

Still Life

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As the armour-plated limousine drew up outside the National Gallery, Corinne glanced out of the window toward the shattered stump of Nelson's Column. The scene always sent a chill up her spine. It was almost a decade since the monument had been toppled by a terrorist bomb. Why hadn't it been rebuilt? Instead, Trafalgar Square had become another of the city's no-go areas, its roads blocked off by army barricades and concrete gun posts.

Only rarely were the roads opened, and Corinne supposed she ought to feel privileged that the military were prepared to allow vehicle access to the gallery today. But it was nothing to do with her, she realized; although it might be the Corinne Dewar Exhibition, she was by no means the most important person who'd be there. By tomorrow, when there were no guests invited for the opening, the only way in would be on foot again. "Ready?" asked Robert.

Corinne glanced at him and nodded. She smiled briefly, looking him up and down. He seemed so strange in his old-fashioned suit, the formal black jacket and trousers, the crisp white shirt and ridiculous bow tie. She was glad her own choice of outfit wasn't so restricted — she wore a calf-length white leather skirt and black satin blouse, although both were covered by a thick simulated fur coat.

The driver opened the passenger door, and Corinne climbed out onto the patch of pavement that had been cleared of snow. Robert followed, and together they walked up the wide steps toward the gallery, squeezing between the barbed wire and sandbags, trying to ignore the flak-jacketed troops, their rifles held at the ready.

"Nervous?" said Robert.

"Not really," Corinne replied. She felt distanced from all of this, as though it weren't happening to her, as though she were a spectator watching at home on her television screen.

"I am," Robert said, taking her arm as they reached the entrance and the last of the soldiers. Inside, security would be handled by the police.

The National Gallery, said Corinne to herself, the ... National... Gallery. Her own major retrospective exhibition at the National, and she wasn't even dead yet. She tried to keep her face straight for the television crew waiting for her just inside the foyer. She'd had exhibitions before, of course, all over the world and too many to count. In London, there had even been the Hayward Gallery a couple of years ago. But this was the big one, the sign that she had arrived and been accepted as the nation's top living artist.

"Miss Dewar," said the television interviewer, as the cameras and microphones were aimed at her. "Can you tell us how you feel to be here today?"

Corinne paused, and as Robert moved away and out of camera range, she wondered how exactly she did feel. She wasn't certain. She had been so delighted and elated at first, but by now, after all the preparation, she felt numb. About half of her works from the previous two decades had been assembled here under one roof, probably the only time that would ever happen. The only time while she was still alive, that was for certain.

Her name was already spoken of in the same terms as the greatest of British painters, Turner and Constable. It was all hype, Corinne was well aware, but it was very nice for people to say it was true. And she was only thirty-nine years old.

"It feels," she answered slowly, as she glanced around the huge entrance hall and saw all the reproductions of her work for sale, from postcards to posters, "pretty good." She tossed back her long auburn hair and smiled for the cameras.

"Can you tell us, Miss Dewar," said the reporter, "which is your favorite painting?"

She was tempted to answer the Mona Lisa, but this was no time for jokes. It was an old question, and one she was tired of. She gave her most frequent answer. "The next one," she said, with a hint of laughter.

The reporter nodded and smiled back. "And which is your favorite in this exhibition?"

"That's hard to say," she replied and it was. Whatever she chose, it would be wrong. Every one of her paintings was a portrait, and so many of her subjects would be here today — and they would all believe their own picture was the best. It had become quite a status symbol to be painted by Corinne Dewar. The rich, the famous, the cream of *Who's Who* must have sat for her over the years.

She could tell that she wouldn't be able to evade the question. The best solution was to choose the most popular subject, and that meant the royal family. But who? The three-year-old heir to the throne? Or the late king? Corinne had painted the monarch only a few months before the assassination. Or the new king with his popular young bride?

"I think it must be the coronation portrait of His Majesty," she said. "It was a great honor for me to be asked to paint the portrait, of course, it isn't only that," said Corinne. "The country — indeed the whole world — is going through a bad time. The king represents all that is best in Britain, and he's a symbol of the nation, showing that we can all pull through these troubles and that the country will once more be safe and at peace."

Corinne noticed Robert watching her, grinning sardonically, and she glanced away.

"Thank you, Miss Dewar," said the reporter, and he stepped aside to allow Corinne to pass through.

Robert caught up with her, but said nothing.

There were several galleries devoted to the exhibition, and all eyes were turned toward Corinne as she entered the first hall. There was a brief flutter of applause. Five hundred invitations had been sent out, and there already seemed that number present. The more important guests, the most famous of those Corinne had painted, were due to arrive shortly. Meanwhile, the others paid more attention to the champagne than to the canvases that hung on the walls around them.

