



The Illustrated Woman, Ray Bradbury

The Illustrated Woman

When a new patient wanders into the office and stretches out to stutter forth a compendious ticker tape of free association, it is up to the psychiatrist immediately beyond, behind-and above to decide at just which points of the anatomy the client is in touch with the couch.

In other words, where does the patient make contact with reality?

Some people seem to float half an inch above any surface whatsoever. They have not seen earth in so long, they have become somewhat airsick.

Still others so firmly weight themselves down, clutch, thrust, heave their bodies toward reality, that long after they are gone you find their tiger shapes and claw marks in the upholstery.

In the case of Emma Fleet, Dr. George C. George was a long time deciding which was furniture and which was woman and where what touched which. For, to begin with, Emma Fleet resembled a couch.

"Mrs. Emma Fleet, Doctor," announced his receptionist.

Dr. George C. George gasped.

For it was a traumatic experience, seeing this woman shunt herself through the door without benefit of railroad switchman or the ground crews who rush about under Macy's Easter balloons, heaving on lines, guiding the massive images to some eternal hangar off beyond.

In came Emma Fleet, as quick as her name, the floor shifting like a huge scales under her weight.

Dr. George must have gasped again, guessing her at four hundred on the hoof, for Emma Fleet smiled as if reading his mind. "Four hundred two and a half pounds, to be exact," she said.

He found himself staring at his furniture.

"Oh, it'll hold all right," said Mrs. Fleet intuitively. She sat down. The couch yelped like a cur. Dr. George cleared his throat.

"Before you make yourself comfortable," he said. "I feel I should say immediately and honestly that we in the psychiatric field have had little success in inhibiting appetites.

The whole problem of weight and food has so far eluded our ability for coping. A strange admission, perhaps, but unless we put our frailties forth, we might be in danger of fooling ourselves and thus taking money under false pretenses. So, if you are here seeking help for your figure, I must list myself among the nonplussed."

"Thank you for your honesty, Doctor," said Emma Fleet. "However, I don't wish to lose. I'd prefer your helping me gain another one hundred or two hundred pounds."

"Oh, no!" Dr. George exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. But my heart will not allow what my deep dear soul would most gladly endure. My physical heart might fail at what my loving heart and mind would ask of it."

She sighed. The couch sighed. "Well, let me brief you. I'm married to Willy Fleet. We work for the Dillbeck-Horsemann Traveling Shows. I'm known as Lady Bountiful. And Willy..."

She swooned up out of the couch and glided or rather escorted her shadow across the floor. She opened the door.

Beyond, in the waiting room, a cane in one hand, a straw hat in the other, seated rigidly, staring at the wall, was a tiny man with tiny feet and tiny hands and tiny bright-blue eyes in a tiny head.

He was, at the most, one would guess, three feet high, and probably weighed sixty pounds in the rain. But there was a proud, gloomy, almost violent look of genius blazing in that small but craggy face.

"That's Willy Fleet," said Emma lovingly, and shut the door.

The couch, sat on, cried again. Emma beamed at the psychiatrist, who was still staring, in shock, at the door.

"No children, of course," he heard himself say.

"No children." Her smile lingered. "But that's not my problem, either. Willy, in a way, is my child. And I, in a way, besides being his wife, am his mother. It all has to do with size, I imagine, and we're happy with the way we've balanced things off."

"Well, if your problem isn't children, or your size or his, or controlling weight, then what ... ?"

Emma Fleet laughed lightly, tolerantly. It was a nice laugh, like a girl's somehow caught in that great body and throat. "Patience, Doctor. Mustn't we go back down the road to where Willy and I first met?"

The doctor shrugged, laughed quietly himself and relaxed, nodding. "You must."

"During high school," said Emma Fleet. "I weighed one-eighty and tipped the scales at two-fifty when I was twenty-one. Needless to say, I went on few summer excursions. Most of the time I was left in drydock.

