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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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The Christmas song of the custodian

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Keywords

 Archaeological Museum of Florence, François Vase, Christmas

The Archaeological Museum of Florence is the set of a delicate fantasy tale.

Dingding...dingding... no, those are not Christmas bells you hear ringing: it is the set of keys with which I announce (to myself, mainly, given that there is no one else here with me, unless you wish to count the Chimera and the Orator) the definitive closure of the galleries for the night.

Though this night I would have gladly avoided it altogether: it's Christmas and everybody is celebrating with their family, while I am not: I am here, in the museum, trying to convince myself that today, the 24th of December, is no different from the 24th of November or February and that tomorrow, the 25th of December, is no different from the 25th of November and so forth. "It's your turn," they said. Because since I don't have a caring wife or children awaiting my return to celebrate, I am the perfect sacrificial victim: the one who can forego Christmas. "It's your turn," they said, with the shift schedule in hand. And so here I am, with these clinking keys playing 'Jingle Bells' instead of Santa Claus' reindeer.

I head to the second floor of the museum, which in its first part houses the Egyptian section. The mummies, as always, fail to greet me. The Chimera, however, sports a Santa Claus hat on its leonine head, thanks to some jovial colleague of mine. Were I the beast, I would not be thrilled.

I proceed and ascend to the third floor. Larthia Seianti greets me with her usual half-smile, lounging on her sarcophagus. I conclude my inspection, switch off the lights and the whole floor falls into darkness. I close the doors, go down the stairs and walk into the custodians' room — my nocturnal post from where I can monitor, thanks to security cameras, everything that is going on inside the museum. My two colleagues and I activate the alarms and literally barricade ourselves in the custodians' room. The evening proceeds like any other work-night at the museum: we stand before the camera monitors, we eat, we return to the monitors, we pull straws to determine our waking shifts (three shifts of two hours, from midnight till 6 a.m.) and we continue surveilling the situation. The only thing that interrupts the usual routine tonight is the toast that we have decided to drink. It is Christmas outside, after all.

In the assignment of shifts, I pick the short straw: I get the worst one, the second shift from 2 till 4. When I arrive at 2 o'clock to take

over, I barely mumble a few words of greeting to my colleague who is heading off to rest. I make myself comfortable on the couch before the console and observe the galleries of the museum on the security camera monitors. Everything is silent, veiled in darkness.

Suddenly, a light appears from nowhere in a gallery on the second floor. I can see it on the monitor. I get up and figure out which gallery it is — the one with the François Vase. I look more closely and see a man in uniform, with a moustache, brandishing a stool at the Vase. “Oh God!” I exclaim. The man on the monitor seems to hear me (but how could he?) because he turns towards me and now it’s me he’s threatening, that is, the camera, with the stool, or no, he really is threatening me! What’s happening? I see his angry moustached face coming closer and closer and...

“You vile ruffian!”

The man has literally jumped out from the monitor and he is here before me in the custodians’ room, assailing me. Stupefied, I stand there looking at him, eyes and mouth agape. I rub my eyes, but no, I’m not dreaming: he really is standing here in front of me.

“Who are you?”

“Who are you yourself? I am the custodian who destroyed the François Vase on September 9th 1900!”

“Good heavens! Why in the world did you do it?”

“I was fighting with a colleague. Over trifles, I later realised.”

“And just because you were arguing you destroyed the François Vase? One of the most important historical artefacts of the museum? Do you realise that people come from all over the world to see it? Legions of students and tourists flock to see one of the most important vases in the history of Greek art!?”

“But I didn’t want to destroy the vase. And told the judge so. But to no avail, he proclaimed me guilty all the same.”

“And why are you here this evening?”

“I am the ghost of the Custodian. While alive, I hated my work; I was a troublemaker who

couldn’t care less about museums. But now as a shade I won’t be at peace until I expiate my sin and tell you about the most difficult moments that this place has gone through. Then you will realise why it is so important to always be vigilant, even when it’s Christmas, and you will see custodians who, unlike me, truly did defend the museum and our heritage. But that’s enough loafing about. Come on!”

No sooner has he said this than he pulls my sleeve and I am sucked into the monitor. I find myself in a gallery that is not the one on the second floor, where the Vase is currently, but another one. The François Vase is located in a round display case, unlike the rectangular one it currently inhabits. I have, beyond any doubt, ended up in a different period. I’d almost swear I’m seeing the display cases packed with vases all around me in black and white. It’s a normal opening day for the museum. And in black and white I see bearded gentlemen wearing hats, with pipes in their mouths, walking about, observing and discussing the archeological finds amongst themselves. My colleagues are in uniform, standing at attention like policemen. Inside the showcases, the descriptive tags are written with an elegant hand belonging to begone times... ah, right, because we are in begone times. I stick my head out the window... and oh my! The garden is much more vast and richer in statues; one can see the arcades of the Medici Corridor, beneath which, amidst vases with flowers and lemon-trees, stand antique sculptures and Latin inscriptions are affixed to the walls. I can barely find my bearings.

“You vile ruffian! I’ll kill you if I catch you!”

“You’re insane! Whatever you’re planning on doing with that stool, put it away and let’s talk!”

“Let’s talk, sure thing, on your grave we’ll talk!”

