

Part I the Death of Marat

I'M LOOKING at Jacques-Louis David's 1793 oil painting, *The Death of Marat*, printed in an art book. The Jacobin revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat lies murdered in his bath. His head is wrapped in a towel, like a turban, and his hand, draped alongside the tub, holds a pen. Marat has expired—bloodied—nestled between the colors of white and green. The work exudes calm and quiet. You can almost hear a requiem. The fatal knife lies abandoned at the bottom of the canvas.

I've already tried to make a copy of this painting several times. The most difficult part is Marat's expression; he always comes out looking too sedate. In David's Marat, you can see neither the dejection of a young revolutionary in the wake of a sudden attack nor the relief of a man who has escaped life's suffering. His Marat is peaceful but pained, filled with hatred but also with understanding. Through a dead man's expression David manages to realize all of our conflicting innermost emotions. Seeing this painting for the first time, your eyes initially rest on Marat's face. But his face doesn't tell you anything, so your gaze moves in one of two directions: either toward the hand clutching the letter or the hand hanging limply outside of the tub. Even in death, he has kept hold of the letter and the pen. Marat was killed by a woman who had written him earlier, as he was drafting a reply to her letter. The pen Marat grips into death injects tension into the calm and serenity of the scene. We should all emulate David. An artist's passion shouldn't create passion. An artist's supreme virtue is to be detached and cold.

Marat's assassin, Charlotte Corday, lost her life at the guillotine. A young Girondin, Corday decided that Marat must be eliminated. It was July 13, 1793; she was twenty-five years old. Arrested immediately after the incident, Corday was beheaded four days later, on July 17.

Robespierre's reign of terror was set in motion after Marat's death. David understood the Jacobins' aesthetic imperative: A revolution cannot progress without the fuel of terror. With time that relationship inverts: The revolution presses forward for the sake of terror. Like an artist, the man creating terror should be detached, cold-blooded. He must keep in mind that the energy of the terror he releases can consume him. Robespierre died at the guillotine.

I close my art book, get up, and take a bath. I always wash meticulously on the days I work. After my bath, I shave carefully and go to the library, where I look for clients and scan through potentially helpful materials. This is slow, dull work, but I plod through it. Sometimes I don't have a single client for months. But I can survive for half a year if I find just one, so I don't mind putting long hours into research.

Usually I read history books or travel guides at the library. A single city contains tens of thousands of lives and hundreds of years of history, as well as the evidence of their interweaving. In travel guides, all of this is compressed into several lines. For example, an introduction to Paris starts like this:

Far from just a secular place, Paris is the holy land of religious, political, and artistic freedom, alternately brandishing that freedom and secretly yearning for more of it. Known for its spirit of tolerance, this city has been the refuge for thinkers, artists, and revolutionaries like Robespierre, Curie, Wilde, Sartre, Picasso, Ho Chi Minh, and Khomeini, along with many other unusual figures. Paris has fine examples of excellent 19th-century urban planning, and like its music, art, and

theater, its architecture encompasses everything from the Middle Ages to the avant-garde, sometimes even beyond the avant-garde. With its history, innovations, culture, and civilization, Paris is a necessity in the world: If Paris did not exist, we would have to invent her.

One word more about Paris would be superfluous. Such succinctness is why I enjoy reading travel guides and history books. People who don't know how to summarize have no dignity. Neither do people who needlessly drag on their messy lives. They who don't know the beauty of simplification, of pruning away the unnecessary, die without ever comprehending the true meaning of life.

I always take a trip when I'm paid at the completion of a job. This time, I will go to Paris. These few lines in the travel guide are enough to pique my curiosity. I will spend the days reading Henry Miller or Oscar Wilde or sketching Ingres at the Louvre. The man who reads travel guides on a trip is a bore. I read novels when I'm traveling, but I don't read them in Seoul. Novels are food for the leftover hours of life, the in-between times, the moments of waiting.

At the library, I flip through magazines first. Of all the articles, the interviews interest me the most. If I'm lucky, I find clients in them. Reporters, armed with middlebrow, cheap sensibilities, hide my potential clients' characteristics between the lines. They never ask questions like, "Have you ever felt the urge to kill someone?" And obviously they never wonder, "How do you feel when you see blood?" They don't show the interviewees David's or Delacroix's paintings and ask them their thoughts. Instead, the interviews are filled with meaningless chatter. But they can't fool me; I catch the glimmer of possibility in their empty words. I unearth clues from the types of music they prefer, the family histories they sometimes reveal, the books that hit a nerve, the artists they love. People unconsciously want to reveal their inner urges. They are waiting for someone like me.

For example, a client once told me that she liked van Gogh. I asked her whether she liked his landscapes or his self-portraits. She hesitated, then told me she preferred his self-portraits. I always take a close look at those who lose themselves in self-portraits. They are solitary souls, prone to introspection, who have really grappled with their existence. And they know such introspection, though painful, is secretly exhilarating. And if someone asks me the kind of question I myself might pose, I can tell he's lonely. But not all lonely people are suitable clients.

After browsing through magazines, I look through newspapers. I read everything carefully, from obituaries to want ads—especially ads seeking a particular kind of person. I read the business section as well. I focus on articles about once-prosperous companies on the brink of bankruptcy. I also pay close attention to the fluctuations of the stock market, because stocks are the first indicators of social change. In the culture section, I note current trends in the art scene and popular kinds of music. Of course, new books are also a subject of interest. Reading these articles helps me figure out my potential clients' current tastes. My knowledge of their favorite music, art, and books will help the conversation flow freely.

Sometimes, leaving the library, I stop by Insa-dong to look at art or head toward some music megastores to buy CDs. If I'm lucky, I find a potential client roaming the galleries. I look for people absorbed in the thoroughly deliberate study of a piece of art, people who never once glance at their watches—even on a Saturday afternoon. These people have nowhere else to go; they have no one to meet. And the paintings that enthrall them, that hold them rooted completely in one place for a long time, inadvertently betray their viewers' innermost desires.

In the evening I head to my office on the seventh floor of a run-down building downtown. I only have a phone, desk, and computer in my office. I never meet anyone here. I don't even have to see my landlord because I pay my rent online. When I get there, I turn the answering machine off and wait for the phone to ring. By 1:00 a.m., I usually receive around twenty calls. They call responding to my ad in the paper: "We listen to your problems." Having read this simple sentence, they wait until nightfall to dial. I talk until early in the morning to people with various problems: a girl being raped by her father, a gay man about to be conscripted into the army, a woman cheating on her boyfriend, a wife beaten by her husband. I hear stories I'd never discover in the library, bookstore, or Insa-dong galleries during the day. This is how I find the majority of my clients.

After a few minutes, I can figure out anyone's level of education, likes and dislikes, and economic circumstances. I can detect and select a budding client with this kind of information. I like having the power to choose my clients.

But there are pitfalls. The very fact that callers still have the will to converse with someone means they haven't despaired deeply enough to enlist my services. So I take a different tack from that of ordinary counselors, who listen to their stories but don't offer solutions. I listen to them only until I can figure them out, then ply them with my advice. There's no point in continuing to listen to the girl whose father rapes and beats her every night. All I can tell the girl, who is already seventeen, is that she should run away. But ordinary counselors tell her to stay, to suck it up, and to call social organizations or the police for help. These counselors are ignoring the essence of the problem and the simplicity of the solution. It's not as if this girl doesn't know what she should do.

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