

## Il Fattore

“Gesundheit,” I murmur to a balding man of about forty-five to my left. Either he ignores me or is too busily concentrated on scouring his right hand over the left knee of his tan suit. He snuffles a bit then rubs two fingers under his nose a few times. I turn with disgust back to my crumpled issue of Time magazine.

I picked it up only moments ago, to relieve the monotony of this waiting room, but found it difficult to be entertained, let alone concentrate on the articles in a magazine that was four years old.

I toss the rag back onto the pile with the other dinosaurs of journalism, causing a small cloud of dust to rise then settle quickly. With a deep sigh I uncross my right leg and set it on the ground. It felt as if I had put my foot down on a bed of nails. The pain shoots its way up into my calf, and I quietly stamp it back to consciousness, all the while grinning like an idiot.

I think to myself that I’ve been here enough times that one would think waiting in this bland room with out of date magazines and uncouth middle-aged men could be skipped. I check my watch and see it is well past 2:30. I check the wall clock for any discrepancy. It is one of those irritating cat clocks whose eyes and tail sway in opposition to count the seconds. I close my eyes hoping to block the image from staining my already pounding cerebellum. *Why haven’t they called me yet?* I think into the blackness of my eyelids. *Why hasn’t SHE called me yet?* My eyes pop open and concentrate ferociously on the young woman behind the counter. She twists strands of her dark shining hair with dexterously long fingers. Her eyes hide behind black-rimmed eyeglasses cast downward undoubtedly at some soft-core porn novel -- the cover of which must have some scantily

clad woman swooning on the arm of a bare-chested He-man, both their hair blowing in the wind.

“Mr. Roller?” A soft voice with a heavy southern accent coos my name from under a peaked nurse’s cap, indicating it is my turn to follow. The woman it comes from fills the entire doorway horizontally. The rolling hills of the sides of her white nurse’s uniform remind me of the stay puff Marshmallow man. She smiles at me, her rosy cheeks almost engulfing the rest of her face. I pick up my things and am ushered through several sets of glass doors to a long white hallway.

My shoes squeak on the spotless linoleum as we walk the sterile passage. The nurse, her name tag reads ‘Kathy,’ glances over at me several times as we walk, her deep-set hazel eyes soaking up what she sees. Her breathing is labored and her enormous bosom repeatedly rises, threatening to burst, then falls again. I cough a bit into my fist, which she takes to be an invitation for conversation.

“Oh, Mr. Rollah,” she drawls. “You have such a talent for description.” I roll my eyes at the familiar compliment, but she continues. “I found your portrayal of Mr. Pablo Picasso so lifelike.” She slows to a stop and plants doughy fists on her wide hips, her head suddenly cocked to the side like a dog’s when it’s listening. “Now what do you reckon could lead a pleasant man like that to cut his own ear off?” Her heavy accent twists ‘own’ into a three-syllable word. I glance about the hallway to contain my very witty comeback then I submit with a breathy, “Crazy things happen I guess.”

We resume our meandering pace and it suddenly occurs to me that this is the longest hallway I’d ever walked down in my life! We’ve passed dozens of analogous doors on both sides. All were Dutch swinging glass and had the Home’s insignia

embossed on each side. There is no indication anywhere as to how far we had gone and how far there was to go. I thought that there should at the very least be mile markers of some kind. My escort trundles along at her steady clip and tries to astound me with her knowledge. I feared our journey would never come to an end.

“They call him il Fattore, which I believe means ‘The Painter.’”

“Yeah,” I agreed, knowing full well that Fattore was a direct translation for ‘creator’ or ‘maker.’”

“But of course you knew that. You must know everything about him.”

“Well, not yet, “ I answer, feigning modesty as best I could.

“Ah can remember my parents showing me pictures of his work when Ah was just a small child.”

As she recounted her childhood, her speaking became more and more melodic, as if she were trying to improvise a song.

“Even then Ah loved his work. Some people said I had very distinguished taste for a young ’un, but I think I just loved the vibrant colors.” Her nose wrinkled at the small joke she thought she made and then let forth a macabre sound that made me think she might have been smothering a squirrel or two in her enormous bodice.

“What’s your favorite piece?” I ask, hoping to at least get some material out of this torture.

