

The Gypsy Madonna Excerpt

It all began on a snowy January day. January is bleak in New York. The trees are bare, the festivities over, the Christmas tree lights taken down for another year. The wind that races down the streets is edged with ice. I walked briskly with my hands in my coat pockets. Head down, eyes to the ground, lost in thought: nothing particular, just the business of the day. I tried not to think of my mother. I am an avoider. If something gives me pain I don't think about it. If I don't think about it, it isn't happening. If I can't see it, it isn't there, right? My mother had been dead a week. The funeral was over. Only the journalists pestered like flies, determined to find out why an uncatalogued, unknown Titian of such importance had only now come to light. Didn't they understand that I knew as little as they did? If they were grappling in the dark, I was floundering in space.

I reached my office. A redbrick building in the West Village with an antique shop on the ground floor. Zebedee Hapstein, the eccentric clockmaker, toiled against a discordant orchestra of ticking in his workshop next door. I fumbled in my pocket for the key. My fingers were numb. I had forgotten to wear gloves. For a moment I looked at my reflection in the glass. The haunted face of a man old beyond his years stared grimly back at me. I shook off my grief and walked inside, brushing the snow from my shoulders. Stanley wasn't in yet, nor was Esther who answered the shop telephone and cleaned the place. With leaden feet I climbed the stairs. The building was dim and smelled of old wood and furniture polish. I opened the door to my office and stepped inside. There, sitting quietly on a chair, was a tramp.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Angrily, I demanded to know what he was doing there and how he had got in. The window was closed and the front door had been locked. For an instant I was afraid. Then he turned to me, his mouth curling into a half smile. I was at once struck by the extraordinary color of his eyes that shone out from his cracked and bearded face, like aquamarine set in rock. I had a sudden sense of *déjà vu* but it was gone as quickly as it had come. He wore a felt hat and sat hunched in a heavy coat. I noticed his shoes were dirty and scuffed with a hole wearing through at one toe. He looked me up and down appraisingly and I felt my fury mount at his impertinence.

"You've grown into a fine young man," he mused, nodding appreciatively. I frowned at him, not knowing how to respond.

"You don't know who I am?" he asked and, behind his smile, I noticed a shadow of sorrow.

"Of course I don't. I think you should leave," I replied.

He nodded and shrugged. "Hell, there's no reason why you should remember. I hoped . . . Well, what does it matter? Do you mind if I have a smoke? It's mighty cold out there." His accent was southern and there was something about it that caused my skin to goose-bump.

Before I could refuse his request he pulled out a Gauloise and struck a match to light it. The sudden smell of smoke sent my head into a spin. There was no way I could avoid the sudden arousal of memory. I gave him a long stare before dismissing the idea as preposterous. I took off my coat and hung it on the back of the door to hide my face and play for time, then sat down at my desk. The old man relaxed as he inhaled but he never took his eyes off me. Not for a moment.

“Who are you?” I asked, bracing myself for the answer. *It can't be*, I thought. *Not after all this time*. I didn't want it to be, not like this, not smelling of stale tobacco and sweat. He smiled, blowing the smoke out of the side of his mouth.

“Does the name Jack Magellan mean anything to you?”

I hesitated, my mouth dry.

He raised a feathery eyebrow and leaned across the desk.

“Then perhaps the name Coyote might be more familiar, Junior?”

I felt my jaw loosen and fall. I searched his features for the man who had once held my love in the palm of his hand, but saw only a dark beard fringed with gray and deep crevices in thick, weatherbeaten skin. There was no evidence of his youth or his magic. The handsome American who had promised us the world had died long ago. Surely he had died; why else would he not have come back?

“What do you want?”

“I read about your mother in the papers. I came to see her.”

“She's dead,” I said brutally, watching for his reaction. I wanted to hurt him. I hoped he'd be sorry. I owed him nothing—he owed me an explanation and thirty years. I was glad to see his eyes fill with tears and sink into his head with sadness. He stared at me, horrified. I watched him watching me. I didn't endeavor to ignore his emotion. I simply left him like a fish struggling on the beach, gasping for air.

“Dead,” he said finally, and his voice cracked. “When?”

“Last week.”

“Last week,” he repeated, shaking his head. “If only . . .”

He inhaled and the smoke that he blew out enveloped me once again in a miasma of memory. I fought it off with a scowl and turned away. In my mind's eye I saw long, green rows of vines, cypress trees, and the sun-drenched, sandy stone of those chateau walls that had once been my home. The pale blue shutters were open, the scents of pine and jasmine blew in on the breeze, and somewhere, at the very back of my thoughts, I heard a voice singing “Streets of Laredo.”

“Your mother was a unique woman,” he said sadly. “I wish I had seen her before she died.”

I wanted to tell him that she had long clung to the hope that he would one day return. That, in the three decades since he had left, she had never doubted him. Only finally, when she reached the end of the road, had she resigned herself to the truth—that he was never coming back. I wanted to shout at him and haul him off the ground by the collar of his coat. But I did not. I remained calm. I simply stared back at him, my face devoid of expression.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“I read about the Titian,” he replied. *Ah, the Titian*, I thought. *That’s what he’s after*. He stubbed out his cigarette and chuckled. “I see she gave it to the city.”

“What’s it to you?”

He shrugged. “Worth a fortune that painting.”

“So that’s why you’re here. Money.”

Once again he leaned forward and fixed me with those hypnotic blue eyes of his. “I’m not coming asking for money. I’m not looking for anything.” his voice was gruff with indignation.

“In fact, I’m an old fool. There’s nothing left for me here.”

“Then why did you come?”

Now he smiled, revealing teeth blackened with decay. I felt uneasy, however, because his smile was more like the grimace of a man in pain. “I’m chasing a rainbow, Junior, that’s what it is. That’s what it’s always been, a rainbow. But you wouldn’t understand.”

From the window I watched him limp down the street, his shoulders hunched against the cold, his hat pulled low over his head. I scratched my chin and felt bristles against my fingers. For a moment I was sure I heard him singing, his voice carried on the wind: “*As I walked out on the streets of Laredo.*”

It was all too much. I grabbed my coat and hurried down the stairs. As I reached the door, it opened and Stanley walked in. he looked surprised to see me. “I’m going out,” I said and left without further explanation.

I ran into the street. The snow was now falling thick and heavy. I set off along the trail his footprints had made. I didn’t know what I was going to say to him when I caught up with him. But I did know why my anger had been overridden by something almost visceral. You see, it’s hard to explain, but he had given me a gift, a very special gift. A gift no one else could give me, not even my mother. And, in spite of all the pain he brought, ours was a bond that could never break.

I was able to follow his footprints for a while, but soon the track was lost among the millions of faceless inhabitants of New York. I felt a sudden ache deep within my soul, a regret for something lost. I scanned the pavements, searching for the old man with the limp, but my heart yearned for someone different. He had been handsome, with sandy hair and piercing blue eyes, the color of a tropical sea. When he smiled those eyes had twinkled with mischief, extending into long white crows’-feet accentuated against the weathered brown of his skin. his mouth had turned up at the corners, even when he was solemn, as if a smile was his natural expression and it cost him to be serious. He bounced when he walked, his chin high, his shoulders square, exuding a wild and raffish charm powerful enough to soften the heart of the most determined cynic. That was the Coyote I knew. Not this old, malodorous vagabond who’d come like a vulture to peck at the remains of the woman who had loved him.

I stared bleakly into the snow, then turned and walked back. My footprints had almost disappeared. And his? They had gone too. It was as if he had never existed.