

THE PAINTED LADY

The Painted Lady and I grew up together. Before I gave up on reading and the schools gave up on me, when I was desperate to hold a book like every other kid, I read comic books. At first, it was just a relief to have something with pictures on the page to help me figure out the story, but then I got into them. All that action. Good vs. evil. Heroes and heroines. The Painted Lady started as a comic book character, a beautiful girl but with the barest outline of humanity. A souped up version of Barbie, she was all the comic book heroines wrapped into one. In my old sketchpads, going back to when I was eight years old, she wore clothes like Robin Hood or Peter Pan and her most distinctive feature was her clenched fists, always swinging at the bad guys. Then we moved into what I call the Mouth Phase, when she spoke into a bubble, giving everyone lip. Man, she was pissed, at what in my drawings I labeled the AATW (asshole authorities of the world). That lasted for several years. When we hit the early teens though, the enemy disappeared and it was just her and me. Okay, I'll admit we had the Sex Object Phase, with headlights the size of Jupiter, but that didn't last long either, because by the time I was 17, she had matured too. There was a certain expression on her face. My mother had breast cancer by then. Every day, at least once a day, I drew my Painted Lady. Suffering showed in the lines I added to her face, lines that revealed her depth, her very essence.

That was the Painted Lady I was drawing one day in my sketchpad when Nemo came into the back room of our shop in Belaport and said to me, "Willie, I got something for you. One golden hostess cupcake ready to go."

He held the curtain open, just a little so I could get a good look at her.

"Pretty nice, eh?" he said. "Maybe you should pay me for the privilege."

"Right. Two inches, Nemo." That's what I always told my girlfriend, Cheryl. It means I only see two inches at a time while I'm working and it's just not sexual.

"Two inches, my ass," said Nemo. He flipped the curtain

back, exposing us to the girl.

I stared. She smiled like she was used to that and pointed to the sandwich board advertising the hours. It was thirty minutes to closing. "Can I still get a tattoo?"

I nodded, not quite up to words yet.

This girl dressed like a woman, but I asked to see her license. Indeed she was just 18. I asked her if she wanted to look at the flash. She shook her head. "I know what I want," she said. "I want the name of the guy I love and I want you to put it right here." She pointed to a very private part. Nemo whistled.

"Sorry." I stood behind the counter. "I don't do genitalia."

It's an agreement I made with Cheryl and it suited me fine.

The girl gave me a cold stare. "What about here?" She pointed with her thin finger to her chest.

"That's fine," I said, pushing a sheet of lettering samples in front of her. "Here are a few choices, or we can create something different."

"I want something simple," she said, choosing the first one on the list. "You won't need to draw it out first."

I frowned. I didn't like someone rushing or dictating my art. "There's a minimum charge. Ninety dollars, up front."

She fished a leather change purse out of her canvas bag and unrolled five twenties and handed them to me. "Keep the change," she said.

I handed Nemo all but the last twenty. "You can go on into the back room."

She swished around the counter and into the back.

"Have fun," Nemo whispered.

"Two inches," I reminded him. When I got into the back room, the girl handed me a piece of paper. Eddie Fratano. That was his name. She told me in a whisper that she was so in love with him. It's like the small room and taking off her shirt changed her. She had a towel wrapped around her, covering all but her upper chest and shoulders. I drew out the name on a sheet of paper even though she had said not to.

"Looks good," she said, "but can you make the 'o' a heart?" So I started and she watched my hand, like she was afraid I

was going to slip, which of course I didn't. When I was almost done, she blurted out, "I'm so crazy about him and it's funny I don't think he even knows I exist." At this point, the E-D-D-I-E F-R- was already on her chest.

"You mean—?" I held the needle away from her skin.

"Yeah." She looked down at her skin as if this guy might materialize into everything she wanted just because she carved his name on her chest. "Please finish. I'm getting cold."

"Just a minute," I said. I went to the front where Nemo was sweeping up.

"Nemo, she's got me carving some guy's name and this guy doesn't even know she exists."

"What's his name?" Nemo asked.

"Who cares, Nemo! I don't want to carve her. It's wrong."

Nemo's face got tight and he gripped the broom. "Willie, don't you start that shit. You don't get to make that decision for the customer. Go finish what you started."

"But—"

"Go finish." He pointed to the back room. "Now."

