

An Immaculate Betrayal – Extract – Bellini's Madonna

After a night of poor sleep in a curtained four-poster, Justine set out on foot for the Chiesa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. The rain had moved elsewhere while they slept and the church was not very far. She declined the offer of a lift in the launch from Giovanni, whose bonhomie had returned after the moroseness of the previous night, and left the palazzo by the street door, a black umbrella lent by Giulietta over her arm.

She had been walking for some time when she became aware of increasing pain in her right foot. When she looked down she saw that the crushingly expensive scarlet Louboutin shoes she had slipped on in preference to sensible brogues had already gouged a sizeable red gash in her heel. How very stupid. What kind of life did she lead that blinded her to everyday practicalities? But she had been going for almost twenty minutes, had just crossed the bridge into the Campo San Polo and was too far from the palazzo to backtrack and change. A return to base would also entail loss of face.

Her map told her she was almost there, with only a couple of streets and two bridges to navigate; so she pressed on, favouring her right leg, trying to touch the foot gently to the ground. Throngs of tourists filled the narrow alleyways, veering between workshops selling Carnival masks in their glittering hundreds and boutiques displaying cataracts of Murano glass necklaces, exquisite leatherware. But no one gave a glance at the celebrated actor hobbling in their midst.

Finally she emerged onto the Fondamenta dei Frari, separated from the basilica by only a narrow canal and pretty bridge.

Briefly disorientated as she entered the echoing church, she looked round in irritation, feeling her sore foot and failing to identify the painting she sought. She walked slowly across the red and white marble flagstones to the centre of the nave and saw in front of her, through the arch of the choir, an immense painting, bigger than she remembered ever having seen. Flaming scarlet and gold, it was clearly an image of the virgin but overwhelming and intimidating with its in-your-face quality. Power and Glory Mary, not young and human. She consulted her guidebook: this was Titian's *Assumption*, one of the largest of his works.

She walked towards it and stood for a while, transfixed by the force of the painter's vision, the tumult of activity as the Virgin, transported on a storm-cloud and raised aloft by the hands of cherubs, ascended to her rightful place, arms outstretched in wonder and fulfilment. Justine remembered the slavish, it really had been slavish piety displayed by Sister Joseph, a teacher in the infant section of her convent school, in reaction to images such as this, perhaps even a print of this very painting. Once, as a child long ago, she had shared that devotion but now she felt only alienation.

A muttering close-by and she half-turned to see a young couple, the woman's head covered by a black lace mantilla, drop to their knees in adoration. She moved away, crossing to the right and through a door into a large chapel, lit palely by tall lancet panes at the back of the apse.

And here, above the altar, Bellini's triptych, colours glowing bright but soft; in the centre, the Virgin and Child. But this virgin radiated sweetness and simplicity, with an extraordinary and moving luminosity that held Justine spellbound.

Mary was clothed plainly in a crimson shift and a blue cloak with a thin gold border. The hands that steadied the baby were smooth and soft, hands that had never scrubbed floors or washed garments. The artist had seated mother and child within an alcove, with a warm amber light falling onto them from a shallow vault above their heads. The colours were so fresh and vivid that the figures appeared ready to glide out of the ornate frame and into the present-day church.

The Virgin's expression was melancholy, certainly, but there was also somehow a kind of humorous wisdom. Bellini's young Mary was profoundly knowing, full of graceful acceptance as well as calm maternal pride in her stalwart little son, who stood on her knees as if poised to take his first steps towards the cross. Silently Justine repeated her own words: '... towards the cross.'

The tragedy three decades ahead would not take this Mary by surprise. She was prepared for it. There was fortitude as well as sweetness in her eyes.

Giovanni Bellini must have loved this woman. How else could he have immortalised her so perfectly in paint on wood? Imbued her with this poignant loveliness? Justine smiled. Had he loved her as a woman or as the mother of his saviour? No one could know now.

But unexpectedly, his Mary had no halo, neither did the child. Had he forgotten them? No: the painter saw her first as a human mother, very special but definitely human. She had been treated naturalistically: no idealised Botticelli glamour here but still a subtle allure as she quietly contemplated her role. And she was as far from a blank-faced icon as it was possible to be. A loveable mortal woman entrusting herself and her son to fate, to the will of God. In a fiery surge of understanding she perceived the essence: this was a beautiful but ordinary, human woman to whom a miracle had occurred, just as Giulietta had said. This was a Mary she could relate to. A simple mother, not very different from Justine herself, years ago when she had given birth to Nat, before bitterness and ambition had diverted her from the basic satisfaction of motherhood.

Partly to ease her throbbing foot, Justine sat down on one of the polished pews facing the images. Bellini's mother and child were guarded by a quartet of saints, two in each of the panels on either side of the main picture. Compassionate and protective, they leant in towards the holy pair almost conspiratorially, drawn by foreknowledge. But she could not keep her eyes away from the central figures of the mother and child, sacred images expressed with utter conviction, but real people, not idealised symbols of perfection.

It was hard to believe she had never seen the painting before. One of Venice's most famous churches and one of its most celebrated paintings and yet unknown to her. How could she have visited the city and missed it? But she had been here only once before, with Jonathan, both of them under stress, full of resentment. The answer to her question came easily: their unhappiness had confined them to the principal tourist areas; hypnotised by their own misery they had been unable to focus on anything else, divert their attention from the looming disaster of their marriage.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was almost two. Was she hungry enough to look for lunch somewhere in the vicinity? Now aware of space in her belly, she decided that she was. For a few moments more she sat absorbing the 500 year-old serenity and poise of Bellini's masterpiece and then she rose and left the church, stopping at the gift shop to buy a postcard of the picture as she went out.

Only a few metres from the Frari she found a little restaurant in the Campo San Toma, and followed the waiter to a small table in a cheerful garden out at the back.

She sipped at a glass of wine while she considered the menu and after ordering with no originality calves' liver alla Veneziana thought about the meaning of what she had seen. She brought the postcard out of her bag and propped it against a small vase of flowers.

Bellini had pared away the centuries of distancing Marian adoration that had transmogrified this woman into a remote, iconic figure with the attributes of a divine monarch: Queen of Heaven. His skill and understanding had exposed the exquisite human being behind the devotion. And Justine resolved to do the same with her own characterisation, to try and dispel the mists that hid the real Mary from view. Patrick's script laid out many facets of the Virgin for her to explore but running through her portrayal, central to her performance, would be the simple human person who had been the mother of Jesus. This was how she would handle it.

There was a universality of experience conveyed in the image of the tranquil, thoughtful mother and child. A real mother with a real child. Did the problem of the baby's conception matter? Had Jesus needed to be the Son of God to do the work he did? Not really. That child had set the foundations of a new religion before the notion of the virgin birth emerged. And if it had really occurred, then, as Giulietta had explained, it was a miracle, pure and simple.

In a distracted haze she cleared her plate, leaving only a smear to show where there had once been food, and tipped back the last few drops of a second glass of wine. The friendly waiter took her money, including a generous tip, and with courtly good manners showed her to the exit. 'Molte grazie, signora,' he said with a smile as he opened the door. Justine turned her head, feeling benevolent and grateful, as if it were he who had helped resolve her problems with Mary. 'Grazie mille,' she said, switching on her allure at full strength.

As their eyes met she felt her right foot, still awkward after its brief rest, catch in the concrete and metal threshold strip. She grabbed at the doorpost, failed to gain a handhold, and tumbled sideways. An explosion of pain in her right temple and she passed out.