**Impostor Syndrome**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Gordon knew Janice liked to paint; Cheryl had mentioned it at the party when she first introduced them.

“She paints?” Gordon had asked, while Janice was at the buffet stocking up on scallops in bacon.

“Mm-hm,” Cheryl said, pulling a toothpick from the hors d’oeuvre she’d just put in her mouth.

“Is she any good?”

Cheryl had held up a hand until the hot little tidbit was out of her mouth, then said, “Don’t know — I’ve never seen any of her work. She’s shy about it.”

Gordon had nodded and not thought any more about it at the time. Oh, he’d been interested — he was interested in everything about Janice just then, and besides, he’d majored in art history, and even if he’d wound up a broker instead of an artist or an art critic or a museum curator, he was still interested in art.

But it didn’t seem especially important at the time.

They’d had dinner together two days later, and met for lunch the day after that, and one thing led to another, and six weeks after the party he had moved his belongings into the big old house on Thornton Street that her parents had left her.

She’d made it clear, though, that she didn’t want him prying into the closed-off rooms on the second floor — not that there was anything terrible about them, but they were private, full of family relics.

And Gordon hadn’t been pushy; he liked Janice very much indeed, liked her shy, crooked little smile and the way she seemed to always be looking sideways at him, liked her childlike, high-pitched laughter. She had a sly wit and a slender, sexy body, and their tastes in any number of things — movies and music and manners — were neatly aligned. He didn’t want to antagonize her. If she wanted to keep a few rooms to herself, that was fine with him. He hadn’t exactly told her the whole story of his own life, either. They had plenty of time to get to know each other better.

So he kept himself to the ground floor and the big master bedroom, and that was plenty of space, far more than he’d had in his old apartment.

Janice liked to paint, Cheryl had said, and it did occur to Gordon that he hadn’t seen any sign of it, hadn’t seen an easel anywhere, or any of her paintings on the walls anywhere, but maybe she’d lost interest, maybe she’d just taken a few classes and then given it up.

He didn’t worry about it.

But then, about three months after they met, he came home one wintry evening and found the downstairs dark and empty, even though her car was in the driveway.

Puzzled, he turned on the hall light, then put down his briefcase and hung up his scarf and overcoat.

“Jan?” he called.

No answer.

He walked down the hall and stuck his head into the kitchen, and that was just as dark and deserted as the front of the house.

“Hello?” he called, in case she was in the pantry or down in the basement, but no one answered.

Taking a nap, perhaps?

He walked back to the front and up the big staircase, and turned to head for the master bedroom, then stopped.

The door of one of the other rooms was open, and light was pouring out into the unlit hallway.

Curious, he stepped over and looked in.

She was sitting there on a tall stool, working on a large painting, a painting done mostly in cream and shades of grey, a painting of a mother in late 19th-century dress stroking a young girl’s hair.

“Wow,” he said.

Janice started and dropped her brush. She turned and stared blankly at him for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “the door was open, and I couldn’t help...”

Before he could finish the sentence she bustled off the stool and slammed the door in his face.

He stood there, blinking, trying to decide what to do next, and absorbing what he had seen.

He’d heard that she liked to paint, of course; what he hadn’t heard was that she was good.

He hadn’t had a proper look at it, of course, but from the glimpse he had had, the painting was excellent — a bit sentimental and old-fashioned in its choice of subject, perhaps, but the composition was original and very, very good, the colors subtle and effective with the warm creamy hues of the woman’s face and clothing in vivid contrast to the cool background.

Mere technical details such as light and shadow and perspective didn’t even come into it, so far as he could tell — they were all perfect.

That was why he had said “Wow,” instead of clearing his throat or otherwise politely making his presence known.

Smart and sweet and sexy — and talented, too. He’d really found himself a prize!

Then the door opened again, the light in the room went out, and he was still standing there stupidly as she pushed past him and closed the door behind her.

“Hi,” he said.

She looked nervously up at him. “Hi,” she said. “I’m sorry about the door...”

“Oh, it’s okay — I’m sorry if I intruded.”

“I shouldn’t have left it open, but it gets chilly in there with it closed — the radiator doesn’t work right.”

“Maybe I could fix it.”

“Maybe,” she said, in a tone that clearly meant no.

“So, you paint?”

“Sort of,” she said, looking down.

“What I saw looked really good.”

