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Artemisia Gentileschi and a Woman's Fury

Biographic novel

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und Der Zorn der Frauen)

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Prologue

The dress tore. It was a noise in two steps: first a small, cautious one, then a big one, decisive. One, two! Light, dark! Artemisia froze for a moment, alarmed by the supposed misdeed. But it wasn't her who had torn her dress to tatters, it was the man, and now he was looming above her again. No! Artemisia struggled free, a third time, a fourth, every time it became harder to resist, as if the man's weight was holding her down, even when she had just managed to shake him off, was darting away, jumping to the side, fleeing up the stairs. But there he was again, right behind her. There was no way out! No, no!

And yet, it had all begun as a little game. They had bickered because they had grown bored of drawing in one-point perspective. Which should have made her suspicious. After all, perspective was his specialty. Drawing large spaces was his trade. That was what Agostino Tassi was famous for, that was why her father had hired him: Tassi was to teach his daughter, the 17-year-old Artemisia Gentileschi, the art of perspective. Their equipment was still lying on the table down in Orazio's studio, where Artemisia assisted her father. But the place was

an absolute mess, the precious paper swept from the table, the tools of their trade strewn around the room. That's where it began.

Come on, give me a kiss, Artemisia!

She had laughed in his face. Such an old man, with a twirled beard and a paunch. Who wore perfume, a *postiche*, a kind of toupee to conceal his thinning hair. Her supposed teacher. Supposedly a great artist. Behind his back, they called him *Lo smargiasso*, the braggart. That's how he was known right throughout the city. She yelled the name out loud, mocking him: *smargiasso!* Settle down!

She had noticed him staring at her cleavage, as if he wanted to suck her breasts out of her dress. She had looked at his hands, they were manicured, showing that this artist was wealthy enough to employ a host of assistants, the hands of a master, restless hands that were constantly correcting her own, even when they were in no need of correction.

Come on, kiss me!

He spoke to her with an excessive intimacy, using the *tu* form. He grimaced as he pleaded with her. He tried to make it look like fun and games. But his face was tense, his skin flushed. His shirt was open.

Artemisia said: You can't paint that, a man saying something, but you can see that he actually means the opposite! You're saying: kiss me, but you mean: I want to make you my conquest.

Exactly! cried the man. And that was how it all began. He reached for her, she fended off his hand and jumped up instinctively with such force that the stool toppled over, and he chased after her.

Not so fast!

Who yelled that? Why did she stop? Her instinct to obey was so strong.

Wait!

No!

She tried to make a run for it. How cumbersome these long skirts were. Three skirts on top of each other. A white underskirt, then a coloured skirt made of linen, and a woollen overskirt. Her top was also made of linen, roughly tucked into her skirts, because she was wearing an apron that cinched everything together at the waist. He grabbed her by the apron string. A good thing she had only tied it loosely!

She slipped away from him. But only got as far as the stairs. Again, her legs got tangled in the long skirts, threatening to trip her up. He grabbed her, she gathered herself, scrambled up. The staircase seemed brighter than usual, as if a light was shining on it from above. It must have been her eyes, she was straining so hard to see, no mistakes now, just scuttle up, up into her room, which had a lock on the door. Twelve steps, she knew that, so often she had counted and drawn them, shading and cross-hatching, just twelve little steps.

His presence behind her, and suddenly, in front of her was Tuzia, her friend, the woman who worked for her father, Tuzia, thank god! Standing up straight, alert, waiting.

Artemisia called her name, saw her smile, saw that she had understood the situation. But what was that? Tuzia stepped to the side, let Artemisia pass. And then the man.

Tuzia, help me!

Laughter from two throats.

There was that voice again that she didn't recognise. The long corridor, the rooms off to the sides. The second one was hers. She already had the handle in her hand when he caught up with her.

Wait!

