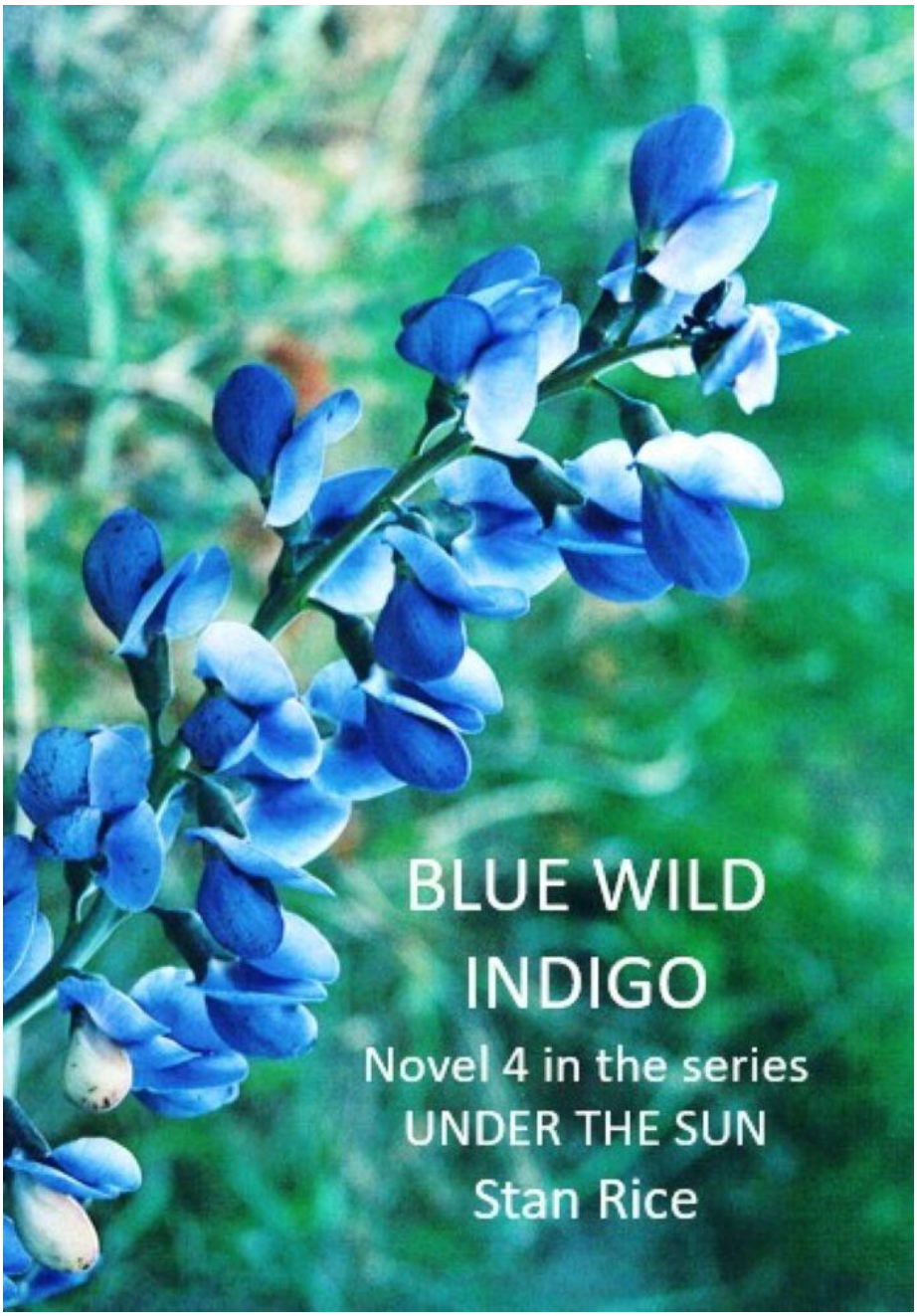

BLUE WILD
INDIGO
Novel 4 in the series
UNDER THE SUN
Stan Rice

BLUE WILD INDIGO

Novel 4 in the series Under the Sun

Stan Rice

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Summary of Blue Wild Indigo

All her life, Sophia is inconvenient. She thinks too much and everybody knows it. She escapes twice from her Amish community in rural Oklahoma and discovers how dangerous and costly love and wisdom can be. The first time, she leaves with Clay. They find that the outside world is worse than their Amish community and they return, join church, and marry. Sophia's second departure—with its risk of shunning—is not so easy. She takes refuge with Gil, a famous, lonely theologian, who is escaping his own past. But by hiding in Gil's house, Sophia has exchanged one set of restrictions for another. Sophia's brilliance shocks Gil into rethinking everything he thinks he knows, as he helps Sophia recreate herself. Their love grows as deeply as the roots of the blue wild indigo, a long-lived prairie flower. As Clay stalks Sophia, she and Gil discover that love is worth even the risk of death. Only after this experience are Sophia and Gil free.

PART ONE: GIL

Chapter 1

Her eyes. It was her eyes that shot out at me, barbed me, and reeled me in. She made me feel like a fish who thought that because he understood the water he understood the world, only to find that he did not even understand the water. She left me flopping on the floor. Even now I do not know whether she intended to capture me or if I just blundered into the circle of her light.

And who was she to do this to me? She herself was living in a backwater of a backwater, a little Amish community in central central Oklahoma. What made her think she was so wise, anyway? Her pond was far smaller than mine.

And why had I never seen her before? I had visited the little Amish store many times. Surely I should have noticed her.

On this early summer day, as on all of my previous visits to the store, I slipped between the wooden shelves and inhaled the redolence of bread, fruitcakes, and beeswax candles. I stopped to look at the little rack of paperback books, with titles like *Peter's Decision* or *Delilah's True Love,* which were intended to convince young Amish people to stay in the community rather than to leave when they reached their *rumspringa* years. I could see from the brimmed straw hats that hung from hooks on the plaster wall that this was a store the Amish intended primarily for their own community, not for outsiders like me. A refrigerator, powered by a generator that used a canister of gas rather than electricity from the local grid, hummed and kept butter and cheese fresh and cold. Apple butter, peach preserves, and amber honey, in brass-capped mason jars, the wildness and goodness of nature, sat obediently on the shelves.

But there she was. In a straight and strait wooden chair at the end of one of the aisles a young woman sat reading a book, her back to me. I rubbed my eyes, irritated with dust carried by the fierce winds outside, and my mind saw stars and galaxies hurtling past the Amish at the speed of light. When the nebulae cleared from my eyes, I saw the woman more distinctly. Her plain blue dress had no wasted material and was stiff with starch. Her light brown hair, long and straight as truth itself, spilled from beneath a white bonnet. Her only decorations were the abstract shapes on the ribbons of the bonnet which trailed back from her head like the tails of a surprised comet and hung down upon her shoulders. Her right hand lay on top of the book, relaxed yet efficiently holding it open; the left hand was underneath the book.

I approached and looked over her shoulder to see what she was reading. I was nearly at her shoulder before I realized how close I had come. She turned quickly and looked back at me. Her round, wire-rimmed spectacles gave her blue eyes, widely spaced and widely open, an electrical brilliance. Only the pads kept the spectacles from sliding off of her small nose, down the thin face past little light hairs on her upper lip. The thin

lips that had never known lipstick seemed also unaccustomed to smile. She blinked, then blinked again. She tilted her head one way, then another, as if triangulating me.

I stammered when my eyes met hers, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. I just wanted to see what you were reading.” She kept looking into my eyes with intensity, and she kept blinking and tilting her head. After a few motionless seconds, her gaze jarred me into confusion. I felt like saying to her, *Don’t look at me like that!*

All I could think to do was to look down at her book. I read the title that ran across the tops of the pages: *The Lost Gospel of Thomas*. This was a book that I had read. It was a translation and commentary on one of the “gospels” that had not been included in the Bible. At last I had something I could say to her.

“I read that book,” I said, regaining my composure. “What do you think of it?” I moved around to be in front of her, and only then dared to look at her face again.

Her owl eyes followed me. She continued to look into my eyes several seconds before she spoke with a calm and very clear alto voice. “It is very interesting,” she said, her lips barely moving. “I think I see why this gospel was not included in the Canon. But, you know, they’ve been lying to us.”

A whole train of thought began to rush through me. I had majored in history, earned a doctoral degree in theology, and was on the faculty of a small religious college when I wrote a book that was at once remunerative and controversial. For both reasons, I had just two months earlier left the college. I now lived off of royalties in a little country house outside of Wapanucka, which everyone called Wappy. It had been months, it seemed like years, since I had a theological discussion with anyone. Nothing could have prepared me to have one with an Amish woman.

“Who has been lying to us?” I asked.

“The church fathers of old, and the modern leaders. They’ve been lying to us.” I would have expected her to lower her voice, lest her elders (such as the round middle-aged woman at the counter) would hear her, but she spoke with firm clarity. “They said there are four gospels. That’s that. Actually, as you apparently know, there were other gospels the church fathers saw fit to discard. With good reason. But...” She inhaled. The oxygen made the blue flames of her eyes burn brighter. “I should like to have had the opportunity to decide for myself. What else are they not telling us? I can only wonder.”

I kept looking into her eyes as she spoke. The Amish, a rural Christian sect, considered nineteenth-century technology to be good, twentieth-century technology to be evil, and twenty-first century technology to be unthinkable. Their numerous small communities spread like lymph nodes through the bruised body of the nation. They seemed synonymous with the acceptance of tradition. I could not believe I had just heard one of them questioning the truths she had received.

She seemed to know what I was thinking right then. “You seem surprised that I was reading this book,” she said.

“Yes,” I admitted.

"What did you expect me to be reading?" she demanded.

"I ... I don't know," I said.

"A psalter? A cookbook?" she continued. "Or perhaps you are surprised that I was reading anything at all?" Her eyes penetrated me even more deeply.

"I really don't know," I said. I wanted to add, *Stop looking at me like that!*

"You probably think," she continued her attack on me, without removing her gaze, "that as I am Amish, I do not have a college education, and you are right. You must, further, consider me simple because I am without formal education."

"Why would I think that?" I stammered.

"You're a professor," she stated with conviction.

"No, I am not," I replied.

"You have 'professor' written all over you," she said. "Your little car out front. The way you read labels."

"Okay, okay, I used to be a professor," I blurted. I was disconcerted that she had analyzed me before I had even seen her. "But you are mistaken if you think that I look down on people who have not had formal higher education. The smartest man I ever knew was my uncle. He was a janitor." I thought it was her turn to speak, but she said nothing; she just continued looking at me and blinking. Her mind was sharpened on a homemade whetstone, and none of my words seemed adequate to encounter it. I finally thought of something to say. "Do you know the book *God and Freedom?*"

"I might," she said. "Who wrote it?"

"A man named Gilbert Harrow. Have you, by chance, read it?"

"Not by chance," she responded.

"You read it?" I asked again.

"Deliberately," she said with a non-smile. She still had not moved even her hands.

"What did you think of it?" I pursued.

"A brilliant book," she said. "Very clear, interesting language. But..."

This last word was like a little bullet in my heart, for this is the book that I had written and that had made me famous.

"But what?" I said.

She continued looking at me. There could have been immense activity all around us, a wiccan dance of brooms and baskets, and I would not have noticed it as I looked into her eyes. She said, "There is a fundamental assumption that the author makes, and never mentions. I am afraid he hadn't even noticed it."

I suddenly knew that my magnum opus was flawed. If an uneducated woman could catch an error in my logic, how mercilessly I would soon be skewered by the Big Boys of Academia, in their reviews soon to be published. "What was the error?" I muttered.

"You didn't notice?" Only her voice sounded surprised; her face remained unexpressive. "The author skillfully demolished every limitation to our religious freedom—every orthodoxy, every theological bulwark. He left us with a freedom in which we could go anywhere, in any direction, without paths or roads or rules to constrain us. He seemed to think that anyone in his or her right mind would desire such freedom."

"And ... this is a problem?" I asked stupidly.

"That's not freedom," she announced. "That's terror. We need rules, laws of nature, to make sense of the world. Otherwise the world is as unpredictable and confusing as a stupid dream. I don't want utter freedom, if that's what it is. I want the laws of Newton, and to know the lay of the land, so I know where to go and how to get there. Gravity is not a shackle; it is a grounding in reality." Now I could see how she fit, even if uncomfortably, into the straight shelves and furrows of her land and people.

She could see something in my eyes. "You look a little disturbed. Was it something I said?" she asked.

As her gaze continued to penetrate me, I felt I could hold nothing back from her. "I wrote that book," I said.

She looked at me a whole minute before she said, "Please forgive me if I have offended you. It is, as I clearly said, a brilliant book. I am honored to meet its author." She extended a slim right hand as the book closed over her left. A little slip of paper marked her place in the book. The softness of her surprisingly warm, moist hand came not from weakness but from relaxation.

"I am not offended," I said, after releasing her hand. "You just shook me up a bit. You see ... I suspect that you are right."

She did not acknowledge my concession. She continued, "You assumed that everyone who is restricted by rules..." She touched her bonnet, with her right hand, to push a loose lock back under it. "...desires to escape. This is not true."

"So ... now what do I do?" I asked myself aloud. I looked away from her, but she continued looking at me. Then we both had the same thought at the same time, and we both said, "Sequel." This time I was sure that she smiled.

"Yes, I could write a follow-up book," I smiled back at her.

"If you are man enough to admit that you were wrong in your first book," she noted, smiling even more grandly. Her teeth were perfect.

"You should come and visit, and we could write the sequel together," I suddenly thought aloud. I smiled. When I realized that I might have gone a little too far, my smile turned into an awkward, fake grin. At least that is what it felt like.

"That would be difficult," she said, her smile dispersing as she opened the book again. For the first time I saw the simple gold wedding band on her left hand. "But, stranger things have happened, in my life and in yours..." She looked into my eyes yet again, as if she knew all of my life. She continued, "In God's cosmic comedy, I might

someday find myself visiting you. I seem to remember the author was a professor somewhere..."

"It was at a little college in eastern Oklahoma," I said. "I just recently quit, and moved here. I like my country solitude." I turned and looked toward the store window, comfortable at last describing something I felt sure about. "My little house has exactly what I need, and nothing I do not need." I looked back at the woman. She seemed unconvinced, as if she knew that some of the things I had I did not, in fact, need; and that I had two bedrooms, one empty. "Water, electricity, a fireplace, a tract of forest for firewood. It has shade, and one small air conditioner, which I use only for one room and only on the hottest afternoons. A place to read, a place to write. A piece of unplowed, ungrazed native prairie full of tall grasses and summer flowers which I can leave untouched, much to my neighbors' disapproval, and then burn it in the early springtime before the leaves sprout, also to the disapproval of some. Burning renews the prairie, you know."

"Not too many places like that around here," she said.

"Right," I said. "And a big okra patch, and tomatoes, near a soapberry tree. I don't need the old barn, so I'm letting the trumpet creepers take it over."

"Your house is on Clear Creek, just north of Wappy," she said.

"How did you know?" I exclaimed.

"I've seen it. I go walking along Clear Creek. It's right out there..." She pointed with her right hand, while the afternoon sun glistened on the gold ring on her left.

"Long walk," I said. "I drove five miles to get here."

"Only four miles along the creek," she responded. "So, you're the person who lives in the old Yaeger house. He died when I was a kid. He was Amish. Couldn't you tell that it used to be an Amish house?"

"How would I be able to do that?"

"The buggy-sized garage is too small for most American cars."

"Yes, I noticed that."

"And there is something else at your house which most Amish houses, but not nearly as many English ones, have." The Amish, being of German origin, refer to other Americans as *English.*

After some silence, I said, "You are going to wait for me to figure it out, I presume. That might take a while."

"Guest accommodations?" she asked, smiling a little.

"No, there aren't any…wait. Human guests?"

"Not necessarily," she said.

"You don't mean the birdhouses, do you?"

She smiled really big.

"That makes sense," I said. "You Amish live closer to the land and its creatures than do most Americans."

"That's not hard to do," she said.

"Sophia!" called the voice of the old woman at the counter.

"Yes, mother?" my new acquaintance responded.

"Come and cut up some honeycomb," said the voice. "There's almost none left on the shelf."

"So your name is Sophia," I said to her as she rose with a humid rustle and gently laid the book on the top of a barrel. "Sophia comes from the Greek word for wisdom. Why am I not surprised that this is your name?"

I imagined that I saw a quick, tearful flash of appreciation in her eyes.

I added, "In the Bible, Solomon said wisdom was sweeter than a honeycomb."

"There's ... there's still a piece of honeycomb on the shelf," she stammered, now avoiding my gaze and addressing me like a customer, as if we had not just spoken about our whole lives. Her eyes were now glistening. "You should try some." I walked to the shelf where she pointed. When I looked back to see her, she had vanished, leaving a stinging emptiness.

Suddenly I was hungry and wanted to eat every pungent nut and grain in the whole brown green world. I took the one remaining piece of honeycomb. I took a fruitcake that had unpretentious undyed Amish fruits, and a little sack of pecans that must have come from the tree that rustled outside. I placed them on the counter. The woman whom I had seen on first entering, and whose roundness and gray hair were hidden in a dress and bonnet just like Sophia's, toted up my charge with a quick mind not hobbled by a dependence on calculators. She wrote the total on a list in a ledger.

As I paid, she said, "You met Sophia. My daughter." Her voice was scratchy and strong like dry brush, and unlike Sophia she had an easily audible Amish-German accent. "She does love them books. It'll get her in trouble someday. But what can you do?" She looked into my eyes, and I saw the slightest spark that had kindled the fire in her daughter's. "God gave her a mind. What's she supposed to do? Cut it out and throw it away? Ha!" She handed me my change.

Chapter 2

A lot can happen in a week. According to the ancients, God made the world in a week. In my week in early July, not much happened except the birth of a few okra pods and tomatoes, the writing and un-writing of a mediocre chapter or two of a new book, and the deciding and re-deciding of what the book was supposed to be about. Sequel. Right. It wasn't as easy as it sounded when Sophia and I discussed it.

But apparently a lot had been happening in a few square meters of an Amish house near Wappy. No one felt the eruption when it happened, and I scarcely heard the arrival of its ejected cinders at my doorstep. I barely heard her footfalls on the old wood of my porch even though the door was open to admit the brief morning coolness. She would have found no doorbell even if she had thought to look for one. I heard a "Hello?" that seemed afraid of its own voice.

I arose from the desk, coffee, and the journal in which I had once transcribed devotions and now wrote enigmas. Who would come to my door at 7:30 a.m.?

"Sophia!" I greeted her through the holey screen door, which divided her into pixels of blue and white and brown and red. The blue and white were the same dress and blouse and bonnet that she had worn last week, or identical ones; the brown was her hair, now curled in sweat, and some dirt upon her hands; a little red bled from scratches on her wrist and face. She also carried a large canvas bag. I looked around her.

"I am alone," she said in response to my eyes. "Am I welcome?"

"I answered that question last week," I said.

She stepped in, brushing insubstantially past me as I held open the creaky screen door. I caught the faintest whiff of sweat. I realized that I had never been so close to her, that I may never be again, and that I wasn't sure if I wanted to be. The Amish—some communities of them, at least—reject deodorant, compensating incompletely by frequent bathing with lye soap, and with layers of clothes. Her cloth bag rubbed my thigh. She took a seat immediately, because I had already told her she was welcome, and because she was obviously exhausted. I watched her take a cloth from her bag and clean the oil and sweat from her spectacles.

"You walked here along the river trail—all night?—the one that only you seem to know about," I observed. "You are bleeding. The briars have grown."

"Yes," she said, putting her spectacles back on. "It took me six hours."

"And with that big purse!" I said.

She looked into my eyes. "It is big for a purse, but small for a suitcase."

I said simply and slowly, "Oh."

She maintained her gaze and said, "It took you long enough to figure that one out, didn't it?"

I instantly understood, or thought I understood, why she had walked at night and that she had left her home, her husband, her life. I simply asked, “What did he do to you?”

“Nothing,” she answered.

“You can tell me. Don’t be afraid,” I said without thinking.

“It did not occur to me to be afraid of you,” she said, then added, “He did nothing, as usual.”

“Then why did you leave?” I asked. She looked motionlessly into my eyes for many long seconds, blinking and tilting her head just as she had done the previous week, as if I should already know the answer. I broke and said, “Stop looking at me like that!” But she kept looking. “Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked, again without thinking.

Then I sat down at the footstool at her feet. “Look, Sophia, I’m pretty dense sometimes. I need to have everything spelled out for me, so you need to tell me everything.” I could not look into her eyes. I looked instead at her work-callused hands and wondered how many washboards and butter-churns it had taken to break open the blister of her life. “You read my book. You know I am no philosopher. I am a straight talker, even when I get into trouble in the academic community for it.” I rose and looked into her eyes again and started yelling. “And why the hell am I telling you all these things about myself? *You're* the one who came to *my* house. I’m in charge here ... *stop looking at me like that!*... so I need to know exactly what’s going on.”

“This is God’s house,” she said. “You have nothing but what God has given you...”

“Cut the crap, Sophia,” I said.

She said, “This is a quote, as nearly as I can remember it, from your book...”

“As I should have said, Sophia, cut the shit. Do you Amish use words like *shit?*”

“Sometimes,” she said matter-of-factly. “Actually, we use four-letter words that are much more powerful, and that we do not understand.”

“Such as?” I demanded.

“Such as *love,”* she said.

“I should have seen that one coming too,” I said.

“If I have offended you, I can leave.” She actually tensed her grip upon her bag, as if to rise.

“Sophia... First,” I said, exhaling and sitting back down on the stool. “You know I could never take offense at you. Second, what manner of monster would I be if I drove away a woman who had walked through a forest all night to see me? I assume you did not come here for tomatoes and okra.”

“This is true,” she said quietly, with a little smile. “No offense, but our tomatoes and okra are better.”

"All I ask..." I stopped, realizing that she would hold me to this as a promise, so I continued, "All I ask *at the moment* is that you tell me everything that happened."

She relaxed and began. "I was born twenty-four years ago..."

"Damn it, not that far back," I said, rising again and towering over her.

"But it is relevant," she protested mildly.

"Yes, it is," I said, assuming the philosophical pose with which I used to try to impress my students. "In due time, I need very much to hear the entire story. Right now I need to know what precipitated last night's journey."

"I have thought for weeks, ever more and more frequently, about leaving," she said. "I had no clear opportunity, so I stayed. There was always one more apple pie to bake, you see. Then you came along and I saw my opportunity. I reviewed all my reasons for staying, and for leaving, which took six days. Like God in the week of creation, I brought order out of chaos, and filled empty spaces with beings of light. On the seventh day, I came here." She rested.

"And your husband must know," I said.

"Of course. I left him a note. He went out after supper—I fried okra for him one last time—and I left the note that I had spent the whole day writing. You know, I feel guilty about not washing the supper dishes, but I feel no guilt for leaving."

I looked toward the windows. "Did he follow you?"

"How could he? I go along the river trail frequently, to commune with the forest. I've never kept this a secret from him. But he does not know or care about how I commune with nature. If he had paid more attention to me, to the life of my mind rather than the minding of his wife, he would have been able to follow me—but then in that case I would not have left." She looked down and spoke more softly. "Actually, he used to know more about me."

"Well, maybe he can again," I said. "Not that I'm trying to get you to go back."

"As I told you, I gave it a lot of thought," she continued. "Of course I don't know whether he might someday change back into the man I married. But if I waited until I was absolutely certain, I might have to wait for my entire life. The window of opportunity was open and I had to act." She looked back up at me, this time without a penetrating stare.

"So I'm a window of opportunity?" I asked, not intending offense.

"You are Gilbert Harrow, the man who can get ordinary people to think clearly about God. Or at least to think clearly about thinking clearly about God."

"Sophia, I didn't mean to imply that you were just using me as a way to…"

"You are a man who spoke to me as a friend and an equal, despite the unlikeliness of the first and the ridiculousness of the second."

"As for the second," I said. "For being an equal. There are only two of us here, so there is no need for a chain of command. As for the first, I felt like you had to be my friend from the moment we first talked."

"You are my blessing from God," she said.

"Don't put me on a pedestal," I said. "Blessing from God? That's a tall order. I don't think I can live up to that." I touched her hand. "Meanwhile, how would you like to settle in for a while?"

"I should scarcely have come here if I did not already know I would be doing so." She stood up.

"You need to cool off a little," I said. Sweat ran from underneath her bonnet. That was when, without thinking, I began to remove the bonnet. She became tense and grabbed it, but only after I had removed it from her head. On her scalp was a smooth and large white scar.

"I was going to decide when to remove that," she said, a little alarmed.

"He did this to you?"

"No."

"Sophia! You can trust me!"

"I know, Gil! Clay didn't give me that scar. I got it when the escaped convict got into our house. You probably heard about that on the news."

I looked at the scar and found myself literally feeling the pain that she must have felt when it was inflicted. I had gotten too close. I stepped back a few inches. "News? Guess I should listen to it once in a while. When was this?"

"Last year," she said.

"Oh, I hadn't moved here yet."

"I know. But it was all over the national papers."

"Maybe I did hear about it, but I must have ignored it. And I had a lot on my mind right about then. Well, Sophia, you haven't had very good experiences with men, have you?" She looked into my eyes and I added, "Don't expect theologians to be any better than other men. But, I say to you as a friend, I will try to always be as good to you as I know how to be. Remember that."

"I will," she said, looking down again. She gently took the bonnet from my hands and slipped it back onto her head. Crooked.

"What have you brought?" I asked. "Besides the bonnet."

She relaxed as I changed the subject. "I am wearing my only clothes. I had others just like them, but why would I bring Amish clothes with me? I brought no food, for I knew you would have some. I brought my writings. My books were too heavy, so I brought only a list of them, in case I want to rebuild the library someday. That includes your book. Sorry. But, let me guess, I bet you have a few copies of it around here." She flashed a brief smile and continued. "I brought one Mason jar of water, now empty. I took my husband's flashlight, but seldom used it. I could feel the forest path with my feet. I used the flashlight only to check for poison ivy."

"Well," I sighed, "I'm going to have to let you borrow some clothes. Do you object to wearing my shorts and pants? I have some old ones that I can no longer wear but have not thrown away. You look about the size I used to be, before my pot belly expanded. Just a little." I thought, then added, "The Old Testament forbids cross-dressing, and cross-dressing was the principal accusation against Joan of Arc."

"Shorts and pants cover legs. Women, as well as men, have legs. This is not a sin," she said, again looking at me like that.

"And I have lots of T-shirts. If you don't mind liberal tree-hugger shirts."

"Good disguise," she observed. "Only, I really do hug trees. Does that make me a liberal? I am unclassifiable." She smiled again. "You don't have any shirts that say *Ex-Amish?*"

I smiled back. "I can have one made for you at the T-shirt store in Durant."

"Maybe I can embroider it on a pinafore!" She laughed.

I looked at her intently, telling myself that I should not, but staring all the more intently for it. I wanted to tell her how beautiful her quiet humor made her, despite the sweat-mussed hair creeping down from under her bonnet over her sweat-spangled face, and despite the little hairs on her lip. So I looked away, and tried to think of what to do next. I then realized what this would have to be.

"I would offer you some breakfast," I said, "But there is something urgent with which we must deal."

"Yes?" Sophia prompted.

"Your husband will probably come looking for you," I said.

"Of course. I am his possession, after all. Or so he thinks. But what can he do? I am an adult and can make my own decisions," she said.

"You didn't write in the note that you were coming here?"

"No. I could not presume that you were certain to even let me in the door, however confident I was that you would."

"But if he does find us, he can make life very unpleasant for us. He could use violence," I said, uncertain as to what manner of man he was.

"I doubt that he would physically harm me," Sophia said.

"I meant, against me," I pointed out. Her lips made an *oh.* "Jealousy might outweigh even the pacifism for which you Amish are famous."

"But how would he know where I am?" she asked.

"He could go to the police," I explained.

"But I am not a missing person," she responded. "I wrote him the note explaining that I left of my own free will."

"But suppose he doesn't tell the police about the note?" I said. I could tell by her face that she had not thought of that possibility. I continued, "Once the police have found you, then you could explain it to them. But by then the damage is done: he has found you. Has found us. He would think that I lured you away from him."

Sophia looked intently into my eyes, this time unblinking, for several seconds.

"I didn't lure you away from him," I said, more loudly.

She kept looking steadily into my eyes.

I exploded. "*Stop looking at me like that!* I did not lure you away from him!"

Her look said, *but you did.*

"I did not intend to lure you away from him!"

"This is true," she said, looking down at last. I exhaled and sat down again on the footstool. She continued, her voice settling down on me from above like cottonwood fluff. "As soon as I knew of your existence, I was lured. You did not intend this; but you could not help but lure me."

I realized something, and told her. "You knew all about my house before we even met."

"Yes," she said, looking down.

"And you had seen me at this house," I added.

"Yes," she said, more quietly.

"So I was luring you here simply by being here," I concluded.

She looked up into my eyes. This time, I caught her gaze and held it. It was my turn to look at her like that. After a few moments, she started to shake her head. But she did not take her eyes from mine. "I was not spying on you."

I kept staring into the darkness inside of her eyes.

"Gil, I wasn't spying on you," she said, standing up. When I again did not answer, she burst out, "*Quit looking at me like that!* I did not *intend* to spy on you!"

"Aha!" I smiled and felt very satisfied. Two can play this game, this little saber dance of the eyes. "It is true that you did not *intend* to spy on me. You were just out for a walk, the same walk to the same place over and over. Well, anyway. What shall we do, to keep your husband from finding you?" I had an idea, which I shared before analyzing it. "If you file a report with the police *first,* they cannot help him find you," I said. Then this occurred to me: "Do you have any way of proving who you are?"

She sat down again and looked at me confusedly, as if to say, *What kind of crazy world have I launched myself into? I know who I am—what's there to prove?*

"Of course," I said, "your husband would identify you, but that's what we want to avoid. I don't suppose you have a driver's license!" I snickered.

She laughed and said, "No, but I have an Oklahoma state I.D."

"Excellent!" I sang. "That will work. What made you get an I.D.?"

"Someday I will tell you," she said, turning back into Mona Lisa.

"Let's go," I said. "Wash your face and hands, and get rid of that blood, but keep your Amish garb for now. It will help identify you. And put your bonnet on right."

I got up, and took her hand to help lift her to her feet. She rose tiredly, wobbling, almost swooning. I wanted to comfort her, cleanse her, let her rest, but I knew we had to hurry. She stood very close to me, her hand on my bare forearm. She felt my sweat and

tension, and I faintly smelled hers. She looked into my eyes, again without blinking. “I really, really, really appreciate this. My life is in your hands. I know you must be very busy, yet you take time, immediately, to help me. Am I disrupting your schedule?”

I had an insight, and started to smile, but forced my face to remain expressionless. For several seconds I peered deeply into her eyes. She repeated her question, and I stared at her even more intensely. Her face began to twitch in discomfort. Finally she burst out, in a voice as near as she could come to a shout, *“Stop looking at me like that!”*

I jumped away from her and started dancing around the room. She simply smiled and watched me. I came back and hugged her briefly. “*Of course* you are disturbing my schedule. I was busy writing stupid illogical things, and spending another day wondering what I was going to do with my life. I had a full day of this planned. Except maybe I was running low on honeycomb and needed to take a trip to that little country store. Of course you are disturbing my schedule, my whole life, *me! Thank God* you are disturbing my schedule.” I took her hand and led her to the bathroom to wash her face. As we walked out the back door into the garage, she smiled broadly.

I wondered if she had ever been in an automobile. But she needed no instruction about how to use the seat belt. I backed out the car and began to drive on the gravel road in front of my house. In response to my expression, she explained, “We do not have automobiles, but we frequently ask our English friends to give us rides in theirs.” She removed her bonnet and let the air through the open window, already warm, dry her sweat. She licked the salt from her lips and closed her eyes as the countryside rushed past faster than her stomach normally experienced. She felt the car swoop from the high pastures bordered by bois-d’arc, winged elm, and persimmon trees, down into the cool glades of box elder and sycamore, and back up to the only stop sign in Wapanucka. She opened her eyes as the car approached the police station, almost the only non-shambled building in town. As we had agreed, I left her at the front door and drove away. She entered the building, bonnet in place. About a half hour later, she approached my car, where it was parked at a little white cinderblock café a block away—which was not open, therefore not full of observant eyes.

“Well,” she sighed, “I wrote a brief statement for them, on one of their forms.” She settled into the seat and buckled up. “I just indicated that I had left home, date and time, of my own free will. The receptionist notarized it after I signed my name.”

“You never told me your full name,” I said.

“Sophia Muth,” she said, pronouncing it like *moot.*

“As in, *moot point?*” I asked.

“No, as in German for *courage,*” she answered.

“Again, it describes you,” I said.

“It is my husband’s name. Does it describe him?” she asked.

"We may soon find out," I muttered. As I drove through the intersection, I looked in the rear view mirror, and saw a black Amish buggy, pulled by a phlegmatic horse, approach the police station from the opposite direction.

Chapter 3

"So," I said as I opened my door for the new partner I had not known two hours earlier I would have, "What are your plans?"

"I think I should like to bathe," said Sophia.

I said, "I meant, over the next several days. Weeks. Months."

"I came here," she said, her face just a few inches away from mine as we stood just inside the front door, "to remove myself from a restrictive world. I know God has called me to use my wisdom for something more than housework. I know my life must be more than *kinder, küche, kirke,* as we say—children, cooking, and church. I need time to decide what to discard, and what to keep, from my Amish life. For example. We ... the people among whom I until lately dwelt ... reject television. I have noticed that you do not have one."

"I never formally rejected television," I explained, "but I prefer entertaining myself, exercising my mind, in other ways. I have an old television, in the garage, but, honestly, I never got around to ordering cable service. Actually, I don't think this house is even wired for cable. You will probably find that many things in our views of life converge—only you reached your position by choice, and I reached mine by laziness."

"Then maybe we can put our minds together and figure out what the good life ought to be like," she smiled. "That is, after I bathe."

I had felt trickles of emotion since first meeting her. But when I looked at her at that moment, emotion flooded me—loving, cherishing, wanting to protect, wanting to feed, wanting to be fed by this woman. She was not mine; she belonged only to herself, yet here she was, uniquely inhabiting my house and life.

She asked, "How long am I permitted to stay here?"

"As long as you need to," I answered. "I could say that your arrival caught me unprepared. But this is not true. Your arrival was unexpected, but in a strange twist of fate, I am ready for you. I have a room for you. The extra food, water, electricity—negligible. I work, if work it can be called, at home. It is as if God had intended for this to happen. God! I have rejected the silly theories of God manipulating the world to fine-tune the events of the lives of religious people. I refuse to call God *Providence* as if providing us blessings is His or Her identity." Then I added, "This isn't supposed to be happening. It's too good."

"Don't expect too much out of me," Sophia said. "I am just a woman, Sophia, not Athena the goddess of wisdom." Her spectacles were fogging in the Oklahoma summer morning. "You told me to not put you on a pedestal. I now tell you the same thing about me. I feel and do things that make no sense. I am not always going to be a convenient woman. There will be times that you will be puzzled at what I, a woman you are deluded into thinking is perfect, do. And…" She looked intensely into my eyes, holding my face

between clamped hands to make sure I looked into hers. “I refuse to be the thing upon which your equanimity rests. I refuse to be Atlas upholding the welkin of goodness in your cosmos.” She released my face. “For now, I should like to rest my mind and re-create my life while I am hiding at your house. But to *stay* here, hiding, is to exchange one imprisonment for another.” Runnels of perspiration trickled on her lip, etching recondite patterns, like arabesque or chinoiserie. “I am deliberately making no plans at this time, as I know I am not wise enough to make them while I am weak and, we must admit, in shock. I should like to bathe, then rest.”

“Yes,” I said. “You must be very uncomfortable.”

“Always,” she said, “and never.”

I led her to the bathroom. I had never made the old clawfoot tub into a shower. I brought her a T-shirt long enough to serve as a dress, as she sat on a chair and unbuttoned her shoes. I ran a bath from the cold water tap, which the summer heat had made lukewarm.

She began her bath. I heard nothing from behind the old wooden bathroom door while she soaked and rested. I proceeded to dig out a space for her in my house. I cleared out piles of papers I had stored in what was now, and perhaps had been intended all along to be, her room. I looked at the bare windows and realized that now was the time to put up the blinds I had bought. I carried the blinds in from the garage, hearing Sophia’s splashing as I walked past the bathroom door. I walked past the door again, bringing tools, and heard a strange squeaking noise from my bathtub.

