

DRAWN

from LIFE

a novel

Sarah P. Blanchard

Drawn from Life

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For Phil and Rich,
my Hōkūleʻa and Hōkūpaʻa

ONE

Thursday, November 18, 2015 - 2:00 a.m.

“Really, Em. You’re being such a drama queen, all that moaning and groaning. It’s not like you’re dying. You saw the X-rays, it’s just a little crack.” Lucy risked a glance away from the wet road to frown at her cousin, huddled beneath a blanket in the passenger seat.

“And your shirt’s buttoned crooked,” she added. “You look like a sad-ass refugee.”

A gust of wind rocked the car. Sucking her breath in, Lucy braked hard. Tightening her grip on the wheel, she hunched forward to stare past the thrashing wipers for a glimpse of black pavement.

Floating woozily on a virtual pillow of something administered by the grumpy ER nurse, Lucy’s cousin Emma was tracking rain streaks on the passenger side window. She blinked and organized a response.

“Next time I break a bone, I’ll dress better. Wear clothes. No more nudity.” She paused and thought a bit. “Posing in the nude.”

Lucy shot her a worried look. “You can’t stop posing for me. I need you, Em. You’re my abso-fucking-lutely best model, always have been.” A pause. “You’re kidding, right? Hey, Mouse, I *said* I was sorry.”

Nudity, Emma thought. There’s a fun word. Who used to say that? Radar O’Reilly on *M.A.S.H.*, her dad’s favorite show. She should call. Let him know she was okay, it was nothing, they’d still be there for Thanksgiving. Call her dad, not Radar O’Reilly. And not right now because it was, like, two in the morning.

Emma caught up to Lucy's concern. "But posing for you is dangerous. You saw it, right? That easel attacked me. And my name's not Mouse." She frowned. "I hate that nickname."

The painkiller was doing a fine job of blurring everything except the mesmerizing swipe of windshield wipers. Emma rolled her head toward the side window, careful not to jostle her left arm in its sling.

Lucy found the interstate's on-ramp and accelerated, risking a skid. Emma wanted to say something about the perils of excessive speed on slick mountain roads, but then she felt the Subaru's all-wheel-drive take hold and the moment was gone. The words in her brain weren't lining up correctly anyway.

Exhaling, Lucy relaxed her grip. "That doctor said you'll be just fine, all healed up by Thanksgiving. So no one needs to know, right?"

Emma considered that. "Have to tell Panetta, get an extension. I've got a paper due Friday. Day after tomorrow? No, tomorrow. Today's Thursday already, right?"

"I'll call him," Lucy reassured her. "What's the topic? Never mind," she added quickly. "This is just me, faking an interest. I'm sure it's totally mind-numbing."

"The Roles of Women..." Emma frowned, concentrating "In Sub-Saharan Village..." Slowly, then: "Economies? I think. Maybe."

"Yeah, boring as fuck." Lucy swapped dismissal for persuasion. "Don't worry, I'll tell Panetta you got a doctor's note. But no one else needs to know." Fingers twitched on the wheel. "This's adulting one-oh-one, Em. We don't need to run to Daddy or Uncle Jerry with every little boo-boo, right? We solve our own fucking problems. Pinky-swear, okay?"

Only Lucy would say fucking and pinky-swear in the same breath.

Through rain-soaked darkness, Emma thought she saw an exit sign and the lights of a gas station and knew she should say something about the Subaru needing gas but instead, she fell asleep.

Emma woke to the crunch of tires on crushed stone and the growl of the Outback downshifting as it began the sharp climb to their cabin. On

the car's instrument panel, the GET GAS NOW light glowed large and red.

"Lucy, the gas—" Panic jolted Emma upright and she gasped as a sharp pain knifed her left shoulder.

Lucy scowled, her face inches from the windshield as she navigated a tight turn through the downpour. The wipers slapped frantically, running on high.

At the first switchback, she slowed to a crawl and snapped on the high beams.

"Fucking headlights." One hand left the wheel to scoop back a shock of white-blond hair. "Useless. I can't see anything."