“Well,” She scrunched her face like a Shar-Pei’s and disappeared briefly in a mass of thought wrinkles. Finally her face relaxed and she returned. “Ah’d say that Ah am most fond of his Murals. Ah remember he did one that had to be at least as high as a house.” She held her hand up to show me just how high it was, her underarms jiggled

fervidly. “The thought of him completing that masterpiece in his condition just gives me tingles like starlight all over my body. Yessir, Ah adore his murals. Maybe I just like ‘em ‘cuz they’re big. Ah like the big ‘uns.”

*I bet you do*, I chuckled to myself.

My instincts as a novelist kick in and I ask, “What do you think of his recurring theme of children as faint shadows?”

Once again her face disappeared into its own folds. She emerged after only a few seconds this time.

“Well sugar, Ah reckon that it might have something to do with his own childhood. I’ve never really thought much about it to tell ya’ll the truth. It don’t make no never mind to me, I just like to look, not analyze.”

“Thanks anyway, most people don’t,” I reassured. My thoughts scanned every article I’d read about il Fattore in my research, recalling that 99.5 % of them mentioned the mysterious smoke like wispy shaped children that appear in many pieces.

Mercifully we reach our destination. Kathy held open one of the swinging doors to the “relaxation room” and we entered. It was surprisingly empty. I imagined the hustle and bustle of geriatrics who spend their days playing checkers, chess, and other leisure activities. I could almost hear the *shoop shoop* of slippers and clackety clack of walkers as I stared down at a rogue black checker mournfully sitting atop a lightly stained wooden table. On the other side of the room was a fireplace accompanied by a large white marble mantle. Two brown leather overstuffed armchairs faced the dark hearth. Jagged creases ran in all directions showing where the leather wrinkles each time someone sits. Beyond the leather armchairs there is a long wall of shelved books. From

where I stand I cannot see any of the titles, but I am sure that everything from gardening tips to popular fiction could be found among the volumes.

I must have been looking for some time because Kathy squeezed my arm encouragingly as I'm sure she was taught to do in nursing school, and pointed out the old man sitting by some large picture windows overlooking the neatly trimmed but hardly used baseball field. I had been so busy taking in the room that he had escaped my sight. He was in front of a canvas, of course, and was paused, palette poised in his right hand, brush quivering in his right. The afternoon sunlight streamed in at a romantic low angle displaying the hills and valleys of prominent wrinkles. I began walking towards the man before saying goodbye to the nurse; barely hearing her shut the door behind me. I approached the old man and glanced at what he was working on. It was a portrait of the baseball field outside. The dirt in the track around the infield looked like it might give off dust if someone were to tap the canvas. I cleared my throat and he came to life. I stuck my hand out in greeting. The old man placed his brush on the easel and gripped my palm firmly but did not stand nor speak. He started each session like this, quiet and reserved, seemingly thinking of something of great importance. But it would usually turn out to be that he hadn't inserted his teeth yet.

"Where is everyone?" I asked as I took a seat opposite him. The old man grimaced, and then muttered something about double portions of Jell-O in the cafeteria. He made a sound of disgust like a horse clearing its throat. I took out my miniature tape recorder and set it to the on position, then lay it to rest on the windowsill, giving myself a mental pat on the back. Without the recorder, deciphering the old man's story through his thick Italian accent would have proved impossible. "Where would you like to start today,

Mr. Bellagio?" I asked. Without looking at me he said, "Tomás, please." He has said this each time we have spoken, but it doesn't seem right to call such a great man by his first name. Would you call Einstein, Al?

He wheezed a bit and tried to mat down what was left of his gray hair before speaking. He asked if I minded if he smoked, which I didn't, so he lit a Pall Mall and blew smoke at the window. The white curls recoiled from the glass and dissipated slowly.

"Nasty habit," he commented. I just nodded in agreement and searched my spiral notebook for where we'd left off last time. My finger traced the lined paper and I found my place. The names Eva and Paolo leapt off the page at me. I leaned back in my chair and set my gaze upon the man's face.

"Last time you had begun telling me of two friends from your childhood who have influenced the bulk of your work." I looked to my notes again, "Eva and Paolo." The artist's eye's flinched at the mention of their names. "My question to begin today is how do they relate to the frequent theme of children in your work."