Sophia emerged from the bathroom, her hair in wild clean tangles. She wore only the T-shirt I had given her, which reached not quite halfway down her thighs. I looked away when I caught myself staring at her legs, which bristled with thin dark hairs stark against a whiteness that had never known sunlight except perhaps as a morning ray over the rail of a bathroom curtain. Her legs were gaunt, but strong with walking. When I looked away, my eyes fell upon her arms, similarly hairy and pallid and gaunt. I looked away again, my eyes falling upon her chest, where two small abalone mounds slightly pushed out the *Save The Whales* message. My eyes rested on her enigmatic smile. In my peripheral vision I saw her chest rising and falling with the enjoyment of oxygen.

“Please forgive...” I began.

“Don’t apologize,” she interrupted. “Your curiosity about my body is natural, and I trust you will not stare at me too much. But you can, at a glance, tell what kind of life I have led.”

“Sophia, I’m wondering,” I ventured, “What was that squeaking noise while the bathtub was draining?” I smiled confidently.

She looked at me with unblinking calmness.

I became flustered. “I wasn’t listening to you take a bath. I just happened to hear as I walked by...”

She continued staring into my eyes like an owl.

"Damn it, stop looking at me like that! I wasn't *trying* to listen to you take a bath."

"This is true," she said, looking away. "You did not come to the door with the intention of listening, although I am not sure whether this would have been wrong. There are so many things of which I am no longer sure. You want to know what I was doing? I was loving you."

I stood astounded. What could this possibly mean? For a moment, I even wondered if she meant that she had been masturbating. "I don't understand," I muttered.

"I was loving you," she smiled. "You have hard water and it leaves a bathtub ring. I was rubbing my foot around the ring to suspend as much of it as possible back into the water so that it would drain away, so that when you took your bath, the tub would not be dirty from my bath. That's one aspect of what it means to love. I always cleared away the bathtub ring for my husband, but it never occurred to him to do it for me."

I smiled. "You're full of surprises. I wrote a whole chapter about love in my book, but I had little to say about simple considerateness as an expression of love."

"You had nothing at all to say about it, as I recall," she said.

"Okay, okay, nothing at all," I blurted. "Leave it to you to turn a bath into a philosophical exercise." When I looked into her eyes, I suddenly wondered if my words had hurt her, so I quickly added, "But I'm glad you do. Please continue. It is refreshing to talk with you, in contrast with talking to my simple-minded neighbors."

"What does it matter?" she responded. "They never come here anyway."

"How do you know?" I asked.

She answered, "You have one chair—the one in which I briefly sat—that is not stacked with books and papers. Your little table is also cluttered—I'm not criticizing—except where you sit. The dishes in your drain are for one."

"Brilliant, Sherlock," I said. "I suppose I cannot ever keep any secrets from you."

"Except one," she said. "I should like to know someday if you were ever married. But you will tell me, when the time is right." She looked at her arms, then bent slightly to examine her legs. She rubbed a bare foot against a red spot on her calf. "Chigger," she explained, then asked, "Tell me, should I shave?"

"Not for me," I answered. "I..." I wondered if she knew that I almost used the word *love.* "...accept you as you are. I am no Pygmalion." I waited to see if she understood the reference to the Greek sculptor who created the perfect statue of a woman then fell in love with it, which after a few moments' reflection she did. "But if you go outside this house, in a short-sleeved shirt or in shorts, people will stare. Normally I would say that you shouldn't care what they think. You are a mammal, and mammals have hair, and if they have a problem with that, tough beans for them. But you want, I assume, to remain incognito. Which is why you should shave. I was about to put up some blinds in this ... in your room."

She sat on the futon that was covered with dark green sheets. I wasn't sure I wanted her to watch me, but what else was she to do? I removed a venetian blind from its box and shrink wrap, then held it up to see where the brackets should go. I noticed with dismay that the window jamb was recessed, so that the blinds would not completely cover the windows from outside view if I mounted them on the outside of the jamb. So I would have to hang the blinds from the inside of the jamb. I began screwing in the first bracket. The screws that came with the blind were too small, and my Phillips screwdriver destroyed the slots. So I went out to the garage for larger screws, finding that I was just irritated enough to take no pleasure in the bright scarlet trumpet-vine flowers or in the beautiful melodies of the mockingbird. When I came back into the room, Sophia was reading one of my books from a pile in the corner. Her left leg was up, revealing a great deal of her pallid thigh. I was sweating from the effort of screwing in the bracket at a strange angle. I finally succeeded with this screw, then found that there was no angle from which the other support screw could be put in. I cursed mildly, and said, "Who designed this? It is stupid." So I hammered in a nail to support the bracket. When I finally got both brackets up and slid in the blind, and the little piece of plastic to hold it in place, I let the blind down a little. The top slat was interfering with the movement of the strings, no matter what I did. I had to get scissors and surgically remove the little plastic slat. Surely, I thought, this third design flaw had to be the last? But when I let the blind completely down, I found that it would not close completely. I started to pull the blind back up, gently and slowly. The mere weight of the blind distorted the plastic brackets, and they broke, letting the blind tumble down to cut my bare feet before tangling up on the floor. Sweating profusely, I began to curse and gesticulate. "Those idiots!" I said. "They are supposed to be experts, but they designed this blind wrong in every way. They apparently never actually tested their product to see if it worked. Yet they call their company *Reliability Products* and their corporate address is *One Quality Drive.* God! I hate..." Then I saw Sophia's eyes. "Stop looking at me like that!" I screamed. She continued to sit calmly with the book propped on her raised knee.

"Of course," I said, meekly now, "I might have just done it wrong." Her expression did not change.

Then she stopped looking at me like that. She looked down at the bed and said, "You modern men try to find a complex solution to every simple problem. High-tech, you call it. These blinds have many parts, some moving, some not, some moving when they should not, some not moving when they should, and every one of them an opportunity for error, whether from the manufacturer or from you. A simple device, in contrast, has only one way of failing." She put down the book, stood up, and removed the sheet from the bed. "Take down those broken brackets," she said, and I did. "Bring me some push-pins and give me that hammer. I know you have push-pins; they are holding up the National Geographic maps on your walls." When I brought her the push-pins, she was standing on the folding chair. She stretched up to hold the sheet against the top

window jamb, and to pin it into the jamb. She tapped the pushpin gently with the hammer into the wood.

Without intending to, I found myself staring at her thighs again, revealed even more as she stood on the chair. There was a little black mole that only one other man had seen, and that perhaps no other man had noticed. I was confused—did she not feel naked? But, of course, this was the first time she had ever bared even her lower legs for anyone outside of her family, so to her probably almost everything felt like nakedness. I stepped back when she got down from the chair. She moved the chair over and stood on it again to continue hanging the sheet and tapping the little pushpins. She did this for each of the three contiguous windows. She stepped down from the chair, turned to me, and pointed at the sheet. I gasped, only now noticing that the sheet was exactly the right size for the bank of windows. It was as if God had planned a convergence of windows and sheet from before the beginning of time, and that it was Sophia was the one meant to make it happen. She was like Wisdom at God's side in creation, as described by Solomon at the beginning of the Proverbs.

Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

Sophia slept through the afternoon, from both spiritual and physical exhaustion. Her door was ajar, to admit the coolness from my one small air conditioner, and I saw legs and thighs sticking out of the T-shirt and hair in humid curls hiding her face. The green of the sheet curtains canceled the red of her hot skin into a not-yet-resurrected grayness. Her chest rose and fell slowly and irregularly. Her glasses lay on the floor below the pillow. The sheet over the window moved in the slight current of air created by an old fan I got out of the attic. I made tuna salad for supper, and saved some for her in case she happened to awaken.

After dark, just before I had planned to go to bed myself, I slipped into her room to check on her. I could see nothing except the faintest rectangle of window, for even in rural Oklahoma there is a lot of light pollution. Sophia was totally silent, and I knew she was awake. I whispered her name, and she answered "Yes" in such a low murmur that I had to draw close to hear her.

"How are you doing?" I asked as I sat on the futon beside her.

"I feel as if I don't exist, here in this darkness," she answered. "And maybe I don't. I am between lives, dying from one, not yet reborn into the next. This darkness..."

"Would you like me to get you a lamp?" I asked.

"No. I need this time between existences. Tomorrow, there will be light enough, and decisions enough." She yawned.

"Then just relax," I said, placing my left hand on her shoulder. At least I thought it was her shoulder. But in the darkness I had come in contact with her right breast, covered by the T-shirt. I was instantly ready to pull back my hand and apologize. But I did not. My hand rested there for an eternal second, noticing that she did not tense or make any remonstrative movement. I could feel the hidden details. My hand then tumbled down the cliff of her side and remained touching her hip.

"Are you trying to get me to relax?" she asked.

I pulled my hand away. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that," I stammered. She was silent and still. I could see absolutely nothing of her body, or face, but I knew she was looking intently at where my face should be, with those wise owl eyes. "Stop looking at me like that!" I whispered hoarsely. She remained silent and still as my left hand dangled. When I put it down, it touched her neck and shoulder. I nestled my fingers into her hair and rubbed her skin. Every second I felt more and more remorse—for here was a desperate woman who had come to me for refuge, and in my house, my bed, and my clothes, she was a victim who could not refuse my advances. Lines from my book, about how a victim is not free to choose, haunted me, and I knew Sophia was thinking of those lines too, which I originally wrote with my right hand on scratch paper, the hand that was not now burrowing around in search of stolen pleasures. Hating myself, I slid both hands inside the shirt and embraced her thighs and caressed them. My hands ever so gently

brushed against the profuse hairs of her abdomen and grazed against warm folds of skin. She then touched her hands to mine, and held them in place, neither rejecting them nor allowing them to advance.

"I'm sorry," I told her, with quivering emotion. "You came here, trusting me to not do this to you. You came here to rest and think, not to commit adultery."

She pulled my right hand to her face and kissed my fingers one by one. "Is it wrong?" Kiss. "I don't know." Kiss. "I am between existences..." Kiss. "...neither an Amish wife nor..." Kiss. "...a whatever I am going to become. But I owe no allegiance to my husband. After all, he has not been faithful to me."

I tensed in surprise. "But..."

"Amish have high moral standards," she said, "but are as fallible as anybody. Our dirty little secret is not this; it is true of everyone. Our dirty little secret is that men can simply be forgiven and move on, while women are branded for life." She grasped my hand more tightly. "But please do not ask me to have sex with you. If you do, I shall not be able to resist. My old life is gone. But what kind of seed am I sowing for a new life? If I run and jump into bed with you, I want to be sure it is the right thing for both of us. Also, I want a man who will father my children."

"You have no children," I said, and she mumbled a confirmation. "You were unable to have children?" I assumed this was correct, for the Amish have as many children as they can.

"I have been pregnant," she announced.

"You lost the child," I concluded.

"Not exactly," she corrected me. "I had an abortion."

"What?" I exclaimed in quiet intensity. "Aren't the Amish one of the anti-abortion groups..."

"Yes, yes," she said. "No wonder our population is growing more rapidly than that of any other American subculture. Amish wives, when pregnant, are supposed to be satisfied with home remedies and aged advice. But I had been reading books about pregnancy and about human biology. As you know, once your eyes have been opened, you cannot go back to ignorance. You cannot unlearn or unsee."

I asked, "What did you read that made you decide to have..."

She silenced me with a fierce look that I could not see. "Gil," she said. "I don't know you well enough yet to talk to you about this."

"That's fair," I said. "I'm surprised you have told me anything at all. You don't have to, you know, as a condition for my hospitality."

I could see nothing, but I felt her begin to tremble. I bent over to kiss one eye, then the other. The strong saltiness on my lips suggested to me that she had wept several times already that day, and I had not known it. My lips transferred the salt to her tongue. I stretched out beside her and held her until she fell asleep.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Sophia was full of energy. She was wearing one of my pairs of khaki shorts. When she came and stood beside me, I could smell that she had put on some of my fruit-scented deodorant. I knew that there was no need for me to justify my choice of a non-masculine deodorant. I had thought about getting for myself some of that deodorant that makes women flock to a man like flies. But right now I didn't want women in general; I was glad to just have Sophia. That is, if I had her.

Sophia had apparently decided to not think about the previous night. She acted like a friend who had always been with me. She crouched down and started digging through my refrigerator. It was a very small one, the top of it not even up to her waist. "How do you have room for anything in here?" she asked.

"You'd be surprised what you can fit into one of these things," I said. "If you plan carefully. I don't buy more than I can put in here. And it uses hardly any electricity."

"You've got dark beer," she observed, holding the little door open.

"Not for breakfast," I said.

She turned her head and looked at me like a comedian's straight-man.

"Offended at the beer?" I asked, not seriously expecting an answer of yes.

"I've had it. I'll tell you about it sometime. Ah, here are the eggs. I didn't know they made egg cartons that only held six. And you have some sausage. This should be enough for me. What are *you* going to eat?"

I laughed. "Now, you've got to share. I'll fry up some hash browns too." I took potatoes from a little shelf on the counter, rinsed them, and got out a simple hand-held grater made out of a small sheet of metal. "I buy prepared foods as little as possible. Fill up on these hash browns, and leave me a bit or two of egg and sausage. Want some coffee?"

"Is that what this stuff is?" she asked, pointing to my cup.

"Yes," I said. "I just put some instant coffee directly into a cup of milk. In summer I don't even heat it. Sort of a poor man's latté. But it has to be good instant coffee. I use that Clásico stuff they sell at the Mexican market in Durant. You know, milk is the perfect food."

"How so?" she asked.

"Well, milk is the only thing we eat that specifically evolved to *be* food. Natural selection has crafted the precise balance of water and protein and fat and sugar to offer perfect nutrition to babies, or to animals such as humans who never quite grow up. Everything else we eat evolved to do something else, and then we made it into food. Fruits evolved to get seeds carried around, and seeds evolved to sprout into new plants. Stems evolved to store food for the plant, not us, to use. Most leaves had poisons in them until we bred them into crops. Animals certainly don't want us eating their meat or eggs."

"I wonder if I will ever produce any milk?" Sophia asked, but did not wait for me to say anything. "May I use this cup?" she asked, running over to my open cabinet and grabbing my special commemorative cup from the International Congress of Theodicy five years earlier.

"Been saving it for you," I said.

She started the frying pan for the sausage and eggs—yes, all six—while I shredded two potatoes, then two more. The raw potatoes started turning a rusty brown as soon as the oxygen touched them.

Only after she was on her third egg and I'd finished frying the potatoes did she slow down enough to talk.

"So, I didn't know there were actually conferences for theodicy. As I recall from your book, theodicy is the art of making up excuses for God."

"That's pretty much it," I said. "Are you familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes?"

"We never read it in church very much," said Sophia. "I think, anyway. Our Bible is in High German, which few of us understand. We speak a Low German dialect. We do not have Bibles in English. But an English girlfriend of mine, Besty, sneaked me a Bible in modern English."

"You had to read the Bible in secret?"

"Yes. Especially books like Ecclesiastes. I have read Ecclesiastes frequently. It is so beautiful. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," I agreed. "It is the most beautiful book in the Bible."

"Then what is the ugliest book?"

"That would be Revelation," I said. "The last book of the Bible. All of that ugly imagery of chimeras and monsters and the Earth flooded with blood and of Jesus with a sword sticking out of his mouth. Sheesh. Whoever wrote that—someone named John of Patmos—must have gotten some bad hash from Damascus."

She had a good laugh over that one. "Could you read Ecclesiastes to me?" she asked as she dug into the food.

"If you promise to not eat all of the food while I do," I said. I got a Bible off of my bookshelf. There was a black and white jumping spider on it. "Sorry, little guy," I said, and blew him, or her, off into the corner. When I got back to the kitchen, I had turned to Ecclesiastes, one of the places to which my Bible falls open naturally.

The sun rises, the sun sets, and then here it comes again! The wind blows from the north, then comes around to the south, going round and round the Earth. The streams join together into rivers, and the rivers flow to the sea, day after day and year after year, but the sea is never filled up. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. Is there anything of which it can be said, Look! Here is something new! But it has been already, in the ages before us. No one remembers what happened in

the past, and nobody will remember what is happening now, and nobody will remember what will happen in the ages to come.

Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil, and a striving after the wind.

Sophia stopped eating and listened intently.

Behold the man who has no family but he works hard and becomes rich. For whom is he toiling? For he will simply die and someone else will have all the riches he has gathered. He was born naked into the world, and he can take nothing with him out of the world.

Behold all the oppressions that occur under the sun. See the tears of the oppressed, and there is no one to comfort them. The people who are already dead are more fortunate than those who are still alive; and more fortunate yet are those who have not yet been born, so they do not have to see all of the oppression that occurs under the sun.

I know that there is nothing better under the sun than for people to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and enjoy their work—this is the gift of God.

Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans are no better than animals. Everything is meaningless. All humans and all animals go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust shall all return.

"Solomon…" Sophia began after I closed the book.

"Solomon did not write it," I said. "Some man who called himself Qoheleth wrote it."

"The author," said Sophia, "did not believe in Providence any more than you do. He just believed in luck. Good luck and bad luck. And then you die. I can guess that the reason you mention him right at this time is that you are going to try to tell me that, if God even exists, something regarding which you were very unclear in your book, this God does not create blessings. So my coming here, to you, today, may be good luck for me, and for you, but it is not a blessing. Maybe just—what was your phrase?—a twist of fate."

"I can still *experience* it as a blessing," I said.

"You may fantasize all you like," she said.

"What is happening right now *seems* like a perfectly-crafted blessing. You needed to leave home, and I just happened to have a perfectly-crafted niche for you to come to. You needed a friend. I needed a friend. Both of us, right now. And here we are." I looked up to the ceiling in amazement.

"I should mention," she said, "that you might be rationalizing. A slightly different set of circumstances, and you would still interpret them as perfectly crafted. Suppose, for example," she said, relaxing but still looking into my eyes, which came back to meet hers, "that I had already been divorced, or widowed, and was living alone when you met me. That I was not Amish but, perhaps, Pentecostal. Or Muslim. Perhaps I might have been wearing a burka, not a bonnet. You would have interpreted meeting me as a providential blessing. And, I hasten to add, I would have so interpreted it also, just as I interpret our meeting last week and my arrival yesterday morning to be perfect blessings from God."

"Wait," I said. "Are you taking Qoheleth's side on this?"

"No, you are," she responded. "In your mind, though apparently not in your heart. I am taking God's side. I think Qoheleth was depressed, and that's why he wrote all those things about there not being an afterlife. I'm not claiming that he was stupid or something. After all, he, just like all the rest of us, was merely a human being trying to make sense out of all the things that happen under the sun. I think he was wrong about man's soul descending into the Earth along with his corpse. I think he was wrong about man dying just like the beasts. But I just want to confront you with the consequences of your own thinking, so that you will not awaken some morning and suddenly realize that my apparition into your life was *not* such a blessing after all. What if, after all, this present moment is our best moment and it is all downhill from here?"

"I don't see how I could think that about you," I said. "Ever."

She gave me a little smile. "Of course you don't see it now. *I* just don't want to have to be the one who, later on, tries to convince *you* that our coming together was a perfectly-crafted blessing, while you are going through despair like Qoheleth. Oh, Qoheleth and all you other theologians and your 'dark nights of the soul.' Of course, I am pleased that you see our coming together as a blessing. I see it that way myself. I hope you never change your mind. But if you do start to change your mind, try not to dive and launch and dive again. Just accept our coming together as good luck. That is enough for me."

Chapter 7

"The time has come," Sophia announced to me the next week, "for me to do something." She had spent several days reading a number of books from my shelves, and writing copiously in her journal. For an entire day she was consumed with writing a short piece of fiction. But she was now ready to emerge from her cocoon.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "You can come with me tomorrow."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We are going to join a protest," I announced.

"I'm ready to protest anything," she said. "Let me at'm!" she said, imitating a pugilist. "God, I can't believe I'm acting like this," she said, letting her arms hang limply from another of my T-shirts. She slouched and slipped her hands into the pockets of my shorts she was wearing. "Acting corny. Amish women are supposed to be serious about work and serious about pleasure. So, what are we protesting?"

"We are trying to save a prairie," I answered.

"You mean, like a pasture or something?"

"No, a prairie is not a pasture. A prairie is native grassland, like back in the days when the bison roamed free. Tall grasses—I mean *tall,* like six feet tall—and wildflowers, some of them equally tall. Like prairie dock, compass plant, and rosinweed. None of these little pasture grasses that ranchers planted for their cattle, like Timothy grass and orchard grass and especially King's Ranch bluestem. And especially none of the disgusting plants, like spurge and bull nettle, that indicate overgrazing."

"You mean, there are native prairies left?" She showed her cynical side.

"Yes. A field near Durant, never plowed, never grazed—they have mowed it but this has not destroyed the native grasses and wildflowers, which re-sprout from the roots. It is one of the few locations where one can find the rare Oklahoma penstemon flower. This prairie is practically the only one left in this part of Oklahoma. The developer plans what he calls *improvement...*"

"Improvement into what?" she prompted me.

"There's already a funeral home there..." I continued.

"Funeral home!" Sophia snapped. "In our community, I mean, the one I once lived in, each home is a funeral home. Each home is a church too. When someone dies, we call the coroner and one of the elders, have a ceremony, and dig a hole."

"They're planning a car wash..." I continued.

"Who needs a car wash?" Sophia was really agitated now. "Matter of fact, who needs a car? Vanity, vanity, all is vanity..." she said, quoting Qoheleth.

"...and a hamburger place..." I continued.

"As if there aren't already enough of *them!"* she said. "Let me guess: a hair boutique."

"Good guess," I said. "And a gas station..."

Sophia added, "with a C-store where you can buy some of that fizzy sugar water..."

"I think they're called soft drinks," I said.

"And this is worth destroying a prairie for?" she asked. "Of course..." She became quiet. "The land all around Wappy and Clarinda was once prairie. It was us Amish who plowed and grazed some of it. But, I can tell you this." She struck a pose. "We would never destroy a prairie for anything other than to raise our food and build our houses."

"Actually," I added, "they're planning a subdivision too."

"But aren't there some weedy lots, already over-grazed, on which to build houses? Why the last prairie?" She was nearly yelling.

"You would be a good speaker at the microphone at our protest," I pointed out.

"It wouldn't be the first time," she said. "Except the microphone part. I stirred up some trouble in our community about how we sometimes overgrazed our Amish pastures. I'll tell you about it sometime. Meanwhile, why do they want to dig up a prairie instead of using land that is already degraded?"

"Location, location, location," I said. Her quizzical stare made me explain. "That's what realtors always say. Besides, people do not notice that a prairie is any different from a weedy field. They see only what they expect to see."

"Tell me about it. People come to the Amish store, and they see exactly what they expect to see: queer folk with peculiar ways, too horse-ass-dumb to enter the modern world." She was panting.

"The developers of the prairie land, of course, say that it is their land and they will do what they want with it."

"It is God's land," Sophia proclaimed.

I continued, "They are also building not one but two churches there."

"Destroying God's creation in order to erect a ... a building to praise Him in! How stupid, how disrespectful, can that be?" She was nearly trembling with emotion. "It is God's land. You said so yourself in your book."

"Matter of fact, Sophia, I'm the speaker at the protest."

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I drove Sophia out to the prairie in the early evening. It was right at the junction of 78 and 199, just where 199 veered west to Fort Washita. The land had belonged to the Hicks family, who cared about the Earth, but they had sold it to a developer. The earth-moving equipment was scheduled to arrive the next day, and us environmentalist protestors would be there to greet them. But at the moment there was nothing except late summer waves of green grass and wildflowers for what looked like a square mile. I parked in a shallow ditch. No fence surrounded this prairie, as it had never been grazed,

and once we had walked about a dozen yards out into the prairie the road was invisible behind the grasses and forbs, if one sat down. The soil here is too dry for the grasses to grow their full six feet. Only the electric power poles, and the big metal barn across the highway that belonged to the Thompsons, marked terra firma in this sea of grass. Those and a straight line of surveyor's blaze orange flags tramping off into the distance. We walked further out into the waves, not following the stakes.

"I saw a prairie orchid here once," I said.

"How do you know what the plants are? You're not a botanist," said Sophia.

"I don't have to be," I answered. "I can look at the pictures in a prairie plant guide as well as the next guy. The prairie orchids are very rare. I only saw this large and magnificent pink and magenta flower once, and never again. But I always find that Oklahoma penstemon I told you about. Here's one right here."

Sophia looked closely at the flower, about the size, shape, and color of a little baby's finger.

Then I almost jumped in amazement. "Where did this come from? How did I overlook it before?" I took Sophia over to a plant about three feet tall. Long spikes of purple flowers emerged from the three-lobed leaves. The intense color glowed in the evening sun. Sophia gasped at its beauty. "It's called blue wild indigo," I told her.

Sophia looked closely at the flowers for several minutes. "The flowers look like sweet peas."

"Same plant family," I said.

"They look like little bonnets," she said.

"Most people think they look like boats," I said. "Maybe flying boats. The upper petals, called a banner, look like the sail, and underneath the two wings—that's what botanists call them—is the keel. It is shaped just like a boat's keel."

"So it is," Sophia said, not looking away from the flower. "The color is so beautiful. But it is purple, not blue. And neither purple nor blue are the same as indigo."

"Indigo is now used as the name of this whole group of plants," I explained. "There is another species that has creamy yellow flowers, and it is called indigo also. Plains wild indigo."

"Well," said Sophia, "it's still not blue. What's this down here?" She indicated a place low on the tallest flower stalk.

"That's where the older flowers have started to turn into fruits."

"They look like little bean pods."

"Yes. And in a couple of weeks, the flowers will have faded, and the stalks will be covered by these beans. And then by late fall, the whole plant will have died back to the ground, leaving only withered brown leaves and dry hard brown capsules."

"It dies each year?" asked Sophia.

"No. I said it dies back. But the underground stems, and the roots, remain alive, waiting for the next year."

I allowed Sophia to be silent for several minutes. Then she said, “That’s what love is like.”

“Why am I not surprised that you said that,” I responded.

For the first time since we had approached the plant, Sophia looked at me. She spoke. “Love is beautiful and tender at the best of times, like these blue flowers. Then the time comes for work, like the plant filling the little beans up with food for the little baby plants inside. And then comes winter, when love appears to be dead. But it isn’t. All that remain visible above the ground are sticks and seeds. The sticks are persistent evidence of the love and work. The seeds are the future. And then, as sure as the Earth itself, the roots endure underground.”

Crouching there in the prairie, with a single breath of air creating a gentle susurrus in the grass, we kissed.

Then Sophia pushed me gently away and said, “No. We need to be careful, Gil. Some, perhaps most, of my roots are still Amish. Certainly my old sticks are.”

“I leave this up to you,” I said. “I am here for you, to help you, not to rush you into doing anything. But remember that you cannot wait forever. This plant does not sit around indecisively. It cannot be assured that it will have even one more day of life.”

“But it keeps growing new roots, making a reasonable (if plants can be called reasonable) guess that there will be a tomorrow and a next year.” She stood up just enough to look beyond the rim of grasses, then sat back down. “We still have to be careful. What if a buggy comes by? Or an English car with an Amish passenger? They all know me. I shouldn’t be out here.”

“But I wanted you to see this prairie.”

“Thanks, Gil. I needed to see it. I needed to see this blue wild indigo that you did not know would be here. Oh, by the way, there is no such thing as blue.”

“What?” I asked.

“Haven’t you ever read anything about the human mind? Surely you theologians take courses in psychology.”

“Yes. But all I remember from the psychology course was about how religious delusions are just the product of the right temporal lobe of the brain. If you stimulate a subject’s right temporal lobe electrically, he or she experiences religious visions: a tunnel of light, visions of dead relatives, a profound sense of peace. These same visions and feelings can be stimulated by drugs, too. But, I guess I should not be surprised, you seem to know more about psychology than I do, from all those books you read.”

Sophia said, “Leaving aside for the moment the question about whether religion is just a mis-firing of the nerve cells in the right temporary lobe, I will just mention that everything I know about this subject came from a little kid book called *Light and Color.*

“There is no such thing as blue, or any other color,” Sophia began again. “There are different wavelengths of light, that’s all. A gradual change from short wavelengths, which we call blue, to the longer ones, which we call red. The cells in our retinas absorb

the light and send messages to our brains. Our brains then sort these messages out and create an *illusion* of color. That's where rainbows come from. In nature, the range of so-called colors from violet, indigo, and blue, through green, yellow, orange and red—remember that indigo is not the same as blue, or violet!—is continuous and unbroken. It is our brains that create the illusion of *bands* of color in the rainbow."

"That's very true," I said. "Natural selection has favored animals that can distinguish colors very quickly, rather than having to think about wavelengths. A ripe red fruit reflects long wavelengths of light, but it is the animal who jumps at the chance to eat the ripe red fruit that gets the fruit first, and survives, and produces more offspring."

"Nice try," said Sophia. "Evolution can explain why we see colors rather than just wavelengths, but can it explain the deep and rich experience of beauty in our souls when we see these colors?"

"Yes, it can," I said. "This part, at least, I have read about. Some people have a deeper and richer experience of beauty, whether it is of color or of music or a love of the land in which they live, than others. These people, lovers of life, will work harder to survive and will produce more offspring. And those offspring grow up into children and then adults who can also love the beauty of the world."

Sophia thought about this, then said, "I'll keep that in mind." She sniffed the flowers, experiencing a scent real or imagined. Then she said, "I wonder what these flowers would have looked like to Clay."

I knew nothing, yet, about her husband. His invisible presence in the prairie suddenly drained the intensity from my field of sensation.

"Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said that," said Sophia. "But, when I first knew him, Clay had, should I say, extra dimensions of experience. He could taste colors."

"That is a mental condition called synesthesia," I explained. "It occurs when the nerves connect to the brain in the wrong way, often when the nerves from the eyes connect not only to the visual part of the brain but also to the part of the brain that creates the sense of taste. A lot of musicians are synesthetes. They can taste sounds. A symphony, to them, is delicious. It's sort of a mild hallucination. Harmless, though."

"With Clay, it wasn't just harmless. It was beautiful. But as time went on, his world became more and more bland. I can assure you that I would not have left the old Clay." Sophia looked down and sighed. "Sorry, Gil, I shouldn't have spoiled this beautiful time by talking about him."

"Don't apologize, Sophia. Not for this, or in general. I think I needed to hear this and you needed to say it. When a woman leaves her husband, the man to whom she flees quite naturally envisions the husband as some kind of flat caricature of a monster. I needed to know he was a good man at least at one time."

"He still is, but that is not enough," she whispered to the ground.

"You can, at least, keep the memory of the old Clay," I said. "My former wife never seemed to take much enjoyment in the simple pleasures of sight and sound and flavor."

When I said nothing more, Sophia said, "I'm listening." When I again said nothing more, she said, "When the time is right, you will tell me about her. Meanwhile," she continued, taking a breath and changing the subject, "you told me the day we met that prairies need to burn in order to remain alive."

"Yes," I said, breathing again.

"I assume it is because the fire turns those dead sticks and leaves into fertilizer."

"Yes. And the fire burns away things that aren't supposed to be in a prairie, like tree seedlings." I sat down in the grass stems.

"I can hardly imagine," said Sophia, also sitting down, "anything more painful or frightening than fire. Certainly the preaching we hear in our churches has a lot of hellfire in it. The men tell us how the God of Love, if we stray so much as a millimeter off of the path—I guess Hell uses the metric system—will make us burn forever, and that we will feel the full pain of it every millisecond of that time. Eternal conscious torment, they call it. Even nature does not do that to us. If you feel something painful—or, for that matter, something pleasant—for a long enough time, whether a few minutes or a few days, your brain starts to adapt to it and you stop noticing it. But maybe fire is an essential part of life on Earth. Do you think this prairie will ever burn again?"

I looked up and saw just one orange flag from a stake. "It won't get a chance to. Concrete and asphalt don't burn very well."

We sat in silence for a while. Then Sophia said, "This is blue *wild* indigo. And we agreed that it represents love. So, do you love me wildly?"

I had an answer straightaway but hesitated to tell her. I finally said, "Yes."

"And what does that mean?"

"When we talk about wild love," I said, "I mean us non-Amish, we usually mean that we toss aside all restrictions of society and propriety and start grabbing each other. That's what we imagine that wild animals do."

"But that is not, apparently, what plants do," said Sophia. "For this plant, love means growing deep roots. And, Gil, if I decide to interpret my feelings for you as love, it will be love with deep roots."

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Early the next morning, Sophia was wearing an old pair of my shorts under one of my national park T-shirts. *May the forest be with you,* it said. "Am I dressed for the protest?"

"Yes," I said. I handed her a bill-cap—it simply said *Water*—and sunglasses. "And with these, your disguise will be complete."

We drove out to the prairie. The bulldozers were already assembled in the part of the prairie nearest to the road. Their large engines were running and emitting diesel fumes. The Red Earth Club (which consisted mainly of myself and Greg Torrey, who always called himself Beef) had set up a podium and a microphone in the bed of Beef's light pickup truck. We had announced our protest in a newspaper advertisement and online, for the few people back then who used the internet. But nobody was there except for me, Beef, Sophia, and the construction workers.

Sophia immediately ran over to look at the blue wild indigo. I did not have the heart to go with her, as I knew what I would see. The plant had been run over, its purple blossoms crushed into the mud. She was briefly depressed, but then seemed to experience a renewed vigor. When she saw Beef adjusting the microphone with its screeching feedback, she said, "I wouldn't need a microphone. I was trained in hog-calling." Then she yelled a very loud *soooo-eeee*.

"Not so loud," I said, "or the capitalist pigs will come running."

Sophia pranced around with excitement. "And then, after the pigs come, we Amish politely tell them, *Thankee.*"

"Really?" I asked.

"Ha! Ha!" She jumped and pointed at me. "Gotcha! Stop looking at me like that! Ha!" She kissed me lightly on the cheek as I mounted the truck to the microphone.

Then the sheriff and a couple of deputies arrived. We had told him we would be there, and wanted to assure him we would cause no trouble. He had come just to observe. Our truck was parked legally on the roadside. The bulldozers stood ready to begin depilating the prairie topsoil. Then a reporter from the local newspaper arrived with camera and notebook.

"Maybe we will get some coverage after all," I said to Beef, who stood beside me in the truck bed. He was stout and hairy. He had long hair in a ponytail, and round wire glasses not too different from Sophia's. He looked at Sophia in amazement.

"Where did you find *her?"* asked Beef.

"She is a star that fell out of heaven," I answered.

"You theologians are full of it," said Beef.

I approached the microphone and began to talk. I explained in clear and simple terms to the almost nonexistent audience why this land was no mere vacant lot, but a prairie; but even if it were a mere vacant lot, it would deserve some care. I could hardly hear myself amidst the churning of dozer motors. When I saw that even Sophia was not paying attention to me, my speech started falling apart. The reporter wrote nothing. Was I so bad a speaker?

Then I saw that Sophia was watching the bulldozers intently.

Suddenly Sophia began to run. She galloped over the ditch and out into the prairie. No sooner than the workers had seen her, she had leapt into the shovel of one of the bulldozers that had just begun to move, and sat down. The bulldozer stopped. The

operator got out of his dozer to pull her down but she leapt out and scampered away to the next dozer. The reporter had awakened and gotten his telephoto lens onto his camera. His prize photo, I found out later, was of Sophia climbing up onto another dozer shovel. Within a minute, two strong men had Sophia by the arms. She tried to pull away but could not.

"Oops, sorry," said one of the men as he brushed against her bosom.

"Might as well rape me, since you are raping the earth!" Sophia screamed. Now the reporter was using his camcorder. This was back when camcorders were big and had to rest on a shoulder. Then Sophia pretended to faint; this, plus her accusation of rape, made the men release her just long enough for her to slip away. One after another, Sophia pulled out the survey stakes and threw them like javelins.

I heard the sheriff say, "Trespassing and vandalism. We got her." I wanted to warn Sophia, but she saw one of the deputies running after her. She turned and ran away to where the grass was taller. Her face was flushed. The uniformed deputy, panting, tried to follow, but sweat rolled down his scowling cheeks. Sophia disappeared into a thicket along a creek.

"I'll get the dogs!" yelled the other deputy to the sheriff.

The sheriff exhaled audibly. "Too damn hot," he said, using the Okie *day-yam.* "Who gives a crap? These earth-freaks slowed down construction mebbe ten minute."

"The surveyor stakes?" asked the second deputy, as the first came trudging back. "That's more than ten minutes' work."

