

Dream of Two

by

Gordon G Hall

words@lakefell.com

© All rights reserved. You may only download and read this work for your personal enjoyment

One

(Athens, Greece)

Anna was playing with pleasure, this fantasy of hers invoking her husband, Panagiotis. She reveled in the wet kisses embellished with soft bites in their tender as well as passionate lovemaking, just as they had indulged themselves as a young, carefree couple. Her body was reacting to him now as it had done then some twenty years ago. Oh, how she needed him. She moaned, reacting to her intimate thoughts, her blood rushing, throbbing throughout her body.

The faint, clattering sound of her paintbrush hitting the floor brought Anna to herself with a start. Tiny splashes of red paint were flecked along her blue jeans, onto her trainers, and over the floor. Her palette was still resting in her left hand; thumb loosely emerging from it. Reality assured her that she was here, at home, in the room that served as her studio. Here she felt able to be her creative self despite the bleak outlook towards the flat roofs of the adjacent apartment blocks. The view of aerials, chimney pots, and lift cabins was hardly one to inspire artistic creativity, but that was entirely her own doing. "I need North light Panos" she had said to her husband, although to be truthful she only said so because it sounded 'artistic'. It did not seem to make any difference at all to the execution of her paintings and she wondered why on earth artists made such a thing about it. This workroom of hers, her studio, was therefor on the top floor at the back of their apartment where, due to the lack of proper roof insulation, it was cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer. The North Light wandered in from the large window, glancing off finished canvasses and 'work in progress' pieces, thereby seeming to mock her attempt at artistic acceptability.

Immediately in front of her stood her half-finished painting, the awakening kiss of 'Pygmalion and Galatea' depicting the moment when the sculptor brings his

beautiful vision to life. She was determined to catch the essence of this scene, that showed allegorically such an important instant for any sculptor or painter. For was just at this point that her artistic, creative dream emerged as a physical reality. How typical, she thought, that this beautiful myth of her own country, Greece, was only known nowadays because it was popularized by Ovid, a Roman. This country of hers was indisputably the source of so much creativity in the arts, architecture, theatre, philosophy and music, but this was negated by the absence of organization. Thus it had been two thousand years ago, and thus, she thought, it is now.

Panos had not overtly discouraged her artistic efforts although he was apt to make disparaging remarks about her ability. At least he had never tried to stop her. Her painting had become such an important part of her life, allowing her to express her feelings, her hopes and her delights. She now had good contacts with two galleries here in Athens where it seemed that her work was appreciated, and more to the point was sellable. Her style was classical rather than modern for unless you were a very well-known artist it was difficult to sell anything later than Impressionism. She did not make much money from these sales so she supplemented her income by doing some consultancy work on interior design with a very able Real Estate agent.

The last twinges of her fantasy tugged at her mind causing her to tremble at the vividness of her imagination; it was such a stark expression of a need. But she knew better than to comprehensively lose touch with the real world. She would put this daydreaming behind her. The actual, corporeal, Panos was, nowadays, hardly ever with her here in their Athens home, and sadly she had to accept that their lovemaking had deteriorated in recent years. In truth Panos' interest in sex had dwindled to the extent that his sexual technique was not half as skillful as the wonderful intimate scenes that she seemed to imagine so easily. It was almost as if Panos did not have the time or the need to show any kind of desire or tender emotion. Whilst he was prepared to perform adequately enough when required, he failed to bring to her the passion that she in her turn was so eager to express.

She longed for her 'old Panos', who really loved her. But perhaps this heightened sexual desire of hers was not really a longing for him, but rather a more carnal desire that was heightened by disassociating itself from her husband. No, she

loved him. She just found it galling to have to accept the sad reality that he placed love for his job above any love that he might now feel for her. She was unhappy that he worked such long hours and that his job as a structural engineer took him away from her all week and every week.

“It’ll only be for a short while darling” he had said when he accepted the promotion to Supervising Manager in the big firm where he was employed. “If I go on working hard and continue to do well then the next promotion will come along within a couple of years and we can buy that cruising yacht we have set our hearts on.” Panos did indeed work hard, but the expected promotion never came and, slightly to her relief, neither did the boat.

She caught sight of the clock outside the studio door. She must be out of her mind. It was almost half past nine. The smell of sweat, mingling with that of turpentine, pervaded her body. Her clothes were splattered with paint and she this unkempt artist was not the person that she wanted to be to welcome home her hard-working man. Panos would be arriving at any moment now and she needed to make herself presentable, both for herself and for him. He would never acknowledge that she had established herself as a professional artist and made it clear that her primary role was that of a loving, caring wife.

From the kitchen there issued the wonderful smell of the meal she had so lovingly started to prepare earlier in the afternoon. She had prepared the chicken quarters and blanché the bacon to remove some of its saltiness. She had added onions, mushrooms some herbs out of her garden, and of course the red wine. The meal was now simmering gently on the stove. There was true delight in being able to cook this dish that Panos enjoyed so much. In the fridge was a bottle of Santorini Atheri, Panos’ favorite wine. In contrast to her, he had a clear preference for white wine, although admittedly it was a slightly strange choice for this meal.

Unlike the bathroom in many Greek apartments theirs had an outside window. She had spent a little time in England before they were married and had insisted that their bathroom should be like those she had experienced abroad. She stripped off her messy clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor, and stepped into the shower. Over the years she had taken care of her body. She was slightly on the short side at 165cm

and was slim without being thin. Her dark brown hair fell well below her shoulders and her skin, although naturally pale for a Greek, turned a light golden brown in the summer months.

It was a shame that this could not be a more leisurely shower, but such indulgence had been thwarted by over-involvement with that painting and then being carried away into a fantasy world. It had only been a daydream, but a quivering within her testified to the underlying reality of her desire.

She reveled in the water cascading through her hair, across her face and then sluicing over her lower body. Her hands felt downwards, running over her flat stomach.

“I want a baby just as much as you do, my darling,” Panos had told her, “But I really have a responsibility to you and to our future child to ensure we are in a stable and comfortable financial position. Anyway, once I have that promotion, I will be able to devote so much more time to being a really good father.”

She had believed him, although her body cried out that time was not on her side and she should have a baby right now.

