

The  
Artist

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There is no evil in sorrow.  
True, it is not an essential good... like love  
But it will mingle with any good thing...  
And it will open the door of the heart for any good.  
George MacDonald

# The Artist

*Summer 2007*

I was in the right place at the right time. That's what Jenny said when I got the message from Renghal Gardens.

We were sitting at a sidewalk café in Budapest drinking cappuccinos and going over our budget and everything we wanted to do before the money ran out. She had some kind of sour cherry pastry and I had ice cream.

"I'll have to cut my time in Vienna short if I want to make it back to London by the tenth," she said, flipping her head sideways to swing the long bangs aside.

"Why?" I answered absentmindedly, breathing over a mouthful of ice cream to warm the roof of my mouth before I swallowed it. "I thought you wanted to spend another three weeks on the continent."

"Well, yeah, I did, but my credit card doesn't agree."

I looked at her trying to figure out what she meant. "Yeah," she said with a wry grin, "I'm down to a handful of coins now."

I mouthed an 'O' and went back to my ice cream.

"How about you?" She asked me with a mouthful of pastry. "Are you still trying to find some crazy job for the summer?"

"Well, duh! Of course! I'm not going to get one but I have to try, right? I've been telling everyone at home I am..."

My phone blared at me and I flipped it open to read this message:

"You applied for a job at Renghal Gardens. Call for interview appointment at..."

It was followed by a phone number.

I stared at it without comprehending. Then I screamed quietly – if you know what I mean by that, "I don't believe it!"

"What? What?" Jenny snapped back at me with a tinge of annoyance.

"Renghal Gardens? It's got to be a joke. David probably sent this. I'm going to kill him!!"

"What? Are you kidding?" She grabbed the phone out of my hand and stared at the screen in amazement. Her mouth fell open but nothing came out.

"I don't know. It's nothing. Right?" I prodded.

"What? No! What if it's real?? You gotta call and find out." Jenny reasoned with me in that excited way girls squeal at each other.

"I can't. I'm too nervous!!"

Somehow we both ended up on our feet. This was unusual because we had done a pretty good job of keeping cool and appearing sophisticated during our time in Europe, but the occasion was worthy of it. For

a couple of art students who had just finished a course in Italy and had a few weeks to explore before going back to America, the thought of getting a text from Renghal Gardens was beyond our wildest dreams.

I had responded to an announcement on the board at the school for a summer position in the Gardens but never expected to hear anything about it. Didn't everyone apply? I had nothing to make me stand out from the crowd, certainly not any striking art talent to compare to the Great Renghal!

Somehow the call was made, and an appointment set up for the next week in Vienna. We sat back in our chairs in astonishment.

"I hate you," Jenny said. She was shaking her head at me with her eyes narrowed.

"I know," I answered. "I hate me, too. At least I will when I get there and they see it's just me and they kick me out the back door. I know I'll get my hopes up.... but right now, I just don't believe it. I don't...."

But I started to. Then I was on my feet again with my mouth wide open. I couldn't even say the words!

"How could you?" she hissed at me. "Are you actually going to get to meet him? *The Artist?*"

"No. I won't. I won't... but what if I do?"

Then I screamed again for real, clapped my hand over my face and decided to leave before the glares of annoyed customers around us became a problem.

The next week found me walking nervously into the elegant lobby of the Grand Hotel Wien dressed in my best clothes, which seemed pretty lame for the atmosphere. I hoped they would make allowances for a young art student.

I gave my name at the desk and they led me to a salon with a long table. Three ordinary, secretarial type people were seated there and they motioned me to sit across from them. I felt even more out of place when I noticed the color contrast between my clothes and theirs. Let's just say I wasn't exactly subdued, and they were all grey and white, even their hair.

I was there for the experience, I guess, so I could say, "Yeah, I did that. I almost had a job with the great A."

