

TANITH LEE

THE EYE IN THE HEART

THE LAST PLACE I SAW WAS Venice. He said he wanted it to be somewhere special -- and it was. The memories are so perfect, and whenever I want, I can take them out of the cupboards of my mind and look at them. The malachite green canals, the greenish blue of the Italian skies, the gleaming domes, the white pigeons. And my husband, standing brown and smiling, his eyes full of pride in me, and love-- and, yes, sexual love as well. How thoughtful he was. They were a magical two weeks.

Our holiday was marred only by one brief episode. I don't know why I think of it, but sometimes I do. To belong to our Sect of course sets us apart. All persons of deep convictions experience these odd occasional slights. One mustn't dwell on them or feel bitterness, because bitterness does no one any good.

But there. She was a young woman in a white dress, tanned, and apparently happy, as we were. Impulsively I went up to her, and asked if she would take a photo of us, my husband and I. I could imagine him, in the future, looking at it fondly, remembering our delight and oneness. But the girl edged away a little. Firmly she said "No." And then, blushing and frowning, to cover her bluntness, "I'm no good with cameras. Excuse me." Then she hurried off.

My husband, seeing I was slightly upset, at once found a man, who was much more amenable, and took the shot of us, which I've seen. It's a nice photograph.

Perhaps the girl was only truthful and didn't want to let us down. Yet...! think she had realized we were people of a sect, our particular Sect, and our beliefs offended her. And somehow, now, I sometimes see her face, with my mind's eye, its blush, its frown, the sort of -- terror -- in it. So, using my special computer, I'm trying to explain.

THERE WAS ONE other thing about Venice, and other places we went through. I did feel so sorry for the older women, the married ones. I noticed especially, their eyes were so dull and heavy and troubled. But I haven't been much outside our Town, and so I'm used to our own married women, whose eyes are always clear and sparkling.

When I was a child, a lot of girls, including me, used to pretend to be married. My mother sometimes told me off for using so many of her scarves, and losing them in the woods. That was before we started Domestic Classes. Then, of course we had to practice properly. There were a few accidents, the worst one when a girl fell down the school steps and broke her ankle. Otherwise we laughed so much. But soon you get very proficient. I was, well, I'm boasting but it's a fact, one of the best. And it's stood me in good stead. Later, once they've allocated your house in Town, for a month before you marry, you have individual training. My husband told me I was an absolute star, but then I showed off to him. I demonstrated what I could do. We sneaked in the house alone, when we weren't supposed to, you see. I think quite a few people guessed, actually. His

smile didn't help, it was so broad afterward you could count all his white teeth!

The only thing I never had quite right was the cooker -- I'm still working on that, but the splash-screen gets pretty dirty. Just so you know, I'm not saying I'm faultless at anything -- heaven forbid.

Some people, I've heard, sometimes ask why. I mean, why we do this.

It's so obvious that it's quite hard to explain. It's that thing about bitterness again. Bitterness, and being hurt -- worrying over what you can't do anything about -- and then hurting others, worrying others, making a mess. And then -- you're left with nothing.

We marry for life. Marriage is sacred. And everyone wants to be happy.

My mother had the bluest eyes. I used to stare and stare at them, so clear and darting as she spoke to me. Aquamarines. I can still see them, though she died last year. It was a sad time. Dad may marry again, though. He's still strong and young-sounding. I take flowers to her grave, and once I tripped, and this young girl, about twelve, ran over and helped me up. I could almost hear Mom laughing. And you such a star! She was sweet, my mother, but she was very down-to-earth, too.

I can recall quite well what she said to me, when I was about five, and she

explained. So maybe I should just use her explanation, instead of trying to find the words myself.

"Women are so sensitive, darling. They have to be. They have to be aware what a man wants, what their children want. They have antennae all over them, whiskers of feeling. And unfortunately that has a down side. It means they get hurt so easily. And then they doubt. And soon they just can't believe. She'll say to her husband, 'You don't love me anymore. I can see it in your face.' Maybe he's just tired -- or maybe his love is tired. But she'll read something so awful into it. And then she'll nag and rave on, and drive him crazy. And in the end he won't be able to stand it. He'll slap her or worse, he'll leave her. And what good will that do her? And men, you see, honey, sometimes they do little things...little things it's better for a wife not to know. It's much nicer if she needn't worry about if she can forgive him. Do you remember that silly song, "Lipstick on your Collar"? Well, the women here in Town don't ever have to bother about that. Most of all, the thing they always see, with the eye of the heart, is how he looked at them last. All that wanting and care, that love. And when he tells you he loves you, why, he does. Oh darling, we're so lucky."

When we came back from Venice, I went straight into our hospital. I had the loveliest doctor. He was the kindest man. He assured me, there isn't a single scar, and he let me feel, so I know. "You're pretty as a picture," he said. He even flirted, and I must have looked nothing at all after the op. "Your eyes are green as grapes, Missy. I could look and look at those green eyes. I could eat them up."

My husband bought them for me. Dad would have, but he just insisted. They are truly beautiful, I cried out when I saw them, in their velvet box. We displayed them with the wedding presents. I'm sorry to say I think there was a bit of jealousy here and there. Well, I'm sorry to say I enjoyed it, too.

And now we live so happily-- all but for the cooker! Never mind. I've got years and years to master that.

In my mind, I can see my husband as clear as a painting, and the love and wanting in his face. And when he kisses me, that's what I see, that's what I'll always see.

Oh, I know there are people out there, deluded people who perhaps even mean well, who try and try to get us stopped, or hounded out of the state, but if only I could tell them how wrong they are. Though I'm blind now, because I'm blind, like every married woman in Town, I know I need never be afraid.

It was my twenty-first birthday last week, and my husband was a little bit late -- only an hour or so. And I might well have started to worry, searching his face, trying to trap him in some lie .... But no, he wasn't lying about all that at the office. I only have to remember his face, the way he looked in Venice. And I take his hand, and his lips are warm.

After all, as my mother said, "What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over."

And I've some wonderful news to give him when he gets back tonight. I'll wait up, even until three or four in the morning. I'm pregnant.

I wonder if it will be a girl?