She didn’t answer, and in the dim light from downstairs he couldn’t really see, but he thought she might actually be blushing.

“Come on downstairs,” she said. “I’ll make us some dinner.”

She didn’t want to talk about the painting; she made that obvious as she conveniently didn’t hear his comments and questions over the bustle of cooking supper. He let it drop — for the moment.

He knew he should probably let it drop for good, but the image of that woman in the creamy Victorian dress haunted him — something about the expression on her face would not leave him alone. He would stop sometimes on his way along the upstairs hall and stare at the closed door.

He didn’t try to open it, though. He wasn’t going to sneak around. He valued her too much for that.

It was almost a week later that he brought the subject up again.

“So, did you ever take art classes?” he asked over dinner.

She nodded, not looking up from her plate. “Years of them,” she said.

“I thought that painting you were doing was very good,” he said. “From what I saw of it, anyway.”

She shrugged. “It’s nothing special,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” he told her. “Not everyone can paint like that. I’d like to see it again, sometime.”

“Maybe sometime,” she murmured.

“Are there others?”

She looked up, finally. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you have other paintings you’ve done?”

“Well, of course,” she said. “You didn’t think that was my first, did you? I thought you said you liked it.”

“I do like it — I think it’s wonderful!”

“Then it couldn’t be my first, could it? Painting takes practice.”

“No, but... oh, I don’t know, I thought maybe you’d given the others away, or thrown them out, or something.”

She shook her head and looked back at her plate; she fumbled with her fork.

“No,” she said. “I still have them all. All the ones that I thought were any good, anyway; I burned the early junk.”

“Could I see some of them?”

“No,” she said — then softened it. “Maybe someday, when I know you better.”

He nodded. “All right,” he said. He knew not to push it any further, and changed the subject. “Say, did you see the news today?”

Gordon was patient. It was six months later, six months of carefully avoiding the subject and never looking in even when she was painting with the door open, weeks after he’d asked her to marry him and she’d put off a decision, that she finally told him one Sunday afternoon, “I want to show you something.”

He looked up from his magazine and asked, “What?”

He wasn’t thinking about paintings; he’d been involved in an article on Vatican politics. He blinked at her, and realized she was nervous about something. He put the magazine down.

“A painting,” she said.

His eyes widened, and he got up quickly. “Please,” he said, “I’d love to see it.”

She led him upstairs — and he noticed, as they climbed the steps, that she was breathing fast, and her hand on the banister was trembling.

She wasn’t just nervous, he realized; she was scared.

Of what? Of his reaction to her painting?

That was silly; even if it was trash, didn’t she trust him to be tactful?

She led the way into one of the rooms she ordinarily kept locked — a small bedroom at the back of the house, full of dusty sunlight and faded pastel furniture.

The painting was the brightest thing in the room; it stood propped up on the dresser. He stepped over to look at it.

She stepped out of his way, not saying a word.

It was an odd scene — a little girl in a pink party dress standing in a littered alleyway against a nighttime background of pawn shops and strip joints, handing a single red rose to a man in a black leather coat. The dress, the rose, the neon signs, the red bandanna the man wore at his throat, all seemed to shimmer, patches of brilliant color against the washed-out, grayed and decayed background.

The faces looked oddly familiar, but Gordon couldn’t place them; he supposed they were just models he’d seen in magazines, or something.

He stared at the painting, taking in every bit of it.

A pawn shop window held a display of watches, and he could read the time on each one; a barroom window reflected a bow in the little girl’s hair, and also a woman in a tight black skirt who wasn’t in the foreground.

Everything was perfectly realized, no detail missed. The neon lights colored the little girl’s shiny black shoes and the man’s leather coat; the man needed a shave. The rose was ever so slightly past its peak, the petals just beginning to droop.

“It’s wonderful,” Gordon said.

“You like it?” Janice said, smiling shyly.

“I love it. Did you... what did you use for models? All the little touches...”

“No models. I made it all up.”

“That’s amazing!” He turned and glanced at her — she was radiant, basking in his acceptance.

“I’ll leave it here, then,” she said, “and I won’t lock the door.”

“Could we put it out on display, somewhere?”

Her smile vanished. “Oh, no!” she said. “I couldn’t let anyone else see it.” She saw the disappointment on his face, and added, “Not yet.”

“All right,” he said. Then he went back to staring at the painting.

