

A Single Blossom

Doctor Emerson had said it would be her final trip. He reached across his desk and grasped her alien hand (when she looked at it now she saw knobby knuckles and thin translucent skin covered in liver spots), and said, “Kay, it doesn’t look like it will be too much longer now. I’m sorry.”

She had packed filled with somber melancholy, knowing it was the last time she would see the turquoise water lit up by the sun, and the charming cobblestone streets she had first seen when her husband Harry had taken her to Lake Como as a young woman. Her older, mature husband who was also a mentor. He had held her hand and led her to the shore; after her eyes traveled over the glowing blue she turned to him. Sunlight

touched his hair, and the illuminated strands were gently tousled by the breeze coming up from the water; he smiled and his eyes radiated his happiness at being the one to show it to her.

Their last trip had been wonderful. Harry had seemed full of new vigor; Kay had seen a glimpse of his old, energetic self. But it had been short lived. They arrived home and two months later she was dressed in black, standing in front of his rain-streaked coffin, listening to the pastor talk about the inscrutable ways of God.

And now, all these years later, she was going to see it for the last time. Before she left for the airport she spoke to her son. In his usual perfunctory manner he said, “have a good trip mom. Let us know when you get back and we’ll have you over for dinner.” He had said that about dinner many times, but she had only been there twice since Christmas. As she looked out the

window at the men loading the luggage onto the plane, she tried to remember when relations with Tim had settled into glacial distance.

When Tim and Joan had been newlyweds, all had been warmth and love. Joan, so solicitous of her widowed mother-in-law, would call her every night. Then the first grandchild came, and the second, and the calls spread farther and farther apart until they stopped altogether. A couple of months before Kay had run into Joan at the supermarket. The warmth that had been in her eyes was replaced by a distant, sad expression, and when Kay asked her about it, all Joan did was look away.

Kay pulled on her seatbelt as the plane readied for takeoff. She was looking forward to a change of scene. Morning after morning, as she would awaken from a fitful sleep, her eyes would open and rest on Harry's cedar chest at the foot of the

bed, where he used to keep his sweaters. She would lay there, feeling the ache of arthritis in her legs, and the full emptiness would descend on her. No busyness, no calls from her friend Maureen down the street complaining about her daughter, no endless loop of Wheel of Fortune to distract her, no bridge games at the country club. Just herself, and the emptiness that had crept in over the years since her husband had died.

She thought of those mornings at the lake, when she would wake up early and go to the window to watch the water change from pink-streaked to bright blue as the sun rose higher in the sky, until Harry came up behind her and put his arms around her. She was hoping that seeing it one last time would revive her memories of him, bring them closer to her after all these years. It was all that mattered to her now that everything was coming to a close, and she realized that there was nothing, nothing but this.

For a long time now, she had felt numb as she sat staring at the scratched wood of the pew in front of her on Sunday mornings. The service, the words, meant nothing to her. None of it mattered. The world was the world, life was life, death was death, and that was all there was.

But she went every week and sat with Jemma, the nice young mother who picked her up and took her home, who invited her to dinner once a month. After service she had coffee and donuts, and laughed and smiled, and nodded when people said God is good.

Kay gripped the armrests as the plane picked up speed and took off. She swallowed one of the sleeping pills Doctor Emerson had given her, and she slipped into a peaceful rest for the remainder of the ride. When she arrived in Como, and the car went around a bend and the lake came into view—an

immense monolith of cobalt blue sparkling in the mid-day sun—for a moment her spirits lifted and she saw Harry again, his kind eyes beaming into hers as he held her hand. But then she got into the room, and saw the same old pink walls, and the one wall that had a mural of grape leaves hanging from a garden trellis, and the drab grey descended over her again. She sat down near the window and looked out at the water until the sun set, then she put on her pajamas, turned out the light and went to sleep.

Kay heard a faint, far away knock. It became louder and louder until she jolted awake. Sunlight fell across the pink floral bedspread as two bright shafts. She sighed and pushed herself up against the pillows.

“Come in.”

“Buongiorno,” said the young woman in a black maid’s uniform, as she pushed the tray into the room and set it next to the bed.

