

# **The Artist**

by

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## The Artist

Vittorio was fifty-one, and an artist. His style was catholic, portraying still life or nature, modernism, cubism, nudism, and roundism with equal facility, and he could represent battle scenes as tiny miniatures or paint enormous water colour portraits enhanced with frescoed features. He was a dedicated painter who denied his art no cost, and had travelled widely to capture Tuscan lights or Egyptian profiles. His reputation had never matched his prolificacy: beyond a small circle of eulogy he was unknown. He had given away several of his works, including ten oils to the Charity Shop who passed them on to the local auction house for sale in a job lot, and three to a local art museum where they languished in a basement, but he was realist enough to know that this did not count and he still needed to sell his first picture to claim that magic accolade, 'Vittorio Laurentzo - Professional Artist'.

He stood looking at himself, reflected in a self portrait done in chalk on silk some ten years earlier. It was a good likeness, and showed dark glinting eyes catching a hidden light, above the great bushy beard he had worn when he had been trying to project a liberal image of himself to the world. The velvet purple beret was hidden in his art cabinet now; the beard too was tidier and trimmer - more the genteel artist than the anarchist. Perhaps he had been too generous with the flesh tints; they showed a smooth leanness and youth that was no longer present and that was over-flattering even as he had drawn it. He sighed: not that it mattered now - if he became as famous as he hoped, they would praise it for the verisimilitude of his youthful memory, and if not - well, then it didn't matter anyway; no one would ever see it. But he felt a vague unease and the picture shook slightly in his outstretched hand as he wondered again whether to include it in his exhibition tomorrow.

His own exhibition - Mrs Teece at least had not been blind to his talents. It had been while he was employed in that silly shoe shop to scrape money together for his next trip abroad, and to pay the rent. The manager had permitted him to hang some of his work on the walls as decoration; just the more pretty traditional country scenes, of course, but they were visible to a swiftly changing group of moneyed customers. It had been gratifying to overhear some of the kinder comments, though disappointingly none had been sold; but when Mrs Teece came in for an awkward fitting in a soft fashion boot, it had been he, Vittorio Laurentzo, who had served her

and managed to find the exact right size and shade after many attempts. She was touched by his patience with her, and when she had commented that “It is such a change to be served in a civil way these days”, and “This shop is really looking quite smart for once!” that he felt emboldened to ask if she liked the pictures. Mrs Teece did like them, and she liked the artist too, and was duly impressed by his fine sounding name. But, as she regretfully, if enigmatically, explained, she could not purchase any of his fine pictures of cows and river banks, as they reminded her too hauntingly of her late husband. However, what she would like was a portrait of him. She provided photographs, and met Vittorio on several occasions to talk excitedly of “My Portrait’s progress”. She was not a wealthy woman, but - in addition to the house and a number of minor debts - her late husband had left her a hall. This he had won from a steeple race bet shortly before his unexpected death, which came in time to stop him losing it again, and Mrs Teece had been advised to keep it going as a steady source of income from lets. Then, in great excitement as the portrait was completed, she had proposed that instead of a fee, which would anyway be much too modest for the value of such a work, she would provide her hall free for one week for a complete retrospective of the artist’s work.

True to her word, Mrs Teece arranged a Grand Breakfast Opening with a selection of breads and cheeses, full press releases, and the promised presence of several eminent critics and a few other artists whom she knew (though their fame was more local than wide); even more important, there was to be television coverage. Now, on the eve of the Grand Opening, Vittorio stood alone in the hall and surveyed his complete collection. It was nothing short of magnificent. The walls were draped with a buff coloured material to hide the worst of the brick-work and the bare plaster, and there were splendid display boards set about in a seemingly haphazard manner but which would allow visitors to move with a purposive and directed ambulation as they followed the numbered descriptions in the catalogue. Standing alone on an easel was the newly commissioned portrait, with its own ceiling spot showing it off to perfection. Vittorio had put considerable effort into this piece, choosing the best features from each photograph of the dead man. He looked a plain and stolid citizen but Mrs Teece had clearly loved him and wanted to preserve this memory and - as a commissioned artist - he was proud to follow her dictate. His own self-portrait hung in an alcove to one side of the main gallery, and seemed almost dark in comparison - for Mrs Teece’s generosity had not been totally without limit. He hesitated for a moment, then lifted it down and carried it across to the easel and swapped it for that of Mr Teece. The chinks seemed to sparkle

with added lustre in the strong light, and he wished he could leave it there; the oils of Mr Teece were so drab and traditional, with his dull suit fading into a duller background. He glanced at his watch: it was later than he realised, and he was meeting Mrs Teece for a drink and supper. Quickly, he switched off the lights and closed the door. Mrs Teece had trusted him with the key, and there would be time to change the pictures back again first thing when he unlocked the doors again.

