

## Pure Inspiration

By Molly Cincotta

She woke up early as always, but he was already awake. He was sitting at the desk across the room typing furiously on the computer, his nose inches from the screen. She pushed back the covers and slid out of the bed. She stood behind him and watched for a moment as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

“Mind if I take a shower?”

He jumped a little, but didn’t turn from what he was doing.

“Not at all. Out in the hall on the left. There should be towels on the doorknob.”

“Thanks.”

She rolled her shoulders and walked to the bathroom. There was one well worn towel crumpled on the floor in front of the door where, she assumed, it had once been hanging. She showered quickly and dried off, flipping her hair up into the towel. She walked back into the bedroom naked.

“You wouldn’t believe this,” he said when she entered.

“Wouldn’t I.” She hunted down her underwear and jeans.

“It was amazing, last night I figured it out. I’ve been stuck on this one part of the story for months now, and I know how it’s going to end now!”

She pulled her tank top over her head. “Thrilled to hear it.”

“Months. Months!” The clacking of the keyboard sped up. “I thought this one was doomed, but I can see it now, exactly where it’s going to go.”

“Exciting.”

“It’s the best thing that’s happened to me since I started this horrible novel. Which is why I’m so caught up now. You understand.”

“Certainly.” She sighed. “I’ll show myself out.”

“Thanks, you’re the best. Leave you number or something, I’ll call you. When I’m done we can celebrate.” His eyes didn’t leave the screen.

“Sure.” She didn’t bother waiting for a response. She picked up her purse and stalked out of the room. In the hall she paused. She turned to look back at the bedroom.

“Oh what the hell.” She fished a scrap of paper and a pen out of her purse and wrote down her name and number. She let the door slam shut behind her as she left.

Out in the air Thalia lit a cigarette and inhaled the thick smoke slowly before blowing it out through her nostrils. Her cell phone rang.

“Yeah?”

“Hey Thal! It’s Diane. Are we still on for lunch today?”

Thalia looked at her watch. “Yeah sure, 1:30 okay for you?”

“Brilliant. I want to show you this new piece I’m working on. I really think you’ll like this one.”

“Fantastic. Look, I gotta run, but I’ll see you later.”

“Sure, sure. See you.”

She snapped her cell phone shut and flicked the butt of the cigarette into the gutter.

“Hey, can I bum one of those?”

She looked up. A young man with a mop of dark brown hair was balancing on the curb beside her.

“Yeah sure.” She flicked open the pack and held it out.

“Hey thanks,” he said. He fished a lighter out of one pocket and took a long puff. “Whew. Wow, I needed that.” He glanced at his watch. “Shit, I’m late. Thanks!”

Thalia gave him the barest of nods and watched him dash across the street. She looked at her own watch: 10:15. A little early, but Callie had awoken her on many a Sunday morning.

Oh why the hell not. She stepped forward and hailed a cab.

Twenty minutes later she rang the doorbell and fiddled with her purse strap until her sister came to the door. Calliope answered the door wearing a pair of yellow pajamas patterned with cartoon kittens. She took one look at her and sighed. “Not before coffee,” she said and turned to the kitchen.

“Oh come on, it’s not like you have any reason to stay up late.” Thalia pulled open the screen and stepped into the house. She always felt like she needed sunglasses whenever she visited Callie. Her sister had eclectic taste and no real sense of theme to go with it. Shelves of brightly colored collector action figures ran alongside an imitation Rembrandt, which managed to clash horribly with the art deco furniture.

“For your information I was working on my own project all last night,” Callie called from the kitchen.

“Medium?”

“Lyric ballad.”

Thalia winced. “You’ve tried that before, remember? It didn’t end well. Not to mention they’re out of fashion.”

Callie appeared in the kitchen doorway clutching an oversized clay mug.

“I’m perfectly happy with my work. And that’s hardly the reason you’re here at this ungodly hour.”

“Its nearly eleven. You’re just lazy.”

“Thalia.”

“Humph.” Thalia let out her breath all at once and flopped down the couch. “I thought we were symbols of inspiration for human kind.”

“We are.”

“No we’re not. We’re the caffeine jolt for any pathetic asshole who thinks he’s got something to show the world.”

“One night stands hardly ever work out for anyone, Thal. You’re not special.”

“How did you know...?”

“Because you haven’t actually been on an official date in over a decade. And I happen to know that you and Clio went clubbing last night and you ended up going home with someone.” Thalia continued to scowl at the empty air in front of her. “Let me guess; latent writer?”

“Not so latent anymore.”

Callie pushed off of the doorframe and came to sit beside her sister. “Baby, you have to realize that everyone in the world wants to discover some hidden greatness inside of them.”

“So essentially it’s hopeless.”