My new friend is the one chasing another custodian who, scared out of his wits, is trying to escape amidst the display cases. The two chase each other, slaloming between the statues. I follow the scene as an invisible spectator, and here we are before the display of the François Vase. Oh God, it must really have happened,

after all. “Stoop!” I cry out. But it’s too late. Standing before the display, the custodian evades the danger by a hair’s breadth. The stool flies over his head but the throw turns out to be long and the stool smashes into the glass that protects the François Vase. Both shatter into a thousand pieces. The loud noise of the vase breaking startles the visitors and custodians in the adjacent galleries. The assailant attempts a desperate escape but is soon captured and immobilised, pending the arrival of the police.

The black and white scene suddenly freezes, like a still image. The assailant detaches himself from it and approaches me, turning once again into my guide.

“I didn’t want to hit the Vase, I just wanted to scare that idiot.”

“Well, I understand, but if everyone acted as you did, either there wouldn’t be any more custodians or there wouldn’t be any more artworks in museums!”

“Oh you’re right, but I didn’t know I would destroy the Vase. Come on let’s go, I don’t like this scene much. In any case, you’ve seen what you needed to see.”

He makes me fly out the window, lifting me onto the roof of the museum.

“Here we are, then. What are you, stupid? Stay low. Can’t you see that if you fidget they’ll shoot you? Keep still and pay attention to what’s happening.”

In the street below us I see a handful of armed men walking hurriedly, hugging the walls. One can hear gunshots and machine gun bursts in the air. I realise that it is August 11th, 1944: the day of the tragic Battle of Florence. At the end of July, knowing of the imminent arrival of the Allies, the Germans had blown up all of the bridges over the Arno, except for the Ponte Vecchio, which the Führer so admired. When the Allies entered the city, a battle erupted between the patriots and the Fascists and Germans. While we are perched here, the gunshots echo in my ears. A detachment of men arrives. They’re armed and suddenly break down the door! A custodian jumps towards them as they gesticulate wildly, yell, and one of them brandishes a rifle, pointing it at the

custodian who then has no choice but to let them enter.

“What’s happening? What have they come here for? Who are they?”

“They’re patriots. They’re looking for two fascist sharpshooters and they’re convinced that they’re hiding in the Archeological Museum. So now they’re searching the whole building.”

“Oh God, can you imagine being a custodian and opening the door to find a rifle pointed at you?”

“Tell me about it! But these are tough times. The custodian knows for sure that there aren’t any snipers hidden inside, but of course, having a gun pointed at you is hardly pleasant.”

We now find ourselves inside the museum. The galleries and showcases are so empty as to seem unreal. All of the artefacts have been hidden and safeguarded in the repository of the museum, down in the cellar, while the great bronze sculptures — the Chimera, the Minerva and the Orator — have been removed to the Villa Medicea in *Poggio a Caiano*, along with the other ancient sculptures of the Uffizi Gallery. In the meantime, the partisans pass before us, running to and fro, looking for the ghost-like fascist sharpshooter. They don’t find anyone and leave. They will find him later, hidden in a house behind the museum. The museum’s walls are riddled with bullets, the windows have been shattered by the nearby explosions and yes, it will take a lot of work to restore everything and return to normality.

“And that’s nothing. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

I look at him, aghast: what could be worse than war? He takes me by the hand and leads me down, flying vertiginously, to the ground floor. To the Topographic Museum.

How different it is from the museum I know: a series of small rooms, each dedicated to a single Etruscan city, allowing visitors to compare the artefacts of all the Etruscan centres. A brilliant idea which, however, was forcefully wiped out on November 4th, 1966: the flood of the Arno, which Florentines consider to be almost even more tragic than the war, caused a great deal of

damage in the Archeological Museum. I can see the destruction now, with my legs immersed up to my knees in mud, and as I walk I stumble first on a clay vase and then a bronze jug. What a disaster!

“Look at this mire. No one could have expected such a catastrophe. If you go down, there’s nothing left, the ground floor has been entirely destroyed.”

The situation is distressing. The water has borne everything away, mixing objects and contexts. Around me I see men at work, colleagues of mine knee-deep in mud, blindly searching for artefacts; they shovel carefully so as to not throw anything away, working busily like ants. None of them is thinking of holidays or coffee breaks or some other foolishness: there is a heritage to save. And I say as much out loud.

“Now have you understood the importance of your work, which you so dislike and consider so useless and boring? I paid dearly for my

foolishness, but I want you to understand that your work is necessary: you have been entrusted with caring for a heritage and, furthermore, you are the first person that visitors can ask for information. That’s why it’s good for you to know the place where you work, to know its history and, why not, what there is inside. Now don’t be a fool and go back to your post, scrooge!”

And once again I am in the custodians’ room, alone on my couch, turned toward the monitors. Everything is dark and silent. I check the time and my shift is about to end. I don’t quite know what happened, but I can still hear the last words of my guide ringing in my ears: “you’ve been entrusted with caring for a heritage”. I have just received the most beautiful of Christmas presents: I have rediscovered, through the museum’s history, the purpose of my work. And beginning tonight I feel the museum as somewhat more my own, but also a bit more your own.

Merry Christmas.

