

Burning The Mona Lisa

Benjamin Glatt

“Once upon a time. On a planet called Earth, all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and thought themselves safe. They were masters of their world,” the old woman began. **The light was only just beginning to fade and the fire was already burning bright. The humans sat around it and listened. They all knew the story, they had heard it many times around this fire or that fire, year after year. But this was the way it always began. This was how it was meant to be and so they listened to the story that began it all.**

Once upon a time, while the rest of humanity was saying goodbye, Simon Glassman stared at the Mona Lisa. For the first time since its construction, the Louvre was truly empty. No curators carefully worked, no army of security prowled, no throng of guests poured through the halls. They all sat up with parents and children and spouses. They made love with wild abandon or prepared with shaking hands the means to end things early if they weren't chosen. They all clung together even as they got ready to separate... because they had to separate. No one waited for Simon, no one to sit up with and stare at their phones or talk over better times, just a cold empty apartment, and a cold empty museum, empty except for the ghosts. The museum was full of ghosts.

A ghost of a child pressed himself against the glass guarding the painting, listening to an old museum guide. The old man described how The Mona Lisa had been painted again and again, how Da Vinci had carried her with him his whole life. In his quiet voice, he opened a world of obsession, perfection, transcendence, a world of masters who loved their craft and brought the beauty of heaven into the world. The child was hooked.

“What is it that makes her so special? Why did they get so obsessed?”

“Why young man? Because it is what gives us meaning. Without a meaning our lives are nothing, we are no more than animals. But if we have a meaning, if we have a great work to do, then we are something else, then we go on forever. You see her there smiling at us. A human hand made her, made something truly beautiful; if we can do that, perhaps, despite our cruelties, humanity is worth it.” The old man was looking off into the distance, rubbing his wrist with scarred hands, but the ghost of the boy didn't see. He stared and stared at the painting. He kept staring until he was drawn away by his parents, but it was too late: the ghost was in love with her. In love with all she represented.

There was the ghost of a young man, who stood a little further back from the great painting. The young man had big dreams. He was newly arrived in the great city, the city of his destiny, and he knew he would take it by storm. He stared up at the master's work and failed to see the painting entirely: all he saw was his own bright future laid out before him. He would paint and paint in a freezing apartment, swept up in a whirlwind of creativity, until that fateful day when the luminaries of this city would recognize his genius. He would carry on passionate and stormy affairs of the heart, and take all the pain and ecstasy they caused and render it on canvas. He would speak to the minds and the hearts of the people of the world and one day his work would hang here in the Louvre. Next to the masters, he loved so well. Her smile seemed to egg him on.

But the young man had to pay his bills and his day job left him too tired to paint, too tired to do anything but go out late into the evening with his coworkers and drink away the night. Now there was a different ghost who stood behind the young man. He was older, more tired, and fatter. He looked up at the Mona Lisa and saw in her smile an accusation, a gloat. She seemed to say to him, "You think you were the first to look upon me with such dreams? Do you know how many young men have stared and imagined themselves my master? Foolish boy, go back to work, your place will never be here." And so he did, his day job became his job and his easel was left to gather dust in his apartment.

The fourth ghost stood staring at her with wide eyes, as though seeing her for the first time. He clutched a sheaf of papers in his hand and waited for his interview. This ghost had come home one day from his job. Had followed his routine and then, decided he would paint; nothing special about that day, just a whim. He carefully prepared the paint, touched it to the canvas, and felt something release inside of him. He painted all that night, painted as he had once dreamed he could. He didn't paint well, he was out of practice, but he painted truly with the kind of wild abandon he had always sought. It seemed that each stroke of the brush tore a great gash in his boring life and his long empty days. The next day he applied to work at the Louvre. He could not rival the masters, he knew that now, there was some peace in that realization, but he could sing their praises.

The last ghost stood nearest Simon. They looked ever so much alike. This ghost was speaking to a group of tourists from a far-off land. He began as he always did, as the old man had, in the old way. "Once Upon A Time." He told them of the painting of the Mona Lisa. And of the man who made it. He spun the tale out: adding and subtracting details, getting louder or softer in moments of revelation or adventure. The tourists hung on his every word, spellbound. Even the other ghosts turned to listen to him. No, not him, they weren't drawn to him but to the painting he described. He could not be a master but he could frame their work, he could stand near to it and tell the uninitiated about its splendors, about the meaning it gave to humanity. He was so happy, so happy that they crowded close, so happy to be in that place sounded by art and light and life. He could not make the fire of human connection for himself but he could stand near it. This was his calling, his path. He would spend his brief time standing next to the great works, praising them, guarding them, sharing their wonder with the world. It was a far smaller but far kinder dream. When this last ghost looked upon the Mona Lisa he saw the rightfully unattainable that most high, the glory of art, the triumph of man, in a curved lip.