Anna stepped out of the shower. She could have turned on the air conditioning as just a little of the heat of the day still lingered into this the Athens evening. The lightest of toweling ensured the continuance of the cool moist feeling over her body for a little longer.

The flowery patterned silk-cotton dress was a piece of cloth so light that it rippled at her slightest move, bringing with it both comfort and elegance. She gazed at herself in the mirror for a while, looking at her reflection. The thin fabric of her dress exposed much of her slim legs, the upper part of her breasts, and all of her shoulders and arms. For a moment she fancied that beyond this solid sheet of mirrored glass she caught sight of another Anna, the Anna that she should have become, who was properly recognized and loved.

“Can you never stop fantasizing today?” She laughed.

Music always succeeded in relaxing her, ridding her of the tension that was inside her. He should be playing a CD, it would make for a warmer, more welcoming, atmosphere when Panos arrived. She started to flip through the CDs as she sat on the

arm of the woodcut Byzantine-style, hand-made sofa, a piece of the finest craftsmanship and Anna's most prized possession in all the house.

It looked as innocent as the day she both physically and mentally, against her husband's wishes, manoeuvred it into the apartment, absolving itself from responsibility for any part in the huge argument that it had engendered between her and Panos

"Jesus, Anna, this is way too expensive and much too uncomfortable!" he exclaimed indignantly. Panos had little appreciation of art, or indeed fine craftsmanship. His was a more practical turn of mind. A sofa should be all that a sofa needed to be: spacious, soft, and hospitable to the user. They already possessed one such. "Why on earth should I buy a second sofa that I'm never going to sit on?"

She could not come up with anything other than the rather feeble truth. "Just for the beauty of it." That had, of course, hardly convinced Panos, so she had to resort to other means, emotional blackmail based upon another truth.

"I never wanted this promotion of yours."

"It's for your benefit too, you know."

"I hate your long absences from home. I feel lonely and unloved in this empty place."

"It won't be forever."

"Look, I've put up with you saying that we should not have a child yet. Have you any idea what this is doing to me? How much I want a child? I need a child. We need a child."

She had finally got her child-substitute. She eyed it now as if it were an alien object from a parallel universe.

Panos should have been home at least half an hour ago. Given her tardiness it was fortunate that he was running a little late. His flight had been due to land at quarter past nine and it would not normally take more than thirty or forty minutes to drive from the airport at this time of the evening. But perhaps the plane had been delayed, or he had become stuck behind one of those blasted dust-carts that the city-council seemed to organize so that they caused traffic chaos at the most impossible hours of the day or night.

Nevertheless time was passing and her lovingly prepared meal would not keep forever. Perhaps it would be a good idea to call his mobile? She was reluctant to do this except in some sort of emergency. At home he only used his mobile sparingly, complaining that during the working day he had it constantly pressed to his ear so that surely it would be frying his brain. She could understand and did not expect him to phone her and thought it best not to call him.

She thought of ringing his hotel in Crete, just to be sure that he had not had to delay his return, but it would be unlikely that she would get much information from there. Whenever she tried to phone him at the hotel the receptionist would come up with some reason for not putting her through, either the line was busy, or else “Mr. Dimitriou has not answered the call.” An enquiry as to whether he was in, would always fail to elicit a helpful response. “Providing information as to the whereabouts of our customers is contrary to company policy.” It was hardly helpful.

The landline phone rang, its strident tone breaking the silence of the house and jolting Anna out of her thoughts. It rang again, just as intrusively, then a third time. It could only be Panos, but if he were ringing home at this time then he really was going to be very late. He must have some sort of problem,

The phone was ringing again and she rushed to grab it before she missed the call.

“Hello, Darling . . .” out of breath she managed to pick up the receiver. The voice at the other end of the line was that of a man she did not recognize.

“Good evening.... may I speak to Mrs. Dimitriou please, that is the wife of Mr. Panagiotis Dimitriou?” The voice, measured, a little dreary perhaps, contained just a slight fluctuation in tone that provided a softening effect upon its distant formality.

A numbness rose rapidly through Anna’s body, starting from her toes and now arriving at her head. “You’re speaking to her,” she answered trying to concentrate so she would understand what this caller was trying to say to her.

There was a momentary hesitation whilst the man cleared his throat, this being either the affliction of a heavy smoker, or due to unease about what needed to be said. An overwhelming feeling of anxiety expanded within her and became part of her, a frozen block of ice where her stomach, and her heart, had once been. The

man, who introduced himself as a policeman, was talking fast, as if he wanted to get this message out of him as quickly as he could. Her ears burned and her mind refused to register what was being said. This voice spoke so close to her ear and yet, it was as if it were from another world, a place with which she had no possible connection. Things were being spoken that were unthinkable, a rumble of sound that she would have rejected as incomprehensible had it not contained a message so clear and simple and brief. Her husband had lost his fight for life in the AHEPA General Hospital in Thessaloniki, following a severe car crash on the National Road. She was required to visit the hospital for the formal identification of his body and the completion of the standard procedures....

A deafening buzzing in her ears prevented her from hearing anything further. She restrained herself from squeezing her temples to keep her head from exploding. This had to be some form of practical joke. There could be no truth in what was being said. The words kept ringing in her ears. Thessaloniki. National Road. Accident.

“Wait a minute. I’m afraid there must have been some misunderstanding.” She tried to regain some composure, clutching at just one final life raft of hope. “My husband has had nothing to do with Thessaloniki or the National Road for at least four years now. He has just come off a flight returning from Crete. By now he will have landed at Eleftherios Venizelos airport. He should have been home by now. I’m expecting him to walk in the door at any minute ...”

Her voice faded as the man interrupted her, firmly but kindly re-stating the facts. “I’m afraid that unfortunately there’s no misunderstanding, Mrs. Dimitriou. We have your name and number, amongst others, from the mobile phone that he was carrying.” Then he added mildly but not abandoning the formality that both the occasion, and his position, required, “May I take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences.” His mission completed he rang off.

The phone was a dead thing in Anna’s hand. For seconds it seemed as if it were glued there, as if some massive force was compelling her to hold it to her ear. Perhaps the arrow of time might go into reverse. This film would rewind and the person at the other end of the phone might be someone else, and would say something completely different.

Anna hung up the phone.

The Byzantine sofa appeared as solid as it had been when she had stood up from it those two lifetime-minutes ago.