In the end I never knew what it was about me that got me a job in the Gardens. The best I can come up with is that they drew my name out of a big basket. The next day I was called back and offered a job beginning in April. There was a six-month contract and it could potentially become a permanent position.

"You will be expected on Thursday morning, three days from now, at 8:00 AM for orientation at this location." One greyish woman explained, handing me a brochure and pointing to an address. "Directions on how to get there and everything you need to know are included."

My initial job description was summarized on the front page like part of the title: Gallery Attendant – assigned to a room or station on the Renghal Gardens estate.

Barely breathing, I took the info, curtsied awkwardly, (which I decided was probably really lame when I thought about it later), and escaped.

"Six months at Renghal," I texted with trembling fingers to Jenny. "Meet me at the Café here to celebrate – it's on me."

Now you can hate me all you want, I laughed to myself.

If there is anyone who doesn't know who Renghal is, (and I doubt it), he is simply the most amazing man who ever lived. To call him an artist almost seems an insult because that's what we call so many ordinary people in the world. He is way more than that. His family is one of the wealthiest and most powerful in the world, and no one even knows what all he is involved with behind the scenes: business mergers, political wheeling and dealing, handling the world market, and what ever else men of his kind do.

I learned to call him J.K., short for Jarvis Kardel Antoine Renghal, like the rest of his staff.

J.K. had made waves in the art world like no one else. Every medium he tackled, he mastered. He outshone all others: painting, sculpture, cinematography, architecture, graphic arts. There was no end to his talent or creativity.

He had been very social and popular in the first few years of his dazzling fame – the child prodigy in his teens – but had quickly grown to hate the limelight. He began to hide from the public, and then he apparently used disguises. He became so adept at these that as

an adult whenever he made public appearances, he looked different enough from all of his previous guises that people weren't sure what his real likeness was any more.

They said he had a very ordinary face, a malleable, pleasant face that he could shape into many expressions. Little things like sideburns and thinning eyebrows combined with a bewildered expression would completely change his look so that even people who knew him got confused. He was thirty years old the summer I started to work for him.

His most famous works were never sold but displayed in a traveling exhibit in the early years. This was too restrictive though, for the abundance of his genius, and he decided to create a permanent residence where his work could be seen the way it was meant to be seen. This is how the Renghal Gardens came into being.

He chose a barren hill on the north eastern coast of Italy and transformed it. All the many gardens were designed by him. He sculpted all the statues, laid out all the architectural plans for the buildings, created fountains, streams, fish ponds, forests, and vineyards. On the top of the hill, he crafted the Renghal Palace, containing chambers created for each mood of his art with soundtracks of his own music to fill their spaces.

He set up tours, parking, transportation, restaurants on the waterfront, and souvenir shops. Tour groups were allowed in on a limited basis for six months out of the year and the coveted spots were reserved far in advance, a once in a lifetime opportunity.

At the time when I entered his employ, it was rumored that Renghal was no longer producing any art at all. This was hard to believe after fifteen years of

such majestic and varied output. Could a man like that just run out? It seemed impossible. Most of his employees were confident that he was focusing on a new art form in secret. "It will come out one day," they would say, and the speculation on what it could be was wild and entertaining.

Orientation, which included about a hundred new attendants, was dull and practical. Flats in town were offered for reasonable rates and, of course, I got one. It was a tiny studio but I was happy with it because it had a quaint view of the water. Also, it gave me a chance to get to know other new-hires like myself.

My job was pretty basic. I was assigned to one of the chambers to keep it dusted, the floor swept and mopped, the windows cleaned, and to be a sort of guard when tours were coming through. I wasn't even actually guarding it because an elaborate security system took care of that, but my presence helped to keep most people in line. I was given a sleek black and white suit with a formal ID to wear around my neck and a walkie-talkie on my belt. Even the suit was designed by him. I loved it.

