

under the **gum tree**

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. JANUARY 2018.





the not-*quite*- right stuff

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When I was in college, my boyfriend's brother had a friend who was dating Kelly Emberg, one of the most visible and successful models in the world.

At the time, I nurtured a fascination verging on worship for her and the other Amazonian glamour-pusses who leaped antelope strides in the editorial pages. Kim Alexis. Patti Hansen. Nancy Donahue. It was the dawn of the eighties, this was my generation, and these were my women. I did not radiate their icy blonde glow but I yearned to be one of them. I wanted my cheekbones to slice through the camera lens, to be photographed on an icy boardwalk wrapped in nothing but taffeta, to have the confidence to pose in head-to-toe black leather against some exotic backdrop. I suppose I imagined my new and serendipitous almost-proximity to

Kelly as a sign in the cosmic realignment towards my destiny of being a model.

By the time I was twelve, I had reached my full height of 5'10". For years, I bristled at the jokes about "Stretch" and survived mortification in ballroom dance, where the instructor permanently paired me with the other class colossus, the male version of myself. It was the seventies, so I'm pretty sure his hair was longer than mine. I am the youngest of four daughters, and my mother couldn't cope with any more braids, so my first dozen years I endured the consequences of a permanent pixie cut. A typical exchange at a random Friendly's, somewhere on Cape Cod:

Clerk: "What's your pleasure, son?"

Me, downcast: "Umm. I'm a girl."

Clerk: "You fooled me, you're so darned tall!"

He lied. I looked like a boy.

In the context of my New England hometown, my extra-long proportions meant that I would: One, be the star forward on the basketball team, and two, be preordained for a lifetime of size-ten flats. Height therefore was a limited asset, one that I was encouraged to leverage in athletics but otherwise best tolerate with the practicality that was the hallmark of us Bostonians. Keds gave way to Jack Purcells, which gave way to topsiders, which gave way to Pappagallo *ballerines* in Easter-egg hues.

By high school, I grew my hair out and flared it, Farrah-style. It was an era when we braved near total exposure in hot pants but otherwise, at least in Boston, we didn't obsess too much about glamour, or—truthfully—our looks. My Yankee mother stashed a hundred Revlon lipsticks in her drawer, but she was fifty before she graced her face with moisturizer (Lancôme—I brought it to her from Paris.) We strove only for suntanned legs in our tennis skirts.

At Princeton, platoons of tall women ambled through campus rowers and high jumpers. The sophisticates from New York City—who sheathed themselves in solid black—were somewhat terrifying specimens to me, a suburban public school kid. I saw eyes rimmed in kohl for

the first time, and purple boots on slender calves. In my class, there was a woman who had gone to a tony Upper East Side girl's school, a model who had even—supposedly—appeared on album covers! I tried not to stare when I saw her, but from the corner of my eye, I was fascinated by her insouciant perfection. Her feline body. Her looks. Her.

Moreover, she caused me to reflect. I was lost in college, unable to distinguish myself in any way at a place where excellence was an absolute given. Everyone had a tagline: "This is so and so, the [fill in the blank]": Heiress to a pharmaceutical fortune. First team All-American hockey player. Writer of this year's musical. Op-ed reporter at the *Daily Princetonian*. Person who threw the curve on the organic chemistry final. No such mythical stature was attached to my name. Furthermore, I had been rejected by the eating club where all of my friends had been accepted. I felt invisible in a place where visibility mattered.

Whether it was defiance, revenge or a desperate ploy to find something that was mine, I hankered to be a model. One day I revealed this to one of my roommates who encouraged me, full-throatedly. "You have the height!" she enthused. That was indisputable, but what was less certain was how to go about being a lock for the next Charlie perfume campaign.

I was a normal, healthy co-ed, even with my meta-collegiate diet (beer, pizza, dining hall sheet cake, black coffee,

repeat), neither stick-thin nor fat. So I went and got myself a gig. Saturdays, I worked as a roaming model for a shop on Nassau Street, donning preppy outfits for Princeton housewives, who swung by primarily for the Chardonnay.

Mostly, though, I studied. Unlike practically everyone else, I had a 9:00 a.m. class each day of the week. By sophomore year, my days (and many nights) were spent sequestered in the basement cluster of offices and classrooms that held the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. It was a place to hide, and Dostoevsky and the nominative singular were perfect places to conceal my disconsolate spirits.

The summer between my sophomore and junior year, I shared an apartment overlooking Boylston Street in Boston with some girlfriends and was determined to make my mark as fashion's next superstar. This was before social media made the world a narcissist's playground, where careers are launched in remote corners of the Internet or stapled to a birth certificate. Models were often discovered at a Minnesota post office, or waitressing in Jacksonville by photographers who knew money when they saw it.

So beyond much reason, I wanted this. I suppose I sought some validation, some confirmation of an identity that so far eluded me. I hoped to distinguish myself in something that was not the campus theater production, or the tennis court, or Condensed Matter Physics class, or the

insider *savoir faire* of chic Manhattanites—areas in which I was sadly wanting.

