4200 words

The Living Beauty

Fiona Bruce Rankin sat up in her death bed to better eavesdrop on her son's phone conversation with Rose Kennedy. Rose Kennedy always made Michael uncomfortable. Fiona turned up her hearing aid and her ears crackled with static.

"Yes, I will stay on with the foundation." Michael's cough was dry and nervous.

Fiona decided that Rose had most likely phoned because she had heard how gravely ill Fiona was, and then wound up lecturing Michael on the merits of public service. Rose was always encouraging her godson to rise to some occasion or other. But, to Michael, with his slight frame and sardonic bearing, public service meant publicity, cameras following his family. New York still showed a notable interest in the doings of the son of Angus and Fiona Rankin. Unlike his parents, little repulsed Michael more than the spotlight. Rose Kennedy would always be disappointed in him.

Fiona was startled by the gilded mirror the maid held at her bedside, who was looking for Fiona to approve her appearance before the guests could be let in. And there she lay: the invalid Fiona. Recumbent in a four poster bed of Indian rosewood, propped upon pillows, she had allowed the little maid to rub circles of rouge onto her cheekbones. No longer refined, they served only to hold up spotted skin. Her peeling lips, now always parted – allowing the slightest of wheezing air to pass – had been painted a pale pink.

Otherwise, her tiny face appeared bloodless. A blue silk wrap hung across her sunken chest as if some guest, recently arrived, had thoughtlessly tossed it there, trapping her under its weight.

Such a waste of time, Fiona thought. Allowing her head first to bow forward, she then strained against the pain shooting from her neck down her spine to complete what she hoped would be interpreted as a nod.

Observing the maid replacing the mirror on the wall, and hearing Michael obey this as a sign to end his phone call, Fiona considered how much she, too, had been disappointed by Michael.

Weeks ago, Fiona had mustered the words to instruct her son to allow her one last Christmas with the family, and then to charge the nurse to – she could not remember what euphemism he finally found acceptable. She did remember that she had been quite clear: she wanted Michael to instruct the nurse to let Fiona overdose on morphine. Christmas morning came, and she found herself annoyed to yet again open her eyes, to see the marble floors and the baby grand piano, to know that this was her bedroom and that she was going to have to live one for twenty-four more hours. That interminable day, Fiona was surprised by what little delight she took in her grandchildren. And by how impatient she was for death. Nothing had ever seemed so unnecessary to her as exchanging gifts. Instead of providing her wellbeing, her family only annoyed her, sapping the last of her energy.

She wondered if Rose Kennedy could take comfort in her family. She was of more advanced years and had had a stroke. Fiona thought Rose should be planning her own dignified escape instead of harassing Michael to venture into public service. She had

her wits about her. Fiona knew that there had to be few things worse than having your wits about you, despite all the medication, as you deteriorate. “Time to wrap it up, Rose,” Fiona said to no one.

And, so, Michael had defied his own mother’s request to let her wrap it up. Rather, he let her live on to this afternoon of New Year’s Eve, the last day of 1986, a colorless year. And what had Michael been up to instead of organizing a dignified death for his mother? He had arranged for violinist, Theophile Duchamp to put on a concert in Fiona’s chambers. Michael perhaps believed that some recently-discovered concertos by Paganini would pep her up, but he was from the world of the living, and that’s how those people thought. Michael’s choice left Fiona more confused than angry. When, she wondered, had he started so flagrantly disregarding her wishes?

It is no matter now, Fiona thought. Michael was off the phone and Duchamp and his accompanist were being led into the room. Her chambers were now dominated by a parade of the musicians and Michael’s second family: his latest wife, Margaret and their daughter, Hattie. The little maid marched among them, serving mimosas from a silver tray. Fiona smacked her lips to signal her interest, finding the sound loud enough to catch someone’s attention. She thought for a moment that Margaret planned to intervene.

Don’t you dare! Fiona thought too slowly. She had never cared for Margaret. She tried to summon a threatening look in the maid’s direction despite realizing that the cloudy film that age had settled over her pupils gave the impression – even to her when she saw her reflection in a looking glass – of retreat from the present. Perhaps even feeble-mindedness. The tray passed her by.

