

**The Perilous
Paintings
of Lily Day**

Tim Pompey

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*For Frances
whose love of life and art
inspired Lily to share her secrets*

*For Jayne, Jill, and Monica,
editors extraordinaire*

I

The Emerging Picture

1.

Lily Day gazed out her kitchen window and sipped some black coffee from her favorite cup, the one with a faded Monet painting of water lilies wrapped around the sides.

A thick, curly mane of grey hair flowed down her shoulders and back. Her tall, straight frame was pressed against the sink at a slight angle. Current point of focus— her neighbor’s jacaranda tree.

She touched her wire frame glasses and adjusted them slightly to sharpen her view. Her weathered face, full of lines and taut angles, was as thoughtful and focused as Rodin’s Thinker.

It was June and the jacaranda in Tom Kelby’s front yard had just reached full bloom. The flowering tree’s limbs, adorned in shades of violet and lavender, expanded in praise toward the sky. Fallen trumpet flowers created a bright blanket across his lawn.

Lily sipped coffee and swiveled against her tiled counter— pale green squares barricaded by various shades of moldy grout.

She glanced around her kitchen and living room and took comfort in the wide assortment of cardboard boxes that spread throughout every room. Taken together, they created a kind of asymmetrical landscape that jutted out among the standing lamps and tubes of paint and makeshift palettes, all crammed into a 900 square foot dwelling with one bedroom, a bathroom, a tiny kitchen. The boxes were proof that, despite living here for a year, she had yet to settle in.

Outwardly, she blamed this on the house's severe lack of storage space, but she also knew a deeper truth — that she was indifferent by nature toward orderliness; that she was not someone who moved easily in a straight line or craved the security of neatness. And besides, with her keen artist's eye, she rather enjoyed their various shapes — the different angles and corners, the multiple shades of beige and brown.

No, this house was not about organization. This stucco square framed dwelling had become her artist abode, her studio, her monastery, and she could think of nowhere else she would rather be, standing here drinking coffee, observing a beautiful tree, dreaming of paints and canvas and jacaranda landscapes from the safe vantage point of her own little box.

Most people who knew Lily had simply chalked her lack of neatness and her quest for solitude up to her eccentricity as an artist. *That's just Lily* they said to each other when they shared in those casual gossip sessions that artists love to engage in, though, if confronted or accused by the word, they would

soundly deny it, preferring to think of their discussions as more dynamic. The critical eye, the thoughtful expression of intellectual exploration, the wisdom of experience that was sometimes called *cross pollination*.

Lily knew better, but kept that to herself. Rather, she didn't mind the mess and she had more than her fair share of company inside this house, living as she did among all her painted fairies and mystical dancers, mythical beasts and masked musicians.

She had her tools, her canvases, her colors, her shapes. She had everything she desired right at her fingertips. The rest of her life was a periphery. She would get to it if and when she needed. For now, her most important task was to watch this tree.



It was midmorning and the sun was just beginning to break through the typical June gloom. Lily liked the effect it created: the light as it jumped out of the grey fog, struck the flowers, and made them appear electrified.

She stood for a moment as if in a trance. Then a knock on the door and her expression shifted from focused to puzzled.

"Who could that be?" she murmured with a slight tinge of irritation, her thoughts interrupted in the middle of a serious artistic viewing. She eased her coffee cup onto the counter, tried to brush herself up a bit, and sorted her way through a narrow box canyon passage to the front door.

“Yes?” she called out.

“Mom?” A familiar voice. Martha, her daughter.

Lily opened the door and smiled broadly when she noticed that Martha carried a tray of cookies—chocolate chip at first glance. “Oh,” she said cheerfully, “I see you brought presents.”

Martha stepped in and gave her mother a hug. “Hey, Mom. Nice to see you.”

Her mother embraced her. “What a nice surprise.”

“Sorry I didn’t call. I’m on my way to work, thought I’d pop in for a second and touch base.”

In a rush, Lily began to push papers and other art items around so her daughter could find a place to sit, somewhere that wasn’t overrun with her normal clutter.

“Here, have a seat,” she urged, trying to appear as if the house was only slightly messy. “I know, I really should clean up.” She eagerly took the cookies and walked into the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“No thanks. Been to Starbucks already.”

Martha eased her stocky frame into an old folding chair and gazed from one side of the room to the other. She was dressed in office attire. A dark-blue business suit with black pumps and a white blouse. Her shoulder length auburn hair eased down her shoulders.

Lily balanced herself against the side of a large box—in one hand a cookie, in the other her steaming Monet cup. “You

worried about me, are you?" She grinned and raised the cup to her lips.

Martha looked around the room and nodded. "Always. You know that."

Lily chewed thoughtfully and fingered the small gold chain and purple amulet wrapped around her neck, a prized crystal that she had bought in Sedona many years ago. "And what's wrong today?"

"Nothing, really," said Martha. "It's just . . ." She stopped, her face turning a faint shade of red. It wasn't the first time they had engaged in this discussion.

Lily eyes grew intent, but her smile remained. "Just?"

"All these boxes, Mom. It's been a year. Don't you think by now. . ."

"Too crowded for you?" She raised the cookie to her lips and took another bite.

Martha wondered if her mother was avoiding the issue (again) or just playing games. Perhaps a little of both. "Mom, look at this place. I can hardly breathe in here."

"It's a small house, dear. I guess I'm just not sure where to put everything. Most of it's art stuff. My accumulated treasures. Didn't really think about this when I bought the place." She turned her eyes away and sighed. "I know. It's kind of an eyesore."

"I know, Mother, but you gotta admit. You're kind of a pack rat."

Lily nodded and put her cup on top of the box. She took a final bite of cookie and rubbed her hands clean. Then she stepped over to her daughter and gently brushed her fingers through her hair. "That's probably true, too. You know me. Neatness is not my specialty."

Martha's anxiety eased. Her mother always had great fingers and knew just where to apply pressure. That perfect touch. Part of the skills she carried over from her hippie days when she worked on and off as a masseuse.

The massage was a reflection of Lily, a gentle soul who would give the shirt off her back, if she could just find one in these boxes. "Just wish we could move you somewhere bigger," she mused, "with lots of closets. And a maid to come in and keep house."

"We?" said Lily.

"Yeah, you know, Bill and me. It's something we've talked about a lot."

Lily eased her daughter's head against her stomach. "Well, it's a good thought, dear. More space would be nice."

"And maybe a pool or something."

Gently releasing Martha's head, Lily moved back to her box and picked up her cup. She took another long sip and gazed merrily at Martha. "All this conversation between you two. You win the lottery without telling me?"