The sheriff stood motionlessly, then dismissed the entire scene with a wave of his fat arm. "Too day-yam hot. Let her go rolla-round in the poison ivy. Now, as for these S.O.B.'s..." He came over to me and Beef.

"Trailer parked illegally?" Beef asked.

"No," said the sheriff.

"Anything wrong with my free speech?" I asked.

"You think I'm stupid or something?" the sheriff asked me, and I just stared and stared at him. "Stop looking at me like that!" he snapped. "We got some questions to ask you."

"I don't know who she is," I said.

"She came with you, didn't she?" the officer demanded.

"That doesn't mean I know who she is," I said, trying not to smile.

After a tense minute of silence, the sheriff dismissed us with another wave of his larded arm. "Too day-yam hot. We all got better places to be." He went back to his patrol car, rolled up the window, turned on the air conditioning, and left. The two deputies, in another car, followed. The dozers were rasping away the topsoil at full speed now. Apparently they didn't need the orange flags. All they were doing was digging away the sod; the re-surveying could be done later.

Beef turned to me. "You're a better liar than I thought you'd be," he said.

"Maybe it's just part of the job for us theologians, eh? We're day-yam good at it." I watched Beef smile. "I wasn't lying," I concluded.

"She came with you, like Sgt. Pudge said. You don't know who she is?"

"Not really," I said. "I know her name, and her husband's name." Beef looked surprised but kept listening. "But I don't know which house she lived in, or her parents' names. Most of the things the law wants to know about a person are things I do not yet know about Sophia. They don't want to know what her thighs look like, what her tears taste like, or how she can make a wise man feel stupid, that she shows her love by cleaning out the bathtub with her foot when she finished, that her handwriting looks like cuneiform, that the embrace of her mind is sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb."

Beef stared at me with silent wonder.

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I assumed that the police would follow me home, or at the very least get my address from my vehicle registration. They would, I thought, be waiting to intercept Sophia. Of course, I was inflating the importance of Sophia, of myself, of environmentalism, to the civil authorities. By the time night was falling, I began to worry more about Sophia being lost than Sophia being found. I admitted to myself that my feelings for her were becoming very intense. I paced around my house, my heart thumping.

Then I heard a faint knock on my back door. Sophia had followed the creek, a shortcut back to my house, but it was still several miles. Her skin, and my shirt that she wore, were stained and torn. Now that she was in the light, she saw blood on her arm, and licked it clean. "Saliva has antibiotic properties," she explained. Then she smiled and proclaimed, "That was exhilarating."

"And totally worthless," I said, referring more to my speech than to her antics. "As we speak, the prairie has been dozed. Tomorrow it will be re-surveyed and trenched. But I gotta say, Soph, that you were magnificent. If I had my TV hooked up, maybe I'd know if you got on the evening news, maybe on that Sherman station."

"That wasn't my first eco-protest," she said.

"Really?" I intoned, settling into a comfortable position to hear a good story.

"Oh, I already had quite a name in my community, a reputation for trying the limits of male patience," she said, also sitting down. She glowed with perspiration. I turned the little fan so that it lifted her hair into clumpy waves. "It was after I'd been reading books about ecology that I realized we needed to keep every tree we had on our property. They hold down the soil, slow down the wind and the rain, and sweeten and moisten the air, all in silent beauty." In one sentence, she had summarized more significant information about trees than I had encountered in an entire semester of botany when I was a freshman. "Clay, he decided he needed to get rid of the bois-d'arc trees in

the pasture. What harm they were doing to him or his work I never knew, but I knew what good they were doing. So when he started chopping and sawing and pulling with the winch—those bois-d'arcs are the toughest trees on this side of the River Styx—I jumped up in the tree."

"You expect me to believe that?" I smiled. "They're full of thorns. But, go on."

"No, really, I did. Do I look like someone who would be afraid of thorns?" She did not wait for my answer. "I bit my tongue to keep from screaming when the thorns poked and scraped me. Clay told me to get out of the tree. Then he began ranting about how the husband is in charge, it was his business to work the land, to bring forth its fertility, just as..." Her voice lowered in unpleasant memory. "...just as he worked on me to bring forth my fertility." She perked up again. "I simply told him, the wife manages the household finances. That's actually the way it is in Amish society. I told him these trees are an asset to our property, and that I had the right and responsibility to tell him so. He didn't listen. He was so intent on arguing me down from the tree that he didn't notice his buddy Roger (our English neighbor) trying to look up my petticoats."

"Petticoats in a bois-d'arc tree. This gets better and better. Did you save the tree?"

"No, of course not. Just for a few minutes. He went on to another tree. So I climbed it. He started lecturing me about how we Amish were the most ecologically responsible people on the planet, which I knew better than he, but I said that doesn't mean we can destroy God's creation with friendly fire."

"Good point," I said, sitting up to attention. (Note to self: I have to use that line about friendly fire in my next book. Someplace. If I figure out what the book is about.) "Did you save that tree?"

"No. He went on to another," she said.

"So you climbed it," I anticipated.

"No," she said quietly and sadly. "Not after what he called me."

"Anyway, you..." I started to praise her.

"Don't ask me what he called me!" she burst out.

I continued, "I didn't. I won't. I was going to say..."

She almost screamed. "He said I was unfaithful. He said that. After he had been the one to disappear out to that titty bar, then he came back and screwed me full of who knows what germs and gave me the mutant baby too. He, *he,* said *I* was unfaithful. That's when I made up my mind that I might as well be, if I am going to be accused of it." She made sure to not look me in the eye when she said this. "Anyway, when he said I was unfaithful, I was so mad, all I could see was that bois-d'arc fruit hanging from the branch beside me."

"I think I know what's coming," I said. Bois-d'arc fruits are sticky, hard, green, and very big.

"I didn't really think he was stupid, but..." She smiled now. "I was quite surprised by the hollow sound of the fruit colliding with his skull." We laughed heartily, but then she drifted off into a sad reverie.

"Then what happened?" I said, calling her back.

She answered, "What? Oh. He got the church council to meet and reprimand me."

"Which you bravely denounced. I know you," I said jovially.

She just looked at me in silence for a few long seconds, eye to eye. I started to speak, but stifled myself. Finally she said, "No, I will not stop looking at you like that. So, you think you know me?" She smiled sadly, and her head shook slightly. "You thought you knew me as a beeswax-dipping Amish housewife, now you think you know me as a goddess, embracing earth and Earth. At least you are trying to know me. No, I did not stand up to them. I was crushed. I could not lift up my eyes." She started to lower her eyes, but forced herself to keep looking at me. "It was probably the only time in my life I wanted to die."

She was waiting for me to speak, but I had no reply, so I brought the conversation back to my original point. I had not yet learned that I did not need to fill every silence. "But now, today, you were..."

"I very soon went right back to being a troublemaker," she continued, not having finished. "When Clay was gone—this time on legitimate business..." She looked into space. "I think." She looked at me. "He was gone a week. He does pickups and deliveries for the whole community. He's the only one the church council allows to have a driver's license. That week was just long enough for me to paint the house pink."

"Oh," I said, becoming animated again, "I remember seeing that house when I drove along Highway 48, when I was first moving here. So, that was your house? It is no longer pink."

"No, it is not," she said summarily. She imitated a gruff male voice, "Next time you want to be creative, do it with cookies."

"Clay?" I asked.

"No. Brother Toland. And the whole council. But I just couldn't stop causing trouble. That's when I became even more of an environmentalist."

"You don't say!"

"Oh, yes. I was reading in a book…"

"You make it sound like books can be dangerous."

"Yes. The word *liberty* comes from the Latin word for book, don't you know. Anyway, I read about something called rotational grazing."

"Is that anything like rotating your stock?"

"Ha. We keep a lot of cattle. I mean, the people I used to…anyway. The soil's not good enough here for farms, as you know." The entire Oklahoma countryside was pastures, with hardly a single farm in sight. "And we are pretty good at arithmetic and bookkeeping. Each new cow we get is an expensive investment, but will produce a lot of

milk or beef or, if you like tough meat from an old cow, both. How many cattle can you stock in a pasture? Depends on the pasture and on the year. You also have to factor in the property taxes, which are pretty low out here but you can't ignore them. Well, the Amish ranchers figure out the exact number of cows to have, and then get one or two more, in case a few of them die. Some ranchers have bulls, and breed calves. They have to keep pretty close watch on the cows, because when a cow gives birth, the vultures will fly up and start pecking out the newborn's eyes and the anus."

"But, vultures are scavengers!" I said in surprise.

"Vultures eat whatever meat they don't have to chase and subdue. Usually that means carrion. But it can also mean a newborn calf. Anyway, the result of all this is that we have too many cows, and we overgraze our pastures. Just like the English ranchers. But unlike the English ranchers, we, I mean the Amish, have a strong sense that the land belongs to God and we have to take care of it. Trouble is, our ranchers think that, so long as there is still a little bit of grass growing in the pasture, we *are* taking care of it properly. But I started telling everyone I could, especially the ranchers' wives who came into our store, that we had too many cattle, and that we had to take into account the health of the land, not just the cost of getting cattle and vaccinating them and such like. When you see the sneezeweed blooming in late summer, a whole pasture can turn yellow. It is beautiful. But it is a sad beauty. That sneezeweed only grows on overgrazed, degraded land.

"Now, about rotational grazing," she continued. "If you use movable fences, you can force the cattle to just graze in one spot, then move the fence and make the cattle move to another spot before the first spot gets overgrazed. This gives the grass a chance to grow back before being grazed again."

"You got in trouble for this?" I asked.

"No, not this time. Most people actually liked the idea. But both the husbands, who make the decisions, and the wives, who manage the household finances, were not willing to buy those admittedly expensive movable fences or to forego the income from the extra cattle. I know that doesn't sound very Amish, to choose the path of greater monetary profit, but remember that we do have our expenses. We don't have house insurance. That's because we don't get mortgages. And we don't have medical insurance. This is because, in the event of sickness, the whole community pitches in to take care of you. I imagine that if the United States ever has mandatory health insurance the way Europe does, the courts will recognize the Amish church as a legitimate provider of insurance to its members. So we do have the expense of helping each other at our times of need. We don't have cars, but a good buggy can set you back four thousand bucks. I think that was more than Clay paid for his first truck. We don't have to pay for gas—except for Clay's truck—but we do have to buy oats for our horses. See? How could I ask people to forego income, especially when they see no difference between sneezeweed

and blue wild indigo? So the church told me to quit talking about rotational grazing, even though they did not reprimand me."

After what seemed like enough silence, I decided to bring our minds back to today's events, which I considered positive. "Well, anyway, today, you were really beautiful out there in the prairie..."

"Beautiful? With my sticklike arms," she began.

"...with your graceful, quick arms," I corrected. "Your hair blowing in the breeze..."

"Uncombed, tangled, collecting dust... and my hairy little animal face..." She had not yet plucked any of the hairs.

"...and your face, brilliant with inspiration. Sophia, I figured something out, while you were out there. You... I mean, I... I mean..."

"You love me," she said.

"Yes," I was relieved to say.

"I already knew that," she said. "And I love you. You already knew that."

"Sophia, I want you to stay with me. Forever. I gave you an open-ended welcome to stay; now I ask you to remain as my partner. My mind and spirit have never felt more alive than since you came..."

"Not even back when you were married?" she asked. She wiped accumulated perspiration from her lip onto the arm of the shirt.

"Not even then," I said. She just kept looking at me. "Stop looking at me like that! Sophia, this is important. I am asking you to be..."

"You already said that," she interrupted. "Just don't expect me to answer right now. You say I am wise. Sophia. I must think carefully about what I want to do with my life. Anything less would be, well, an insult to you, if I instantly followed the urging of my..." She looked down. "...my heart." She turned from me as she rose from the chair. "I'm going to bathe and to bed now. It has been a long day."

"Good night," I said, reaching to embrace her.

She pulled away from me. "Don't touch me, Gil. Listen to me. My heart is churning within me. I must remain apart from you while I ponder what is best for my life. If you touch me, I will not be able to resist you." She approached me. "If I should happen to ask you to sleep with me, that is my heart and body speaking, not my mind and spirit. Please please please please do not grant me that request, no matter how passionately I may ask you." Her face was nearly touching mine by this time. "If I should need to leave you, I do not want it to break my heart. The Amish are afraid to love too strongly, lest the loved one dies. Perhaps that is the way I am acting toward you now."

She turned away from me. I watched her silently recede down the hall.

Chapter 8

Gloria's hair was as red as her chlorophyll was green.

And when she called me one day, out at my little country house five years after we had been in graduate school together, all the memories of her hair and chlorophyll came flooding back to me.

*

Gloria's Ph.D. advisor was one of the world's foremost photosynthesis researchers. He could tell you exactly what happened to the chlorophyll molecules in the first picosecond after the photons of light hit them. But that was not good enough. He wanted to know what happened in the first femtosecond, as if he were trying to explain the Big Bang of biochemistry. And Gloria was going to help him on one small part of the project: how the chlorophyll molecules changed shape after they were exposed to an attosecond-long flash of light.

The fluorescent lights above the tables in Gloria's lab, on which little plants grew in small pots of artificial medium, were bright. What kind of plant? Gloria never told me, but it didn't matter, since the plants were genetically engineered to grow rapidly under artificial light, which meant that they could never actually go outside and be kissed by vampire sunlight, which would suck the electrons out of the chlorophyll molecules and kill them almost instantly.

Gloria led me over to a fume hood in which a fan exhausted the air out through chimneys. "We have to keep the organic solvents we use to extract the chlorophyll in here," she said. "No matter how tightly you stopper the bottle, the solvent fumes will diffuse out and fill the air in the room with explosive molecules. All you would have to do would be to generate a little static electricity and the whole place would blow up." She made her laboratory work sound adventurous, even dangerous. "But the fume hood ventilates the solvent molecules out into the air."

"What happens to them then?" I asked her.

"The oxygen in the air destroys them eventually," she replied. "And we have to keep the chlorophyll in the dark once we have extract it." Gloria picked up a glass flask from the back of the fume hood. It was covered with aluminum foil, which she proceeded to peel away. "We have to keep the chlorophyll in the dark, because the light will cause it to break down into pheophytin, which is a dirty yellow color. The magnesium atom falls out of the middle of the chlorophyll molecule, and zing! No more green. Strange, isn't it?" She held the flask next to her hair, lit bright red by the light behind her. The chlorophyll was a deep green brooding emerald. "The pigment that is responsible for

making all the food in the world by absorbing sunlight is destroyed by that very same light."

"Then why don't all plants die in the sunlight?" I asked.

"Because the chlorophyll molecules are part of a *system,*" she answered. "They do not act alone. As soon as one of them loses an electron, an enzyme provides an electron to replace it. So the chlorophyll molecule never has a chance to fall apart when it is inside of a leaf. It has a support system. In the case of our artificially-bred plants, the system does not work very well, and they die in full sunlight."

"And where does the enzyme get that electron?"

"From water."

"And where does the water get its electrons?"

"From God." Gloria smirked. "That answer should satisfy you Divinity School grad students. But in this flask, the enzymes have been killed by the solvents, so they cannot replace the electrons, and the poor chlorophyll molecules just fall apart when light shines on them."

"Well, then you'd better put the flask back in its foil and back into the fume hood," I said. I was always uncomfortable when I thought something was out of place, among my possessions, or in my life, or in somebody else's.

Gloria smiled and her green eyes glistened. Her round face was not what one would call beautiful, but she always smiled really big as if she were defining what beauty was supposed to be. "This one is just for practice," she said. "Once I begin my real research, I will have to do the entire extraction procedure in complete darkness. I even have to separate the pigments in darkness, pigments that I cannot see to make sure I am separating them. God, can you imagine? I'm such a klutz, and to have *me* working in complete darkness with glassware? Tell you this much. Nobody is going to be in the darkroom with me. Anyone who touches me and I'm not expecting it, I punch them in the face. Or where I surmise the face is supposed to be. I can't help it. Just reflexes."

"Thanks for warning me," I said.

"Now in a regular dark room, like a bedroom, I'm okay," she continued, putting the foil on the flask and sliding it back in its place. "What we call darkness is not really completely dark. You can still see stuff, even if just subliminally. But the laboratory darkroom where I will have to work is like the Outer Darkness of Hell, not one photon, except for the invisible photons of body heat. But those don't affect the chlorophyll." She stopped and looked into the sky beyond the six stories of the BioSciences Building. "At least, we think they don't. Come to think of it, nobody knows for sure." She looked back at me. "But the laboratory darkroom keeps out all of the *visible* photons. Like down in the deepest grotto, Carlsbad Caverns or something."

"You said you would have to separate pigments," I said. "You mean, there's more than one?"

"Oh, there are all kinds of pigments in plants," she said, slinging her wildly curling hair back over her red-splotched neck. She was short, and her breasts would surely knock something over in that darkroom. "Phytochrome sets their biological clocks, cryptochrome tells them which way to grow, anthocyanin turns red or blue depending on pH."

"On what?"

She ignored me. "And there are two different kinds of chlorophyll. Chlorophyll *a* is a bluish emerald color, while chlorophyll *b* is an olive green color. I'm just studying chlorophyll *a.* Notice anything?" She turned to me and puffed herself to fullness.

I didn't think she wanted me to comment on her hair or body. So I said, "You're wearing green."

She waited for me to figure the rest of it out. I finally did. "Your blouse is the color of chlorophyll *b*..."

"Chlorophyll *a,*" she said.

"That's what I meant," I said. "And your pants are the color of chlorophyll whatever the one was that I didn't say. I thought you said they broke down in light. How can you have chlorophyll-colored clothes?"

She exhaled and laughed. "The colors in the fabric are inorganic pigments. Copper based. Chlorophyll is a fragile molecule, but copper is an atom. Nothing destroys copper. That's why artists use copper malachite for their green paints."

"Copper?" I asked. "Not magnesium? You said chlorophyll was green because it had magnesium in it, and when it lost its magnesium…"

"Magnesium is not green," she said, brushing invisible motes from her shoulders. "Neither is the chlorophyll without the magnesium. It is the *interaction* of magnesium and the rest of the molecule that makes chlorophyll green. But partially oxidized copper is just green, without needing a system to make it green. That's why old pennies turn green."

The doors to the lab were wide open, and there were usually about six other grad students at their desks in the lab. But right at that moment, the room was empty and the light bench full of plants hid us from the hallway.

"Gloria," I said. "What a nice name."

"Why, thank you, Gil."

Before she had a chance to compliment me on my name, for no particularly good reason, I continued. "It's the kind of name you would expect for a woman who studies light."

Gloria looked puzzled. "I guess it sounds like *glory,*" she said.

"Lots of words related to light begin with *gl-* because of their roots back in old Anglo-Saxon. We theology students have to study linguistics, you know. Anglo-Saxon words like *Gloaming. Glow. Glisten. Glimmer. Gleam. Glade. Glance. Glint. Glass. Glaze.* Even the word *glad* comes from the root word meaning light."

"How about *glum?*" she asked.

"No, not that one," I answered. "And unfortunately, *glory* is not one of those *gl-* light words from Anglo-Saxon. It comes from Latin. Or maybe they all come from some Proto-Indo-European word. I don't know. But somehow all of those words except *glum* seem to fit you perfectly."

Gloria did not know how to respond to this statement I had not planned to make. She just looked confusedly into my eyes and said, "Thanks."

We continued our conversation in a little restaurant next door to the BioSciences Building. Gloria was in the Plant Biology Department, which sounds like a name given to it by somebody who couldn't remember the word botany. There was also an Animal Biology Department. The restaurant was a counter-culture cruelty-free free-range Paleo-before-Paleo-was-chic low salt organic restaurant. Gloria and I were eating red soups—mine was tomato soup with paprika and hers was borscht with beets and red cabbage.

"So why are there two kinds of chlorophyll?" I asked.

"They each absorb slightly different colors of light. But there didn't have to be two. Maybe God wanted there to be two. Why not three? But that's a question for you Divinity School students to worry about." She was chewing her beets and cabbage while I was sloshing my tomato soup around in my mouth. She was working while I was savoring. She stopped chewing. "Do you theologians do anything useful?"

I already knew she wasn't tactful unless she forced herself to be. But the fact that she blurted out something that might have offended me actually made me feel comfortable in her presence. No pretenses going on here.

"We try to understand the Big Picture," I said, hoping she could hear the capital letters.

You could always tell when Gloria was not impressed. I tried again.

"You scientists look at things through a microscope, but we theologians try to look at things through a macroscope."

She slapped down her spoon. She pointed at me with a pungent brown bread crust. "That's the biggest load of…" When she realized how loud she was talking and that other people were looking at us, she spoke more quietly. "Where the hell did you get that? Please don't tell me they taught you that in divinity school."

"Okay, I won't," I said, smiling. She liked that.

"So," Gloria continued, "if there is some kind of spiritual realm, might there be such a thing as destiny? But from a scientific viewpoint, destiny is all bass-ackwards. There is no destiny that draws events toward it. That's putting cause-and-effect backwards. So you must believe in destiny?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Like, maybe, I was destined to study light because my parents named me Gloria?"

"I don't know," I repeated.

"You study spiritual things," she said. "What is a spirit supposed to be? If you can't detect it or measure it…"

"You can't put love into a test tube," I said. That one was from a tract I'd seen somewhere, a cliché too stupid even for divinity school.

Her answer surprised me. "Sure you can," she said. "It's the neurotransmitter oxytocin. You could, I guess, put it in a test tube. No, a human is not a bunch of molecules enlivened by a spirit that flies off to heaven."

"You're right," I said. "There is not a separate spiritual realm. It is an *interaction* with the physical. Just the way that neither the magnesium nor the rest of the chlorophyll molecule are green; it is the interaction that makes them green. That's the way humans are with God."

She sat motionlessly and thought about what I said for just long enough that I began looking around. "Nice try," she finally said. "I'll keep that in mind. Meanwhile, I'm Catholic, and I go to mass, and I feel whatever it is you are supposed to feel, but it's just habit. Just instinct, like a salmon swimming upstream. I was just raised that way, and I feel incomplete without it, like any other kind of habit. So long as I go to mass and don't blurt out anything bad about Pope John Paul, my folks are satisfied, and I feel like I am in the right place in the world. See? If I don't know what's true and what isn't, I might as well be in the church, where I'm comfortable, as out of it, where I would be fighting myself all the time. But when I go to bed at night, I don't have that old-time religion to comfort me." Suddenly she was serious. "You know, I have no fucking idea whether this research project I'm doing is going to work. I'm getting a B in the graduate plant physiology seminar, for crying out loud. I wish I could be like you, confident that God is blessing my path. Sorry if I've offended you…"

"Don't worry," I said. "There is not a single spiritual doubt you have expressed that I have not myself struggled with. But I just can't let go of God. Sometimes I hate Him, but I can't just ignore Him." I tried to keep the capital letters out of my voice this time.

Gloria was draining the last borscht broth from her bowl as I said this. Her eyes got wide over the green-glazed ceramic bowl decorated with what looked like little molecular benzene rings the way a peyote user would see them. She put the bowl down without looking away from my face. Her red lips, without lipstick, hung apart. I took this as an encouragement to continue.

"This is the fundamental problem," I said. "It is the question philosophers have been struggling with since at least the time the book of Ecclesiastes was written." I could see her making a mental note to look at Ecclesiastes. "Is God good? Then He isn't God, because if He was, He could stop the evil in the world, or at least offer a little help to people who suffer, unless he isn't good, in which case the suffering of the world either doesn't bother Him or is maybe even His Will."

Now it was Gloria's turn for a cliché. "Here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own," she said.

"Were it that simple," I subjuncted.

"It was John Fitzgerald Kennedy who said that," she said.

"I know."

"He was an Irish Catholic."

"I know."

"It was in his 1961 inaugural address."

"I know."

"And he found the goodness of God in the arms and breasts of Marilyn Monroe."

"That's the point," I said. "If God lives through our work, then it's up to us to decide what is right and what is wrong, when to sleep with a Marilyn Monroe and when not to, when to use power to entice a Marilyn Monroe to sleep with you and when not to, when to invade a Cuba and when not to. So where's God in this?"

"You said…"

"Yes, I said it was an interaction. But as part of an interaction between humans and God, it would be nice if we got a little help from God once in a while."

"Well," said Gloria, pushing her soup bowl away and grabbing the little bowl of plain unsweetened yogurt that she had not mixed into the borscht. She looked at it closely as she spooned it into her mouth. "There seems to be no answer, either to your problem (gulp) or to mine (gulp), so we might as well just relax. We should do something that is not science and not theology. How about music?" She turned her green eyes on me.

"The university orchestra is having a concert tonight," I said.

"What are they playing?"

"Mahler."

She sighed. Gustav Mahler was the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Austrian composer who wrote massive bipolar symphonies that alternated between intense tragedy and sublime joy. "Mahler? What part of *relax* do you not understand?" She looked around the room for inspiration, and pointed to a poster tacked to a cork board. "Tomorrow night!" she said. "The Russian folk orchestra is playing."

I looked at the poster. "Perfect!" I said. "I'll be by your lab at five tomorrow, comrade." This was back during the Cold War.

I thought about going to the Mahler concert by myself. The concert was part Mahler and part Withold Lutoslawski, whom I considered to be a scribbler of noise. Not wanting to sit through Lutoslawski to get to Mahler, I just stayed in my apartment and put Mahler's Third on the stereo, as I had so often before. I knew the record so well that I knew where the little pops in the vinyl grooves were. It was an old disc and I watched the needle arm bob like waves in the sea. I thought about Mahler's God. His third symphony had movements about what the summer and the winter, what the animals, what the plants, what the bells in the night, and what love told him about God. He didn't try to make

things into wordy syllogisms. For him, God was simply an experience. Maybe he was onto something. Maybe that is what I would write my thesis about. But for now, I had to finish reading for a class about how the Catholic theologian Hans Küng argued that you cannot prove that God did not not not exist.

*

The next afternoon I walked into Gloria's lab. I came up behind her as she stood looking blankly at book spines above her desk. I touched her shoulder. She whirled around and punched me. Immediately she scrunched up in contrition. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to, it's just…"

"I know," I said, smiling with the rest of my mouth. "You warned me that this might happen. Guess I'll remember next time."

As we walked to the pizza parlor that was named after the university mascot, Gloria seemed subdued. Her hair glowed as brightly as it had before, as if it had its own source of light on this cloudy day, but the sparking photons were gone from her face.

"So what did you do last night?" I asked her as we ate our individual pizza slices.

"I studied biochemistry," she said. "We had a test today."

"How did it go?"

"Do you believe in miracles?"

"Only if you do them for God and attribute them to Him," I answered.

She stopped chewing. Her pizza trembled like wet soil in an earthquake. I touched her hand.

"My advisor said I should consider moving over to the Agronomy Department," she said.

"Do they study photosynthesis over there?" I asked.

"All the time," she answered. "It is the basis of crop yield and productivity."

"So, is that so bad? Maybe…"

She slapped down the pizza. "I don't want to study crops. I want to understand what happens in the first moment that a dark chlorophyll molecule gets ravished by the first photon of light. And how about you? Suppose your advisor said to stop thinking about the Big Questions and study up to be a church camp counselor? How would you like that?"

"You're not at that point yet," I said. "Are you?"

"No," she said, picking up her wobbly pizza slice and biting it.

"The way will become clear as we continue to walk it," I said, quoting some theologian somewhere. "The path does not exist until the moment we put our feet down on it. It is…"

"An interaction," she finished.

"And the only part of the road ahead that is clear is the next step. Russian music awaits us."

The Russian orchestra was not what we expected. There were as many balalaika players as a regular orchestra has violin, viola, cello, and bass players. Balalaikas small and large, with strings stretched over a triangular sounding board. The triangle of the bass balalaika was bigger than a semi-truck wheel. There were squeezeboxes known as *bayan,* stringed *domras,* and a couple of giant dulcimers known as *gusli.* There were a few flutes and oboes too, but no brass instruments.

The music took our breaths away from the very first moment. The notes flew faster than a hummingbird's wings, mostly scales in the minor mode. Then there would be a quiet section that sounded like an entire nation of heartbroken maidens and starving collectivist farmers, like teardrops in wodka. Right in the middle of the concert, some of the players brought out wooden trumpets known as *rozhoks* and Vladimir horns. They sounded like kazoos. At first this seemed really stupid. But somehow the wooden trumpets sounded right, in context, in their interaction with the rest of the music. The titles of the songs seemed really depressing at first: *Alone on the Road I Stand, Do Not Blame Me, The Wide and Rolling Steppe.* But the songs were not depressing. The melodies were a defiance against all the sadnesses of history. No heartbreak could make these Russians stop playing their music.

Afterwards, some of the musicians played in a little room that had been converted into a dance floor. Gloria and I swirled around with Russian dancers in ribbony costumes. It left us breathless. One of the male dancers whispered something to Gloria when I was not near. I heard her say, "I'm not that kind of girl."

I escorted Gloria back to her studio apartment. All the way back we did clumsy Russian dances and loudly sang that first simple and memorable melody. We made hoops with our arms and kicked our legs, doing do-si-dos as backward as a Russian Я. We didn't care what anyone thought or whether they cared. We whirled and threw one another around. Before we thought about it, we were inside her apartment hugging and kissing.

"I needed that," she said breathlessly.

"So did I. Well, about that guy. What kind of girl *are* you?"

"Not the kind of girl who will hop in bed with someone who will be on a plane to Moskva tomorrow morning."

"So, you have religious morals?"

"Not really. It's just self-protection. I don't want to lose my heart. That guy was handsome, except for his teeth." All the Russians had big gappy teeth, as if the entire Soviet Union had fetal alcohol syndrome. Then Gloria said, with her chest against mine, "I know what we need now. Massages."

Her meaning was clear. Massages, with no plans for what would come after the massages. The rest of the path would become clear as our feet interacted with it.

She helped me out of my shirt, and I heard her removing her blouse as I lay on my stomach on her bed. Her massage was powerful. She picked at little protuberances on my skin like a monkey. She released all the endorphins in my musculature. Once or twice I was sure I could feel the tips of her breasts against my shoulder blades.

She kissed my ear. “Did you bring protection?”

“I wasn’t, I mean, I did not plan to, I mean…”

She sighed. “I know. I didn’t plan this either. But when you put your foot down on the path, you cannot be sure which direction it will suddenly take you. I have some.”

“Sure,” I said, then added, “although I don’t have any diseases.”

“How can you be sure?” she asked.

I was silent. I could feel her become motionless. “You mean, you’re a virgin?” she asked in surprise.

“Well, it depends on how you define virgin.”

“My God, a virgin! Right. Well,” she said, her hair tingling my shoulders, “you’re going to be prepared. If we have unprotected sex, God may forgive us, but *Treponema pallidum* won’t forgive you and the human papillomavirus won’t forgive me.”

“Is that what biology sex talk sounds like?” I quipped. I lifted myself up and turned over to look at her, but she turned out the light at that moment. I heard her slip out of her clothes. She lay beside me and I massaged her shoulders, kissing random spots on her back like meteors not caring where they landed on the moon. She got up. I heard a drawer open and close, and heard a plastic package being opened. She slipped the rest of my clothes off of me. Her hair tingled my chest as she slipped the rubber over the little brainless head that never thought about what it was supposed to do. She was right, even a dark room is not dark. I could see her vague outline towering over my supine form.

*

The next morning was a sunny, warm Saturday in late spring. Gloria came knocking on my studio apartment door. She had never been there, but I had given her the address. I lived alone because I wanted to think about the Big Questions without distraction.

Gloria wore torn blue jeans, slung loosely on her stout waist, and old boots. Her red T-shirt had a cartoon hillbilly face on it, an advertisement for a local discount store.

“I’ll give you just long enough to change into your old clothes,” she said.

“These *are* my old clothes,” I said, looking down at my worn but intact khaki pants.

“No boots?”

“I have an old pair of tennis shoes.”

“Well, get them on. I haven’t got all day.” She crossed her arms and stood looking at me.

"Do you mind telling me where we are going?"

She held up a key. The name stamped onto it didn't give me a clue. "Bluefield?" I asked.

"It's a forest," she said.

"You mean there are forests around here?" We were in the middle of the Midwest, where each square of land had a calculable value in bushels of corn or soybeans. There were a few trees around farmhouses, but forests?

"Yes. But it is surrounded by a big fence to keep out the deer and the deer hunters. It belongs to the university."

"How did you get a key?"

"I borrowed it from a guy I used to date. He studies mosquitoes out in the forest. I only see him when I go borrow his key."

Gloria drove her little puttering rusty car along country roads, usually just numbered but occasionally with names like Cat Cave Road or Deadman Springs, names based on events either imaginary or forgotten. We turned around a corner with a couple of scraggly elms and suddenly before us was about a hundred acres of forest. The tall trees grew right up to the fence, within inches of which the corn and bean fields began. The forest began and ended as suddenly as a movement of a Mahler symphony. Pokeweeds and ragweeds stuck through the chain link, seeking the sun of the open field while hiding their roots in the protected woodland.

"Bluefield Woods," Gloria announced as we drove up to a little gravel spot beside the padlocked gate.

"Imagine this!" I said. "An original bit of forest surviving in the farmland."

"Not original," she said. "It was farmland about a hundred years ago. Then some guy named Bluefield decided to stop plowing it and let the trees grow back. His descendants gave the land to the university to use as a research plot."

"Must be a perfect place for your friend to study mosquitoes."

"Actually, there are more mosquitoes hatching from the little puddles around the farm fields than in the forest. In the forest, the little pond has mosquito larvae, but it also has bugs and fish that eat them, which you won't find out in the fields. The farmers around here keep writing to the president's office and demanding that we spray the forest to get rid of the mosquitoes, not realizing that, first, their fields produce more mosquitoes than the forest does, and, second, that their pesticides aren't killing the mosquitoes even out in their fields. Of course," Gloria added, pulling a little squirt bottle of DEET out of her backpack, "there are still plenty of mosquitoes in the forest. Want some?"

"I'll try doing without it," I said, waving away the repellant. "Bring it just in case. But I hate insect repellant. It reminds me of the solvents in your lab."

We got out of the car and locked it. Gloria unlocked the padlock and slipped the chain from the fence. She opened the gate just enough to let us slip in, since the greenbriers intertwined their branches with the hinges, clogging their movement. Then she relocked the gate.

The forest understory was not the jungle I had been expecting. Instead of a thick growth of rank vegetation, there were delicate little plants spread out in the deep shade. I walked over to a little patch of them and knelt down. Gloria knelt beside me, her shoulder against mine. The plants looked like little diaphanous green ghosts.

"They're called clearweeds," she said.

"Good name for them," I said. "I guess I was expecting…"

"There's actually not much growing on the forest floor," she said. "Not enough light. The plants that grow here are spread out and small, making use of the little bit of light that is available. These same plants, out in the full sun, would curl up and die."

"Sort of like your lab plants."

"Yes. Now, look up."

There was pretty much nothing between my head and the branches of the maple trees high overhead.

"Do you notice anything about the leaves?" she asked.

"They form a very regular pattern, sort of like figures on a quilt or on wallpaper."

"That pattern is no accident," said Gloria, close to my ear. "The leaves orient themselves so that they do not shade each other, and can absorb as much light as possible."

Then I looked down into Gloria's face. Without thinking, I kissed her. When I raised my hand to her shoulder, she said, "No."

"It's the most beautiful place in the world for the most beautiful thing that a man and a woman could do," I said. "Soft beds of plants," I said, motioning to a slightly denser growth of slightly larger forest floor herbs.

"You didn't bring protection, did you?" she asked.

I sighed. "No. I didn't think that we might…"

"Well," she said, "I did plan ahead. I planned that we would not, so I didn't bring any either. By the way, those soft-looking plants over there that you want to lay in? They're nettles."

"Yow," I said. "So, what do we do?"

"I remember hearing in the homily after mass one Sunday, *Be still and know that I am the Lord.* Well, I don't know about the Lord part, but let's just do that."

And we did. We sat on the forest floor, shifting occasionally to look at something more or less closely. I saw beetles clambering their tenebrous way through the mud, having trouble climbing over tufts of moss that a human would not even notice. Whenever I started remembering what Gloria and I had done the previous night, I tried looking for something new to divert my thoughts, and I always found it, whether a crane-

fly or a spider in its delicate web. I looked at Gloria's face and hair occasionally. An orange ladybug crawled into her hair, as if it had found camouflage. I wondered how the little bug knew what color it was, since it could not see itself, so that it would know what color of background to hide itself in. There are so many things we do not know. And people like me think we can figure God out?