I had been told that I would only be allowed to work there for a few weeks before I was moved to another chamber. Apparently they had to move people around regularly or they became too attached and possessive of the chamber they cared for. There were rumors of some turf wars and dismissals I didn't get the full scoop on.

My first assignment was the chamber of melodies. Every morning I would catch the Gardens bus on the street by my apartment, and ride through the forest and the lower gardens up to the massive gate. The sun would be rising over the water to my left and my heart

would thrill with delight. The aromas of the gardens came in the windows. The scanner would search us and the gate would roll open. From there we were each driven to the building where we worked and joined the staff of that location for the morning meal. Even this was a pleasure, not so much because of the simple fare, but because of the charm of the kitchen where it was prepared and eaten.

From the kitchen, I walked through six hallways and five doors, past indoor fountains and murals, mosaic floors and a column of marble semi-covered with ivy in a twisted and intricate design. My eyes and fingers opened each computerized security check, until I reached my post in the melody chamber.

This hall included an assortment of art forms that had one thing in common. They were associated in some way with melody. There were threads of many different pieces of music that somehow blended as you passed from one section to another so that in one exhibit you heard one melody, and as you transitioned to the next, the two melodies complemented each other until you heard only the second. Then as you moved to the next, the blending was once again pleasing – or interesting, or challenging – and in every interaction of sound, there was no clash that was not intentional.

The themes of the art worked in the same way. One would be a painting of sound waves that challenged you to hear a harmony with it in the music that played in your ears. Another was a sculpture of the finest threads of glass fiber, gold filigree, platinum hairs, all of these vibrating with the faintest hum in the sounds that played over them. Another was colored light waves melting through a sheet of falling water. Each piece was captivating, complex.

My first day there, I couldn't even talk about it. I just looked and listened and walked around in a daze. I paced calmly when a tour was there and swept the floor in the ten minute break between groups.

By the second day I had a few clever words to say along the lines of "Wow!"

By the end of the week I could form a full sentence. "I didn't realize he was a scientist," I said one morning at breakfast. They all nodded and a couple smiled knowingly. They must have been thinking I had still so much to learn.

At the end of the day I would go back to my place in town, read until I was tired and then go to bed to dream of the chamber of melodies. I had no desire to create any art of my own. All my creative sensitivities were arrested and absorbed by this one man's work. I wondered if my response was strange and I didn't know it.

I hadn't even learned all the melodies before I was moved to another chamber, then to another. I barely had a chance to catch my breath in each one before I was transitioned to the next. I couldn't even describe them all. There are books you can buy if you want to read about them, although they could never do them justice. I wasn't allowed to see any part of the palace I hadn't worked in before. Every time I was moved to another area, a whole new epoch of artistic experience opened up to me and captivated me once again. When I remember them now, each one seems like a phase of my life that I lived through. I was allowed to continue to move freely through the areas I had worked in and so, little by little, the extent of my domain increased, and I began to have more access to the entire grounds.

This was the first tier of training.

Were they looking for people who would love his art or perhaps ones who would still appreciate it once they had seen so much? Were they straining out those who were there with the hope of personal gain or cheap imitation from those who merely loved art? I had no way of knowing, but as the months went by, I found myself becoming part of a smaller circle of “stay-ons” who weren’t eliminated and replaced by new workers.

We built our own friendships and found ourselves hanging out together in town after work. We hiked in the countryside and we ate in restaurants. Sometimes we even took day trips into surrounding areas on the weekends. I made friends there that I kept for the rest of my life. At the time I assumed we were all really cool people because we were artistic. But I think we had more in common than that and it was easy for us to understand each other. Actually, it grew easier. The longer we worked there, the more in tune we were to each other.

Several of the guys were interested in me but I was much too satisfied with my current daily life to

want to ruffle it with a relationship. "Not now, I don't know when" was my message to all men. They were okay with that and didn't push it. We were friends. A couple of them were really good friends, the kind you can tell almost anything to.

