

“The Painting”

By Zach Hammack

There was a painting by José Aparicio discovered outside of Mexico City in 1863. It sold for nearly a million pesos, to a certain plantation owner by the name of Don Juan “Fat Boy” Romero. Romero lived up to his name. He was certainly the largest man south of the Rio Grande and the richest. His plantation, although a giant in cane sugar production, was also the home to a substantial private collection of classical art from Spain. Galleries upon galleries filled with golden framed oil paintings, which shone with their own little radiance, like artificial suns, the pride of Mexican Spaniards.

The caretaker of the collection was a hunched, old man named Ignacio, who was often seen roaming the galleries, limping slowly but steadily, dusting frames and sweeping the floor. Romero loved Ignacio; even if he was a crippled *mestizo*. That didn’t matter; Romero, a Spaniard, didn’t care about race or appearance. They used to say Romero could look at a person and see their soul, their essence. That’s why he loved Ignacio: he had the soul of a lion.

Romero could still distinctly remember the time one of his workers was cut fatally by a scythe in the fields. He could still picture the blood, splattered surreally over the cane stalks like crimson paint thrown onto canvas. The memory was so clear. Every dark, sweaty face staring through the leaves was too familiar. One of those faces was Ignacio. He had seen it happen, comforting the wounded man until he took his last breath. Romero could see the soaked tourniquet, dripping black....dripping to infinity. Ignacio’s oily, gaunt face was huddled over the dead body. He said a quick prayer. Then the memory ended. Romero couldn’t see beyond that.

Now before him was a crisp, square envelope stamped with a blood- red wax seal. A royal “V” was circumscribed within it. Romero grabbed a paper knife and cut it open slowly; he knew it was important business. He unfolded the piece of parchment inside; his eyes instantly picked out “Aparicio” imprinted in a steady cursive hand midway down the letter. This was the auction house’s official stationary.

“To be collected at your convenience, at the auction house of Don Villanueva,” Romero read aloud within the sun-splashed annals of his domed gallery.

Ignacio was studying a nearby painting intensely.

“Don, don’t you know this frame is chipped?” he replied humbly.

“What was that?”

“This frame.”

“Did you not hear me Ignacio? I may collect my purchase. The Aparicio.”

“Your first?”

“My first original. Nearly a million pesos, and you shall retrieve it,” Romero said, holding the letter in his meaty, pale hands.

“Send Oscar.”

“I can’t trust him. I can’t trust anyone except you.”

“You’ve put your faith in the wrong man,” Ignacio said, sliding his finger down the spiny frame.

Romero’s eye clouded over. His mind became instantly warped. He could only see the reflection of a candle’s wick in a pile of gold coins. The gallery had disappeared. He was now in a cellar. Ignacio was still there, but he was clothed in a dark poncho.

“You must return them,” he said hurriedly to another figure near the illumined coins.

“No, Ignacio,” was the only reply.

“It’s unjust. You know that.”

And then they both turned to him and Romero’s vision ended. His mind returned to the present and his memories crawled back into the past.

“Faith in the wrong man?” Romero blurted.

“A million dollar painting in the hands of a cripple! Don, you go too far. You put too much stake in loyalty.”

“It’s loyalty that’s kept you here. You could’ve settled somewhere nicely. I would’ve fixed something up for you. Instead you stay.”

“A man with no work has no meaning. My livelihood is here in these paintings, behind this glass. Art is my soul.”

Romero stood silent for a moment. He wiped the sweat of his forehead with the back of the envelope. The wax seal felt smooth and cool.

“You’ll take my chaise. You’ve driven it before.”

“When do I leave?”

“Tonight. I wish for you to go unnoticed.”

“It shall be done Don,” said Ignacio, hunching to form a stiff bow.

Romero left.

When the sun had transformed into a red lamp and then into a state of nonexistence, Ignacio harnessed the burros to his master’s chaise and rode towards the auction house. If Romero’s directions and calculations were correct, he was to arrive at Villanueva’s in less than two hours, to collect the painting.

He sat in the coach seat, buried within the warm confines of a woolen shawl. It was his temporary shelter from the harsh, biting winds that swept quickly over the bare Mexican desert, forming clouds of abrasive dust that slammed into the chaise's mahogany frame. The burros didn't mind the obstruction however. They barreled on stoically, plowing steadily on the road to the auction house.

