

## A MORNING



*Jordan Smith*

KIRK WOKE in the painted chair from India, disconcerted that he was on the wrong side of the house. The sun was in his eyes. He did not usually doze in the east parlor, which overlooked a stand of trees sloping easily to the fields; he preferred the more dramatic vista beyond the western porch. He loved to think of the gatherings he had hosted there, the men in their formal dress and women in new gowns, up from their brownstone mansions in the city. Between the full splendor of a fair day in the mountains and the picturesque sunset, there was always a moment of pure glare, a light that crippled vision. His guests would sometimes cry out, look at him as if in complaint or blame, as if this were a punishment for which he was responsible, and then exclaim again as the sunlight deepened, diffused, became regal and painterly and democratic at once. He had learned to recognize, early on, the moment when the effect reached its peak, and he would clap, servants would appear and light the lamps, and the comforts of the table

would begin.

He felt the pressure of the slats on his back as he stretched, and then the arthritis shot from his knuckles to his shoulders, that familiar pain that had claimed what little attention his other worries spared him. Turning to try to relieve some of the tingling in his arm, he looked at the little oil painting on the wall, a study for one of his most celebrated compositions. He had never thought it wise to sell a preliminary version, even when the completed work might never come on the market, and especially not this one; the finished canvas, painted only for Helene, hung over the fireplace in the main parlor. It was a study of the living stone of the Treasury of Petra, viewed from the *Siq*, the sandstone chasm through which the pilgrim passed. Two large, dark boulders framed the elongated oval through which the temple itself was visible, their tone not a color, but the almost entire absence of light. This was the foreground, but visible from any distance only in outline, eclipsed by the sun on the stone building within the cleft, and that, he suddenly thought, was just the problem. The composition could not be faulted, but the juxtaposition of the exotic, the archaic, the sublime with that hardly defined darkness was over-subtle; it begged the question of which dwelled within which, and that is something that Hamilton, his master, would never have done. With Hamilton, it was all or nothing, and that was the one lesson he had declined to learn. But had Hamilton ever seen anything like this? And not simply seen, but endured,

not only the sight of it—for which nothing could prepare you, the journey through that deepening rift, and then the sun itself, if you dared to look up from the coolness of the sandstone, narrowing into irrelevance before the sudden explosion of glory, human, inhuman, at the tunnel's end—but the turning away as well, which meant walking back into the darkness since there was no other way. In the face of the canvas, Hamilton had only commented on “the striking effect”; praised, of all things, the draftsmanship, which might have gone without saying; attended, for all his vaunted transcendentalism, merely to the self-evident. Which meant, Kirk knew, that was all there was, and it was not enough. This was not the end of their friendship, but it was the end of something.

McEvoy, on the other hand, his colleague, his fellow student, his rival in painting and perhaps in love, had said too much, if briefly and, as was his habit, vulgarly. “Genitalia,” he had murmured. “It’s a pity you have no interest in the nude. Artistic interest, I mean, of course. You should call it *Entry into the Pud . . .*” Kirk had cut him off, and spent the next year in nervous relief that no critic had even hinted at such a misrepresentation. It did not surprise him that McEvoy’s arrival had been announced by telegram and abruptly. He was blunt and despicably, thoroughly modern; Hamilton had told him, in Kirk’s presence, that his strength would always be the novelty of his technique, that he would never have his teacher’s philosophy nor Kirk’s appreciation of what was simply, powerfully there to

guide him. “And technique is the father of lies,” Hamilton had added.

“Or the mother of invention,” McEvoy had replied. “And we must all love our mothers.”