"Go back to low beams," Emma forced the words through clenched teeth. "It won't reflect off the rain as much."

"Really?" Lucy snapped. "Do you want to drive?"

Emma bit back a response. Yes I do, but no I can't. What if we run out of gas? No one else drives this road, we're still a mile away—

Her right hand flew to the grab handle as the car fishtailed and thumped into a pothole. Now sharply awake, she caught her lower lip between her teeth and braced both feet against the floor. Pain shot through her shoulder.

Three steep hairpin turns later, they pulled into the nearly invisible clearing at the end of the old logging road. The Outback sputtered its last fumes and died, sliding a little sideways in the mud.

At least the house lights were still on.

Lucy offered Emma a weak grin. "Made it. Easy-peasey."

They stumbled through blasts of cold rain to the porch, strewn now with slick wet leaves. Inside, Lucy slammed the door against the wind as Emma dropped her wet blanket on the floor and toed off her muddy shoes.

Rain drummed hard on the cabin's metal roof. We're okay now, Emma thought as Lucy helped her peel off wet jeans and socks. In a few hours it would be daylight. When the rain ended Lucy could take their other car, Emma's Miata, to get gas for the Subaru. Everything would be fine.

As Emma tried to figure out how to lie on her right side while holding an icepack on her left shoulder, Lucy's "easy-peasey" tickled her memory. One of her mother's favorite phrases. What other platitudes would her mother provide now?

It's not a problem unless you make it a problem, Emmie. A warm blanket and a hot cup of tea, that's all you need. Let Lucy do the hard stuff. She'll take care of you like she always does.

Except her mother was gone forever and there was nothing easy-peasey about life with Lucy.

Emma at nineteen liked to study root causes. What factors precipitated the Great Depression? Which innovation motivated a barter economy to transition to a monetary system? How did she end up with a hairline crack in her collarbone?

The physics of that was simple: The crossbar of Lucy's easel had collided with Emma's clavicle. Force plus velocity plus trajectory. But what was the propelling force, Lucy's frustration with that damned art project or the disturbing text from her mother? Probably both.

Like all juniors in the Silvermill College art school, Lucy was required to produce a capstone project, a major artwork worthy of exhibition at the end of the fall semester. She'd proposed creating a three-dimensional self-portrait, a life-sized plaster sculpture that she would then destroy during the gallery show.

She had a theme and a title, Genesis and Catharsis. She knew what Catharsis would look like, a multimedia video extravaganza—with strobe lights, clashing cymbals, maybe cannon fire—during which she'd sledgehammer her plaster self into smithereens.

But Genesis was proving tricky. She'd begun with typical Lucy-style enthusiasm, creating detailed drawings that exaggerated her own angular features—aquiline nose, wide shoulders, sharp hips. Plus all the body art, the ink and metal ornaments.

The timeline required her to complete a frame of wood and chicken wire by Thanksgiving, but she'd spent all of October and half of

November changing her mind about the perfect posture to express The Full Essence of Lucy. Nude, of course, but what then? Spreadeagled on a concrete slab or draped on a tree limb? Emerging from the ground as a hellish demon or crouching like a hungry spider? She loved Louise Bourgeois' arachnid *Maman* at the National Gallery in Ottawa, but wouldn't a spider be too derivative?

Emma had suggested a Lucy-piñata, suspended from a tree branch like a naked paratrooper or a flying zombie. Just joking, Emma had added, but her cousin liked the idea. She just couldn't decide what should spill out of the Lucy-zombie-piñata when she destroyed it on camera.

After months of listening to Lucy's indecision, Emma was done contributing feedback. *You're going to smash it anyway*, she wanted to say. *Just get it done.*

On the afternoon before the hospital trip—Wednesday, a week before Thanksgiving—they'd come home early from classes. Emma retreated to her bedroom to work on her economics paper while Lucy sat in front of the television, sketchpad in hand, to draw warrior poses from *Game of Thrones* freeze frames.

A little before six p.m., Lucy dragged her big A-frame easel into the center of their front room and set it up beside the fieldstone fireplace.

