

“Imagine anything you like,” she whispered. “I can be anyone or anything you want.”

Medusa’s Child

Kim Antieau

I FOUND HER on the steps of my apartment building. She was shivering, though the day was warm. Her light brown hair hung in strands about her face. Her cheekbones stretched her pale skin. I almost walked by her. I thought she was just another of the bag ladies who frequented my area. Then she looked up at me.

She had extraordinary eyes. They were black—two black lightless pupils. I had to paint those eyes. I had to paint her.

I am not certain how I got her to come up to my apartment. I know I promised food. Whatever I said, she followed me into the building and to my apartment.

Once inside, I asked her her name. She did not answer. I told her to make herself at home while I started dinner. I had spaghetti sauce from the day before, so I put it on the stove and started water to boil for noodles.

She stood in the middle of my living room which doubled as my studio because of the huge picture windows. I had several paintings on easels and two leaned against the wall. She walked over to them and touched the edges of each one with the tips of her fingers. She did it almost reverently.

Kim Antieau

“An artist,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said. I glanced at her. Although her body was bent and her face lined, I guessed she was not even thirty years old.

She turned and looked at me with those huge black eyes.

“An artist,” she said again.

I wondered then if I had latched on to some very strange person. She could utter only two words: *An artist*. Maybe she had been in love with a painter once and he had killed himself because she left him—or something equally as dramatic.

She came and stood close to me while I cooked and watched me stir sauce and break noodles into the boiling water. Once she reached out tentatively and touched my arm with one finger. Poor girl, I thought, she hasn't eaten in days and she's grateful to me.

“Leila,” she said.

At first I did not know what she was saying, and then I realized she was answering my first question.

“I'm Matthew McClean. Matthew means ‘Gift of God,’” I said, as I pulled two plates from the cupboard. “I was the sixth child after five girls. You can see why they thought I was a godsend.” I laughed. She did not even smile.

“Leila means ‘dark as night.’”

That was all she said. No story behind it. Was she born on a stormy night? Was her grandmother's name Leila? She's not much of a conversationalist, I thought, but that was all right. I hated chatterbox models.

I told her to sit down, and we ate our first meal together. Neither of us said much. I was curious about her, but I did not want to pry and scare her away. I was getting more and more excited about the prospect of painting her: the mysterious woman lost in strands of greasy hair and ragged clothes.

She was more animated by the end of the meal. Color returned to her cheeks. She pushed her hair behind her ears, and I saw she was not unattractive. When she had finished her meal (she didn't

Medusa's Child

eat much), she looked over at me. She smiled and said, "Well, Matthew, you want to paint me, don't you?"

I nodded.

"What will I get in return?" she asked.

I impulsively looked toward the door, wondering where the cowering waif was who had walked into the room a mere hour ago.

"I can pay you my standard rate for models."

She shook her head. "I don't want money. I need other things." She gazed at me. "How long have you been an artist?"

I was a little annoyed by her tone. First I had practically scraped her off my steps and put food into her starving body and now she was asking for my qualifications.

"I have been an artist all of my life," I said. "I have been commercially successful the last five." I was proud of that. Pretty good for only being thirty years old.

She nodded. "Young," she said. She sat quietly for a moment, looking around the room, and then she rested her fingers lightly on my arm. The hair on my arms stood up, as if drawn to her fingertips. Her touch was cool and pleasant.

"I want to stay here."

"Here? Don't you have a place to stay?"

"No."

Normally I would have tossed her out then and there. Several women had wanted to move in with me at different times and I had always said no, except once, and that had been a terrible mistake. I hardly painted at all until she moved out.

"Please, Matthew, I won't be any trouble. Just for a while, until you finish painting me." Suddenly she was the waif again.

I smiled and said, "Okay."

I made a sketch of her that night. She sat on my couch with her hands folded demurely in her lap. The sun was setting. The walls of the room turned gold and red. The gold touched Leila's head. For

Kim Antieau

a moment her hair was flaxen, Rapunzel reincarnate. And then the red tinged her skin and she was like some fiery goddess, her hair gold snakes snapping at dust particles in the air.

The next morning I found her padding around the kitchen in a pair of my jeans and a T-shirt.

“I lifted them while you slept,” she said. “I took a shower and washed my clothes. I’m making an omelet for us.”

She appeared taller than she had the night before, probably because she had bathed, eaten, and had a good night’s sleep. My sofa bed was more comfortable than my own bed. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks rosy. She looked like a well-scrubbed college kid.

“Thanks,” I said. “I am hungry.”

I sat at the table and rubbed my eyes sleepily. What had possessed me to let this woman stay with me? I glanced up at her as she put the omelet in front of me. It’s those damn eyes, I reminded myself.

She was a good model. She sat very still and looked off into some place within herself. The natural light from the overhead windows flattered her. Work went slowly. It was hard to capture the quality in her that had first attracted me. I could not get the eyes. They were too black. On canvas, they looked like huge holes in her face: she looked like a zombie, or as if she did not have a soul, something queer like that.

“What do you do when you aren’t hanging around apartment buildings?” I asked while we ate lunch.

“I do things.”

She continued eating, apparently not interested in answering my questions. I glanced out the window. Clouds had covered the sun and it looked like a summer storm was approaching.

“There goes the day’s painting,” I said.

“That’s all right,” she said. “We can spend the day getting to know each other.”

Medusa's Child

I was surprised she wanted to talk, but when she got up and went to the couch, I followed and sat beside her. I began talking about myself. She held my hand loosely in hers and listened while I told her about my life, my crowded but happy childhood filled with dreams of becoming a famous artist, my time spent traveling before college, my successful years as an artist. For some reason I poured out my life to her as if it were some kind of liquid she could drink. It frightened me a little, letting someone know so much about me. She probed me for details—gently squeezing my hand when I was not sure what I wanted to say. As the storm washed against the windows, Leila seemed to grow more beautiful. Her voice became stronger, more assured. She was no longer the trembling bag lady I had met yesterday. I was amazed at the difference and chalked it up to my company and good food.

We talked the afternoon away (or rather I talked; she mostly listened). When we got hungry, she suggested a pizza. We ran outside into the rain, laughing and splashing in puddles as we made our way to the neighborhood pizza joint. I forgot she was a bit strange, forgot she was a hobo, and realized I had found a new friend: someone who liked to listen. My artist friends were not big on listening; they liked to talk and talk, mostly about their own work. Leila wanted to know more about me and I loved it. I sat with her in the pizza place, sipping a malt and pushing strings of cheese into my mouth, and I wondered why I had not found someone like her before.

When we got back to my apartment, Leila stood in the middle of the living room and began undressing. I sat on the couch and watched her. My stomach tingled. Soon she stood before me naked. She was beautiful. How could I have thought she was ugly? She came to me and I put my arms around her and pulled her toward me. My clothes slipped away and we were side by side on the couch.

“Imagine anything you like,” she whispered. “I can be anyone or anything you want. Let yourself go.”