After maybe a couple of hours, Gloria touched my hand. We stood up together, silently, and she led me to the fence at the edge of the forest. My eyes had so adjusted to the gloom of the forest floor—not darkness, but gloom, another one of those *gl-* words, referring to the precious little bit of light that is present—that the fields outside the forest seemed almost violent and dead. Crops and little clearweeds on the forest floor both had the same kind of photosynthesis, but crops are enslaved plants whose only function is to be photosynthetic factories of agricultural products. Wild animals are free, but livestock are just factories of meat and milk. And the whole world of sunlight outside the forest was also drenched in chemicals, pesticides and fertilizers and herbicides and fungicides, to make those factories work as efficiently as possible, regardless of health, for what other measure of health is there aside from productivity? I now understood the Fall of Man, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden.

And I suddenly understood why Gloria did not want to transfer to the Agronomy Department. What matters is not so much what you study, as the context within which you study it. I now understood Gloria and loved what I understood. Before we left the forest, we stood and embraced long enough that sweat formed a sticky glue between us. Then we stumbled out into the harsh glare—another one of those *gl-* words—of reality.

We did not see one another the following day. I called her in the early afternoon, when she had gotten back from mass. Gloria had gotten excited about writing her thesis proposal. When I called her in the evening, I heard the whirring of her electric typewriter as she spoke to me briefly.

*

I stopped at Gloria's desk on Monday. She was not there, nor did I find her later in the day. She did not answer her phone or respond to my messages. I checked on Tuesday, and one of the other students said that he had not seen her. On Wednesday, there was a partially-packed box of books and papers on her desk.

I walked around Gloria's neighborhood, hoping to see her coming back to her apartment. And I did. I almost didn't recognize her. She wore a crisp white blouse and an elegant gray pant-suit. Her wild red hair was tied and pinned back. She wore high heels and cosmetics. Red lipstick. I ran up to her.

"Gloria! Where have you been? I almost didn't recognize you!" I panted.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said.

I looked disbelievingly into the face of the woman I only now realized I desperately loved.

"I've been looking for you for three days!" I said.

"Well," she said, looking down at her uncomfortable toes, "I haven't been avoiding you. I've just been busy."

"Gloria, what's going on?"

"Well, let me take you to a nice dinner and I'll tell you all about it," she said, looking back up at me. "Say, the Ziggurat?" She referred to the best restaurant in town, on a revolving tower that gave diners a panoramic view of the flat farmland and its obedient rows of corn.

"Please," I said, "fill me in just a little bit first."

"I just got a job," she said. "They interviewed me just ten minutes, then offered me the position." She touched her hair back into place.

"But you *have* a job," I said. "A research assistantship through your advisor's grant."

"That's barely enough to live on," she said. "I'm going to be making real money now."

When she told me how much it was, I had to admit to her that if I ever earned that much I would be pretty satisfied.

"Who's it with, I mean, where will you, I mean, what will you be doing?"

She named the world's largest agrichemical corporation, which had just held a Recruitment Day at the university.

"But, they're *evil,*" I said. "They're destroying the world with their chemicals."

"Evil?" she said. "If you theologians ever figure out what evil is, let me know. All I know is, pesticides just *are.* Somebody has to make them. Somebody has to sell them and that somebody is going to be me."

"But I thought you weren't good at chemistry."

She frowned at me. "I'm not going to be doing chemistry," she said. "I'm in sales. Salespeople who know some chemistry are more convincing than others."

"I thought you wanted to study…I mean, more than study, but really understand chlorophyll."

"Well, I'll be selling herbicides, and they actually have something to do, not directly with chlorophyll, but with the membranes that contain the chlorophyll. See," Gloria brightened for just a moment, "the way some of these herbicides work, they attach to the membranes and fuck them up. The chemists at the company get to design herbicides that fuck them up better. And then I sell them." She was glum again. "Speaking of chemistry. My advisor said that I was doing so poorly in biochemistry that he would not be able to renew my graduate position past the end of this semester."

"That's why you were packing your boxes," I said.

"Took you long enough to figure that one out," she said.

"But, what about Agronomy?" I prompted.

"They were willing to take me on probation," she said. "I'd have to take biochem all over again."

"But, probation? That's not so bad. That means you will have another chance to prove yourself."

She sighed and slumped. "Gil, you just don't get it. Probation makes it sound like I'm a criminal."

"Does not!"

"Gil!" She was almost screaming, the way she did that day in the little restaurant. "I'm the one who has to make these decisions for myself. I don't need an amateur theologian trying to fit my choices into some cosmic framework!" When she saw the look on my face, she said, quietly, "Gil, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lash out at you. But I've already given my answer. Now, don't you want to go and celebrate with me?"

"No," I said.

"Why not? I thought you liked me."

"Oh, I more than like you," I said. "But you have lost your idealism. You have allowed the corporate world to defeat you and assimilate you. It would not be a celebration. *You* don't even want to celebrate."

Gloria looked down at a shiny piece of broken green glass on the pavement and started pushing it around with her beautiful new shoe. "I suppose you're right."

"Look," I said, "I'll come by tonight…"

"No," she said. "Gil, don't make it harder than it is. You're not the only one who is going to be feeling the pain of separation." Then she told me where she would be working—several hundred miles away—and her starting date, which was very soon.

And thus began our agreement, which we had maintained for ten years. We exchanged letters, newsy notes rather than deep epistles, and whenever one of us moved we exchanged addresses and phone numbers. We maintained contact through our marriages and divorces. And we each had an open invitation to visit the other. And since our divorces, we had been calling one another more frequently, speculating about the possibility of a visit.

*

All of these memories came flooding back when I heard Gloria's voice on the phone.

"Oh, hi," I said. "How are you?" There was no way my greeting could sound as enthusiastic as our last phone conversation had been.

Gloria was silent for a moment, then said simply, "I'm coming through your part of the world, and I thought I would stop by and see you. At last!"

I suddenly felt terror. I had been hoping that a relationship would develop again between us, and I had been hoping for her to visit. Living alone and writing all day, I had a lot of time to think about how nice it would be to get back together with her. Not, of course, that I could live with her in the city. But then along came Sophia, and I had not had time to think about Gloria. I did not want to burn the bridges that connected me to Gloria, so obviously I did not want her to know about Sophia, just in case Sophia did not work out. All I could say was, "What could possibly bring you to Wapanucka, Oklahoma?"

"A trip from Dallas to Tulsa," she answered. "Cheaper to rent a car than to fly. Besides, I hate flying. The airlines treat you like cargo and assume you have an infinitely flexible schedule. And they shove you around like nobody's business. Oh, you get to your destination all right, in some form or other and at some time or other. You know, each plane ticket should come with a little warning label, *Full net weight of cargo guaranteed. Some shifting and settling may have occurred in transit.*" She listened to my sincere laugh. "So," Gloria said, "are you up for a visit?"

"Uh, yeah, but maybe right now wouldn't be such a good time. See, it's still a little bit of a mess..."

As I spoke to Gloria on the phone, Sophia walked into the room. Her wide, wise eyes and her analytical ears instantly understood the meaning of my conversation. "I just really don't think this would be such a good time for you to visit."

Sophia looked at me with that unwavering gaze that made her so lovely and so terrifying. In her new shorts and tee-shirt, she ran her fingers through her hair as she stretched.

"But, Gil, I promise I won't be any trouble at all..." said Gloria. I didn't answer, as I watched Sophia instead of thinking. In the silence, I detected a change that I would have seen on Gloria's face if I had been looking at her. "Look, Gil, I didn't mean to make a pest of myself..."

"Gloria, you're not a pest, I really enjoy every time we talk, and I've been looking forward to seeing you..." I suddenly realized I had to repair some damage. Sophia realized it too.

"It's just that..." Gloria sighed. "From your letters, it sounded like you really, really wanted to see me again."

"I do, Gloria..." I hoped my voice didn't sound like I was whining.

"And here the opportunity comes up, which hasn't happened in ten years in our busy lives, so of course I thought maybe I could ... but ... but no, some other time, okay?" These sounded like final chords to me.

"Maybe there's some other place we could meet..." I said.

"Don't you remember inviting me to visit your home, Gil?" Gloria sounded a little hurt. "Sometime when your house is a little more in order, maybe I can come by, but of course I'm pretty busy, as you know."

"Wait, Gloria..."

"Sorry, Gil, I have a call on another line. I owe you a letter. Pretty soon, okay?" Impatiently she said, "Bye, Gil." But just before hanging up, she added, "You've been a real friend, Gil. I won't forget that."

Sophia saw my dismay as I hung up the phone. She continued to stand in beautiful stillness. Without preliminary, she said simply, "You don't have to hide me from your friends."

I sighed again and avoided Sophia's gaze. "No? This particular friend is someone I thought maybe, someday..."

"...you might become intimate with," Sophia finished my thought. "And how could you tell her you have a woman living in your house with you?"

"Exactly," I concluded.

"I refuse to put this kind of burden on you. Please call her back, and before she comes, I will leave." Sophia didn't sound angered or hurt.

"But I don't want you to leave either," I said. When I saw Sophia's cool stare, I realized it was perhaps not the best thing to say.

"Do I understand," she began, "that you are burning your bridges, your connections with female friends, your chances for future happiness, on account of me? Are you assuming I am going to remain here with you? As your woman?" Her words, but not her voice, sounded offended.

"I don't know. I haven't decided," I answered honestly.

"It will not be your decision," said Sophia, ramming her face close to mine. "Offering me your hospitality was your decision, and continuing it is your decision. And…" She exhaled and looked away from me. "Your friendship, the way you listen to me, the way you make me feel like someone who matters…that was your decision also. But all the other decisions are mine. I plan," she announced, looking back at me, "to remain here only until I arrange for employment and my own place to live."

I had not actually thought about Sophia leaving. I wanted her to leave, and to stay. I could tolerate neither the pressure of her presence or the vacuum of her absence. However, I did not want her to leave until I had my own desires figured out. "That may not be very easy to do..."

I could see a little explosion of anger in Sophia's eyes. "The same feet that brought me here can take me away," she announced. "It doesn't sound very difficult to *me*."

"I would worry about you," I said. "I would worry, like an older brother..."

"Older brother? That is not what you intend in our relationship," Sophia said quietly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, unsteadily.

"I mean, I saw what you have in your dresser drawer. It was open when I was cleaning the house yesterday. You intend for me to become your concubine." Her use of the Old Testament term made it sound as if I planned to incarcerate her in a harem.

"The condoms? They were left over from before..." I started to prevaricate, but I knew from her look that she had also seen the receipt for their recent purchase. I have this habit of keeping all my receipts on my desk. "Sophia, listen," I sighed again. "You are over-reacting. You are here, you are welcome here, please stay exactly the amount of time you need to stay. Meanwhile, I have to suspend some other parts of my life..."

"Call her back, and tell her about me," Sophia ordered.

"No," I said hesitantly.

"You are hiding me as if we are having an adulterous affair!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I am hiding you. That's the point," I implored.

"But not from your friends out of town," Sophia said, exasperated. "I am telling you, I cannot remain here if I think that I am demolishing any of your potentially close relationships with other women. Call her back, and tell her the truth. As you know, she suspects something worse than what the truth actually is."

"Everything is going to turn out fine," I said, truncating the conversation by leaving the room.

I got very little reading and writing done the next couple of days, as I heard Sophia looking through the yellow pages and making phone calls, seeking employment. I knew, depressingly, that I had lost both Sophia and Gloria. Everything would not turn out fine.

*

The next day, when I returned from town, I saw a new little sports car parked in front of my house. It had a rental car sticker on the bumper. I parked away from my house, behind a clump of willows, and approached from behind my house, assuming that someone had driven Sophia's husband to my house, had found her and was waiting for my return, for an ugly scene. I could not imagine what an Amish Ugly Scene would be like, but I did not want to find out. I approached the side of my house without windows, and crept around the shaded north side, to the main bedroom window. I was confused to hear laughter coming from inside my house. I glanced inside, around the half-raised sheet that Sophia had put up in place of blinds. I heard the voices approach. I slunk quickly to the ground, unless I should get caught peering into my own bedroom window. I had forgotten about the pile of old buckets that perched against the wall, and they came clattering down, and I fell under them. Before I could get up and run into the trees, two women stood before me.

Sophia and Gloria.

They were laughing at me. One of the buckets had dumped rusty, muddy water on me.

Gloria approached me, hand extended to help me arise. It was the same Gloria, with just a few white hairs amidst the red. “Gil, you clown, why didn’t you just tell me?”

As I stood, I said, “I didn’t think you would understand.”

“You think I’m stupid because I am a woman?” Gloria asked. I looked at her in fear. When I saw her smile, I knew she was not serious. “Gimme a break, Gil,” she said, giving my shoulder a friendly punch. “I decided to come by anyway, and when I met Sophia, she explained everything to me. She’s a wonderful woman.” She approached me to hug me, but hesitated, because of the mud on my shirt. Instead, she put her arm around my shoulder and walked me towards the house. Sophia approached from the other side, and put her arm around me also. The intertwined threesome was unable to enter the back door without falling apart into a ball of laughter.

*

“God,” said Gloria as Sophia finished telling her story, that is, the part she had already told me. The red ants were already swarming through the little cracks around the sink into the rinsed but unwashed dishes of our pea soup dinner. “I can’t imagine what you must have gone through.”

I admit that, however well I knew this part of Sophia’s story, I was deeply moved by the retelling, as much as Gloria was by hearing it the first time.

“And my story isn’t over,” said Sophia, to whom Gloria had told our story from back in grad school. “I cannot know where my path will lead. It’s like Gil said to you, the path does not appear until you put your foot down on it.”

“And my story?” said Gloria. “I cannot see myself selling pesticides forever. The end has got to come. We cannot keep up this unsustainable world of expensive and poisonous agriculture. The soil washes away. The federal government has to prop up our whole food system with massive subsidies to farmers and corporations, including the one I work for. What will I do next? Every time a paycheck comes, I delay the decision a bit longer. The soil needs deep roots, and so do I. Someday. It’s always someday.”

“And my story isn’t over either,” I said.

“You haven’t told me your story about why you quit teaching,” Gloria said to me. “Except the part about how you could not assent to the doctrines of that little college you worked at.”

“Isn’t that enough?” I asked.

“No,” said Sophia. “Gloria’s right. I can tell that there is something more you have not told us.”

I cleared my throat. “You women really have intuition, don’t you?”

“Either that, or you just aren’t very good at hiding your thoughts,” smiled Sophia.

I began my story. I taught the intro to Bible course and the Biblical history course at a little Christian college. I had, after all, ended up doing my Divinity School Ph.D. on an aspect of Old Testament history that turned out to not be as interesting as I had thought, but turned out to be adequate to get my degree. But my second semester at the college I was assigned to teach the Fundamental Issues in Social Sciences course, which everyone called "fiss." It was a course all the students took, along with the creationist Fundamental Issues in Natural Sciences ("fins") course. I leaped at the chance, mostly because that rabid conservative Dr. Dominic Pester always told the students that society was going to hell in a handbasket because of abortion and the curtailment of gun rights. But he was on medical leave. Here was my chance to get the students to *think* about issues rather than to just rehash what their fire-and-brimstone preachers had already told them.

So I had the students read about how world population was growing faster than our food resources, about how we were destroying the biodiversity that God made, and how corporations were preventing us from doing anything about our problems. I was, in short, saying some of the same things that the old Biblical prophets said, Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, only using modern data. Amos denounced the rich people for grinding the face of the poor in the dust. The Chronicler attributed the fall of Jerusalem to the failure of the Kingdom of Judah to keep the Sabbath of the Fields. This was a practice, which Moses commanded right alongside the Ten Commandments themselves, of letting the agricultural fields rest and renew themselves every seventh year. I read to the students what the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes had to say about the weariness of life and the finality of death in a world where the race is not to the swift nor victory to the strong, but where time and chance determine all outcomes.

"You told them that?" asked Sophia.

"I had been waiting for an opportunity to say those things," I said. "I have thousands of pages of notes in my journal about them. They're over there." I waved vaguely at a pile of spiral notebooks.

The students had never heard anything like this. They had always been told that all we had to do to please God was to keep our guns ready, and anyway, if things got too bad, Jesus would come back just in time. I pointed out to them that Jesus was not obligated to come back to Earth just because we happened to need a magical deliverance from the messes we have created.

Some of the students were hostile to my message, though they seemed to respect it. A few of them embraced my message and decided to dedicate their lives to humanitarian work. Then there was this one girl who got very depressed about the predicament of the world. She came to me to talk about it. I tried to cheer her up, saying that maybe all the nations of the world would finally decide to work together rather than to fight one another, but she could tell from my voice that I didn't believe it. A week later

I heard that she had attempted suicide. Her parents sent her away to a fundamentalist Bible camp, and promptly sued the college.

"Did they win?" asked Gloria.

"Yes and no," I said. "A settlement was reached. But…"

"But that was the end of your Bible college career," said Gloria.

"Actually, there is a lot more to the story," I said.

"We're listening," said Gloria.

"Some other time," I said.

"Whatever happened to the girl?" asked Sophia.

"There was no way in hell that they were going to let *me* know." I concluded, "Right now I have just enough money from my book to pay my expenses. But the book will get old, and I will run out of ideas."

"Maybe," said Gloria.

"Likely," I said. "Then what will I do?"

All three of us sat in silence around my little table, which was roughly the shape of a disc of dust and gas in a solar system that has just begun to form and to which many, though not all, possibilities remain open to it.

"You know," said Gloria, looking at Sophia. "I was most impressed by what you did…" She started to laugh. "What you did with those bulldozers!"

"Well, you can do that too, if you want," Sophia told her.

Gloria sighed. "No, I think I see it the way Gil does. Acts like yours, brave though they are, will not have any effect on the world. I know what I'm talking about. I'm inside the big corporate machine that you tried to stop."

"And there's always more money to make," said Sophia.

Gloria frowned and looked at her perfect fingernails. "And it gets even more complicated. This guy I've been seeing. He's one of the veeps of the corporation."

"Veep of what?" asked Sophia. She knew perfectly well that Gloria was about to cry but decided that the best thing to do for her was to keep her talking.

"Vice President of Brown-nosing and Backstabbing," Gloria answered.

Sophia looked confused.

"Gloria, you are the only one here who has a good and ongoing income," I said. "But I think you are the one who needs most immediately to do something about her situation."

"Every night when I come home from work I decide that is what I'm going to do, and every morning I go right back to work." Gloria was still close to tears.

"And before you know it, you will be old," said Sophia.

Suddenly Gloria stood up, slinging her combers of fiery hair like a Valkyrie. She began to shout, "Would you two…" But she looked into our eyes and sat down.

"You don't need to fight this thing alone," I said. "There must be some environmental organization you can work for. Are you good at fund-raising? Those organizations need fund-raisers."

Gloria smiled. "I could learn, I guess."

"You are in sales, as I recall, right?" I asked.

"Yes…" Gloria's voice trailed off.

"I can see the headline now. *Pesticide maven joins Greenpeace*," I said.

Gloria looked into my eyes. "I like it," she said.

After a few minutes of silence, I said, "Well, now that we've all solved each other's problems, why don't we step outside a moment and watch the sunset? It won't wait for us."

Everything seemed strange outside. Night was falling but white light was coming from the east, reflected off of high clouds. The gigantic clouds swirled slowly then gradually faded into yellow and pink. The clouds looked so soft and peaceful. It was not until later that I heard they were the top of a big thunderstorm that hammered Coalgate, a town to the northwest of us. Gloria and I were alone for just a moment watching the clouds.

"Gloaming," I said.

"Glimmer," she answered.

"Glisten."

"Gleam."

"Glint."

"Glower," she said.

"I don't think that's one of them," I said. "Neither is *glum*. But *glad* is one of them."

"And that's what I'll be when I finally get my head straight," she said.

"There is no such thing as a cloud," I said before I had really thought it through.

"What?" asked Gloria.

"A cloud is not a thing. It is a system. Just like chlorophyll, remember? Now those clouds look like they have very definite surfaces. But a cloud is just where the air gets cold enough to reach dewpoint. The difference between the inside and the outside of a cloud might be only a degree of temperature or a percentage point of humidity. And, you will notice, that interface between inside and outside is always moving."

"Okay, Mr. Theologian, get to the moral of your little story," smiled Gloria.

"You can do something to make a difference. Maybe only a degree or two of difference in your world, but it might be enough to really produce a noticeable change, a change that people can see from miles away," I said.

Gloria thought about that. "That's a bit of a stretch. Gil, I love you but you're definitely not going to be the next Leo Buscaglia." Buscaglia was the author who wrote *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf* and other sentimental fables to help people cope with

difficulties. “The Creeping of Charlie the Cloud? I don’t see it. But, meanwhile, you have really really really made a big difference in the way I feel. About everything.

“I have a hotel room waiting for me up in Tulsa, and a meeting tomorrow morning,” Gloria continued. “I have to get on the road. Long drive. Stay in touch, okay? I mean, not just once a year the way we’ve been doing.”

“We will,” said Sophia, approaching silently behind us.

Not long before, Sophia had been determined to leave her house of refuge and find a poorly-paying job. But when she said, “We will,” I suddenly felt that a new bond had formed between us.

“Have a safe drive,” said Sophia. “And just be glad you don’t have to go to Tulsa in a buggy.”

PART TWO: SOPHIA

Chapter 9

Dear Gil,

You have asked me to write about my experiences which have led up to my current difficulties with the Amish church. This is going to be a challenge for me to do. But thank you so much for asking me to do this. And these thoughts are all mixed together with my feelings of deep friendship for you, which I will attempt to keep separate from my feelings about my encounter with God-or-Whatever and with other Amish, including my husband Clay.

I have to admit that trying to use this word processor will probably drive me crazy. It was easy enough for me to learn the keyboard, but the computer keeps changing my spellings. When I write *rumspringa* I mean *rumspringa* and not *rum springs.* And the curser jumps all around on its own, highlights text, then deletes what I just wrote. Thanks for showing me the little curved arrow that lets me backtrack and recover what I lost. Now I know why they call it a curser.

You said that writing down my ideas will help me to figure them out. I had not thought about that. For many years I have kept a journal. Until recently it was a devotional journal, but one in which I honestly wrote about my confusion and even my doubts about passages of scripture. Now I'm not even sure it can be called a devotional journal any more. I think you said this about your journals also? Writing my old journals helped me clarify my thoughts. But, once they are written in pen, the thoughts become immutable, or nearly so. Red ink for anger, green for joy, black most of the time, since I was raised to think of everything in black and white. But on this computer I can, and must, go back and change things I have already written. When I have finished, there will be a flawless document that looks like the wisdom poofed fully-formed into my brain. When I write in ink, I cannot hide the formative frustration that goes into each difficult step. Some of my erstwhile Amish girlfriends kept journals too, and they never have things crossed out or cross referenced, other than making references to the Cross. They want perfectly beautiful journals, so they never dare to think anything other than what has already been approved as perfect.

*

I was an inconvenient child. I asked about everything. At first, my teachers and parents were pleased. They even praised me for having an inquiring mind. But after a while it annoyed them. Here is an example.

When we studied Christopher Columbus in our one-room schoolhouse, we learned about him as a great crusader for Christianity to bring light to the native heathens, and how much of a joy this light was supposed to be for them. The teacher told us that the conversion of the Indians, for the most part, was successful; most of the Choctaws and Chickasaws around here in central Oklahoma go to Baptist churches.

Then an English girlfriend, Betsy, who lived on a farm near ours, borrowed a book about Columbus from one of the municipal libraries for a school assignment. She didn't want to read it; she just made something up and turned in her essay at her school. But she let me read the book. We Amish children were not permitted to borrow books from libraries. I got quite a different picture of Columbus in that book. When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, he found that the natives had a few gold trinkets, which they had apparently acquired from the Aztecs. But they had no gold of their own. Columbus, however, was sure that they did. Once he took away the little bit of gold that they had, he commanded them to bring him more. When they could not, he cut their hands off.

I put the book down and never finished it.

So when the teacher started telling us again about Christopher Columbus, I stood up—I think I was about twelve—and started shouting. This in itself was shocking. Amish school children are the most polite pupils on Earth. Pupils, not students, since we memorized, rather than studying. All of the other pupils, older or younger, stared at me in shock. I don't remember exactly what I said. I sort of got taken out of myself by rage, a kind of rage I had never felt before. I'm fairly sure I did not use any expletives, which I at any rate had not yet learned. But I was screaming about how Columbus could not be doing God's work if he coveted gold, which is against the Ten Commandments…

"Please, Sophia, sit down and be quiet."

"…and then HE CUT THEIR HANDS OFF!"

"Please, Sophia, control yourself."

"HE CUT THEIR HANDS OFF!"

"Sophia, please, sit down and be quiet."

"That is worse than killing them, because they have to go around the rest of their lives looking at the stubs at the ends of their arms…"

"Sophia, nobody is saying that everything Columbus did was right. He made mistakes…"

"This was no mistake, Miss Huygens. This was deliberate evil!"

"Columbus opened up the New World with the effect that our Anabaptist ancestors could come here from Europe and live in freedom, away from persecution…"

"That doesn't mean our ancestors could take away other people's land…"

"…and away from martyrdom…"

"That doesn't mean they could kill other people!"

"Our Anabaptist ancestors did not kill anyone. But Columbus made it possible for them to eventually come here to America…"

"Okay! Okay! Why don't we just study our ancestors and not talk about Christopher Columbus, who was an evil man…"

"Sophia, please, shut up and sit down…"

I walked around the room and spoke directly to each student as long as I could. I was met with pure astonishment. I held up my little hands right into their faces and said, *HE CUT THEIR HANDS OFF!*

The teacher told one of the older pupils to run to the store and tell my Dad to come and get me. I was crying in the corner when my Dad arrived to take me home. Gently, and without anger. Everyone assumed I would not act this way again, and they were right.

The next day, a boy two years older than I took me aside at recess. He was not wearing suspenders, so he must have been over thirteen. In the moment or two before the teacher separated us, he managed to tell me he really admired what I had done.

"But do you agree with me?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" he responded. He seemed to always have a secret smile.

His name was Clay Muth and he would later be my husband.

Chapter 10

Rumspringa is our Amish time of running and springing around. Every Amish adolescent is given freedom to do things that were previously forbidden and that, later, will again be forbidden. It lasts from age sixteen until whenever the adolescent, or in some cases young adult, gets tired of running around and comes back home. Or doesn't.

The idea behind rumspringa is quite simple and honest. In the Anabaptist tradition, no one can join-church unless they make a personal decision to do so, and feel moved by the Spirit. My people believe that no one can be forced into the church. So the adults have to let the young people go around and take chances and sin. To sin boldly. Of course, the parents worry. They spend sleepless nights of worry whenever their daughters slip out at midnight to meet the sons of other sleepless parents to do all kinds of sinful things. To drive around in a car, usually too fast for the gravel lanes. To drink beer or hard liquor. To smoke cigarettes. Or weed. To listen to loud music. To dance in a circle of light in back of the barn belonging to yet another pair of sleepless parents. To explore one another's bodies away from the circle of light. It is our time to go wild. Once a young Amish boy-man or girl-woman tastes of the pleasures of the flesh, he or she can then compare this style of life with the orderly, peaceful, and generally cheerful family life in which we have been raised. The choice is usually pretty clear. Amish youth compare the shallowness of sin with the deep satisfaction of Amish family life and choose the latter, about ninety percent of the time.

I'm sure you, with your analytical mind, are ahead of me on this, Gil. The two options offered to Amish youth are not an honest choice. Nasty and dangerous sin is not, in fact, the only alternative to the narrow purview of Amish life. We never have a chance to try anything else. Such as, for example, high school or college. Amish parents strongly urge their children to drop out of school after eighth grade. From age fourteen to age sixteen, Amish children work for their parents. I worked in the store, and learned a lot about how to run a business.

But what I really wanted to do was to go to high school. I especially wanted to learn about science. But ever since the Supreme Court's *Yoder v. Wisconsin* decision of 1972, Amish parents have legally claimed that compulsory school attendance for Amish children is a violation of their religious freedom. But whose freedom? Do the parents have the freedom to determine what their kids think? Nobody asked me what I thought. Some Amish kids go to high school, but only if they go to the English school administrators and insist on it, and also if they have a way to get to school. I did not. It would have been a long buggy ride to the nearest high school even if someone would have given me a ride. The English school district did not have enough money to pay a bus driver just for me, the only kid within several square miles who wanted to go.

But Betsy secretly brought me books from her school library. I devoured each of them, even those that would seem to be boring, such as *The United States in World War One.* I read that one, forgot most of it, but was left with one major thought: It was a really, really stupid war that nobody seemed to be able to get out of. I enjoyed the Pippi Longstocking books, about the Swedish girl who lived alone and had a sassy attitude not found in Amish kids. I also read books about Native American history. I read about how the land where I lived, in central central Oklahoma, once belonged to the Caddo tribe, but the United States government forced the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes to relocate here from the Southeast, and then went and took the land away from the Chickasaws and Choctaws. I looked at the soil of my homeland in a new way: I saw that it was drenched in blood, no less than the European lands from which our Anabaptist ancestors had escaped.

But then one day I saw the land in yet another new way. Where before I had seen soil and rocks, I now saw the history of a planet.

The book Betsy brought me was just called *Fossils.* It explained how dead animals and plants could, over very long periods of time, turn into rock. They decompose, but their cells and bones are replaced by minerals that crystallize in them from the surrounding rock, which leaves a crystally type of rock that is an exact duplicate, to all outward appearances, of the original specimen. Scientists can also measure how old the rocks are. The visible fossil record goes back over five hundred million years. I tried to get my mind around this number. I calculated that if the length of the path from our house to the store was five hundred million years, then all of human history was less than the thickness of a coat of paint on the outside of the store. And the Earth itself, of course, is much older than the five hundred million years of visible fossils. And then the book said that coal and oil were big piles of ancient plants that had experienced high temperature and pressure millions of years ago.

These concepts, as you might guess, are outrageous to the Amish. They claim that all the fossils and coal and oil were formed at once, about four thousand years ago, during the Flood of Noah. Usually even the English school districts refused to have this kind of science book, the kind Betsy brought to me, on their library shelves, and the state legislature in Oklahoma was, then as now, pretty hostile to evolution. But somehow this book slipped past the non-Amish censors and got into my hands.

And then along came Clay again, one day when I was fifteen. He had entered his rumspringa, and was driving his own truck around. Not fast, not recklessly. He was getting paid for hauling things around for people. He delivered something to our store, and then Mom said she needed some fabric from a warehouse in Durant, about thirty miles south. Clay wasn't exactly sure what she wanted, a certain kind of tacking, but I was, so I said I would go with him. We would be back before supper, so Mom did not see any reason I should not go with him.

As he drove, he smiled at me. I suddenly felt as if I could trust him. I was taking a risk as I told him the only things he did not already know about—my secret books. Then he told me he had done the same thing, reading under the covers by flashlight when he was supposed to be asleep. He, too, had read a book about fossils, and another one about—I gasped when he said it—evolution.

He looked over at me. I was already wearing spectacles by that time, and I think he was trying to imagine my face without them. So I took them off and smiled at him. He smiled back. Then I put them back on as if to say, *Get used to it, I wear glasses.* He kept smiling.

We got the tacking, and were ready to drive home. But Clay drove over to the public library. I felt as if I were walking into a holy place. This was at the time that computer terminals were replacing card catalogs, and I marveled at both. He checked a couple of books back in, and checked others out. The library was only for residents of Bryan County, but they made an exception for Clay.

"The Oklahoma Constitution," I read the title of one of the books. "Why are you reading that?" My voice made it clear that I really wanted to know the undoubtedly legitimate reason for his interest in that subject.

"I'm thinking I might want to be a lawyer," he answered.

"Why?"

"Sometimes people need help," said Clay. "Legal help. When the strong try to take advantage of the weak, the weak need lawyers to protect them. Like us Amish, for example. When we need legal help—and you know we do, more often than you have heard—we go to English lawyers. Well, why not to an Amish lawyer?"

"The church will never let you…"

"Or, perhaps, at least, a lawyer who grew up Amish."

"We would trust you," I said. "And you would have a lot of clients."

"You make it sound like I would just be doing it for money," he said.

"Why would I do that?" I asked. "But, you have to admit, the temptation to rake in the dough by doing whatever an oil corporation tells you to do would be hard to resist."

"Remember that time that the truck driver was going up 48 and fell asleep at the wheel? And ran into the van picking up Amish kids to go to school?"

Nobody could forget that. This event, four years previous, was etched on our collective memory. Four children died. It caused an outpouring of grief, and resulted in the penning of a lot of bad poetry. One of the poems actually said that God took the children to Heaven because He was tired of having nothing but old geezers up there. I'm not making this up, Gil. I know you can find about a dozen reasons why this is a stupid belief. But it was our community's way of coping with the grief and the obvious problem of why God would allow this to happen. They sure as hell weren't going to turn to Ecclesiastes for consolation! There is a roadside shrine with plastic flowers on it. You've

seen it, Gil, even though you probably didn't know the story. We would have put up photos of the children only we do not have photos taken of ourselves, or of our children. This would be a violation of the *gelassenheit*, the self-effacement and resignation that Amish believe that God requires of us.

"I could help families during crises like that," said Clay. "Or even help the truck driver. He was at fault but did not intend to kill anyone. That's the difference between murder and manslaughter. Only it gets very complex. I would need a law degree to sort things out."

"What would you have to do to be a lawyer?"

He sighed. "I don't like to think about how hard it would be," he said. "First, I would have to complete the equivalent of high school. There are programs for this, called Q.E.D. or something."

I was suddenly excited at the thought that I might be able to do this too.

"Then I would have to get a college degree. Not just a two-year degree at a community college, but a four-year degree."

"Sounds expensive," I said.

"They have scholarships, but it's not enough to live on. I would have to keep working. So it would take me longer than four years. Then I would have to get into law school, which is one of the most expensive things you could ever think about doing. I would have to take out a big loan."

"The church won't let you do that either. Why is it so expensive?"

"I guess the law school thinks you will get rich by working for an oil company so you can pay back your immense debt."

"Doesn't sound like something an Amish lawyer could do," I concluded.

"I think it would be really exciting to be a lawyer," Clay continued. "One of my English friends has a video cassette player, and we watch movies."

"What kinds of movies?"

Clay scowled at me then continued. "One day my friend had a cassette of old Perry Mason reruns from 1950s and 1960s television. Perry Mason was a fictional lawyer out in California who was always saving his clients from being falsely accused of murder. He instantly became my hero. He was always taking risks, but always winning, and always making justice triumph. That's what I want to be like."

Of course, neither of us knew that lawyers were not really like Perry Mason.

Clay talked to a librarian, a woman with hair long enough to qualify her for Amish church membership on this basis alone, and explained my situation. They issued me a library card, but I knew I would not be able to use it. Since he was in his rumspringa, Clay had his own room, separate from anyone in his family, and they let him keep whatever he wanted in his room, so long as it is legal—such as library books. But I had no such privacy or privilege. I was lucky to have hidden the few books Betsy had brought to me. Still, that card made me feel a little bit stronger.

On the way back to our store, up Highway 76, Clay continued to follow 76 west instead of going north on Highway 48. He just looked at me and smiled. At another junction, he turned his truck onto Route 199—right there at our prairie corner, Gil—and continued west. We were only about ten miles off of our prescribed route, but I was already worrying about getting home.

I had heard about Fort Washita when we studied history. It was a fort that the U.S. Army built to protect the immigrant Chickasaws from the native Comanches in the 1830s.

"We don't have much time," he said as he led me right over to the skeletal hulk of what had once been a two-story building. When we got there, he told me to look closely at the building blocks. I had to look at them a couple of minutes before I realized that the reddish-yellow limestone was crammed full of pale whitish seashell fossils. I looked around. Every building block was the same. There must have been millions of fossils in the ruins of Fort Washita.

"They are all the same kind of fossil," he told me.

"But some are big, some are small…"

"But they are all the same species," he repeated. "A hundred and ten million years old, from the Cretaceous period. Oklahoma was, at that time, a shallow sea."

We drove back on Highway 78, and Clay pulled over to the side of the road, near tumbled-down brick walls of a long-vanished house. We walked over to a little patch of soapberry trees. Underneath the trees was some of the same reddish limestone, crammed with seashells, from which the fort had been constructed. Of course, I could not take a chunk of the fort home with me, but this rock was free for the taking. I slipped a little piece of it into my apron pocket.

Soon we were back on Highway 48, heading into Wapanucka. We got as far as the English school when Clay pulled the truck over next to the school's low brick wall. He got out of the truck. I did also and followed him as he walked back south on the highway. There was a fair amount of traffic, and we had to walk back in the weeds and mud to be safe. Then he stopped.

