

Chapter 2. Camille Claudel Had to Dig Her Own Clay

There were naked mannequins in an otherwise empty store front window across the street from my office. The store was wedged between a Chinese carryout and a sports bar where day-drinkers gathered. For two weeks, the mannequins stood facing the street, posed but unclothed. I could tell from their nakedness that the bodies were second-hand. They were nearly genderless with smooth nether regions and interchangeable arms. It was unclear what they would be modeling. The store, itself, was dark. There was no sign on the door, but it was in the process of becoming something, the latest iteration of a place that had been many things: A mattress store, a cash-for-gold place, a home furnishings consignment shop. Mostly, I suspected, it had been a place to launder money.

Maybe not. Maybe this was the start of someone's dream, and they were putting a lot of effort and savings into making it happen. Maybe the mannequins would be adorned in something beautiful that drew customers to the door. I hoped so. I wanted the store to be more than a doomed retail venture in a struggling neighborhood known for addiction and human trafficking with four rundown motels close to the highway.

For many years, I worked across the street at a nonprofit that was perfectly situated to help recovering alcoholics. I also worked as a writer, and the writer in me related to all of it: The silent nakedness, the struggle to be something else, the desire to follow unlikely dreams, and the will to reinvent myself again and again.

Also, the store front seemed like it needed to be written into a short story. It was more than a backdrop. It was a symbol. It could be a character and a place where the story began. It

was *my* story. Or it was my article. I wasn't sure but I knew it was important. Somehow it contained the answer to what I wanted to know: What is it about humans that makes us want to follow our dreams? What causes some of us get stuck, unable to move forward? And what spurs others of us to get up, despite the odds, make ourselves vulnerable, and try again?

I wanted to know because truth be told, I was looking for a short-cut. I was a writer who had a difficult time writing. Yet, around me were artists and writers, friends of mine who were prolific in their output. I was envious. I wondered if something was wrong with me because I struggled. I wanted to be a productive creator. I wanted writing to be effortless. Somewhere along the line, I'd gotten the idea that it should be. Could be. But I didn't know how. I went in search of physical, psychological, emotional, and creative answers to figure out how to struggle less and write more. I didn't know my fear of uncertainty and vulnerability were stopping me.

I felt like a naked, motionless mannequin. I was looking out at the world through a large glass window, with so much to see and so much to say, but unable to journey in the direction I wanted to go. This is not a metaphor. When I was twenty-eight, I worked part-time at an art school, silently naked as a figure model dreaming up stories to write. My job was to stand very still. Not move for twenty minutes at a time. Not even to scratch my nose. To the outside world, it seemed I was figuratively and literally going nowhere in my life.

This was my grad school *before* grad school when I was too poor to take classes, but hungry to learn. Figure modeling was a way for me to earn a few bucks and immerse myself in a creative setting. Did it matter that these were visual artists and I was a writer? It did not. I was absorbing lectures about foreground, background, negative space and the like, then going

home and translating these lessons in fiction. I was daydreaming stories and taking interesting journeys all while standing still.

In one class I remember the teacher focused on contour and shadows. She took a piece of charcoal, wetted it on her tongue, “You don’t mind, do you?” she asked, as if my answer made a difference. She drew a line down the side of my body. She traced the curve across the side of my breast and continued past my waist, down my hip to my calf muscle. I was stunned. No one drew *on* me. I could feel myself flush with embarrassment. I didn’t know what to say. I needed the money. I couldn’t say no because at that point in my life, I didn’t know how. What I did instead: I took the experience home and I turned it into something. I gave myself a voice and wrote about it.

That’s a nice tight story about a story. The truth is, it took a couple of years for me to write that story. I was a very slow writer and I suspected something was wrong with me that I couldn’t produce work quickly, even when I wanted to. I was a perfectionist, yes, but I also fought myself to sit down and write. Every time. Even when writing was exactly what I wanted to do. I had all kinds of fears—about my abilities, my audience (non-existent except in my head), my future success, my future failure. I brawled with myself at every turn.

I did what I knew how to do: I started reading. I got books from the library about other writers and ways to be more creative and productive. I worked my way through Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* several times and Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* as well as many others. Sometimes these books helped, but mostly they made me feel worse. It seemed to me creativity books were written by people without creative difficulties. They shared secrets about how to be successful, but their starting points were well-beyond anything I could relate to or

imagine for myself. I didn't have a father who was a writer, an ex-husband who was an award-winning film maker. I didn't have real-life examples that I could emulate, and from where I stood, naked and cold, my back in a knot, my arms in the air (in a gesture of contemplation or maybe bow hunting) I didn't trust that my dreams to be a writer might be anything other than far-fetched.

When I was an undergrad, working my way through college as a picture framer, I met a customer who was a sci-fi writer. My nineteen-year-old English-major self was hungry for advice about writing. I wanted to have a conversation. Instead, this customer told me matter-of-factly that I had no right to call myself a writer until I'd been published, and even then, I couldn't call myself a writer until someone with more publishing credentials called me a writer first.

