



The Illustrated Man, Ray Bradbury

The Illustrated Man

“Hey, the illustrated man!”

A calliope screamed, and Mr. William Philippos Phelps stood, arms folded, high on the summer-night platform, a crowd unto himself.

He was an entire civilization. In the Main Country, his chest, the Vasties lived—nipple-eyed dragons swirling over his fleshpot, his almost feminine breasts. His navel was the mouth of a slit-eyed monster—an obscene, in-sucked mouth, toothless as a witch.

And there were secret caves where Darklings lurked, his armpits, adrip with slow subterranean liquors, where the Darklings, eyes jealously ablaze, peered out through rank creeper and hanging vine.

Mr. William Philippos Phelps leered down from his freak platform with a thousand peacock eyes. Across the sawdust meadow he saw his wife, Lisabeth, far away, ripping tickets in half, staring at the silver belt buckles of passing men.

Mr. William Philippos Phelps' hands were tattooed roses. At the sight of his wife's interest, the roses shriveled, as with the passing of sunlight.

A year before, when he had led Lisabeth to the marriage bureau to watch her work her name in ink, slowly, on the form, his skin had been pure and white and clean.

He glanced down at himself in sudden horror. Now he was like a great painted canvas, shaken in the night wind! How had it happened? Where had it all begun?

It had started with the arguments, and then the flesh, and then the pictures. They had fought deep into the summer nights, she like a brass

trumpet forever blaring at him. And he had gone out to eat five thousand steaming hot dogs, ten million hamburgers, and a forest of green onions, and to drink vast red seas of orange juice.

Peppermint candy formed his brontosaur bones, the hamburgers shaped his balloon flesh, and strawberry pop pumped in and out of his heart valves sickeningly, until he weighed three hundred pounds.

“William Philippus Phelps,” Lisabeth said to him in the eleventh month of their marriage, “you’re dumb and fat.”

That was the day the carnival boss handed him the blue envelope.

“Sorry, Phelps. You’re no good to me with all that gut on you.”

“Wasn’t I always your best tent man, boss?”

“Once. Not anymore. Now you sit, you don’t get the work out.”

“Let me be your Fat Man.”

“I got a Fat Man. Dime a dozen.” The boss eyed him up and down. “Tell you what, though. We ain’t had a Tattooed Man since Gallery Smith died last year. . . .”

That had been a month ago. Four short weeks. From someone, he had learned of a tattoo artist far out in the rolling Wisconsin country, an old woman, they said, who knew her trade. If he took the dirt road and turned right at the river and then left . . .

He had walked out across a yellow meadow, which was crisp from the sun. Red flowers blew and bent in the wind as he walked, and he came to the old shack, which looked as if it had stood in a million rains.

Inside the door was a silent, bare room, and in the center of the bare room sat an ancient woman.

Her eyes were stitched with red resin-thread. Her nose was sealed with black wax-twine. Her ears were sewn, too, as if a darning-needle dragonfly had stitched all her senses shut. She sat, not moving, in the vacant room.

Dust lay in a yellow flour all about, unfootprinted in many weeks; if she had moved it would have shown, but she had not moved. Her hands touched each other like thin, rusted instruments.

Her feet were naked and obscene as rain rubbers, and near them sat vials of tattoo milk—red, lightning-blue, brown, cat-yellow. She was a thing sewn tight into whispers and silence.

Only her mouth moved, unsewn: “Come in. Sit down. I’m lonely here.” He did not obey.

“You came for the pictures,” she said in a high voice. “I have a picture to show you first.”

She tapped a blind finger to her thrust-out palm. “See!” she cried.

It was a tattoo-portrait of William Philipus Phelps.

“Me!” he said.

Her cry stopped him at the door. “Don’t run.”

He held to the edges of the door, his back to her. “That’s me, that’s me on your hand!”

“It’s been there fifty years.” She stroked it like a cat, over and over.

He turned. “It’s an old tattoo.” He drew slowly nearer. He edged forward and bent to blink at it. He put out a trembling finger to brush the picture. “Old. That’s impossible! You don’t know me. I don’t know you. Your eyes, all sewed shut.”

“I’ve been waiting for you.” she said. “And many people.” She displayed her arms and legs, like the spindles of an antique chair. “I have pictures on me of people who have already come here to see me. And there are other pictures of other people who are coming to see me in the next one hundred years. And you, you have come.”

“How do you know it’s me? You can’t see!”

