

Pink Pastel and Velvet

Brian Gordon Wilcox shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Over the past few hours, the small steel chair had become hard and restrictive. He rubbed the right side of his ass, which had gone numb.

Brian's pale, greasy complexion shone like an undercooked piece of fish. He was old enough now to not have to worry about acne, but greasy skin, lower back pain and a gimpy knee were another matter.

His eyes traveled lazily along the red velvet carpet, past creamy beige columns and up three steps onto the small round stage.

Every few days he rode the train through the tunnel into the city's old, cold guts. He'd hit street-level, and saunter a few blocks down Granville Street to his favourite little cave known as "The Austin". Time seemed to stand still there. It wasn't a mistake that these kinds of places had no windows, not only for privacy but also so the patrons could ignore the passage of time. Bars, casinos, nightclubs and strip joints were all like this. A window would kill the dream and remind you of how shitty and bleak reality felt. Who the hell wanted that?

After hours and hours inside, Brian would finally emerge onto the street and be surprised at how dark it was outside and how fresh and animated the air seemed. On under used legs, he tended to stumble like a drunk back down the street, and submerge into Granville Station to ride the train back through the tunnel. The train might pop out under a muddy brown sunset or, sometimes, a clear starry sky.

At that moment in the strip bar, Brian was lost in the curves of a young girl on the stage, twisting herself like a snake. He madly sketched and scribbled in an attempt to capture her on paper. He was in a Renoir phase this week, aiming for a style that would be somewhere close to the honesty of the artist's bathing women and dancers, although much to his dismay, Brian found that his attitude often imbued his drawings with a cynical twist that would have suited a character from a Toulouse-Lautrec nightclub scene. It made him feel like someone he didn't want to be, like a stranger trapped inside someone else's personality.

He marveled at the girl; at how the hot pink light made her skin looked flawless and artificial, like the surface of a new mannequin. He wondered if living flesh would ever become obsolete. Artificial human figures seem to have become so lifelike and realistic. He thought of a friend of an acquaintance; a guy who had a small studio over near Terminal Avenue. The guy had claimed to be a sculptor and had bought himself one of those ultra-realistic rubber love dolls over the Internet. It was almost completely made from silicone (kind of like Pamela Anderson, Brian had joked at the time). The guy said he used it as a model for sculpting, and sometimes to get into the high-occupancy vehicle lane on the highway. However, Brian noticed a small camcorder on the shelf and figured that this guy was probably more of an amateur filmmaker than any kind of sculptor. Some people were just into freak shows.

Brian looked up from his sketchpad and noticed that a different girl was now strutting around on the small round stage. He sighed and flipped over to a clean page. The previous girl was down on the floor tying up her robe and walking away through the swinging door next to the bar.

A new heavy metal song pounded into Brian's brain, obscuring his thoughts. He noticed that the new girl on the stage had really large hands, sort of like Michelangelo's David. He looked and looked but couldn't see her neck properly. He wondered why all the strippers he had seen always wore their hair down. It tended to obscure the ears and shoulders too much. Why not wear it up instead? His black felt marker rolled off the table and hit the floor with a plastic clack. He cursed at the inconvenience of the break in concentration.

Brian wondered why the human brain was located in the head instead of somewhere else. Maybe that's where we get the idea that thinking is a more elevated pursuit than say, shitting or having sex. What about all those old jokes about a man's brain being located between his legs? Probably not too far from the truth, he decided.

He looked around the dark room at the few other patrons. Who came to a peeler bar at one in the afternoon just to look at naked girls anyway? Probably the same people to whom the sign outside appealed: "We open at 11 AM. Start your day here with a nice cold beer!" Pretty sad. Brian didn't apply that same snobbish judgment to himself of course. His case was different. He was an artist.

He had sketchbook after sketchbook of women all to himself in his closet at home. Pages full of smooth pink skin, muscular tension and stroke upon stroke of creamy oil pastel. If his aunt ever found that other pile of special sketchbooks under his bed, she'd probably have a heart attack. He chuckled for a moment and sighed.

A peripheral movement caught his eye, and Brian noticed that the previous dancer was walking towards him from the direction of the bar. Now she wore a short T-shirt and tight, faded blue jeans. Somehow her hair had changed from long and blonde to curly light brown with blonde highlights. Her walk still had a little bit of swaying runway strut to it. She was wearing heels. He wondered how she walked in bare feet when nobody was watching. Her body proportions seemed less exaggerated down at floor level. She just looked like another pretty girl from Abbotsford or Surrey.

"Hi!" she said, inviting herself to sit down across from him. "I'm Tina." She smiled and looked perky as hell. Brian was practically speechless. He mumbled a weak hello and felt his mouth go dry. He'd never had one of the dancers join him before. It was weird and he didn't know what to do. By reflex, he pulled his sketchpad a little closer.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Um, Brian."

"Hi." Tina paused, waiting for him to speak, but Brian just smiled.