I went back and finished in a hurry. Then I sent her away through the back door. It was one of those hot days in June when even the flies couldn't move. Her high round hips swung side to side making her little miniskirt with the lace bottom flutter. I wondered for a minute how Eddie Fratano could resist her. I went back in and started cleaning up. I could hear Nemo in the front talking to a customer, one of the regulars, a guy with half his body covered with tattoos. In the two years I had worked there, I had designed three abstract drawings for Nemo to tattoo on this guy. Right then, I saw very clearly something I had known before in a vague way: Nemo was a scratcher and as long as I worked for him, I'd have to be a scratcher too. I told myself then and there that no matter what Nemo said, I was never going to carve a girl like that again, one who didn't have the love of the man she wanted. I shouted to Nemo that I was leaving, then I slipped out the back door.

I drove the two blocks to the bank, where Cheryl worked as a teller. We had been together since the beginning of high school. She was waiting at the corner, wearing perfect white sneakers, with her

shoes in a bag and her small purse under her arm. Her long brown hair shone and she looked all-aglow in a yellow suit. Every time I saw her, a little zap of desire went through me. She put her skinny electric body in the car and leaned over to kiss me in a whoosh of floral perfume and her own body smell, which was a hell of a lot more interesting.

"You're in a bad mood," she said.

I told her about the girl and Nemo's making me finish carving her. Cheryl frowned and checked her makeup in the rearview mirror.

"Well, what do you expect, Willie? Look what you've chosen for a profession."

"There's nothing wrong with the profession. It's who I work for." Although neither of us said anything more, Cheryl's comment bothered me. When we were in high school, my art was a turn on, but lately I was beginning to wonder.

It was Friday night and we were meeting some friends for drinks. When we got there, Cheryl abandoned me at the door to go talk to our friends, who she saw every day anyway. As I walked by myself, I felt a little tap on my arm. My high school guidance counselor, Ms. Wainwright. I gave a stiff nod and tried to slip by, but Ms. Wainwright stood right up and hugged me.

"William Mann!"

"Ms. Wainwright."

"Look at you." She turned my elbow so I was facing a table of teachers, who seemed like they didn't want to be disturbed.

"It's good to see you," she said. A shadow crossed her face.

"Your mother? How is she?"

"She died, Ms. Wainwright. About a year after we graduated."

Ms. Wainwright got very serious, right into her counselor's mode. "That's very hard, Willie. I'm so sorry." She lowered her voice and put herself between me and the others at the table. I remembered her using that tone of voice with me, years ago, junior year. The SAT scores had just come in and we were all to have conferences with our guidance counselor to identify our future goals. My SAT scores were sitting on her desk when I walked into her office. I started talking about art, and how maybe I could be an artist. I still remember the look on her face, one of physical pain. She pulled out the scores and read them silently, then looked up at me.

"Maybe you could pursue art as a hobby, but just not count on it as your professional future. Or, you could try to work up to it, slowly."

Now I said, "Ms. Wainwright, I finally found a job using my artistic talent."

"You did, Willie?" she squealed in a plastic voice. "I'm so proud of you. Tell me."

"I'm a tattoo artist."

Ms. Wainwright blinked, then even though she tried to keep her smile plastered across her face, it was just too much for her. The smile fell, hard. "Well, I'm happy for you, Willie." Then, she plunked herself down in her seat and went back to drinking. When I walked away, I imagined giving her a tattoo on her tight, stringy ass. I would swab her skin clean, then start with a double pack of needles and adjust the contact screw to really make the needle jump through her epidermis as I drew a bee with a gigantic stinger. Then, I would invite her to take a look and I would say: "Now you know how much you've always meant to me. A giant pain in the ass." For the entire meal I tried to wipe Ms. Wainwright and her effect away. Cheryl laughed and joked with our friends like I wasn't there.

Ms. Wainwright was gone by the time we left.

"You didn't say two words tonight," Cheryl said when we got in the car.

I just shrugged and neither of us spoke on the way back to my house. What I couldn't put in words, I tried to communicate in performance. Cheryl must have understood some of it, because when we were through she patted my chest and whispered, "It's all right, Willie," over and over, until she fell asleep.