Over the next hour, Corinne greeted the new arrivals and those already present, shaking hands and accepting kisses on the cheek and hand, seeing in the flesh again so many people whom she could now remember only as paint on canvas. She seldom recalled her subjects; all she was ever concerned with was their faces. Politicians and diplomats, sportsmen and actresses, industrialists and millionaires, aristocrats and finally the Queen Mother herself, and Corinne curtsied and accepted the royal gloved hand.

"So good to see you again, my dear," the Queen Mother said, although her eyes passed straight through Corinne.

Corinne had painted her when she was the queen, shortly before her husband's sitting. She had heard that the first portrait was a trial run and that if the king hadn't approved, he would not have allowed Corinne to paint him.

The Queen Mother looked hardly any different from those days six years ago. "I did so adore your picture of my grandson," she said. "I have a copy

of it in my bedroom."

Corinne could only nod and smile, not sure what she should say. She was used to meeting the famous only when they sat for her, and she seldom spoke while painting. Most of her subjects soon gave up trying to converse, while others thought it was beneath them to talk to her. That suited Corinne fine. She wasn't interested in talking; it was too much of a distraction. All she ever needed to say were things like "Head up" or, "Look to the right a little more."

The Queen Mother didn't spend much time in the exhibition, only long enough to walk once around the galleries, studying the catalog more than the pictures themselves. And once she had gone, many more of the guests felt it wasn't worth staying. They were here to be seen, not to see Corinne's paintings.

As the halls emptied and only a few dozen remained, Corinne wandered at random around the exhibition. Every single picture was a portrait, totally representational, almost all of them done on commission — they weren't subjects she would have chosen herself; they were simply jobs of work. There were very few of them she could identify with, and those only the very earliest. It was her exhibition, but they were no longer her paintings; she didn't own any of them. Two years ago a painting she had done six years previously had been sold for half a million new pounds. Corinne hadn't seen a penny of it. All the picture had meant to her was five thousand pounds at the time, enough to live on for a while.

She noticed the painting through the archway in the next hall, hanging in an elaborate gilt frame all by itself. It was worth a lot of money, so it was deemed to be a better picture. Corinne walked through the doorway and toward the painting. It was of a famous actor, a man who had become a Peer of the Realm because of his portrayals of Shakespearean characters. He was dead, but his image lived on. It was his widow who had paid so much for the picture, buying it from the theater owner who had commissioned his most famous actor in his most famous role, Hamlet. Corinne had seen the play but had not been impressed by the performance. When the widow had died last year, the painting had ended up in the Tate Gallery in part payment toward taxes. It was a good painting, Corinne conceded detachedly, but certainly no better than any other of hers. Since the half-a-million-pound sale, her work had become even more in demand. What better investment was there than giving an artist twenty-five thousand pounds for a canvas that could be worth twenty times that price? Robert had begun adding to each contract of commission a clause that guaranteed Corinne a percentage of the

painting's resale value.

"Half a million quid for that old ham?" said a voice from behind Corinne. "I wouldn't give a fiver for it!"

She spun around and found herself face to face with the prime minister.

"By that reckoning," the man continued, his eyes sparkling, "my picture ought to be worth a thousand million!" He looked from the picture and toward the artist.

"Hello, Corinne," he said, offering his hand.

"Hello, Graham." said Corinne as they shook hands. "Sir Graham, I mean. I didn't know you were here."

"Call me Graham, since we're old friends," he said with a wink, still holding her hand. "No, I sneaked in without paying when everyone else was leaving." He glanced around the gallery. "It's certainly an impressive show, Corinne. You must be very proud."

"Yes," she said, managing to free her hand from his grip. "I must be."

The prime minister had been one of her first major commissions, a dozen years ago. In those days he'd been plain Graham Anderson, deputy leader of the Opposition. He'd been very charming and witty, and the sitting had taken three days, throughout which he tried to persuade Corinne to go out with him. The final day, they'd gone to a small Malaysian restaurant, and afterward he'd seduced her. He phoned several times over the following weeks, but she never returned the calls. They hadn't met again until now.

The man raised his eyebrows. "What is it? You've reached the top and you think: *Now what?* I know the feeling."

Corinne shook her head. "No, it isn't that." She shrugged. "I don't know what it is." Then she smiled, quickly glancing around to see where Robert was, hoping he'd come and rescue her. There was no sign of him, and slowly she began walking toward the next gallery. Sir Graham stayed with her.

"It's been too long since I've seen you, Corinne," he said, and she could almost believe him; but the man was a politician, and so he always sounded convincing.

Corinne saw Sir Graham's portrait, and she led him in that direction.

"What a handsome chap," said the prime minister, staring up as they stopped by the four-foot-square canvas. "Who is he?" He peered at the name engraved on the brass plate at the bottom of the frame. "Why ... it's

me!" he said in mock surprise.

Corinne couldn't help but smile at his antics.

"You must come around to No. 10 for a meal next week," he said.

"I seem to have heard that line before."

