

*Machia and the Devil*

*(Letters from Niccolo Machiavelli to Barbera Raffacani Salutati, 26<sup>th</sup> June- 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1513)*

26<sup>th</sup> June

Most illustrious lady, etc,

Silence is death; and so I find myself writing to you again. The monotony of this infernal place has been broken with a curious incident. I hope I'll be able to tell it right; I want you to understand exactly how strange these last few hours have been.

I wake early this morning with a little bucket of birdlime and my wicker cages and head for the little clump of woods over Sant Andrea. It's quiet up among the trees. A necessary escape from the nattering and sweaty people of this village. Stay in Florence, my lady. The foundations of Sant Andrea are built on envy. Every morning the priest from Sant Bartolemeo comes to speak with Marietta, and compare his church's stained-glass with the murals of the Vatican. Every night the prostitutes enquire whether the courtesans are prettier in Florence. And I am trapped here among them, as useless and as steeped in jealousy as any of these creatures, dreaming about the politicians you dine with and the gossip you must be hearing. You write to me with the latest news, I know, and my other friends do the same, but it's always one step away from being there yourself, in the heart of the storm.

It occurs to me, clinging to the branches of the tallest tree to spread the bird-lime, that envy is a homosexual sin by its very nature; you take pleasure in both degrading yourself before a superior, and desiring to switch positions. I laugh and laugh at this until the thrushes burst into flight above, below, and all around me.

And it's this noise that makes the boy, dashing through the leaves below, cry out,  
'Is anyone there?'

I reply, idle in the sunlight, continuing to brush,

'Yes, there is, lad. Just another bird, singing for joy in the bright golden morning.'

'Please, sir,' the boy says. Not in the mood for joking, I think. He sounds as if he's been running.

Then he bursts out,

'If you have any medical skill, you must come with me to Bracchi's fields. Niccolo Machiavelli is dying.'

As you can imagine, this catches my attention.

'He's not in Bracchi's fields,' I reply, my brush hovering in mid-air 'but can you tell me what he's dying of? He'd be very glad to know.'

But the boy insists.

'No, sir- it's him all right- I saw his back. All blackened lines and red from where the Florentines *dropped* him. And dressed like a tramp and without a penny on him!'

Call me mischievous: what would you have done in my place?

I drop out of the tree, land on my feet in front of the startled boy, and announce,

'You'd better take me to him then, lad.'

The boy reacts with confusion, and marvels at the 'uncanny likeness' as we walk across the fields. He keeps babbling,

'Like twins, sir- I'll swear, it's marvellous! Marvellous!'

The rangy peasants inside Bracchi's mill have a very different explanation. We can hear the joking and loud banter from the path. Another man dying doesn't mean much, even if it is Machiavelli the traitor. But when we duck inside, silence falls. Then someone mutters,

'Witchcraft.'

It takes quite a great deal of bad luck for a man to be tortured once for treachery and again for witchcraft in his lifetime, as I'm sure you can imagine, so I take this in good humour, strike a pose, and cry,

'So, boys, do I look like a man who's dying to you?'

They shuffle apart to reveal a body lying slumped amongst the mealbags.

His hair is exceptionally dark, his skin very pale, and his features are pointed and sharp. He's lean, and his back and shoulders bear the marks of savage torture. In short, my lady, an exact portrait of my own face and body. His clothes have been torn to rags and his feet are covered in blisters.

This is all I know. A hired sawbones is at work on our friend now, but it seems the boy was premature in thinking him actually dying. Marietta complains that I've turned the kitchens into a butcher's shop, and refuses to believe me when I tell her that there was simply nothing else I could do.

The farmers wouldn't take the man in, and there seems to be a collective sense around the village that, because of his extraordinary resemblance to me, he is somehow my responsibility- or my fault. The priest came knocking an hour ago to shake his head at me and ask about last rites. I sent him packing. I'm troubled by the man's scars. When I drew my finger along them in the mill, one by one, and named their causes- rack, *strappado*, boot- the farmhands drew back. These injuries, like the mark of Cain, tell the world we're wrongdoers. I'll write again once I know more.

N.M.

N.B. He's woken up. A Venetian, and his name is Iago.

