

The Smell of Old Paintings**A Short Story****Al Taylor**

Sun leaked through the museum skylight and hit the glossy linoleum floors. Attica's hands brushed charcoal nibs across cream-colored paper as she traced the outline of an older man sitting with his grandson two seats over. The pair laughed, cutting a croissant with a dull plastic knife, the grandfather taking care to split it in such a way so that the grandson's piece would be bigger. Their expressions were captured by Attica's careful gestures, her quick but poignant strokes holding them still on paper.

She was, at heart, a people watcher. Attica loved to observe how others intermingled, taking great care to portray human experience within her sketchbook accurately. The museum she currently sat at was her newfound favorite place to draw from life. It was accidental how she found herself at the local museum—how she had stumbled in one storming day with her sweatshirt pulled high above her head, sketchbook tucked close to her chest to prevent it from being exposed to the water. At first, when the curator stared with wide brown eyes at her disgruntled appearance, Attica assumed she was about to be scolded or, God forbid, kicked out. Yet, after a pause and a quivering gaze, the curator broke into a soft smile, chuckling fondly and asking if she was alright, introducing herself as the building owner, the curator, and most importantly, Dr. Sapfídha Trivádha.

She filled up more pages in Attica's sketchbook than anything else.

Long since had she memorized the soft curve of Sapidha's face, the roundness of her nose, and the sharp sadness of her eyes. Deep, warm, honey-caramel eyes that drank up a room as if taking into consideration every minor detail within it, from the squeaks of someone's shoe to the fine layer of dust on an unused bench. Her eyes took everything in and had the finest sense for the infinitesimal.

Attica's most recent portrait of madam curator was two inches over from the grandfather and his boy. She filled up a page easily, though her life counterpart seldom brought attention to herself. She had a knack for blending in, an art form in and of itself.

Naturally, Attica hadn't noticed she had moved until the cool baby blue of her pantsuit pressed itself to her side, coolly fitting into the polished wooden bench like it had been built with her specifically in mind.

"What did you draw today, little artist?" She cooed, voice heavy but soothing—not entirely unlike a warm cup of tea.

Attica blushed a bit, turning to pass the sketchbook from her hands to Sapidha's. The woman took a second to mull over each drawing, gently rubbing her thumb across the book's spine as she hummed in quiet approval. She had long since gotten over any self-conscious feelings about her subjects seeing the drawings she did of them. In fact, she knew this particular subject was very fond of seeing what candid she had captured throughout the day.

“You’re very talented,” Sappídhá said, “I hope one day to see your pieces hanging here.”

The red dusting across Attica’s face deepened to a dark cherry color.

“This is nothing; it’s just doodles—really.”

The curator scoffed, “No art is nothing. It is something by the very nature of being art.”

She gave a cursory grin to Attica, turning the sketchbook back over as she let her posture relax. There were fleeting moments in the two’s interactions where Attica saw comfort leak out of Sappídhá when no one was around to expect better of her. There was a crooked smile here, and a nasally laugh there, a certain type of humanity that Sappídhá never let anyone but Attica see. Warm, honeycomb curls fell from behind her ear as the loose ponytail she frequently tucked her hair into slowly became undone throughout the day.

“Is that why you have the museum?” Attica asked, “You’re a big fan of art?”

Sappídhá sighed—not an annoyed sound, more of the sigh you would let out after having eaten an incredibly rich meal. A fulfilling sigh. A satiated sigh.

“I have a museum because I want art to be preserved,” She said.

And wasn’t that the most perfect answer you could give? Attica rested her head on her hand, cupping her chin gently as she let out a sigh of her own, smiling fondly. Maybe she put the curator on a pedestal, but it was hard not to.

Cheekily, Sappídhá leaned closer to her—so close that she could smell the perfume clinging to her clothes. Lavender and cinnamon. It was a scent so undeniably her, so simple, and

yet Attica would never have guessed that's what it was. It was such a unique smell; after figuring out the scent, she had spent an entire afternoon trying to find the exact perfume she wore. Had she not, at one point, overheard an older woman ask Sapidha for the name of the brand she bought from, she would never have learned the woman made her own perfume at home. That was, of course, how she learned that Dr. Sapidha Triváda, art museum curator, didn't see the point in buying anything she couldn't make at home. Every outfit, necklace, hairpin, high-heel, or perfume had all been made by her hands.

“Actually,” Sapidha whispered, “the reason I have a museum is simply because I have too many things. Where else would I put them, if not here?”

Attica snorted, gently leaning forward as the other woman also allowed herself to fall into her laughter. She was content, at that moment, to let herself drown in the sound of Sapidha's laughter. Her voice was rich and warm like bread, tinged with an accent she could never sort of place—while her laugh was just as brilliant and bright.

The two women settled after a minute, and Attica moved her legs to sit criss-cross on the bench.

“Can I ask where you got all this stuff?”

She nodded toward the nearest piece, a large oil painting of two women embracing on a field of flowers, cliffs raging behind them as they feed each other grapes in blissful ignorance of the world.

“Mm,” Sapphídhá hummed, “When you live as long and in as many places as I do, you collect many things. That painting in particular, was done by a close friend of mine in France.”

“That painting,” Attica nodded at it once again, “Is from 1914.”

“Yes, yes, it is.”

Attica gently chuckled, “I find it hard to believe you personally knew someone from 1914 France. You don’t look much older than me.”

Sapphídhá shrugged, teasing a smile as she glanced toward Attica, “People tend to say I look young for my age. But like it or not, that portrait is mine.”

“You mean you own it. Right?”

The curator said nothing.

“Because,” Attica said, “there’s no way the portrait could be of you. It doesn’t make sense; you’re far too young.”

This time, Sapphídhá smiled as though she was in on some sort of inside joke. Something only she knew.

She stood up, gently bowing to Attica and keeping the same coy smile.

“I really must get back to work, if you don’t mind.” She said, “I hope you enjoy your drawings.”

Part of Attica wanted to stop her. To grab her hand. To say anything to make her stay. Instead, she let the smell of lavender and cinnamon waft away and turned her attention to the painting pinned up in front of her.

For the first time, she took in the way familiar honey-comb curls fell across tanned shoulders. It was almost uncanny, the resemblance between the painting and Sapidha. The same hooked nose, soft features, sharpness to deep mahogany eyes. Attica was certain that if the painting had a scent, it would be lavender and cinnamon.

And if she just squinted, she could make out the plaque underneath; ‘Antoine Gagnon (b. 1882), *Portrait of Lady Sappho* (1914).’