

*Funny how a short story [this is a long short story] can become a trilogy. This was written before I began The Trilogy of Remembrance comprised of The Drawing Lesson and The Fate of Pryde. [The third in this trilogy is a work in progress.] You'll see a number of the characters, Alexander, Daphne and Peter right here. Although the characters are formed, the story is rather different.*

## **FLEETING MOMENTS**

*by Mary E. Martin*

With a furious blow of his cane, Alexander Wainwright shattered the globe of his studio light. The naked bulb swung in wild arcs, making his shadow leap like a demon set free. A broad river flowed through the grassy plains of his painting. Dark reflections of trees in the water appeared like silent, shadowy boatmen cast aimlessly adrift. The artist seized his brush.

Squeezing out fat curls of black, yellow and red on his palette, he advanced upon the canvas. Deftly, he painted one tiny black figure beneath a tree, which stared back at him in terror. He leapt upon a stool and painted another creature on the far bank. It, too, cried out. More desperate beings sprang to life with eyes cast upward to the leaden sky. Finally, he created three naked, trembling figures hidden in shrubbery. Wainwright, his lips breaking into a thin smile, cocked his head to one side.

"Who are these creatures?" he asked aloud.

"They are the trolls," he whispered as exhaustion swept over him. He fell asleep, fully clothed, upon his bed.

At noon, a banging came at his studio door. Wainwright peered out. "Ah, it's you, my angel! Bringing light into my darkness."

He let in his friend and art dealer, James Helmsworth, who stared at the canvas. "My God, Alex, what have you done?"

"I've had a break through." Rubbing his grizzled chin, Wainwright said, "They are the trolls. They've always been there, but I only just found them."

Tears glinted in Helmsworth's eyes. "Why would you desecrate your own work, Alex? Painting such creatures in that lovely setting?"

Wainwright shook his head. "Those pitiful creatures are God's work. My landscapes create serenity and the trolls express horror at the abandoned terrain." He peeled the cellophane from a cigar. "So, there it is!" He waved his cigar at the painting. "The collision of two world views. Serenity and horror."

Helplessness swept over the dealer. "But Alex, you have a following, a reputation."

"A polite way of saying I'm a cheap, commercial hack?"

"No, of course not! But with this vision, buyers may be difficult to find. Please, Alex, take a break. Let your vision percolate. You may see things differently after a rest or better still, a trip. You could visit your friend, Peter, in Venice."

Wainwright snorted. "Ah yes! But my friend may not wish to see me."

"I'm sure he will!" Jamie coughed gently. "You've always called him your muse."

Wainwright sighed. "I suppose Venice might be pleasant this time of year. Good idea, Jamie. I thank you."

Helmsworth was concerned. Wainwright never gave in without a tirade about the creative process. "You'll really go, Alex?"

In the light, the artist's face looked ancient, yet serene. "Yes, I'll ask his advice."

"I'm so glad you agree," breathed Jamie. They shook hands. "So you'll get a flight?"

Wainwright shook his head as they walked to the door. "No, dear boy, I'm going to take the train. More time to think." His eyes gleamed. "I'll get a ticket for the Orient Express to Venice." Clapping his friend on the back, he glanced at the canvas. "You're quite right. More consideration is needed."

"You'll call once you're back?" Jamie asked from part way down the stairs.

"Yes, dear boy. I shall discuss it with you then." Wainwright closed the door and Helmsworth, still suspicious, rushed down into the street.

"Quelle chance, Monsieur!" The white-coated waiter beamed up at Richard Carson. "I have an opening at this sitting. The previously assigned guest is indisposed. Please follow me."

Richard caught his balance as the Orient Express swerved along the track. The woman seated alone at the table looked up. Although her smile made a bright facade, her deep blue eyes

were tinged with unfathomable regret. Instantly, Richard was drawn by the flicker of vulnerability in her expression. He smiled and extended his hand.

"I'm Richard Carson and you are?" he asked pleasantly.

"Daphne Bersault, Mr. Carson."

"Apparently, your assigned luncheon companion is ill." He unfolded his napkin in his lap. "And so," he smiled, "we have the good fortune to meet."

Daphne shifted in her red-plush chair. The man seemed open and friendly. Everything she was not. Gazing out upon the gray equipment sheds flying past, she wondered about her original table companion, Alexander Wainwright, the famous British landscape artist.

"Are you going as far as Venice?" Richard asked politely.

"Yes, I am." She turned to the window and wondered at the wisdom of her trip.

Richard could not resist. "Have you been there before?" he asked.

"No. I've been to Rome and Florence, but never to Venice." A shadow, passing over her face, marked that which she left unsaid. Although fair, soft and kindly in appearance, her aloofness frustrated him. Cascades of piano music came from the bar, but when the door slammed shut, their silence was filled with the clack of the wheels on the track.

As green fields and thatched cottages flew by, Daphne tried to study his features, mirrored in the glass. *A pleasantly worn man with dark eyes reflecting kindness.* After twenty years, she was returning to Venice. In her mind, she saw ancient buildings rising up like golden vapours and the gondola which had carried Adam's body from the dock across black water.

After they ordered wine, Richard continued "Venice is incredibly beautiful. The canals, architecture, the whole feel of the place."

Daphne remembered the sad and gentle eyes of the boat captain as he told her of Adam's suicide. But she smiled politely at Richard and banished visions of darkly snaking canals. "I'm sorry, Mr. Carson. Tell me more about Venice."

"As I was saying, Venice is truly beautiful. In the morning, the light is soft and hazy and at noon, the city looks like a golden curtain hanging over the water." He stopped, surprised at his own artistic expression. She speculated upon such sensibility in a man.

"Do you know what happened to Mr. Wainwright?"

"Who is he?"

"The one whose seat you have taken."

"Oh, the assigned table companion," he laughed.

"I hear he's a famous landscape painter."

Gazing at her, Richard thought she might well attract the attention of a painter.

"Perhaps we'll meet him at dinner." He paused. "Is your trip for pleasure?"

"In a way. But I have some loose ends to tidy up." She remembered Adam's last words to her. *Get the fuck out of here!* And her final angry response. *Grow up! You're just a spoiled brat!* She should not have left him.

"Will you tour Venice alone?"

"Yes," she replied. "I need time to myself."