"This is true," he responded, and then took an extra long drag from his cigarette. "When I was a child, my family, we settled in Venice." He stroked the corners of his mouth as he thought. I had two very close friends. In Italian we have a saying. It is, *una mano lava l' altra mano e tutti e due le faccia.*" On the last word his hand came up, fingers pressed together, and punctuated it with a flick of his wrist. "It means that one hand washes the other and both of the hands they wash the face." The adults used to call my friend Paolo and I 'the hands,' and Eva was 'the face.'" His mouth drew on the name Eva as he said it. He let the long sound of A fade out before beginning the Vuh. He paused again to draw the last of the tobacco from his cigarette. He stared out the window

pensively. “Eva,” he whispered again. We would have done anything for her.” He began a story about his childhood and the detail his aged mind provided was astounding and breathtaking.

Our gazes met unexpectedly and our eyes locked. His sclera were pure ivory without a single blemish or blood vessel. They were dotted perfectly with a bottomless pupil surrounded by a nimbus of brilliant blue iris.

Although I saw that the old man’s lips still rounded out syllables over his crooked, yellow teeth, I couldn’t hear the words. But somehow I knew everything he was saying, even before he said it. I am not a lip reader, but as I was drawn deeper and deeper into the ever-expanding blackness at the centers of his eyes, I felt as if I were falling into his mind. The thoughts he had seemed to become my own. Soon it wasn’t words I was receiving, but the whole picture, as if I had lived in Venice and I was remembering my exploits with my friends. My clothing began to feel damp from the rain.

I saw that St. Marks Square had been especially crowded with tourists that April even though the rainy season had come early and lingered longer than expected. The canals were overflowing, and people scurried between awnings holding their jackets over their heads. At least the locals did. It was always easiest to distinguish the tourists. They were the ones holding inside-out umbrellas like they were walking large dogs across the square. Water cascaded from rooftops and transformed the narrow cobblestone alleyways into rivers, sending unsuspecting mice and insects out on un-seaworthy crafts of leaves and bits of wood. All of Venice was miserable, especially those wearing thick soggy robes conducting masses day in and day out at the cathedral. If they had not been holy

men, one could swear that they were cursing under their breath. It seemed that the only people who were enjoying the weather were the children.

Small groups of them ran about the square, squealing with delight as they pounced on puddles, spraying anyone and anything near them. The unlucky pigeons that loitered about looking for crusts of bread paid the price for not retreating to the safety of their nests -- though not Tomás.

“Where were you?” I asked from my hypnotic state.

“We were too young to be tramping about on our own.”

Tomás and his friends Paolo and Eva stomped their own puddles away from the other children and St Mark’s Square. They preferred the quiet winding streets behind the safety net of the marketplace. At least that was what they told themselves. The reality was that their parents forbade them from playing in the square with the other kids. Their parents preferred to keep them close to home. Daily, Tomás’ mother reminded him of her friend who foolishly let her son play in the square, after which he’d been found at the bottom of a canal. Tomás’ questions about the boy were always met with vagueness and inconsistent facts. Still, he minded his mother and the others minded theirs.

The trio ran circles around the merchants, who even today in the pouring rain hocked their wares. Tomatoes the color of rubies and apples as crisp as the winter air, they shouted to the shimmering silhouettes as they passed by. “Hey you kids!” The merchants yelled. “Either buy something or get lost. You’re bad for business.” The children found this daily banter to be incredibly amusing: especially Paolo. Here he was in his element -- although, almost anywhere was his element. He ran slalom about the yelling vendors, his hazel eyes fiery and his mop top of brown-red hair shooting off in all

directions. When he was being especially mischievous, his eyebrows knitted together, in a sort of meeting of the minds. They were doing that now, as he played one of his favorite games. He liked to bargain the price of a single apple down to a mere five hundred lire, then toss the fruit disdainfully back in the basket at the last second, complaining of a worm or bruise. Better than a half a worm Tomás always chimed in on cue.

On this dreary day, the three friends splashed their way deeper and deeper into the winding streets, drenching each other and themselves. When they finally stopped to catch their breath, they noticed that nothing looked familiar anymore. Or, rather, that everything looked exactly the same, as it can tend to do throughout the archipelago of small islands, though Eva's house was *not* next to the bridge and Tomás' mother's watchful eyes no longer peered from the second story across the way. Paolo searched the sky between the buildings for his mother's clothesline, but could not find that either.