She didn’t just have talent, he thought; she was a genius.

Why did she hide it so completely?

He looked at her with a whole new sense of wonder. Who was this woman he was living with? She obviously had depths he hadn’t even imagined.

He turned back to the painting.

Why had she painted that particular scene?

Why was that the painting she had chosen to show him, rather than the one of the Victorian women?

It was a mystery.

When he looked again she was gone, slipped silently away.

He took to reading in that little back bedroom, where he could look up at the painting every so often.

It was a month later that the second painting appeared. He went into the room, book in hand, and stopped dead.

The two paintings were side by side on the dresser, the girl in the alley and the new one, of a plump man standing in a forest clearing, smiling beatifically, arms spread wide as he looked up at something that wasn’t in the scene, bands of sunlight spilling down between the trees and streaking bright colors across the mysterious dark green forest gloom, the brightest light bleaching the man’s face almost white.

Again, it was a stunning work. Gordon stared.

“Do you like it?” Janice asked at dinner that night.

Gordon didn’t pretend not to understand.

“I love it,” he said.

She beamed at him, and hummed to herself later, when she cleared away the dishes.

Two more paintings appeared a fortnight later — a woman in a white gown trimmed with red, blue, and gold, standing in a ruined church; and a man reading a newspaper on an otherwise-empty subway platform as an express ran by. The newspaper headline was Subway Killer Strikes Again, and it was only after he read that that Gordon noticed the bloodstain on the concrete by the man’s foot.

Why had Janice painted such a thing? Why had she chosen that as one of the handful he was allowed to see?

And why didn’t she let him see the others? Why didn’t she let anyone else see any? Her younger brother had visited, and had been forbidden entrance to any of the locked rooms, including the back one that had become Gordon’s private gallery.

Didn’t she know how good they were?

He asked her that flat out at dinner.

“Do you know how good your paintings are?”

She blushed. “No, they aren’t,” she said. “They’re just... just playing around.”

“They’re art,” he said. “First-rate art. They should be hanging in galleries and museums!”

“Oh, Gordie, it’s sweet of you to say that, but I could never let them be displayed anywhere.”

“Why not? They’re nothing to be embarrassed about — they’re fine, fine work!”

“No, they aren’t, Gordie. And speaking of work, did you know they promoted that obnoxious Karen Baker?”

Having thus changed the subject, she steadfastly ignored any attempt to change it back, babbling on about her office.

At first, Gordon thought she was just trying to distract him, but then he began to listen to what she was saying.

“You should have had that promotion, shouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t want it — all that responsibility!”

He let it drop — but the next morning he stayed home from work, and around mid-morning he phoned Cheryl, who was a manager in the same office as Janice, and after some chit-chat asked, “Isn’t Jan about due for promotion?”

“Janice? She didn’t tell you?” Cheryl asked, startled.

“Tell me what?”

“We offered her a promotion — twice, in fact. She turned it down.”

He pressed her for more details. By the time he hung up he was seriously dismayed, and thinking back over other incidents that had taken place during his relationship with Janice.

There were little things, like thrown-away lottery tickets, and bigger ones, like the secret paintings and the refused promotions, and even the postponed marriage decision.

Janice, he realized, was systematically avoiding success.

A promotion was obviously a success, and she surely must realize how good her art was, so keeping it secret was a way of avoiding success. And marrying him — well, he couldn’t help thinking of that as a form of success, too.

He’d heard of this sort of thing — sometimes it was called “impostor syndrome,” the belief that one didn’t deserve success, that any success would lead to disaster because it was undeserved, that sooner or later everyone would realize that one was undeserving, an impostor, and the success would be snatched away, to be replaced with disgrace.

He was angry with himself for not having realized months ago that Janice had it.

He’d read about it. Sufferers would sabotage their own lives, doing it to themselves before anyone else could do it to them, so that their imposture wouldn’t be discovered.

He remembered how she had been frightened when she showed him the first painting. She must have been afraid he’d tell her she couldn’t paint, he realized — that he’d expose her as an impostor.

He stood in the hall, one hand still on the telephone receiver, thinking it all through.

He had respected Janice’s wishes about the paintings, and the marriage, and everything else, up until now; he’d assumed she had sound reasons for her actions. Maybe not logical reasons, but reasons.

But if it was this phobia that was responsible, that was different. She shouldn’t let it run her life.