The waiter took their orders. Her words had imposed such silence, he dared not intrude further. If he had been too forward, he set it down to lack of social ease after twenty-five years of marriage to Caroline. Suddenly, he missed their easy chat and undemanding silences. Without her, he seemed to stumble at every turn. To blot out thoughts of his wife, he looked about the dining room car filled with gray, expectant faces. But he was drawn back by the loveliness in the woman seated with him. She seemed vulnerable and exposed like a delicate flower in sunlight. .

Holding back the brocade curtains, Daphne saw only dark layers of cloud. Surely, they must be nearing the sea coast. Twenty years ago, everything lay ahead. Since then, she had drifted like a castaway, scarcely alive. It was time to return. She tore herself from her thoughts.

"Where do you stay in Venice?" she asked.

"At the Hotel Bellini. Wonderful view of the Grand Canal." He felt his attraction grow. *Ridiculous to think, to hope so soon after Caroline.*

"You're on business?" she asked.

"Yes. I design mostly business software, but virtual reality is the big item. Suddenly, he wanted to talk with her for hours, but he held back. *Let her set the pace.*

Daphne laughed softly. "I do like that term, Mr. Carson. Virtual reality." She sipped her wine reflectively. "Just think how many realities we carry within ourselves."

Richard frowned. Her question provoked thoughts of his wife whose psychotic episodes had shattered their calm and rational life. Now she was incarcerated in an institution. *And some people's realities are true madness.*

"And do you work, Ms Bersault?"

"Yes. In advertising."

"Really?" She did not seem the type. "What area?"

"Creative design. I'm the idea person. But," she smiled wanly, "I get a bit tired of all the manipulation."

Richard laughed. "But isn't seduction the name of the game?"

"Yes, I suppose . . ." she said as a shadow crossed her face, once again marking that which was left unsaid.

Awkwardness overtook him and he fell silent when the waiter arrived with lunch. His calm and reasoned marriage had exploded with Caroline's first psychotic break and now he longed for solace amongst the spires and domes of Venice. In the light, Richard caught her impenetrable expression of sadness. Immediately, he wished to comfort her, with what he did not know. Nearing fifty-five, he had assumed all desire had passed, but he could not account for the stirring within nor for the extraordinary thought which came to him. *If passion is really gone, what reason is there to be alive?*

He sought a new topic. "Are you familiar with Alexander Wainwright's work?"

Daphne shook her head. An elderly couple stood beside their table waiting to be seated across the aisle.

"John!" the old woman said crossly. "Don't let that waiter put us where it's so bright."

"We have to take our assigned table, Gloria." John sat down.

The old woman's small eyes darted about for other evidence of mistreatment, only to rest upon Richard. She leaned across the aisle. "Did you mention Alexander Wainwright? Didn't you hear? He shot himself in his cabin, just as the train was pulling out of Waterloo Station."

Colour drained from Daphne as she rose swiftly. Richard jumped up and moved aside. As if desperate for air, she rushed up the aisle and flung open the door.

Gloria shrugged. "I thought everyone knew about the suicide. Wasn't he an artist, John?"

John grunted.

"Still waters run deep with artists."

"Gloria, you know absolutely nothing about the man," he said.

"But they're different. When Peter was growing up, I used to wonder what was going on in his head." She laughed. "Such a fanciful little boy, he was!"

"Fanciful? More of a lay-about, I'd say. Don't suppose he's got any sort of useful work yet?"

"He's a writer, John. Mark my words. He'll soon be famous. He might be nominated for an important prize."

"So you've been talking to him?"

"No, dear. Just a short note from him a week ago. Surely we could have dinner with him."

John snorted, "Maybe, but I'll not pay for any of his crowd of lazy misfits."

After lunch, everyone disembarked for the ferry across the English Channel. Boarding once again, Richard ordered a vodka martini in the bar. Caroline's madness had sprung from nowhere. Last year, when he returned to their Paris hotel from business meetings, he was aghast. Suddenly, she screeched, *You've been out fucking that slutty woman!* Howling, she attacked him, until a doctor came and administered drugs. *If that snarling beast lives within Caroline, it possesses every soul on earth.* Now she was incarcerated at the Macklem Hospital, nestled in the rolling hills of Connecticut, where the idyllic landscape might restore her. They said no one could have foreseen or prevented her psychosis. He felt absolved, yet useless.

Back on the train, Daphne's sense of doom deepened. *How could this trip to Venice have begun with another suicide?* Countless times over the past twenty years, she had imagined her last angry moments with Adam. *Do I stay or leave?* Just one tiny decision in the midst of hundreds made every day. But, of course, she knew it was a different kind of decision. At sixty-three, she began to dress for dinner. She folded her cream-coloured silk blouse and tweed skirt on the chair and stepped into the shower. Since the age of twenty-seven, Daphne had dominated Madison Avenue with her creative sales ideas. *Advertising is the most powerful form of seduction. Think sex. Think sales.* Daphne thought sex better than anyone in the game. Not the cheap, tawdry stuff, although it had its place, but the light, laughing, fun kind that swept through people and infused them with desire for love and passion and of course, the product. In the daytime, creative ideas infested her brain, blotting out the hateful spires and dark canals of Venice. At night, she could easily have a man to ward off Adam's disembodied spirit. As she dressed, she thought of Mr. Carson.

At eight o'clock, Daphne and Richard were seated for dinner alone at a table for four.

Two violinists played Strauss. In the candlelight, she looked quite lovely to him, her earlier reserve having melted away. Briefly, they chatted about her firm, Mickleberg and Wright and his software company at Fifty Fourth and Lexington. Only once did he lose track of his thoughts, distracted by her gentle smile and the curve of her breast.

She saw his wedding band. "Does your wife work in your business?"

"Wife? No. I'm afraid she's passed away." Somehow it was easier than the truth.

"I *am* sorry, Richard."

"It was a long time ago."

She nodded and for several moments, they occupied themselves with the menus.

"I feel as though I've met you before, Daphne."

She frowned in concentration. "Really? Where?"

"Did you ever go to Columbia University?"

"Yes. I studied Commerce. But years ago."

"My wife taught there. Professor Caroline Henderson."

Daphne smiled broadly. "She taught me my only arts course, Renaissance Music."

Richard was surprised at how good it felt to smile.

"She was a wonderful teacher. Everyone loved her."

Moments later, they said in unison 'small world,' then laughed.

The waiter pulled out a chair. A very tall man, dressed in a charcoal suit of Edwardian cut stood beside the table. He wore a shirt of egg shell blue with white collar and cuffs.

In a deep, gravelly voice he asked, "May I join you?" He seated himself and ordered a scotch. "I am Alexander Wainwright." He smiled and extended his hand.

