

Diego Forever
by Kelly Chastain

Of course I would fall for him. There is something about his mustache, the way it curls up at the edges, and how it skirts the top of his dashing smirk. His brown eyes twinkle, or at least appear to be twinkling, which I have come to understand is a major feat when painting a portrait. Particularly a self-portrait. It's Sunday, after midnight, and I have to give a presentation in twelve hours. The last thing I need is his pixels burning like a Spanish sun into my computer screen. Yet in a fated series of keystrokes we've found each other. There he stands with a glove on one hand, MJ style, and the other, naked, and curled regally on his hip making it impossible to look away. Clad in black, his figure pops off the ochre background in opposition to the majority of his canvases. A one off. An original.

Every girl falls in love with at least one moody brooding artist in her lifetime, and in my lifetime it's Diego Velázquez. Never mind the fact that nothing about his life suggests moody or brooding, just artist, but at that he excels. He's been dead for over three hundred and fifty years, and I find this to be more than a minor inconvenience. At nearly one in the morning I am filled with intense longing, and before I know it I'm checking fares to Madrid. Two hours later, I fall into bed having resolved to ignite a spark with the dapper Spaniard, to throw ourselves into the libertine bustle, and to experience the ways only a mustache can tickle. Our incompatible blips on the time/space continuum leaves me with two choices:

1. Get a tattoo on my left breast of a dagger impaling a heart wrapped in thorny roses. Scrawled above in swirling tattoo typeface - "Diego Forever".
2. Go to Spain and lick his canvases.

I take option two because everyone knows that tattooing your lover's name on your body is the kiss of relationship death. And besides, the thrill of going to Spain to walk in the footsteps of *mi amor* is intoxicating. Then again, so is the seventeenth century paint with its pigments made from the pulverized bodies of insects and stone ground minerals. At the very least, these paint chips will guarantee a serious buzz. The demotion of the Spanish monarchy and the end of the Inquisition makes it much easier for me to get close to his paintings. Close enough to huff the iron oxide at least. I'm torn between my happiness over the demise of political and theological domination, and my desire to actually step back into time, to dodge the bishops' red coats, and to sneak into the palace to fetter away an afternoon with Diego himself.

Velázquez spent his time working for King Philip IV as the court painter and left behind a trove of portraits, most of which hang in Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, Spain's oldest, largest, and most famous museum. Outside the main entrance, I stand before his dominating copper sculpture now oxidized into a beautiful patina. He leans forward in his chair and looks down at me from behind that mustache. One elbow rests on his knee with a paint brush in hand, a palette lays across his left arm, and that silly little collar made famous by his boss juts from his neck. I imagine removing it altogether, followed by the buttoned vest, and eventually the knee breaches. It's June in Madrid and Diego is doing nothing to help the rising temperature.

According to the Prado map, about half of the museum showcases Spanish painters. I bee-line it for the second floor where Velázquez keeps company with his fellow greats: Rubens, Titian, and of course, Caravaggio, who was so influential in Velázquez's work that most of his pieces are described in artsy circles as "Caravaggioesque." *Mars, God of War*, completed in 1640, is just such a painting. Unlike Diego's self portrait, the background is mostly black, and

Mars appears in a wash of light that shines on his bare arm and leg as if revealing something true and mysterious in all those layers of muscle. With the dark background now forgotten, I stare at his physique. Wearing his helmet, and nothing else, he sits on an unmade bed in a swath of pink silk with his loins covered in bright blue fabric. This is not the eternally youthful and triumphant Mars, or Mars in the garden wooing Aphrodite. No, this is Diego indulging his love of paradox - Mars, the god, waking up from a disappointing one night stand.

His shield and weapons lay in a heap at his bare feet, and his right hand holds the handle of something that finishes off canvas. It could be an axe, a mace, or a toilet plunger for all I know. After reading the placard I learn it's a general's baton of command. Obscured in shadow are his eyes, but lo! What a mustache! The same handlebar style as Velázquez himself. I cannot take my eyes off of him.

Like many of Velázquez's paintings, I want to step inside the world he has created. I want to ask Mars if he would like a few aspirin and a café bombon, the Spanish coffee confection designed to cure all ails, and to tell him in frank terms that this will do nothing to win Aphrodite's love. She will drop him like a hot rock if she finds out about his escapades. Maybe I'd tip back his helmet to see his eyes, or sit on his lap Santa Claus style and ask him for a pony that I don't really want. More than likely, I'd be glancing sidelong looking for an isolated corner in which I could lure Diego during the afternoon siesta. It grieves me that I can do none of these things.

A group of kindergartners in matching red jackets enters the room with nary a glance to Mars. Instead, they sit cross-legged in front of another Velázquez prize, *The Thread Spinners*. Mars, dejected, looks at them forlornly as they point out the spinning wheels, the balls of yarn,

and the ladder in the background. It's all part of their culture curriculum which includes nothing but ambivalence toward the war god. People file in and out, read his placard, glance at him, leave. Even the school children rise, get into their hand-holding-stay-together formation, and move on.