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Mary Wilson huddled in a cardboard box hidden in a door recess, out of sight of such little bits of the world as dared to walk past her dark, unlit alley. Tiny and thin as a Lowery, she covered from the cold under a cover of yesterday's news. She had long since finished the sandwich she had scavenged from the bin behind a local restaurant; people seemed to leave less and less these days, she thought. Half hidden in another box lay a number of little figures she had assembled from the litter which blew about her: squashed Coke cans, cigarette packets, a dropped lady's handkerchief. She would use anything which came to hand, bound with bits of wire pulled from a rusty fence in the park, or from pieces of packing put out behind the big stores, twisting them to grotesque shapes: semblances of people or animals, which she sold in the day for a few pence to passers-by.

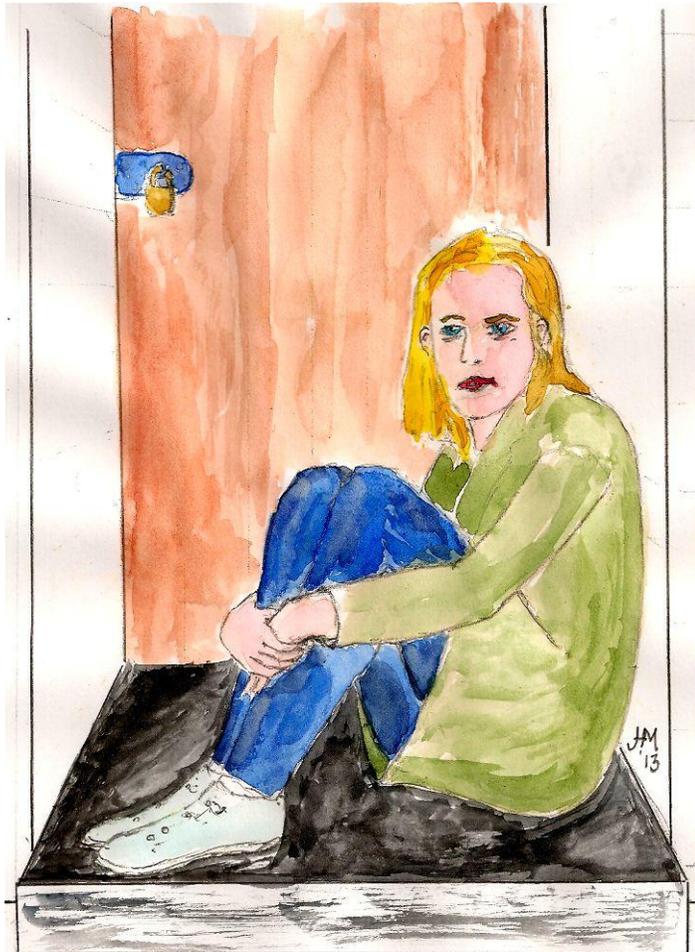
She shivered violently, and stood to force some circulation into her aching white limbs. A man passed and she asked for a light. He took out a heavy, ornate lighter but - as she moved to take it - he grabbed her arm and tried to pull her towards him. Other groups were passing at the end of the alley, and she threatened to scream if he touched her; he scowled then and swore softly, then offered her a little money, frightened by the power of her threat. But this she refused, for she had pride enough to live by her own efforts alone. She just wanted a light: and this time he held out the lighter for her and she touched the flame with a rolled up spill of newspaper, and started a small, low fire in the dark doorway as the man hurried away. Slowly the pile of accumulated rubbish caught alight, and she sank back with a contented laugh before its cheerful blaze.

She had earlier found some lemonade discarded in its bottle, still with the screw lid on, and had been looking forward to this moment all evening. She removed the lid and noted sadly that it did not fizz, but swung it to her lips anyway - to spit it out with vile distaste: it was turps, or some other foul and undrinkable liquid. She threw it down in disgust, and ran to the nearby public

toilets, but it must have been after ten for they were already closed, and she had to go on to a kindly hot-dog vendor, who gave her a mug of water. But the thought of getting 10p for the bottle in the morning cheered her again; she could buy some loose chocolate pieces for that. On second thoughts, she needed a new felt tip pen for display posters to try and tempt more customers, and - resolving to set art before pleasure - she slipped back to her doorway.