Readers: Never stomp on the tender dreams of another creative being with such asinine cynicism and contempt. That man's words imbedded themselves in my psyche for too long, propping up insecurities I already held while I waited for validation to come from the outside.

I did know one person who had written a book: My grandfather. It was a book about camping—what to pack and where to go— self-published in the 1940s. According to my father, it never sold because no one was interested in trail guides and camping books back then. My grandfather was before his time. I don't know what part of this is true. I couldn't read his book because all copies had been thrown away. There was no evidence, nothing I could point to as justification for hope. My grandfather, known for exaggerating his own successes and telling tall tales, never spoke about it. My father mentioned it to me once as a cautionary tale. So, in

my family, my desire to be a writer was met with pragmatic defeatism as a general rule; maybe indifference on a good day.

Conversely, my father said, “Find a job you love.” He loved his work. He investigated con artists and it gave his life meaning. This was a conversation we had many times over the dinner table while he was eating a stack of Oreos for dessert and I was still scraping lima beans around my plate. My father felt sorry for people who lived “lives of quiet desperation,” so he wanted my brother and me to be happy and pursue fulfilling work.

Except—not writing. I should have practical dreams. Artists were irresponsible and poor, he said. Writing and publishing books was something other people did. (Also, women only went to college to get husbands, and professors were intellectual snobs. “Those who can, do; those who can’t teach” he said.)

To recap my starting point:

- “Real writers” had someone in their lives who could give them a leg up.
- Validation should come from the outside; I wasn’t a writer until someone more successful told me so.
- We, in my family, were not the sort of people who wrote books. Even if we tried (and were visionary), we were destined to fail.
- Because I was a young woman, I should find a man to take care of me.
- Oh, and I should love what I do and give my whole heart to it.

These words formed my foundational beliefs. It was my background noise—as if the radio, TV, and internet were all telling me that a creative life was impossible. It made my writing process so much harder than it had to be.

Yet, some deep quiet part of me inched toward my dreams, anyway. As if I were the person who placed naked mannequins in a dark window with a vision of what I wanted to display, even if it wasn't apparent to everyone else. In the most unlikely ways, I was on a creative journey.

My part-time job as a figure model was part of it. Standing still was safe, a form of meditation, a way for me to reclaim parts of myself. Sure, I came home with terrible backaches and knotted muscles from holding a pose too long, but there was a certain freedom in allowing art students and retired folks to render my likeness in charcoal, paint, and clay. I was seen and not seen at the same time. Their paintings were not me, but I was somewhere in there.

In another class, the sculpting teacher pointed out my swayback and belly. He told his class, "Stop trying to create a perfect figure in the clay. See the flaws and accentuate them. See beyond what you think you see." Philosophically and spiritually, this is what I needed to hear. I was the model, but I was learning a lot about color and energy, movement and shadow. I was learning about myself. Everything I learned, I applied to my writing.

In one class, the teacher lectured about the struggles artists have endured for centuries, especially women. He talked about the effort involved in the creative life, the indifference of the world. "You guys are lucky," he said. "It will be hard for you to make art, but not nearly as hard as it was for artists that came before you." His students seem unconvinced. "Camille Claudel was a better sculptor than Rodin," he said. "She had to work harder."

Maybe no one else in room was listening that day, but I heard it. I understood what he meant when he said, "Camille Claudel had to dig her own clay."

There's a scene in the French movie, *Camille Claudel*, when Camille is digging at night in the rain and mud, crying but determined. Or that's the way I remember it. Was I *that* dedicated to my writing?

In 1995, when I was newly sober and rebuilding my life, I wrote stories on a borrowed computer, a heavy dinosaur that belonged to my housemate, Nikki. She let me sit at her desk in her room in the evenings when she went on dates. Fortunately, Nikki had a lot of dates. Eventually, I found a used computer for free. As I wrote, I sculpted my own story out of the mud of old ideas and beliefs about who writers were —drunk and depressed, suicidal, penniless, undiscovered until after death, or so successful that others did the work for them. There was my personal muddiness of trying to create without being impaired. I was both the shaper and the thing being shaped.

I hadn't learned yet that before I could write a book, I had to *become the person who writes a book*. I wanted to be "successful" without fully knowing what that looked like.

Two days after my thirtieth birthday, I sat for a class that was drawing my face. During breaks, I strolled around the room to inspect their renderings. I was alarmed. These students were seeing way too many wrinkles. How could I have crow's feet at thirty? They gave me laugh lines that weren't there. One of the drawings looked just like my mother. As class progressed, their drawings deteriorated even further. I found out later their assignment was to age me twenty years at a time. My vanity was not being attacked. I was just getting a glimpse into the future. What I looked like on the outside was not how I felt on the inside. To become the person who writes a book—or multiple books—I had to do some internal work.

