

the pietà

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He receives her in silence. as if his interacting with anyone were a sacred event.

The solemnity bothers her, it makes her uneasy. Not, she thinks, because she is self-conscious, but rather because she is too aware of the ridiculousness of his gravity. It is ridiculous because she is the object of worship in this back room behind the laundromat – but this she does not realize. She is a woman, though, and should be used to it. But then no, it has only been since she turned twenty-two or -three that she has been seen as woman – so she has had little experience with this pattern of response. (And he so clearly sees her as woman. Is it because he is so uncertainly man? Do homosexual men define women with sharper lines in order to appear clear about their own sexual identity? she didnt know.) At least he has stopped calling her Patty. She will wait for the third name.

Though the absence of small talk is pleasing, she attempts to compensate or cancel or ignore the hallowed hush. She finds the image of monk under vow of muteness welcoming her into his cell as if unfolding a beautiful flower, a little pretentious. he has no cowl.

"I had to come to town to deliver a score, so I thought I'd drop by." Funny she should call Toronto a town – she herself lives on Lake Simcoe, part of (well not really) a small community that didnt even have a population sign.

"So this is your new place," she says hating to resort so soon to the social convention. But she knew he wouldnt accept it, there is no danger of a guided tour requiring correct hums and hahs.

"Yes," he answers definitely, and with an unexpected pride. His movements are slow and wondrous as he finds a place for her jacket.

He had moved two or three months ago. She had called once in the summer and asked to see his work. He had been surprised – an indication of how misunderstood everything still was, since she had thought the event was long overdue and had wandered why it was by request and not by invitation. (But then, she was still waiting for him to ask to hear some of her work.) About a month after she had visited him to see a few paintings, he had called. This had surprised her – up until then, that is since their initial meeting and parting three years ago, all the attempts to 're-kin' had been initiated by her. It was she who had written several times, it was she who had appeared at his doorstep. She had decided that this lopsidedness was responsible for some insecurity on her part – am I pushing myself onto him, does he want to see me, does he think wont this bitch ever let go – and that insecurity, that uncertainty about his evaluation of her, made her overly defensive. It was this defensiveness that had left their first attempt in ruins: after five intense and exhausting hours they both simply gave up and left the field. The second attempt, a year after that, when she had come to see his work, was also almost lost several times; but they managed, just, to keep balanced on the fine line between worthwhile upset and futile outrage. This visit is her third, but at least his phone call has intervened. He said he would like

to visit her sometime but he had just moved and was working on renovations, a lot had to be done, but the place was ideal, he planned to stay for a while this time, and he had arranged to tend the adjoining laundromat, full-time now, maybe only twenty hours a week later, so he couldn't come up yet, the laundromat too needed a lot of cleaning and fixing up.

"Yes," he repeats eventually, and raises his hands. "I raised the ceiling a bit and put in those windows. It was far too dark. I needed the sunlight," he says, his voice heavy with conviction. It sounds like a rationalization.

"And I've learned so much," he continues. "People think they need to apprentice for years before being able to do work like this. It's an illness of our society, this horrid underestimation of human potential and its consequent over-dependence on practice, practice, and more practice for competence." He pauses. She is not sure if he is waiting for her to nod or giving her time to understand what has been said so far. She finds both unnecessary and the pause irritating drama. no, melodrama.

He resumes slowly. "I have never done any carpentering or plumbing before, but after looking through a few books and making a few mistakes," he points to the end window, which has a crack. "I put a nail through that one, it'll have to be replaced – ", he pauses again. "People look at the greats, for instance, Michelangelo, and say, 'the man was a *genius*.' Yes. But that's just it. The *man* was a genius – Michelangelo was, after all, only a man, just like the rest of us. What he can do," he emphasises, "I can do. All you need is desire – true sincere desire," he looks directly at her. But she has come to doubt this theory of the self-sufficiency of romantic passion. She has taught music, for years, and has realized that though much of what he says is true, ambition, even if it is sincere ambition of the strongest, purest kind, is not enough – ability is also required, in proportion to the task at hand.