I couldn't sleep, so I got up and left her all curled up with the blankets and went for a ride on my motorcycle. The bike helped clear my head. I stopped on the bluff overlooking the marina. My mother loved to skate there when I was a kid. I closed my eyes and I could almost see us back there, circling, flying over the ice. I wished I had my sketchpad with me. I wanted to draw it, what I saw and felt. I wanted Nemo to feel it too. When I first met him, he was a big, bald man with a salt and pepper beard, who could bench press 250 lbs. easy, but now he had esophageal cancer and spoke by burping air up through

a machine in his throat. I was watching him waste away, just like my mother.

That Monday when I opened up the shop, the air itself smelled disappointed. It was a slow day and I sat there for hours drawing. Ms. Pain in the Ass Wainwright and my problem with carving that girl started a streak that lasted all week. Not that we never had a slow week before, but I never thought about it in terms of a bigger picture because sooner or later, business always picked up and my needs were few as my mother used to say when she was trying not to feel guilty for not being able to meet them. By Wednesday, I still had no customers. That evening, Cheryl and I were watching T.V. and I started going through my sketchpads, looking for some new flash for the shop.

Cheryl stopped my flip of the pages with her manicured finger and regarded one of my Painted Lady sketches. "Here she is," she said. "Your mother as a comic book character."

"What?" I pulled away from her.

"Absolutely. Those piercing blue eyes, your mother's dark hair. Before the chemo, she was beautiful."

"I know that," I frowned, "but the Painted Lady – I've been drawing her since I was a kid. You think this is like some Freud thing?"

Cheryl laughed, a deep-throated laugh, the kind of laugh I hadn't heard from her in a long time. "Oh, Willie. Relax."

Neither of us wanted to ruin that moment. I wanted to hold on to it forever. "Will you move in with me?" I asked.

Cheryl regarded me. "Are you messing with me?"

"I'm totally serious," I said. "I want to make a bigger commitment to each other."

"And then what?" She pulled her shirt down over her irresistible belly.

"And then ...maybe the next step? We get married, I guess. I don't know."

Cheryl got up and kissed me on the top of the head. "I don't think so, Willie. Come back and ask me again when you do know."

I tried to pull her down, but she resisted.

"I'm going to sleep at my place tonight," she said.

I watched her walk out the door and I was proud of her for putting me in my place. She deserved more. I would have to do better.

The next day, there were still no customers for me, so I went into the back room, got out my private drawing pad, a fresh pack of needles, the paints and everything else I needed to cross the threshold to artistic maturity. Once, Nemo had offered to tattoo me and I explained I was saving my skin for my own tattoo, something special. He had reached for a pile of his kid's Legos and said, "Willie, creating a tattoo is like building something with Legos. Every skill is just like one of those Lego bricks." He looked funny with a Lego in his hand. "Lining, coloring, shading. First we get the skills. Then, after you get them, you work one at a time and put them together." Nemo's advice had made me a professional. Some tattoo artists get their practice on fruit, then work their way up to paper plates. But really the only way to tattoo is on human skin. Because there's nothing else like it. Any fruit or vegetable, the skin is too thick. A paper plate? You just go through. Nemo let me do all the lining right from the beginning. And no customer of mine ever got an infection. I was ready for this.

Drawing the Painted Lady on paper felt more right than ever before. I took my time, closing my eyes every once in a while so I could see in my mind's eye her character, not just her shape. When I was satisfied, I took the drawing over to the transposer, ran it through to get the reverse image and then made sure everything I needed was within reach of the chair. I took off my jeans, sat down and flipped the leg rest up. Carefully, I applied the Painted Lady's outline to my leg. Her head started on the outside of my upper thigh and her feet just grazed my knee. I gripped the outliner and began etching the thick bold line into my skin, working two inches at a time just like always so that, even though it was my leg and upside down at that, I saw only the lines in segments that curved, until she was all there. I filled her in with color, red and purple for her outfit, black for her hair, vibrant blue for her eyes. She stood, almost three feet, at home and full of attitude. When I was finishing up, Nemo came in.

"I wondered what the hell you were doing back here." He leaned over me to get a better look. "She's a beauty, Willie. You going to add her to the flash?"

I looked up at Nemo standing there with his red bandana covering the hole in his throat and the truth hit me.

"No, Man," I said. "I've been thinking, Nemo. It's time I

went out on my own."