“You feel like the lions, the elephants, and the tigers to me. Unbutton your shirt. You need me. Don’t be afraid. My needles are as clean as a doctor’s fingers. When I’m finished with illustrating you, I’ll wait for someone else to walk along out here and find me.

And someday, a hundred summers from now, perhaps, I’ll just go lie down in the forest under some white mushrooms, and in the spring you won’t find anything but a small blue cornflower. . . .”

He began to unbutton his sleeves.

“I know the Deep Past and the Clear Present and the even Deeper Future,” she whispered, eyes knotted into blindness, face lifted to this unseen man. “It is on my flesh. I will paint it on yours, too. You will be the only real illustrated Man in the universe. I’ll give you special pictures you will never forget. Pictures of the Future on your skin.” She pricked him with a needle.

He ran back to the carnival that night in a drunken terror and elation. Oh, how quickly the old dust-witch had stitched him with color and design. At the end of a long afternoon of being bitten by a silver snake, his body was alive with portraiture. He looked as if he had dropped and been crushed between the steel rollers of a print press, and come out like an incredible rotogravure. He was clothed in a garment of trolls and scarlet dinosaurs.

“Look!” he cried to Lisabeth. She glanced up from her cosmetics table as he tore his shirt away. He stood in the naked bulb-light of their car-trailer, expanding his impossible chest. Here, the Tremblies, half-maiden, half-goat, leaping when his biceps flexed. Here, the Country of Lost Souls, his chins.

In so many accordion pleats of fat, numerous small scorpions, beetles, and mice were crushed, held, hid, darting into view, vanishing, as he raised or lowered his chins.

“My God,” said Lisabeth. “My husband’s a freak.”

She ran from the trailer and he was left alone to pose before the mirror. Why had he done it? To have a job, yes, but, most of all, to cover the fat that had larded itself impossibly over his bones. To hide the fat under a layer of color and fantasy, to hide it from his wife, but most of all from himself.

He thought of the old woman's last words. She had needled him two special tattoos, one on his chest, another for his back, which she would not let him see. She covered each with cloth and adhesive.

"You are not to look at these two," she had said.

"Why?"

"Later, you may look. The Future is in these pictures. You can't look now or it may spoil them. They are not quite finished. I put ink on your flesh, and the sweat of you forms the rest of the picture, the Future—your sweat and your thought." Her empty mouth grinned. "Next Saturday night, you may advertise!"

The Big Unveiling! Come see the Illustrated Man unveil his picture! You can make money in that way.

You can charge admission to the Unveiling, like to an art gallery. Tell them you have a picture that even you never have seen, that nobody has seen yet. The most unusual picture ever painted. Almost alive. And it tells the Future. Roll the drums and blow the trumpets. And you can stand there and unveil at the Big Unveiling."

"That's a good idea," he said.

"But only unveil the picture on your chest," she said. "That is first. You must save the picture on your back, under the adhesive, for the following week. Understand?"

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," she said. "If you walk with these pictures on you, I will be repaid with my own satisfaction. I will sit here for the next two weeks

and think how clever my pictures are, for I make them fit each man himself and what is inside him. Now, walk out of this house and never come back. Good-bye.”

“Hey! The Big Unveiling!”

The red signs blew in the night wind: NO ORDINARY TATTOOED MAN!
THIS ONE IS “ILLUSTRATED”! GREATER THAN MICHELANGELO!
TONIGHT! ADMISSION 10 CENTS!

Now the hour had come. Saturday night, the crowd stirring their animal feet in the hot sawdust.

“In one minute—” the carny boss pointed his cardboard megaphone—
“in the tent immediately to my rear, we will unveil the Mysterious Portrait upon the Illustrated Man’s chest! Next Saturday night, the same hour, same location, we’ll unveil the Picture upon the Illustrated Man’s back! Bring your friends!”

There was a stuttering roll of drums.

Mr. William Philippus Phelps jumped back and vanished; the crowd poured into the tent, and, once inside, found him re-established upon another platform, the band brassing out a jig-time melody.

He looked for his wife and saw her, lost in the crowd, like a stranger, come to watch a freakish thing, a look of contemptuous curiosity upon her face. For, after all, he was her husband, this was a thing she didn’t know about him herself.

It gave him a feeling of great height and warmness and light to find himself the center of the jangling universe, the carnival world, for one night. Even the other freaks—the Skeleton, the Seal Boy, the Yoga, the Magician, and the Balloon—were scattered through the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the great moment!”

A trumpet flourish, a hum of drumsticks on tight cowhide.

