanded he put your name on a sculpture? Do you think anyone else would have listened to you go on and on about art and how brilliant you are? Yes I wanted to learn from you, but you don’t even have the decency to tell everyone at this table just how important my contribution was to this project.”

“Your contribution—I’ll tell you what you did: smoothed a line here and there, or finished an eyelid. That’s what you did. Your contribution can be summed up in a word, irrelevant.” Lachaise said spitting out the word. He got up from the table, standing a few feet from me and pointed his finger at me, “Take your contribution, and get the hell out of here. Look at all these people. They’re here for me. They don’t know your name, and they never will. Now get out.”

“Get out?” I screamed. I moved around Isabel, and with my arms outstretched I rushed at him. I hit him in the chest with both my hands and all my weight going into him. He took three quick steps back before he lost his balance and fell backwards. His hip hit the side of the table: glasses and bottles flew off as Lachaise landed on the floor. Isabel screamed. People closest to the table sprang back to get out of the way of the flying glass, others jumped up and looked on with their mouths open. I moved closer to him, breathing hard, and my hands clenched. Lachaise reached for the table but his hand slipped and he cut his hand badly on a piece of glass. He shook his hand and blood flew off and landed on my suit jacket. I lunged at him, but two of his friends grabbed me as others helped Lachaise up. I strained against the two men holding me, my face set, my eyes stretched as I tried to get closer to Lachaise. They pushed me back. I staggered

backwards, but caught hold of a chair and regained my balance. I said, “Goodbye to the almighty Lachaise, his monumental sculpture, and his even larger ego.”

I shook them off, headed for the door as Lachaise yelled something I couldn’t hear. Outside in the cool night air I was trying to catch my breath. I turned back to the club, saw the blood on my jacket and knew I was done with both of them. I put my arm in the air, made a fist, raised my middle finger, and yelled, “Goodbye you pompous ass.”