Sir Graham studied her doubtful expression. "No, Corinne, I mean it. Come and meet my wife; she'll be delighted to see you. Got your pictures of the bloody royal family pinned up everywhere, she has." He shook his head despairingly. "What do you say? I'd like to talk to you."

"Talk, just talk?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Pity!"

They both laughed.

Sir Graham turned his back on the portrait, standing in front of it, holding his head at the same angle and assuming an identical pose. "Does it look like me?"

Corinne looked at the picture, then at the prime minister, then at her painting again.

"Yes," she said, slightly surprised. "It looks exactly like you."

As they lay in bed that night, Corinne said to Robert: "Why?"

He knew what she meant, it was a discussion they'd had many times; but they'd never reached a conclusion. Robert said nothing for a minute as he stared out of the window, from the few scattered points of starlight above and down to the darkened streets of London below.

They had been together eighteen years, ever since they had been students at the Royal College of Art. Sometimes Corinne believed that Robert must resent her success; he hadn't touched a brush himself in over a decade.

But what Corinne couldn't understand was why she should have succeeded where so many others had failed. Because her work was different, Robert told her. Perhaps that was true — but what she was doing was no different from what the portrait painters of four or five centuries ago had done.

Who needed portraits anymore? Not when there were photographs and holograms. Her whole painting life had been dedicated to the exact

reproduction of facial characteristics. That was imitation, not art — art wasn't there to imitate life. She never felt inspired to do better, because that wasn't required. Those who commissioned her wanted a frozen moment in time captured forever on canvas.

The reporter had asked her which her favorite picture was — but to her they were all the same. She could hardly differentiate between them. Her earlier work, say fifteen years ago, hadn't been so polished; but now, she knew, she had reached perfection — and had been turning out the same product over and over again for years.

It was what people wanted, and she wondered why.

"Because it's the times we live in," answered Robert, sliding his arm beneath her neck. "People can't understand what is happening to them and to the world; they want a return to the days when things were simple and easier to understand. A portrait is a portrait. None of your modern art — modern being anything later than 1900. There's nothing wrong with them wanting that, nothing wrong with you giving it to them."

But there was, thought Corinne, there was.

Seeing so much of her work on display side by side had brought home to her how alike it all was. She'd spent twenty years repeating herself, and it seemed that she never really thought about it. She simply did it unconsciously, like breathing. And without realizing, her life had been slipping away.

She and Robert had never married; there hadn't seemed any point. Neither had there been any children. Who needed them? And by now it was almost too late.

Robert had become her manager and agent, but they seldom discussed her work. What was there to talk about? Someone sat for her, and she painted a portrait, an absolute likeness.

"Why haven't you ever let me paint you?" Corinne asked. It was a subject she hadn't considered for years.

"I can't afford it," said Robert.

"I'm being serious."

"Why do you want a picture of me when you've got the real thing here?" He kissed her cheek. When she didn't respond, he added: "Painting me would be like bringing your work home with you. And business and pleasure don't mix, or so the story goes."

"I think ..." Corinne paused.

"Do you? I often wondered about that."

"I think," she repeated, ignoring him, "that it's about time I stopped painting portraits." She waited for Robert's reaction, but he remained silent. "I want to change my style, do something different. I'm fed up with tycoons and debutantes. I want to do abstracts. I want to do laser sculptures. I want to draw patterns in the sand for the tide to wash over. We can afford it, can't we? We could retire for a few years. If it doesn't work out, I can always go back to what I've been doing. What do you think? Robert? what do you think?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" he said after so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"It's the best thing I've heard you say in ten years."

She stared at him in the moonlight, then rolled over on her side and hugged him close.

"Well . . . almost the best thing."

"Oh, Robert," she whispered, "I love you."

"Glad to hear it," he said and they kissed.

Half an hour later, Corinne said: "I saw the prime minister at the exhibition."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Robert, almost asleep.

Corinne's one night with Graham Anderson was the only time she had been unfaithful to Robert. Robert didn't know about it, and she had no intention of telling him. He'd had two or three flings, Corinne was well aware, but nothing serious. She had never questioned him or let on that she knew. He had stayed with her, and that was what mattered.

"He invited me to Downing Street for a meal."

"Uh."

"Will you come if I go?"

Robert turned and rubbed his eyes. "I can't stand the bastard," he said, yawning.

"He's the best prime minister we've got."

"Great. I didn't vote for him."

"Not many people did."

"I know. But he gets elected. Whatever happened to democracy? Call

this a free country?"

"No one's called it that for a long time," Corinne pointed out. "Anyhow, will you come to dinner?"

"Do I have to? He probably wants you to do his portrait again."

"Then I'll need you there to talk business. You're supposed to be my manager."

"And you've given up portraits," said Robert. "Remember? Changed your mind already?"

"No, I haven't. And Graham Anderson doesn't need another portrait. He stood in front of the painting I did of him, and he looked exactly the same. That was twelve years ago, and he doesn't seem to have aged a day. He must be in his mid-fifties by now, but he doesn't look it."

