

CLAY MYTH

by Elise Saba Stephens

Morgana never touched the telephone on weekdays. Her messages accumulated quickly, but soon the number dwindled, and she didn't feel guilty anymore. Touching the phone would have violated one of the three most important rules that Anthony had given to her on the first day of work.

1. *(M) shall not wear fabrics made of acrylic fibers.*
2. *(M) shall restrict herself to a diet of whole-grain organic foods while in the presence of the artist.*
3. *(M) shall not have any physical contact with electronic devices during the sessions nor shall she do so during the work week in order to maintain natural equilibrium.*

The list went on, but he'd told her these three were the most important. At first Morgana had thought that "(M)" stood for her name. Then she realized that Anthony had written up the requirements before he'd selected her from among the other applicants, so perhaps (M) stood for "Madam," since he was seeking women for the position. Unsatisfied with her own answers to the (M) enigma, when the first week had gone by and she'd passed the initial stages of holding her facial muscles "as still and cold as granite" (Tony's words, not hers) Morgan asked what the symbol meant.

"Twin mountain peaks," he answered, not looking up from his sketchpad. Morgana watched the pen in his hand, captivated by its ferocity as the tip dug into the paper, carving significance like a vicious and triumphant tattoo. Sometimes the paper broke like torn skin when he drew particularly quickly.

Tony was living art—the creator in constant, perfect, and fluid motion. Morgana usually hadn't the faintest idea of what he tried to represent through his sketches. Of course, Tony called it *mimesis* instead of *representation* whenever he drew anything, but Morgana didn't mind his attachment to ancient words. There was something almost noble about the way he liked the old archaic manner of doing things.

What made his *mimesis* unnerving was that, for each sketch he created inside his cedar-paneled studio, he depicted her. At first, when Morgana couldn't decipher his sketches or recognize herself at all in them, it scared her, but soon her curiosity compelled her to collect them. At the end of the day when Morgana cleared the crumpled and discarded papers from the studio floor, she secretly slid them into her satchel. After only a few weeks, a full wall of her apartment fluttered like birds' wings

whenever she opened the door. They were clues to a mystery, and she constantly rearranged them to see if they'd offer an answer.

One particular sketch looked like half of a butterfly with a torn wing and knotted antennae that had curled up in the fold of a falling leaf. When Morgana first saw it, an inexplicable rush of pity pulled her down with it. She almost heard the despairing shriek. She smoothed out the sketch, pressed it between her phonebooks, and pinned it in the center of her wall, letting the other sketches radiate out from it as the core.

Tony had given her an answer for the meaning of (M), and it didn't help at all. Twin mountain peaks? Morgana frowned. He wasn't paying attention to her. She could tell by the way he cocked his head to the left, like a dog listening to a melody at a frequency that she couldn't hear. He often acted in this deeply contemplative way during her breaks, as if when she wasn't officially holding still for him, their connection was also severed. What frustrated her was not that he wouldn't speak to her, but that she couldn't hear his song.

She sensed he was sketching her hand. He especially liked the little finger of her left hand because Morgana had a habit of straightening it as if perpetually present at a refined English tea party. Tony was sketching her, even though she was supposed to be on her break. Morgana didn't mind this, especially when she got to watch his eyes. They reminded her of wet stone spheres: hard, dark, intense. He never spoke when his eyes went dark; it was at these moments that he was in the presence of genuine inspiration.

When her "rest" had ended, and Tony again responded to her conversation attempts, Morgana asked, "Then why don't you just call me Twin Mountain Peaks? It sounds natural enough, like a Native American name or something."

"If I'd wanted a Native American, I would have specified that in the job description." A pencil and a blotting sponge were in his mouth while in his hand a fountain pen splashed an ink ribbon on the paper. "All right, you don't like that interpretation of the symbol. Here's another: (M) represents the Divine Feminine."

Morgana stared at him. He'd rather toss her some made-up pretense than simply tell her why he'd picked that letter. She knew it wasn't random. Everything had significance for Anthony Castillo. He was an artist, and if it didn't have meaning

inherently, he'd invent it. He could invent a story of ruined wealth in a crumpled gum wrapper.

