

At Eternity's Gate
by
Gary A. Braunbeck

"...true creativity demands some measure of enjoyment be subtracted from life."
--Herman Hesse, *Gertrude*

--*So, my love: How would you begin telling the story of your--of our life?*

--*Who would believe it?*

--*I would. Tell me. Please?*

--*As you wish: There once was a young woman who woke one day to find that she'd been given the power to journey between this world and another. Does it sound like a splendid gift? Then consider this: She could control neither where she would go or when.*

Do you like the way it begins?

--*I do. Now, the rest, if you will.*

--*I will, my love, I will. Anything you ask of me...*

Lucinda turned her wheelchair away from the painting, adjusted her belly-bag, and decided that sadness was the color of rain. She knew that rain had a color--hidden though it was--for she had spent many hours studying it from behind her hospice window: Rain and sadness were the same pale shade, for she saw that color every time before one of her seizures. She'd been having so many damned seizures lately--

--boosted from her body, her thin flesh shed by her shadow, floating down that hazy corridor surrounded by faces with unreadable expressions--

--and none of the doctors could tell her why.

No wonder, though: She doubted the seizures had any rational--let alone medical--explanation.

She looked over her shoulder at the painting, realized she was too tired to continue working on it today, then leaned back her head and closed her eyes.

“I’m guessing that’s your subtle way of telling me that you’re finished for today?” said Jordan, the volunteer art instructor.

“I’m tired and my bag’s almost full.”

“Do you want me to call a nurse?”

Lucinda shook her head, forcing back the liquid numbness trying to envelope her torso--the first warning sign of an oncoming seizure. She often wondered if she wasn’t subconsciously going through the Kübler-Ross final stages of death and her body was accepting what her mind didn’t want to think about.

Jordan came over to her chair. “Are you sure you don’t want me to--”

“No. The nurse’d only give me a shot--not that I mind. Sometimes, even when I’m not in all that much pain, I ask for one, just so I can sit very still and feel the drugs blossom inside. It’s like your first cool drink on a really hot day, an ice-bird in the center of your body spreading its wings wide.” She laughed. “All of which probably means I’m a junkie by now, but...what the hell, you know?” She opened her eyes and saw Jordan standing in front of the painting.

“This is really quite splendid,” he said. “You’ve come a long way in a very short time. I feel like I might have actually taught you something.”

“You have, you know that. Fishing for a compliment, are we?”

He smiled at her, a perfect boyish smile from the hairy face of a bear. He seemed so much larger and more powerful today; he filled the room.

The numbness spread upward into her skull. Everything was slowing down. The dark space opened up to her, revealing the pinpoints of light hidden behind the pale scrim of the rain. She felt weightless and freed and very much afraid.

“...oh god...”

Jordan was next to her, taking her hand. “What is it? Is it happening again?”

“...yes. I d-don’t want--”

But she was no longer there.

She was outside of herself, her flesh, twisting within the--

-- the pinpoints that tumbled toward her, each one becoming a face that sped past with astonishing momentum, leaving only emptiness and longing in their wake, the last of them becoming a sphere as it approached her, folding in on itself until it was the very absence of space; then it flashed, an eye winking, blossoming and segmenting into a maelstrom of kaleidoscopic images: A ramshackle windmill, a group of miners emerging from the pits, a dusty country road, a field of sunflowers, boats in a harbor, a billiards room that remained before her gaze, expanding, solidifying, emitting sounds, vibrations, scents of wine and smoke and fresh-baked bread and sweat...

...She sat at a table near the entrance. The table was part of the billiards rooms, the room part of a tavern, and the tavern was overflowing with people, some festive and

gay, others pensive and melancholy. Smoke drifted past her face in thin, spicy wisps. The music was muffled and somewhat discordant but appealing, nonetheless. More scents came to her: Coal dust and drying mud, hot beef and gravy, dying flowers and damp wood. She liked it very much.

Across the room two men were sitting at a scarred oak table, an opened bottle of wine between them. One of them, a great bull of a man who reminded her too much of Jordan, was laughing boisterously while his companion sat intensely--almost deathly--still, glowering with narrowed eyes and chin pressed down against his collar. He wore a tattered, wide-brimmed hat of woven straw; his beard was scraggly and auburn, his eyes bloodshot and beguiling. After a moment, he raised his head and spoke to the bull.

“I should have known better than to tell you about it, Paul. I despise you when you get this way. Everything has to amuse you or you don’t want to hear about it.”

“Ah, my dear friend--if only you would *listen* to yourself when you these moods come on you!”

“I find I can still recognize my own voice, thank you.”

The bull named Paul leaned onto the table. “But if you could hear yourself--it isn’t so much what you say, it’s how you say it. Your words are often more colorful than your paintings.” He sat back, brushed some hair out of his eyes, and launched into an over-ripe imitation. ““I tell you *it follows me!* I hear their *keening*, I see their *faces!* And I float there, trapped, frightened--”” he dramatically placed his hand against his forehead ““--*oh, so frightened*, so frightened and *alooooooone!*””

Merrymakers at nearby tables laughed, a few of them applauding in thanks for the entertainment.

“What?” said the Bull, looking at his companion. “Did you find my performance less than satisfactory?”

“You wail like a woman in childbirth.”

