



Never Judge An Artist By Her Vagina Dress (Or Lack Thereof)

by Angela Lovell

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I am not accustomed to paying rent. The past several years I have moved around, sometimes inhabiting an extra bedroom, sometimes sleeping on a living room couch, sometimes sharing a boy's bed and often housesitting for friends. The last time I paid rent was in New York City's Hell's Kitchen. Thanks to the Internet, I had found a roommate on 45th and 9th Avenue, charging just \$625 a month.

Lurabelle wore thick, black-rimmed glasses. She was small, gangly, spoke with a metallic twang and dressed like a farmer's son. Her dull blonde hair was usually tucked under a baseball cap. This was exactly the girl in high school who tries to fit in with the drama kids just to end up playing Old Man in the school play.

Lurabelle wanted me over the other roommate candidates because I was vegan, like her, and the dogs sharing the apartment, Lucy and Cocoa, adored me. It was a harmonious situation for everyone. We shared a tiny kitchen and bathroom, but Lurabelle also shared trail mix, vegan chili dogs, fresh vegetable juice and expensive lotions.

Lurabelle had a dog-walking business and loved to care for needy mammals. I was an impoverished temp/waitress, needy for many things. We were a perfect match.

When I first met Lurabelle I played it cool, emulating the girl next door. This is the same character I portray in job interviews, assuming everyone longs to live or work with the type. My perception of Lurabelle was that of a girl who saved birthday cards from her grandparents, jumped when people brushed against her on the subway and enjoyed Anne Geddes' "art." I have not been so surprised by a character since my gynecologist of eleven years hit on me.

The only decoration in our shared bathroom was a light-up Jack-o-Lantern from Halloween. The kitchen was even duller, with sticker pictures of her furry clients covering the cabinets. It took me nearly a week to see the inside of Lurabelle's bedroom, which was actually the apartment's living room.

With her collection of power tools, Lurabelle had erected a small wall and installed a door missing two feet from its bottom. Lucy and Cocoa could come and go with this Dutch door, and they often came scratching at mine. My first time seeing the inside of Lurabelle's sanctuary delivered a great surprise—above her bed hung three prints of Britney Spears in leather pants and patriotic tube top. Roughly affixed with large staples to each of the Britneys' crotches was a cut-out of an enormous penis.

"That's from my last art show. The name of this set is 'What She Really Wants.'" Lurabelle grins to one side of her pointy face. She is delighted by my lack of speech.

"You're an artist?"

According to my elementary school art teacher who placed one of my third grade sketches in an actual art show to the delight of my mother, we are *all* artists. Lurabelle knew how unassuming her demeanor is. I eventually learned Lurabelle lives to shock people.

"Wanna see videos of my performance art?"

I regard "performance art" with the same skepticism reserved for River Dancing, bisexuals, slot machines and mixing hard liquor with beer. Lurabelle pops a video into her player, and what is projected onto her large, white wall slowly unravels my earlier notions.

Lurabelle waltzes into a crowded art gallery wearing little more than a tool belt and a lot of eye makeup. She is scary, sexy and pissed about something related to men, so she takes aim at a nearby wall and pummels away with her hammer. Audience members snicker uncomfortably until Lurabelle enlists several women with staple guns, hammers and wrenches, pushing them to beat the wall as well.

A very pregnant woman fittingly tears a large hole in the wall. Lurabelle glows as she strips her crotchless nylon hose (worn as a shirt) over her head and staples them above the pregnant woman's hole. Poetic? I'm without words, though filled with questions. Lurabelle knows these questions and answers them despite my silence.

"I built that wall before the show. It took two days. Everyone thought it was part of the gallery!"

Why would any sane person do such a thing? Building walls, yes. Destroying walls in the nude among strangers, no. Art amazes me, especially impromptu pieces, but this seems a misuse of energy. I don't understand. I pretend to though, not just because Lurabelle was my new friend and roommate, but because art is a sensitive subject and sometimes we must play Emperor's New Clothes. I exaggerate my reactions, and based on what Lurabelle perceives as my enjoyment, she shows me more.

Lurabelle is handcuffed to a chair as a Nazi-type woman plucks her eyebrows. I think this was filmed snuff-style, though I've never seen

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a snuff film.

“It was hard finding someone who knew how to pluck eyebrows...”

What the fuck is she talking about? Any woman who ever had a mirror and twenty minutes to kill has learned how to pluck eyebrows. Now I’m really nervous about my new roommate. And usually I’m the odd one.

After the art show, Lurabelle offers up photos of her favorite people. Her family lives upstate in cabins. It makes sense that Lurabelle grew up in the wilderness. Images come easily of her swinging from tree to tree, digging holes with bare hands, and skinny dipping in lakes; despite her veganism, I picture her biting the heads off squirrels and birds. She is an understated wild woman. She also has a serious case of jungle fever.