"The Divine Feminine?" She knew he was mocking her. Morgana's voice shook, but something kept her from breaking her pose.

"Breasts, if you will."

"I beg your pardon!"

His smile was even more infuriating. Morgana knew he said this to fluster her—to evoke emotion in her features and posture. Knowing that he was manipulating her towards an artistic goal made the fury well up even faster, which of course made Morgana look even more lively, which Tony liked. The cycle was positively maddening. Feeling the pressure build in her temples, Morgana spun towards the studio's one large window and reached up to massage her head, breathing deeply. She didn't care if the movement annoyed him.

"Hold." Tony whispered. Morgana froze, obeying his command with savage precision. If anyone else had said that to her, she might have wobbled intentionally, yet she knew by the tone of his voice that the obsidian sheen was taking possession of his eyes and she respected it too much to defy it. She held her fingertips still, barely brushing her hairline above her ears. Her eyelids hung partway lowered. She would probably hold this pose for at least fifteen minutes, and her next break was hours away.

Morgana often wondered why she didn't leave the studio. Tony's requirements were ridiculous; she didn't speak much for the entire time she was there, and frequently he would try different tactics to draw an emotional response from her. But every time she thought of quitting, certain moments with Tony would flood her memory: the way he'd told her that when she laughed at his jokes her mouth reminded him of two sleek red foxes snuggling together; or when he looked at her second toe (which she'd always thought was ugly) and told her that the Greeks thought that a long second toe was beautiful. Tony showed her photos from a book of famous sculptures and pointed out the longer toes on several stone feet, just so she'd know it was true.

Morgana couldn't quit because part of her had been created inside that studio. This part of her was beginning to view herself in the way Tony saw her. If she left now, this newly-born part might not have a chance to reach maturity.

Preferred Qualities:

(M) shall have training in basic classical dance or, at the very least, have a cultured grace in her physical movements.

After two full months of coming to his studio for five days a week, Morgana finally found a way to make Tony tell her the meaning of (M). After discarding the method of asking repeatedly during each of her three daily breaks, she'd tried pleading and even (he really hated this) asking him at times when he seemed to be deepest in contemplation. Instead of bringing about any sort of revelation, she provoked a harsh word or two and, once, a smirk. Anthony suggested she try to stop breathing if it would help her stay quiet. She only smiled and started devising other techniques. Morgana finally decided she'd guess, and possibly he'd correct her out of exasperation.

"The Magpie is ready." She announced when he opened the studio door for her at 8:30 a.m. At her first break, she announced that the Mermaid thought it would be a good idea to crack the window, because the air smelled a little stale. Then the Mamba decided she would sing for her whole break in a tune that was almost on key, but not quite. Tony finally snapped when she said "The Monkey is going to have to eat a snack before dinner."

"Damn it, it's the *Muse*, Morgana!"

She experienced a brief flush of pleasure when she saw that, for once, she'd brought out an emotional reaction in him. Then she considered what he'd said. The Muse. Morgana remembered nine beautiful dark-haired women on Greek amphora that she'd seen in a museum. They'd looked like sisters; slender and graceful, holding things like lyres, masks and book, they were the goddesses of inspiration.

"I wasn't about to post an ad that read 'Seeking: Muse for help with Artistic Inspiration,'" Tony explained. "Please reply quickly: Successful artist in between art shows and in need of ideas for new material."

"People would think you were crazy," she observed.

He winked at her. "Or that I was some strange, obsessed and tortured artist. This is, of course, only true when my creative energies run dry! Thus, I chose the title: 'personal assistant,' but I had to keep (M) for my own artistic conscience."

He'd never asked Morgana about her feelings regarding art. She assumed he'd just sensed how much she loved it during the interview. She'd spent a few too many hours in art museums, awed by the shrine-like rooms with velvet ropes, glass cases and

lasers protecting the sacred beauty. When Morgana realized that she'd be required to take various stances inside the studio instead of working at a desk in its corner, she was initially surprised. "You're absolutely perfect," he'd said. Yes, it was flattering. She was intrigued. She stayed. Every day when she left the studio, she felt like she'd been given something that she'd been missing in her life before. And now she knew she was giving something to Tony—she was the Muse.