The balcony door stood open and the buzzing, high-pitched sound of an electronic alarm clock forced its way into the room from an adjoining apartment. A dog barked in a neighboring yard, and from the street below came the merciless shriek of a motorcycle being raced along a narrow alleyway.

Anna stood frozen, numb to the world. Her world. Her world that was disintegrating even as she stood there.

(Thessaloniki, Greece)

Glaring rays of fierce sunlight attacked Anna's exposed, red and swollen eyes almost blinding her as she emerged from the hospital in Thessaloniki. A frantic search of her handbag failed to reveal her dark brown sunglasses. They were not there, nor in the small bag of hand luggage. Why did she always find the most awkward situations to lose her sunglasses? Yes, she had them when she disembarked from the plane. Were they still with her when she arrived at the hospital or had she left them in the taxi? Perhaps she had left them somewhere in the hospital. If so, where? There were too many possibilities, perhaps at the reception desk, or the coffee table in front of the filthy bench where she had sat waiting. Or could they be in the morgue? That word was stomach churning. Gross images from the awful place flooded into her mind. Oh, how awful to see that body, broken and twisted by the accident. They had done their best to make Panos' remains look presentable, but could not totally conceal the trauma that he had suffered.

The sunglasses must be in her bag. She bent down to peer in it, fumbling amongst its contents, glasses case, wallet, lipstick, handkerchief, phone, documents, receipts and an extra dark-blue summer dress that she had stuffed in there 'just in

case'. As she bent down something flopped off her head and over her dark hair that, under the dazzling sun, seemed to be making an attempt to turn blond. The glasses fell onto the ground in front of her.

She was due to meet a woman who had contacted her only yesterday, a stranger who called herself Stella. The phone in the sitting room had rung a few times and then stopped. Anna was reluctant to answer, the last thing she wanted was to listen to stuttering condolences from friends, family, or business acquaintances. Half a minute later the phone started again, insistent, demanding. Anna reluctantly picked it up.

“Yes?”

“Am I speaking to Mrs. Anna Dimitriou?” This was a woman’s voice, and one that she did not recognize.

“My name is Stella. You don’t know me, but I have some information for you regarding your husband who was so tragically killed yesterday.”

Anna said nothing. What could this all be about?

“I assume you are coming to Thessaloniki in the next day or so. May we meet, I really think it is in your interest that we should.”

“I suppose so” Anna said.” She took Stella’s number and said she would phone her.

She had contacted this somewhat mysterious Stella as soon as she had landed and agreed to meet for coffee at Baraka, a café/bar in the centre of town. She had no idea what this woman wanted and hardly felt up to any sort of social contact. However Stella had been insistent that they should meet so she had taken a taxi to Tsimiski and walked up Dimitrou Gounari.

A tall, 30-something woman rose from one of the outside tables and held out her hand. “Hello, I’m Stella”. She was undeniably attractive in the manner of a model, with long legs and a thin body. Her light brown hair was styled in a pixie cut. Despite her looks she did not appear to be in much better shape than Anna, Clearly she had been crying recently although she had made an attempt to cover her red and swollen eyes with concealer.

“I am in no condition for small-talk,” said Anna, “tell me why you have contacted me at this unhappy time, and I will be on my way.”

Stella was clearly nervous, fiddling with her coffee spoon and playing with her paper napkin. She was reluctant to meet Anna’s gaze. “I really don’t know how to tell you this,” she said “I know it is going to be an awful shock to you. It will not be easy for you to understand and accept, but I would ask you, please, to try and remain calm and not judge me too harshly.”

What could this information be that was so distressing that it would be difficult for her to take in? Anna was prepared for almost anything. Her chest fluttered with anxiety and her heart was responding with irregular beats. She waited with a growing unease.

“Anna,” continued Stella, “by now you know that your husband was not on that flight from Crete that you expected him to have caught. I have known him for about four years and am fairly certain he had never been there during that time. You see for the larger part of each month, that is when he was not with you, Panagiotis worked and lived here, in Thessaloniki”. She paused and searched for Anna’s reaction.

Anna just stared at her expressionless. Her heart was pounding madly now.

“What I am certain you did not know was that Panagiotis was also committed here. By which I mean that we own a house and have two children, my son who is just three and my little girl who is one and a half.”

Anna said nothing. Her whole world was spinning and she could not stop it. She made to stand up, but was overwhelmed. Her legs buckled beneath her and she slid to the ground, knocking over the chair and a glass of water. She was still half-conscious, but could not move her legs or arms. Far away she heard a waitress shouting,

“Kosta, call an ambulance. Now.”

The café staff fussed around her for several minutes. It was overwhelmingly embarrassing to realise what had happened and Anna was even more, unhappy, angry and lost, when Stella’s words returned, lingering in her head, like a half-remembered nightmare that was impinging on consciousness. It all seemed so unreal.

A number of worried faces were gathered around, observing, giving water, moistening her face, smiling with sympathy, and asking concerned questions. Was she all right now? Was there something they could do? If only they would go away and leave her. Someone took her pulse and suggested that perhaps she should be taken to hospital for a check-up.

“No, no hospital,” she said, “and no ambulance. I’m fine”. All she wanted now was a taxi to take her to the airport where she had a flight to catch.

“I am so sorry,” said Stella. “This really shouldn’t have happened.”

Anna said nothing, wondering why this woman was still with her, perhaps gloating over her discomfort.

“I can imagine how difficult this must be for you, and believe me, I’m in a terrible condition myself,” Stella was being kind rather than aggressive, but Anna was losing her patience. She had been maltreated enough for one day and did not want to talk to this imposter.

“What the hell do you want of me? Haven’t you taken enough from me already.”

“The only thing that I want is to be at Panagiotis’ funeral. My children have a right to be there. Panagiotis was their father. I can well understand how upsetting our presence is likely to be to you, but it’s important to us that we should be there.”

Anna could not feel anything. However hard she searched there was no hurt, no anger, no disgust, indeed nothing at all to remind her that she was still human and very much alive. There was not one single emotion to be found. In the end, she came up with just one question, asked out of curiosity. “You knew about me the whole time?”

“Yes,” the woman answered.

So the dirty stinking sub-human rat who had been her husband had led a full open and honest life with this awful woman who was trying to be kind to her

She paused for a few seconds. “Very well, you can do as you like about the funeral, it is no concern of mine”.

