

PAINT THE TOWN RED

By Rebecca M. Senese

There is no meaning. All that was has vanished on the winds of time. It has been a dark, terrible night. I awake to the sounds of spiders scurrying in my brain. They leave webs of memory hanging in tatters in my mind. I listen for a moment to the silence until the pain explodes upon me with the thunder of a heartbeat. It has been a bad night.

I awake to the sound of the clock ticking away the seconds of my life. The pain is very bad today. The nerves up and down my spine seems to scream in agony from what feels like a burning, electrical shock. I lurch from the bed, falling in a heap to the carpet. The texture is rough and scratchy against my cheek. My stomach tightens and I feel a desperate need to vomit.

I begin to crawl towards the bathroom, the patterns on the carpet weaving crazily before my eyes. I reach the cool, comforting tiles just as I am sure I will never make it.

Relief comes quickly afterward. I lean against the cool porcelain of the tub to catch my breath. I feel a little better; the pain has receded to become a dull, throbbing ache in my head, more manageable now.

I think of food for a moment but my stomach threatens to rebel again and I let the thought fade. I am feeling restless today. The bugs of activity crawl beneath my skin. Strange images of snakes and blood filter into my brain from some forgotten dream. Desire washes through my system like a powerful drug. I look down to see I have a throbbing erection. Suddenly I know it is going to be one of those days.

I sigh. I am used to this by now. It is one of the few consistencies in my long, nomadic life. At this particular time I am an artist, using the colours of paint to reproduce the visions that the sweet craving of the need creates in my head. I once read an article where a psychiatrist stated that normal people must ignore the horrors of everyday life in order to stay sane. The sick man is one who can see these horrors, and is sickened by them because he does not have the ordinary illusions he needs to remain sane. Perhaps this is why I exist, to rip away the safe, stale illusions from men's minds and force them to face reality.

The name I use right now is Richard Damon. It is a suitable name; it serves its purpose which is, of course, to be filled in on government forms and such. Most people consider names as a form of identity, but I believe this is far too complex an idea for any name to convey. My name does not identify me, for what I am cannot be put into mere words.

I glance at the travel clock that I left sitting on the sink before I went to bed the night before. It reads eleven forty-five; I have slept late. I hurry to the dresser to pick out some clothes, forcing my legs into cooperation. I had wanted to find an apartment today, but the pain and the need have collaborated against me.

I throw on some jeans and an old shirt. I feel slightly unsteady, as though I was a little drunk. My skin is burning where the clothes touch me. They trap my erection in a deathgrip, making me moan. It is the need, and I know it's time to do another painting. The unsteadiness is the first stage, before it consumes me like a raging tiger and I must go on the hunt.

Probably the best thing to do is to go to the gallery where it is quiet and warm. Few people go there on Thursdays and it is necessary for me to be alone at this stage. The presence

of people only seems to deepen my pain and sharpen the need until I can barely control it. And control it I must. Even when I am driven to action, I maintain control. It is always so tempting to loosen my grip, to sink into that beckoning ecstasy where the visions in my mind blend into reality but to do this would cause things to go too far. That I do not care to contemplate.

The motel room is suddenly oppressive with its dingy walls and the grey sunlight slanting in through the drab green curtains. I pick up my leather jacket and grab my wallet from the dresser.

Pushing my feet into a pair of loafers, I leave, locking the door behind me. It is a habit, the paint and canvases would be of no interest to a thief.

The sun is stabbing-bright when I step out onto the street. I squint, causing all the objects around me to blur and blend into one another. The people walking by are strange blobs, and I feel distanced from them, watching them as a scientist watches an amoeba. Without warning, the pain sharpens in my stomach, causing me to double over. It splits and shoots up my arms like lightning, crisp and clean in its deadliness. I am not unfamiliar with this pain, but its suddenness always catches me by surprise. It is the taste of tin foil in my mouth, sharp and biting.

A man stops and grabs onto my arm, asking me if I am alright. The fool, would I bend down to the ground like this if I were alright? I shake his hand off angrily. He steps back, his hands fidgeting like a little rat's. His eyes are wide and entirely made up of pupils. He looks at me for a moment and I feel a stab of repulsion towards this specimen before me. My need surges forward, but I push it away. It is too early to paint just yet. I stare at this little rat. Could this

one really be a man, could he be an example of whatever god who had created us intended us to be? I find it hard to believe and I lurch away from him, feeling nausea curdling in my stomach at the sight of him. Such a pathetic, weak little man. He is a recurring trend in mankind, one I wish to abolish. The thought sends blood rushing to my engorged loins, leaving me lightheaded. I, like a wolf among sheep, cannot find companionship here; I am of a different breed.

The pain fades, its memory blurring in my mind with all the other times. I feel its burning turn to anger at this strange and contrived world. I long to tear it down with my hands, to reveal the old, open sore that is man, to uncover the bleeding wounds that man in his stupidity inflicts on this world. I try to show it in my paintings, but each time the need comes and I act upon it, the paintings fail as if the ultimate essence of what I try to achieve cannot be captured on the canvas. I do not believe this, for I would then be living a lie, so each time I strain to capture that which seems unattainable, to grasp the sweetness that quenching my need brings.

