

The Bludgeoning of a Burgeoning Young Artist

by Garrett Socol

Freddy Hodge had always been ahead of his time. The visionary painter was born two weeks premature, kicking his way down Wanda Hodge's uterus. The crib hadn't even been delivered yet, so the four-pound infant was forced to sleep between his eccentric mother and restless father on their tattered bed for the first few nights of his life.

At the age of seven, Freddy broke the nose of a boy who bullied the class nerd.

By the time he was twelve, Freddy had spent a night in jail for assault and battery after striking a bearded stranger who tried to maul his mother.

At fifteen, the rebellious boy was convicted of knocking out a store clerk and stealing art supplies. Tried as a minor, he was sentenced to ten days behind bars plus probation.

The volatile teenager was plagued with deep-seated anger issues, the bulk of his rage directed at his father who deserted the family shortly after the boy's sixth birthday. The small remainder of Freddy's rage was saved for his mother who had turned their tranquil home into a hangout for bikers, hookers, junkies and gypsies, all drawn to the tattoo parlor in the living room.

Specializing in Aztec, skull and snake tattoos, Wanda Hodge's artistic talent brought her celebrity status in the small town of Kennel, twenty miles from the Atlantic coast. Money flowed into Wanda's tattoo parlor, and most of it was spent on the purchase of ink, needles and cocaine, much to the dismay of her only child who begrudgingly learned the family trade.

While Freddy considered himself cursed in many ways, he was blessed with extraordinary physical beauty: blue eyes, golden

hair, olive skin that encased a tight, muscular frame. When he turned sixteen, the girls in the neighborhood began throwing themselves at him as did some of the mothers of the girls. None of this interested Freddy; it was *painting* that became the fractious boy's outlet.

The moment Freddy's brush touched a canvas he felt a sublime rush as if he'd taken some mind-altering substance. The act of choosing a color and spreading it on a blank surface was sacred. It gave him power. Brought him joy. Took him to nirvana.

Just prior to turning twenty, Freddy, was discovered by the renowned patron of the arts Athena Easterling.

Devoting her life to sponsoring burgeoning talent who happened to be young, male and attractive, she explained to Kevin Sessums: "There's a certain sensual strength in the work of a man that I just haven't found in the work of any female." With wild green eyes, mocha painted lips, alabaster skin, and a thick black braid cascading down her back, Athena was a combination of Irish peasant girl and Apache princess, standing six feet tall in bare feet, with every feature appearing enhanced or decorated. Even her unusually crooked teeth seemed that way on purpose, as if to exist as an avant-garde sculpture carved out of pearl.

It was Athena's modus operandi to invite a new protégé into her estate every six months. (She admitted to having a long neck and a short attention span.) Her most recent discovery, Keegan Rhys Malone, a square-jawed painter whose work depicted sensual encounters in dimly lit breweries, was the first artist-in-residence who refused to walk away quietly. "You think you can snap your fingers and make me vanish?" he asked, his eyes burning with contempt.

"From the start this was a temporary arrangement, n'est ce pas?" Athena spoke in a British accent festooned with French phrases and inflections. "Leave. Allez!"

"I feel used," he bellowed.

"Did you not use me too?" Athena asked. "Now please use the front door and depart with dignity."

"I'll paint one masterpiece after the next," Keegan shouted like a crazed revolutionary. "You'll see. I'll be put on a pedestal next to Picasso and Dali."

"Don't forget to take your toiletries," Athena said.

Freddy Hodge came to Athena's attention through her personal assistant Bitsy Woo. While thumbing through a magazine in the reception area of her gynecologist's office, Bitsy came upon an article about Freddy and Wanda entitled *The Art of Mother and Son*. Accompanying the piece were photographs of Wanda's tattoo designs as well as Freddy's paintings. Bitsy was so struck by the boldness of Freddy's art, especially its riveting depiction of the relationship between food, sex and blood, that took the magazine with her. Athena was impressed enough to request a meeting.

Freddy borrowed his mother's jalopy with its busted headlight and small hole in the floor on the passenger side. As gray clouds swirled above, he zoomed forty miles to the affluent community of Beaux Facade Beach. Freddy had never been this close to such opulence; the topiaries alone took his breath away. After the security guard opened the front gate, Freddy pounded on Athena's solid oak door and was greeted by a wavy haired Aboriginal housekeeper named Peg. She smiled coyly while ushering him into the grand foyer.