But the Glassman of flesh saw only the end, and he wondered if in her smile he could see fear, or regret or bitter sorrow. He had always feared the end in the vague way he always feared being hit by a car or cancer. He had read papers full of dire predictions for years; about climate damage and war, famine, and crime. He had learned to ignore, learned not to think too much. He had learned to be afraid of what people were capable of and then learned to hide that fear in apathy and work. Yet when the end came it was not borne on the back of the evil that men do. The end came from above and it was so far beyond them that all they could do was hide.

In the space around the earth, two great ships tore each other to pieces. They were fighting a war, such things happen in wars. But their corpses filled the earth's orbit with debris. Terrible weapons fell and exploded in the atmosphere, discharging their radiation into the people of earth. Fuel and coolant rained

down poisoning the world, and of course the debris, the never-ending debris, a billion meteors waiting to tear human civilization apart. A thousand things were tried, all failed. The water could not be drunk, the food could not be eaten and every day more and more pieces fell to earth killing people and hopes and cities.

And the worst was still to come, the earth was about to pass through the largest debris field of all, the one that would blacken the skies for a thousand years, the one that would drop a hundred chunks big as the one that killed the dinosaurs. It was the end.

Until the refugee ships came. They came with a message of mercy, a message of rescue broadcast to every speaker in the world. They were strange things, not like spaceships at all, not the way Glassman had imagined spaceships. He hadn't spent much time imagining spaceships but he was surprised that among the profusion there weren't at least some that looked familiar, that looked like something a human would design. They were all different shapes and sizes and without being told he could tell that they were built by different minds. Most were as different from each other as they were from what a human would make, a great hodgepodge of strange and frightening vessels. The ships settled all over the world. On every continent, in every country, they settled, but there were still far too few of them. Not enough room on the ships. Not for everyone, not for nearly everyone.

The ships had landed that morning and now, in 5 minutes, his phone would go off. He knew what the message would say. 250 Million could fit on the ships, 7.25 billion would stay. He would be among the ones who stayed, of course he would, he knew billions of people across the world were praying to whatever they turned to when all the lights of the world went. They prayed that their children or spouses or siblings or friends or selves would be picked, that the right name would be picked by the great lottery of survival. But not Simon.

No, he stood alone in an art museum saying goodbye to paintings. He didn't deserve to live, not like they did. They all knew what it was to live to spend a life doing, all he could do was stand here and praise those who had done, who had lived long before he was born. He didn't begrudge them their survival. It was right, he accepted it. He was no part of a future, he had never even been part of a present. He was a man of the past standing in the cold museum with his ghosts. He stared up at the Mona Lisa; she smiled down at him. The only comfort he would get at the end of the world. The only comfort he told himself he needed. He was almost at peace, he was dwarfed by the museum made small by its size, it would be a magnificent tomb.

His phone went off.

He was chosen.

He stood in silence, numb. He had been picked; there was no reason, of course. He knew that intellectually. Knew the lottery was purely random. But it still shocked him, shocked him to the core. He had been teetering at the precipice at the end of his life, ready to take the last step into oblivion, eyes wide open head held high, only to discover that the ground went on. His future would continue, it had to, the

rescuers had made it clear that there would be no substitutions, no giving away a spot. He would be saved. But why? What had he ever done to deserve to be one of the chosen survivors? He looked where he always did for answers, to the painting before him to the smile that had captivated generations, and in a moment of inspiration, he understood. He was asking the wrong question! It wasn't what he had done. It was what he would do. He knew why he had been picked, he would save her. He would save the soul of humanity the art that gave it meaning. Simon Glassman would save the Mona Lisa.

The Paris ship was a strange thing. It looked almost like a huge wedge of cake or pie balanced seemingly precariously on its point. The balance was even more disturbing because the ship leaned about 20 degrees. It looked at all times as though it were going to fall. The hull of the ship looked like the skin of a pineapple or a strange lizard. It wasn't lit from any place that Simon could see, but the whole thing was easy to see and distinct even in the dark. He was lined up with the rest of the chosen. They stood in the warm summer air and stared ahead. Some wept; others spent their time with loved ones who were not chosen. Parents comforted children, and Simon clutched the wooden painting case that contained humanity's soul.

All around the line of the chosen were the silent crowds. Those who would be left behind. Some looked on with envy and longing at the line, some looked on with anger, some with fear. Simon wasn't sure which group worried him more. The line was moving slowly forward. To get to the ship they had to pass through a strange gate in the fence that had been erected around the ship. The fence was guarded by soldiers, their faces grim and sad and hard. They had volunteered to keep order as some escaped, to ensure that the lucky few got on the ships and got away without interference from the unlucky many. It was a horrible job.

At the gate stood an alien. He had seen this one before, on TV, or at least one of the same species. It looked like a pillar of translucent flesh, but with a strange melted quality like a stalagmite, or a candle after years of use. He could see within its body strange shapes that he assumed must be organs. The creature had limbs that contracted in and moved out from its body. How many he didn't know. He thought this one was wearing some kind of environmental suit; its body was more obscured than the one that had been on TV. He was just close enough to hear it speak. It was speaking in French. Its voice sounded strange: it was a woman's voice, a nice voice, but clearly synthesized. He thought that the little black disk, imbedded in what he couldn't help but think of as her face, was probably making the sounds.