I had many girl friends, however, who liked to be seen with me. They weighed one-fifty, most of them, and I made them feel svelte. But

that's a long time ago. I don't worry over it any more. Willy changed all that."

"Willy sounds like a remarkable man," Dr. George found himself saying, against all the rules.

"Oh, he is, he is! He smoulders-with ability, with talent as yet undiscovered, untapped!" she said, quickening warmly. "God bless him, he leaped into my life like summer lightning! Eight years ago I went with my girl friends to the visiting Labor Day carnival.

By the end of the evening, the girls had all been seized away from me by the running boys who, rushing by, grabbed and took them off into the night. There I was alone with three Kewpie Dolls, a fake alligator handbag and nothing to do but make the Guess Your Weight man nervous by looking at him every time I went by and pretending like at any moment I might pay my money and dare him to guess."

"But the Guess Your Weight man wasn't nervous! After I had passed three times I saw him staring at me. With awe, yes, with admiration! And who was this Guess Your Weight man? Willy Fleet, of course. The fourth time I passed he called to me and said I could get a prize free if only I'd let him guess my weight. He was all feverish and excited.

He danced around. I'd never been made over so much in my life. I blushed. I felt good. So I sat in the scales chair. I heard the pointer whizz up around and I heard Willy whistle with honest delight.

"Two hundred and eighty-nine pounds!" he cried. "Oh boy oh boy, you're lovely!"

"I'm what?" I said.

"You're the loveliest woman in the whole world," said Willy, looking me right in the eye.

I blushed again. I laughed. We both laughed. Then I must have cried, for the next thing, sitting there, I felt him touch my elbow with concern. He was gazing into my face, faintly alarmed. "I haven't said the wrong thing?" he asked.

"No," I sobbed, and then grew quiet. "The right thing, only the right thing. It's the first time anyone ever ... "

"What?" he said.

"Ever put up with my fat," I said.

"You're not fat," he said. "You're large, you're big, you're wonderful. Michelangelo would have loved you. Titian would have loved you. Da Vinci would have loved you. They knew what they were doing in those days. Size. Size is everything.

I should know. Look at me. I traveled with Singer's Midgets for six seasons, known as Jack Thimble. And oh my God, dear lady, you're right out of the most glorious part of the Renaissance. Bernini, who built those colonnades around the front of St. Peter's and inside at the altar, would have lost his everlasting soul just to know someone like you."

"Don't!" I cried. "I wasn't meant to feel this happy. It'll hurt so much when you stop."

"I won't stop, then," he said. "Miss . . ."

"Emma Gertz."

"Emma," he said, "are you married?"

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"Emma, do you like to travel?"

"I've never traveled!"

"Emma," he said, "this old carnival's going to be in your town one more week. Come down every night, every day, why not? Talk to me, know me. At the end of the week, who can tell, maybe you'll travel with me."

"What are you suggesting?" I said, not really angry or irritated or anything, but fascinated and intrigued that anyone would offer anything to Moby Dick's daughter.

"I mean marriage!" Willy Fleet looked at me, breathing hard, and I had the feeling that he was dressed in a mountaineer's rig, alpine hat, climbing boots, spikes, and a rope slung over his baby shoulder. And if I should ask him, "Why are you saying this?" he might well answer, "Because you're there."

"But I didn't ask, so he didn't answer. We stood there in the night, at the center of the carnival, until at last I started off down the midway, swaying.

"I'm drunk!" I cried. "Oh, so very drunk, and I've had nothing to drink."

"Now that I've found you," called Willy Fleet after me, "you'll never escape me, remember!"

Stunned and reeling, blinded by his large man's words sung out in his soprano voice, I somehow blundered from the carnival grounds and trekked home. The next week we were married."

Emma Fleet paused and looked at her hands.

"Would it bother you if I told about the honeymoon?" she asked shyly.

"No," said the doctor, then lowered his voice, for he was responding all too quickly to the details. "Please do go on."