The children's first impulse was to run, but where to? They huddled under a peaked archway and shivered when cold droplets falling from the roof found their bare necks. Tomás was the first to speak, his large brown eyes shimmering. "I think we're lost." It was all that he could think of to say, but he thought it best to say something. The others nodded in agreement.

"What do we do?" Eva whimpered, her lower lip trembling. Her fair face was shiny with moisture and her blue eyes wavered, looking first to Tomás, then Paolo, then back to Tomás. She pushed a clump of matted blonde hair that was stuck to her face behind her ear and balled the heavy damp sleeves of her green blouse with her fists. Small streams of water pattered to the ground when she squeezed.

Tomás' mind raced. What could they do? He tried to remember what his mother had told him, only about a million times, regarding what to do if they got lost. His mind filled with darkness, blanketing his thoughts and pictures of escape. He put his hands to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut, wrinkling his brow, trying to force *something* from his memory. Not a single annoyingly accurate piece of advice came to him.

It looked as if Eva was about to let the floodgates open when Paolo spoke. "Perhaps if we just walk around a bit we might find our way back?" His voice had a tremor of determination in it, which was instantly beaten back by Tomás.

"Or we might get more lost!"

Eva's eyes began to well up with a mixture of tears and rainwater. She put her face into her hands and began to sob with deep gusting breaths.

"Well," Paolo paused, "it's worth a shot. Let's just walk around the corner and see what's there."

Eva nodded, blinking back her tears. She saw some logic in this and Tomás consented because Eva did. The three stuck close, not quite holding hands because only babies did that and they were certainly not babies anymore. They walked to the end of the cobblestone street towards the canal, walking around the puddles and trying to stay under any overhangs along the way.

But when they rounded the corner they saw only another Venetian cobblestone street almost exactly like the one they'd just left. As if on cue the rain began to fall harder, obscuring the clothing still hanging from lines between the buildings. The children stared up at the oncoming raindrops and sighed collectively.

Eva slumped against the building and slid with a sploosh into a small puddle that had collected where a cobblestone was missing. Tomás thought she was crying, but it was hard to tell if it wasn't just rain on her face. The boys paced in front of her like philosophers discussing a mathematical proof.

Tomás tried desperately to think of an idea before Paolo. He always seemed to be better at everything they did. And because of it, Eva liked him better. Tomás glanced over at his friend. He watched as he paced, his brown corduroy pants were too long and dragged on the street. The cuffs seemed several shades darker. While Tomás was studying him, Paolo suddenly straightened – he had an idea.

“C’mon,” Paolo instructed, and ran off towards a small shop at the end of the street. The fabric rubbing against itself seemed almost musical when he ran quickly,

“Where are you going?” Eva called after him. He threw an impatient grunt over his shoulder and the others shrugged their own shoulders then followed.

They gasped for breath in the doorway of the shop. Tomás also wheezed due to a slight case of asthma that was especially bad when it rained. They lingered in the doorway for a while and tried to figure out exactly what type of shop it was. There was no sign above the door depicting the nature of the wares inside, nor was there a display window.

“Now what Mr. Smarty Pants?” Tomás snarled at Paolo.

“Let’s go inside and just ask for directions.”

“But we shouldn’t talk to strangers,” Eva reminded her friend, hearing the echoes of many diatribes in her head.

“You got a better idea?” Paolo snapped back.

The others didn't and kept silent while Paolo searched their faces for suggestions. Small bells chimed when the door was opened, but instead of emitting a light angelic sound, the bells gave off a sour ringing like the one a person occasionally gets in his ear. They entered single file in a sort of sandwich; Eva was the meat and the boys bordered her on both sides. Tomás was the last one to enter and closed the door carefully so as not to set the chimes off again.

Clearly the store was not a run-of-the mill tourist shop, such as one might find in the hundreds around St Mark's and the surrounding streets, where tourists could always count on being inundated with thousands of delicate glass items. Little porpoises that stand on their noses and tails, ballerinas balanced on point, and even wide eyed glass fish swimming nowhere in their glass bowls. There was not a single piece of Venetian glass in this shop, or even a carefully crafted egg. Instead, the store was filled wall to wall with tables piled high with items of all shapes and sizes. It seemed to be a pawnshop, but unlike any the children had ever seen before. Although everything seemed to belong in a pawnshop, (baseball mitts, wallets, watches, etc...) the items on display all seemed to be brand new instead of second hand.