Martha looked chagrined. Again her face turned pink. "No, not yet."

“Well, it takes money to move. I should know. I saved for years to get in here. Can’t say how long I’d have to save to move out.”

Martha knew the drift of this conversation. It always ended the same, but she couldn’t help herself. The thought of her mother crammed in here for the rest of her life gave her the willies. She decided to change tactics.

“What are you working on now?”

Lily jumped up and moved around a stack to where her easel stood. “Come and look.”

Martha rose and followed. She managed to squeeze in front of her mother, put on her reading glasses, and scrunch up her nose. “What’s this?”

“I don’t have a title for it yet,” said Lily, “but I was looking at pictures of the Grand Canyon and got an idea.”

Martha moved up to within six inches of the canvas. It was familiar in that her mother often created scenes that were in this world but not of this world, scenes of mysterious lands inhabited by humans, half-human animals, and a host of weird looking creatures that could have come straight out of a medieval book of magic spells.

But this had a slightly different twist. The scene was mountainous with flares of red and orange in the sky. The canyons were steep and barren and yet warm in color, as if they had been molded from an enormous pile of fresh ground coffee.

“Nice,” said Martha.

"I just finished it," Lily chirped. "I'm going to take this down to the Blue Light. Sonia wants a few more of my paintings. I think this one might have a shot at landing on someone's wall."

"Good choice."

An uncomfortable silence descended on them. Once again, Martha glanced around the room and looked worried.

"So," Lily said, trying to encourage her daughter to speak. "What's up, really?"

Martha worked her way back to her chair and crossed her legs. Her brown eyes caught her mother staring at her. "I'm worried about you, Mom."

Lily slipped toward the front door and leaned back. She crossed her arms and waited. "Because . . ."

"You're all alone here, and frankly, with all this paper and canvas, this place is a fire trap."

Lily nodded. "I won't argue with that. Maybe I should call in a cleaning service. Or get married. Not sure which would be cheaper." She gave her daughter an impish grin.

Martha looked skeptical. "Seriously, Mom. Don't joke. Even if you called the Molly Maids, you'd have to pay a small fortune to convince them to come here."

Lily smiled and nodded. "True."

"Bill and I discussed this and wondered, if we helped, if you might be willing to move."

"Move where?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Some place cleaner, safer, less likely to burn down?"

Lily paused, her eyes unblinking. "And where would that be?"

"I don't know. Just wondering if you would be open to the idea?"

Lily pushed off the door and returned to her original box. "Could I paint there?"

Martha watched her mother, hoping for signs of interest. She knew she was treading perilously on sacred territory. "Well, I don't know. Maybe."

"My own place?"

Martha knew these questions were meant to poke holes in her argument. Her mother was ever so kind and sometimes at loose ends, but when push came to shove, she was sharp as a tack, stubborn, and extremely independent. "We could try," she said as a way of keeping the discussion alive.

"And my artwork?"

This was the real crux. Martha had learned long ago that she had to compete with a separate family, and now, in this house, these paintings had attached themselves to Lily like a belt. This universe her mother inhabited, a fierce rival with her own flesh and blood.

"There's a lot of stuff here, Mom, you never use," Martha argued. "You could pick what you like and put the rest in storage."

Lily grimaced. "What would that cost?"

"Don't worry about it. Whatever it costs, Bill and I would happily pay it if it means you live some place safe and clean."

Martha glanced at several of the paintings that lay at her feet. Two female angels bathing. A train winding its way through a series of green hills. A group of minstrels and mimes dancing in a courtyard under a violet sky. "I think It's worth exploring."

Lily tapped her hands lightly against the box. She couldn't help it. She was growing weary with the gist of this conversation. Her mind wandered to her latest work. It was time to get busy.

"I'll think about it," she said sweetly.

Martha smiled and stood up. "You do that." She gave her mother another hug. "We'll be in touch."

"Okay," Lily said and smiled back. "Drop in any time."

"Enjoy the cookies. They're homemade."

"You know I will." Lily grinned and folded her arms.

Martha paused at the door and waved, then hurried out.

Lily remained by her box and stared at a large painting hung on the far wall that she had done ten years ago. A flying green dragon that had wrapped itself around a damsel in distress. The damsel held an elaborate sword straight up in the air but offered no resistance. Strange cherubim surrounded them, some sitting, some flying, some up in the trees. They served as witnesses to the struggle.

Lily sighed and brushed back a strand of stray hair. That was her mythical period when she had become fascinated with Arthurian legends. It was one of many phases that she had experienced.

She added them all up on her mental spreadsheet. It seemed that her life had grown and compacted at the same time and that she had no idea how to guide each burgeoning part to a single place. Each day, the pile grew higher, the space smaller, until her dilemma had reached epic proportions and ruled over her like a benevolent despot. The only way she knew how to deal with it was to keep painting.

She walked over to her current work, picked up a brush, and started. It felt as natural as walking or riding a bike. Fingers relaxed. Strokes smooth and even. Eyes drinking in the canvas. Her thoughts melded with the picture and for the next several hours, nothing else mattered.

2.

Lily pulled her old Toyota Corolla into a parking space at Surfer's Point and eased her feet onto the asphalt. In her hands, a pencil and sketch pad.

It was late afternoon, one of her favorite times of day. Along the coast, the kite surfers and board fanatics were out in full force, navigating waves four to five feet high.

Turning west on the boardwalk, she started her usual stroll down to the Ventura River in hopes of drawing some waterfowl, perhaps a snowy egret or a great blue heron.

Sometimes she took sketches of local birds and used them as models for some of her more fantastic creatures or as subjects for her wood carvings.

The view out to the Channel Islands was clear today, with outlines of Anacapa, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa Island stretched for miles across the water.

To Lily, the view and the sound of the waves crashing on the beach were mesmerizing. Adding a musical quality — the chorus of birds and voices echoing along the shoreline.

Walking slowly, she found her center and began to breathe deeply. For her, this was the equivalent of yoga.

She sat on her favorite bench along the river's lagoon and intently watched the birds. Seagulls. Plovers. Egrets. Herons. Raising her pad, she did a few sketches, watched a man play with his dog at the river's mouth, and took some time to simply peer into the distance.

Time and space fascinated her, the mind's ability to quantify and calculate. How far was it to the actual horizon? What was the spatial distance between the eye and empty space? At what point did seeing become an infinite task?

She recalled some of her philosophy classes at San Francisco State back in the '60s. It was the place where all these unanswered questions first formed in her mind, helped along by copious amounts of pot, student bullshit sessions, the Grateful Dead, and more than a few memorable acid trips.

