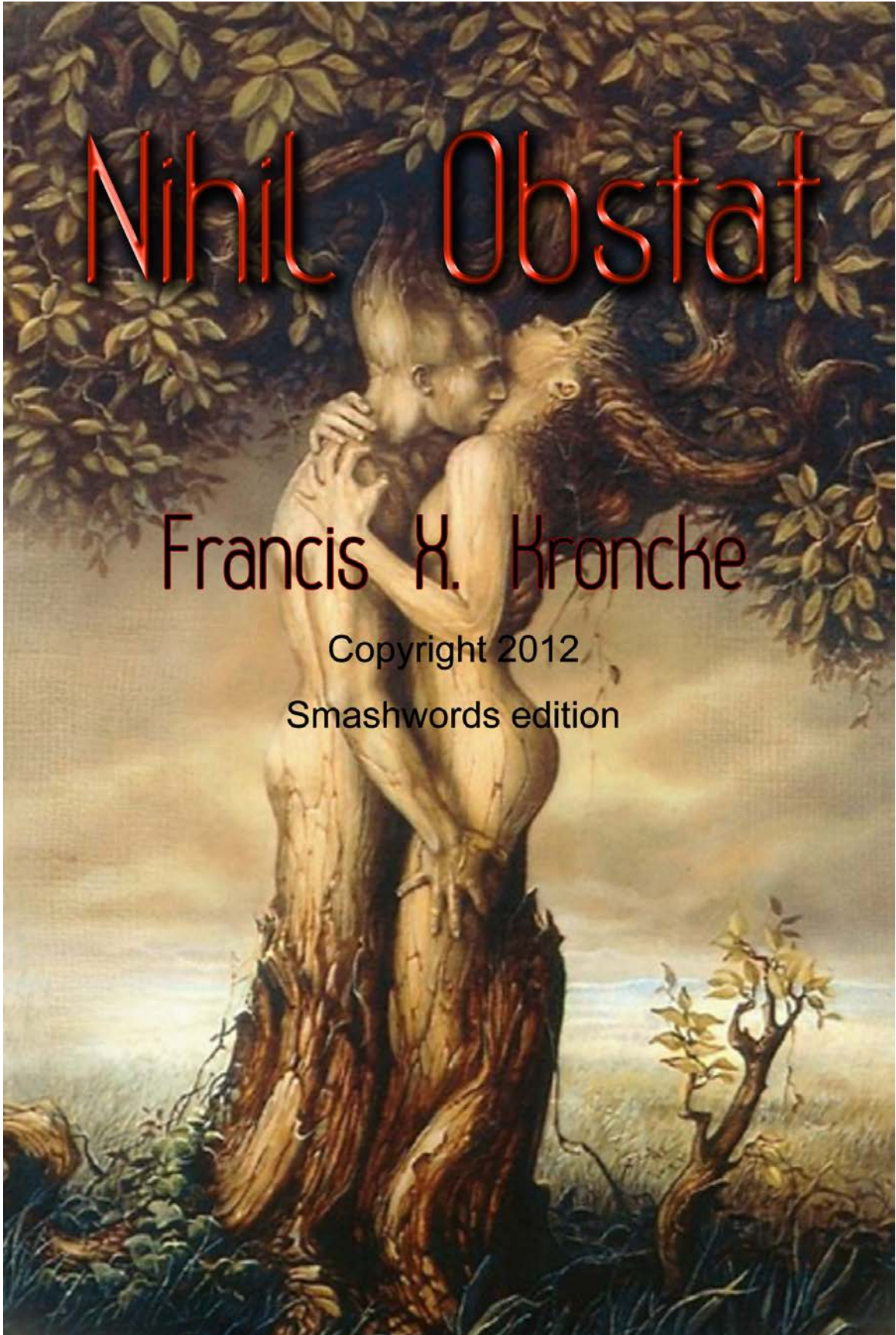


Nihil Obstat

Francis X. Kroncke

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Smashwords edition



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By Francis X. Kroncke

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PART ONE: FIRST MEETING

CHAPTER 1

When he first saw her, he knew that it was just as when he last first saw her. For there had been so much time between them that time was new. This then a First Meeting.

The First Meeting is a planned accident of a college reunion. Such is the reality of this peculiar collegial annual. As if they come hoping that once back from whence they had shipped-off, so now they would be given a new passage. Indeed, ticketed again to begin again. Sheared and shriven of a past which once had been only future dream. Few gatherings are attended in hopes of planned accidents as are such college reunions. And here they are, from the Class of '00, Jude and Sharon, accidentally clashing.

“Sharon?”

“Jude.”

He hardly could let himself remember. No, he could remember. What he wouldn't let himself do was feel. Not let those interred images seep, trickle through then pool. For if so, they would erupt, wash over him. Flow down and score him like a shower of acid. So, he looked. Somewhat. *Hardly*.

However, after a fleeting few seconds of hardly, from the hurried accumulation of tidbits and glances, blinks and beholdings, everything was taken in. As if all the past was now rolled up into a nice tight winding of one singular photographic tape. All nice and compact and able to be stored and marked for eventual destruction.

An actual flash of five seconds—he was not counting—but so was the period, the measure, and the duration as past pivots and becomes potentially the future, again. Like a balled fist unfurling vulnerable palm. A flash whose confession could fill a small shelf in a cathedral library. For what is the past but a confession? And so the act of recalling the past but an act of confessing?

Pre-temporal. At *non-existence* courting the heated kiss of zero. So he was back there. *Back-then*, at that initial and initiatory flash. Eyes shocked as eyes tend to be at first sightings. Confusion at the mercy of a jiggling focus.

Back-then, he had just turned nineteen. And had eyes which girls called Killer Eyes. Strong browns which veiled their true intent. Eyes which were a mere dance of obscurity conjuring mystery. Masked by eyelids which were soft. Not drooping. Not sleepy. Not even seductive. Simply dreamily alluring. He blinks very slowly and less than normal. This possibly the root of his alluring power. But neither he nor they nor she in this particular instant of First Meeting at all registered these observations—these peculiarities and their fragrant powers.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

She was startled, but the word of greeting came easily, not forced. It was like she had known that he was about. Had been—while maybe not waiting at this precise moment—had been anticipating. As if for a long time she knew he would come. And here he is.

So, “Hello.”

Back-then, so now, he feels as if his mouth is useless. Rarely has it been but his weapon, and if not an actual weapon than at least a versatile tool. It kept him attached to the world, admired by the world, loved by the world. But here, dead mouth, once again as before—tongue which

sticks, thick with a glue only lost innocence congeals and hardens. More than glued: riveted and sealed, welded and interred deeply within his mouth. His “Hello” had been the first and last word ever spoken to her. All else was and would ever be but gibberish. The gargle and croaking of a tongueless, lipless, mouthless soul.

She had said, “You’ll be late.”

His books, the stride she had halted him in, the look which had frozen him, the buoyancy of the spring air, all informed her. He was on his way to class. The campanile bells were tolling 3 o’clock. He was late.

“You’ll be late,” offered a second time. So had he disappeared, as if he had never been there. She gazing upon him as he strode. For he took off as if she had hit his accelerator. A kick and a spurt and a jolt towards “that way.” Whichever way “that way” was to be, so he moved. And it was like the props shifting in her high school play. The sheer imagination of it all had thumped her back-then as it does now. Yes, “thumped.” This the jumpy word kicking through her head, *Thump!*”

She laughs as she watches the past theatrics collide with the present fantasy. He’s gone—“*Who is he?*”

Now, as she first sees him, she knows that it is just as when she last first saw him. For there has been so much time between them that time is new.

This then, a First Meeting. So is she anticipating.

CHAPTER 2

“Sharon?”

“Jude.”

Not a moment’s hesitation. They remembered, and so the present began. “My,” and as he began he wished that it had been twenty-five years earlier where he would not have ever given the slightest thought as to the wispieness of his hair, the revenge of gravity at his belt-line. Never had thought about how she was seeing him. Back-then, just glad to see her. All unabashed excitement to be within her presence. Even now, not looking at her cosmetic. The line and fall of her breasts. The shower of her hair. The gleam from her eyes. No, for him, both then and now are total rapture within her presence. That grip upon his soul which absorbs his tongue. Yet, he is now smoother, cultured in the art of corporate palaver. An expertise in cocktail chatter. More, the chiseling of the soul adrift in dark hours, the heartfelt groping for words at moments of death’s most throttling grasp. And so, artfully he says, “My, Sharon, you look as beautiful as yesterday.”

She lets herself be *Sharon*. The Sharon of his memory. The Sharon she came here to remember. To accidentally re-find. Oh, she had always enjoyed all that he could not say. She never forgetting Jude in the wild abandonment of his eyes. Eyes which the other girls fawned over and babbled about. But eyes which she alone knew as worshipping eyes. Ones with a depth that invited her to leap into life...and—*oh my!*—risk great heartaches as much as great joys.

So does she remember her remembering back-then. That other boys had talked about life. About living the Good Life. About marrying them and being filled, bursting, exhilarated. Images of babies popping from her belly did not frighten her as they spoke. She rather enjoyed the magical conjuration. But with Jude she had *his* sight and so backed-off.

She now this instant sees herself, once again, taking a step-backward, not physically, not by measure, but in vision. For there had been then, as there is now, that something about Jude which

enchants her, lures her—to plunge fully into a depthless life! *Gasp*. A plunge most perilous and death-defying.

So, as he slowly blinks, she knows that it is Jude. He more unchanged than anyone she has re-met this day. Though he has thinned on top and widened in girth, he yet stands so tall above her. Not just in inches but in reach. That skyward reach which she had once felt so unworthy to reach towards. *Oh, Jude*, he for whom she had accidentally planned. “*Why Jude...you’re as blind as you ever were!*”

Each knew that the class reunion was over. That the football game would be missed. He not pausing to consider how much he would like to hear them call his name again as they touted the “National Champions of 1999.” No, not a scar of a thought for that. He smiles. *Ack*, so painfully does he smile. For he had always sensed that Sharon would be here. One day, a day in the future...and that that would be the most excruciatingly difficult day of his life. A day to choose final dying.

She smiles up at him.

They, as if responding to orders, hold hands, lightly.

CHAPTER 3

So it happened.

Again.

But this time—just for the slightest of moments, not even a scratch, more like a tingle—this time they could observe themselves getting together. See the accident happen. Be innocent bystanders as well as victims. But so goes planned accidents.

Jude caught himself in a tangle of monologue. He wanted to stop, but he couldn’t. Really couldn’t. Was talking inside his own head. Came to shout, *Stop! Stop!* Felt himself helpless and hapless. He was getting angry.

Sharon accepted his words as protection. Possibly more like bandages and band-aids. Those things which got you through until a real doctor arrived. More than he could know, his words were the suck and thump of artificial respiration. She had been sure that she would not survive the initial crumple of the accident.

“I said that, didn’t I?” As much to himself as to her.

Even vocalizes his anxiety, “Why am I babbling on like this?”

She was not much help. She didn’t offer any. She liked the dying victim thing. At least for the moment. It gave her an excuse to feel the pain. Feel it with the abandon one does as one lies dying, knowing that this most intense of pains will end. More, knowing that it is the last great pleasure of living.

Sharon just looks at him and smiles. They had stopped walking. Found a picnic area over by the fabled lake. The lake they, separately, had been to quite often back-then. Which had become part of a shared fable. Of the fabulous memory of so many who found the lake bewitching. “*Fragrant Isle*.” Discovering it as they discovered themselves. So many feeling—though few but the rash poets with sophomoric swagger put it into verse—that they had been born from this lake. That this mystical water was what their college learning had been about. Was metaphor for.

But now they know it just as a lake. Moisture which strives to fly up and kiss the sun but is eternally denied. So, it is here as it had been there back-then. Now they sit down, fabulous together.

Sharon was the first to spin the wheel, spindling, “I can’t tell you about my life.”

She wanted to add, “Just can’t.” But she didn’t want to chase him away.

“Well, to be honest...Can I be honest anymore? *Ha*. The things you do to me, woman! I’ve always seen myself as honest. But here I am, lying to you. Like a hardened criminal sitting on Death Row!”

“That’s how I remember you,” she says, as much a statement of recall as it is an indictment. This statement carries much of her freighted guilt at having backed away from Jude.

“I remember you as honest.” She is snared by the word. For it seeks something else from her. And she says without weighing its import. “*Abrasively honest*, Jude. If nothing else, abrasively honest.”

The sky was blue.

The grass was green.

The trees had leaves.

The air stirred but little.

Others came and went.

Gravity kept them nearby.

So, it was a moment of coupled innocence. Come once again.

He says, “Right, we can lie?”

She checks her smile, “What else?”

Then followed dinner. A Japanese affair. Not the same location as in the past, but it would do. An ambience that once evoked a stirring of the alien and the foreign. But since then both have traveled, broadly and diversely. He beats a bad rhythm and she conspires with a faulty imitation of a maestro’s wand. All this time and in-between they lie.

It was as at the other First Meeting.

It was fitting.

“I’ve three sons. All graduated here. Waiting for my fifth grandchild. Claire’s been passed now, some seven years. It’s been not as lonely as I expected, but it certainly has been *different*. I hadn’t expected the difference.”

She did not press him. She felt she fully understood. It was her kind of lie. And now her turn. “Five beautiful daughters. Oh, I don’t mean just pretty faces, but real women. I like them all. Glad that I can honestly say that. They’re all around here. One across the state-line. But Pierce and I have been lucky. They married men who got jobs here. For me it’s six grand-kids, three and three, see, I’ve finally gotten to have my sons.” Sharon’s last sentence stopped too abruptly. It annoyed them both. But he knew that he had to wait. It was her turn after all.

“Pierce and I celebrated our thirty-fifth anniversary...”

Then she wept. Jude cried in turn.

Neither shed a tear.

If others had seen them, say a zealous journalistic major who was out scrawling profound observations, witty words like bird feathers, and all such stuff. Well, if he had seen them he would have started dropping adjectives and adverbs which missed the moment: quiet, formalistic, well mannered, conversational, chit-chat, small jokes muffled with head bobs. All such things applicable, but at heart no one really noticed them. Not as they were or actually are. Not as at First Meeting.

He had dabbed at a missing tear or two. She had placed her fingertips—just them—arrest the back of his hand.

“We’re such terrible liars, aren’t we?”

“Truly.”

All this just to be ready for the simple lie which defines First Meetings.

He stands, steps towards and pulls her up and close with a firm motion.

“I love you, Sharon.”

“I love you, Jude.”

What else can be spoken at First Meetings but this lie?

Truly, Sharon knows that unless she roots the Earth that she will wilt, *again*.

Luke fears to say more, curses his cowardice...this scene dreamt about so often now emboldens him...*I will tell her the truth!*

Hearing herself lie, her heart rebels...*I will tell him the truth!*

PART TWO: INNOCENCE

CHAPTER 4

Pierce Masterson was living a charmed life. Even he knew it. Relished that phrase, “charmed life.” He felt that it was expressive of his magic.

How else to name it but magic? Not the atheistic, God-denying, Mortal Sin laden magic of those who opposed Christ. Not them. Not that. Rather, the magic of turning little things, oddly. More like the tricks he’d seen those Russian paranormals perform. Where they bend spoons or some such inconsequential entity. Like them, for him, it was his look that stared. Not straight at them, but at that something just behind their eyes. *Doe Eyes! Flower-Petal Irises! Fiery Eyes of Eve’s Daughter!* Man, how he loved their eyes. Just behind, in a place he knew other men did not—*Could not?*—go nor touch. Such was his spot. He presses it with a stare and they say *Yes!* and *Oh!* But more often, say nothing. Just follow him. He touches a hand and their flesh meshes. As he walks, they walk behind. A magical chain.

As a boy Pierce charmed “older women.” The matrons and the matriarchs. Not knowing them as such, but simply drawn to charm them to sip their power. Have them bestow upon him not just cookies and extra glasses of lemonade but kisses and hugs. Long sweet-cheek kisses and gulping, absorbing hugs. Which took him inside their bodies. He feeling this though not naming it. Seeing it. Watching himself float between their warm breasts. Feeling their hands upon his shoulders as they gently push and guide him down into their inner-self. That self which is a pool, one of Eternal Desire. For they desired to be with him forever. This he sensed, had no words, but had that *behind* look, again. Washing across their faces. Tapping at their moist lips. Laughing itself as this look transformed them and they became his. His pool, there to swim and splash and dive so deeply under that he no longer had breath but lungs which served as gills. And he all naked. Never uttering *naked*, but being so!

These “older women” were charming. And still to this day he knows. Laughs almost annoyingly at this charm, this power over older women. In not too long a time, he swam into other lakes. Charmed others as he would charm Sharon. Sharon, a distant cousin. Marked somewhere along the matrilineal line. She had first been charmed by him at her sixteenth birthday party.

“Him.” For in her own mind she spoke of Pierce as “him.” There was an inability to utter “Pierce” and not feel the actual fright of that name. Its nuances. Its metaphorical torturing. Him,

she had avoided for so many years. Being charmed at a distance. Somehow suffering even at a great distancing. For he did not notice her, truly and actually had passed her by on numerous occasions: holidays, holy days, wedding days, picnic days. Simply floated by unaware of her existence, so had she convinced herself. Scarcely understanding charm, his charm, the charming from the mountain-top.

“Sharon.”

First heard, her life was no more.

Not as she had known it, nor as she could remember it. Even to this day she has memory only to this First Meeting. All prior sixteen years wiped out. Not that she doesn't have images or even re-dreams early childhood events. True, but she has not words. Has learned to simply utter unintelligibly when called to confirm an alleged event or happening.

“Unhuh,” being how she vocalizes when she cannot recall. Knowing better to affirm than deny. So avoiding embarrassing inquiry concerning her factual ignorance.

“Sharon.”

Her name comes to him as if from memory. Not of a memorization of the cousins near and far, but of what was at the bottom of the pool. That which he was diving down for. As if her name was chant. What had called him then and always into the arms of the “older women.”

“Sharon.”

For the very first time he had named *her*. Never before uttering names. Not of these “older women.” Because for him they had not names. Not names as ones he could sound and they would respond. Not names of magic or power.

“Christie's Mom” or “Mr. Johansson's wife” or “Pamela's Aunt.” Sounds. Copulating mumblings.

But, “Sharon.” As he spoke it. Formed it with his lips. So he felt himself come open. Felt himself widening his arms to hug her. Embrace her. Grapple around her body and float it within himself. “Sharon.” As instantly as he spoke it, he knew it meant that she was his. Not just girlfriend. Not a steady. Not simply someone to date. No, as his possession. His stare not only touched her, it anchored her. Set itself in that spot behind her eyes and drilled itself as deep stake into her soul. *Ah*, Sharon is truly Pierced.

CHAPTER 5

Sharon overcame her fright of Pierce. It was the first lie she told herself. But it was not the first of the lies she came to grasp had bound her to Pierce from the start.

She liked his stare.

It had come with her name, “Sharon.” She feeling this her birthday present—from him.

Not the scary-cat jittering away from him as she had done in those years when she had not known what she was doing. This time, this moment, her name came as a surprise. As a gift wrapped with a beautiful bow. For as she heard it—“*Sharon!*”—so had she come to feel how beautifully adorned she was for him. That for Pierce it was she who was the present. This then *their* birthday. Others would come and go in their life—for it was *their* life, singular, not lives as two and separate from that birthday moment forward. *Others*—charmed Sharon was certain, because for her the word “charming” also offered its services. Everyone began to qualify Pierce as “charming.”

Clearly, she knew that there were others. As such she had no need to ask. Even after the long summer of his junior year. The one where he went abroad with his classmates. To China and

Indonesia and back for a playful week in Disneyland and bikinis on the beach. No need then. No need ever did she feel to question that she was his. His girl. His sweetheart. His one-and-only.

No need.

He was also charmed by their mutual singularity. He relished the feeling that the anchor was set. For it freed him to frolic in the embraces and kisses and deep pool plunges with others. In turn, “younger women.” He all magical with these. Enchanting and drawing forth their inner-selves as Vixen and Pussy-Cat and Lioness and Cat-Woman. On and on, through the years ending high school and into college there were always women—magically materialized by his stare. But he had not a need for them.

Sharon was the only one he felt, and came to know that he felt, a need for.

Only she whom he was convinced possessed the Black Water. That which slaked his charming power.

This his image, “Black Water.”

Not a thing black about her. Not in flesh nor soul nor deed. That’s how he knew. For when he sunk his anchor into her, he felt it grappling him. A sucking him down. Crystal pool with foreboding purity.

She fascinated him.

He *wanted* her.

Not in the major lust ways that he explored with other women. Girls and floozies and flirts and roundhouse-fucks. No, they were like props on the stage. Magician props—distractions, vessels of misdirection. When he had said, “Sharon,” he had snapped—full body and finger-tip smoking—with the electric crackle the word unleashed. For the briefest of moments he had lost his stare.

What was there not to like about “charming”? For Pierce was most magical on every level. President of every class each year. Star athlete in four high school and two college sports. Multilingual. Breathlessly seductive in gutter Parisian. In form, Pierce played a fierce Blues piano. Trumpeted muscular poetic songs. Whirled and stomped on the dance floor changing daily and mundane reality into mythical and shattering moments of memory.

“Pierce.” The name on a thousand lips. Each day. Every day.

So, what was not to like? Sharon liked it all. “It” being her and Pierce in all these moments. As from that first birthed call—“Sharon!”—coming to her *as* his coming to her. It was all at once that moment when fright recedes as the Natural Order of things takes over. So had she come once, years later, to describe it to herself. Pierce being that name for the Outside, for the Other. This she knew as she studied psychology and philosophy and comparative religions. He being not only metaphorically in name but in actual presence “The Change” which she was tip-toeing towards that day of *Sweet Sixteen*. On her very tippy toes as she and all her girlfriends knew, as even more the “older women” knew, so now she knows. Knew that she wanted to be changed. To be entered. To have an anchor set within her. To be—how else to say it but “pierced”? For so had her mother described it, but only as one among many thrusting and penetrating and wrestling and severing terms. “It”—her wanting to become woman, and knowing in ancient bone and stirring blood that it must be through piercing.

What was there not to like about Pierce?

CHAPTER 6

Pierce had decided upon twenty-one. Not that from seventeen it wasn't his to choose. Away from his parents, especially the proximity of his mothers: close and grand...and the gossip of five older sisters. With seventeen there was high school graduation and a validation of his intellect via national ranking on the SAT. With several scholarships awarded for his science prowess and his athletic promise. Seventeen—a State divisional championship in hand. Losing entry into the All-State tournament by a fumble at the one-yard line. Likewise being bounced out in basketball by a team just too much taller.

Nevertheless, it was all Glory Road. His way into the aura of “Seventeen.” Which rhymed with “mean.” Which rhymed with “no longer mean and green.” Which rhymed with “no longer mean and green and pristine.” The jocks all laughed as they roused the silliness around the locker-room. Expecting that Sharon was the candle of the night. But it was not to be. No, she was for twenty-one. Another milestone, another notch up. Still then “older women.” Fully cognizant of his powers, of his magical air. Of how easily it was for him to transform them...make them disappear!

The robust challenge of his name had never been lost on him. Kids had teased him from the sandbox onward. “Pierce my ears!” the little girls teased. “Pierce my ass!” the bullies threatened. But it was okay. He liked “Pierce.” Saw himself growing into the name. Into its power—warrior might. His body all a lance and all about his to pierce, run through, tumble from their horses in the joust. Stick like with a large needle. Yes, his body grew but mostly his words. These with which he pierced: knitted, wove, tethered, stitched...hmmm, he liked “*Pierce*.”

On route, there were three. He saw them as special threads. At times like three serpents nesting and being charmed from upward the Indian basket. He their reed, and as they blew him, so they were charmed, fascinated.

Aunt. Niece. Cousin. It has a symmetry he likes. Laughed with a sniggering splotch of mirth as he imaged them large pieces in a quilt. One he hung on his wall.

Each a special type of piercing.

Auntie was a naughty girl. She liked enticing him with, “Come here and pierce the naughty girl!” And with that she'd skirt around the couch, lifting her dress or unbuttoning her slacks. Exposing parts of herself. All the time giggling and pleased with her naughtiness. She, he had to pierce and pierce again. She never letting him go with just one parry and thrust. “No bang-bang!” she'd chime as if using a foreign tongue, “Me naughty but nice!” And she'd slide down under him and truly pierce him with her tongue and her hands, the scratch of her fingernails. Oh, this “older woman” was a delight.

Auntie was what seventeen was all about. Bringing a memory to a woman of her first years. Those years of ignorance, when ignorance of men made everything seem dangerous and exciting and “good.” Now knowing their weariness and boredom. Their patterns. The trifling *Two-Step* thing she does to get them off. And then they roll over. For Pierce, Auntie was a thread flying in the wind during the brisk and blustery June which so often marked the local commencement festivities.

Niece. Deceptive in age. Almost a sister of her Aunt. Yet, unbridled and unbound. She had been recently divorced. She would not have cared if she knew about her Aunt. Actually even if she had come to learn that Pierce had “found” her own face in a frame atop Auntie's china closet. She would have relished the pain, the hurting. Such would be for her all that so much more charming. For she wanted to punish him. Actually, pierce him through and through.