Nemo let the curtain drop behind him. "What do you mean – go out on your own? I invested all this time training you. You're just starting to pay off."

"Nemo, don't pull that crap. I carried my weight from the start and you know it."

He pointed to his throat. "You see the unexpected things that can happen, Willie."

"I know, Nemo. I took care of my mother right to the end, remember?"

He nodded and looked away. He leaned against the wall and regarded me. "Well, what do you want? More money? More clients?"

I dabbed at my leg, trying to absorb the last bit of excess paint. The Painted Lady reached up my thigh like a pillar.

"I want to take my art to the next level, Nemo."

Nemo regarded me with that fatherly look I saw him give his own kid. "Willie, you're a dreamer."

That Saturday, I convinced Cheryl to take a ride to Hartford with me. We parked near the train station and immediately I vetoed that section of town. Yeah, they had a couple of good restaurants, but nobody was gonna say "Yeah, damn fine steak, now let's go get tattooed." And the train station itself would bring some riff raff I didn't want at my door. Drunks and prostitutes give tattoo artists a bad name and we're already persecuted enough. The civic center was out, rent way too high. The neighborhoods I decided against because I wanted to be right downtown. If I was moving to the city, I wanted to feel like I was in the city. I found the shop on a quaint little street, just a few blocks south of the civic center next to a tux shop and a lingerie shop with some pretty complicated contraptions that Cheryl said would take five years to get in and out of, did I want to see? I said, Hell yes.

I took down the phone number listed on the poster. On the way back home I asked Cheryl again to move in with me. "Let's have a six month run," I said, "and then if you can stand me, I'll give you a ring and we'll set a date."

"Is this really what you want, Willie?" She was zipping her heart locket back and forth on its chain.

"Yes." I started to tell her how I saw the future and I was so

busy making sure she knew I didn't doubt myself; I forgot to ask her if it was what she wanted. We went back to my house and made sweet mid-afternoon love. It wasn't until we were lying quiet in each other's arms that Cheryl noticed the tattoo.

"Jesus, Willie!" She rolled away from me and sat up, frowning at the tattoo. "Do you think it's big enough?"

I laughed, until I saw she was upset.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to do this?"

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"I like it on paper, but Jesus, Willie!"

"Is this about the mother thing again? Because if it is, I think you were off base."

Cheryl took a deep breath. "Okay, Willie! You tell me. Why this cartoon woman on your leg?"

I looked down at the Painted Lady. "This is no cartoon, Cheryl. She's like my soul expressed on the outside, where people can see."

Cheryl put her tiny hands on my face. "Nemo was right about one thing, Willie. You really are a dreamer." But her anger was gone and I was glad.

The next day Cheryl moved in and I called my doctor friend, the one who was responsible for keeping Nemo's shop certified and he called a friend in the state health department and learned there was no ordinance against tattoo shops in the city of Hartford. We were home free. The certification process was underway. So then I called the landlord, who told me the place had been empty for three months. The rent was high, but still I asked to see the shop. I saw it and fell in love. Ms. Wainwright's lack of faith, Nemo's doubts, Cheryl's unspoken desire for a solid foundation – none of those things stopped me from signing the papers.

The Painted Lady opened a month later after a bazillion coats of paint and a new shop window, done by the world's best, with the best acrylic paints money could buy. I bought a sheet cake from Better Value and got a picture of the Painted Lady scanned onto the cake for opening day. I sent invitation cards to my customers, again with the Painted Lady's image, to come and bring a friend. They showed up. Everyone asked about her – a few of my more crude customers made

comments about her while eating the cake, but most people seemed to understand the significance of this move and what it meant to me. Cheryl even managed to look cheerful, although she had cautioned me that opening my own business would be hard.

"I see all these small business owners come into the bank," she said. "Most of them fail in the first year."

"I don't plan to fail," I replied.

"You have to look at the bottom line, Willie," she said doubtfully, but still she went around serving people punch. I kept looking at the door, waiting for Nemo, hoping he would come and give me his blessings, but he didn't.