Why on earth did she do that? Why had she stopped for a moment? Had the urge to comply been so deeply ingrained in her? Was she so used to paying heed to the voice of a man? Artemisia yelped in rage. And in pain. The man grabbed her by the hair at the back of her neck. And dragged her into the room. Into her room. Which had once been a refuge to her. But now felt like a trap. Artemisia struggled. She tried to get past the man. But he was too

heavy. Too big. Even his mouth was big. Huge. The mouth of a dog, snapping at her. His teeth rotten. The maw glowing red, as if filled with fire. She'd never seen that in the pictures her father painted of his saints and his princes. The bed! The most sacred place of all. She made sure that Tuzia kept it meticulously clean. The others found her fastidiousness over the top, but the sheets had just been changed this morning. The bed was high, with four posts reaching almost all the way to the ceiling. She banged into one of them, I'm okay, I'm okay. She tried to kick the man, but the skirts got in the way. She was lying down. Gasping for air. The man's hands on top of her. His heavy skull. His grimy boots. Why were his boots dirty? They hadn't been out of the house. She twisted and turned, but he moved with her. The bedding beside her, on top of her. He pushed it aside. At least he wasn't suffocating her.

Artemisia, you're driving me crazy. No, that wasn't true, he was the one driving himself to madness, his violence was his alone, he had succumbed to evil of his own accord.

She had wrenched her head painfully to the side trying to wriggle away from him, away from his hands, his lips. Up above, she saw the small opening of the window. The light fell onto his face. She was in the shadow. She couldn't get away from him, he was above her again. Birds outside the window. A pair of pigeons on Via della Croce? In the centre of Rome, in the middle of the city? That didn't make sense, she thought. Then that rip, first one, then two. And her scream.

Stop!

Cut!

Stop, stop!

They all came together. The camerawoman, who was sitting on a chair outside the room they were shooting in and had just checked the monitor. The assistants. The script girl. And, of course, Lena, the director. She was the one who had yelled out. Cut. But only after Joy, the lead actress, had screamed: Stop! Which was completely unheard of. Nobody

interrupted the shooting of a scene, especially one with so much action. It was a choreography, every step, everything the crew did had to be perfectly timed.

Okay. That's it. Let's take a break, said Lena. We'll get back to it in an hour.

Someone grabbed coffees and a carafe of water. They sat in Lena's trailer. The director and her assistant, along with Tim, the scriptwriter, Joy, the actress playing Artemisia. And the professor, as they all called her, the expert consultant for this major feature film about Artemisia Gentileschi, the most important female painter of the Baroque period, the maestra of biblical scenes, who was raped as a young woman.

What was that all about? – Lena's voice stern, but not unfriendly. – I sure hope you have a good reason...?

It's not working. – Joy's voice was a little shaky, but unwavering.

What's not working?

The setting. The camera. The lighting. The whole scene. Joy paused, looking for the right words. The director, co-operative as always, motioned to one of the assistants to bring the monitor over.

Why don't we take a look at what we've just filmed.

The five of them sat watching for a long time. Focussed. Suddenly Joy blurted out:

There, that's it. That's exactly what I mean.

She pointed her finger at the take they were watching. A close-up of Danilo, the actor playing Agostino. His powerful face framed from below, making it look even stronger. His skin red, eyes bulging.

It's not half bad, don't you think? – Lena wanted to relieve the tension in the room a little.

But Joy wasn't going to let up: Like, who is this actually about?

The director looked perturbed. They had spent days, weeks discussing it, before finally agreeing to show the rape scene. Graphically, but not voyeuristically. No female hands

clawing at the sheets, no face contorted in pain, no naked breasts. Camera one followed Danilo, a point-of-view shot, lots of movement, they had practiced going up the steps a thousand times, but it made the pursuit and the sense of confinement clear. Then a cut to the bedroom, the focus on the rapist, shot from over his shoulder at first, then moving back into a medium long shot, Agostino – that is, Danilo – looming above the bed like a giant, and on the bed, Artemisia – Joy – disappearing into the tangle of sheets. Clearly the victim, but shielded from the camera.