“That’s Kevin! His cock is *beautiful!* I keep trying to get him to let me take a picture and use it in my next show.”

In this photo taken at Times Square, Lurabelle stands small and lily-white, minus glasses or covered shoulders, in the arms of a very large black man with dreadlocks. The look they share is obvious. This is the way people look at each other when they share amazing sex.

“The guy I was dating before Kevin was a real disappointment. I just ran into him today! We didn’t talk. He’s mad cause I punched him in the face.”

I realize I have to ask so that when I retell the story later it will be complete.

“He was a two-pump-chump. Yeah, I went over there wearing nothing under my coat, and he fucked me for two seconds then came!”

Lurabelle tells me she was on all fours (doggie-style) when the chump finished his alleged two pumps.

“I turned around and let him have it! Punched him right in the nose! He hadn’t even finished coming!”

This is utterly disturbing, and I want to back away, building to a run. But Lurabelle feels very close to me after this night of show-and-tell and invites me to her dad’s cabin. I am flattered because Lurabelle likes few people, but I am also pensive. Lurabelle is definitely a superfreak. I enjoy the freaky, but not when they punch. I will be very careful splitting utilities with this girl.

Two days later the dust is settling, and I’m feeling at home again. Lurabelle must have noticed me getting comfortable, so she recounts another art show to provoke my concern. Lurabelle says she entered the crowded room naked. She says she enjoys being nude or “dressed like a whore” because it commands the audience’s attention. Lurabelle walked through the crowd to the stage where she wiggled into a rubber dress covered in vaginas that hung on a wooden coat hanger reading, “For men and boys.” Once in vagina dress, Lurabelle shot dirty looks to each and every member of her audience.

“One woman actually cried!” she beams.

There’s really no appropriate reaction to someone’s joy from a distress-inducing rubber vagina dress. But the question I follow with would deliver many sleepless nights.

“Of course I still have it!”

Lurabelle produces the infamous dress, flesh-colored and covered in a dozen life-size, molded vaginas. She brings it right to my face, right in our kitchen and I see in the honesty of kitchen lighting that the vagina Lurabelle chose to mold was deformed. I’ve seen the intricacies of few vaginas except for my own, so my question is justified.

The disgust in my voice, however, can’t be helped, as this vagina looks like that of an 80-year-old prostitute’s. The clitoris, known for its lovely little bud of promising pink hidden in flowery folds of feminism, is instead long and wrinkly, hanging completely to one side. This clit has grown nearly two inches long. I didn’t know they were capable of such things.

“Whose vagina did you cast?” I ask, as though keeping vomit at bay.

Lurabelle perks up, answering proudly, “Mine!”

I had no problem sharing the bathroom with such a bizarre piece of “female” anatomy, but I started noticing Lurabelle shifting her crotch like a teenage boy, and that bothered me. What was that thing in her tiny pants, and what does Kevin do with it?

Regretting this last question was easy when I got my answer in the middle of the night. Kevin and Lurabelle snuck in very late and began to toss each other loudly about her room. I closed my eyes tightly trying to sleep, but I was plagued with the unholy thought of *two* erections nearby. And then they started. She was on top—I could tell because her voice came from above.

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The springs threatened an explosion that would land them on our neighbors below. She came quickly. It sounded like Kevin was strangling her, and for a moment dialing 911 replaced the horror of a monster clit as I thought my roommate was being murdered. The last time I had been so disgusted by sex was when I heard my parents “making up,” but back then I could sleep on my brother’s bedroom floor and block such mind-warping effects. There was nowhere to go when Lurabelle and Kevin would come home and violate my slumber.

Then Lurabelle made it up to me. Coming home from a hideous day of unpaid waitress-training, I was greeted by Lurabelle and some extra dogs she babysat.

“Angie, you wanna make a quick hundred bucks?”

My favorite money is quick money.

We trucked on down to Soho to meet Michael, a very famous artist with an upcoming show. He was flustered, but extremely excited about my breasts and length of hair, which at the time was deep red.

“Oh, you’re perfect! It’s going to be beautiful!”

Michael took us around the corner, passing a green fuzzy sculpture of naked, bowing woman. Footage of rock climbers played on the walls, and the theme seemed to me very Mother Nature. Especially when I saw my container. It was a girl-size aquarium, about seven by four feet, sitting on a small stand. Its glass bottom glowed with a warm, greenish light through a layer of salt. The whole container resembled something a mad scientist might keep his beloved’s corpse preserved in until he could jumpstart her dead brain.

“The water is heated. It’s like a warm bath!”