Paolo walked deeper into the shop while the other two hung back by the doorway. He approached a table on the right and picked up a walnut kaleidoscope and turned it over in his hands. The finished wood was sanded to a silky smooth texture that was very pleasing to the touch. Several interchangeable optical ends sat in a line next to the kaleidoscope. One looked like a crystal golf ball, another was a plain marble, but the others contained pieces of colored plastic encased between frosted glass. Paolo ran his thumb over raised logos of a sun and moon on either side of the handle. He lifted the

instrument to his eye; he almost looked like he was searching for land through a spyglass. His body became very rigid and for several moments too long he barely moved. Eva put a hand on his shoulder as Tomás watched, still standing in the doorway. With her touch, Paolo shuddered back to life and brought the toy from his face.

“You must look in here.” He said with stalwart conviction in his voice. He held it out to Tomás who warily inched away from the door and took the kaleidoscope from his friend’s hand. “Try a different end Paolo whispered.” Tomás replaced the stippled marble at the end with an end containing little shards of colored glass and plastic and lifted it to his eye.

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice battered my ears. It was Kathy. She held a small white cup in each hand. “Here’s your medication darlin’.” She bent and handed the cups to my subject. She gave me a quick wink as he downed the meds. “Thank you,” he gulped then patted his mouth dry with a light blue paper napkin she produced.

I noticed that the sun had begun to set and the brilliant white light from before was starting to turn a beautiful orange color. Kathy stood above us and made no indication that she was on her way out.

“How ya’ll doin’? She asked.

“Just fine,” I replied in a tone that any normal human would have recognized as a suggestion to leave. Instead she turned to Mr. Bellagio and grasped his shoulder.

“Are you all right Mr. Bellagio? Are you tired? Would you like to rest a bit?” She batted her lashes at him and showed all of her teeth.

“No, thank you,” he answered in a careful tone. “I must continue though, before I forget where I left off.” I was about to tell him that I had a tape recorder for

circumstances such as that, and then thought better of it. He was getting rid of our friend the walking stereotype.

Looking defeated she sighed, “well then, I’ll best be getting’ out of the way then. Don’t be ‘fraid to call if ya’ll need anything.” We both muttered thank you and finally she started towards the door. “You boys have a nice aft’ noon,” she said then waddled back out of the room.

Once she had closed the door behind her, the old painter shrugged and pointed a thumb backwards at the departure of Kathy. “She’s crazy, but kind.” I smiled and bounced my shoulders. “They make me take them,” Bellagio explained in regards to the medication. “Mostly Vitamins. Who knows if it helps? They are the experts, so I do not complain.” I nodded in agreement.

“Should I play back the tape?” I asked.

“No, no,” he replied. “I may be old, but my mind has not failed me yet.” He lifted the paintbrush from the easel with his withered and liver spotted hand, then dipped the end ever so gently into the well containing black. He then put the brush to a piece of canvas off to the side that seemed to be for testing colors and wiped off all but a tiny bit of the paint. “I believe,” he began again, “that I was telling you about my first experience with the kaleidoscope.” I nodded. “Good, for it is not the last you will hear of it.”

This time when he began to speak, falling back into his world was far easier. My mind rushed past the falling rain and slippery cobblestones back into the peculiar shop where young Tomás was about to put the beautifully carved kaleidoscope to his eye.

“Can I help you?” a voice scraped from somewhere across the store. Eva stifled a scream that instead passed between her pressed lips as a small yelp. Tomás backed away

from the voice and edged closer to Eva; his hand reached out and brushed her elbow. She took his hand now *because* they weren't babies anymore.

The words had come from a hunched old man standing behind a counter in the far corner of the shop. His head was almost completely bald save for a few tufts of wild gray hair above each ear. His eyes were pale blue, almost white and they stared off into space in two separate directions. "Well?" he said impatiently, and his jowls waggled as he did.

"Hello," Paolo stammered, he was always the bravest. "We're a bit lost and..." He was cut short when the man finished his sentence.