“I consider that a compliment.”

“I thought you would understand,” said the auburn man. “To feel that you are bodiless, unbound. I am more than just myself in that place, I am some idealized form of myself. I know there is a way out, you see, and I know that it’s very close to me...I can *feel* it but I cannot get near it. And the crying, it follows me even after I waken. I go to my window, I look out, but there is no light to be seen in any of the houses, there are only those in the sky above, and I know that those lights contain the source of that soul-sick weeping, and I feel a force--”

“--you feel the force of drink, my friend,” roared the Bull as he lifted the dusty wine bottle. “Perhaps a taste more of this will satisfactorily deafen you. If not, I can at least promise that enough of it will leave your soul to drunk to wander from your body while you’re sleeping.”

Lucinda felt her body go rigid; this was all very familiar, too much so: As if she had heard the echo of a sound that hadn’t yet been made.

The auburn man grew suddenly furious at the Bull’s words, and with a violent swing of his arm flung the wine bottle to the floor. “Isn’t it enough that you perpetually mock what we do, you and I? You wear your hypocrisy like a priest donning his robes for mass. When the nobility dangle their wealth in front of your face like a scrap of meat at the lips of a starving dog, you loudly proclaim that there’s such divine, moral, ethereal passion at the heart of your work--‘It is the soul in conflict with itself that is the most

important thing of all’--yet you feel no remorse when you strike away the hand of a beggar in the street. How can you do that? Tell me. Make me understand how you can profess such compassion and yet continue to deny that there *is* truly a measure of pain in the universe that is born into each of us, one that cannot be eased and follows us through every moment of our existence and perhaps even beyond? Make me understand how you can go on gorging yourself on meat and wine and sleep in a sad whore’s stained bed, forever turning a blind eye to the misery of humanity when you know damned well it’s in your grasp, your gift, to ease part of that misery!”

“You never were any fun once the drinking started. If you were to ask me, I think--”

“*Goddamn you, Paul!* How can a man so brilliant be such a filthy, arrogant shit?”

The Bull’s face turned into a slab of granite. “How dare you lecture me about compassion. Christ!--how many times have I listened to you bemoan the rancor that chokes you when you think of the way your fellow men treat one another? Are you telling me that it is permissible to disdain mankind as a whole yet admire individual dignity? Or are the poet and composer the same to you as the aristocrat and anarchist--deserving of scorn until they have suffered enough that you deem them worthy of your caring? For someone who purports to be a man of the people, my friend, you have a curiously selective heart.”

The auburn man’s eyes seemed to slide back into his skull. “I think...I think....”
He grabbed the edge of the table, shuddering.

The Bull looked suddenly terrified. “Is it happening again?”

“Not for love...not for any woman’s love or the love of a people...just...let me

awaken once with silence surrounding me...just once let me not hear it!" He flung himself off the chair and into a waiter, knocking them both to the floor as he kicked and moaned and flailed his arms, a thin trickle of foam crawling from the corner of his mouth. The bull leapt to his feet as the auburn man thrashed to his knees and reached for something on the table, then all too quickly a crowd gathered around the scene, laughing, shouting, pointing--

--Lucinda could catch brief glimpses of frenzied, violent movement--

--then came a crash and the howls of laughter turned to gasps, then cries of fear and disgust. The mob quickly dispersed. A gust of cinnamon smoke drifted against her eyes as she rose to see the two men.

The bull, the man called Paul, was sitting at the table, roaring with black laughter that threatened to become a snarl through his clenched teeth and tears. The auburn man was on his feet, pressed face-first against the stone wall, pounding it with his fist, scraping flesh and blood over the stones with every blow. He clutched the left side of his head with his other hand, blood streaming from between his fingers. A rusted knife lay at his feet.

The bull rose, grabbing something small and blood-sopped from the table and flinging it at the auburn man. "Here, goddamn you: Take it! Take this proof of your bloody magnificent suffering that you value more than anything else in your pathetic life! Take it and put it on your tongue and taste it and swallow it and gag on it!" He slammed his chair into the wall, splintering it into kindling, then stormed out the tavern door. The auburn man sank down, trying to pick up the severed lobe with trembling and blood-slick hands. After a moment he snapped his gaze up to Lucinda's face.

She had never seen such haunted, haunting eyes.

"Did you understand?" he whimpered. "Did you?"

She could find no words. She knelt beside him, took the earlobe from the floor, and gently placed it in his hands.

His fingers closed around her wrist. Lucinda touched his cheek, feeling an affinity for him that she'd never experienced before.

His voice was the whisper of a child lost in the darkness: "Have you ever felt it?"

She wanted to answer him, to say that she had, she was, but the numbness had returned and was seducing her, drawing her back through the dark space and into the pale shade of rain; a surge of suffocating pressure.

The auburn man spoke her name, his image dwindling.

"Lucinda?"

She reached toward him but he was mist.

"Lucinda?"

Shaking her by the shoulders. Her head lolled to the side and she opened her eyes to see Jordan kneeling in front of her wheelchair--

--no, it was there, on the other side of the room.

She was in her bed, her head cradled by pillows, and Jordan was sitting on the edge, holding her hand. She blinked, saw the clear tube rising from the bandage on her arm, snaking up to an IV drip. She drew in a short, sharp breath that filled her torso with fire. She touched her belly-bag; it was empty.