Michael had used this aquarium in another show with a naked floating girl. He had extra space in this gallery, so his assistant suggested pulling it out again. The upcoming show would last two hours and Lurabelle couldn’t make the first shift due to dog-walking conflicts. That is where I came in. We would divide the two hours of floating and split the \$200 Michael offered as payment.

One thing we’re still unsure of is whether to do it clothed or nude. I choose to love my naked body because hating it is so mainstream. Floating naked in front of art critics for an hour is something I truly believe to be enriching, but I worry about Lurabelle hopping in and everyone seeing that monster genitalia. I still can’t tell if Lurabelle is even aware of her body’s strangeness.

Michael asks us for suggestions on what to wear and says we can float naked if we like. I suggest something flowing and see-through since the pump will be on and because I want to keep Lurabelle’s secret anyway possible. I can’t tell if I want to protect Lurabelle or the audience, but the next day I pick up a green slip nightgown from Macy’s and Michael gratefully reimburses me.

I know this nightgown will be transparent wet, but it should at least create a thin veil. I arrive early so I can get an idea of what is expected of my “performance.” Michael bustles about excitedly, taking my thumb ring and wearing it for luck. His work does not especially impress me, but I like Michael and I want to follow his direction.

“Keep your eyes wide and position yourself so you float in the middle of the tank. Act catatonic!”

Michael walks me to the tank twenty minutes before patrons buzz through clutching wine glasses and programs. Technicians stand on ladders and make last-minute changes to the lighting. When I get in the tank it is warm and welcoming. Michael and I agree it was wise to pee before my floating shift. I hear the techies’ tinkering cease and feel them all watching my nightie grow transparent. I relax. All the salt in the water makes me extremely buoyant. My breasts float on top of my chest and I feel lovely.

There is no lid on the aquarium as I float at chest-level to viewers. The waterpump drowns out most noise and lulls my busy mind to a half-sleep. Meditation had always practiced in vain before, but now I see I just needed a warm aquarium and a murmuring audience.

The first art enthusiast approaches my tank and looks in at me. His appearance startles me and I instinctively look straight into his face, causing him to jump. We smile at one another, sharing an inside joke, and I fight the urge to look into the next dozen faces.

February enters through the opening and closing door, puffing just enough chill to the rim of my aquarium to keep my nipples hard. Upon examining my pink erections, I crown myself *Most Beautiful Naked Girl in the Room* and praise this floating queen for being so bold. Nearby in the east village, my boyfriend arrives from Pittsburgh with his band for a show. He will not attend my night of “performance art” because—though he enjoys me nude—he admits, “I can’t stand watching others look at you like that.”

I understand, but wish someone I knew would come see me. The New York Times takes photos and I do not blush. They took my picture years ago for winning a “Best Director” award. I think myself beautiful *and* well-rounded now. My grandchildren will laugh retelling this story at my funeral.

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My light meditation is disturbed when a duo of French women come too close to my face. At first they argue in their own language, but in consideration for an approaching American couple, they slip into our tongue and reward me.

“She is so a mannequin, look at her! She is too beautiful to be real!”

My heart speeds up a little. I constantly carry my ego atop my shoulders, sure I am attractive, collecting internal traits of beauty as well. But when people come close to stare and compliment aloud, I grow nervous. I don't want to disappoint.

The other French woman argues, “She is not a mannequin, look at her blink!”

My blinking has been rhythmic. Methodical. In harmony with my slow heartbeat. Now I must concentrate under this scrutiny to maintain what was an easy performance.

“You can make a mannequin blink!”

My favorite Frenchies are ethnically loud and the American couple tells the women what should be obvious so close to my flesh, “She's a real girl!”

I am Aqua-Pinocchio, and I breath in a little more than I should as a catatonic.

“See? Did you see her chest move?” flails a French woman.

I wish them away. My performance is suffering, and now I'm nervous. The French women fade as they travel across the room, and I can feel new eyes on me. In my stirred little mind I play the same scene of arguing French women in front of fuzzy green girl sculpture on the other side of the gallery.

"She is a mannequin!"

"You can cover a woman in green and make her stand still!"

Conceptions of time are unclear in warm, salty bathwater, being viewed by strangers like penguin at Central Park Zoo, so I am completely surprised when Michael's assistant leans in and whispers, “That's it! You're all done!”

She holds a towel. I quickly and quietly stand, trying to roust my mind and body as though we're about to miss the school bus. There's a foot stool next to the tank. As I get one leg over the side of this girl-zoo, I hear applause. All around me intellectuals cradle wine glasses into their chests so they can applaud me.

When I'd accepted my award, which I was certain would go to a “real” director, the audience had applauded me with the same enthusiasm and smiles. Just like that day, I'm overwhelmed by delight and surprise. Just as I'd accepted that plaque, I exclaim like a child surprised by a new bicycle, “Thaaaaaanks!”

