

Tradition

Inspired by "Sleeping Contrabass" by sandas04



Francisco Capecchi sat in the same spot just off of Via del Mare precisely at 11:43 in the morning, the fourth of each month, regardless of the weather. After all, one could easily dress for the weather--coats or umbrellas, water bottles or shorts. It wasn't much of a sacrifice on that front.

Yes, sometimes that meant being brusque and asking whoever was in his spot to move along--or, at least, to shift over enough for him to take the space directly above the bench's leg. It was worst during the summer months, when tourists glutted Rome's eternal streets and even this little space not too far from the Tiber River would become overrun. Francisco managed to keep calm about this issue, though once there was a bit of a disagreement--some British tourists didn't understand plain Italian and wouldn't move, almost making him miss his appointment. That had been a rough day. Still, there was always the solace of the Tradition to make it up to him.

And now it was the fourth again, April this time, and the weather was slightly warmer than one might expect. Francisco approached the plaza, his contrabass naked to the elements, his aging legs shuffling along as fast as possible considering his burden. His watch--well, really *her* watch, which was his now, of course--told him that it was 11:38 and so he had better move along. Five minutes was not much time when the eightieth decade was coming to a close.

By 11:40, a man--younger, generations younger, so young that he would never have heard the stories of living under Mussolini at his parents' knees--plopped down right in Francisco's spot. Plopped down without a glance to see whom he might be inconveniencing, his phone plastered to his ear and a small backpack on the ground next to him.

Francisco's heart dropped. Now it would happen again. Confronting people was not his favorite way to keep the Tradition alive. But there was nothing for it: He needed

to sit there, and he only had three minutes to do so.

"Excuse me, sir," he said through his wobbly jaw, each breath catching on the age in his lungs. "Sir? Excuse me, but that's my spot."

The man looked up, surprised, his eyes red-rimmed and watery.

Francisco hesitated for a moment, too shocked to know what else to say. Someone else was sitting in his spot, and though he felt a jolt of sympathy, it really wasn't his problem that the man cried.

"What?" The man blinked a couple of times, wiping his eyes and shifting the phone a bit, telling Francisco that he was talking to the old man carrying a contrabass and bow.

"My...my spot. I need to sit there."

"Oh." The man looked around as if he didn't know where he was or how he got there. "Oh, sorry." He picked up his backpack and shifted to the far end.

"Thank you," said Francisco, his heart finally slowing. Another fourth, another commemoration. He could continue the Tradition, unbroken.

Gently setting the instrument behind the backless bench, he settled himself in position, watching his watch carefully so that the timing was precise. Only once his watch--*her* watch--said 11:43 would he be ready.

The moment came.

He sat.

He closed his eyes and listened to the distant din of traffic, the gentle stirrings of the wind. To his far right, he could hear the low murmur of the stranger's resumed conversation, though nothing said was loud enough for Francisco's old ears to make out. He opened his eyes. A woman in a floral dress and wearing a straw sunhat walked past.

He looked at his watch. Eleven forty-five. That was all it had taken. Two minutes to lose everything. Just as surely as he placed himself in the same spot on that bench in that plaza, the familiar ache of sadness did the same inside of his heart. It was here that it had happened, here that his whole life changed.

Without bothering to wipe the tears from his eyes, he stood, picked up the contrabass, and, after a moment to tune the strings, began to play. It was the same song that he played every fourth--it was part of the Tradition. It was the song that they'd danced to at their fortieth wedding anniversary. It was the song that they'd play every Christmas Eve, after mass.

It was the song that he played at her funeral.

As he always did, Francisco's performance was done with his eyes closed. The music said what he could not, and the world turned watery anyway. The notes filled the square, the familiar melody drifting over the cobblestoned plaza, the music another farewell to Francisco's heart.

"That was beautiful."

The comment startled Francisco. The final note had--much like she had--died in the plaza as he stood next to his instrument, his heartache tracing down his cheeks.

He looked to his right. The man from before--Francisco had forgotten he was

there--was looking at him. The phone, no longer pressed to the man's ear, was dark and ignored on the pale expanse of the bench. Tears stood shimmering in the stranger's eyes. "It's 'The Prayer', right? The one that Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli sang together?"

Francisco nodded, unable to speak.

"You...you played that beautifully."

"Thank you."

The man sat while Francisco, sniffing, returned the contrabass to its position behind the bench. He sat down and closed his eyes. The time was now 11:49. He had one more minute of the Tradition. Then he would leave, return to his own home, and live without her. One more minute of living with her, if only in his memories.

"I...sorry, I don't mean to interrupt."

Though, Francisco noticed, the man *did* interrupt. He opened his eyes and looked at the young man.

"But," continued the stranger, "I just...I just wanted to thank you. For playing your song."

Francisco looked at him, not knowing what to say. He hadn't played the song for a stranger. He'd played it for *her*, for his Flora. For himself.

"I just..." The man took a deep breath. "I just got some...really bad news. My son, um...well, the doctors did all they could, but..." He choked a little. "I'm four thousand miles from him and my wife, stuck here in Rome. I..."

Francisco stared. The man's Italian was perfect--he hadn't suspected the man to be a foreigner. "Your little one?" he asked, his voice rough with lack of use and his own grief.

The man nodded. "Cancer. It was in remission, we thought. But..." The man shook his head, the tears pouring more freely. "My credit cards got stolen yesterday and my flight home isn't for another week. I don't know what to do."

Francisco sat for a long moment. "I am sorry for your loss. Believe me, I know what it's like." He sat where he'd been four years before, when Flora had wilted next to him on this very bench, her laughter still in her mouth when her heart betrayed her. When his heart had failed, in its own way, too. "I think the best way to grieve is to remember him. To make a tradition of the love that you had...that you still have."

"Is...that what you did here? Is that why you played your song here?"

Francisco nodded.

"Does it help?"

"The grief can never fully go away. But it's always good to remember."

The bereft father nodded. "I'm sorry for your loss, too."

Francisco forced a smile. "We who survive carry the burden of sorrow, my friend. But that doesn't mean things are hopeless." Rising on his arthritic legs, Francisco hobbled over to the man, extending his hand. "Francisco Capecchi."

"Oli Dresden." He took the offered hand, shaking it firmly, then paused. "Wait, *the* Francisco Capecchi? The international performer?"

"I was, yes, at one point. That *was* my life. I retired when..." Francisco trailed off.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Well, Oli, I think there may be something that I can do to help."

Oli shook his head. "I rather doubt it."

"No. See, you gave up your seat to help me. I can do something in return."

Oli straightened. "What do you mean?"

"Give me ten minutes, I will get you on a plane."

"Oh, no, I couldn't--"

Francisco raised a hand. "I have friends, Mr. Dresden, who are involved with travel. I've done a fair amount of it myself. They will be more than happy to get you to...where are you from?"

"Montana. In America."

"You speak Italian quite well."

"My mother..." He waved a hand. "It's...you know, a long story."

"Of course. May I borrow your phone?"

"Um, yeah. It's almost dead..."

Francisco dialed the number from memory. "It won't take long."

He was right. By 12:20, Oli Dresden had a flight to Texas, with a connecting flight to Billings shortly thereafter.

"There you are." Francisco smiled and handed the phone back. "Something to help make the world a bit righter."

"I don't know how I can thank you enough."

"Get to your family. Support them. That will be thanks enough."

Oli smiled, some of the sadness in his eyes gone. "Why would you do this for me?"

"To help." He returned the smile. "I don't know. Maybe I'll make it a new Tradition."