

The Old Man

by Daniel Harris

The old man tied his black tie and put on a black beret. His bones hurt, but at ninety-two it was to be expected. This was not the first funeral he had attended. He had buried his parents, two brothers, three sisters and a wife. At his age, he had lost almost all. Now he was preparing to go to the last funeral he had any interest in attending.

The car service driver, Sadah, was an elderly Sikh with graying beard and orange dastar who always drove the old man in a highly polished limousine.

—Where did you wish to go, sir?

—To Saint Augustine church in Park Slope Brooklyn. It is located on Sixth Avenue and Sterling Place.

When they arrived at Saint Augustine, the old man told Sadah, the driver, to wait for him. He would be going to the cemetery for the interment. He would also need a ride from the cemetery back to his apartment on West End Avenue.

—Sir, you have engaged the car for the whole day. I will wait for and drive you wherever you wish.

The ride from the Upper West Side took longer than he planned. The service was in progress when he entered the church.

It was a beautiful church, a Brooklyn landmark. The church was filled with mourners. When he entered the church with his hat in his hand, a choir was chanting, Psalm 91:

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
Will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust."*

The sounds of sniffing and weeping could be heard with the music.

The deceased woman, Nausicaa, had requested that the old man's *Requiem Mass* for sixteen *acappella* solo voices be performed at her funeral. In the reverberant confines of the church, the old man

recalled the first performance at the Cathedral at Reims in memory of his French music mentor, Madame Dupain, for whom he had composed the work forty years before. It was his only sacred work, yet it remained his most performed. The old man was not there to listen to his work, but to celebrate the life of the woman in the casket.

As the funeral bier and family members filed out of the church to the hearse, the old man sat with his hat on his lap. He did not weep outright, but his eyes brimmed with tears. The woman in the casket was an apparition from a lifetime ago.

The day before, the old man had traveled late to the funeral home. There were no family members and the man on duty was about to lock the door. The old man asked for a few minutes with the deceased.

The old man entered the room with the casket, which was surrounded by many bouquets of flowers. The dead woman was beloved by many besides her large extended family.

The old man looked upon the corpse. The embalmer had done a good job of catching her *joie de vivre* and magnetism. To the old man, she could have been the young vibrant woman smiling across the table at him the first time they dined together in the Auberge *Fleurs de Mai* in Provenance. Perhaps it was a *trompe-l'œil* or a testament to the embalmer's art.

The old man put the bouquet he carried across the dead woman's waist. She was dressed in a suit. The old man never knew her to wear a suit, but then he knew her fifty years before. He had seen her once from a subway car in the Times Square Station. She was standing on the platform holding her two small children's hands, while her handsome husband checked the subway map. His heart had almost stopped, but the train and his heart continued on their journey.

His brothers had always said, "You should have married Nausicaa."

It was not so easy. He was a driven, difficult man. He was poor, and probably a potentially poor provider. Her parents were against

the relationship. After five years, they broke her down. She left after a night of tears, sex and recriminations.

A few months after the break-up, he took her to dinner. She almost agreed to come back to his home. But she had said, if I go with you, I will move back in and I can't do that. There was no argument, what she said was true. He returned home in misery.

As he stood looking at her corpse, his success and wealth in middle age meant nothing. Just as before, money was immaterial. She came from poor immigrants, salt of the earth. She loved the life he lived. She missed the concerts, the travel and the continual sense of discovery and adventure. Even after she married, she would come to his concerts and afterwards give him congratulations, or occasionally a kiss on the cheek.

The old man had married a beautiful high-powered woman. Nausicaa's husband had made a serious pass at the old man's wife in the lobby of Carnegie Hall. Words were exchanged between his wife and Nausicaa's husband. Nausicaa walked in on the exchange. The old man arrived too late to intervene. Nausicaa stopped coming to his concerts.

The old man and his wife were great friends, after a few years it was a passionless marriage. They were fiercely loyal to each other's accomplishments and careers, but they were also competitive with each other. The emotional turmoil put a daily stress on their relationship. At one point the old man had moved to France and lived alone for several years. He and his wife had reunited, more out of necessity than love.

After his wife passed away, the old man grew more solitary and remote. His music, contrary to his depressed mental state, became more animated, colorful and joyful. At the same time, he became more and more withdrawn. As affectionless as his married life was, he missed his wife, but he also knew that he had missed a big portion of the human experience. He had no heirs. His wife's relatives were distant and mostly unknown to him. He spent the first years after her death, securing her reputation in academic circles. He sold her papers and rare book collection to the New York Public

Library. He paid for the reprinting of her books. He suffered through many interviews by earnest yet clueless female graduate students trying to relive the glory days of pioneering women's scholarship.

The old man rose from the pew where he was sitting. He arrived outside as the hearse was pulling away. He found the car and told the driver to follow the hearse with his headlights illuminated.

The cortège drove for about an hour to a cemetery on Long Island. It was a beautiful place with views of Long Island Sound and the Connecticut shore in the distance. The old man sat in the car until the casket was lowered into the grave. He left the car and walked to an oak tree near the gravesite.

The celebrant intoned:

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,

Till thou return unto the ground;

For out of it wast thou taken:

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

The old man quietly coughed and shook his head. Nausicaa was never “dust.” If anything she was the rich loam that nourished, a fertile field whose joy and enthusiasm had been the cornerstone of his creativity. Decades after their separation, she was still the wellspring from which his most important work had sprung. Nausicaa was the talisman that illuminated his creative life.

Clumps of earth hit the sarcophagus with a dim thud. The old man walked back to the car and took a large bouquet of magnolias from the back seat. He walked to the grave. A man with a front loader was ready to push the dirt over the casket.

—Please wait.