"The honeymoon." Emma sounded her vox humana. The response from all the chambers of her body vibrated the touch, the room, the doctor, the dear bones within the doctor.

"The honeymoon ... was not usual."

The doctor's eyebrows lifted the faintest touch. He looked from the woman to the door beyond which, in miniature, sat the image of Edmund Hillary, he of Everest.

"You have never seen such a rush as Willy spirited me off to his home, a lovely dollhouse, really, with one large normal-sized room that was to be mine, or, rather, ours. There, very politely, always the kind, the thoughtful, the quiet gentleman, he asked for my blouse, which I gave him, my skirt, which I gave him. Right down the list, I handed him the garments that he named, until at last. . .

Can one blush from head to foot? One can. One did. I stood like a veritabb hearthfire stoked by a blush of all-encompassing and evet moving color that surged and resurged up and down my hod in tints of pink and rose and then pink again.

"My god!" cried Willy, "you're the loveliest grand camellia that ever did unfurl!"

Whereupon new tides of blush moved in hidden avalanches within, showing only to color the tent of my body, the outermost and, to Willy anyway, most precious skin.

"What did Willy do then? Guess."

"I daren't," said the doctor, flustered himself.

"He walked around and around me."

"Circled you?"

"Around and around, like a sculptor gazing at a huge block of snow-white granite. He said to himself - granite or marble from which he might shape images of beauty as yet unguessed.

Around and around he walked, sighing and shaking his head happily at his fortune, his little hands clasped, his little eyes bright. Where to begin, he seemed to be thinking, where, where to begin?"

"He spoke at last. "Emma," he asked, "why, why do you think I've worked for years as the Guess Your Weight man at the carnival? Why? Because I have been searching my lifetime through for such as you.

Night after night, summer after summer, I've watched those scales jump and twitter! And now at last I've the means, the way, the wall, the canvas, whereby to express my genius!" He stopped walking and looked at me, his eyes brimming over.

"Emma," he said softly, "may I have permission to do anything absolutely whatsoever at all with you?"

"Oh, Willy, Willy," I cried. 'Anything!'

Emma Fleet paused. The doctor found himself out at the edge of his chair. "Yes, yes, and then?"

"And then," said Emma Fleet, "he brought out all his boxes and bottles of inks and stencils and his bright silver tattoo needles."

"Tattoo needles?", The doctor fell back in his chair. "He ... tattooed you?"

"He tattooed me."

"He was a tattoo artist. He was, he is, an artist. It only happens that the form his art takes happens to be the tattoo."

"And you," said the doctor slowly, "were the canvas for which he had been searching much of his adult life?"

"I was the canvas for which he had searched all of his life."

She let it sink, and did sink, and kept on sinking, into the doctor. Then when she saw it had struck bottom and stirred up vast quantities of mud, she went serenely on.

"So our grand life began! I loved Willy and Willy loved me and we both loved this thing that was larger than ourselves that we were doing together. Nothing less than creating the greatest picture the world has ever seen. "Nothing less than perfection!" cried Willy. "Nothing less than perfection!" cried myself in response."

"Oh, it was a happy time. Ten thousand cozy busy hours we spent together. You can't imagine how proud it made me to be the vast share along which the genius of Willy Fleet ebbed and flowed in a tide of colors."

"One year alone we spent on my right arm and my left, half a year on my right leg, eight months on my left, in preparation for the grand explosion of bright detail which erupted out along my collarbone and shoulder blades, which fountained upward from my hips to meet in a glorious July celebration of pinwheels, Titian nudes, Giorgione landscapes and El Greco cross-indexes of lightning on my facade, prickling with vast electric fires up and down my spine."

"Dear me, there never has been, there never will be, a love like ours again, a love where two people so sincerely dedicated themselves to one task, of giving beauty to the world in equal portions. We flew to each other day after day, and I ate more, grew larger, with the years, Willy approved, Willy applauded. Just that much more room, more space for his configurations to flower in."