From under the visor of an ancient Brooklyn Dodgers cap, Michael announced that Hattie should open the performance by playing a "little tune" on the piano.

"An etude!" Fiona Rankin silently repeated what she thought she heard. "How indulgent! Poor What's-his-name," she thought. "A musician, accustomed to royal command performances, summoned to a room that surely reeks of old lady talc only to listen to a girl's piano lesson!"

Finding this mildly amusing, she let her dry lips form the slightest of smiles, and her son beamed in her direction. He leaned happily into his wife, pressing her hand so she would turn to see Fiona's smile, too. "Yes, Mother," Michael said. "I'm glad you are pleased."

Fiona could see that Michael seemed to want something from her now that she had nothing to give anyone. With a crooked finger, she signaled to the little maid carrying the tray of mimosas, and the girl again paid her no attention. Fiona tapped the bedside table, beckoning Michael to the chair closest to her, indicating she wanted to speak. He leaned in, his ear hovering just above her mouth. She got a hold of his hand and dug arthritic fingers into his wrist as hard as she could.

"I am not pleased. I want to die." Each word was accompanied by a thin whistling sound.

Michael looked down. "Yes," he whispered.

"You know?" She choked. "Then why …"

"Can we please give it a few more days?" He gave a little wave to Hattie who was staring at them from across the room.

"What will happen in a few more days, Michael? Are you hoping God will intervene and take me off your hands? The nurses will attend me, and I will prevail, because I am too weak to defy their care." She had little voice left. "You must take charge of this."

When Michael leaned in close, he nodded as if he was listening, but Fiona wondered if he understood. Mother and son had shared a history of listening closely but not coming to the same conclusions.

When Michael was fourteen, his father, Angus took him deer hunting upstate. Angus returned home furious, and Michael spent the next week on the verge of tears. Angus told her that Michael had managed to shoot a doe in the head, a fatal shot. "That boy is a natural!" he said.

Both father and son gave the same account. Michael had been excited at first. But when they got close to the downed deer, to the blood and its unblinking eyes and its great flanks, the boy cried violently. Heaving sobs. He couldn't see through his tears, he couldn't hold onto his knife. "Go back to the car, son," Angus said. Angus Rankin had come from nothing. He had built a textile business in Aberdeen and cultivated an Edinburgh accent, which he used to convince Fiona's wealthy humorless father that she should marry him. Angus had brought her to the United States and found wild success in real estate. Even in the years up to his death, Angus continued to amass a fortune oil rigging off the west coast of Scotland, an invincible immortal fortune, fostered by good luck and sound decisions. Angus Rankin met every challenge.

Michael came from everything. He found too many things challenging.

One evening soon after the deer incident, Michael appealed to Fiona not to wear animal fur. Not any fur, not even her prized blue fox. She held him to her and kissed his forehead before putting the coat away for that particular evening, and he believed he had changed her lifestyle forever.

But she knew that she would never stop wanting to cloak herself in the finery that so few women would ever touch. She liked to be reminded of how far she had come, how far Angus had taken them all. She had listened to her son's request and concluded that one night would suffice.

At her bedside, Michael signaled the maid to bring the tray of mimosas. Smiling at Fiona, his eyes misting, he lifted two flutes of bubbly orange liquid and rested them on the bedside table. He helped Fiona better adjust herself in the bed before handing her a glass.

"Okay, mother." He winked and touched the rim of his glass to hers. "Okay."

She took a sip and returned his smile, trying not to let on that the drink tasted like dust. Fiona hoped that Michael was giving her a final wonderful toast to seal their pact, a toast to her last day on this earth. But she could not be sure that he had only listened to her request and concluded something else, something that would not suffice.

Michael turned his attention to his daughter. "Hattie," he said.

Hattie rose from her chair, looked at the piano and turned back to Michael who smiled at her warmly. "Daddy," Hattie asked, "Why are you wearing that old hat?"