"I'm sorry Ma'am, you did not win the lottery, please step out of line." Her voice was pleasant but flat, emotionless.

"Please, my daughter needs me." The woman was pleading: she had tears on her face and was clutching the hand of a girl no more than six or seven.

"She can have my spot." It was a man holding the girl's other hand.

"She cannot: the rules of the lottery are clear, they prevent chaos and violence. You may not use another's spot."

“Please, our daughter needs her mother, it’s...”

The woman angrily brushed him away.

“No, no, you won, you should go, but please, what harm could one more person do?”

“I’m very sorry, but we have carefully calculated the number of humans that this ship can carry; we filled as many slots as we could. This is the only way. Please step out of line or I will ask your soldiers to move you.” The men who stood around the alien stared down at the woman, their hard cold eyes still red. Before she stepped out of line she kissed the man and the little girl, then back straight she walked away from the line, her steps only faltering once as she went to join the ranks of the un-chosen.

The line moved on.

The Alien took one look at Simon’s phone and waved him through. Its arms were much clearer up close and he was sure she... it? Was wearing clothing.

“Thank you, so much, could I ask, what’s your name?” The alien looked at him, or at least he thought she did; he assumed that the deep black and green spot was an eye of some kind.

“The best translation would be, The Scent Of A Maroon Flower, Growing From The Skull Of A Tyrant. Thank you for asking, please proceed.” He did one plodding step at a time toward the entrance of the ship. An oddly-shaped hole of deeper darkness against the craft’s strange clarity. He only saw the beginning of the madness. He looked back when he heard the gates of the compound begin to close, but he was already at the mouth of the ship, already being pushed forward by his fellow survivors who had seen what he had. The mob, the unselected came at the gate in a great rush.

He didn’t know how it started, but it did, and they all came screaming to be let on. They were warned, once, and then the soldiers began to fire. The last thing Simon saw of the earth was the great tide of people torn apart by the crying soldiers. In that moment he thought back to the old man rubbing his wrist and looking at the painting. “If we can do that, perhaps, despite our cruelties, humanity is worth it.” Simon clutched the Mona Lisa’s case tighter to his chest and turned away from the horror of earth and into the darkness of the ship.

Simon had expected the pillar creatures but the Aliens that came for them were very different. They were big about six to seven feet tall when standing but much bulkier than a human. Their skin was an odd off-white and looked thick and hard. Their faces were almost humanlike but with very small black eyes a longer jaw and tiny ears. They had no hair on their heads but they did have mustaches of a sort, though he thought they looked more like whiskers. At first, Simon thought that their strange movement was because of their weight, they were enormously fat, but he quickly noticed their strange short legs with too large feet. Their hands were also obscenely large for their bodies, and it appeared that only the last few inches of each finger could move independently. It was hard to tell much else as they were wearing thick clothing. Simon had been expecting uniforms but the creatures wore a hodgepodge of hides, skins, and what looked like rubber but was faintly red. The only things they wore in common were cloaks or coats of white fur.

The humans still in the entry chambers huddled together. Others were being led away by several of the big creatures. One of the aliens stepped forward. He spoke to the gathered humans. He had a device he spoke into that translated his words; his actual voice before the translation was hard to listen to. A series of deep thrums punctuated by painfully high-pitched shrieks: it reminded Simon a bit of whale song, but much faster and more complex.

“Human, earth people, you are weak, very weak, and small, weak and small and lost. It is a fishless thing” The voice coming from the translator device was flat and mechanical, nothing like the beautifully rendered voice of the pillar creature. It was strange too because it seemed like there was great feeling of some kind in the alien's face. Simon couldn't for the life of him tell what that feeling might be but something was moving him. “You have been crawling in dirty places, free from rising things and now, you are to be eaten by falling things, by the idiots and the slug eaters.” He paused and looked around. Simon didn't know what to say or do, the other people around him were mumbling, afraid, confused.

After a moment the Alien resumed. “We are not great healers, we are not saviors, but we heard of your deaths, and so we came. We are asked by the saviors to help save and we come. It is a great crying we see below and we are full of the goodness of life to help you run from it. You will follow to where you must stay.” Again he put down the device and looked at the humans. Some tried to smile at him but if it meant anything to the Alien he didn't show it. Finally, the alien turned and walked away with that strange awkward gate out of the room. As the alien left Simon saw the others reach out to touch him and thrum low. It must mean something but he had no idea what it might be.

Then they were herded around the ship. The inside of the ship was relatively well lit with a kind of blue-white that felt chilly. Actually, the whole ship was cold, like stepping into a walk-in freezer. Which at least was good for the protection of the treasure he carried in the case. The walls were either a dark metal or some kind of blue-white glass. Simon got a distinct impression of age from the inside of the ship.