None of it made much sense then. Most of it didn't make sense now. Still, these thought patterns seemed irrepressible to her. She couldn't help indulging her curiosity with a wide range of highbrow questions.

The sun was now directly in her eyes, falling toward the ocean, changing the sky's colors. Another potential painting. As she shifted her legs and threw back her head, she noticed out of the corner of her eye someone sitting next to her. Taking one last moment to indulge in her thoughts, she turned and glanced at that someone.

From first appearance, it looked like a homeless man, one of many who frequented this path. He sat next to an old bicycle attached to a homemade cart. The bike was filled with all his earthly belongings and a good deal of trash. Tarps. Backpacks. Sleeping bags. Cans for recycling. Old clothes. Junk.

The man was emaciated, hair thick and ratty, with a T-shirt and jeans that appeared to be on the verge of falling apart. He was in desperate need of a bath, his face and hair stained by dirt and ashes from his campfire. His skin suffered from a severe sunburn that had turned his whole body into brown shoe leather.

"Howdy," the man said. "Nice evening."

Lily glanced at him and was immediately troubled by his presence. Still, she tried to stay open-minded. Remaining serene, she gazed into the distance and pretended that he was not the least bit disturbing. "Yes, it's a great view from here."

"I've seen you come down here before," he said. "You like to sit on this bench."

The idea of this man keeping track of her was even more disturbing. Not just homeless. A stalker.

"I do come down here," she said. Taking a deep breath, she sighed. "I like the view, and the birds. They all inspire me."

"Me, too," he replied. His body jerked a bit, a spasm of some sort.

"You live down here?"

“Yup. Out in the river. I got the best place in the world, if you like nature.”

“I do,” she said as she turned slightly toward him.

His gaunt face fixated on her, black eyes set deep in his head. He pointed. “You draw, I see.”

“I do,” she said. “I’m an artist.”

“Painter?”

“Yes. Mostly oils and acrylics.”

He smiled and laced his fingers together. “Me, too.”

“Really?”

“Hard to believe, huh?”

Lily did not answer but she did return his smile.

“Can’t do much now. Kinda hard for me.”

Lily nodded.

“When I was young, I was pretty good. Did some oils, took up sculpture. Used to have some stuff in local galleries around here.”

“Really,” said Lily, trying to hide her surprise.

The stranger paused and looked toward the sun. “What’s your name?”

“Lily,” she said. “Lily Day.”

“Frank,” he replied. “Frank West.”

Lily pushed herself to keep the conversation going. She reached out her hand to shake. “Nice to meet you, Frank.”

He took her hand and squeezed lightly. “I kinda fucked up my life,” he said. He dropped his chin into his fist and

fixated on the lagoon. "But when I was younger, I did a lotta art. I liked it."

"You still have any of it?"

"Nah, too hard to carry around. Besides, who's going to believe me, lookin like I do?"

Lily took a breath and propped an arm on top of the bench. Her fingertips landed only inches from his shoulder.

"I seen you draw, though," Frank said. "I got kind of a gift, you know."

Lily looked puzzled. "A gift?"

"I can see through people."

She frowned and shook her head.

"Yep," he said. "I got a little ESP in me. Always had it, just never talked much about it to anyone. Don't want people thinkin I'm crazy or nothin." He grinned and opened his mouth to reveal a set of brown gapped teeth.

"You, for instance. I can see inside of you."

Folding her hands in her lap, she looked puzzled.

"Meaning?"

"You're special."

She chuckled. "Frank, that's the worst pickup line I've ever heard."

"It would be, if that's what I meant, but it ain't."

Lily grew quiet. She could tell he was serious.

"I can't tell you why, but it's true. There's somethin in you that's different from most folk."

“Like?”

Frank scratched his right ear and threw himself back on the bench. “I told you, I can’t know what it’s all about. You just need to know, cause if something different happens, you shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Different, like . . .”

“Different different.” He glanced off to the side. “Hell, I don’t know, but you’ll know when it happens.”

Lily paused again. “Well, thank you, Frank. I think. I have no idea what you’re talking about, but thanks anyway.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m an old homeless guy. You shouldn’t pay me any mind. I get that. But still, I got a gift and so do you. Just don’t be surprised.”

“You think I’ll know?”

“Oh yeah, no doubt.”

“Okay, then.” She smiled at him. “I’ll know it when it happens. Should I come back and tell you?”

“No need,” he said. “You won’t see me no more. Just remember. I said it. That’s all.”

He rose and jumped on his bike. “Nice to meet you, Lily. Wish I was in better shape and had a few dollars in my pocket. I’d ask you out for a drink. You’re one good lookin chick.”

Lily blushed. “You’re a player, aren’t you, Frank?”

Frank grinned again, his wire brush beard and cracked lips expanding across his thin face. “Used to be. Hell, those were the

days, when I could dance and drink like a fish and fuck till dawn. In my day, you and me, we coulda partied hearty.”

“We could have,” she said.

Frank waved at her and pushed on his bike pedals. In a matter of seconds, he had turned up the path and disappeared into the brush.

Lily stood up and gave the flaming sun a final look-see. Then she headed back to the car, wondering what the hell Frank could have meant. He seemed to be convinced, but years in the river, starvation, and a damaged liver could easily affect anyone’s powers of perception.

Still, she believed in some of what Frank had talked about. That some people had extraordinary powers of the mind. That it was possible to cross universes and make contact with other beings. That life was not limited to just Earth and that somewhere beyond human perception lay more worlds, other beings, more possibilities for contact.

All this she had come to terms with back in her hippie days. But whether or not she believed Frank, what he said about her, that was another question entirely.

3.

Lily returned from Surfer's Point and went straight into her house. Entering the kitchen, she spotted an open bottle of wine, delicious smelling bags of food spread on her table, and knew immediately. Tom was here.

Hurrying to the back door, she peeked out and saw him seated in an old lawn chair. "Breaking and entering, I see?" she said playfully.

Tom turned and grinned. "That fence of yours makes for easy pickings." His brown eyes, offset by a rugged, round face and broad smile, eagerly invited her response.

Lily knew. The repartee. Game on. "You could wait for an invitation," she shot back in a teasing tone.

Leaning back in his chair, he crossed his arms. "If I did that, when would I ever see you?"

She gave him a coy smile. "I'm not that bad and you know it."

"Well, okay, but what's the fun if I don't surprise you every once in a while?"

Lily stepped down to the brown patch of ground that posed as her lawn. "I see you brought wine. So what's on tap for tonight?"

"Chilean. Cab Sauv. Brand called El Vaquero. 2010. Found it at BevMo. There's a glass here waiting for you."

She circled and sat opposite him in the other ancient lawn chair.

