

DANIEL GRIFFIN

The Last Great Works of Alvin Cale

I FOUND OUT BECAUSE of a dream. In this dream I was speaking to my son and asked how he was. “I’m skinny,” he said. “Really skinny.”

“How skinny?”

A long sandy silence followed. “Really, really skinny.”

“Why?” I said, and he paused again, long enough it built a pressure inside me. Something awful waited.

“I’ve just become too skinny,” he said at last.

That pulled me to a shallow wakefulness and I tossed and turned a while. When the clock said five, I got out of bed, made coffee on the propane stove and sat in the withering darkness. Although Alvin lives only a few hours south of me, we’ve whittled our connection thin and I hadn’t seen him in almost three years.

I should have made my way into town and phoned him right then, but instead, once daylight held a steady grip on the land, I picked up my rucksack and a small canvas and went out to paint.

There’s a cluster of giant firs I love—a cathedral that blots out the sky and encloses the forest floor. I set my stool in a well-worn spot in a bed of needles among the ferns and propped the blank canvas in front of myself. The painting consumed me as it always does, the physicality of the work, the concentration required to transfer life through my eyes and through the brush onto canvas. A day of work beat away the voices that dream had awoken. A week later, though, I dreamed about Alvin again. He said he wished he wasn’t so skinny. Pain and suffering lurked among those words. I was up early enough to watch the sun rise, but this time, once that ball of fire was clear of the trees, and its rays cut deep into my cabin, I walked out to the logging road, got in my truck and headed for town. The nearest phone’s at a Shell station on the Trans Canada. I plugged in a quarter. Alvin’s phone rang almost a dozen times. I was ready to hang up when Sandy answered.

“Hi,” I said. “It’s Skylar.”

“Oh my God. Skylar.” The way she said that set off a depth charge within me. “It’s your dad,” she said to Alvin.

“Sorry if I woke you. If it’s a bad time ...”

And then my son was on the line. “I was wondering when you’d call.”

I didn’t recognize Alvin’s voice at first. He was six weeks into an experimental treatment for a stage-four tumour in his sinuses. His nose had started to collapse from the radiation and it gave his voice a high edge.

“Alvin?” I said. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“Oh God, Dad. Oh Jesus. Didn’t you get my letters?”



I live in a cabin in the bush year round with no electricity and no phone. It’s crown land and it was once a commune of sorts. This story truly starts there almost thirty years ago. I was drawn to the west coast by what Emily Carr had done, what Jack Shadbolt and Sybil Andrews were doing, and what I thought I could do. I was pulled into the bush by the dark rich colours of the earth, the filtered light and ancient trees. Alvin’s mother and I built the cabin I live in now. At its peak we were a community of a dozen souls—a draft dodger, his wife and their baby, a former math professor, a communist from the north of England, and a pair of sisters, one of whom had adopted a son. Curious locals joined us off and on. And starting in the summer of 1978, a girl from Quebec named Sylvette Turcotte. I met her on a rainy day outside the Co-op. She had a striking face—deep-set eyes, big and open. She’d travelled west with a boyfriend who now worked in a logging camp.

For almost three years Sylvette was my model. She was the source of the best work I’ve done in over forty years of painting. She had an elastic body, graceful and elegant in every posture. She had skin that picked up dimples of sunlight, a figure that cast shadows upon itself. There are models who contribute to figurative work on levels beyond shape and form and she was one. Even today I believe her body enabled me to see the human figure in a new way.

People in town called us hippies. They talked about free love. There was love, but it was never free. My wife left me a year after Sylvette arrived. Alvin stayed. He was sixteen by then and had begun to sketch Sylvette while she posed for me. Like Picasso, Alvin never drew as a child draws. He was proficient and precise from the day he began. Standing beside me in that cabin twenty some years ago, he captured her with simple strong lines, bold gestures with charcoal, pencil and eventually paint.