The old man stood for a long time staring at the casket. He could almost feel her long arms around his neck and her full soft lips giving him that first joyous kiss.

He dropped the flowers on the casket.

As he walked to the car, a man almost as old as himself came up to him.

—Do you remember me?

The old man studied him, but there was no recognition.

—I'm Nausicaa's older brother, Adam Tsakonas.
—Of course, yes. It has been a long time. Sixty years or more.
They shook hands.
—Are you well? asked the old man.
—Yes, but I am old. And you?
—The same.
—Would you care to join the family for a small dinner?
—I would rather not. Perhaps we could have a drink together?
—Yes, I would like to tell you something. I will tell the others to go ahead.
—My driver will drop you after we have a drink, said the old man.
Adam went to the cortège and told them that he would join them later.
When Adam returned, the old man was sitting in the back of the car. The old man motioned for him to enter.
—There is a quiet seafood restaurant near here that will be open this afternoon. I will instruct the driver. It has the same view as Nausicaa's grave, said the old man.
—I would like that, said Adam.
The driver knew the restaurant and drove them there expertly, as only a man who is proud of his chauffeuring skills would.
The two men sat in silence. Both looked straight ahead. Their sense of grief was palpable.
—She had a wonderful life, said Adam, Nausicaa's older brother.
—No doubt.
—Many people loved her. Her children felt blessed to have a mother like her.
—Yes, I saw that quality in her from the beginning.
They drove in silence until the car entered the gravel driveway of the restaurant.
—Sadah, said the old man to the driver, you will wait for us to return. Then you will take Mr. Tsakonas to his destination. We will then return to my apartment.
—Yes sir. You know I will wait for you.
—Thank you. You have been most gracious, Sadah.

—You are a special client.

—Thank you, Sadha. Mr. Adam Tsakonas is an old friend.

The two men left the car. It was mid afternoon. They entered the restaurant, empty except for two men in golf attire at the bar.

—May we have a table with a view of the water? asked the old man.

—Yes, said the hostess, a young leggy raven-haired beauty.

The two men followed her to the table.

—Do you have Belon oysters on the half-shell, asked the old man of the hostess, whose dress revealed most of her apple-sized breasts.

—I don't know if we have Belon oysters today. Will you accept Wellfleet oysters?

—I prefer the Belon, said the old man, but if you don't have them, tell us what you have.

The hostess left and returned a few minutes later.

—You are in luck. We have Maine Belon oysters. They are being unloaded from the truck at this moment. The chef says they are the best he has tasted in years.

—Thank you. We will take a dozen and a bottle of *Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin* Champagne.

—Very good, sir.

—Adam, do you remember when Nausicaa bought two-dozen Belon oysters for my thirtieth birthday?

—Yes, and Michael and I came and ate at least a dozen. Nausicaa was not happy, but we kept making jokes about how she was going to be sore in the morning because the oysters would make you so potent.

The old man's eyes twinkled in memory of those good times.

— Nausicaa was such a good sport. What a great sister.

—She always admired you as a brother. She would say she couldn't have better brothers. She loved you and Michael. When Michael died in the plane crash while taking off from the carrier deck, she was in tears for weeks.

—You know, it wasn't his fault, the flight officer sent him off as the carrier plunged into the back of a big wave. He was the top gun of all the top guns. It never should have happened.

The men sat in silence.

The hostess brought the oysters and a busboy brought the champagne.

The busboy poured some champagne in the old man's glass. He sniffed it and rolled some in his mouth.

—You may serve it; the old man ordered the busboy.

The busboy overfilled the two men's glasses. The old man cleared his throat, but the busboy was indifferent.

—To the memory of Nausicaa, said Adam.

—To Nausicaa, said the old man.

They sat mulling over memories and champagne for some time.

—Try an oyster, said the old man.

Adam took an oyster and with his seafood fork expertly removed the oyster from its shell. He savored it in his mouth, chewing it to extract the complex flavors. The sea, zinc and umani exploded in his mouth. He took the shell and drained the liquid.

—These oysters are excellent, Adam said after taking a sip of champagne.

The old man ate an oyster, savoring it even more so than Adam. He poured a dram of champagne in the oyster shell, swirled it around and put the shell up to his lips and sipped the liquid.

The men did not talk. They slowly ate the oysters, extracting maximum flavor from each one.

The hostess came and refilled their champagne flutes.

When the hostess was out of earshot, the old man said.

—I chose this repast because it represents to me the best qualities of Nausicaa. She was effervescent with the complexity of the champagne and alive and rare as these oysters.

Adam sat looking at the old man whose eyes were wet with tears.

—You knew her as a woman. I knew her as a sister. We were both the lucky recipients of her love and affection. You, of course, knew her more intimately than I.

The old man looked at Adam, the old man's eyes nearly blind with tears.

—Do we ever know anyone? asked the old man.

—A big question, replied Adam.

There was a long pause. They both took a sip of champagne.

Adam asked, was it Tennyson who wrote:

*'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.*

—Yes, said the old man. The taste of love lingers a lifetime.

Adam was afraid the old man would become maudlin.

—I must rejoin the family. Perhaps we should go.

—Yes, you are correct. I should not keep you. Sadah, my driver, will take you to your dinner engagement and return for me.

—Are you sure?

—Yes, I would like to finish the champagne and share Nausicaa's last view.

—As you wish. May I pay for it?

—It has been paid for already.

—I doubt we will meet again, said the old man, but know that I loved your sister and never had a bad thought about her. She did the correct thing, as her successful life proved.

—She always liked you. She told me about a week before she died, that if I saw you I should tell you.

—Tell me what?

—I can't say, it sounds too trite. Know that she remembered you until the end.

Adam turned and walked from the restaurant.

The old man raised a glass.

— Nausicaa you were always my girl.

