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Marwan's David

Marwan, a former student of mine who sculpts free-standing statues from tombstone marble, knows he is stepping onto a minefield of trouble with his new work of art.

He expects to be hated, threatened, maybe even killed.

I taught then, as I teach now, Introduction to the Humanities, the same course offered by most of the colleges and universities around the world. You know it. *Studia Humanitatis*, as the Renaissance humanists called it. The study of being human. Or the study of being humane, if you will.

These great works and great ideas are the gifts the past has given the present, I intone like any boring prof, and these great works and great ideas are the gifts that the present someday passes on to the future.

Marwan scribbled incessantly while I lectured. But his scribbling was closer to note-taking than the rest of the class seemed capable of doing.

His scribbles were proportions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Renaissance art, as done by legendary names like Donatello, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, and Bernini.

Back when he was my student, Marwan was fascinated by David. The glorious and mighty King David who united the Twelve Tribes of Israel and ruled for forty years and made Jerusalem the capital of the Hebrew nation.

The shepherd boy David who killed the giant Goliath.

He felled him with a slingshot, Marwan insisted.

That's why so many artists – painters and sculptors both – choose David as their subject. Against all odds, the shepherd boy prevails and triumphs over his more powerful enemy.

Marwan came back the other day.

I sculpted my own David, Marwan told me. Want to see it?

Before he began working, Marwan studied the great masters. Marwan studied Donatello's David, life-sized and naked except for a fourteenth-century shepherd's hat from Tuscany, his foot atop the severed Goliath's head. Donatello's David is cocky, saucy, insolent, triumphant.

The first free-standing statue in a thousand years of Western civilisation, I lectured. Done in 1430, at the start of the Renaissance.

I like him, Marwan said, because he's cocky. But he looks silly being naked.

Marwan said his David is more like Michelangelo's David, which was created more than seventy years after Donatello's work.

A political piece of marble, Marwan said. Just as Michelangelo was making a statement about the tyrannical Medicis being kicked out of power in Florence.

Except Marwan's David isn't eighteen feet six inches tall, as Michelangelo's David is.

Marwan scoffed. Three times as high as a man? David is the giant, not Goliath. He's not a boy, either. He's a man. He's a god, really, a grown-up god.

His David is only three feet high.

He must be small. The forces of tyranny against him are so great.

His David is not naked either.

He wears street clothes, T-shirt and tennis shoes, like any teenager today.

Does he still have his slingshot? I asked.

Would he be David without it?

Marwan didn't spend three years on hi74

The moment of truth, I said.

The moment of truth.

Marwan didn't paint his David with oil on canvas, as Caravaggio did. Marwan didn't cast his David in bronze, as Donatello did, or in marble as Bernini did. Marwan didn't discover a giant block of Carrara marble in a stonecutter's back lot, as Michelangelo did, a block so cracked that a century of previous sculptors had refused it as unusable.

Instead, Marwan spent his time outside classes, driving the back county roads of northwest Ohio, searching for weathe