"Please, Em, I need you to pose. Twenty minutes, that's all. I've got it narrowed down to three concepts. It won't take long."

Emma stifled a sigh. The economics paper needed her full attention but Lucy sounded desperate. She set aside her laptop and pulled off her sweatshirt because posing for Lucy usually meant nude.

"Twenty minutes," Emma agreed. "Then dinner. I'm holding you to that. How about Norah Jones?"

They'd agreed years earlier that the model chooses the music. To the opening notes of "Sunrise," Emma draped her jeans and underwear neatly over the sofa and stood naked on the braided rug in front of a dark window.

"I need your hair up," Lucy reminded her.

Emma gathered her thick curls, wrestling the mass into a thick bird's nest and securing it with an elastic band above her neck. A few russet strands always escaped, springing away from her head in defiance of hairdressing and gravity.

At Lucy's direction, Emma eased into a warrior pose with feet planted wide and hands clutching an imaginary broadsword over a shoulder.

Beneath the music she heard a light rain peppering the windows, the beginning of a storm moving through the mountains. She shuddered a little, imagining the cold rain against her skin.

"Puh-leese, Em," Lucy coaxed. "Hold it just a little longer. I've really got to get this done. Bring that left leg forward a bit."

By the time the first sketch was completed, all the blood had left Emma's arms. Twenty minutes came and went, but Lucy kept sketching and coaxing.

"Hang on, Em. I've almost got it. Five more minutes."

Then it was five more in a new position and five more after that, until Lucy forgot to ask and Emma forgot to protest.

Norah Jones had run out of songs. The only sounds now were the rain and Lucy's frustrated mutterings as she dragged a floor lamp around the room and repositioned her easel. Nothing was working. She blamed gloomy lighting, paper-curling humidity, and Emma.

"Jeez, Mouse. That pose is so static. You're just standing there like a freaky little rodent. I need you fierce and powerful. Be a dragon queen."

Emma steeled herself, not for the pose but for what would happen next. There'd be swearing and foot-stomping, sketches ripped to shreds. Eventually Lucy might produce something brilliant, but the process was always fraught with drama.

"Just fucking try," Lucy growled. "Come on, Mouse. You've got to look like me."

Emma remembered Rodin's nude study of Jean d'Aire, a bronze sculpture at the art museum in Raleigh. One of Auguste Rodin's besieged *Burghers of Calais*, the massive figure stood in defiance and despair, fists

clenched at his side as he prepared to sacrifice himself to the invading army.

Worth a try.

“How about this? From the Rodin garden.” Emma turned away and imagined herself large and powerful. Knees locked, fists coiled, jaw clenched.

Lucy’s scowl evaporated. “Oh! Yes. Can you get more weight on your right leg? Like you’re stepping toward death. Keep your back arched, show those biceps. That’s awesome!”

But it wasn’t awesome, it was impossible. Emma was six inches shorter and ten pounds heavier than Lucy, all soft curves where Lucy was hard bone and muscle. Emma didn’t have biceps.

She couldn’t be a body double for her Valkyrie cousin and she really couldn’t be the nine-foot-tall statue of a desperate, naked Frenchman. Five minutes later, her arms began trembling. When her right calf cramped, she collapsed on the sofa and folded herself into a blanket.

“Sorry, Lucy, I can’t do this. You took pictures of the Rodins. Can’t you just look at those?”

“No, I can’t! I deleted those stupid photos and now there’s no time!”

She tore the Emma-burgher sketch off her easel and ripped it in half. Crumpled the pieces and tossed them into the cold fireplace. Threw herself into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

“It’s a fucking disaster,” she groaned.

“Let’s take a break,” Emma coaxed. “We can go back to it after dinner.”

She pulled on her clothes and began ladling chili from the pot on the stove while Lucy sulked on the sofa. Emma hesitated over a bottle of red wine, then poured a scant half glass for Lucy. She corked the bottle and tucked it away in a cupboard.

Food brought Lucy back to life. She ate hunched over the table, spoon in one hand and phone in the other, alternating between eating and swiping through a dating app. Left, left, left. She snort-laughed derisively and kept swiping.

