

The Bleeding Man

by John Horner

Spain, 1959

When he heard the trigger click, he knew he was going to die. Not at that exact moment, but something happened to him when he squeezed the pistol and heard the loud blast of gunfire that sent chills running down his spine. At first he didn't know what emotion it was that made him feel so unsure of himself for the first time in his life. Actually to be a little more accurate, he didn't know what it was like to feel any kind of emotion at all. It was the screaming that awoke him from his unpleasant daydream. When he looked across the table again, he was disgusted.

The other man that was sitting there grabbing his bloody kneecap couldn't have been more than 115 pounds. As he sat there looking at the man that he shot, he couldn't help but wonder how such a pathetic, barely human creature could slip under the radar of Los Camisas Rojas. After what seemed like hours, he finally gestured toward the painting at the center of the table.

"So I'm sure you've heard the stories, and you know what I'm going to do to you." After a moment of silence, the bleeding man looked up at him. In that second they locked eyes. All time stopped. Somewhere in the world, there was a child in an attic hiding for her life, somewhere there was a young couple in the thrills of making love for the first and last time, somewhere there was a man selling out his neighbor for the safety of his own family. But there in that condemned house, in that condemned part of the world, it was just him and the bleeding man staring back at him, staring into him.

After a moment he continued, though there was something in his voice that was different. "I am sure you know I'm going to kill you like I've killed many men before you. But how you die is left entirely up to you. If you cooperate, it'll be one clean shot to the head. However, if you choose to be brave, I'm going to blow off your other kneecap and sit here until you beg to die." It was at this point, after he'd laid out the choices that he'd seen so many men start to sob and apologize to him as they blabbered names, hoping for a quick death.

But not this man. The bleeding man began to laugh maniacally. To his amazement the other man began to speak.

"You think you can kill me, but you've never been more wrong about anything in your life. If that painting means anything at all, it means that even in a world dominated by cold, cruel, selfish men like you that love and beauty and laughter are still alive. And wherever there is love, laughter, and beauty, I am there in spirit. You can take that gun and pump a thousand bullets into my body, but I will live on."

It took every fiber of his being not to show his true emotions. Two things happened to him that never had before. The first was that the suspect actually confronted him and didn't give up easily. The second was that as that bleeding man looked at him, he felt a surge of emotion that

made him want to put down his weapon and hug that man like he would a brother. Not knowing what to do, he pulled the trigger and watched the man's brains splatter all over the wall behind him. His hands shaking, he pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette and began to puff away.

Back at his apartment, he took the painting out of his trench coat. As he scanned over the painting, drinking in every minute detail, he was amazed. Amazed by how a picture could affect him and make him feel happy and sad and so human all at the same time. He was also amazed at his stupidity. He knew if any scanners picked up the painting tucked in his coat, the Red Shirts would get him by tomorrow at the latest. If it was anybody else, they'd be taken in the middle of the night and never spoken of again. But he was different. He was one of their own. He would be made an example of, and he was very afraid.

Fear played a huge role in getting his part of the world to where it is today. After the Spanish Civil War when both sides lost the war and a lot of lives were lost too, people were afraid. Out of that fear rose a man. A man who said he wasn't afraid, a man who said he had all the answers, a man who called himself Picasso. It was said that he once had aspirations of being an artist, but now he wanted to paint a picture of a different kind. He would stand on the stage for hours and plead the case for the simple working man who wanted nothing more than to feed his family and to make his country something to be proud of. In their fear, people bought it hook, line and sinker. The man who his fellow countrymen looked upon as a god said that the problem wasn't the country, or the famine; it was the individual. He said it was what made us different and divided us; it was religion and art and literature that was the enemy, not ourselves. If we only joined him in giving up those things that bound us to truly be free, we could rule the world.

In a few short years, the art was as dead as the people who spoke out against him. He looked again at the painting, at the picnic with a cathedral in the background and a child flying a kite off to the side on a lovely summer day. He looked at it for hours until the telephone ringing brought him back to the real world. On the other end was a man who said tomorrow was going to be the most important day of his life. The chancellor, Picasso, wanted to speak with him directly at ten the next morning in the house with no name. Needless to say, he couldn't believe his ears.

When he hung the phone up, he went back to analyzing the painting, every color, every shape and person that inhabited the tiny world within the picture frame spoke to him more than any living person ever had. And he knew what he must do. He must make it to where people could read, fly kites and go to picnics once again. He knew must kill Picasso.