"There," he said. "See that little cliff?" The tan-colored layers of stone were nearly hidden underneath scrubby elm trees.

"Yes," I answered.

"Those layers, someone told me, are four hundred and ten million years old. From the Ordovician period. Oklahoma was, at that time also, a shallow sea. And that's why we have crinoid fossils here. Well, go find some."

I picked up a rock. Like the cliff stones, it was tan-colored, but it was studded with what appeared to be white rocks. But they weren't rocks. They were fossils. They were white rings, like something you might string into a necklace, and they were all lined up, like vertebrae of a fish. They reminded me of the little soft bones inside a can of salmon.

"Fish bones?" I asked.

"No, this was from a time before there were any bony fishes," Clay said. "They hadn't evolved yet. These are crinoids. That's sort of like a starfish on a stalk. These rings are from the stalk."

When I heard the word *evolved,* I felt some tingling in parts of my body that had nothing to do, I thought, with understanding science. I picked up another, similar fossil rock, and put both of the rocks in the pocket of my apron along with the red limestone.

Clay didn't tell me what to think about the fossils at Fort Washita or at Wapanucka. I didn't show them to anyone, but kept them in a little box under my bed. Then one day, as my sixteenth birthday approached, I decided I wanted to make myself a necklace out of crinoid rings. I got a nail and started scratching free the crinoid pieces from one of my rocks. When Mom asked me what I was doing, I said I was making a necklace to wear after I was sixteen.

"What are them things?" she asked.

"Crinoids," I said, explaining what they were.

"Where'd you get that rock?"

"Along the road just south of Wappy."

That would have been the end of that had I not said, "They are four hundred and ten million years old."

"They are no such thing," Mom said. "They got buried by the Flood."

One day, at closing time, Bishop Eash stopped in at the store. He was big, strong, and old. His hand totally engulfed mine as she shook it. I could feel the deliberate gentleness that hid the strength of that hand. He had never shaken my hand before. I had never been important enough for a direct handshake.

"So," he began, "your mother tells me that you are making a necklace."

"It's for after my sixteenth birthday," I said.

"So it is," he answered. "Your mother says you are making it out of what looks like little fish bones."

"Not really fish bones. They are crinoid stalks. Crinoids are like starfish on stalks." Now I knew what his visit was about. It was not about the worldliness of wearing a necklace. It was about fossils.

"Starfish?" asked Bishop Eash. "I didn't know we had any of those around here."

"They're fossils," I said.

"Ah," he said. "From the Flood." One thing about Bishop Eash is that he didn't waste time. His pleasantries were always efficient.

"I suppose you could say that," I said.

"But can *you* say that?"

Mom was busying herself with rearranging things on shelves and pretending to not listen. She had just put out a new shipment of brim hats. The brims were small. Only ministers and bishops got to wear wide brims, special order.

"I cannot claim to know," I said, sliding like a fish back into the water weeds.

"Where else could they have come from?"

"Maybe I will understand someday."

Bishop Eash was clever but he was also chicken-hungry and it was almost dinner time, so he took a short cut in his discussion with me. "Your mother tells me that you said they were some ungodly number of years old. Millions."

"So I have heard."

"From whom?"

Not wanting to involve Clay, I said, almost truthfully, "I read it in a book."

"There is only one book with the truth in it," he said predictably.

Against my better judgment, I decided to explain myself. "I don't believe everything I read in books. But I can see evidence for myself."

"Well, that sounds interesting." Bishop Eash maintained his pleasant voice. "Suppose you explain that one to me."

"Well, the rocks over by Fort Washita are full of seashells. But the rocks near Wappy are full of crinoids. There aren't any rocks with them mixed together. And those dinosaur bones they found over by Antlers? And those dinosaur footprints down in Texas? You never find any of them mixed together the way they would be in a great big Flood." I started to warm up. "The rocks with the dinosaur bones have no human bones with them. The rocks with the human bones have no dinosaur bones with them. The very oldest rocks don't have any big fossils at all. If these fossils were all the products of a big Flood, why don't you find the fossils mixed up together?"

"Well," said the bishop, "maybe the seashells were in one place, and the—what did you call them? Crinoids?—were in another, and the dinosaurs were someplace else, and the people…"

"I don't mean just once in a while," I persisted. "I mean all the time. You never find them mixed together. At the end of the book…"

"Which book?"

"…the author quoted some British scientist. Someone asked him what it would take to shake his belief in the long ages of the Earth as seen in the layers of rocks. He said, find me a Cambrian bunny."

"A *what* bunny?"

"Cambrian, that's the very oldest rocks with fossils in them. They have seashell fossils in them, but no mammals. In a big Flood, with the water swirling all around…" I interrupted my own sentence. "Remember that sermon you gave about the Flood? You talked about how the Flood waters were swirling as high as mountains, while Noah and his family and all the animals…" I interrupted my interruption. "Including two of every kind of insect? There are three hundred and fifty thousand species of beetles! But inside the ark, Noah and all his fellow creatures were in a little world of peace and calm. You remember that sermon?" Of course he did, and I didn't want him to have to tell me, so I

rushed on. “You’d expect that, under those conditions, at least a *few* mammals would have gotten mixed up with the Cambrian fossils. Maybe just one little bunny. That’s all it would take, just one. *Just one* Cambrian bunny. And even that atheist British scientist would have given up his belief in evolution.” I gasped, amazed at what I had just said, not even sure if I could remember it.

“So, a Cambrian bunny. Hmm. That is the condition that those atheist scientists put on God?”

“They aren’t all atheists. Just this one. His name was Haldane, I think.”

“So if God doesn’t deliver, for Dr. Haldane’s personal inspection, a Cambrian bunny, then this fine Dr. Haldane considers himself free to reject God.”

My Mom heard this part. Her eyes got really big. She had not expected a discussion about bunnies.

“The fossil deposits just don’t look like they were produced by a big Flood,” I concluded.

“And you don’t believe God could have, shall we say, scooched the crinoids over here, and scooched the seashells over there, and scooched the bunnies up somewheres else? During the Flood. So they ended up in different mud layers.”

And now came the bravest thing I had ever done: to challenge the ecclesiastical authority of a bishop of the church. “But why would God have done that? To scooch the fossils around in such a way as to make it look like evolution had happened?” When I said *evolution,* I felt like I was tossing a swig of whiskey right in his face. “The Bible says nothing about God scooching any fossils around. You just made that up. *You can’t just go around making up scripture, Bishop Eash, you can’t do that! You aren’t God!”*

I had just, in a roundabout way, accused a bishop of blasphemy. Us Anabaptists used to get burned at the stake for saying things like that to the Catholic priests.

“God’s word says that there was a Flood in the days of Noah, and it covered the whole Earth.” He gave up on reasoning with me.

“Maybe when God said the whole Earth it was just His way of using a figure of speech,” I mumbled.

“God always speaks literal truth,” said the bishop. “God does not lie.”

“You sometimes tell stories during your sermons,” I said. “Does that make you a liar? No,” I answered my own question. “You say those things to make a point, not to lie.”

“But God does not do that,” he repeated.

“You mean, you will not permit God to do that,” I said, now totally scared.

“You cannot find any passages in the Bible that are clearly meant as just figures of speech,” the bishop said.

I would have said, *Yes I can, and I will find them.* This would have meant that I would study the Bible. This would, you might think, have delighted the old man. But remember that in the Amish church individual Bible study is not encouraged. We only

studied the Bible in groups. It didn't help that our Bibles are in High German, which almost none of us can speak. I could have gotten hold of an English Bible. There are some English churches, including one just down the road near Durant, that insist the King James translation of 1611 is the real Bible, the one God really wrote, rather than even the original documents from the first century! But the King James Version would not have carried any weight with Bishop Eash. Only the High German Anabaptist Bible. So I was stuck. The Bishop was right. I could not find any such examples in the German Bible, which I could not read. I was not even really permitted to look for them on my own.

"Perhaps we can continue this conversation later," the bishop said, cordial again.

I thought but did not say, *You have exactly 218 days, 7 hours, and 28 minutes before I turn sixteen and I can simply refuse to talk to you.*

Chapter 11

When those 218 days were up, I went to work at the store as usual. Nobody said anything about my birthday. But when Mom and I got home, our yard was full of Amish youth, girls in plain dresses, aprons, and bonnets, and boys in denim jeans that buttoned and in white shirts without collars. Collars and zippers were considered vain in our church. Some other Amish church might feel differently. They had their own rules of *ordnung.* Dad had already put up the volleyball net and the kids had already started playing. Dad was mostly retired, being almost unable to get around. The doctor (yes, we go to English doctors) said it was a heart condition and that he just had to rest, unless he wanted an expensive and risky surgical procedure. He smiled from his lawn chair. The sight of happy Amish youth made his heart restful.

Mom and I approached Dad.

"Barbecue time," said Mom.

"Not for me, at least not much," said Dad. "Them arteries."

"And we're having a gospel sing after supper," added Mom.

Happy birthday, Sophia.

I did enjoy it. Really, I did. The only bad part about the volleyball game is that us girls had to wear leggings even underneath our full-length dresses, no matter how hot it was. The food was good. Our church does pretty good barbecue. We aren't so good at fried catfish; all of our buggies converge on that little store in Coleman on fish fry nights. But we can do barbecue, so long as it doesn't have much hot pepper in it. And every kind of sticky, fluffy conglomeration of flour and high fructose corn syrup you can imagine. We sang songs whose German words we did not understand. Nice tunes, though. About nine o'clock, everyone started going home.

When everyone was gone, the neighbor women were cleaning up the dishes, the neighbor men were folding up the metal chairs, and Dad was rolling up the volleyball net, Mom took me into the spare bedroom to show me my birthday present. It was an old Singer sewing machine, on a big wooden frame, complete with a treadle and with a wooden cap to put over the metal parts. Sounds just like what you would expect in an Amish household. But there were some wires coming out of it. Puzzled, I looked more closely. The old machine had been fitted with an electric motor. It even had an electronic sensor that would detect if a finger got too close to the needle and immediately stop the bobbing action of the needle. Our Amish homes, at least here in Oklahoma, have electricity, but it comes from electric generators. We are not connected to the electric grid, since the Bible tells us to not be *yoked* to unbelievers. We sure as hell didn't want any heathen electrons infiltrating themselves into our houses. Sorry about that little outburst. I could go back and delete it, but I think I'll let it stay. But one wire went outside the window. Mom smiled and followed my eyes.

"That wire goes to a solar collector," she said. "For sunny days. It uses house current the rest of the time."

I felt really good right then. Not that I wanted to spend a lifetime sewing, but it was just so clever to integrate the best of old time and modern technology. I profusely thanked Mom. She told me to thank my Dad, since he had wired it all together.

*

But there was nothing my parents could do about what happened a couple of nights later, a Friday night. The local rumspringa boys knew where I lived. At nightfall, they drove up in a truck and waited for me. I took a bag with me and started quietly down the stairs. Mom and Dad watched me, with worried looks.

I hopped in the back of the truck and sat on the bed. "Hi, Velma," I said to a girl just slightly older than myself and, like me, wearing Amish garb. Three guys sat in the cab. Through an open panel window in the back of the cab, a male voice called, "You girls ready?" It was Clay.

"Yeehaw!" called out Velma.

"I mean the new little girl," said Clay.

"Um, I guess," I said.

"That's the spirit!" said Clay, who slipped the truck out onto the dirt road. Then he floored the gas pedal and we sent plumes of dust up into the clear night sky. He went even faster on Highway 48. That was the spirit, all right. It was illegal for us to be in the back of the truck without seat belts. And Clay was driving way too fast.

We stopped at a convenience store. The guys bought Slim Jims, beer nuts, beer, and cigarettes while Velma and I slipped into the women's bathroom to change out of our Amish garb and into jeans and T-shirts we had brought in our bags. We knew exactly what we were doing. That is why we did not wear brassieres when we emerged from the bathroom. Velma was a little more voluptuous than I, and she tugged her shirt down so that her nipples were clearly visible. I did also, not quite as spectacularly as she.

"Get rid of those glasses," Velma told me. "You look like a…" I kept them on.

I found myself beside the cashier. His name was Michael but he went by his middle name, Dewey. Everybody knew he was a homosexual. We had no problems with homosexuality in the Amish church, because it simply did not exist. When Dewey gave change, the guys touched it as little as possible before they slipped it back into their trousers.

"Hi, Dewey," I said to him. I was the only Amish person who ever talked to him.

"Hi, Sophia," he answered, with glittering eyes. He knew a rumspringa party when he saw one, and he knew exactly what he was doing when he neglected to card the guys who bought beer and cigarettes. *You must have been born before this date to purchase tobacco products,* the sign said. "I was hoping that I'd never see you going to

one of these. I know I shouldn't say this, since we make money off of it, but those cigarettes will kill you. And that alcohol…"

Here was a hell-bound faggot fearing for the moral virtues of an Amish girl. But, of course, I was not at all convinced that he was damned. Or that anybody was damned. You see, Bishop Eash's criticisms were two-edged. If his interpretation of the Flood was wrong, so perhaps also was his interpretation of the depravity of homosexuals.

"Trust me," I told him. "I'm not stupid."

"I do," he said, smiling a little. "Sophia, forgive me for saying this, but I wish it were possible for us to be friends." I knew he meant that he wished I was male and more than a friend. And by talking with Dewey, I was doing just about the only thing that was morally off-limits to a truckload of rumspringa kids.

When we got to the dance ring, which was just a pasture lit by a dozen kerosene lamps, we were greeted by Stacey, a charming-faced guy with a half dozen cigarettes in his mouth. He couldn't talk, so he just made goofy animal noises as he handed a lit cigarette to Velma, and another one to me. He gave Velma a little hip bump. He stopped with an inquiring look in his eye. I nodded and he bumped me too. Front to front.

Pickups and old cars disgorged Amish youths in redneck clothes, and soon loud music was blaring. I didn't know what the music was. This was where I would learn, I supposed. All I knew is that it was not the music Dad had enjoyed when he briefly listened to the phonograph of a friend many decades ago during his rumspringa. Whatever the music was, it simply could not be Riley Puckett and the Skillet Lickers. I'm not making that up. This music sounded like an angry black man. Somebody tried to put a PBR in my hand, but I said I wanted to start with just a Coke.

"Pepsi OK? That's all they sell at the C store."

"Yeah," I answered.

I finally tried the cigarette. Everyone was watching me, and they got the entertainment that they awaited. They watched me gag, double over coughing, and spill my Pepsi.

"Then you probably don't want one of these quite yet," said Roger, an English kid who hung around with us a lot. He had a reefer.

I stood off to the edge of the circle of light. Casey and Velma were well known among us as the hardest partiers. When a new song started, all eyes were on them as they swiveled their hips, with their arms above their heads. Casey was shirtless and I already told you about Velma. During the last verse, they rubbed up against one another, front to front, as the rest of us sang out, Woo!

A guy I did not recognize approached me as I was wiping the Pepsi off of my jeans with a little napkin.

"Hey," he said.

"Do I know you?" I responded.

"You will," he said. "Hey, don't mess around with bullshit stuff. I got the good stuff."

Right then Clay approached us. "Hey, Jodie," he said to the guy.

"Name's Joe," came the answer.

"Hey, Jodie. Sophia here's new to this scene, so you might consider staying away from her until, maybe later, she is wise enough to know whether she wants what you got. Or not."

"You speakin' for her?"

"You sure as hell aren't," said Clay.

I'd hardly been here five minutes and I was already being rescued by a knight in shining armor. I liked it. I crushed out the cigarette with my ill-fitting borrowed tennis shoe and smiled up at him.

Clay took the cue. He said to "Jodie," "She'll let you know if she wants anything from you. Meanwhile, you know what you can do."

When Jodie left, Clay turned to me. "He's selling drugs," he told me.

"Which ones?"

"You don't know one from another, so it doesn't matter. You know what addiction is?"

"Sure. I read about it in a book about the human body."

"The human body? Was it one of those books in the Amish school with the sex chapters torn out?"

"No. Betsy let me borrow it. It had sex in it, all right. All the organ systems were drawn against photos of nude models. With their backs turned or with the front in darkness, of course."

"So you know that if you get addicted to something, you're not really free to choose to not use it. God, this is rumspringa, girl, and you need freedom, not addiction."

Somehow hearing Clay say *God* and *hell* was really alluring. He used the Lord's name in vain, although not in connection with an expletive. Little Amish girls think expletives are so funny that we told little stories with regular English words in them that could be miscon-screwed as naughty words, such as the three merchants who went to Amster-damdamdam. But Clay's language, just barely over the border of proper speech, made me feel like he was even more of a knight in shining armor: he was the noble black knight on the chessboard where the good and the evil armies looked exactly the same. I could hear somebody else, it might have been Roger, using "fucking" as an all-purpose descriptor. Clay was somebody whom I already knew had a respect for language and the knowledge that it purveyed and would not use any word in a meaningless fashion.

"What's that in your hand?" I asked.

He held up a bottle. "It's a Guinness Stout. A beer."

"Where did you get it?" I thought there was a cooler of it somewhere at the party.

"It's the only one here, so if you want some, you have to drink it from this bottle."

I took a sip. Then another. It was powerful stuff. I don't mean the alcohol, though it must have had more than the PBRs everyone else was drinking. But it had an irresistible bitterness to it, like a whole swamp full of sinful plants. Only then did I realize my lips had touched the bottle rim that his had touched.

"Whoa, that's enough," Clay said. "I said it was the only one here. Gotta share."

"Where did you get it? I didn't see any at the C store."

"Roger's Dad likes it, and keeps a lot of it around. Expensive stuff. If you want to drink a six pack, this stuff is not what you want. Too expensive and too powerful. Roger hates it, but he slips some away from his Dad's stockpile sometimes for me. His Dad doesn't count too well. I 'preciate it when Roger does this for me. He could get in trouble for it. See, he's English, and his Dad wouldn't take rumspringa as an excuse."

"Well," I said, "if he gets in trouble, he knows where he can find a good lawyer."

"You remember what I said about law school!" Clay exclaimed.

I started to say, *Of course I remember!* But I said, "Sure."

"Having fun?" he asked me. "You're supposed to be."

I laughed pretty loud. Everyone else was, I felt, pretending to have a good time, but my laughter was the only human sound that ran free as the wind. "God no," I said.

Clay motioned for me to follow him. We sat on a bale of hay off in the near-darkness away from the circle of noise.

"I don't want to be here," he told me.

"Well," I said, "it's better than a gospel sing. Well, I take that back. I just got here, so I'm not sure. At any rate, it's different. So, if you don't want to be here, what *the hell* are you here for?"

"The others expect me to chip in from my wages to help with the beer. And I have a truck too. But I sort of resent having to spend my money on this shit." Ooh! "I'm saving up."

"You mean, you're really going to do it? College?"

"Damn right, Sophia. Now, look. This little party here. This is supposed to give you a taste of the world outside Amish culture. But that is a real crock. The kids here, and the adults, want you to think that your only choice is between cigarettes and whiskey and wild sex on the one hand…"

"Wild, did you say, wild sex?"

"Don't tell me you don't know what goes on at these parties."

"Okay, I won't."

"Oh, Sophie, you crack me up. Okay. They want you to think your only choice is between cigarettes and whiskey, both of which will have you throwing up before midnight, on the one hand, and an Amish life on the other. This party right here is not where you need to be. If you want to have a fair choice between the Amish life and an alternative, then, for you, it has to be college. You know perfectly well that your parents and mine are more scared of us going to college and learning about sex…"

"…and evolution…"

"…than about having these pitiful little drunken parties. Sophie, I got my G.E.D. It's easy. Smart as you are. You just take a test at the state social services agency. Pass the test, and they give you your high school diploma."

"Without going to high school?"

"Why not? All you're missing out on is football games and parties that are sort of like this one."

"But, how am I going to study for the test and then take it?"

"Sophie, you're sixteen now. I'll come pick you up and your parents can't say boo about it. And there's more."

"Go on."

"I got plans, and I want you to come with me. I'm going to move to Tulsa and go to the community college up there for my first two years. Soon as I save up enough money for a down payment on an apartment. I can still work for rent and tuition. And I can get help from the state on the tuition."

"Then law school?"

"Well, there's a few steps in between, most of them involving money. But I'm going to start anyhow. You in with me?"

"You mean, move to Tulsa with you?"

Clay whispered into my ear. "You don't like it, you can always go back to your parents' store. That's what rumspringa is all about."

"What would I study?"

"Sophie!" he exclaimed, then he resumed whispering. "Sophia, you're so damned smart, you can study anything you want!"

And Gil, you were not the first person to notice that my name means *wisdom* in Greek.

"Where would *I* live?"

"Sophie, you crack me up. You'd live with me."

"Oh, so that's where this is going."

"Sophia. We don't have to have sex if you don't want."

I thought about this and decided he meant it.

"Is that what you want?" he prompted me.

"I don't know," I answered.

Then he touched my breast. Of course, he could feel everything through the thin fabric. Just like you did, Gil. You can edit this last part out if you want.

"Do you want to have sex now?" he asked me.

"Did you bring protection?" I knew I was supposed to ask.

"Yes," Clay answered.

"You planned this."

"Look," he said, pulling away from me. "We don't have to, all right? You could go have sex with one of those other guys." I'll just jump ahead here and say that this is what Velma did, and this is why she had a hasty marriage arranged with Casey, who was noble enough to take on the responsibility for the baby, and they both joined church, about a year after that rumspringa night.

"Clay," I said, "I'd love to do something with you, I don't know what but something, but you have to realize everything is hitting me all at once. I can't trust my own judgment right now, especially with this…what's in that beer? But what I can say is this. You get that apartment in Tulsa, then come back and we can talk. Sounds like you're going to go up there, with or without me? Then let's keep in touch about this.

"God!" I said, standing up and looking into the sky. Was I calling on God? Maybe. "It would be such a joy, a liberation, to be able to just learn about whatever I want to know! Liberation! Freedom! I'll bet that word is in the Bible, only I don't know what it is in German so I can't find out unless I get an English Bible…But how could God, if He is the creator of all things, not want us to know stuff? If the Amish way is so good, let it stand up against whatever I might learn. Let it show itself to be superior. And if it is, we can go back."

"I think you already know what the answer is going to be," Clay said.

We sat, arm in arm, watching the antics of young Amish who thought they were experiencing freedom.

Clay kept looking at one of the kerosene lamps. "I like campfires better than lamps," he said. "But there's an open fire ban, so it's lamps. You ever look closely at a fire, Soph?"

"Define *closely,*" I said.

"Why am I not surprised that you said that. Okay. What color is a fire?"

"It's red, of course." I looked at the unchanging yellow-white of the lamp and thought about what a wood fire looks like. Then I said, "No, it isn't. A fire is red. And yellow and white and orange."

"And blue," added Clay.

"Blue?" I turned on him.

"Blue light is a hot flame. Once in a while there must be a bit of sap or something that burns hotter than the rest of the wood, and out comes a little blue tongue. Or purple. I've seen purple in fires sometimes."

"I've never noticed," I said, turning back away from his face. "But from now on I will." I wanted to add, *You have already changed me.*

"And a campfire tastes so much better than a light bulb or a kerosene lamp," said Clay.

"I sort of like the smell of smoke too," I said. "And kerosene doesn't smell that good."

"I don't mean the smoke. I mean the color."

I turned slowly to look at him in wonder. I did not yet know about synesthesia. “What did you say?”

“You can’t taste colors?” Clay asked. “Right. That’s the response I always get, which is why I stopped saying anything about it. People always think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t,” I told him.

“Bishop Eash told me to be careful, it might be a demon.”

“Please, tell me about it. About tasting colors.”

“Well, blue tastes really nice, a deep and rich flavor. Blue, like your eyes when I see them in the daytime at the store. Right now, they don’t taste really strong, since there isn’t much blue light from that lamp reflecting off of your irises. They look a little gray right now and taste kind of bland. Red tastes really sweet, like strawberries. But the yellowish color of lamps and light bulbs taste salty, like new sweat.” He stopped. I said nothing at first, as I marveled at what I had just learned. When I prompted him to continue, he said, “I can taste sounds too. Major chords—do you know what those are?—taste sweet, while minor chords taste salty. Major chords make me see purple. Minor chords make me see kind of a dirty green, like a rusted penny. Not the kind of green like a leaf. Dissonances—those are notes that clash with each other—taste like you got a bite of something that has been in the back of the icebox too long. A lot of that tonight. How can they stand this music? It sounds like screaming.”

“You’re talking like an old man.”

“I’m just telling it the way I experience it.”

We spent the rest of the night with our arms around one another’s shoulders and breathing the scent of one another’s scalps.

Chapter 12

It was hardly two days later when Clay came by the store to tell me that he had an apartment and a job. My Mom was not shocked, for I had told her everything. I don't know how much she had told Dad.

I was in the store, but had not been working much. I had spent nearly all my time carefully scraping away the matrix and removing crinoid rings from one of the rocks, and then drilling holes in them, using different sizes of screwdrivers that I just took off of the store shelf. By the time Clay came for me, my few possessions were packed, and a string of fossils hung around my neck. I pulled off my bonnet and slung my hair free. I was now free to cut it, but had no plans to do so. That night at the party when Clay and I did not have sex, he had pulled my hairpins loose and inhaled every handful of hair and told me how much he loved it. I looked defiantly at my mother, but I did not throw the bonnet aside. I slipped it, and the hairpins, into my little bag.

Clay had wanted us to live in the tall round apartment building at Twenty-first and Riverside, the one that looked like it was copied from the old Capitol Records building in Los Angeles. But it cost too much. It turns out we qualified for government rent assistance at an apartment complex right next to Oral Roberts University in South Tulsa. We were so close to the Cancer Tower that it could have fallen over on us. It is called the Cancer Tower because Oral Roberts, a television preacher, claimed that a nine hundred foot tall Jesus appeared in the sky and told him to build three big towers and use them for a hospital, and if so, God would reveal to him the cure for cancer. He even claimed, in so many words, that God would kill him if his followers did not provide the money to build the towers. His brainwashed (I use this term after careful consideration) followers coughed up the money and built the tower. And woopsie, there was no cure for cancer forthcoming. But the buildings were still there. From where we lived, we could see the flame at the top of the Prayer Tower at the university, where the spirit of Oral Roberts was kept alive in every heart even in his absence (he had retired to southern California).

On the way to the apartment office, Clay stopped at a drug store to let me choose a little bottle of perfume. I chose a tiny bottle of Happy. We had to live frugally, so this was to be our only luxury; he volunteered to forego luxury himself except for an occasional bottle of Guinness, which you could buy anywhere in Tulsa and which we shared.

When we got to the apartment office, Clay identified himself and indicated that I would be a co-occupant. There was no legal requirement for proving or even pretending that we were married. This gave me a tingling feeling. I guess just about everything did right about that time.

"You got a job?" the secretary demanded.

Clay handed her a piece of paper that verified his employment. Delivery truck driver, not much, but it was employment.

The secretary's supervisor, an old young woman with a coiffure, came stamping through and gave Clay and me a contemptuous look.

"You better call the employer, if the phone number's even real," she said to the secretary. "You know these white trash. Oh, and does the girl have a job?"

"She is not required to," said Clay. "Just one tenant needs to prove employment."

"White trash," huffed the supervisor, who walked out the door.

When she was gone, the secretary said, "If it's any comfort, she's even ruder to the blacks and Mexicans and Burmese."

"Burmese?" I asked.

"Immigrants from Myanmar. The army of the dictatorship keeps attacking their little tribe—the Zomi tribe, I think it is, in the northwest corner of Myanmar. The lucky ones make it to America. They depend almost completely on federal help. You two, not quite as much." Then she snickered a little. "One time, a couple of poor American Indians came in here. They were speaking their tribal language with each other. Ms. Reed, she told them, *This is America. If you want to talk Mexican you go back to Mexico.* The man told her, *We were speaking Cherokee. If you want to speak English, you can go back to England.*" Now the secretary was laughing. "Well, wasn't much Ms. Reed could say to *that.* Law requires her to offer an apartment to people who meet the qualifications. She just huffed and left. You two have a strange accent. Where are you from?"

I had never thought about it, but our continual use of Low German at home, and High German in church, gives our English kind of a strange sound, as I am sure you have noticed, Gil. "We speak a German dialect," he said.

"You're from Germany? Well, welcome to America."

"Actually, we were born in Oklahoma. We're Amish."

We enjoyed watching the secretary's temporary confusion followed by laughter. She said, "As I said, welcome to America." I could tell it would be nice to have a friend in the apartment office. She called Clay's employer, as she was ordered, and then gave us the final contract to sign.

"What's this?" asked Clay. "Seven hundred dollars a month for a studio apartment?"

"You only pay two-fifty. Uncle Sam pays the rest."

When we left, Clay said, "That doesn't sound right. Sounds like they're cheating the government. Seven hundred dollars my ass." I was starting to get used to Clay's careful and intelligent use of expletives. "And I'll bet with that bitch running the place—the supervisor, not the secretary—there are some tenant complaints that don't get acted on. She can just pretend to not understand a Zomi accent or something. Maybe someday, when I'm a lawyer, I can help out people like them."

Our furniture was a futon on the floor—no frame, just the futon—and some beanbags from the nearby Wal-Mart. That's where we got cheap food, also. There and a little Asian grocery store across the street from our apartment. Clay's parents had loaned him some money, which he saved in a bank account except for getting us a small non-Amish wardrobe.

The night we got the futon and some sheets, Clay and I lay together arm in arm. Each step of the way, he asked me if I was comfortable with it. The first time is painful for us women. Clay tried to be gentle. I suppressed some of my whimpering, because I knew he had needs too. I knew it was not his first time, but I knew it had been a while and that he would be faithful to me. He told me how much he loved every little part of me that I had not even realized I had. He grasped my skull with his fingers, kissed my cranium, and said that this was the best part. Gil, you can leave this part out too if you are uncomfortable with it. When I first showed up at your house, I sort of made Clay sound like a bad man, but he never was. Especially not that night. Later, as you will read, we had our severe differences. But I still do not think he is a bad man.

Clay dropped me off at a library across town, one that was on his way to work over on Garnett. I got a computer terminal for two hours at a time, where I read everything about the G.E.D. The librarian who helped me was so friendly and patient with me. She had long dark hair and a nice smile. Lots of dimples. I was a little intolerant of the computer, which was a new experience for me. The librarian told me that some people think there are gremlins in the computer. Gremlins, apparently, are imaginary little spirits that like to play pranks. I made sure to thank her and to tell her supervisor also. As I left one day, the librarian was dealing with a woman who thought her computer was filled with satanic demons, quite unlike the gremlins.

Then one day Clay dropped me off at the state education agency and I passed my G.E.D. test. All that study, and then those little crappy questions that I could have answered even without studying so much. Before long I had enrolled for the fall at the community college, and had loans and grants lined up. I was underage, but they let me in anyway. By now it was late spring, and Clay and I had the summer ahead of us before beginning our studies. It was a chance for us to work overtime so that we could cut back on our hours after the fall semester began.

There was a Wal-Mart within walking distance of our apartment so that is where I got a job. It was not a convenient walk. I had to wait for traffic to pass then walk across a little bridge in the middle of a traffic lane. And there was no sidewalk, which meant I had to frequently walk in mud, until later in the summer when the dry weather began. The pay was not very much. I have to admit that I was rather surprised, at the job interview, to hear food stamps and Medicare described as job benefits. They worked me thirty-nine hours a week, so that I did not have legal privileges of a full-time employee. They said it was because I was under age. After a while, I began to wonder how anyone could live on

such an income, much less save up for college, even community college. Thank God for those scholarships.

Since I knew I was not going to derive any joy from my paycheck, I decided I would use my job as a chance to study humankind. My supervisor started me off with restocking and inventory. Someday this will all be done on hand-held computers, but we still had to keep paper records, and then enter them onto databases. Every night, coming home from work, I told Clay about the totally astonishing things that people thought they needed to buy. Whole counters full of flashing computerized plastic toys for kids. Hundreds of VHS tapes of movies many of which are violent or charged with sex. And not the gentle kind of sex that Clay and I had begun to experiment with. T-shirts with stupid slogans on them. Underwear that is meant to enhance the sexuality of women's bodies for lovers who should not need stimulation. Clay certainly did not. As I worked on the shelves, I would watch kids pick things up, throw them around, damage them, then put them back. And I watched adults do the same thing. Plastic packages torn open and spilled on the floor. Of course some of the items seemed perfectly sensible to me, since the Amish use them too. The candy aisle had hundreds of kinds of sweets, but Amish eat lots of sugar too. And the nutritional supplements section had all kinds of strange herbal medicines. But we use those too. Dad made horehound salve and sold it in the store. He claimed it would cure anything. We had a whole tradition of Amish *brauchers,* or herbal healers. But for the most part, the Wal-Mart inventory consisted of thousands of items any one of which might warrant a visit from Bishop Eash with an admonition that it was too worldly. And since I was often sitting down to restock lower shelves, I would see butts when I glanced up. It was usually not such a pretty sight. There is no shortage of fat Amish butts, but they are always concealed. And I know some people can't help being fat, but the people I saw in Wal-Mart made no effort to control or conceal anything. In the aisles of Wal-Mart, buttflesh often spills forth from ill-fitting shorts, zits and splotches and varicose veins and all. Yet somehow the photo studio, out past the cash registers, could always make fat parents with fat children and fat scowls look cheerful and pretty.

Then they put me on the cash register. That's when I got to see what people actually bought rather than just looked at. I flinched at first when I had to scan the barcodes for family planning items, something strongly rejected by the Amish church, until I saw the people who bought them, and decided that having one or two million fewer of their sperm on the march would not be such a bad thing. It was exhausting to have a long line of impatient customers at checkout waiting for someone who was clueless about how to find the money to pay—a credit card that was not overlimit, or even how to count change. And frequently they would challenge me, saying that I had double-charged some item, that I was cheating them. Me? I didn't make any money off of cheating them. We would have to check over the entire receipt before the customer would give up.

I especially dreaded the days at the customer service desk. People would bring back items they claimed did not work, such as lamps with defective switches. I always believed them, for I had been instructed many times to take returned items and put them back on the shelf. Even a defective item would eventually be sold to someone too lazy or too cynical to return it. I don't know if all Wal-Marts do this, or if this one still does, but it did when I worked there. But they also brought back items they had obviously ruined themselves. My favorite example is the woman who brought back a white T-shirt she claimed did not fit, and who conveniently did not have her receipt. There were little amber circles under the arms of the shirt.

At least I did not have to deal with shoplifters. The greeters did this. And all they had to do was to press a little button. Within seconds, security personnel would grab the shoplifter or, in a few cases, an innocent person suspected of being a shoplifter. I had heard from other apartment residents that if you called the police it might take an hour for the police to respond to, say, an incident of domestic violence; but if you shoplift from Wal-Mart, three police cars will swoop down on you within minutes with their lights flashing.

The summer wore on. It was hot enough that I was glad to work in an air-conditioned building even if it was a Temple of Worldliness. Clay sweated a lot from delivering appliances in the blistering heat. When his shirts developed little amber circles, I offered to take them back to Wal-Mart and exchange them.

And I started thinking about the classes I was going to take in the fall. Many students are resentful of having to take these classes, but to me they were part of my liberation. Literature! Computers! Math, not just the arithmetic of running a store. Biology! All of biology sounded interesting to me, not just the parts about sex and evolution, but even the stuff about how cells work. I frequently looked very closely at the skin on my arms and imagined the microscopic cells.

Chapter 13

Then one morning in late summer, everything started to change. It was a Sunday morning, on which neither Clay nor I had to work (a rare enough situation). A storm had blown through, and behind it was clear and cool sunshine, though the wind remained fierce. We decided to take a walk down by the river a few blocks to the west. The city maintained a sidewalk along the river bank. To get there, we had to cross under the bridge that carries Riverside Drive over Joe Creek, which was a big concrete drainage ditch. We started down the cement stairs. We could tell there was a man on the sidewalk under the bridge, but took no notice of him until we got to the bottom of the stairs. He was one of the mentally unstable homeless people we had heard about. His dirty hair was thick and continuous with his beard. His clothes were greasy. He had his pants down and was squatting on the sidewalk. Clay immediately turned me around and nudged me back up the stairs, which we took two at a time.

To get out to the river without going under the bridge, we had to cross Riverside. The six lanes of traffic seemed almost uninterrupted, and the cars and fuming trucks were moving at full speed. The speed limit was fifty, which means sixty. We finally saw an opening in the traffic, and we started to walk quickly across. Right then an old car with a grinding engine pulled off of a side street and headed toward us. I am certain that when he saw us he speeded up, gunning the engine. Clay and I had to run as fast as we could to get to the curb and jump over the guard rail.