During the drive through the roads of Thessaloniki to the airport, and later as she looked vaguely out of the aeroplane window at nothing in particular, she tried to overcome the overwhelming swirl of feelings that were besetting her. It seemed as if

betrayal and pain, rage and despair, were all trying to shoulder each other out of the way in competition for the exclusive occupation of her mind.

She needed to think in practical terms. It had been arranged that Panos' body would be transferred to Athens the next morning. There were the funeral arrangements to take care of and she had to let relatives know. Dora, Panos' mother, had moved to the States as soon as her husband had died, in order to be with her elder son, Petros. Anna had never liked his mother and apparently this feeling was mutual. They had not overcome their suspicion of each other, never really relaxing in their rivalry for primacy in Panos' heart. It was so ironic that in the end neither of them had won that.

Then there were his friends. Not many of them either. With his frequent long absences and lack of interest in maintaining contact, most of the people he had known eventually slipped out of his life. Perhaps she should call Kostas and Paulos who had remained faithful.

On her side - oh my, that was the toughest part - there were her parents, both in their seventies. How much should she tell them? Just learning the news of Panos' death would be enough for her father to need extra pills for heart and blood pressure, and surely mum would need an extra dose of her sedative? Telling them the whole truth about his second family would be so much worse; indeed she feared that it would finish them off. Clearly it would be irresponsible of her to tell them so much, so she would also have to construct a convincing excuse for not expecting her parents to attend the funeral. This was not going to be at all easy.

The plump middle-aged woman on the next seat, who had fallen asleep almost immediately after take-off, was now snoring rather loudly. Her flabby body was occupying the whole of her allocated space and she was, probably in search of some comfort, now leaning seriously to the right. Her head was lolling from time to time onto Anna's shoulder and, as the woman breathed heavily, her head moved in sync with the rhythmical movement of her ample chest. Anna wondered if she could push her back in place without waking her, but this mountain of a woman was far beyond Anna's weight-lifting prowess. She prodded her arm gently, then more persistently. The lady woke up with a jolt, looked first at Anna's shoulder, then in

some surprise at Anna's face. Under different circumstances Anna would have smiled at the woman, perhaps she would have made a pleasant or witty comment, but just now such niceties were beyond her. She must have given her a rather stern glare for the woman smiled timidly and mumbled an embarrassed "I'm sorry". Five minutes later she had fallen asleep again, quickly resuming her previous position. Anna sighed.

Then there was her brother Lukas, just thirty now, nearly a whole decade younger than her, but with him at least she should not have a problem. Lukas was so open-minded and understanding, and yet, she knew he would regret that her 'bloody fraud of a husband' - she could just hear Lukas saying that - was not alive so he could have it out with him man to man. But Lukas would not burden her with inquisition and blame. Who else was there? Ellie of course; Ellie was three years younger and almost like a sister, her closest and perhaps only, true friend. The two of them had laughed when Ellie had graduated from law school at about the same time that she was marrying Panos. "I hope it'll never be necessary," Ellie had said with a smile, "but in case by any chance you need a divorce lawyer, you've got one here for free, lucky you." Ellie had said it in jest, but now Anna knew she would now need both Ellie's friendship and her professional expertise.

(Athens, Greece)

As she entered her house Anna experienced an intense urge to vomit. She ran to the bathroom and was sick. She relieved herself, and poured water over her face. She took off all her clothes but instead of putting them in the washing machine or in the laundry basket, she wrapped them up in a ball and tossed them into the rubbish bin with a swift, somewhat exaggerated movement. It was as if there would never be a detergent strong enough to clean those clothes and by the act of throwing them out into the rubbish she was ridding herself of all the pain and all the shame that was inside her.

Emerging from the bathroom she heard the house phone ringing, not her mobile. Her experience of the last calls she had taken on it presaged something equally unpleasant. She hesitated. Perhaps she should ignore it? But it might be her

parents; they always called her on the home phone. She was uncertain as to whether she was ready to talk to anybody.

“Hello,” said Stella, “I hope you don’t mind. I’m just checking to see if you are okay.”

“Fuck off.” With a growing sense of injustice and cold rage Anna reached down and tore the phone cable from the wall, hurling the phone across the room.

So this was what it had all come to. She looked around the house, so quiet, so empty. This was her life, or what her life had been. These walls, these floors, this furniture had that been her companions and her only family. They had given her comfort and provided her with a sense of belonging. They had held the warmth of bodies; they exuded memories, shouts of laughter, words of love, promises full of hope, and smells of homemade gourmet food accompanied by glasses of wine. They had also held the loneliness and the anticipation and the failure and the anger and the apathy and the compromises that she had made.

She looked around the house as if she was searching for, inspecting, acknowledging the whole of the life she had lived here. Every single centimetre of the house, every piece of furniture and decoration, even every appliance, cried out with some personal memory. The expensive Bokhara carpet that she and Panos had made love on, bought as soon as they had moved into the house before they even had a sofa. The television set they had watched Kieślowski’s Three Colours Trilogy, ever playfully disputing as to which was the best one of the three. The portrait she had given him as a birthday present. The poster, made out of a picture Panos had once taken of her whilst she was sleeping; the blender where she would mix peppermint, rum, sugar, lime and soda to make a Mojito cocktail for moments of festivity and mirth; the closet containing his clothes - and hers. All neatly washed and ironed, fragranced and softened with the best softener she had been able to find in the market. Their bed, that had been host to their hungry explorations, affectionate cuddling, and tired nesting - but also her own bed, her companion and comforter in nights of loneliness, when she had fumbled in the sheets for the memory of the warmth of a body that was absent, where she had smelled the pillows for a lingering

scent in wet, fulfilling, promising dreams - and which had also hosted in her nightmares.

It started slowly and rather quietly, without much sense of celebration. She pulled the sheets off the bed and flung them onto the floor. She took the pillowcases off and tossed them randomly around the room. One landed on the radiator, the other got stuck and hung amusingly on the copper leaves that embellished the small bedroom candelabra. She opened the closet and started taking hangers of clothes out of it, throwing them on the floor, one by one, his clothes and hers. She approached the bookcase and, with admirable strength of arm, swept all the shelves from top to bottom. The books fell all over the place, ending up arranged like a heap of irregular crazed dominoes. She smashed the T.V. with the antique vase they had so longed to acquire, and with her own bare hands broke the glass cover of the poster of her as a sleeping beauty. In doing so she cut herself badly and blood spilled over the glass and the poster and the wall with some of it slowly running down her arm.