For a moment, we are alone. I lean toward the slate gray walls, the braided keep-at-least-two-feet-back cord grazes my kneecaps. I lean into Mars and his brushstrokes. "Give them twenty years," I whisper. "They're too little to understand. Would *you* want to explain to them this hot mess you're in?" The second wave of red jackets interrupts us, and we both know how this is going to play out. We watch as they form a semi-circle in front of *The Thread Spinners*, their eyes focused on nothing but their teacher. After a lengthy goodbye I linger another moment, blow Mars a kiss, and head for the next salon where I know Diego is waiting.

Just through the door is the biggest room in the building and has an art deco skylight roof. The gray floor tiles give way to red and gray marble streaked with blue. Unlike the area with *Mars* and *The Thread Spinners*, this room is a hive of activity, chatter, and the clicking of camera shutters even though photos are strictly forbidden. Voices bounce off the walls and floor, all indiscernible, even when standing within arm's length. This room, like the four previous, is dedicated to Velázquez. Here his work as a court painter shines. I scan the walls: Philip with his dog and hunting rifle, Philip standing at a desk, Philip standing and looking important. It's a Philip IV parade with few exceptions.

It wasn't *Mars* or Diego's self portrait, the one with the short hair, the funky collar, and the singular gloved hand, that made me fall so hard for my conquistador of the canvas. It was his most celebrated work, the last painting he is known to have completed, *Las Meninas*, finished in

1657. It's here, in front of the masterpiece, that I find my troop of five-year olds wedged in among the tour groups and budding artists, staring up at princess Margarita who could have been, in another time, their classmate.

Velázquez creates the same dark background as *Mars*, and places Margarita in the foreground in high light. She is surrounded by two attendants and flanked by two of the court dwarves. Behind them, her chaperone and a palace bodyguard shun me as they peer through the shadows whispering secrets to each other. If only they gave me a chance. I could give them so much more to whisper about, but they don't, and in the hum-drum of palace life the dog falls asleep at the dwarves' feet. All of the action takes place in the bottom third of the canvas, culminating in a scheme of blues, whites, and browns. The illusion of light streams through a nearby window, and also from an open door at the back of the room, where José Nieto Velázquez, the Chamberlain of tapestries, has paused, like me, to look in on the sitting.

The dark top presses down on the figures punctuating their diminutive statures and the pressure that is already on little Margarita who is only five years old. Little does she know that in ten years she will marry The Holy Roman Emperor, have four children, and die before she turns twenty-two. Here, she's infected with a boredom that can only be cured by chasing a cat through the garden, or by throwing pebbles in the fountain. She'd likely give anything to don a red coat and clasp hands with an assigned buddy for the remainder of the Prado visit. Her loyal attendants continue their coaxing. One curtsies while the other offers Margarita a red cup, and for just a moment they get her to stand still. She looks at neither of them, pinning her curious gaze on the group of her fellow kindergartners. I watch her, waiting for the moment when she runs across the room.

What is most striking about this painting is all the pictures within it. Most are shadowed copies of portraits lining the back wall. A mirror shows the King and Queen of Spain. Some argue that it is a reflection of a painting, but I think they are there, standing shoulder to shoulder with me, keeping an eye on their little girl, and quite possibly offering up a 1650s Spanish equivalent to the ice cream sundae if she's good. Their presence only confirms my suspicions about her desire to dart off and play, to go outside and get dirty.

On the bottom left, behind a canvas twice his height, stands Velázquez with brush in hand.

We stare at each other. Time and space do that romantic-comedy movie thing where everything slows down, and the man's laughter next to me stretches out like a line of taffy. A woman raises her map in dramatic slow motion speed. Jaws hang agape. My heart thuds in my chest as the room around me slowly comes back into focus. The Japanese couple move on to Phillip with his dog and rifle. The school children find the red cross painted on Velázquez's chest. They don't know it, but it represents the Order of Santiago bestowed upon him by the King's decree in November of 1659 just a few short months before his death. I watch fifteen pairs of eyes focus on the painter who stares back at us, at them, and at me.

There he stands in his black coat with the gray satin undershirt, his high waisted belt, and like his statue outside, a palette rests on his left arm. I gaze upon his oval face, the curly hair and crazy collar, and of course, that mouth-watering mustache that started everything. Finally we are together, and in that split second I realize there is no hope of us ever being alone.

It's then that I imagine Velázquez's voice in my head, breaking the ice with this, "They want to call this painting Las Meninas, but I think Meta Velázquez is more appropriate. Who else

but me could paint a picture of me painting a picture of the royal family?" Then he laughs, but not an evil genius laugh, the laugh of an uncle who always plays pranks and knows coin tricks. I wonder if he knew how controversial his statement would be. By painting himself with Margarita he claimed the status of the artist, and art itself, was just as significant as royalty. He must have known, that sexy rebel.

"Can you believe this? I am surrounded by a circus of children, dwarves, sleeping dogs, and the King of Spain. It's a crazy gig," he goes on. I wonder what his wife thought of it, and of me lusting after her long-dead husband. Did she appreciate his facial hair like I do? Did she wish he would paint her? How could she not?

Diego considers the beholder. A profound statement lies curtained off behind his lips. Who wouldn't want to sit for that guy who peers out from behind the canvas? The one who stares you straight in the eye, not looking over his brood of models, but straight at you, the viewer.

"Step inside," he says. "Come into my world."

Who am I to resist?