Mr. William Philippus Phelps let his cape fall. Dinosaurs, trolls, and half-women-half-snakes writhed on his skin in the stark light.

Ah, murmured the crowd, for surely there had never been a tattooed man like this! The beast eyes seemed to take red fire and blue fire, blinking and twisting. The roses on his fingers seemed to expel a sweet pink bouquet.

The Tyrannosaurus rex reared up along his leg, and the sound of the brass trumpet in the hot tent heavens was a prehistoric cry from the red monster throat. Mr. William Philipus Phelps was a museum jolted to life.

Fish swam in seas of electric-blue ink. Fountains sparkled under yellow suns. Ancient buildings stood in meadows of harvest wheat. Rockets burned across spaces of muscle and flesh. The slightest inhalation of his breath threatened to make chaos of the entire printed universe.

He seemed a fire, the creatures flinching from the flame, drawing back from the great heat of his pride, as he expanded under the audience's rapt contemplation.

The carny boss laid his fingers to the adhesive. The audience rushed forward, silent in the oven vastness of the night tent.

"You ain't seen nothing yet!" cried the carny boss.
The adhesive ripped free.

There was an instant in which nothing happened. An instant in which the Illustrated Man thought that the Unveiling was a terrible and irrevocable failure.

But then the audience gave a low moan.

The carny boss drew back, his eyes fixed.
Far out at the edge of the crowd, a woman, after a moment, began to cry, began to sob, and did not stop.

Slowly, the Illustrated Man looked down at his naked chest and stomach.

The thing that he saw made the roses on his hands discolor and die. All of his creatures seemed to wither, turn inward, shrivel with the arctic coldness that pumped from his heart outward to freeze and destroy them. He stood trembling. His hands floated up to touch that incredible picture, which lived, moved and shivered with life.

It was like gazing into a small room, seeing a thing of someone else's life so intimate, so impossible that one could not believe and one could not long stand to watch without turning away.

It was a picture of his wife, Lisabeth, and himself.
And he was killing her.

Before the eyes of a thousand people in a dark tent in the center of a black-forested Wisconsin land, he was killing his wife.

His great flowered hands were upon her throat, and her face was turning dark and he killed her and he killed her and did not ever in the next minute stop killing her. It was real. While the crowd watched, she died, and he turned very sick.

He was about to fall straight down into the crowd. The tent whirled like a monster bat wing, flapping grotesquely. The last thing he heard was a woman, sobbing, far out on the shore of the silent crowd.

And the crying woman was Lisabeth, his wife.

In the night, his bed was moist with perspiration. The carnival sounds had melted away, and his wife, in her own bed, was quiet now, too. He fumbled with his chest. The adhesive was smooth. They had made him put it back.

He had fainted. When he revived, the carny boss had yelled at him, "Why didn't you say what the picture was like?"
"I didn't know, I didn't," said the Illustrated Man.

“Good God!” said the boss. “Scare hell outa everyone. Scared hell outa Lizzie, scared hell outa me. Christ, where’d you get that damn tattoo?” He shuddered. “Apologize to Lizzie, now.” His wife stood over him.

“I’m sorry, Lisabeth,” he said, weakly, his eyes closed. “I didn’t know.”
“You did it on purpose,” she said. “To scare me.”
“I’m sorry.”
“Either it goes or I go,” she said.

“Lisabeth.”
“You heard me. That picture comes off or I quit this show.”
“Yeah, Phil,” said the boss. “That’s how it is.”
“Did you lose money? Did the crowd demand refunds?”

“It ain’t the money, Phil. For that matter, once the word got around, hundreds of people wanted in. But I’m runnin’ a clean show. That tattoo comes off! Was this your idea of a practical joke, Phil?”

He turned in the warm bed. No, not a joke. Not a joke at all. He had been as terrified as anyone. Not a joke. That little old dust-witch, what had she done to him and how had she done it?

Had she put the picture there? No; she had said that the picture was unfinished, and that he himself, with his thoughts and perspiration, would finish it. Well, he had done the job all right.

But what, if anything, was the significance? He didn’t want to kill anyone. He didn’t want to kill Lisabeth. Why should such a silly picture burn here on his flesh in the dark?

He crawled his fingers softly, cautiously down to touch the quivering place where the hidden portrait lay.

He pressed tight, and the temperature of that spot was enormous. He could almost feel that little evil picture killing and killing and killing all through the night.