They finished the chili just before eight, when Lucy's phone pinged with a text.

TWO

“Fucking spam.” Lucy frowned. Her finger hovered over the delete icon.

She paused. “What—? It’s my mother. But it’s someone else’s phone.” She swiped rapidly, her frown deepening. “Shit! Really? She says she’s moving again. Leaving New Haven, going back to Stanstead.”

Lucy had been born in Stanstead, Quebec, just north of Vermont.

Emma set their empty bowls in the sink. “When’s she leaving? After Thanksgiving?”

“Now! *Right now.*” Lucy’s face pinched in dismay, then fury. “This is so fucking *stupid*. She says I can’t call her because the phone she’s using belongs to someone named Brad. Who the hell is Brad? She’s left Hartford, she’s literally on a bus. But she’s heading *north*, not south. They’re almost at the border and now they’ve lost the cell signal. *Fuck.*”

“North?”

“Canada! Quebec!”

“But she’ll be back for Thanksgiving, right?”

Lucy threw her phone down. It skidded off the table, bounced on the braided rug, and came to rest against a leg of their saggy old sofa. Being closer, Emma retrieved it and placed it back on the table.

Lucy jumped to her feet and began pacing between the fireplace and kitchen sink.

“Shit shit shit! My *fucking* mother. She can’t *do* that! They’ll stop her at the border. She can’t get a work visa, she can’t get a job. If she sneaks over the border, she’ll get deported. Again.”

“Why is she leaving?”

“Who the fuck knows?”

“I’m sorry,” Emma couldn’t offer a hug, she’d be flung off. “Last time you talked, she was clean, right? Six months sober?”

Lucy continued pacing. “This is my mother we’re talking about, remember? No fucking way she’s still clean. And she’s the one who said oh, let’s get everyone together for Thanksgiving at the family farm.” She mimicked a saccharine wheedling. “We’ve got things to talk about, she said. To celebrate, because Maggie’s sober. She swore she’s getting her life together, everything’s turning around. Yeah, no.” She resumed pacing.

“Maybe—”

“Fuck that shit. She’s disappeared again and I’m *done* with her.”

“But we’ll still have Thanksgiving. Dad and Jerry are flying down on Tuesday.”

Lucy paused to glare at Emma. “You don’t get it! She was supposed to ask Jerry—” She broke off abruptly. “Fuck it. Let’s go somewhere. I’m sick of hanging out here.”

Emma knew if they drove the twenty miles into Asheville, Lucy would head for a bar. Emma, always the designated driver, would have to drive them home through the storm.

“Let’s not, okay?” Emma hated to beg so she aimed for logic. “Your tank’s almost empty. Do you really want to stop for gas tonight, in this rain? Besides, I’ve got work to do.”

Lucy flopped onto the sofa and threw her head back to stare at the ceiling. Emma waited a beat, then opened her textbook.

A minute later, Lucy shot back onto her feet and strode to her easel. “Okay, let’s finish this stupid drawing. You offered, remember? After dinner, you said.”

Emma sighed. She marked her book with a paper napkin and shed her clothes again.

Lucy poked through her box of charcoals. “You know, Em, in the whole fucking world you’re the only one who understands me. The only one who puts up with me when I get crazy.”

Emma couldn't claim to understand Lucy but she suspected the last part was true. No one else tolerated her cousin's tantrums and sarcasm. But was that a strength or a weakness?

Lucy positioned a wooden chair near the window. "Nothing hard, I promise. Just sit and stare at the window, okay? And pull the band off your hair. Let it hang loose, or whatever it wants to do." She switched off the overhead light and dragged her easel across the floor, bringing it closer to Emma. Now the only light came from a small desk lamp on the kitchen table, beside Emma's left shoulder.

"Shake your head again, Em. Your hair, it's wild." She pulled a wool blanket off the sofa. "Here, drape this over your shoulder. Maybe I'll add some fabric for texture. Rags, or wet seaweed. Remember that exhibit in Montreal, with the kinetic fabric that moved to music? A skirt started fluttering when I sang to it. That's what I need."