And what would McEvoy make of him now, a gentleman farmer, painter of exactly no finished work since his return from Mexico a year ago, a designer of decorative patterns, tenant of a city studio full of unsold canvases, master of or over-mastered by this splendid house that even he knew had become his life’s work? McEvoy would note all this and find it—not wanting, no. What was worse, he would find it in character, as unsurprising as the half-filled sketch books from the Mexican trip, meticulous as always, carted back with crates of, well, call them artifacts, scraps and shards of pottery from the tourist markets and carved stones. They were fakes, of course, like most of the “old masters” on the dining room walls. Authenticity of that kind had never interested Kirk. A signature on a canvas—what was that? Now that the arthritis forced him to struggle to paint as often with his left hand as with his right, did his signature still resemble itself, did his brush strokes reveal the same touch? Would a critic or curator in a hundred years misidentify that hand, label a perfectly authentic Kirk a clumsy forgery, or a skillful one? Hadn’t he touched up, oh so lightly, a few of those problematic paintings he displayed as the flower of the European tradition when the canvases he brought home did not quite match expectations? Would that make them more

valuable or less?

He managed to get to his feet and, as always, once he was up and had walked a few steps, he felt steadier, more confident. When he glanced through the window now, the view no longer seemed uninspiring; it was something he might have painted early in his career, a serviceable landscape, suggesting talent, if not yet accomplishment, in the carefully painted barn, the oaks and maples rising behind it, the line of poplars the eye wanted to follow to what another canvas might reveal as a garden with iris beds and rustic benches. Then, as he took a few more steps and the angle changed, as if in a sudden intimation of mastery, the bay stallion was led forward into the barnyard where the farrier had just as quickly appeared, standing next to a brazier, and all so realistically done that he thought he might smell the charcoal and hot iron, hear the stroke of the hammer.

It was not the hammer. It was the footfall of Dr. Lot descending the stairs from his examination of Helene. If he had somehow forgotten this appointment, it could only be because he dreaded McEvoy's coming so much more than the doctor's well-rehearsed reassurances. They were unconvincing, but they were predictable; at least they indicated no worsening of the unexplained syndrome that had caused Helene to withdraw ever further from the daily routine of the estate. He could imagine her now, exhausted from Lot's medical attentions, lying on the day bed in her sunny room in the lowest level of the tower, on the walls

the pressed and framed ferns they had brought back from Jamaica after that ghastly spring when both of their oldest children, their only children then, had died of diphtheria, and they had fled to that island as if only a place so lush might be an antidote to woe. It had not been, of course, but walking the trails through high walls of fronds, Helene seemed to lose some part of her grief in this growth that made no claims on her. His own response was different; he noted his pleasure in the place, in the scenes that filled his sketchbook, as from a great distance and with a kind of stunned combination of admiration and contempt. This was irony, which he despised. It ground like bone on bone.

His conversation with Lot was brief and exactly as expected; things were no worse, they might get better, he would return next month, fresh air and calm and . . . Kirk hardly listened; he looked at his watch, hoped he had not been obviously rude, walked the doctor politely to the door, then sat on one of the benches in the grand entry hall. It was only a half hour until McEvoy's arrival. He might as well wait there. On the wall in front of him was the great, the famous canvas, the one that had made his reputation and eventually his fortune. *Sunset in the Andes*. It was his own; he thought that even now, his own light, a physical presence, nothing like the splendor-filled reverence Hamilton had tried to show him, had shown in painting after painting. But how else to explain the feeling as he had painted so well that mere talent—and no one had ever doubted his talent—meant nothing, added nothing

to the surge he felt, blood quickening, muscle under the finest control, a tension of intent like the friction between the cello's bow and strings. Some days it was all he could do to remember it, now that the arthritis followed a similar path, shooting from shoulders to fingertips, a ghost, sharp-tongued and persistent and mocking.