The sidewalk along the river was for both pedestrians and bicyclists. We were not the only pedestrians, but we seemed to be the only ones who were not striding briskly in spandex and wearing headphones. Fast bicyclists wove in and out of the pedestrians. Clay and I had to be very careful to not make any movements that the cyclists might not expect. We watched the trees and birds to help us forget the humanity that we saw around us. We watched mockingbirds jumping around and singing on the tops of the light poles. Clay saw an oriole slipping from one elm tree to another. A hawk looked for mice in the weedy fields.

We sat in the shade of a cedar tree growing on the weedy river bank. The tree hid us from the river, the stream of cars, and the people. We sat, now totally accustomed to having our bodies touch, on a big broken piece of concrete that had been hauled in long ago for river bank stabilization. We watched big ants busily dragging paralyzed beetles down into their big mound. We both thought about how life in the city was as busy, mindless, and merciless as an anthill.

Clay spoke what we were both thinking. “It’s not supposed to be like this,” he said.

“We can put up with it a while longer, until we start school,” I said.

“Can we?”

"Of course we can. It's only about three more weeks."

"I mean, can we start school? We're being as frugal as we can, living almost like Amish. Well, actually not as good. Here we are, paying for things that would be free from our neighbors and families. And we haven't saved up very much money, even with overtime." Clay got overtime for weekend deliveries, but there was no overtime for a part-time employee at a 24-hour Wal-Mart. We had indeed lived frugally. My co-workers would splurge by having the Vietnamese women in the nail parlor next to the photo studio do their nails, while my nail care was limited to biting off stray cuticles with my teeth. We got help on our rent, and help on our tuition, from the government, but we would still have the same living expenses when classes started in August as we did in July, but could not work as many hours.

Then Clay added, "Is this what life outside the *ordnung* is supposed to be like?" I knew he was referring to the litter from consumer materialism that blew in the wind all around us, Styrofoam cups and plastic bottles and used cigarette lighters, and to what was under the bridge. "We dreamed of, you know, *intellectual* freedom, but I'm wondering how we are going to get there."

"We'll get there," I said with the last of my faith.

On the way back we carefully looked under the bridge. The homeless man was not on the sidewalk. We took tentative steps into the shadows. Sleeping bags and pillows and sacks of junk food were crammed between the concrete bridge struts. We could not see any men. We avoided stepping in the piles of waste on the sidewalk. The scarab beetles were already at work on the piles, to lay eggs before the summer winds would dry them out. Clay stopped right in the middle of the sidewalk. Bank swallows chirped and nestled in the spandrels and under the eaves, and the crescent support arch perfectly framed Clay's face as he looked deeply into my eyes. Surrounded by piles of shit, we kissed passionately and for several minutes. When we separated our faces, tears had mixed with sweat. Gil, leave this part in.

So we tried walking the other direction. We walked up Trenton Avenue to where the Joe Creek sidewalk went under Seventy-first Street. Gang graffiti was spray painted on every surface. And there was an astonishing amount of litter strewn on the concrete bed of the ditch. We stopped and began to look closely at the litter. There was an empty wicker basket, an empty backpack, torn-up stuffed animals, several shopping baskets, old computer manuals, children's clothes, and even a ledger book of expenses, complete with adding-machine tapes, and a notebook in which beauty salon appointments had been kept. I found a notebook in which a child had drawn pictures with colored pencils. It contained a little girl's non-Amish dreams of being a princess. There was some story here, but we would never know what it was. Were these things the belongings of a single mom made homeless by eviction? That would explain one of the shopping carts. Was it stuff that had been stolen from an apartment and then dumped? Was it from garbage bags that homeless people had torn open and then strewn all about?

When we got back to our apartment, we pulled one another's clothes off and threw them on the floor. We imagined them to be completely disgusting. We showered each other vigorously and then made love with totally clean consciences. It took hours to wash our clothes in the one washing machine that was working for the apartment building.

"Maybe God's trying to tell us something," said Clay.

"Clay, we've come this far," I said. I was also thinking about how far we had come in our relationship. If we went back home, we would certainly marry and settle down. I wasn't quite ready to choose this. "We can't turn back yet."

"Maybe we should have saved the money instead of getting those tickets," Clay said as we were piling our clothes into the one functional dryer.

"No!" I exclaimed. "Too late now anyway. No refunds or exchanges."

We had bought opera tickets. Tulsa had a really good opera company, but it was summer, and the Tulsa Opera was not performing. The opera we were going to was produced by a traveling troupe famous for pushing the limits of artistic interpretation. We had bought the tickets—in cash, at the Performing Arts ticket counter—two months in advance. It took us hours to get to the center, because the bus system was so complicated that you could get almost nowhere quickly.

We had heard that *Carmen* was the most popular opera in the history of music. Neither one of us knew anything about classical music. Clay had listened to plenty of rockabilly on his truck radio, but when we moved to Tulsa, where they had a public radio station, we listened to classical music on a cheap radio from Wal-Mart. It took some getting used to. But after a while we began understanding its beauty: the variety of tones of the instruments, the whole range of emotions from giddy joy to intense drama. We knew that opera was supposed to be not just great music, but great acting and colorful costumes and compelling stories. It had everything. We considered starting with the local Gilbert and Sullivan company, but we both knew that we might be able to afford only one opera, so we bought tickets to *Carmen.* The performance would be on the next Friday night. As we leaned against the metal rail talking, we decided that we would persevere in our work and our aspirations at least one more week.

*

Then, that week, as Clay described it, the shit hit the fan. I had never heard this phrase before, so it captured my imagination. I envisioned a whole parking lot full of people dripping with sewage.

When I arrived at Wal-Mart for work, police had surrounded the front doors. Sirens were blaring and lights flashing. I cynically assumed it was for a shoplifter. I approached the police, and heard one of them shouting through a megaphone, "Please

stay away from the store. Employees, go home for today." Without pay, I assumed. "There is a shooting incident currently underway."

Then I heard gunshots and screams. A door window shattered. It must have been a lone gunman who "went postal," to use an old phrase, since the first mass public shootings decades earlier were in post offices. I tried to imagine what it was like, people hiding in racks of clothes, the gunman ducking behind shelves. The only thing I could imagine was from the Old Testament, Joshua leading Israelite soldiers on a rampage and killing everyone, man, woman, and child, and even the animals, in a Canaanite city. A law enforcement helicopter circled overhead. Then I heard silence. Ambulances shot away with the bodies of the wounded, but one ambulance took its time with the dead body of a man I assumed was the gunman.

We heard later, on the news, that the gunman used an assault weapon and that no motive was known. Then we heard, on right-wing radio, that no amount of mass shootings would justify even the tiniest bit of control on the sale of assault weapons. Mentally unstable people have an unlimited right to buy and carry assault weapons, though not to shoot anyone with them, said the screaming voice on the radio. We assumed this meant that innocent shoppers—that is, guilty only of materialism—did not have the right to safety.

*

Then things started going wrong in our own lives.

I was the first one to get in trouble. I knew it was going to be a bad day when a police helicopter circled overhead around and around me. I knew I was not its target, but the danger must have been very close by, even though I could not see it.

When I went back to work, I was sent back to restocking, and a customer asked me where to find something. I had answered questions like this almost a thousand times (do the math; ninety days, at least ten times a day).

"What brand is it?" I asked.

"I don't remember," she said. It was a very personal item, one that was used for something that even a rumspringing Amish girl could not imagine anyone would want to do.

"Check in health and beauty aids," I said.

"I already did. They told me to check here in housewares."

"Well," I said, "all the personal items are in HBA." And then I said what I apparently should not have said. "Why would anyone want to buy that?" The customer took offense, and my supervisor was watching. I was called into the office of the floor manager.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't intend to offend the customer."

"Well, you did. Customers who feel offended, for whatever reason, can cause us a lot of trouble. They are inconvenient even when they are wrong."

"I'm sorry, sir, I will think ahead next time. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"You're just a girl yet. You'll learn as time goes on. That's not why I called you in here."

"Sir?"

"You seemed to be urging the customer to not buy something."

"Sir, you've got to admit that that item was pretty silly. I mean, what business do we have trying to sell things like that to people who don't have much money to start with and who should be saving up their money to get out of debt and why are you looking at me like that?"

"So what business do you think we are in? That's our whole business model, getting people to think they need things they don't, and to spend money right now rather than later. If they save their money up, they almost certainly won't spend it here."

Friday was to be my last day. Word had spread that I was being "let go," as if it were a liberation. What took me by surprise was that my fellow workers seemed to be avoiding me, as if they did not want the supervisor to see them with me. It felt almost like the first steps before *meidung,* shunning, in the Amish community. It took my breath away to think that one of the things I liked least about being Amish was something I was experiencing here on the outside. Another thing I was not expecting was that it would be difficult to get a good letter of recommendation for another job.

At first this did not seem to be much of a problem. One of the delivery men where Clay worked quit, and Clay could not lift some of the items he was delivering by himself. According to hiring rules, the delivery company could not discriminate on the basis of gender, and he made a tentative deal with his boss to have them hire me to run deliveries with him. Since I was not full time, my age was no problem. This was better luck than I could have imagined. So instead of waiting for Friday to roll around, I quit Wal-Mart on Wednesday. I almost felt like saying "Fuck this," only why would I want to use a word that denotes something as pleasurable as fucking to refer to leaving behind a disgusting job? The explanation, as I understand it, for why people use the word *fuck* as a curse is that cursing is not really speech. It originates from a different part of the brain and is unrelated to the meaning of the words. The words need only to be monosyllabic and have harsh consonants in them that sound like spitting and hissing. Maybe I would get to take a psychology class and learn about this!

By Thursday I was helping Clay deliver things. I enjoyed wearing a khaki uniform like his. Some of the items were heavy, but no heavier than things I lifted in my parents' store all the time. Clay and I kept brushing up against one another and stealing little kisses and caresses while we were inside the truck van. It was starting to feel like heaven.

And then Clay ran over a dog. It was a stupid dog. It yapped and yapped and ran out in front of the delivery truck. The owner should have had it leashed. Clay did his best, slamming on the brakes enough to cause boxes to slide in the van. But the owner, a woman who was pitifully stupid and certainly could not make full use of the large home entertainment system we had just delivered, was extremely angry and threatened to sue. Over and over again, each time more loudly, paying no attention to the poor twitching dog in its little pool of blood.

Even though it got us in even more trouble, I had to admire Clay as he talked to the customer. He offered to make a little Amish dog casket for the animal, take it on a funeral procession of black buggies, and give it a Christian burial in the pet cemetery over in Glenpool.

Clay's supervisor called us both in on Friday morning.

"Sir, I tried my best to not hit the dog, but it just threw itself under the wheels."

"You sure?"

"I'm extremely careful, sir."

Me: "He is. He was."

"Well, the customer threatened to sue, and had even called a lawyer."

"The customer doesn't have a prayer. Sir."

Me: "She doesn't."

"Of course not. But she can cause us a lot of trouble. We have to hire a lawyer, and that costs money. It's cheaper to just settle out of court. And we had to tell the customer that we were firing you."

"You're firing me?"

Me: "You're firing him?"

"That's what we told the customer."

"But, sir! I have rights too."

"That's why we're not actually firing you. We're just suspending you. We might call you back to work in a few weeks. But there's a lot of applicants for your job and there might not be room for us to take you back. Or we could reassign you to Oklahoma City."

"Sir. It would cost more money for us to commute than we would get from the work."

"Well, that's the offer, take it or leave it. Why not move there?"

"We're going to start college in a couple of weeks, sir."

"They have colleges in OKC. Think it over, Clay. Oh, they have dogs there too."

"Thanks, sir. I would not have known this if you hadn't told me."

That last remark pretty much made the decision for us.

There wasn't much else to do but to get ready to go to the opera that night. We had bought new, though not expensive, clothes. I wore my necklace of crinoid rings. We

had to decide whether to go ahead and eat out, something we had not yet done. *What the hell,* Clay said. *What the hell,* I agreed.

A little bit of smoke smell diffused into the non-smoking section at the pub where we ordered gourmet burgers and dark beer. It was extremely noisy.

"How is anybody supposed to enjoy the flavor of the food when the noise in here tastes so bad?" Clay asked.

"So," I said as I pushed jalapeno peppers around the big Portobello mushroom on my burger. "What do you taste when you look at a mushroom?"

"A mushroom, to me, tastes the way a choir of brass instruments sounds. They taste very brown, with just a hint of chocolate." Then he looked me in the eye. "So, do you want to think about maybe going back home?"

"Hell no," I said.

We sat in silence for a long time listening to the sounds of carousing all around us.

"They sound so happy," I said.

"Oh, Sophie. Think about it. They are probably having just as much shitty luck as we are. But they are just defiantly showing they are not going to let it get them down."

"You're probably right," I said. After more silence, "What would we do if we went back home?"

"You said we're not going, remember, Sophie?"

"I meant, just theoretically."

"Well, the elders would probably let me keep my truck and do deliveries for them. They recently voted in church that delivery trucks were acceptable in the *ordnung,* even though personal vehicles aren't. We couldn't use the truck to go anywhere just for ourselves, though."

"Except into town to the library," I said.

"The church wouldn't like that. They won't even let members read the Bible by themselves. Oh, but you know all about that."

"We could give it a try. Just theoretically. We could give it a try, and if they didn't like us reading books, we could just leave again."

"It wouldn't be quite so easy, Sophie. If we settled down and joined church, rumspringa would be over and we'd be subject to the *ordnung*."

"I assume we would get married."

"Yes, I assume so. Sophie, how long have we been in Tulsa? And all during that time, I've never laid eyes on another woman I thought I might want to get hitched to."

"We've only been in Tulsa a couple of months. But I agree. I haven't seen anyone else I might like better than you. Oh, and that includes back to home too. Besides, who else would want me? A mixed-up not quite not Amish girl."

"Sophia, don't talk like that. You are a treasure. A good wife is worth more than jewels, it says at the end of Proverbs, which I'm not supposed to be reading in English." We had been reading an English Bible at night sometimes. Parts of it were scary, parts confusing, but parts were really sublime. The best part was the Song of Solomon, which Clay and I used as a sort of sex manual, a Christian's *Kama Sutra.* But I don't think you want me to write about that, Gil. Anyway, that night was almost our entire discussion of marriage.

We had to hurry up and finish our gourmet burgers before the opera. We were rushing at the last minute because somebody in the pub had a heart attack and the fire truck blocked the parking lot for a few minutes. We found a parking spot only a few feet from the patrons-only pub lot, but it was open to public parking and was free after five o'clock. We had to run in our new shoes, comfortable but not yet broken in, to get to the big auditorium.

Clay and I earlier in the week had gone to the library a couple of times to listen to CDs of *Carmen,* with headphones, and read about it on the computers. Not the whole thing, of course, but just enough to know what to expect.

Just before the opera started, Clay said, "If we went home, just theoretically, we would not be doing this ever again."

When the overture started, Clay and I were swept away. I'm sure you know the music, Gil. A great march melody with cymbals. And the Toreador melody! I could hear people humming it around me. And when the opera started, the bright yellow and red uniforms of the soldiers must have tasted very good to Clay.

We knew what was coming. I knew that from the very moment that Carmen threw the rose at Don José, he was lost. The alluring worldliness of Carmen, Carmen who defied the fates, who tore up the soothsayer's cards that predicted her death, who said that love was a wild gypsy child, who said that she would live free and die free, was irresistible to him. For him, love was enslavement. And for Carmen too. She could not escape her fate, once she began to love the Toreador, who was even more assertively selfish than she was. The recurring theme of the Habanera was, *Beware of love!* The world sucked them in like a maelstrom. Of course, to me, it meant to beware of anything that the outside world claimed to be the path of freedom. Just thinking about all of this during the early music of the opera made me afraid of straying outside of the Amish community in which I had grown up. But I assumed that when we got back to our apartment and relaxed a little, the feeling would pass.

It was still only the first movement of the opera. The soldiers outside the cigarette factory were talking about this beautiful woman who was looking for Don José. Only it was not Carmen. It was Micaëla, the innocent and pure girl from Don José's hometown, who had come from Don José's mother to beg him to return home and marry Micaëla. Before she appeared on stage, I knew that Micaëla was me.

I didn't know what was coming. I thought I would know. But before Carmen even appeared on stage, there was Micaëla. What was the producer of the opera thinking! Of course, the producer can perform the opera any way he wants to, with any stage setting, with any costume. I had read of Shakespeare plays being set in post-World-War-Three settings. I had read about *Richard III* reaching its climax when the king said "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" while sitting in a jeep. Producers can do whatever they want. They have room for massive stupidity, and room for genius. I did not know which one this was.

But when Micaëla appeared on stage, she was wearing an Amish dress. She even wore a bonnet. She was me, and Clay was Don José.

Why did the producer do this! *Did God make him do it, knowing I would be in the audience? Won't God leave me alone even during my rumspringa?*

I hardly noticed Carmen's magnificent performance. When Clay and I stumbled out of the auditorium, I knew he was thinking the same thing I was.

Chapter 14

The church had a party for us when we came back. There remained a few weeks before we would officially join church, so I could still wear English clothes for a little longer, and Clay and I could still ride in his truck into town for library books and for bottles of Guinness. Clay and I signed up for the nine pre-baptismal classes, where we learned very little theology but a lot about what our community thought was right and what was not. I'm sure you will understand what I mean, Gil, when I say that the Amish are much more concerned about *orthopraxy,* correct practices, than *orthodoxy,* correct doctrine. They will fly through the roof if they suspect that you doubt the Flood of Noah, but they will not ask you. Don't ask, don't tell. But if you are a man and your hat brim is a little too wide or a little too narrow, or if you are a woman and your post-rumspringa hair has not quite grown back enough, watch out. Our wedding date was set for a week after our baptisms. Both of our families arranged church financing for a little house for us to start our family in, but meanwhile Clay continued to live in his little room off to the side of his parents' house, and they knew perfectly well that we were having sex in there. But so long as Jesus didn't come back before our baptisms, and surprise us in a state of sin, everything would be made right pretty soon.

I was honest with Clay about some things I dreaded about joining church. The main one was that, according to Biblical precepts, the husband is the head of the wife, completely under his command. Not that an Amish husband mistreats his wife (although some do); for what body would inflict injury on itself? But the body has to have a head, and the husband is that head.

Clay's response was, "Oh, Sophie, don't you know me by now? I respect you, and I know what a brain you have. No way am I going to boss you around. All that the church rules mean is that, if we cannot work out an agreement, I have to be the one to make the final decision. Of course, we have to act like I am your boss. Therefore I am going to be your *titular* head."

Secretly, we made plans for where we could hide books and maybe an occasional bottle of Guinness. Of course, there was no completely safe way to continue in these, our only two premeditated sins. Church members considered themselves privileged to come into anyone's home and snoop around in closets if the Lord led them to do so, and we figured that somebody would keep track of the mileage on Clay's truck and calculate that he must have driven someplace other than where his pickups and deliveries took him. But we did what we could. At the last minute Clay's English friend Roger took pity on us and agreed to keep our secret, and hide our books and bottles at his place.

When I emerged from under the waters of baptism, water streaming and dripping from my bonnet and dress, and when I heard the congregation singing one of our favorite *Ausbund* hymns, I felt truly at peace. I felt elation at taking on myself the rigid structures

of the ordnung right at about the same time you were finishing your doctoral dissertation. And I felt true joy when I spoke my wedding vows, in German, to Clay—Clay, the dust of the good Earth.

Chapter 15

But, as you know only too well yourself, Gil, people change when they get married. And Clay changed.

It took a long time. We were both into our twenties before I began to notice the change. It was just subtle at first. He who had once been such a stimulating interlocutor gradually stopped being curious about the world. I would tell him something that I heard on the little radio that only he knew that I had, and he would nod and say, *Well, don't that beat all.* Or something like that. I gradually realized that he was unintentionally conforming to the attitudes and speech patterns of the other men with whom he worked.

Then he told me that he thought I should not listen to the radio as much.

"I just listen to the news," I said. There was no public radio station within a hundred miles, but the Chickasaw tribal station had news.

"Don't you see, Sophia?" He looked down at his toes. "People are going to wonder how you know all these things, and you'll have to tell them, eventually, about the radio. And the books too. And me—I repeat things you tell me, and the men wonder where I heard it. One of them said, *That wife of your'n again?* No, Sophia, we have to do this right." He no longer looked at his toes but into my eyes. "We need to fit in, see. And that means *I* should be the one to tell *you* things."

I briefly exploded. "That's a load of…sorry, Clay, but throughout our relationship it has never been that way."

"We've joined church now, and may soon have a family," he said. "Maybe it's not good to be quite so curious about the world. We should just believe things. It's easier that way, and a lot less stress," he said.

"Oh, is it?" I responded. "Maybe for you, but for me, it is *very* stressful to force myself to *not* ask questions and wonder about things. I think asking questions is essential for my faith."

"Whoa, Sophie. Explain that one to me."

"It's like Søren Kierkegaard said."

"Who?"

"A philosopher I would have read if I'd gone to college. A philosopher I read in one of the books we got at the library. He talked about the *leap of faith.* He said that, unless one has doubt, one cannot have faith. Faith without doubt is just credulity. But if you doubt something, and then satisfy yourself that it is true, you truly have faith."

"Sounds risky to me, Sophie. Leap of faith, like over a cliff. We Amish don't have leaps of faith. We braid our arms together and hold onto one another if we have to reach down over a cliff. That's how we do things. No leaping. Which brings up something else. I don't think them books are such a good idea anymore." I think that was the first time he used *them* as an adjective. "And that journal you keep!"

"You haven't been reading it, have you? Other than the parts I read to you, which is actually most of it."

"Should I? Just how much leaping are you doing in that journal?"

"Well, I am going to keep getting books."

"How?"

"How? We always stop at the library when we…You don't mean to tell me that you're going to stop taking me?" I panicked, realizing that the only science and the only history and the only things about the Bible I would ever learn were things I had already read about, if this happened.

"Sorry, Sophie. This had to happen sometime, so we might as well get started. The menfolk are talking about me. And, in case you don't know, the womenfolk are talking about you."

"Let them talk! Our church reviews the ordnung twice a year, and so far there has never been any specific mention about not reading books."

"Like you said, Sophia, it's up to the church. And if you keep reading them books, it might come to that."

"It might come to that," I repeated. "Well, let it."

And it did.

I got Betsy to bring me books. At first I kept them hidden behind the counter where I continued to work at the store. Mom knew about them, of course, but God bless her, she said nothing. But after a while, since people saw me reading them while they were milling about the store, I decided to just leave the books right out on top of the counter. Occasionally they were pleased, especially when I was reading Amish books by David Kline and a book called *Farming the Lord's Land* and the books of Wendell Berry, a liberal Christian who has several Amish friends. Everyone asked me what Bill McKibben's *Enough* was about, and were pleased when I told them that the author said that our technology was going too far—that when new technology made some people superior, pretty soon everyone adopted it, and what had been superior was now only average, and we had to raise the technological bar again, creating a spiral of materialism. Everyone I talked to nodded their heads in vigorous agreement with Bill McKibben's point and his celebration of frugality. But one day I had a copy of *The Circle of Life,* a picture book about rituals and initiations around the world, and there were a few pictures of naked people in it. I had to hide that one right quick in a hurry. I tried to read *Does God Exist?* by Hans Küng, the Catholic theologian. I think I saw that book on your shelf, Gil. I gave up on it, but before I did I had to hide it, because people wondered why I would bother reading a book about a question with such an obvious answer.

My next book was about genetics. I tried to explain to other Amish what genetics was. It is the scientific study of how traits get passed down from parents to children. Well of course they do, was the response I always got. But it wasn't that simple. That was the book where I learned about dominant and recessive traits. The recessive traits were

hidden and only showed up when a child inherited two copies of the trait, one from each parent. Most recessive traits are enzymes that do not work. That is, genetic diseases. These traits appear most frequently in small communities of people who choose partners from within the small community. As I read further, I recognized not only that the Amish were a perfect example of this but that many of the specific traits—such as having an extra finger, or having a metabolic disease—were those that I knew were common in our church. Even such things as women being a little bit hairy. I had never thought about these things being unusual, since I knew next to nothing about people outside the church. I also had never known what caused them. The book said genetic mutations caused them. The church said God sent them as afflictions to test our faith. Of course, maybe God sent genetic mutations to test our faith…I'll let you theologians work on that one, Gil.

Then Bishop Eash came by the store. I knew it was not to shop; his wife did the shopping. He looked around at the jars of honey until there was nobody else in the store except my mother and I. He informed me that some of the men had formally complained about my reading, and that the matter would be brought up before the entire church at our next meeting—unless, of course, I renounced it immediately. Which I did not.

Who could these men be? One of them must have been Clay. None of the other men had said anything about my books. As I said, many of them seemed pleased with my choice of reading. But maybe their wives had told them differently. You see, it is not just the menfolk who compete with one another to determine who is holiest.

Was it Clay? Our lovemaking had previously been passionate, but Clay now started talking only in terms of children. An invisible barrier was growing between us. We kept ourselves busy to not think about it. The menfolk helped Clay build a little barn out back one Saturday for chickens and a cow. I worked in the store, took care of the animals, went walking in the woods, and was home for Clay each evening. I made wonderful meals, not dutifully but because I believe we should enjoy everything we have to do. But there was nothing, aside from my books, about which I could imagine Clay finding fault.

I did not believe that I had changed any. But how could I know?

And so, as promised, the announcement was made in church—which met in Brother Toland's house this time—that the menfolk would have to consider the matter of Sophia Muth and her books. There was no prosecution and no defense. In our church, though not all churches, the menfolk cast secret ballots. When Bishop Eash pulled the ballots out of the same cloth bag we used for freewill offerings, and counted them, he looked up and said, "The church has decided that Mrs. Muth may continue to read whichever books she wishes, so long as they contain nothing contrary to the truth of Christ."

Apparently most of the men remembered me reading David Kline rather than *The Circle of Life.* I was elated. I should not have been, for the question should never have

come up. But the other women, who had felt that they should be a little standoffish, were now happy to laugh with me again.

Clay and I did not discuss the decision. There was nothing to discuss. But he became very distant. About that time he began repeating some of the things we all heard in the sermons about how our Anabaptist ancestors were persecuted, and how the world hates us because we are, to use the German biblical phrase, which I here translate, a peculiar people. And he started talking about how the American way of life was under attack, eroding away under the influence of what is called diversity but is really only sin. His easy humor was replaced by a bleak sternness within a remarkably short period of time. I finally decided to confront him with this after supper one day. He always complimented me on my cooking, but he didn't seem to enjoy it. For one supper, I made everything red, the color he had found most delicious. I dropped little hints about how delicious the color red is. He just kept saying that it tasted fine.

"Clay," I said. "We used to enjoy things. What's up?"

"We still enjoy things, don't we? A good day's work, we can look anybody in the eye and feel satisfied. And I just complimented you on dinner. And…" He got really uncomfortable but went ahead and said what he knew it was not wrong for him to say to his wife. "…I enjoy it when we are in bed."

"That's not what I meant. I wasn't fishing for compliments, about my food or about my body. That's vanity, isn't it? What I'm worried about is that something's eating you."

He started talking again about how the world hates us and that morality is being destroyed. "We have to stand firm and be upright. It's a grim task, sometimes, but as the Good Book says, *It is through much tribulation that we must enter the Kingdom of God."*

"No, Clay," I said. "It's not a grim task. I don't find it grim at all. I don't find holiness a burden." I had to stop and think about that. I thought about how I wanted the freedom to read books that did contain things contrary to the truth of Christ, even if only to intelligently disagree with them. I had just started reading your book about that time, Gil. Also I thought about how I wanted to wear shorts when I worked in the garden. And I wanted to walk humbly in the world, which is what our aproned dresses are all about, but whenever we happen to be in the English world, our dresses make us look like we are passing judgment on others, putting ourselves on the very pedestal we claim to detest. And I wanted an occasional Guinness, which Clay never got anymore, even when Roger offered to get one for us.

Right about that time, Nine-Eleven happened. We all went to the houses of English neighbors to watch the television coverage. We were swept up in the same patriotism as everyone else. Our preachers had often said that places like New York City were bastions of worldliness which would come crumbling down. But when the World Trade Center actually fell, we certainly did not feel vindicated. And even though we considered all members of the United States Congress to be heathens, and we knew that

the United States was not, in fact, God's chosen nation, we were deeply moved when we watched the full Congress singing *God Bless America.*

I could tell that Clay was deeply disturbed by it. Everyone was, but Clay much more than any of the rest of us. He had to go on a long trip, up to Tulsa and St. Louis, to get special leather straps for Brother Singleton to make harnesses out of. When Clay came back, he seemed embittered. He told me about the Muslims he had seen, and how they kept themselves apart from the rest of society, and how their women had to wear burkas and veils. I just looked at him, unable to believe that he failed to notice that Amish society did this also, with aprons and caps instead of burkas and veils. He started referring to liberals and Muslims as if they were the same thing, which is ridiculous. He started to speculate about how it would be good for people to start arming themselves against a possible takeover by liberals and Muslims. I knew he would never himself start buying up weapons, nor would anyone in our church, for pacifism is one of our most basic beliefs. Many rural Oklahomans accumulate assault weapons, but Amish do not.

Chapter 16

For a couple of weeks, Clay had stopped mentioning weapons and persecution. He even seemed to relax a little bit. But then two events occurred that stirred up his antagonism against English society to an even greater intensity.

The first was the airplane. Our Amish community was not particularly big, but some entrepreneur got the idea to give tours of Oklahoma Amish country. We had country stores, but we had not given into the salesmanship of Amish-themed restaurants as had the Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio Amish who were in other ways more conservative than we were. We have a rule to visitors on our property: no photographs. But they can stare all they want to. And I was one of their favorite persons to stare at, partly but not completely because I worked at the store. And Clay didn't like this one bit. The tourists would buy up all the copies of our books. Normally this would not have been a problem but we intended these books for our own use. Therefore we had not printed many copies of them. We suspected that the tourists would take them home and, along with their memories of us, snicker at how quaint and weird we were.

And then the entrepreneur added an airplane tour to his offerings. He just had one plane—a propeller plane with about three windows on a side—but it would fly around our community, with my family's store in the center, over and over and over. Sometimes the plane would follow a buggy. One evening when Clay and I were coming back from a hymn-sing I could see him get more and more tense as the plane circled us for the entire trip. He pulled the reins tightly and we almost spilled over turning the corner to our house. There was nothing we could do about the plane, of course, so long as the pilot maintained at least the minimum altitude. We did not know what that altitude was, and could not have estimated it if we had known. I tried once using trigonometry, but it's not as easy as you might think.

The second was when the convict escaped from the maximum security prison in Stringtown. He had slipped behind boxes in a delivery truck, which got him past the two fences of razor wire. The sheriff came and told our community about it at the store and asked us to announce it to everyone. It was a Monday and there were no church services planned for another thirteen days (our churches meet only once each two weeks) but we got the word around as best we could. The convict was a felon, but not a murderer, at least not yet, and nobody knew if he was armed.

We had all begun locking our doors in the daytime. I did this like everyone else. But I did not do it literally every time I went in and out the door to go check on the chickens. But that is all the time it took for the felon to slip inside our house. And he did have a gun.

He smiled at me with most of his teeth. He had a big silver one, installed no doubt at state expense. He held up the gun but did not point it at me. “I don’t plan on usin’ this none,” he said. “I think we can all git along here right nice.

“Say,” he continued. “Don’t I know you?”

“I…I don’t see how you could,” I said, my voice trembling.

“You done all growed up,” he smiled big enough to hide his eyes. “I used to live around here. Growed up here. We used to come into your store oncet in a while. I always done thought you’d grow up to be a right purty girl, and I was right.”

“You will not touch me,” I told him. “You might have to use that gun on me, but you will not touch me until I am dead.”

“What a waste,” he said. “Woman like you.”

“Spare me your blandishments,” I said. He looked like he didn’t know or care what blandishments were. Maybe he thought they were Amish pastries.

“Don’t matter no-how,” he said. He threw a glance at a spare brim hat that Clay had on a hook on the wall. “Yore husband might come in any time and catch us. Me with my pants down and all. That’d be the end for me, sure enough.” What he did not know was that Clay had just returned from a trip. Just yesterday, his advances would not have been interrupted by a husband. “You know what I really want,” he said. “Just to lie low here until night, then I leave here with some food. Now you, little woman, you come here and sit in this chair.”

“And if I don’t?”

He held up his gun, still not pointing it at me.

“The sound of the shot will be heard all around here, and men will come running,” I said.

“Oh, they’ll chase me in their buggies? I’d love to see that.”

“Well, you might get to.”

“There are other things I can do with this gun what don’t make so much noise.” He flipped the gun up and grabbed it by the barrel. He walked toward me with the gun held like a bludgeon. “Now, all this can be avoided, little lady. If you just sit in that chair. And turn it toward the wall.”

I did.

I heard him get something from the table. It was a rope that he had found in the barn. Next thing I knew he had grappled me with his left arm, his forearm across my breasts. He held me longer than necessary. He was very strong. He must have had a lot of time to use exercise equipment in the big house. Then he whipped the rope around me, binding me, arms and all, against the back of the chair. I started to slip free but not quickly enough. He hit me with the butt of his pistol, on the head, really hard. It was a glancing blow that ripped the skin and drew blood. You saw the scar, Gil. Soon he had tied me up very securely.

When Clay got home, I did not greet him at the door. He ran to the kitchen and saw me, tied up, and the felon with his gun.

"I don't plan to use this none," he told Clay, brandishing his pistol. "Ain't no need for that. I'll leave y'all alone, soon as I get what I need, and it's nightfall."

I could not see the look in Clay's eyes, as I was facing the wall, but I could imagine it. He was fantasizing about a bloody revenge against the man who had touched then bound his wife. He saw the blood running from the wound on my head, and saw my head bending forward as I began to get dizzy.

"Just give him what he wants, Clay," I said weakly.

"Now, we can do better than that," said the felon. "First off," he said to Clay, "this here woman needs some help. Now I'm gonna keep this gun on you while you go to the bathroom and get some peroxide or alkyhol or something, and some bandages. I come here to get what I need, not to hurt nobody."

"Why you fucking son of a bitch…" Clay began.

"Clay, let's just get this over with," I said.

"Well, looky here, a foul-mouthed Amishman," said the man, smiling.

"He's right," I told the man. "You are, in fact, a fucking son of a bitch."

Now the man looked really entertained.

"And we aren't fooled by your pretense of caring about my wound," I said. "You don't give a shit about anybody but yourself."

The felon affected an air of being hurt. "Oh, now, ma'am, that ain't true. Why, one would almost think that you don't plan to show me a measure of Christian love and hospitality!"

Clay and I were equally amazed. "What the hell did you just say?" Clay enunciated each word distinctly through gritted teeth.

"Why, you-all know, don't you? It's right there in that Bible of your'n. The chaplain done read it lots of times to us inside. You know, if someone asks for a goat, give him your cloak as well, and if he makes you carry his burden one mile, carry it two. Now, you do believe, don't you, that the man who said that was God in the flesh? And that he was giving that command to you? I'll take that as a yes. And he said, do not refuse him who asks of you. Well, I am askin' stuff of you. And if you just do what that Sweet Jesus told you to do, nobody gets hurt, and you get the esteem of God in Heaven. Sounds like a pretty sweet deal to me! Now, sooner you tell me where you got your money hid, the less tearin' up the place I'll have to do. Because you know as well as I do I'm gonna find it."

He found it. Clay was utterly silent. I was the one who told the man where it was.

Finally Clay spoke. "Bible don't give you no right to steal."

"True enough," smiled the man as he counted the bills. This included some money that the church had leant us. "But that don't make no difference to *your*

responsibility, now, does it? You're suppose to give me what I want. As for me and God, you just leave that up to me and God."

By now the blood was starting to dribble into my mouth and all over my collar, and my eye was starting to swell a little. I started to feel faint.

"Bible give me a right to defend my wife," Clay muttered.

"Well, no problem there, bro. You just let me get on the road here—mind if I take some of that nice cheese from your fridge?—and you can take care of her all you want to. Course, we got to wait until it gets a little dark. So, you just make yourself comfortable, and we can get things all sorted out after sunset."