Daphne almost knocked over her water glass.

Richard stared as he held out his hand. "Richard Carson."

"You look shocked, Mr. Carson. As if you'd seen a ghost."

"Forgive me, sir, but someone said you were dead."

Wainwright appeared greatly amused. "Really? Then my work has just increased substantially in value. But, as you can see, it is a false rumour." Wainwright gazed at Daphne with glowing eyes. "Please, Richard, introduce me to your lovely wife."

"This is Ms Daphne Bersault, but she's not my wife. We've only just met at lunch."

Alexander Wainwright took her hand and kissed it. "Indeed, my dear, a pleasure. I thought I was destined to a lonely dinner, but now I see the gods have favoured me."

Daphne's sense of doom lifted.

"How did I die?" he asked pleasantly.

Richard shifted uncomfortably. "I'd rather not repeat gossip."

"No, please, it would be of great interest to me."

Richard realized he was gazing at the artist's long, slender fingers. He was struck by the oddly beautiful emerald ring on his left hand. Daphne also was unable to take her eyes from the artist. "Someone said you had committed suicide just as the train pulled out of Waterloo Station."

Wainwright tossed back his head and laughed. "Now that's drama! If one must be dead, better it be by one's own hand. A last attempt to assert control in a random world."

Richard frowned. Daphne took a sip of water and at last said, "I understand you have a very fine reputation for landscape painting, Mr. Wainwright."

"Indeed I do." The artist sighed deeply. "It's strange how people fawn over bucolic scenes but," he said brightly, "they've made me an excellent living."

Daphne frowned. "You sound bored with your work."

"Very perceptive of you, my dear. Lately, I've begun painting tiny little figures in my landscapes." With a flourish, the artist drew a figure in the air. "The first one appeared on a river bank. I was unhappy with a reflection of trees in the water, which looked like boatmen on the way to Hades. So, I tried to create a distraction."

Richard suppressed a smile.

"First one figure slid from the tip of my brush and then another, until the entire canvas was peopled with these strange creatures. A bit like the paintings of the artist Breughel. You know those dark works of people who all look like village idiots?"

Richard shifted away slightly. "Who were they?"

Wainwright winked. "They are the trolls. What we poor humans look like to God. You see, we are only playthings for God's amusement. Each day, floundering in a random world, we must make a thousand choices with no real knowledge of the consequences, which sometimes must be borne for a life time."

Daphne paled, but remained silent.

"Have you ever watched a bored school boy torture a cat, my dear?"

Daphne recoiled. "Certainly not!"

"If you believe God is that school boy, everything makes sense. Only that can explain why good people must suffer and rogues and scoundrels win out."

"But surely you believe in free will?" she asked.

"I believe in the anarchy of meaningless, random events. Unless you have the eyes, ears and heart of God, you cannot understand. Only human emotion can make any sense of it."

Richard shook his head, but continued to stare at the artist's ring. Something odd emanated from the man. Was he mad or simply eccentric? *What if emotion threatens to destroy you?* He examined the wine list.

"My world is filled with demented beings." The artist shrugged amiably, as if catching an afterthought. "And so I must paint them."

Richard reflected with perverse satisfaction. *What can this man know of real demons, ones that snatch away people you love?* Hoping for an intimate dinner with Daphne, he was unaccustomed to the sense of annoyance building within.

Richard asked, "What are your plans for Venice?"

"To drink my fill of it once more and then leave, preferably in the middle of the night." The artist's eyes flickered as he said, "And Daphne, what will you do there, my dear?"

"I have some unfinished business," she replied.

"Ah, a woman of mystery?"

Daphne could not help but smile. "Not nearly as exciting as it sounds."

"You have, my dear, if I may be so bold, an enchanting aura of sadness. I hope your business is not too painful."

Daphne smiled tentatively and said, "I have to set certain things right."

"It would be my pleasure to show you around. Venice is a very romantic city." .

In the candle light, Daphne blushed. Richard scarcely recognized the bitter flame of jealousy within.

"Have you been there before, Daphne?" Wainwright asked.

"Only once. But an emergency forced me to leave immediately."

"What could possibly tear one away from Venice?" Wainwright sipped his scotch.

"A family matter."

The waiter arrived with the salads. "What sort of work do you do, my dear?"

"I'm in advertising."

"Ah! The most seductive of all professions." He leaned back in his chair to appraise her.

"Tell us the secrets of your trade, Ms Bersault."

In the flickering candle light, Daphne hesitated only a moment. "You have to find out what people yearn for. Everyone wants love but few ever find it. In my business, we capitalize on the ache for what's missing in life and subtly suggest the product will fill that void."

"Ah yes, what we really want!" Wainwright laughed in his low, gravelly voice.

"And what might that be?" asked Richard.

"Adventure, chaos, freedom from dreary obligation." Wainwright winked at her. Richard was consumed with envy.

"How does this fit with your troll theory, Mr. Wainwright?" asked Daphne.

The artist frowned. "Need there be a connection?"

"As playthings of God, with no free will, how can we manipulate and seduce?"

Wainwright paused. "How extremely clever, my dear. Perhaps it's a great game. We shall discuss this over a nightcap in the bar."

"You're big on games, aren't you?" Richard said suddenly, prompted by malice. "Hell of a way to live. My wife and I always dealt with things calmly and rationally."

"And where is your wife now?" asked Alexander.

Richard paused. "Actually, she's passed away."

"Sorry to hear that. Recently?"

"Almost a year now."

"Were you happy together?"

Richard looked startled. "Yes. We had the life we wanted."

After coffee and dessert, Wainwright asked Daphne, "Shall we repair to the bar?"

"I'm very tired, Alexander. I think I'll just turn in."

"Of course, my dear," he smiled. "Until tomorrow." Bowing formally, he left.

To Richard, her face, lovely in the soft light, expressed a confusion, which he attributed to the mysterious effect of the artist. *That sort of man can have any woman he wants.* The dining car darkened as waiters snuffed out candles on the empty tables. *If I am not faster, he will have her to himself, if only briefly.*

He spoke. "Caroline's not dead." Immediately, he felt an odd sense of release.

"Pardon?"

Compelled to speak by some new force, he continued, "She's not dead, but she might as well be. She's in an institution. She's had some sort of psychotic breakdown." He stared out the darkened window.

"What happened?" Her expression reflected concern.

"No one knows exactly." He waved for the waiter and ordered a cognac. Daphne requested more coffee. The faltering light of the candles cast shadows across the table as they sat in silence until the drinks were served.