"Jordan." She felt a smile. "Is it morning already? I don't remember when I--"

He rose to his feet, stepped away, and turned her painting toward her.

"Jordan? What are you--?"

The words caught in her throat.

The painting was finished. She could clearly see that it conveyed everything she had intended; the gulls seemed to shimmer as they soared toward the morning sun, the sands had a life all their own, shifting and scattering and drowning under the foaming force of the ocean.

Not looking at Jordan, she whispered, "How...how long have you been here?"

"A day. A day and a half. You don't remember?"

She shook her head. "All I can remember is feeling the numbness right before the seizure, hearing the sounds of someone crying...a lot of people crying, then..."

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, steadily, her mind grasping at the remnants of images, finally focusing on that of a scarred table top--

--and she remembered what had happened to her beyond the dark space.

Opening her eyes, she asked Jordan what he had seen and heard.

"You had a seizure. I called for the nurse. We took you from the chair and put you in bed. I wanted to stay but a doctor came in and ordered me to leave. I came back early the next morning. They told me that you were fine, that you were conscious and were working on a painting. I came in and found you..." He gestured toward the easel. There was a deep, drying stain on the carpet. Lucinda blanched; once before, after she'd first arrived at the hospice, she'd tried to stand while her belly-bag was full, only to have it burst and slop down her legs, filling the air with a stench so overpowering and rancid it caused her to faint. Standing was, had always been, would probably always be, a nearly insurmountable task, requiring reserves of strength she couldn't sustain. So weak, so live

to see seventeen, let alone twenty-eight. She used to imagine herself just snapping off one night, doing a Granny Weatherall and clicking out, not living long enough to watch her life grind to a halt in a series of repulsive, sputtering little agonies. She never thought her last days, weeks, months--however the hell long it was--would be spent like this. She looked at her tutor and felt a pressure in her throat.

"How did I--?"

Jordan placed his hand against her cheek. His touch was satin. "You spoke almost constantly. In French. Why didn't you ever tell me that you spoke my native language?"

"I...I don't. I flunked French in high school. I picked up one or two phrases, a half-dozen words, but--"

Jordan shook his head. "No, this wasn't textbook French spoken in a mock accent. You spoke it as fluently as if you'd been speaking it all your life. You used slangs and idioms I haven't heard since I was a boy in Asnieres."

"But...how?"

He only stared at her.

"I was standing? Moving?"

He gave a slow nod of his head. Lucinda suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable and angry for that vulnerability but leaned toward him anyway, burying her face in his chest, feeling his massive arms enfold her like they would a frightened child, her fear and confusion temporarily held at bay as she filled herself with the scents of his body. The smell of a man, she thought. The nearness. She felt something trickle into her belly-bag, and once again silently railed against nothing and everything for her condition, her heart aching at the memory of the auburn man clutching his bleeding head.

Jordan pulled back and cupped her face in his hands, staring into her eyes. "The man you spoke of, the 'auburn man.' Would you know his face if you saw it again?"

She thought of his eyes that haunted, and whispered, "Yes." Jordan smiled at her, the same smile he gave her when a painting was going well. She adored that smile.

He turned away from her and picked up a large book from the bedside table, a thick, heavy volume whose pages held photographs of various artists and their work.

As he flipped past pictures and biographies of Frans Hals and Michelangelo and El Greco he said, "It never occurred to me that I should educate you about various styles or artists. It was so rare to find someone like you, someone who was born with a natural aptitude and had never been exposed to fine art in any way. The minute I saw your work I knew that yours was a genuine talent. All my life I've waited for a student like you. I--" He sighed. "I'm sorry. I was going to make a point with that but I seem to have lost track."

"You get used to it."

He looked up. "Do you know how much I hate it that you're so sick? Do you have any idea how--"

"--please don't. Please."

He reluctantly returned his attention to the volume on his lap.

Lucinda felt weaker than ever, and wondered if the seizures would ever stop--or, at the very least, lessen in their intensity, fade away as Jordan was now, as if being swallowed by a fog.

Jordan turned the book toward her, one beefy finger resting next to a portrait. "Is this the auburn man?"

"How did you know?"

"Is it him?" His voice was glass.

"Yes." She felt her body tugged forward as the fog cleared and the dark space emerged from behind, creeping toward her, its silvery pinpoints blinking.

"*Arles*," he whispered. "You were with Vincent at Arles. Dear God."

She wanted to hold his hand but he was now an intangible and she was cascading on the pale shade of rain down a hazy corridor, flying past faces and strange dream-figures--one of them a lithe female figure with the head of a black horse, ears erect, neck arched, vapor jetting from its nostrils, and she thought she should know this figure, this strange creature, this thing of wonder--then she was drifting, finally feeling her feet touch the cold marble floor of a long hall. She walked haltingly until she arrived at the section where he waited for her. Standing at the doorway she could smell the stench of human waste, could hear the wretched outcries of the other patients. She moved through the doorway, tripping over an emaciated woman lying naked on the floor, shuddering violently, the soles of her mangled feet smacking against the wall with a moist, raw sound. Lucinda stepped aside, staring in muted horror as vomit dribbled from the woman's mouth, then flew out and up in a sickening spray as she began to thrash about, clawing at her throat.