She spat on the Bokhara and as her frantic steps took her from room to room she ended up in her studio. She looked at the 'Pygmalion and Galatea' painting temporarily undecided, and then with total dismay. She calmly approached it and after she had taken it off the easel, she thrust her foot through it, pulled it out and then thrust it in again, and again, and again, until the painting was turned into a rag of coloured canvas stripes emerging from the holes she had made, hanging in all directions. When she was finished, and as if such treatment was not enough, she took the remains of the painting out onto the balcony and sent the tattered ghost of 'Pygmalion and Galatea' spinning in free fall from the fourth-floor apartment. This was not her home anymore. Neither had it been her life. She had not been living.

She fell asleep on the studio floor amongst the blood and tears and mucus.

Two

(Lancaster, seven months later)

“And the winner of this year’s Caesar Charleston prize for the best debut Romantic poet is . . .”

The ballroom of the Grand Hotel was oppressively hot. It was oppressively furnished; in fact it was oppressively everything. Presumably in its hey-day, in the era of the *thé dansant*, things had been different. An orchestra would have been playing serenely in the background, palms would have been gently waving in the lightest of breezes, guests would have been gliding easily between tables before taking to the renowned dance floor. But that had all been a long time ago, in a different world.

This evening the ballroom of the Grand had been given over to a private function. Every year the hospitality and tourism industries joined with their trading and manufacturing counterparts to be judged and duly rewarded in their various categories by The Northern Business Initiative. Winning such a prize was hardly national news, but nevertheless it was a much sort after recognition, most especially for ‘up and coming’ organisations. As the prize-giving progressed a sense of ennui prevailed, that could only be alleviated by a decent quantity of alcohol.

The Master of Ceremonies was trying, in vain, to revive the flagging interest of the assembly. Eventually all the business prizes had been thrust into the sweaty hands of falsely smiling chairmen who, because their firms all contributed towards swelling the coffers of the NBI, were in effect awarding themselves large cheques for their achievements.

The MC was not quite done yet. This year, for the first time, the organising committee had decided that they should introduce something a little out of the ordinary. Thus this year there was a Poetry Prize. It was an anomalous little cultural postscript to an evening of lavish entertainment but the MC was spinning out his announcement of the winner as if he was hosting a major celebrity TV show. “Now, Gentlemen, and Ladies of course, it is time to celebrate a little bit of culture - eh?”

You keep the wheels of business turning but where would we all be without a bit of art - eh? We all need a bit of titillation - eh?"

'Eh - indeed' thought Nigel. What the hell was he doing here, an intellectual hostage amongst these thrusting, shiny-suited seekers after power? Admittedly his table seated half a dozen fellow poets, mostly with their partners, but even they seemed to be caught up in the overwhelming commercial spirit of the evening, one rather over-enthusiastic purveyor of doggerel even venturing to suggest that he was so enthused by the evening that he would be seeking sponsorship for his work from one of the firms present.

Nigel wondered if it would have been better had Judith accompanied him. But he was also aware that the presence of his wife might have made things even worse. An unused table setting had stared glumly at him throughout the first two courses before a waitress in fish-net tights had deigned to remove it, finally accepting his assurance that he was destined to remain un-partnered throughout this evening of forced merry-making. It was so difficult, Judith had certainly seemed keen to come and then, just as he was pulling on his brown suede jacket over the retro-1960's black polo-neck sweater, she lay flat out on the bed and put her hand over her eyes, "You go on your own, I'm staying here." There was not even time for a decent argument.

Upon the low platform that was serving as a temporary stage, imaginary drums rolled. All that was needed to complete the ghastly scenario was for the MC to announce a 'commercial break', but in the absence of such the sweaty little man extracted a card from its envelope with a flourish, emulating every flourish that he had flourished throughout the whole tedious evening.

"is . . ." the imaginary drum roll stopped, ". . . Mr Nigel Marston with his sexy poem of love and romance - The Pale."

Nigel froze. Slowly he lowered the glass of sweet fizzy wine that had been approaching his lips, grim stuff it was, but elixir to one seeking an escape from total sobriety. This could not be happening to him. How could he have brought that particular, possibly charming but excruciatingly lightweight and hardly prize-winning poem to this awful place? Why had he been so stupid as to enter the competition? He had offered up a piece of himself, somewhat hackneyed it was true, but an intimate

web of words and emotion. Now it had been ingested in totality by these all-consuming sharks of commercialism that were circling around him, circling closer and ever closer. There was no way out.

The whole ballroom turned towards him. Face after face; table after table of faces; serried ranks of faces - and each one of them was baring its teeth at him, mouths fixed in a rictus of false praise. He sensed rather than saw the green-eyed approximation of support emanating from those fellow poets who were seated with him. Behind their beaming congratulatory smiles metaphorical hands shifted, their fingers better able to tightly clasp around concealed literary daggers.

Real hands were now clapping, smashing one into another, creating a deafening, ever-shifting wall of sound that bounced off the ceiling and reverberated around the walls before wreaking destruction upon assembled eardrums. More hands were raising him from the faux-gold arms of his upholstered chair revealing its deep crimson padding, peppered as it was with whole armies of miniscule yellow stars.

Nigel stumbled his way to the raised dais where many decades ago the resident Big Band had elegantly played a number of Viennese Waltzes. Hands patted his back with such fierceness that in unison they shoved him staggeringly forward. The MC, as resplendent and as uncompromising as a tamer of lions, stood waiting, still sweating slightly, and beaming at him. A moist hand was extended from this oh so jolly little man. It pumped Nigel's right arm, then professionally rotated him to face the room.

"Stay," mouthed the MC as if commanding an errant gundog. He then turned to the besuited bodies seated at tables whose crisp white tablecloths obscured the cheap reality of their plywood tops in some sort of bemused metaphor of the whole evening.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure, no, my very great pleasure to welcome our Special Guest Writer to present the Caesar Charleston prize. So please give a big hand for . . ."

"Oh God," thought Nigel, "Not again."

". . . none other than . . . Miss Josephine Debray."