"Must be one of those immortals." Robert sat up and leaned back against the headboard. "He probably is, come to think about it. It makes sense, him being the prime minister."

"What do you mean?"

Robert scratched his head. "You must have heard the rumor going around a few years ago, about a treatment for prolonging life?" He glanced at Corinne, but she shook her head. "No?" he said. He shrugged. "Well, there was this story that immortality had been discovered — but naturally it was being kept for the rich, for the people in power. People like the Right Honorable Sir Graham Anderson, prime minister."

"But it would have been on television."

"Oh, Corinne, you're so naive sometimes. This is England, woman. The only country in the world that doesn't have laws prohibiting its people from doing things — it has laws that permit them to do things."

Corinne wasn't really listening. She was thinking about the Queen Mother, and how she didn't seem to have aged, either; but that was only six years, she supposed. "Would the royal family be included in this conspiracy of yours?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Then how come the king is dead, the last king."

"The king is dead," said Robert. "Long live the king. The answer is simple: Even being immortal isn't much protection when your state coach and you inside get blown up into millions of tiny pieces."

"You don't believe all that, do you?" Corinne said. "About some people

being immortal?"

"You must be joking." Robert slid down under the duvet again. "It must be nice, though," he added sleepily, "to live forever."

Corinne remembered all the paintings that had lined the walls of the National Gallery, only a part of her output over the past two decades. To live forever?

"I can't think of anything worse," she said.

Robert didn't join Corinne when she accepted the prime minister's invitation, and Sir Graham arranged for her to be picked up by helicopter and taken to Chequers, where he was spending the weekend discussing the new emergency regulations. Corinne was surprised that the rest of the inner cabinet didn't stay for dinner; when they sat down at the table, there were only three of them — herself; Sir Graham; and his wife, Lady Carole.

They spoke of everything and nothing, but all the time Corinne couldn't help thinking what Robert had told her about immortality. Neither of the other two looked as old as she knew they were. They both seemed to be about forty.

Corinne tried to dismiss the idea. Lots of people appeared younger than their age, and Corinne believed that she was a good example. She'd looked after herself, was careful what she ate, took plenty of exercise. In a favorable light, she reckoned she could pass for thirty. But the older people became, the harder it was to disguise the years — and Graham certainly didn't look fifty-four.

The meal was excellent. There was certainly no food shortage here, and quite exotic fare at that — fresh salmon, followed by venison. Corinne hadn't eaten such rich food in years. And after the different wines and liquors, she was feeling light-headed when they went into the study and sat down in the plush leather armchairs in front of the blazing log fire.

Lady Carole excused herself after a few minutes, and Corinne was alone with Sir Graham. She smiled as the flames warmed her face. After a few drinks, her earlier thoughts about the man's age seemed ridiculous.

"You kept looking at me in an odd way before, Corinne," he said. "What were you thinking about? The last time we met?"

"At the National Gallery?"

He shook his head, smiling softly. "You know what I mean." He stood up and took a cigar from the box on top of a carved bureau in the corner,

then lit it as he sat down again. There was silence for a while as they watched the logs burn. "The night you finished my portrait," he added.

"Twelve years ago," Corinne reminded him.

"Was it that long?" Sir Graham stared at the paneled wall beyond her. "I suppose it must be." He hesitated, as though unsure of his words. "Do you think I've altered?"

"Altered?"

"Since you painted me?"

"What makes you ask that?" she said suspiciously. It was almost as if he could read her mind. Had he stood in front of his portrait so that she could see he was no different? It couldn't be, that was ridiculous.

The prime minister smiled instead of replying. "Would you like another drink?"

Corinne shook her head.

"It's true, you know," Sir Graham continued. "I've hardly changed. Two years after you painted me, I had — er — had an operation, a certain treatment to stop me from aging." He was watching Corinne, waiting to observe some reaction.

"Cosmetic surgery, you mean?"

"No. Longevity. Perhaps even immortality."

Corinne looked away from him and stared into the fire. She felt confused and wished she hadn't had so much to drink, but she didn't doubt that Sir Graham was telling the truth. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked, after a few seconds.

"I wanted you to know that it works, that there's nothing to fear or worry about."

She glanced at him, not understanding what he meant.

"I'm offering you the chance of having the same treatment, Corinne. Would you like to join the elite, be one of us, and become immortal?"

She shook her head slowly, in disbelief rather than rejection. She could accept the idea of immortality, that there had been some secret medical breakthrough; it was entirely possible. But ... but

"Why me?" she asked. She frowned. "Because of that one night twelve years ago?"

The man laughed, then sighed. "No, Corinne, not because of that." He

drew on his cigar and studied the glowing tip. "Let me explain. When I first became a Member of Parliament, I heard a story about immortality. I didn't believe it could be true, but gradually I realized that this treatment did exist. A process had been found to prevent old age; the secret of eternal youth — call it what you will. But it was in the hands of those who held the real power in this country, not their puppet politicians like me. I decided to change all that."