It was only a few minutes until sunset, but the hour until full darkness seemed to drag on forever. We watched the man begin to eat some cheese, and then to savor it, and to compliment it. Then some bread and butter. Having to keep the gun in his left hand, he couldn't actually spread butter on bread, but he tore off hunks of bread and licked the hand-cut pad of butter. He liked the milk too. "Better'n that slop in prison," he said. "And cheaper too, I bet. That slop they give us, prolly costs the taxpayers plenty from them contractors. You think I'm bad, stealin' a little money here and there, but them contractors make off big and it's legal. Prolly charge the taxpayers twenty dollar for a shitty piece of meatloaf." I was starting to slip away from consciousness, so I didn't care what he said. Clay remained tense and ready to spring. He started to lunge several times, but each time the felon pointed the pistol straight into his face. At least that is what it sounded like to me.

"Y'know," said the man. "Soon as I got out, I headed right over here. I figure Amish don't have phones to home, and so I'd be relatively safe. And you're all known to be right nice people. Well, time for some stories. I'll tell you a few, just to get us started." And he told us about the new prisoners and their anal initiation ceremonies. "Now, you prolly think the guards don't know nothin' about it, but they do. Oh, they do. But they know better than to interfere." And on and on.

It wasn't completely dark when the man decided it was time to leave. As soon as he slipped backwards out the back door, Clay leapt toward him. Right then, I fainted. Clay heard my chair fall over. He told me he came to help me. But I'm not sure. If all the rest of what I heard is true, he was too busy to help me. Not that I blame him. I could feel the rage in my heart just like he did, before I fainted.

Right then, I've been told, Bishop Eash rode up in his buggy. A moment later, the felon had tackled him and pushed him down on the ground. Eash is a big man, but the felon had the element of surprise. The felon must have thought riding in an Amish buggy was the perfect getaway. But before he could climb into the buggy, Clay had hit him on the back of the head with a hoe. Then he kept hitting, even after the felon was down. Bishop Eash had to restrain him.

"We are to love our enemies, Brother Muth."

"He attacked my wife and invaded our home."

"And you've knocked him down. That's enough. Time to stop."

"He's an evil man. He would have murdered her if I hadn't come home when I did."

"You don't know that, son. Defending yourself is your right. Killing a man when he's down isn't."

"Where's his gun? Where's his gun? I'll shoot the son of a bitch…"

"Don't get yourself in trouble, Clay."

"I'll blow his fucking brains out."

"I understand your feelings, son, but this is not the right thing to do. You're faster than I am, so you take my buggy and go get help. I'll find his gun and make sure he doesn't go anywhere. Wait. Clay, where is Sophia?"

"He beat her and tied her up."

"Then you should go and help her. I'll stay here and make sure the man doesn't move. Then you can go get help."

I found out later that, after Clay dressed my wound and laid me on the bed, he jumped in the buggy and went for help. But not before he had picked up the hoe and beat the felon several more times.

Gil, you learned the first day I was at your house that the woman who got attacked, in that news story, was I. The felon remains in a rest home, unable to move from his wheelchair. The judge and jury were understandably lenient to Clay, putting him on probation.

But for me and Clay, this was not the end of the story but the beginning.

Clay's message was always the same: if he had had a gun, he could have protected me and his home and the whole community. But the church leaders, while thanking Clay for his zeal, kept quoting Jesus, who told one of his followers who had tried to keep Him from being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane: *Put your sword back in its place, Peter; for those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.* Finally the church leaders had to tell Clay to shut up. He did not.

Part of me was happy that Clay had exhibited such zeal in defending me. But after a while, listening to him talk about it over and over, I began to feel that he acted more in wrath that his wife, his possession, had been touched, rather than out of love for me. I only gradually reached this conclusion, but he never talked with me about how I felt, physically or mentally, during this experience.

I really empathized with him at first, but he never relaxed in the days and weeks after, except briefly after I massaged his shoulders. After a while I simply felt that I was no longer in touch with him.

Chapter 17

One day Clay took me with him on a delivery trip in his truck. As we drove north on 48 into Wappy, I spoke up.

"Pull over," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Pull over," I repeated.

He pulled over at the first safe place, beside the brick wall at the school. Kids were playing on swing-sets and teeter-totters. The supervising teachers did not look at us; they have seen more Amish than you can shake a stick at. I strode south, Clay following, on the east side of the highway, to the Ordovician cliff. I picked up a rock full of crinoids and held it in front of Clay's face. He showed no emotion whatsoever.

"We're living a lie," I said.

"No we aren't," he responded.

"What we are supposed to believe about this rock is a lie."

"Nobody asks me about no rocks, and nobody asks you about no rocks. Don't sound like no lie to me." He was cultivating a rural Okie way of talking more than he ever had before.

Then I inhaled and stood at my full height. I opened up my arms so he could see my blue dress. "The world is beautiful," I said. "Look at my dress, Clay. Look at it. Blue is beautiful. You told me once about how good the color blue tastes. Tell me right now, Clay. What are you tasting?"

He said nothing, but just kept looking at my neck.

"I'm waiting for your answer," I said.

Then he reached up and gently grabbed my crinoid necklace and pulled it. The string held. He pulled some more. I did not move. Finally, he reached with both hands and pulled the string up over my head, knocking off my bonnet. He did it so quickly that I had no time to respond. He held the necklace in his hand.

"I'll keep this for you," he said.

A puff of wind blew my bonnet, which had fallen by the roadside, into the highway, where a big truck ran over it. We stood there for a few minutes. Finally I sighed, threw down the rock, and retrieved the bonnet. Then I grabbed the necklace from his hand, threw it down, and walked back to the truck.

*

Then one day Betsy told me about a concert that was being held at the university in Durant. You know, the one they might let you teach at if they need an adjunct professor, Gil. They don't pay adjuncts much, but it's better than what you're earning now. Anyway, it sounded like an interesting concert. A small consort of musicians played

ancient instruments. The main focus of their concert was the music of the Sephardic Jews who lived in Spain in the Middle Ages and were eventually driven out by the Most Catholic King and Queen Ferdinand and Isabella, who later enabled Christopher Columbus to go CUT OFF THE HANDS OF INDIANS. I thought about rewriting that, but decided to leave it just as I would in my handwritten journal. The Spanish killed many Sephardic Jews who were not lucky enough to escape. Once they locked a bunch of them in a building, probably a secret synagogue, and set it on fire. Anyway, I thought Clay would be interested in the concert. Us Amish have a tradition of being persecuted, also, and so perhaps the music would be thematically similar to the songs in our Ausbund. Clay hesitated then agreed. Betsy agreed to drive us.

And that is precisely what most of the concert was about. Hauntingly beautiful melodies with lots of delicate vocal notes. The beautiful Asian woman who sang had the most enchanting voice. And she was as demure as any Amish woman. Clay seemed to be enjoying the music. And probably the woman too. I didn't care whether or how he looked at her.

But then the group also performed a little bit of flamenco music. You know what's coming. The woman stood up and removed her black jacket. Underneath she wore a red dress with a revealing neckline. And during the music, which sounded a little bit like the Habanera, she danced around like Carmen. Red, the most delicious color. I looked over at Clay's face, expecting to see at least a little bit of a smile. But Clay's face was a frozen mask of fear and loathing. I knew exactly what was going on. He was not angry at the woman. He was not angry at me. He was angry at himself.

Chapter 18

One evening, after an early supper, Clay told me that he was going to a church meeting.

"I don't remember any church meeting," I said.

"It's not to our church," he said. "It's in Durant."

He told me it was a Patriot's Conference sponsored by one of the Baptist churches. The speakers were going to talk about how the United States needs to reclaim its Christian foundations. The principal speaker was a famous radio evangelist, the host of *Modicum of Truth.* For the most part there are only two kinds of radio stations in rural southern Oklahoma: country stations, and religious stations. The few times I had heard this man on the radio, I was amazed at how little of the Bible he actually talked about. He threw in a verse or a fragment of a verse once in a while that appeared to bolster up whatever political point he was trying to make.

"But the Founding Fathers created a secular government," I said to Clay. "America doesn't have a Christian foundation."

"They didn't have an anti-Christian government in mind either," he answered.

"What does that matter to us?" I said. "We have our own society, here, and it's no business of ours if the rest of the world is secular or even evil. The Bible says, if I understand it right, that our citizenship is in Heaven. We are Amish Christians first, and Americans second."

"We pay taxes, and some of that money goes to an anti-Christian government."

Our neighbor Roger knocked at the door. "You ready?" he asked Clay when he answered the door.

"Let me get my hat," he said.

I walked up to Roger. "What's this all about?" I asked him.

"Clay wanted to go to this here Patriot's Conference," he answered. "Me, I'm not too interested, but Clay really wanted to go. Durant's a long ways, and the meeting don't finish until after dark, so going in a buggy is out of the question, see. And he don't feel right using the work truck. I said I'd give him a ride. Nothin' to worry about, Sophia. I mean Mrs. Muth."

"Sophia," I said.

"This church is a real bulwark of the Doo-rant community. Won't be anything bad happen there," he assured me.

When Clay and Roger left in Roger's truck, I ran to the store, where we had a phone. I wasn't supposed to use it without permission, but nobody was there and I had a key. I called Betsy.

"God, I heard about that conference," she said. "Can you believe it?"

I told her that Clay was going and that I needed to go to, so that I could understand what was going on with him. Betsy, who now lived in Durant, hesitated just a moment then said, “I’ll get there as fast as I can. I don’t think we’ll get to the conference by the time it starts. We’ll have to slip in the back.”

“That’s what I wanted to do anyway,” I answered.

Betsy came for me within a half hour. I passed the time by washing the dishes and putting away the leftovers. As she drove me down Highway 48, past the little shrine for the dead kids and past the big limestone quarry, Betsy said, “I left the food and the dishes out. Tweekers will probably get into it.” That was her cat.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said.

“No problem,” said Betsy. “I’d do just about anything for you, girl.” She had always done almost anything for me, back when she lived on the farm next to the one on which I grew up.

“Where’s this church?” I asked.

“It’s not at the church. It’s at the university. The church rented the gymnasium.”

“That big an event, huh? I guess that means it’ll be easy to slip in unnoticed.”

We had to park several blocks away on a narrow street beside a falling-apart clapboard house with broken toys in the unmowed front yard. Anyone who saw us must have been struck by the sight of a thin woman in full Amish garb and a plump woman in shorts walking as fast as they could toward campus.

The gymnasium was full. People sat on the bleachers, even up behind the speakers’ dais. Men paid close attention, while most of the women were mothers who tried to control their children. Many of the children were running around pretending to shoot one another with guns.

The famous preacher was not himself the main speaker, it turned out. He introduced a man who wore a military uniform. I very much doubt that he was speaking with the authority of the United States military, but he obviously had their permission to express his personal views. And I do not remember what all of these views were. As soon as I started listening, colors started rushing before my eyes, colors of anger. It was as if Clay’s synesthesia had temporarily transferred to my brain, but all of the flavors had charred and burned in an untended oven. The man’s message was that Jesus wanted us to all have firearms, which included assault weapons. I thought about Bishop Eash telling Clay, that night not long before, that Jesus had told the Apostle Peter to put his sword away. I think this man would have said that Peter should indeed keep his sword put away but keep it ready to use at a moment’s notice. At no point did this man say that Christians should get out their weapons and use them against any other human beings. But he said we should all have weapons and keep them, and ourselves, ready, because surely one day we would need to use them. He even announced, and told stories about, a special camp that trained young Christian men, and older ones too, to shoot assault weapons at targets. The targets were hidden among forest trees and the participants were supposed to shoot

first and ask questions later. I was hyperventilating. A few people looked sideways at me, as I looked around the bleachers from the back of the aisle. Betsy held my hand.

When the speaker finished, the applause was thunderous. The radio preacher then gave a little sermon about how God had punished ancient Israel and Judah because they had permitted homosexuals to exist. I nearly choked on that one. For one thing, I was pretty sure that was not in the Bible, even the smuggled English Bible that I had read. For another, I could not imagine someone like my homosexual friend from the C-store, Dewey, causing a country to degenerate and get conquered by its enemies. The preacher went on about how even the atheist communists in the Former Soviet Union are offended by homosexuality, and if it offends even them, how offensive it must be to God!

"Calm down, girl," Betsy told me, giving me a little hug. "Hey, maybe we better go now. We want to avoid the crowd when they disgorge from this building."

"I need to hear the rest of this," I said.

"No you don't, Sophia," she answered.

But we stayed while the crowd sang *Onward Christian Soldiers.* I didn't know this hymn very well. It is not in the Ausbund. Mothers held up their toddlers to dance to it with little march steps.

Betsy and I started to leave, when someone announced over the loudspeaker, "And now, the grand prize." He held up a big semi-automatic rifle with a big cartridge chamber and the best scope that money could buy. And it was free for whoever's name was drawn from the basket. We had arrived too late to sign our names on tickets. In the old days, only men would have been able to win, but nowadays it was open to women also. I almost wished that I could win the prize so that I could hold it in the air, then beat it against the floor until it was warped and cracked. But the winner was a big white man with whiskers in a flannel shirt. He looked like all the other men.

"Okay, now we can leave," Betsy said. I started with her to the door.

The announcer then said the second prize was a little pistol. "Don't be tricked by how small this little baby is," he said. "It'll blast like the dickens. The winner gets the gun and a little box of ammo, just enough to get him—or her—started. You need a concealed-carry license for this one, so whoever wins has to sign a statement agreeing to take the training. Okay! The winner is…"

We started out the door.

"Is there a Mr. Clay Mooth here?"

I ran back to look. There was silence, rather than cheering, as the crowd saw an Amish man jump down from the bleachers and approach the podium.

Chapter 19

Clay continued to work on me as on a field that needed plowing so that it could be fertile. The joy was gone out of our intimacy. I missed the old Clay so much. I told him so, and he ignored me. I never asked him about the gun.

Clay took ever longer trips. About once a week he was gone overnight, and sometimes for a whole week. But I could not complain. The whole community depended on him for some supplies that could not be obtained locally. And, if he had been more joyous when we were together, I would not have minded his absences.

I was working at the store one day when Roger came in and bought a lot of stuff. Loaves of bread, pies, cakes, some of our famous yogurt cheese. He lived alone, so I didn't understand why he needed all this food, which wouldn't stay fresh long enough for one person to finish it. Of course, I offered to carry some of it out to his red pickup truck.

"Just put it in the truck bed," he said.

When I had carefully placed the items there, I started to say goodbye and go back into the store.

"The reason I bought all that stuff is I wanted you to come out here with me," he said.

This surprised me, and I felt briefly uneasy. But he is our neighbor and we were out in full daylight. So I quickly relaxed.

"I need to tell you something," he said. "Something private."

I looked up at the sky and the branches of the tree so that nobody would think we were having a deep conversation. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's Clay. I think there is something you should know."

"Go ahead, Roger. I can take it. God is my strength."

"You know that trip he was on?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I saw him."

"Yes?"

"It was up in Savanna, on Highway 75, you know? Well, I saw him in a titty bar."

"A bar? Well, I'm pretty sure he doesn't drink here, so I doubt that he has started any new habits, especially since he would never drink while driving…"

"You don't know what a titty bar is, do you?"

"No. It sounds like…You mean…"

"Yes. Young women get up on this stage, with men all around, and start taking their clothes off."

"You mean, all of their clothes?"

"Sometimes. In this one, yes. All of their clothes. And the men get right up next to the stage and…maybe you don't need to hear the details."

"You're sure it was Clay?"

"Amish garb and all. I was back in the shadows so he didn't see me."

"I don't know what to say, Roger. I guess, if he doesn't make a habit of it, I'd just as well forget I heard this."

"There might be more."

"Might be?"

"One of the women started stroking Clay on the face with her…but you don't need to know that. And when she came down from the stage, she came over to Clay and tugged him by the collar into a little room in back."

"You mean…"

"I don't know, Sophia. I never been back in one of them rooms. I do know that once in a while, police officers come in just to look around, but there's some advance warning, and whoever is in the little rooms skedaddles out. Didn't happen with Clay, but I seen it sometimes. Whatever goes on in there is illegal, and there's not a whole lot in Oklahoma that's illegal, when it comes to titty bars. Especially anything that might…" He looked around and acted like he was going to leave. "Anything that might spread disease."

I stood in shock.

"Clay used to use condoms," I said.

"Glad to hear it, but that was a long time ago, weren't it?" He whispered quickly to me before getting into his truck. "I really thought you should know. Especially since it don't reflect too good on Amish to see one of all-y'all in a titty bar. If he doesn't go disappearing on you, I wouldn't worry. Much, anyway."

"Except about diseases," I said.

"I wish I knew what to say, but I don't. And it's not like he isn't satisfied with you…" Roger moved toward the cab of the truck.

My mother called out to me. We had to finish our conversation fast.

"Clay always says nice things about you, and I think he means it. But he seems troubled…"

"I have noticed, Roger."

"I don't mean to cause you no trouble, or him either. I don't mean to get your church all riled up. But just keep an eye on him. I will too."

I turned and walked quickly back into the store without glancing at Roger.

Clay did take other trips, pretty short ones but long enough. At first I tried even harder to compensate, to help Clay to relax a little. I tried some special things in bed. Pretty mild by most people's standards. But they just made him tense up more.

But then I just started getting rebellious again. I started reading fiction. I got away with *Canterbury Tales.* It had a reputation for innocence because it was part of the high school literature canon, but that was because nobody ever read it except me. God, there are some pretty racy stories in there. Remember the one about…but I digress. How did that book not get banned in Oklahoma? I got Clay some Perry Mason books by Erle

Stanley Gardner, knowing how much Clay had liked the reruns a long time ago, but he didn't read them. I did. And Mark Twain. You've read him, I'm sure. I didn't let anyone know that I read Twain's *Mysterious Stranger,* which was an open attack on religion, about how it was ridiculous to believe that there was a good God who allowed bad things to happen. It wasn't a very good book, because Twain is better when he is telling a story than when he is preaching against religion. As I worked my way from John Updike to the artist formerly known as T. Coraghessan Boyle, complaints arose, but this time I didn't care. I also read theology books. I already mentioned reading one by a certain local author who will remain nameless. Yes, people complained, but Mom reminded them that the church had given me permission to read.

That was when I painted the house pink, on one of Clay's trips. And when I jumped up in the bois-d'arc trees. And started my rotational grazing crusade.

Chapter 20

And that's also when I got pregnant. Of course I was overjoyed when I found out. But something made me hesitate. It was because of that book that I had been reading earlier, the genetics book. Where I read about hidden mutations, which show up more frequently in populations whose close relatives interbreed, such as isolated communities and religious sects.

Clay and I are second cousins. My parents are cousins. Clay's parents are second cousins. Family ties are one of the things that keep the Amish together. We could, with total adherence to our faith, seek marriage partners in other states. But the same sense of community that makes so many Amish young people come back to the fold also draws them to marriage partners within the local Amish community. Some non-Amish fundamentalist churches have special young people's meetings so that they can find partners within the church but from outside of the local area. But that just doesn't work with us.

Anyway, about genetics. Many traits, normally hidden, show up from inbreeding, I have read. Genetic diseases, such as Ellis-van Creveld syndrome, glutaric acidemia, and McKusick-Kaufman syndrome, virtually unknown in the general population, show up in Amish populations. I don't usually memorize scientific terms, but I memorized these. I assume my hairiness is one of those normally-hidden traits. You can imagine that I was worried about my child.

So I went to a doctor's office. A gynecologist. Betsy gave me a ride. I told Mom I was going to the health food store, but Betsy waited while I slipped over a few blocks to the doctor. I said that I could never come at another time, so she saw me right away. She did a sonogram, one of those new 4-D sonograms, and showed me the clear evidence. Spina bifida was just one of the genetic ailments my fetus had. She took blood for further genetic tests. They also sent me to a state office; that's when I got an I.D. card. Betsy took me home.

A few days later a social worker drove out to my home with the test results, since I had neither phone nor reliable transportation. I was alone. My baby, she said, would also have xeroderma pigmentosum—the slightest exposure to the sun would cause her skin to swell and flake and form tumors. My head swam, and I saw boxes within boxes: a child, fettered in a wheelchair, in a dark house, in a dark restrictive society. So I told the woman I wanted an abortion. She gave me a ride immediately to the clinic.

Clay would never have known—it was only the third month and he didn't know that I was pregnant—nor would anyone else have known, since nobody saw us leave. But when we got to the clinic, the protestors were lined up ready to yell at any patient who entered, and to command God to damn any nurse or physician who helped them. *I was there to release my baby's soul!* But they began their chanting and placard-waving. One

of them said *It's an Amish woman* instead of the usual *Heathen baby-killer.* They started yelling at me about how I had betrayed my church and my God. They knew *nothing* of me or of my circumstances, nor those of my child, but they presumed to tell me all about myself. Maybe they are right, but... the arrogance! So I walked the Via Dolorosa to the front door, and into the room that would bring relief—but, of course, no happiness. When I left, they started yelling at me again. *Remember this day,* they said. As if I could ever forget it! *Make a cake each year to celebrate your child's murder. One of those nice Amish fruitcakes,* someone added. *We'd expect this of some goddam liberal, but you?* said an old man.

Someone took my picture, and put it on the Babysaver website. Someone in a downtown office saw it, not an Amishman of course—we have neither computers nor offices—and recognized me. One of Clay's friends. Clay brought the chief elder, Brother Toland, to confront me. Instead of condemning me, Brother Toland merely prayed for God to have mercy on my pain and desperation. I think that it was for Clay's sake that they did not subject me to the *meidung.* Some of our churches might have done so, but our church leaders could not ask Clay to shun his own wife. They did, however, make the announcement in church. There was no point in keeping it secret.

Nobody wanted to talk with me after church. Except Mrs. Ahmann.

Margarethe Ahmann spends almost all of her time at home. She has to, except when one of her daughters can substitute for her. One of her sons, Timothy, is about my age, but has never left his wheelchair except when in the doctor's office or hospital or when being cleaned. He does not respond to anyone or anything. He is able to swallow soft food. Mrs. Ahmann never told anyone what the genetic defect was that incapacitated her son. The metabolic diseases all have pretty much the same symptoms. He was always drooling, which I believe in any community other than ours would have invited the kids to make fun of him. But nobody in our church did, even behind the family's back.

Mrs. Ahmann kept her back to me, and I certainly had no desire to talk with her. Then from the corner of my eye I saw her turn and stalk up to me. I started walking. She kept up with me.

"You think it's been easy for me and the others?" she began. "Well, when God closes a door He opens a window. And in through that window has come lots of help. You wouldn'ta had to handle it all yourself. The women come and cook for us, and I haven't had to do Timothy's soiled laundry for years. You not only rejected your responsibility, but you rejected the whole church's love and willingness to help out."

I said, "I wasn't thinking just about myself, Mrs. Ahmann, or about the church. I was thinking about the lifetime of suffering my child would have."

"So, you think Timothy is suffering? He doesn't make no groans or anything so I don't think he feels no pain. He doesn't know what he's missing. And you can decide who lives and who dies," she spat her words at me.

I could think of lots of answers to that, such as *I am not the one who created the mutations* and such like, but I said nothing. I kept walking.

"So, you would have had Timothy killed, wouldn't you have?"

"I wouldn't presume to make a decision for anybody else," I said quietly, without looking at her and without slowing down.

"Well," she said very loudly, "Timothy's right over there. Why don't you just go strangle him right now? So that my life might be a little more pleasant, according to your way of thinking?"

I thought about saying, *Timothy's not a fetus anymore,* but I did not.

She stepped around in front of me. "Oh, the names I could call you!" she shouted.

"I wouldn't blame you, Mrs. Ahmann, if you did," I answered quietly, choosing another direction to walk.

She followed me. "Oh, the names! But I won't. Because names don't matter none. What God judges is what we *do!* I don't know whether you're no murderer or manslaughterer or whatever. But God knew what you did afore anyone else did! And now we all know!" This time she literally spat upon my back.

By now I was walking away from the house and into the weeds. She did not follow me there. But she kept yelling. "You don't deserve no children! God's going to close up your womb!"

And maybe He has, Gil.

And then she turned on Clay, who was watching from a safe distance. He did nothing to intervene. Of course. I did not deserve any help from him. "I feel sorry for you, son. So sorry. To be trapped with a wife like that."

I did not look back to see Clay's expression. All I know is that he said nothing to Mrs. Ahmann as she left.

When I looked down in the grass, I saw a dead bird. It was a hatchling that had been pushed out of a nest in the scrub elm tree next to me. Maggots dug into it and made it look like it was twitching.

I did not make the world.

I walked over and stood near the edge of the driveway. My mother came up to me and whispered, "You okay, Sophia? You need to come home with us?"

Clay walked over to my mother, placed his hand on her shoulder, and extended his hand to me. Nobody else approached us as he led me back to our buggy.

Clay said nothing to me after that, other than necessary information such as when he would be home. I saw no anger in his eyes.

Gil, I don't want to write the rest of this.

Chapter 21

The night I left Clay and walked over to your house, he was out at night. He had started using the truck without telling anybody about it. As I said before, I had already made up my mind to leave, after meeting you. I was just waiting for the right time. And that morning when I came to your door, I really didn't want to talk to you about it; after all, I didn't know you then. Now I can tell you why I left. I left because I wanted to have my own space in which to think about whether I should have left or have stayed. Before I decide whether to return to my home and community or not, I have to come up with a satisfactory alternative. Just writing this has helped me, but the process is not over yet. I thank you again for not taking advantage of me when, a vulnerable cinder from a silent volcano, I landed on your doorstep. And I beg for your continued patience. That's what love is, Gil.

Your loving friend,
Sophia
July 15, 2003

PART THREE: GIL

Chapter 22

Dear Sophia,

You asked me to tell you about my marriage. I'm afraid it won't be quite as dramatic a story as yours, but I think it will explain perfectly to you why I was so astonished by your wild love for me.

Eastern Oklahoma Bible College is high on a mountain north of Poteau. Well, not quite a mountain. Even though the teams were the Mountain Men (and women), there are technically no mountains in Oklahoma, just very big hills. A rich donor, Stewart Hundley, gave the land for the campus and still owned the surrounding forest, from which he sold timber concessions. So there was no development around campus. This was beautiful, but it also meant that the faculty, staff, and off-campus students all had to commute. So, even though it was ten miles away, I had to get an apartment in Spiro, a town on the banks of the Arkansas River.

I was fairly excited about the job during the workshop for new faculty before the beginning of my first semester. My colleagues, and the administration, kept saying things about how we were educating the whole person and challenging the students to think. I quickly found out that this was not the case, with consequences I have described elsewhere. I was not yet, at that point, an agnostic.

We were also free to join whatever church we wished. This, of course, was also not quite true. Everyone at the college attended a congregation that called itself God's House and met in an immense building about halfway between Poteau and Spiro. Not being part of a national network of churches, the minister at God's House could proclaim whatever seemed right to him and to the Board of Leadership. Not having any better idea, I started attending that church. My colleagues hinted that I should join. To do this I had to fill out a questionnaire which asked theological questions.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the one and only Son of God?

[It depends on what you mean by Son and God. But, I can interpret it in such a way as to answer] *yes.*

Do you believe in the death, burial, and bodily resurrection of Jesus?

[It depends on what you mean by resurrection but I can interpret it in such a way as to answer] *yes.*

Do you believe that Jesus will return and judge the world, taking those who believe in Him to Heaven and sending those who do not believe in Him to an everlasting Hell of eternal conscious torment? [It depends on what you mean by return and Heaven and hell and conscious, and in particular by what you mean by believe. If you mean that I assent to every doctrine you might preach, the answer is no. But the Bible says "He who

loves is born of God," and I love, so that makes me a believer. If I interpret it this way, I can answer] *yes.*

[Marginal note: This kind of reasoning happens in Amish churches sometimes too.—SM]

I met Lois Butcher at the bank. She was, I supposed, a teller. She recognized me from church.

"You're the new professor," she said. "One of them, anyway."

"Is it that obvious?" I asked.

"I remember you," she said. She looked down and smiled tightly with red lips. Her short dark hair was perfectly symmetrical around her sharp face with bony cheeks. "I'm good with faces. Helps in my work. So, you want to open an account? The bank requires a credit check, you know, so you need to sign here, that's right, but we won't run one, we'll take the college's word on it. They hired you, good enough for us."

"Thanks, although I'm not afraid of a credit check. You mean, you can just waive the credit check?"

"Helps to know an assistant manager."

"And that would be you."

She smiled. "Just sign here. Skip the part about income and all that. If we need to know, which we won't, we can ask the college."

Then she signed the form. "That's the important part, my signature," she said. Then she looked up at my name and address. "Wow, that's pretty amazing handwriting. It looks Chinesey or something." She saw me still holding the pen. "Oh, that's how you do it. You have that pen scrunched up in your fingers like nobody's business. You've got that pen under control and I don't mean maybe. Gonna keep your students under control too?"

"No," I said.

She looked up at me and smiled. "Good answer. I like you already." She gave me my starter checks. "So, you want the box of checks mailed to a post office box? Good move. I don't trust the mailboxes around here, even at the apartments. I use a post office box myself, even though I live in an apartment. Oh, you live in Spiro?"

"Yes, I do."

"So do I. See you around? Spiro's not a very big place."

"Maybe. I won't be doing much except eating and sleeping there."

She gave me her card. "You be wanting anything, contact me."

"Will do," I said.

"No, really." She looked into my eyes. She wore pine cone earrings. "There's more to do in Spiro than eat and sleep."

I saw Lois in the Warehouse Market the next Saturday. She wore a T-shirt and jeans, and no earrings. Her hair was still perfect, though.

"Why, if it isn't Gil Harrow," she said, with a big smile. Her teeth were small and thin.

"Well, hello, Ms., um, Barker."

"Butcher. Close enough. Fancy meeting you here. Not like there's anyplace else to shop in Spiro. Special today on chicken gizzards."

"I've never had those," I said. "I usually eat Asian food."

"Nearest sushi is in Tulsa," she said. "Not worth driving that far for."

"I guess that leaves chicken gizzards," I smiled.

"They're not for the inexperienced," Lois said. "I need to teach you how to do gizzards. Come on." And the next thing I knew, she was showing me how to choose the right package of gizzards. If you see any yellow or green, that means that the underpaid and undertrained Mexican meat handlers cut open the gall bladder, which creates a really vile taste. When she picked up a package of gizzards and looked at it closely, I noticed what was not on her left hand. "Oh, and by the way. Gizzards are about fifty percent cholesterol. You don't want to eat too many of them.

"And, if you got time away from your scholarly pursuits, I'll show you how to fry them up," she concluded. I hesitated, but she said, "Rural Oklahoma survival skill."

"Well, that settles it," I said.

"How's your schedule?" Lois asked.

"Pretty open on weekends," I said. I watched her face and could tell that she already knew that.

She pulled out a pad of paper and wrote an address on it and handed it to me. It was out on a country road.

"I thought you said you lived in an apartment," I said.

"I do. Just got this place. If you can wait until Saturday, the electricity will be on."

"Sure thing. Moving? If you can wait until Friday, I'll lend a hand."

After carrying boxes from her apartment to her car on Friday, I went out to her new home on Saturday. Nice new furniture everywhere, but most of the boxes were still packed. It was a large acreage, and even had a view of the Arkansas River above the trees in a little swale.

"Land goes down to the river," she said.

"Wow, nice place," I said. "How did an assistant manager swing that mortgage?"

"No mortgage. It was Great Uncle Shel's place," Lois said. "He's in a nursing home now. Premature dementia. I don't think it's inherited. The dementia, that is."

I wasn't sure why she had said this. I said, "So you grew up around here."

"Yes." I waited for her to tell me more about her family, but she didn't. I figured she would tell me on a need-to-know basis. Right now we were focusing on Rural Oklahoma Survival Skills.

"No wonder you know where everything is," I said. "You must have spent a lot of time in this kitchen."

There wasn't much to frying chicken gizzards. Roll them in flour and plop them down in hot oil. When they're done, put them on paper towels to drain. There was really no need for training. I thought about this as I peeled, cooked, and mashed potatoes.

"No can do," I said when Lois got out a bottle of merlot. "College rules." I had signed a teetotaler Pledge upon being hired.

"Even when you're not at work?"

"Nobody drinks at work. You don't. A rule like 'no alcohol at work' would be meaningless."

"A rule consists of words. What do the rules say?"

"I think it's something like *I will refrain from the consumption of alcoholic beverages while in the employ of the College*."

"That sounds like it means the work week. I work with contracts a lot." She poured herself a small glass. "I'll cover for you." She looked conspiratorially up into my eyes.

"Sounds a little dishonest," I said. "Better not say anything about it at church."

"Dishonest, eh?" Lois said, taking a sip from her glass. It looked like a really old glass from her great uncle, or even from earlier generations. "You know, Gil, what's most important is the heart. You are not going to be disorderly or drunk in public, and nobody is going to see you, except me and God, Whose Son made some pretty good wine. I trust you. You've never been in any trouble for public intoxication, or even any traffic violations…"

"How did you know that?" I asked, sincerely curious.

She choked for a moment and put down her glass. She did not answer.

"You've been checking up on me," I said. "And not just a credit check. Hey, relax. I already told you I was fine with that." She looked down at her hands then back up into my eyes. I suddenly realized that she was probably looking for a responsible man. Who knows, she might have already looked over the roster of new male faculty—which had been published in the newspaper—and picked me out. Maybe if there is a God who performs miracles—a possibility I still believed—God had scooched me over to Lois's window at the bank that day. And as for me? A young woman who had her own country estate—I could do a lot worse. "Hey, Lois. Smile." She did. "I saw that cole slaw in the fridge. And where's *my* wine?"

Chapter 23

All eyes were on us as we sat together in church.

"You sing really well," Lois said as I took on the main melody, then the bass line, then the tenor line on the third verse. Of course I was showing off. I was a professor.

Then came the sermon.

"Times can be tough, but you need to stand firm in the Lord."

"Can't be much tougher than those gizzards," I whispered to Lois. She stifled a giggle. Lois had told me about how her great uncle had broken his dentures while eating gizzards. You have to bite into them carefully and vertically, without horizontal shear. The ligament part was even tougher.

"There are so many temptations of the flesh."

"And gizzards are not one of them," I whispered to Lois. She didn't try as hard this time to stifle her giggle.

"But Jesus Christ gives us the power to say no to those temptations." Of course Lois and I had not given into any temptations of the flesh. We weren't stupid. If we got found out, I'd be out of the college so fast I wouldn't know what hit me. I suppose the power came from Jesus, but it wasn't really much of a struggle to stay out of bed with Lois. At least not yet. I really wasn't in love with her. I did, however, like the way she smelled and the way her hand felt when she shook mine. I didn't know much about her body, figured I would find out in time, and was in no hurry.

I found out a lot more about her body the next weekend when we went kayaking. She said she was planning to have a gravel path put in from the house down to the river, but for now we had to slip through the bushes and trees, dragging kayaks behind us. Neither of us was exactly sure what poison ivy looked like, so we erred on the side of caution. But once down at the river bank, we peeled off our outer clothes and left them on a big dead cottonwood snag. I did not look too bad in swimming trunks. Her body was thin and had few contours to hide in her bikini. She wasn't even big enough to plug the hole in her kayak. Soon we were maneuvering around in the river.

"Watch out over there. That's an alligator."

"Is not."

"Is too! Look at those beady eyes."

"Those are just bumps on a log. Alligator?"

"There *are* alligators in Oklahoma."

"Not this far north."

"Not yet. Ever hear of global warming?"

"Um, yeah."

"And there's a snapping turtle."

"Okay, I believe you this time."

I had worked late hours in the office to get my class materials ready for the following week. And when the weekend came, kayaking with Lois was the most fun I could ever recall having. She got mud all over her rump, and I had to help her clean it off with river water. But it was all in perfect innocence.

[Marginal note: Try telling that to Bishop Eash.—SM]

Chapter 24

One weekend, I had dinner (this time, a more conventional one) at Lois's new house. Pretty good roast beef, broccoli, and horseradish sauce.

"Wow, this beef is really tasty," I said.

"I guess so," Lois answered.

"What do you mean, you guess so?"

"All meat tastes pretty much the same to me."

"You mean, beef and chicken and…all the same?"

She looked at me a while and said, "It's called anosmia. I am anosmic."

"That means you can't smell anything," I said.

"Right. I can taste the basic things—sweet, salt, sour, bitter, and umami, which is a kind of generalized meat taste—but all the things we usually call flavor is actually scent, and I don't have it. That's why I don't wear perfume, lest I put too much of it on."

"Sorry to hear that you can't smell," I said. "You're missing out on a lot."

"But I don't know it," she observed.

