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## The Work of the World

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# **The Work of the World**

*By Mark C. Joslin*

The rain droplets beaded against the high windows of the old house, the only noise Franco could hear. He had a strange and horrible fantasy that after blinking he would open his eyes to see the pair of bloody eyeballs next to his right hand on the window pane. The cords trailing the eyes were all messy and tangled. Franco imagined this until it became terrifying, and then squeezed his eyes together very tightly, as if the pressure would push the nasty thoughts away. It took him several seconds to gain the courage to open his eyes again, and to his relief the pane remained empty.

In the chair across the room, his old aunt mumbled in her sleep. It was late afternoon on a rainy day and she had fallen asleep watching Franco. He swung himself off the window seat and ran across to the stairs. The house felt cold and dark, and he switched on every light-switch he encountered on his way toward Jammie's room. The whole way he held up his hands defensively, like a person groping in the dark. In Jammie's room he slid his hand inside the door first, to turn on the light before entering. Franco recoiled violently as his hand touched something damp among clothes in the hamper below the light switch.

The gate to Jammie's crib was down and bits of glass were still scattered on the floor. The bloodied blanket was stuffed into a laundry hamper next to the door. He had touched it. For a moment, Franco fancied that the pair of eyeballs sat on the crib, lolling around absently. Thunder crashed suddenly and Franco tore out of the room and down the stairs. He sat on the floor next to his aunt's chair until she awoke.

"Oh Franco, whatever are sitting there for?" she said after moistening her open mouth.

"I was afraid of the thunder, auntie," said Franco in a small voice.

"Dear, it's just electricity in the clouds, nothing a boy of your age should be frightened of. How late is it?" asked his aunt, rising. "Just after eight o'clock, we better get down to the hospital to check on your brother. Put your shoes on and get in the car, Franco. I need a drink of water."

Franco slowly followed his aunt into the hospital room. His mother was sitting in a chair beside Jammie's bed. Jammie lay motionless in bed with thick bandages over his eyes.

"Oh dear," whispered his aunt, clasping her hand over her mouth. "His poor little face. Celia, sweetie, oh my God, I'm so sorry. Such a little boy..." Auntie's voice became hoarse and cracked. Celia and his aunt embraced and wept, while Franco stood with his hands in his tiny coat pockets, staring at his brother's unmoving feet. He began to cry, too.

It felt like someone else had done it. Not him. Franco's tiny chest was heaving with sobbing gasps, and he wept with the abandon of a child who feels no shame in crying. Already the guilt was forming into a hard stone in his stomach as he watched his mother weep with his aunt. Franco clenched his small fists. He could never tell now.

"Frankie, give me the whistle. It's my turn now," whined Jammie. Franco

looked at him disdainfully.

“You don’t get any turns. You traded it for my car yesterday. It’s mine now and you can’t use it. You’re too little anyway.”

“But Frankie you said I could still use it! Stop lying! You always lie to me!” Jammie shrieked breathlessly, on the verge of tears.

“Stop it right now. You traded it so it’s mine and I say you can’t use it,” Franco replied matter-of-factly. “Now leave me alone.”

Jammie was becoming hysterical, choking out, “Stop lying! Come on, please! Stop it. Please,” groping toward his brother’s voice.

“Don’t touch me! You traded me! I’ll hit you Jammie! I promise I will.”

“Please Frankie. Please, please, please. You’re lying. Please!” Franco felt a surge of repulsion and his brother’s open patheticness. “I’ll put you in the closet and lock the door. Stop crying right now Jammie. You can scream and no one will hear ‘cause I’ll close the bedroom door too. Just keep on crying. See if I don’t do it.”

But Jammie kept stumbling toward him, hands outstretched. “Please! Frankie, please,” he kept sputtering.

Franco took Jammie violently and dragged him into the closet as Jammie struggled and shrieked. He forced him in and slammed the door shut, leaning against it so his brother couldn’t open it. Jammie screeched and cried frantically, pounding the door with all his might, while Franco taunted him about the devils that lived in the closet.