My work that summer was at two shops in the Quincy Market. One of them sold dollhouse furniture and accessories. On those days, I emptied baggies full of tiny cherry pies into one slot in a drawer, one-inch-high silver candelabras into another. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, I worked in an “emporium” that sold Christmas decorations, such as twenty-four-inch wreaths strung with fake pinecones and plaster holly berries.

One hot morning before my shift at the dollhouse store, I sauntered with head held high into a Boston modeling agency, implying, basically, “This is your lucky day.” I had assembled a small collection of extremely amateur, but in my view flattering, snapshots from football games and my mother's fiftieth birthday party in which I laughed and smiled and posed with friends.

The woman with the gray bob looked unfazed. “Do you have a book?” she asked. I probably had *Chekhov: A Life in Letters* in my canvas tote, but realized what she meant and demurred.

“No,” I said. “I'm sorry. I pulled an envelope from my purse, removed the photos and handed them to her. She glanced at the one on top of the pile, then another randomly chosen from the deck, and handed them back to me.

“You don't really have a look, either,” she added.

Neither book nor look? Oh dear, this

did not look promising.

"Frankly, you're not special," she said. Her candor drenched me like ice water from a hose.

"What do you mean, 'look'?" I asked.

"You're not unique," she said. "Models need a look. You need to be the girl next door, or the weary Contessa, or a bombshell like Patti Hansen or too gorgeous to ignore like Lauren Hutton," she said. I nodded politely, feeling myself shrinking, blushing, dying.

"I mean," she shrugged, "you *are* tall."

And clearly boring. "Well, maybe if I had some better pictures, you know, with makeup," I said pathetically.

I looked down at my feet, strapped

enough to get respectfully dolled up for her appointment. Now, I was mortified by how hard I had tried, and that maybe cutoffs and bare feet would have given me a competitive advantage.

"You're too tan," she said. It was true: I was a deep, Bain de Soleil bronze, and I had labored hard for that rich hue. She explained that you must be a blank canvas, not an already painted one. This was news to me. I was certain that having a serious suntan would raise my stock. The models I admired in magazines always seemed tawny and glowing, as if they had just stepped off a lifeguard stand in Malibu.

"Monday, be here at ten for hair and



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into neat and perhaps too practical summer sandals. I ran my palms over the lower part of me, as if to smooth the wrinkles from my favorite, slightly formal brown and tangerine-orange striped sundress. Earlier, in the apartment, I had looked upon my reflection with pleasure. Surely, I had reasoned, the woman at the modeling agency would be impressed by this nice college girl, obviously raised well

make-up. I will book Tony, you'll like him."

"You will do...what?" I asked. My eyes widened with the thrill of confusion. "I'm going to have a photo shoot?"

"May as well get some decent pictures," she said. "We can do a session. You're tall, so you're ahead of a lot of girls that come in here."

"What does Tony cost? I mean, do I have to pay him and the make-up person?"

"No, honey, we take care of it."

Euphoria constricted my windpipe and my words leapt, like a little girl's, from the very top of my throat. "Oh, thank you!"

"No guarantees, but you need a book. Stay out of the sun," she warned.

I was on my way to Rhode Island for a weekend of sailing and rum and tonics, so I would struggle to honor her request. In Newport, I careened across Narragansett Bay with George, a gorgeous boy from Yale, and tried to grab any sliver of non-existent shade. I was giddy in a way that was entirely unfamiliar. The prospect of my upcoming photo shoot, and all the joy and affirmation that would ensue, boosted and emboldened me. The honeysuckle was more perfumed, the ocean air more pristine. I pinned my shoulders back and elongated my neck, practicing that couture stance, and I swear this confidence made me grow another two inches. I told no one about my upcoming photo shoot, but my loose, relaxed body must have telegraphed to George that something was hoisting me from within. I had changed from the most pointless person at Princeton, spending her summer as a purveyor of papier maché Santas, to someone glamorous and worthy.

On Monday, I reported for hair and makeup. The blush carved angles into my face, and my unremarkable brown hair was styled to be sleek and undulating. A smallish, very encouraging woman took charge of my fingernails and toes, now deep cherry red. I slipped into high heels

and my worn strapless bikini, revealing tanlines, too sharp to cover up, from all the beaches that summer. The photographer snapped away.

The sensation was curious and sudden—I felt ridiculous in stiletto sandals and a bathing suit. Still, I gamely tried to follow his cues.

I changed into tennis clothes and we ventured outside. I frolicked around a fountain in Boston Garden, and tried to look contemplative clutching the wrought iron banister of a Back Bay townhouse. The photographer was chipper. I was embarrassed. He wanted seductive, petulant, jubilant, surprised. All I could manage was doe in headlights, or self-conscious prude. I was the opposite of a natural and wasn't much of a frolicker, either. That afternoon, it was all too clear and even more disappointing: modeling was a talent, and I didn't have it. Shame seeped through me like a stain.