As he paused, Corinne asked: "How?"

The prime minister shook his head and smiled without humor; he wasn't going to say. "Things are a little different now. Wealth and influence are no longer the main qualification — perhaps because everyone rich or powerful enough has already been treated. But I want to offer the opportunity to the nation's finest talents, our scientists and composers and poets . . . and artists. You're too valuable for your skills to be allowed to die. What do you say, Corinne?"

She said nothing — she was having enough trouble thinking clearly. Her mind was filled with flashes of brief ideas that set her brain reeling. This was crazy. Sir Graham was offering immortality as casually as a glass of brandy.

"The treatment arose out of cancer research back in the 1980's," the prime minister added. "The original experimental rats are still alive forty years later. It works equally well with humans, and with no significant side effects. There is complete cell renewal in all bone and tissue, even brain cells."

"And . . . and you're offering this to me?"

"Yes."

"But ... uh ... I mean . . . what will it cost me?"

"Nothing." He laughed briefly. "It's the only thing you can still get on the National Health."

"What about Robert?" she asked suddenly.

Sir Graham knew at once whom she meant. "The man you live with?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Corinne. We have to restrict it to a few people, and he's not . . ." He shrugged his shoulder. "Well, he's not one of them."

"Because he isn't rich? Is that what you mean?" She couldn't accept, not if the treatment wasn't available to Robert. "What if we were married?"

The prime minister shook his head again. "I realize it's a difficult

decision, but if you —

"What about your wife?" Corinne interrupted. "She's had it done, hasn't she? Like you. Why should she be any different from Robert?"

Sir Graham held up his hand to stop her tirade. "I don't want to hear any more about this Robert," he said calmly. "Furthermore, you won't discuss this with him or anyone else. What I have told you is in the strictest confidence."

He didn't need to threaten any reprisal; his cold eyes were all the warning Corinne needed.

"Don't take too long reaching a decision. You can have a couple of weeks to consider it."

Corinne rose to her feet. "I can give you my answer now," she said. She would not say yes, not without Robert.

Sir Graham held up his hand once more. "Don't be too hasty," he told her. "I've asked you once, and that's all. If you refuse, then it's final." He stubbed out the cigar, then added for emphasis: "And you will die. You might live another thirty or forty years, growing old and feeble and senile, but you will die. Think about it, Corinne, think about it."

Corinne stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on the bedroom wall, examining herself, trying to remember herself twenty years ago — and wondering how she would look in another twenty years.

Twenty years wasn't long at all.

And time was cruder to a woman than a man. Would Robert still love her when her skin was loose and wrinkled, her hair gray, her face thin, her stomach fat... ? Already she had noticed the way that he looked at other women — younger women. He was still very handsome, tall and slim, but the years would take their toll on him as well. But men seemed to age so much more easily than women. They didn't live as long, there were more old women than old men, but what consolation was that? Corinne didn't want to grow old, and she didn't want to die.

But how could she live, accept the treatment, then watch as Robert grew older and frailer, until he finally died while she remained the same? The answer was simple: She couldn't.

She had known and loved Robert for so long, he meant more to her than anything else in the world . . . than everything else in the world. She couldn't give him up. She wouldn't want to live without him, which she'd

have to do if she accepted the treatment and Robert couldn't have it.

What was the point of living forever if it meant being alone? Corinne could still remember how it had been before she met Robert, the endless lonely days and the even longer lonely nights.

The cost of eternity was too high. She would give up everything, even the offer of infinite tomorrows, for Robert, because without him she was only half alive.

She didn't regret any of the years she had spent with Robert. They'd had their problems and their arguments, but on the whole their relationship had improved with time. She looked forward to spending the rest of their lives together.

There was no need to tell Graham Anderson of her decision. If she didn't get in touch, then he would realize she believed her first instincts were correct and that she'd refused his offer. That night, as they held each other close, Corinne said to Robert: "Tomorrow I'm going to start my final portrait. I don't want any objections or discussion — because I'm going to paint you."

Robert opened his mouth to speak, but she put her hand across his lips.

"Don't say anything," Corinne told him. "All you have to do is nod your head."

Robert did as he was told; he nodded his head.

"Good," said Corinne. "That's settled. It'll be my last and my best."

She tried not to think about why she wanted a portrait of Robert, but was aware it was because as the years went by she would have a permanent reminder of him as he was now — before he had grown old. But for the same reason, she had no intention of doing a self-portrait. Corinne had never painted herself — she didn't want to remember how she had been, not when the mirror showed her the way she was now. The idea had not been very pleasant in the past, but for the future it seemed even more frightening, forever taunting her with the opportunity of immortality — which she had thrown away.

