

SUNSET

Now and again I get the urge to visit the Uffizi Gallerie, not for the *David* or its other works, but to sit in an old warehouse where I can slip into my past. People think I'm getting senile, like my father was, but despite my fading memory of past years there's still a lot more for me to look back on than forward to. Of course I'm eighty now, and Uffizi helps that. She calms my soul, evening the moods of my own set of bygones in ways I prefer to what I have left. The only other thing I have to pass what time remains is an old scrapbook, and it doesn't soothe my angst the way the museum can.

Julia drives me. She's a daughter of my host, a young woman well into her own life, but sensitive enough to realize the comfort an old man finds in such trips. When she sees me drift from work to the scrapbook she'll suggest it. Her twin sister Gwen cuts me when that happens, tells me I'm going crazy, and declares to others that I almost got myself shot the first time I went. It's partly true, I suppose, though it wasn't there I was shot, and it wasn't then. All that happened at Uffizi is that a guard pulled a gun on me.

I don't blame the guard. Thieves broke in a year before my first trip. They took a casting by Rodin. They were caught, and the casting restored, but insurance insisted a guard be hired even for the old warehouse. These days no one has money, not even museums, so Uffizi hired a less expensive and less experienced young woman simply because she has some familiarity with firearms. Her name is...Marybelle, or Margherita, something like that, and she's a nervous sort, and mistook the sound of my cane's silver tip on marble for that of another burglar.

I was the room with fragments of the Madonna's fingers that were broken off in the 1972 *Pieta* attack, searching for something else. Margherite crept in, and seeing me bent over those precious fingertips cocked her pistol and demanded, "Mani in alto, Signore!"

I've had guns aimed at me before, but it's not something you get used to. I tried to be calm, I turned to show I was only an old man, even bowed a little, and seeing her relax a little said, "Bongiorno, Signorina," and struggled a pass from inside my coat pocket. "*Per favore, dove La Crime Sophie?*" I asked, showing it. *Where is the piece they call Sophie's Tears?*

She eyed the pass and settled herself further, then took me out of that room and down some corridor, to the last room, as I recall, and to its last case. It's old and wooden and grimy, and has three dusty objects inside. Those I remember, but who wouldn't: the first is an old mystery clock made by Tiffany; it's lovely but broken, with two of its legs replaced by stained corks; then there's a Faberge egg with a hole the shape of Louisiana in its lower shell; through the grim you can see the dim gold coating inside; and then there's a necklace, a simple piece laid on plain black cloth. That's what I came for, and that's why I go back.

The metal and gems revive memories I can't completely control, in a way that's indulgent and tiring, but I can no longer resist. And so I go back, again and again. Gwen frowns at my color when we return to the villa, and says I'm foolish to live in the past that way. Maybe she's right. Besides, it can tax what strength I still have. Sometimes I wonder if I'll have a heart attack when I'm there. So I resist, for a while, but it's like a small tapping you can ignore just so long, one that gets stronger until it's too much. Julia sees me fidget or go to the scrapbook; she'll offer to take me, and we'll go, and I'll sit, and it will carry me back to two other women who are now long dead and gone.

The younger ones I live with are Julia and Gwen Basso. I have a room in their family villa, a lovely estate built four centuries ago by a family named Spinali. It fell out of their hands and into the weeds until one of the dead women found it—my old client—or I did for her. Things are too complicated for me to remember it all, but we rebuilt the place, and when my client died it somehow went to the Bassos. I did that too, but don't remember exactly how.

Julia and Gwen's parents are dead and gone some years ago now, but they let me remain to repay a old debt. It's pleasant payment: my window looks out on the garden below; there are lilacs and lilies and a lawn, and a bright yellow Acacia that hides a pair of Orioles. I leave the window open so they'll wake me in mornings, then have my coffee sitting there and try to pick them out. There's talk about moving me now, because I have trouble with stairs, but they've promised me another window. I'm glad for that, because it's a nice distraction, and for a while keeps me from going to Uffizi.

But when Julia senses I can't resist she'll hesitate in conversation, as if inviting me to ask, and if I don't she'll suggest it, without ever asking why I go, or what I do while I'm there. She came with me last week, and introduced herself to the guard before she left. Neither of them understands fully why I sit there, why it tires me so, and why I keep going back. But Julia accepts it in a way that neither pushes me to go nor prevents me from the trip. Far from it. She knows I must be properly dressed when I go out, makes sure my clothes are pressed and has Lalo shine my shoes. Then she drives me there and drops me off, and spends her day at the Consulate until I call to tell her I'm done.

It can be a full day of sitting, and though it's a nice car on the drive there, and a nice chair Margherite has for me, even sitting can be tiring, even when your activity is all in the mind, maybe especially then. By the time we return to the villa it's often been exhausting.