My eyes grow accustomed to the light and I start to walk down the street. My skin still tingles, my senses are tuned to whip-sharpness. I am an alien from some other world, looking out onto this world of man. Cars drive by, honking at pedestrians who risk to run across the red light. The buildings stand like backdrops in some cheap Western film, as though they could be torn down and dragged away any moment. There is an aura of falseness about this city. I relish its decay.

I reach the gallery in only ten minutes. My loafers slap lightly against the concrete steps as I run up them to the door. The security guard Tom smiles and waves at me as I stroll by. I return his wave, though I do not like him. I've seen the way he looks at the children who come

into the gallery and I know what he would do if ever he was allowed to escape the conditioning of society. He is a hypocrite like so many people. I do not deny what I am, nor what I do, in fact I revel in it. The need allows me the freedom to express my true self and find the reality that exists behind the masks.

It is as I had expected. Few people clutter the gallery. I move slowly towards the rooms in the back where the older paintings are. They by far are my favourites. Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Children" impresses me very much. A reproduction hangs here but I am fortunate enough to have seen the original. The angry colours and brutality of the scene is stunning and exciting. It has a trace of the flavour that I try to achieve, unfortunately it is a picture showing the monstrosity of gods, not man.

My footsteps echo on the marble floor like crystal tears. A woman and a small boy stand off to one side, the woman gazing at a painting and the boy looking about with obvious boredom. He glances at me and, feeling a momentary impulse, I allow my thoughts to reveal themselves in my face. The boy's eyes grow wide with terror and he makes a small strangled cry. The woman jerks his hand almost absentmindedly.

For a moment I allow the hunger to let me consider the boy but he is really too small, too immature to quell the pain, to achieve the sweetness. I need an adult to devour, using their own life, their own pain to satiate my hunger, to sooth my need. Only then can I paint.

The boy seems to sense my attention. He cowers against the woman's legs. She turns in annoyance and slaps him across the face. I smile and am satisfied. My jeans do not strangle me quite so much.

I continue to the back of the museum to the room where my own paintings hang. As I draw near I can smell them, each individually. They all have a history, they all contain a germ of my hunger, a germ that I hope will infect mankind and lay waste to their lies.

As usual the room is deserted. No one appreciates my work. People tend to glance here and then look away or if they do enter, they keep to the centre of the room, their eyes wide and bewildered because their dim, little minds cannot comprehend what they see. When they can no longer stay in this room, they scurry away like mice leaving the heavy stench of fear hanging in the air until the ventilation system sweeps it away.

For me this room is a haven. While others cannot stay in this room, I find the closest thing to peace here. The air seems permeated with the smell of blood; hot, sweet and wet. It dances in patterns, flitting from painting to painting, weaving magical spells. My pain, my hunger seem to be less of a concrete thing here, less alive. Instead it seems to inhabit my paintings, speaking in unison. In this room, my need is controllable and I am almost human.

My paintings are nightmares some would say but I say it is reality. The reality that every man refuses to look at, the reality of blood, of the pulse, of the rhythm.

My technique is abstract, if such a word has a meaning.

And the paints...?

I walk over to one of my earlier works. It is a large canvas, six feet by ten feet. I used only red in it, and there was so much red to use. It is my favourite colour. Harold once asked me if I got a discount by buying such vast quantities of one colour. I merely smiled at him.

I sit on the bench in front of this work. The wood is a living entity beneath my buttocks,

inhaling and exhaling, shifting slightly. I study the swirls of the colour, remembering when I made them with the brush in my hand. I find them now a little obnoxious and pretentious; I had a tendency to be cocky back then. The name of this work "Gregory in the Limelight" suits the look, firm and crisp. I remember him well.

I want to look over the rest of my paintings but the need, which has been relatively tranquil during my meditations, clutches at me with steel fingers, gripping my intestines like so many strands of licorice. I gasp and fall from the bench. The floor slaps me hard on the cheek, the cold tile bringing me back to awareness. My heart pounds, blood rushing. I lie for a moment, rubbing my erection through the cloth of my jeans. My nerves are alight. I must paint. As soon as possible.

Slowly I stand. My legs are quivering but they hold me. I glance at my watch and see I have spent all afternoon here. It is almost seven.

Quickly I leave, ignoring Tom's farewell wave. I have only one purpose now, one direction.

Time contracts and I am back in my dingy motel room, searching through my clothes for something to wear. I don't care what I find, never mind the color, never mind the fit. I have a fire within me and I must hurry or be burned alive. I feel exhilarated.

I rush to the street. The night sounds are deafening. An old vagrant is leaning up against a glass storefront, his gasping breath a hurricane in my ears. He asks for money as I walk by, his voice almost bursting my eardrums. Agonizing, I lurch away. There is only the need, only the heat of desire, and the old man is not good enough for paint.

I am on a new street. I glance at the sign. Ridgeview. Near the university. Many students will be out tonight, laughing and dancing, pretending they are alive.