"And when I've finished," Corinne concluded, "we're going to go on a holiday. A long tour of the world, visit some of the places we've never seen — while they still exist."

The portrait was the most difficult Corinne had painted in years. Perhaps it was so hard to capture Robert on canvas because she knew him too well, or it was because they were in an entirely different relationship during the sessions. It took much longer than she had anticipated.

"I'm not surprised no one ever asks you to paint them twice," Robert had said on the first day. "It's so boring sitting here. At least you could talk to me."

"Move your arm back where it was," Corinne had replied.

"I'm glad I'm not paying for this," he'd complained, shifting his elbow half an inch along the arm of the chair.

Half of the work of a painting was done when the subject had left; she worked directly with oils on a prepared canvas. When she was alone and without distraction, she could concentrate on the more detailed work of the background and clothing. It looked more natural to follow what should have been there rather than what she'd actually seen. She could invent the texture of cloth and the way it hung, imagine the shadows where it was folded and creased, far more authentically than it ever appeared in real life.

Finally, on the fifth day, Corinne said: "That's it. You can go now."

"Thank God for that." Robert stood up and stretched, rubbing at the back of his neck. He began to walk toward the easel. "Can I take a look?"

"No." She hadn't allowed him to see what she'd done yet; she never showed her portraits until they were complete.

"You said you were finished," said Robert, but he halted.

"I said you could go; I didn't say I'd finished. I'll be a few more hours yet, but I don't need you." She glanced from the picture and over at Robert, and she smiled as though she'd just seen him — he was no longer the stranger who'd been sitting for her. "I want to get it done tonight."

"O.K. When do you think you'll be through?"

"I'll be back about eight, no later than nine."

"Fine. Don't be late; I'll book a table for dinner, to celebrate. Shall I pick you up here?"

Corinne nodded, her attention returning to the painting in front of her.

"That way at least I'll get to see my picture," said Robert. "I'll come by at half past eight, O.K.? Phone me if there's a change in plan."

Corinne squeezed another inch of cerise onto the piece of mirror she used as a palette, and when she looked around next, Robert had gone. She wasn't sure if he'd left a minute ago or an hour.

She realized that there wasn't much more she could do; the light from the window was fading. Even if there had been more daylight, she had

virtually finished. She put down her brushes and easel and climbed off the stool. She had finished; there was no point trying to delay the moment any longer. She was through. It was over, finished. Her last portrait.

She didn't even look at it as she took her brushes over to the corner by the sink and began cleaning them with turpentine.

What was it Robert had said before? That he'd come and pick her up before they went out to dinner? But that was no good. She had to go home and change. She kept other clothes in her studio, but nothing suitable for going out. And she certainly wanted to shower and wash her hair if they intended to celebrate.

After drying her hands, she rubbed skin lotion into her palms and worked it around her fingers and up to her wrists. She stared at her hands. They were long and slender, like her fingers. Her fingernails were trimmed down almost to the quick, because they were very brittle and split easily. Maybe she'd have time to grow and take care of them better from now on.

She took off her smock and hung it up, glancing around the high-ceilinged white room and remembering all the people who had been there. Corinne had always preferred painting in this room, although that hadn't always been possible. Removing her headband, she shook her hair free as she walked toward the phone. She noticed her distorted image in the blank screen while punching out the first digits. Then she paused and pressed the cancel button.

What was the point in calling Robert? What was there to tell him? Only that she was coming home early. She could be back in less than half an hour; then she could bring him here to view the completed portrait before they went out for the evening.

Ideally, she would have liked to take the picture now and give it to Robert as her gift. But it was too wet and awkward to manage alone.

She put on her street clothes, her old faded and patched coat, the scratched boots with worn heels, then left the room and security-sealed the door. Although the major walkways were quite well guarded, Corinne always carried a bag with a small sum of money. It could easily be snatched from her hand, and it was safer than having nothing. If an attacker found nothing to steal, he was more likely to become violent.

She walked quickly, not looking at anyone as she passed, her eyes aimed at the ground a dozen feet ahead of her, until she reached the perimeter fence that surrounded the block of flats. The armed guard in the blockhouse opened the outer gate as she approached and he recognized

her.

Often, Corinne had considered that she ought to take over one of the other flats as her studio, but it wouldn't have been the same. She'd had the old room for fifteen years now, and she felt more at home there in some respects than in the apartment she and Robert shared.

The outer gate shut and the inner one opened, and Corinne walked across the bare concrete toward the entrance. She glanced up at the twenty-story tower for a moment; then, as she reached the glass door, she saw Robert in the hallway, waiting for the lift. Corinne slowly pushed open the swing door and began to creep silently toward him.

Then she realized that he wasn't alone. A slender girl with short curly red hair was with him, and Robert was nodding his head as she spoke. Corinne paused, wondering who she could be. Perhaps she was one of the neighbors. The lift doors opened, and Robert put his arm around the girl's shoulder, drawing her close to him and kissing her on the cheek. She laughed and pulled away, jumping into the lift.