Michael shot across the room to kneel by Hattie, as if he were the beloved father in a Shirley Temple movie divulging a delightful truth to his daughter. "Why, Hattie, your grandmother caused quite a stir at the Symphony many years ago. During a World

Series, when the Brooklyn Dodgers played the New York Yankees, your grandmother wore this cap to a performance at Carnegie Hall." Hattie fidgeted and gave Fiona the impression that she was unfamiliar with each proper noun. Michael continued. "Her picture was in all the society pages. People found it outrageous! I thought she looked charming."

With shiny eyes, Michael turned to Fiona. She bowed her head imperceptibly to disguise her contempt. "What a foolish thing for me to have done," she thought. She considered that she must have loved her son once. But today, she could only focus on the fatuous slit he had cut in the back of the hat so it would fit on his head.

As Hattie took her place at the piano, Duchamp and his accompanist sat primly on the bench by the great window, politely gazing straight ahead. Hattie smiled around the room and announced with a voice broken by nervousness that she would play "Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road," by Elton John. Michael and Margaret cooed and applauded, and Duchamp managed a stiff little clap. Fiona turned her hearing aid off.

The young accompanist – Fiona didn't even try to learn his name – looked familiar to her. But didn't everybody these days? Was that the most consistent thing about aging, that everyone looks like someone you've seen before? He had shiny black eyes that seemed to be all pupils. He was doughy and the window bench forced his long legs to make awkward Ls into the floor. More so than usual, his youth was an affront to her. She didn't know why.

She looked out the window behind their heads. A single streak of orange cut across the colorlessness like a scar. The pale clouds brawled in the winter sky to the

soundtrack of Hattie pounding her little fingers on the keys like a horror movie organist. Fiona, ever watchful over Duchamp, observed him to wince.

His suffering amused her and she resolved not to state aloud her displeasure with this private concert. Although she was astounded by the idiocy of the idea. Michael was a fool who found some perverse joy in preserving her. She peered at him: the gray smatterings in the dark hair sticking out from under the cap, his abundant eyelashes, the pointy cheeks and chin, his sickle of a nose. These features, so characteristic of his father's face, were merely muted copies on the son's.

Certainly, one could not disparage Michael's steadiness. He was a man of dedication and hard work, far superior to his peers, inheritors of fortunes they did not contribute to. Michael was hampered, Fiona decided, by his loyalty to the appropriate. Unlike his father, Michael had no passion for wealth, and worse, no imagination. Traditional and nostalgic, he had no interest in modernizing the Rankin businesses. He had neither opened any new facilities nor closed any existing ones. It was as if a clock had stopped when Angus died. Michael had the ambition of an heir.

And there he stood, her life in his hands, stalwartly at his wife's side while the gauzy afternoon light seeped into the room around them. They are like peasants in a Chagall painting, she thought. Dreamy and anachronistic. Assisting a mother's suicide requires boldness that Michael, perhaps, does not possess.

Who will assist Rose Kennedy when her time comes, Fiona wondered. She decided a daughter would be more helpful in such matters. Fiona considered that she should have had a daughter.

With great care, she reached to touch a post of her exotic rosewood deathbed. Even though her useless spine would not allow her to examine anything, Fiona remembered she had always marveled at the exquisite design of this bed. The artisan was a penniless Cuban with a preternatural gift. Through each of the four bedposts spiraled carvings of lions, lambs, fruit trees and snakes; the flora and fauna of Paradise. Behind the propped up deathbed pillows, the headboard showed Eve peacefully reclining in Adam's arms, while the First Man held out his hand to a wolf. The beast bowed its head gently to take the fruits Adam was offering - to eat out of Adam's hand.

Fiona wondered how Adam and Eve ever came to forgive God – never mind worship Him - for showing them Paradise and then casting them out of it. How could they settle for a mortal life, knowing exactly what splendor was lost to them forever? She had suffered a great loss of splendor when she became infirmed. And she was finding it impossible to forgive anyone for letting her lead such a wonderful life and then age.