And fading, too, the memory of the look on Helene's face when he saw her at the exhibition where he had first shown the picture. The gallery had been crowded for days, despite (or was it because of?) the extravagant admission he had decided to charge, sensing, all the way from Hamilton's aerie, his disapproval of such dramatics. The painting was behind red velvet curtains, with chairs arranged as if facing a stage, and beside each seat, a pair of pearlized opera glasses. When the viewers found their places, he walked to a podium to one side of the curtains. Each night after the first there was applause simply at his appearance, but he knew enough to hardly acknowledge this, simply lifted his arm, and an unseen assistant pulled the cord that drew the fabric aside. It was like a veil of mist rising over a beloved and celebrated ruin or the view from a window in some hotel in the Alps where you had arrived too late to take in the splendor and now, as you sit at your table about to take your first sip of coffee, the waiter pulls back the drapes, and there it is. But if that alpine view were at once rugged and beautiful, still, it was not unexpected. Grandeur of course, and fear, but all the same, a landscape that had been the subject of so many

symphonies and poems and prints that it did not shock as it might have; you felt its chill, but it was like putting one foot out of the covers on a cold morning.

The first glimpse of Kirk's view of the Andes, the majesty of the proportions and the savagery of the light, left the viewers so stunned that it was a moment before the second wave of applause broke out, not merely appreciative but adulatory and self-approving, as if the audience praised both Kirk and themselves for having survived what they had witnessed and now might bring back to the civilized city they'd reenter soon enough, just as he had brought such wildness back to the tradition of art. Then they reached for the opera glasses, as if the dissolving of distance into an appreciation of the artistry of detail was what they had come for after all.

Helene was in the second row. She had already caught his eye, a fine tall woman, soberly dressed, with a tautness in her profile. She was not, he was sure, here to seek sensation, but some sort of resolution. She did not pick up the opera glasses. She stared at the canvas. She seemed to take in the full force of the serrated mountains, the barbed trees, the barbarian sublimity. Then she looked at him, as if she expected to see something of the same in his face. She kept looking. As if she were not disappointed.

Was she disappointed now, he wondered, after such a long time, after the sad young deaths and then the three more children who lived, who flourished? She had possessed, always, a mixture of diffidence to his opinions

and certainty about what held her attention. The house, all he had done to it, the elaborate Moorish designs, the filigree and fancy, these she had left entirely to his taste for opulence; though he did not think she shared it, he had flattered himself that she gave it at least her appreciation. The ferns she had gathered and dried in Jamaica she had learned not only to preserve but to classify and, on their return, began to propagate the local varieties; for a year at least, nothing else seemed to give her pleasure, until she found herself pregnant again. She had done everything he asked, had discussed the intricacies of each renovation, attended gallery receptions, remonstrated with the staff, arranged for nannies and schools, hosted dinners, all without complaint, but, he found himself thinking as he watched her gentle, calculated withdrawal, without any more spark of delight or commitment than he could see in her now. If she were to suddenly appear beside him in the foyer and announce that it would be shabby not to offer any visitor, even this one, lodging, a dinner, and the company of neighbors, it would mean no more to her than any conventional gesture of respect. The last time he had seen McEvoy had been at such an occasion, a dinner he had suggested and she had organized for a few of Hamilton's former pupils not long after the painter's death. It had also been the first showing of a portrait of Helene that he had done for her birthday; he had hung it on the wall above and a little to the left of her chair. Of course there had been praise and toasts, once the memorials to Hamilton

had all been spoken. Of course she had expressed her pleasure in the painting and deprecated herself as a model. As they stood to leave the table, McEvoy, who had been seated next to Kirk, leaned over and said quietly, "A word, just a word. You know flattery when you hear it, but I will always tell you the truth. You think you got her, but you didn't."

KIRK STARTED in his seat. He had almost fallen asleep again, but now he heard carriage wheels on the gravel, and then, although the door was a thick one, a voice he knew as McEvoy's, strident and impatient, telling the driver to set his bags on the stone porch, and soon after there was the rapping of his stick on the door. Kirk rose to answer it himself. He had told the servants to keep their distance until he called for lunch; although he could not have known whether this was because he did not want to embarrass McEvoy with a show of opulence or whether he feared that whatever McEvoy had come to say (and surely he had come to say something) might be embarrassing to him. In any case, the less ceremony, the easier it would be to usher him out the door with no trouble to Helene, although she had expressed only indifference to the visit. She had never approved of McEvoy, neither of his art, which she found facile and sensationalist, nor of his manners, and when her approval was withheld, the question of liking or disliking never even arose.