The patients were roaming everywhere; staring, singing to themselves, weeping. Their voices rose to the ceiling, the echoes expanding, touching, coalescing, then crashing down on her head; it was the sound of a million babies doused with gasoline and set aflame, the cry of a million broken-hearted men shrieking their anguish into the black, uncaring night, the keening of countless ages of affliction all come to rest in this spot, at

this moment, searing her to the core.

She felt disgusted by it, sorry for it, yet at the same time an intricate part of it all. She watched the patients slide down the clammy marble walls like flies struggling to break free of a spider's web, writhe deep inside cement bathtubs, squat in corners relieving their tortured bowels, cover their heads to protect themselves from blows delivered by invisible assailants, all of them muttering in low, hoarse, lunatic voices.

Then she saw Vincent.

He was sitting on his bed next to a large barred window, and he was sketching. Occasionally he would stop, stretch, and scratch at the bandage on the left side of his head. She watched him for several moments until he at last noticed her, smiled, and gestured for her to join him.

"What are you drawing?" she asked as she sat next to him. He pointed out the window. Down in the yard Lucinda saw other patients, these wearing flowing white gowns, walking around a large stone fountain as if it would take them elsewhere.

"Look at them," muttered Vincent. "You and I should know such contentment." He blended a shadow with his index finger, put the sketch down, and turned to her. "Everyone suffers here, be it from madness, disease, loneliness or pain, everyone suffers. We understand each other like members of the same family." He took her hands in his; his palms were rough and calloused but they felt like a rose cradled in her grasp.

"When will you leave this terrible place?"

"Soon, if I am to take Dr. Gachet for a man of his word. I will visit with Theo for a while and then, I suspect, I will go to a place I have often dreamt of retiring to."

"Where?"

"Auvers-sur-Oise. God speaks through its landscape. There is a field there I have always wanted to paint."

Lucinda moved closer, kissing him on the cheek. "May I come to be with you there?"

"Yes. I need you by my side very badly. Once I feared that all my tenderness had died with Margot, then you--" He pulled her to him. "You have given me back something of myself I thought long dead."

"I do so want to be with you. It's been two months since you came here, yet this is the first time I've been allowed to see you."

"Oh, my lovely lady, why is that so important? You must have known that I would come to find you after my release. Why come to see me in this...this squalor?"

"Because I know what you meant now. In my dreams I, too, see the other faces. I hear their weeping and when I wake I can spare little thought for anything else. You are not a madman, you are not possessed."

"Then, you feel it too? That sense of being...lost within those cries? Abandoned?"

"Yes."

He grunted, released her hands, and turned away. "All colors are ones of despair," he whispered. "Red is man's rage, yellow his lust, blue his reason and gray his conscience. Green is his spirit, shit-brown his heart, and all of them are moving toward the same place, a place where they will unite into blackness and...unimaginable nothing." He wiped something from his eye, peered out into the courtyard, and began shaking.

"Once, when I was in the Borinage, I painted the miners there, and the colors seemed so majestic when used for them. It was one of those times--all but lost now--

when I felt as one with the colors. I used to think red was the color of love, after all--be it sentimental tripe or not; a rose awaiting the touch of the sun so it might fully blossom, then be plucked from its stem and held in the hands of a beautiful woman." He arched backward, gasping in harsh breaths, one hand pressing against his chest.

"But no matter how hard I try the colors come out their darkest now. And nowhere are they darker than in my dreams. It terrifies me. Not only do I feel that I have been abandoned among those weeping faces, but each time I sleep now I feel as if I'm getting closer to the moment when that unseen exit will close behind me before I can return to my body and awaken, and I will be trapped in there forever." He smiled a crooked grin. "Shall I tell you my greatest fear? The one that is always in the front of my mind, compelling everything I do? It is that I will never live long enough to paint all the pictures in my head. And do you know why? Because I have betrayed the colors, and they are punishing me by putting me in that unknowable place between the mind and soul every time I sleep. I don't want to go back, do you see? It is so...so lonely there."

Lucinda reached out to touch him, but before she could reach he leapt from the bed and grabbed the bars on the window.

His cry was filled with rain.

"When the day is over will you weep at the passing of the sun and all it has given you to see? Will you rejoice when the dawn arrives at all the chances it offers? Will you take the hands of a ragged one, an odd, damaged, discarded one? Will you bring them mercy and comfort, tell them that this madness and loneliness will pass?" He began pounding against the bars with an opened hand. In the distance Lucinda could hear the attendants running down the hall. She rose from the bed and once again tried to touch

him--she knew she was trying because she could feel her limbs moving--yet she was suddenly outside herself, staring down, watching herself remain motionless.

Vincent began ramming his head against the bars. "No! No, you will not! You shall drink and laugh and close your eyes to all of it. You shall mock the lost and lonely ones, spit on the poor, and in that lonely place where my dreams send me there shall emerge another face twisted in pain. *YOU WILL FORGET! YOU ARE DEAF!*" The attendants fell on him, dragging him to the ground and strapping his arms behind his back. One of them tore his bandage as they dragged him down the corridor and Lucinda rose, only to be wrenched away and hurled into the dark space, and there she saw the faces of others lost in dreams and agony, trying to find their way back to bodies long since dead and buried and rotting under the earth. Their mouths opened to release wails of misery; their eyes shed tears that became starlight pinpoints, ebbing away from her, and she lurched forward, dropping her palette and gasping for breath.