"And you need directions home?" The old man's eyebrows rose slightly, it was more of a statement than a question,

"Yes please," Paolo answered in his most polite and adult voice. The old man slipped on a pair of dark glasses to hide his wandering eyes, made his way around the counter and hobbled towards the children. Eva buried her face in Tomas's chest, paying no attention to how damp it was. She squeezed his hand hard, so hard that his fingertips became numb from lack of circulation, though he did not ask her to stop. Instead he looked at their clenched hands and smiled a bit as gooseflesh formed on his body.

The old man felt his way over to Paolo and stopped less than three feet away. Tomas and Eva were at least six feet from the old man, but all three could smell him just the same. The odor he gave off was a combination of mothballs and rotting fruit. Eva wrinkled her nose and pinched it with her fingers.

"Where do you live?" The old man's upper lip curled. Paolo started to answer, but then he obviously thought better of giving a stranger such significant information. "Near

St. Peter's," he lied. The children knew their way to and from the church. He was sure the old man could see he was lying.

The shopkeeper paused for a moment and thought, sucking in great volumes of air then let it all out in a gust directly at Paolo. Tomas' could see Paolo struggle not to distort his face in repulsion. His chin twitched and the corners of his eyes wrinkled, then small tears escaped the clenched lids. At last the man spoke. "You kids are," he paused for effect then drooled the rest of his sentence, "far from home."

"Yes sir," Tomas piped up, to which Eva added, "and we need to get home before our parents start to worry."

"Of course." The old man seemed to be getting older by the minute. Now he hunched over lower and great crevices formed on his brow. "All you need to do is go back the way you came." A smile stretched across his face; it seemed he found his answer to be very clever.

Paolo did not. He found this kind of answer to be typical of adults. "But which way is that?" He asked impatiently.

"You're not far, go back up this street and cross the bridge. Things should start to look familiar then. Is there *anything* else I can help you with today?" The old man let the word "anything" lounge about on his tongue before letting it out directly at Paolo.

"No thank you," Eva said quickly and started for the door, practically dragging Tomás along behind her.

But Paolo wasn't ready to go yet. "You're blind, right?" he asked directly, and the old storekeeper didn't seem in least bit shocked. He merely replied, "Yes, for more years than you've been alive."

Paolo's head tilted and eyes squinted, his brows once again meeting in the middle of his wrinkling forehead. "Aren't you worried that someone could just come in here and swipe something without you knowing it?" His eyes unconsciously slid to the kaleidoscope.

The old man smiled a big grin, revealing mostly gums, "I'm not as worried as you may think. I have my own special security system." Paolo body shuddered as if a chill had run up his spine. Tomás thought the room had suddenly grown colder.

"Paolo!" Eva pleaded between clenched teeth. He hushed her with a wave of his hand.

"Like what sort of system?" Paolo's voice had regressed back to his own age again.

The old man smiled viciously again. "There was a time, once, when a little boy about your age, tried to steal from me." He brought a gnarled finger to his mouth in thought. "I don't think he made it home." The pawnbroker giggled a bit. "He got what he deserved."

Paolo swallowed his fear and tried to reply but no words came out of his mouth. He looked like a fish gasping for breath as it lay dying on the deck of a fishing boat. The old man turned around slowly. "If there is nothing else I can interest you in, I must say good day." He made his way back toward the counter. Paolo seemed to be frozen. Eva and Tomas warily crept back over to their friend and shook him back to life. When he came to, Paolo's body straightened again and the fiery gleam returned to his eye. He swiped the toy from the table and thrust it into Eva's pants. She tried to protest, but Paolo clamped his hand over her mouth and indicated the shopkeeper with a jerk of his head.

She looked to remind herself and seemed to actually shrink with fear. The three friends tiptoed at first then made a hasty retreat to the street.

“Thanks again!” Tomás shouted from the open door, and then they were gone. The old man sat back behind the counter smiling wide again. A small white moth fluttered around his head, alighting on his ear.

The children ran down the street at top speed toward the bridge. “I can’t believe you did that!” Eva admonished as she dug out the goods.

Paolo slowed to a walk and reclaimed his prize. He trumpeted it towards the skies in triumph. “He was just asking for it, trying to scare us like that.”