29th June

Most illustrious lady, etc,

So much more to say, and the news I have is all of our strange new friend, who has revealed himself to be a fascinating man. Marietta, although she took against him from the beginning, was kind enough to feed him a rich broth while he lay in his illness, which seems to have raised his spirits. We've taken away his rags and supplied him with my clothes, which, as you can well imagine, are a perfect fit, though Marietta claims they're a little less tight around the waist on him than they are on me. He's resting well, the children come to play around him and keep him from morbid thoughts, and in the evenings, instead of spending all night playing tric-trac with my host and a couple of kilnsmen, I come home to speak with him.

A military man, and – it's odd that such similarity in appearance and such similarity in misfortune should coincide- he was a loyal servant of his state, falsely accused of treachery. He's told me the story of his escape, and, though he's carefully masked most of the details, he wasn't able to hide the fact that he was forced to steal a fishing boat at the critical point. I intend fully to find the place of his incarceration; it's made me curious.

So we've sat late into the nights and he's told me about battles in Cyprus and Rhodes, great military actions behind sweeping banners and the howl of trumpets. I'm not such a fool, of course, that I believe all of the more extraordinary details, but he tells them so well that you find yourself willing his version of events to be true. Take one story, which has our Iago fighting a monstrous Blackamoor, (he refers to him jokingly as *Il Capitano*) a puffed-up mercenary without law or loyalty, on the battlements of an unnamed bastion. He describes every feint, every cunning trick as if they really happened, and at the climax of his story he jabs at the brutal scar in his bowels where the enemy wounded him. Then, thrusting forward and almost unbalancing himself, he demonstrates how he finished off the uncircumcised brute, "thus!" through the jugular vein.

I've told him, on my part, my ideas for the Florentine militia, and he seems to approve of them.

Marietta admits to finding Iago rather dull. I try to explain to her what I see; the man has drive, though I'm not sure exactly to what end. He can hardly remain lying down during the daylight hours, no matter what we tell him, and constantly calls the children to him to tell them stories and to devise new pranks to play on their mother. The people of Sant Andrea tread the dirt roads like those accustomed to keeping only one thought in their head at once; when I enter the room and see my friend alone, his mind is golden and alive and spinning like a universe drifting in a chosen direction, centred on his skull.

I don't mean to bore you either, though I think that I know you and know your affection for me well enough to guess that you will be glad that I have finally found a friend in this dreary limbo. He is getting better, and I'll send him on his way soon with a few coins and much gratitude for his company.

N.M.

*1st July*

Even envy can be forgotten when we find new joys in the filth around us. I'm enjoying myself; in the morning, my friend and I will play some joke on the natives- he'll pretend to be my bastard brother, or I'll pretend to be him and vice versa- and in the afternoon we talk about past wars and the strategies of princes. You'd appreciate him, I'm certain now, in a way Marietta simply can't. You're both sophisticated where she is simple. Take this conversation; I praise the works of the playwrights to the skies (I will write you one to perform, one of these days, I promise) and tell him that drama may redeem mankind.

He responds by saying that the playwright composes for the mob; even when he's being truly shocking, he hopes that the shock will create a kind of mass delight. When six or seven dullards laugh at a play, everyone else laughs, and the play becomes a comedic triumph. If everyone around you begins to cry, you assume that the play is unremittably tragic. So, he says, if drama does redeem mankind, it's only ever by drugging the crowd into a kind of collective stupor. The playwright is an orator, a manipulator, and a schemer. The written word, he says, is meant for individual consumption. The author and the reader meet in open conflict and they try to outwit one another. There's a sense of honour to it; a duel between minds.

'But the reader is dumb,' I reply. 'Weaponless.'

Only, he says, while the author strikes the first blow. Then the reader becomes an author and, unless the author does not care about being slandered and ridiculed in writing, he will have to become a reader.

I laugh at this for some time and then we go back to discussing the wars of the Borgias.

At a quiet moment, I clear my throat and I ask him,

'You were dropped? When they...'

He knows what I mean. He alone knows the marks of torture.

'Yes, he says. The *strappado*. You were dropped, as well.'

I nod.

'How many times?' he asks.

'Six.' It seems distant now; as if it was someone else who lay on the shit-stained stone with a torn, relentlessly painful back and scribbled funny poems to friends so they could know I was all right.

'I was dropped eight times,' he says at last, quite somber, tracing lines over his own forearm. He looks up. 'But I never talked. Never.'