"When she had her first psychotic attack, I scarcely recognized her." Richard took a long drink. "She'd always been so intelligent, calm and reasoned. Then everything just crumbled."

"The doctors can't tell you why?" she asked.

Richard shrugged. "Nothing of any use. I'll always wonder if I could have prevented it."

"No. Please don't think that." She sighed. "Guilt is deadly."

Richard sought to change the topic. "Amazing to run into each other like this." After a moment, he said, "Some say everything happens for a reason." By nature, Richard shunned intrusiveness, preferring to let whatever intimacies might be exchanged flow naturally. But curiosity overtook his politeness. "You looked so sad when you spoke of guilt. This trip to Venice is an unhappy one?" He was shocked at her response.

"On my first trip to Venice, my lover took his own life."

"Good God! I'm sorry."

"We were only children. I left him when he needed me most." Only a few waiters remained to clear the tables. "I couldn't stand being with him any longer."

"What was wrong?"

She hesitated, as if expressing her thoughts were new. "He was *so* moody. Nothing I did seemed to help. I was very young." Daphne finished her coffee. "Will you excuse me, Richard? I'm really tired. I think I'll turn in."

"Of course. I look forward to seeing you at breakfast. Have a good night."

Returning to his cabin, Richard saw Daphne stopped in conversation with Wainwright at the bar. The artist took her arm and guided her through the far door to the sleeping cars. Richard stared out upon the trees and darkened farmhouses racing by in the night. Drawn to her by some elemental yet elusive force, he knew he must unearth its shadow-like essence.

Leaving the artist behind, Daphne returned directly to her own cabin. She hoped to read, then fall asleep. Ten minutes later, she was startled by a knock at the door. Gathering her robe about her, she rose to answer. There stood the artist.

"May I come in? I have something to show you."

Strangely, she felt she had known him for years. "All right," she said, motioning him to the chair. For the first time, she noticed his ring, a beautiful, highly polished emerald. "You need company, my dear." With the flair of a magician, he produced from beneath his cape, two delicate liqueur glasses, which sparkled as he placed them on the table. Next he brought out a bottle of cognac. "Shall we talk?" His eyes bore into her as he filled her glass.

"All right," she said, taking the glass. "I don't mind a small drink."

Wainwright sank to the bed. "Why are you, a woman of great strength, so sorrowful?"

The cognac warmed her. "When I first visited Venice, my lover committed suicide." Mesmerized by his presence, she continued, her words flowing naturally and without restraint. "But when he needed me most, I deserted him."

"Two souls alienated from each other at the moment of their greatest need." Wainwright sighed deeply. "You left him because you needed freedom from his black moods."

"How did you know that?"

Wainwright shrugged. "Simple human nature. You had your own life to live."

"No, I mean how did you know about his moods?"

"It's in your eyes."

Confession was a release for Daphne. "He was always angry. He took it out on me." She tucked her feet up under her robe.

"He did not know how to live his own life."

She gazed at him over the top of the tiny crystal glass. "How do you know this?"

"It's a very old story."

"He wanted to escape from his family and practising law. He couldn't tell them that, so . "

"He took it out on you." Wainwright lowered his eyes. "Then he escaped. Another ancient tale."

"His sisters . . . "

"Blamed you."

"Who are you? How do you know my story?"

He held his cognac up to light. "I, my dear, am just a painter with a philosophy of life."

Suddenly, she focussed on his hands, which were pale, long and slender. Michelangelo might have painted those hands centuries ago.

The artist unrolled a sheaf of papers. "I've made sketches of you," he said.

Daphne caught her breath. In one drawing, she wore an elaborate floral hat and in another she appeared as some sort of woodland nymph. She was fascinated with the strength and resilience emanating from each sketch. *What has he seen in me that I have not?* Then she asked, "Why have you chosen me as your subject?"

"Because you are my muse."

"What?" Daphne was astounded. "You don't know me. We've only just met." But the drawings expressed her whole life and being with just a few exquisite strokes of charcoal. The child had flourished to be replaced by a beautiful woman complete in strength and wisdom.

After sipping the cognac, Daphne felt the glow rise within her. "I don't understand. Please explain it to me, Alexander."

The lamplight fell full on his face. "My art comes from deep within." His slender hand made an arc in the light. "Some quality, an essence, within the muse, is like a candle in the dark, leading the poor artist through his own private hell toward his creation."

The cognac burned her throat. "But how can you see what I cannot see myself?"

The artist smiled slowly. "One rarely sees what one has become, although it is obvious to the one who is inspired."

Daphne blushed. "What must I do?"

"Just exist. Only that is required of a muse."

Wainwright handed her two drawings. "These are to remind you of your journey."

"Journey?"

"You have travelled much in twenty years." At the door, he bowed, then left.

The artist's presence seemed to cling to the very fabrics of the room. In bed, she stared into the darkness, until she slid toward dreams crowded with tiny, cowering creatures on a distant river bank.

Richard tried to read in his cabin. Tossing the paper onto the bed, he decided upon a walk. The door in the corridor was flung open and a black form shouldered through.

"Good evening Richard. You've not turned in yet."

"No, Mr. Wainwright." Richard was glad to see the artist was alone.

"Come to the bar for a drink?"

Drawn by the intense expression in the artist's eyes, Richard followed him wordlessly through the now empty dining car. As they marched past the kitchen, waiters, laughing at some joke, fell silent and drew back. In the bar, they slid onto stools and ordered cognac. The pianist finished his cigarette and started to play a Chopin etude.

"So what are your plans for Venice, Alexander?"

"I'm visiting my muse."

"Pardon?"

"The nine goddesses, the daughters of Zeus."

Richard tried not to smile. "I have nothing so exciting as that. Just business."

"How dreary for you! Surely you'll see some of the sights?"

"Of course, I will." Richard hesitated. He had to find out about Daphne. "I enjoyed talking with Ms Bersault. A very interesting person, don't you think?"

"Yes," the artist replied, his eyelids flickering. "She is deceptively in charge of herself. That which lies beneath interests me greatly."

Richard's eyes fell upon his companion's slender white hands and brilliant emerald ring.

He felt as if someone else were speaking. "My wife, Caroline, is not dead." Wainwright remained silent. "But she might as well be. She's in an institution."

The artist's eyes narrowed. "Really? Did she have some sort of collapse?"

"Yes. A good word for it." Richard tore his eyes away from the ring to focus on the pianist, whose blond hair shimmered in the lamp light. "She's had numerous psychotic breaks."