Suddenly, Franco hated the entire thing, wrenched the door open and hurled the whistle at Jammie. Jammie came toward his brother gratefully, but Franco ran out and down the stairs.

Franco sat at the dinner table with his mother and brother for the first time in a long while. His mother glanced sidelong in his direction every several seconds.

“God, Mom, what do you want?”

“Frankie, Mr. Moreno phoned today,” began his mother patiently, “you’re failing history and algebra. What are you going to do with yourself? If you would just—”

“Don’t call me Frankie. I’m not a little kid.”

“Well Franco, if you want to be treated like an adult, it comes with responsibilities. You have to earn it.”

“It’s my name, I don’t have to earn anything,” Franco spat defiantly.

“Frankie, why are you getting angry? I’m just trying to talk to you. Jesus, you get so defensive all the time.”

“Stop calling me Frankie.”

“Adults think about the future, Franco. And right now, you’re not doing that. You skip school and run out at night. Jammie has seen you and so have I.”

“Jammie doesn’t see anything Mom. He’s making it up to make me look bad.”

Jammie, looking smug, interjected sarcastically, “Don’t worry about school Mom, Frankie’s going to be a painter. He’s an artist. Like Michelangelo.”

“Now, Jammie—” she began to say.

“How would you know what Michelangelo looks like, Jammie? Poor little blind baby. Why don’t you go crying for Mommy?” retorted Franco savagely.

“Frankie! Stop that this instant!”

“Shut up!” cried Jammie, slamming his fist on the table. “You don’t know anything about being blind! I hate you.” He formed the words with bared teeth.

“Jammie!” shouted his mother.

“Are you going to cry you little helpless child? Oh, don’t cry. God, you’re so pathetic.”

“Frankie, that’s absolutely enough. I never want to hear this kind of talk from either of you again.”

“Mom, honestly, I don’t care much about what you want to hear. I’m leaving,” said Franco coolly, rising from his chair.

“Don’t you leave this table!”

Franco smiled mockingly. “Bye bye Mommy, bye bye baby brother.”

Heavy paint droplets slid down the torn canvas, leaving cloudy trails behind them as they dripped on the sheets covering his studio floor. Franco sat at his desk, with his hands folded under his chin, utterly exhausted. His hatred for those paintings had been the strongest feeling he’d felt in a long time, but he’d hated destroying them almost as much. The tiny black pupils stared at him from the shreds of canvas.

“God, I hate those eyes. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them.” He couldn’t bear to look at that small black spot, and shut his own eyes very tightly, willing the horror away. There were wet beads of paint on the desk too. Franco smudged them loathingly with his finger.

“God knows my soul, He knows I didn’t mean it to come to this. He knows my soul. He knows I was just a child,” he muttered, as if chanting the Eucharist. Franco repeated these again and again as he rose and brushed the ever-present shreds of canvas away.

“God knows my soul. God knows I didn’t mean it. He knows the truth.” He mumbled faster, shuffling on the floor, brushing and turning with both hands.

“He knows. Only him.” His frantic hands found the needle, there, next to the pupil. Franco returned to his desk chair, and held the needle with hands trembling in anticipation. “I hate them.” For the thousandth time he rolled back his sleeve and did it.

Strange chemicals swam in his blood, it surged like a torrent under his skin. The pressure behind his eyes threatened to burst his body as an over-pumped bicycle tire. Franco waited for the moment to pass. This was familiar, and he knew its ways. There were probably no canvases left. All around him flew

disembodied pairs of eyes, undulating with cords flowing behind them, comets of his affected state. He rose and moved toward his paints.

Partway to the paints, the weariness and the swarm of swirling eyes stopped him, flying too thickly to move forward. Franco lay down, but squeezing his eyes shut was no good now. The artist's easel was smashed and all the canvases torn to pieces, he saw helplessly, nothing to paint on. Nothing to work on. Franco put his head back and closed his eyes, still seeing those eyes before him.