“Buongiorno. Grazie.”

“Prego.” She smiled, turned around and closed the door behind her. Kay pulled the tray over the bed, poured cream into the coffee and stirred until it turned a light brown color. She was about to sip, but then she realized, why not add sugar? Why try to be healthy now? It would all end soon, she might as well do what she wanted. She put two heaping teaspoons of sugar into her mug, stirred, then sipped the warm, sweet liquid. Now that was what coffee should taste like.

She took a small bite of toast. It was hard to get breakfast down these days; she tried one more bite then laid it aside. Lingered over her coffee, she put off the moment when she had

to get out of bed. After her second cup she pushed the tray away and slowly moved her legs to the floor. Pain shot up; she realized she had forgotten to take her aspirin first thing. She picked up the pills on the nightstand and swallowed them down with the last remnants of cold coffee.

A half hour later she tried again. This time, the pain was muted, and she was able to get into her swimsuit and cover-up. She ran a comb through her thin, brittle hair, and remembered when she was first married, and Harry would run his fingers through her thick brown hair, when she was his girl bride, only nineteen to his thirty-five. Her mother had said a May-December romance would never work out. But they had been happy, except for the times when one of Harry's black moods descended on him, but that hadn't been often enough to mar the joy their love had brought them.

Kay laid the comb down and put on her sun hat. She had put on some make-up out of habit, but these days nothing could be done for her looks. The sagging, the blotching, the intricate web of wrinkles: it was all inevitable and a dash of color here and there wasn't going to solve anything.

With a sigh she picked up her straw bag in one hand, and taking her cane in the other, made her way to the beach.

Halfway down the trail a man asked her if she needed help. She said no thank you, and continued on at her slow pace. She reached the sand, and with each step pushed the cane firmly to steady herself. She arrived at one of the beach chairs, carefully set herself down and looked out at the water. It was as beautiful as she remembered. She stared at it, watching it undulate under the bright sunshine. She meant to take out her book, but before she knew it her eyes opened onto orange and pink streaked

water, and a beach covered in lengthening shadows. She felt a pressure on her arm.

“Signora, posso aiutarla?”

Kay struggled to focus on two quivering pinpoints of blue that became wide-set eyes beneath a strong ridge of brow bone; an aquiline nose descended from between the eyes and led down to lips that were made of harmonious curves. Suddenly there, in her line of sight, beauty had sprung up. With a tinge Kay realized that the young man’s beauty was fleeting. It would fade. But there it was before her, and behind the manifestation of it that would fade, it felt as though there were something that would go on.

“Posso aiutarla?”

“Uh, si, per favore.”

He helped her up and they began heading back to the hotel. She didn't look at him, but his face was stamped in her mind. It seemed to flow over her thoughts, softening their edges.

They reached the trail. "Thank you I can make it from here." She looked at him in the dim light, and saw that he was very young. Probably no more than twenty-five.

"No, I go with you," he said, and he smiled. She was reminded of a piece of music she had heard with Harry years ago, when he had taken her to a concert. There had been that moment, when the orchestra had swelled, and she had felt it was beautiful. He smiled again, and there it was again, the same feeling. She smiled back but then immediately regretted it, thinking of the wrinkles and sagging and that new liver spot she found under her eye the other morning. But she was being an old fool. What did it matter what she looked like? There was

nothing to be done, nothing to be gotten. It was like when she sat in her garden at home, surrounded by her roses. They were beautiful and that was all.

When they reached the entrance of the hotel long shadows descended over the cobblestones, and the sky had dimmed considerably. Kay looked up at the young man. “Thank you.” She was embarrassed to find tears welling up in her eyes.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled then disappeared into the shadows. As Kay made her way up the stairs into the hotel, somehow her arthritis felt more bearable. When she got to her room she set her bag down and sank into the armchair next to the window. Stars were beginning to etch into the night sky, filling it with pinpoints of light. She thought about the vastness of the space in which the stars hung, and wondered how it had all come into being. Opening the window she heard the sound of

the breeze passing over the water. She closed her eyes and let the simple sound wash over her. Once again she saw the young man's face, set against the pink and orange sky. Its beauty seemed eternal but it was fleeting; in a few short years it would be marred by the marks of time.