The words still echoed in her mind. *You're absolutely perfect.*

A muse was more than just a pretty woman on a vase. She was also a goddess. Morgana couldn't stop thinking about this. The morning after he told her the definition of (M) Morgana lay on her bed staring at his sketches. Although she still didn't know how some of them could possibly be inspired by her, she looked more closely, catching glimpses of herself.

Preferred Qualities:

(M) shall be of a quiet disposition. All applicants with need to converse for multiple hours a day need not apply.

Morgana arrived at the studio at 8:25 instead of her fairly standard 8:37. Tony answered the door with his shirt still unbuttoned and a cell phone pressed to his ear.

"Gotta go, honey." He hung up. "Come on in." The way he gestured broadly with his hand, however careless the arc swept through the air, seemed to add a hint of grandeur to Morgana's entrance. As she stepped across the scuffed brown floor, she thought it might have been polished overnight.

That day he only wanted to draw her hair. He wanted to see it "tossled," and then he wanted to "frizzle" the ends (Tony felt entitled to create his own words), and then he wanted to watch it fall across her shoulders.

"It's like molten lava today," he told her. "Have you enhanced your natural red? It's richer."

She didn't speak the whole morning, too fascinated by the new meaning to her work. A goddess? Even though she knew it was ludicrous, the concept tingled through her like an especially smooth Riesling. Visions of Aphrodite and Artemis and Athena filled her head. Tony would soon be sculpting her; did that mean she was somehow joining their ranks?

As they finished lunch, Tony brushed the focaccia crumbs off his fingers and told her, “I’m ready to bring out the clay. My sketches have finally reached a good complexity. The third dimension has been whining for my attention long enough, don’t you think?” He laughed.

The next day Tony tore a plastic veil from a large column of gray clay, hacked off a lump, and began to add water and knead it, all the while watching Morgana with a smile.

He wanted to sculpt her shoulders. Tony had her stand with her back to him. He had a dozen sketches of this exact pose spread out on the floor at his feet.

“Relax, it’s just clay; it’s no different than pen,” he told her after ten minutes of wordless work.

Morgana breathed deeply.

“Your shoulders dropped two inches when you did that. Pause right there.”

“Do all sculptors use live models when they’re sculpting?”

“I don’t know everyone else’s method, but I want my art to look *alive*.”

“Yes, but—”

“You like lemon drops, don’t you?”

Morgana turned. “What?”

“Please resume your stance. As long as you don’t move your shoulders or neck, you may speak.”

Morgana felt her neck hairs rising.

Tony spoke again, gently. “You like lemon drops, don’t you?”

The hairs fell flat against her skin. “They’re my favorite. How did you know?”

“Relax. Your shoulders keep bunching up and making these furrows. They’re lovely, but that’s not what I want to draw today.” He was quiet for a moment. Then, “By the way, do you practice yoga?”

“Three times a week in the evenings.”

“Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays?”

Although she was sitting fully clothed in her tank top and capris, Morgana didn’t think she could feel any more naked. “And Saturdays. How did you know?”

Tony reached over and tugged on the hem of her capris, erasing a crease. “On Tuesdays and Thursdays, after you’ve practiced, your movements are stronger, more centered. I get my best work on those days. And when you sleep?”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry. I didn’t finish my sentence. This little clump in the clay was distracting me. Do you sleep curled up? On your left side?”

“I don’t know what that has anything to do with anything!”

“Some days you come in and look like your whole left side wants to curl onto itself. I assume then that during the previous night you had too little sleep.”

“I’ve only been working for you for two months. How—”

“I’ve only been studying you for thirty hours a week, my dear. I know you. I’ve drawn you.”

“But—”

“Here.” He slid a small paper bag across the floor to her. Inside it glistened a cluster of lemon drops.

“Take one and suck on it.” He winked at her.

“To keep quiet, right?”

“You’re much more inspiring that way.”