The towering Athena breezed into the room followed by three adoring dachshunds. With one bejeweled hand extended and the other waving an Hermes scarf, she introduced herself. Then she took him on a grand tour of the eleven bedrooms and nine baths on three separate floors. Paintings of all sizes and styles dotted the walls. Finally, Athena beckoned her guest to the Victorian sofa in the living room and held his gaze as they descended simultaneously like a team of synchronized sitters.

"I take it you like my work," he said.

"You're renegade and original," she responded, her legs in a lotus position. Despite their three inch height difference and twenty year age gap, there was a comfortable ease between them, a subtle recognition, as if they were members of some unique tribe.

"I've always been a renegade," he said.

"That's what makes you original."

Peg entered the room with a pot of steaming Australian coffee and a plate of chocolate biscotti. She grinned flirtatiously at Freddy before exiting with a petulant swing of her hips.

It took five minutes and our biscotti for Athena to extend Freddy an invitation to move into her home from August through January. "What's the catch?" he asked.

"The catch is you have to paint for five hours every day," Athena explained. "And I own half the work you complete."

"I won't have to wash floors or haul heavy furniture?"

"Would I ask a pianist to chop vegetables with a kitchen knife?"

"I guess not," he said.

There was an implicit understanding, made clear by Athena's gentle stroking of Freddy's silky blond hair, that he would share her canopy bed with its frilly fuchsia pillows. He didn't mind this, despite despising the color of the pillows. In fact, the novelty and perverse nature of the arrangement intrigued him.

"You're an enigma," she told Freddy. "A pauper with the allure of a prince."

"Thanks," he replied. "Can I ask why you do this?"

Athena's face lit up with a knowing smile as if she'd heard the question before. "Bien sur," she said. "I am a connoisseur of art. What I do is search for tomorrow's Matisse, next year's El Greco."

"Cool," he said.

"My great disappointment is that I don't have the talent of an artist." Born in the Greek city of Thessaloniki, Athena Easterling spent her childhood in London, Perth, Lisbon, Paris, Moscow, Las Vegas and Tel Aviv. The family owned a corporation that manufactured and distributed medical supplies, employing more than five thousand

people worldwide. When a freak hot-air balloon accident in the French Pyrenees killed her parents and only sibling, Athena

inherited the business. "And so I found myself an orphan and a billionaire all at once," she ruefully said. "Contrary to what people think, money does not prevent a girl from crying herself to sleep."

"You still run the business?" Freddy asked.

"No, I sold it, made a killing." Athena placed both hands on her chest and took a long deep breath. "You didn't give me an answer," she said, heart racing. "Do you accept my invitation? I don't extend such an invitation to just anybody." Her words were as unsteady as a rickety wooden bridge in a windstorm. She understood that she would be heartbroken if he turned her down.

"I'd *love* to hang in these digs, are you kidding?" he said with an incredulous grin.

Freddy moved into Athena's palatial home the following afternoon.

Meals were prepared by Athena's Cordon Bleu-trained chef Lucien, and served by a butler named German (though he was Russian) on large plates decorated with hand-painted Chinese letters. Shaved fennel salad with Macadamia nut-crusted sea bass replaced corndogs and fries as Freddy's typical dinner. On his second night at the mansion, Athena insisted on changing his name to Frederick Rhys Hart.

"Definitely has class," he admitted.

Stimulated by his magnificent new surroundings, the young artist spent at least ten hours a day on a creative high, occasionally taking a break to watch the crashing waves on the beach or the cloud shadows that moved across the Athena's rock garden. One particular rock, gold and football-shaped, actually shimmered in sunlight, and Freddy was so dazzled by it that he displayed it in the studio.

During his stay at the estate, Freddy created two influential pieces acclaimed by art aficionados in three continents. About *Naked Laundress Flying Over Liverpool*, the renowned critic Jackson Wise wrote: "Hart's golden orange sky, perhaps the world on fire, reflects a frightening, post-apocalyptic universe. His loosely

thrusting strokes are the carriers of idealism, symbols of the mad, limitless possibilities of the creative mind at work.”

About *Prairie of the Wounded Prostitutes*, the renowned critic Lance Phlug wrote: “Hart's new work is strangely reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec with the added influence of Degas, specifically the latter's deep psychological intimacy found in his early family portraits. But Hart's rebellious spirit looms large. Each painted prostitute nail, each braid of hooker hair, each fold of slut skin, shrieks of non-conformity thanks to either its bold color or magnified size.”