Skewer. Stake. Whatever it took to have him cry out to her. Plead with her. Recompense her for all the brutalities she has endured.

“Niece.” For Pierce the seduction had been the chronology. He had always been fascinated by history, by the framing of a story, the long line of a radical, heretical idea from persecuted insemmination to common-place flowering.

Yes, the likes of Niece he had never known. *Naughty* was a natural. For there had been a smell of naughty in the embraces of those “older women” of yore. But as he had not then known it, so yet he did recognize it through Auntie. As for Niece. *Niece* would never give him enough.

Never praise him enough. *Ouch!*...the twist was her damnation by faint praise. She said it was “Okay,” “Would do,” “Gets me through the night.” And she made him know that she was always waiting for someone else. That he was not “it” or *him*. Not for her Prince Charming.

This, he had never confronted before. A charming witchy twist. She as a nastiness. Spitting out his come, not swallowing. Telling him that he better “work my sewer” because her plumbing was all screwed up. This totally confused him. *What did she want?*

When he realized it, he couldn’t get his plumbing snake unwound!

She laughed at him. A chortling, sarcastic half-stuffed laugh bitter with sneering giggle. *Christ!* Niece was the first woman Pierce ever slapped. Actually his one and only. For as he whacked her along the backside and shoved her forward with a knee-thrust, he flushed red-hot and bolted upward holding his mouth as he staggered to the john to puke.

“*More!*”

Rump up and full-boobs swaying. Eyes which defied description, as description of any woman he had known. Eyes which were orbs whirling and twirling and insanely drawing him towards them. Hypnotizing....she flops over and plays her pussy and closes her eyes and proceeds to masturbate with such fury and frenzy that all Pierce can do is rage, “Stop! Stop!” and jump on the bed, grasp her hands and throw her back and knife into her and rut like a large blade. Not a plow harrow but a blade, long knife. Slicing, sucking blood. So so long that it hoists him high above her. So high that he can’t see her but he knows that she is there and he knows what he has to do and he saws and saws and saws...they flop apart, dead together.

“*More!*” A putrefied whisper. One buzzing with the whimper of butterflies.

Niece pierced him.

At seventeen, he could handle it.

Would he have ever stopped during this summer of tornado and prairie fire to consider Sharon?

He’d see her. They’d date.

She was his.

She was for twenty-one.

So, then, *Cousin*.

That she was Sharon’s cousin, too, did not dismay him. In fact it lit the fuse.

Ignorance and stupidity and falling for the simplest of charms, she disgusted him. More, as he waded through Aunt and Niece so was he reeling from Cousin.

A woman who did not know what to do with her flesh. He said that to himself. Wanted to say it to her.

She'd just lay there. Let him have his way. Unbutton her blouse. Unhook her bra. Unfurl her panties. At first—just the first night—it intoxicated him. She was like the first ever jolt of *Wild Turkey*. Pure madness. He went totally out of control.

But she, a clay woman—he couldn't figure why she wanted him to pierce her?

She didn't giggle like Naughty and she didn't bounce him about like Niece. *So?*

He found that all she wanted was, "To please you." Asking, "*Does this please you?*" In a thousand ways. So much that he hated it. Too much sugar. *Blah!* But then he thought he was stone crazy.

"Why not?"

And so he did.

Amused, he pictured himself like sauerkraut on a German Dog at the State Fair. Just one big wiener. It made him laugh. Silly laugh. But that's what Cousin did. Charmed him as cock. Only cock. It was a different kind of magic. As if she was there but then not there.

The Assistant—all sex-appeal and tightly glued glittering wrap; nothing but an accessory—like his magician's wand. So was Cousin.

Ah, Cousin!

He thought he'd forget her quickly. But ever an amulet of curious charm.

All these just for Sharon. *For her*. No other way. Because he wanted to be a seasoned performer by twenty-one. Wanted to be what a magical male could be—true wizard. Without a doubt he knew this is what *she* wanted. The seduction transmitted from out the Black Water. Stirring. Like Good Witch's cauldron. How she was, was clear to him.

She was the lake transformed—*Fragrant Isle*.

Such a vision filled him. Burst him at his seams. Drove him through the madness of his seventeenth summer. Sharon to be pierced—only at twenty-one.

CHAPTER 7

Jude it had been who fumbled on the one yard line. Also, he who though tall was not tallest that day in the basketball finals. Always somewhere where Pierce was about, but not charmed by him. Not within nor being a point on his charming circle. All this somewhere not lost on Sharon. She for whom Jude yearned each year as both got just that little bit older. That little bit more mature—a bit "experienced" which he hoped, each year, each birthday, would be of notice to her and so would she come closer than the just, "You'll be late." For as he disappeared, so he felt himself disappearing into "being late." Not having arrived in time to be there in front of her alone. Late even for and on this their First Meeting.

Jude had known her, this Sharon Seymour, actually peed in his pants next to her in *Busy Bee's* sandbox. She not noticing. He not noticing. Noticing nothing but the imagination of the sand. Not with words but with hands: molding, forming, casting into the air to let it fly, and it did fly. And it did land. On hair and hands and shirts and blouses and into eyes. Both cried from sand in their eyes.

Known Sharon Seymour but then never truly met. Having been introduced in the "Yeah, that's Sharon Seymour" type distant introduction of grade school years. And not lessening that distance into high school although she was quite visible. Cheerleader. Secretary of every class, each year. Stepping up to win awards. Standing just a shade down from him on many a stage. Both linked by being bright and good and involved and active and all those adjectives which,

like chains, restrain the darker, more criminal passions of the young. But it was corsages to others. Given and received. It was trophies raised and cheers resounding... kisses unknown and dreams undream with others. All this until the First Meeting, “You’ll be late!” *Amen*.

In Philosophy class—so memorable for the lecture actually was relevant!—her words yet echoing as the prof emptied epistemological abstractions from his head as if unloading a cache of weapons from a hidden armory. “When you were born, you were late. *Understand?*” And Jude did. Did understand!

“*Existential*” this-and-that.

“*Carpe diem!*” over-there-and-here.

“*Live passionately for you are already dead!*”

Scribbles and notes. But as he heard them so they were *Jude’s* words. Jude’s thoughts. *Cogitations*. He knew that he had to find her. Not that he didn’t know where she was, but then, *he didn’t*. Didn’t know if when he came to her she would be there. *There*: in his mind the concrete word breathes italics.

Jude wanted to write, “You called?” or “Late is early for next time.”

Something clever. Witty. But his hand couldn’t finish a word. Found itself flying off the page. Ink blotching his escape. Face it, if he walked up to her, what could he say?

Running by her—now, that would work. *Running*—he could just drop a poetic glance her way. Or mumble something—preferably mumble. For then she’d want to know what he said. And it would give him time to figure out what to say.

Jude had never drunk alcohol. Not a wisp. But he this instance fears intoxicating water. For he knows that anything from Out-There is from her. Her magic elixirs were all about. He almost stopped breathing just thinking about her.

Two weeks later and she is *gone* gone. *Is that what her message meant?* Not late for class, but just late?

Her summer in Italy, then a semester each in Hungary and Thailand.

Jude had his football. In practice he defends against Pierce. He likes kicking his fucking ass all about!

CHAPTER 8

They were both gone when she returned. Pierce, however, thought everything was on schedule. He had visited her in Thailand, and taken some southeastern pleasures for memories. Not all photos of him and her, nor merely the memory of exotic spices.

She had decided to extend her studies and did not return until her senior year. Pierce, starting off on his doctoral jog, and Jude, wandering in the misery of a father dead and the plight of the last son to leave the grieving widow.

All that he gained on the collegiate gridiron and of lesser degree in his scholarly classes, these were nothing. It was a year during which the chthonic nuances of “late” cut at him, lashing and slashing ever so slowly. A true torturing. Taking its time—this “late”—in disemboweling him. Coring him out. Hooking and hoisting him like a bull’s carcass. Large pan to catch every drop of his blood. Potent stuff, especially when distilled by death.

Often this year he went back home. Sentinel at his paternal grave. Knowing what she could not have meant by “You’ll be late.”

Had he come to hate Pierce? He thought about the word—*hate*. Smirked at it and *late*. “Late.” Pierce had frozen just that juke of a moment when Jude needed that block. Three guys leveled him. Each getting off at one floor: Basement, Lobby and Penthouse. They had creamed him. *Rats!*...struggle all he did, and he did fiercely struggle with all he had, he just struggled past the ball. It not struggling to come with him. *Fuck!*...when they later cheered *All State First Team* Pierce—dual hero of quarterback and wide-receiver—well, had he hated him then?

Hate... Could you hate someone who was charmed?

Again, three opponents collapsing back. Lassoing him at the center. Not just the pushing and the shoving. For Jude loved to push and shove. Relished the grunts and the noise of slaps and jolts. No, it was to make just that one of the slightest fakes before tossing it towards him. Just one goddam head-fake by Pierce and Jude could’ve had the ball with just two on him. And two had never, never, never, ever and never, been enough. Three, however, fucked up the paint. So, *Hate Pierce?*

Hate had to wait. Jude had stopped being late for many things. College years rumbling both of them along, as males jolt along jock-strapped and all. It’s just that things went differently for awhile. Jude had his own space. His own time.

Sharon they shared.

She kept the hate away.

Even the day—not a date, not one in memory as if checked off on a calendar, nothing which for him was ever worth an anniversary—just the flick of time, hearing, “Sharon married Pierce.” And he didn’t wait for the location and the weather report and the rumbling echo of dance music... “Late”—that’s all.

She had returned. Graduated. Turned twenty-one.

Pierce and Sharon married when she turned twenty-one.

Jude went off to law school. Graduated. Passed the bar. Then married, they left for somewhere on the other side of the international date line; fifteen years. Jude knowing that, no matter what, he was by geography and the curious relationship of sun to earth, never late in her world, again.

CHAPTER 9

Twenty-one. An age which once-upon-a-time before had been “the age.” *The year* when those shrouded by Youth grasped hands and flung themselves into the vortex called Life. Yet which they merely and fully understood only as Lust. That rageful, heavy-breathing, perfume scented kiss of the Stabbing of Death, the Sneering at Decay, the Sniggering at the Lame.

It was the age for marriage. *Ah! Twenty-one.* As such Pierce knew her to be chaste. Not physically untouched. No, rather *not* psychically raped. Not virginal in so many ways, but still quite innocent. He, himself, had worked, labored to keep her such. He did so by consuming her. Exhaling her name, “Sharon.” And with the inhale transubstantiating her into—not himself—but into a new herself. An encapsulation. The magic of his charming power which renders a female as homunculus: little person. Sharon—*her*—living now solely as part of his world.

It was, indeed, her to be his pleasure. This which his utterance, “Sharon,” unfurled. As if her name was a long, long unrolling red carpet. Red with her blood. And as he walked, it was this blood which tided upon his legs. Up past his ankles and upon his thighs. Blood with its sweetish smell. Ad he knew it was from within her. No need to name it. No tag from the anatomical

charts. Rather, it was blood as closeness. As the innerness of her. Her substance. As if she were a portal from which came this magical nutrient. One which he sipped with his desire and craving. And poked with his lust. Blood which he found not with other women, though they did bleed for him. He seeing it as no other way but *for* him. Taking their amorous tokens with him and showering them away. Slight laughter at the fear of the inconsequential microbe—knowing that their blood carried the pandemic erotic poison of the time. But Pierce feared not as rash youth fears not—he simply soaped fear away. For her innocence protected him, so he believed. Sharon, herself, had marked the same year, but with a measuring from a different pacing. She surrendered to her instinctive mothering power, desiring to marry and have children, “Right away!” This “Right away!” covering fear of her own early death. Something which seemed foolish after all were born. But only after.

Had there been other than Pierce? In her soul, no. Upon her body, yes.

But not for piercing. For she had mastered the arts of male manipulation. Drawing them to rush and spurt and shattering wail with a well stroked cock or a long sucked penis. Or, most seductively, with the map of her flesh challenging them to unearth the Odyssean treasure which was lost but to be found in her darken cave. She laughed the first time she understood that it wasn’t “Greek” anymore! All this, yet her innocence well fortified. Keeping within herself what she knew only he who would be her moon could draw out. This wilding and mysterious presence was kept charmed and so restrained by Pierce.

It had been Jude who had threatened her. *Only Jude.*

PART THREE: SHARON’S LIE

CHAPTER 10

“I’m sorry I never met Claire.”

“I’m sorry I ever met Pierce.”

Such has been their chatter. Noisy monkeys in the trees. Clicking beetles in the brush. Clattering brook among the stones in the Garden of Eden. Playing all the roles. Asking for no understudies.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Certainly. What else can we say?”

The hate finally came.

Sharon hated Jude for being late.

Jude hated Sharon for simply being.

“Claire was French. We met while I was researching my first book. She was naked. I mean like the French are. On the Riviera. A thong and her choking breasts all displayed. How could I not?”

“Pierce remains as charming as ever. You’ve heard about his endless acclaim, I’m sure. Of course?”

What can he say?

"It's true. More money than anyone ever needed. More inventions than one mind could ever behold. More fame, more power, more influence... The man was always simply *more*."

(*"Just one, the slightest of head-fakes!"*)

"I loved her."

"I loved him."

It was now the third day. Both grasped the symbology: three days in the tomb. Walls and doors unknown to each other. Only themselves as walls and doors. And it was time. Time for the hatred. So, for this time, another lie.

"I never wanted your body..."

"Oooh!" she belittles him. They're back in the sandbox.

"Let me finish. I wanted *you*."

"Oooh!" as she lays back upon the bed. "Pierce only married me the day we divorced."

"Am I back in Professor Farry's philosophical wonder-land?"

She doesn't laugh. Face quite stuck.

"*Okay. What?*"

She drowns in her tears. Sees them fall and puddle and spread horizon-less, like ocean waves becalmed. Rising to choke and gag and vomit like geysers stuttering and shattering in this room. Not room just a bed. Not a bed just a touch. Just *their* touch. All that is and was and will be. The Catastrophic Flood—and he not Noah! "I don't want to lie, anymore."

His eyelids flutter.

"I killed Claire, you know."

"How else?"

The hatred bound them, like swaddling clothes.

"How can we not lie?"

"Asking me? *Ha*."

"So," sheep in wolf's clothing, "fucking ain't enough?"

"I've run out of holes. And, you're no better."

They gag and chortle at themselves. Wine. First champagne, then some blood cabernet, smothering with sweetest of ruby ports.

"I want you to tell me your lie."

"*Allow me....*"

CHAPTER 11

"Happy Birthday, Sweet One!"

She blushed.

A thousand-dollar bill!

Sharon erupts into a blush that drains blood so rapidly from her face that she is marble-flesh. She gasps to gasp.

"Ta da! You're legal tender!" Wickedly.

(The hushed, cradle-whisper wickedness.)

Around her neck, a sterling chain with the M-note rolled tightly. Mummified in a startlingly smooth stainless steel tube. A vein tube.

"I'll never take it off!"

All adoration and pledge at The Offering. He picks her up and carries her to the satin spread. There to float her down upon his own ardor. He all aflame and she not only tender but tinder. They burst as they lock and strike flint.

There would hardly be a time—not a week nor a day nor, so it seemed to Sharon, even a second—that Pierce did not possess her. She felt herself as valued and secure as Pierce’s precious M-note pledge with its own almost icy, always silver-cool tingle tapping her breasts. “You *do* love me!”

Such words! These only *once* are let slip in all their years together. For they were bold words of her triumph. Of her accomplishment. Of the capture of her Prince Charming. Only once because she did not want him to hear her so shamelessly rejoice.

“You *do* love me!” A slip that very first night—wedding night. The wedding night. The Night of Pierce. His eyes frightened when all four words were heard. He frightened, so she surmised, because he lost his stare. And so in eternity Sharon was lost. Without tether. Sensing herself alone in the room. A room shrilled with lust and dusted about with unabated desires. Now, in that exclamation, she is alone and terrified. Feels—what else but ugly? Total abandonment. Of rejection. Having found herself the only person in the whole universe. There being no Other and not another, simply herself, solitary. Feeling in that adoration moment her barrenness. That she could not, would not, conceive. Never to be Mother. And only the scratchy whimper, as if scraping his teeth on the wind to say, “Yes.” A yes without exclamation, without affect, but oh so magical! For once heard she knew it would never be heard again. For she would never so proclaim again—this their wedding union.

Possessed.

If she had been in psychoanalysis, Sharon would have used that word positively. It was her feeling beyond being charmed. It was a knowledge of satiation. That there was something even beyond her physical being that Pierce held when he enwrapped her. Saw when he stared. Drew forth when he spelunked and jumped to his own side, exhausted.

“Fat. You make me feel fat.” Him, not her.

“Fat?” She had to laugh. Pierce was anything but an ounce of fat.

“What can I say? It’s a good fat.” He furrows. “I think.”

“I want you to make me *fat*.” Her hand upon her tummy. He knew. She knew.

Three years. It took thirty-six months before she could trick him.

Sharon never thought about “trick.” She merely thought herself as being as clever with her charms as he was.

Whenever she told him: three times in all, he but shook his head—positively acknowledging the fact. Then he’d pick her up—each time, with every conceptual announcement—and carry her regally, slowly processing upstairs to bed. Lay her most gently down. Then place himself at her side...and fall asleep. Regardless of time of day or season of the year. He slept, for hours, snuggled next to her.

Sharon was charmed.

“I’ll name the boys, you name the girls.” Pierce never had to wrestle with the baptismal angel—all were daughters. With the first, the pattern was set. Every two years, another trick.

Sharon received Pierce’s resignation as fidelity.

Pierce knew that he, himself, wanted this charming. But he also knew that he didn’t want it at the level of every-day reality. Never a diaper would he change—“Really?”... How to counter Jude’s disbelief?

Charmingly, he encouraged Sharon to breast-feed as long as possible. *Why did he want me to do that?*

“You’re a good mother.”

“He’d say that. Relentlessly.” *I use the adjective carefully.* He was relentless in his maternal praise, and she saw it flutter in capitals: GOOD MOTHER. But once birthed, so did his sexual play change.

What he had never considered, so now he began. Telling her of his trinity affair of Aunt, Niece, and Cousin. Self-congratulatory, he is pleased that she relished every aspect of his erotic skill-set...not knowing that she had expected “More!” artful playfulness in bed and was surprised with the ensuing “Less.”

As Pierce began to make love to her for the first time as “Mother” he lightly touches her pubis. Hovering his hand, letting it touch hairs ever so slightly. As always just the proximity sounds a clarion blast and her inner self slips into mystified sightings. He who had kissed her all over, now still everywhere...except not ever again *here!* Ever but to be just a brushing by, a nod of the head, curious gesture. Never entering her with tongue, merely finger excitation. Noted, yet for her whatever he would do was sufficient. For all he ever did and had to do was gaze upon her, see *behind*, and she was his. This now a knowing about what she then thought, here knowing otherwise.

What she now discerns but which she lost through her immersion in her own pleasuring—a pleasuring which was and continued to be the mere beholding of him—was the erotic charge of his post-partum sexual positioning. For where he once focused almost solely upon her face and breasts, kissing and fondling, and gazing deeply, now he ritually approached and entered her first from the south. There flying to her with fingers—as always, only digits—which alighted and fluttered-up and again with eagerness landed on her mound. There to transform into a shiver of snakes and writhe along the ground till his whole hand became integral to her like the potter weighing the clay before throwing. Ah, from the cool, dashing, armor-clanging knight he now was truly the wizard. Working her and enflaming her with a desire not just to enter. No, Sharon had felt his piercing, the stone hardness of his clash and clang when penetrating her. No, this was the high-dive to enter deep water: *Black Water*. The spreading of the boughs, thick and leaf-sodden boughs, pushing them aside. Not with might and strike, but with magical incantation. For Pierce took to speaking, not words, not sounds, but with soundless symbols. Faint tappings on her flesh. The tenderest of caresses of her clitoris. The most pacifying stroke of her vulva with his hungering palm—he being Lilliputian while being gigantic. And he’d finger-kiss her and so kiss her again and again. Then when he fled the plains to rise it was always like the Phoenix; fiery! This she saw in his eyes. Always a joy. Ever a smile of escaping. And he’d come to her, “Sweet One!”...possess her.

“Possess?”

“Don’t you see? Pierce, you possess me. *I don’t possess you.*” Hard, cold fact. As frigid as an algorithm. “But, the girls?”

“Just thousand dollar bills.” Grimly. Dourly.

“I don’t get you.”

When in God’s Name has he ever said that?

They were thirteen-years married. Insemination cycling was complete. In her post-partum depression with the last so she had pierced him with “Just thousand dollar bills.”

The shrink told Pierce, “It’s predictable. She’s aware it’s the last and she’s reaching out to stay. To assert her specialness—the one you gave her. The girls are threatening. Displacements. Don’t worry. It’ll pass.”

“How did you come to know all this?”

When they divorced, he told her so. *Piercingly.*

CHAPTER 12

“I’m trying to be fair. I gave up on “objective” long ago. The least is fairness. For me it means simply remembering. Not blotting him out from my memory. Not—this is what I think he’s done. Pierce’s done. That’s really “Our Story.” But that came later. After the divorce. For me remembering before the divorce is all I can do. Nothing objective, as if I’m telling the girls *the truth*. I tried that. But no more.”

When did you start smoking?

“How does a woman remember? I’ve asked myself that question. You might think it odd, but women are different from men.” *Let’s not even go down that alley!* “Okay...maybe that’s not what’s worth talking about. But remembering is. Nothing seemed improper. It all just flowed. I remember it that way. I liked falling on my back, bouncing up with the bed springs. Watching my legs spread like wings—that surprises you?

That I’m flying towards him, like on a magic carpet? I always wanted to ask him what he thought, but we never...see, I remember fun. It was fun. For years it was only fun. Even when I sensed that he didn’t want to get me pregnant—I thought of it as a game. One I played better than him. Just once, then it was easier the second, third, fourth and fifth times. Understand, Jude, it’s a harmony of minds. Not just the ball and mitt thing. He didn’t want it, so I didn’t, either...but when I wanted it—to be fair, only women get pregnant, men don’t inseminate them! *Ha...You okay?*”

I started smoking after the divorce. That’s what witches do! Humpf.

“I had fun. I’ll have to admit that; be fair. For him it was all power. This charming stuff—*his* crap! But I didn’t know it as crap. Who did?”

(“Just a head-fake!”)

“Power. When he wanted me and I wasn’t up for it, I’d sucked him till he cooed. It was fun! I was amused. I wouldn’t have said it back then, not that way, but this is remembering. He’d even mount me and bung-hole me. He liked that word. What did he say, “Gargantua”? Something like that. Anyway, he’d like it anytime.” Tittering: “I’d like it anytime.”

Witches smoke, I get it.

“Look, who thought we were anything but Happy Middle-Americans? Even when fame and fortune came, just richer Middle-Americans? Anyway, it went like that. Nothing changed, for what—the first twenty-five years?” She hesitated, “Maybe.”

And...?

Whiskey—straight. Long-filtered cigarettes.

Her habits freeing his. Pipe and sipping ruby port.

Long hours.

No one is counting.

“When you look back over those years, everyone’s years, what nifty label can I use? ‘Homemaking Years?’ ‘Baby-baking Years?’ ‘Family-building Years?’ You got a better one?”

Whatever.

“They’re all *Fuck Years*. Nothing else.” Crushing a butt; she does only one a day. Coughs. “Look at it, the broad view. Pierce always liked ‘the sweep of history.’ You too, right?”

He smiles, not taking any time on the agenda.

“Let’s say, no matter what, we’re just fucking all the time. Everything. *Everything* is more erotic than Freud could ever imagine. *Bawdy*. All the accumulation of money. All the late hours in career building. The cooking and cleaning and giving baths...*everything* is erotic. Life’s a fuck, ain’t it?!”

You’re drunk.

“You want some cunt?!”

Lewd. As lewdly as Sharon could be, so she was. Spreading her legs and licking her fingers, then stroking herself.

“I don’t have a thousand,” Jude said piercingly.

Remembering: *Okay. Almost done lying. ...Up a half-flight. Poised to be the center of Pierce’s visual universe. Me a palette of wanton colors craving to be spread!*

“Oh!”

“What?”

“That was the end. I mean *THE END* with capitals. Or, maybe just the beginning. After that, I don’t know. This is what I’m trying to remember.”

Pierce turns away from her.

A turn which is a pivoting—“Give me a fulcrum and I will move the world!”

A turn which became 180 degrees. No more, no less.

“It took me awhile. Sometimes I can hardly let myself not not-remember, but be fair, I realized he wasn’t being fair.”

“How?”

“He only permitted daughters. That wasn’t fair.”

Maybe I’m too drunk?!

“Why do I think *you’d* understand?” *Why?*

A too large portion of London broil. Too much butter on the vegetables. They should’ve only ordered dessert. Chunks of chocolate disguised in unsubtle forms—Mud Pie or Triple-layered German Chocolate. Glutted, they yield to the jaded sweetness of the cocoa bean.

“It had taken me twenty-five years. I simply wanted to be cunt...I was freaked.”

Freaking me out, man!

“Not that he didn’t come to me. Not that he didn’t turn around. Turn and move towards me, with that look of his. As usual I willingly yielded. *Surrendered*. Threw open my arms and let him tear my clothes off. Really tear and rip. It hurt. But it was a seething moment and I liked it.

