

from *Treatise on an Awakening Sentiment*

So I'll begin: on the evening of December 12, 2004, a Sunday, I was sitting backwards on one of the three chairs crammed into the kitchen-studio of the tiny, first-floor apartment on Via Fabio Filzi in Padua where my painter friend Claudio Laudani lives. Claudio had scattered newspapers over the floor, set up a plywood table, and was dripping paint. Claudio's apartment consists of two rooms and a bath. There's the kitchen-studio with a small cooking space and a window overlooking Via Fabio Filzi. This is Claudio's all-purpose room: for painting, socializing, cooking (when he remembers), studying, everything. The other room has two places to sleep—two mattresses on the floor—and a bunch of canvases and panels, painted and unpainted, some hanging on the wall, most leaning against the wall: a glass door leads out to a tiny, 2-by-2½-meter courtyard surrounded by an extremely high wall where Claudio often dries his paintings in the summer. You have to go through the room with the two mattresses to get to the long, narrow bathroom. The kitchen-studio includes: a table piled with paper and drawings, an ashtray, pencils, knives, boxes of Toscani cigars, razor blades, books, drawing pads and sketchbooks, and other stuff; a bookcase full of books on art and poetry and mathematics, the top shelves open, the bottom shelves behind cabinet doors; a small refrigerator; the cooking area with the sink, the range top, all the cabinets; the three chairs I already mentioned. In the corner between the apartment door and the window, there's a nine-inch serrated knife on the wall, hanging in a leather sheath. Two black-and-white photocopies have been taped to the door for years: one is a copy of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* (I'm never sure which version, the one in London or Istanbul) and the other's an *Annunciation* by Antonello da Messina (the really famous one, with the hands almost in benediction). When he paints, Claudio usually leaves the doors to the bookcase partway open (or else he uses the plywood table) to prop up the canvas that he'll lean against the top part of the bookcase. But in those weeks of December 2004, Claudio was experimenting with *dripping*, with paint

drops, so he was mainly working off the floor.

My friendship with Claudio began on a June day in 2001: it was around ten in the morning, and I was walking along Via San Francesco, headed from home (my old apartment) toward downtown, and as always, I was walking and reading the newspaper, when I heard a voice saying: "Excuse me, excuse me." I looked up. I saw this man, tall, massive, completely bald, but still handsome, wire-rim priest glasses, somewhat nervous. The man said:

"You're Giulio Mozzi, right?"

"Yeah."

That's how our friendship started, and continues to this day. I think Claudio got all his friends the same way. I asked him once:

"So your wife—how'd you meet her?"

"Same as you."

"Meaning?"

"I stopped her on the street. She was a beautiful woman."

"You asked her to pose?"

"No. The photos and paintings came later."

Claudio and this woman are no longer married. Claudio shares his tiny apartment with a friend he sometimes calls "my friend" and other times "my benefactor." Claudio's friend never talks, or almost never talks; I've seen him a few times in the apartment, and those few times he always left right away, or else he retreated into the room with the two mattresses—like a snail if you touch its horns, I once thought—leaving Claudio and me alone to talk in the kitchen-studio. Claudio's friend, *his benefactor*, is the son of an industrialist family, a very rich family (acquired, not inherited wealth). He lives part of the time with Claudio, the other part I don't know where. I'd imagine with his family, in one of the family homes. Now and then Claudio tells me, "My friend's in Friuli," but I don't know why he goes to Friuli or what he does there, seeing that his family's in Padua, and that Claudio's friend, as far as I can tell, isn't doing anything with his life. When he's living with Claudio, Claudio does everything for him. He cooks for him. Tells him what to do. Tells him when he can or can't stay in the apartment when I'm there (and, I'd imagine, when Claudio has girls over). He bosses him around like a child. And Claudio's friend, truth be told, seems like the type you need to boss around, "Do this. Do that," or else he'd just stop and not do anything. Though occasionally