Emma groaned. Another concept, another complication. But if Lucy was feeling inspired instead of frustrated, she'd go along with it. "Thanks for the blanket, cuz. It's getting chilly. Maybe you could light a fire."

"When it's raining? No, it'll just make the room smokey. Besides, the wood's all wet."

It had been Lucy's turn to bring in logs from the woodpile by the porch.

Emma pulled the blanket closer, thinking she should've kept her clothes on. How many years had she been posing for Lucy's art? She couldn't remember the first time. Before kindergarten, certainly.

Cousins with no other siblings, they were only a year apart in age. They'd been thrown together since childhood by circumstances and their family's collective need to cope with Lucy's mercurial mother Maggie.

Whenever motherhood—or life in general—overwhelmed Maggie, Emma's small rural home in eastern Connecticut became Lucy's refuge. The doorbell would ring, usually late at night. There'd be whispers or raised voices, sometimes tears. A shadowy figure would hand over a backpack and nudge the sullen girl through the door.

Emma's mother Kit or father Frank would fold Lucy into an unreciprocated hug and exclaim, "Look, Emmie. Here's Lucy, she's staying with us for a night or two, maybe a week. Isn't that wonderful? We can always make room for Lucy."

The night or the week frequently stretched to a month or longer, depending on where Maggie had gone and why. Rehab, jail, drugs, a new boyfriend, alcohol, a halfway house, drugs again, jail again. Frank's sister always vowed to return for her daughter when she got her act together.

Each time, Emma would set aside her toys and offer Lucy a fresh box of crayons or markers. The girls had learned to co-exist through a shared interest in art. Their talents emerged early: Lucy's artistic skills, Emma's ability to follow admiringly.

Lucy especially loved the gritty messiness of charcoal. She often used both hands, holding a drawing stick in her right and a blending stump or eraser in her left. If the work went well, she'd swap the blunt stick for a thin piece of burnt grapevine or a white highlighter. She was her own toughest critic, though, and most drawings were abandoned halfway. Sheets of sixty-pound Strathmore crumpled on the hearth made excellent fire starters.

Now she paused, scowling. "I've got the lighting right, but the composition is flat. It needs more depth." She pointed her charcoal at Emma, accusing. "You're easy to sketch, Em, but hard to draw. I want myth and mystery, but you're all saints and serenity. No depth."

Emma tried to speak without moving. "What did I do? Was I shivering? I'm trying to hold still but it's cold."

Half of her body was covered by the blanket, the other half exposed. She felt goosebumps and nipples rising, probably not the look Lucy was looking for. "How about a Mona Lisa smile? That's mysterious."

"Stop that, Mouse," Lucy muttered. "Don't move. And stop mocking me."

Emma flinched. "Sorry. I'm not mocking. I'm—"

"No stupid Mona Lisa face."

There was a *snap* and Lucy groaned. “Shit. I need a new stick.” She rummaged through her box. When she resumed sketching, the strokes came hard and rough, like a rake scraping concrete.

“Em,” Lucy demanded, “why don’t you ever get angry? I’m trying to put some emotion into this drawing but you aren’t giving me anything.”

Time to shut this down, Emma thought. *Get up, get dressed, get warm.*

But she remained in her chair, distracted by the sight of her own reflection in the window. Floating in darkness, framed by an exuberant mane of curls, her face looked blank and inconsequential. The mask of an artist’s manikin.

“Okay, if you can’t do anger, try shame.” Lucy was drawing now with quiet, carefully controlled strokes. “Think of something shameful. Like that asshole in seventh grade, what was his name? The boy who grabbed you behind the bleachers.” Her voice had gone flat and cold. “Remember how he got you down, shoved his hands under your shirt?”

Calmly now, she was prompting pain like it was a friendly bit of nostalgia. “Remember what that felt like? Show me that feeling. I want to draw that.”

Emma’s goosebumps vanished in a flush of heat.

“Then remember,” Lucy continued amiably, “how glad you were when I hauled him off you. Remember what I did to him? You were so scared, you were crying. But I saved you, right?”