He glanced up the stairs, and let go of the phone. Then he changed his mind and picked up the receiver again while he pawed through the phone book.

One of his old college classmates, a fellow art major, owned a gallery now.

Gordon handled the four paintings with the utmost care as he loaded them in his car and drove them to the gallery for Ian to inspect.

He brought them through the back door, one by one, and leaned them up on a framing table.

Ian, at first casual, grew more respectful when he got a look at the first canvas.

“You know the artist?” he asked, looking sideways at Gordon.

“I’m living with her,” Gordon explained.

Ian whistled a note through his teeth. “Must be interesting,” he said, looking back at the painting of the girl in the alley.

He inspected the four paintings carefully.

“Do they have titles?” he asked.

Gordon admitted, with some embarrassment, “I don’t know; I never asked.”

“We’d need to frame them before we could hang them.”

“You’d be willing to display them?”

Ian glanced at him, startled. “Are you nuts? Of course we’ll hang them! The only question is whether I have the nerve to ask what they ought to be worth.”

Gordon blinked.

“They’re not for sale,” he said.

Ian sighed. “Then what the hell are you doing here? We’re not a museum, Gordie; we’re a business.”

“I was thinking you... you know, as a favor, for publicity, I thought you might display a couple, just to see what sort of reaction you get.”

Ian stared at him.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well, see, I want to convince Janice how good they are. She’s... well, she doesn’t believe she’s talented.”

Ian looked back at the paintings.

“She’s talented, all right. She’s fucking brilliant.” He considered, then said, “Look, Gordie, I’d like to help — but I’d also like a chance to sell these. You think there’s any chance this Janice might be willing to sell something? Maybe not these particular pieces, but you say she’s got others?”

“I think so,” Gordon said. “These are the only ones I’ve seen, but I’m pretty sure she has others put away.”

“Think she might want to sell any?”

Gordon hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he said at last.

“Well, find out,” Ian said.

“I can’t. Look, Ian, suppose I were to loan you more than a dozen paintings, enough for a one-woman show, and I promised you’d be the exclusive agent if she ever does agree to sell any? Would you do it?”

“Do what? A show?” Ian considered that. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “It’d be good publicity, showing these — get people into the gallery. One day only, on a Saturday. I’d need at least... let’s see, three on that wall... at least twenty paintings, to do it right, but I could maybe get by with one room. A dozen would be the absolute minimum, and they’d all have to be good-sized. How many will she loan me?”

“I don’t know,” Gordon said. “I’ll find out and get back to you.”

That night at dinner Gordon sat across the table from Janice, watching her closely, trying to gauge her mood, how she would react to the suggestion of a gallery show.

She was being unusually quiet, though, and his attempts to guide conversation to the subject of her painting — or for that matter, her fear of success — were unsuccessful. She would only speak of trivia.

Finally, he asked straight out, “Jan, are you afraid people would make fun of your paintings?”

She looked up, shocked, from her pecan pie dessert.

“They wouldn’t, you know,” he said quickly. “The paintings are really good.”

“That’s not it,” she said.

“Then are you afraid they’d praise them? And that you don’t deserve it?”

“No,” she said, looking down at her pie. “That’s not it, either.”

“Then why won’t you let anyone else see them?”

She looked up, looked him right in the eye. “You don’t know?” she asked.

“No, I don’t. I can guess, maybe, but I wish you’d tell me.”

“If you don’t know, Gordon... no, I’m not going to tell you.”

She pushed away and left the table, left her pie unfinished.

He watched her go, and debated going after her.

She was lying, he was sure. She was afraid people would laugh at her work — or that they wouldn’t, that they’d tell her it was wonderful, and she’d never be able to live up to it.

But she wouldn’t admit it.

He got up and followed her, and found her standing at the foot of the stairs, looking up into the darkness. He came up behind her and put his arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’d never do anything to hurt you, Janice — I just want everyone to see how wonderful you are!”

“I’m not wonderful,” she said. She pulled away.

He had to show her, he thought. She was wonderful, and he had to convince her of it. She had no self-confidence, that was the problem; she didn’t think, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” she thought, “Nothing ventured, little lost.”

But he believed in “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” !

And two weeks later, opportunity fell into his lap.