There were many warm evenings in September when we sat around coffee debating a million different things about life and purpose and things we had read. Or laughing and talking of meaningless things, enjoying one another's company, and the pleasure of being young and healthy. I don't remember any one person sticking out as the glue that held us together. It seems golden and precious to me now but at the time, I took it for granted that life would always be this way.

One of those nights together stands out in my mind. We were sitting at a table outside a café with coffee and dessert. Russ was complaining about the foam on his cappuccino and we were making fun of him.

"It ought to be white with swirls of light brown just begging for the little mound of sugar to be poured in the center," he said with a frown, "not this wimpy bubble bath fluff. What is this?" He poked at it with his spoon.

"It suits you," Craig smirked and I think I elbowed him.

"Whatever," I said.

"Wherever," he corrected. "He shall have bubbles wherever he goes..." and I started laughing. I don't know why. It wasn't really funny. It was just the way he said it.

"Why is it that men always take offense at things they think are feminine?" Janina said, "What makes

bubbles feminine? Why aren't they considered masculine?"

Everyone started talking at that. Of course bubbles were feminine! Actually they had to do with babies, which are more in the realm of women. Comments like that.

It became an argument but it was all good-natured. Sergei claimed bubbles are quite masculine as long as they were the right color and Marie said they should be the color of champagne. And somehow it got into the names used for colors in interior decorating.

I would have forgotten it within the hour except for what Marco said next.

"That makes me think of the round chamber." He interrupted several voices talking at once and suddenly silence hung at his last word. We were all there. Just like that, we were in the round room thinking of that pool, the ripples that continually start at the center and expand through different shades of color. Now and then bubbles rose to the surface. There was some extreme panning in the soundtrack that oscillated back and forth around the room and the music was so melancholy and beautiful. It made you want to cry and it made you want to dream; to dance, to run through a forest, or dive into stormy seas. *That* room.

"How did he ever come up with that room?" Dan said thoughtfully.

"Why is it so special?" Marie responded. "It has ordinary elements, basic simple design. Why do we all stop and wonder like that?"

"It's like he's talking to us about something we don't have that should be ours," I answered, "it makes us long for something..."

"Long for what?" Sergei smiled with a silly smile, a mouthful of cake and eyebrows cocked at an angle.

"For freedom..." someone said.

"For purpose or hope," said another.

"To know him..." I said half to myself.

"Know who?" Russ asked in surprise.

"Did I say that out loud?" I answered flushing just a little. I took a gulp of my coffee and set the cup down carelessly, splashing it on the table. "Renghal, of course. Who else?"

I was embarrassed that I had exposed a secret desire of mine, afraid that I would be lumped into the rather large group of women who wanted nothing more than to meet him.

"Everyone wants to meet him. What does that have to do with the color of bubbles?" Craig quipped lightly and we laughed.

"Nothing," I said and changed the subject.

But we all felt it. The longer we were there, the more real Renghal became to us, and we wished we could meet him. But from what we heard from the rest of the staff, this would probably never happen.

We booked a sailboat one evening and watched the sun set behind the Renghal Gardens estate from the deck, as we enjoyed a fresh fish dinner and white wine.

"What kind of a man is he?" Marco pondered, leaning back with arms folded behind his head. The gentle sound of water lapping against the side of the boat murmured in our ears.

"He's a moody genius," Marie offered. She was dressed charmingly in a white and blue sailing outfit with sunglasses and a hat. I remember wondering if I should have worn something more feminine than shorts.

"Probably a snob or a narcissist," Craig added, chewing a bite of fish and washing it down with a swallow of wine.

"And he obviously hates women," Janina raised an eyebrow smugly, as if she knew him well. Her yellow sundress and pink nails were appropriate sunset colors. Maybe I should've worn something more artistic.

"Why would you say that?" Russ countered, as the yellow sun melted into the west and an orange glow began to diffuse through the skies. "I've never seen anything that seemed misogynistic..."