I walk along the sidewalk, calmer now. It is close, I can feel it. The need is a steady drive, it has devoured me and made me whole. I am alive now, the smell of the night is strong in my nostrils, the sounds are loud in my ears. The neon light reflects softly on the windows of the parked cars, distorting themselves, distorting reality. Distort is what man has done. It is my job to remove the distortions.

I arrive at the bar. The door flies open and a couple spill out laughing. Music follows them like an eager puppy but is locked back in as the door swings shut. They stumble past me, weaving and shouting.

I ignore them. They are unimportant. But I could smell her in there. Tonight a "her" to quench the hunger, still the pain, satisfy the need. And then I will be able to paint again. I smile.

I reach for the door knob and it graciously fits into my hand. I push it open and descend into the pit. From the doorway I see the crowd bathed in blood light. It flicks on and off, making the people fade in and out like ghosts. To me they are phantoms, false and unreal. I push my way through to the bar.

The bartender brings me a drink and I can feel her eyes upon me. Her gaze slices through the crowd and splashes upon me like a shock of cold water. I look around and she is there. She turns her head when she sees me watching her, exposing the tender flesh of her neck. She waits for several heartbeats and then looks back. Her eyes are wide in invitation.

The crowd parts and I am with her before she can change her mind. It is always good to

keep the prey off center.

Her laughter hangs in the air like wind chimes. I smile and tell her about my work. She nods eagerly; I am perceived as being intellectual, sophisticated, bohemian. She should look deeper and see the predator.

Manoeuvring her out the door is simple after another drink. She uses it to steel her nerves, I see it in the tilt of her head, the stance of her thighs. She rubs her hands on her skirt nervously and laughs again.

"I've never met a guy like this before," she says.

I smile with understanding. I am so sensitive.

We start off down the street. It is deathly quiet after the assault of the bar. My pain is sharpened, tingling in my nerves. My body knows what is to come and craves it. This is how a lover must feel, the itch for the press of warm flesh, to engulf the body of another.

I take her back to my motel room. Her footsteps are soft on the carpet behind me. As I open the door to draw her in her brow crinkles slightly. She is apprehensive about it being a motel room. I smile to reassure her; she is so close, I must make her enter the room. The pain begins to return, making my nerves burn. I want to scratch the palms of my hands but I force myself to relax. She must enter the room. I lean against the doorway, away from her. She is intrigued, the way she licks her lips tells me so. Come in, I think at her, willing her to step over the threshold. Her large eyes, moist and wide, blink once, twice. A smile twists her lips.

She steps into the room.

I am in agony but I enforce casualness as I close the door. I turn away from her and lean

my forehead against the wood. My face is slick with sweat from having to restrain myself. I feel weak. The need rages inside and threatens to drown me.

"Richard," her voice whispers from behind me.

I turn to see she has shed her skin, removed her mask.

I barely have time to gasp before she is upon me. Her lips pull back from her teeth as she snaps at my face. I twist away but her hands as talons entrap me. We tumble to the floor. The rug scratches my cheek. I feel her breath on my neck. Her hands rake against me, shredding clothes. A moment later she is digging into my flesh. I feel hot blood pouring over my chest, my belly. It is intoxicating.

I raise my head to look at her. Her eyes shine in the darkness and I see my need reflected in them. Another devourer, another predator. I fall victim to myself. If I had the breath for it I would laugh.

She digs her hands into my sides, nails puncturing the skin. My blood pulses out from its fleshy cage, free to flow in the air. The headiness does not distract me from the conclusion. She means to kill me and use my body for her own needs.

It is a tempting thought, to yield to her strength, to allow her clawing hands and biting mouth to devour me. An end to the need, transferred instead to her. I would live on in her legacies, in the bloody entrails she leaves in her wake.

But even as I think this, my body disobeys. It lunges against her and I feel the need rise up, overpowering my resistance, crushing my desire for oblivion. It will allow oblivion only of my making.

I rise above her, a phoenix, and plunge down with my fists, again and again. She fights with fury. Her nails connect on my shoulders and rip through the flesh, but I ignore her defenses.

My fists rise and fall, battering her face, until nothing is left but her eyes staring wide and unbelieving from the pulp where her head had been.

Slowly I become aware of the room. I stand over her body, my own body naked and slick with blood. I can not tell who bled the most, but she does not stir from the puddle at my feet. I step away and notice my erection is harder than ever.

I shower although I am reluctant to remove the marks of our battle. The water burns my penis, but I will not orgasm until the painting is done. I look back over the encounter and see how I should have recognized her, but the need was too strong. I could not see the subtle signs.

As I step back into the room to survey her wreckage I taste the regret that I know I will feel for some time to come. Another like me, she could have shown me ever more intricate ways to satisfy the need. Together we could have hunted as a pack and ravaged the innocent world. Alone I am only an irritant. Together we could have called down a holocaust.

I sigh and feel humble before this lost potential. Now that I know I am not alone I will have to be more careful.

I move to the dresser and pull out a paint brush. The light from the window is not yet strong, but she will still be slick and wet when the sun rises.

So long I have struggled to find the perfect subject. I only hope now my technique will prove worthy of her. The thought of dipping my brush into her is a fever in my mind.

I set a canvas on the chair by the window and settle down to wait for the light.

END