This man is my brother.

I think, as well, he may have been a victim of love. He tells me often about the beauty of the young bride he had once in Cyprus. Murdered, he says, by a slave, a mad dog, a fawning courtier who oozed his unhealthy attentions over her. I reply that I know this kind of man well, from Florence; the man who is always charming and never honest, and he nods vigorously. He seems to have had genuine affection for her, though with a healthy vigour- "full of game", he calls her, laughing. At any rate, his love for this great beauty must have had its effect on him; I keep suggesting to him that he visit the dames in Spedaletto, to slake the hungers of a man imprisoned, but he refuses every time. If he wasn't so obviously a man of the world, I might be inclined to call him a prude, or a monk. I will find a woman worthy of him.

N.M

N.B.

You tell me in your last letter that I've forgotten all about you in favour of this Venetian trickster. Be fairer on me. You're in Florence and I'm trapped out here in Sant Andrea, this thatch-roof limbo, counting time till I can come back. Iago said today that I'm a thrush caught in bird-lime waiting for a hunter to tear me up by the feet. I'm sorry, I promise I won't mention him again! You see? Your jealousy is making me nervous.

*3rd July*

Most illustrious lady,

A man arrived today, demanding food and a bed for the night, with seven white horses, which, he claimed, I had ordered from him three days earlier in Spedaletto. When I told him that I'd done no such thing, he left, cursing, but insistent that I'd already paid the exorbitant sum for these animals. I checked the books; the money had been paid, and the amount filled in correctly.

Iago says he doesn't know anything about it. It may be the mark of a low mind that I suspect my friend may have lied to me. But I suspect this is the opening gambit of an amusing prank and we'll have to wait to see the punchline.

He told me a very funny story this afternoon, over the oil press, of a wealthy Jew in his hometown who was so desperately in love with a noblewoman that he pressed jewels and coin upon Iago, who'd managed to somehow convince him that he could play the go-between. My friend snorts with laughter when he describes how often this Jew would sidle up to him, nostrils flaring like a bull, to stuff a bag full of trinkets into his hand and ask him, 'Has the lady spoken of me?'

Have you had any such callers, my lady? I'm thankful I always came to you in person.

About the other matter- I'll write to Vettori tomorrow asking if he can intercede on your behalf.

N.M

*7th July*

Most illustrious lady,

Things are beginning to turn very odd. For the last three days I've been receiving letters of reply from old friends who I haven't written to. Yesterday, a trail of crossbowmen came pounding at the door from Florence and France to ask me what the urgent matter could be. Dead thrushes I haven't caught turn up, hanging on the rope across the garden like flowery ornamentation. I confront Iago about these pranks and he charms me with conversation about the power of princes. Is it, he says, wise that I write the book that I've been planning for these last few months- is it right that the art of statecraft should be revealed to the literate gentry? What if they pass it on to the masses? And then I have to engage with him on that matter.

He's been in my sanctuary. A bust has been moved (did I move it?) and he knows too much about my theories- much more than I've told him. To think of this joker in the cold stone heart of my house, gazing up at history- what if he knows my secret, silent ritual? What if he has stripped naked, donned my robes of state, and asked questions of the ancient great?

What if they've replied?

Today Marietta comes up to me in the pantry (I was scavenging for something to eat) and tells me that I've overstayed my welcome. It takes me close to an hour to even convince her of the possibility that I am her husband. And then I stride outside, furious, and at the centre of the garden Iago is sitting, framed in rosehip, smiling at me like an old friend, and I sit with him, and we talk. What spell has he cast on me? Why can't I confront him?

He's been spending a great deal of time with my boy Leopoldo. The two of them march out into the countryside together on sunny days with my cages and nets. The peasants are complaining that a devil has been souring their crops and attacking their livestock. I walk into my own chambers and find Marietta dozing in the sheets, as if sated. Am I a man, I ask myself- or a shadow of this man, this other me? Then I calm down, and I remind myself. I am Machiavelli, and Iago is Iago. I don't think he's been sleeping with my wife. I trust him.

That sounded dramatic even as I wrote it- like something a bad actor might say- I'm sorry. I'm a little startled by all of this, my lady, but I'm not insane. I hope you'll continue to reply to my letters. You and I aren't as easy to fool as these simple country types, are we?

N.M.