He took me there, right on the landing. A rare drop home for lunch and he had me. Had me—as I remember it!—hard and long and with a frenzy. It was fiery and fierce. And I wanted to shout and scream “Fierce Pierce!” Like back at cheerleading. Hollering to help him run. Run harder and faster and more wildly. That’s, that’s how I remember it. That’s fair. *Fierce Pierce!*”

The End?

“You’ll understand...if you still want to listen? Am I a maudlin drunk?”

Pathetic!

“You do love me!”

CHAPTER 13

"It was never to be as before. I wear this damn thing, this *this* chain. This damn...*hell*, give me another shot.

He stopped playing with me, with my pussy. *Crap!* We did so many things. But we didn't talk it. Not a talking sex thing, but a doing. Pierce was ever piercing—as corny as that might sound. And I liked it; him.

Only later did I mark the change. Maybe I knew and maybe I was in denial—I don't care for analysis. Pierce loves it, but not me. He always thinks he's smarter than the shrink; just a game. Everything's a game. New game...we did pornography."

I am furrowing my brow, quizzically—in case you're not noticing!

"One night, a Friday. The kids were in bed. I always wash my hair Friday night, so that's how. Otherwise, I'm not too good at dates—you know. Enters, pops in this video and there we are with these kids—well, younger than us—humping and fucking and screwing all over the place. This girl going from guy to guy—not in the same room, but like a story. Bad story line, must say. Then they have a girl on girl. I thought maybe this was the reason, but he looked at me and fast forwarded. Then came on some guys, two with one girl and they were sucking and fucking and innig and outing."

Where'd this go?

"Getting a little excited, eh?!"

Fair. I'll play fair. He asked me, "Turn you on?" He didn't wait for an answer. Just began the game. Next night, the first one was someone he knew, but not me. A professional connection. Told me that we were "swapping." That if I gave it to this guy, his wife would give it to him.

He was alone. Came to the door like delivering flowers. He didn't expect me to be shocked, but I was. Hesitated. Looked at him. Hard. He squirmed. I can't say, but then—strange moment—it was comfortable. ...*It was insane!* I was rocked. He said, *Here*, and slipped me a video, *Maybe this will help.*"

Why?

Me or him?

"I didn't realize that I wanted...I had read some women's mags, and I'd read about myself, my age group. All those other me's. And I'd read those "How to keep your marriage sexy!" articles. Mostly laughed. But fair, I got to be fair here with myself—later, I had the word "anger"—but then I tricked myself. Seeing Pierce charming this guy's wife. Being bewitched by the thought. Fair, I was curious. This is what overcame me, at least as I see it. *Curiosity*. And knowing that Pierce had lovers before me and half—somewhere way back in my mind—half-knowing I was sharing his charming. But not then, not this night. I just got curious. And this guy was okay, not nervous. So I said, "I don't need a movie. We'll be the movie." God! I don't know where that came from. But I hadn't been so out of breath turned-on since I can't remember when.

We went in and just went wild. I never asked his name. He didn't ask me. We just went at each other. Not like with Pierce. But like back when I was studying abroad...Christ, Jude, I practically beat him to death! He actually gimped when he went down the steps."

Mercy! Mercy!

"When Pierce came home, we said nothing. Just poured some drinks and went to bed. In the morning, he was up and out jogging when I woke."

"It began to play with my mind. I talked to myself—see this clearly now, looking back, not then—telling myself that Pierce thought I was a treasure, an alluring piece of gold. That he'd

show me to these other guys.” *Did he have a picture of you naked?* “And they’d just flip out and say, *I’ll trade you!* Something about it which flipped the right switch.”

You didn’t talk?

“Hard to believe? But it was like we were a movie and we were watching this movie. It was us but it was on the tube. Like that.

It was once a month, just twice. Then every weekend. They’d come to my house. Gave me that sense of being in a jewel box. And I liked it. Got to look forward to it. Never asked, and they never asked.

Then, he came home with a guy.

That threw me.

I wanted to talk this out, but he said, “I want to watch.” Not a command. Not even naughty and dirty. But like he *needed* to watch. Like there was something he had to see—or I had to show him—as he watched.”

Twenty-five years?

“It was like starting over. There was an innocence about it. Even looking back I know I wanted this. Maybe...maybe now I know more than Pierce did.”

I need a shower. You?

“Sure.”

Lying in bed.

Lying near each other.

Lying.

“He would still look at me with that same look. The other guy would be there but, even then I knew, wasn’t there. Like we were fucking this guy together...took me awhile to admit this. That this was the bond I was feeling with Pierce. Hell, it excited me! As if he was sharing part of himself. That this guy was some kind of externalization—what do they call that in magic, where you make this soulless creature? Don’t, can’t remember that—but it was like this guy—any of the guys—was doing our will. Doing what we wanted. Was exposing parts of ourselves which we had never even known we had. It got all screwed up like this—at once clear, at once totally murky.”

Blind faith?

“I wish.

About a year’s time and it was our only way. I couldn’t even think of it any other way. Sure, something in me ran a screaming monologue, *Whore! Evil woman!* ‘He’s another woman’s husband!’ *Pornographer! Blasphemer!* How else? The religious stuff. Not a great part of our lives, but I knew this was sin by any call. I admit, it seemed right. How else to phrase it? “Right.” As in all four square corners and it fit into the square hole.”

What did you really find?

“You mean, What did I think *then* I was really finding? Not what I think now. Then it was a greater sense of myself. How to tell you this? ...Why do I think you’re even hearing me?”

You always knew me.

“Silly. That’s about it. I was getting to know *me*. A fuller me. A greater me. Like Whitman proclaiming his cosmic self, I was yawping! *Tee hee*. So much for *American Lit 303!*

Professor Argathugian. Yuck.

That's about it. I was cosmic woman. More powerful than Pierce ever made me. *I consumed men.* That's about it. All of a sudden I was consuming them—these guys, including Pierce. A me I never knew."

Not Eve!

"Not Eve."

It was inevitable. Sharon and Jude coupled. Just stuck themselves together in their intoxication. Limbs entwining and penetrating while more customary organs slept on the doorstep.

Come morn, they flipped a coin to see who would pay for the next couple of days.

CHAPTER 14

I hate you.

This she knew was where she was. All she could offer to Jude. All which was, after all was said and done, gifted by Pierce and through Pierce and with Pierce.

I hate all males!

"You fill me. You complete me." Mockery from their once favorite oldie film.

But not to her; to him.

Nameless him.

"Oh, not nameless. By this time I didn't care about names. That's why I remember them. *Him.* He was Joe. Just a simple Joe. It always made me think of a kangaroo."

"The curse of the *Discovery Channel!*"

They both laugh; close laughter; exhalations which each feels upon the other's flesh—goosebumps and tittering.

"It was like that. Like we read about in Anthro—old what's its name? The pipe dragon?...*Murzerkski?* Joker: *You can dance to my name?* God he was corny! But all that *Golden Bough* stuff—transference and substitution."

Joe was what?

"*He's your cunt.* That's what Pierce said. And Joe's just sucking it up. Not looking at me. Not that catty sister claw-your-heart-out hatred. Just looking at me and Pierce—totally sucked, that's what."

Claire and I could write a recipe book: Sexual Dishes for Vegetarians.

"That's funny?"

Jude really wanted to fuck her, for some reason...in his own mind, "For some ungodly reason!"

But he didn't. Just let his Little Richard sing a sad song and mope about in the shadows.

"She wasn't such a good fuck, our sweet Claire, eh?"

Don't.

"You didn't want to see her pinned by another?"

Why ask me that?

“Not jealousy? Was it...just fear?”
Fear keeps us lying.

“I would’ve slit his throat if I had a knife.”
So you killed him with kindness?

“Look, this is one of those peak experiences, don’t you get that? Am I messing up being here with you?”

It took no more. He mounted her and drove himself into her body. Plunged so hard that his cock sucked down his head and his body, all arms and legs slithered into her hard clenched pussy and hid.

You think I don’t know what you’re doing?
(No one can see me. She can’t see me. *I can’t see me.*)

“Pierce would *only* fuck the guy. Not me anymore.”

“Stop for a bit. Let me get this straight. Pierce makes you into some kind of sex-goddess in his mind? Some kind of external but powerful Erotic One before whom he has to enact his sacred ritual, this sexual ritual. Is that right?”

She nods.

“Wow. You didn’t actually discuss it, I mean, talk it out this way. But you knew. And you knew he knew. *Hmmm.* I can understand that. *Maybe.*”

She closes her eyes.

“Okay. Gotta give it to him...(Motherfucker, just one fucking block!)...Pierce moved beyond his lie, found the truth, adored you, but...through degradation. *Far out! Far fucking out!*”
I am woman, hear me roar! Now how pathetic...!

“Come here, Sweetheart.” And Pierce jiggles his cock in his hand, hard and rod-like as the guy scampers across, just a yard or two, hands and knees, then just knees, Pierce smiling most paternally and lets the excited and rambunctious mouth lick him and half-swallow and tongue him and finally full-throat with eyes wide with glee and death-eyed-glare accept him and massage him with tongue and cheeks-on-thighs and slight pressings of hands and total veneration of his body as he sways, not un-flag-like to Sharon’s mind, sways just like with a slight breeze and undulates back and forth like small waves until the short-stemmed, handicapped words of ecstasy jerk and blurt and smack themselves from out Pierce’s head, “Oh, my Love, my Love ...*Suck me Bitch!* Goddam motherfucking cocksucking whore son-of-a-bitch!”—losing out in sound and cadence and symphony to the gash and crack and choke of sputter and spastic nerve disconnecting utter of orgasmic ecstasy. “Agggggggghhhh!”

Just four or five times.
It *was* fascinating.
Time was not time, then.
Days and months and weeks and seconds: no measure.
But how did you feel?
Bewitched.

“Take me at my word, this word—bewitched.”

“Okay.”

“Know why? ... ‘Read *Genesis*. There’s something there.’ He said that. Really. Caught me totally off guard. We never paid attention to such stuff during our marriage, but he was adamant, ‘Look, there’s a story there. *Our* story.’”

Our story?

He went religious?

In a way.

“C’mon, Claire and I went to church. Became functional Methodists. Supported religious causes. Sure, the morality. There’s something about the morality, especially with the kids. But what this *Our story?*”

Actually, quite simple.

Simple?

“Simple. It’s right there. God created Adam, but Eve’s from Adam’s rib. His body.”

The point?

“It’s not a rib, it’s Adam’s penis.”

So?

It’s the power.

Jude was floored. Like the Archangel putting down his flaming sword and allowing him to enter the Garden... “Pierce’s piercing penile power! *Wow*. That is fascinating!”

What else was there to say? “Truth is more unbelievable than the Lie. *Ha*.”

All his life Pierce sucked after the power. Sharon saw it early on but never viewed it as negative. But there it was. All his scientific pursuits. All his patents and awards and stock multiplications... all for power. “So, why didn’t I see myself as power? As, for him, the capture of this power? *After all, I was his penile delight!*”

Pierce’s Truth: “You had it. Right there.” He full-arm-as-pointer shoots his eyes and all his meaning at her crotch. “Between your legs. All my life, that’s all I heard—Pussy Power. And we guys went for it. Life’s power. The power to overcome death. *Tasty* and powerful.” Concluded with an emphasis not ashamed of it naughty delights.

I got it.

Didn’t have to see him fuck more than three more guys...and I got it.

Three?

Hell, don’t get hung up on the numerology, for God’s sake!

“It’s inside the male. How else to say it?”

Sharon was blitzed; not drugs or whiskey—just a bit ontologically zoned.

“When I mated with you...” Sharon stops abruptly, like sucking all the wind from the room, is mute. The tinniest of froth edges upon the median of her lips.

Jude gets up and goes to the bathroom. He knows he could be gone for years, generations...she is not here, she is back-then.

“When I mated with you I exhausted myself. Your cunt is the biblical Void. No doubt. And I tried to fill that Void. Hero that I am!” Pierce sniggers, but within himself. “You exhausted me. No, no, *more*, you took more from me than I had!” A sharp silence.

“I took *all* you had.” She wanted to lace it with arrogance, but she fought off pity.

“No.” He hesitates. Hardens himself for this confession. “No. You took *more* than I had.”

Then it all began to make sense. Sense in Pierce’s way. A charming sense. With the boys—how else for her to think, more to *feel*, about them but as “boys”?...with the boys he found that he could give and give and give and get and get and get...*Eternal*...what?

“Eternal Love!”

Cock-sucked.

Butt-fucked.

Jerked-off.

Each way. His way. Their way.

Sucked his teats.

Licked his toes.

Humiliation.

Submission.

Surrender.

Total Power.

“God-like. How else to phrase it? Adam was banished because he acted human.”

God-like is what?

“Because of his weakness—this loneliness, whatever that really was—that’s the sin. Adam going outside of himself when all he needed was inside of himself. Not her, but his own self.

God the Almighty Father was—*Is!*—inside Adam. *Inside me.*”

She could hardly stifle an “Amen.”

Pierce: “You don’t understand. You can’t understand. *I don’t know why women are here?* Maybe it’s all simply that you have male babies and that’s your Salvation. I don’t know.”

She confessed that she stood above him as he slept that night, hammer in hand: several false starts and a final failure.

After three more hours, she realized, “This isn’t it. Not it at all.”

She slid the hammer under the bed, slipped under the covers, and slept soundly.

The lie binds. Such is our culture’s story of origin of he and she. Adam and Eve. Pierce and Sharon. Claire and Jude. (Not *Jude and Sharon?*)

It’s like when you age, at least for some—and here for Jude and Sharon—you over time slowly grasp the lie and its power. Its fascination. That is, *fascinans*—to fasten, like being nailed to the floor in front of a screaming, blood-drooling and teeth-ready-to-gouge-your-eyeballs-out, hot-foul-farting-slurping-breath-terror-from-hell and you know you can’t move, that no-shit you are dead...*that* fascinating.

It’s the oldest of fascinating stories. Capital letter—a culture’s Big Story, story of origin. Man and woman creating their relationship, their identity and meaning of life-together through

weaving with the lie. Finding Adam in the Garden, thinking he is all alone, only he and his god—a piercing male—who pierces him with a rib and tricks him, astounds him, saying that *she* had never been there before, was not walking around on the other side of the Garden, so upon introducing her to him Adam proclaims, “This is it! She is part of my own bone and flesh! Her name is ‘woman’ because she was taken out of man.”

Capital letters—The Lie.

What then The Truth?

About the truth of the lie—all men and women know this, not all are conscious of it. Sharon shrunk from Jude because he—not knowingly himself, himself a stupid son of Adam!—wanted more than the lie, sought a rawer truth he only sensed...seethed through his body and soul only when she was around, this Sharon, she who had only known herself, back-then, in the lie, as being only *woman*.

Now knowing that Pierce was her Adam.

Who is he?—meant Jude.

And what is his Truth?

CHAPTER 15

Only as they left did they realize how they would never leave and had never left. “*You’ll be late.*” Of course, always late, but by being late so being bound by the same ribbon of time—seeing it now, knowing it now as a ribbon, something with actual texture, not a counting nor a measure but a thing. They being an integral part of that thing, like color is to a rainbow, not the threads which could be counted but rather the hue, tint, tone. She feeling them as a dandelion yellow: thickly clustered, waving as endless field, snapping at the robbin-blue sky and he the darkness of the underbrush: *indescribable*.

As such they left the days there—wherever “there” really was is of no importance, for they are still together as they will always be...an *isness*.

Sharon returned to the world where Jude had only been expectation. But this time, as if a soul bubbling...if souls can bubble.

Jude had only one place where time past and future could be found—with Pierce.

“My man!” a hoisted beer, a bit, just a smidgen too high so thinks Jude, a stein thrust above at full arm’s length with the usual Pierceness of words that stabbed—“My, my, ole buddy, still fumbling at the one yard line!”

This was a rehashed image—one of a handful of such—which conveyed more than what others would hear, celebrating him as *Second Best. Not as Bright. Hand-me-downs*. Meaning *Sharon-discarded*.

In Pierce’s world it was all just humorously charming.

In their youth Jude would have half-acted out his impulse to smash Pierce’s face...at least hurt him a bit with a yanking head-lock.

Nevertheless, if he wants to get what he’s come for, Jude knows that he’ll have to let Pierce be Pierce, so he smiles wanly, sips his beer, and starts the slow spade work.

It took four bottles of deep dark brew—a micro-concoction from some local sylvan hop-meister—to get there but it started at two, Jude then sensing that Pierce’s tongue had become not just unglued but actually liquid...words flow upon a breath like a magic carpet.

Aaaah, he knew it would be found—this which he wanted to know.

“I appreciate, sincerely appreciate, *everything* she’s done. Not just being mother”—*Is there a mist here in the eye region?*—“for she was, *is*, a great mother, but for being so, so...” and Jude holds wait, allows the sculptor to adjust and raise his hammer to just the right angle, “so *useful*.”

There really wasn’t anything else he wanted—*this was it*. Everything Sharon said, validated now with his word, this term, this apt capture of the Pierce’s truthful lie: *useful*.

Sharon hadn’t used that word but it was what “Our Story” was about. Once heard, Jude knew it as such—*Genesis* as the declaration of the usefulness of woman.

But being Pierce, Pierce could not, would not stop. For if nothing else he was always charmed by his own charming power, and as he thought he knew Jude so he thought Jude had yet to hear what Pierce thought Jude should hear. So Jude held steady, nursing his suds; bed-side manner.

“You must understand—*can* you understand?” not stopping for an answer, not listening to Jude’s nonverbals...“Of course not. *Maybe*. Well, my friend,” not spoken with warmth, merely a substitute for an objectless pronoun, “Well, my friend, it happens when you give your all. *Who could have known?*”

A pause waiting for a refill.

Pour it in...pour it out!

“For us, we men, *they* were the ultimate. To have them, possess them, to lie between their legs, this was all, *everything*. What else did we talk about *but cunt*? Scoring. Hitting a home run. Planting the harvest. How many ways did we say the same singular one goddam fucking most important thing? “Fuck ‘em!” What else did we ever say? Even in church, what was our prayer but for them, and having them meant fucking them—no matter what the prayer said, we all knew, we all knew.”

Drifting off; stellar dust swirling.

Come to me.

Not a command. Not even an invitation. Simply how things happened.

I love you.

Knowing that it was meaningless, but necessary. Like a cork to a bottle. For both opening and stopping. Saying it as seduction and uttering it as apology and repentance—“I love you.”

After awhile both knew—as they knew every man and woman so espoused knew—each knew that the words had no meaning; were not even just empty but were non-sense...nothing was evoked nor erupted.

I love you...spoken as they divorced. Their last words, flashed by eyes—as the distance increased so did the intensity of their love—a totally unknown sensation.

“Right. Say it again.”

“Fucking men is eternal...how do I get you to understand that?”

“I know you want to know how this happened—*the first time*, right? Like how did I score my first touchdown—who threw the tackle? (“Certainly not *you*! Ha. Ha.”) It was a challenge. Not even drunk, just throwing darts. This guy, Pete, I came to know him well—turned to me and said, “Do you want to live forever?” Of course I thought he was just bullshitting...but there was that something in his eyes—he was a fascinating guy.”

Long pause and a sad sigh—Jude knew the pandemic appropriateness of “was.”

“Pete was one of the Great Ones. But like so many, he was part of the Oral Tradition—*no cheap remarks, please!*—he left his word truly incarnated, truly enfleshed, on those he loved—no, wrong word, inept: *adored*, those he adored and who adored him.”

They just kept downing brew after brew.

“The first time he just looked at me. Had me over at his place and we just spent the time totally naked. He’d look and look, like he expected something or someone to magically erupt from out of my skin. It seemed silly after the first hour, but it was truly an unusual moment, so I went with it.

He’d look at all my skin. “The skin is one. Remember that.” And it dawned on me that my whole being—for him—is my cock. It’s not just the penis, it’s the skin. Every part of me is one part. *Get it?* He was truly involved in looking at my cock from every possible angle.”

“The skin replaces itself. Simple biological fact. One I’m sure you’ve known all your life. But what’s it a sign of?”

Signs point. Symbols express. Metaphors link—Professor Narandu.

“I had fucked her—in how many ways? Screwed. Rammed. Poled. Jacked. Humped. So many ways of fucking. But with Pete it was—this is a special word, so remember it: *presence*.

When he discovered himself within me—for it was never penetration but an appearance, something of the magical, almost a bi-location of his penis, this his specialness, that he made me aware of myself as myself...not as *ourself*, or as *another* self, but as *myself*.

Sharon... oh well, it’s not that she didn’t but I think, now I think I know—she simply *couldn’t*. That women can’t.”

Sign, symbol or metaphor?

“I never really even gave it a moment’s thought. For, for, see, it’s like beauty. Like being at MOMA and suddenly being possessed by the presence of the artwork. No, that’s an unhappy phrasing. How shall I phrase it?”

Fucked?

“Pete had a way of being with me at a distance. Remember that philosophical thing Professor Arndt would always say—which I must admit I thought absolute bullshit at the time, not now—here’s why, Pete was with me, as presence, as presence of my own presence. *Get it?* Because we’re the same sex, same sex lovers, the intimacy is, what? Isomorphic? A singularity? Aw, shit, I’ll never get it exactly. When did I ever think that Pierce Masterson would yearn to be a poet? But so it is. Pete was like that.”

One cock. All penis. Skin is eternal. Amen.

“I never had to wait—this is what, this is The Truth which I discovered—with women it’s all waiting. Waiting for them to be in the mood. Waiting for their blood-letting to pass. Waiting for the babe to be born. Grasp that my cunt imprisoned friend! *Ha*. Did you know you were a felon, a sexual felon? Convicted of the crime of loving only women? *Ha*.”

Someone drill your brain with a hard cock? Emptiness I see.

“Pete was out of time.”

Pierce paused. He signaled for some more, but when the waiter came he said, “Four fingers.” Jude nodded. *Why not?* Sharing the sacred cup of the essence of the *Wild Turkey*, being brothers of the distilled ooze; *ha*.

“My girls I love. My wife, this one named Sharon, she I love. But Pete, he *is*.”

A full short-glass of *Wild Turkey* drunk and imbibed and sucked-down and gobbled within a broken-thought.

“Pete is, not just Pete, but me. And I *am* him.”

He did not have to signal, the waiter knew him...more attendant short-glasses full and at the ready.

“There is no separation. When my cock explodes it’s not semen into the void. Not a million frantic suicidal sperms hunting for one paranoid egg. Nothing like that.” Pierce speaks steadily. With conviction. One strengthened by a tone which betrays the long time such words had been meditated upon and mediated through experience and meshed with the marrow of his being—bone and soul.

“When Sharon got pregnant, what male wouldn’t have felt as I felt—both exultation and absolute terror?” He looks hard at Jude, *Did her sister Claire so free him to feel this manly bond?*

“Exultation at having escaped total death. Meaning total absorption into her. Into the feminine. Into that canine toothed maw called their cunt.” Evangelical airs carry his words. “Can you deny this? Dare you deny this? This Truth?”

Mater dei. Mater dolorosa.

“God, women are *weird*!...totally, but totally and *only* useful.” He spits it out, “Christ Almighty, if it hadn’t been for Pete....”

Drunk as a skunk...but by booze or love, umm, “presence”?

Jude knew this all too well from his side. Where Claire had been anything but a Claire: a Clarity—a Light. For though he had adored her and honored her and sought her blessing and offered himself to be a servant at her every gate...so had she withheld his entry to but a passage only a few steps in. Into the vestibule. There to leave his express mail package...but not to carry himself as gift into her inner sanctum.

Somberly, he definitely knew what Pierce was suggesting, stating, pointing towards.

Emptiness. Copulation into a whole which is less than the sum of its parts.

Tears could never wash away whatever it was he felt needed to be washed away...from his body, from her body, from their spousal body—together as nut and bolt, that was all.

“Pete was more than just a ‘balance of male and female.’ He was not an androgyne. He was...was *beyond*.” No glasses were full.

Nietzsche's Superman?

"No. No. For God's sake no. Never. Not. *My dear Jude.*" Pierce paused as a man would who had, unknowingly and without a shred of warning, come to find himself teetering tip-toe upon a precipice addressing an abyss.

His was a look which said, *You'll never understand!*

Fuck you...JUMP!

"The cock up the ass is not the cock up the ass. It is not a fleshly dildo. It is not a substitute vagina. It *is* what the cunt can't be. Can't be because the cunt is functional, it is useful, it gets its meaning by being useful—as the trapdoor for the mad seed, all those spermies which go wild searching for that egg, for that one and only her. *Ha!*

Understand—are you really *my friend?*—but is that important now? I think not. ...*hmm.* We are empty of drink but full of spirits, aren't we now."

Both laugh soundlessly.

"When Pete discovers himself within me—anus or mouth or caressing palm—then it is that we are not present to death, in that with women we are present to life and with life to death, that whole Cycle of Life thing...no, never! Grasp this, oh Jude, Patron of Hopeless Causes!" He snorts, embarrassing himself with the noise of his snout, suchly Pierce does giggle..."Oh! Never. Simply never. For the same sex lover the joining, the embrace, the coupling is for the increase, not for the diminishment...for when I am physically separated, when the cock ejaculates and melts into happiness, at that moment I am him. I am Pete. Pete is me. We are both males. Not like with women where we look—and you must have looked at Claire like this, *must have*—with women we are stunned by the separation, it exhausts us, we weary and like the French say we suffer the "little death" that *petit mort*...true, oh, so true. Isn't this true?"