She looked across at his sketchbook and to his coloured pencils and oil sticks.

"Are these crayons?"

"They're oil pastels. Watch out - they're sticky. You'll get it on your..."

"Ewww. Oh... Sorry..." Tina wiped her hand with a napkin. Brian felt awkward. He was lousy at small talk.

"So, do you draw... us, here a lot?"

"Um, yeah. I, I've been coming here for a while."

"Cool! Can I see?" Her voice rose like a curious child. Brian smiled nervously, flipped his sketchbook to the first page and pushed it across the table.

"Oh, wow! I love the colour!" She flipped it over like it was a carpet sample. Flip. "Wow." Flip. Flip. "Ooh. Is that Marta?" Brian had no idea who Marta was. "I like the colour of that. Ooh! Wow."

While Tina was absorbed in his sketches, Brian took in the contours of her nose, the roundness of her cheek, and the suggestive creases of her painted eyelids. Flip. Flip. Flip. But, it was strange too, the odd little irregularities that began to reveal themselves. One eyebrow hair was 60 degrees out of kilter with the rest. She had a small pimple near her chin. One of her front teeth was crooked. There were two closed piercings in her left ear lobe, and a small heart tattooed on her left shoulder. Brian finally decided that they weren't irregularities; they were natural. They were character.

She looked up again, and Brian looked at her face. She had these incredibly pale blue eyes, like watered down Windex. The eye sockets were just a tiny bit too far apart, giving her a slightly vacant, detached expression. She seemed like a friendly, bubbly girl though. It was weird how nobody ever wanted to make eye contact in this place, like they couldn't acknowledge or didn't want to be self-conscious of their own desires. Tina looked right at him and smiled. He felt himself blush a little. It was weird but nice.

"You know, you're a talented artist Brian. Did you like, go to school or something?"

"Um, no, I just kind of taught myself."

"Wow. That's amazing." Tina leaned a little closer. "Would you draw me?"

Brian furrowed his brow as he flipped through his memory. "Actually, I think you're in here." He spun the pad around and opened it near the back. Flip. Flip. Flip. "Here."

For the first time, Tina's face dropped a little. "That... What is that? Is that me?"

"Sure. Brian waved his finger down the line of the pink abstracted torso and over the hard bone of the hip. "See, there's the abdomen. The angle starts from just under the shoulder

and goes over the hip and follows to the right knee. You had that purple silk robe kind of half-on. This is the pole in the background."

"Oh, so it's like, an artistic version? But... you can't tell it's me. You can't even see my face!"

"Oh, well, I'm, I have a little trouble with faces. They're, um, hard."

"Oh. So, you just like drawing the bodies?"

"Well, not just that, but that's part of it, I guess."

"You know, I have a friend who modeled for a drawing class at that art school, you know, over the bridge."

Brian knew the school well. He had wandered through it and seen some of the student work during a drawing exhibition a few years ago. It had fascinated and intimidated the hell out of him.

"So, would you draw me? Like a portrait?"

"Hm?" Brian's mind had wandered, and he thought Tina had asked him to do something. "What?"

"Would you draw a portrait of me sometime?"

"Oh, I... um..."

"I'll pay for it. That's not a problem."

"No, it's not that. It's just, I don't know if I could do a good enough job." He sighed and knew he was deflating himself right in front of her. "I... how about if you don't like it, if it doesn't look like you, there's no charge. If you do like it, I'll let you have it anyway."

"What?"

Brian smiled. "On the house."

"Oh, well, thanks! That's nice!" She shifted in her chair and looked around the bar. "So, where do you want me. Do you want to do it right here?"

Brian was scared to death, and felt pressured. He liked her and deep down he really wanted to try but wasn't sure if he was ready.

"Um, well, I can't do it now. It will take more time. When will you be here next? I'll come back."

"Day after tomorrow. Same time."

"Okay." He felt a wave of confidence come back, and that familiar timeless feeling that always came with the beginning of a new drawing. "Um, wait. Wait a minute. Hold still." He pulled out his short little blue 2F pencil. It would have to do. "I can get a few things down now real quick," he mumbled.

Tina sat still with a serious and slightly self-conscious expression on her face. Brian's hand went scribble, scribble, scrape, stroke, stroke, stroke. Tina didn't move a muscle for the few minutes he needed to get down her proportions and hint at some contours and modeling.

"Yeah, I think this might work..." Brian muttered.

Tina peered over at the pad and smiled at him. "Thanks. I'll see ya. Bye."

Brian felt this rush of accomplishment. Something had clicked up to the next level, but he really didn't know what the hell it was.

It was only 2 PM and he felt like leaving the strip club already. He downed his last gulp of beer, threw everything into his sagging packsack and headed up the aisle, waving to the bartender on the way out into the faded lobby. Near the front door, a beam of sunlight caught him fresh in the eye. He pushed himself outside and felt that same sunbeam even warmer and more potent in the crisp afternoon air.

Maybe he would go to the park and draw the people or the pigeons.