He handed her the old Monet cup she loved. "Glassware's not fancy, but that's not my fault. You really need to restock your cupboard." He raised his own plastic cup. "Cheers."

She raised hers in response and took a sip. "Hmm, this is good."

"It is. No doubt those Chileans really know their stuff."

A former city manager and lifelong resident of Ventura, Tom Kelby had retired and moved into his adobe bungalow next door nearly ten years ago.

Sitting square in the middle of a gritty section of town, he certainly had better options, but insisted that it reminded him of the house he had grown up in on the north end of the Avenue when it was still a comfortable family neighborhood.

The real reason, however, was more complicated. After suffering from a nasty divorce, he found himself with too much retirement time on his hands. Seeking something useful to do, the house served as a challenge he couldn't pass up.

Using his considerable construction skills, he had restored it to its original pristine state. In the end, the rundown adobe had

proved to be his salvation. In Tom's eyes, he and the house took care of each other.

"You been busy today?" he said.

"Busy, as in killing time," she answered. "Went down to Surfer's Point and did some sketches."

"New paintings, I see. Couldn't help but notice as I walked through."

"You haven't seen my latest work?"

"Not yet." He took a sip of wine. "I'm still waiting for that invitation."

Lily waved him off. "Well, now, I'll get it out in the mail this week. I can even hand deliver yours if you want."

Tom's eyes twinkled. "Does that come with benefits?"

Lily slapped his arm lightly. "It comes with a viewing. The rest you have to earn. Hard work. Diligence. That's my motto."

Tom laughed. He loved her subtle sense of humor, her playfulness.

It was almost a year ago when they had met and recognized each other as neighbors during an art function at the local Bell Arts Factory. From that point on, they had taken pleasure in each other's company, with a tacit understanding that whatever they shared, their lives remained their own.

At least that's what Lily believed. Sometimes she wondered if Tom expected more. She also wondered about herself, whether she wanted more.

Still, she liked the fact that he gave her both enjoyment and space. If his expectations were higher, he kept that to himself. He seemed to appreciate her intelligence and gentleness. At least that's what he kept telling her and she had no reason to doubt him.

Tom eased his hand across Lily's fingers. "So, this piece I'm waiting for, the one with the invitation. Does it have a name?"

"Ah, yes, my so-called Grand Canyon inspiration. No. It doesn't have a title yet."

"Ah, well, it's lovely just the same."

"Why thank you, sir. Nice of you to notice."

They paused to take another sip.

"How about you?" said Lilly.

Tom feigned surprise. "Me?"

"Yeah, what have you done today? Besides eating and sleeping and breaking into old ladies' houses?"

"You know me. My art is farting around. Hung out at Jody's for a while."

Jody's, a local watering hole in downtown Ventura complete with the pungent smell of beer, piss, and old carpet. A place to drink, catch up on gossip, and watch ball games.

Lily grimaced. "Lovely."

"It has its charm."

She smiled knowingly. "Like overripe but jovial?"

"That's it, my dear. That describes me and it in a nut shell."

"Hmm."

Tom jumped out of his chair. "Oh, I almost forgot. Given your meager diet and aversion to cooking, I also brought dinner."

Lily grinned. "No!"

"From the Kathmandu, no less."

He raced into the kitchen and returned with bags of food, plastic silverware, and paper plates all piled precariously like a Jenga tower on top of each other.

"Tikka masala, your favorite, and plenty of naan."

"Well, aren't you full of surprises?"

"I am tonight."

"What'd you get?"

"Lamb kadahi."

"Oh, carnivorous."

Tom nodded briskly. "At my age, carnivorous is good."

He divided the dishes between them and refilled her cup with wine.

"No candles?" she asked.

Tom shook his head and spoke with his mouth full. "Not a candle in sight. Not in your house anyway."

"They're packed away."

"Everything in your house is packed away."

"True enough."

"Time to start unpacking. Time to give you, me, everyone who visits, some space to move around."

"I'll get to it . . . someday."

“Spoken like a true procrastinator.”

“It hasn’t kept *you* away.”

Tom smiled in agreement. “Not for a second. Then again, I’m adventurous.”

“And I’m your adventure?”

Tom laughed again, a big hearty laugh that always warmed her up. She finished her wine and took another savory bite of masala. She had to admit. It was nice to be the apple of someone’s eye again. It was nice to be surprised with dinner. What was it that Frank had said earlier tonight? She was *special*.



Late night and Lily lay in bed with her arms spread across the mattress. Even though Tom had gone home, she still felt his warmth caress her body. Wrapped in her sheets, their white fabric glowing faintly in the dark, she looked like an angel adrift.

Though cool tonight, she left the window open to enjoy the incoming breezes that smelled of salt and fog.

Her mind drifted back to her conversation with Frank, how he had seemed so sincere. Talking about her gift, whatever that meant. Reminding her of what it was like so long ago to engage in some off the wall discussions about spirituality, metaphysics, the possibility of extra terrestrial life. Youthful conversations, but earnest to the point where she had believed in the possibilities.

The age of Aquarius, the summer of love, a simple song of freedom, blah blah blah.

Life had crashed on her for sure. Jobless, sometimes homeless, trouble with drugs and alcohol. Years later, a husband who died. Single parenthood. The desperation of survival.

But she *had* survived, fought back from the brink, and carved out a normal life separate from all that new age bullshit.

So now, what was happening tonight while she lay in a state of dreaminess?

She had decided after retirement to do nothing but paint. Full time. All day. Whenever she wanted. And suddenly, engrossed in her art, that curiosity about life's great otherness had come roaring back. Her early naiveté had not died after all. It had just been buried beneath the demands of modern civilization.

Now, Frank and his strange little proclamation in her life. Her gift. What the hell could that mean?

She let her eyes wander around the room, thought of Tom and how he had brought some fire back to her life. She wasn't sure how all these pieces fit together. Maybe there was no real pattern, just a constant search for what lay out there beyond the five senses. She had learned that life didn't have to make sense. You simply had to pay attention and enjoy the ride.

Right now, despite Frank's strange words, the ride was good. Maybe he did see inside of her. Maybe there was something in

her life that stood out. Hidden, perhaps, just under the surface. Hidden and waiting to pop out and reveal itself.

These were the thoughts that comforted her as she drifted off and fell into that place where she could dream freely and never have to wonder if it made sense. All she had to do was accept it. The gift. Her gift. Buried alive in her subterranean imagination, it had returned to the scene to play with her dreams. She fell asleep, confident that whatever this was had come out of its hibernation, fully wrapped her in its arms, remained beside her as her steady companion.

4.