Cheryl helped me pick out some curtains and I barely had time to hang them Monday morning before clients started coming in. Everything went fine the first week. I brought home double what I was bringing home at Nemo's and yeah, as Cheryl pointed out, the rent was double, but still, I was just establishing myself here. A couple more weeks came and went. Then one day Cheryl came in as I was just finishing up an enormous heart on the biceps of a Puerto Rican guy named Jimmy. The heart, one of my own drawings, had roots trailing down Jimmy's arm and a thorn stabbing its mid-section. In the thorn I drew the name of Jimmy's wife, Brenda. They had been married twenty years and he wanted to surprise her. I went over some tips with Jimmy on how to care for his new tattoo, then he left and Cheryl waved a piece of paper at me.

"Nemo came into the bank today and he asked me to give this to you."

The paper was an advertisement for a tattoo art show. I remembered hearing Nemo and some other guys talk about these shows, where tattoo artists could buy their stock of flash from other tattoo artists. The ad said the flash brought ten dollars a sheet, and there would be a contest. First prize was \$5000. I decided right then and there to enter the Painted Lady in the contest. When I thought of all my original flash, I thought I could pull down a thousand easily. I told Cheryl how this would help me cover the month's rent. She looked from me to the new curtains, she said, "That's great, Willie, but what about next month?"

"Maybe I'll win the contest."

"And if not?"

"I'll just keep drawing," I said.

"Willie," she sighed. "You are not looking at the bottom line. We can't go on like this forever."

One afternoon not long after that, two ladies arrived at the shop. One of them had a real Spanish accent. I learned later she was from Colombia. The other one, her friend, was local and it was her idea to come. They were both wearing jeans and jean jackets, but those didn't look like their regular clothes. You get a feel for that in this business. I could tell by their haircuts, both stylish and careful, that and their shoes. I invited them into the shop and they giggled like teenagers. One prodded the other. Finally the one named Barbara said, "You have to forgive us. We're laughing so we don't cry. You see, we both turned forty this month."

"No way," I said. "You ladies barely look thirty."

They smiled as if to say they knew better.

"Do you want to look at the flash and get some ideas?" I asked. They said no, they already knew what they wanted. Barbara told me they were both scientists. She researched butterflies. Her friend, Maria, researched parasites that lived on sharks. I never did get the parasite's name. They pulled out their books and showed me their pictures. They wanted me to draw and I was happy to oblige them. I started drawing the butterfly with its four wings and its sharp middle section.

"Oh, you are doing a fine job," Barbara said. "Look at that detail. What an eye he has!" She smiled at Maria, then back to me. "This is why we chose you," she said.

"Why?"

"The name of your shop. The Painted Lady. It's a kind of butterfly."

"Really?"

Barbara spelled it on a napkin at the same time she said it again. "Cynthia Cardui: Nymphalidae The Painted Lady."

Just the way she talked, I imagined that she was a good teacher.

"It's a powerful migrant, moving regularly throughout Northwest Europe from countries of overpopulation in North Africa. It

has several caterpillar food plants, but it loves thistle best." She flipped a page and pointed to it. The butterfly had some brown, some orange, some yellow. She told me now how they flew during the day, not night.

"I can give you a beautiful tattoo," I said. I continued drawing, just the way I saw the butterfly in my mind. I didn't need to look much at her image on the page. Now it was in my mind. My hand went smooth over the page up and down, back and forth long strokes, and short ones.

"Oh, you are good," said Barbara.

"Yes," said Maria. "A fine artist."

No one had ever given me this much encouragement. My hands felt light and free. The women asked questions about how I got started and where I worked before this and if I had a girlfriend. I told them about Cheryl and her concerns that the shop couldn't make it.

"Oh, but you must never stop drawing," Maria exclaimed.

Within 30 minutes I had the outlines of their tattoos. I put them through the transposer and held them up for the ladies to examine.

"Beautiful," Barbara said.

"Perfect," said Maria.

"Okay, where?" I asked.

Maria wanted hers on her biceps. A real jock type. I had to explain how in years to come the skin would sag and the tattoo would look like a faded, stretched balloon. She and Barbara exchanged looks. She picked her ankle. Barbara chose to have her butterfly just below her collarbone.

"You two are sure? Once you've got it on, you've got it for the rest of your life."

"We're sure," they both said.

Barbara said she would go first. "Will it hurt?" she asked.