"Your marriage was happy?"

"The happiest. Never argued. We were peaceful together."

"Did she long for passion?"

Richard looked up sharply. "Why do you ask that?"

"Serenity and peace can be awfully boring, old chap."

Anger rose in Richard. "We loved each other. We had a good life."

"But she left. Are you sure it was the life she wanted?"

Richard fought for control. "Who the hell are you to say that?"

"If she was a passionate woman- and in my experience, most women are-then she might wish to escape."

In frustration, Richard slammed his fist on the bar. "Do you understand nothing? She has a disease, just as real as cancer or . . ." The pianist stopped playing. Richard stared into the artist's eyes. "Who are you?" Richard demanded. "Got answers to everything. So damn clever, making all humanity fit into your grandiose theories!"

The bartender left off his polishing and came to stand nearby. Alexander smiled patiently and waited for the tirade to end. Richard tossed down some bills. "That should cover it!" He slammed through the doorway for his cabin. The artist lit his cigar and motioned the pianist to continue.

Next afternoon, Richard's first glimpse of the spires and domes of Venice intensified his longing for escape and solace. In the noisy station, grit floated in the air and shafts of sunlight permeated the gloom. He caught a glimpse of Daphne several cars down. The artist stood close to her, then kissed her cheek. Richard turned for his luggage. *What chance have I?*

At the Hotel Bellini, the bellman saw Richard to his room, which was large and bright, overlooking the Grand Canal. Sounds of late afternoon came to him as he watched black gondolas glide past. It was unbearably sweet to recall making love with Caroline in a twilight room in Paris or London. *Does she ever think of me?* He stretched out on the bed, knowing he could not bear whatever the answer was.

Next morning Daphne was determined to find the point of disembarkation of the boat. Twenty years ago, she had watched them carry Adam's shrouded body to the gondola with its hawk-like prow. When a distant bell had tolled nine times, a circling flock of birds rushed upward in a burst of white and landed on the cupola. Now she walked through early morning fog to San Marco Square to the Campanile, the only clock tower she knew.

Sounds ricocheted across open space, making a distant voice seem to come from beside her. The columns of the cloistered walkways looked, in the mist, like charcoal smudges on a canvas of brown and gray. She sensed a presence, but then it might have been the play of shadows between the columns. She walked toward an empty café. Sitting alone, she heard footsteps and thought she saw a figure standing between distant columns. *Was that the artist, Wainwright?* She rose and hurried toward the colonnade, but found no one. She sat upon a step. *In the sketches, I do not resemble the woman who ran from Adam.* With simple sticks of charcoal, Wainwright revealed her aura of sadness, but the smile suggested an inner kindness and strength. Pigeons waddled at her feet looking for crumbs, then stopped to stare blankly at her. The sketches showed she had already forgiven herself. *How strangely reciprocal! He has held up a mirror to me and I have inspired his latest work.*

At noon, Richard walked back to his hotel, pausing on the Rialto Bridge over the Grand Canal. He marvelled at tricks of light, which made the heavy stone and wood of ancient buildings hang like curtains in the air. His cell phone rang.

"Yes?" he muttered.

The voice came from four thousand miles away in North America. "Mr. Carson?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Dr. Galsworthy, here. It's about your wife."

"Yes?"

"She has unaccountably slipped into a catatonic state. Despite our efforts, we haven't been able to communicate with her at all for several days."

"How can that be?"

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Her body is entirely rigid. She responds to nothing."

"What happened?" *Inching further toward a living death.*

"We don't know. At least not yet."

"What can you do?" Richard acknowledged his shameful yearning for freedom.

"We've tried the usual medications prescribed in these situations, but to no avail." The voice paused. "But we do have one more option."

"Which is?"

"Electro-shock therapy."

Richard felt the jolt through his entire body. *No, not Caroline!*

"Mr. Carson?" came the doctor's voice.

"Yes, I'm here. What good would that treatment do?" He marvelled at his detachment.

Now in technical territory, the doctor spoke briskly. "The condition is relatively rare and data is limited. But we have a success rate in approximately twenty five percent of the cases."

"Then the chance of any real recovery is poor."

"Not precisely. But if you mean a return to her previous state, then, yes."

Richard shoved his hand into his pocket and began jingling his change. He gazed at the parade of light and colour along the canal. *The torture of useless clinging to life.*

At last, he spoke in a dry voice. "Let's wait and see."

"Certainly."

Richard hung up quickly. Suddenly, the scene before him became incomprehensible. He turned away and hurried down the steps to the Bellini. Outside his hotel, he sank to a chair in a nearby café and ordered half a litre of vin rouge. He drank down the first glass quickly.

*Gone, but not gone. What had Wainwright said? 'Serenity and peace can be awfully boring . . . a passionate woman might wish to flee.'*

Pouring more wine, he forced himself back in the chair and put on his sunglasses. *I am entitled to freedom. She's already gone but I remain in limbo.*

Daphne, realizing she was faint from hunger, looked for a café. Crowds of people flowed past her, then suddenly parted. There was Richard at a table finishing a glass of wine.

Amazed, she approached. "Richard?"

Lowering his sunglasses, Richard looked up. "Well, Ms. Bersault." He smiled wanly and stumbled slightly as he held out a chair for her. "Join me. Your artist friend has left you?"

"Are you all right?" She frowned.

He shrugged. "Of course. Life's just great!"

Daphne sat down beside him. "You've been to your meetings?"

"Done for the day. Now I'm just sitting here getting drunk."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Not at all. Fantastic life! I'm just revelling in the beauty which surrounds me."

He looked away for a moment, then picked up his cell phone. "Actually, I just heard from Caroline's doctor." He spoke more quietly. "She's become catatonic."

"Oh, Richard, I *am* sorry! When did they call?"

"Just now. The hell of it is she's in a sort of limbo, neither dead nor alive."

"Are you going back home?"

"That's what I've been trying to decide." He drained his glass and set it down, with a pained smile. "But there's little point."

They sat in silence for several moments. "They suggested electro-shock therapy," he said.

"God! Would that help?"

"Nobody knows for sure. So, I told them to just wait and see," Richard said with finality.

Daphne nodded slowly. A waiter approached and she ordered coffee and a sandwich.

Richard stared out into the square. Weariness slipped over him as he contemplated the ancient view. *Generations have walked over those stones toward that church. For what purpose? Wainwright had said, 'Why must good men suffer and rogues and scoundrels win out?'*

"I thought I saw the artist, Mr. Wainwright, in San Marco this morning," Daphne said.