Athena read this review to Freddy as they sipped pomegranate martinis. Nothing gave her more pleasure than to make Freddy smile. Every night, in the half dark, Athena gazed at the body in her bed. He always slept on his side, the soft blanket draped over his hip. A narrow ribbon of light illuminated the roundness of his shoulder, the thickness of his thigh. Sometimes she buried her face in the sturdy stone wall that was his back, held onto his torso like a life raft, breathed *him* instead of air. Sometimes she was moved to unexpected tears by his ravishing, dangerous beauty.

As for Freddy, he felt like he'd been rescued from an infested, polluted pit, and his gratefulness gradually grew into a kind of unexpected love. “We are outcasts,” Athena said. “Personae non gratae. The world does not want us to breathe the same air, eat the same food, swim in the same ocean. But we need to breathe and eat and swim, you see.”

One of Athena's stranger habits was wiping her mouth on Freddy's underwear while he was wearing it. This only occurred after dinner. When the meal ended, Freddy would routinely unzip his trousers and allow Athena to briefly wipe her lips on his boxers. Freddy chose to wipe his lips on a cloth napkin.

One night before dinner as the scent of roasting lamb wafted into the room, Freddy fiendishly grinned. “The time has come,” he said.

“The time? For what?” Athena asked.

“For me to ink you.” Before Athena had a chance to express her horror, Freddy raced out of the room to grab his tattoo materials. When he returned, he created an exquisite two-tone butterfly on Athena's left calf.

One hundred miles west, Keegan Rhys Malone couldn't shake the humiliation of his banishment from Athena's palace, especially since he stopped taking his anti-psychotic medication. Adding insult to brutal injury, he found Freddy's work obvious and unoriginal.

In Keegan's first gallery showing since exiting Athena's estate, the esteemed critic Sander Dunn wrote: “Still using the brewery as his backdrop, the artist is stuck in a world that has lost its luster. The young women in *Ladies Bathing in Lager* seem bored by their activity just as the scantily-clad servant girl does in *Rubbing Brown Ale on the*

Albino. Even in the striking *Let's Scare Bonnie to the Brink of Death*, Mr. Malone's spatial relations seem off. The startled Bonnie, with her frightened eyes, appears infinitely larger than the two men attempting to stuff her into the mash tun. A promising talent neglected to keep his promise.”

This scathing review pushed Keegan over the edge. The very day the critic's words appeared in print, the artist filled up the gas tank of his red Corvette and headed east, armed with a box of granola bars, a six-pack of Guinness, and a hunger to set things straight.

When he arrived at the security gate of Athena's manse, he faked a cheerful smile for Scutter, the jovial guard he had befriended (and gifted with bottles of brandy) during his six-month stay. “Scutter my man,” Keegan said. “Would you believe I left one of my sketch pads on the front porch?”

“Not a problem,” Scutter said, reaching for the phone.

“Don't bother Miss Easterling. It's in a pile under the patio table. I don't even have to go into the house.”

“All right then,” Scutter said.

The electronic gate opened, and Keegan proceeded. He pulled up to the patio,

then quickly entered the house through a side door. Freddy was exactly where Keegan expected him to be, in the studio, standing before his canvas, brush in hand.

With a demonic shine in his eyes, the wronged artist pulled out a nylon rope from his pocket and entered the studio, approaching his rival from behind. In a sudden rush, he lunged at Freddy with maniacal force and tied the rope tightly around his neck. Freddy realized he had little to no chance of freeing his constricted airways, so he tried another tactic. With his left knee, he used every bit of available strength to kick his attacker in the groin. The move was so powerful and unexpected that Keegan wailed in pain like a wounded horse before falling to the terra cotta tile floor. As Freddy grabbed his football-shaped rock, the thrill of the fight came charging back to him like hunger after a lengthy fast. He bashed the boulder into Keegan's head and felt intoxicated by the joy of physical assault. As he prepared to strike the shrieking victim one more time, Keegan yelled, "Don't!"

"Why not?" Freddy asked, his arms suspended in midair. "You were about to choke me to death, right?"

"I was thinking about it," Keegan confessed.

"Is there some reason why I shouldn't knock the living daylights out of you?" Freddy asked. Keegan took a few moments to consider this, but it was one moment too long. Freddy delivered the lethal blow just as Athena rushed into the studio, her three dachshunds scurrying behind. "Mon Dieu!" she cried, frozen in the cold wind of shock.

"Who the hell is this guy?" Freddy shouted. "He tried to kill me."

"That's Keegan," she mumbled, staring at the burgundy blood gushing from his head. "An artist who lived here once. I'll have Peg fetch the police."

Freddy pleaded self-defense. The violent incident made headlines and became fodder for the blogosphere, tabloid magazines and cable news networks.

