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It is damp and dark in the corner where I sit. I inhale deeply the smells of working class sweat mingled with the pipe smoke that rises to hover above my head in a gray cloud. The light from lanterns casts deep shadows around the room and creates a welcomed niche of anonymity into which I settle. The noise from other anonymous patrons filters to me in waves. As I methodically pull from the bottle in front of me, the warmth spreads through my body and soothes me.

I have just come from the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, having been summoned there by the priests to discuss the commissioned painting I made for them. They brought me there to inform me they would not accept my painting. You see they are blinded by details and they miss the truth behind the scenes I paint. They are outraged at my depiction of Saint Matthew with dirty feet. It is unsuitable and sacrilegious for a saint to appear earthy, they say. Dirty feet imply work upon the land, a human activity, and therefore it casts Saint Matthew in a human manner. But it is nothing I haven't heard before. Most of my paintings have been objects of criticism at some point. Both the private patrons and the church have been strong opponents of me. They cannot even see the name Caravaggio without anger.

When I was younger I was driven by my desire for realism. The world around me was stimulating and I was intoxicated by even the simplest elements of nature. The beggar outside my apartment was my favorite model and a basket kept me painting for months. I thought the chubby little boy next door was the most angelic image in all of Rome. So I happily painted what I saw and was content. But I realized I was the only one to see it this way. My patrons began rejecting my paintings one by one. My images were too honest for their tastes. Their idea of beauty is not what they see around them, but an idealization of reality.

This constant battle I fight frustrates me to the point of madness. It angers me that they cannot see past these petty grievances to the real issues behind my work. I am angered by the aristocratic patrons in their cozy villas and smug lifestyles. I am angered by their scorn of me when I refuse to idealize them, to mask their wrinkles and scars. I am angered by the church for only accepting the wealthy as ideal images of Biblical devotion. I blatantly lay the emotional truth out on the canvas as my eyes see it. I bare myself, naked before Rome, and all I receive in return are meaningless criticisms of dirty feet and beardless Christs.

The truth is where my vision lies. The church speaks flippantly of truth in all its hypocritical splendor, while I struggle alone in my studio for the same truth through the reality around me. But their truths are only words and my truth an honest vision. All I want, all I have ever wanted, is to be real. The simple workingman, wearing his worn clothing and tired eyes is the image I desire. The common folk I see in the fields at noon and in the taverns at night are the subjects

I devour. To show the human side of all men as well as the human side of our religious icons. To honor these men as they are, to bring these saints to a reachable level. To paint the pain and elation and humility we all feel as clearly as we experience it everyday of our lives, without clutter or elaboration. This is the truth I see and paint.

The church and the aristocracy cast down their eyes on the working class. They say the common people are not worthy of pictorial representation, especially as models of their own saints. But the church is wrong. It is the working class that is real and the aristocracy that is hypocritical.

But of course there is nothing I can do to change their minds. I will not change mine. So I continue to paint the way I want to, the way I have to, and the anger inside me grows. There was a time when I fought this anger, but slowly the anger took over. It became me, now it defines me. It was sometime during this personal metamorphosis that I discovered the connection between anger and the creative process.

So many artists look for ways to open their minds and elevate their creativity. Liquor has always been popular. And now with the establishment of trade with the Orient, opium is gaining a significant following. But drugs are not the way to a higher consciousness. It's anger that motivates me and awakens the creative element within me. It's better than a drug. It is my drug. I need it and I crave it. Anger empowers me. I feel stronger and more controlled when I am in this state of mind. This power gives me passion, too. I think there is something about the intensity of anger that creates this relationship between it and creativity.

When I enter this state of mind, the anger surrounds me like an aura, intensifying my emotions. My senses become acute to every detail; they open themselves up to me. Yet my anger protects me from distraction as well. I am focused and my mind is cleared of everything but the canvas. I see visions of work not yet begun, nonetheless complete. There are saints on their crosses and martyrs on their deathbeds, waiting for my breath on life. There are rich reds and yellows meandering their way across the surface. The anger is my high and the paint my release. I can no longer have one without the other.

I think my addiction to this state of mind is also related to its commonality. When I sit in the tavern or pass the fields I see the anger on the faces around me. It's of a different type than mine and is propelled by other sources, but still it lives and breathes inside them as it does in me. The frustration that comes from working from dawn until dusk to feed a family is something the aristocracy will never understand. But I know something of that exhaustion and the anger it evokes. I know about living hand to mouth while the aristocracy flaunts their wealth with ease. In this system anger is as common as the common folk themselves.