Corinne froze, unable even to turn away in case Robert should see her. But all of Robert's attention was on his companion, and the lift doors slid shut. Slowly, Corinne walked toward the lift and pressed the button automatically.

What was going on? She'd seen Robert, she'd seen the girl, and she'd seen the way they had been behaving — but she refused to believe the evidence of her own eyes. No wonder Robert had asked her what time she'd be finishing at the studio tonight and to tell him if there was any change. He'd wanted to bring that girl back here with him.

The second lift appeared, the doors opening, but Corinne didn't move. The doors swished shut. She turned and went out through the swing door.

When she reached the studio, it was twilight and she couldn't remember having walked there. She felt dazed and bewildered as she moved across the bare floor and sat down on her stool in front of the easel and stared at Robert's picture.

"How could you?" she whispered. "How could you?"

Without realizing, she'd picked up her sharpest knife from the workbench. Now she raised it like a dagger, about to plunge the blade into Robert's treacherous face.

Her hand quivered, and her eyes were wet with tears, blurring her vision of the portrait. This wasn't the answer. She opened her fingers, and the knife dropped to the floor.

Corinne sat without moving as night fell, and she shivered, feeling hollow and cold inside.

After a while she stood up and walked across the room toward the phone.

"Corinne! Where have you been?" Robert stared at her, his face reflecting a complex series of emotions — relief and anger, joy and anxiety. "I've been nearly out of my mind, worried to death. What happened to you?"

"Hello, Robert," said Corinne, pushing past him into the living room. "I've been away,"

Robert rubbed his hands across his cheeks. "I know you've been away, for God's sakes! But where? Why? What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Corinne sat down. "I feel a bit tired, that's all."

She was exhausted. For fifteen days she'd been under sedation, and the effects of the drugs hadn't worn off yet. They hadn't told her what had been done, and she felt almost exactly the same as she had the day she entered the clinic. There were no scars or any sign that her body had been operated on. Perhaps it had all been a hoax, a joke fashioned by the prime minister's warped sense of humor; maybe he'd raped her every day while she'd been unconscious. Corinne didn't really care.

Robert sat on the edge of the chair opposite, staring at her. "I've been through hell, Corinne. I thought you were in hospital or had been kidnapped ... or were dead. All I could hope was that you'd decided to go on that holiday without me. I tried the police, the security forces, the medical authorities. No one knew, and no one wanted to know." He shook his head. "It's good to see you, marvelous to see you. Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Corinne shrugged, trying to keep her heavy eyelids from touching. "I had to get away, Robert, that's all. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know. But ..." She shrugged again.

"Corinne. Corinne, Corinne." Robert stood up and paced the room. "When we went to the studio that night and found you gone, we thought you must have come back here and we'd missed you. Then when you never arrived. . . . Oh, God, I can't begin to tell you. . . . Why the hell couldn't you let me know you were all right?"

Corinne watched him as he paused and stared out of the window. She

frowned. "'We?'" she asked.

"Yeah. Juliet was here, my niece. You know her, Louisa's daughter."

"Juliet?" repeated Corinne, trying to remember.

"Yes, Juliet. She's started at art college now and she wanted to see you again. She phoned up because she was in London, and I invited her around that evening."

Corinne stood up and walked over to Robert, putting her arms around him and resting her head on his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her hair and held her tight.

Corinne wanted to cry, but there were no more tears.

Corinne wished she had never painted that portrait of Robert, or that she'd destroyed it when she had the opportunity — yet she didn't want to be without it, either. While it hung on the wall of the house in Kent where they'd moved after their two-year world tour, it reminded her of how Robert had been.

The portrait was how she always thought of him, and whenever she studied him properly it came as a surprise to notice how much he'd altered. His hair was thinning on top and the black lightening to gray at the sides, while the skin around his cheeks was more creased and drawn; his face was gaunter, a maze of broken veins; he'd put on weight, particularly around the middle; he no longer stood so straight, and his shoulders seemed more hunched, as though the passing years were dragging him down. He was forty-eight years old, one year more than Corinne.

Yet Corinne hadn't altered since she had returned from the clinic.

She studied her image in the mirror every day, looking for signs of aging — for deeper wrinkles on her face, for her skin to become drier and lose its tautness, for the first gray hair to show itself. But there was nothing.

At first she had pretended that by keeping her appearance, it would prevent Robert from looking at younger women. He had no need to, because she was a younger woman now. But all the time she was worried by the fact that Robert was growing older while she was not. What would happen when it became all too apparent? How would he react when he discovered, as he inevitably must, that the years were dividing them?

She ate more starchy food and gave up exercise, trying to add a few pounds to her slender figure; she no longer spent so much time looking after her skin, and she chose different makeup; she tinted her hair a shade

lighter, gradually adding hints of gray. It made a difference, but not much.