The walls and floor, especially in the large corridors were scuffed and scared, in a few places glass panels were missing or patched, and he thought he saw some kind of mold growing in the corner of the room that, he was horrified to learn, was the bathroom. The ship was wet too, the walls were always damp to the touch and everywhere there were huge tanks. One of the survivors in Simon's group asked the alien who was showing them around why. It simply replied, “For Swimming.” This one was less talkative than the other. They were taken to a small room and told to “Refuge in this place while we sledge to your new place.” The room was about 300 feet square, and like almost every room they'd seen it was a perfect cube. It was packed with humans. Simon's group found places, mostly in the middle of the floor as the walls were already taken.

Simon sat in the center of the group of refugees and stared around at the strange blank walls. He felt utterly desolate. He wanted to feel sorrow for those left behind and he did, but not enough. He wanted to feel horror at the deaths of those who had tried to rush the ship, and he did, but it was a gentle ache. He wanted to feel concern for his fellow survivors, or even that matter for himself, he did, but only in a sort of vague way as though he was seeing the frightening future through frosted glass. No, what was really getting to Simon was the ship. It was the aesthetics with which it was designed, it was the sense of space and proportion, everything about it was wrong. Not wrong in any fundamental way, but off in so many

smaller ones. No human would ever have designed a space that looked like this. It was just wrong. It was truly alien in a way that Simon had never realized something could be. For the first time, Simon truly understood that earth was gone. He might never again live in a place crafted by a human eye or human hands. He held the painting close, he felt utterly alone, the last being in the entire universe that knew what beauty human beauty really was. He could barely see around him through the tears that were pricking at his eyes and all he could see clearly were his ghosts, standing around him in a circle bearing witness.

The ship lurched and the humans were thrown into each other. They didn't know but the ship had just leaped from the planet's surface into orbit. It was now rushing out of the solar system and making the adjustments it would need for its first Jump. Without even realizing it they had left their home behind. For Simon, it felt like a kick to the chest. Not because the sudden jolt hurt him in some profound new way, but because as the ship jolted a small foot came up and hit him right below his collarbone. It was a little girl, he had seen her somewhere before.

"I'm so sorry, are you ok?" the man was apologizing for the girl while at the same time moving to protect her, as though Simon might be dangerous. Simon almost smiled: he had never been dangerous, at least he had never thought so.

"Yes, I'm fine." he was far more worried about the painting but the case was untouched. "Just a knock not a problem." The painting was safe, it would be ok. He allowed himself to settle again. Back into the black sorrow that sought to eat him alive. Back into his contemplation of alien geometry.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," it was the man again, "But what do you have in that case there?" The little girl was sitting next to the man leaning on him. Her eyes were wide and she was looking at the painting case. He could tell she had been crying probably for quite some time, he was surprised he hadn't noticed. Now that he did though, he began to hear it from others as well. All over the room, people were sniffing or crying. Many more sat as though in a trance, a few talked in quiet voices.

"It's a painting." He didn't want to tell the man the whole truth. He wasn't sure why he didn't, who would bother stealing her now?

"Oh, hear that Ester, it's a painting." He was talking to the girl, but she seemed not to have noticed him. Her eyes were fixed on the case.

"Show me?" It wasn't a demand, more a question. He was about to just say no, he couldn't possibly remove the nails that held the case together here, not where it could get damp. But before he did he really looked at her; she seemed so lost. Simon got the strong impression of someone drowning, clutching at whatever would keep them above water.

"Well, Ester?" the man nodded. "Ester, I can't open the painting here but I can tell you about it. Do you want to hear a story?" She nodded and leaned into the man even more. He had told this story so often before but never to so small or so captivated an audience.

"Once upon a time, there was a great artist..."

She was asleep before the end. He could tell she was exhausted, but the man listened intently all the way through. He stared at Simon and the painting and at nothing at all, that Simon could see.

“Is that really the Mona Lisa in there?” He asked when the story had ended.

“Yes, I couldn't leave it behind.” He couldn't quite read the man's expression; he realized he had never tried that hard to read an expression before.

“There was room for a painting but not... I'm sorry, I don't know your name?”

“Simon.”

“Peter... So Simon, how was there room for a painting, even a great painting and not more room for the people? For, for my wife.” Suddenly he recognized the man and the girl. They had been the ones trying to get through the gate at the last minute. The ones trying to get the woman through. The man was looking at him with those hard inscrutable eyes.

“I don't, I don't know why? They let everyone bring a bag, and, and.” He was suddenly afraid to say it. Afraid to tell the man what he believed to be true. “And it's important to save the Mona Lisa, much more important than any one person. We aren't just meant for survival, we need to have a meaning. We need great works and great tasks, you can't abandon that even, no, no especially at the end of the world. So, I'm sorry about your wife. But I won't apologize for bringing the Mona Lisa.” His voice had risen while he spoke and he realized he had been sitting up straighter, his fists balled for a fight. He forced himself to relax. Relax under Peter's piercing stare.