She dutifully looks around – there certainly is sunlight in the room. but nothing else. no paint, no canvas, no easel. the room is bare.

"You haven't been doing any work?"

"Oh – this isn't where I'll paint. This is where my books will go and my desk. think tank," he summarizes, in that false tone of apologizing for a need that he really thinks is a mark of superiority.

"Oh." She had thought he was so bent on sunlight because of his painting.

"No," he explains, "my work is to be viewed under dim lighting, and so I must paint in the same conditions of light." She wonders about the symbolism of this as he leads around corners and bends, cluttered with books, piles of boxes, some clothes, and a hot plate.

As they pass a narrow door en route, he comments, "I've even installed a shower. There was no plumbing at all when I moved in, that's why the rent is low." They step into a larger (larger, not large) room which is opaque with layers of fine, white dust.

"This will be the studio," he deftly walks around objects, "I took out a wall here," and points, "that's why there's all this plaster dust around. I want to put a backdrop here, some dark cloth," he is so full of his plans, "for when I use models," he gives her a sort of respectful smile. It takes her a moment to realize that it is she he intends to honour by putting on a pedestal. But before she begins to explain that such a position could not be anything but uncomfortable, the memory of a line, three years old (no, far older), comes to her – 'you're *so* beautiful' – his plans are for a nude. the third name already.

"...and what I want to do next is install a solid wood counter here in the middle, to this

wall, put in a sink, with a swing faucet," he has become precise, an authority in this field too, she notices. "So this side will be kind of a kitchen and that side will be for my work, mixing paints, etc. Then the walls have to be redone in drywall."

Have to be? A wall is a wall. If it holds up ceilings and keeps out cold and noise – what is this 'have to be' from one who preaches the necessity of living at the barest possible level of

subsistence? Really was all this work necessary? or just desirable, just his upper class 'essentials'.

"Why?" she asks.

"What?" she has disturbed.

"Why do you *have* to put up drywall?"

"You cant put thumbtacks into plaster and I have all of my prints to put up yet. I have to be surrounded with wall to wall prints," he says glowing, "van Gogh, Rembrandt, ..."

'Have to be' again, from one who would criticize my teaching as selling out, as distracting from my art, to pay the 'unnecessarily' high rent (show me a house for cheaper, why do you need a whole house for yourself, show me someone who accepts tenants with a piano and a dog, well the pet is a luxury and why dont you use a piano at the conservatory or something, well there are lots and lots of prints *and* originals at the galleries and why dont you just fuck off).

"...Michelangelo." He sees the accusation in her eyes. "One's environment greatly affects one's work," he states simply, as if that settles a disagreement.

Yes, she thinks. Yours has succeeded in keeping you from it for months. But she tries to agree – not to gloss over, but to try to show, again, that no matter how much he would like to see in her a nonbeliever to be converted, she is already of the same order as him – that she too is an artist, one who feels greatness.

"Yes", she says, "that is why I like it where I am. I like the silence, the bush and stream in the back, the trees out every window – "

"But that's looking *out*," he attacks, "you're looking beyond, escaping your immediate environment."

She is startled and cannot reply. He is determined in his vision of her.

The guided tour is over, no hums and hahs had been forthcoming. He leads her back to where the desk was. His hand wafts to a stool for her and they sit facing each other. She notices the yellow papers covering the desk – pieces of the credo he is assembling. Two years ago he had said he'd send her a copy when it was finished, to explain what was too much to go into then, yet what was the basis of their fundamental differences, he had said. She does not ask if it's any nearer to completion.

He gazes at her, steadily, lengthily, hoping perhaps to achieve a mystic intermingling of eyebeams. For a while she meets his eyes, for a while she had hoped the same, but then bored, she turns away, pulls out of the staring match. She realizes he will interpret that as her inability to face, her having something to hide, her failure to pass the test of his no-exit eyes. This bothers her because it isnt true. She simply no longer accepts the romantic notion of communication by silence – such messaging is not pure, but ambiguous, in the inner ears of the beholder alone. So she speaks.