And there he was, framed in the open doorway as were so many of the figures in his canvases, with a close-cropped beard going to white as was his once reddish hair, a suit that had seen hard wear, a battered traveler's broad-brimmed hat, and, in a touch that was pure McEvoy, a Peruvian poncho draped around his shoulders, rough wool, russet and purple and gold. "I see," said Kirk, pausing a little, then offering his hand, "that I am entertaining royalty."

"Frank," said McEvoy, "why do you live so unreasonably far from the station? When I travel, I don't mind hardship, but when I visit . . . And what you have done to your home! It's very like you. A kind of fantasy, wouldn't you say?" He stepped back out of the doorway and looked up, as if to take in the facade. "But I think it's the best thing you've done."

Kirk needed a moment to take this all in, the suitcase, the reference to a visit. He was rarely rude, or even direct, but panic inspired him. "You're not planning on staying, surely? We're understaffed, and Helene is ill. I understood from your letter that you were only stopping for lunch."

He could not be sure of what he saw in McEvoy's glance, except that something of his own anxiety seemed echoed there, along with, more familiarly, that wolfishness, that hunger for the main chance, that he had seen even in the days when they shared an apprenticeship in Hamilton's studio on the other bank of the Hudson. Then McEvoy put everything back into place, benign and a little confused and urbane all at the same time. "You didn't get my second

letter, then? I had meant to lunch here, then cross the river to stay with Cecily Hamilton to discuss a new show of her father's works. She is, I'm afraid, in a position where she may have to sell some of the canvases he left her, even a number of the better known ones, and I thought I could help her arrange to do this discreetly. You know what the market is now, awful, awful. Any hint, any hint at all that it was something of a fire sale, and the prices would drop like, well . . . you yourself have experienced what it's like to lose a public, haven't you? But just last week, I received a telegram, a rather brusque one, asking me not to come. Still, I could not miss the opportunity to visit you and Helene. She's not well you say. Truly, I'll be no trouble. Shaw told me you had a guest room tucked away somewhere. He found it comfortable."

"Comfortable enough for a young man."

"And his fiancée. What did you think of the young Maude? More to the point, what did Helene think?"

Kirk said nothing, merely stood aside and gestured, as close to imperiously as he dared, toward the sitting room. Shaw's visit had not been an enjoyable one, although the young man was pleasant enough, as was his rather mild talent and his cheerful Maude. Neither of them, Helene had said, with a brain to their name, and the discovery that they had been quietly, but not quietly enough, sharing a single room when they had been ushered into quite separate quarters at distant ends of a corridor had brought the stay to an embarrassed, if not an unwelcome, end.

Even before that, Kirk had tired of Shaw's fawning, tired of his own pretense that he was only taking a short break from the studio for reasons of health, tired of the vapid conversation about their set, their parties, their . . . The chatter had been endless. Who would have thought that the absence of thought could be so fatiguing.

"He's well regarded." McEvoy took a seat before Kirk had the chance to offer one. "You and I might not agree; Hamilton wouldn't have even let him clean his brushes. But he'll have a show soon, he'll be noticed, he'll sell. That's what he'll do. He'll sell."

"I don't know if I have made myself clear, Ryan," Kirk began, disheartened at the tone of his own voice, a pleading, self-important old man. "Helene is ill. She had meant to, she had every intention of joining us for lunch, but her doctor was here this morning, and he says she is no better. She is exhausted. You and I can eat together, and I'll have my man take you to the hotel in Hudson; you can catch the morning train to the city." He took a good look at his old colleague's disheveled suit; worse yet, he let McEvoy see him looking, and he relished, positively relished the malice in McEvoy's face.

"If you're wondering if I can afford it, Kirk, put your mind at ease."

"I was, I admit. I wouldn't want you to be in difficulties, even if they are none of my making."