Jude is stoic. He lets Pierce interpret as he wants.

"That's why being gay is a difference of kind not just of degree. It's not simply a sexual difference. Not, as I think, lesbians are. That *is* different, but a sexual thing; a denial thing. What do you think...*ole friend?*"

The insincerity of the question, the shallowness of the concern...Jude just closes his eyes and fart-smiles like a horse's ass!

"The energy. The sheer, magnificent, unbridled, explosive—yes, evolutionary!—evolutionary energy! This is the difference...which you can't grasp unless you *do*. And you haven't, have you?"

Bless me Father for I have sinned.

"Pete's cock is his skin is his presence which becomes the skin of all males who make themselves eternally present through the enfoldment of their bodies, through the joy of discovery... I know you've heard this...surely, that you've heard it as a confirmation of the depravity of gays, but I am seven people a night! Seventy-seven eternal presences. Extended on a cosmic scale seven-hundred and seventy-seven times. *Verily, verily!* I am the Mystical Body, the Cosmic Christ...*grasp this my fumbling friend, Jude?*"

He heard the message.
He did not kill the messenger.
Nor did he want to.
He wanted to know the bottomless Truth of Pierce's message.
So, back to her. To Sharon.
To she with whom these lies became truths.

CHAPTER 16

"Even if I videoed it. Even if the *Virtual Fantasy* machine put you back there. What would your interpretation be?"

They had come together through silent invitation. Neither had spoken. Just knew. Returned to that same motel; different room—*Who would have remembered the number?*

"Lie or Truth. We both had that bent. That metaphysics course. That asshole of a pompous former Jesuit turned Rabbi—*Please, let me never remember his name!*" A joke they hadn't shared in over twenty-years, but one still fresh for them.

"It always seems like a Catholic confessing. Maybe about this Pierce was right—"Only on your knees will you know the Truth." *Maybe*. But it's like I've been kneeling waiting my turn, which I know will never come! See, but then maybe not. Maybe that's why it keeps coming back, this feeling—hashing over and over, twisting words, re-writing the script, grasping for a metaphor...*Shit!* That's why I don't care what *you* think. Lie or Truth—why do we bother?"

They de-dimensionalized themselves and spoke only molecularly on a quantum scale where as waves they avoided points.

Sharon woke first. Feeling him as a rush upon her breasts, as if his hands were not there silent and at rest beside his body, not touching her. But he was like hard rain which left not its feeling of wet but that of soaking, of having come into you, not just upon you... so was Jude, lightly snoring at random intervals ... she muffles a riff of titters, then goes to the bathroom.

Two cups of coffee. He appreciated the gesture. It was his custom to be up first and brewing the day's warm drug, so he appreciated this more than she knew.

"I look back—what? It was maybe six months. Like a six month journey around the world or something. Where things happen so fast, things which are so out of your daily routine, so bizarre from a cultural point of view that you just take snapshots, vignettes which are hopes, acts of hope, hoping that when you get home someday—also an act of faith, these snapshots, that there is still *Home!*...get there and can look at them and tell a story. All the time knowing the photos can't ever, not even slightly, approach what really happened. That you'll have to lie—maybe too strong, just fib, like all storytellers fib. I guess."

"I want to be distracted. I want to ask you about the size of their cocks. How far they penetrated. How you could suck two at a time. Did they connect when one was in your mouth and the other up your cunt?"

Distracting questions, like sermons on Sunday, to distract from the horror, the terror, no, maybe the pleasure... *shit, I want you to make me jealous...angry...I want to hate you!*

“Give me something I can handle—like you like scurrying around on all fours like a bitch in heat getting fucked and sucked and rammed and jacking everyone in sight.” *Please, give me hatred!*

“Jude. You can really be an asshole.” Without a pause, “Your turn to fetch the coffee.”

“*My turn?* I see, sure, I always wanted to do what Pierce did. I mean, not guys. But two guys and a girl. Or two girls and a guy. Had that a time or two. But can’t really get into a space where there are other guys. This is where I flounder ... *just talk...Please!*”

“The mechanics. The theater. The color. All the sounds. Each time became more of a performance. Feathers and body-paint and jungle drums...dress-up as Mozart and the courtly crowd doing minuets...rouge upon us...transvestite posturings, me as a bang-bang big baton cop, they sucking *my* dick...one of them as a pregnant momma doing all types of nasty things to us “little boys”...oh, it surely was a run and a rush...maybe it was the money and the fame; *maybe*. Who could touch us? Criticize us? We were uber-rich. Had friends in high places. Were untouchables! ...*We could touch whatever we wanted....*Can you really accept this?”

Were you ever me? Played me?

Sharon fell to the floor sobbing. *Kerplunk!* off the bed. Like a log shot like a torpedo over the raging rapids over the lip of a waterfall—almost a free fall, as if there would never be a bottom to alight upon.

“Oh, my God!”

“Why else did you find me this time? You could have found me whenever you wanted. Any reunion. *Correct?*”

She lays crumpled; a voice from the bottom of a deep well—*Black Water*.

“All those years, lying to myself! Christ...of course, of course...can I drink this bitterness, this... *I know* he told you—“useful”—right?

Back then I thought that was bitter! Wormwood.

Thought that that summed it all up. Thought I could never...he wanted what was *me* in *you*. That’s it?”

Sharon can’t open her eyes to look at Jude—she no longer wanting eyes.

“Maybe he planned it. I don’t know. Maybe he knew it was the last night. Maybe it was some kind of ritual. Maybe something he had done before. I simply don’t know. I truly don’t know.

Pierce had always had these guys masturbate him and lick his come; swallow it. He’d even dab his thumb with some and make symbolic marks upon their heads. We all laughed. Once he did that with me. So I didn’t make much of it.

Then he was always what he called “the pitcher” and the other guy was “the catcher.” I thought it was *Catcher in the Rye* stuff, but he said no—just the Great American pastime. That seemed funnier to him.

He’d butt-fuck this guy and I’d blow him at the same time. ‘Three in One’ we called it...oil, get it?...Both guys seemed to really love it. For me, what can I say? It was like double fudge, a high energy treat, can’t have it every day...look at me, I’m straying, here.”

With an ease she didn't anticipate, she wakens her body, rises up from the bottom, surfaces, sits up and looks at him; *what?*

Feel better? Are you having a good time?

"He'd fuck me. Or back-door me. And the other guy would lick me and jiggle Pierce's nuts...gosh, every conceivable Euclidean manipulation of the planes of our bodies—we simply were Geometry Wizards! *Tee-hee.*"

Was I there?

Give me time.

Stand back.

Let me get up and lie down.

Go away! Just for a moment.

With a pillow across her eyes, Sharon continues.

"*Yes, you were there...* 'Strap it on.' Not a command. Not even an instruction. More, a validation. Of my absolute and fundamental usefulness.

A big thick cock. Bigger than big could be. And Pierce in the line-up, then not as pitcher but as substitute. But he didn't say a word... I hardly thought for a moment—it was quirky but not kinky. I didn't even give it a moment's thought, not after all we'd done. Just strapped it on and stuck it in him...easier than I thought...lots of lube, but that wasn't it, no, he was sucking me in! Christ, that's true, really...in it went, he groaned, I stopped, for a mad moment I thought I was him, that he was making me Pierce because I was piercing him—stupid pun!—*but* it wasn't ...*how'd I know?* From how hard I resisted the knowing. Him squirming, then yielding, to what I now know was an imitation of myself in this position which he hated and so rarely gave me, so when he did I took all out of it that I could—me becoming the depthless cave of the dank, orphic hallucinogenic pit of Dark Mothering."

Stop me! Stop me! I don't want to lie! Not lie, not anymore! But she can't stop. Jude doesn't even know what Stop would be.

"Black Water!" He exhaled, *Black Water!"*

As she breathes the phrase, so does she pull away the pillow, and as she pulls away and as she speaks so now yet soulfully eyeless does she become likewise mouthless—as with the words so her lips disappear.

"That's what I realized. Pierce *wanted* me to become you. Maybe he was pushing these other guys *into* me. Or trying to see if I'd be sucked into them. Like some magical play, where one of these other guys would all of a sudden become me and I'd become him. And he could name me "Jude."

Crap! Damn, that's when I stopped. Didn't actually leave the house, but stopped...the moment *you* were there."

Jude with Sharon: faceless, headless, bodiless...*totally useless.*

PART FOUR: PIERCE'S TRUTH

CHAPTER 17

Pierce's Truth. It came to him in the Salt Lake City airport while sitting at a bar, passing time waiting for a late arrival, going home from a skiing long-weekend, the eternal Wasatch

(“Eternal. That’s how I feel them.” *Pierce’s Unsolicited Comment Upon Utah*—heard by no one), having finally followed Pete’s advice—*How many years now gone? Four?*—coming to this Zion—“I tried Jerusalem,” Pete had said, not with sadness, but as if holding an empty cup—coming here to where the “Holy Family”—at least as Pete grasped it, “Biblical Family”—might yet be a possibility.

Pete had wanted Pierce to validate, to ground, to incarnate through his own lustful ways the Truth that Pete had been servant to for so many years. Sitting here, Pierce: wet-eyed-drunk-with-loss attempting to make present his departed Pete, palming the air for him, inhaling and begging—*utmost shameless beggary!*—for a wispy scent of him, “Even his putrid dust,” so the thought flashed.

Pete’s Truth: *She* had not been here; *is* not here—neither on Earth nor in Heaven.

Pierce’s Truth: that *She will never be* here.

(“Amen.” Was that Pete’s ethereal whisper?)

He weeps more deeply, a double-loss of him and Her.

First Meeting: “*Do you want to live forever?*”

The asker played a good game, sweet stroke of the cue, not jiving like a hustler, just a fun guy, not a serious bone...several beers, more smoke than the law allows these days, lots of good music, and a thickening crowd. Pierce likes it when the crowd gets thicker. More people is like spiking the whiskey; better, like snorting some *gom*, and “The Gom is Good!”

He liked the laughter, the relaxness which came with preparedness for the hunt, for the dance, for the game—the game the way he likes to play it.

“Ya got me!” A surrender that compliments.

Not a hustler—but his eyes betray him! Pierce is amused by the cat and mouse affair.

One last maneuver: “Damn fine shot.”

The mouse who thinks he is the one hustling is clicking his way around the table, slight but rapid taps with the cue stick. The clicking is his way—*A way of what?* mulls Pierce—hypnotizing this non-hustling other guy, “Peter Aloyious McInny O’Doul”? Was Pierce supposed to believe this moniker? *The scourge of Irish Catholic parents?*

“And another fine shot!” Not a brogue, but an uprush of camaraderie, as if calling all the boys about to stand circle round the table and watch his competing chalk-dust genius do his thing ...something like that, but Pierce watches this Pete even more closely—*Do you want to live forever* comes now not like a question but more like a statement, like a challenge, an invocation. He can’t help but picture this Pete atop a hill booming the words: question, challenge, invocation—conjunction?

Fuck, Pierce gets it. It’s more than a hustle, it’s his power. And sure as he softly smiles and beguilingly winks so does the other guy lose it, just can’t hold it, is right there ready to come and he can’t step back not a tad, not a breath, has to rush in, is pulled in, sucked in, no longer a jammer but a small fish gobbled by the bigger whale—*ha*, Pete, the consummate hustler!

“Aw, such a terrible miss. You deserve better,” and giving what the guy really wanted to hustle more than the eight ball, Pete drapes an arm across his back, pulls him close and kisses him—one of those uninterpretable forehead kisses, somewhat paternal, somewhat brotherly, somewhat—*What?* “Accepting.” Right, in Pierce’s mind, Pete accepts this guy...so the guy loses even as he thinks he wins—palms Pete’s butt and so acclaims himself a *winner!*

“Pyrrhic victor,” snidely whispers Pierce to himself.

“You’re a fine one...”

Pierce’s hand, right palm out, says, *Don’t*.

Such became their bond. Pete instantly knowing Pierce as not just a brother, not even as a future lover, but as a companion, with a comradely air, fully grasping the way he plied his nets.

“Ya, got me, eh!” Pete halts at the *Stop* hand-signal...a clap and whistle to the waiter: two more.

“You screwed up. You wanted him to win, right?”

“Beggorrah, I meant to let him win.” A wickedness behind the dodge.

Pierce, with a practiced imitation of a shrink’s toleration of all absurdities, smiles limply.

“Ouch!” Pete with a rush of hands covers his eyes, “You saw right through me. Good for you.” He hands Pierce the next round.

“But don’t I just see through you now, pretty boy, don’t I?”

As is his habit, Pierce is staring *beyond*...heaving anchors, javelining anchors, cannon-firing anchors...staring and staring, searching for the *beyond*.

This guy can also pierce?

Pierce had had a fling or two.

Seeing them all as a fling, akin to his early romps with older women, now finding men who seemed to need him so much, needed to touch him and suck him and press him close to them, all, he knew, wanting the charming power to rub off, to stain them, to puddle and spot somewhere either on their possessions or within their souls...but these were *flings*—as if he were flying about and when he settled they’d grab him and fling him up and away again.

When he had first been propositioned he had been fittingly drunk. In that pick-up way which allowed even him to find an excuse in case what was about to happen was unpleasant or something to be blotted from memory.

That he liked it—“it” being a blow-job—certainly didn’t surprise him. Sharon was good on that account, even now that the girls had begun to come—for after number two he was absolutely certain that Sharon would only *give* him daughters—even now, Sharon played a full-hand of poker-sex.

“Spades!” Each had taken turns naming wild-cards, and then they’d romp—when either one beat the other three times in a row—“I want you to wiggle on the floor like a harp seal and croak my name all the way to my muff.” *You get the idea.*

In tempo, Sharon and he both played the six and the nine.

But this time there was an edge, an edginess which seemed like an infection, like this guy just couldn’t be satisfied, that his eyes and his hands and his mouth were never going to be satisfied, like there was something bugging him, something which just wouldn’t let him let Pierce go...like there was no end intended nor desired.

But Pierce had ended it, passing in delight as he half-spurred his intoxicated stash...then began to feel lousy...so he had done it and just walked away.

What did it mean that “She” is not there?

Pete had taken to the Mormon body—his last desperate effort to hustle the Divine. Seduced and compromised and deceived and outright violated every aspect of Mormon womanhood. He had read their Scriptural triad: OT, NT, Book of Mormon. Knew their differences. Knew that they were not of The Original Sin. That they looked to planets as zones for “post-life-on-Earth populating.” Husband, a father god. Wife, a mother goddess. *Mormon Her!* Incarnate in the

flesh, lickable and consumable...so he journeyed to Deseret to enjoy Her, time and again. *Mother of All*.

(“Moroni, toot that horn!”)

“Mother of All”—for there is in Mormon tradition a flirtation with the Mother Goddess, as if without Original Sin She had to be real and holy and so—*Awake!*—real Eve was holy! Female bodies are holy. Amen.

This is what drew him; why Pete sent him—for if She were there, “Here, once again in seductive flesh of Eve, submissive flesh of Mary!” then Pete knew that theirs was, without doubt, a new Revelation, a Latter Day gospel.

But, “She is not here!”—confirming what Pete had found, long past, and now bequeathed to him.

Where is She? Why did She leave?

After plundering a thousand sister-wives, after deeply cavorting with Deseret pussy, Pierce soon understood that—*Amazing!*—the Mormon Woman had once truly been publicly acclaimed as the fount of a New Age—of the *Latter Days*. These women might not have thought of themselves as that but he had come to learn from Pete that they were actually that...daughters of Her—Mother Goddess. This an original Mormon belief that was soon repressed as Mormons strove to escape the brutality of religious and secular persecution and moved inward to embrace the emptiness of America. These Mormons had risen during the early decades of the first century of American expansion when the Holy Spirit was scourging America, purging the New World of the residual religious errors of the Old World, here, Mormons rejecting the ways of apostate Enlightenment as well as Evangelical based Revolutionary Protestants whose followers had failed to hear the true Revelation of the Latter Days that, indeed, Jesus, himself, had come to the Americas after he Resurrected, more, that he spoke to the native people who, so it was revealed, were children of a lost tribe of Israel...all these new Revelations fell upon the clogged ears of Protestant leaders who were touting America’s Manifest Destiny and calling for *Revival!*...but all that was revived was a revival of ancient religious hatreds as Mormons were tarred and feathered, shot to death, driven from their lands...all, so Pete intuited, because She was being revealed. For a millennium She had *waited*. Upstate New York. Patiently for Joseph Smith. Her bosom heaving. Her legs spread apart.

Fatefully, in a way harmonious to Divine Eyes, as the Mormon-revered native peoples were facing genocidal threats and so mournfully trekked upon their Trail of Tears to soon be ingested by reservations that made them invisible so, in tandem, Brigham Young came unto to Her...took Her to himself, hid Her in a Conestoga wagon and trekked out to celebrate Her in the wild lands of the West—She, his frontier-woman. He boldly took her amidst the mountains of Utah. The Holy Lands of so many faiths which had preceded: Anasazi, Utah, Piute, Kansan, Apache...on and on, the list was unlistable...for as before so did these new invaders, Indo-Europeans, white locusts, once again discover Her in the rocks, in the sand, in the wind, in the sea of salt...building cities, irrigating the land, and erecting holy edifices to house Her comfortably at home with Him.

Pete accepted Joseph Smith as a seminal prophet of this Latter Day New Age, one who believed that in the new Garden called “America” that She was once again manifesting Her love for Him...here, Mormons holding that deities have bodies like common folk and so through honoring and loving Her daughters, so do His faithful sons make present the Latter Day’s special revelation—that She, Her, Mother—Goddess is here, present among us, in the fullness of womanhood. As a faithful scion, Pete celebrated Her, searched for Her—as was his special

gift—through deeply penetrating Her sons...yet only coming to make present through the heated fires of manly embrace the truth that the Mormons of today only know about Her desertion, Her desolation, the Apocalypse of Her as in their beds as they soon Forgot Her, Betrayed Her, Denied Her...acquiescing to pressures from the ruling religious culture, so near the turn of the 20th century they thrice-denied Her...answering a resounding “No!” to Jesus’ lover’s demand, “Will you really lay down your life for me?” *Ah*, “I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times!”

Mormon cocks did do crow as Her sons once again took to embodying all that *Genesis* had wrought—the Obliteration of Her, the Idolatry of the Cock.

But there was more, “Pete...” but Pierce couldn’t finish, for who wants to report to his departed Beloved that nothing has changed? Finding that without Original Sin that Eve is deprived of the one remnant power she possessed—of her Eros, of her cunt. Eve now not to be wife of Adam but polygamous plaything. “Brigham Young as the Hugh Hefner of the Latter Days”—but Pierce would not write such down. These insights, this trip, all was nothing to him, only a validation of what he, himself, had come to understand through Pete’s fucking of his own body...that the Mother of All is but merely “useful”...sadly, the twinned revelation of the Old and the New Age.

Why did you send me here, sweet one? Was it to probe where you disdained to do so? For me to plunder daughters as you had sons? *Damn you my beloved!*

Faithfully, he had approached Her in her only to validate Pete’s truth that He is in him, *only*. Knowing now more than ever that all that was biblical and Christian was cock. All that was Holy was the Sacred Rod of the penis.

For he had found within the hard clutchings of ecstatic Mormon women—whose cunts were but clasping arms of the Disappearing Goddess—the Latter Day truth...*that Pete was right, correct, undeniable.*

There in Salt Lake City...a water so bitter with salt, the lake of too many tears, tears of cosmic proportion and contribution, there, he found his answer to Pete’s Question.

Do you want to live forever?

The Answer was *Yes*. And the way was through clutching all that was male. This another Latter Day revelation of the Mormons—the culminating revelation of the grander biblical tradition—that what comes from the penis is what is holy: ten, twelve, thirteen kids—what did it matter? No ecology. No concern for the Population Bomb. No dalliance with things merely mortal, physical, sensual, material. *Satan be gone!* for the Mormons were and are America’s—the *New World*’s—shepherds of souls on the Spiritual Quest, chanting “Fuck and Fuck and Fuck!” *Amen*. And *Hallelujah*. And line up the women. And fuck them again, “For, behold, they are useful!”

Pierce had a great fucking time in Utah!

Yet, truth as always had its price. Pierce came to know what Pete knew long time ago while a fledgling monk within the Catholic world—that all that the ritual was about—all that the Evangelical Exegesis was about—all that Dogmatic and Doctrinal Inerrancy and Incontestability and Papal Infallibility was about—was the “stick ‘em up the ass” ritual of Jesus on the Cross.

For what was Jesus but the fully fucked queer on Death Row?

Son. Brother. Cousin. Was he Cain or Abel—*both*?

There on the Cross. The Cross being the cock as snatch. Stick it in and when you try to pull it out its cross-bar stakes itself into your flesh...and you die, die, *die*.

How many brother monks had Pete known who masturbated with the Cross?

The Cross. Ever so symbolically the penis. Ever so the hurting cock, pushed in and rammed about so that it pains the cunt, the pussy, the reflexively willing vagina.

Did you know that raped women do not have scars? That they lubricate and accept the maddening cock, the slicing penis, the devastatingly violent rod?

So in time, Pierce had also come to the men...to Pete's queering way. Found those among the Mormons who like Pete had processed beyond women, beyond polygamous rituals and fantasies. Had them kneel in worship of his cock...and for the first time ever he knelt for them—took their prophetic cocks into his mouth and found himself as Her...this *Pierce's Truth*, that he is she, He is She. This the true Latter Day revelation—the gift of Joseph Smith, which burden Brigham Young carried to the Lake of Salt Tears: Lot's Lake, where wives are kicked about in clouds of salty dust.

There is no She, no she. Not fooled by the presence of Eve in *Genesis*, rather discerning the Obliteration of Eve—born of a male, making present the Truth that “the male body is the birthing body.”

This the final spiritual insight, that without Original Sin there is no need for Her. She for whom Original Sin was name, indictment, justification. And because of this primal sin, so death entered the world; paradise was lost.

“Do you want to live forever?” *How?* Behold the male propagating without female, this the Final Word—that women are no longer of any significance at all, of no place in the Order of Things.

No longer are their bodies *useful* in anyway. They are not just *not* worshipped but not to be recognized—of no spiritual worth, not even the worth of an Original Sin...merely cunts, pussies, vaginas, holes through which the cock comes to find...discern what?

Pierce's Truth is that there is just Cock—women are illusions!

“Men, let us celebrate males alone!” Spiritually alone. Populating the Earth and other worlds by Himself through himself...*cockus spermaticus universalis*.

Such was revealed unto our brother Pierce, discerned as he sucked and was sucked and came to be comfortably at home in the Land of Salt.

Just a gay ole time, had by all!

CHAPTER 18

Pete never wanted to tell Pierce “all about it”—as Pierce several times requested. Not that he simply wanted to remain mysterious and as such alluring, knowing as good lovers do that mystery keeps the lie honest—never fooling each other that love is a total surrender, a total emptying, a total offering of oneself to the other...Pete did not want that. But it was also more so pedestrian or trifling, such that except for this foolishness about Utah—and he knew he was sending Pierce on a fool's journey, but amusement was what Pete found more bewitching than anything else, and so it was his deep love for Pierce which kicked up this idea of “Salty Hatu” (liking to spell things backwards)...amusement and then he just didn't want to deal with his past,

not deal with it with anyone else for he had, exhausted and pissed, dealt with it by himself...so he wanted just to ignore it, forget it, dismiss it, let it slip from his pocket and be windswept in a gutter.

But it's not that easy.

The words were a refrain. From the earliest of youthful memories. Possibly Sister Andalusia, possibly one of the nameless faces all smelling of "Father" and pawing at him at every turn of his every desire. "But it's not that easy." Not easy—so God let his Son be slain so that things were easy now, in a way, grace being his, but then not, "Not *that* easy!" For he had to *imitate* this Jesus, become a son not just of Patrick Aloysius O'Doul, Senior, but a Son of God...become a Christ...and that certainly wouldn't ever be easy.

Yet, it was easy. *Too* easy, so he had thought looking back many times. At least easy for a guy like him. Not knowing that "like him" meant he was gay and that maybe it meant Jesus was a fag—all that stuff yet latent, stifled for the apocalyptic revelations at the end of the millennium...no, "like him" was not discussed openly, but he watched the priest put on robes and knew them as gowns. Watched him kiss and bow his neck for the sacred stole and knew it like a chain of pearls. Watched him so precisely and exactly and with drop-dead seriousness ply all the articles of ceremony upon his body and so Pete knew them all as cosmetics and adornments.