“I know why. It's a problem of gas, they don't have enough life support. I asked one of the aliens.” Peter was talking quietly almost to himself. “They aren't supposed to be doing this you know, they aren't a refugee ship, they're basically truck drivers. When we saw all the ships coming down we thought it was some brilliantly orchestrated plan to save us but no, no it was a last-minute thrown together thing. All of humanity, saved by a midnight cram session. Well, all that's left.” Simon flinched back from the sudden intensity of the man. “I want to be angry at you Simon, really I just want to be angry, but at you especially. I want to scream at you, to tell you how dare you put some dusty old painting before a woman's life. But I won't, because you're right. We do need meaning, we all do, and maybe that painting can help. Maybe it can remind us of our greatness out there in the stars. My meaning is here.” He stroked the sleeping girl's hair. “And your meaning is that painting. I heard the way you talked about it. So maybe you're right. Maybe we do need the Mona Lisa.”

Peter subsided into silence, still stroking the girl's hair. For a brief moment, he reminded Simon forcefully of a child stroking a stuffed toy, drawing comfort from giving comfort. Simon really looked at the man, looked into every wrinkle on his young face, on the red-rimmed eyes at the thinning hair. At the curve of his lip and the small sad motion of his hand. He looked at the man, the way he looked at the paintings and saw in him something, something like the great works of art. Had people always been like this? Or was

this man special? Simon felt the edge of a storm building in his heart something he could only see out of the corner of his eye. Something to destroy him. He needed to bring it closer, needed to bring it into focus.

“Peter? I’m sorry about your wife, could you tell me about you? About her? About Ester? You listened to my story, I’d like to listen to yours if you want to tell it.” Peter looked up into Simon’s eyes and he must have seen something there because without preamble or introduction he began to tell. It was in many ways a boring story, the same story that had played out a thousand times.

They met through work. Began dating. Got married. She already had Ester. He adopted her. They were happy. A story without much conflict, a story about good people finding happiness in each other's company. A story, only given its power because of its end. Peter described the way his wife used to take them camping, building fires and tents side by side in the cool of the evening, their hands and eyes brushing as they worked. The way she would get absorbed by books, any books, and bring those worlds to life for Ester and him. The way she would kiss him once as lightly as she could in the dark hours of the night when she thought he was asleep. When he told Simon about his utterly uneventful life and about the woman who had shared it. Simon began to see her. Not like his own ghosts but the way he saw Peter, the way he had always seen the paintings. He looked down at the sleeping child and saw her, really saw her for the first time: she was beautiful and sad with a tiny hint of a smile she looked to Simon, in that moment, like the Mona Lisa, she looked like meaning. For the first time since he had learned of the destruction of earth, Simon wept.

Simon was asleep when the ship touched down. He didn't even notice it when it happened. He was deep in a dream in which he ran from a terrible storm that bore the name revelation. He was awakened by Peter, who shook his shoulder hard to get him up. The first thing he noticed was the cold. It had gotten deep inside him during the night and now it was a struggle to even rise. But rise he did. All the humans followed their rescuers off of the ship. Everything about the new place was strange. There was a little too much gravity, the light was too blue and it was cold bitterly cold. They were in a huge basin, or room with no ceiling, made from some kind of dark volcanic rock. The floor was crisscrossed with ridges half a meter tall seemingly arranged at random.

More and more people came off the ship until there was a great crowd standing together in the strange new place. It must have been seven or eight hundred but they were dwarfed by the size of the room. The Aliens were unloading several boxes and crates from the ship, straining to push floating dollies loaded down. The Alien who had greeted them when they first arrived. The one Simon was coming to think of as the captain stood alone in front of the crowd of humans he adjusted his speaking device and addressed them.

“Earth humans, you will refuge here. The saviors will come. They will come to bring new houses, new worlds. Here is a place used for storing things, it will store you until they come. We leave. There is fish in the containers. We wish you strong ice and a clear skies for all the days to come.” Then he turned and walked back to the ship. The other aliens followed. A moment later the great ungainly slice leapt into the air, almost without sound, and took off higher and higher until it was lost to sight. The crowd of humans stood around staring at each other. What now? They would be picked up by someone else? When?

Simon stood with Peter and Ester. They were talking in hushed voices. Everyone was. It was as though the size and strangeness of this place had forced them to keep still and quiet. It reminded Simon a bit of the way people acted in really great churches. Some people had started opening the crates; despite what the alien captain had said they were full of all kinds of food, not only fish. But it was a strange assortment, packaged candy next to a whole butchered cow, bread soaking in semi-frozen orange juice. It was as though someone had just gone through a market and threw everything in a box. But at least it was food.

Simon ate a little bread: it was nearly frozen, but it was great to have something to eat. Everything would be ok: they had food, they had water, they would soon be picked up, everything was ok, everything but the cold. The cold was a problem. It had been cold on the ship, a little too cold for comfort, but this was worse, this was much worse and few people had warm clothes. Simon certainly didn't, it had been warm in the city when they had left. A pleasant summer night. The cold was deadly, he could feel it cutting deeper and deeper into him, his body had barely woken up and started to warm itself when the cold began seeping in deeper and deeper. And to make matters worse it looked like night was falling.