It might get quite a bit worse, Kirk saw. He had not realized how angry he was, and not primarily at McEvoy,

who seemed not much different than he ever had been, but at the simple fact of being interrupted, and precisely because he had been doing nothing, nothing at all. It must have been years since he had felt such a desire to be short with anyone. And it would not do to antagonize McEvoy without placating him after; the man was waspish enough when offended, but when first insulted and then coddled he became more pliable. In the circles in which McEvoy still managed to have influence, you would have to be an acknowledged master to be immune to his sting. Either that, or you would have to be beyond caring.

“But”—Kirk sighed, a stagey mannerism, just the sort McEvoy had always brought out in him—“I am sorry, Ryan, really I am. Let me see if I can’t arrange something, just for this evening. I am sure Helene won’t join us, but there is a guest room upstairs. The ones we used for the almost-Shaws are being redone, but this is very private, a little less well-appointed, but always prepared for an unexpected stay and perhaps more suited to your tastes.” He allowed himself a long look at the poncho, still draped over McEvoy’s shoulders. “You seem to have been roughing it. Where have you been traveling? In pursuit of inspiration?”

McEvoy pulled from his pocket a short, blunt pipe and a tobacco pouch from some roughly tanned hide. As he filled the pipe, he did not look at Kirk; it was as if the tobacco and the actions of his fingers absorbed all of his attention, and yet no actor, Kirk thought, could have

done a better job of suggesting a man considering how deeply he should feel an offense, then finding almost to his surprise the possibility of forgiveness. “I have been,” McEvoy lifted his head and smiled, a smile that had been useful to him many times, “retracing your steps. I have been to Lima and Cuzco. I have been to the Andes. It is as magnificent as you painted it. And that is what I went for, not for inspiration, but for verification.”

“Verification?”

“Frank, I do not think you have been in a gallery in years. When was the last time you were even in New York? You can despise Shaw all you like—he is facile without real facility, he is mercurial without emotion, for him life transpires and never transcends. But he is what is wanted now, not reality but a luminous simulacrum of it. Last year I went to an exhibition of work like that, and what I saw, well, it shook me. I thought, what if they have it right, these young men, what if it is all just appearance? And I knew the answer immediately: it is all over. Art will be whatever we think we see. And where will the real be then? Lost. And who is the best painter among us who tried to preserve that reality? Who took all the Emersonian puffery out of Hamilton and let in the clear, harsh air of matter-of-fact nature? Why, Kirk, of course. But is it true? Did he paint what was truly there? I knew only one way to find out. I went to see for myself.”

“And you went all the way to Peru?”

“I did. To be entirely truthful, I had business in San

Francisco, and then I had—well, I’ll call her a patron—who encouraged me to travel.” McEvoy laughed. “You know when a patron of that sort offers you a ticket, it is time to go. But the rest is true, or true enough. Means, motive, and opportunity. I took a sketch book, of course, but I just wanted really to look. To use my eyes for once. And when I saw the Andes, I found that I had only your eyes available. I could not see anything you had not. And it was real. I salute you.”

He did not seem to be saluting, thought Kirk, looking at McEvoy slumped in his chair, drawing heavily on his pipe, sending out a cloud of smoke that smelled of autumn, of burning leaves, but he nodded in acknowledgement.

“That’s right,” said McEvoy. “Say nothing. Just as when Hamilton praised you. You never knew what to do, did you? Self-deprecation never came naturally to you, and smug self-approval went against the puritan grain. And yet you had no doubt, no doubt at all about what you deserved. Well, you deserve my praise, or at least the work you did then—is it as long ago as it seems?—at least that painting does, and, what, a dozen others? That one too, of course, that one especially.” He was pointing to the final version of the *Petra*.