I don't wish to kill her, he thought, insistently, looking over at her bed. And then, five minutes later, he whispered aloud: "Or do I?" "What?" she cried, awake.

"Nothing," he said, after a pause, "Go to sleep."

The man bent forward, a buzzing instrument in his hand. "This cost five bucks an inch. Costs more to peel tattoos off than put 'em on. Okay, jerk the adhesive."

The Illustrated Man obeyed.

The skin man sat back. "Christ! No wonder you want that off! That's ghastly. I don't even want to look at it." He flicked his machine. "Ready? This won't hurt."

The carny boss stood in the tent flap, watching. After five minutes, the skin man changed the instrument head, cursing. Ten minutes later he scraped his chair back and scratched his head. Half an hour passed and he got up, told Mr. William Philippus Phelps to dress, and packed his kit.

"Wait a minute," said the carny boss. "You ain't done the job." "And I ain't going to," said the skin man.

"I'm paying good money. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, except that damn picture just won't come off. Damn thing must go right down to the bone."

"You're crazy."

"Mister, I'm in business thirty years and never seen a tattoo like this. An inch deep, if it's anything."

"But I've got to get it off!" cried the Illustrated Man.

The skin man shook his head. "Only one way to get rid of that."

"How?"

“Take a knife and cut off your chest. You won’t live long, but the picture’ll be gone.”

“Come back here!”

But the skin man walked away.

They could hear the big Sunday-night crowd, waiting.

“That’s a big crowd,” said the Illustrated Man.

“But they ain’t going to see what they came to see,” said the carny boss. “You ain’t going out there, except with the adhesive. Hold still now, I’m curious about this other picture, on your back. We might be able to give ’em an Unveiling on this one instead.”

“She said it wouldn’t be ready for a week or so. The old woman said it would take time to set, make a pattern.”

There was a soft ripping as the carny boss pulled aside a flap of white tape on the Illustrated Man’s spine.

“What do you see?” gasped Mr. Phelps, bent over.

The carny boss replaced the tape. “Buster, as a Tattooed Man, you’re a washout, ain’t you? Why’d you let that old dame fix you up this way?”

“I didn’t know who she was.”

“She sure cheated you on this one. No design to it. Nothing. No picture at all.”

“It’ll come clear. You wait and see.”

The boss laughed. “Okay. Come on. We’ll show the crowd part of you, anyway.”

They walked out into an explosion of brassy music.

He stood monstrous in the middle of the night, putting out his hands like a blind man to balance himself in a world now tilted, now rushing, now threatening to spin him over and down into the mirror before which he raised his hands.

Upon the flat, dimly lighted tabletop were peroxide, acids, silver razors, and squares of sandpaper. He took each of them in turn. He soaked the vicious tattoo upon his chest, he scraped at it. He worked steadily for an hour.

He was aware, suddenly, that someone stood in the trailer door behind him. It was three in the morning. There was a faint odor of beer. She had come home from town. He heard her slow breathing. He did not turn. "Lisabeth?" he said.

"You'd better get rid of it," she said, watching his hands move the sandpaper. She stepped into the trailer.

"I didn't want the picture this way," he said.

"You did," she said. "You planned it."

"I didn't."

"I know you," she said. "Oh, I know you hate me. Well, that's nothing. I hate you. I've hated you a long time now. Good God, when you started putting on the fat, you think anyone could love you then? I could teach you some things about hate. Why don't you ask me?"

"Leave me alone," he said.

"In front of that crowd, making a spectacle out of me!"

"I didn't know what was under the tape."

She walked around the table, hands fitted to her hips talking to the beds, the walls, the table, talking it all out of her. And he thought: Or did I know? Who made this picture, me or the witch? Who formed it? How?

Do I really want her dead? No! And yet. . . .He watched his wife draw nearer, nearer, he saw the ropy strings of her throat vibrate to her shouting. This and this and this was wrong with him!

That and that and that was unspeakable about him! He was a liar, a schemer, a fat, lazy, ugly man, a child. Did he think he could compete with the carny boss or the tentpeggers? Did he think he was sylphine and graceful, did he think he was a framed El Greco?

DaVinci, huh! Michelangelo, my eye! She brayed. She showed her teeth. "Well, you can't scare me into staying with someone I don't want touching me with their sloppy paws!" she finished, triumphantly.

"Lisabeth," he said.

"Don't Lisabeth me!" she shrieked. "I know your plan. You had that picture put on to scare me. You thought I wouldn't dare leave you. Well!"