Lily woke up in a state of panic and found herself sleeping on a bed of pine needles as soft and cushioned as any fine mattress. They were thick and deep and had fallen from surrounding trees that were as big as any redwood she had ever seen. Enormous lush evergreens, thousands of them knitted together across miles of forest. Sweeping branches with ebony needles that were easily a foot long.

Fear swept over her. The first question that crossed her mind: Where was she? Certainly not anywhere in Ventura. The last she remembered, she had laid down in bed and thought about what her daughter proposed, mulled over whether or not it was time to make some changes.

Now she was here in an unknown forest. Was it day or night? Still no clue. The darkness was a blanket, but some type of faint, filtered illumination peeked through the holes in the branches and created small circular blue tinges across the forest floor. It reminded her of watching thousands of fireflies floating around in the summer when she used to visit her Aunt and Uncle back east.

Lily brushed the sleeves of her beige cotton nightgown and gazed around for some sense of direction, but as far as she could see, the scenery was the same. It disoriented her, like standing in a station and not knowing which train to take. East. West. North. South. Trees and glowing patches of pine needles. The black outline of giant trunks that stood rigid as stern soldiers waiting for their orders. She tried to keep panic from taking hold of her thoughts.

“Hello?” she said instinctively, keenly aware of her loneliness and sense of displacement. Not that she expected an answer. She just needed to hear the sound of a human voice, even if that voice was hers. She looked at her legs and feet, wiggled her toes to make sure she was in her real body, and waited. One breath after another, she tried to find her center.

After calming her nerves, her second instinct was to walk around, but in this place, without trails or sun or moon or any outside guidance, walking seemed like a waste of time. What was the point if you couldn’t tell where you were going?

Lily sat cross-legged in the needles and peeked up at the spots of light. Then she laid back and stretched out her arms and legs. It was a sacrificial pose, an invitation to let whatever brought her here know that she was a willing participant.

She sent out a mental invitation. *If anyone is nearby, would you please let me know?* Perhaps the message would travel to someone who could read her mind, someone who might be advanced in their understanding of telepathic language.

She believed that reading minds was possible, that the brain knew more about communication than just speaking. She was convinced that, when freed from its restrictions, the drift of human thought could burst from its stem, travel for miles like spores on a dandelion, and fall where it was understood.

Not that she had proof of this. It just seemed logical to her, and now that she was here, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to test her theory.

With nothing to lose, eyes closed, breathing slowed, she tried to connect to any other presence that might dwell in this vast forest. Her message winging the stratosphere, she waited for what seemed like an hour for some type of answer. Nothing, no one, not even a small breeze responded to her urging.

It was depressing and frightening to think that she had landed here all by herself and that she might be forced to live a solitary existence for the rest of her life.

That is, if this place was real and not a figment of her dreams. It wouldn't be the first time that she had been submerged in an out of body experience, but this forest was clearer, more distinct, more physical. It didn't have the feel of a vision or a drug-induced state of mind.

It had its own sense of being and was completely different from anything she had previously imagined. And she had never awakened in a place like this. All her other dreams had that otherworldly quality. The mind being aware that it was moving temporarily outside of itself.

Being here was not the same. This forest engulfed her with its own strong reality. Its presence. Its fresh smells. She really believed that she was here, awake, alone.

Lily sat up in a loose yoga position and sighed. What else to do? Her only conclusion: Get up and walk, which she did. Picking a direction, she brushed back her hair and began to hike slowly through the forest. If nothing else, it would occupy her mind and help her to focus.

She tried to take note of anything distinctive. The lines on the bark, the pine needles under her bare feet, the light itself and where it might come from. She stopped occasionally to look up into that light and discern if it fell from a sun, a moon, or perhaps some mysterious living force. Given what she had seen, everything in this place was possible.

Step, step, step. The needles crunched softly underneath her feet. As thick as they were, it was like walking on a highly cushioned rug. Her nightgown caressed her body under the sway of her movement, waving easily around her like a flag dangling in a gentle wind. She had to walk cautiously to keep her balance.

The faint phosphorescence from the surrounding light spots let her know that she was moving, passing huge, round trunks on her right and left. It made her feel like she was walking on a treadmill. Everything the same from one tree to the next.

Something caught her eye. Two glowing orbs on a tree branch. Small orbs, the size of owl eyes. Lily stopped and

waited. It was not clear to her if these were new lights of a different color or something else, perhaps attached to something living.

“Hello?” she spoke as an invitation, trying to sound friendly.

The orbs did not move. Neither did Lily. It was a stalemate.

Lily’s surprised turned to fascination. Was this her first sign of life? Was this her first encounter with something unearthly? She tried to sound encouraging. “I won’t hurt you.”

The orbs remained still, but suddenly Lily realized that the orbs were not alone. Surrounding her, more orbs began to show themselves, until they numbered in the thousands throughout the forest. They appeared to be eyes, but nothing lit strong enough to reveal more than that.

The sheer volume in the trees reminded her of stars in the sky, except these were close, showering her with a faint orange and yellow tint. “Oh my God,” Lily whispered.

Suddenly, shrieking voices like the sound of a thousand crows engulfed her. They were sharp and raw, so much so that she shielded her ears and fell on her knees to the forest floor. If she could, she would have buried herself in the pine needles. As it was, she squeezed herself into a tight human ball. The noise went on for several minutes, then suddenly stopped.

Lily raised her head and looked up. The orbs were gone, vanished, as if someone had flipped a switch and turned them off. But she knew. She was not alone.

She stood up and shivered from the encounter. Her ears continued to ring with a tinny whine. Even though the forest was warm, she patted her arms to knock off the chill she felt, the cold slap of fear.

Standing perfectly still, she saw something else. A dark form next to a trunk about ten feet to her left. She could see the thin black legs and the outline of a body, but no face.

"You are lost," said a low, growling voice.

Lily took a step backward and almost tripped.

"You are quite lost," the voice said. "Far from your proper world and without direction."

Lily regained her balance and set her feet apart. "Yes," she said. "I am, as you say, quite lost."

"Here, I assume, by accident."

Her heart rate slowed. She felt her normal voice return. "By accident, maybe. Then again, I might be dreaming, in which case, my dreams have brought me here."

The creature stirred a bit. "For what reason?"

"I don't know," Lily said. "When you dream, you don't always know the where or why."

"Then you are here by accident."

Lily did not respond. She could tell there was no point in arguing. However she'd come, it wasn't by choice. She accepted his definition.

The creature stepped away from the tree and stood directly in front of her. Even though his face remained hidden, Lily could

see that he was tall, perhaps eight feet, and willowy, with arms and legs no bigger than tree branches. In fact, if not for his voice and the sight of his lengthy hands, he might have been mistaken for a tree.