Jordan was sitting on the floor in front of her chair, drinking a glass of beer and leafing through a book, one of many that were scattered around him. His eyes were red from lack of sleep.

Then she saw her new painting.

An old, emotionally broken man, sitting in a small, weak chair, his head buried in his thin, calloused hands. The room surrounding him was bare and decrepit, its sole window looking out on a golden field and blue sky. Across from the old man she could see the traced outline, barely discernable, of another chair yet to be painted. The scene was one of breathtaking beauty and melancholy, and though the brush which had composed the scene may have been held by her hand, another's had guided it.

The colors were not applied with her usual smooth strokes but, rather, an uneasy yet oddly effective combination of her strokes fused with violent, almost frenzied slashes; the picture seemed to vibrate.

"Four days this time," said Jordan. "You refused to remain in your chair, but your bag didn't leak."

She looked down at her belly-bag and saw that it was empty. There was no discomfort now. She felt the pale shade fading, the dark space moving farther away.

"Was I still speaking in French?"

"Yes." He stared at her. "You know who he is now, don't you?"

"Van Gogh?"

"Van Gogh." He poured a glass of water and helped her to hold it while she drank. She smiled her thanks, he covered her with a blanket, and she eased back in the wheelchair.

"It's not like a dream at all," she said. "I am there. I make a difference."

Jordan tried to smile and failed miserably. "There's a lot I need to explain to you. Try to explain, anyway. I'm not sure I understand some of it myself." He shook himself and took a deep breath, then pointed toward the new painting.

"This painting is based on a long-lost sketch Van Gogh did entitled *Worn Out: At Eternity's Gate*. He remarked once in a letter to his brother Theo that he couldn't begin the actual painting until he found the right color scheme. He said that if he could realize the proper balance and light composition, that he'd know what was missing from the picture. He did a preliminary version of this piece that many historians have mistakenly assumed was the finished product. He believed it might have been the fruition of all he'd

been striving toward in his work."

Lucinda could not, did not want to, grasp what he was saying. "And you're telling me that this is...this is the way Van Gogh wanted it done?"

"Yes...and no. There's as much of you in this as him."

She shook her head. "How could I have--"

Jordan took hold of her hands. "Listen to me. I've been thinking back to when I was boy. When I was eight, I came down with a serious fever that lasted nearly ten days. The doctors thought I would die. During that time, whenever I fell asleep, I would have these absolutely terrifying nightmares. One night I woke up after a particularly scary one and found my father sitting at my bedside. I remember the way he stroked my hair and sang to me, the way his hands felt when he placed a cool, moist rag over my forehead...he was a very kind man and I miss him...anyway, on this night, I refused to go back to sleep.

"He told me, then, about the tunnel that our soul flies through whenever we dream, that all souls travel through this tunnel, even those of people who have died and are on their way to God. Somewhere along the way, this tunnel separates into two branches--the dead take one branch, the dreamers take another. But sometimes the dreamers and the dead get confused along the way and don't know which branch to take once they arrive at that point. A dreamer has the luxury of simply turning around and going back, but the dead have to remain there, alone and afraid, and that's what causes us to have nightmares--that fear. The lonely fear that the dead have."

"The Lady or the Tiger?" said Lucinda.

"Something like that, yes. As I grew older I developed an interest in dreams and did a great deal of reading about them. I also read about astral projection, fever-dreams,

what happens to the mind of someone who is in a coma or experiencing a seizure--and, of course, near-death experiences. In almost every account I came across, the people described a long corridor, or road, or tunnel, and each saw a light at the end. I began to wonder, What if it's true? What if there is a place out there along the path of dreams where the road--the tunnel--branches, and there are countless frightened spirits--spirits of the dead--just standing there, uncertain of which way to go?"

Lucinda shook her head. "I still don't quite--"

"Let's just say, for the moment, that it is true, all right? And let's say that, eventually, one of these spirits of the dead decides, to hell with it, and chooses a branch, only it turns out to be the wrong one. Think about it. What would you do?"

Lucinda felt a familiar ache in her chest. She tried not to think about the moment of her approaching death because it would come soon enough. "I don't know. I...I guess that I'd try to find my way back to the branch."

"And if you couldn't?"

She bit her lower lip. "I don't want to talk about this any longer, Jordan, please? Why are you--"

He snatched another book from the floor, opening to a previously marked page. "This is an excerpt from a letter Van Gogh sent to Theo in July of 1883. He was talking about what he experienced during his seizures. Listen to this: 'When I am at work I feel an unlimited faith in art and in its healing powers, yet I must take care that I carry that faith with me into the opaque blackness when it enfolds me, as it so often does these days. It astounds me, this *dark space*, for as it swallows me it releases me, also, and I feel weightless, as if being carried away by thousands of glittering pinpoints of light to a place

where everything in this tiny universe convenes, a place where life and death meet for a while to tell each other their stories. I believe when I arrive at this place I will find the answers that have been missing in my life. Only there will I be freed to paint as I always should have, to bring my work to fruition, to perfect that one last image which has eluded me for all my days and dreams. I know such things are pure fancy, for even if it is true, I will be among the bodiless, then, the brush forever out of my reach. But I grow weary and the words on this page blur, so I leave you for now." He snapped the book closed and stared at Lucinda.