"Oh, no!" Sergei interrupted with a grin and a wink toward me in his careless way. "He's a gentleman and he loves women like I do."

"You say things like that a lot, Janina," Craig responded with a hint of irritation. "I think you hate men."

"I don't hate men," she sat up, crossed her legs and leaned toward him with a subtle smile. "I love them."

None of us really wanted to follow that thread of thought.

The colors in the west melted from orange to pink and purple, and the gentlest of breezes ruffled our hair. It was too beautiful of an evening to waste on mediocre topics.

"Have you ever noticed how some of J.K.'s art is intended for children?" I steered the conversation into a different direction.

Most of them looked at me in confusion. Golden light reflected off of their hair and faces, tinging them with a pleasing warmth. I wished I could paint that.

"No," Marco said. "Like what?"

"There are no children's exhibits that I'm aware of," Dan commented thoughtfully. "Unless you've been in a chamber I don't know about."

"No, not like that," I said. "They *all* have elements for children."

Russ looked at me strangely. He did that sometimes.

"I suppose children can appreciate art on a more basic level," Janina conceded, "but they can't grasp

the deeper nuances that require adult understanding and perception." The evening colors glancing off her hair framed her face and accented her words.

"Next time you're in your chamber," I challenged them, "drop down to one knee and look around you. You'll see what I mean."

"You can just tell us. I'll probably forget," Sergei shrugged. His face was in shadow now, as if he were already forgetting.

"Different angles at lower heights – that's not exactly intentional, Brianna," Dan suggested reasonably, staring into the distance. "Maybe you're reading into it."

"What chamber are you assigned to right now and what did you see?" Russ asked me. A glint of light sparkled in his eyes as he looked at me. It made them look golden.

"Well..." I had been thinking about it all evening, trying to figure out what it was the artist had done. "I'm in the South Sea Chamber and you know how one wall is like a coral reef? If you crouch at kid height, you can hear different sea sounds than when you're standing. And there are certain angles of the wall you can look into that almost look like magical, underwater scenes."

"I don't know," Craig questioned, still looking sideways at Janina as though unable to move past her slur against J.K. "It probably has more to do with your imagination than his intention."

"And I think I've seen things in other rooms, too," I assured him.

"I love the metal room," Janina gazed into the horizon with dreamy eyes. "It's all abstract and complex and full of aggression and meaning."

"No," Marco frowned. "It's depressing. Industrial. Stark and cold."

"The ice chamber is cold," Russ laughed. This was true. It was kept below zero to preserve the sculptures and walls.

"I love that one!" Marie exclaimed with a lovely smile. "You go in through that rippling hallway of ice – it's so glorious!"

"Here's a challenge for you," Dan presented to us. "If you could capture this evening and immortalize it in art, what would you portray and what medium would you use?"

"That's not art," Janina sneered. "No real message..."

"Not my question," he shook his head.

"Sand sculpture seems fitting," Craig commented first. "Maybe just the sailboat, the dinner, and us."

"Lame," Janina snapped.

"I'm a fan of oils," Marie breathed in the warm sea air. "An impressionist painting, maybe."

"What would you do?" Russ nodded toward me.

I thought for a moment.

"I'm not a good enough artist to create what I would want," I answered. "I think I would just record audio and leave it at that. Sorry. It's a copout, I know. And you?"

He stared at the deck, deep in thought.

"Wood, water, sand," he said finally. "Abstract."

"Sculpture, base relief of our faces," Sergei grinned with more than a hint of sarcasm. He was more of a critic than an artist, so any suggestion he made wouldn't be genuine.

"Honestly," I ventured. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to create art again. After drinking in all *this*... I'm saturated, satiated. I have nothing to give." There was

something a little melancholy about that but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"I feel the same way," Dan agreed and a couple others nodded.

Living there, observing and experiencing it all, was a creative work in itself.

*End of sample*