

# **“When The Painting Sings...”**

**Judith Nolan**



*“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams...”*

***Eleanor Roosevelt***

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It was after midnight and Vincent’s chamber was illuminated by extra candles, holding back the familiar darkness that always hovered in the small alcoves and corners. The cheery brazier flickered and crackled, dispelling the perpetual chill of the underground world.

Catherine and Vincent stood in the centre of the room. They’d decided to remain Below for the night, rather than return Above to their brownstone. None of their four grown children was at home this weekend, so they had no pressing parental obligations.

Often lately, they’d found they preferred the quiet solitude of the tunnel world to the hustle and bustle of their city life. It was a softly sweet addiction to their memories of the past.

They stood side-by-side, regarding Kristopher Gentian’s latest gift with wondering eyes. Vincent put his arm around his wife’s shoulders, drawing her closer to him. He pressed a kiss into her hair, as she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

He shook his head. "It's almost as if we've stepped back thirty-five years. I remember well that night when you brought down Kristopher's first painting of us," he mused, staring at the large painted canvas resting on the wooden easel before them.

"I found this new one on our balcony when I got up this morning," Catherine mused. "You'd already gone Below. I stepped out to enjoy the air and my morning coffee and there it was. Wrapped up in old brown paper and tied with bits of ragged string. Just like all the others he's left for me to sell on his behalf over the years."

She laughed softly. "He's very careful to only come out at night when the weather is fine and moonless. He would hate to find his precious work damaged by moisture. And yet I've never seen him, so I have no idea how he's really doing these days."

She drew a ragged breath, releasing it slowly. "I have so many unanswered questions. Is he still youthful and impossible to pin down as either living or dead? Does he still wear that awful Mets cap and the rumpled clothing? Does he remember to eat properly?"

She waved a hand in frustration. "I feel this crazy need to mother him. But he won't permit it. All I'm allowed to see are the paintings and the notes he leaves for me from time to time. I have no idea where he's living now."

"Kristopher has always been Kristopher." Her husband nodded. "He is unique and uniquely-talented. He could be a ghost or a man and will never admit to being either of those things. Being labelled would only cramp his style."

"Yes, that's Kristopher, all right." Catherine shook her head in bemusement.

"But this..." She frowned at the painting. "I knew as soon as I saw my own name on the tag, that it would be something very special. He wrote it was a belated Winterfest present."

She chuckled. "It's only eight months late."

"And yet it is special and very Kristopher," Vincent agreed. "Exhibitions at the Met, record high prices paid for his mysterious works. But he remains the same. Simply Kristopher."

He indicated the bottom right-hand corner of the painting where there was a stylised signature. "As he signs all his paintings with a simple K and a line before he moves on to create the next masterpiece."

"That first one he painted of us was breath-taking enough. But I think he's truly excelled himself this time. He had his sketch he did of me at the coffee shop to work from back then..." Catherine mused. "But we guessed he must have painted you from memory. That night at the drainage tunnel when I gave you his first edition of Tennyson..."

She cast a quick look around the chamber. "He was spying on us, then. Has he been spying on us all these years, that he can again capture both of us so well? His odd ability to appear and disappear at will has always been one of his more aggravating qualities."

"Ah, but a true magician never reveals how he accomplishes his tricks." Vincent chuckled. "All we can do is watch the show with open minds and applaud at the end. I applaud our magic artist now. I do not think he has painted anything finer."

"Yes..." Catherine shrugged as she looked back at the painting. "This is an incredible and astonishing work, isn't it?"

"It is..." Vincent agreed slowly. "You could say... even magical..."

Catherine turned to smile up at him. "Now you're sounding like Kristopher again. He does that all the time. Casts a spell over us and then leaves. The money he makes from selling his paintings is substantial and yet all he wants to buy are more paints and canvas. He leaves the administration of his estate all to me. I do worry about him sometimes. I doubt he spends enough money on food."

Vincent raised his eyebrows at her. "Oh, I have the feeling he does well enough. He simply doesn't wish to spoil the well-built illusion of himself being the starving artist who died tragically for his work."

He looked back to the painting. He reached out gently to touch the edge. His lips curved into an enigmatic half-smile. "I thought so..."

Catherine noticed. "And you're smiling again. Just like last time. What have you found now?"

Vincent shrugged. "Kristopher works only in oils."

"Yes, he does," Catherine agreed. "And lots of it. In the notes he leaves for me to find, he demands I buy him a great number of new supplies at least once a month. He doesn't understand if a certain cherished colour is out of stock. Since Mr Smythe died and the 777 bookshop is no more, Kristopher has turned to me for help and ready access to his money. He's lucky I don't charge him for my services."

She shrugged. "I'm beginning to think poor Mr Smythe was something of a saint because of what he must have put up with all those years when Kristopher lived above the shop."

"Or a very canny businessman who knew when he was onto a good thing," Vincent replied. "He never struck me as someone easily duped by Kristopher's more eccentric tricks. He perpetuated the illusion around Kristopher's supposed demise in order to become his agent. They had a good deal going for many years."

"Maybe..." Catherine smiled, not grudging their ghostly artist his due. "But it gives me certain leverage to make sure Kristopher's, at least, trying to take care of himself. I think this painting is his idea of payment in full."