She swallowed, once, painfully and said, "So you think that...that--"

"I think that when Van Gogh died his spirit took the wrong branch. I think he was lost there until you came along. I think that during one of your seizures your soul met his in the dream branch and he recognized you for what you are. He knows that he is dead and that you--" His voice cracked on the next two words. "--are dying, so he's...I think he saw in you his chance to come back into this life long enough to bring his work to fruition."

Jordan's eyes filled with wonder. "All their lives artists wonder where it comes from, their gift for creation. You've said yourself, and I've experienced it too, that there are times when a work seems to be creating itself and is only using you as a conduit. Look at the painting. It's your style, yes, but it's evolving at an incredible rate."

"But--"

"Don't you see? This painting was to be Van Gogh's summation of all he'd done, but he never figured out what was missing from the sketch. He's finishing the work not only through you, but with you, as well. Your two styles are merging into one."

He dropped the book onto the floor.

It took a moment for the full impact of everything to hit her; then Lucinda began shaking. "But...why me?"

"Because you share his loneliness, his pain and isolation." Jordan knelt down and held both her hands.

"Tell me, the first time in the tavern, is that when he mutilated himself?"

"Yes."

"Gauguin was there, that's right. October of 1888. And the second time?"

"An asylum."

"That would be Saint-Remy. May, 1889."

"Why are the dates so important?"

"Because after Van Gogh left the asylum he retired to--"

"Auvers-sur-Oise?"

"He told you?"

"Yes. I promised to meet him there."

The blood drained from Jordan's face.

"What is it?" asked Lucinda.

Jordan shook his head. "I don't want--"

"Say it."

His eyes met hers. "If this is what's happening, if all he wants is for the two of you to finish this last piece, then why are you going back into his past? Why is he sharing only certain moments with you? There's no need."

"Why does that scare you?"

"Because on July 27th, 1890, Van Gogh shot himself in the chest in the field outside Auvers. He died thirty-six hours later."

Lucinda was transfixed. "He mentioned a Margot?"

"A neighbor in Holland when he lived there in 1884. Margot Begemann. He loved her dearly, but both families were bitterly opposed to their love. She committed suicide after several failed attempts. It was shortly after that he began his 'crises' periods. That was when those violent slashes became predominate in his work."

"His 'crises'...were those his own seizures? Like mine?"

"I'm almost positive."

"But why are my seizures so...so unrelenting now?"

"Because whatever it is he needs to do through you needs to be done soon. When was the last time you looked at a calendar?"

"I don't remember."

"Today is July 27th."

"...and the painting still isn't finished? Is that what scares you?"

Jordan was a statue. "No. What scares me is the thought that goes through my mind when I try to see this from his point of view. I love life, and I love my work. I think I would be willing to do anything to ensure that I could keep on creating for as long as possible."

Lucinda rubbed her eyes and exhaled impatiently. "I wish you'd tell me what it is that's--"

"What if he's decided that a few more months of life, even life in a sick body, is better than staying where he is now? What if he's taking you back into his past, to places

you have never seen before, in order to--Christ, I can't believe I'd think this of him--in order to leave you there so he might use your--"

"Whoa," said Lucinda, holding up her hands. "Stop right there. Now, I will admit that this is all quite...extraordinary. We both know that something is definitely going on here, but when you start saying that Vincent is trying to trick me out of my body so he can move in for a little while, it's crossing the line into something too weird, Jordan. Do you understand? I'm not totally naive about people. I think I'm perceptive enough to know when someone has a hidden agenda and I truly don't think he does." She was shaking. "I really can't talk about this anymore, at least not right now. I don't feel well, I really don't, and I'm sick of it: Okay? I know that I insisted you tell me what was bothering you but now I'm sorry I did because you're right, it's kind of scary, so can we just drop it for a little bit? Can we just stay here and enjoy each other's company?"

He leaned forward and kissed her; gently, warmly, compassionately.

Lucinda felt her bowels shift. A thick, wet gurgle filled the air as something leaked into her belly-bag. She looked away from Jordan. "You must find me repulsive."

"Far from it. Even the colors of autumn cannot compare to your eyes. Oh, Lord--I can't believe I said something that corny."

Lucinda began weeping. The smell from her belly-bag reached her, causing her to cough and weep all the more; for all the days of her childhood spent alone in her room, a sketchbook her only companion; for all the times she'd sat listening to the other children playing outside her window, laughing and shouting as they rode their bicycles and played sandlot baseball and argued whose turn it was next on the swing; for all the moments when she looked up from her work long enough to realize that she would never be a part

of it, and there was no self-pity in these tears, only an aching resignation which was as much a part of her as her flesh and shadow. Just to have one of those days back, to be a normal healthy child for just a few hours, to have known the joy of jumping into a pile of leaves, a mud fight, a quick, silly game of hide-and-go-seek.