He couldn't fall asleep: he tried a dozen times, but the cold ate into him. Near him, Peter and Ester slept or at least appeared to. Holding each other tight, sharing warmth. He should have joined them. He knew that. He should have asked. But decades of not asking, of not being part of the flow of the world, had stayed his tongue and now it was impossible for him to ask, not while they slept. He had to move. He stood up and began to walk, careful not to step on anyone. The humans lay in a great group around the crates, some clung together others were off alone shivering on the ground. Some watched as Simon passed, others were still.

His mind was racing, as he walked out, away from the group of humans. He was thinking about Ester and Peter, he was thinking about what he had seen in their faces. He was thinking about the nature of beauty. And as so many had before him Simon sought his answers by looking up to the stars. They weren't his stars, but they were still vast and magnificent. He stared up, willing the storm gathering in him to show itself. He felt as he had the night he had picked up his paintbrush again, as though there was something inside him fighting to get out. He searched the unfamiliar heavens for it but he couldn't see it, oh he felt so close so full of potential his heart was boiling over with a wild energy an energy without focus or direction, and the stars remained alien. Just beautiful specks of light. No great bears, or drinking gourds, no belts or crabs. Just dots against the black.

"Excuse me," said the old woman. "Can I join you?" He jumped, he had been so preoccupied with the sky he hadn't heard her coming.

"Yes of course. I'm sorry I didn't hear you coming, you frightened me."

"Oh, I have that effect on people," she laughed, old and weak but full of genuine humour. "So young man, what's so interesting out there in those strange new stars."

"I'm not sure, I'm just looking for answers, and I thought, maybe the stars would be a good place to look but, I don't know, they're just stars now." She nodded gravely, looking up.

“I knew there was a reason I came out here. All of them back there are so wrapped up in grief that they have their faces buried in each other, buried in the dirt. And here you are staring up at the stars. What answers are you looking for?”

“I don’t know, I, well, my whole life I’ve been in love with art, been in love with those rare things of transcendent beauty that humans can create. They’re what give us meaning you know, without that without creation we’re, we’re just animals with plumbing.”

“Hey now, don’t speak ill of plumbing, I had to shit twice on this freezing rock, and once on the ship. Not fun.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, keep talking, I’ve had enough of heads down, and hear I am pushing yours down into the toilet, tell me more of your star thoughts.”

“Star thoughts, I like that... Meaning matters, we have to do more than live we have to live for something. I used to have that, I lived to praise the work of the great masters of art. I loved that, I would go back to it if I could, but I don’t know... I can still do that, I have one painting left to praise. I have the Mona Lisa.” She whistled softly.

“You actually brought it?”

“Yes it’s...” he reached for it, then remembered the painting case still lay where he had lain. “Oh, it’s over there where I slept.” He should have been anxious but he wasn’t. “I wanted to preserve something, I wanted to save some of what gave our existence some meaning, but, but then I saw the ships. And I realized something, something horrible.” He fell silent staring up, arranging his words, like his paintbrushes.

“You know suspense is more fun when you’re young, at my age, I’m worried I’ll never get to finish the story.” He laughed with her this time. Laughed until she started to cough, a hard horrible cough. He held her up until she brushed him off. “Keep going, I’m fine, it’s just the chill.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I realized when I spent time in the ship, those aliens, the ones who took us here, didn’t see beauty the way we did. If I showed them the Mona Lisa, they could never understand. The thing I realized on the ship is that without a human to look at her, she’s just a stretch of colored canvas. But that’s not all, it’s more than that. I listened to a man’s story, to the way he talked about his life, about his wife, his daughter, and I saw something in them. I saw them the way I see the paintings. They are, each in their own way, a masterpiece. I know these things matter. I know they are meant to fit together but I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. It’s just out of reach,” he trailed off. They stared up at the stars in silence for a long moment, punctuated only by her coughing.

“Young man, when did you first fall in love with that painting? Why did you become so obsessed with it?” She was looking at him her eyes focused and piercing.

“You know I was just thinking about that before I was selected. I was a kid and this guide at the museum told me about how she was painted, about Da Vinci’s obsession, about how her beauty brought meaning into the world. You know I learned years later, when I worked there at the museum, that he had survived the camps back in WWII.”

“You heard a story? And fell in love?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re...” He stopped speaking and stared up at the meaningless night, a night full of stars but empty of images, but no, it wasn’t, he could draw a line from star to star he could make any picture he wanted. The sky wasn’t empty of pictures, it was empty of stories. The storm crashed over him, and in a moment he was swept away by revelation, terrible and wonderful revelation. The fibers of his life came undone and were reformed. He closed his eyes as one version of himself and opened them as another. It was so quiet in the great open room but in his mind, the whole world was shaking apart and changing forever.

He turned to the old woman, to tell her. But she was bent over, in his ecstasy, he hadn’t heard her coughing, hadn’t heard her horrible ragged breaths.

“Oh no.” He kneeled beside her cradling her body against his, she was so cold and every cough shook her like a leaf. “Are you ok? Can you speak?” Finally, it subsided.

“Well, I can now.” Another little cough escaped.

“We have to get you warm, you’re going to die if this keeps going.”