“I went there too, you know? Of course you don’t. It was years ago, one of those years when you and I weren’t, shall we say, in contact. I had offended you, I think, by some comment I made about a portrait. Was that it? You know, Frank, you have a very pointed way of dropping someone

without seeming to do anything at all. It was as if I'd fallen off the edge of your regard into a sort of desert. When we were students together, living in that preposterous mansion of Hamilton's, mixing his colors and cleaning his brushes and nodding like idiots at his every pronouncement, all that kept me going was your good opinion. Hamilton thought I was just a little better than a duffer, and my family thought I should have been a banker, and none of those ever so impressive visitors to the studio gave my work more than a glance, but I could tell that you thought I had something, something I hadn't quite gotten to, but would, with time, with time and patience. Without that, I might as well have been my grandfather in the tobacco warehouse, making money hand over fist and spitting on the floor to show how little I cared for anything else. So, when we had that falling out, I thought an actual desert might be preferable to a spiritual one, and I packed up and headed off. I wasn't thinking about following in your footsteps, not at all. I went to Jerusalem. A pilgrimage? All I found was an empty tomb where belief or wonder might have been, might have been once. I met a mad Englishman there who was determined to find his way to Mecca and wanted my company, but I took one look at myself in the disguises he had assembled and laughed—a sandy-haired, freckled Mohammedan. I wouldn't have lasted a day, but I pretended to go along with him, just to see how crazy he was, and then I bargained privately with one of the guides, and after the first few nights of the journey, we

slipped away toward Petra. What was I thinking? Stone in the desert. What can you do with it but crawl into a cave and if you've time enough carve steps, a lintel, a few more decorations, a treasury or a palace. But it is still a cave in the rock, a hole, a nothing. But I suppose you are eager for me to come to the point. That is the point, that painting of yours."

As McEvoy spoke, Kirk had found himself distracted, as if he were sketching the scene between them from a distance, and at the same time he had the sense that he was being watched, viewed by someone whose eye was more discerning, more analytical than his own. The sun was reaching towards noon, and it came full through the window with its stained glass border and old-fashioned leaded pane at the top of the stairs, throwing a pattern of shimmering light on the polished oak floor of the entry hall, and when he looked over, Kirk saw a shadow there, and then, on the second step, Helene, sitting like a child waiting for the adults to notice her, knees drawn to her chest, arms wrapped tightly around them.

"My dear," he said, and stood. McEvoy looked too, put his pipe down on the table beside him, rose and bowed, for once without the ironic exaggeration he often gave to such gestures. Kirk walked over to his wife, held out his hand, and after a minute, she took it, stood, and walked with him to greet the guest. Kirk could feel a tremor in her hand, nothing unusual, a sign of the fatigue that haunted her. He led the way to a loveseat opposite McEvoy's chair,

then sat with her. “I told Ryan how ill you have been. We didn’t expect you to join us.”

“Eavesdropping is the one pleasure of infirmity,” she said. “You are always welcome here, Ryan, or as welcome as you wish to be. From your conversation with Frank, though, I take it you are here less as a guest than as some sort of commercial traveler? You have something to buy or to sell? You have a proposition?”

“You do get to the heart of it quickly, Helene. Do I lack subtlety? Have I lost my touch?”

She was flushed, Kirk noticed, which meant that she was very angry, although someone who did not know her well might take it for either a fever or a burst of exuberant health. “You were never subtle, Ryan.” Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap, another sign. “And directness is another quality an invalid may allow herself. Although, to be even more honest, I think your visit is more distressing to Frank than to me. Have you brought more baggage than he can lift?”

McEvoy seemed startled. He sat upright in the chair, letting the poncho slip back from his shoulders, and Kirk was surprised to see how frail he looked, the suit not only rumpled but hanging much too loosely, as if its owner had shrunk. “I seem to have mistimed my visit.”

“I did try to tell you,” Kirk began, but Helene interrupted.

“But here you are.” She seemed to relent. “Well, Ryan, it isn’t as if we had a busy day planned. Frank will putter, and annoy the staff, and pretend he’s going to start work,

but not quite yet. I will lie in my bed and pretend a book interests me. We're hardly about to turn you out. You might as well get on with it."