“Sure.”

One morning he had her resting her face against her knuckles and glancing upwards as high as she could. Morgana knew she was supposed to look calm and pensive, but the eye-position made her want to react with a glower.

“Hey.” She felt a soft tickling on her cheek. His hand was under her chin. “Think of a little fluffy pink cloud lifting you up right there.”

Morgana smiled in spite of herself.

“There you go. No more grumpy-face.”

Morgana sensed strength in his hand and was momentarily certain that he possessed the power to snap her in two, an intoxicating possibility.

Tony didn’t touch her often but, each time he did, Morgana was intensely aware of it. Now something strange had happened—Morgana could still feel him even when he wasn’t.

The following morning at the studio, she stood holding an open book, her head bent slightly over it, her hair bound loosely at her neck with a wide ribbon. She felt a gentle tingling across the back of her arm and around her elbow. Stealing a look out of the corner of her eye, Morgana saw that Tony was working on the arm and elbow joint of the sculpture that was slowly forming in front of him. She wasn't sure if she'd seen this without realizing it, and then felt the sensation in her arm, or if the response had come to her, unbidden, through some inexplicable connection.

Preferred Qualities:

(M) shall have a basic understanding of color combinations such that all patterns and clothing are not distracting from (M)'s form and natural characteristics.

Once he had her stand with her hands under a faucet of water, and gave her directions for how she was to move them. Morgana almost fell asleep to the sound of his voice.

One day, he played soft instrumental music. Morgana found herself dancing and twirling. Suddenly, from behind, Tony's hand swept around her waist and they were waltzing across the studio. The wood floors seemed built especially for dancing. The moment ended abruptly. When the CD moved onto the next track, Tony whirled away and began warming a hunk of clay between his hands from which he would sculpt a pair of dancing feet.

Insomnia was a new, numbing sensation. Morgana read more because of it. She didn't like *Ivanhoe*, but at least she could say that she'd read it in three days. Of course, she hadn't slept for two of them. When she turned the pages, she'd hear the crisp whisper of paper brushing against paper and think of the way Tony fanned his sketches, whispering of their own accord, across the floor. They might have been sacred flower petals, an offering in an ancient, isolated temple.

Weekends felt longer and longer. While she was grocery shopping in the fruit aisle, she couldn't stop thinking of how interesting it would be if Tony were to sketch her with a star fruit in her hand. Five points of the star, contrasted with five fingers of the human hands. Tony's disgust for the electronic world had rubbed off on her—no longer did she

want to touch her computer. When she bought a new brand of shampoo, she wondered if it would make her hair curl more tightly, and if he'd notice the scent of white tea and ginger.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, dragging the bristles of a paintbrush across the fingertips of her left hand. The brush's handle had snapped that day and Tony had discarded it. Like the half-born sketches, Morgana took it when he wasn't looking. She started painting imaginary rings on her fingers. Big thick bands, little twisting strips and ornate puzzle rings that fit into each other... She stopped when she got to her left ring finger.

"I'm taking Beatrice out for her birthday tonight." Tony had said that afternoon. "We'll stop a little early today so I have time to go home and change."

Morgana felt a strain in her throat. "Who's Beatrice?"

Tony's face broke into a smile. His eyes sparkled under his tangled eyebrows. "She's my wife."

He'd said it so easily that Morgana knew the fact was never meant to be a secret.

At the time, he'd been experimenting with drawing Morgana's reflection in a large bowl of water. The water quivered as Morgana set down the bowl to wipe her palms on her skirt. "I didn't know you were—"

"Oh, it's because I don't wear my ring."

"The usual indication, I'd say."

"My fingers swell when I work. I wear it here." He tugged on the gold chain around his neck and out popped his solid gold wedding ring, twinkling in the light.

She couldn't take her eyes off it, even though each flash in the sunlight felt like a tiny burn on her retina.

"Don't move." He reached for his sketchpad. "Right now your eyes are exquisite."

The tightness in Morgana's throat spread to her neck, shoulders and jaw. From her chest upwards she hardened into stone. A living statue.