Then the regret blossomed and matured, meeting her at this point in time, making her wish that she were sitting here a whole and desirable woman, one who didn't rage against the frailty that entrapped her, one who didn't have to resort to the humiliating recourse of tears in order to grapple with the cold equations that equaled her reality, a woman who--

--she took a deep breath and began to calm herself. She felt Jordan release the brakes on her wheelchair and begin pushing her toward her dresser. In the mirror her hair looked tangled and lifeless, not the bright, glowing stream of copper that it was when she was freshly showered.

Jordan smiled at her reflection. "I can see why he is so taken by you. If I were in his position, I wouldn't hesitate to travel across time for you."

She wiped her eyes.

Jordan picked up a brush and ran it through her hair. "See?" he whispered. "A countess is born."

"You may kiss my ring, good sir."

Jordan laughed his roaring Frenchman's laugh, filling her with a sense of need and being needed; a sense of place and comfort.

Then he turned her chair around and kissed her again.

She felt herself grow warm; she could barely contain the excitement his touch

"I have been alone most of my life," he said, never looking away from her eyes.

"Children mocked me because of my size, my face...I've had little need for any companionship aside from the easel, canvas, and brush. After I turned forty I realized that something was absent from my life, so I volunteered to give free art classes at various grade schools and hospitals and...well, that's how I came to be here. I look at you and feel the heat of a thousand secret flames. Your breath is a song to me, whispering promise. I feel as if the arc of my life has been pointing toward this moment for all of my days. And sometimes, when the light comes in through the window and you turn to look at it, your eyes sparkle and I imagine I know what God must have felt like the first time He gazed upon the creation that was woman...or maybe I'm just full of shit and you happen to be beautiful but can't see it and I've been in love with you for a long time."

Lucinda pulled him to her and kissed him once again. Then, suddenly, as she lay her head against his shoulder, the effects of the last several days draped over her; she felt the sweat, the pain, the time.

"Jordan, I., I'd like to take a bath but I don't...oh God, this is harder than I thought it would be. I don't want you to call the nurse to help. I hope you don't--"

He picked her up out of the wheelchair and carried her into the bathroom.

As he gently bathed her body he took great care not to jostle her belly-bag. "I want to tell you one more thing," he whispered. The water seeping from the cloth in his hands massaged her with warmth, easing the strain. "I know, now, that I was meant to be here for you. Shhh--don't say anything, just listen. It used to be, when I told someone the story of my life, it would stop there. But since I've met you..." She closed her eyes and Jordan kissed her wet hair and placed another warm, soaked cloth over her face.

“Since I’ve known you, I have told you the story of my life, and you’ve asked to hear it again...and I find, now, that when I tell it over, it’s no longer my story. It’s *ours*, and I will protect that with sword and shield.” The diamond droplets of water trickled down her cheek, glided over her chin, slipped down her neck, and slid a moist path between her breasts; then his hand was there, the soapy washcloth rubbing gentle circular patterns, moist and creamy, lilac-scented, and she stretched, arching her back, sighing as the washcloth dropped away and his lips began trailing down her neck, pausing at her shoulder, then to the slope of her breast, then he delicately cupped one breast in his hand, his thumb stroking her nipple until it became firm. His lips covered her nipple, drawing it into his mouth meekly yet hungrily, and she closed her eyes all the tighter, hearing a low growl rise from deep in her throat, emerging as a sigh, and the slowly drifting lights behind her closed lids separated, shimmering in rhythm with the spasms below her waist, becoming thousands of bright pinpoints that seemed to surge from somewhere in her center as she reached out and clutched the back of his head, guiding his wonderful lips to her other breast, feeling him take the nipple in his mouth as the fire and lights within her intensified, caressing her, moving her, rocking her, tickling, rolling, arching her toward him, and she felt the softness of the bed beneath, the satiny brush of the sheets, his firmness inside her, pulling back teasingly before plunging in again, and she held him close, pulled him into her until she thought he was buried inside up to her throat as she shuddered and pulled her legs against his pressing hips, digging her fingers into his shoulders, forcing him deeper as she threw her head back and cried out--

--then he kissed her neck again, whispered something she didn't understand, and moved away.

She blinked, rolled over on the bed, and saw Vincent staring out the window. His face glistened from the lights in the street below. The echoes of music and laughter drifted into the room on an intoxicating midnight breeze.

He seemed so weary, so worn-out.

"What is troubling you?"

"I am so very happy that you are here with me," he said.

She rose from the bed and quickly dressed, then joined him by the window, feeling somehow detached from everything, as if part of her had remained trapped in the dream branch.

"Something is wrong," she whispered.

"Did you know that you talk in your sleep?"

"What do I say?"

"You talk of strange people and places. Who is this Jordan you keep mentioning?"

A great jolt tore through her, pulling her out of herself, allowing her to hover above the scene for an instant, then spiraling her back down to Vincent's side.

She felt dizzy and disoriented. Van Gogh put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"Yes, fine...thank you." Something felt...felt--

--then Van Gogh was leading her toward the door. "Come. Walk with me. I want to show the field. I want you to be with me at...I want you there. I need for you to be there with me. I've a gift I wish for you to take."

She thought she detected the echo of someone else calling her name.

"You should sleep," she said. "You've not been well and--" He touched her lips,

and she was silent.