“I need to go up to Chicago,” Janice told him. “My uncle Eugene’s moving, giving up his house and taking an apartment, and he’s asked me to come help him sort through stuff, see if there’s anything I want.”

“Oh?” Gordon asked.

“Yeah, he’s got a lot of the old family stuff. My cousin Charlotte will be there, and maybe Aunt Grace, if her health holds.” She hesitated. “Would you like to come?”

“When would this be?” he asked.

“I’d be leaving Thursday, coming back Tuesday. I’ve got vacation days I can use.”

He looked at her, then said, “I don’t; I’m afraid I’ll have to pass.”

“Oh, I thought you did,” she said.

“Nope.”

He was lying; he did have leave time available.

But this was his chance to put on that show at Ian’s gallery.

She seemed disappointed, but he thought about how her face would light up when she saw the reviews, when she heard people raving about her work.

“You go ahead and have a good time,” he said.

“All right,” she said, a bit coolly.

A few minutes later he excused himself and called Ian.

Ian complained about the short notice, but agreed. Gordon provided him with Polaroids of the four he’d already seen, so that he could advertise the show.

And Thursday, as soon as Janice was gone, Gordon took the keys from her dresser jewelbox and unlocked all the upstairs rooms, his hands trembling with anticipation.

How many paintings would there be? Would there be enough good ones?

Then the door of the first room, the room where he had seen her working on her painting, swung open.

There was the easel, and the stool, and the lamp — and behind the door a stack of canvases.

A large stack of canvases — sixteen in all.

The Victorian woman and child were there; so was a stunning self-portrait that showed Janice’s face subtly distorted, her teeth almost fangs, her expression predatory. There was a painting of a steam train, one of a pair of horses, one of a man chopping vegetables as a little girl watched...

“Jackpot,” Gordon whispered to himself.

He was wrong, though; the jackpot was in the next room, where the canvases were stacked on all sides — portraits, landscapes, still life, even abstracts.

Altogether, there were over a hundred and twenty paintings.

Some of them were obviously early work; some were so bizarre Gordon didn’t know what to make of them. Even so, when he arrived at Ian’s gallery Friday morning, he had sixty-six canvases packed into his car.

That was all he could fit and still have room to drive.

Ian, after a few moments of shock when he saw the number, and several moments of awe and delight when he looked through the available material, weeded them down further, and in the end, forty-three were hung.

The show was a wild success.

And Tuesday, when Janice came home, clippings of the rave reviews were set out on the living room coffee table, waiting for her.

The reviews were all just from the local papers, there hadn’t been time to get any serious attention, but it was a start. He couldn’t wait for her to read them.

He met her at the door, kissed her, and took her bags.

“There’s a lot more stuff in the car,” she said.

“I’ll help you with it,” he answered. “Let me drop these in the bedroom.”

As he hauled the luggage up the stairs he glanced back and saw her drifting into the living room, looking at the clippings, and he smiled nervously.

She might be angry at first, he’d taken a really great liberty, but when she saw what everyone said about her work...

He dropped the suitcases by the bed and hurried back down.

She was sitting on the couch, holding one of the clippings, staring at it, stunned.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I know you were afraid that people wouldn’t like your paintings, but I knew they were good, so good I had to share them — and see? Everyone loves them!”

She finished reading the review, then turned and stared up at him.

“You really don’t understand, do you, Gordon?”

“Sure I do, Jan,” he said, but she was already on her feet, pushing her way past him.

He turned and followed her out to her car — as she had said, it was full of boxes and bundles. She circled around to the driver’s side and opened the door.

“What should I get first?” he asked, reaching for the passenger door.

“Lost,” she said, as she tapped the power lock switch. Then she climbed into the car, slammed the door, and started the engine.

He stood and watched helplessly as she pulled away.

She was angry. He should have known. But she’d have to come back sooner or later, and maybe he could make her see that he hadn’t done any harm, he’d been saving her from her own fears.

He turned and went back into the house.

She’d be back. And she’d see that he’d done her a favor.

She’d be back.

But she wasn’t back when the phone rang about eight, and he snatched it up ready to apologize, ready to beg, but the voice on the other end was Ian’s.

“Does she want to sell any?” the art dealer asked. “I think I could get ten thousand for that big one of the old woman and the cobwebs right now.”

“I don’t think so, Ian,” Gordon said. “I’ll talk to you later.” He hung up.