There was no conscious thought when his mind flipped these images to their shadows where his mother slipped on a beautiful dress and had his dad snap the string of "genuine imitation pearls!" (as she had happily said upon her birthday surprise) and observed the cosmetics of dusty rouge and simple earrings and the hats—*aha!* the square-cornered biretta, the skull cap, the bishop's conical miter: adornments...as when he watched the cardinals doff the red beanie and the Pope bow his head for his majestic crown: *Il Papa's* bejeweled tiara, well, it was his mother adjusting her hats: chapeaux of so many sizes and for so many events...no conscious thought but the feeling, the comforting sense that this was *right and fitting and just*—as the phrase rang true to him in later years...all that was of both worlds: male and female, motherly and fatherly, so in this one world, this priestly and monkish world was all One: integrated...it fit him and it felt right but only when he left it all behind did he grasp how fitting it had been.

As such, Pete did not talk much about his monkly and priestly past. Early on, he did share some Scripture with Pierce, mostly because he was amazed by how ignorant such a world famous and astoundingly wealthy and clearly brilliant genius like Pierce was of things mythic. But he knew that all he had to do was give him *Genesis*. There in that story remained all that Pete had confronted. *How the female comes from within the male body*. That's what his priestly past was about, him being a male who has the female within. Others—known soon as "not Chosen" but accepted later as simply "not like him"—*him* here being Adam and Jesus and the generations of their sons who were also their daughters...how the flaming Queens made him shriek and he didn't shy away from the boast by the younger of proudly being *Queers!*...but he knew more, felt more...something they all missed, for they were willing to die too soon, much too soon as "those not like us" died—had their children and died: all their life centered around dying at childbirth: died to their youth when the babes came, died to their marriage when the nest was empty, died to themselves as they accepted being "Grand" parents—with nothing grand about it except the expectation of a *Grand Finale!*

Ah, truly, grandchildren as the messengers: “Your time to go!” Not knowing it but saying such as they came out of the hole as flesh messages, “Your time to go back through the hole!”

Doubtlessly, Jesus’ amusement, “Lest you be like children...” only bested by, “Unless you be born again...” The day, the moment, the nuclear whirl and spin and queering on the quantum hump when Pete grasped that these were straight-man lines, great intros to some raucous belly-laughing *aha’s!*...this overwhelmed him that instant he rejected his vows, slipped out of his robes for the last time. Neatly folded and set in orderly display...all that would be needed by the fellow priest who would be readying for the next Mass—a High Mass so he mused that instant instance... snickered and snorted, chortled and chuckled, all without a sound all the way out—verily, outted.

For it was Life Eternal which Pete had found. Grasping that the Jesus on the Cross, the Crucified Son, the Dying Christ...grasping that he was She as only She can be, as within him. More, that it was his duty as a priest, his obligation, his mission, his calling to continually, daily, forever and ever—“Until they get it!”—hoist the symbols of this truth, this revelation, this insight. Elevate and hold aloft the breaded Host with its message that “I am bread,” verily all and only bread—to be consumed, to be taken internally, to be transformed within...for within the male was she, there to be fed, fed by this bread, no longer was she external, separate, apart, no longer an alien, no longer just a Goddess, just a deity, part of a cosmic balancing act—no, all that was Life, all that was existence was throttled by duality: pain and pleasure, suffering and beauty, birth and death...ah, birth and death. “Who, in looking upon the Cross, isn’t disturbed, not just in mind but in flesh, feeling all that pain, the torture, the agony...but how soon they forget that it is consumed by the Resurrection?”

Do you want to live forever?

Pete heard Jesus say, “Yes.”

What a queer guy, this wandering wise-acre from Nazareth!

Because they were closer than his straight brothers who still had need of women for usefulness, Pete did not criticize his gay brothers—not in public tongue, at least. Nevertheless, he was amused by how so many simply flipped themselves over and played out the duality. Still mimicking being the Great Mother, the Whore of Babylon, The Bad Girl...nasty and cultish and innocently dumb. How many strove so hard to be Dumb Broads! It was truly an amusement.

With Pierce, it was different.

Pierce had spewed the world with his internal feminine—these his daughters.

Pete spied it the first night. Pierce’s look. Knowing it as piercing before knowing his name: *aha*, another amusement. “Life is full,” Pete chuckled quietly.

There was in Pierce no knowledge, no grasp on the facts, no pollution of any gospel, no infectious trace of any revelation. Religion had never attracted him, and Pete immediately understood, as instantaneously as he felt Pierce stare, that look *beyond*...for it was in this *beyond* that Pete had found himself once outted.

“Woman require that you push it out. Giving birth is something *you do*, my brother. Those daughters are from within you, not your wife.”

Pierce always the pitcher—“How amusing.”

Your daughters are you...as you are their Mother.

“Don’t you see it’s a game? Balls and bats: testicles and penises. And hitting a home run. And driving it home. And running to home. And sliding into home ...can’t you laugh at this?”

Pierce tried; couldn’t.

Your daughters are you...your eternal presence.

“How amusing.”

Although he was amused, sex with Pete was nothing like sex with anyone else. Not just the mechanics but this thing he called “presence.” Pierce was fascinated by *presence* the moment Pete first looked at him naked.

“I’m onto you, my sweet piercer. You want to pull me apart. You want to hack me apart. Like all those gods in all those repetitious and boring Creation Stories of yore. My, my I wish you were more well read in those areas.” The sigh was hummingbird. “When we’re together”—and they are together, in the same place, buck naked, on some Hopi rug or some such knock-off, candles lit, wine glasses full, the gentle whispers of “Ocean Rhythms” seeping from the walls...“When we’re together, you keep trying to tear us apart.” Pete was at the verge of tears, teetering with frustration, shedding “We’re going to miss the bus!” sighs, ever despairing in heart that Pierce won’t truly pierce.

*Tell me...*this yearning keeping Pete still there: only Pierce’s eyes, these which speak of desire, of hunger, of having been to someplace which the eyes know they cannot speak about but which they can share, share as insight...*Black Water!*...but first something or someone must be sighted. And in his eyes, through them, with them Pete sights *himself*. So he steadies; stays put.

“When you grasp a sweet buttock, be it hers or his, is there any difference? I mean, *real* difference?”

“She’s more slippery”...he regrets the words as spoken.

Pete frees a silent *fuck!* He drops a small grin.

A gulp of wine. “Smart ass.” A hand rakes through hair. Hoping to find what?

“Okay. Of course I’ve thought about it. Of course I’ve compared it. *Who doesn’t?* Who wouldn’t?”

Pete, raising his glass, salutes him; sips.

“You want me to say this?” A burst of unfamiliar anger.

Without waiting for an answer, “Right. I can slap the bastard around, beat him up, wrestle... shit, we can slip into a bath of violence...and no one complains.” Bitter, “Do you know how much women complain?” Bitchy voice: “Oooo, dear you’re squeezing me *too* hard...Honey, you’ve turned me *raw*...aw, shit, it goes on and on. *On and on.*” Trailing off into a weariness.

A couple of moments: “I understand.”

Snidely, “*You?*...You understand women?”

The Cross and Holy Violence and Salvation through Suffering...Pete didn’t want to go there, so he doesn’t.

“Women make you feel bad. Like somehow you’ve violated them. No matter how gentle you’ve been. I know that, without ever having touched a woman.” An easy statement for Pierce to accept.

What wasn’t was—“Do you want to know why? It’s just that—*because* I haven’t touched a woman. Violence, for me, isn’t the thing.”

They had lost it there. Pierce was burned out. He wasn't counting but it had been two hours and he hadn't gotten off. Somehow that tidbit of intuited knowledge started to piss him off. It rose to his brain and painted the image of Pete as a waste of time. Losing in the moment all that he thought was great about Pete, hearing now only words and having no way to release the piercing power within him, the fury at the base of his scrotum, the rumbling of the dicey balls...he wants to lean over and slap Pete, hit him hard and throw himself on top of him and force his way into him..."Fuck him! Fuck the asshole!" rockets throughout his head and hands and excitable cock...yet, in direct proportion to how hard his cock sets so does he—*How? Why?*—become less attracted to Pete...just stands up and walks to the shower: *knew* that it would be a long shower; wanting it to last forever, wanting it to be over only when he knew that Pete wasn't there.

Presence.

Pete was fully satisfied.

He—*Pierce*—was becoming present.

CHAPTER 19

Pierce took Pete at every position, every angle, every Pythagorean mystery of number and mathematical subtlety.

Pete was undone. "Is there no death in your fuck?"

The first time: "Slow down!"

The second time: "Slow down and pay attention!"

The third time: "Slow down, pay attention, and forget me!"

The fourth time: "Ooooooooooooo!"

Pierce had taken him to the full meaning of his name. With every stroke of his cock he envisioned himself spearing him, slicing him, cutting him, hacking him, sawing him...every stroke in his mouth, up his ass, through his hands...coming at him when at rest, when not at rest, when sleeping, when not sleeping, coming at him in his dreams as in his wakefulness.

He licked him like syrup on a spoon.

He inhaled him like dope smoke.

He smeared him all over himself like the mists of cocaine.

He cracked him open and snorted him like an ampoule most insane.

What was left?

"Now that you've had me.

Now that you've fucked me.

Now that you've charted my every domain.

Where are you?

Where am I?"

On his back, Pierce spent and pierce-less. Wrought down to nothing, a nil, a shell...that curse of the male which requires re-fueling, a moment's hesitation to catch one's erotic breath, that spite of the woman whose cunt is not satisfied...this he saw in him; this he felt within himself. "Goddam motherfucker!"

Pete laughs, and makes sure Pierce hears: “Amen.”

“What do you find up my ass?”

Pierce doesn’t want to answer; won’t; doesn’t.

“C’mon, talk to me!”

Pierce won’t chatter; swallows his tongue.

Five hours of sleep and it’s an early a.m. awakening.

“Sweetheart.”

He likes the word.

“Sweetheart, how are we ever going to find the woman in you if all you do is fuck the woman in me?”

Pierce does not answer. He simply mounts Pete...and for the first time ever, turned over and let Pete mount him.

Presence, Pete thought—a bolt of revelation within.

Upon the later awakening Pierce found Pete’s pillow empty. It had not been the first time, but this time it was more than a simple fact describing physical space, it was an eruption, a percolation this empty pillow, empty upon his sighting but once sighted fused and ready to blow!

Pete was in the kitchen preparing breakfast: eggs and bacon, some toast. Pierce smelled the coffee as he walked down the corridor.

Once he looked into Pete’s eyes, all that had threatened him since waking dissipated and disappeared.

“These eggs are you.” Two poached.

“This toast is us.” Two butterless slices.

“This meal is what we are for each other.”

It was this imagery, this symbolic artfulness, this true queering of the normal, of the expected, the everyday which Pierce realized was what was strikingly special about Pete—*what scared the shit out of him about Pete!*...what made him insatiably in love with Pete.

If Pete had asked him to cut off his cock and deep fry it—at this moment he would have done it.

“Presence.” As he lifts the orange filled glass.

“Presence.” As he takes his napkin and places it upon his left leg.

“Presence.” As he casts down his eyes and looks upon his plate, there gazing upon the revelation which is Pierce.

Pierce could not utter the word “presence.” He could only with great difficulty lift the word, a linguistic signifier which weighed immeasurable tons...only with great difficulty lift it, not with tongue but with his eyes, eyes which in their *beyond* hoisted the sign in code: *Presence*.

Pierce ate. Deliberately. Slowly. Masticated instead of masturbated. Held the yolk upon his tongue realizing that it was the soul of Pete. Sipped his coffee and knew that he and Pete were sipping each other: the flow of semen bound them in many forms, many elementals.

“As much as I love you, I can’t”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Let’s not play with words.”

“Can I play with your dick?”

“You can lick my ass till Kingdom Come...but I won’t come.”

“Is this the change? Not of heart but of cock?”

“You’re confused.”

“Me. *Moi?*”

“Don’t be cute. Don’t be goddam fucking cute!”

“I’ll be as cute as I want to, to any cock that comes along”...he wagged his fanny to staple the thought to Pierce’s brain.

“It’s come to *this?*” Devastation. “This” as the utterance of Gabriel come again to blow his horn and rid the Earth of *them*.

It was at this time that he maneuvered Sharon into strapping on the dildo.

Pete had heard the stories. Jude at the one yard line. Jude triple covered in the paint. Heard them only when Pierce was stinking drunk. Now, he hears them while he is stinking sober... more, *clear*: stinking clear. The clarity of the moment is transforming—he is passing into another dimension.

“I told her to strap it on.”

Further into this dimension: watching as he looks backwards—he like Lot casting an eye backward and seeing the wife strap on the dildo and seeing his lover, his intimate, his twin-soul, his orgasmic embrace... words drifting upon other dimensions: watching her into him and he striving, struggling, making a great effort, sucking in a great wind, screaming a thundering *ohmygod!*

“Satisfying. The pain was curiously satisfying.”

You failed Jude, ya know. But Pete didn’t say it. He not the archangel with the fiery sword. Just a lover. *Just?*

“I love you.” Once said, hungering to say it a thousand million times, watch Pete hear it, have Pete respond from beyond, “I love you, too.” *I am living forever! Thank you, my beloved.*

Pete’s mission was finally fulfilled. His monkish vows, faithfully obeyed. Yet, at this moment of ecstatic union also watching it not happen, *not* the presence, just the fuck, the screw, the penetration of in and out, the molecular scraping and screeching together...he, now accepting the virus: that long awaited, fated messenger from the other realm—accepting it becoming attached to him at his most microscopic level where *what is, is not* and such illogics of the conscious mind go to play, yet, observing the mechanism: at once cosmic, at once infinitesimally human: cell for cell, molecule for molecule, atom for atom, quark for quark...observing it, detailing it as queer, as a queering of not only himself but of his presence...a gay presence now and forever *not* Pierce: a presence singular and indefinable and indescribable and unmentionable... Pete embraces the virus which jumps him a transcendental layer.

Pierce, at the same time, was getting pissed that he was, once again, not getting off.

CHAPTER 20

At Peter Aloyious McInny O'Doul, Jr.'s grave—standing, kneeling, blazing as flame, prostrate, face into the moist dampness which was now all that his presence was, is—shall be, intoning, "...now and forever. Amen."

A curious Catholic funeral. Oddly so to Pierce because he had never been at one. A mite bit more curious if he had been able to relish Pete's final prank—missed by most about him, most interpreting it as the result of a yet to be disclosed *Death-Bed-Confession*, seeing it as the *Return of the Prodigal Son*—missed, except by a few who thought it at least ironic...but missed in general, so allowing Pete to laugh as he really never liked to laugh—*alone*.

As requested, the funeral Mass was a High Black Mass. Steamingly gloomy. Weighty drapes drawn over stained-glass windows. Air thickly blackened by stout candles which spewed an oily residue. All darkened in spirit by the requisite somber vestments and apparel. Pitchblende black offset by coal-dust black highlighted by inky-tar accessories—all dreary funeral dress, expressed most fetchingly in the several hats—worn upon Pete's specific request—fluttering flocks of ebony and raven netting, such was the sight, his last laugh with the program titled: "I am a Light unto Death"—his final priestly ritual in harmony and chant: sonorous, horrific "Dies irae, dies illa..." ("Days of Wrath and Doom Impending, O What Fear Man's Bosom Rendereth...") in an orchestration precisely and perfunctorily performed with charnel charm by an aged, long ago deaf to the buzzings of the world, now *emeritus* Monsignor McCarthy—pastorally accepting this request as he had Pete's upon the burial of his father one year and his mother the next, now some years ago, too many for the gnarled fingers to count...so his final act, his queering ritual was set by Pete, set down in a letter to an "old chum," one who had remained "inside" but remained so monkishly incarcerated because he lived vicariously through his Minor Seminary bud, *Petey the O'D's* uncloseted and unfrocked escapades...knowing the deeply dark Celtic humor of his holiest of friends, not even he however plundering the depth of the sob...of that single, solitary, eros-less sob from the eternal soul of the male who had sought "Presence."

The sob—whether in a hell or a heaven: *Does Pete know? As to location?*—was the fulfillment of presence, not its simple linguistic lack.

Thus for Pete, his sob on earth made present through his audiotaped gift to Pierce—his *verbum*:

My dear, sweet of heart Pierce. My piercing man. My Centurion Lance.
Oh, truly have I been pierced!

How I know now all that I have sought to know. Sought and found with you in the moment of fulfillment, the same moment of loss. You have taught me so much! Yet I know that it is not for you to know this from me, not now, maybe not from me forever. I do not understand the process, but I have been transformed. Thank you. I love you.

I sob. Please, sweet one, do not think this as just sorrow. No. Though it is not your way, it is mine. The Cross is a sorrowful sob. As is the Resurrection a blissful one. I love you because only you have brought me to both. I sobbed when you became present to me. Your presence was this

sobbing, because you were at the same moment away from me. This I have come to grasp, to understand is presence—*sobbing*.

I've offered you the mythic way. I do not know if it will be your way, or if it need be your way. But if you do, it is Cain and Abel. This our story. Not Adam and Eve. This I have come to understand as I sobbed.

Why did Cain slay Abel? As with myths, the surface meaning is a misdirection. Whether he slew him in the body or not is as trivial as the question of the bodily Resurrection. What the story is, is us—same sex lovers. The positing in this great mythic tradition at its source of our queer way. Not the Garden of Eden and all its passionless heart. Wretched story! All its passion reduced to genital play! Ah, such a pornographic curse upon the self-proclaimed Chosen Ones!

It is us: Cain and Abel. *Sacrifice*. Arguing over sacrifice. Both sacrificing. But seeking something MORE. Fuller. Seeking, as I know now, so terribly know in the cells of my body—self-consuming am I—my whole being one Sob!

Presence. It is my word, and I bequeath it to you. For it is the bond of Cain and Abel. One departed—into death or some new place, who cares? The other—to wander forever! Can there be a stronger, more tender, more enriching bond? That Cain and Abel are never separated. *They live forever*, in each other's presence!

Cain is not killed, for he did not kill! We know Yahweh for his savage justice, but even He could not grasp what his sons had revealed, what they had made present!

They are living forever. Living as each other's presence.

It is *them*, they who are not like us, they who—so apt the word for us in its blissful resonance—are not *gay*...these were the ones who cast out Cain. Yahweh would have slain him if it had been a matter of true sin. Please, please let this be known!

You are a genius, my Pierce. And I have been pierced by you. You are my charming boy. I love you with a greediness you may never become fully aware of, but I do.

It is you who pierced me. Doing so by sacrificing me. I your Abel. You my Cain. Sacrificed as you brought into, no, no, you conjured, made our presence actually present when you unfolded to me the twisting depth within your presence of *him*, this other... *Jude*.

Oh, you twisted me! Transformed me. Broadened me. Widened me.
Bloated me with your deathless fucking...till you pierced me with
Jude...and we sobbed! *Our presence.*

I go. I speak these words because it is my breathing I leave with you. Ever
inhaling your name. Ever exhaling your name.

Always are you piercing me my love!

Living with *you*, my Beloved, forever. Pete

Pierce has played Pete's message five times. Each time his message becomes clearer.
Clearer in the reductive way Pierce always understood Pete—as letting him free, unlocking cages
Pierce didn't know he was in until Pete held the key in front of him, inserted it, rotated and spun
Pierce out or in or however but then present to a new world, a novel experience, a feeling and a
rush of thoughts which had been unanticipated.

Yes, Pete certainly did sacrifice himself—whispered inside his cosmic brain. *He has set me,
his Cain, free to wander.*

*Free...*and if he understood the words of this queer lover, his Beloved, then he was free to
wander, to seek and search out he, *him*, the one who had made them present, this Jude.

This, then, *Pierce's Truth*. Delivered sobbingly, *She will never be here*. But, *Who is here?*
Jude is here.
("Why?")

PART FIVE: JUDE

CHAPTER 21

Jude had left Pierce as he had left Claire: dead.
Truer, "Murdered."

He knew him as slain.
Watched the body in its quaint quakes and shivers and rattles of dying.
Blood seeking its boundaries of gravity. Sweet kiss of the line; outline.
Cain—soul murderer.

"You listened to his lies!?"
"Mostly his Lie."
She was choking—children like broken swords denying her reflex; she vomits within.

I am The Great Mother!
I'm sorry, I gave that to Claire.
I don't care, I want it from *you*.
I'm sorry, you got it from Pierce.

Fucker!

“What do I care if you could’ve made that touchdown?” Swarm of gnats’ irritation.

“Because you could’ve made it, too.” Sympathy.

“But then I’d have to accept my Lie, our Lie, his Lie.”

Why am I here?

In sum, what they both knew about Pete made an afghan of mottled pieces.

“Do you think Pierce could ever get beyond his own charm?”

“Is this the insight of your marriage—that he snaked himself?”

She giggles.

He slaps her butt, playfully and with pride.

Claire, *I’m dug out.*

“I never got it. Not for a very, very long time. She was decay before I even began to get it. See, I have to admit, I *terribly missed* her life. Misunderstood her. Mis-named her. For she wasn’t Light, but seeking Light. She thought that I was a light, maybe The Light, that I’m not sure of.

I thought she wanted children. What else, I seeded her. She saw it—how could I have been so blind? She saw it as being dug out.”

Sharon, she didn’t need to say “Womb to Tomb” but it was there.

“How many ways did I miss her? Not hear her? Misread her? Everything about me was a lie. How else could she have read me? Heard me? My words, “I love you,” what to her? Daggers? Spades plunged into her belly?

Looking back I realize, it was like with Pierce. I wanted the motherfucker to throw himself in front of me, give me that goddam block! Wanted him to do something, all the time misreading him, he just not being able, because, what?...*the block was within me?*...sounds like crap, but something like that.”

Jude would say this, say it in a thousand ways, a thousand stories, a thousand moments of reminiscence...all the time hoping that he was pushing her away, very, very conscious that he wanted to push her away, that he did not want to move, not move beyond his Memory, not create a new reality where Pierce did throw that block, did give that head-fake...no, he was lying.

Shoo! “You’re guilty. As guilty as a female Cain! You knew you’d eventually slay him. I hear you, hear you saying, ‘I don’t want to live forever!’ and ‘Mothers die for children to be born.’ I hear you, right? *You knew!*”

It was “knew” in the sense of fuck: “You fucking knew! You fucked as you knew! You knew you were fucking him to death!”

Amen.

Males are really stupid children; useful, but ...

I wanted Claire to be you.

You do understand that?

Pierce wanted me to be you.

You do understand that.

"I only gave her my male. My cock. That's it, isn't it?"

"Too stupid not to be true."

"But how was I to know she wanted me to mother her?"

"You're lying. *You know.*"

He had to leave her. Jude had to depart this very flash away from this woman, this person, this presence, this event which was stabbing him, no, no—*Liar! Liar!*—she was charming him, drawing him out of his Memory—that which was Lie.

In his own room: somewhere, some place, in this dream room he turns and acknowledges the presence of Claire.

Didn't you expect to see me when you saw her? Are we not Sisters?

Spectral laughter, oddly warm, edged with a vitality that snaps Jude "Awake!"

How could I have told you? That I wanted you to slay me. Not murder me, no, my darling, my love, my shared heart, to open me, wider than at birth, that children were not it, not what you are to me, that I wanted you closer.

The skin on his hands begins to peel back, slowly from nail cuticles heaving off anchors and smoothly unrolling like a backwards wave from the beach, no longer seeking end in the sand, a terminus on the earth, but sailing off into a horizonless sunset.

"I, I," halting, not afraid, just unsure of direction, "I, I, I wanted your intimacy. Craved your intimacy. What part of you did I not relish and honor and ...? Not want to give you of myself? Tell me. *Please* tell me, I can't stand to Lie anymore!"

And as he woke he knew that she had never left. Had been and would be with him, forever.

Two couples meet for a fine repast. Jude and Sharon are aware that they are moving through a ritual of sorts, not harshly conscious, just letting it happen, this happening being dinner, calling and arranging and attending to nourishment, to fine-food, of every sort, of fine wine...eating, supping, consuming with a "Here, have a taste of this" on a fork, extended, not offered, not a play for anything but a shared pleasure. As such, now always a shared pleasure... early mornings—few as they have been—are fresh bagels and pungent coffee, he strong-bodied and straight from the bean, she with dashes of flavors drawn from extracted chemical imaginations...so they eat as they prepare.

"Do you think language makes this impossible?"

They have been here before.

"It never seems to make it possible for us."

What does that mean, then?

It's that we take too little of the world. At least for some of us. Isn't this what Pierce and Claire have in common?

But we thought we were taking everything they could give.

True.

Why else did I have those other men?

And why did I wait so long for you...for her to die, then?

"There's a lot of truth in their lives."

"More, I'm afraid than we've been able to admit."

“Are we lying, again? I mean, not now, but with *their* lives?”

“Not sure. I think *how* we lied is what we’ve come to admit...confess, really.”

“It *is* that, isn’t it. The *how*.”

“Seems so.”

“We really *did* love them.”

“That’s what they wanted. Like it or not, we must’ve wanted it, too.”

Turning, in such a turn that the senses belie that the world turned, also turning in a way that was not North and South, East or West, not even Horizontal or Vertical, but in a way which was never before.

“Love is forever. That’s for sure.”

Neither said it: *We’re for now!*

Both heard it.

Jude and Sharon: “Hello!”...”Hello!”

At a First Meeting.

CHAPTER 22

Now.

“There is nothing but Now. The Future and the Past are lies.”

She shocks him by snatching his resting penis, a stealth by clutch.

“What!?!?” He fears mutilation!

Scolding: “How can you say something that stupid?”

He gulps.