She opened her eyes to a sky full of pale pink light that sent its tendrils out over the lake. What a mistake to fall asleep in the chair. Her legs were stiff and painful, and she would need to get across the room to take the aspirin. Holding onto the arm of the chair she pushed herself up. The pain and stiffness intensified. She inhaled a long deep breath, took a few steps, leaned against the bed and made her way around it. She sat down, picked up the aspirins and swallowed them.

Another day. She had another whole day to live, and somehow it seemed full of promise. She picked up the phone

and cancelled breakfast in bed. She would eat at the hotel restaurant.

An hour later she stood in front of the bathroom mirror. Why not put on a little eye shadow? Yes her eyelids were crepey, and had lost their firmness, but some color could only improve things, it certainly couldn't hurt. She dabbed her lids with light brown.

There were quite a few people in the dining room by the time Kay made her way there. She sat near a window. The sky had become cloudy, the water was choppy gray waves, and dark clouds loomed on the horizon. But still, Kay knew the sun was above it all, radiating light and warmth. She heard a familiar voice rise up. Sitting across the room at the table near the stairway was the young man. He smiled at the young woman sitting across from him, and he laughed—a full, sonorous

sound—that spread throughout the room and brightened it. The young man smiled and waved at her. With a start Kay realized she had been staring.

She waved back as the young woman turned. Kay saw long, shiny blonde hair and large eyes. Young, as Kay had been so many years ago. The young woman's face melted into a smile. Kay smiled back, feeling for a moment like she was a part of her own youth again. The couple exchanged a few words, then the young man got up and approached Kay's table.

“Good morning. You join us?”

“Good morning. That would be lovely, thank you.”

He picked up her coffee cup and purse and offered his arm to her. When she sat down the young woman smiled and said, “I'm Clara. This is Franco.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Kay.”

“Franco saw you sleeping in the chair, and it gets so dark at the lake at night.”

“It was so kind of him to help me.”

“His grandmother passed away this year. It was very hard on him. He said you remind him of her.”

Kay thought of the sporadic, cold, phone calls of her son. She looked into Franco’s eyes; the warmth she saw in them kindled something within her, something she hadn’t felt for many years.

“Sorry for your loss,” said Kay.

“Thank you.” Franco turned his gaze to Clara. “We’re here on our honeymoon.”

“Congratulations,” said Kay. “I used to come here with my husband. He passed away years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” said Franco. “Do you have any children?”

“I have a son and two grandchildren, but. . . but I don’t see them too often.”

“Both of us had our grandmothers living with us,” said Clara. “But in the United States, things are different.”

Kay nodded her head. “Yes, very different.”

“We’re going for a bike ride today,” said Franco.

“I used to do that with my husband.” Kay remembered the warm breeze flowing over her as she turned a corner and saw the glowing water of the lake. “You’ll enjoy it.”

“Yes we’re looking forward to it. Tonight we’re going to eat at the Trattoria Bel Canto. Do you know it? You can sit on the balcony and watch the sunset as you eat. Would you like to join us?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t interfere with a couple on their honeymoon.”

“To tell you the truth, you have the same smile as my grandmother.” Something passed between Franco’s being and her own, and she felt she had to accept the invitation.

“Of course, that would be wonderful. Thank you.”

Kay spent the afternoon at a café, next to a large stone flowerpot overflowing with white jasmine flowers, looking out at the water, drinking coffee and remembering when she had met Harry. Harry and her father had been working on an important case together, and one Friday night he came over for dinner.

Kay had sat through many such dinners with her father’s colleagues; she had expected another boring evening as usual as she made her way down the stairs and turned the corner into the dining room, and saw Harry sitting next to her mother. But this

time, something happened. She stopped at the threshold and wondered why she had chosen to wear her old grey dress that was a little too big and hung at the shoulders in an odd way, rather than that new pink dress that had a belt and swirled out on the bottom. Too late now. She smoothed her hair and entered the room. Harry looked at her, and when her mother introduced her, a moment went by where he didn't say anything, then he blushed and said, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

She smiled. "Thank you. You too." She sat down opposite her mother, next to her father who was at the head of the table.