The ensuing trial was nothing less than a media circus with crowds of frenzied onlookers gathering outside the courthouse each morning, holding signs that read either *Free Freddy!* or *Fry Freddy!* There was no denying that young Frederick Rhys Hart bludgeoned Keegan Rhys Malone; the only question was motive. Athena came to Freddy's defense, but her character was sullied by conservative activists who painted her as an immoral predator who purchased young men for her personal pleasure. Freddy was painted as a painter who connived his way to fame, fortune, and fine dining, a combination obsessed Wunderkind and streetwise thug.

Media savvy attorney Roz Weinkrantz-McClure, who agreed to take Freddy's case, told her client, "Never underestimate the power of the people." She booked Freddy on a string of popular news programs and instructed him to focus on his unusual childhood: the abandonment by his father, the tawdry activities that took place in his mother's tattoo parlor. She also instructed him to wear a tight muscle T-shirt. Public sympathy quickly swayed to Freddy's camp.

It took the jury a mere twenty minutes to reach a verdict. The foreman, a lanky tree surgeon with grass stains on his rumpled shirt, solemnly announced: "We find the defendant, Frederick Rhys Hart, not guilty."

Public outcry was immediate. Freddy's supporters cheered; his detractors chanted the name Keegan Rhys Malone as they marched in candlelight vigils. Some in the media suspected the verdict was a result of Freddy's undeniable sex appeal. One of the jurors actually admitted (to the Associated Press) that she found Freddy "ferociously seductive."

Frederick Rhys Hart changed his name back to Freddy Hodge and declined Athena's offer to move back into the mansion, explaining that it was time to move on, free of entanglements and potential gossip. This stunning, mystifying news hit Athena like a

meteor. It was as if a plug had been pulled from her body and her organs could no longer function properly. The no-end-in-sight agony began to saturate her spirit until it engulfed her.

One month after this unsparing decision, Athena swallowed thirty sleeping pills with a strong pomegranate martini. Then she took a kitchen knife and stepped into a tub filled with warm water and freesia scented bubbles. As she luxuriated in the bath, she lifted her leg and deliberately slashed her ankle, making a sizeable cut into her one and only tattoo. She rested her leg on the side of the tub so that she could watch her two-tone butterfly bleed to death. After a vibrant and colorful life that had taken her from Stonehenge to Red Square to the Champs-Elysees to the Liberace Museum, the dazzling Athena Easterling reached an abrupt dead end.

Consumed with grief, Freddy couldn't wrap his head around this startling loss. The woman who had rescued him was now gone, leaving a gaping hole in his life. At the same time, commercial success came at the artist with such mighty force that he barely had time to mourn. His paintings were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, he earned millions in product endorsements (Crayola crayons, Abercrombie & Fitch twill shorts), and a major television network was negotiating with his mother (who closed her tattoo parlor to become her son's manager) about a reality show. Freddy's deadbeat father crawled out of the woodwork, claiming he wanted to become a family again. Freddy pummeled him in the stomach after spewing a series of obscenities.

When a terrific house two miles north of Athena's mansion went on the market, Freddy bought the place. It was considerably smaller than Athena's but with a cozy guest house in which Wanda decided to live. Freddy hired Athena's world-class chef Lucien as well as her Russian butler German.

He began painting less and less; six hours a day became four, then two. Then he stopped altogether and decided to spend a year abroad, visiting Greece, London, Perth, Lisbon, Paris, Moscow, Las Vegas, and Tel Aviv before being banned from three separate

airlines for striking three male flight attendants in three separate incidents. It seemed as if Freddy was banished to his home forever. It seemed to his *mother* that he lived with an intense desire for absolution, something he refused to discuss. Wanda wasn't sure if her son felt more guilty about the murder of the young artist or the abandonment of the older woman, but she undoubtedly leaned toward the latter.

One overcast day in July, as gray and white clouds swirled above, Freddy picked up his brush. It felt foreign to him, unnatural, the way a right-handed person might feel using a pair of scissors with his left hand. Still, he pushed himself to paint. Hours passed like days until Freddy reconnected with his gift, and when he did, it felt as if he'd never taken a break.

This began a new era in the life and career of Freddy Hodge. Something was different, however. Every piece of work he completed, whether a simple sketch in black and white or an elaborate painting in vibrant color, featured a thin, quirky creature sitting in a lotus position with a martini glass in one hand and an Hermes scarf in the other. Sometimes this intriguing figure was front and center; sometimes it was in the background camouflaged by color and light. But wherever it happened to be on the canvas, the eye of the beholder was undeniably, inexplicably drawn to it.

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