I don't see the problem? – Lena was clearly getting annoyed, you could hear it in her voice.

Artemisia didn't wear ... plunging necklines – Joy was aware she was starting with the least important thing.

True. – The expert intervened. – At the turn of the seventeenth century, women only wore low-cut necklines for major festivities.

And he wasn't her teacher. Hadn't been for a long time. If it's true that he ever was. We're not ... we're not being historically accurate here, said Joy tentatively, and looked at the expert, who was taking notes.

Christ, of course not! – Lena interjected, getting worked up. – We're not making a documentary here. And the goal in this shot is to depict the voracious male gaze. The way it falls on a woman like a judgement. Bang. Every woman knows that feeling. And the teacher-student situation is essentially archetypal.

Exactly, said Joy, that's probably what bothers me. It's ... that male gaze.

The male gaze on the victim. – Said Lena's assistant, jumped in to back Joy up.

Joy nodded. The others sat there silently for a moment.

The question is, the assistant said tentatively, whether we actually need to include the scene in such detail.

Well it is the opening scene of the film! barked Tim, the scriptwriter. – It's both the opening and the scene that ties everything together. Even people who don't know Artemisia's work have heard of about the rape. She is essentially identified with this horrible act. We give people a way into the film, you know? Everyone has some experience of abuse.

Joy waved her hand dismissively. Suddenly she felt utterly exhausted. It was draining to throw a spanner in the works so late in the game. Sparking the ire of the whole crew in the process. She knew that they would all end up paying for it. Things would get even more hectic, even more rushed. Every minute of a day on set that wasn't spent working was viewed as a waste. The pressure was palpable. And yet. She thought for a moment about how to adjust her line of argument, appreciative that the others were willing to listen. It was a good crew. Thoughtful. The director was no tyrant. She took her team's opinions seriously. Joy looked for the right words, stuttered, interrupted herself, started again.

I think I understand, the expert finally said, measuredly. – I understand what you're getting at, Joy.

She looked at the leading actress, then let her gaze drift across to the scriptwriter and the director. Lena looked at her intently.

Yes?

The expert took a deep breath. If I'm understanding you right, Joy, the question you're posing is: Whose story are we actually telling here?

Chapter 1: Rome

The little girl was clinging to her father's hand. She wanted to see what was happening up front. But she was too small. She could see nothing but the manteaus and hoop skirts of the ladies and the ballooning trousers and cloaks of the men, could hear only the hushed prayers of the crowds around her. Stiff robes and a constant murmuring. Black, black, and more black. Her father was silent. He did not join in on the prayers. He had hardly said a word over the past few days, in fact. Orazio Gentileschi, an affable character, a painter who was always surrounded by flocks of friends, who loved the taverns of Rome as much as the studios of its artists, had fallen silent. A mountain. Dark. Impenetrable. His jaw clenched. His gaze directed away from Artemisia.

Father? Of course she didn't say that. Not here in the church. She never found it easy to obey rules, but she was considered an obedient child. The sweetest of the four children. Her three brothers stood to her right and left, bawling. Artemisia stayed silent, her back straight. Did she understand what was going on? Did she understand that this was a last goodbye, a catastrophe for her and her family? Her mother had passed away during childbirth, hardly a day over thirty. They had laid her out, placed her dead child on her chest, nestled in her waxy, white arms. The candles in Santa Maria del Popolo flickered, the incense reeked. The people stood there, the lamentation for the deceased carried on so long, the space was so starved of oxygen, the air so acrid and heavy with grief, that people began to wobble. Was the dead baby a girl? Or a boy? Artemisia couldn't remember. The last few days had become a blur, the mornings and evenings. She had gotten up prepared breakfast for her brothers together with their weeping maid. It could just as easily have been an afternoon snack, so formless had the days grown. She had arranged it on the table and cleaned up afterwards, before brushing her hair and bathing herself. She was eleven years old. Now she was a woman. And would be responsible for her brothers.