“And how long do you plan to stay?” the creature asked.

“If I’m here by accident,” she said firmly, “I can’t answer that question. I don’t know how I came, I don’t know where I am, and I don’t know how to get out.”

The creature appeared to give her answer some serious thought. “A dilemma,” he said with a hint of gentleness.

“I think that’s a good way to describe it.”

“Hmm.”

Lily was keenly aware that she may have been the first human to ever set eyes on this place. Given her natural sense of curiosity, she had a thousand questions to ask. Not wanting to be rude, she remained quiet.

And desperate. To talk. To find out where she was. To leave, if possible, but, more important, to understand what or whom she was dealing with. Her heart pounded. Her body broke into a cold sweat.

“It is strange for us as well to have you here,” said the creature. “Our worlds have always been destined to remain separate. To mix them invites danger.”

“And what world is this?” said Lily.

“This place? It has no name that would translate in your language. In fact, our language is not a language at all as you

understand it. Our language is, well, more of the mind, unspoken, but perfectly understandable to those who dwell here. But let us suppose that we might give it a name in your language. As close as I can come to the right sound, you can call this land . . . Arbus.”

Lily nodded. “A planet?”

“Not exactly. Different dimension, different plane of existence. You would not find us on a star map. In fact, you would not find us anywhere at all given your level of understanding. We are separate from your sensory world.”

“Really?”

“Yes, which means that you must be quite special to have come here, someone whose knowledge of life goes beyond your physical world. Someone who understands . . . the beyond.”

Lilly felt her breath catch again. She crossed her arms and stared up at the trees. “Holy shit,” she whispered. Odd how the words of Frank came back to her. Suddenly, what he said clicked and she remembered his line. *There’s somethin in you that’s different from anyone else.* How had he known this?

The creature took a step toward her. “Does this sound like you?”

Lilly lowered her head and watched him again. “Well, yes and no. I mean, I don’t think of myself as special. I’m just a painter from Ventura who likes to think about other worlds. I even use them in my pictures, but that’s about as far as it goes.”

She raised a finger to her cheek. "Still, here we are. I guess that means there has to be some kind of magic, don't you think?"

"Yes," the creature said, "this magic as you say is definitely in you . . . and in your paintings. In fact, I think your *pictures*, as you call them, have led you here."

Lily felt her knees go weak. She sat down with her nightgown spread across the pine needles. Her body tented, she shut her eyes and tried to calm her nerves. Breathing, clearing her mind. She spoke quietly. "My name's Lily, by the way."

"Lily," he pronounced. Out of his mouth, it sounded guttural.

"How about you?" she asked.

"I told you. We have no need for names here. We're aware of each other simply by being."

"Oh," she said.

"You can call me whatever you choose."

She paused. "You speak English."

"I speak many languages," he said. "I am a gatekeeper of sorts, and I have visited your world on many occasions. I think some have been aware of this, though some are so distracted, they would never take the time to notice me. Of those who have, some have called me friend, some have called me demon. It all depends on your perspective about . . . other beings not of your world."

Lily stared up at the tall treelike being. Suddenly she was at a loss for words. Her eyes fixated on the creature's torso, taking in

the details of his spindly structure. There was a word to describe this, if she just could just think of it. A word like . . . awe.

The creature stirred slightly and pointed a long finger at her. "Perhaps you can give me a name, if that would help."

Lily thought about it, wondered what kind of name would be appropriate for such a strange person, someone who spoke her language but was not human. It was a tough choice, but something popped into her head from her years spent in the 1960s as a hippie in San Francisco. She remembered George Harrison's song, *My Sweet Lord*, and thought it might be good to give him a name that was positive, enlightened, otherworldly.

"How about Krishna?" she said.

"Krishna," he repeated in long slow syllables. "Very good. Now I am, at least to you, identifiable."

Lily continued to stare at him. Her words came out slowly. "Can you help me get back?"

"No," he said brusquely.

Lily felt her spirit sag. He had given her an abrupt judgment, the shocking truth about where she had awakened.

"But," he added, "you can help yourself."

She looked at him curiously. "How?"

"How did you get here?"

"I have no idea."

"Yes, I think you do. Consider the details of your journey."

Lily felt exasperated, as if she was back in high school trying to learn algebra. Her teacher, Mr. Rutgers, a tight ass if there

ever was one, telling her to master the formulas and all else would follow. She remembered how those same formulas were like Greek to her. She recalled him looking at her with stern eyes as if he questioned her intelligence.

“Easy for you to say,” she said.

“Easy for you as well, if you take the straightest point.”

“Last I remembered, I fell asleep and woke up here.”

“Then you must return as you came.”

“By . . .”

“Sleep.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

Lily was reminded of how the most obvious solutions often avoided detection. Such was her case. “You’re right. I should have guessed that one.”

“Then you will leave soon?”

“Should I?” she asked hopefully, expecting perhaps an invitation for dinner or an hour or so to drink whatever served as a cup of coffee in this world.

Krishna pointed a clawed finger toward the tree branches. “You saw these creatures in the trees?”

Lily nodded. “Ah yes, those things. They’re very . . . noisy.”

“For your benefit, I shall give them my own name.” Krishna stopped briefly and engaged in thought. “How about . . . gribs?”

“Gribs?”

“Yes, based on the sound they make.”

"Oh, is that what that what you call it?"

"Of course, I'm using that term loosely, for your benefit."

"All right, then. For my benefit. Gribs." She waited for a follow-up. None was forthcoming. "So, these . . . gribs. What about them?"

"I am holding them back."

"Back?"

"From attacking you. They're built for defense. Quite effective when turned loose."

"Dangerous?"

"To you, very."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes."

"Then where shall I go to be safe?"

The creature bent down and for the first time, she saw his face illuminated by the forest's faint light. Eyes dark red, skin black and leathery, mouth exposing very sharp teeth. Ears stretched out like a bat. In her world, the face of a monster. She gasped and shielded herself.

"You must stay where you are," he said, "be very quiet, and return to your dream world."

"But . . ."

Krishna's face remained expressionless. "But?"

"I just woke up. I'm not that sleepy."

Krishna returned to his full height, his head hidden once more in the tree branches. "I can help."

“Help?”

“I can help you sleep.”

“Without hurting me?”

“Yes.”

“Or eating me when I fall asleep?”

“I assure you, despite what you may have heard or read or seen in drawings, I have never eaten anyone from your world. You’ll be quite safe as long as I’m here.”