"Please, Frankie, please. Stop lying to me! Please!"

He jolted forward at the sound of his brother's voice. "I deserve this! I deserve it!" he wailed. "But I was only a child. A jealous little child." Franco opened his eyes, and the room felt clear again. This, as a thousand times before, was the time to reveal himself.

Franco ruthlessly threw aside the broken easel and the smashed track lights that stood in front of the long, white studio wall. Seizing his brushes, he began with shaking hands.

When sober, Franco knew he'd never have the courage to return the gaze of those ever-present, ever-watching eyes. But now he stared at them, into the pit of those dark pupils. Every time he'd come down, Franco had torn the canvases of his former trip into pieces, despising his weakness and fearing their discovery. He would finish this time though, and make Jammie see. The wall couldn't be torn apart like the canvases. There was no going back.

Sweat flowed freely down his back as he made the long curving strokes of the two matching orbs, feeling that in each moment more sets of eyes gathered to watch him. He was painting in a concert hall, then a football stadium, at the very locus of the universe with every pair of eyes trained on his work of the world, every ocular nerve coursing with his creation and his sin. The curving circles doubled back on themselves and within themselves and wound deeper into the wall and out from it. The work exhausted him and blood pulsed in his eye sockets. The festering wound had been lanced, and all the nastiness was rising to the surface.

Franco injected again, feeling his courage waning, and once again. No longer perspiring, he felt chilled to the bone. But finishing this painting of his studio wall was all he could do, the only thing left to do, except lie in the shreds of canvas.

"Jammie, Jammie, Jammie," thought Franco, "I was just a child. I deserve it. I did it. It was me, Jammie."

The superintendent shuffled through his heavy ring of keys, searching for the one to Franco's apartment. "Haven't seen him in several months," he was saying, "but some other residents heard a noise last night, so when you folks came in I thought it might be a good time to check it out," he said, glancing at James and his mother.

"He left home years ago and hasn't contacted us since," replied James

somberly in his dark glasses. “Frankie was staying with our aunt for a year or so, and she kept us updated, but he straight-out refused to speak to us or even be in the same room.”

The superintendent nodded sympathetically, and tried another key in the lock. “We don’t know what got into him. We’ve simply decided that enough is enough,” said James’ mother tersely, “A mother has a responsibility for her son, regardless of what he himself decides.” She said it calm enough, but with the restraint accompanying something more painful.

The key turned in the lock, the door opened. All three went in, Mother’s hand on James’ arm. The musty smell hit all of them discouragingly, signaling that something was wrong.

“I’ll check the kitchen,” said the superintendent pointing left, “You two check the bedroom through the hallway.”

“Oh my God,” began mother, putting her hand to her mouth.

“What is it, what is it?” asked James.

“This place is an absolute wreck. I’ve never seen anything like it. Oh, Frankie!” she said as her voice cracked.

As his mother began to pick through the shreds of linen, canvas, and paper, James turned out of the room into the hallway, feeling his way along. He turned into a room that felt big and breezy, and something like leaves rustled around his feet. A faint breathing came from across the room. “Frankie? Frankie!” he called, hurrying across the room. Hearing his voice strongly reverberate back at him, he knew he must be close to the far wall now. A croaking voice came from his left.

“Jammie. Jammie. It was me.”

“Frankie! Is that you? What’s going on? What do you mean it was you? Mom! Come in here, I’ve found him!” People came rushing through the shreds of canvas noisily, and went straight to Franco.

“Oh God, no. No, no, no,” cried Mother, “No. Frankie, no!”

As James tried to find his brother, he put his hands on something thick and goeey, smelling powerfully of oil.

“That’s a damn big pair of eyes, son. Covers the whole wall,” said the superintendent in James’ direction.

“It was him,” thought James, seeing it for the first time, “Him, my own brother. Franco.” From the edges of his sightless eyes, tears had begun to fall.