"Beautiful, beautiful, just keep still," Tony whispered.

He brought his wife to the studio two weeks after he'd sold the dancing feet sculpture. He wrapped his arm around Beatrice's shoulders with such confidence, such care, that

Morgana knew again that he'd never been trying to hide his wife from her. Beatrice took Morgana's hand and drew it near her face. She gushed that she had wanted to meet Morgana for some time now, enamored as she was with Tony's hand sculptures. "So delicate and elegant! I see why he can't stop using them for his work! I made him let me keep the piece with the hands holding a dove. Tell me; is there a secret behind holding still for so long?"

Morgana couldn't tell her that it wasn't a matter of stillness, but of complete suspension.

Morgana couldn't sleep. She did a few yoga poses—twisted tree and triangle, because they always soothed her—and crawled into bed to read. *Les Miserables* proved uninteresting since she hated the sickening, never-ending romance of Cosette and Marius. For them, love was nauseatingly mindless and simple. Morgana preferred Eponine, Cosette's sister, the heroine who died at the end, saving Marius's life and getting from him only a passionless kiss held no romantic love for her. Happiness was only meant for a select few, even in the fictional world.

After Morgana had papered her four walls with sketches, she started tacking them onto the ceiling. One page, a drawing of her ear, kept rustling in the air current produced by her bedroom fan. She'd always hated her ears (dwarfed at the lobes, too wide and floppy at the tops, like an oversized elf) until Tony had drawn them. She felt larger and more powerful whenever she looked at his sketches. Morgana was sure this wasn't healthy, but it made her feel like she was seeing herself through new eyes, and what she saw was beautiful. And for the first time, she felt like she might be able to draw and not despise what she had created.

With Tony's first mention of the word *muse*, Morgana's fingers had tingled, as if itching to create something. She'd tried to sketch on her own the evening after he told her the definition of (M). The sketches were flat and awkward, but it was the first time since middle school that she'd felt gifted enough to grip a charcoal pencil and try.

Preferred Qualities:

(M) shall have an admiration of Art and its related fields. This respect for Art is crucial for the daily mental preparation.

Morgana performed two sun salutations, noting the irony of doing these at night, before she allowed herself to pull her dictionary off of her bookshelf.

MUSE

n. Classical Mythology. Each of the nine goddesses regarded as presiding over and inspiring learning and the arts, esp. poetry and music.

n. A Muse as represented in painting or sculpture.

This was what she'd seen in the museum. How fitting that Tony was a sculptor.

n. A person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an artist's inspiration; the presiding spirit or force behind any person or creative act.

Tony asked her to stay late the following day. The winter sun was setting earlier each evening, and Tony wanted to light candles so he could draw in the shadow-thick light. When they'd finally finished, it was dark outside, the stars pricking the darkness. He walked her to the bus stop. A downpour caught them and they sought the cover of a nearby pedestrian bridge. Tony watched the falling mist for a moment then turned to Morgana and whispered, "Thank you," and gently squeezed her wrists with both hands. A warm spring surged through her veins.

"You are a gem," he said. "You are the best muse any man could ask for."

Morgana let herself look into his eyes, fully and without any of the self-conscious shyness that often accompanied her visits to his studio. He looked back with an even stronger intensity, and then turned to face the rain. Her bus approached.

Tony laughed. "I'm going back to the studio. You've given me an idea. It's going to take me all night just to finish the preliminary sketches."

He leaned towards her and Morgana heard the distant monotone of an imaginary EKG machine as her pulse went flat. He kissed her briefly on the cheek, and ran back into the downpour, his arms outstretched as if to embrace the entire storm.

Tony pulled her through the studio door by the hand and tugged away a tarp, revealing a rough sculpture: the product of the rainy night. It had a small face with large, shy eyes, a wobbly little chin, and an upturned cheek, as if waiting for the kiss of blessing. Its half-formed roughness upset Morgana. The absence of details disturbed her. She knew that it

was modeled after her, yet it didn't look like her. The chin was weak, the ears were shrunken and the eyes were very wrong. They looked bewitched, not clear or piercing. That night, in her apartment, Morgana held the heavy, leather-bound volume with the same reverence the Greeks would have given to an oracle's prophecy. She'd returned to the definition again, but this time only some of the words came into focus when she read the entry.