"We could not bear to be apart, for we both felt, were certain, that once the Masterpiece was finished we could leave circus, carnival, or Vaudeville forever. It was grandiose, yes, but we knew that once finished, I could be toured through the Art Institute in Chicago, the Kress Collection in Washington, the Tate Gallery in London, the Louvre,

the Uffizi, the Vatican Museum! For the rest of our lives we would travel with the sun!"

"So it went, year on year. We didn't need the world or the people of the world, we had each other. We worked at our ordinary jobs by day, and then, tin after midnight, there was Willy at my ankle, there was Willy at my elbow, there was Willy exploring up the incredible slope of my back toward the snowy-talcumed crest.

Willy wouldn't let me see, most of the time. He didn't like me looking over his shoulder, he didn't like me looking over my shoulder, for that matter. Months passed before, curious beyond madness, I would be allowed to see his progress slow inch by inch as the brilliant inks inundated me and I drowned in the rainbow of his inspirations."

"Eight years, eight glorious wondrous years. And then at last it was done, it was finished. And Willy threw himself down and slept for forty-eight hours straight. And I slept near him, the mammoth bedded with the black lamb. That was just four weeks ago. Four short weeks back, our happiness came to an end."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor. "You and your husband are suffering from the creative equivalent of the 'baby blues,' the depression a mother feels after her child is born. Your work is finished. A listless and somewhat sad period invariably follows. But, now, consider, you will reap the rewards of your long labor, surely? You will tour the world?"

"No," cried Emma Fleet, and a tear sprang to her eye. "At any moment, Willy will run off and never return. He has begun to wander about the city. Yesterday I caught him brushing off the carnival scales. Today I found him working, for the first time in eight years, back at his Guess Your Weight booth!"

"Dear me," said the psychiatrist. "He's . . ."

"Weighing new women, yes! Shopping for new canvas! He hasn't said, but I know, I know! This time he'll find a heavier woman yet, five

hundred, six hundred pounds! I guessed this would happen, a month ago, when we finished the Masterpiece. So I ate still more, and stretched my skin still more, so that little places appeared here and there, little open patches that Willy had to repair, fill in with fresh detail.

But now I'm done, exhausted, I've stuffed to distraction, the last fill-in work is done. There's not a millionth of an inch of space left between my ankles and my Adams apple where we can squeeze in one last demon, dervish ox baroque angel. I am, to Willy, work over and done.

Now he wants to move on. He will marry, I fear, four more times in his life, each time to a larger woman, a greater extension for a greater mural, and the grand finale of his talent. Then too, in the last week, he has become critical."

"Of the Masterpiece with a capital M?" asked the doctor.

"Like all artists, he is a superb perfectionist. Now he finds little flaws, a face here done slightly in the wrong tint or texture, a hand there twisted slightly askew by my hurried die to gain more weight and thus give him new space and renew his attentions. To him, above all, I was a beginning. Now he must move on from his apprenticeship to his true master works.

On, Doctor, I am about to be abandoned. What is there for a woman who weighs four hundred pounds and laved with illustrations? If he leaves, what shall I do, where shall I go, who would want me now? Will I be lost again in the world as I was lost before my wild happiness?"

"A psychiatrist," said the psychiatrist, "is not supposed to give advice. But ..."

"But, but, but?" she cried, eagerly.

"A psychiatrist is supposed to let the patient discover an cure himself. Yet, in this

case. . ."

"This case, yes, go on!"

"It seems so simple. To keep your husband's love.."

"To keep his love, yes?"

The doctor smiled. "You must destroy the Masterpiece."

"What?"

"Erase it, get rid of it. Those tattoos will come off, won't they? I read somewhere once that--"

"Oh, Doctor!" Emma Fleet leaped up. "That's it! It can be done! And, best of all, Willy can do it! It will take three months alone to wash me clean, rid me of the very Masterpiece that irks him now. Then, virgin white again, we can start another eight years, after that another eight and another.

