

THE PRINCESS OF PINUPS

Her image is iconic: That perfect body, that trademark haircut, that good-girl-gone-so-very-bad grin. She's Bettie Page, the Queen of Hearts, the undisputed empress of 1950s pinup girls. Yet for a woman who can be seen everywhere from lunchboxes to tattoos to an upcoming biopic slated to star Liv Tyler, Bettie herself has stayed out of the limelight since her heyday nearly half a century ago. In a rare interview granted to A&F's Sean T. Collins, the still-feisty Ms. Page sets the record straight about why she walked away. And, with a Tennessee accent sweet as molasses, she demonstrates why she still occupies the hearts—and bedroom walls—of America.

I want this cleared up: I just saw myself on another documentary on TV the other night, and they claim that my big ambition was to be an actress. That is not why I went to New York. I went after I got divorced because I always wanted to see Times Square, the subway, the bridges—things that everybody always wanted to go there to see! I just drifted into the modeling.

The story of how I got started modeling has been told a lot, but a lot of lies have been told about it. I was out on Coney Island. It was October of 1950, and I had never been there before. And I saw this black fella, Gary Tibbs—man, did he have a beautiful body! I was very interested in a good-looking body. He was doing these exercises on the beach, and I sat down not too far from him to watch him. He had little trunks on and, man, was he built. When he put his clothes on, he came over and said, "Have you ever done any photographic modeling?" I said no. He said, "I think you'd make a good model. I'm a Brooklyn policeman, but my hobby is photography. I have my own studio, and I'll make a little portfolio for you to take around, free of charge, if you'll do it for me." It was beautiful, the way he could retouch photos. He sold my first pictures to a little magazine in Harlem. He's the one who got me wearing bangs. For years I had my hair parted down the middle in a ponytail, tucked down around the sides. But he said to me, "Bettie, you've got a very high forehead. I think you'd look good if you cut some bangs to cover it." Well, I went and cut the bangs, and I've been wearing them ever since. They say it's my trademark. But one thing he did irked me, though. I was about 10 pounds more than I was later on during my modeling years, but he didn't think I had enough breasts. So he made me stuff the bras of my bikinis with Kleenex. I said, "Do you even think I need that?" "Well, I think you need a little more in the 'upper stories,'" he put it. You can tell in the pictures that it's sort of uneven-looking, but that's what he wanted, and there was nothing I could do about that.

Gary got me started posing for camera clubs. I was never one who was squeamish about nudity. I don't believe in being promiscuous about it, but several times I thought of going to a nudist colony.

I love to swim in the nude and roam around the house in the nude. You're just free as a bird! If you haven't been swimming in the nude, you ought to try.

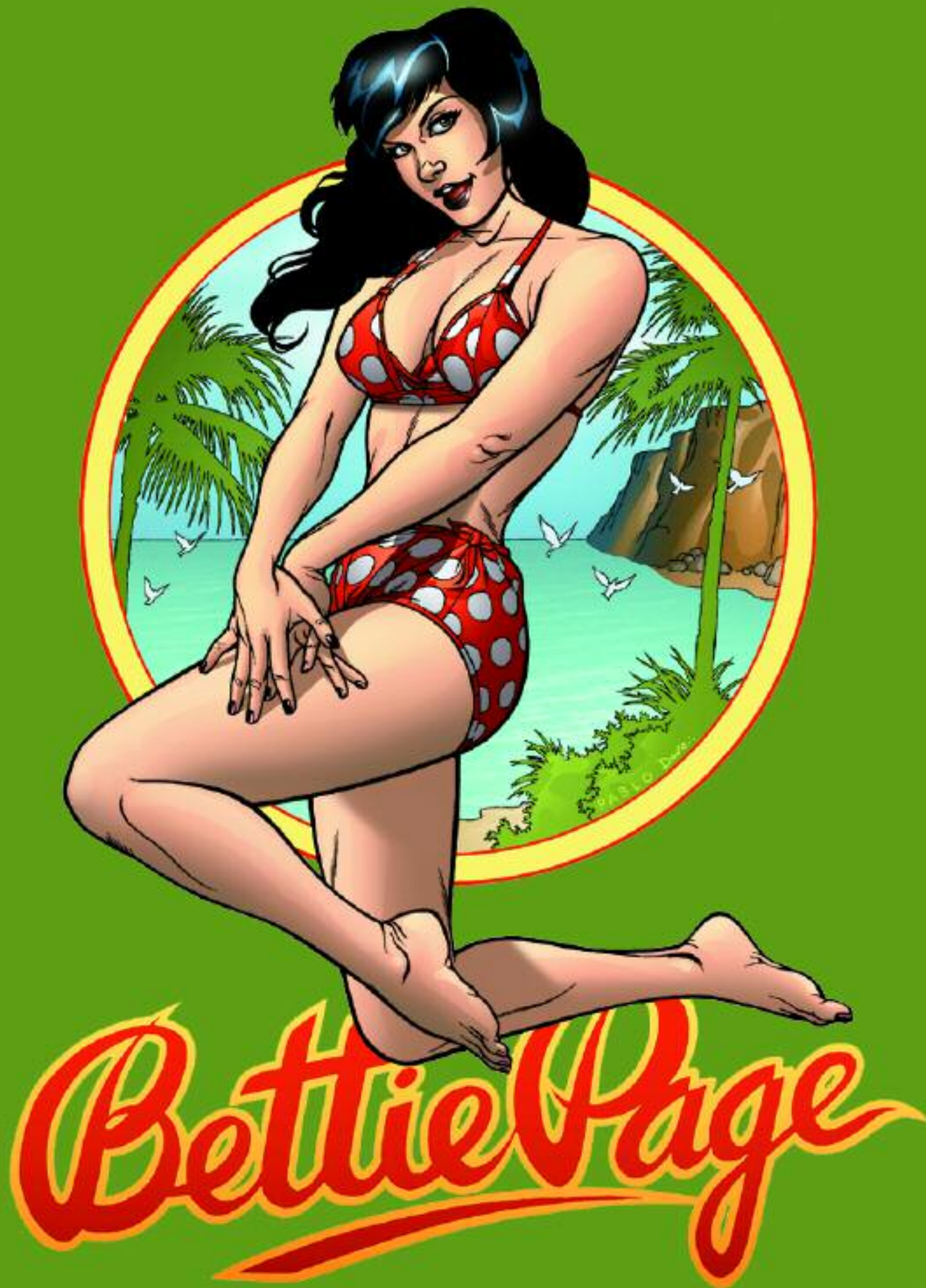
You feel unencumbered and so free. It's just another world, swimming nude. But you know, they called me a sort of innovator for sex and all—I had less sex during those seven years in New York than I had any other time in my life! During those years I was dating an actor and bodybuilder.