More thunder from the audience as from the side door of the stage emerged the gothic presence of JDB. She floated, rather than walked to the podium, her ample

frame swathed in things black that boasted a trail of golden tendrils. This doyen passé of the literary scene held up a plump white hand to hush the expected adulation, but not so urgently that she could not indulge herself in it.

Nigel stared at the woman. He vaguely recalled some radio show that had, very briefly, discussed her work. As far as he could remember it had been met with thinly disguised contempt from whatever literary critics had been strutting their stuff on that exceedingly pretentious programme. He was not ashamed to admit that had never read anything written by this bountiful vision.

“I am so privileged that little me has been asked here this evening by no lesser personage than Lord Acton to present this important award that his Foundation has so generously donated as this year’s Caesar Charleston prize.”

The audience once again erupted, whilst a well-built rather florid man half rose from the nearest table thereby acknowledging his own presence. He made a tiny bow in the direction of JDB. His Lordship was a man of manufacture rather than culture, and no doubt due to his making a truly munificent donation to the Ruling Party, had been recently elevated to the peerage.

“I am all too well aware,” cooed JDB, “of how our wonderful poets of today are struggling against the overwhelming tide of Modernism in an almost vain attempt to stem the copious outpouring of Free Verse, and this in the face of something of a drought in government funding.”

His Lordship scowled slightly, and Josephine, sensing his discomfort added, “such being, of course, only the result of the most carefully targeted of initiatives towards industrial sponsorship.” Acton relaxed.

Nigel stared out above the heads of the well-dined attendees. He did not look at the multi-faceted ceiling ball, nor did he focus upon the golden tassels of the crimson pelmets. His spirit picked him up and transported him to the open moorland above his grey stone house. He could hear the bleat of the new-born early lambs and smell the musky scent of the peat-bearing beck. High above him an Elgarian lark ascended, singing its own harmony in tribute to that great composer. Here, in this imagined English countryside, his spirit could rise and fall like that bird, untamed and

untainted by the false splendour and fading promise of the Grand Hotel - and all who were currently sinking within her.

“ . . . to that wonderful poet, Mr Nigel Marston.”

A few hands clapped, realized they were in a very small minority, regretted their mistake, and retreated to their owner's laps.

Had she finished? Why was everything 'wonderful'? Was he supposed to do something?

The MC manoeuvred Nigel obsequiously to just right of stage centre. The prime location that had been picked out by the Roving Spot, was of course fully occupied by the redoubtable JDB. The MC passed an oversize chunk of cardboard to the poetess. She held it out graciously, one edge towards Nigel, who duly took hold of it. Cameras flashed.

“I have great pleasure in presenting you, Mr . . . ahem . . . Nigel darling, with this incredibly generous cheque from the Acton for Action Trust.” She proffered her cheek. Nigel negotiated all the formidable fleshy obstacles in the way of the presented target and administered the statutory smack at air.

He peered curiously over the top of the cardboard of which they both held an end. 'Pay' it said, followed by a hastily scrawled 'Nigel Marston'. The next line jiggled into his view, 'the sum of Two hundred and Fifty pounds Only'. Nigel particularly liked the 'only'.

The MC ushered the Debray off stage and relieved Nigel of the cardboard cheque, propping it against the lectern. “So as a final treat, Ladies and Gentlemen, I will ask Nigel, I do hope I may call you Nigel, to recite his poem, The Pale.”

Sotto voce Nigel responded with just a tremor of hope in his voice, “I don't have it with me.”

“Look at the Autocue,” whispered the MC. Hope died.

With remorseless efficiency the first verse appeared on the screen. He started to read:

*We have strolled the forbidden garden;
My silent love and I;
We have drunk of the midnight perfumes,*

And caught starlight from the sky.

Nigel's throat constricted.

He knew that the poem was doggerel, the saccharine-laden rhyming couplets that would be so eagerly seized upon and torn asunder by the critics, but he was a trifle put out to realise that he had already lost half his audience, most of whom were busying themselves in the all-important task of refilling their glasses. Those few that were still looking in his direction wore the patient fixed smiles of attendees at a Sunday sermon, uncomprehending and massively bored.

We have crossed the mighty oceans;

My storm-tossed love and I.

We have ridden the foaming wave-crests,

And sucked the seas bone dry.

He was having trouble making himself heard over the increasing level of conversation and the clink of so many bottles upon a myriad of glasses.

We have scaled the highest mountains;

My light-foot love and I.

We have climbed the highest summits,

And watched as clouds pass by.

We have wandered the darkest woodlands;

My dappled love and I.

We have counted the trees of the forest,

And howled the wild wolf's cry.

The MC signalled frantically to the sound engineer to increase the volume issuing from the speakers. Nigel lowered his microphone. A screeching howl erupted as feedback filled the hall, bouncing off the peeling, yellowish paint on the upper parts of the walls and hurling itself back at the now boisterous audience.

The MC leapt at Nigel pushing up his hand that held the Mic.

“Keep it up.” He said. At that very moment the screeching ceased and, save for those words, reeking with double entendre, the hall fell silent. The phrase resonated around the quietened ballroom.

A snigger ran around the audience as the overdressed and over-stressed exchanged meaningful winks. “Keep it up, ho, ho!” There was no way forward now. Nigel surveyed the gaudy ties and glinting necklaces displayed upon the necks of their corporate owners, who were exhibiting all the signs of at least partial inebriation. The sniggering metamorphosed into a rumble of barely suppressed laughter that ran from table to table.

The MC called for silence. “Gentlemen, Gentlemen, please give our award-winning poet your attention.”

Nigel fought against an overwhelming desire to run, to put as much space as he could between himself and this God-awful place with its God-awful audience.

*We have loved with the wildest passion;
My wanton love and I.
When you steal through my open widow
And fondle my naked thigh.*

The attendees were in the mood now, and no mistake. An extremely tedious evening of receiving awards for their business prowess had emboldened the recipients to regard this so-called poet as the walk-on comedy turn arranged specifically for their amusement. Nigel ploughed on amongst the catcalls and ribaldry, the end was in sight:

*But now, Light Love, it's over,
It is time to bid goodbye
For though Moonlight shines forever
Mere Mortal Man must die.*

Nigel stood quietly and alone, bombarded by roars of laughter and raucous shouts of ‘Keep it up, Nige’.