In 1981, Sylvette left and Alvin left with her. Sylvette was two months pregnant. She and Alvin lived together on Galliano Island and then on Salt Spring. This was the early eighties. I was lost in a short flash of fame built on those paintings of Sylvette. My only works in the National Gallery are of her.

Eventually Sylvette returned to Quebec. She still lives there, in Montreal. She has a daughter I've never met. The year Alvin found out about his cancer, the year I had those dreams and drove down island to be with him, this girl Lysanne had just turned twenty-three.



Alvin's wife Sandy is short with a roly-poly beauty—a plump frame, big cheeks. She met me at the door, opened it wide. “How are you doing?” I said

Sandy backed off a step and raised the cigarette in her hand. “Started smoking again.”

Alvin was on the sofa at the far end of their loft. The TV cast a trembling glow across his blanketed body. I wanted to walk straight over, but something held me a moment—a cocktail of anxieties: the possibility he was asleep, fear of what I was about to see, and the years of muck built between us, a weight like undigested meat in the belly.

Sandy led the way and Alvin turned to face us. His nose was wounded, red and bloody looking. A gauze patch covered his right eye. The skin of his face, leathery and thin, looked ready to break apart.

I sent out a hand, but wasn't sure where to lay it. Eventually Alvin raised his own hand, embraced mine. “It's good to see you,” I said.

He coughed, and it moved his whole body. He coughed again—took several attempts to get up the phlegm, and then he rested. He didn't speak, but he looked at me, that one eye red-rimmed, worn and droopy. I could feel my own eyes fill with tears and finally overflow. I've lived a long life. I've stilled my heart more times than I can count, but here was my son, my only son, the child I raised. It took a moment to pull myself into control. “Today was a radiation day,” Sandy said. “We just got back from the hospital. It's been a hard day for him.”

Alvin turned his head, looked up at the ceiling. I glanced around the loft. Three walls were filled with paintings. It was all his work, but I only recognized one—a painting of Sylvette lying supine, face turned away. I knew it because he'd painted it standing beside me in my cabin over twenty years ago. It had a raw, fleshy power, a bold weight in colour and composition—amateurish, but strong and fresh in his interpretation of the body.

The day he began this painting is marked in my mind so clearly I can recall the canvas I was working on. I never finished it. I set it down as though it were somehow tainted by the power of the painting emerging beside it.

Pablo Picasso's father, Jose Ruiz, was also an artist. He taught the young Picasso for years, but they fought bitterly. They had a falling out. The exact cause isn't recorded, but Picasso began signing his paintings using his mother's maiden name. Ruiz set down his brushes, gave painting up altogether in the shadow of his teenage son's brilliance.



Alvin noticed me looking over his paintings. He raised a hand. "Old work." It was a croak of a voice. He took a deep breath, spoke again. "Hung for a party ages ago."

Sandy backed off a step. "I'll make tea. Just sit with him. He'll like that."

I took the rocker at the near end of the sofa. A newscast flickered across the TV, pictures of soldiers in desert fatigues. The volume was off. "The body's a miraculous thing," I said. "You'll see. Your body will amaze you."

Sandy returned with the tea. "He needs distractions," she said. "Made me get him a TV. We keep the volume off sometimes so I can hear him." She handed me a mug, sat at the far end of the sofa and lifted his feet onto her lap. "He listens to books on tape from the library. And we get a lot of movies. Plus he sleeps a lot. Especially after the treatments." She patted his feet. "He's so glad you've come. We've been waiting, hoping you'd get his letters."

"Don't go into town much these days. Sometimes forget to check my mail."

Sandy turned her attention to the TV, finished her cup of tea, then left to go grocery shopping. Alvin snored faintly. I sat alone with him, took his hand, dry and chapped, skin brittle from years of oil paints and turpentine.

In the early evening, Alvin awoke. He looked around. "I'm here," I said. "Right here." After a silent moment, he closed his one eye and slept again. He was like this as a boy—a fitful sleeper. He'd call out, his mother or I would come in, and he'd roll over and sleep again.