"Next Saturday night, the Second Unveiling," he said. "You'll be proud of me."

"Proud! You're silly and pitiful. God, you're like a whale. You ever see a beached whale? I saw one when I was a kid. There it was, and they came and shot it. Some lifeguards shot it. Jesus, a whale!"

"Lisabeth."

"I'm leaving, that's all, and getting a divorce."

"Don't."

"And I'm marrying a man, not a fat woman—that's what you are, so much fat on you there ain't no sex!"

"You can't leave me," he said.

"Just watch!"

"I love you," he said.

"Oh," she said. "Go look at your pictures."

He reached out.

"Keep your hands off," she said.

"Lisabeth."

"Don't come near. You turn my stomach."

"Lisabeth."

All the eyes of his body seemed to fire, all the snakes to move, all the monsters to seethe, all the mouths to widen and rage. He moved toward her—not like a man, but a crowd.

He felt the great blooded reservoir of orangeade pump through him now, the sluice of cola and rich lemon pop pulse in sickening sweet anger through his wrists his legs, his heart.

All of it, the oceans of mustard and relish and all the million drinks he had drowned himself in in the last year were aboil; his face was the color of a steamed beef. And the pink roses of his hands became those hungry, carnivorous flowers kept long years in tepid jungle and now let free to find their way on the night air before him.

He gathered her to him, like a great beast gathering in a struggling animal. It was a frantic gesture of love, quickening and demanding, which, as she struggled, hardened to another thing. She beat and clawed at the picture on his chest.

“You’ve got to love me, Lisabeth.”

“Let go!” she screamed. She beat at the picture that burned under her fists. She slashed at it with her fingernails.

“Oh, Lisabeth,” he said, his hands moving up her arms.

“I’ll scream,” she said, seeing his eyes.

“Lisabeth.” The hands moved up to her shoulders, to her neck. “Don’t go away.”

“Help!” she screamed. The blood ran from the picture on his chest. He put his fingers about her neck and squeezed.

She was a calliope cut in mid-shriek.

Outside, the grass rustled. There was the sound of running feet.

Mr. William Philipus Phelps opened the trailer door and stepped out.

They were waiting for him. Skeleton, Midget, Balloon, Yoga, Electra, Pop-eye, Seal Boy. The freaks, waiting in the middle of the night, in the dry grass.

He walked toward them. He moved with a feeling that he must get away; these people would understand nothing, they were not thinking people. And because he did not flee, because he only walked, balanced, stunned, between the tents, slowly, the freaks moved to let him pass. They watched him, because their watching guaranteed that he would not escape.

He walked out across the black meadow, moths fluttering in his face. He walked steadily as long as he was visible, not knowing where he was going. They watched him go, and then they turned and all of them shuffled to the silent car-trailer together and pushed the door slowly wide. . . .

The Illustrated Man walked steadily in the dry meadows beyond the town.

“He went that way!” a faint voice cried. Flashlights bobbed over the hills. There were dim shapes, running.

Mr. William Philipppus Phelps waved to them. He was tired. He wanted only to be found now. He was tired of running away. He waved again.

“There he is!” The flashlights changed direction. “Come on! We’ll get the bastard!”

When it was time, the Illustrated Man ran again. He was careful to run slowly. He deliberately fell down twice. Looking back, he saw the tent stakes they held in their hands.

He ran toward a far crossroads lantern, where all the summer night seemed to gather: merry-go-rounds of fireflies whirling, crickets moving their song toward that light, everything rushing, as if by some midnight attraction, toward that one high-hung lantern—the Illustrated Man first, the others close at his heels.

As he reached the light and passed a few yards under and beyond it, he did not need to look back. On the road ahead, in silhouette, he saw the upraised tent stakes sweep violently up, up, and then down!
A minute passed.

In the country ravines, the crickets sang. The freaks stood over the sprawled Illustrated Man, holding their tent stakes loosely.
Finally they rolled him over on his stomach. Blood ran from his mouth.

They ripped the adhesive from his back. They stared down for a long moment at the freshly revealed picture. Someone whispered. Someone else swore, softly.

The Thin Man pushed back and walked away and was sick. Another and another of the freaks stared, their mouths trembling, and moved away, leaving the Illustrated Man on the deserted road, the blood running from his mouth.

In the dim light, the unveiled Illustration was easily seen.

It showed a crowd of freaks bending over a dying fat man on a dark and lonely road, looking at a tattoo on his back which illustrated a crowd of freaks bending over a dying fat man on a . . .

The end