To her horror the wind had blown the fire against the door, and the heaps of shredded polystyrene she had left ready to burn slowly through the night were blazing and melting in a fierce heat. She caught up a stick and raked them away; the door was smouldering slightly but she beat out the remaining sparks then settled down for the night with a thankful sigh in her cardboard box, pulling the newspaper coverings tightly around her.

Next morning she woke with a cold trickle of water soaking her boxes; she had overslept and it was already light, and a larger than usual crowd was gathering at the end of her alley. She picked up her display boxes and



moved towards them hoping for some early business so that for once she might buy a roll and a cup of tea for a proper breakfast. She set out her little objects on top of a plastic gritting bin, and wished she had already made out the display sign she wanted; for nobody took any notice of her.

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Vittorio Laurentzo was in tears - the whole hall had been gutted and the firemen told him nothing could be saved; there was nothing left, and he watched helplessly as the brigade poured water over the charred ruins inside. Occasionally, he could catch a glimpse of something he recognised

still smouldering on a wall, only to see the firemen pull it down with thick gloves and pour yet more water over it. They did not wish to risk a fresh outbreak, they explained. They had to be thorough. They hoped there was nothing of any great value there; but hopefully the insurance would cover it.

The television crew arrived, and took a little footage for the news broadcasts. The other artists who had come for the opening were sympathetic, and reminisced about accidents their own masterpieces had suffered, and how they had risen above such minor setbacks and gone on to even greater efforts. The assembled critics from the world of art were disgruntled, having travelled some distance and at great inconvenience, only to be cheated of their prey. Even the pile of printed catalogues which had been left ready to sell in the entrance hall were all destroyed. Suddenly, there was a great cheer, and the firemen came out proudly carrying one picture they had found tucked away by itself in an alcove, and which fate seemed to have spared from the inferno: it was the portrait of Mr Teece. The camera man made a great show of filming this piece, and the artists made even more sympathetic noises; but the critics, overcome no doubt by their frustration, suddenly burst into laughter. So this was the Great Portrait: this sad, unimaginative piece of dull Town-Hall style vulgarity. They could not even bring themselves to make proper criticisms; they just derided it rudely and howled at their wit. Soon, the whole group were laughing hysterically and even the firemen could not resist a smile. But Mrs Teece snatched the picture from them in fury and stalked off with it: she had paid for it and it was hers!

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The crowd began to move on. The invited group had become quite friendly and they agreed to adjourn to the pub round the corner to put the day in proper perspective over a breakfast pint. It was then they came upon Mary. The artists were keen drinkers and would hardly have given her a glance, but the critics fell in raptures about her work. She had wedged shreds of torn paper to each piece with a price on: 5, 10, 15 - even 20. Immediately, the critics derided these prices as far too low - but paid them anyway so that posterity could say they had given their support while she was still unknown; and they were certain they could fetch double these prices in the London art rooms, for this season primitive art was definitely 'in'. They spoke of her broken twisted shapes as "forms pulled from her imagination, yet forming a logical extension to her world of inner torment", and "the self-expression of her revulsion at an oppressive modern world". The

television crew set up their camera again and began to film each piece in detail, and invited comments from the critics who began a lively discussion between themselves. The artists said they had always admired Mary's work, and claimed to have given advice and supplied materials; for they enjoyed the chance to be on television and did not like to argue too fiercely with these eminent art critics from London.

Mary was confused by the speed of what was happening. She did not argue when somebody threw a thick warm coat round her shoulders and invited her to a grand breakfast, though she tried to protest when money was pressed in her hand: but the television interviewer seized on this as natural artistic reticence, and she was too quick witted to argue for long that really her prices were measured in pence not in pounds. Somehow she realised that fate had at last kept faith with her, and especially when one of the critics talked in terms of a big London display and a feature article in a forthcoming Sunday Colour Supplement.

Across the square she saw the bowed head of a bearded, lonely man walking tear-faced away. She wanted to run over and invite him to share her good fortune: then she recognised him as the man who had given her a light.

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