"It will hurt," I said, "but nothing you can't take." In that moment, I thought of my mother. She had asked the same question about chemo. I showed Barbara the sterilized equipment, the surgical soap, caps to mix the colors, the latex gloves to cut the risk of infection and explained how I outlined first, then filled in the outline with color. In that moment, I felt proud and happy, but something more: I felt fulfilled. There have been times I just couldn't do my best work, too many other things to think about, like when I was taking my mother for

chemo every week. We carried an aluminum bowl back and forth and my car smelled of vomit for months. But right now, in the city of Hartford, in my new studio, I was flying. These ladies submitted their bodies to me and when someone puts her body right before you, with the legitimate fears of dirty needles, bad art, and still trusts you, well you feel humbled by it all.

When I finished with Barbara, she stood up and examined herself in the mirror. She turned and looked at me in a way nobody has ever looked at me, in a way that said she would for even one minute trade places. She gave me a kiss on the cheek. Then, Maria got into the chair and I did her. She was more quiet, but I watched the expression on her face as the parasite took shape. It was love. She loved that thing with a passion. Why else would you dedicate your life to something that looks like a leech? When I finished she had tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Willie," she said in a whisper.

Then Barbara took out her camera and we started taking pictures. First, I took one of the two of them together, and then they each took one of me with the other.

"This is so much fun," they said.

"You did an incredible job."

"I've got something too." I smiled. "My own Painted Lady." Their eyebrows went up. "Do you want to see it?"

"Yeah," they said. "Show us."

I was feeling good on the talk of my talent. I wanted them to see my best work. I wanted to share my passion. Next thing, I dropped my pants to show the Painted Lady curled around my upper thigh. They giggled and covered their mouths, but as soon as they got used to me in my underwear, they came closer.

"Such vivid colors," Barbara said. "Like stained glass."

That's the moment the door opened and in walked Cheryl.

Her mouth dropped open, her eyes widened, then narrowed to little slits. She gulped a little air. "Willie?"

I pulled my pants up. "Cheryl. What are you—"

"No, Willie. What are you DOING?"

"We asked to see the tattoo," said Maria.

"We begged," said Barbara.

"But it's not sexual, right, Willie?" Cheryl had not taken her eyes off me.

"Please. What are you implying?" Barbara asked.

"I am a university professor," said Maria.

"Me too," said Barbara. She looked at Cheryl as if she was waiting for an apology.

But Cheryl was only looking at me. "This is your big step up? Advancing your career?"

"Cheryl, I was showing them my tattoo. That's all."

"Yeah, Willie. Your high and mighty art, right?"

"You must see...he is a great artist. Why, we've been all over the place, looking...and we found the best in the business right here. Why, Willie could open a place in San Francisco."

"Shut up!" Cheryl said to the women without looking at them.

"There's nothing high and mighty about being a tattoo artist." Cheryl shook her head at me. "An artist doesn't expose himself to his customers." She spun around and slammed the door.

After she left, the ladies started asking all kinds of questions. Does she always talk to you like that? (No). Should we go after her, and try to explain? (No). I reorganized the flash as they felt my outrage for me. Cheryl's words hurt. What was I going to do? It wasn't professional to pull down my pants in front of customers. Nemo, for all his scratching, would never have done that.

"You must go after her and make her see that you are an artist," said Barbara.

"You must tell her that if you stop drawing, you will be tearing out your heart," Maria added.

I shook my head. "Please, I think you should go. If you want to help me, send your friends here for tattoos."

The ladies promised they would, that I would have ten new clients that week, then they gave me their cards in case I wanted to have Cheryl call them. I helped them collect their books and bags and off they went, through the door, the sun shining down on their freshly tattooed bodies.

The shop was quiet again. I calculated that even if the ladies found me ten new clients and those ten found me ten more, sooner or

later, the pyramid of referrals would taper off. And then, would it be enough? Maybe for me, but not for Cheryl, I realized, even if I could convince her that I would never be so stupid again, because she could not see in me what I saw in myself. I paced around the shop, swiping a dust rag over the furniture, then the windowseals. The street looked so quaint with its handsome signs hanging over every shop. So professional. Not like Nemo's operation at all. I opened my sketchbook and started to draw. It was the Painted Lady taking shape, with more dimensions than I ever remembered. She was full of suffering, loss, love, happiness. All rolled into one, caught by me, through my art. I got out a fresh piece of paper and started to draw.