For Nigel it was the final straw. The ghastly decaying ballroom decked out in its glitzy gold and crimson frippery, the sweaty little oh-so-funny MC, the podgy gothic eminence that, having left the limelight, had plumped itself down next to Acton, that parvenu of a hapless peer. And now his tender offering to the gentle moon, the muse of poesy, had been utterly destroyed. Nigel clutched his microphone and moved menacingly to the front of the low staging.

“Fuck off,” he said. “Fuck off the whole fucking lot of you.”

The MC laid a restraining hand upon the arm holding the microphone.

“And particularly, Fuck Off You,” said Nigel., turning the man around and gently propelling him towards the back of the stage.

The podium boasted an old-fashioned microphone cable upon which the MC tripped and in doing so hurled himself headlong into the backcloth, which collapsed around him revealing recently painted scenery, that of a tableaux depicting what appeared to be a Roman orgy.

It seemed to Nigel that this was curiously apposite.

The MC unrolled himself from the backcloth and decided that he must remove the poet. He sidled around the far side of the now deserted podium and placed himself squarely in front of Nigel, making a successful grab for the microphone. For one, short, moment it looked as though he might regain control of the situation, however the unfortunate man had been startled by the ease with which he had wrested the mic from Nigel’s grip and, unbalancing, took a pace to his rear. With a howl of surprise and fear he tripped backwards off the staging falling heavily upon the floor. Unaware that the mic was still live he uttered the immortal words “Shit, my bum hurts!” The audience bayed with laughter and the photographer from the Gazette snapped a frame that the next day would be syndicated, to his great profit.

Nigel was feeling sick, he was exhausted, and above all he wanted out of here. He could no longer be associated in any further way with this tawdry award ceremony. In a final attempt to preserve his own dignity, and the dignity of poets the world over, he walked firmly and finally from the ballroom.

With a feeling of the greatest relief he stood upon the front steps of The Grand Hotel and drew in a deep breath. Then, to the distress of three blue-rinsed ladies from the USA who had just alighted from their taxi, he threw back his head and bellowed to the world in general “Bloody, bloody, hell!”

(Lake District, UK)

Twenty miles of navigating a Land Rover through late evening traffic had a strangely calming effect. The uncompromising driving position coupled with the roughness of the ride served both to sooth Nigel's wild thoughts and focus his mind on what he had achieved rather than leave him mulling morosely over the disaster of that awful prize-giving.

Two miles from home he pulled off the minor road at Mile Cross and switched off the vehicle's headlights. Down in the valley the half dozen sodium lights of the village stabbed their way into the surrounding darkness, whilst the almost full moon was draping the high fells beyond in a comforting veil of light. It was a view that he knew so well and that he could never tire of, by moonlight or in full sunshine.

His approach to the aesthetic of landscape was almost reverential. Here was not just the wonderful contrast between lush meadows, bosky forest trees, and the starkness of the high fells, but beneath the very obvious surface beauty there lay a wealth of meaning concealed within the rich resource of landscape and social history. It was ingrained in the very fabric of the countryside. The stone walls that ran so straight and uncompromising up the steep fell-sides intakes of Napoleonic enclosure, the deciduous woodland once so prized in Elizabethan times for the oak that had made England the sea-power that she then was, the Herdwick that had caused such petitions in Chancery because of their wanderings from one monastic sheep-walk to another in the days before they acquired the ability to hold a heaf.

Truth be told such thoughts were but a device for him to further delay his homecoming. Judith had been left lying on their large double bed. Outwardly, even in her mid-forties, she still retained much of her once stunning looks, but inwardly she was a changed and changing woman, far removed from the fun-loving vivacious girl that he had married. In those days they both had several drinks every evening, and he thought nothing of it. As time went on he became aware that Judith was drinking a little more than he was but, he reasoned, that was because he had to keep a clear head for those early morning starts of his.

Judith had been quick-witted although never particularly acute of intellect. Her boundless energy and her ability to charm everybody that she met had been an

inspiration to him. Even in the early days of their marriage she had her quieter weeks, but he accepted those as a more reflective part of her nature, not realising that such mood swings were occasioned by her drinking.

The problem had however become more pronounced, especially after Caroline, their second and last child, had gone to secondary school. Perhaps the physical involvement in caring for her young children had helped her stave it off, but by the time she reached her late thirties she was an alcoholic, and a very difficult and unpredictable one. Perhaps there was more than an element of what was originally called manic depression and was now referred to as bi-polar disease, but there was no getting away from the root cause.

Nigel worried about their future. He had been successful in selling the boat chandlery and had done pretty well out of that sale. He was happy about that although both he and Judith had worked hard for many years to build things up to the stage where the business could be sold well as a going concern. They had both been in their late twenties and it had not been easy setting up a boat chandlery, especially with two very young children. The large outfits around Windermere had leaned on them in an unfriendly way for some years, but with his knowledge of boats, and Judith's eye for stylish clothing they had survived, and more than survived, they had done well. How different Judith had been then. If he was struggling with a contract she had used her charm and motivational skills to snatch success out of potential disaster.

It was getting cold sitting in the Land Rover with its rudimentary heater. Even with the almost spring-like days the nights could be decidedly chilly. Winter had not finally released its grasp. With some reluctance he started the engine.

“Hi, Judith, I’m back.”

He was hardly expecting a response. He walked through to the den, pulled the Poetry Award invitation card from his pocket and dropped it into the bin. He looked at it nestling there between a rotting apple core and the discarded draft of a poem that he had been working on and smiled, it seemed an appropriate resting point, half way between creation and disintegration. In an absent-minded way he gathered the random scattering of books that adorned his desk with the intention of returning them

to their allotted places on his shelves, however there was a cry from the Sitting Room, "Is that you, Nige?"

The summons was imperative, so leaving the books on the corner of his desk he went in search of his wife, finding her ensconced in her favourite comfortable chair, a bottle by her side. The television was on, but he doubted if she was, or had been, watching it. Neither of them liked football. He switched it off.

"Hello, dearest, how are you feeling now?"

His wife turned towards him, her face a picture of sadness and rejection. The Siamese raised itself from her lap and lazily eased its body onto the floor. Judith pushed a few wisps of hair from in front of her blue eyes and focused her gaze upon her husband.