It's often said the longest journey is from the head to the heart. For writers, the journey is longer: from the head to the heart to the page. Again and again, through multiple drafts. I had to confront my creative vulnerability and fear by learning ways to work with it and through it. I had to change my relationship to my writing and to myself. I had to contend with procrastination, perfectionism, vulnerability, expectations, uncertainty, and discouragement. Standing still in those art classes, letting other people draw their ideas of me, I was taking the first steps of a journey, silently shifting my beliefs and following my dreams, despite the false starts, setbacks and detours.

No one is going to dig your mud for you. Camille Claudel knew this because she was a woman creating in a man's world in the 19th century. But also, she had to dig her own mud because that's what we all must do. Commit. Commit to shaping ourselves into people who create. You can spend your life working for others and feeling a sense of loss about not writing the stories you want to tell. You can also commit to your excuses if you want to. You can commit to anything you want. So why not commit to your creativity?

Said another way:

"A non-writing writer is a monster courting insanity." –Kafka

"Possessing a creative mind...is something like having a Border Collie for a pet: It needs to work or else it will cause you an outrageous amount of trouble. Give your mind a job to do, or else it will find a job to do, and you might not like the job it invents...If I am not actively creating something, then I am probably actively destroying something." –Elizabeth Gilbert.

Or, this story my mentor once told me about Saint Teresa of Avila: During her time in the convent, Saint Teresa spent seventeen years praying without feeling any sort of meaningful

connection to God. *Seventeen years without feeling connected to her Creator*. Still, she prayed. She showed up. Saint Teresa had faith, even when she didn't experience the peace and comfort she hoped her efforts would give her.

I don't know what part of this story is true. But it's remarkable. It makes clear two things about art—the necessity for faith and the power of and need for good storytelling. Our stories are what we carry, who we are, and what we have to share with one another. Your job is to tell yourself better stories so you can tell the rest of us stories *only you* can tell. You're going to have difficulties and failures. You're going to confuse the process of writing with the desired for getting published and achieving success. You're going to think you know what success looks like and you're going to be wrong. The trick is in knowing how not to get discouraged and keep going anyway.

I knew none of this when I started writing. What I'm telling you is, you are not alone. Learn from my mistakes and my successes. It took me ten years to get my first book published—more like twenty years if you count when I began writing one of the stories in my book—more like thirty if you count when I first started writing stories. My book was shortlisted in contests five times before it was finally published. I felt doomed to be second-best, a perpetual bridesmaid. I put it in a drawer for a few years because I'd lost faith in it. I'm not alone. Creators throughout history have had difficulties and spectacular failures. I knew about them, was determined not to be them, and yet.

Hopeful writers don't like to hear this part of my story.

Listen: After seventeen years of praying in a 16th century convent and not connecting to a creator; after all those raining nights digging for clay in a ditch in 19th century France only to

have Rodin receive credit; after all those days standing naked and voiceless in a 21st century storefront window next to a bar in a struggling neighborhood next to the highway, I learned some things.

First, all of it is necessary.

Second, it doesn't have to be that hard.

CREATIVE INVENTORY

To build and sustain a creative path, you'll need to review your creative journey to this point. It helps to understand where you come from to get where you're going. Your first task is to write your creative origin story.

What foundational assumptions and beliefs have influenced your creative journey? What internal and external voices have stood in your way? What life events pulled you toward being creative or thwarted your creative path? What methods or practices have you tried that have worked well? Worked for a little while? Haven't worked at all? What do you want your creative journey to look like going forward?

I can feel your creative anxiety rising already. Take a breath. You don't have to be a good student and answer all these questions. Keep in mind, there's no wrong way to do this. Also, there's no wrong way to do this. Yes, I said that twice.

If you're looking for some guidance, here are some ideas. You can write your origin story as a narrative, a poem, a fairy tale, a letter, a timeline, a list of bullet points, an outline, a flow chart, a mind map, an interview with yourself, a note to self, an email, a freewriting exercise, a blind typing experiment, or any way form that makes sense for you. You can write in full

sentences or fragments. You can write in crayon, pastels, ink (just not invisible ink), magic marker (permanent or water soluble), sidewalk chalk (take a picture before it washes away), or type your origin story on any device you choose. You can write on lined paper, blank paper, construction paper, computer screen, phone, and so on. If you're a visual person, draw, paint, collage, or film your origin story. If you're kinetic, use your body to tell your story. If music is your thing, do that.

There are only three *musts* to do this exercise correctly. First, you must start your origin story, even if it's just in your head, and you must finish it, but not finish it all the way. Your story is ongoing and is apt to change as you discover more. Second, you must make your origin story imperfect. Purposefully imperfect. Third, you must commit this to memory: *there's no wrong way to do this*.