"It's a simple enough matter, really." Again McEvoy picked up his pipe, but this time he only cupped it in his hands, hunching over, staring at it instead of them. "I mentioned my patron? In San Francisco? She is a very wealthy woman and a great admirer of artists of, shall I say, our generation? Your work, Frank, is especially dear to her heart, and she owns several of your earlier landscapes—the one of the glen below Hamilton's studio, a few of the studies from the Andean journey. But she has nothing major; nothing has come on the market, at least not the sort of thing she really admires."

"If she wants a new painting, she has only to let me know."

"Of course. You have a studio full of them. Everyone knows. But that isn't what she wants."

"An older painting? There isn't much that hasn't been sold."

"Not just an older painting. *That* older painting." McEvoy had stood as he spoke; now he strode to the wall to the right of where they were sitting. The high sun through the window both obscured and highlighted the painting at which he pointed, the finished *Petra*. The rock walls were darker, almost invisible; the great Treasury was gleaming, a yellow flame creased with crimson. His voice was quiet, but for once without affectation. "She wants that painting.

Only that one. When I described it to her, and no one can describe your work as well as I can, no one knows as well what you're after and what you've achieved—or what you haven't, for I am nothing if not honest—when I described it, she almost blushed with anticipation. She would have written you immediately, but I insisted you would only throw such a letter in the fire, and then I said that I would come in person, as her agent. She is prepared to offer . . . But I think the real question is what are you prepared to ask?"

"You know the answer." Kirk had risen too, walked toward the window, his back to McEvoy. The pain in his arm was like nothing he had felt before. "That is Helene's painting, done in her honor. And tell me, Ryan, would I have blushed to hear you describe it? Hardly, I'd guess, with anticipation. You remember my offer of a ride to the hotel in Hudson?"

"You should consider this carefully, Frank." Ryan stood next to him now, and he was almost whispering. "It is not just the money. She will pay enough for you to finish whatever further designs you have upon this place." His gesture took in the room, the stable yard beyond the window, the vista toward the river. "Well, perhaps not quite that much, now that I take the measure of your ambition. But it is your reputation at stake here. You are almost forgotten. You know you are. You have been eclipsed—true, a partial eclipse, as yet—by Shaw and a gaggle of others, and he is not the best of them, some are not so

easily dismissed, there will always be fine painters, Frank, coming along. My patron is not the kind of woman to keep her acquisitions to herself. She will make much of it, and that will make much of you.”

“Do you think I care?”

“I think,” began McEvoy, “that you have never cared about anything else.”

“Or nothing quite so much.” To Kirk’s surprise, it was Helene who spoke; she too had joined them at the window. “Sell it, Frank. I’ve never really liked it. I never understood what it had to do with me.” She looked around at the walls, paintings everywhere. “Sell them all if you like.”

Kirk felt something in himself give way, a sensation he had not thought he would ever feel again after the first time, at the double funeral for their children, when he had watched the caskets lowered in the August heat and, to his surprise, to his shame, fainted where he stood. But this time, his consciousness became more acute, more (he hated to admit this) pictorial and in the way he least liked. He was watching them all, himself included, as if he were the worst sort of painter, the limner of social ills and domestic strife, the hack who offered only the most tendentious, the most obvious of comments on the narrative he put on canvas just to make such tedious moralizing possible. There the three of them stood in light that had just begun to dwindle. There was an old man defeated by the mere ordinariness of time and talent passing, a self-pitying man, a lover of illusions who had pretended to care only for the

real. There was another man, a little younger, a dissipated man, a waster of talent, a parasite, a waster of lives. There was a woman, but she was obscured by the low glare, which highlighted her frailty, but also brought out, in the set of her jaw and the slope of her cheekbones, that she was harder than either of them, having looked things in the face and neither liked what she saw nor turned away.

“Sell them all, Frank. Flood the market. Amaze the doubters. Cheapen yourself with exposure. Dominate the pretenders. What could be worse than what you’re doing now? What could be worse than all of this decoration?”