Muse . . . a female lover . . . or thing regarded as . . . an artist's inspiration

There were two options. A or B. Lover or Thing.

She wasn't the Lover.

If she kept hanging on, waiting to see what else Tony would show her about herself, then something inside her—that something that was alive, even if it wasn't artistic—would eventually crumble like dry clay. Tony had portrayed her in that sculpture as a shriveled half-human who had been waiting too long for a kiss that was never going to come. Tony had been inspired by her when he made that pathetic-looking piece. For the first time, it terrified her to be a muse.

She arrived at the studio twenty minutes late, despite having caught her normal bus. The mere distance between the bus and the studio had taken five times longer to walk than normal. Morgana couldn't explain why each step hurt so much, because there was nothing physically wrong with her. At 8:51 Tony flung open the door at the sound of her first barely audible knock.

"I think I might bend one of the rules and ask you to carry a cell phone from now on, sweetheart." He said as he ushered her inside. "Electronics may not be natural, but I was worried about you."

Morgana swallowed once. "Soon, I won't be causing any more worries."

Tony set down his empty coffee mug and fixed her with serious eyes. She could see his concern and care and, furthermore, his utter obliviousness to her own agony. What she'd thought was affection from him was nothing, just like when she'd felt him touch her even when he hadn't.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Morgana spoke to the covered lump of clay in the corner. "I have to go."

“Do you want some vacation leave?”

“No, I mean I—I’m—quitting.”

“I see.”

Wasn’t he going to plead with her? Or look a little miserable?

“I suppose every muse has her season, doesn’t she?” At least he sounded sad.

“Then this is goodbye. I valued our friendship and every ounce of inspiration you gave me. You know that, don’t you? You were an invaluable asset.”

An asset. A thing. Her vision spun for a moment.

Tony said calmly, “I’ll mail you your final check.”

That was it?

“One last thing,” Tony said.

Morgana gripped tightly onto her handbag and reopened her eyes.

“I want to draw your face right now. It’s absolutely riveting. Can you stay that way? Just one more time?”

Morgana nodded wordlessly but, as Tony gathered his pencils and notebook, she tore open the door and ran down the steps onto the street. She would not give him this final inspiration. One unspoken phrase hung bitter on her tongue. *It isn’t enough just to be a muse. It’s all right for goddesses, but not for humans.* Adoration was for the gods, but humans needed something different.

There were unanswered questions she’d never ask, too. Morgana would never know the reason he’d kissed her, or if there had been any reason at all. It was probably just a “thank-you,” nothing significant, just like the gum wrappers in which Tony could find meaning. He’d rubbed off on her; now he wasn’t the only person who found significance that was actually never there.

After a few days away from the studio, Morgana had already written her own top three rules for a Muse:

(M) shall inspire art, not love.

(M) shall evoke beauty, but never a lasting affection. (M) shall lead Artist down the road of enlightenment, but (M) shall never win Artist’s heart.

(M) shall be companion, angel, friend and sometimes lover, but never wife.

She whispered this to herself, imagining that she was rewriting the ancient Code of the Muse. It made her feel a little better, like she wasn't alone, and that perhaps another girl would learn from these rules someday.

Morgana found a job at a nearby bakery, and mercifully it didn't occupy any additional thoughts after her shift ended. She'd stopped forcing her way through books in the classics section, since they had a funny way of alluding to either art or artists, and adopted a much simpler pastime of skipping stones. It was really more like throwing them as hard as she could into the pond at a park near her work. She took down all the sketches from her walls and brought a small handful every day to the pond. She'd wrap an individual sketch around each stone.

Morgana watched the water as her reflection shattered over and over again, the stones ripping the surface with a violent, tearing force. But always the pieces resumed their places and once again there would be a complete girl staring back, trying to smile through her tears. No matter how many stones she threw, the reflection always healed, returning to its shaky but shining wholeness.