

Opening extract from

**THAT TERRIBLE  
SHADOWING**

**The Quest Across Time for  
Caravaggio's Killer**

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## THAT TERRIBLE SHADOWING

### The Quest Across Time for Caravaggio's Killer

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As with so many young men, before and since, it was lust and curiosity about female flesh that led to all my later tribulations. Curiosity, then as now, has been my redemption and my ruin, and lured me into the dark orbit of a man whose overweening genius reverberates down the centuries. How I wish I had never been introduced to his poignant and capricious soul, yet how spiritually undernourished my life, and the life of all humanity, would have been without him.

One cold November day in 1965, when I was sixteen years old and when I had just left school but not yet embarked on the delights of working life, I was in London and engaged in the favourite teenage pastime of mooching about. I wandered aimlessly into Trafalgar Square and, simply because it was there, decided to visit the National Gallery. I had no particular interest in art and no particular desire to visit the National Gallery but it did possess one over-riding attraction for an impecunious adolescent visiting London . . . free admission. Also, there was the lure of naked women. In the mid-1960s, images of naked women were not so widely distributed in every tabloid newspaper, cinema film and television programme as they are in the early 21st century. The hormones coursing through my adolescent body took control and visions of pearly white women with rosy pink nipples beckoned me inside the gallery. None of the gallery staff took any notice of a gangly, stick-thin, nose-picking, acne-faced youth wearing a plastic imitation leather jacket, winkle-picker shoes and a greasy Mick Jagger hairstyle. We all looked like that in those days, except those poncey Mods.

After scrutinising the wallplan of the National Gallery I selected what I thought were the most promising galleries in my search for nipples or, if I was really lucky, pubic hair. I found myself in Italian art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Leonardo da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks was impressive, even to a philistine adolescent like me, but the vacuous prettiness of Botticelli, the fervid chocolate-box stiffness of Raphael and the soft-focus piety of Correggio

et al was really beginning to piss me off, despite the occasional nipple. Then I saw a painting that caught my interest as forcibly as if Britt Ekland had been standing there naked, despite the painting being devoid of any trace of nipples or pubic hair. The picture looked like a scene from a Martin Scorsese film that had been photographed on to a piece of canvas and then surrounded by a gold frame. What the hell was it? Surely it should be in a gallery of modern art, not stuck in here with all these dead, and dead boring, Italians? I read the picture notes attached to the wall beside the painting. It was called Supper at Emmaus (frontispiece) and had been painted by an artist known as Caravaggio in about 1601. That could not be right! It had to be a modern work! The dramatic immediacy of the scene was spellbinding. On the right of the picture, Saint James throws out his arms to protest about something. In the foreground, Cleophas is rising angrily from his chair and looks as if he is about to deck somebody. The innkeeper in the background is looking at Christ as if to say 'what the fuck is all this going on in my tavern?'. Christ Himself remains calm, an oasis of benediction, but He does not look like any Christ I have seen before. He is soft, androgynous, almost pudgy and pretty, but with a commanding air of authority. In front of them, on the dining table, are fruit, fowl, bread and a carafe of wine, all painted with an astonishing dew-fresh realism. The whole painting is as dew-fresh as the day it was completed. Here was not a prissy, nancy-boy, lisping vicar, village social type of art. Here was not the art of cosy curled-up cats or pretty vases of flowers or country lanes winding through lush meadows or false promises of a soft eternal life hereafter. Here was a punk anarchist, spit-in-yer-face, what-the-fuck-are-you-looking at, bover boy type of art. Fascinated, I gazed at the painting for I don't know how long, forgetting all about rosy nipples and pubic hair.

Excited by my discovery, I took the train home to Bedfordshire and went directly to the local library just before it closed for the day. I found the most promising-looking volume of artist biographies and looked up the section on this man Caravaggio. He was everything that a sixteen-year-old yob, with testosterone raging through his bloodstream, could hope for. His real name was Michelangelo Merisi, he was called Caravaggio after his home town in Lombardy, and he lived from 1571 until 1610. The writer of the biography, with barely concealed distaste, stated that Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was a notorious braggart, a violent bully, a drunken habitué of the brothels of Rome, an equally regular habitué of the prisons of Rome and, in the end,

became a fugitive from justice after killing a rival in a duel. Oh, and by the way, he was an artist of genius whose original vision changed the course of Western art and still influences the way we see the world today. He really was the dog's bollocks. Imagine my surprise when, some forty years later, I found him sitting next to me in the National Gallery.

