

St. Francis Meets Rodin

A One-Act Play

by

Brian Kokensparger

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Thank you for coming. I know you didn't expect me. You got the wrong address? Or are ya looking for the feller who used to live here a few months ago? Either way, come in. Sit. Make yourself comfortable.

(Takes a moment to survey the faces of the audience, smiling occasionally if something strikes him as rare or beautiful, and reacting to the audience as he feels appropriate for a dying man)

You're all beautiful. Lots of young faces. Solid flesh and warm, pink cheeks. You're giving up an evening of waltzing and romance to sit with me. How do you people dance these days? Has ballroom dancing come back? Always thought it would. You probably left your kids with Gidget and raced over here just before the first curtain. Enjoying your visit but worrying about the rug rats at the same time. It's always a tough choice, isn't it?

(Takes another silent look at the audience)

I see wrinkles. You've hid them with make-up. That's all right. It's all right to cover 'em up. It's all right to just let them wrinkle, too. You went out to dinner at the steakhouse before you came, didn't ya? Put on your shiny black dress and good perfume. You didn't know about me. If you knew, you wouldn't have come. That's all right. You're here.

(Looks out the window at the flashing awhile)

Hope you didn't get caught in the storm. A real fireworks extravaganza. Loud crashes like cymbals. And splashes of yellow. White. Sometimes blue or red sparks. I watch it on the wall. I've got the only big screen TV in the whole building.

(Laughs again)

You look tired. I won't keep you long—you've had a big day. Close your eyes if you like. I've done it a hundred thousand times and never thought it was time wasted. You younger ones look a little nervous. Shifting around in your seat. Guess you've never been to a death before. I've got the easy part. You'll go home afterwards. Home to your quiet house. The dark. Maybe to your children, snoring in their beds if they're little. Watching TV and eating Fritos if they're older. What are you going to tell them? If they ask what you saw tonight? Are you going to say you saw an old man die?

(Larger flashes of lightning in the window)

See that? Hot, molten lava with flecks of red. A froth of blue. I used to think if I could shave with that blue froth I'd never get wrinkles. I was young then. You worry about wrinkles when you're young. They never got in the way of anything. Sometimes helped me out. People don't expect much from a wrinkled man. Once I caught a young lady trying to steal a Greek vase. Thought she could put it in her J.C. Penneys bag. Carry it out like a new toaster. I was standing in the next room. She brought a little glass cutter.

(Raises his arms weakly to his head)

What are these? They're ears. Had them back then, too. Standard issue. She got caught because she didn't see 'em. She only saw my wrinkles. I let her go.

(Returning his arms to his side)

Forty three years I worked at the art museum. Listening. Watching the people come and go. Society women yawning, talkin' to their partners in crime. Art students wearing their berets and sitting on the floor. Young boys sneaking glances at the nudes. They came to learn about art and they inspected every crevice of it.

(Tries to sit up a little more)

It happened every Sunday afternoon. Some young couple -- out for the day of culture they'd promised themselves years ago -- they'd pass quickly from one painting to the next, heads nodding like the shutter button of a camera. Look -- nod. Look -- nod. Look -- nod. I'd fall asleep just lookin' at 'em. Then they'd move to the El Greco: Look -- nod. The name plate would catch an eye and they'd fall over each other. Messed up the rhythm of the shutter dance. You heard of the shudder bug? They'd back up and stare -- sometimes five minutes or more. Then they'd give one big nod, and zip past the next few as if they had to catch up with some big commanding clock that only they could hear. Guess after you've seen El Greco, you've seen it all. I always told the director Mr. Van Patton, to put the El Greco last. He didn't listen to me. Bet if the old Greek himself saw what I saw, he woulda' told him to put him last, too. Ain't no justice once the money changes hands. Ain't no justice.

(Shakes his head, lost in his own thoughts for a moment)

Too many people nowadays, they think you gotta close your eyes to pray. Next time you're at the museum, look at the St. Francis painting. Got his eyes wide open. You think he prays to the dark? What's in the dark? No, he sees. He sees, and he prays. And before long, he prays when he sees. Everytime he sees, he prays. No, he doesn't say a prayer. What he sees says a prayer for him. I once saw an old man -- much older than I am -- shuffle past that painting. He was so bent over, he had to look up just to look at it. He stood there, must have been ten minutes. And then all at once -- I wouldn't a' noticed if I didn't stare at him the whole time. Watchin' him watch St. Francis. All at once -- he straightened up just the tiniest bit. Just a smidgin'. An' when he walked again, he had just a little more spring in his knees. Nobody else woulda' noticed it. But I did. Ya see, St. Francis said a prayer for him. He does that. You look at his painting, he says a prayer. The longer the look, the longer the prayer. Same thing with all the paintings. By the time you make your way through the whole musuem, God knows your name by heart.

(Looking up to the ceiling)

Did a lotta prayin' over the years.

(Looking at his hands)

Watch the Rodin bronzes long enough, and they move. Got one little ballerina. With a pink tutu. The little girls always stop there. They want to touch it, but it's behind glass. Guess it looks like a doll to them. Maybe makes them want to be dancers. I don't know. But they stand, watchin', real quiet for a minute or two. She's the patron saint of little girls. She has somethin' to say to 'em, and they listen. Surprises the teachers, they're so quiet. Like the sculpture. Just stands there, lookin' pretty. Never says a word. The girls see it and it turns them to stone.

(Rubbing his grizzled face with his hand)

First time I saw it, decided I'd take a second job to get my little girl those dance lessons she wanted. She quit after three weeks, but she still has the shoes. She keeps them on her dresser, between her Bible and her hairdryer.

(Laughs a little)

One lady in a Rembrandt looked like the director's wife. Mrs. Van Patton. There's an art patron for ya. She was so serious she made canvas crack. After while her husband didn't let her in the museum. He let Venus in, though. Saw her a few times. Venus belonged in the impressionists room, with her thick paint and sharp colors. She'd brush right past the paintings like a workhorse with blinders. Straight to Mr. Van Patton's office. Had meetings with him. One time she stopped dead in her tracks and turned to a large battle scene. She was up real close, staring. I thought,

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