

No Matter

by [James Como](#) (May 2024)



The Rape (after Correggio), Italian School, 17th C

Daniel enjoyed the click of his heels on the pavement, the rhythm of his stride, the closeness of the tailored jacket perfectly fitted to his shoulders. He enjoyed the solitude of the starlit night. So, when he turned into the courtyard at the end of which was the winding iron staircase leading to his room, his mood was marked by fair weather, his conscience was clear, and his body loose, as though he were about to dance. He was enjoying civilian life.

As a soldier he had neither shot at anyone nor been shot at, but his service had changed him in two ways. He came to appreciate male camaraderie, a new experience, and his hyper-courtly attitude towards women loosened considerably, though his old-school Wyoming upbringing had not been entirely undone.

Maybe that is why what he saw when he turned that corner first shocked then disgusted him. Two men were brutalizing a half-naked woman lying face-up on the grass. Her nose was bleeding, mascara ran down her tear-blotched cheeks, her blouse was ripped open, her pants and underwear torn down. One man was kneeling on her arms stretched out above her head on the grass. The other was lowering himself onto her.

"Help me" she moaned when she saw Daniel, and the two men froze and looked up.

In one of those moments that lasts a lifetime, Daniel registered his options: intervene or walk away. It was during that moment that the man pinning the woman's arms said, "you'll have to wait your turn, buddy," adding, "him, me, then you?" It was an invitation.

Daniel noted the delicacy of the woman's face, its ethereal allure, a beauty with which any man would long to be at one. As he stepped closer to this group, so intimately entwined, the woman saw Daniel's expression and muttered, bitterly,

“yeah, you’ll have your turn, won’t you?”

And in this longest of moments Daniel felt, and knew that he felt, what the woman discerned. As he gazed, his admiration was mutating into something bestial. Just a twinge, but there it was, and in that instant the ex-soldier commanded himself.

He looked at the men. The one mounting the woman was the closest, and the biggest. With uncanny swiftness and a feeling of overwhelming repugnance Daniel snapped up into his chin and, before the head could bob, drove a heel into his cheek.

The man fell off the woman, unconscious. Daniel stepped towards him, ready to kick again, but heard the other man standing. When their eyes locked, the man shuffled to his left, past Daniel, then broke into a run out of the courtyard.

If relief and fear could co-exist in one person, that person there and then was this woman. She sat up and reached out. Was she seeking help or fending Daniel off? He grasped her hands and lifted her. She said nothing.

As she bent to pull up her pants Daniel removed his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. “Can you walk?” “Yes,” curtly. “Do you need more help? The police? A cab?” “No thank you. I can do that.” As she wrapped the jacket around her she said, “I’ll return this to you.” “No. It’s yours now.” She said nothing.

Then she asked, “why?” “Why?” he spoke softly. “Why what?” “Why did you help me?” He paused, staring at her. “Because,” he rasped, “you needed it. That’s why.”

He turned and walked away. She watched for a long moment, then asked, loudly, “what’s the matter?”

From a distance Daniel muttered, “no matter.”

[Table of Contents](#)

James Como's new book is *Mystical Perelandra: My Lifelong Reading of C. S. Lewis and His Favorite Book* (Winged Lion Press).

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