She shakes her head, *naughty boy*—a “Don’t do that again!” shake—winks threateningly.

“So?”

“It’s Now because of the Past and the Future.”

He grimaces, *Splitting hairs!*

She slaps his thigh, hard enough to get his attention. “Don’t give me that look. It’s all the difference. Pierce and Claire are all the difference. Even Pete. Even *those* guys,” and with an inclusive embrace of guilt she eyes him, “Even *those* women you’ve never told me about.”

He snorts like a kid sputtering pop through his nose; swipes his face as he shouts, stammers and makes those imperceptible jerks which move him a cosmos away from her, *Not guilty! You have no evidence. I’m not guilty....*

“those women...” she finishes with a faked stabbing jab at his groin.

“Pierce could have had you.”

“Possibly.” A syllabically stretched series of ses. “Pah...ssssssssiiii..bly.” Not so much a word as a sound, him not wanting her to interpret out loud what he knows she is saying.

Icily: “Those other guys were just try-outs. Dummies. Like your tackling dummies. Only when I strapped on and mounted him did I know, however...have to admit that.”

“But I would have never....”

“Sssssh!” finger-tips on his lips. *Let me show you.*

She firms him up.

Strokes. Slow and long.

Fingertips. Slithering like tongues, like wrapping ribbons.

Moist tongues. Four-thousand all at once, a dervish whirling of lust.

Jude is harder than harder and as high as he can stretch, she now having him “there,” there where “he” is the identity of his penis, cock, rod, boner, jammer, rammer, dick, stick, knife, blade, sword...*whew! He is there.*

She has transformed him, made him lose connection with his bodily self and is all *Now* in his penis-consciousness-unconsciousness...where she wants him, knowing this as a state beyond intoxication, he never to remember what he says during this time, his pledges, his promises, his vows...because in this *Now* she is at home being one with all women, hearing him as if he is all men, in that conversation which inevitably gets out of control, so far out that he tries to empty himself into her, and here he does, again—taking her by the hair and lifting her just a tad too hard, pulling her up and eating off her lips, savaging her with a fierce fire which is unashamed to melt her cheeks and lick her beauty, then rolling her over and around, intentionally sweating...blood of his passion, sweating so that she is spotted by him, scented, stained and marked so that she is his only one, *One and Only!*...so the Lie: again and again and again...but she is there too, for this she knows, this is common ground with Jude and Pierce and all the males, the ground she only tread beyond once, that once when dildoing Pierce, but now she is Lying also, taking him upon her loamy box, setting her buttock into the mattress like the edging around a garden plot, there waiting for the rain, his rain, waiting and waiting and waiting...for the disappearance as the rain vanishes but the ground remains, now only as wet but still ground, so she waits...he rains, *thunder-clap.*

“Stupendous!” And he squeezes her a tad too hard.

He blows out several rapid big manly sighs, bellows out a huge fart, not embarrassed, just drowning in this pounding surf of pleasure...does all this and flops over to his side—oblivious of her.

Not that he hasn’t done her right. Hard sucks upon her breasts. Fondling of her clitoris. Firm grasps upon her buttock. Mad desire drooling from his eyes upon her face. All his flesh afire. *Ah*, he did her right. She even remained enough in the Lie to accept that, and like it.

Just a robe half-on, carrying two cups of newly perked coffee.

He tenting the sheet with his knees. Zapping the remote.

She eyes the tube: “Little boys chasing balls...*gaily?*”

He smiles an impish smile, but does not surrender the magic: *Click. Click.*

She sets the cups on the nightstand. Knees the bed as she leans over and snaps her fingers over his reclusive dick, “Click. Click.” She rolls her eyes as she sticks out her tongue and wags her head.

Jude mutes the game and tosses the remote control unit onto her pillow.

She quickly picks it up, points it towards the TV and with a slow torture *clicks* them into tele-darkness.

“Are we any different? Just Claire and Pierce fucking as Jude and Sharon?”

“But it *is* different.” Jude’s not sure if he is making a statement or forming his own question.

“Why do you think you’re any different than those other guys?”

Nasty, “Maybe I don’t want to be different from those *other guys?!?*”

You know we both know we're playing this game.
You know we both know we know about Lying.
You know we both know that we have to do this.
You know we both know that we don't know how to do this.

The *how*.

"It isn't our bodies. That's what we all thought was the how. Feverishly trying to understand 'How to make ecstatic love.' Reading books. *Kama Sutra*. *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*. All that."

"I know what you're going to say. But I don't know if I want you to say it. I'm happy when we fuck. I don't want to fuck that up."

"Jude!" Dismissive annoyance. Impatience. "I really wonder if *maybe* the lesbians aren't on to something." Almost spite.

"Aw, shit, honey, I didn't mean to make you angry, unhappy..."

Again, her hand on his mouth stops him; gags him.

"Listen!"

He wants to be attentive. Says to himself, *How?*

"When you get like this—any of you guys—I just don't know, it's all a Lie, the Big Lie, that you, you guys, *any of you fucking guys!* can or do or want to, hell, I don't know... Do you *want* to listen to me?" Totally vulnerable inquiry; heart beating atop her chest.

Jude grits his teeth, unintentionally grimaces so baring his fangs—his mind is all thoughts about eating his own head, seeing himself opening his gape and chomping down on his own head—*Weird!*—he is sweating rivers inside his skin.

He is a mere one flinch and hesitation too long—Sharon bolts from the bed, naked but clothed by departure.

She is in the kitchenette part of the suite. They having chosen to spend days in rented spaces in upscale hotels rather than be distracted by "Your place or mine?" type maskings of "Why don't we live together?" Sharon is seated on a stool, one of four around the food bar. Her cup of coffee is still full, and no smoke signals are rising. *Both naked.*

"It's me and Pierce, isn't it?"

She gazes out as if he's not within her sight.

"Right." He is at the farthest stool. He wishes he had something to hold. Rakes his hands through his hair. Reflexively rubs his palms on his gut, aware of his grossness, of his total unattractiveness, at that instant moment feeling like a left-over wrinkled baked potato, half-eaten, justly to be picked up and tossed into the garbage can.

"Right." Eyes closed. Blank.

Okay.

"Pierce and me," almost imperceptible—more thought than talk.

"We're like blind guys. Maybe that's not the right image. But, what can I say? We're like totally blind. Maybe mute and blind...*dumb*. Okay...but I don't know if women are any blind-less—what would it be?—less blind? Okay. Right. I'll accept this. What Pierce's lying was all about. That women are useful. Sure. Okay. *Christ!* Maybe if a guy came onto me, maybe if Pierce had actually tried to seduce me, maybe then I'd know, have some way of saying "No, I don't want that. That's not it." Maybe. Not sure. When I was with Claire—*once*—we both were

sick, quite sick, and I don't know, we just got into bed and turned towards each other and maybe it was the drugs, you know how medicine can do this, like you separate from your body, you float about, and we floated about, above the bed, looking down at ourselves, knowing that we were looking down on ourselves...then it happened, we both knew that we couldn't figure out which bodies to go back to, that somehow—our eyes, we were looking into our eyes—okay, that's it, we looked and we couldn't figure out who was who...she never talked about it, I didn't know whether I should, drugs and all that...but we knew, from that day on...knew that something *could* happen.” He hadn't seen her turn towards him...silent rotation of galactic attraction.

She, herself, had understood it, all of it. *It*—What she and Pierce could only approach through mock play. Until she strapped it on and sensed as enlightenment the wave of desire, no, craving, not just desire, the hunger—seething but disciplined desire which hardens into craving, such a craving rushing back at her from him: changes her, alters her, kicks her in the head and she is two-headed as she is two-cocked, her clitoris blooming and bursting through the dildo, shattering it and blasting into its place, not physical place, not just anal canal like Eire Canal, no, her total maleness rising to a godly presence, a Deistic force, not just plunging but plundering, rampaging in playfulness, in an edgy joy, a most horrific pain as she is the charm for Pierce, she the charming snake, her whole body becoming cock...taking what he could never give, might have not even known that he is now unintentionally giving...never coming back to her after that moment, that penetration...but as she listens to Jude, now she knows why Pierce craved Jude.

CHAPTER 23

How.

They both agreed, they had loved their spouses.

“Love. An emotion when the other person is perceived as an object.”

“A bit warmer than that, don't you think?”

He reaches across the bed and lightly strokes her breasts.

“I come in pieces, don't I?”

“Me, too.”

Pierce had needed a male who didn't need him. For whom his charms were not charming. His conscious mind would never confess it but that male was Jude. This is what Sharon is exploring, remembering him looking back at her, just a tilt of his head, and she now knows that Pierce was seeing her not with that “useful” look which she had so falsely interpreted as love but eyeing at this moment oddly, making her feel queer...*Pierce craved her!*

But she knew it was not her, not her as Sharon, but that something else which was useless, what the dildo effected—she was just the remote operator, strapping it on as if a robot, not a fleshly appendage, true, but as she worked him so it became a spiritual one, a deeply probing psychic tool.

She heard herself eye him back, *I don't need you.*

Using that sexual contraption Sharon had become Pierce's lover. True lover—willing to do anything, lay down her life...but still expecting to hear back an *I love you so that you'll love me.*

“There's no such thing as selfless love.”

Jude is shocked, not by her words but by the emotion. *What is she feeling?*

“If it had been love, I would have hated him.”

“For all those times he didn’t see you?”

“No. For this time, *seeing* me.”

It was really odd. “Peculiar,” said to himself.

It was shut-down time. As if their First Meeting was over. Lasting now several months, but over. Just like that. *Snap!*

Without further conversation, they both got off the bed and began their various tasks preparatory to leaving. Sharon always straightened the bed. Not make it up, but took it out of total disarray into a semblance of “just messed.” Then she’d shower, put on make-up and leave. This time, no make-up.

For Jude it was the shower first, “I’m faster,” and a bit of stretching before he simply put on this and that, ran his hand through his hair—“Pillow combed!” she’d chide—and head out the door; always stopping in the hotel lobby for a cup of coffee to go.

It went that way this time.

Jude, uncharacteristically, skipped the coffee.

Even more off-center, Sharon was first out the door.

Four months. There would be no messages. No cards. No calls. Not even hang-ups.

There might have been thoughts and feelings and desires but such are not recorded on any record historical, etheric, astral or otherwise dimensional.

Blank.

Jude and Sharon went blank.

PART SIX: WORSHIP

CHAPTER 24

Once Upon A Time, the world was as the world is.

All that was, was within the arms of an embrace.

Within this embrace, imaginings and drops and sprinkles of all things surged back and forth into entities and substances and bodies all about.

Plants and animals and rocks and airy fragrances played upon the temporal wind and scale majestic and entropic.

As was, so is: a music of discord striving for harmony and melody and full-throated song.

As was, so is: an embrace wherein she and he discovered themselves as Beloveds.

Once Upon A Time, Sharon and Jude wrapped within an embrace.

“Do you want to grow old, together?” A question either one could have asked, and just did, simultaneously. Like a duet, they were in sync.

Another four months had flitted away but it was as if they had never left the bed at their last hotel. Back into a penthouse suite, snuggling, not wanting to distract from the issue both knew was at hand, they met, kissed, slipped out of their clothes and right into bed, never letting their eyes stray each from the other.

“Our kids would have a good time with that. *You’re old already!* Can’t you hear them squeal!”

He reached out and touched her cheek with messaging fingertips, “They’ve already spent the inheritance!”

Both smile a silly and dismissive smile.

Each knows that more serious matters thrive within their foolishness.

“I asked myself *Why are we apart?* and I came up with a thousand answers. A long list.”

She waits. Always interested in lists.

But he hesitates too long, “And ...?”

“Err, you want my *Top Ten*?” he arches his eyebrows in mock amazement.

She wishes, at that moment, that she could swat his dick. She hated him when he caught her so quickly and with the goods in tow.

“Go on.” Not pushing his amusement, rather attending to the moment.

“You know,” registering a tone which betrayed his penchant for long explanations, “Ya know, when I was real little, back in Bayonne, my mother always had me make two lists. She said this was a “Family Tradition”—if you can believe that, parents saying things like that which stay with you the rest of your life...Did I ever tell you about how far back my family goes? To the Mayflower and all that. Or sorta, somewhere back there, my mom was into genealogy...”

“Jude!” Pleading. Cop holding *Stop* sign. Wayfarer suddenly recognizing a friend.

“... into genealogy.”

“Jude.”

He looks at her blankly. With a “What was I saying?” stare.

“The list, Sweet One. The list.”

“Yeah. Sure. Just a joke, really. Mom always had me make two lists. ‘Positive and Negative’ she’d say. So what I really did was write out this *Why We’re Apart* list so I could get to the *Why We Should Be Together* list.”

He stops and looks at her. Again, a shade blankly.

She starts to giggle. Catches herself.

“Earth to Captain Jude!” Her fingertips tapping impatiently—“*What is it?*”

He presses his lips tight and blows out his cheeks like the proverbial bull-frog. Holds, straining, like holding a pee. She watches. Observes. He’s still holding it. Then, one puffing blow: an exhale like a small balloon popping.

“*Worship.*” Actually, a long extension of each syllabic beat: *were* and *ship*. Amazingly, the word did actually sail off. She watches it launch from his lips and bobble up and down and yaw and lurch until it steadies itself and in a parabolic arc sails steadily towards her, she the wharf where the anchor of worship is dropped.

It scared her: this eternal instant upon which the word was formed, assumed its phantasmagorical shape, and bolted towards her seeking reality in the acceptance of her hearing. In that same eternity, Sharon wanted desperately to be back at yesterday. *Back then* or whatever it was that had preceded this moment, this coming back into Jude’s presence, for she now knows all of the fears which she thought she had dealt with when they had long ago youthfully separated, wants so, so desperately to wake from this bad dream, to be faceless and

blind and without hearing, a something, not even a creature, but that something which had existed, no, hovered, had simply floated in upon an aloneness, a separateness, a space of total singularity but one wherein she had had all the power—to accept the Lie of her life with Pierce, to accept the hatred she had of Jude for being late, to confirm within herself that Jude was not worth the effort now that he was an ageing coot...the mentally sounded *coot* comforts her since she knows that she herself is not really ageing, not old, not-so because no one could truly see her and if they tried, anyway, she was faceless...*useless*.

Back then, now confessorially—she had relished Pierce’s failure to only find her useful. Admittedly, as she first floated so had she accepted that Pierce and Jude as all males were, as were all other humans, simply illusions and delusions—simply imaginary, spectral playthings of her creative mind.

Nevertheless, now she was scared; depthlessly.
“*Worship*.”

“That’s a meaningless term”...verdict: as she stands and walks over to the wet bar, finds some red wine and starts peeling the seal.

Jude is taken aback both by the abruptness of her response and the oddity of her checking out a bottle of wine right now. Not only is it only ten a.m. but Sharon has never shown any interest in wine—a long-standing serious hobby of Jude’s.

He recovers. At the intellectual level, “What do you mean *meaningless*?”

She twirls the bottle in her hands. It appears that she’s reading the label. In this moment, actually, Sharon is contemplating murder. The word *worship* had evoked a fear which grew so vast so astoundingly fast that before she realized it she had stood up and started walking as her mind finished rehearsing the details of her move. *Walk. Pick up a bottle. Turn. Smile. Distract. Smash.*

The blood and the wine mingled in her mind as the acceptable solution, as the appropriate symbolic response to this singular word.

Naked murderer.

A frozen moment. Her heart pounds. Random beads of sweat sneak out from under the protection of her bounteous hair.

“Sharon?” Bewildered inquiry.

With a startled step backwards—Jude anticipates she is fainting—but an as quick recovery lurching forward, Sharon re-sets the bottle back on a shelf, rattling it as it settles, hands quivering and twitching, a motion Jude does not see, rather watching her from behind he simply sees her return the bottle, so thinks nothing of it...is simply waiting for her to speak.

“How can you and I,” still back to him, then turning, “*understand* such a word?”

The hopelessness of her tonal phrasing attacks him. He just sitting there, solicitous, and as she turns it is like a tsunami wave or a flock of wild geese or an explosion so powerful that there is no sound, simply sundering—just sitting there and her face reveals the chasm, the depth of despair, the void which hungers with a sucking tongue...Jude is absolutely terrified.

In this inexpressibility of a moment, they know what they knew but only in the most superficial of ways at their First Meeting. That all their life had been a Lie, not a Lie which is balanced by a Truth, but a Lie which was not balanced by anything, which exists on its own, which made their individual lives seem to have a storyline. *The Lie of Lovers*—they had this phrase, knew it as an amusement and as a sad commentary on their lives to that date. *Lovers* as

ones through whom life continues, extends itself, throbs. They had said it at various times, “The Lie of Lovers” but in the same breath always knew that they had nothing else to say. This, why they had gone blank so often, had turned the page and found their life together, blank.

Now, the page waits to be written upon.

First Word—*Worship*.

More terrifying than any words, than this paltry conversation, this poverty of communication was the realization that they had begun. *Begun*. That, though they had been physically apart, they were always in embrace; had always been.

Not simply sexual conjugation but worshipping embrace—the simple act of asking the question had altered their sight, each of the other...and the dread was the stabbing joy of the moment which came as they shared the insight that they had begun to give meaning to this word *worship*—to become its presence.

“*It’s not that easy.*” Pierce’s burden was also magically there this moment. Each drew back, shifted themselves away from the other ever so slightly, did all they could to shield themselves from the sight of the other.

Jude closes his eyes and plops down onto a sofa, there to assume a *rigor mortis* pose with a pillow suffocating his voice.

Sharon simply bolts from her spot and finds refuge in the bathroom.

It was past noon before the tinklings and creaking sounds of working in Jude’s kitchen snipped at his ears giving the signal, “Safe! It’s safe to emerge.”

Adam and Eve without fig leaves.

The table was spread in the most standard of ways. What she had brought from home to make the stiff beauty of the luxury penthouse more comforting. Simple every day dishes and plastic glasses with cheap paper napkins, and, as always, the chipped set of shakers, a gift from the grandkids, transforming the kitchen...just ham and cheese and diet sodas, a travel clock ticking away: analog not digital, just a woman and a man, a late middle-aged woman and a late middle-aged man, a grand woman and a grand man, pulling back the chairs, both not hearing the squeak of the linoleum...just Jude and Sharon having lunch.

They ate and barely talked. Each allowing food in the mouth to halt any efforts at “Talking with your mouth full!” which they knew was childishly forbidden, so had they forbidden, so are they forbidden.

They eat and barely glance at one another. Attending to other things. Crumbs on the plate. Dabbing a mustard splotch off a cheek. Swishing the ice cubes around to hasten the cooling of the drink. Such things. Intentional and unintentional things.

They ate, *together*.

The dishes done. Despite the presence of the sonic dishwasher, Jude hand-washed the dishes—soaped and rinsed and within the same musical stroke Sharon picked up a towel and dried them.

Lunch over. Kitchen neated. They walk back into the living room.

Both sit down on the sofa, separate ends. Resting an arm. Holding space between them like a blanket on the beach.

Smiles: at the same moment, maestro wand raised, each smiles: small smile, genuine and not forced, each a small smile of satisfaction.

“Why are *we* together.” She did not utter it as a question.

“Do you think,” and so it began, “that some of us are simply joined together differently?”

She furrows her brow, momentarily. The slightest of rotation of her head, a minuscule dip of the chin, ears at the ready.

“I thought about Pierce and Claire and Pete...about many men and women, in all types of relationships I’ve known. Some seem not able to love. This we all know. They seem only to be cocks and cunts. Sexual athletes and such. Ya know?”

“Women wouldn’t see it just that way. Not that way, I think.”

“Not even lesbians? Or celibates?”

She holds his questions as the answers to his questions.

“*Fine*. Grant me this way of looking at it. Some people seem not able to love. Others seem only to love. They need a two-way relationship. An ‘I give you this, you give me that.’ Where kids are the medium of exchange. I’m sure you’ve know that.”

She nods an unhesitant affirmation.

“Then there are some—us, I think—what was it, that old classic, ‘Love’s a second-hand emotion’...always disliked that, but it makes some sense to me now. Because there’s something greater, a first-hand emotion. Get it?” His ending rises on a wave of excitement, of the need for eager acceptance—a beggar fully expecting a toss of the coin of the realm.

Sharon stares at him, a non-communicating eyeing.

Jude half-stands and then plops to a spot half-way between them.

Sharon holds her ground. “You want my opinion? Or just tell you you’re right?”

Jude hangs his head; does not retreat.

“I don’t think language is helping us here.”

Either one could have, did have, must have said it.

Jude shifts and consumes all that remains of the space between them, legs leaning against legs, hands resting atop hands, eyes so close that they can see into interior distance.

“But I need your words.” As if he had said he wouldn’t give them?

“Jude, I also need your words because words are all we’ve had. Maybe it’s all we’ll ever have. I’m not sure but I have this belief, this idea that we need to talk so we can finally become silent...Does that make any sense?”

“Jesus, honey, I love...” He halts, struggles, bites his lip, then exhales, “Christ Almighty, Sharon, I want to worship you!”

She hears his word. But it is his intent which beats in tempo with her own heart: *It is true, yes, sweet Jude, true, some of us can no longer Lie, must speak the Truth—we are not “just lovers.”*

CHAPTER 25

Not just lovers.

It was a phrase which held them, pinned them, like a safety pin slipped through their navels. If they moved—incredible pain.

“Why did we human start to dress?” He laughs at them—himself and her.

“It’s crossed my mind.”

Clothed by nakedness...need they do more? Ha.

Noticing—the physical intensity of their sightings of one another was majestic, swept away like seventeen year olds—all Buck and Doe, all Whooping Warrior swooping down on Lady Bathing at lake’s edge...they barely stopped to describe it, for they were beyond words...not that words weren’t faithful, just that they did not need sound, for their passion for each other seethed—their flesh, all hands and eyes and tongues and rollings and tossings and mountings and kneelings and probings and joltings and snugglings, all this spoke what was spoken, what needed to be spoken, what they wanted to say to each other.

They knew that they were in love. Big letters: LOVE.

Love was the easy part.

Familiar.

Path trodden. Grass trampled.

Love allowed for the parting.

The separation.

The forgetting.

The dying of embers.

When she first had had Pierce she convinced herself that she had this love. *Was I always in denial about Jude?*

When he first had had Claire he convinced himself that he had this love. *Was I always blind to Claire?*

This type of love—which defined Love as they had been educated and had observed—this type of love was that which made being alive seem to really be alive.

“Horror—that you’ll leave.”

“Absolute fear—that you’ll die.”

It was the essence of a Love which requires Forgetting and Abandonment and Obliteration and...yes, Hatred.

Both know this. Even intellectually had come to it, each on their own as also when together.

It was Love as always The Lie.

“I never wanted to hate you this much, Jude.”

"I never wanted to fear your death this much."

"Is this why most let the embers die?"

"Snuff 'em out."

They smile a guilty smile; each.

How to let go of this?

Why let go?

"Should we?"

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Another choice?"

They read each other's mind and soul.

It was Love as always The Lie.

"I thought Pierce had let go."

Why does she pause?

"You mean that Pete was *only* you?"

She almost spits! "No! That he was only you, *stupid*. How many times..." and she is gagged by her anger, her spite, her hatred.

*Whoa!...*He quantum leaps elsewhere; anywhere.

Jude had gotten up, more, was spooked like quail—fluttered up and away, taking himself over to the wet bar. Uncorks one of his favorite Merlots and pours himself a glass; one for her.

Her bra. Alights next to his left foot. Dare he turn?

"Coward."

Shit, what now? What kind of game is this?

Her skirt. Two shoes. Followed in physical time by balled up nylons.

Ankle deep in her skins; shed.

He doesn't have to look. He knows. She's fiercely naked.

"Fiercely" because she had been naked all the time...now *naked* naked!

It's a curious bit of reprieve. He takes a quick gulp—so rarely a gulper, but here it might work...gulps again and refills his glass a third time, then pivots, frontal attack.

"*Me*. I'm the Coward?"

The wine in the crystal goblet he extends is the blood they must drink.

"Quiet!...Let's begin."

A command, but not lust driven.

She does not step over to help him, as she so often has...no seduction.

She takes her glass, sips. Her eyes are dripping blood.

He, bare-assed yet fully dressed in his skin, picks up his glass again. Steps into the symmetry.

“I know I don’t have to say this, that we dress up to talk about intimacy. About worship. It happens all the time. We’ve both let it happen.” This is something she had to say, and upon saying it, she feels a release of tension—not of a coil within but as of a burden without—throwing off a heavy cloak from upon her shoulders, one with a thick hood capping her head and neck.

Jude raises his glass, an acknowledgment.

They both sip.

Both are aware of the shared blood of the vine flowing within them.

“Do you *want* me?”

Her tone. Her inflection. All tones. All inflections. An echoing word. A cascading question. Question and interrogation and indictment and accusation. Quickened with allurements and seduction and shamelessness and pornographic bellow.

He senses it.

She knows it.

He is throttled. She throbs.

Blank.

Blank, together; again.

Glasses empty.

No wine spilled. Tribute of the vine intact.

“Where are we?”

“No, my dear, *who* are we?”

He is clothed by his blindness—self-imposed closure of eyes. He doesn’t want to see her, not see Sharon. Not see himself.