When Alvin next awoke, I lifted Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* from where it was face down on the coffee table and offered to read. He held up a hand to stop me. A moment later he said, "I'm trapped in my mind."

Not enough energy to do anything, but my mind still churns.” It was nine at night. He’d slept about six hours. “I drift through anxieties and worries, dwell on unsettled business. Probably all these drugs I’m taking.”

“Worry never helped anyone.”

“Remember how I wanted to live in town, wanted to go to school, have friends?”

I nodded and he raised his hand to his face, explored a moment. “I wanted a TV and a record player. I wanted to be a regular kid. Go to school. A locker. Remember how much I wanted a locker?”

“Could have got you a locker if you’d just said.”

“You and Mom were in la-la land. She was stoned or drunk and you were painting or dilly-dallying with someone or other.”

“Oh for God’s sakes, Alvin.”

He turned his head to look up at the ceiling. “After you moved us up there, I mostly hated you. I thought I hated the painting too. Until Sylvette arrived. Although for a long time I just did it so I could see her naked.”

“Why are you talking like this, Alvin?”

He shook his head and maybe he shrugged.

“You’re going to pull through this—”

“Dad,” he said.

“Your doctor’s good? I mean, you’re happy with your treatment, your oncologist?”

“Sandy thinks I should try something more natural. Diet based. Fighting fire with water not with fire.”

“Sounds oversimplified.”

“The work was flying out of me just a few months ago, I was exhausted, sleeping twelve hours a day, and painting the other twelve. Thought it was the work draining me. And then I started getting these headaches. For a month or two I assumed it was the turpentine. Tried different products, the fumeless stuff. Looking back there were six months of warning signs before I went to the doctor. That’s what would have made the difference. Catching this six months earlier.”



On one of the first days I was there, I came upon Sandy in the kitchen staring out the window with her hands in the murky dishwater. She didn’t turn around but seemed to sense my presence. “Had my hair done today,” she said.

“Looks nice.” I’d already done the dishes. I wasn’t sure why she had her hands in the sink.

“I wanted a baby,” she said at last. “Everyone looks at us and says it’s so tragic. Alvin. Cancer.”

She turned towards me, clasped her dripping hands. “I’ve left him three times because he didn’t want kids. Each time he’d somehow pull me back, say he was ready. Never happened though.”

She was waiting for me to say something. I took in a breath, but before I could speak, she said, “He can be a selfish bastard.”

“Most artists are.”

“So self-absorbed. He chose painting instead. Muck-covered canvases instead of a family, instead of a child to love.”

“Some people aren’t cut out to be parents.”

“It’s not that I don’t love him, Skylar. But I’m forty-one, for God’s sakes. I’ve spent ten years waiting for him.”

“He’s not much older than you, and he’s fighting to live.”

She nodded, shifted back a little, leaned against the counter. “See, I can’t even explain it to you.”

“He’s my son.”

“I’m in mourning already for a life I’ll never have. He won’t even let me try *in vitro*. I’d be willing to do that, you know. Happy to do it even if he weren’t around for the baby.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that. Him not being around, I mean.”

“Forget it. Just.” She turned and set her hands back into the dishwasher.



They had visitors. The woman who lived downstairs popped by that afternoon with her twin boys, creating a short-lived whirlwind of activity in the loft. While Alvin, Sandy and the mother spoke, the twins chased each other and squealed. One rattled a toy car in circles on the hardwood. Both started tossing paper airplanes about the room. I sat in the corner and watched.

Later in the week there was a man with long matted hair which he pinned in a pile on top of his head. He didn’t say much. He just sat drinking tea with Alvin. Mostly, that’s what I did too. I sat by him and drank tea. I read aloud from *Letters to a Young Poet* once in a while. When he was up for it, we talked. One morning out of the blue he said, “I wrote to Sylvette. And to Lysanne.”