Her father cleared his throat. "Now then, let's eat." He began carving the meat. His face, as he carved, was impassive as always. Kay could barely remember it showing any other expression. Every day he would come home, eat dinner and go into his study. If she ever knocked on the door their conversation

was short, and always ended with him saying, “are you keeping up with your schoolwork?”

As she ate she felt Harry looking at her. Once she dropped her fork and it clattered onto her plate. Heat rose to her cheeks. She glanced up at Harry. He smiled at her, with a smile that helped her to feel calm. When the dinner was over he stood in the foyer getting his coat on. He shook her father’s hand, then her mother’s, and when he shook Kay’s she felt a firm pressure, and his hand lingered a little longer than it should and he looked into her eyes.

She went to bed thinking about the handshake. The pressure of his hand on hers had ignited something in her; she longed to see him again. Harry came for dinner every Friday night while the case was going on. They would eat, then Harry and her father would disappear into the study until the early

hours of the morning. While Kay fell asleep she knew Harry was still in the house, and she wondered exactly what he was doing at that moment and if he was thinking of her.

When the case was over, and it was his last dinner there, Harry had looked across the table at Kay with a wistful expression. As he stood in the entryway pulling on his gloves, for a moment it looked like he might say something to her, but then he only lowered his eyes, looked up at her one last time, put on his hat and went away.

Kay had felt a hole in her heart. All night she couldn't sleep, thinking of what it meant never to see Harry again. Why hadn't he said anything to her? Why slink off into the night like that?

She had lost hope by the time the annual firm Christmas party rolled around. She hadn't wanted to go, but her mother had

said, with a stern look on her face, “the family goes every year to support your father. Now go get ready.”

With a heavy heart she pulled on her red velvet dress. As she sat in front of the mirror sweeping her hair up into a French twist, she paused to examine her features. What was it about her that had caused Harry to leave? All she saw were her familiar brown eyes, her upturned nose, and her thinnish lips. Maybe that was it. She looked like every other girl at her parent’s country club. What was there that could set her apart in Harry’s eyes?

Sitting in the back seat of the car, driving through the town looking at the Christmas wreaths dotting Main Street, she wondered why she couldn’t forget him. Even when that handsome young man from her father’s office had asked her out, who everyone said looked like Montgomery Clift, she had felt nothing. She had only said yes to please her mother.

She entered the country club between her parents, past a glittering display of white Christmas lights. Kay scanned the room full of people. Her heart sank when she realized Harry wasn't there. Halfway through the party, when her mother started her annual Christmas conversation with her father's secretary, she decided to go out onto the balcony that overlooked the lawn. She leaned against the railing and breathed in the cool night air.

"Kay."

She turned around and felt a stab in her gut when she saw Harry. It took a moment for her to respond. "Harry, hi."

"How are you?"

What should she say? She was miserable. But she couldn't let him know that. "Fine thank you. How are you?"

He ran his hand over his forehead. “I’ve been OK I suppose. What have you been up to?”

“School and applying to college. I had my nineteenth birthday.”

“Right, of course, your senior year. Happy birthday Kay.”

“Thank you.”

Silence descended. Harry moved closer. “Kay.” He took her hand. “I’ve missed you. I know I’m ridiculous, a thirty-five-year-old man telling that to a nineteen-year-old girl. But there it is. I’ve missed you terribly. I don’t know what to do.”

Tears sprung to her eyes. “Harry, I missed you too. I couldn’t understand why you left like that and never came back.”

“Kay.” He pulled her close into a hug. Before she knew what was happening he leaned down and kissed her. “I know I’m so much older. And I tried to forget you. But I just couldn’t. I

know it’s foolish. You’re only nineteen and you were eighteen when I met you. But I can’t help it Kay.”