And in all the years after the treatment, Corinne never picked up a brush; there was neither the need nor the desire to paint again.

She and Robert spent almost all of their time together. They had always talked for hour after hour, but now it seemed there was very little to talk about. There was less laughter, and there was less loving.

"I think we ought to move back to London," Robert said one warm summer afternoon as they sat in the garden and watched two butterflies chase each other across the empty swimming pool. "It's a lot safer there these days."

"I like it here," Corinne answered.

"So do I, but I don't think it's good for us. We're so isolated, it's like living in another world. The days slip by, then the weeks and months, almost without noticing. Then suddenly another year's passed."

Corinne said nothing.

"And you've still got your studio in London," Robert told her.

"Have I?" Corinne turned to look at him.

Robert nodded. "I've kept on paying the rent, because I knew you'd want to go back there someday."

"We're not broke, are we?"

"No, not at all. But I thought you might want to start painting again."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you're an artist, that's why. You didn't start painting for money; that wasn't the reason you did it. I know you said you'd stop doing portraits, but you didn't mean you'd give up painting absolutely."

Corinne wondered what had made Robert bring up the subject, and she waited for him to continue.

"I think you ought to start painting again, and soon," he said. "It's been eight years. You never do anything these days, nothing at all. You don't even read, and I look after the house and garden. You ... you've just retired." He shrugged, then smiled, as if to take the edge off what he'd said.

"There's plenty of time," said Corinne, and she returned her attention to the butterflies.

"You've changed, you know; you're different. Ever since you went

missing that time." He grabbed hold of her arm, forcing her to look at him.

After that first day, when Corinne wouldn't answer, Robert had never questioned Corinne again about her disappearance. He seemed to have realized that she would never tell him where she'd been or what had happened.

"I haven't changed, Robert." Corinne said.

Robert stared at her, his brow creased, his eyes studying her face. He opened his mouth slightly, as if to speak, then closed it again. He shook his head once. Looking down at where his hand clutched her bare arm, he squeezed his fingers against her flesh for a moment before letting go.

"No," he said slowly, as his eyes widened, "you haven't, have you? I'm the one who's changed." He stood up abruptly, his chair toppling to the ground, and he turned his back on Corinne. "Tell me it isn't true."

"What?" Corinne glanced at him as he clenched his fists by his side. He couldn't know, he couldn't possibly know. He was only guessing wildly.

"Tell me it isn't true!" He spun around, his eyes meeting hers.

Corinne blinked, then looked away.

"I see," he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"What's the matter, Robert?"

"Come on! Don't play games. You can't pretend anymore."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Corinne. Then she looked away, searching for the butterflies, but they had disappeared.

Robert went back into the house. He left an hour later, and she never saw him again.

Lying on a towel, a huge parasol protecting her from the sun's glare, Corinne stared out across the white sand toward the turquoise ocean.

"There's a letter for you," said Kurt, as he sat down next to her and set the tray of iced bottles and chilled glasses on the low table.

Corinne raised her sunglasses and peered at the envelope as Kurt held it toward her. It had been a long time since she'd received a letter. This one had followed her around the world, judging by the number of changes to the address.

"Open it," she said.

Kurt did so, and she took the single sheet of paper from him and unfolded it. The letter was handwritten, and she glanced at the signature first, not recognizing it. Juliet Merchant. Then she looked at the date.

"What's the date today?" she asked.

Kurt told her; the letter had been written three months ago. She began reading.

Dear Corinne Dewar:

You probably do not remember me, but we met many years ago when you came to visit my parents. My mother, Louisa, was Robert Coogan's sister. I will never forget meeting you. In fact, it was probably because I met you that I went to art college. I studied fine art, but was not good enough to become a full-time painter. I did, however, meet my future husband at college, and we now have three children and four grandchildren.

The reason I am writing is to give you the sad news that Robert died last week. He passed away peacefully in his sleep, of natural causes. I have no idea why you and my uncle separated after so many years together, and he would never say. Some time previously, Robert asked me to write to you upon his death and say that he was sorry and that he understood — he said you would know what he meant. He could not write himself as he had become blind during the last years of his life.

Finally, I would just like to add how much pleasure your work has given me and say how much I and so many others regretted your decision to give up painting.

I hope you are in good health. Best wishes.

Juliet Merchant.

Corinne folded the letter, then tore it into pieces before giving it back to Kurt. Kurt handed her one of the two tall glasses he had filled. As she raised it to her lips, Corinne studied him from the corner of her eye, noticing the fold of spare flesh around his waist and the way his hair was starting to recede at the temples.

She sipped her drink, gazing across the smooth beach to the tanned,

lithe figure of a young man walking in their direction. He had been swimming, and his nude body sparkled with drops of water. His hair was blond and his limbs and torso finely muscled.

As he passed Corinne, his eye appraised her own slim, naked body. He smiled at her, slowing his pace and Corinne returned the smile.