“Didn’t realize you were still in touch.”

“We are and we aren’t.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

The morning sun threw a great box of light into the loft, revealed dancing particles of dust around us. “Do you think it’s odd we never talked about this?” Alvin said. “About Sylvette?”

“These things happen between men and women.”

“Not that. I mean, not just that.” He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I knew you were sending her money. Maybe because of that, all involved were just as happy to let you think Lysanne’s your daughter.” I could feel him looking at me, but I didn’t meet his gaze. “She’s not though.”

“I know, Alvin. I put two and two together over the years.” I didn’t want to go down this road with him, didn’t want a tour of the past. For me every moment but now is best sealed in a box and left to gather dust. Maybe that’s one of the reasons I paint. It’s the very essence of living in the moment. I turned my attention to a still life hanging on the far wall, a bright tapestry of flowers and vases and gourds.

“Maybe because you thought she was yours—”

“Don’t know that I ever thought that.” I managed a chuckle, eyes focused on the still life, hoping we could just leave it at that.

“I sometimes allowed myself to think she wasn’t mine. Or at least not to take responsibility.”

“Now you’re trying to blame me.”

“I have a daughter I don’t even know.”

“Jesus Christ, Alvin.” The strength of my own words propelled me from the rocker. I took two paces and turned. “It was a piece of generosity I could little afford which went largely unrecognized. Unappreciated.”

“No need to blow a gasket, Dad. I’m sure it was appreciated.”

“Just to be clear here, I never claimed her. I never offered her my name. I simply sent some money. Truth is I’ve never seen her. Not since she was a baby. There was plenty of time for you to take some responsibility.”

Alvin was suddenly sweating, drops beaded on his narrow forehead. He noticed me watching. “It’s the medication,” he said and wiped the sweat away.

I looked back at the painting. “That still life has a nice balance. It’s well composed.”

“These are all old. Hung them for my birthday. Been meaning to take them down.”

“For Christ’s sakes, Alvin, take a compliment.”

“I spent my life trying to capture the truth of the world only to realize it’s impossible.”

“You set your sights too high. Always have.”

“I heard you and Sandy last night. Talking about kids and all. I guess I am a selfish bastard.” He licked his lips and resettled his head. “Have you gone up to the studio?”

“Not yet.”

“You know, this last creative spurt started with her, with Sylvette. Painting the memory of her.”

“Will she come? Sylvette?”

“Don’t know.”

“Would it help if I phoned?”

“Doubt it. I’ve written to so many people without hearing back. Suppose I’ve pushed everyone away over the years. Just like you did.”

“Who else did you write? Besides me, I mean.”

“Mother.”

“Alvin. How—” I cut myself off. “She’s been dead five years, Alvin.”

“What am I saying? I mean—” He looked like he was forcing himself to smile. “Oh God, I don’t know what I mean. I’m just so tired I can’t think straight.”

“Rest,” I said and crouched by him, pulled up the blanket. “Just rest.”



If he hadn’t mentioned Sylvette, I might not have gone up to his studio. And if I hadn’t seen those paintings before he died, I might have left them as they were and gone on painting in obscurity the rest of my life. But that’s not how it happened.

In the morning with the brightness of early sunlight, I pulled paintings from slots, removed drop cloths, set canvases around the room. They were paintings of pain and suffering—fire, bodies, war and destruction. These were paintings of death and Armageddon in the hazy colours of dawn and dusk—figures melting into shapes and colours, an energetic blending of figurative and abstract. They were painted with wild brushstrokes, a firm, ambitious movement on every canvas. They were a horror story of a mind that seemed rawly touched by death. And I couldn’t take my eyes away.

In most, the figures were unrecognizable, but there was a series of small portraits of distorted and blasted faces. Sylvette was a mere memory on the canvas, but I knew it was her.