Just like that day of accomplishment, my entire audience laughs at my reaction. There's nothing like being laughed at in the nude. I quickly get the towel around me and run to bathroom where Lurabelle is waiting for my soaking wet nightie.

“Man, Angie, you looked great! When I walked up there were five guys standing around you!”

I am not sure how I feel about this. I suppose, since they applauded instead of whistled, I feel all right. Lurabelle gleefully tears off her dog-walking wear and grabs at my salty green slip.

“Michael told me not to get in. He wanted you to do the whole set. He begged me to leave you alone saying, ‘She looks so preeeeetty,’ and I was like, ‘I'm gettin' in that tank!’”

It was not the money for Lurabelle. She just loved her art. Still, I wish she had left me to stew longer. Being the center of attention may be one of my most favorite things in the world, but I never expected to feel so beautiful naked in front of strangers before. This night's flattery would carry me a long way.

Lurabelle goes to the tank and I am led in towel upstairs to the apartment portion of this gallery. Having no idea I was floating beneath something out of Architectural Digest, I make efforts to close my mouth as I am led through amazing rooms to the gigantic “restroom.” One could truly rest here.

I've seen many interesting bathrooms in my day, but I'd never showered in a stall the size of my bedroom. It was unreal. Two high, glass walls cornered me as I danced around naked and salty under three showerheads, singing my best showertunes repertoire. I had taken my hairdryer and boyfriend's band T-shirt so I could dart straight from the gallery to the show. Around the five foot gold-framed mirror reflecting the smiliest me to ever get naked in a room full of strangers, were lovely pieces of jewelry laid out next to European lotions.

I don't know their owner and she doesn't know me. How peculiar to be among a stranger's intimate things. How trusting. A demented little devil appears on my shoulder insisting I take a souvenir, but that devil rarely overrides my foul-mouthed shoulder angel who agrees with me: We do not steal from people. Suddenly I wonder about hidden bathroom camera, which mattered little if the owner had attended the show and already seen my wet wares.

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Lucky black cats litter the king size bed and I take their pictures with a camera I will lose later. It's for the best, as I'm sure my imagination repaints these memories brighter than Kodak. Hurrying downstairs, I can't wait to see Lurabelle in the tank! But when I get there, I face a sore disappointment. She is asleep, floating in the corner, not at all centered as Michael had requested. Her hair was long, but soaked up the green light instead of contrasting against it. She was very pale.

Lurabelle looked like a corpse. Her breasts fell into her armpits, and I wanted to pull her from the tank and resume my throne of Naked Salt Goddess. No crowds gathered to look at her, and I began wishing her monster clit would show so at least there would be something of interest in those waters.

Bustling through patrons who smiled and nodded as though I was on the cover of *Vogue*, I trudged through snow and hailed a cab to the east village where an anxious, pacing creature in red hoodie squeezed me until breath threatened to abandon my lungs forever. I wanted my boyfriend to share my enthusiasm. I did, after all, pass on an elitist dinner in the lovely apartment above the gallery with art patrons to see him play the same songs I had heard a dozen times.

Secretly, I considered staying for that dinner, with fantasies of famous artists begging to paint me nude, as a handful of ex-boyfriends had requested yet never done. This boyfriend was grateful for my attendance, and as we made out in a parked, rocking van, I felt fearless and sexy, which is all I ever want to feel. Later, my shoulder devil appeared and having denied her earlier, I gave in now to her request of bar bathroom sex with my sweet, sweet bassist.

That night, after playing his East Village show packed with Asians, rockstar boyfriend and I rock my futon all the way across my small bedroom with the gusto of two superstars trysting at The Four Seasons as reporters lurk in the lobby. Later I learn from mutual friend that Lurabelle was outside my door listening like the creepy little elf-pervert I knew she was.

Leaving Lurabelle's home wasn't difficult, as I returned to Pittsburgh to join the ranks of an "artists' community" owned by a member of Rusted Root. There was not much community except for the shared bathroom. The same tattling friend who exposed Lurabelle's eavesdropping called to elaborate with information of the small, *black* strap-on dildo Lurabelle bought weeks after I moved out. Kevin dumped her for being "too freaky," and she wore that phallus everyday under her clothes, offering girls at the Bellevue Bar money to fellate it.

Obviously, I got out just in time. Yes, I love quick cash, but even a girl who floats naked in an aquarium has her limits. This black strap-on is too obvious to be Freudian, and I realize Lurabelle doesn't hate

her clit at all for its protrusion. If anything, Lurabelle, like a thirteen year-old boy, wishes it were bigger. I love her for that and for the experience. I no longer see or speak to her, but from far, far away, I love that superfreak.