“Oh, I’m already dead, I should never have been chosen, not with all those children left behind. I have no business being here. I can’t start over on a new world. Just, tell me what got you so excited a moment ago. Let me hear something about the future, it has to be kinder than the present.” He looked at her and saw in her again the beauty he now knew was there. Saw her strength, her despair, her hope and knew what he had to do.

“Tell me your name.”

“Oh don’t bother, as the sailor used to say, I Am That I Am, and that’s all that I am.” she chuckled and coughed. He didn’t start. “Oh fine, never liked my name much but I suppose you gotta say something at my funeral besides look folks this old lady here froze... Love, my name is Love. Oh I know that look, put your eyebrows right back where they belong now, it’s not some performance name. My parents were a bit unusual is all. Tried to live in the woods you know. Thought hippies were sellouts. Now, tell me something interesting or I’m going to die out of spite, you hear?”

“Love, I won’t tell you, I’ll do you one better, I’ll show you.” They walked back slowly arm in arm. They passed shivering people, people clinging together, people pacing back and forth. Rubbing their hands. Of everyone, he passed, he asked the same question, until a small thin man wordlessly handed him what he needed. He went back to where Peter and Ester lay where the painting still sat in its protective wooden case.

“Peter, I need you to help me with something.” Peter glanced over at him, he looked scared and cold and he was holding Ester very tight. “I need you to start a fire for me. Just like you used to with her.”

“With what, I have no matches, no wood.” Wordlessly Simon handed Peter the lighter he had just borrowed.

“As for wood, you have that,” and he pointed at the case around the Mona Lisa.

“Are you sure?” Simon nodded and without a word ripped one of the loose panels off the front of the case, and broke it over his knee.

“Please Peter, hurry, I think, I think I can make this important. Ester, could you stay with my new friend Love? She’s very cold.” Ester blinked at the old woman then snuggled up next to her. Taking comfort by giving comfort.

Peter build his fire well, others saw what they were doing and gave pieces of paper, another lighter, some matches a few people were now gathered around. Finally, Peter was ready to light. He didn’t know why but before he did he looked up at Simon awaiting a signal. Though what it would be he did not know.

Simon closed his eyes and raised his arms. Those nearest got quiet they could feel it, something was happening, something was about to change. Simon called on his ghosts to come to him, he would need them all, the child, the dreamer, the defeated, the happy, and the despairing. He pulled them all into him until all he had ever been was in his throat ready to burst forth.

He nodded to Peter.

The fire sprung to life.

He began the invocation.

The old one. The one the children loved in public and the adults still thrilled to hear in their hearts, the one that signaled a journey to a better world was to begin. For Simon, it was the opening line in his prayer for meaning.

“Once upon a time!”

His voice was loud and strong, he knew how to make it carry, and all the people gathered there hushed and cowering against the cold stone heard it. They looked to him and he could feel their attention, see the

need on their beautiful faces. He had wanted to praise the work of the masters and here they were the greatest masterpieces he could imagine.

“Once upon a time. On a planet called Earth, all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and painted. They were masters of their world, but it was not always so.

Once they feared wild beasts, once they feared the rain and the lightning. They ran from Lions and hid from Hyenas. They whispered alone in the dark too afraid to come out and face a world of such terrible danger. They stayed in their little groups, hid in their caves. For they feared each other almost as much as they feared the beasts.”

Yes, he would begin here, begin in fear and despair, begin as he had before the painting, content to die alone.

“Then one day, a new human was born, he saw the world and was not so afraid. Even as a child he would wander out and the others would have to bring him back and scold him for his foolishness. But he laughed at their fears, for he was strong and brave and clever.”

He spoke in the voice of the child, all innocent awe and excitement.

“So when he was old enough, he set out from the caves to show the people he was not so afraid to show them that they should fear no Lion. He found a Lion drinking at the stream and as quietly as he could he snuck up behind it. He prepared to throw his spear but before he could the lion’s sister leaped on him from behind. He was strong, and fast, and brave. He wrestled with the Lion and got the better of her, but it was no good for her sister joined the fray and even so great a warrior as he could not fight two Lions. So he ran and he hid. He felt so ashamed that he hid for many days. He had sworn he would go out and kill a Lion, he had sworn that he would show the people that they didn’t have to be afraid. Instead, he would just give them more to fear. But how could he kill two Lions alone? So the human thought and thought and came up with an idea.”

The young proud man and the defeated disappointed one each had their turn, his ghosts speaking through him and fading into him. The people were gathering closer and closer to the little fire.

“Many days after he had left the warrior returned to his people and asked them to gather around him. And he told them of how he had fought and lost and how he had then gathered his strength and challenged the Lions again and killed them. He told them that he had tried to bring home their carcasses but that many more Lions had arrived and so he could not do it alone. The people listened in awe as he told them of how he had fought the Lions, how he had driven his spear deep into their necks and broken them. They listened in awe to the man who could do such a thing.

When he called for them to join him they eagerly agreed. But he said it was not enough. So they went to all the other caves of the humans and they all listened to the warrior and they all agreed to join him. So a great number of humans came into the valley. They were armed with spears and with the knowledge of how to fight Lions and so they approached without fear.”