Her father squeezed her hand. Artemisia looked up. Now he looked down at her, but it was as if he didn't see her. He was miles away. Would he ever come back?

Prudenzia Montone had been the love of his life. Well, she was certainly a good match. But love? His mates at the local tavern didn't understand it. There was no such thing. Or they saw it as something that had to be weathered, like a thunderstorm, and which would die back down soon enough. But that a man like Gentileschi, happy-go-lucky, a real mensch who was able to hold his liquor, had gone gaga for a broad? That's how they talked in the tavern when they thought little Artemisia wasn't listening or didn't understand. Maybe Orazio had only taken her because she needed a husband. Quick and discreet. Everyone had heard stories about that kind of thing. The woman already had one on the way, so to speak.

Artemisia listened in and tried to make sense of it. Her mother used to send her to pick up her father. Which worked better on some days than others. She hated it. She didn't like the air in the tavern, thick with wine. She didn't like the way the men talked either, which was as wobbly as their gait when they finally got up to go home to their wives and children, like her father, most of the time anyway, once she had pleaded with him enough, tugging on his sleeve, begging and wining. Her father was often the focal point of these boys' nights, and yet he was different from the rest of them. Often he and his mates would sit in a circle, but the distance between Orazio Gentileschi and the men either side of him was bigger. Was that a sign of respect? Or distrust? Perhaps it was a mixture of both. Orazio Gentileschi never forgot who he was even for a moment: he was an artist. *The* artist. Certainly one of the most respected artists in Rome at the time. He had explained that to his daughter time and again, his index finger raised, his upper body bent down towards her, a friendly expression on his face.

Never forget that: an artist!

On a par with the blessed and cursed Merisi. He was the only one her father was willing to recognise as his equal. Michelangelo Merisi of Caravaggio. But he rarely showed his face around here – and if he did, it was only to borrow money because he was running

away from someone or looking for a place to hide. Merisi was always on the move, it was a mystery how he managed to get any painting done at all. Artemisia looked around: Merisi wasn't there. He'd run his mouth again. This time he had offended her father, or defied him, which was one and the same thing. He had turned up at her house just after her mother had passed away. Well, passed away hardly describes it. She died a miserably death. It had taken them three whole days to get the little one out of her battered body. She had bled to death. Nobody had been able to stop it, she had first moaned and wailed, writhing about, swatting away the towels they had brought her with a sweaty hand. Then her body had stretched out straight, she seemed to grow paler and quieter by the minute, the sheet over her body grew slack, a dark stain emerged over the centre of her body, until the midwife ripped the sheet away and replaced it with a new one, and then another. Artemisia had not been able to look when the sheets were changed. The little child had been completely blue, it wasn't breathing. Terrified, Artemisia held it in her arms, she didn't know what to do with it. It was not her job to hold a dead baby, naked, exposed. She grabbed some fabric, swaddled it quickly and clumsily, immediately began rocking it in her arms, just as she had seen the women doing, but of course nothing stirred, no tiny fingers reached out for her, there was no whining or suckling. Everything remained silent. Only the mother's laboured breathing could be heard, and Artemisia saw that her mother was now looking at her and the newborn, and Artemisia couldn't help but pull the cloth to the side a little so that her mother could see the tiny face of the dead child:

Look!

But there were already other people crowding around her mother again, the midwife, even a doctor, whom her father had frantically called over, and her mother's gaze was obscured by the bodies, a frenzy erupted, there was shouting and wailing:

Prudenzia! Breathe!

Cries for more towels and water.

Hot water?

No – cold!

But in the end, they could not stem the flow of blood. Everything turned red. The redness drenched the bed, the sheets, the towels, turning the whites crimson and darkening the grey, and Artemisia was hurried out of the room, the dead child still in her arms.