"You know, I've been thinking of the various arts. When you paint you must conceive *and* execute. When I compose, I just conceive – as a composer, I am not expected to perform the piece as well. I guess I wonder if that makes composers lesser artists than painters." She

continues, "sculptors are like painters but choreographers are like composers. Writers – well we all know how to write so the execution is eas – is that it? the degree of difficulty in the execution determines – "

"Drawing, painting, involves a large degree of skill too though, the gestures involve as much fine motor control as playing a piano – "

"Do they? I mean, if I were to be able to play my compositions, well, I'd have to be spending at least a couple hours a day at the keyboard just for maintenance, and I dont want to take that time – "

"But why not – if it's a part of your art, you must – "

"But no, there are others who perform, others who have spent lifetimes with their instruments, why should I try to compete? And dont forget, I'm just talking about piano. Would, you say, then, that I must learn each instrument of the orchestra so I can *finish* my work, execute my symphony? That would be impossible."

"Well," he comments carefully, "it wouldn't be impossible. But you must do as much as you can, as best you can." she can hear him adding 'Patty'.

"Well I do." She is getting defensive again. "In fact, I just finished getting all my compositions for solo piano on tape. They're not perfect performances, but it's better than nothing – " hoping for praise, or at least, interest.

He winces, "better than nothing?" He makes her feel as if she had committed some despicable sin. "That is compromise. Why do it at all if it's not the best you can do?" She has to agree. She admired his perfectionist, uncompromising view. It struck a sympathetic chord in her. But she sighs, thinking of how she'd had to record each piece at least twenty times until she could get from beginning to end with not one wrong or missed note. Then she'd hear a crescendo not done just so, or a ritardando not paced as well as she wanted. And if the expressionistic aspects were well done, damn it if she didnt just hit an f there instead of g. It was frustrating work. It took weeks during which she hadnt composed or written anything at all. She had finally finished the taping, accepting imperfect attempts as better than no attempts at all. At least now she could sit and listen to her work – it was different to listen when not playing – and to learn from it. And now others could hear it. After all, she created not just to create, but to communicate.

"Have you ever heard of Wittkower's theory of the *non finito*?" she asks, "the works of art that are never completed because execution constantly falls short of conception. Well, if I adopted your view, my art would be *non existo*."

He doesnt laugh. "But at least then when you did compete a piece, it would be perfect. It would last. It would stand with the masters."

"then when." Yet she has to admit that her own many compositions are pale beside his few leaping torsos and serene visages. No, she rationalizes, it's just that I am more critical of music than painting, that's all.

He pauses, sorrowfully. "You are too impatient."

"Perhaps, yes." Why does she always give in? No, it isnt exactly giving in. There is perhaps some truth to his diagnosis – mirrors can be helpful. Yet she feels defeated, corrected again. She hates the role (always diagnosee) she sinks into when with him. Other times, she would leave, now. – Why doesnt she leave? Why does she keep coming back? At first, she knows, it was because he is one of the few people who is conscious, passionate, actively

thinking and feeling – this attracted and stimulated her. But now, she has her own consciousness and passion and doesn't need to play parasite anymore. Now she keeps coming back because it is important that he know this. she must make him understand, that he is no christ. and she, no disciple.

So she doesn't leave. Instead, she reaches out with her hands, "we haven't touched yet." He smiles and joins his hands with hers. There are words she doesn't say, words half-formed lying restless within her flesh: as long as I am behind you, child, beneath you, body, or above you,

goddess, I am not beside you, human being. She moves her fingers across his hands – marble can be sculpted, it is given meaning by the hands of the artist who molds, interprets, creates as he desires, but you cannot create me as you wish, I am not stone. and every time you raise your chisel, another piece of my freedom to be and be taken for what I am, falls away.

"What happened there?" he asks, noticing the scraped knuckles of her one hand.

"Oh", she smiles, "I'm working on a new technique, playing with one's knuckles."