Six months later they were married. And now here she was alone, all these years later, seeing the lake for the last time. She thought of Harry at the end, in his hospital bed, his bone thin hand reaching out to hers as he wheezed and gasped for air, then everything stopped and she knew he was gone. And she’d had no idea how to live without him.

She finished her coffee, and was grateful to see that the sunlight was beginning to slant and mellow out. She glanced at the dainty silver watch Harry had given her for her thirtieth

birthday. She had to meet Franco and Clara in a half hour. She paid her bill and made her way back to her room. When she opened her suitcase and rifled through her clothes, she realized that she hadn't packed anything nice enough for the restaurant they were going to. She settled on a plain pink blouse and her tan skirt. It was passable. She wondered if she could do anything with her hair. She stood in front of the mirror and pulled a comb through it. It looked dryer than usual. She put in some curl cream but it didn't help. Then she had an idea. She opened the door of her room and went down the elevator. Outside the hotel were large flowerpots full of purple bougainvillea. She used her nail scissors to cut off one of the blossoms.

Back in her room she attached it to her hair with a bobby pin. Why hadn't she thought of that earlier? She had to admit it looked very nice, and took attention away from her hair, which

had lost all its beauty over the years. She added a touch of pink lipstick. She felt ready.

Kay entered the restaurant, lit by a large glittering chandelier, and scanned the room. Franco and Clara were at the bar. As Kay advanced she saw that Clara had put on black eyeliner, and it suited her very well. It brought out her large, expressive eyes.

“Kay. Good evening,” said Franco. “How was your day?”

“Lovely, thank you. How was the bike ride?”

They exchanged a look. “It was wonderful.”

The happiness of the couple made her think of her honeymoon with Harry. They had gone to Venice, spending their days wandering the ancient streets, lost in conversation. Over dinners in one charming restaurant or another, Harry had shared with her the history of the place. One evening, walking hand in

hand, Harry stopped beneath a huge old tree rustling with the evening breeze, and pulled her close to him, and whispered in her neck that he loved her more than anything in the world, and he never knew that he could experience such happiness.

“A honeymoon is such a special time,” said Kay.

A waiter came up to them and led them out onto the balcony. The lights from the buildings on the opposite shore reflected in the water, and the sky glowed with the last vestiges of dusk. The mountains rose up from the lake, shadowy and mysterious.

“I love your flower,” said Clara, “what a good idea.”

“Thank you.”

They ordered drinks and the waiter brought their menus.

“The fish here is very good,” said Franco. “Clara and I came here on our first night.”

After everyone ordered Kay said, “where are you two from?”

“We’re from Bari,” said Franco. “It’s near the heel of the boot, on the Adriatic Sea.”

“How did you meet?”

“Clara’s grandmother lived down the street from us. Every week Clara and her parents would go there for Sunday dinner. We used to play together. Time went on, Clara went off to college, and I went to work in the family business, and I didn’t see her for a few years. One day, after work, I went to the store a few streets away, and on the way back, when I turned onto our street, I saw this woman, dressed in black, and when she turned around I saw those eyes. And that was it for me.”

He reached across the table and covered Clara’s hand with his own.

“How lucky you two are to find love,” said Kay. “My husband and I were very happy too. We used to come here every year. I wanted to see it one last . . . that is, I wanted to see it again.”

The waiter brought their food. As they ate, Franco and Clara shared stories about their wedding, and Kay shared some memories of Harry. The dinner ended before Kay knew it. When the bill came she took it. “I insist,” she said.

“Kay we can’t.” Franco shook his head and gently pulled the bill from under Kay’s hand. “It’s our pleasure.” He smiled at her and she knew he was thinking of his grandmother. She felt overcome. She looked down into her drink. “Thank you for this lovely evening,” she said, “you don’t know how much it’s meant to me.”

“Thank you,” said Franco.

“Yes,” said Clara, “we had a wonderful time. Franco, why don’t you walk Kay back to her hotel?”

The prospect of a walk with Franco, in the cool darkness of the evening, was very welcome to Kay.

“Yes, of course.”