McEvoy was staring at her now, in hope, it seemed to Kirk, and in amazement, but also with concern. He had known them for years, but he had never, Kirk was sure, heard this voice, raspy with fatigue and isolation and contempt. “Helene,” McEvoy said, and it sounded as much a protest as a question, “what is wrong with you? How ill are you?”

“How ill would you like me to be? How ill would I have to be to convince Frank to do what you want?” She had turned to face them, and still Kirk felt himself a spectator in the drama, only as engaged as a good theatergoer might wish to be. “I am exhausted, and I am in pain, constant pain, and the doctors, the best doctors anyone could afford, cannot tell me why. And tell me, you two, you artists, just how does that make me different from anyone else?” She stepped back into the room, back into herself, thought Kirk, a woman in a striped dress, her hair a little

disheveled, her hopelessness more a matter of habit than of anguish. "That's why you might as well sell it, Frank. I'm no different from anyone else."

"That is why I won't," he answered, the pain now shooting up his arm and across his shoulders, his breathing ragged, although he knew he must appear calm now; it would never do to give McEvoy more of a story than he already had to take to his next round of dinners, to offer his patron as a consolation prize for the painting she would not get. "But there is a preliminary study in the next room, Ryan. I did it before I saw what I was really after, but it's close enough. You can take that back to San Francisco. Tell your friend that it is hers for the asking. Exactly for the asking."

"She is not asking for a gift."

"Then she may send me whatever she likes, and you may take what commission you expect from that. Go on. Take it off the wall. I'll call my coachman. You know, I had forgotten, there is also an evening train."

He could feel the tension in McEvoy, his desire for the painting balanced, for barely a moment, against the consciousness of the insult Kirk had intended. McEvoy would take the painting, Kirk was sure, as he would make the most of the tale he now had to tell. He would leave them alone in this elegant tomb of a home. He would go back to the marketplace.

"Hamilton always said you couldn't resist a cheap gesture." McEvoy was back in the room now, the painting

resting on the floor, leaning against him, dust from the frame leaving a streak across his trouser leg. “He laughed when he heard about your little peep show with the Peruvian painting. He said it was just like you.”

“Perhaps you weren’t listening closely enough, Ryan. Perhaps he said it was just like *you*. Perhaps he realized that I will learn from anyone.”

“Even from her?” McEvoy had rested the painting against the wall now and walked over to where Helene had slumped into a chair, the match of the one in which Kirk had awoken from his nap. “Then you are a poor enough pupil.” He put a hand on her arm, but she did not look up. “Good-bye, Helene. I promise you I will say nothing of any of this.”

“If you keep that promise,” Kirk said, “you may take your pick of any painting here except the *Petra*.” He was looking past McEvoy and Helene now, into the dining room with its clutter of paintings and thinking how in Hamilton’s house the walls had been bare because, he told the two young men who studied there, he needed his head clear to see what he saw. “In fact, you may take all of them, all of them, but that one.”

Outside, he could hear the coachman chatting with the farrier, and he knocked on the glass with his ring finger to get the man’s attention, pointing to the stables when he looked up. The coachman nodded, whistled, and a groom came running for instructions. How easy it all could be! He turned to McEvoy. “Helene needs a rest now. I do

too. The coach will be ready soon, and you can return to walking up and down over the earth.”

“And you,” replied McEvoy, gesturing towards the display case of ceramics from Mexico, “can go back to your potsherds. It was never more than allegory with you, was it? You never saw anything.”

“I never wanted to.” Helene looked up at him as he spoke, and she almost smiled, a strange and fleeting gratitude. “Who would?”

He helped her to her feet, but it was she who led him to the hallway, where they stood, two pillars, as McEvoy picked up his bag and walked out the door. Between them the sun through the leaded panes threw not light, but a wavering representation of light. Something Shaw would appreciate; something someone might care about, who had nothing else at all on his mind. ☺☹☺



JORDAN SMITH is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *The Light in the Film* from the University of Tampa Press. He lives in upstate New York, not far from The Olana Partnership, whose presentation of the life and work of Frederic Church provided the impetus for “A Morning.” He teaches at Union College.