Bodybuilders aren't sexually minded much, and he did not appeal to me sexually. We'd go camping, and we slept in a pup tent most of the time, all wrapped up, and the most we would do is kiss a little bit. I had wonderful times with that fella, but no sex. Oh, I enjoyed my sex, but I wouldn't do anything if I wasn't in love with the fella. That was for four years, and they talk about me being an innovator of sex!

You wanna talk about a dirty liar? Old Senator Estes Kefauver. I would like to string him up and stick pins in him, him and his whole committee. He was wanting to be president, old Senator Kefauver, and he was from my home state, Tennessee. He started on this whole crusade about pornography. He got it in his mind that old Irving Klaw, the only photographer I ever did bondage for (and I only did it because it was required to get paid—now people think I go in for that stuff!), was the worst purveyor of pornography in the United States. Two members of the Kefauver Committee came out and knocked on my door one morning and said, "We are going to put Irving Klaw up on the stand for pornography." And I said, "Irving doesn't even do *nudes*! He's so careful, since his photos go through the mail, that he won't even show the nipples through the bikini or bra that's too thin. He puts pasties on you. Many times we had to wear two pair of panties, so that no shadow of the pubic hair would show." But those dirty louses, they were accusing *me* of something. Some young fella somewhere in Florida—I think he was 16 years old—had a lot of my bondage pictures, and he killed himself while he was looking at one of them. The police said I was responsible for the death of that boy, because when he had killed himself he was all tied up like in some of my pictures, with a gag in his mouth. That's one of the reasons they were going to make me testify. I had nothing to do with it. I am not responsible for the pictures that boy bought or anything else.

They didn't even believe me when I said Irving didn't even do nudes, much less open poses—that's what they called pornography back then. I was asked a lot to do open poses, but I would never do it. But there was one camera club that I posed for a lot, and they paid me a lot more than any of the others. They had a big party one St. Patty's Day, which was a big thing over in New York in those days, you know, with the parade and everything. I used to hate alcohol—my mother drank when her second marriage flopped, and because of the way she was, I hated anything having to do with whiskey, and I wouldn't even touch it. I was afraid to get addicted to it. But they knew that I liked light, sweet May wine, and blackberry brandy, so they had that there. Well, I got drunk apparently, and I had never been drunk in my life. To make a long story short, I must have done open poses





and didn't even remember. A couple weeks later these two plainclothesmen came to my door and said, "Bettie, we have some pictures we want to show you. Can you tell us who this girl is?" Well, they were of me, nasty-looking things, and they had even taken ones up close of my private parts and all. I said, "I know exactly where they came from." The head of the camera club claimed to the police that he was playing the horses on Long Island and owed his bookie a lot of money, about \$800. And his bookie was going to beat him up if he didn't get paid, so the guy sold those pictures from the party in the underground shops on 42nd Street. And that's the pictures that the plainclothesmen had. They went through all the shops that were selling the pictures and got all the negatives and all the pictures. Later, the police said he told them he was sorry he had to sell the pictures—he said he might have been killed, and he had to get the money somewhere. It sort of soured me on modeling.