The guide spoke, praising great feats. Simon added another big piece to the fire it burned higher, he ignored Peter gesturing for him to slow down, to use less wood.

“The lions hearing this came out to meet the attack, they charged the humans expecting them to run. Humans always ran before, but this time they knew that lions could be killed so they held firm and they fought together and one by one the lions fell. The humans had a great feast of Lion and the warrior sat in the place of highest honor. They asked him to tell them again about how he had killed the two lions and the warrior said to them.

I failed to kill two Lions, they were too strong for me. So I came among you and told you that I had killed them. Then we set off together and we killed two lions and many more besides. That is how I killed two Lions. Some were confused, some were angry, but the wisest among them asked the warrior what new magic was this. He said to them, ‘I will call it a story. It is the magic that can make scared creatures from the caves slay powerful Lions. It is the magic to bring those who are not kin together and make them brothers. It is a powerful magic and will do great and terrible things.’ He was right.”

Now it was Simon who spoke, spoke as he was now, as he had been made by a sky without meaning and a child's smile.

“Stories of gods raised up great temples, stories of kings great armies, stories of merchants built great cities. As the stories became more and more powerful, so too did the people. They multiplied and spread. They were carried across the seas as much by their stories as by their boats. New stories emerged, stories about the value of pieces of paper, stories about lines on maps, stories about the rights of all people, about liberty, brotherhood, and equality. All our greatness because we could come together and believe the same story.”

His voice rose now louder and full of a great passion, the fire burned high and he paced back and forth, all the people huddled close bound by the fire and the words.

“I was once a human on earth. I believed a story about a painting, this painting, I believed that that painting and the great works like it gave me meaning, that they gave all of what we did meaning. But without people to tell stories about it, without people to understand it, it is just a painting, colors on cloth. And so I say we need a new story, we need something to believe, something to give us strength. We have been robbed of our home and cast out but we are one people, one people bound together with a thousand thousand stories and we must tell them. We must never forget. So let us begin with this.”

As his voice rose to its crescendo, Simon picked up his beloved Mona Lisa and threw her onto the fire.

“Once upon a time, on a planet called Earth all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and told stories. They were masters of their world, and so it will be again.”

He stood in a kind of shock, looking at the greatest painting in the world catch fire. He had known what he had to do, had known what he would do but seeing it was almost too much to bear. He stared at her smile one last time and thought he saw approval in it. But perhaps that was just the story he wanted to believe.

He looked into their faces and didn't know if he had succeeded. He saw excitement and fear, confusion and triumph and still under it all that deep sorrow. Some whispered “and so it will be again” but he wasn't sure how many. They were huddled close as he needed them to be, they were close to the warmth of the fire and close to the warmth of each other. But they needed to do more than survive they needed to... from the circle beside him a voice spoke out. It was old and tired but its words were strong even through the coughing. Love spoke.

“Once upon a time. On a planet called Earth, all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and traveled far. They were masters of their world.”

She told them a story of her youth, of the kindness of strangers and the cruelty of chance. She made them cry and exchanged knowing looks, and greatest of miracles she made them laugh. She finished her story as she had begun.

“Once upon a time. On a planet called Earth, all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and made beautiful mistakes. They were masters of their world, and so it will be again.”

This time most of the crowd joined in with her, murmuring the new words, “so it will be again.”

They had barely stopped when a man in a white shirt stepped forward and began, “Once upon a time.” They told their stories all through the night. Some told of great things that humans had done. Some told funny stories, some told stories from books or films they liked, but most told the stories of those who were dying on earth, making Gods and heroes of ordinary men and women. A father became a great teacher, and sage, a mother a warrior conquering impossible odds, a lover so passionate that the stars were put to shame, a child, who would have grown to save the world. They lied and stretched and made the small mighty beyond measure. Not because they did not remember, but because there was a whole new galaxy of Lions stretched out before them and they would need powerful stories to survive.

Simon sat between Peter and Love, watching the fire burn. He knew they might die here, knew the fire wouldn't last, knew that the spark he had given all of himself to light might burn out. But he was content. He might die, but he sat in a warm circle of humanity, he looked at the fruits of his own great work, and he listened to the stories his people made meaning out of and was at peace.

“But as we know that was not the end.” The old woman’s voice was tired now, but she would finish, it was her duty. ***“No, no it was not the end. For news of the fire and the story of the sacrifice and the new meaning spread out to every far-flung place that we were sent. And all across the stars, we began to tell our stories, the stories that keep us strong the stories that make us one, the stories that remind us that. Once upon a time. On a planet called Earth, all the humans lived together. They could do terrible things, and they could do wonderful things. They loved and feared and told stories. They were masters of their world, and...”*** the old woman’s voice was drowned out by a chorus all those around the fire spoke the words they knew so well. Words spoken by humans in the slums and the farms, and the factories, spoken together around fires and alone in cold ships. Spoken by children who didn't understand and the old who understood far too well.

“And so it will be again!”