Lily exhaled, a deep cleansing breath. She gazed around the forest and wondered how close she was to these so-called gribbs. Perhaps only a few yards. She could hardly imagine going to sleep in their presence. But given Krishna’s promise, she decided to try.

Laying down on her back in the needles, she sighed and closed her eyes. “Will I ever return?” she said.

“Only you know that,” said Krishna. “Perhaps your paintings will help you. Just be aware.”

Lily cringed and bolted back up. “Of what?”

“I may not be around to help you.”

She shivered again, laid down, and curled up on her side in as small a ball as she should manage. “Good night,” she said.

“Good night,” he replied.

She heard the rustle of branches and felt a long rough finger touch her temple as lightly as the brush of a butterfly. Then she fell fast asleep, a deep dreamless sleep.



When Lily awakened, she lay on her back on her own dilapidated bed and recalled where she had been. Doubts immediately came to mind. Here in her world, her small room, the world of Arbus may or may not have revealed itself. The presence of Krishna may or may not have been real. The grips may or may not have squealed at an earsplitting pitch.

She looked at the ceiling—off-white plaster with cracks running like trails from one side to the next—and tried to remember every little detail about the forest, every word that Krishna had uttered. Even as she came to life, the so-called dream seemed to recede from her memory.

She realized that the dream must not be lost. She had crossed over to something both dangerous and wonderful. It must be somehow captured with her brush.

Easing out of bed, she took a moment to clean up, brew a cup of coffee, and look out her window at Tom's blooming jacaranda. It still continued to blanket his lawn with flowers and remain a bright inspiration. But this time, she was only casually interested. Her point of focus had shifted elsewhere, to a universe far beyond the tree, the earth, the known boundaries of life.

Putting the cup down, she hurried to her living room, sorted through various canvases and paints, and began to sketch. For

the remainder of the day, she drew, took notes, drew some more. By noon, she was painting the scene.

Lily worked into the early hours of the morning, worked until her hands ached and her eyes grew bleary.

Finally, from sheer exhaustion, she stumbled into her bedroom, collapsed, and hoped beyond hope that no grib would fly out of her head, no vision of Krishna would frighten her, no forest would surround her, and that she would remain anchored to her own world. The bed she lay on was as firm as packed earth. Her walls and ceiling were enclosed by the trappings of wood and plaster. From her weary viewpoint, all was as it should be. This time, no dreams. Just hard, deep sleep.

5.

The ring of a cell phone startled Lily from her slumber. Fumbling around, she picked it up and pressed the receive key.

"Hello?" she said weakly.

"Hey, sleepy head," said a man's voice.

"Tom?"

"Who else would call you this early?"

"You could have waited another hour."

"But then my call wouldn't be a surprise."

Lily struggled with the phone, trying to keep it pinned to her ear. "And I wouldn't be grumpy taking your call, which seems to offset any benefit from the surprise."

"Ah now, don't be a crank," Tom chirped. "I've got breakfast ready."

"Breakfast?"

"It's Thursday, silly. We always have breakfast on Thursday."

"Thursday?"

"Yeah, on the dot."

"But didn't we just have dinner on Monday?"

Tom paused and let out a deep breath. "What?"

"Dinner. Monday. Kathmandu."

He paused again, obviously puzzled. "Well, all right. So we had dinner on Monday and now it's Thursday. What's wrong with your calendar?"

Lily did not reply.

Tom continued to tease her. "Had a late night, huh?"

She decided to go with the flow and let him think what he wanted. "Very."

"Painting?"

"Like mad."

"Well, you gotta eat."

"At some point, yes."

"Eggs, bacon, Costa Rican coffee from Starbucks. Your favorite."

Lily's interest perked up. "Can you give me a half hour?"

"Why not now? I like you frumpy. I like you grumpy. You know that."

"I know what you like and it's got nothing to do with the way I look in the morning."

"Well, now, that's not true. I like you when you're sleepy and just rolled out of bed."

"That's sweet. Give me a half hour?"

"All right, then. You get a half hour. But don't be late or I'm coming over to drag your ass out of the house."

"The door is locked."

"I have a key, remember? We're neighbors. We help each other out."

"I'm hanging up now."

"Don't be late."

"Keep my food warm."

"I will keep warm whatever you desire."

"Animal."

"She devil."

"Goodbye."

"Costa Rican coffee."

She hung up and plopped back on the bed. She could already smell the aroma from the fresh ground beans. Her stomach growled. She suddenly realized that she was ravenous.



Lily stretched out next to Tom and watched him with his eyes closed and his breathing relaxed. His thick arms were folded across his chest. His coarse, grey hair sat only inches from her eyes. "You look so peaceful," she said.

"Hmm," he replied, as if he was half asleep. He took his big hand and rubbed it up and down her leg.

She laid an arm across his neck and gave him a kiss. The feel of his skin, soft and freckled, felt good against her body.

"You've been holed up this week," he said. "Haven't seen you for days. What's up with the painting?"

Lily remained quiet and wondered how much she should tell him about her strange dreams, gribbs, Arbus, etc. She kept her response simple. "I've been having some weird dreams."

"Oh?"

"Sometimes I paint what I dream."

"You can remember them, huh?"

"Oh yes, some of them anyway."

"And this dream?"

"It's a little hard to describe."

Tom did not respond.

"In a week or so, I'll have you over for coffee. You can see for yourself."

He rolled to his side and gazed at her face, his eyes searching for clues. "You're very mysterious."

"I am, I have to admit. Some people think that's strange."

Tom brushed a finger against her cheek. "I don't mind strange."

She returned the gesture and nuzzled his cheek with her nose. "You're sweet."

"Is this thing you're painting animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

Lily gave this some thought. "All of the above, probably, but it's also a place."

"Somewhere you've been before?"

"Well, yes and no. It's a dream, remember?"

"So this place, it's in your imagination?"

She stopped and held her breath. How to answer that question. Again, she guarded her secrets. "Probably."

He kissed her. "Okay, then. Next week. Coffee at your house."

"I promise to clean up."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

She gave him an exasperated look. "I can do it, you know. I just have to make up my mind."

"Before I come over for coffee?"

"Yes, if I want to."

He smiled skeptically. "Will wonders never cease?"

"You watch. I'll surprise you."

"You always do."

He rolled toward her and closed his eyes, but his hands moved up her thigh. She felt the warmth return. "You're hungry," she said softly.

"And you're a Jezebel."

She rolled against him and let him completely embrace her.

6.

It was well past midnight and she had been at it again— all day long, all night long, with only a couple of breaks for coffee and some sandwiches

Her mind had been captured and her brush flew across the canvas as if something or someone held her hand and translated. Now she looked at the painting and marveled at its accuracy, the memory linked almost exactly to the actual event.