*11th July*

I need to have a word with Iago. His pranks are becoming too dark. Yesterday he spat in the face of the priest in Sant Andrea; and today a letter arrived from Vettori, addressed to me, agreeing with my last letter that 'this damned priest could do with being taught a lesson.' I am not the author of these deeds and I cannot take the blame for their consequences. But I had to spend most of the morning apologising to the little fool, and, more importantly, convincing him that it was Iago who did him wrong, and not me.

But then I step out into the fields to rebuke Iago and he is teaching Leopoldo how to duel in the sunshine, and they're laughing as if they were father and son. And I think, he's not responsible; no heart can hold such goodness and such mean-spirited, unmotivated cruelty. There must be a third Machia, a third Iago, who's playing us both for fools. Then I begin to wonder whether it's my own jealousy of this man- a true soldier, who's suffered more than I ever did- that's making me so untrusting.

When did I become such a gull? The idea frightens me. What if you think yourself a tragic victim and just don't know that someone is laughing at you? Your tears made their mirth.

This morning Leopoldo runs to find me in my sanctuary. He's never done that before; I've never let him do that before. I must look very stupid in my robes of state, crouched before Dante's head, because he bursts out laughing and rushes to press a small doll into my hand. It's been sewn together from scraps of my own clothes.

'What's this, child?' I ask him, and he replies, breathless, as if he's rehearsing something he's been taught,

'Since you admire Dante Alighieri so greatly, you must have a place in the human commedia as well as the divine one. You are both Il Dottore, wittering on and on about your one true love, power, to gain power over fleeting love,' and he waves the doll to prove his point, almost forgetting his next words in the process, 'and...and you are Pulcinella, Punch, disfigured, and unable to see beyond the end of your own nose.'

How do you strike a child? Especially when it's only a puppet on the end of someone else's strings? He skips away, happy that his task is complete, and I sit in the darkened sanctuary and wait for one of my friends to speak to me.

Dante Alighieri will not tell me the secret of banishing devils. You tell me it's quite simple to get rid of this man- that I should just throw him out and take my clothes back? I rise from my seat, my lady, and, still clutching the doll, I dash out into the fields in search of my Harlequin. Sunlight falls upon my robes for the first time this year. But Leopoldo is sat by himself, raking up the earth with his grubby hands, making a little garden from mud and worms.

The fields are empty. Iago knows. He knows when I'm about to burst and he makes himself scarce.

Leopoldo, without looking up, says,

'My father says to tell you that he's gone up into the woods to catch thrushes in the birdlime.'

'I'm your father, Leopoldo,' I insist. 'I'm Machiavelli. I'm your loving father.'

Leopoldo won't speak to me. I'm in hell, Barbera.

N.M.

*13th July*

Has he been writing to you? For the sake of everything, everything that we have, you understand me, encountered together, you must burn these letters, and don't trust a single other one that comes in my handwriting. If I come to your door, send me away with threats or violence, because it will not be me but a devil in my guise.

N.M.

*16<sup>th</sup> July*

It's ended.

For three nights in a row I sleep in my sanctuary, wrapped in my robes of state, cradling the bust of Dante to strike at my enemy if he comes in the night.

On the third morning whispers are already beginning to spread through the village. A bawd in Sant Bartolomeo has been found murdered. Her throat cut- 'Thus!' says the priest, drawing his finger over his jugular. Marietta, who keeps glancing nervously at me, cuts the cheese. The priest adds, confidentially,

'Some of the villagers think they know who it is.'

And I know who they think it is. I have often been a guest to that bawd's house. This is my enemy's final move. I'm to be killed for a crime he committed.

Then I know what has to be done.

I kiss Marietta. She responds, coldly at first. She's not sure my tongue is my tongue, I think, or perhaps my enemy is just more proficient in the ways of love. The priest's envious lips smack at one another; he watches us closely. I ask him to leave, as politely as I can. My hands are shaking.

Then I get dressed, in my best clothes, covered in mocking gashes as they are, and go to look for my enemy.

He's gone from the house. Leopoldo watches me silently, raking his mud-garden, in the fields.

My nets and cages have been left in their usual place, in the hall. I heft them onto my shoulders and set out across the valley and into the woods.

Birds are whistling in the trees, and one of them is Iago.