When Ignacio neared his destination, a gallant figure atop a mule met him halfway carrying an unwavering torch. From its glow, Ignacio could see that he wore a white suit with a Stetson hat crowning his polished, bald head. His skin shone with the same white intensity at Romero's.

"Don Juan!" the figure shouted amiably.

Ignacio didn't return the greeting.

"Juan! It's Villanueva! Don Villanueva."

When he got nearer to the chaise, Villanueva's smiling visage turned sour. The torch wavered for once.

"Excuse me..." he said bitterly.

"I am Ignacio....Don...Don Juan Romero's servant," Ignacio replied quietly.

"For the painting?" Villanueva noticed the servant was a *mestizo*- an old, crippled *mestizo*.

Ignacio nodded.

"Follow me."

Villanueva guided his guest to the back of the auction house. Ignacio descended slowly and painfully to the ground, grasping his shawl as if he were choking. He then tied the burros to a post and followed the white man into the auction house.

The back entrance didn't open onto much. There were two thin sets of stairs, going up and down. Villanueva pointed down.

"You know the painting I presume?" Villanueva condescended.

"I will recognize it yes. Aparicio has a unique style," Ignacio gladly explained.

Villanueva grimaced with disgust. He didn't look at the man before him. It was too unsettling. To think, that a man like Romero would place his affairs in an invalid was beyond comprehension.

Ignacio heard a man shout with great enthusiasm from a door near the stairs, followed by cries.

"2,000!" a voice rang!

"2,200!" another quickly followed.

The auction room.

"Attend to your business. Be quick." Villanueva instructed.

The cellar was nothing more than a deep hole carved into the sandy, gritty surface below the crumbling foundation of the auction house. It was in bad shape. In chaotic rows of dusty blackness, Ignacio spotted racks upon racks of paintings, large and small. One rack read, "To be sold" another "To be repaired." The one Ignacio sorted through was named "To be collected." The Aparicio was near the back.

Above, in the sprawling auction room floor, large joyous men sat perched on the edge of their seats, holding embroidered numbers.

“Going once, going twice...” the caller yelled jocularly.

A hand shot up. The bid was raised. Villanueva was standing next to the front podium, supervising the activities, silently hoping the cripple would hurry up and leave. He didn't want the patrons to see who had come to collect the most expensive purchase in his auction house's history.

After a flurry of shouting and arm waving, a loud crashing noise rumbled below. Silence ensued in the room for a half a second, and then the bidding continued. Villanueva was no longer standing near the podium.

“5000!”

“I got 5000, 5500 anyone? 5500!”

“5500!”

Below, Ignacio was covered in shards of glass. The frame had proven too heavy. The canvas had split down the middle.

“6000! Going once!”

Villanueva saw the mess.

“Going twice.”

He reached into his suit.

“Sold!”

He shot Ignacio three times with a sawed off revolver, piercing the woolen shawl with hollow bullets.

The crowd above froze.

“Damn cripple,” he shrugged, tossing his weapon on Ignacio’s slain body.

That night, Villanueva wrote a brief telegram to Romero. He had explained the situation. He would provide him with a few other paintings and another servant. He apologized for the confusion.

But in reality, Don, do not worry. The man was unfit, inferior. His lose; hopefully, will not hinder the orderliness of your plantation...

Author's Notes

"The Painting"

I attempted to fill my short story with deep symbolism. This is evident in the blatant comparison between Ignacio and the painting. Ignacio directly points out that his life is art, that his whole existence finds meaning in Romero's gallery. It can be said, then, that Ignacio's soul can be compared to a masterpiece: beautiful behind the frame of glass (Ignacio's crippled, old body). At the climax of the piece, when Ignacio breaks the painting, Villanueva kills him. Villanueva and Romero represent the continuous battle of aesthetics. "What makes something beautiful?" is the question that is continually asked throughout "The Painting". Romero sees Ignacio as something more than a worthless invalid, while Villanueva's limited, bigoted view is ultimately fatal. Romero experiences two flashbacks in my story. They are meant to augment the idea that Ignacio had the "soul of a lion", which should also add to the tragedy of inevitable death. One major theme in my piece is the idea of the eye of the beholder. Beauty and worth are subjective; they are experienced through the lenses of the human soul. When misused, grave ramifications are possible.