It was too hot to go to work covered in foundation and blush, so I went home to wash the day off my face. That evening, I closed up the dollhouse store. The late shift earned me an extra two dollars and fifty cents an hour.

Whoever I was supposed to be out there was at odds with who I actually was, and it caused a muddled mix of emotions. I was confused because I had ached for it, yet realized I had no gifts for it. I was ashamed to confirm I had failed my audition. I regretted that I had submitted myself to the prying camera that saw

my naked, reluctant truth. I was afraid I'd squandered my best chance because I'm too repressed or uptight or awkward to make good on my dreams.

Maybe the photos would tell a different, more encouraging story.

To my horror, the photos bore out my discomfiture, and something else. Whatever alchemy was meant to occur between woman and camera never materialized. There was nothing special in my face or gestures that could emerge, big, fascinating, alluring in an image.

The ladies at the agency were ruthless in their critiques. It was Boston, and I suppose I expected gentility. They spread some prints across the desk. The lady with the gray bob remarked on the "flat plane" of my face, the brows that sat "too high" above my "one is higher than the other" eyes, my legs that were "so muscular!" The clincher was a grotesquely unflattering shot in the middle of a contact sheet. Me, awkwardly leaning into an open gate, tennis dress spreading out from my waist like a tent. "See, you look like a cow in this one," she said, circling it with a red grease pencil. "I mean, the camera doesn't like such broad hips."

"Oh," I said. My eyes smarted from tears and fury.

"And like I said, you don't exactly have a look," she finished.

"I get it," I said.

I was no weary Contessa, it was true. I also took a lousy picture. My features, which merged into some kind

of rational harmony in real life, skewed asymmetrically, like a Cubist portrait, through the camera's lens.

"I'd like to keep these photos," I said.

"May I?"

"You can have the prints," she said. "We need to keep the contact sheets."

"For what?" I asked. She shrugged and put everything in a manila envelope. "They're yours. Good luck."

It would take a few months to recover from the horror of being picked apart feature by feature.

That's not true. I've still not entirely recovered.

In September, I returned to Princeton, amped up my academics and my studies. It was senior year and I was motivated, as I had not been before. I wrote a thesis on an obscure Soviet writer and got recruited by the CIA and the National Security Agency. These were Reagan/Brezhnev years, and Washington needed some help.

Like many of my dreams, the one about being on the cover of *Vogue* never came to pass, and the humiliation at the hands of my judges (mind you, this was decades before *America's Top Model* and the reality show universe where rejection is the cultural norm) did, in fact, serve somehow to fuel me. I needed to find some worth in the estimation of my peers before I got out of there, and in a way, I did. I was now, "Marcia, you know, she's in the Russian department," and that distinction, however superficial, served me well when I graduated. I held off on Langley, spent

eighteen months on the road in the Soviet Union and eventually began a career in television, on the other side of the camera.

I never told my friends—not George, my roommates, my family, or even any of my many shrinks—that once I tried to be a model. I never mentioned how urgently, even obsessively, I believed that only the camera could prove my worth. I wanted to be noticed. I wanted, perhaps, to be envied. But I still cower at the image of me ashamed and alone at that modeling agency and would not, for anything in the world, ever allow my looks to be judged again—at least not to my face.

As dreams go this one was best discarded. There was no way of wishing or persevering my way to modeling success. Okay, maybe if I practiced, I could train myself to be more at ease in silly poses, but the rest was physiology. My bone structure couldn't study its way to a perfume ad. It was no one's fault (least of all my own) that my image would not sell mascara or ballgowns in the marketplace. It was business. In the end, my head had

hungered for something that would not and could not come to pass. In a way, it also craved something that, I have to remind myself, my soul rejected and this conflict left me with a delicious gem of truth about who I was meant to be.

I still saw models as exalted creatures and even now get a twinge of shame when I imagine what it cost me in self-respect to try and join their ranks. But I had my small moment, before that flash of indignity with the harpies. There is one decent shot from the bathing suit series in the studio, and I recall the photographers' directions. "Look at your lover" —he pointed to the fan with the gale-force winds directed my way— "and say, 'I love you,' in Russian." My bare legs were folded around me, I puckered my lips, *Ya tebya lublyu*, and he clicked. Not long ago, I placed that photo on a shelf at home, next to pictures of my wedding and my kids. Twenty-year-old me, believing in possibility and looking for it. Finding it. Elsewhere. 📍



Marcia DeSanctis is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *100 Places in France Every Woman Should Go* (Travelers' Tales, 2014). A frequent contributor to *Vogue* and *Town & Country* magazines, she has also written for *Marie Claire*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Tin House*, *Literary Hub*, *O the Oprah Magazine*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Time*, *Tin House*, *The New York Times*, and others. She has been awarded five Lowell Thomas Awards by the Society of American Travel Writers for excellence in travel journalism.