"I mourn for many things, my love. I mourn for the damage we have done to our souls, I mourn for the starving and the lonely and the madness in us all, the loss of our wonder...but when all is said and done, no notice is taken. I cry and lament, I rage at friends and strangers, I do myself harm, but in the end, as ever always, I go out at night to paint the stars."

Once again Lucinda was jolted from her body, and as she hovered this time she saw the many dark space faces clearly, though she recognized none. Looking down she saw not Van Gogh but Jordan, holding her in his arms, his words a dim echo in the thick air.

"...he can't have you, I won't let..."

Then she was plunging down to a field upon which the moon and stars cast an ethereal glow. She glimpsed the hunched shadow of man, heard the great, unmistakable crack of gunfire, and cried out.

The dark space came to her again, but this time only one face passed her, a face she recognized, but then there was nothing but the wind, wrapping its arms around her. She began walking through the field. Her foot brushed against something. She knelt to pick it up.

A smoking pistol.

A great pain took possession of her core. Slipping the pistol into her pocket, she stumbled out of the field and through the mazelike streets back to Van Gogh's flat. She opened the door and crossed to the bed, then lay down, the pain finding fiery focus in her chest.

She closed her eyes and saw windmills and dim pool halls, noble miners marching out of caves, shimmering trees under starry skies, an old man sitting in his chair, hunched over, his face buried in his hands--

--and realized that something about this last image was different from the painting at the hospice. Before she could discern what it was, someone jostled her arm.

She opened her eyes and saw a stranger looking down at her. His eyes were gray and his face deeply lined with worry. He brushed some hair out of her eyes and dabbed at her forehead with a cool, wet cloth.

"Shh," said the stranger. "Do not try to speak. The doctor will be here soon." She looked slowly around; she was still in Vincent's flat. Something was leaking from her belly-bag--

--no, not her bag, not at all, so what--

--she looked down.

The center of her chest was pulp; bleeding and painful.

"What is...who are..."

The voice issuing from her throat wasn't hers but she recognized it, nonetheless.

"Don't you recognize me, brother?" whispered the stranger, wiping tears from his eyes. "It's me, Theo. Please, Vincent, say that you know me."

Then she knew.

Jordan had been right.

And, quietly, she resigned herself to die in Vincent's place.

"No one will ever know," she whispered. "And if they did, no one would ever believe it." She wondered how long it would take before Jordan realized that the person

living in her body and speaking in her voice was not her, but Van Gogh. She wondered what they would do, how they would react, whether or not they would dare to tell anyone.

Theo's face became a fleshy blur as he picked up a pillow.

"I wish I could die now," she said in Van Gogh's voice.

And was answered somewhere in the darkness by an echo: *Only a moment longer, my love, my friend. All I wished was just a few moments alone with the image, nothing more, and then I shall give to you all the pictures in my head that I never lived to paint. Forgive me for my selfishness but I had to see for myself what you have done with my sketch, how you took the base and built upon the image I was no longer worthy to express. I am sorry for frightening you, but I will leave you now--but know this one last thing to be true: I treasure you.*

Don't you know that I would never abandon you to darkness?

There is no image worth the price of a soul.

Then the pillow was pressing against her face, pushing down, cutting off her breath. She became aware of the dark space, the tunnel, the faces and bright pinpoints, and her heart ached for the loss of Jordan and what time might have remained for them, and suddenly, as she felt herself slipping away one last time, she wanted to be with him again, not here, not dying in Vincent's place, and she raged against the dark space, choking, her mind screaming out Jordan's name as her hands began flailing against the stone-heavy pillow--

--remember me to your Jordan, my love--

--which suddenly was pulled away.

Her chest hitched, and she coughed, blinking her eyes against the light.

Two beefy hands cupped her face.

"Lucinda?"

She opened her eyes and saw him leaning over her.

"Jordan?"

He pulled her into him, embracing her and weeping. "I'm sorry," he said, throwing the pillow aside. "I could think of no other way to force him to leave, to make you return to me. I would have hated living from this moment on without you."

As she lay her head against his shoulder, whispering, "We were wrong about Vincent, my love," she saw the painting, complete at last.

The old man was no longer alone.

Across from him sat an elegant, aged woman who was looking at him and laughing. She was the ghost of an errant wish--that a woman might never lose the radiance which crossed her features when a suitor came to call, never see her beauty dissolve little by little in the unflattering light of each dawn, and never know a day when the scent of roses from an admirer did not fill her rooms. She was every night you sat alone and lonely, wishing for the warm hand of a lover to hold in your own as autumn dimmed into winter and youth turned to look at you over its shoulder and whisper farewell: all this was in her face, accentuated by a benevolent resignation that told you she was happy, here in this room with this hunched old man who, Lucinda could now see, was not weeping into his hands but, rather, laughing at a joke just told to him by the woman. The scene shone with quiet joy, well-earned repose, and a sense of home; at the last, a home finally found.

As she wrapped her arms around Jordan, she smiled, part of her mind wishing Vincent peace.

I will paint the stars in your memory, she thought.

Outside, it began to sprinkle, and Lucinda decided that she'd had it all wrong; after so many years of staring out countless lonely windows, after so many years of daydreaming among the raindrops that whispered against the glass, after so many years of wishing for a home and the tenderness of a loved one, she finally realized that it wasn't the color of sadness, after all...

Rain was very, very pretty .