"You mean you haven't been with him?"

"What?"

"I mean staying with him?" Then, he realized he was still a bit drunk.

"No!"

"Sorry." He grinned happily at her.

Daphne's sandwich was delivered and she began to eat. Richard sat in silence, staring out onto the Square. Old women in black sat hunched before tables of souvenirs. *So, there's still a chance.* Only one thought leapt into his mind. *Why not make love with her?*

"Why don't we," said Richard leaning forward and touching her hand, "take the vaparetto along the canal and then have dinner at Harry's Bar." He was delighted when Daphne agreed.

Having invited his parents for dinner, Peter Cummings expected to see them when he opened the frosted glass door of Harry's Bar. He had envisioned the tug of disapproval on his father's face at the casual elegance of the restaurant. Such an expensive place would put the old man on edge for the evening. The perfect spot to announce his nomination for the Booker. Immediately he picked out those, at the bar, he wanted to avoid. Jason Brierly, the literary critic, rotund and smug as ever, looked up and spotted him. He pursed his lips. Gene Darling, the film critic, stopped his speech and, with a small smile, set his glass down.

"Peter!" Brierly bowed formally. "The next winner of the Booker. Do join us."

The crowd parted and Peter was drawn to the bar. A martini was set before him.

With a wink at his colleagues, Jason said, "Congratulations, Peter. What's all this terribly exciting stuff in your book about love and catching a glimpse of the divine?"

"And being disappointed because it was a mistake." Gene laughed.

Brierly began to chuckle. "Disappointed in love. An ancient and tragic tale."

"So you've read the book?" asked Peter.

"Not entirely." Brierly smiled up at him. "But it sounds exciting."

Peter despised critics, especially Brierly. "I never discuss my work with someone who has not taken time to read it." The light caught Peter's hardening jaw. He knew Brierly was out to settle a few scores.

Brierly considered Cummings a truculent son of a bitch with a reputation for virulent and unwarranted attacks on critics. "I know we're a slow bunch, Peter, but you must be patient with us." Jason patted his arm. "In a nutshell, what's the story?"

Tasting vindication for all his years of labour, Peter could not resist. "It's a journey to regain mystery and connection. About the search for the essence."

Brierly rubbed his chin. "Sounds deep and highly personal, Peter. Is it based on your own experience?"

"It's a work of fiction, of imagination."

"Of course," smirked Jason, as he crowded closer. "You know, you sound a bit like another chap we know. Alex is always going on about capturing the essence in his landscapes."

The critic's face floated closer. "You mean Alexander Wainwright?" Peter asked.

"Of course, I do," replied Jason softly. "But lately, he's taken to painting troll-like creatures under his bridges. What's that all about?"

"He says the trolls are humans as they appear to God." Peter shifted on his stool. "His landscapes are our vision of the divine and the trolls are God's vision of us. Serenity and horror. Sort of a two-way street."

"How incredibly clever! How did you learn that?" Jason winked at Gene.

Peter shrugged. "Alex has written about it."

"Really? In a published article?"

"No."

"Interesting. Your ideas seem intimately entwined with his."

Peter drew back. "You think I've stolen my ideas from him?"

"No, of course not, dear boy!" Jason soothed. "But there's a fascinating interplay."

"And just what is this essence, Peter?" Gene asked from behind him.

Thinking of Alex, Peter spoke in a distant tone, "It's the centre of things, where everything in the world comes together."

"My . . . my. Is it a spiritual book, Peter?" Jason asked.

"No, at least not in any conventional sense."

"But in some way, surely," said Gene.

"It's about attraction."

"Ah ha!" Brierly grinned up at him. "To whom or what?"

"Is it about sex?" asked Gene. "I do hope so or at least about love."

"I'm talking about something beyond all that usual stuff."

"Which is?" asked Brierly softly.

Although usually taciturn, Peter's words tumbled out. "About the mystery of life, the act of creation, and that force . . . an elemental attraction. It's beyond sex and desire. It's that helplessness. You're drawn, and you do not know why, to something in another person, place or thing. Call it a glimpse of the divine . . . a call to something beyond this apparent world."

"Fascinating. How do you know this divine essence exists?" Brierly smiled.

Peter sighed. "The only proof is that we spend our lives seeking it. That longing, the yearning which is the inspiration for all creativity." He was beginning to feel the effects of the

martini. "Once in a while, you see stunning beauty, whether it's in a raindrop, a mountain or a human soul. You know you have caught a glimpse of it in fleeting moments. But sometimes you're mistaken and find your perception was simply a mirage."

"So, have you found this yourself?" Brierly shifted closer. "And perhaps lost it?"

Peter murmured, "I found it in the book's protagonist, Jack Higgins. We *are* talking about a fictional character. Remember?"

The circle of critics grinned up at him. "Don't leave us hanging, Peter? Who disappointed him?"

"Read the fucking book, gentlemen." Peter smiled broadly. When he glanced at the door, he scarcely recognized the elderly man and woman.

*My God! My father and mother! But they are so pale, parched and worn. Like dead leaves. Is this puny figure, the man who has driven me through hell most of my life?*

"Mum? Dad?" He held his mother close and shook his father's hand. He was shocked at their frail tentativeness. "I've made a reservation in the upstairs dining room. Shall we?" He herded them through the narrow galley toward the stairway.

Seated in the dining room, his father remained cold, formal and withdrawn.

"I have some good news, mother . . . father. I've been nominated for the Booker Prize for literature. "

His mother's face broke into smiles. She gasped. "Peter! How wonderful! Is it a famous prize?" Peter nodded but the voice he longed to hear was silent.

At last, his father muttered, "Fine work, indeed. How much is the prize?"

Peter exhaled sharply. *Always measuring by money.* "Fifty thousand pounds, father."

"Really? I didn't think writing paid that much."

"Goodness!" Gloria's mouth dropped open. "Look! It's that nice couple from the train."

Richard and Daphne were being shown to a table at the window overlooking the Grand Canal.

"What a coincidence." Mrs Cummings waved at them. "Do come over, Mr. Carson and Miss Bersault. I want to introduce our son. He's been nominated for the Book prize."

"It's the Booker, mother."

Richard and Daphne shook hands all round, then retreated to their table.

"Let's have some wine, to celebrate," said Gloria.

His father examined the menu. "Expensive place, all right."