I had travelled to London to visit a client. Thankfully, considering my client's vodka-and-onion breath, our business had been concluded much sooner than I had anticipated. I left his office and even the London traffic fumes seemed tropically-scented after Mr. Halitosis-on-legs. I was within walking distance of Trafalgar Square. Just as it had been forty years before, it was a cold day but bright and bracing and, on a whim, I decided to stroll to the National Gallery and pay homage to the painting that I had discovered all those forty years ago but had not seen 'in the flesh' for several years. Just as I had done when I was a priapic teenager, I toured some of the galleries from other eras first, just to heighten my sense of anticipation. Finally, I could resist temptation no longer and made my way to the 1600-1700 gallery. When I saw my painting again, it was with that stomach-churning sense of excitement and nostalgia that you feel when you glimpse a long-lost love in the crowd. Caravaggio is now much more famous than he was forty years ago and the Supper at Emmaus always attracts a big audience. It was irritating to have to share my picture with hordes of gawping tourists but there it was, still frozen in time, and as compelling as the first time I saw it. The brown leather bench in front of the painting became vacant. I sat down. Someone sat down beside me, on my left. I studied my painting, having to glance at it in between the moving bodies of dozens of spectators, until I became aware that the same man had been sitting next to me for several minutes. He had moved uncomfortably close to me. I looked around at him, trying to be casual about it, and found that he was staring at me with an amused and interested expression.

'Hello, Steve,' he said, in a guttural, almost mechanical-sounding, foreign accent.

'Hello,' I replied, in that hesitant and startled way you do when someone catches you by surprise. 'I'm sorry, do I know you?'

The intruder ignored my question and, indicating the Supper at Emmaus, asked: 'What do you think of that painting?'

I answered cautiously. 'I like it very much. What do you think of it?'

'I like it very much too,' he replied, 'but then I should do because I painted it.'

You know the feeling . . . the dishevelled junkie boards the tube train, mumbling to himself, and you think 'please God, don't let him come and sit next to me'. This time, God had decided to play His little joke on me.

'You painted it?' I repeated.

'Yes,' the intruder confirmed, still with an amused look on his face.

'Well, you must give me the name of your embalmer because you're wearing very well for someone who died four hundred years ago.' I stood up and started to move away towards the exit, my enjoyment ruined by the gallery lunatic.

The lunatic stood up with me and blocked my escape. 'No, I didn't die, or so I've been told. I've been here waiting for you, Steve.'

'Look, how do you know my name?'

'The people who sent me here showed me what you look like, told me your name is Steve Maddan and told me all about you. You were on a television quiz show, whatever that is, answering questions about me.'

Reassured by this statement and beginning to understand - so I thought - what was going on, I decided to humour him. 'You mean Mastermind?'

'Yes, that's it. I've been waiting for you since then. I am Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, but you can call me Michele.' He offered me his hand to shake. I did not take it.

I studied his appearance. I had to admit that, from what I could remember of the portrait drawing (illustration page 2) by his friend and contemporary Ottavio Leoni, this man looked like Caravaggio. A lot like Caravaggio. He was tall, with a stocky, powerful physique. His hair was long, thick and black. His eyes were also black, with very long eyebrows which were bushy and rounded. His black moustache was full but his black beard was thinner and more wispy. He wore an ill-fitting black business suit, in which he looked awkward and uncomfortable, over a grubby open-necked white shirt. I glimpsed an ornate gold chain underneath his shirt. The most disturbing

element of his appearance was the whitened and barely visible remains of scars that had once disfigured his face. Or so it had been made to appear. I was beginning to understand that this was some practical joke or television candid camera stunt. I decided to go along with it for the time being.

I asked: 'How did you know I would be here today?'

'We didn't, but there is a sensor hidden in the frame of my picture. It told us you were here.'

'Us?'

'Yes. Come and look at the frame if you don't believe me.' He grabbed my sleeve. I momentarily tried to pull away but then allowed him to drag me through the throng of spectators until we were uncomfortably close to the Supper at Emmaus. I looked around and saw the gallery attendant watching us intently, ready to intervene. He was a black guy and he was big and he looked as if he could handle himself.

'Look, there it is,' the lunatic said, pointing at a gold convex scallop among the many gold convex scallops that decorated the elaborate frame. The scallop he indicated was slightly larger than the rest. It certainly disturbed the symmetry of the frame but it could have been a defect in the manufacture of the frame and proved nothing. Wary of the gallery attendant, I decided not to argue and moved away from the picture.

'That is a sensor that told you I was here?' I asked, allowing an edge of sarcasm in my tone of voice.

'Yes, and I was automatically reactivated out of ChronoStasis and sent through time to meet you here. We knew you would one day return to look at my picture again. We didn't know how else to find you. You took your time.'

'Please accept my apologies for that,' I said, 'I've been busy helping Vincent Van Gogh look for his missing ear.' I looked around theatrically.

'Where are the hidden cameras?'

'I don't know what you mean?' the lunatic replied.

'Okay,' I said, in a louder voice, playing to the hidden microphones, 'you are an Italian artist who died four hundred years ago and you have travelled through time specifically to meet me.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'How come you speak English so well?'

'They gave me some sort of translator device so that I think in Italian but, when I speak, it comes out of my mouth in English.' He held up his hand to show me a thin gold ring around his left middle finger. 'This is it.'

'So that's why you sound like Chico Marx.'

'Who is Chico Marx?'

'Who are "they",' I asked.

'I'll explain everything when we get back to where you live and then I can . . .'