Outside the restaurant, Clara gave Kay a hug. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight dear.” Before letting go of Clara’s shoulders, Kay looked into her eyes. In their gentle glow was the future; Clara had a whole future ahead of her, and the thought comforted Kay. Something would go on.

Clara touched Franco’s shoulder. “I’ll see you back at the room.”

“Yes, see you there.” He turned to Kay. “Shall we?” He held out his arm. Kay placed her hand through it and they began walking.

“How much of your trip do you and Clara have left?”

“We’re leaving for Tuscany tomorrow. We have a week there. Then we head back home.”

“What a lovely honeymoon.”

“Yes. I saved for a year to have this time with Clara.”

They walked on in silence. It was a clear night, and every now and again a gentle breeze came up. As Kay walked along next to Franco, her hand on his arm, she found herself thinking about the vaulted gold ceiling of the Como Cathedral. Funny, she hadn’t thought about that place in years. She and Harry had gone in that one time. It had been very beautiful, but so was the lake.

They turned a corner and the hotel came into view, and Kay realized that these were her last few moments with Franco. It was so hard to let him go. “Franco, there’s something I want to give you. Please, come up for a minute.”

“You don’t have to give me anything.”

“No please. I need to.” Her eyes filled with tears. She took a deep breath. “I need to do this.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll come up, don’t worry.”

“Thank you.”

They made their way up the stairs and into the hotel. They entered the elevator; it whirled and began ascending. They reached Kay’s floor and entered her room. It was dark, and she turned on a floor lamp near the door.

“Please sit. I’ll be right back.”

Franco sunk into the armchair as she went into the bathroom and closed the door. She unzipped her toiletry case, opened the small side pocket, and took out a gold watch. She had given it to Harry on their twenty-fifth anniversary. On it she had inscribed: All my love always, love Kay. She had kept it with her ever since Harry had died. But now she wanted Franco to have it. But why? She closed her eyes. It was one of the last things she had of Harry. Why give it to a young man she didn't know? She saw again the first moment she had glimpsed Franco's face, with the fading light behind him. She wanted to give it to him because she wanted to be a part of what she saw there, in his face, a part of the beauty she had seen. Somehow that would comfort her. She took the watch and opened the bathroom door.

She felt a jolt of shock and fear when she saw that the man sitting there wasn't Harry. Her mind reeled and it snapped back into her head that Franco was there. She took a deep breath. It was beginning its inevitable spread to her brain, much sooner than Doctor Emerson had predicted. Taking another deep breath, she made her way to Franco. He stood up.

"I want you to have this. Please." She held out the watch. Franco took it and examined it.

"You gave this to your husband didn't you?"

"Yes I did."

He shook his head. "I can't take this from you. You're making a mistake. I don't think you're thinking clearly."

"Please. I need you to have it."

"But why?"

Her eyes welled up and she felt a catch in her throat.

“Because I’m dying, and I saw you on the beach and I need you to have it.”

“Kay please don’t cry. You’ll make yourself sick. Come here.” He led her to the bed and sat down next to her. He put his arm around her. “It’s OK.”

She held onto his collar and cried into his shirt. After a few minutes she calmed down, and she laid her head on his shoulder. The sparkling blue of the lake seemed to enter their room, and for that brief moment, her head resting on his shoulder, she felt like she was a part of him. Outside, the lake was being ruffled by the light wind, the waves were rippling, and there was something there: something in the lake, something in Franco, something she had forgotten about for years, as she had sunk down into her pain after Harry had died.

Kay lifted her head and held the watch out to him. He closed her hand over it and pushed it back towards her. “Kay I know something I’d like to have.”

“What is it?”

He pointed to her flower. “May I?”

“Yes of course.”

He gently pulled out the bobby pin and took the blossom. “I will always keep this to remember you by. I will cherish it.”

Kay’s eyes welled up. “Thank you Franco. Thank you so much.”

“Knowing you has made my trip even more special. Thank you for that. You’re a lovely woman.” He squeezed her hand.

“Are you going to be OK?”

“Yes, I think I will.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.” He stood up. “I have to get back now.”

“I know.”

Franco helped her up from the bed and they walked to the door. He kissed both of her cheeks. “Goodbye Kay.”