Oh, Doctor, I know he'll do it! Perhaps he was only waiting for me to suggest-and I was too stupid to guess! Oh, Doctor, Doctor!" And she crushed him in her arms. When the doctor broke happily free, she stood off, turning in a circle.

"How strange," she said. "In half an hour you solve the next three thousand days and beyond of my life. You're very wise. I'll pay you anything!"

"My usual modest fee is sufficient," said the doctor.

"I can hardly wait to tell Willy! But first," she said, "since you've been so wise, you deserve to see the Masterpiece before it is destroyed."

"That's hardly necessary, Mrs.-"

"You must discover for yourself the rare mind, eye and artistic hand of Willy Fleet, before it is gone forever and we start anew!" she cried, unbuttoning her voluminous coat.

"It isn't really"

"Merely," she said, and flung her coat wide.

The doctor was somehow not surprised to see that she was stark naked beneath her coat.

He gasped. His eyes grew large. His mouth fell open. He sat down slowly, though in reality he somehow wished to stand, as he had in the fifth grade as a boy, during the salute to the flag, following which three dozen voices broke in an awed and tremulous song:

O beautiful for spacious skies
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain

But, still seated, overwhelmed, he gazed at the continental vastness of the woman.

Upon which nothing whatsoever was stitched, painted, water-colored or in any way tattooed.

Naked, unadorned, untouched, unlined, unillustrated. He gasped again.

Now she had whipped her coat back about her with a winsome acrobat's smile, as if she had just performed a towering feat. Now she was sailing toward the door.

"Wait-" said the doctor.

But she was out the door, in the reception room, babbling, whispering, "Willy, Wiffy!" and bending to her husband, hissing in his tiny ear until

his eyes flexed wide, and his mouth firm and passionate dropped open and he cried aloud and clapped his hands with elation.

"Doctor, Doctor, thank you, thank you!" He darted forward and seized the doctor's hand and shook it hard. The doctor was surprised at the fire and rock hardness of that grip. It was the hand of a dedicated artist, as were the eyes burning up at him darkly from the wildly illuminated face. "Everything's going to be fine!" cried Willy.

The doctor hesitated, glancing from Willy to the great shadowing balloon that tugged at him wanting to fly off away. "We won't have to come back again, ever, Good Lord, the doctor thought, does he think that he has illustrated her from stem to stem, and does she humor him about it? Is he mad? Or does she imagine that he has tattooed her from neck to toe-bone, and does he humor her? Is she mad?

Or, most strange of all, do they both believe that he has swarmed as across the Sistine Chapel ceiling, covering her with rare and significant beauties? Do they both believe know, humor each other in their specially dimensioned world?

"Will we have to come back again?" asked Willy Fleet a second time.

"No." The doctor breathed a prayer. "I think not."

Why? Because, by some idiot grace, he had done the right thing, hadn't he? By prescribing for a half-seen cause he had made a full cure, yes?

Regardless if she believed or he believed or both believed in the Masterpiece, by suggesting the pictures be erased, destroyed, the doctor had made her a clean, lovely and inviting canvas again, if she needed to be. And if he, on the other hand, wished a new woman to scribble, scrawl and pretend to tattoo on, well, that worked, too. For new and untouched she would be. "Thank you, Doctor, oh thank you, thank you!"

"Don't thank me," said the doctor. "I've done nothing."

He almost said, It was all a fluke, a joke, a surprise! I fell downstairs and landed on my feet! "Goodbye, goodbye!" And the elevator slid down, the big woman and the little man sinking from sight into the now suddenly not-tab-solid earth, where the atoms opened to let them pass. "Goodbye, thanks, thanks ... thanks ..."

Their voices faded, calling his name and praising his intellect long after they had passed the fourth floor.

The doctor looked around and moved unsteadily back into his office. He shut the door and leaned against it. "Doctor," he murmured, "heal thyself."

He stepped forward. He did not feel real. He must lie down, if but for a moment.

Where? On the couch, of course, on the couch.

1961

The end