"Tell us about the book, darling." said Gloria

Peter shrugged. His father would think it stupid. All he read was newspapers and magazines. Real writing, not made up nonsense. "It's about a man, named Jack Higgins, who undertakes a long journey."

His father's eyes flickered. "You mean a travelogue?"

"Not quite, father. More about the growth of the human soul."

"I suppose only brilliant academics will understand it."

"No, not at all, Father. Anyone of average intelligence will."

"Your agent will, no doubt, take the lion's share?" asked John.

"He gets his cut, yes."

"D'you have much of a chance?"

"Pretty good, I think. But the competition is stiff." *Jesus! I came from this!*

"Well, then, best of luck to you." His father sipped the wine. The waiters came with the menus.

"So, Father, how was your rose garden, this year?" asked Peter blandly.

"Quite nice. But could have been better."

"That's one of my most striking childhood memories. Always out in the garden tending roses." Peter regarded his father coolly. "I think you even talked to them more than me."

Shrugging, his father smiled warily. "I always liked the way the rose buds opened in the spring. Like a new beginning."

"It must have been a nice break from the job you hated."

"Well, hate's a bit strong." John leaned forward.

"Really? You always told us you hated your work as a civil servant in the post office. But, of course, you stuck to it, because you had us to support. Isn't that right, Dad?"

"Well, yes. That's what a man does! But if you're saying I neglected . . ."

"Ignored for a bunch of roses!" Peter laughed.

The old man's eyes grew dark with anger. "You're denying me the only pleasure I ever took? You, who loafed about and never got a real job?"

"That's right. And look where I am now. Hanging about Venice, still with no real work. No prospects." He shook his head.

"Well how *do* you support yourself?"

"I don't" Peter said quietly. "I live off the warm praise of others." A waiter approached the table. "Let's order." Peter said. "I'm starving."

The red sun dipped behind Salute, the ancient church at the mouth of the Grand Canal and cast an eerie light throughout the dining room. The tread on the stairs was heavy. A thick, deep voice boomed upward. "Must leave you all, gentlemen, and dine upstairs."

Daphne set her fork down and Richard stiffened. Peter looked up sharply. Waiters stepped back to let the man pass. He shouldered into the small dining room, seeming to blot out the light. He wore a hat and was dressed in a suit reminiscent of decades past, with a peach-coloured shirt, resplendent with white collar and cuffs.

Daphne looked up to see the face of Alexander Wainwright exposed in the intense light. Her intake of breath was sharp, but she smiled in delight at his presence.

"Daphne? Richard? What good fortune to meet." He bowed and kissed Daphne's hand. "I am truly pleased you have found each other."

"Would you join us?" Daphne asked.

"No. You do not need my company now." He turned away to the far side of the room.

"Peter!" Wainwright exclaimed.

"Hello, Alexander." Peter's lips curled downward as he shoved back his chair. "Good of you to notice me."

Wainwright rushed toward his table. "Congratulations, Peter." In an awkward embrace, their figures briefly made a single form against the setting sun.

Peter broke free. Anger gave him strength to blot out his intense hunger for their friendship. He stood back. "So, you've decided to return after all."

Sitting down, Wainwright called out, "Waiter! Bring us a magnum of Mumms. I want to propose a toast."

Peter slouched into the chair beside him. "It's about time you showed up. Thought you were likely dead by now."

"Hardly. But, I *have* been somewhat indisposed."

"Sunning yourself on the Costa del Sol?"

Wainwright tossed up his hands. "Of course not! Why such a surly mood? I'm here to congratulate you on your masterpiece."

"You've read it?"

"Yes, Peter, I have. And I find our ideas are intimately entwined."

"And which ideas might they be?"

"You write about the mystery of life and finding the essence in other people, places and things. I know exactly what you mean, but lately, I've had my share of disappointments."

Wainwright lowered his voice and touched Peter's arm. "We must talk of these things soon."

Old intimacies of thought nearly overtook Peter, but he drew back and asked, "What disappointments could you possibly have suffered, Alex?"

"Fading of a vision, dear boy. I fear I have lost my way."

"Really? The great Wainwright is adrift? I thought the trolls were your latest revelation."

Wainwright smiled sadly. "Now, I am not so sure. I need your advice."

Peter's mouth tightened into a thin line. "What possible advice could I give you?"

"I came to Venice to speak with you."

"So! I *do* still have some value?"

"Indeed you do! But, Peter, why are you so angry? Tell me what's wrong."

Peter shifted away in his seat. "When I was in greatest need, you buggered off!"

"You needed money?"

"Yes, of course. But not just that. I thought we'd agreed to work together. A shared vision, or had you forgotten?" Peter said angrily. "Now you want to pick up where you left off?"

"Yes, but . . ." Wainwright lowered his eyes. "I needed to get away and have time to think."

"Goddammit!" Peter shoved back his chair. "What about our shared vision of the essence?" Peter's eyes grew hard. "All this crap about being your muse! How you saw in me the essence of what charges this world."

Daphne looked up sharply from her table.

"Naturally. And you still are," said Wainwright carefully.

"But you left. I must have lost my charm." Peter concluded grimly.

"Peter, don't be silly. You were a great inspiration to me. The vision you express in your writing is nothing short of astonishing."

"And thinking only of yourself, you dropped me. I was wrestling with the book. I needed someone to talk to." Peter shoved his hair back and glared at Wainwright. He was shocked at his fierce craving for the seductive exchange of thought and vision.

The sun had almost set in a blaze of red. The dining room was growing dim. Boats outside in the water tipped and swayed. Waiters came to light candles and uncork the champagne.

"I have returned, Peter. Is that not enough? Wainwright held up his hand. His rings glowed in the candlelight. He rose unsteadily.

Peter stared up at him. *A frail old man.* He glanced at his father and in fury thought, *How can I ever be free of these old men?*

"A toast, Mr. and Mrs Cummings, to your son." Wainwright stood, towering over the table, his face growing strangely smooth. He loosened his white collar. Peter slouched in his chair.

"To our excellent author, Peter Cummings. Not only can he see beyond this apparent world to its essence," Wainwright turned and bowed deeply to Peter, "but he has that rare talent and ability to convey to us the shape and texture of what he has seen. Your vision, Peter, in this shadowy, imperfect world guides us to understanding. May you win the Booker Prize."

Peter looked up at Wainwright coldly. "Sweet words, Alex. Now that you want something. But you left me to flounder when it suited you. You flatter me now but you weren't there when I needed you. You just disappeared. I tried to write you, telephone you. Even got in touch with your gallery. No! The great Alexander Wainwright does not wish to be disturbed."