For almost an hour I looked over the paintings, not as a critic, nor painter nor father. They connected beneath that, connected with the human

through the primordial visual—the sense that travels directly to the soul and can make it shudder.

When I returned to the loft, the man with the dreadlocks piled on his head was sitting in the rocking chair. I lingered at a distance, waited until he was done his tea then walked him out. At the door, he said, “Think positive thoughts. Give him your positive energy. It’s making a difference already.”

When I returned, Alvin was asleep. I rocked by his side while images from those paintings coursed through my mind—the burning colours, the lopsided composition, the twisted faces, figures sprawled across canvases. When Alvin finally awoke, I took his hand. “They really are quite good,” I said after a moment.

His one eye focused on me, bloodshot and red-rimmed; it was hard to return his gaze. “If it weren’t for the fact they’re in my studio, I wouldn’t be sure they were mine.”

“They’re an achievement,” I said. This was another understatement, and I knew I should have said more, but I didn’t have the generosity at hand.

“Just before you called last week,” he said. “I went up there. When I looked at them, even with just one eye, I could see that I was dying.”

“Don’t say that, Alvin.”

“I’m fighting this, Dad, but I’m just saying.”



The next day, I drove back to Tofino, back to my cabin and the bush. I arrived at dusk and slept. In the morning I began to paint. The only cabin I use is one large room with windows facing every direction and a bedroom loft above the little kitchen. The rest of the space is studio—floor spackled with paint, two easels in the middle of the room alongside a large white mobile wall. I use a narrow counter at one end of the room as a pallet. The other side of the room is racks and slots for paintings. Space is so tight I’ve removed most older canvases from their frames and rolled them.

That morning, I began from the bones of abstract work I’d done off and on the past two years—a dozen paintings that were not yet realized. My best work comes from painting over an existing piece, starting again without starting again.

For eight solid hours I worked with brush in hand. Painting is physical and draining, but I worked on three different canvases before I lay down and slept. Over the next five days all I did was paint, sleep and eat. I pushed until this old body teetered on the edge of collapse. And then I went into

town. It was Tuesday, two days after Alvin's second-to-last radiation treatment. Someone should have been home, but I called all day without getting through. I left two messages and then checked at the post office for any general delivery mail. There was a card from Alvin postmarked in May. "I have stage four cancer. I'd like to see you. I'm writing because I don't know how else to get in touch. Will you come?" Some words were scratched out. At the bottom he signed it only with an A.

The card was two months old and although I told myself that, I couldn't help but read it as today's news. My body slumped against the post office wall. The clerk stepped from behind the desk, but I waved her off and managed to stand.

I returned to the cabin to sleep that evening. The last quarter-mile along the ridge that leads to my house was a struggle. My legs were watery weak. Twice I had to rest where I wouldn't normally even pause.

I spent the next day in bed, didn't return to town until that Thursday. Sandy answered the phone. "They've stopped the radiation." That was the first thing she said. "They found more cancer. In his brain."

"I'll be right down. I'll come tonight."

"We're leaving this afternoon. There's an alternative treatment centre in Tijuana. We've been considering it for a while. Sort of famous for holistic treatments."

"And they say they can help?"

"They're willing to try."

"Sandy, it's a long way for him—"

"Let me put Alvin on. Hold on a second."

Alvin grunted into the phone. "So she won that battle," I said. Meaning it to be a light-hearted comment though I knew it didn't sound that way.

"There's only one battle here, Dad, and we're all on the same side."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"So am I."

"If these are your last days, Alvin, don't spend them in Mexico. You could paint. We could paint together."

"I've lost one eye. I'm half-blind in the other. I'm just trying to live, Dad."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"I don't know."

My fingers ran down the pad of buttons on the phone, touching but not pushing. "I've been working since I saw those paintings of yours. They've travelled with me. They live in my mind. Best things you've ever done."

“I know. Even when I was working on them I knew. It was like I’d channelled something, brush guided by a force beyond me, as though the paintings weren’t even mine.”