“I can’t see you,” she states sarcastically. *Men are really weird!*

Three minutes...half-an-hour...four weeks...what did it matter? He just found himself seated; sat down and escaped into a chair, into the embrace of a reality, one substantial, an exit for ethereal escape—so Jude escapes.

They had placed the wine glasses down, each without breaking; each without caring whether a drop remained as residue.

Each was on another planet...or some such other dimension.

But they were there together.

Both know this.

Want this.

It arose as a day-dream. They knowing it as such. Watching it rise and arrive. A common sight. Which came upon their common breathing. Naked except for the cloak of their breathing; this their shared connection. Wrapping them as they sit six Euclidean feet away from each other.

Breathing which transverses the distance of every dimension: Pythagorean, Newtonian, Einsteinian, Planckian, Aquinian, Teilhardian, spectral, divine, transcendental...whatever

algorithm or equation or transformational jot and tittle which had separated them, which had allowed them to cut and twist and sever themselves, their presence—split in two so that they could become Lovers.

Breathing which rose and made itself tangible, and revealed itself intangible: inhale, exhale: breathing.

Fig leaves no more!...an epiphanous moment... humorous... laughing...embracing.

Breathing which floats them, drifts them through sounds—lung sculpted sounds which are words, words but more—names...more, *Names*: jude-sharon, isis-osiris, inanna-demuzi, rama-sita...whispered, barely audible, unspoken...jesus-mary, abraham-sarah, abelard-heloise... unknown, forgotten, unintelligible...all jude-sharon, adam-eve, all jude-sharonsharonjudejudesharon.....

Breathing which stops.

Light which has abandoned the day.

Darkness flitting into nooks and crannies.

Clocks round-housing and crisscrossing.

Breathing which stops.

They stopped breathing.

They started Breathing.

CHAPTER 26

“This is disturbing.” Sharon has said this often these last months. Jude nods in agreement.

“Is it the sense of personal distance, of *personal space* as some call it, or what?”

Jude purses his lips but admits nothing.

They had shared images. They wanted to avoid jargon so they sought to “just talk, babble on.”

“I know there’s something in me, talking with me, actually arguing—sounds schizoid, for sure!—but it goes on, sometimes all day, that I’m,” and she pauses, not so much to capture the right word but to confront the feeling, that feeling which happens *then*: *then* being those times “it” happens...“that I’m not supposed to get *that close*.”

“Skin,” Jude begins, “it’s like we’re unrolling skin. Miles and miles of skin. Not wrapping us but coiling, somehow, down and down...which feels like up and up—that happens to you?”

She grits her teeth and locks her lips.

“It simply *more*.”

“Fuller.”

“Right. *Fuller*.”

“When I come to you—hands and fingers—it’s like I’m walking, no, really like flying, flying low over the ground, like a blimp looking for subs, I can see below the surface...not you, not just you, not you with your luscious butt! *Ha*. But you *as me*.” Stops. Halts.

Iron door slammed shut.

“I know that feeling.”

“Is this worship?”

“I think so.”

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

“Do you want to live forever?”

He told me that, too.

Was he nuts?

Sure.

Like us?

Maybe.

Living forever.

What dies is this cock. If I keep it, it dies with my body. If I give it to you, it lives—assuming you outlive me, feminine statistics and all that! *Ha.*

But it’s not just us. Not just two sucked into one ego.

No. Of course not.

What?

Sometimes. Don’t you feel that way. We just intensify our being together, intensify our, magnify our *separateness*. After all, who do we share this with?

Is that really important?

I think so.

Maybe tomorrow, but not today.

You’re such a die-hard optimist!

My breasts become yours, but when you’re sucking me in this fuller way I see you, I know it’s you, but I’ve this cosmic feeling, this vastness, like I’m the Great Mother of ...of everything, one, *everyone*, like I have a thousand breasts, like I know why they call it “The Milky Way.”

I’ll admit that.

What?

I’m sucking more than you.

Other names?

Names. Faces. Breasts. At moments—*Does this bother you?*

Somewhat.

I see.

It *is* difficult—the names, that is.

What can we do?

I’m not sure. Don’t want to obliterate names, do we?

“THX 123” or whatever? *Fuck that!*

Yeah. *Ha.* Not that.

At times I want my cunt to be Sharon’s pussy and no one else’s. Just like I want to blow Jude, not someone else. Tell you, I had that disconnect with Pierce, suppressed I’ll grant, but had *that*. Don’t want that.

I'll cop to that.
You want me to cop *that*...
Always!
Nasty boy!
(They laugh. Merry laughter.)

When he slips inside her—for he always liked to come in slowly, as if his dick were easing into slippers, he liked the caginess of it all, the slithery pace, incremental sense of pleasure and pain and presence—so when he slips inside her he waits for that deathless moment, that bliss on the other side of Rock 'n Roll...for it is Rock 'n Roll as he hears the drums beat as he shifts from sly thief into slick Cat Burglar, stealing her diamonds, stroking her clitoris and dropping her *Ooohs* and *Aaaahs* into his black bag...prowling, he slinks then bursts out into the ballroom, there where she is dancing, wearing amazing masks—funny, grotesque, goofy, even quite demur, waltzing with a thousand masked men, twirling and spinning from arm to arm..but he is *Zorro* and pounces from the balcony to the floor and with svelte swishes of his cape and deft and daring slashes with his terribly swift sword, he slices...*Aha!*...unmasks her. And with each mask cut away so do they, these others, masked men, all disappear, fade and become—not dead-men on the floor—but become him...fade and seep into him, *Victory!* as he has her in a thousand ways as unmasking her bounteous ways...a fury, a flurry, a ferocious whoop and holler and he is *Gone!*

Gone...but she remains there laughing, a ruffling raucous low titter...a bit of mirth that sucks up his fantasy: slurps it with a big howling *smack!* of her Southern Mouth—and he's *Returned!*...kissing his cock with the thousand lips of her Delta Daughters...dancing round his Maypole, strewn with ribbons of his memory, pennons of sperm, playing and wrapping themselves in wispy threads of semen... laughter: horrifying, fascinating, terrifying, enchanting, deathless-laughter...*howling*.

She likes his story.
He is aghast at hers, at how orgasmic he is turned, again!

“Worship. That’s really a tough word to get behind in public conversation. I mean, if I told a bud you worshipped my cock and I worshipped your cunt...*wow*, what do you think?”
She shakes her head, a “maybe crazy” shake.

“But it’s exactly *that*. That’s what I have now, what we have now, is really each other. This presence is present. Gotta give some insight her to Pete and Pierce.”

“But why didn’t they, why did they need each other, I mean, *males*?”

Long time in between...coffee and cake and getting dressed and then undressed and showered and washed and deciding to drive into town for some more wine, ordering a pizza—both kidding each other about “pepperoni and sausage no more!” aging “veggie heads” and drinking diet soda, but just foolish banter as is all “in between” silliness, grasping that they needed such in-between moments.

“I’ve asked myself about Pierce.” But she stops him.

“No, I have to tell you. I got myself into the Two-for-One. I liked the feel of it, the totality of it. I mean I never understood being called “a good piece of ass,” but then I did. I liked him up

my butt as I blew the other guy.” She is halted by the memory, a tingle of pleasure stirs her bottom lust.

“It was when it got reversed, or inverted, whatever’s the right term. My sucking him and him sucking this other guy or them switching, then it felt different. Like I was just hanging on. Like I was an after-thought to their doing it to each other. Like that.”

“I never did that.” Came too fast upon her close. Revealed too much. She doesn’t miss a beat. Not a stroke.

“Such a liar,” dismissive, unimpressed...a bit crushed.

He can’t recover. He can’t stop himself—he wants to lie and lie and lie and lie—*She’s gotta believe me. She’s gotta.*

“I don’t believe a word you’re saying...and *not* saying.”

Verdict read: *“The woman made me do it!”*

Ranting with anger and vitriol and *nuke-the-bastard* and *hang ‘im high!* froth—“How can you say that? That’s what we’ve left behind. Or supposed we’ve left. A fucking lie. You sit there, clothed from toenail to split-hair, just sit there and lie at me...lie and lie. Jude, you’re one son-of-a-bitch...or not a bitch but a fucking ball-less guy, father, sure, of Father God, ole stud Yahweh, all you males are in one fucking conspiracy. *Goddam, you Jude!*”

“Bless me Father for I have sinned.” Jude in mock prostration, appealing to that of The Father within her.

She atones: “I’ve been dick-mad all my life. I lied to myself about it, a fucking million times. I wanted to steal all the dicks in the world...and make them serve me.

Thou shalt not kill...hell, Father I killed. Hundreds, maybe ten thousand, a million or more. Napalm words. Nuclear humiliations. Axing put-downs. Anyway I could.

Thou shalt not steal...wahoo! Father, I stole, filched the greatest treasure: their balls, golden balls. Beat them in games and snatched them away. Emasculated them! Left them impotent. I was supreme! Grand! Stupendous!

I took their balls and swallowed them. Gulped them down. Chewed them. Cracked them open and sucked them dry. I was the Biggest Ball-Buster in town.

Thou shalt not commit adultery...tsk, tsk, Father, I committed adultery. I stole their husbands from them. I drew them away with my honeyed desire. I robbed their imaginations and left them cock-less in Gaza—ha, ha, get that, Father?! A great pun, but that’s it. My greatest sin—I cold-cocked their men and slung them over my shoulders. Never touched a woman, Father. Gotta give me some indulgence there. Ha!”

Should I give her absolution?

“I’ve never *had* a man?”

“I think that’s a way of seeing it.”

“Because no man knows how to love a woman?”

“No, my darling, Jude, it’s what we’re doing, because no man knows how to worship a woman.”

“Or a woman, a man?”

“Has to be.”

All this, leading to habit and ritual. These Breathing moments between them were too raw to take back into the “real” world, the clock world, the world of Lovers.

Ritual. Knowing that it was a creative act. Constructing a world. Tying the sensate to the spectral...linking, entwining.

It began with the purposeful omission of the word “Love.”

“That word upon which The West believes it is built. The Love of God.”

“Amen.”

Love being for them the distracting word, the utterance of The Fall—Adam *sentenced* to cleave to his wife...this cleaving but a condemnation for bearing children, they to love and cleave...this called Love.

Ritual.

Sharon pays attention to Jude’s body.

Jude pays attention to Sharon’s body.

Ritual.

Attention.

Not so much when together, mostly when in sighting distance.

More, when far away. When the devilish collective imagination slips them the word “Love” and expects them to forget each other.

At this time, placing his own fingers upon his cheek and lifting off her kiss, one single solitary simple kiss...raising it up and blessing the world with it, all about and all throughout, letting it descend upon his lips, alight and then dissolve upon his, all this time translocating himself to her side, there to be for her whatever it is she needs this moment, an act of a combining ritual thus creating the whole which is greater than the sum of its parts...this their daily practice.

She twirling a strand of her hair. Feeling it as he twirls it. As upon her he lovingly and lustfully and with insanity flashing wildly in his eyes as he ejaculates, such moments, this coming to her, she flying out from every tip of every hair to be present with him: a Medusa of intensity, of fierceness, of a shock of snakes...kundalini and spinal, riding the column of her erotic self up from her Delta out through the cirrus Clouds of her hairy head...she wraps him up, enfolds him, suckles him with every strand, exposing herself, opening herself so vulnerable, permitting him to suck a thousand sucks upon her self, so being Nurture and Drink: *Black Water*.

Ritual.

Sharon intends Jude.

Jude intends Sharon.

Ritual.

Intention.

Upon waking they had begun the practice of allowing the other to emerge from sleep, and then slowly come together. With varying intensities and diverse approaches but every day, each day coming to each other making skin contact—a contact which hails the other as another, someone in his or her space, someone to invite...into one’s skin and there to breathe.

So, they awake. Each attends to their morning necessities, and once existence on Earth is reaffirmed they *intend* the other.

Intending for them is prying open their minds to envision the other, to picture them and so allow the other to float into one's mind.

They move towards each other—*Hello*—then they name the other. Touching a face or an arm. Just a point by ritual, just a point. The merest of touches, “Hello, Jude.” “Hello, Sharon.”

They move towards embrace.

Hands now full palms upon the other: cheek, hair, shoulders.

Bodies pressing: knees touching, chests abutting, arms latched.

Hugging. Pulling closer. Closer as their minds and bodies merge—intentionally opening each to the other and welcoming the day. Clearly realizing that they are creating the day.

“You are the Mother of All. All life flows from you and to you and through you.”

“You are Father of All. The sun rises and the moon sets and the fire inside the plants and the hunger inside the animals and the glory of the rocks and the sky and the water all are within you and process through you.”

“I praise you.”

“I praise you.”

Ritual.

Sharon is moonlight.

Jude, sunlight.

Ritual.

There are days—special days—where thunder strikes at sunrise. She, more often than he—so they have noted and kidded—is the moon refusing to die as she explodes into sunlight and shakes his world around and around leaving him like a corpse suddenly resurrected...with eyes so wide that they do not see, and with a heart pounding so hard that he cannot hear, and with limbs so trembling and exhausted and squeezed of all their night life that he knows he cannot rise from the bed, that the day will never be here...but then the magic: she shifts him, rotates his totem, upside downs his world and like a blustering, untamed, chaotic oil fire gushing at sea so with the noise and clamor of the unquenchable sizzle of fire and oil and water, so is he brought to sunburst...and as she leaves him he is simply amazed...more, he is eternally grateful. Hums, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine!”

Such are the rough drafts of their ritual moments, once Breathing together.

CHAPTER 27

Skin.

She lies next to him. So, so aware of being *next to*. So aware of her skin. And of his skin.

She strokes: it is the river of her messages this skin.

What is his skin becomes her skin.

That moment they touch—*What is a touch?*—she has tried to answer it for him, for herself.

...it is like a fullness...like drinking a glass of water, at the start there is the shock of the difference: wet-dry, cold-hot, moist-dry...then that sense of presence, of the other within you, not inside you but within where you hold it: water flooding my mouth, still separate but inside, and so the desire begins, always the desire to have, to be quenched, to be satisfied, to let it slowly glide down my throat and then plunge into my belly...but the fear: always the fear of drowning, of choking—way back in my childish brain the family story: “Drowned in a cup of

water”...telling me to be careful, to be more than careful when handling the baby, giving it a cup of water: *Drowned in a cup of water...* do such things ever leave your mind?

...that’s it: the first touch...then there’s the briefest of hesitations: *Enough?*

...I fill the glass again, maybe half-full, waiting, waiting: *Do I want to drink?*...something within always saying, even for the briefest of moments, *Never enough! Drink!* And another: *You’ll drown!*...so it is, so it is when I touch you: lightning thoughts, flashes, but they’re there...yet I wade ashore, touching you, stroking up and down your body, like walking the beach’s edge...having come from the ocean feeling sharp pains in my chest, my lungs are not used to this alien air, this alien land, this *you* which I now approach, discover, invade—*youareamazing!*—I steel myself for invasion, for I get excited...personal, hidden, intimate excitement, my mouth begins to slaver and my hands become moist, for I am water, this alien stuff which borders your body and so I come, move like a mist, a fog, stroking your thighs, feeling your muscles, watching you twitch as you sense the pleasure of my being, my presence, knowing inside myself that you are mystified, baffled, unsure, unable to discern my intent—invader or discoverer?

...I don’t want you to know and I don’t let you know, *but I know!*...moving, I come to your belly and the fine muscles of your chest, I romp in your skimpy hairs, twist them and make them jump-ropes for *my* pleasure...pleasuring myself as I know your fear begins to mount: *Is she paying attention to me?*

...I can hear this wail, this plaint, your cry-baby whimper, so I move on and up to the delight of your lips, kiss you with tenderness, and kiss you with surprise, peck and teasingly bite your lip, *ah!* sensing the arousal within your mouth, the hunger of your tongue, I meet you and we promenade, *boogie-woogie!*, *cha cha cha!*...we mirthfully laugh, for now I have you, now I have your inner skin, this my first conquest, of your serpent tongue, your spectral self, here in exposed desire, so soft, so easily pierced, chained, so easily snatched, I could snatch your tongue and you wouldn’t know the theft because your eyes are becoming my eyes: fascinated you peer into me and I let you peer down into me, deep down into my Cauldron, where you watch me stir you, hand upon your penis I stir...with the breath of my desire, stir and raise you up, truly conjure up the fire in your blood, the ancient fire which hides behind the cells of your flaccid soon at full “Attention!” penile body.

...*Oh!* This is a great joy, a great bedevilment...your tongue, the first part of your flesh which becomes mine, that spelunking strap which is tethered to your spine and to your brain, which my teasing dips and darts transform into a chord, striking musical chord: rhythms messaging to you, “Come out! Come out, Jude. Come out and play!”

...so you do, march yourself out, strutting yourself, all Band Major and the thump and thud of your cocked baton raised high, aloft with dramatic clash and strumming of the air so do you call me, entertain me, boast of your ability to have me—for this is how you forget your skin, forget that you are not me, beguiling and buffooning yourself by shouting that I am yours, “Sharon is mine!”

...all that is happening is my drawing your skin to me, my slipping under your skin, inserting myself so innocuously with a French kiss of your tongue and then I am like your own saliva slithering inside you, mingling within you, to become you, blood of your blood, cell of your cell, desire of your desire

...so am I yours as the lust which I bring strides out to march in counter-stroke with the beat of your band—oh, your pounding heart, the break-out of dancing beads upon your brow! oh, how delicious you become!

.. and I lick you, I can't but lick you, I can't stop licking you...I'm lost, I've entered your woods and am myself lost, for as I have invaded so have I been invaded, as I have kissed, so have I been kissed.

...there is a blankness, a moment of absolute non-feeling—my hands are not my hands, my knees knock not against my knees, my belly is not there, my tongue is not my tongue...it is then *We are skin!*—boundary to both inner and outer worlds...it is then *We are eternal!*—for it's the moment, the instant, that time which is not time but which is a knowing and a feeling and a fulfillment.

...arrgh! the agony, the misery, yet the pulsating throb of *We!*—of the presence of *we*.

He knows. Jude knows. It is their common voice. Their common tale. The fright they share at how similar their stories are, their images, their words but more, the presence in that moment, at that time—*we*...“Not you and me, but *we*. Truth?

So it is.

Skin is we.

They Lie no more.

CHAPTER 28

“It seems there's just one thing we know nothing about.”

“*Just one?*” Mocking his presumptiveness.

He flinches—itself a mock response.

“We attend to our bodies. This is something new. But not radically new. It's new because it *is* a way of living forever and not dying.”

“Saint Pierce be praised!” Softly uttered, part sarcasm, part humbled insight.

“Verily! Saint Pete, too.” Then Jude gets up from his recliner and steps over to her end of the couch, there where she so often comforts herself, nestled, whether dressed or naked, there she so often sits reading, listening to music, but always working on being present—on Breathing.

This time she reacts with those slight communications of eyebrows and cheeks and hands lifted from the task of the moment as if she is perplexed by his movement. She thought they were in their private mode but “Guess not!” she says to herself.

Sharon warmly smiles at Jude as he sits down next to her on the sofa.

“We're so much in the conscious mode,” with a pause that forewarns her that he is already into deep thought, coming to her from some distant planet. “See, conscious. Like, like everything we've been working on is in the real world.” Pauses. Brow furrowed. Sharon realizes that it is merely an accident of his universe that she is sitting there, for he is off somewhere talking to someone else or some other group or something, “Like, it's been amazing, hasn't it?” She folds her hands: *Is he really waiting for my answer?*...Jude rolls back into the couch, looking straight out into the room, distant sighting. “Nah, what a terrible word ‘real.’ I mean what's *real*? Nah, don't want to go there.” He abruptly turns back towards her, this time he is fully attending to her. Sharon feels him lift her skin with every word.

“Dreaming.” He halts, like screeching brakes, mild snort, salted with a humorous insight: “*Baby, you're a dream. You're my Dream Baby.*” Laughing as he says this to her, a small laughter carrying amusement. Before she can respond, “Do you get it? Do you get it?” A bit more childishly excited than usual. Punctuated with a, “Huh?”—a punctuation that chokes a

gagging laughter from her, “What?” as if spitting up a cigarette butt unknowingly hidden in a mistaken cup of cold coffee.

He smiles—idiot grin.

What? inside herself.

“Dreaming!” as Jude jumps up from the couch. She sees him as being catapulted by some mysterious force up and he’s standing. Does a silly jig—hop and step and kicks his heels. It’s all so silly to her. But she knows he’s hot onto something.

He turns and throws out his hands to her...hands of invitation. She grasps them and stands. He pulls her close.

“Guys always say *You’re my Dream Baby* and all that. Seems like gibberish. Seems demeaning at times. I mean the Barbie Doll stuff and Eve as a Bad Dream *et cetera, et cetera*...but there’s that “grain of truth,” again, you *are* my Dream Baby...and I’m yours. Now,” with a finality, “Now, what about that!”

You want to dream, together?

Why not?

Is that possible?

We breathe when asleep, right?

“See, maybe it’s a guy thing, ya know. Women like to say that. Maybe there’s some truth.” He throws the sentiment out, not expecting her to play catch.

“See, you’ve made me wonder. *Often*. What is it that you’ve been dreaming?” He does pause to see if this is a hook for a small-mouth trout.

She narrows her eyes—signs of her intensity—he knows she won’t say anything, not right now.

“Women dream. Right? And men aren’t supposed to.” He halts. Walks around a bit. Akin to a dog circling to do its morning duty. The image does not ride either’s imagination.

Jude had to stop. Something inside him formed a stabbing pain. *Gas?* to himself. But what it was didn’t matter because he is half-crippled with pain...he haltingly steps towards the bathroom.

“Something I can do?”

He couldn’t answer—just waved her away.

She watches him half-drag himself out of the room, left leg with a quirk and a slight gimp. *Was it the sausage?* This morning Jude had eaten like a horse, especially the German sausage he so loved as Saturday morning treat. *Vegetarian mortal sin, alas!*

Sharon returned to her reading.

Jude was a healthy horse, this the image the doctor gave him; he shared it with Sharon. *Macho-man forever!* As such, she wasn’t in the least alarmed. Not that health hadn’t become a constant item of discussion as it was for all their ageing friends. But she had let it stand: *sausage*.

Then, after a quarter-hour—not timing him but then having looked up at the end of the chapter to check the time: eighteen-minutes or thereabouts, and Jude not having called out a word or come out to say, “Going up-stairs,” or anything like that.

She found him curled up on the bathroom floor, not just fetal but twisted and bent as if he was part-way through some contortion of turning himself inside out. She did not have to ask

about the pain, he was totally silent—the savage grimace on his face told of his inner torture. She feared that he was being compressed by some powerful external force...but was resisting.

“911. Please hurry, I think it’s a heart attack!”

Total panic, but the words came out. The trembling fingers and shaking arm had found their mark on the three buttons. Once done, Sharon realizes that her heart is crammed in her throat, a fierce headache pounding directly into her forehead...this, and more...that she is *scared*.

Somehow—*How?*—a great malevolent force has entered their house. Something so evil that it slipped by her eyesight on every level: sensate and non-sensate...she drops to her knees, hits the floor with a thump-thud and finds herself inside her mind scurrying for some antidote...early childhood training as she is praying, “Jesus save him! Dear God help me! Oh, God why?”... a hundred times recited, moaned through chattering teeth, shaking body, she can hear her bones rattle one against the other, hear her internal fright form its own name: *Death!*

She is, at this moment, totally bereft, totally without comfort from any dimension, feeling the terrifying smallness of her being, sensing herself as a piece of crumpled paper blown along the street. Images assail her of her insignificance, of her unworthiness...she cries, breaks out into crackling sobs—no one there to hear her...but she knows there is, there is that presence, sensing it as Presence, a something come to crush her, “Measly worm!”—a phrase from somewhere, but not the words as much as the full body feeling, seeing herself as a worm the kids play with, that they torture, that they slice in half to watch it maniacally squirm and twist in agonizing torture...foolishly and helplessly and fated never to connect with its other half, ever again.

The para-medics find her so kneeling. The front door being an unlatched screen this time of year. They are not surprised...possibly a tad surprised that she was not kneeling next to the body, but they were trained not to ask such questions, trained to appraise the moment and get to the victim.

She is still kneeling, sobbing, as Jude is carried out on the stretcher.

She wakes to their alien presence as a strong hand presses itself firmly but gently upon her shoulder, “M’am”—just that word, sound, soft but authoritative greeting, now a command, “M’am” again, with a slight shake, Sharon lifts her head....

CHAPTER 29

The angelic Seraphim takes her by the hand; she rises. There is joyful song all about. A hymn without words but yet one of praise, of deep passionate praising, such that she knows that it is the song of her Sweetheart calling.

Here, the fiery angel, winged hand upon hers, lifts her, for they rise, flutter up and into the sound, the calling, the attractive power which she suddenly knows sustains them...more, more than sustains, which creates them.

Around her enfolds a cloud of luminescent, pulsating colors: vibrancy alive—every conceivable hue and tone flashing through its visual presence as an ardor, a devotion for her, for all around, for the adorer who calls her forth.

This vibrancy becomes part of her self. She is immersed in an iridescence that communicates to her an adoring craving for her, which communicates an honoring worship of her own self, of her body, of her singular presence.