I'm fighting the urge more this time. Maybe I'll just stay here in the villa, help Lalo in the garden. He's planting fresh lavender along sides of the little walkway, and there's a bench under the Acacia where I can listen to the Orioles. That would be much easier than going. But the feeling is stronger today—or maybe I'm a little weaker, or just tired. I didn't sleep so well last night. Where's that damn scrapbook?

I don't sleep well the nights before I finally go. One night last week I woke up at...five-thirty ...and lay thinking. Julia must have heard my bed creak, because she came up fifteen minutes later with a fresh cup of coffee, got my cane and helped me to the window chair. She saw the scrap book open on my desk, and hesitated the way she does, so I asked, and she agreed to take me that very morning. With that I was too excited to read, so I sipped the coffee and searched for Orioles while she took my shoes down to Lalo.

She reminds me of my old client, the one who had me rebuild this place. I called her Lou, which is short for something I don't remember. Lou was old and small and fragile by the time I met her, but somewhere inside still had enough iron to cause plenty of trouble for an angry young man like I was in those days. She was never intimidated by anything I saw, and could always put her little foot down among far larger men, even when she knew she was headed towards disaster, even when I warned her.

She wasn't one for idle talk, not by the time I met her. Julia reminds me of her in that way too—she's never one for chit chat, I mean, or for wasting time. She works on the drives into Florence, even though she's the one driving, using one of those gadgets in her ear. She'll make several calls before we get there. It makes me feel a little less of an imposition, I guess, although I can never get used to being driven around by someone who divides their attentions

that way. But I sit in the back and keep quiet while she speaks softly enough that I can slip into the current that pulls me to Uffizi.

Driving there always reminds me of my first trip with Lou. It was different but similar, different, because Lucca to Florence is through green vineyards and brown villas, where the trip with Lou was through desert and decay; different, because I was driving then, where now I sit in the back seat, and different, because I was a young hothead then, where now I'm too old and tired to get upset, if indeed any anger still exists inside me. And similar, because...well, because it feels so much the same, maybe because of what I remember when I get to Uffizi, maybe because of who I remember, or maybe just because I want it to be the same.

For the longest time I never went back to Florence. But then my employer died and the office sent the scrapbook, and when I cracked its stiff pages open I came to a photo which reminded me of the piece, and I had to go see it. It was a strange feeling, reluctant and pressing at the same time. I worried about it, resisted it, then said to myself just once, but the single visit turned into a regular pilgrimage, or, if Gwen's right, an obsession. But age brings the privilege of whims I used to hate in old clients, and I don't care about ironies anymore, so long as they don't lock me up. Gwen is, as I say, suspicious of how much of my present is spent in the past, but she's young, and won't know for decades how many voids life brings her, or how hard it is to fill them with anything but memories. Once again, I don't care.

The necklace belonged to Lou for a while. The first time I went to Uffizi I tried to picture it around her neck...and that of the woman we searched for. I stood and stared while the guard stayed and waited. I couldn't bring myself to stop, or even move, until my leg began to stiffen—I have to shift while standing, one leg to the other, then back again, so Margherite brought me a chair with a tear in its cushion. It's the only one she had, and except for that flaw

is a beautiful piece, with velvet and fine carpentry. Not sure why I admire that, but I do on every visit, and I use it each time I go.

I've gone enough times now to well know the way. Each time I tap in until I see Margherite, and we have a small liturgy together. Each time I give her a little bow and say, "Bongiorno, Signorina", and each time she returns a respectful, "Good daye, Signore"; each time I explain why I'm there, and each time she nods, as if agreeing that's a very good reason for coming; and then, each time, she takes me to it.

There's a yellow square of paper in front of it, with faded handwriting which says, "Le La Crime Sophie", which means *Sophie's Tears*, and below there's another name—"The Elder"—the name of the grandfather of the woman we sought. I read the card on every visit—I'm not sure whether it's my fondness of ceremony or whether it settles me like a pleasant introduction, and then I sit, and Margherite stands back, and it's quiet, except an occasional cough from me, or the creak of her leather belt.

She stays through my whole visit, watching the whole time, never acting bored. I have no idea why. There's no drama here—age has turned me into one of those gray people in the background while younger people focus elsewhere. But there's comfort in her presence; I like her being there, and like her quiet. It's all the human companionship I care for when I go there, and, come to think of it, most of all I care for in my life.

After a long while I take a deep breath and use the cane to pull myself up. I steady myself and straighten my coat, and then I turn and nod to Margherite, "*Grazi y arrivederchi, Signorina.*" Each time she nods back a soft, "*Good daye, Signore.*" Then I tap my way out, feeling satisfied but a little beaten. I make my way back to the main building and call Julia, and have an espresso in the café' until she comes. I'll sleep well that night, and for the next few

days, and will put the visit out of my mind, maybe occupy myself with some family paperwork, and perhaps, eventually, if I feel like it, go back to father's scrapbook. Then again, one thing always leads to the other, and the other is always Uffizi. So I'll resist both. Maybe this time I'll be stronger.

Maybe I'll spend more time in the garden.