“You said you’d written to your mother. Who else did you write?”

“My mother? Dad, I didn’t—”

“Never mind. Forget it. I’ll see you when you’re back. You hang in there, okay?”



It took me an hour to walk the path back to my cabin. I had to rest at every chance. It took two days before I could pick up my brushes. Even then all I could do was stand and stare. All my life I’ve thought I had something to say. Pile all my paintings end-to-end and they couldn’t whisper a word of comfort now. I set down the brushes, looked out the windows—out over the ocean, across the great expanse of grey which meets the sky in a fine thin line. I can stare out there for hours, watching the weather change, watching distant boats, mind racing out over the Pacific, out towards Japan and China.

That weekend I bought a roll of quarters. At the library, I wrote down every number for a Sylvette or Lysanne Turcotte in Montreal. I called them all from the pay phone outside the IGA with no luck. When I was done, I called Alvin’s neighbour for an update.

“What am I supposed to know?” Sue said. “What am I supposed to tell you? They just left.”

Back in my cabin, I set those abstracts in storage slots and worked in the garden. I harvested my marijuana crop, carried it into town. I called Sue again. She said they were giving him some tests. That was all. No other news. I spent the rest of the week putting frames together. I gessoed them, then drove back to Victoria.

I used the key they kept under a flower pot. Up in Alvin’s studio, I lay the paintings out, drank from them again, then gathered together the half dozen smallest canvases, the portraits I believed were of Sylvette—her face melting away into abstract forms. These I took with me.

In my studio the next morning, with those portraits of Sylvette arranged behind me, I raised my brush and stared again at a blank canvas, bent close until I could make out its dimpled skin, could smell the dried gesso. At the bench, where all the colours of God’s prism are squeezed in drips and drabs, I touched my brush to the azure blue of a summer sky. Standing at the easel I turned slowly and faced Alvin’s paintings. I crouched by the first—a rich vision of a face turned raw and bloody across the top of

the painting. It was as though the skull had been sliced open and the top lifted off. The face itself was green, grey and blue and I brought my brush so close to the dark shadow of the nose that it might have touched. I backed away, dropped the brush and for a moment paced the room. I walked end to end, looked out at the ocean, but not even that could hold me. At last, I returned to the painting. I raised my brush and this time it did touch.

In the early 1900s, Chaim Soutine used to send an assistant to buy paintings from hawkers on the banks of the Seine. He'd use these as a base. He'd begin from them. I'd done similar things throughout my career, although never with a painting of my son's. In one way or another every artist works from the paintings of others. We all stand on each other's shoulders, we all take and we all give. It's the cycle of art.



Next morning I returned to town and called Sue. "They're coming home," she said. "But it's not good news. They're going from the airport straight to the hospice."

My body went slack. I leaned against the phone booth to stay upright. My mind had formed a scale from worst news to best and this was as close to the worst as I'd allowed myself to consider. I managed a few words of thanks into the receiver, backed out of the booth and walked away.

The Sooke Hospice is a quiet retreat in the hills—a peaceful place where people go to die. I arrived in the evening after a rain. The earthy smell of a warm damp garden was rich in the air. A woman in a black leather coat stood smoking under the awning. I walked past her and through to reception where a nurse led me down a short hallway. Alvin was propped up in bed, ashen and gaunt—the withered branch of an ancient tree. Sandy was curled in the chair beside him, and my entry woke her. She rubbed her eyes, and Alvin turned my way. He seemed to smile as he raised a hand. He said something, but it was just a croak.

"Lysanne," Sandy said. "She arrived last night." And then the woman in the leather coat was at the doorway. Her stringy black hair fell over her face, but even through that veil she looked like her mother—the strong jaw and muscular face, shoulders set at attention. This could have been Sylvette walking into our lives twenty-some years ago.

Sandy stood. "Lysanne, Skylar."