He watches me, legs dangling from the branch of the old ash like a woodland sprite. As if all he'd ever done was mischief. Anger is boiling through my gut. I stand quite still, the wooden beam of the cages cutting into my shoulders and into the old wounds of the strappado.

'The commedia ends with marriage and forgiveness,' I say at last. 'But you won't have my wife, and you won't have my mistress, and you won't be forgiven for what you've done.'

He continues to whistle.

'No words?' I snap. 'Nothing to say for yourself, you devil, you dog? After you've taken my life, my family, my own words out of my own mouth?'

'A man that's been abused by the great,' he says, quite suddenly, shifting position on the branch, 'wants to bring the great low and raise himself high. So he lies and he flatters and, above all, he wants to show them that he knows more than they know.'

'Does this sound familiar, Machia? This is why I've tortured you. To hold a looking-glass up to your face- to remind you what you are.'

He leaps down, like I leapt down to confront the boy, and suddenly my own face is before me, grinning.

'I don't believe you,' I tell him. And for the first time since I've nursed him back from the point of death, something in him seems to falter.

‘What?’ he says, showing his teeth.

‘You haven’t brought everything around you to ruin to teach me a lesson. You’re not a morality play performed by overweight drunks in black-and-white masks. Envy’s coiled around your heart and struck it tight. The men who tortured you were right to do it.’

Something black and entirely new is spreading across his face.

‘Governors,’ he says, ‘Governors and generals, officers and lords and fucking ladies. They do this to us, Machia. They ruin us. You and me, we’re the salt of the earth. We have our own talents and we have to claw our way up to even stand in the same room as them, and when they’re done with us they toss us aside.’

He puts a hand to my cheek.

‘You and me understand it, Machia. We can see how rotten the whole world is. And we’re not simple enough to think we can alter it. We know we have to ape these great men to survive. We tear the whore’s silk dress off to reveal the disease between her thighs.’

‘You’re talking like a madman. You’ve ruined my life. You’ve turned my son against me. You’ve put the mob onto my tail. You’ve killed a man, for Christ’s sake.’

‘Leopoldo,’ he says, and he’s grinning again, ‘is going to grow into a *man*. There was never any hope for us. We’re tainted with the old values. He’s already a little prince.’

He must have known that those words would be a step too far. He knew my mind better than anyone. He understood how to press people, better than any torturer, into the cold corners of their heads. Because as my hands thrust at his throat, he begins to whistle like a bird again.

Then his own fingers start pushing at my side and I think, he has a knife, he planned all along to lure me into the trees and stab me here.

But he’s tickling at my sides. And, as I push down on his throat, I begin to laugh, helplessly, an idiot baby even as I crush a man’s last breath out of him. He must have wanted this final insult.

And it’s too much; the laughter becomes a pain in my belly and I’m the one screaming out for him to stop even as he lies under me, choking serenely. I keep on shrieking in unbearable humiliation. But my hand finds an old flint stone and I lift it and jab it downwards, like lightning from the sky.

I’ve buried him, Barbera, among the trees, beneath a pile of stones. It seemed appropriate. I don’t know if the villagers will accuse me of the bawd’s murder; hopefully I’ll be able to explain to them the story of the man with the face of Machiavelli, and they’ll assume that the tramp did his killing and moved on. I’m at home now, in my sanctuary, safe. Marietta simply stared at me, as I trudged in through the door, blood-and-dirt-stained, with a kind of repulsion.

Leopoldo has been crying, somewhere in the house.

I still don’t understand why he did what he did. His motives seem unsatisfying; another set of lies conjured up by a man accustomed to building his life out of them. He remains the man who wandered into my life, like another Machia from another world. A less fortunate Machia, perhaps, who killed his wife and deserved the pain the world allotted to him. I can’t judge him.

I buried him with a prayer, if that’s of any use. I hope I can outgrow his predictions. I hope it’s possible to recognise the horrors of the world without stooping to mingle with it. So I buried him with a prayer, for the two of us.

He was a prince, though he wouldn’t take that entirely as a compliment. And I’m convinced that, beneath his mockeries, there was a tragedy in his character, lurking unseen- a monster in the depths of ocean that causes tempests on the water’s surface.

Do you remember the lines I wrote for you?

I laugh and my laughter does not touch my soul;

I burn and no one sees my passion.

I am not what I am, Barbera; and, God help me, I have begun to write again.

N.M.