But the aristocracy, too, is not immune to this feeling. They may not understand the anger of an empty stomach or a leaky roof, but in their own way they feel it. In

their own haughty way they are angered by my work and by their reactions to my paintings they become like me. Their anger at my work fuels my own anger and we become united in a never-ending circle. Their outrage at my images gives me the motivation to create more images for them to criticize.

Tonight as I look around me at the faces engaged in frivolous banter, I welcome the madness like the alcohol I pour down my throat. I let it wash over me and thoroughly fill me up.

Lost in this unending train of thought, I look up to find the fleshy, rosy-cheeked waitress hovering over me. She smiles and continues to stand above me expectantly.

“What?” I say irritably.

“Another drink?” she asks.

I say yes and she obtrusively winds her way through the crowd back to the counter, stopping occasionally at other tables. As I wait for her return I reach my hand down to where my sword is resting at my hip. The blade is cool on my hand and at my ankle, where the tip touches me. It calms me a bit to feel it there. I go nowhere without it; in the section of Rome I inhabit we all carry them. It is the only way to insure safety. But I would carry it regardless. It gives me a sense of power.

Continuing to rest my hand on my sword, I glance up to see the waitress approaching me again, a tray loaded with drinks in her hand. As she passes the table just beyond me, her dress catches on a chair, throwing her towards the floor. The tray sways back and forth before taking air and landing in disarray on my table. I am showered with an assortment of liquors and glass.

As the waitress pulls herself from the floor with the aid of a table and several patrons, I grip my sword tighter. Despite the coolness of my soaked clothing against my body, I feel hot all over. Without thinking, I draw my sword from my side and jump from my chair, breaking what little glass was yet unharmed. I reach the stunned waitress just as she's regained her balance. Grabbing her collar with one hand, I force her against a wall. She cowers in my grip, her head bowed for fear of making eye contact with me. I thrust my sword within an inch of her neck and leave it there for a moment. We remain like this and for several seconds the room seems to stand still. Then at once the moment is broken as I feel a strong hand wrap itself around my shoulder. Forgetting the waitress, I turn and extend my free hand without even taking aim. As my fist meets his face, I too, feel a sharp pain on the side of my head. We both stagger backwards, fighting for balance. My leg finds a niche in the uneven dirt floor stabilizing me, and I raise my sword above me in a commanding gesture.

“Who wants a fight?” I shout.

The eyes of those around me lower and my fresh opponent shuffles slowly back to his table. The waitress remains against the wall, eyes still focused on the floor. I replace my sword in its sheath, place my payment on the counter and amid hushed glances, exit the tavern.

The night air is much cooler than in the stuffy tavern, especially against my wet clothing. I feel rejuvenated and I notice my surroundings with a heightened sense of detail. The beggars seem unusually ragged tonight in their worn clothing and unbathed skin. And the lights filtering from upstairs apartments appear unnaturally moody in the dark night. I am anxious to reach my studio; I feel a sudden urge to paint. I can picture the finished canvas as clearly as I can see the rickety carriages rolling by me in the street.

The painting I see is set in a deeply shadowed room of a robust crimson cast. The figures, wearing weeping, sorrowed expressions, gather round the body of a deceased woman. She is draped ungracefully, over a table, barefoot and bloated. She is both hideous and beautiful. She is the Virgin Mary, as the mother of the common and humble. She, modeled from a poor dead woman I saw pulled from the Tiber last week, is also humble and human, herself.

Presently I awaken from my thoughts as I reach my studio. As I enter I throw my cloak and sword on the floor. I light the lanterns and the canvas before me awakens to the flickering light. The palette lies on the table beside me, awaiting use. I immediately mix a warm, rich red and thrust my brush at the canvas. The brush licks the surface repeatedly, more by instinct than by will. Red violet lays itself on top of the red in places. Black enters now; the surface begins to undulate. The layers build, becoming many layers, becoming a thick rich surface. A line of red evolves into a shape, and a draped cloth emerges above the heads of the mourners. I am unaware of time or the space around me. I continue like this for what must be hours, for the light of an early dawn sun is creeping across the canvas before I know it. The lanterns have burned out, the oil used up. When I can no longer stand, I enter my body once again. Laying my brush down, I throw my body onto a small cot on the far side of the room. I am spent and it is only a matter of seconds before I drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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