"Yes. But as we already know, oils take months to dry completely, Catherine. Sometimes even years." Vincent sighed. "This canvas holds no moisture at all. I can only wonder how he does it, time after time. Making his work seem as if it's been stored for years in that old warehouse of his and not simply painted last week in a loft somewhere in Soho. I often think that he—"

"Oh, no..." Catherine put a finger across his lips to silence him. "Don't say it. You know how Kristopher likes to play with us for his own amusement. I'm sure he's laughing at us, right now. Wherever he is."

She recalled Mr Smythe's words to her, first uttered in the 777 bookshop all those years ago. *'The world takes away our certainties. And our beauties...'* She studied the incredible painting.

"And sometimes... just sometimes, it gives them back to us," she whispered.

She smiled as she leaned back against her love, the most beautiful, most certain thing she knew. Vincent tightened his arm around her before resting his cheek against her hair. Then they lost themselves in the painting.

It was a scene with their own smiling faces framed in the centre of the work, reading a book together. Vincent, with his long mane frosted with silver threads, among the gold and sporting the fuller beard he now wore. He looked as strong and desirable as always.

Catherine studied her own painted image. Her hair was simply dressed and creamy-white, long and curling around her neck in the style she favoured. The lines on her face had been drawn there by years of love and laughter. She knew she would not change a single one, nor begrudge the march of time.

The lobes of her ears were adorned with her favourite pair of pearl earrings. A fact that had not escaped her attention. They had been a fortieth birthday gift from her loving husband.

She touched the tip of her finger to them now. She was wearing them tonight. Kristopher must have closely observed her, at some point, to know what she liked to wear. Perhaps he'd passed her one day in the street, secure in his anonymity. She could well imagine his cheeky audacity to do such a thing.

Above their heads on the canvas ran a nightscape scene of the Brooklyn Bridge, spanning the painting from side to side in an iconic view Catherine remembered well. Across the bottom stood a haphazard line of Winterfest candles, thirty-five in total. One for each year of their lives now lived together in both the tunnels and Above.

But the final richness of the work was in the many incredibly detailed faces that surrounded and framed them. All were unique, identifiable and loved. The

children who had grown and left the tunnels and those who remained to raise their own children in the hidden world far below the city streets.

There were the tunnel dwellers and those from Above who had since passed from this mortal plane. There were so many happy faces.

And then there was Kristopher, smiling out at them with mischievous intent from among the others. Exactly as Catherine remembered him, all those years ago. Charming and boyish and totally impossible to pin down, or be made to stand still long enough for a rational conversation.

"I love these most of all..." Catherine reached out one finger to touch lightly on the image of her beloved father, who had died only recently after a long and eventful life. "There are so many. Kristopher has captured them all so beautifully. I feel they could almost speak to us if we listened hard enough."

She caressed her father's painted cheek lovingly. "Hi, Dad... I love you..."

"Yes..." Vincent touched a fingernail on the smiling image that belonged to his own father, carefully detailed on the cover of the book Vincent was reading to his wife. "I know Jacob will love this. We'll show it to him in the morning after breakfast."

The old man was approaching his one-hundredth birthday. But while he'd been forced by advancing age to leave the mundane day-to-day running of the tunnel world to his sons and grandsons, he still insisted on being kept informed of all the goings on in his world, no matter how small or insignificant.

"Father..." Vincent shook his head. His stubborn parent loved to think he was still in charge and they indulged his whim, because it kept his mind from dwelling on how little time he might have left.

Jacob still enjoyed playing chess, even though his eyesight was failing him and he needed help to make his desired moves. It showed the steel in him, bred deep into his bones by the early years of hardship spent Below.

Still, he refused to give in and be beaten by time. Not yet, not when there was still so much left to do...

*"Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light..."* Vincent quoted his father's favourite Dylan Thomas poem softly.

"Yes...", Catherine nodded, wiping a tear from her cheek. "Be well, Dad. Be well and happy, wherever you are...", she whispered to her father's image, before putting up one hand to cup and stroke her fingers over her husband's bearded chin. "I love you so much... more than the spoken word can ever say..."

"As I love you..." Vincent replied. "Always and forever..."

He nuzzled his lips against the side of her neck.

"Hey, lady," he whispered. "I don't have anywhere else I would rather be right now. Do you want to fool around for a bit?"

Catherine laughed happily as she turned to him, raising her lips to within a breath of his. "I thought you would never ask..."

As they kissed, they relished the idea that they truly had nowhere else to be tonight. Moving together toward the wide, soft bed, Catherine fancied she could hear again Kristopher softly quoting the same Oscar Wilde poem from their meeting in the park all those years ago...

*'We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the blue bird, singing of beautiful and impossible things. Of things that are lovely and that never happen. Of things that are not and that should be...'*

"Everything is as it should be..." she whispered to the clustering shadows and smiled as she sank down among the pillows of the bed, surrendering fully to her husband's loving embrace. "And I would not change one single thing..."

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*"If you want to be happy, do not dwell in the past, do not worry about the future, focus on living fully in the present..."*

**Roy T. Bennett**