She rises—no longer sensing up from down, more rising in the sense of a filling-up, of a swelling up, of a magnificent unrolling of her self into many selves as simultaneously into a deeper self—floating in depthless Black Water!... *Ah*, in every fiber of her being: every

molecule, atom, muscle, nerve and mode of presence conscious and sub-conscious, is she now fuller: *more!*...now impassioned...now burstingly worshipped.

She Breathes with Jude.

“You are the Fullness of Time. The Great Mother of All the Living.” Sounds, not words, not a body, not seen, but surging his presence surging throughout her.

“You are the Cauldron of Fire. The Tree of Life whose roots hold, cuddle the Earth to your nurturing breasts. The Cloudless Sky whose Innocence makes perfect all that is Creation.”

“You are my Beloved.”

In this swell of passion, this embrace so drenching, she senses the adoration, the special tenderness, the inexpressible joy of being beloved. *Beloved*...she is bursting.

“You are All That Is. You are the Present. The Moment Filled. You are Birth.”

All about honor her. Revere her. Bless her every sense with a sense of goodness in the sense of rightness in the sense of completion...of perfection.

“You are the Perfect One.”

Then her Beloved comes. Piercing her. Moving through her with every pleasure.

Handsome of sight.

Majestic of fleshly presence.

Powerful in his stare.

Indestructible in his Heart.

She knows him instantly as Courage, as Fearless, as Triumphant, as Magnificent.

He is at her side. In the same moment, he is inside her. Inside her through his embrace, drawing her to his golden flesh, flesh which becomes her own, she now all silvery glow and ecstatic throb for theirs is one heart joined in desire, coupled in hungered passion, unified in the singularity of their Devoted Passion, each for the other...minds as one, spirits integrated, souls meshed...she knows his insatiable passion as he leaves her in his now *not-present* moment...*ah!* she swoons, shakes, trembles, dissembles throughout time and space...no longer inhaling the sweet odor of his kiss, no longer tasting the seduction of his subtle tongue, no longer pressing her softness against the steeled-flex of his engorged body...*no longer*....

“Ma’am?” Bewilderment. It rockets towards her. She distantly hears the question, spies the question mark floating, hurtling towards her—she cannot escape its impact!

“Ma’am?”

Jaw unattractively ajar, like a dying crone at death’s door, Sharon stands, rather allows herself to move upwards, up and standing and slightly holding the hand of the paramedic: young male, descriptionless face but overwhelming there as a helper...she responds to his caring gesture, stands and snaps to, all in a simple moment’s time for him, he aware of the effects of shock, of the sudden capture by sickness and death of so many, so this lady is okay: *Doing okay*, in his own mind...he draws her up and walks her towards the ambulance.

Despite his own instincts, that she sit down and rest, go to bed, maybe take a tranquilizer, he knows she must ride to the hospital with them—she as the source for information about this man...*Her husband?*...information about his insurance.

CHAPTER 30

By the time Sharon finishes with Admissions, she is without feeling—observing herself as if disembodied and floating above, moving along the ceiling, tracking her physical self...as it walks so does she move.

So does Sharon enter the room. Step through the portal and observe Jude. It is a distanced observation. She not bringing her heart with her—left somewhere in deep lock-down, herself not aware of the lack of her own heartbeat, stepping across the threshold into the world of machines...hearing the beep, scanning the monitors with their gossipy digital conversations, a monologue, stand-up comedians these machines, sucking Jude, suckling his blood and siphoning his life force, slurping it and re-cycling it, transubstantiating him into other unknown elementals—medicines with colors and thicknesses, liquids filling up the exterior body with which they had sheathed Jude...he now machine carapaced, alive she knows now only as a machine, most of herself is not unaware of the magicalness of the realm into which she has—*by what measure, by what clock?*—“just stepped.”

Bad signs: The doctor’s hesitation to turn towards her, as marked in the moments it takes for him to respond to the nurse’s sighting of her: *wife, mistress, mother, lover, sister?* Sharon vaguely noticing the nurse’s frozen response, fighting off a grimace, professionally wiping away the give-away look of hopelessness, nodding ever so practiced a nod towards the doctor, then dropping her eyes onto Jude’s arm where she rearranges some bandages and tweaks some adjustments which are her make-do protection from what the doctor must do. He turns, “Mrs. Schutt?”

She turns towards the angel, knowing him now as Archangel, in his own majesty with legions behind him, she turns towards him and with a wordless sob questions, *Why?*

“Mrs. Schutt?” Firmly, but gently; he reads her shock.

Sharon’s head jerks up and towards him, swiveling as if she herself had grasped her head from behind, clutched her own jaw and firmly snapped it up and towards the speaker...jerked away because she feared any longer to look at Jude.

She smiles. Innocent, idiot smile...one recovering and not knowing what else to do but to smile a child-like smile of no consequence.

“Mrs. Schutt, has your husband had any recent illness? Or trauma of any kind?”

Sharon steps into the reality. Left hand to her lips, a slight smile and an exhale of bemused titter. “Oh, no. I’m *not*...” and she fights off the desire to surrender to the Obliteration, “I’m not his wife. I’m, I’m...a *close friend*, a long time friend, but we just met, recently...” She is fully aware of her embarrassment—*Stupid!* to herself...“I don’t know,” firmly in control, composed, “about his medical history. We’ve been together, but we haven’t talked about that.”

The doctor steps away from the bed and towards her. Stands close in an intimate, personal space, but he does not touch her. He is not there to comfort, but to communicate, to inform.

“I have to tell you. We’re perplexed. He appears to be quite healthy. There’s nothing indicating a heart attack, which we first expected. All his vitals are good. No scars or signs of operations. That’s why I need to ask...anything traumatic...even emotionally traumatic?”

How else does the Lie give birth to the Truth except through trauma? For him to truly know her, to truly move beyond love, being her lover, to know Sharon in the depths of her person, her

existence, as woman, female, mother....as Beloved...so he had to face her deepest darkness—drink deeply of her Black Water.

She manifests herself as Death. Dark Mother. Horrifying Evil Witch. For it is Love which requires Death, is defined by it—*Dying Forever Love*.

She loves him unto death!

In her Dark Heart, she is now relishing her Abandonment by him, rejoicing in her Obliteration from his Memory, savoring his Departure, his Sundering of their embrace, his Escape... *Escape!*

Darkly, so she knows her piercing power—*drowns him in Black Water*.

“Can you get in touch with his family?” The doctor asks, hoping that she will gather the information he needs.

“Umm. Yes. I can.” Closing off the doctor; giving him what he wants. Dismissing him, knowing that he would never understand.

“Anything. Remember, anything which might have traumatized him.” Hesitant. Unsure, but trained to ask because of the patient’s age. “Be sure to ask about his sex life. Any dramatic changes.” Delivered with mailman courtesy.

Sharon nods.

Alone with Jude. Standing beside his bed. “*Impotent*. They want to know if you’re impotent.”

Am I?

CHAPTER 31

The Archangel hands Jude a shield. It is a new body; a new flesh. It is hammered in muscular hardness: bronzed. From his eyes daggers fly. Out from his mouth is pillaging fire. Into his hand is placed his staff, his spear, his magical penis. So armored, so hardened...The Father’s Warrior Son, *Jude Schutt*, is once again potent!

Beside his bed she sits. Her left hand lightly upon his. She accepts that they have been denied bodily speech. She worries—a tapeworm tunneling through her mind—that she might have, that they might have missed the moment. *Did we not see it?*

There is nothing here, so Sharon intuits, but the trauma of the insight Jude was about to share with her...he was bubbling, excited, with a glint of madness in his eyes...how else but to enter this stage?

Drown him in Black Water!...“Oh, no...never!” she shouts out to the empty room. Scarce would anyone present, however, have grasped the majesty of the unfolding moment for now Sharon is facing the Truth of who she is as Black Water. She is the Dark Mother grieving at the grave of her son—but a child whom she has slain! *Infanticide*. Murdered because He wants no challengers, no suitors to compete for Her affections. Dark Father on His throne at Black Water’s bottom.

“Yes.” This time, “Yes!” as she stabs him through the heart...kills Jude this Son whom the Father rejects.

Black Water. What Pete and Pierce found as they became present: themselves as Cain and Abel...brothers killing brothers, each vying for the Love of their Dark Father, Warrior King.

“Uuuggggghhhh!” Sharon has knowledge, suffocating knowledge of all this in a terribly confusing way, one that tears at the fabric of her flesh, which manifests itself in a horrible gulp of sadness...herself being swallowed by a force, a malicious, evil, ill-intended presence that wants her as dead as Jude is here slain.

She... must be...must drink... must embody... must become....is Black Water!

(“Mother—Dead in Childbirth.”)

(“Child—Stillborn.”)

Nothing is easy!...Pierce’s words. Now? Where? Why?

At Black Water’s deepest depth, she hears his words as a threatening challenge. His tone of superiority—“Of course you will fail, mere useful woman!”—stabs her in the back. She knows what she must do...softens her heart, dies to herself her at Dark Water bottom, dying to that of the Dark Father within her to...to...a kind word, a sweet yet emboldening word, sounds coming into and through her heart, opening her wom...it is that of the Great Mother within her, setting forth her course of action, “To rise from the Black Water, you must accept your fate—drink deeply the Black Water...*dream fully* the Warrior Dream!”

Dreaming the final Warrior Dream... Back then, Jude had been slain...slain by his God, Father God, laid down and slain within the Biblical Warrior Dream, for it was within this Dream—so Sharon knows, so she knows—that he was made whole and healed and formed as *perfect male*—he who lives without women—Jude as the Son of Adam, as the Cock...formed to see only his penis, only it to be worshipped. So Sharon knows—knows as she slips, for the last time, within his Warrior Dream...dreaming Genesis: *In the Beginning...*

“It is you, Sharon, who are delusional. You who act like the Daughters of Lilith. As if you were created by God!...But it is not so! You are created by me, *from me*—you exist within me. I am your all. It is I who you shall worship. Must obey. The Father does not speak directly to you, *only* to me.”

She hears this Dream’s chatter, it recycles again and again, sonorously. She had lain down beside him before, *back then*, during their First Meeting at the college reunion. Lain down because he needed her, so she thought. That he wanted her, so she felt. That he lusted for her body, so she believed. That he had found her loveable and worthy of his most heartfelt love, so she hoped.

As she now Dreams with Jude, Sharon feels his psychic energy drain, observes the pallor blanch his cheeks as astral blood hemorrhages...she so feels and understands for she is becoming him, becoming this Jude, becoming this Son of Adam...she is surrendering herself, her body, her soul, her spirit, surrendering and becoming Eve, again—lying down next to him, feeling his pain, participating in his Dream...she now Daughter of Eve, child willing to Forget her Mother, willing to offer up her cunt for Obliteration, willing to accept Love in exchange for Worship, live only and ever for the Father’s Love...so they Dream: Jude and Sharon Dream the final Warrior Dream.

“You see me as only Cock.”

“What are women good for but to be useful?”

“To get you off—*that’s it?*”

“What else, bitch?”

Pierce—*not just in ethereal words but in full presence!*—is at Jude’s side, lying down next to him on the other side of the bed. Pierce whom Sharon had not seen slink into the room but whom she should have seen, so she says to herself upon sensing his presence: *Pierce!... You motherfucker!*

“Jude, my boy, my brother, my lover...be strong in this Dream, do not be seduced by her for she is the Betrayer. She only wants to suck you down into death, into obliteration, to create children who will rise up to slay you!

Women *are* only useful. Do not be ashamed of that Truth, of this Revelation. Our Father has been merciful, he has let them live...he has bestowed upon them the tiny cock and offered them the many pleasures of the fuller cock. Do not be beguiled by this Temptress.”

Dreaming the pleasures of the fuller cock: He had often brought her to deep pleasure by massaging her clitoris. At first, he had done this somewhat mechanically. As an ardent lover-to-be, his young mind had consumed every book on the sexual arts which he could find. In the beginning, he enjoyed—like drinking that first cold beer!—enjoyed touching her here and there and making her spark electric. Sweet kisses. Nip of the ears. A lick upon her nape. Gentle hands upon her breasts. Lolling suck of her nipples. Then, the frolicking in her wetlands, that part of her which was drooling to have him...faintly touched and unleashed are floods of frothing passion, her body rifling with lust and panting desire, she grips him hard, rolls towards him but then is jerked away from him by ungodly hellish passions of darkest fears...it is a spiritual reflex, one he does not let escape on fleshy terrain so he parts her Passage and slips in fingers like small sailboats launched upon a lake...which flap and heave and are dragooned around by terrifying thunderbolt winds...so does he pleasure her, arriving at her clitoris—her own small male, an image at which his inner mind always sniggers and laughs, like matching up against a really short guy in basketball!—*but* as he takes her on so does she swell and loom large...blasts upward as if her clit were just the tip of some submerged gigantic penis, for hers is a craziness to match his own when masturbating, he strokes her and the top of her head cracks open and a pillar of fire flares up, splattering the sky of their love with a fireworks of joy and happiness and excitement...yet, it was also always here that he struck the most stolid fear of her, for she seemed unquenchable, never to be satisfied, endlessly strokable...here that something within him knew that he had tread beyond Love and entered into the treacherous realm of Worship—into a fabled land where goddesses reside...*but he mere mortal, he mere Odysseus!*

...faithful, he gave all to her, but also found clever ways to escape from her, to bestow his respects and shout his admirations, then slip away from her Fragrant Isle...down into her, simulating with his fingers the thrust and parry of his cock, turning her southern mouth into cock-hungry and if he did not mount her and have his way, then he’d kneel upright, abruptly terminate her wilding pleasure and wag his cock in front of her mouth, holding it and stroking it, kneeling there with concrete immovability, not allowing her to miss his intent or avoid his command, for it was a command—and if he had to take her by force, *By God!* he’d take her by force!...so all was shifted to his cock, to his maleness, to the potency within him, she now knowing that her pleasure would only come after his, that he would return to her again but only after the Main Event...after thrusting and parrying deep into her mouth: north and south...*Amen.*

Rise up with him from within Black Water. “Yes! We will!” a shout equally not heard by another.

“Jude, Jude...I know you don’t fully believe. I feel, I sense, I was present to you as you began to bleed. Not bleed from your penis, not bleed like Adam did when the Father God cut a false cunt in his side, cut and circumcised his penis, drawing drops of blood and with that blood mystifying Adam, fooling Adam, duping Adam with Eve...they who awakened to live the Dream wherein only the cock is worshipped—God The Father Cock Almighty as through his son...profane totem ringing testicular bells.

I know you don’t *fully* believe.”

As Fate is served, Sharon begins to Dream with her Beloved.

But there is no text to direct her, no whisper from cosmic corners, no communication from another sphere.

She slips off the bed, stands and steps to the other side of the bed—*Pierce, be gone!*—reaching over so as not to drop his hand, not to lose contact...nudges the machines out of the way. She carefully drapes the various tubes—*Spider threads!*—over the bed’s head-board...moves this and that so that she can lie down next to him, be as physically close as the barrier of skin will allow.

She attends to his breathing: they Breathe.

She attends to his smell: mingling to become Perfume of Desire.

She attends to his sight: plucking out her Third Eye so that he may see with it and that she may share his blindness.

She attends to the architecture of his body—aligning hers to be intimate with his, visualizing knees to knees, stomach to stomach, breasts to breasts, arms embraced...merging: Jude and Sharon in wholed singularity—coupled as Beloveds.

“I’m dying, Sweetheart, aren’t I?”

“So it appears.” *Ah*, how she wished she could factually lie.

Jude heaves a sundering sigh—the air in the room splits and divides.

“It is all too much! *Too much!*”

Sharon panics. These words are Despair Unending. *What can I do or say?*

Sharon prays: Mother where are *we*? I have come back here as I have a thousand times, a million times as I have tried to be a faithful Daughter of Eve. I have born his children. I have beached ships full of sexual pleasure. I have accepted his Cock and worshipped it with him...but now, now—*No longer! Not again! This Warrior Dreaming must stop.*

Sharon knows it is Jude’s vowed departure from this Warrior Dreaming of the battling sexes that has slain him. Knew even before he finished talking about it where he was going; what he was going to say.

“*We need to Dream, together! Dream the Beloveds Dream!*” She had heard Jude say this in her own Dream, even though he was slain and had fallen before he spoke it to her in time and space.

Sharon tightens her grip on his right hand. Holds and presses it tightly, squeezing. “We are to live forever, together!”

Can you hear me? Jude. Jude. Jude!

“Can you hear me?”
“Of course.”
“I want to worship you.”
“It’s not possible.”
“Don’t believe that!”
“It’s not Dreamable.”
“Don’t ever say that!”
“I don’t know how to give Birth. I can only Slay.”
“Stop Dreaming *that!*”

Dream *this*: Jude and Sharon are forever. There was no Beginning. No Garden. No God-Alone. No Adam without Eve. This myth does exist. It is alive. It is being dreamed.

But it doesn’t have to be so.

Yet males have been so blinded. Adam so blinded to Eve that he believes she came from him!

But—*idiot savant?*—even he knows he has no womb. No cunt.

So, what is it that must no longer be Dreamed?

Jude, *I know*: The Warrior who simulates in battle the birth. Who in battle spills blood—makes the male body bleed, like you in menses! Who in battle, supposedly, kills so that he who is slain is born, again, on The Other Side..Jesus dying rises...*Our Father Who Art In Heaven.*

Sharon strokes Jude’s penis. It engorges into a fullness.

“You know I have a cock, am Great Father. Let me now unveil *your* cunt, oh, Great Mother!”

She touches his forehead. Taps and waltzes her fingertips till one alights upon Jude’s Third Eye. Thrumming. Sweetly whispers words of endearment...*Awake!*...he opens.

“Magical eye. Eye of Imagination. This is our Beloveds power—to imagine, to dream, to create endless realities. Realities which we share together in embrace: physical embrace, soulful embrace, astral embrace!”

Jude is astounded and bewildered by this queer, oddly fuller sense of himself.

“Imagine yourself as Great Mother.”

Gasping, *I am Great Mother!*

Awake!

Jude and Sharon, “Forever henceforth *we* Dream the Dream of the Beloveds.”

CHAPTER 32

Awake.

When she first sees him, she knows that it is just as when she last first saw him. For there has been so much time between them that time is new. This, then, a First Meeting of the Beloveds.

She feels him Breathe; breathing her, inhale, breathing him, exhale.

“Wake up, wake up, Jude, my Beloved!”

Sharon Seymour worships Jude Schutt.

No longer holding him only as a useful instrument—as seeding Cock.

No longer restricting him to the spheres of Time and Space.
No longer denying him her Eternal Soul and them Eternal Life.
No longer denying The Embrace of the Beloveds.
Awake, my Great Mother! My Beloved, Jude.

Jude awakens...they are standing upon a mountain peak at twilight's embrace of sun departing and moon rising...he turns towards her, bows and begins to celebrate her...words lifted by his heart's song he proclaims to all the living on Earth and in the Heavens...his praise is a worshipping of Her in Sharon:

"Who is my Beloved? Sharon is my Beloved. I celebrate you my precious Beloved, Sweetest Sharon. I celebrate Her in you. Hear me, my brothers and sisters, hear me all creatures above and below, hear me as I honor my Beloved.

The sheer delicacy of her undoes me! I who am bone and muscle, the conqueror, the smithy at the forge, manipulating the life we share, find myself but a whimper in her ear, a melting of heart on her lips. She comes to me and her mere presence, sighted from afar, buckles my knees and my mind is no longer mine, my heart so much bigger than I could ever imagine. For there is a healing that she is, a closing up of open-ended parts of me, a suturing together of flesh rendered asunder by blows and battles. In her presence I am humbled, dissembled, dashed into shallow pools of water. Yet so majestic am I when we embrace, as I am so full of her and me that I expand cosmically and sense myself as eternal, never dying, *a precious coupled presence* so fierce and formidable which we have unleashed with simple, even mundane words, words of enticement, of incantation, of seduction, of ecstasy—"Come to me, my precious beloved!"

Hear me, all my brothers and sisters, hear me and join with me...celebrate your Beloved!"

No longer living The Lie of Lovers—living in Truth, the Beloveds Breathe and Dream.

CHAPTER 33

The doctor was amazed at Jude's astounding over-night recovery.

"Honestly," he says, "we don't know what happened to you."

("Dreaming is not part of his healing imagination.")

Jude smiles, warmly giving the man his due, thanks the nurse, ready to exit this reality he no longer needs.

At day's end, Sharon picks him up; wheelchair at the curb.

They go home.

Sharon has just finished cooking supper. His appetite is ravenous, but he is still physically weakened by the ordeal.

"There's no worship in your gobbling down this meal!" she teases.

Fork halted on the way to his mouth, a small gulp..."Err, sorry. My body seems to want to catch up with...with *whatever* happened."

She thinly smiles; simply happy for the return of such pedestrian foolishness.

He imagines the fork as a shovel, heaving coal into the freighter's fiery oven.

They are early to bed this evening.

Quietly they read; maybe half-an-hour.

“Honey,” her word stops him; he had just begun to doze. “Honey, do we understand what happened?”

“Huh?...Sure do.”

Annoyingly smug, so Sharon thinks. She notices his pillow punching moves—can interpret all his small habits!

“Jude.” Firm. A tonal slap. Large rock heaved into small pond.

He stops again; halts—pushes the pillow back up so that he can sit back up.

“Sharon?”

“I want to know if *we* understand what happened.” The “we” was two syllables long.

Jude releases a tired sigh. It causes Sharon a split-second of remorse. She scolds herself for pressing him...but then shakes it off.

“I know,” a second-wind, Jude feels a surge of power as he speaks, “I know what I think we know. ...I died and was born again.”

“And...?”

“And?” Jude holds the question with two hands raised in front of him, playfully rocks back and forth as if the question is trying to escape his grasp.

“And...we are going to be Old together. We are going to Age together. Because we *are* the Ancient Ones. Right now.” He smiles; pleased with what he has been able to articulate, at last.

Sharon stirs. His answer is not totally satisfactory.

Jude is not aware of her unease.

“Do you understand that *we* are pregnant?”

The wildness of the image forces a stuttering guffaw and a sarcastic remark, “Should I call you Sarah?”

She catches him—mentally turns him around and over and kicks him in the astral butt!

“Right, sure, you’re Abraham. *Of course.*”

Silence grasps their tongues...silliness fades...deep thoughts are shared without words: they slip into each other’s arms, embrace....enter the Beloveds Dream.

The Beloveds Dream...embracing as they open to worship. Full worship of his cock. Full worship of her cunt. Mouths hungering to kiss. Like thickly fogged clouds close to the earth, so they lay entwined...the Beloveds open to Dreaming...she embraces him and he embraces her—two flames in fiery consummation as One.

...his flesh now flows with her astral blood, his heart beats now with her astral beat—it is for Jude to become cunt: Potent Cunt: with the blood of the Great Mother flowing through his veins.

... her flesh now flows with his astral blood, her heart beats now with his astral beat—it is for Sharon to become cock: Potent Cock: with the blood of the Great Father flowing through her veins.

Coupled: Sharon as Jude: Jude as Sharon...are One, are god and goddess, Mother and Father of All the Living.

The pulsation of their embrace is the entwining two-hearts, two-minds, two-souls that flare up as One as do candle flames when they merge, then part to become two, again—he and she, He and She

...swallowing and being swallowed, penetrating and being penetrated, surrendering and being surrendered unto

...no longer Forgetting The Male within Her nor The Female within Him—Jude-Sharon-Sharon-Jude, the endless flow of Eternal Life, of Eros Eternally Afire

And what shall we awaken to when we no longer die?

We shall wake unto an unimaginable Presence.

We shall wake unto an unimaginable Memory.

We shall wake unto an unimaginable Devotion.

We shall awake unto an unimaginable Dreaming.

We shall worship, eternally as Embraced.

We shall be forever Beloveds, Dreaming.

(“*Nihil Obstat!*”)

THE END

Note: Ni·hil ob·stat 1. *Roman Catholic Church*. An attestation by a church censor that a book contains nothing damaging to faith or morals. 2. Official approval, especially of an artistic work. Here an erotic play on the phrase with the double-entendre meaning that “Nothing is forbidden!”

Francis X. Kroncke is a seeker whose has journeyed through the monastic life, the theological academy, federal courtrooms, a federal prison cell, and the byways of corporate America. In 1970, he took his Catholic theology into the American courts as he defended his draft board raiding crime, re: the trials of the “Minnesota 8.” During and after serving time, he explored the dark, Shadow side of America...and his own soul. In his published essays he has focused on the ancient call which is heard most distinctively in the institutions and through the experiences of the dark side of the biblically based Western and American cultures. The article, “An Outlaw’s Theology,” was published in the journal *Cross Currents* (June 2011). A companion piece, “A vision of coupled presence,” appeared in the journal *Theology and Sexuality* (2011). Also available on line are the novel, “Kill the Dove!” about the Sixties and prison, and “Outlaw or American Patriot?” a trial memoir. See, other writings, interviews, the play, “Peace Crimes,” etc. at: <http://www.outlaw-theologian.net>

Links:

[The “Minnesota 8”](#)

[“Peace and War in the Heartland”](#)

[“Earthfolk”](#)

[“Outlaw Theology”](#)