Lysanne stepped forward. "How do you do?" She rose to her toes and kissed my cheek. "I do not speak English well." She flashed a wide, embarrassed grin, almost giggled.

“Welcome,” I said. “It’s so good. I mean.” I turned to Sandy unsure what Lysanne could understand. “You should have said. You should have told me.”

Alvin raised his hand for Lysanne. He spoke little above a whisper, and she leaned close to listen. She nodded as though she understood, although the language barrier must have prevented him from getting words across. When she backed away, Alvin managed to sit up, and with our help, he stood. He posed for a photograph with me and Lysanne. We rang for the nurse. She took another which included Sandy, then one of just Alvin and Lysanne, one of him with Sandy and finally one with me—the two of us trying to smile, my arm around his bony shoulder.

Alvin slept and Lysanne went out to smoke again. Sandy joined her. I watched Alvin, his rib cage barely registering each shallow breath—every one a labour to produce. His face once round and full had been chiselled away. It was now just bone and skin.

Sandy returned and I listened as she made herself comfortable. “So?” I said after a while.

“So,” she said.

“Lysanne.”

Sandy nodded, gestured outside. “She’s talking to someone on the phone.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant—”

“I know what you meant.”

I stretched out my legs.

“He’s happy,” Sandy said. “It’s made him happy.” She leaned her head back and for a moment I thought she was going to sleep. “Months ago, when we first talked about going to Tijuana, it seemed so expensive. In the end, the money was nothing. It was the cost in time. It really just exhausted him. He could have spent a few more days with Lysanne. A few more days at home.”

“I know.”

“It feels like it’s been so long, but really it’s only been three months. Hardly a beat of time.” She raised her head, opened her eyes and looked at me. “Sometimes I wonder if all this effort to prolong life was more for me than him.”

“Have you talked to him about this?”

“In a way.”

“Now’s the time. I mean, if it’s important, don’t let him go without talking this through.”

She snorted. “That’s rich, you telling me I need to communicate. The things the two of you need to talk through could fill a book.”

I did my best to smile, but I knew it wasn't coming through. I turned back to Alvin, still and peaceful looking. "Maybe that's it. There's so much there's effectively nothing."

"That's one way to look at it."

"We connect through our work."

"That's a bullshit answer."

"What do you want from me, Sandy?"

"I don't want anything from you. Maybe Alvin does though. Maybe you do, but can't see it."

"I believe it's possible to connect through the paintings, that our shared endeavour brings us together on a different level. I know you'll never understand, but it's true."



We sat with him through the night, the three of us, his witnesses, alternately holding his hand, brushing the sweat from his forehead and rubbing his bony feet. In the morning, he asked for more morphine. Sandy climbed into bed with him, curled against him while the nurse increased the dose in his IV. That evening he died—a last quiet breath and then nothing. Stillness. Peace.

"Will you leave me with him?" Sandy said. "For a while."

I led Lysanne into the damp night, into the rich earthy smell of summer. The moon was full, leaden in the sky, hanging there heavy and white, ready to fall earthwards. We got in my truck and I drove us into town.

I switched on all the lights in the loft and took Lysanne to the sofa where Alvin had spent so many of his last days. This was the only painting of Sylvette left in the house as far as I knew. Lysanne gazed at it and nodded. "Sylvette," I said. "Alvin. He was little more than a child. So was your mother."

I went to prepare the bed for her and when I returned, she was sitting on the sofa, arms folded, alone in her thoughts. I sat and took her hand, squeezed it, this soft still hand of the only child of my only child.

From the moment I'd stepped into the loft, I could feel my son's paintings. They called to me, the last great works of Alvin Cale. Although I sat with my granddaughter, my mind was already heading upstairs, and although I told myself I wouldn't take them, I knew it was a lie. I knew before the next day passed all those canvases would be in my truck. This knowledge, wrapped tight in shame, ate away at me while my granddaughter wept.