he might act on impulse: one time, Claudio told me, his friend went straight to Friuli, and came back with a gorgeous two-seater car. He liked it—he snapped it up. In the tiny hallway (maybe 1½ meters) between the kitchen-studio and the room with the mattresses, there's a portrait in a magnificent frame that Claudio did of his friend some years back, before we ever met. For almost a year, all I saw of this friend was the portrait, then the first time I ran into the two of them together on the street, Claudio sent his friend away. In the painting, his friend's face is half in light, half in shadow; he's wearing a yellow polo shirt with a single button; a tiny, tiny snake, jaws agape, is wrapped around his neck; the background's dark, reddish-black, like a night sky glowing red with fire, and on the left side, by the friend's right ear, there's something that might be a crucifixion, or maybe a bonfire. Claudio's friend is his benefactor because the friend owns the apartment where Claudio lives and his friend wanders through now and then; in exchange Claudio takes care of his friend, cooks for him, tells him what to do, what to wear, gives him advice, behaves in each and every way like a father and mother would towards a son who needs their guidance in everything. What I don't know is whether or not Claudio's friend really needs all this guidance or if Claudio, out of friendship but also out of self-interest—in exchange for using the studio apartment—has turned his friend into someone who needs guidance in everything. Claudio's friend graduated in medicine last year and took around ten or fifteen years to do it. Claudio wrote his thesis. A thesis about migraines, because Claudio's interested in migraines. He gets migraines. There are some migraines, Claudio told me, that are typical of artists, even some typical of painters. Leonardo da Vinci also got migraines. One time, Claudio (standing in the kitchen-studio, reading in a solemn voice, the book in his left hand, his right hand slowly gesturing in the air) read a passage to me from Dmitri Merejkowski's famous book, *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*, about da Vinci's migraines and the connection between migraines and genius. That's how Claudio explains his own migraines. I don't know if he takes something for them, some kind of drug: in the end, for him, to hear him talk, migraines are a blessing. They're the symptom of an approaching *state of grace*. "When you talk about a state of grace, it's not the same thing as *inspiration*," Claudio told me. "Inspiration's a psychological state. At most, inspiration shows the

good rapport between an artist and his inspiring Muse. A state of grace is a cosmic occurrence. It's not about your abilities—just the opposite. When you're in a state of grace, you're a complete idiot. You're in a migraine daze—and then it's gone—and you're just dazed. You don't even feel the urge to work. You start painting and you don't care in the slightest. Whether you make this stroke or that stroke. But you do it anyway, and no question you're making some strokes and not others. And in the end, there's the painting. Right there. And it's not even yours. Because something can happen, can intervene just by chance, and it's this accidental intervention that makes the painting. Like the tale about the desperate artist who can't remember how to paint, and so he throws his palette and brushes at the canvas and out comes the perfect painting." I suspect, more often than not, that Claudio sees himself as having migraines, migraines typical of painters, of genius painters, because he thinks of himself as a painter, a genius painter. Because he sees himself as entering into a state of exaltation where he's no longer Claudio Laudani, he's no longer a *pòro càni*—the dialect's needed: "poor man" is inane; "poor bastard" means something else entirely; *pòro càni*, "poor dog," used in expressions like "sémo tùti pòri càni," "we're all poor dogs," echoes with the idea of a "useless slave"—a *pòro càni* who lives in two first-floor rooms and keeps arguing, not even wanting to, with his ex-wife who has a lover now and a baby with that lover; a *pòro càni* who doesn't have a penny to his name: instead, he's a painter, a genius painter. *Ego pictor*. He's a genius painter in the same sense, the same way, as Giorgio de Chirico: he's an absolute painter, and nothing else. An artist. A man who has the right—and above all, the need—to bend his entire life and the life of anyone in reach to the demands of art. A man who, when he does something out of interest, doesn't do it in self-interest but in the interest of art: because he's an artist, and he is one absolutely.