Tomás thought Paolo was always good at justifying his actions. He and Eva were still holding hands, and swung their arms back and forth wildly as they walked. Paolo walked in zigzags while looking up at the clearing sky through his new kaleidoscope. Tomás followed his gaze upwards and saw that scant fluffy white pillows had replaced the billowing gray storm clouds. The sky was bluer than he could recall ever seeing before. He shut his eyes and let the warm sunshine radiate on his face.

The bridge they approached was typical of the many in Venice. It was very wide and stretched up and over a canal between rows of buildings. The steps were short but also long. Each took almost one’s entire gait to scale. Along the sides of the bridge was short metal fencing attached to evenly spaced pillars of marble. Flat internal crosspieces formed a repeating pattern of diamonds. Mostly it was only for decoration, but also prevented a small child from toddling into the canal. Small gondolas and other watercraft lined the sides of the canal. Some were filled with fishing gear, other just with water.

Paolo reached the bridge first and hopped up the steps by twos then paused at the top to take in the scenery. Tomás and Eva paused at the water's edge. They stared down at the black murky water. A sudden breeze lifted the rank smell from the water and it drifted into the children's nostrils. "PHEW! What do you suppose is down there?" Eva wondered aloud.

Tomás contemplated the toxic canal and then spoke in a soft voice. "Well, I suppose there could be the dead body of that boy that old man was telling us about." Eva dropped his arm and backed away a step.

"Stop that!" She shook a finger at him.

"Come to think of it," Paolo added from on top of the bridge, "I saw some people dump someone in this very canal the other day."

"Yeah," he continued, "that's where he must have gone. That's what causes the stench on hot days; it's all the bodies that are decomposing." Now the sparkle was in Tomás' eyes. Eva covered her ears.

"I remember my dad caught a baby when we were fishing the other day. He said he would have kept it, but it was too small, so he had to throw it back." The boys giggled uncontrollably.

"Stop it! Stop it!" She shouted. "I hate you both!" Those words struck Tomás like no others would. His devilish smile disappeared and he ran to Eva.

"I was just kidding." He apologized. "It's just the mud and seaweed, and some rusty old anchors. That's all the smell is, I promise." Paolo was less sensitive.

"You prissy!" He taunted Tomás, and when there was no response, he slapped his hand at the air once and went back to gazing through the kaleidoscope.

Eva was controlling some light sobbing from becoming deep wails. “You promise?” She asked with wet eyes.

“Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye.” Then added, “Take my fish and pat them dry.” This elicited a small giggle from Eva. She wiped at her eyes with the backs of her wrists and smiled broadly.

“I knew you were kidding the whole time,” she boasted.

“Like I believe you for a second,” Tomás shouted back at her. She chased him up the steps and they joined Paolo at his perch on one of the guardrails on the bridge.

“Tomás you’ve got to see this.” Paolo thrust the toy at his friend who tried to fend it off.

“Keep your stolen things to yourself.” Eva scolded.

“What are you, his girlfriend or something?” Paolo knew just the right buttons to push. Both Tomás and Eva’s cheeks instantly flushed a deep crimson then quickly spread to the rest of their faces.

“Of course she’s not my girlfriend,” *yet* Tomás thought.

“Yeah, and he’s not my boyfriend. He’s got cooties.” Paolo seemed to buy into their stories and tried again.

“C’mon, just look once. It’s just a toy, it can’t hurt you.” Once again he held it out to Tomás who slowly took it into his hands.

He felt its smooth sanded texture and rolled it between his palms. Then he lifted it to his eye and looked up at the now cloudless sky. The colors were remarkable, practically luminescent. He had never seen such vibrancy from anything of this sort before in his life. Turning the end made the spectacle even more spectacular. Tomás

could hardly keep from running off with the thing himself. The sea of shapes and colors engulfed Tomás immediately. Reds, blues, greens, all danced at his will. The mirrors inside the kaleidoscope reflected undulating triangles and spinning leaves. The reflections melded into one another becoming twisting pinwheels and fireworks. The more things tumbled, the deeper Tomás sank beneath its power. He began seeing images he would have thought impossible. Faces and people, and places all appeared before him in the tiny wooden tube. Sweat beaded on his arms and his breathing slowed to a shallow mantra. A cool breeze blew causing the tiny hairs all over his body rise, but he hardly noticed. He was too enraptured with the sights before his eyes.

