

## one

At the end of his first week in Cambridge, I took Scot across the river to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Scot was ten, and I figured he would feel at home in Boston's famous bijou palace. It is jam-packed with Japanese screens, French stained glass, German altars, Persian rugs, Italian paintings, and no end of esteemed bric-a-brac. I didn't know Scot well, but I knew he liked flea markets and jumble sales, and I am astonished that I am about to tell you that I was embarrassed by Scot's peculiarly limp limbs and his gooney posture and I was hoping to stand him next to the pre-Renaissance paintings and see his likeness in those charmingly misproportioned saints and angels.

I wanted a new angle on Scot.

I wanted to lose perspective.

We were on the third floor, in the Gothic Room, when Scot started to get sick to his stomach. Vertigo. He was okay if he kept to the center of the shiny cobblestone floor, but he couldn't stop himself from occasionally glancing through the Islamic arches into the empty air of the central courtyard. He asked the security guard how long a fall down it was to the ground-floor greenery, and when the guy said, "Let's take a look," and put a hand on his back, Scot's knees gave out, and as he collapsed, he squeaked out the words, "Please, stop it, sir."

The guard backed off, and he raised his hands to prove, I guess, that he wasn't a child molester.

I waved at the guard, a no-harm done gesture, and I said, "He's afraid of heights. It's not your fault."

But the guard was embarrassed and insulted, an emotional cocktail that Scot serves us to many strangers. He said, "What's

the matter with that kid?" just loud enough to make it hurt. Then he wandered into the next room.

Scot said, "I'm sorry I screamed."

I pulled him to his feet. "You know those empty spaces I showed you on the walls downstairs? The paintings that were stolen?" It was true. Somebody had walked out of the place with a collection of Dutch masters worth millions. "Everybody's been in a bad mood around here since then."

We were only a few feet away from my favorite painting in America, a small gold moment made by the Italian genius Giotto six hundred and seventy-five years ago. *The Presentation of the Infant Jesus in the Temple* is displayed on an easel—an inspired choice by Isabella, who acquired and placed everything in the museum while it was still her home. The Giotto is a genuine masterwork, and the easel makes you mindful of its humble origins. A man mixed up some egg-tempera paints and applied them to a small board. That's the history of art. The easel, unfortunately, is draped in red, a dash too much dash for me, but not for Scot.

Scot didn't comment on the flabby body of the baby Jesus. Held high on his back in Simeon's red-robed arms, Jesus steadies himself by clinging to Simeon's beard with his left hand as he reaches toward his mother's outstretched arms with his right, and his body becomes a casual crucifix. Something sad shadows this golden moment.

Scot was fascinated by the drapery. "You know, Ed, you could do that with your furniture at home," he said. "Or a bike."

Four young women arrived with big pads of paper, and they were followed by two handsome young men who'd obviously shopped for clothes in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald. One of them had found a pair of white bucks.

Scot instantly recognized the young men as better versions of Sam and me.

The guard came back, none too happy with any of the malingerers in the Gothic Room. He warned each one of the sketchers not to sit in the carved, mahogany thrones, torture devices that no American would mistake for chairs.

Scot snapped open the blue leather camera bag slung over his shoulder.

The guard called out, "Sorry. No pictures in here, son." He looked at me accusingly.

Scot rummaged in his bag and finally fished out a vial of pink lotion. He jiggled a big blob into one palm, rubbed his hands together vigorously, packed and snapped things back into place, and stood up.

The lotion was fragrant beyond reason.

I heard the guard sniff.

I stared at Saint Simeon, the baby's hand in his beard.

One of the sketchers asked her friend if she smelled something funny.

The man with the bucks said, "That shouldn't be allowed," and pulled his linen friend to the next room. This was too outré for them. Draped furniture, yes. Stinky perfume, no.

The guard said, "That's some strong stuff."

Scot looked happy. To me, confidentially, he said, "It's called Pink Gardenia. It was on sale. I also bought the bath splash." Then he placed his slippery hand in mine, and we headed for the stairs.