Janice hadn’t come home by midnight, and Gordon finally gave up and went to bed.

He was awakened by the phone; he snatched it up.

“Hello?” he said. “Janice?”

“No,” said a man’s voice, “this is Lieutenant Arneson, with the police.”

“Police?” He blinked and sat up.

“Is this Gordon Webber?”

Nightmare scenarios ran through his mind — Janice in a car wreck, Janice mugged, Janice raped.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m Gordon Webber.”

“If you could come to the Holiday Inn on Route 35, we’d like to talk to you.”

“Is this about Janice?”

“Yes, sir, it’s about Ms. Fletcher.”

“Is she okay?”

“No, sir, I’m afraid she isn’t. If you could come to the hotel, please?”

“I’ll be right there.”

He hung up the phone, and quickly got dressed. Fifteen minutes later he hurried into the hotel lobby.

There were three cops standing by the entrance to a first-floor corridor; he approached them and shakily said, “I’m Gordon Webber — I think Lieutenant Anderson wanted to see me? About Janice Fletcher?”

“Lieutenant Arneson,” one of them corrected him. “Room 122; he’s waiting for you.” He pointed down the corridor.

At the door of the room he was ushered inside, and met by a man in plainclothes who introduced himself as Arneson.

Janice wasn’t there; Gordon had half-expected to see her lying dead on the floor.

The bed was unmade, he noticed.

“Where’s Jan?” he asked.

“The hospital,” Arneson said.

“Then why am I here?” Gordon demanded, starting to turn.

“The hospital morgue,” Arneson told him.

Gordon stopped, and sagged.

“I thought it would be easier here,” Arneson said. “We’ll be going over there later, so you can confirm our identification of the deceased, but I thought we should have a little talk here, first.”

“How’d it happen?” Gordon asked, not looking at anyone or anything in particular.

“Pills,” Arneson said. “Sleeping pills. Lots of ’em.”

Gordon blinked.

“She left this,” Arneson said, holding out an envelope.

Gordon looked at it, and saw his name and their shared phone number written on it. He took it and pulled out the sheet of paper inside.

“That her handwriting?” Arneson asked.

“Yes,” Gordon said, starting to read.

“Gordon,” it began, and at the omission of the customary “Dear” his eyes began to tear. “I know you don’t understand what you’ve done to me. You thought I was afraid I’d be laughed at, afraid of failure, but that was never it. You thought I was afraid to marry you for the same reasons — but that wasn’t it. I couldn’t marry you because you didn’t understand. You didn’t see what my paintings were about. I didn’t show my paintings because they were private, Gordon — they were my innermost soul put down on canvas. I was never good with words, so I used my pictures. I never cared one way or another about money or success, I had enough of both and didn’t need any more, but I cared about my privacy — and you put my soul on display, you invited the public to trample through my most secret feelings, feelings you never understood. In a way, you raped me, Gordon — a psychic gang-bang. I can’t live with that. So I’ve left you these two notes, and I’m saying goodbye. I hope you’ll understand at least one of them.”

It was signed “Janice,” and underneath was a P.S.: “Not Jan, you son of a bitch.”

Gordon swallowed hard, then looked up from the note to Arneson’s hostile face.

“It says two notes,” Gordon managed to say.

Arneson nodded, and gestured to one of the other cops.

The man picked up a piece of board, about two feet square, that had been leaning against the wall. He handed it to Arneson, who held it up and displayed it to Gordon.

Gordon looked at it, at Janice’s final painting, done in cheap hobby-shop pigments on masonite, and finally understood.

It wasn’t anywhere near as finished as any of her others, parts of it were little more than hasty sketches, but it was still a fine work of art in its way.

The painting showed a magician and his assistant, standing on a stage before a crowd of reporters. The magician was a man in top hat and cape — and Gordon recognized his own face.

And seeing it there, he also realized that he was the man in the leather coat in the first painting she had shown him, and that Janice had been the little girl.

The assistant was Janice, as well — Janice standing stark naked, teeth clenched as she fought against pain; the magician had sliced open her belly and pulled out a double handful of her intestines, and was displaying them to the applauding crowd with flamboyant gestures.

Blood dripped through the magician’s fingers, but he smiled proudly, oblivious to the blood and the woman’s agony as he performed for the crowd.

And Gordon knew that that smile, and the entire painting, would haunt him for the rest of his life.

*end*