It occurred to her that the Cuban artist had been her lover for a short time. She wondered if the memory belonged to someone else's life. She had no idea why she was unfaithful to Angus at that time of her marriage. And she could not recall if she had actually loved the Cuban. His fingers had been wide and flat, like spatulas, with blisters on the tips. His mouth had tasted of rum and lime. She had taken the bus once to meet him at his decrepit studio in Brooklyn, and the two had flown together to Havana. Angus was never watchful over men like the Cuban. He felt superior to them, and did not bother himself with their comings and goings.

Fiona wished she had never been happy. Perhaps people who led miserable lives could more ably bear their ends. It would have been better – and she realized what she

was about to think and tried to stop it, but no, there it came – it would have been better never to have lived than to have lived well.

She moved her hand away from the lion carving. How pathetic to lie dying in this living bed. "'O, heart, we are old,'" she thought. "'The living beauty is for younger men…'" She knew these words were not her own, but she couldn't remember where she'd heard them. A poet: Yeats or Keats

She had met Yeats once when she was at the Abbey Theater and she was barely twenty. She had achieved a small speaking role in one of his plays - the name escaped her now. At the dress rehearsal, he approached her with a deep crease in his forehead. "The Irish words roll like boulders off your tongue," William Butler Yeats had said to her.

She found herself staring at Margaret, imagining that Michael's younger appropriate wife from fine American stock likely had a bone to pick with her. Margaret, who was part of a generation that could wait to have children, likely judged Fiona as a selfish parent, one who did not disrupt her life terribly for motherhood, one who sent her only son away to boarding schools. Margaret, Fiona noted, never fretted about her weight. Such women were not to be trusted. With her patrician forehead, Margaret had the open expectant face of the privileged, unlined by worry, because she never suffered a moment of suspense that what she waited for would come.

Hattie finished her song, and she did not notice Duchamp rise from his place on the bench. He was a pencil-straight line, from his chestnut shoes to his disheveled hair. Fiona had always remembered him with a mustache, but his face was well-shaven today.

Heedless, Hattie started in on another song. Fiona turned her hearing aid on in time to hear the ruffled Duchamp hiss, "It's 'Someone Save My Life Tonight!'"

Michael was able to interrupt her, gently but panicked, but not before Duchamp precisely collapsed onto the window bench, wiping a handkerchief across his upper lip to regain composure.

Fiona spied her daughter-in-law moving closer to the far window, and she fixed her attentions along Margaret's likely path, to the pedestal where the glass sculpture of a woman's head and shoulders reflected dreary light. In better times, Angus had commissioned one of the glass masters of Murano, Mario Something-or-other, who had worked with Picasso, to create this colorful and incongruous image, like a balloon animal, of a primary-colored woman with a feathered hat. Angus had told her the sculpture was of her. But just now, she realized that he subject of this piece could be said to be any rich man's wife. After Fiona's death, even Margaret could claim the sculpture was of her.

Hattie stood and everyone applauded, including, as Fiona was certain to note, Duchamp. Margaret smiled to herself dreamily, resting a finger on the blue shoulder of the glass woman. Fiona couldn't bear, suddenly, Margaret's khaki pants, so unflattering, and the insipid style of her pale red hair. And what was she wearing on her feet? Some kind of canvas shoe with a cork heel, as if she were on the dock in Nantucket? Yes, she was badly dressed, but perhaps more practical and cold-hearted than Michael. Fiona considered that Margaret might actually enjoy assisting a suicide.

The accompanist took his place on the piano bench, and Duchamp stood, violin pressed to his left shoulder, bow languishing at his right side. Fiona closed her eyes and

dreamed that she leapt from the bed, kicked over the pedestal, and smashed the Murano glass sculpture. It lay in pieces on the floor. The old woman laughed and laughed.

Fiona opened her eyes, and they burned and then watered in the stale dry air of the room. Her hips ached, and she wanted Margaret to get away from her sculpture. "Madeleine," she croaked to her daughter-in-law, even though Duchamp had begun a frenetic song. Michael heard her and motioned to his wife. Fiona did enjoy getting Michael's wife's name wrong. Margaret knelt by her bedside, smiling kindly.

Fiona said, "Nothing, dear. It's good you've come."

