

Wrap-up

We were nearing the end of filming at the prison, but I wanted to see Gino D'Ignoti for one last time.

D'Ignoti was a notorious "don" who was now serving a long sentence. Our interactions had been polite, but I felt that I still didn't know him as a person.

We had been given access to the prison art class - a more relaxed setting and one where I thought I might learn a little more about him.

The room contained six prisoners quietly working on their projects. While some of the men painted or drew, D'Ignoti sat at a workbench and moulded clay.

His dark-rimmed glasses and grey brushed hair made him look like a bank manager at an evening class.

D'Ignoti was carefully sculpting a model of a deer. It was unfinished but already had a sense of life, as though it might leap away in a moment. Beyond D'Ignoti on some shelves were finished pieces - a hawk raising its head, the hand of a gorilla, an unsteady and vulnerable colt. Each seemed unforced and with a sense of existing in its own space.

I told him how much I admired his skill and he shyly showed me the magazine photos he worked from. As he talked, I was struck by how much this mattered to him. I also wondered whether, in other circumstances, this man might have been an artist.

He still wouldn't talk about his life outside of prison, but suddenly said that he had something for me. I was wary of all we had been told - how the inmates might try to manipulate us.

I began to say that we couldn't accept anything, but he raised his hand and stopped me.

He reached behind for an object wrapped in tissue paper. It was one of his finished porcelain figures. D'Ignoti looked into my face and I glimpsed for the first time why he had been a formidable don. He looked over his glasses, and slowly said that I should take it, in respect for him and his art.

So I did.

Later, I found myself running my fingers over the way he had sculpted the movement and freedom of the animal, swimming and turning under water. It was a work of near genius. But I also realised for the first time what he had done.

D'Ignoti had made me an otter I couldn't refuse.

Word count- 400 words