For a time, when my friends and I talked about Claudio, we called him the "Great Unknown Artist." If we talked about him in writing, we always used capital letters. Or we just called him "Art." I'm convinced Claudio is truly a great painter. One of his paintings is on the cover of this book, the exact painting he was making the evening of December 12, 2004, with his *dripping* technique, while I sat straddling one of his three chairs and watched. Claudio is truly a Great Unknown Artist, because he's a Great Artist and because he's

Unknown. Note that I didn't say: "Because he's a Great Artist *but* he's Unknown." I said: "He's a Great Artist *and* he's Unknown." I don't want anyone to think I think that to be truly, fully a Great Artist, you have to be Known. That's really not what I think. Of course I'm sorry Claudio's not Known, but his being Unknown doesn't add or subtract from his being a Great Artist. Of course in life in general, and in an artist's life in particular, it's better being Known than Unknown. And I'm actually writing this novel—not just for the money (which I desperately need)—but because I'm hoping, sooner or later, that Claudio will become a Great Known Artist; actually I'm sure of it. Not to mention, the entire novel just came to me, popped into my head, on that evening of December 12, 2004, while I was sitting in Claudio's kitchen-studio.

How Claudio's managed to scrape by over the years, I don't know. I don't know if *his benefactor* has supported him. I don't know if he has, if he had, any money saved. For a number of years, before he was reduced to living with his friend in this tiny apartment, I think Claudio was actually well-off. Once in a while he talks about his old apartment, his wonderful books, his art books, his complete Meridiani Mondadori collection. On one of the bookshelves in the studio apartment, there's a photo album from his trips. China, India, Tibet, Africa, places I wouldn't begin to recognize. The photos are spectacular. For a while, after that first time we met on the street, I thought Claudio was a photographer. When we were together, he always had this one picture with him that he wanted me to see. "I took a picture of the Madonna," he'd say. The picture was a beautiful picture, a young girl dressed, according to centuries of iconographic tradition, like you'd imagine the Madonna to be dressed. A dark mantle (one of Claudio's blankets) draped over her head and shoulders, covering her hair and chest. It was truly a gorgeous photo of the Madonna. "The Photographic Madonna," Claudio called it. He dreamed that this photo, properly enlarged, might be printed on cloth or another kind of backing and wind up in some churches. I think he went to every church in Padua, Claudio did, offering them his "Photographic Madonna." But all the priests he spoke with told him no. Some, listening to him, were even horrified at the thought.

"Some of the greatest painters used almost anyone to model for their Madonnas: a lover, a prostitute, the baker's wife. And that's

okay," Claudio said, "because, they tell you, it's the painter's art that sanctifies, that Madonnifies the painting. The girl who did the modeling doesn't matter. And the painter doesn't matter, either. Caravaggio was a bastard, a criminal. Even so, his paintings are okay. But the 'Photographic Madonna,' no. Because, they tell you, that's a portrait. A real person. A person actually here. A particular person. And so she can't be the Madonna. Like I had nothing to do with taking the picture. Whatever. Look, I'm telling you: out of all my photos, there's only one of these."

And he got them out, made me look at all his attempts at photographing the Madonna. Even the other photos of this same girl, taken that same day.

"Look," he said.

I looked.

"Can you tell this one's something else entirely?"

It was true—it was something else entirely. The "Photographic Madonna" was one thing, all the other photos—beautiful photos, no doubt—were something else.

"It was an accident," Claudio said.

"Or the Grace of God," I said.

"Maybe," Claudio said.

Claudio, during those months when he wandered around with the "Photographic Madonna" in his bag (a black leather bag), was like someone experiencing something supernatural, something that happens once and only once, in one instant, one *click*, and then it's gone for good. He hadn't spoken to me yet, during that time, about his migraines; and maybe, during that time, he didn't have them. Maybe his migraines and his theory of a *state of grace* were a later invention. You never know with Claudio.

"You know," he said, "I couldn't even do it again. I couldn't do this photo again. I could set myself up right there, use the same light, the same girl, the same blanket for a mantle, the same everything, and even if I tried a million times, it couldn't be done."

"No doubt," I said.

And yet, even while I tried to go from being somewhat secular to somewhat mystical with Claudio, just to follow his ideas, even so, the thought of putting a photograph in a church, like an object of worship, a photograph of the Madonna, that is, a photograph of some woman