"How could you leave me?" It was clear that she was angry, but she was also close to tears, "I've been here all alone for ages and ages. Where on earth have you been?"

"You know very well. I was at that poetry award ceremony that we were going to together."

"Was I? I don't remember. Poetry, that's nice."

"You decided not to come."

"I couldn't. I just couldn't," a single tear started to trickle down her face. "I don't know what's wrong with me. It doesn't make sense."

Nigel felt a sudden compulsion to protect this unhappy woman. It was not by positive choice that she had come to this. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"I would have come with you, was it fun?"

"No, it wasn't," said Nigel as memories of the Grand Hotel started to flood into his mind, "It was bloody awful. But I won that prize, you know."

"But all the same, I should have come."

"You know what, I actually won that bloody prize."

"I would have been there with you. It would have been . . ." she seemed to search for a bigger word, " . . . nice."

"Pretty measly really, only £250 and they haven't even given it to me yet."

Judith was fiddling with the sleeve of her dress. She seemed to be trying to get it underneath her watchstrap and becoming more and more enraged that she could not do so. Nigel looked at her, wondering. Sometimes she would still be able to hold a serious and, if not intellectually rigorous, at least cogent conversation. Then there were times like this when she seemed to drift off into her own world. He considered rather vaguely how contented she might be. They had both been very happy once, indeed for the first half of their twenty-something years together. Now happiness seemed to elude her, indeed he was uncertain as to whether she continued to seek for it.

He had tried to fill his life, his creative impulses, with poetry. A couple of years ago he had attended a creative writing course in Kendal. He had enjoyed it, not so much for the content but more for the interaction with people. He had not realized that he was lonely but he enjoyed the companionship of being caught up, albeit briefly, in the lives of others. He still kept in touch with some of them. They met once a month and read their latest poetic efforts to each other, but again he stayed with the group more for the pleasing company that such meetings offered rather than the versifying output that issued therefrom.

He turned again to his wife. "Have you had any supper?"

She shrugged, indicating that either she had, or she had not, but either way she did not much care.

The phone rang. It was Caroline, phoning from London. "Hi, Nige." From their earliest days he had encouraged both her and Jimmy to call him by his Christian name and the shortened version seemed to have just emerged from that. This first name thing from his children had seemed a little odd, a little 'ultra-lefty' at first, but now that they were adults it put them all at an equal standing, and he liked that. "How did it go?"

"I won the bloody thing, Caro, but you wouldn't believe how awful the ceremony was. You know the Grand, well it's become a really grotty place and it was full of the most ghastly business people tonight."

"Well done indeed. Was that the moonlight one that I laughed at so much?"

"Just so, but those heathens thought it was about a randy old lover."

Nigel could hear the delight in his daughter's voice. She had supported him wholeheartedly in the renaissance of his poetry.

"Did Mum enjoy it?" Judith had taken a different view about how children should address their parents.

"I'm afraid she didn't make it. Had a bit of a do."

"Oh, no. Is she OK now? I know she is in a bad way, but honestly, Nige, it's you who's bearing the brunt of it. You need to be careful; you must pace yourself."

"I'm fine, darling, and Judith is pretty good right now."

"And you won - that's brilliant. Did they give you loads of dosh?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds"

"Bloody hell, that won't do much to keep the wolf from the door - oh well don't spend it all at once."

"Do you want to have a quick word with your mother?"

Nigel knew that Judith would find it hard to speak to Caroline, but Caro was good at keeping in touch and would do her best to cheer her up.

"It's Caro," said Nigel, "she wants a word."

"Of course it is, you idiot. Here let me speak to her." With a surprising degree of strength Judith wrenched the phone from his hand and walked, a trifle over exuberantly, towards the kitchen.

Nigel returned to the den and sat down at his desk. It was the bleakness of it all, he thought. He could manage his wife with the help of Zenca, the Polish woman who lived in the village. He thought he would be able to do so for some time, but he missed any form of meaningful communication. Judith had been very amusing company in her day and had been good fun to have around, enjoying a bit of joshing and verbal banter with him and their friends. He missed the sex as well. He was perplexed as to why she had rejected his every attempt to make love to her for the past year. Things had not been that good for some time before then, but they had sex once or twice every week when they were both in the mood.

He hit the space bar and his computer screen came alive. Slightly furtively he navigated to the Caesar Charleston page. 'Vanity,' he thought, 'All is Vanity.' His name was there, highlighted against 'Romantic Poet of The Year', and one click took

him to The Pale. There was nothing there yet about the ruckus at The Grand, nor was there any sort of Bio about him, for both these exclusions he was profoundly grateful, although he noted that his e-mail address had been posted as a hyperlink, presumably so that potential publishers could beat a path to his door. He smiled gently at the ridiculous thought.

He could hardly have foreseen the success of this venture of his into a poetry competition. Since his mid-teens he had enjoyed scribbling the odd bit of verse. In the early days, at boarding school, he and some of his friends had tried to set poetry to jazz - in the style of Christopher Logue of Red Bird fame. This had not been that successful; he wanted their syncopation to match his stanzas, whilst his three musician friends felt that they had first call and he should fit his verse to their music.

The door moved just enough to allow passage for the Siamese, white with dark brown points. Nigel was not a lover, or even a liker, of cats, however he had agreed to their having this feline as a pet, a Siamese being the nearest thing in the cat world to a dog. It leaped effortlessly, despite its 15 years, onto his desk and stalked around to his side, her tail erect.

“Go on, Tids, bugga off, and get your paws off my keyboard.”

He turned the animal around so it would walk away from him. Seeking solace it pushed its back against the book pile and rubbed hard against it. The books tottered and fell with a resounding crash. The cat made a wild leap for safety, legs outstretched and claws deployed. She hit the curtains about a metre above the floor and dropping to the ground accompanied by the sound of rending material, she fled the room.

Far from being upset Nigel was grinning to himself as he picked the books up one by one, replacing them in the larger of the two bookshelves with care, distracted only by the notion of thousands of words clattering to the floor. Was it a cat-aided bid for literary freedom, or merely a symptom of rejection?

He pulled out the lower left-hand drawer of the desk and looked in a somewhat disinterested fashion at a cut-glass tumbler and a bottle of Johnny Walker. He changed his mind and closed the drawer.