Duchamp hit a poignant note and held it with his left index finger, while plucking strings with his ring finger. He let the long note hang in the air until the violin string stopped vibrating under his touch. In better times, such a note would have got caught in her throat and would have moved her.

Fiona recalled a summer night in the woods, a party by a lake. Moonbeams fell shimmering onto the waves. In a chair by a bonfire, she was not wearing any shoes and her bare feet lounged and preened in the sweet breeze. All around, she could hear the happy chirpings of conversation, the tiny lapping sounds of the lake. There was a man at the party she desired. She drank bourbon and breathed in the bonfire smoke and the softness of the grass. Everything smelled clean, pure. Rubbing the balls of her naked feet into the summer grass, she felt anything was possible.

Could it be? Fiona thought now, reliving the delightful surprise of recognizing desire in a man's eyes. Could this simple insignificant night have been the greatest moment of her life?

Her head jerked back, and she closed her eyes, giving out a little cry. Michael shot her a concerned look. She waved her hands, shooing him back to watching the performance. She licked her lips without meaning to, but needing to, and Michael handed her a cup of water from the nightstand.

She remembered then the bedside of her own dying grandmother, the old woman's eyes pale and restless. They were unnatural on her face, like eyes that spy on you from cutouts in a portrait. They seemed possessed of worldliness inconsistent with the old woman's bedridden dementia. Fiona thought she must look the same to the others.

Studying Michael's bearing for pathos, she found instead self-deprecation in his narrow shoulders. He glanced back at her, and then turned away quickly, a little embarrassed that she noticed his attentiveness. Fiona understood in a single sanguine wave that Michael would not allow her to die while she was disappointed in him. And the very act of his keeping her alive was the most disappointing thing he had ever done. So close to the end, Fiona loved no one, nothing. Not even sleep. But she knew that if she wanted her son to muster the courage to let her die, she would have to prove to him that she loved him.

Clearing her throat, she signaled to Michael that she wanted to say something. He reached behind her head and cradled her useless neck in his arm. Again, he lowered his ear to her lips. Her white curls, so much dandelion fluff, stuck to the razor stubble on his face.

Fiona told herself that she must have found it an incredible thing, to have had a baby. She touched her son's fingers, reminding herself had once belonged to an infant. She could not summon any sensation. Finding the effort of this intimacy uncomfortable, she wanted to beg her son to smother her with a pillow, to let her suffocate in his arms. Instead she rasped, "Yeats."

"Yeats?" her son asked kindly. "Which one?"

Fiona coached herself: Think about beauty, think about life. Focus. "The 'Grecian Urn,'" she said.

Michael smiled. "Do you mean Keats?" He carefully removed his arm, and rested her head back against the pillows. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty?"

She smacked her lips to show her assent, for him to continue.

He waited for Duchamp to finish the song he was playing, waited for the applause to subside, waited for Duchamp to adjust to the interruption. Michael took his place beside the violinist, removing his baseball cap and holding it reverently to his chest. "Beauty is truth," he recited to the room, "Truth, beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." He bowed slightly.

Margaret clapped, Hattie found a piece of gum on the window bench, and Duchamp's accompanist played the first few measures of Beethoven's Fifth on the piano, which made everyone laugh.

Sinking into her pillows, Fiona closed her eyes and saw herself, in better days, at a café table in Paris. Her wine glass glittered with the evening lamps. This vibrant and vital Fiona threw her head back in laughter, a cigarette between her elegant fingers, her

lips painted crimson. She was talking to a reporter, talking to a camera. This was how she would have liked to have told Michael what she knew:

"Oh, Michael! You can't believe it! This life, everyone's life. It's all such an incredible waste!"

But instead she conjured up all she could remember about acting. She could not afford to reveal even the slightest artifice. "Michael," she said into his hovering ear. "I am so proud of you." Michael twitched. "You are the most precious part of my long long life."

He sat at her side, pressing her moth's wing of a hand into his chest, crying silently. Fiona felt that he believed her and they were awash in a marvelous peace. And so she was hopeful for the first time in years.