Wainwright reached for Peter's arm. "My dear boy! I had no idea Helmsworth said that."

Peter waved him off. "Doesn't matter about him. It's you who seduced me with your marvellous visions, then cut me off." The artist shrank back.

"Since you asked, I'll tell you what I think." Peter stabbed a finger in the air. "Your fucking trolls tell a lot about you." His shadow danced across the wall. "We poor humans, with all our faults and frailties, are the trolls and Alexander Wainwright is the perfect, malicious god, who toys with us."

John tossed down his napkin and rose to his feet. "What nonsense! Two grown men carrying on like children." He turned on his son. "You've been a whiner right from the start. When are you going to grow up and be a man?"

Peter turned on his father. "A man?" Cracking, his voice slid upward.. "I pity you, father. You've lived a dead life, filled with hatred."

John raised his fist. "I did my best for you. Coddled you like a baby." Peter started at his father. The waiters withdrew to the corners of the room.

Arms spread out, the artist moved between the father and son. With the candle light glimmering on his face, he spoke quietly. "Don't be foolish, Peter. You need neither your father's approval, nor mine."

"Meddling in people's lives, again, Alex? Getting your tentacles into them so sweetly they don't even realize they're being sucked dry." Peter glared at Wainwright. "Turning your back when we actually need you."

John gripped the edge of the table. "If I had my way you'd both be locked up in an institution for the insane." Neither the artist nor Peter heard him.

"Peter, sit down, please." Wainwright sought to draw him into his chair. "How many times must I apologize?"

"Apology is not enough!"

"What do you want, Peter?"

"I want you to prove yourself."

Wainwright blinked, then said, "I cannot do that." He extended his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Have it your way. Add my alleged meddling and abandonment to all the petty grievances you nurse. It's as if you cherish your wounds."

John Cummings snorted in disgust. "You've hit the nail on the head, Mr. Wainwright. Try to tell him anything for his own good and he turns on you. He's been like that all his life."

Everyone fell silent and watched the hardening of Peter's face. His eyes glimmered brightly. "Thank you for your love and support, Father. You've not said a kind word about anything I've ever done. You see the world from the viewpoint of a postal clerk, dismally pigeon-holing everyone and everything. Even now, all you can do is ask about the money and fling names at me."

John drew himself up with great dignity. "Go ahead and complain, but I'll tell both of you this. Life is no damned mystery like you say. It's hard work and making the best of your lot. Why don't you stand on your own two feet?"

Peter gripped the arms of his chair. Alexander reached for his hand, saying, "Don't Peter!" Peter shook him off. "If you want my help, my advice, use your power now."

"What?"

"Prove you aren't just a meddling old man. Now's your chance to play god." Peter jumped to his feet, dragging Wainwright with him.

"How? What do you want me to do?"

Simmering with rage, Peter pointed at his father. "Make that man love me. For God's sake! Take away his hatred and my anger. Now and for all time. Please. I've seen you do it before. You can, if you only will."

Alexander Wainwright gazed at Peter for long moments. Their forms wavered in the candlelight. Finally, he spoke softly. "I can never do that, dearest boy. If I had, you would not have written that superb book and if I do, you will never write all the books still within you."

Peter gaped desperately at Wainwright. "Please, Alex! You can do it." He licked his dry lips then looked away from his friend. "I see you will not."

Slowly, the artist shook his head. He turned sharply to the table. "My dearest friend imagines I have powers, which I do not. My usefulness has ended and I must leave you now." Nodding curtly, he rushed down the stairs and out into the night.

Outside, Gloria walked through the mist, ahead of John, back to their hotel. She stopped in front of a window filled with coloured masks and marionettes.

"Could you not have answered him?" she demanded.

Surprised at her anger, he hung back. "You needn't go at me! The boy has no respect."

"Were you too deaf and stupid to hear him asking?"

"Asking what?"

"For you to love him."

"What? He didn't say that."

"Yes, he did! Just like a little child asking his father to love him. It broke my heart to see it." She sighed deeply. "I feel sorry for you. You do not know what you have lost." In that

moment, she vowed to keep her son to herself for ever, never again to be caught in between. They walked past the Basilica and on toward their hotel.

Richard and Daphne walked in silence toward San Marco. Suddenly, she stopped and turned to him. "Wainwright made sketches of me," she said quietly.

"You posed for him?"

"No. He did them on his own." She laughed, a little embarrassed. "He said I was his muse. His drawings showed me a part of myself I didn't know."

Richard stopped in the Square. Mist curled up around them. *My exact thoughts. A deeply quiet spot where everything in the world resides.* He reached out for her saying, "Daphne, I want you."

Instantly, she felt his desire. Slipping her hand around his neck, she felt the stiffness of his collar and smelled his skin and the starchiness of his shirt. "Where shall we go?"

Gently he drew her aside and with increasing haste, they walked back to his hotel. In his room, they stood at the window over-looking the Grand Canal. From behind, he reached forward to caress her breast and kiss the line of her neck. "There is something so lovely in you to be accepted just like a gift." He drew her to the bed.

When they lay together, they knew at last their bed warm and safe. And when they made love, they were slow and gentle and for the first time, the pain began to float away. The way it was meant to be.

Peter Cummings walked aimlessly until four a.m. At his hotel, he fell into bed, exhausted. Brilliant flashes of disconnected images filled his mind along with stray words and catch phrases. One image remained fixed; his father and mother at Harry's Bar, looking pale, parched and worn as dead leaves. He knew the next book was forming. After a dreamless sleep, he was awakened by the telephone.

"Hello?" He thought it might be Alex, but it was his agent, Sean.

"You've won the Booker, my boy. Congratulations!"

Peter let the phone slip down onto his chest. *The old men have lost their power.*

"Really?" he said weakly. "I'll be there for the ceremony." Then he hung up. Rising to the window, he stared out upon the canal. Gondoliers' voices rose up to him as he started to pack. *Now, I am free . . . and alone.*

Alexander Wainwright switched on his studio light. The naked bulb swung gently on its cord. The trolls were still dotted across the landscape. Technical flaws glared at him. The absurdity of the concept mocked him. He squeezed out gray, green and blue paint onto his palette. Swiftly, he painted over one troll after another with light, deft brush strokes until all, except two, were gone. With his smallest brush, he covered over their stricken features and gave them new eyes, which reflected his own vision of what lay beyond the serene landscape.