

David

My name is Francesca. Once I lived in a small village a distance from Florence and this is the story of my two sons. I know a mother is not supposed to favour one of her children above the others, but I will confess that my eldest son David was the apple of my eye.

He was a beautiful boy – tall and lithe with a mop of unruly golden curls. From the moment he could hold a pencil in his chubby little hand he drew. He drew people and animals, flowers, the clouds, trees ... anything and everything. As he grew older his artwork developed. He loved to wander around the local hills drawing and painting scenes from nature. Everyone said he was truly gifted.

His younger brother Michael adored him and copied everything he did. Michael was a competent artist but didn't have the gift that God had bestowed upon his brother. He didn't have his angelic looks either, he was short and dark. It was obvious David would become a great artist and be rich and famous one day with patronage from the church and the wealthy families of Tuscany. I was very proud. But they say pride is a sin.

When he was 13, David became apprenticed to a local artist but he was not happy being confined to a studio, spending his days preparing panels and grinding pigments or just copying drawings made by his master.

I told him that he needed to obey his master willingly so he could in turn become a well-known artist and have his work adorning the great houses of Florence. He said: "But mamma, I don't want to paint pictures just for the rich nobles and fat priests to hang on their walls and inside dark churches. I want my art to be seen and enjoyed by the common people."

He started going out at night with his paints and brushes. I worried and one night I instructed Michael to follow him and let me know what he was doing. He told me the next day that David had become a graffito artist – someone who painted on walls and public places. This worried me. It was illegal to do this as dissidents and trouble makers had been using public buildings to promote their causes and the town fathers had declared anyone who practised graffiti to be a vandal and outlaw. And when Michael told me what David had been painting I was doubly worried.

"He is painting cherubs Mamma with the most marvellous chubby little naked bodies and angels."

Cherubs! Naked! Angels! Not only would the town fathers be outraged, the church would declare his artwork blasphemous and sinful.

I tried to talk to David but he wouldn't listen to me. His father lectured him but it was no use. He continued on his path to social ostracism, ruin and worse.

One day Michael came to me. “Mamma, you must come with me and see the most marvellous painting that David has done.”

We went out when the sun went down and I followed Michael out of the town to the ruins of an old Roman aqueduct. When we were under one of the ancient arches, Michael held up his lantern and I gasped in astonishment. There on the ceiling of the arch was God in all his majesty and glory touching the finger of Adam and giving him life. Even I, an uneducated woman, could tell this was a masterpiece. And at the same time as a mother I knew this was an act of extreme danger for my son. Painting God and scenes from the bible outside the imprimatur of the mother church was considered sacrilegious. He could be imprisoned, tortured or worse.

I went to confession early the next morning and confessed to Fr. Dominic that David was the artist painting blasphemous paintings around the town. He made it very clear what needed to be done to save David from the wrath of the church and the law. Michael was sent back to the aqueduct with whitewash and a brush to cover up the painting and David was hurriedly dispatched to live with relatives in Rome. It broke my heart, but I never saw my beautiful boy again.

A few years later Michael in turn was apprenticed to an artist and sculptor. He worked hard and spent a lot of time in the marble quarry in Carrara with his master excavating and preparing the precious white marble the area was famous for. He became strong and tough from working with a hammer and chisel on the pure white granite. He was naturally dark but became even more swarthy from being outside in the blazing sun.

Eventually Michael went to Rome and became a well-regarded artist and sculptor with patronage from the Pope and the powerful Medici family. He was now known by his full name, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni. I never travelled far from my village but I heard from neighbours who had been to Rome that he had painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. The centrepiece was God giving life to Adam. Michael had remembered the Roman aqueduct painting very well and had reproduced it but now with the blessing of the Pope.



One day when I was very old, Michael arranged for me to make the journey to Florence with him where he wanted to show me something that he had worked on for the Cathedral. When I saw the figure he had created there in pride of place, my heart sang. It was a 17 foot figure of a young man, completely naked. David. Everyone thought it was a likeness of the biblical figure of David about to fight Goliath. But I recognised the unruly curls, the beautiful face, the gentle eyes – even the bag of chalks and paints he carried everywhere slung over one shoulder. Yes it was David. My David. My beautiful boy.