Lily dropped her brush and leaned back against a pile of boxes. Her spotlight shined on the middle of the frame and gave the scene energy. The trees in the forest seemed to jump off the page.

But what really caught her eye was her depiction of Krishna. She had decided for the time being to leave his face shadowed, to let the black forest and the bits of blue fluorescence highlight his body and give him a sense of ominous power. He seemed to capture the scenery around him and bring the eye directly to his torso, his long legs, his leathered hands. The way she painted him, it was exactly as she remembered.

“Gotcha,” she said and smiled, but her smile faded as she took in the whole scene and wondered if there was some cosmic connection here. If this scene was more than just paint on a canvas. If the painting itself sent a message. She shivered and dropped the brush onto her makeshift palette.

“What am I doing?” she said and folded her arms.

Her bright blue eyes squinted. Her index finger touched her chin. Suddenly it was as if she was in a trance, her mind floating freely back to that undiscovered planet, or moon, or whatever it might have been. She felt the draw, the connection to Arbus. She had the feeling that it had infected and hid inside her body like a virus waiting to reveal itself.

Lily pushed away from the boxes and switched off the spotlight. Then she turned off the other lights and stood in darkness. Easing off all of her clothes, she let her whole body soak up the night. Her hands brushed against her stomach, her breasts, her shoulders. Everything old, wrinkled, sagging, but not her spirit. The picture had ignited a spark that had kicked itself into a small fire.

She wondered if Arbus had done something to this creaky old body. Not a reversal of time exactly or a physical rejuvenation. The flat breasts against her chest reminded her of her age and her short future.

But the odd visit to this place had affected her. The details were yet to be revealed, but something was different. Her eyes sharper, her mind clearer, her thoughts more focused.

Lily sighed and felt her way through the dark to her bed. She sat on the side and sensed her vulnerability. Alone. In the presence of the picture. Dropping on her back, she tried to find her usual cracks on the ceiling, the cracks that her eyes followed every night before falling asleep.

There they were. Crooked, jagged, wandering. They spread like a trail across the plaster. As her eyes adjusted, they made their usual journey from one side of the room to the other. Then, laying on her side, she quickly and peacefully fell asleep.

7.

The sunlight streaming through her bedroom window woke her. She had rolled to her side and was lying uncovered in a fetal position on top of her bed. Still naked, she looked at her body in the light and felt a sudden surge of embarrassment.

Jumping up, she threw on a robe and went into the kitchen to start some coffee. Another glance out the window at Tom's front yard before hurrying into the living room. Everything was as she left it. The painting of Arbus still leaning against the wall.

Then she glanced down at it and noticed something strange. In the center of the frame, Krishna had disappeared. In his place a thousand little glowing orbs in the trees. The gribbs staring directly at her with their painted eyes in a subtle shade of orange.

"Holy shit," she blurted out and stumbled back a step. Her elbow knocked against a box and caused her coffee to spill.

Lily hesitantly picked up the painting and held it at several different angles, checking to make sure that what she saw was correct.

There was no mistake. The scene had shifted. Krishna had faded out and the gribbs had revealed themselves. It frightened her to think that her painting seemed to have a mind of its own; that behind the precise strokes, a powerful force was present and watching.

Setting it down, she went back to the kitchen and poured her remaining coffee down the drain. Laying the cup upside down on the counter top, she hurried back into the living room. Something in this other universe had latched onto this painting and decided to use and tease her.

Her head spun and her legs felt weak. Hoping to avoid an embarrassing fall, she sat cross-legged on the floor and let the moment sink into her head.

Who would have thought a painting could be more than just a painting? That it could be a mystical experience which revealed itself at will?

Her cell phone rang and made her cry out, "Oh!" Startled, she banged her arm against one of her storage boxes. It sent shock waves through her body.

Lily pushed herself up off the floor and hurried over to answer it. "Hello?" she said breathlessly.

"Mom?" said a familiar voice.

"Martha?"

"Yeah, Mom, it's me." She heard the shallow sounds of her mother's labored breathing. "Are you all right?"

Lily inhaled and turned once more to face the painting. To her relief, nothing else had changed. "Yes, dear, I'm . . . I'm fine." Her wavering voice inferred otherwise.

Martha picked up on it. "You don't sound so good."

"I just woke up, dear. Haven't got my head cleared yet. Haven't even had my first cup of coffee."

"Oh, okay."

Lily hesitated.

"Well," said Martha, "have you thought about what we talked about the other day?"

"Yes."

Martha waited for more details. To no avail. "And?" she said impatiently.

"I'm still thinking about it. Can you give me a little more time?"

"Sure, Mom, take all the time you need. It's your house, your decision. We're just here to support you."

"Okay, then, dear. Thanks for thinking of me."

"We still on for dinner tomorrow?"

"I'll be there." Truthfully, Lily had forgotten.

Martha hesitated again. "Mom? You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, dear. Why?"

Her daughter let a moment pass. "You seem a little distracted."

"Isn't that the story of my life?" Lily's fingers tapped anxiously against a box. "You know me. Sometimes I float in a

different universe." She knew full well the irony of her statement.

"Okay," said Martha. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Lily knew that tone. Doubtful. Skeptical. "Thanks, dear. I love you."

"Love you, too. Bye."

The line went dead, but she held the phone to her ear anyway, as if there was something else to say, something that might make her daughter less alarmed. Nothing pithy came to mind.

As she lowered the phone, it rang again. Startled, she dropped it and heard it clunk on the floor. It continued to ring with a persistent clanging chime.

Reaching down, Lily raised it cautiously. The blue screen told her it was working. "Hello?" she said.

"The time will come," said a gruff voice.

Lily jerked the phone away, then returned it slowly to her ear. "Who is this?"

"The time will come for you to leave," the voice said.

Lily suddenly remembered that voice. "Krishna?"

"The time will come," the voice repeated.

The phone went dead. She held it in front of her face before gingerly placing it back on the box.

Turning to face the painting, she stood and scanned it top to bottom and side to side. Suddenly her skin turned cold. She covered her mouth with her hands to keep from screaming.

The painting had returned to its original state. The forest, Krishna, no gribs. Lily put her index finger in her mouth and bit down. The pain helped bring her back to her senses.

The outlines of a picture formed in her head. Her dream. Her painting. The gribs. The voice on the phone. The paint and frame and visuals, not just a flat perception. And most clearly, the image of Krishna, red and dark and threatening and yet somehow persuasive and convincing. This painting, no ordinary painting. As much as Arbus and the forest and Krishna himself, it was, in every sense of the word, alive.