Callie put an arm over Thalia’s shoulders. “Eventually someone’s going to make the connection. Eventually someone’s going to want you around because they’ll realize that they’re at their best when you’re there. And that’s all anyone can hope for. Even a Muse.”

“Right...so hopeless.”

“You know, you’re awfully bitter for a Muse of Comedy,” Callie remarked, poking her in the side.

Thalia squirmed away. “And you’re a pretty awful poet what for having inspired the great ballads.”

Callie rolled her eyes and stood up. “Get up, get out of my house. Go clean yourself up and next time you meet a nice boy, try talking to him before you jump into bed.”

Thalia shook a cigarette out of the pack. “I think you just called me a whore.”

“I might have. Now get out of here. I’ll see you on Saturday for Mel’s opening. And wait till you’re outside before you light that thing up.”

Thalia had one hand on the doorknob when she paused.

“Callie?” she asked, not turning. “Have you ever found anyone who...could inspire you back?”

There was silence for a moment.

“Once. But it was a long time ago and I haven’t yet been able to create anything worthy of what was inspired.”

“That’s not very encouraging.”

“It’s not meant to be. What it is, is true. It doesn’t just...occur for us the way it does for them, but it still happens.”

Diane's latest painting was a remarkably intricate rendition of two dancers in mid-lift and by the end of lunch she has scuttled off back to her studio with a clear picture in her mind of exactly how to alter the female dancer's right ring finger to get the proper flow into the motion. Thalia remained behind, drinking lukewarm coffee and smoking her last cigarette down to the filter. She stabbed it out in the center of the ashtray and stared at it.

Cigarettes. Remarkably useful things for a Muse. Their presence gave action and purpose to a character, and the look and smell of their smoke could accent nearly any scene. They gave sophistication in one image and took it away in another.

She snorted. That was probably why she'd picked up the habit in the first place.

Thalia was still fiddling with the now empty pack when a hand appeared in front of her face. She blinked several times before it registered that the hand was not only holding a fresh pack of cigarettes, but it was also attached to the young man from the street earlier that day.

"You look like you could use this," he said to her quizzical look.

"I only gave you one," she said.

"Yeah, but I like to repay with interest. This seat taken?"

He didn't wait for an answer, just slid into the empty chair. Thalia shrugged and opened the pack. Almost before she had the cigarette to her lips he had his lighter flaming under her nose.

"I realize you think you're hitting on me, and I'll grant you're very smooth, but I don't date sixteen year-olds."

"Haha, very funny. I'm twenty-five and you can't be more than thirty."

"You'd be surprised."

"At least you've ruled out straight up lesbian. Age is a little easier to work with."

Thalia chuckled. "Oh you mean Diane? She's friendly, but married to her painting."

"That's a shame. She was cute too."

"So what's your poison?"

“Pardon?”

“Watercolor, poetry, the theatre? What talent do you have waiting to be discovered?” She leaned back in her chair and rested her elbow on the back.

He chuckled. “Nah, art’s not my thing. I’m in school to become a lawyer and that’s all I really care about. My grandfather, my father and now me.”

“Oh come on, there must be something. A hobby from high school? An instrument you played in the fourth grade?”

“It’s the hair isn’t it?” he said, running one hand through the mop of it. “Says ‘I want to be a starving artist’ to everyone.”

“Everyone has a dream. They’re just all waiting for the right inspiration to get them going.”

“My ‘dream’ is law, like I said. I guess you could say it’s my passion, but can’t say that it really gets my heart racing. It’s just...what I do.”

Thalia leaned forward and stared at him. “Nothing inspires you? Makes you want to...create something?”

He shifted, looking uncomfortable for the first time. “Not really. I mean, I like a lot of things. I’m just not...intense about any of them.” He snorted. “Geez, you really know how to zone in on a guy’s weak spot.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is this some kind of scheme to get me to go away?”

Thalia laughed. “No, not at all. I’m just...intrigued. I’ve never met someone with no passions before. I don’t think I quite believe you’re for real.”

“Okay, look,” he said, leaning forward to look her in the eye. “I’m not the kind of guy who is waiting to be discovered for something. I figure that whatever you want, you have to go for it, yeah? So I tried painting and music and all that crap growing up. None of it stuck. So my dad says, ‘Follow in the family tradition, be a lawyer,’ and what do I care? If I’m going to spend the rest of my life not being absorbed by what I’m doing I might as well make some money doing it.”

Thalia studied him. “I think being a lawyer counts,” she said slowly. “I think maybe you’re inspired to create order in an otherwise chaotic world.”

He chuckled. “Do you?”

“Yes I do.”

“Well I’ll tell you what, when I win that big case that defeats entropy and puts the universe back on track, I’ll give you a call and you can say ‘I told you so.’”

Thalia smiled and fished through her purse for a pen. She snagged a napkin from the holder beside her and scribbled her name and number on it.