“That’s not fair—” The blanket slipped to the floor as Emma leaped to her feet. Naked and not caring, she spun to face her cousin. “I’m done—”

Lucy kept drawing, apparently unconcerned that Emma had broken the pose. “Okay, so give me something else then. How about some random time when you really screwed up. No, fuck that, I forgot, the Mouse never screws up. Oh, I know! How about grief? That could work. Remember when your mother asked you to go skiing with her? But you said no. So she went alone, and then she died.”

Lucy stepped back from the easel to inspect her work. Shook her head, sighed, and added as an afterthought, “I loved skiing with your mother. If I was there, I’d have gone. Then maybe she wouldn’t have died.”

The casual cruelty took Emma’s breath. She bit down hard on her lower lip, then had to force words past the tang of blood. “You don’t get to use my grief for whatever this is.”

Lucy resumed drawing with a fresh violence that threatened to tear the paper. She remained silent.

Abruptly remembering her nakedness, Emma retrieved the blanket from the floor and fumbled it around her shoulders. From long habit, she sought conciliation. “Lucy, I’m sorry about your mother running off again. But what you’re doing right now, it’s a mind-fuck. Don’t dump all your shit on me.”

Emma, who seldom swore, had captured Lucy’s attention. The scrape of charcoal stopped.

“Much better, Mouse. You’re actually defending yourself.” A pause. “This is exhausting.”

What’s exhausting? Emma wondered. *Drawing me, or bullying me?*

How could she defuse her cousin’s anger? “I can’t be the angry one,” she said. “That’s your job. Remember the summer you turned twelve? Uncle Jerry said you acted like you were the Director of Outrage and Fury. He said it’s my job to stay calm, to balance your anger. We’re yin and yang, that’s why we’re friends.”

Suddenly Lucy was standing way too close, pushing the fury into Emma’s face. “Yin and yang? Friends? Shit, that’s it? That’s what you think we are?”

Emma pulled her blanket tighter and fought the instinct to retreat. “Sorry. How about—”

Lucy spun back to her easel. “Sit down, Mouse! I’m not done. And do *not* say besties,” she spat, “or something equally fucking stupid, like BFFs or soul sisters. Superficial crap.”

“No, I mean— I don’t know! Fam? Tribe? Blood sisters? What would *you* call us, Lucy?”

The second piece of charcoal broke and Lucy’s face twisted in rage. She grabbed the easel with both hands and heaved it.

Charcoals and sketchpad rattled to the floor as the easel’s wooden crossbar smacked Emma’s left collarbone. Too startled to cry out, she crumpled to her knees on the bare floor. Whimpering, gasping for breath, she clutched her left arm tight against her breasts.

Lucy’s rage evaporated. Begging forgiveness, she guided Emma to the sofa and rushed to fill a plastic bag with crushed ice. She helped Emma dress and guided her through a cold drenching rain into the Subaru, then drove ever so carefully down their treacherous mountain road with the car’s headlights reflecting nothing but slanting rain and the black forest.

In the emergency room, Emma sat for three hours on a hard plastic chair. She dripped melted ice and hot tears while Lucy swore at the hospital staff. Shortly before one a.m. on Thursday morning, a burly ER nurse in wrinkled teal scrubs took X-rays.

“You’ve got lots of bruising but only a small crack in the clavicle,” he said. “You’re going to have swelling and pain, but you don’t need surgery.”

He taped her shoulder to immobilize it and showed them how to fasten a sling and a clavicle brace. “This will take the pressure off. Ice it every two or three hours, if possible, for the first twenty-four. Don’t try to use it at all for three days. Then you can swap the sling for just the brace so you’ll have a little mobility in that arm. Really, you just gotta leave it alone to heal. In a week or two it should feel a lot better and then you can get a referral for PT.”

When he handed Emma a prescription, Lucy scoffed. “Hah. Percocet? That’s not strong enough.”

The nurse kept a wary eye on Lucy as he spoke to Emma. “Follow the directions. There’s enough for three or four days, no refills. Then if you still need something for the pain, try acetaminophen or ibuprofen or a combo.

This is an opioid, so don't even think about driving until you're off it. Got that?"