'Whoa, hold on,' I said, beginning to tire of this nonsense, 'you are not coming home with me.'

'Why not? You admire my work, don't you? We are friends already, aren't we? You are the only one who can help me.'

'Look, I wouldn't care if you were the Mona Lisa come back to tell me what the hell you were smiling at, you're not coming home with me. I'm sorry to ruin your carefully prepared stunt. I'm saying sorry to the film crew, wherever they are hidden. I'm saying sorry to the bouffant-haired egomaniac presenter or whoever is waiting to jump out and take the piss if I fall for this crap, but this has gone far enough. You are a good actor and you do look very like Caravaggio. I hope you've been well-paid for doing this but I'm leaving.' My voice had raised in volume without me being aware of it and I was now attracting some suspicious looks from the gallery visitors. I pushed past the lunatic and walked away quickly towards the exit.

To my surprise, 'Caravaggio' followed me and grabbed my arm again. 'Wait a minute, you English fucker,' he shouted angrily. 'How dare you talk to me like that? Me, the greatest fucking artist in Italy, has already waited four hundred years and then been put in ChronoStasis for another three years in this poxed-up museum waiting for you to show up and then you won't have anything to do with me? You arrogant cunt. You should think yourself lucky that I let you even look at my pictures, let alone talk to me.'

We were now attracting many more suspicious looks and my temper was beginning to flare up. Then I realised, with relief and almost with amusement, that this is just how the real Caravaggio would react and that

this actor was staying in character in a last ditch effort to persuade me to remain in the show. Clever!

In a conciliatory and much softer voice, I said to him: 'Okay, you are a very good actor. You've performed your act very well, very cleverly, but I'm just not interested in being involved in this stunt, whatever it is. Go back to your producer, or whoever you are working for, and tell them I won't play along and that I'm sorry I'm not more of a good sport.' I began to walk away again.

'No, I'm coming with you,' Caravaggio said. 'You have to help me.' He now had an arm wrapped around my neck, holding me back. The gallery attendant stood up and began to move towards us. I broke free, ran out of the gallery and looked for the way out. Caravaggio was right behind me shouting: 'Stop. Steve, stop and wait for me.' I ignored him but he carried on following me. I pushed through a door and through a throng of tourists, knocking an elderly Japanese couple out of the way, mumbling hasty apologies as I did so. I burst through another door and then I was leaping down a flight of stairs towards the Trafalgar Square exit with Caravaggio right behind me trying to grab my jacket. The gallery visitors frantically parted to allow we two running fugitives through. Then Caravaggio really cut loose. He started screaming: 'Cunt, fucker, bastard, shithead, fucking English fucker.' This was really not funny anymore. I ran out of the building, turned left and down the steps into the throng of Trafalgar Square tourists. I hastily looked back to see if Caravaggio was following me. To my surprise and relief he had stopped at the top of the National Gallery steps. He appeared to be open-mouthed in shock and amazement as he stared at the crowds, the tall buildings, the fountains sparkling in the bright glare of the afternoon sun, the soaring stone column with Nelson perched on top, and the traffic of red buses, rumbling lorries and cars roaring past on the far side of the square.

I escaped into the crowd and away from the lunatic's line of sight. I turned left into St. Martin's Lane, past the statue of Edith Cavell, and zigzagged through the back streets to make sure he could not follow me. I did not know or care which way I was going. I was badly shaken by the whole experience. Whoever had set me up for this practical joke, whether it was a television company or sick-minded friends, they had carried the whole thing too far. I determined that, if I ever found out who they were, I would make them pay dearly for frightening me like that. I went into a pub and ordered a

double scotch to calm my nerves. As I sat on the bar stool, calmed by Famous Grouse and comforted by Victorian burnished wood and gleaming brass, it occurred to me that nobody knew I was going to be in the National Gallery that day. Even I did not know until a few minutes before I actually decided to go. Nobody even knew I was travelling to London that day. Even if I was being followed and then seen going into the National Gallery, 'they' would have had only a few minutes to set-up hidden cameras and microphones and prepare the actor who was playing Caravaggio. Either that, or the film crew would have to be on permanent stand-by in case I dropped in to the gallery. Neither of those options was practical, feasible or sensible. No, the only explanation was that 'Caravaggio' was a mentally unbalanced individual who really did think he was the artist. He must have remembered my name and what I looked like from my appearance on the television quiz show Mastermind, when I had taken the life and work of Caravaggio as my specialist subject. By coincidence, this deluded individual had happened to be in the National Gallery at the same time as me. This encounter had been a very disturbing experience. I was relieved to think that I had recently moved away from where I had been living when I appeared on Mastermind. There was no possibility that the lunatic could know where I lived. With that reassuring thought, I drank up, found the nearest underground tube station to transport me to St. Pancras railway station and caught a mainline train that returned me, with relief, to the anonymous rural calm of Bedfordshire. I congratulated myself for extricating myself adroitly from a tricky situation. I would not have been so smug if I had known that the situation was about to become a whole lot trickier.