“Goodbye Franco.”

Kay looked into his eyes one last time. He gave her a sad smile, and then he was gone.

Kay woke up late the next morning. She thought she would feel wretched, but instead, she felt a ray of hope. Bright sunlight filled the room, and she felt that somehow, there was something good for her that day. By that time Franco would be gone, somewhere among the olive trees of Tuscany. It made her happy

to think of him, walking arm in arm with Clara, looking at some beautiful landscape, the sunshine touching his features, illuminating them with its glow.

She took her aspirin and waited a half hour. As she got dressed she decided she wanted to see the cathedral one more time. She would eat lunch then spend the afternoon there.

The sky was a bright, cloudless blue as she made her way across the square, and in spite of the arthritis and the aches and pains, she felt somehow young again. As though there was something more, something waiting beyond the shadows of her life.

She stepped into the cool dimness of the cathedral. It lay before her, vast and intricate. Incense hung heavy in the air; she took in a long, deep breath. As she walked in she was conscious of an expansive feeling, a feeling that she was being enveloped

within the immensity of what surrounded her. She sat down and looked up at the enormous vaulted ceiling. Her eyes were drawn to a stained-glass window; sunlight streamed through the deep purple, pink and blue panes, and splashed color onto the wall. Kay's eyes fixated on the colored sunshine. She watched it quivering on the wall, and she began to cry. The crying turned into sobs that she couldn't control, that made her shoulders heave.

Someone touched her arm. "Signora, stai bene?"

But all Kay could do was look away and continue to sob. The man stood there for a few moments more then shuffled away.

When she woke up the light had become dim. She looked around for Harry. Where was he? He was always right next to her. She stood up and felt pain in her legs. What had happened?

Then the arthritis, the disease, Harry's death all hit her again as if she had never felt them before. She was old now. She was dying. She was alone.

But what about the colored light from the stained-glass window, what about the lake sparkling in the sunshine, what about Franco's face, the waning sunlight surrounding it like a halo—there had to be something behind all that. She sat down and looked up at a vaulted dome, etched with symmetrical gold inlays swirling up to the apex. They had built the cathedral to be so intricate, so grand, so beautiful. As she looked up at the dome, a peaceful feeling, like the faint echo of a sweet sound barely heard from far away, made gentle waves into her being. When Harry had died, she had thought that all of him, even his essence that in their most intimate moments she felt she had seen, had ceased to exist. No hope. Her Harry, who she had

loved more than anyone, destroyed by death. She looked towards the altar; the face of Christ twisted in pain no longer brought her that uncomfortable, lost feeling. The pain was a part of life, but it wasn't everything. Somehow she had lost sight of that. She sat there for a long time, until she knew night had fallen.

Then she started back to the hotel, the peaceful feeling her companion as she walked, feeling the evening breeze caressing her skin. She passed a small restaurant that had a flowerpot filled with pink Wisterias in front of it. She remembered her rose garden at home. How many days had gone by in the last few years, when the flowers had been in glorious bloom, and she had stayed inside, always having an excuse as to why she didn't go out and enjoy them? She had turned her back on them so many times. She had turned her back on so many things.

She turned the corner and saw the hotel. It was such a beautiful night. She would go up, get her sweater then eat dinner at a place where she could sit outside. But as she rode up in the elevator, she felt a sudden burst of indigestion. She shouldn't have drunk that extra cup of coffee after lunch. Back in her room she took some antacid but the pain only seemed to get worse. She laid down on the bed and looked out the window at the darkness of the night. Somehow, the darkness seemed to be overlayed with a sort of peaceful harmony, something beyond anything that could come and go, come into being and then decay. She felt it within herself, linking the old, arthritis-ridden Kay with the young girl, standing on the balcony, looking into Harry's eyes as he told her he loved her. She felt it beckoning to her, coming off the lake, coming from everywhere; she let go and let herself merge into it, the eternal beauty.

The young woman in the black maid's uniform pushing the breakfast tray found her the next morning, eyes open, face peaceful and serene. She reached over and closed Kay's eyes.