"Looks like it's working," he smiles back.

"Actually one of the strings was off and I tried to tighten the pin with just an adjustable wrench. I need a ratchet wrench of some sort, I think."

"Ah," he understands, "it's good you're trying to tune it yourself." The compliment insults. "You should learn how to repair your instrument too. You should know everything you possibly can about your instrument. The wood..." he becomes quite intense. no, that's not right. he is never really un-intense. "...a thorough knowledge of and excellence of materials is *essential* if one is to work with those materials to produce a piece of great value."

Upper class remnants again, she thinks. Who is going to pay for this Yamaha concert grand you say I *need*. And, I have better things to do than learn how to build a piano for god's sake. One lifetime is all I have, maybe.

"Do you know what Michelangelo did?" She nods but he doesn't see it, or refuses to believe it.

"Some sculptors just sat in their studios and ordered their marble and they got what they got and that was that. But he, when he was ready to do the pietà, he –"

"He went to the quarry himself." That stops him. but only for a brief moment. His eyes continue to penetrate as he carefully forms his sermon, statement by statement.

"Yes. And do you know how he chose the marble?"

It was a rhetorical question, but she was ready. "He waited," she imitates his gravity, spacing her words as he does, "for the first light of day." She has interrupted, anticipated his punch line, destroyed his delivery. "I read that book too," she adds.

He recovers quickly, "yes." He pauses. She pictures herself running through the jungle chasing ivory. "And that is why there is no marble sculpture that surpasses the pietà in excellence," he ends, reverently.

She is surprised. This causal relationship is new to her. Something about it feels wrong, but she does not say anything. This bothers her because she is sure he interprets the silence, again, as awe and acceptance.

A week later she realized what felt wrong – it wasn't just the causal connection that she rejected, it was also the implied premise: she didn't think the pietà was a great work of art.

Michelangelo had sold out. For one, the piece shows the annoying and sexist stereotype of woman as mother, static support, and man as saviour, hero. But that was the conventional perception, so maybe we'll excuse that. (though masters should rise above convention.) Further, at the time of the crucifixion, Christ was thirty-three; that would have made Mary at least forty-five, she figured, perhaps more like fifty or fifty-five. Yet the pietà shows a woman in her twenties. Clearly Michelangelo thought the ideal woman was young, perhaps even childlike. Too, though not a nude, the pietà shows a woman who is pleasing to look at. He obviously also thought that physical beauty was important. More important than showing the feelings, the

thoughts, the experiences, Mary must have gone through. She continued her analysis, "the pietà has not one wrinkle to show her pain, her courage, her own heroism. No, she is simply *young* and *beautiful*, and therefore *revered*. the three points of the female triangle. How unlike a master – Michelangelo presented and adored mere Beauty and Youth, instead of Reality and Truth; it's all outside instead of inside, all form and no content. Excellence of matter does in *no* way ensure excellence of substance.

That form is related to content is a leftover value of your upper class childhood, she thought. A value you obviously hang on to, she realized. You wander around all day mumbling 'do I dare, do I dare', and then you pick up the circular saw (purchased, not rented or borrowed, it is a good investment you say, too aware that I know your laundromat job pays only \$3.70 an hour) instead of a paint brush. You spend months installing windows – imagine my amusement when I discovered they were not in your studio. The rest of us, whose parents do not give never-due loans, learn to ignore our immediate physical surroundings. Those of us who feel and think become involved with our internal landscape; the quality of wood of the kitchen counter, the convenience of swing faucet – these things become irrelevant.

You are so preoccupied with the *form* of being an artist – with reading voraciously, speaking passionately, living in great faith, undergoing tests and trials. I could remind you that you have done only seven paintings – three are copies, two are unfinished – -but you would call on Leonardo for justification, telling me that he left only thirteen, all of them great works of art.

At which point I would recite your definition of greatness: to be great is to move others to greatness. It's a tautology, Jonathan, it doesn't say anything.           it's all form and no substance  
– it's empty.    like you.       and all you create.            like the pietà.