But let me finish about the Kefauver Committee. Those dirty louses made me go down to the Federal Courthouse Building down near Wall Street. They had me sitting there outside the courtroom now from 9 o'clock in the morning until 1 a.m. Finally—I don't even know how late it was—the janitor was cleaning up in there. He said, "Lady, what are you doing here?" I said, "Nobody told me I could go home." "Of course. It's been over hours ago, and everybody's gone home." "Well, why didn't they tell me?" "I don't know, lady, but you gotta get out of here." I had to try to get home at 1 a.m. from all the way down in Greenwich Village back up to West 48th! I was so angry I could have bit nails. Everybody had left and didn't even tell me! I had told them I wasn't going to testify and say that Irving Klaw was selling pornographic pictures. I said, "I will not lie about it." But you know, it ruined Irving. They confiscated nearly every one of his pictures, and nearly all of them were of me. It caused him to get shaken, them claiming he did open poses and having him on the stand for hours, trying to make him confess. They just ruined him. Poor Irving, he died shortly afterwards.

Something else was happening at the time. I don't know if anyone knows much about this. I started getting these horrible letters in the mail, full of terrible things this guy was going to do to me. He would take pliers and pull the ends of my breasts out. Even worse things he was going to do to me down below, if I didn't send him pictures. I got frightened. I called the police about it, and they called the FBI because there was a murderer of women they were looking for who would write horrible letters to women before he would slit their throats. They thought this might be him. This monster wanted me to have photos delivered to him on Amsterdam Avenue at 116th Street at one in the afternoon. "You'd better be there," he was warning me. Well, the FBI were parked across the street in a couple of cars, just like something in the movies. They had me stand on that corner with a manila envelope, as if I had photos. Finally, a couple of teenage boys came out the apartment building right across the street, looked around and came back in. The FBI guys went after them, and it turned out that the monster writing me those horrible letters was a 16-year-old boy. They identified his typewriter—in the letters he was typing to me the *T* was broken, and he had that on his typewriter. They finally got him to confess. A 16-year-old boy with a mind like a maniac. Well, that got to me.

So, I decided I wasn't going to model anymore. Not only that—they were going to tear down my apartment building to make one of those big parking garages for Rockefeller Center. That was another reason I wanted to get out of New York. I was tired of modeling by then. I thought I was too old, because my breasts were beginning to sag. I thought that I would retire when they had too many pictures of me, and they had. I just wanted to do something else.

All this hogwash about me disappearing—where do they get this, somebody tell me!

All I did was decide to leave, to stop modeling and do something else with my life. I married a young fella who only cared about three things: movies, sex and hamburgers. I divorced him after ten months and eventually married a man with two boys and a girl, which I always wanted, but his ex-wife drove us apart. I also received Jesus as my savior. Yet there's all kinds of wild stories going around that I was living in a trailer park in Kentucky, and that I married some kind of rajah in India and was one of his harem. Who knows how these stories get around?

I tell you, my agent and I were going over my recent years of popularity, and even he doesn't understand. There were models in New York whose pictures have been all over, and they have not had the resurgence of popularity in all these years—all of it's me. Why, I do not know. But listen to me—I've gotten more money from it now than I ever did get back in my modeling days. I just got a swimming pool and a Jacuzzi. It makes a difference. Why, they call me an icon now, and I was trying to get my agent to explain to me what an icon is. They call me a supermodel—oh yeah, don't forget the supermodel! Back in the business, we never heard of a supermodel, or an icon either. Now, I can understand maybe Marilyn Monroe is one, but not me. Anyway, I think old stars ought to bow out, and not be in the public eye anymore, and let the old pictures be shown from when they were looking good. I feel that way about myself. That's why I don't mind doing audio interviews, on the tape recorder or telephone, but I do not want to be photographed. I want to be remembered as I was during my glory days. We all change when we get old, and I don't even like to see myself in the mirror. I don't look that bad, but compared to the way I used to look, I do. I put a few pounds on like most everybody when they get older, but I'm getting it off now. I got my aerobics plan set up. I work out half an hour every night. And I'm going to build up my heart. My goal is to live to be a healthy 100 and beyond. But I've been a night owl all my life, so I need to get more sleep or I'll never make it.

Did I say anything incriminating? Well, give your girlfriend an extra kiss for me, and you behave yourself and don't take any wooden nickels.

Opposite page: Illustration by Pablo Raimondi. Previous spread: Bettie as Playboy's Playmate of the Month, Miss January 1955. Photograph by Bunny Yeager. Reproduced by special permission of Playboy Magazine. Copyright © 2001 by Playboy. Used with permission. For more on Bettie, and on oodles of other delightfully unclothed women, visit Playboy's Cyberclub at playboy.cyber.com. Membership has its privileges, as they say. Bettie has her own Web site, too, replete with swell merchandise, at bettiepage.com.