“Better yet, give me a call sometime this weekend.”

He took the napkin and grinned. “That was a hell of a lot easier than I thought it was going to be.”

She shrugged. “I think I’m right, and I wouldn’t want you to forget me before you win your big case.” She stood up and slung her purse over one shoulder.

He glanced down at the napkin. “Thalia, huh?” He looked up at her and held out a hand. “I’m Robin.”

“Nice to meet you Robin. You should call me before Sunday. My sister has an art show opening that I need help getting through. I’ll buy you dinner afterwards.”

His mouth quirked into a half smile. “I’d like that.”

Thalia thought it was cute that Robin held her hand while they looked at the artwork. She could tell he didn’t find it very interesting, but he squinted at each picture with intense concentration before looking at her to move on to the next.

They examined one oil painting of Cleopatra with the asp wound around her torso.

“None of these are very...happy, are they?” he muttered just loud enough for her to hear.

Thalia tilted her head in his direction. “That’s Mel for you. Cheery girl, but attracts tragedy like a magnet. None of the rest of us could ever figure it out.”

“How many siblings do you have anyway?”

“Eight. All sisters.”

“Wow. I was an only child. Must have been a lot less pressure on you to follow in your parents footsteps.”

Thalia suppressed a laugh with a shrug. “Perhaps.”

They moved to the next piece.

“Is that really the only reason you became a lawyer? Your dad?”

Robin shrugged. “I guess.” Then he shook his head. “No, no I guess not. I mean...I like law. There are plenty of worse things to study.”

“You look at things pretty glass half empty, don’t you.”

He gave her a look and gestured to the sculpture in front of them. It depicted a man prostrate before a broken cross. “You’re telling me that? Are you sure your sister doesn’t need therapy.”

“I think if you met...”

“There you are, Thalia!” Melpomene appeared from around the corner and enveloped her sister in a hug. “Callie told me you would be here. She didn’t tell me you were bringing a gentleman friend.” She grasped Robin’s hand in both of her own. “I’m Mel. It is so good to see Thalia out with a guy. I swear she hasn’t been on a date in a century.”

“Mel!”

“Oh hush you know it’s true. Look, you two enjoy yourselves; I’ve got to go keep Clio’s friend from boring all the guests with the historical inaccuracies of the Catherine of Aragon piece. Bye.” She fluttered her fingers at them and then headed off toward a crowd on the other end of the hall.

“You were saying?” Thalia asked sweetly.

“I still think she needs therapy...just maybe not in the upward direction.”

“Join the club,” Thalia laughed. “But seriously, tell me. Why law? Why not just say ‘Fuck you, family tree. I want to be a doctor.’ I hear they make money too.”

He squeezed her hand. “You know, I hadn’t really thought about it before.” He gestured to an ink drawing on the opposite wall. “Let’s go look at that one.”

“You’re not getting away from my question that easily.”

“I know. I’m just giving myself to answer correctly.” He nudged her with their joined hands. “You’re so persistent about it.” He studied the drawing.

“Well?”

He turned to her. "I like things that I understand. Law...makes sense to me. We need rules, and we need to have standards for keeping them enforced. It all...fits." She grinned at him. "Liking things that make sense is a long way from a passion to create order in the universe you know."

"I know," she said, still smiling. "But it gets me a hell of a lot closer than 'I did it because my father wanted me to.'"

He chuckled. "Okay, I will give you that inch."

Calliope found them at the next painting.

"Thalia, you remembered. I'm almost surprised."

Thalia rolled her eyes. "Robin, this is my eldest sister, Callie. Callie, this is Robin. He's a lawyer."

"Going to be. I'm not there quite yet."

"Nice to meet you Robin, are you an artist?"

"No, ma'am."

"Musician, writer?"

"None of thee above. Just a lawyer."

Callie looked at Thalia. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Thalia cast a glance at Robin. "I'll be right back." In a stage whisper she added, "Older sisters you know."

Callie pulled her over beside an abstract sculpture of a woman holding a stillborn child. Thalia eyed it skeptically before turning her attention to her sister.

"So I give up," said Callie. "What does he do?"

Thalia smiled. "Exactly what he said he does, he's a lawyer. Or a lawyer in training."

"And the appeal for you is that, what? He stays in bed longer than the others?"

"I wouldn't know," Thalia responded. "This is our first date."

"So...what's the deal? What's the attraction?"

Thalia looked over to where Robin stood, head cocked to one side as he attempted to take in a series of black and white photographs of beaten women.

“He’s never going to create anything, Thalia. It’s going to drive you mad.”

“He’s a project,” she told Callie.

Callie rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Thal. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to try to change a man.”

“I’m not changing him,” said Thalia, turning back to Calliope. “I’m inspiring him.”