“Give it back now,” Paolo held out his hand, but Tomás could not hear him. He was then ripped from his euphoric state when Paolo unexpectedly tore the plaything from his hands. “Give it,” Paolo repeated, this time with ferocity. Before he knew what was happening, Tomás hands flew toward his friend and they grabbed at the toy. Paolo fended off most of the advance but was taken off balance by a solid punch to the midsection. Paolo was heavier than Tomás by at least 15 pounds, but had been surprised by the rapid attack. Paolo regained his balance and pushed Tomás away from him.

“What are you doing?”

“I wasn’t finished!” He had to have it, and no one could keep him from it. His eyes burned and mouth frothed.

Eva screamed for them to stop, and tried to run between the boys, but they pushed her down, scraping her knee in the process. She pressed her fingertips into her cheeks and began to cry.

Tomás charged his best friend and snatched at the kaleidoscope.

“Stop it!” Eva shrieked. But it was too late. Paolo had lost his footing backwards and toppled into the filthy canal. His body made a great splash as it hit the water and Eva screamed again but this time not in pain but in horror.

Tomás froze unsure what to do as his friend floundered in the murky slime. In one hand was the kaleidoscope, his other clenched at the air. His mind kicked into gear and he turned to Eva. “Go get help!” he directed. She dawdled, staring at her drowning friend and Tomás yelled at her to get going. She ran off towards what she hoped was St. Mark’s square in search of help leaving the boys alone. Tomás took his shoes off and told Paolo not to worry; he was going to get him out. He placed the cursed toy into his left shoe. His mind raced, he had never learned to swim. The sea was too rough and the canals were too toxic. He took a gulp of air and jumped in after his friend.

My tape recorder clicked, signifying the end of the tape. I leaned back in my chair, blinking saline back to my eyes. They felt as if I hadn’t closed them in hours. “What happened?” I asked, literally on the edge of my seat. I clumsily flipped the tape and set the recorder going again. The window was now caked in a fine white residue and the sun was starting to set. Mr. Bellagio’s face was aglow, bathed in orange from the setting sun.

“Well, as I said, I had never learned to swim. I woke up a few hours later in my bed. Eva was there with my parents and they all looked as if they were looking at me in my casket.” He gave a short laugh. “It turned out that I sank like a stone and got tangled in some anchor chains. It was the cause of my accident. Il Fatorre crushed his cigarette on the pile of others in the ashtray and shifted his weight. He lifted what was left of his body with surprisingly powerful arms and stretched his two, capped stumps around in circles

beneath him over the seat of his wheelchair. “Eva had brought the cavalry just in time to pull me out.”

“And Paolo?” I asked.

The old man sighed, “He didn’t make it.” I felt tears threaten the corners of my eyes, but I blinked them back. One made it through my defenses and rolled down my left cheek.

“Here,” the old man handed me the blue napkin he still had lying beside him. “It was a long time ago,” he said directly to my face. I shut the tape off and packed it away.

“Come and git it!” Kathy announced her arrival into the room. She smiled broadly at me. “So sorry Mr. Roller, but it’s time for his dinner.”

“We were just finishing for the day,” I replied. I stood slowly, letting my spine pop a few times as I got up. The painting il Fattore had been working on now seemed finished. Small wispy gray shapes now populated the scene. Some were running between the bases and others scrambled for a tiny white baseball. “It’s beautiful,” was all I could muster. I was never very good at complimenting art.

“Thank you,” he said obviously sincere.

“Well, I’d like it better if it were bigger.” Kathy added. “C’mon you, there’s lobster waitin’ for you.” She started to roll him away when I yelled after them.

“Wait!” She swiveled the chair so he could see me. “What happened to Eva?” I could feel my heart racing and my palms were slick with sweat.

“He smiled again, a beaming smile, creating deep ridges around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes. “She died a few years ago, as my wife. Her real name was Angelina and Eva was her middle name. She hated her first name because the kids used

poke fun at her and ask her if she were an angel and could she fly and all the rest of the nonsense that children do. So we called her Eva.”

My heart slowed and my breathing became easier. “See you next week Mr. Bellagio.”

“Tomás, please,” he repeats for the millionth time.