"But can't that be dangerous?" I continued. "You need to be able to smell natural gas if there's a leak. Natural gas has no odor, but the utility companies put in mercaptans that you, I mean most people, can smell."

Lois pointed up to a little electronic monitor on the wall. Ah, I realized, a methane sensor—not quite as good as a normal nose, but enough to save her life.

"And that wine you are drinking," I said. "It must taste sort of vaguely sweet to you."

"And vaguely bitter. Red wine with tannins. And sour. I drink it for the buzz."

"Well, you're missing out on wine, too."

"There are connoisseurs of wine who can detect thousands of scents in wine, or they claim to," said Lois. "Are you one of those?"

"No," I said. "So long as it's decent, it's okay. The only wine I didn't like was this stuff called Bull's Blood. I should have known. If it is only six dollars, and is imported from Bulgaria, it must have been cheap at the source, therefore bad."

"So you also have a diminished sense of smell," she said.

I paused and said, "You are right about that. Enjoy your dinner."

She suddenly started wheezing and got up from the table. After a moment, she recovered. "Horseradish," she said. "I could feel it. That's not flavor; it's pain sensors."

We had dinner together every weekend, sometimes twice. We usually shared a videocassette movie after dinner. Religious-themed movies, mostly, but once in a while a movie that was supposed to be for families. One time we watched *Problem Child.*

"I'd have difficulty with a child like that, Lois," I said.

"Why?" she responded. "The child is just asking questions and pressing the limits of acceptable behavior, sort of like some theologians I know. Don't spill your wine."

"But I guess I would just accept whatever child God sends," I sighed.

"I guess so, Gil."

Then one night we just sat on her couch. She didn't have a movie picked out. She cleared her throat.

"So, Gil. We've been spending a lot of time together." We didn't look at each other.

"Yes," I said. "We never really sat down and discussed it, but if we don't recognize one another as boyfriend and girlfriend, then we are the only ones who don't."

"Can't you theologians just say *yes?"*

"So, when did it start?" I smiled and looked at her. "Our relationship? I think it was when I pulled your leg about the alligator."

"Was not."

"Well, not much later than that."

"I meant earlier." She looked up at me without a recognizable smile.

"You mean, the gizzard date?" I asked.

She was silent.

"You mean, before then? In the store? No, you can't mean, when we met in the bank?"

"I can't say, but it's been a while. So," Lois said, looking back down, "I want to know what you might be thinking, you know, about us."

"My intentions toward you are honorable."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Well, why don't you tell me what *you're* thinking."

"I asked first."

I froze. "You mean, maybe, you want us to be on a more…formal footing."

"Something to think about."

"Why me, Lois?" I turned fully toward her. "I mean, you haven't really had a chance to try out other men…or maybe you have. But not since I came to town."

"No." She stared seriously at her hands. "Gil, honestly. There's the community rednecks, and there's the college fundamentalists. And there's you."

"I can see you've been giving this some thought," I said. "After all, you checked up on me pretty soon after we met."

"Gil! I mean, what do you expect? When you…" She cleared her throat. "When you care about someone, you naturally want to know more about them." She looked at me and I could see her going down a mental list. I had never told her anything about my family background or my childhood experiences, nor had she told me about hers. Those things, which I intended for us to explore later, were apparently not on her list.

"You'd be taking a little bit of a risk forming a long-term relationship with me. I don't have tenure."

"We all have to take some risks, Gil."

"But, tenure? That's a pretty big deal. It's a career-maker or a career-breaker."

"You'll get it, don't worry."

"How do you know?"

She didn't answer.

"How can you be so sure? And if I don't get tenure, will you go with me to another college? Unless I stay here while you work your way up at the bank. Or we go somewhere where you can get a better bank job. Or…I think I see. Maybe getting tenure here is not the last word in my success."

"Of course not, Gil. But don't worry."

"So I ask again. How do you know I'm likely to get tenure?"

"I know a lot of people around here, including at the college. I hear things. And the things I hear about you are good."

"And, people listen to your opinions about me, too?"

She didn't answer.

"Well, I appreciate it, but the tenure decision is going to be made by Stewart Hundley, most likely. We all know where the college's money comes from. I don't suppose he listens to *you*?"

She didn't answer.

"There's something you're not telling me."

She looked at me bemusedly.

"Lois Butcher, tell me what you are thinking."

"My mother listens to me."

"What is her name?"

"Her name is Linda."

"Go on."

"Linda Hundley Butcher." When she saw the look of surprise on my face, Lois smiled and said, "Gil, you can't be serious. You didn't know who I was? You're such an innocent."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I recovered quickly. "I knew you had a rich uncle—this wonderful house, and all—but I assumed…Why would Stewart Hundley's granddaughter be working in a bank?"

"No granddaughter of Stewart Hundley would be sitting around idle."

"True," I said, professorially. "But why aren't you off in Tulsa or somewhere going to society balls? Why aren't you in the Silver Spoon Circle at the Philbrook Museum or something?"

"Been there, done that. But I'm happy here in eastern Oklahoma, out in the boonies. Lots of men I met in Tulsa implied that they could get used to living in the boonies. But I wanted a man who came out here of his own volition. And I certainly, certainly didn't want a man who knew who my grandfather was before getting to know me! Oh, and incidentally, up in Tulsa, with all that oil money, timber money isn't as impressive as it is around here. So, what do you say?"

"I mean, are we talking serious now?"

"You theologians never talk any other way but serious. With you, everything is cosmic. I don't mean we should make commitments right now. Just enter the phase of, you know, thinking about it."

But we never seriously thought about it any other way. We had a big wedding. And of course we added my name to the property deed.

Chapter 25

About a half year after Lois and I got married, the contractors started putting in the gravel path down to the river. We certainly didn't expect any problems. But one day I got a phone call from an inspector who asked if he could meet me and Lois out at the property.

At the appointed time, the inspector introduced himself in a jovial way. This made us a little suspicious, but we went along with it.

"Nice place out here. Quiet," he said.

"Yes. We like it a lot," said Lois.

"It's no mansion, but with nice acreage like this, why would we want a mansion?" I said.

"Quite right, quite right," said the inspector. "Out here in what some folks would call the middle of nowhere."

"Yes. Certainly, down here by the river, we wouldn't expect it to be…to have any easements for roads or cables or anything…" Lois's voice trailed off.

"No, no, of course not."

"Oh. Well. We thought that's what you called us out here for," Lois said. "To tell us to not build the path because of an easement."

"No, no. Today, this is sort of in the middle of nowhere. But seven hundred years ago, this place was hopping with activity," said the visitor.

"Oh, how interesting!" I said. "If I remember my history right, that was about the time of the Mound Builder Era, also called the Mississippian Culture. They had trade routes all over eastern North America. Their center of operations was up at Cahokia, outside St. Louis. I visited the historical park there once."

"Well, it was one of their centers of activity," said the man.

"You're getting at something," said Lois, with a bank supervisor look in her eyes.

"Well, Cahokia is the most famous of their sites. But we knew there had to be others."

"Like, where?" I asked, still uncomprehending.

"Like, apparently, here." The man signaled us to follow him down the unfinished trail. Lois frowned, but I smiled grandly.

The trail down to the river ran through what had until recently been a pasture. The man pointed to a grassy mound that was scarcely a half meter high. It looked like literally a million little mounds all over the world. "That's a mound," he said.

"Of course it's a mound," said Lois. Then her eyes widened. "Oh, you mean a *mound!"*

"Yes," said the man.

"This is a mound? Like Cahokia? This little thing?" Lois was not pleased.

"Well, there's been some erosion, of course, during the last seven hundred years, so the space around the mound has filled in. But the construction workers found some artifacts."

"Arrowheads? There are arrowheads all around here," said Lois.

"And they're all state property," said the man. "But I don't mean just arrowheads. I mean some pretty high-quality things. Things that must have belonged to some high muckedy-muck in the Mound Builder civilization. Some nice pottery and jewelry. We don't really know yet, because as soon as the first items were found, the contractors were required by law to stop construction and call the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey."

"You're stopping construction?" asked Lois.

"Say, this is interesting!" I said. "This could be something big. Cahokia was a big ceremonial center. They even found…oh." I stopped.

"Some of the pottery looks like it was ceremonial," said the inspector.

"Ceremonial," I repeated. "You mean, sacrificial?"

The man nodded.

"I read about that. At Cahokia they found evidence of mass graves of captives and evidence of human sacrifice…"

"You found bones here," said Lois.

"Yes," said the official.

"How many?"

"Enough that we think there will be a lot more once we start digging."

"So, you're going to dig this field up?" asked Lois.

"Yes," the man answered.

"Well," I said. "That's not too bad. An archaeological dig! The only thing our neighbors can claim is a few cow pastures. We'll be the only ones with a famous archaeological site. Why, think of it! I can bring students here on field trips. We can talk about how primitive religions justified human sacrifice, and why the religious and political leaders would have wanted to do this. I might be able to write papers about it, maybe even a book, and…"

"I thought the first European explorers just found scattered villages with teepees," said Lois.

"That was after the collapse of the Mound Builder civilization," said the man. "This place was already abandoned by 1500."

"Just the field?" asked Lois. "That's all you're going to dig?"

"Well, for now," said the visitor. "But this looks to have been a major city. Right on the banks of the Arkansas River, a big hub of trade. There might be dig sites all around here."

"So, you're going to dig the whole place up?" Lois was starting to sound frantic.

"Not right away," I said. "Right?"

"Just some exploratory digs at first," said the man. "We don't have enough money for anything big."

"This will put Eastern Oklahoma Bible College on the map," I announced proudly.

"And if we say no?" asked Lois.

"That never happens," said the man. "We've always been able to work out amicable agreements with land owners. But, meanwhile, I wouldn't be planning any construction around here."

"Gil, they're going to dig up our house before this is all over!"

"No, we aren't," said the man.

Chapter 26

"No, they aren't," said our next visitor. She was a white-skinned, white-haired, very pretty woman of uncertain age who identified herself as Cherokee. "They aren't going to dig anything here. They shouldn't even be here. This is a burial ground, and it is holy. Nobody should be here. *You* shouldn't even be here."

Lois's face blanched, but I recovered quickly from the surprise. "Well, I wouldn't be so sure about that," I said. "The state antiquities office, in conjunction with scientists at the Survey, appears to have jurisdiction over this matter, not you."

"The bones of our people are here," said the woman.

I cleared my throat. "They are very unlikely to be the bones of your people. There were no Cherokees here until the early nineteenth century, long after this civilization collapsed. The indigenous tribes here are the Caddo and the Wichita."

"There is evidence," said the woman, "that the Cherokees are the direct descendants of the people who built the system of mounds all around the continent."

"However that may be," I said, "you have no jurisdiction here. So, it's been a pleasant visit, I'm glad to have learned about your people, but I think it is time to go."

Lois looked at me with gratitude.

"We'll be back," said the woman, who was dressed in a leather blouse with fringes. "All other things being equal, the state antiquities office may be in charge. But we have a request before the state supreme court to have this declared a Cherokee burial site."

"You can't possibly get anywhere with that!" said Lois.

"You heard of Kennewick Man?" the woman asked.

"No," said Lois.

"Yes," I said.

"Well," said the woman, "the tribes that *presently* live in the vicinity of Kennewick, in Washington State, were given jurisdiction over the burial site of Kennewick Man by the federal government. Kennewick Man died about nine thousand years ago, and nobody knows which tribes lived there at that time, but the courts gave the *present-day* tribes the rights to the skeleton. And as for this sacred place? The Supreme Court of Oklahoma will decide whether we have the legal right to say what happens to this place. Morally, spiritually, it is ours. You are trespassing on sacred ground."

"Of all the…" Lois became agitated.

"Quiet, dear," I said. "Nothing is going to get resolved right now."

After the woman left, I said to Lois, "I hope your grandfather knows a good lawyer."

He did. We didn't need him, however. The state supreme court declined to hear the Cherokee petition. Actually it wasn't from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, but from the United Keetowah Band of Cherokees, whose headquarters were just down the street from the Cherokee Capitol in Tahlequah. But then the Keetowahs tried the United States Supreme Court, since, technically, the Indian nations are not under the jurisdiction of the State of Oklahoma. They are under the control of the United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs. Sort of.

And then the band of Keetowahs arrived. Five of them. The woman we first met was among them. There were three young men and an old man, all wearing buckskin. They walked right into our field and started beating a drum and chanting. At night. Apparently they had another petition—to carry out ceremonies at the burial site, for some temporary but unspecified period—that was granted by the court.

"This is outrageous," said Lois, stalking around our bedroom with her arms crossed. She looked very severely beautiful in her silk nightgown.

"It is certainly interesting," I said.

"The word *interesting* can mean lots of things, and you theologians mean all of them." She sighed. "So the Cherokee office won't do anything about it?"

"Apparently our visitors aren't your regular Cherokees," I said. "They're Keetowahs."

"What's…"

"That's a band of traditionalists who have been agitating against white civilization ever since the Cherokees arrived on the Trail of Tears. The Keetowahs don't really talk to the regular Cherokees very much. So the regular Cherokees can't help us and the Keetowahs won't return our calls."

Lois stepped over to a side table and turned on a small but loud fan. "This ought to drown out the drum beats," she said, slumping down onto the bed. I was already sitting on the bed reading a book about, what else, Native American history.

"Actually, I kind of like the sound of the fan anyway," I said.

"I can still hear them," said Lois, with her arm crooked over her eyes.

"Try earplugs," I said. "Wax earplugs. I use them."

Lois sat up and looked at me fiercely. "I shouldn't have to use earplugs in my own bedroom." She sighed. "Unless you start snoring." I could see her mental ledger sheet, labeled *earplugs,* with me in the positive column (since I didn't yet snore) and the Keetowahs in the negative column. I felt grateful to be in the positive column, as I once again looked at her beautiful petite form.

"Maybe," I said, "I can go reason with them."

"I'm going to sleep," said Lois, turning the fan up all the way.

I put on some clothes and shoes and walked quietly out to the spot where the Keetowahs were drumming. "Hey," I said. *"Osiyo."* I had looked up how to say hello in Cherokee.

"Osiyo, yonega," said one man. I wasn't sure if the five people were the same ones I had seen earlier. Surely they must take turns. The white-haired woman clearly in charge but remained silent.

"You about done for the night?" I asked.

"Just getting started," said the man. "Tonight we drink the Black Drink."

"What's that?"

"It's a purifying tea made from the leaves of the yaupon holly."

"What's it for?"

"It used to be to prepare warriors for battle. Tradition goes back a long ways, my man. At least as far back as Nanyehi, the last Cherokee Warrior Woman."

"My great-great-great-great-great grandmother," said the woman. "Also went by the name Nancy Ward."

"The black drink, it's an emetic, makes us vomit, clears out the guts. But we don't have warriors anymore. Just us spiritual leaders carrying out ceremonies."

"Is all of this really necessary? I mean, this is our home."

"Oh, my man. Not only is it necessary, but it was foreordained."

"Says who?"

"When we first came here, we found some yaupon holly bushes growing right along the edge of your forest. A whole bunch of them. The Great Spirit must have put them there. I'd invite you to join in, but you're not Cherokee."

"Well, I'll get back to my house then."

"Sure. No problem. Don't feel like you're intruding or nothing."

"I won't."

Lois had finally fallen asleep when I got back to our room, but she woke up just in time to hear the sound of people retching loudly after consuming the Black Drink.

Chapter 27

A couple of days later a couple of big pickup trucks pulled up on our property. You know, the kind that rednecks retrofit with wheels the size of small planets and that they use for churning up mud. Oklahoma does not require front license plates, so in their place were license-plate-sized Confederate flags. Rifles sat dormantly on racks in the rear windows of the cabs. One of the trucks had a horn that played the first line of Dixie.

By the time I got out to check on what was going on—I had only a few minutes before I had to drive to the college—there was already a confrontation going on. A burly white man, in T-shirt and bandanna, faced off against the biggest brave, who also looked like a white man in his T-shirt and bandanna.

Something was about to happen and would have had I not pierced the little bubble of tension. "What is going on here?" I asked.

The white man turned his head, but not his body, to me. "These people claim that the bones at this site are Cherokee. That is not true."

"I still do not see what this has to do with you," I said.

"It has been scientifically proven that the Paleoindians were Europeans. The earliest skulls from before the Clovis Era in North America had European, not Indian, facial features. That is to say. We white people were here in North America before these Indian people came over from Siberia and conquered us." The man looked at me with calm fury. He had studied just enough history and archaeology to be dangerous. The Paleoindians were the earliest inhabitants of North America, about 14,000 years ago.

"This is untrue, and even if it were true it would be totally irrelevant," said the Cherokee. He had not studied just enough history and archaeology to be dangerous.

"The DNA evidence should answer that question, once the archaeologists find a good specimen," I said, as if I had to prove anything. "But for the present moment, you are trespassing on my property."

"So are they," said the white man, looking back at the Cherokee. "Don't you get it? We're trying to help you out."

The Cherokee glanced toward the Confederate flag. "Doesn't look too helpful to me."

"Somehow or other," I said to the new intruder, "these Keetowahs have gotten permission to be here. You, however, have not."

"We're not stayin'," the man said. "No, we respect property rights, we do. Not like those people who call themselves *persons of color* even when they aren't any darker than a suntanned redneck and keep intruding on white folks' land and claiming not only that they have a right to do so, like the Mexicans, but claim that they were here first, like the Injuns. No, we're not stayin'. We'll be around, in places with public access, but believe me you'll know we are here."

The other whites were standing and watching. This included one stout middle-aged woman. The man who spoke to me turned and went back to his truck. He got in his truck, and the others got into theirs. They revved their engines, dousing me and the Keetowahs with diesel fumes, and drove in a wide arc, almost running over the Keetowah camp, and drove back out to the road. Big pickup trucks cannot turn around in anything less than a wide arc.

Lois came running out, dressed for work except for her tennis shoes. “What was that all about?” she asked. I could tell that she wanted to insert “the hell” but could never be sure who was listening and might tell her grandfather.

I explained briefly, then added, “That guy seemed full of anger, or full of something. I don’t know whether he had too many prunes, or not enough.” I’d been waiting years to use that joke.

The modern version of the Warrior Woman said, “Maybe he should try some of the Black Drink.” Everyone except Lois laughed.

“Well, they’re gone,” I said, leading Lois back to the house. I glanced over my shoulder to speak to the Keetowahs. “Don’t bait them, though. These people can be pretty nasty sometimes. They keep saying The South is gonna Rise Again. But then they have some beer and decide that maybe The South will rise next year. Harmless, unless you bait them.”

“We’ve run into his kind before,” said the Warrior Woman. “We pick our fights. We’re not indiscriminate. He’s not worth fighting.”

The rednecks were gone all right, at least from our property. But two trucks stayed parked along the highway next to our driveway. They had banners and posters—hand-painted—proclaiming that white people were the true natives of America. Local ordinances prohibit posting bills on public rights-of-way, so the rednecks kept their banners and posters either draped from the sides of their truck beds or posted on frames that stood on their truck beds. Local ordinance also prohibited loitering, defined as staying in one place for at least four hours. So every four hours they packed up and moved about twenty feet down the road or up the road or across the road. They played loud rockabilly, usually songs with patriotic themes. A truck would leave and another would come with rested and showered rednecks, so that for the next forty-eight hours the roadside near our driveway never lacked two trucks. They waved to me and to Lois when we left for work or returned. They never blocked the driveway.

The people who blocked our driveway, perhaps not realizing it was a driveway, were the reporters. There must have been a dozen reporters in almost as many vans at any one time during the day, although the rednecks were alone at night as they half-dozed and their truck radios droned quietly. The reporters came from as far away as Tulsa and OKC. The only thing that bothers me as I write this is that those reporters didn’t come to listen to me at the bulldozed prairie a couple of years later. The vans had satellite dishes on them to broadcast their interviews directly back to their offices.

And the rednecks were ready. They had their little brochures of information about a pre-Columbian European presence in North America. They spoke to the reporters about the research of a scholar named Cyrus Gordon, of whom I had briefly heard in one of my seminary classes. Gordon wrote that there was Phoenician writing on a stone found at Bat Creek, in Tennessee, they said, and the stone was buried in an Indian burial mound so it had to be authentic. Other scholars said it wasn't Phoenician, but was a closer match to the Cherokee syllabary invented by Sequoyah and first used in 1826. Gordon also claimed that an inscription found in the Brazilian state of Paraíba was of Middle Eastern origin. The rednecks also presented Gordon's story about the Los Lunas Decalogue Stone from New Mexico, which was a Hebrew inscription of part of the Ten Commandments. The stone, when first discovered, was very weathered, but now has sharp and crisp incisions. Most scholars consider it to be a fake. Another purportedly ancient stone, but one in very good condition, was supposedly found in a burial mound near Hopewell, Ohio. Many rednecks are at least mildly anti-semitic, but these men and women were jovially celebratory of the dispersal not only of ancient Phoenicians but of ancient Jews to the New World. A century ago, many people thought the Native Americans were descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The people who hold this theory believe that ancient whites from the Near East came over and taught the dusky natives all about civilization, including how to build pyramids and mounds that looked vaguely Egyptian. Of course, if you build a mound, especially a mound with steps on it as with the Mayan ruins, it is going to look vaguely Egyptian. But the reporters ate it up, and published everything the men and women in the trucks told them.

But the crown jewel of the redneck protest was the Heavener Runestone. You see, it wasn't just Phoenicians and Jews who came to North America, they said; it was Vikings too. Of course, everyone already knows about Leif Ericksson coming to Vinland, which might have been Newfoundland. But there is no undisputed evidence that the Vikings made it more than a few miles inland. But in Heavener, Oklahoma, which was just a few miles down the road from our land in Spiro, there were Runic carvings in a big rock. Moreover, they were Runic carvings that you could actually read. The redneck protestors were happy to hop in the reporter vans and take them down Highway 259 to Heavener to show them the carvings at a state park that now protected the site. Most scholars (or all, depending on your definition of scholar) consider the inscription to be a fake. There are stories about people who knew people who knew the people who carved them, but none of this was written down at the time. The style of runes in this inscription had fallen into disuse by the time of the Vikings. The fact that an almost identical inscription has been found in Poteau, Oklahoma, just a few miles away from Heavener, was greeted as confirmation by the whites and as a duplicate fraud—by fraudsters who had not even driven very far—by scholars. The fraudsters did, however, drive a little farther to deposit a small runestone in the mud along the North Canadian River, further west in Oklahoma. The letters "PIA" were found carved in a rock on Turkey Mountain

just southwest of Tulsa. The Tulsa reporters promised to check this out when they got home.

There was even this really annoying botanist who came around. He studied a certain species of tree, found in a small location in south central Oklahoma. This species of tree, an alder I think it was, grew in only three locations in the world: the Delmarva Peninsula east of Chesapeake Bay, a single swamp in northwest Georgia, and in south central Oklahoma. He believed that the Mound Builders had carried the seeds of the tree with them from Delmarva and planted them in Georgia and Oklahoma. When asked for further evidence of his assertions, all he could say was that there were a lot of things we do not know about pre-Columbian history. I wasn't sure what this had to do with the archaeological site on my property or with the assertions of the white protesters. I think he just wanted to be on television.

And the reporters wanted to interview me. However annoyed I was at both the Keetowahs and the whites, I could not pass up this opportunity. I was the closest thing that the college had to an expert on such matters. So I got to present my face on television explaining with scholarly caution that the evidence is solidly against the idea that Europeans visited North America before Columbus, except for Leif Ericksson, but of course scholars (such as, I reminded them, myself and the rest of the faculty at a college that most of them had never heard of) are open to any new evidence.

"How do you feel about the Cherokees sitting on your property?" asked one.

"They're actually Keetowahs," I said.

"Well? Aren't you getting a little tired of them?"

"They're here legally, so it's not my place to say. I can just say that my wife and I will be glad when everything is over."

"Aren't you a little tired of the white protesters too?"

"Of course, but they're here legally as well."

"The protestors have connections with the World Creativity Movement, a white supremacist organization. Doesn't this bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me. But I believe the appropriate government authorities will make sure they don't do anything inflammatory, at least, any more than what they have already done."

"What does your wife think about all of this?"

"Ask her yourself."

"We did, and she told us there was a place by the river at the end of the trail that is blocked off that we can go and jump in. We understand your wife is the granddaughter of Stewart Hundley."

"Every woman is somebody's granddaughter."

"What does Stewart Hundley think of all of this?"

"Ask him yourself. Meanwhile, did I tell you about the book I am writing?"

*

The reporters were starting to get a little weary of the whole thing when the white protesters pulled their carefully-prepared stunt. Just after sunset one evening, some of them huddled under some trees off the side of the road. Soon afterward, what appeared to be Indians with tomahawks came running up our driveway and screaming at the Keetowahs who had continued their drumming. The drumming stopped for the first time in I don't know how long. I'm sure Lois knew. The intruders swung their tomahawks in the general direction of the Keetowahs. They knocked over the teepee that the Keetowahs had erected. (Keetowahs, as was also true of Cherokees and the other tribes who had come from the east, had never actually lived in teepees.) When the invaders ran back down our driveway to their trucks, they were met by law enforcement.

I went down to watch the televised confrontation between the sheriff's deputies and the white intruders dressed like Hollywood Indians. The whites explained that they were doing the same thing that our patriotic ancestors had done at the Boston Tea Party—dressed like Indians and trespassed on private property to do something that history would revere. The footage was pretty good—the whites had some creative costumes that would under any other circumstances have been considered borderline indecent—and this clip made it onto Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show,* in which a comedian reporter who never left the studio pretended to have been on the spot. It was the first time *The Daily Show* had done a spot about rural Oklahoma since they sent Samantha Bee to Sipokni West, a fake old west town in south central Oklahoma, a couple of years earlier. The deputies were not impressed. Nor could they do anything, since the tomahawks were kids' toys. The only charge would be trespassing. When they saw me, they asked me if I wanted to press charges. I said I just wanted to get some sleep. That is, unless those reporters over there wanted me to tell them about the book I was writing.

Chapter 28

The white protesters left after a few days. The Indian drummers left after a more few days. They blocked the archaeologists, who came to dig around some more, and the archaeologists had to gently push them out of the way. I felt relief. Lois was still upset. She noticed something unusual.

"Why are there so many archaeologists around here?" she asked me.

"I'll check before I go to work," I said.

It was now late autumn and a chilly wet day. It had been cloudy, so the oak forests had turned a dull brown instead of the brilliant gold and red that you see in crisp clear autumns. I walked up to a man who looked like he was in charge.

"So, I didn't realize there were so many archaeologists in Oklahoma."

The man wore overalls and smiled. "There aren't. Most of us are excavators. The only archaeologist on site right now is that person over there." He pointed. I didn't like his use of the phrase *on site.*

"So," I said as I approached the archaeologist, who wore torn jeans and a flannel shirt. "I thought there would be just a few men here, you know, with shovels. But you've brought a whole trove of equipment."

I thought the archaeologist was a man until she spoke. "You're Mr. Harrow? Honored to meet you. I'm Dr. Albrecht. You got an important site here. The equipment? First," she pointed, "we put in stakes and strings to mark exact locations. We GPS them. Over there is the rack from which we hang the sieves. We dig up the dirt, then sift it, looking for artifacts."

"Where did you get the money for all this? You've got one, two, three, four sieves set up and more shovels than I've seen since they started building that CVS down in Poteau."

"A rich donor who is very interested in history."

"It wouldn't be Stewart Hundley?"

"Course not. It's the other timber guy."

"You mean Paul Hillyard?"

"That's the one." Hillyard was Hundley's main business competitor. He owned lots of loblolly pine plantations in eastern Oklahoma. "He heard about this place, and in no time had donated money for us to order extra sieves and hire excavators. Those sieves are expensive, mostly because it's such a small market."

"Found any bones?"

"Of course. But that stuff about an Indian burial ground was wrong, at least so far. Turned out to be dog bones. The Natives here didn't have horses or cows or such. They used dogs to pull travee to move stuff."

"To pull what?"

"Travee. French word, spelled t-r-a-v-o-i-s. Triangular frameworks made out of tree boughs. They hold the merchandise up above the ground. One point is attached to the dog, and the other two drag in the dirt."

"How could anyone get dog bones mixed up with human bones?"

"When you get just pieces of rib, it can be hard to tell them apart. You see what you expect to see, sometimes, in archaeology."

"In theology, too."

"What's that?"

"Never mind. Well, it's kind of a relief to not have a burial site here."

"For us too. We have Native observers here, and some of the excavators are Native, and if they find any bones that look like they might be human, they can shut us down."

And it wasn't long before they found human bones. And not just a few. They found what had once been a big pit and it was crammed with human bones. Apparently it had been a mass execution of captives, mostly male. The captors who ruled this portion of the Mound Builder civilization had kept most of the women as slaves. One of the archaeologists told me that, in Cahokia and probably here too, when an old chief died, his wives were sacrificed and buried with him. I even read in a book that, according to legend, the captors raped the women and then, a few months later, killed the women and cut out the fetuses for their prime delicacy, roast baby. I wish I was making this up. But you can't make something like this up.

I was no stranger to horror stories of this sort. There seemed to be no end to the creativity that the Sumerians, then the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, displayed in their cruelty to the other tribes they conquered in what is now the Middle East. They would flay and impale their victims. Sardanapalus had his wives killed and buried with him. From Biblical accounts, the Israelites seemed almost humane when they conquered Canaanite villages and cities. But, of course, we have only their records for this. Perhaps these people, who gave us Abraham and Moses and the Ten Commandments, and the scriptures that said that they were God's chosen people, were just as evil as the Babylonians. I began to wonder about this more and more even while I was teaching students about the Old Testament.

I could not identify the precise point at which I stopped believing that the Israelites were God's people, or that God had a chosen people at all. My teaching did not change much. I just added phrases such as *according to Scripture,* rather than directly saying that God ordered Joshua to put every man, woman, child, and beast to the sword as he conquered Palestine. I even wondered about the word *scripture.* But all it means is something that is written down. I tried to keep the capital letters out of my voice when I said *scripture* or even *god.*

But I clung to faith of a more general sort. Part of it was faith in the New Testament. Jesus had fulfilled the destinies of prophet, priest, and king, which in Old Testament times had been separate competencies, always vying for the upper hand in Israelite political struggles. But now Jesus was all three, and His Kingdom was spiritual, so there was no more justification for mass killings. I was utterly honest when I taught my students that mass murders such as the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, carried out by French Catholics, and the massacre of the Pequot Indians, carried out by the American Protestant Pilgrims, were contrary to god's will, and even my most fundamentalist colleagues agreed. I taught a seminar course about the New Testament book of Hebrews, which was a letter supposedly written by the Apostle Paul to his Jewish friends. It is a confusing, contorted justification that explained the Christian Church as the new version of the Nation of Israel. I just left out the words *confusing* and *contorted*.

The other part of my faith was that, somewhere, sometime, there must have been people whose religion led them to embrace peace and love instead of conquest and persecution. I mean, aside from brief episodes such as the communist Christians who lived in Jerusalem right after the death of Jesus. They owned everything in common and loved one another. But it didn't take long until Emperor Constantine had taken up the cross as a new symbol of conquest. And, as I taught my students, the Christian church was torn apart by schisms almost right away. Manichaeans and Valentinians and Gnostics and all the wearisome rest. I wondered if maybe, just maybe, the Native Americans were peaceful spiritualists. But when those bones started coming out of the pit on our land, I quickly dismissed this delusion. I came to believe that, while you can always find individual, nice spiritual people and small groups of nice people, there has never been a benevolent religious culture, a People of God, in the history of the world. This was starting to drive me to distraction.

Chapter 29

And that was when the real troubles began.

I was blindsided by an attack by—I can hardly say his name without disgust—Dominic Pester, the wavy-haired sallow-skinned historian near retirement. He barged right into my office, which was quite small, which meant that I had to back up from my computer and almost press myself against the bookshelves lining the wall to keep some space between us.

He grimaced at me. His face normally looked like a grimace, but he made sure to enhance the effect. He held out a stubby finger toward me. "You are teaching the students that the Bible is full of errors," he spat at me. "You started it in my course back when I was on medical leave."

"That is not true," I said, my alarm starting to turn to defensiveness.

"Oh, yes it is. Everybody knows it."

"Have you ever been in one of my classes?" No response. "Have you ever looked at any of my class handouts?" No response. "I would be glad to show them to anybody, and challenge anybody to find any problem with them."

"The students don't like what you've been doing in your classes," he said even more loudly and more closely.

"I have not heard this, and it was not in any of their anonymous evaluations of my teaching," I said.

"You don't even start your classes with devotionals, do you?"

"No, I don't. That's not relevant to the class. They get plenty of devotional experience when they attend chapel services every morning at 10:40 in Hundley Hall."

"Well, that's the problem," Pester said. "The students need more guidance regarding what to believe. And you're not giving it to them. You actually let them reach their own conclusions!"

"That's my job as an educator," I said.

"No it's not." Pester lowered his voice but made it more intense. "Your job is to guide them into the pathways of eternal life. And you're not doing that. Need I mention Miss Belinda Beck?" This was the girl who had attempted suicide after taking my class. I ignored his reference.

"The Dean has had ample opportunity to order me to start each class with a devotional prayer," I said. My own voice was rising. Our Dean was mild-mannered and, had I not been starting to get angry, I would not have used the verb *order* with regard to him. "He has not done so. If he does, I will comply. No problem."

"You are not doing what needs to be done," Pester sniffed. "You seem to not put any effort into teaching your classes. You are spending all your time writing on that book."

"The research for that book is helping me teach my classes better," I said, half rising. If I had risen all the way I might have run into the intruder. "Some of them are helping me with the research. It will be an important book for the College."

"Ah, free labor," Pester said.

"In return for acknowledgements in the book."

"The book about the Native American sites," he said.

"You bet. It will be an important book for…"

"You said that," Pester sniffed again.

[Marginal note: Are you ever going to finish writing that book?—SM]

"Besides," I continued. "Weren't *you* writing a book?"

"That project is on hold," Pester said.

"Publishers rejected it?" I should not have said. But, fury flowing through me, I continued. "Wasn't that the book about how American history courses should not include so much information about slavery and about the genocide of Native Americans? That history courses should be more patriotic? Isn't that why you've been cancelling some of your classes, so that you can drive to Oklahoma City and meet with legislators to get them to propose a bill to make Oklahoma high school teaching standards de-emphasize the plight of black and Native peoples? No wonder nobody wanted to publish it. Maybe you should have one of those Christian home-school publishers print it up, or maybe Bob Jones Press?" Bob Jones University, down in South Carolina, had stopped requiring black and white students to use separate sidewalks much later than public universities in the South, citing their religious belief that races should be separate.

Pester suddenly became calm. "You're implying I'm a racist?"

"No," I said intensely. "That's exactly why your insistence on writing and promoting such sh—such stuff is so puzzling." My voice rose again. "You have nothing but false accusations to make against me. You could easily have asked the Dean if there was any evidence to support your accusations. Had you done so, you would have found yourself to be in error. In which case, you could have shut the—shut up, and there would have been no problem. But now you are invading my office—I remind you the door is open, anybody could be out in the hallway hearing you make accusations that could form the basis of dangerous rumors…" I was glowing with wrath by that point.

"And you give students extra credit projects to write about their own religious thoughts," said Pester, raising himself to as impressive a hauteur as he could.

"Yes, you are finally correct," I said, glowering.

"Anybody can write an extra credit essay," he said. "You are giving your students ribbons for just showing up."

"Not true," I huffed. "I do give full credit for thoughtful essays. But not every student writes thoughtful essays. And, since it is not required, some of the students don't write at all. You are welcome to look at the distributions of my grades, and you will see that I grade neither more nor less harshly than anyone else here at the College."

"You don't know that, of course," said Pester.

"Of course not," I said. "But the Dean knows whether it is true or not. If I were off-base in that respect, the Dean would have told me. And of course you don't know either. That hasn't stopped you from blabbing out falsehoods about me."

I stood up. Pester jumped back as if he thought I was going to attack him. "Whoa, hold back! Are you going to get violent or something? See, this proves it."

"Proves what?"

"Proves that you are psychologically unstable."

I was about to explode, but controlled myself, so as not to provide him with any confirmation of his beliefs about me. "Listen here. You came to my office, not I to yours, and you came in anger and to make false accusations. You have nearly pressed me against the bookcases. This is aggression. Of course I'm angry."

"Everyone knows you have psychological problems," Pester said calmly, with a big smile.

"By *everybody* you mean everybody whom you have told that I do. The people whose views you have biased. Now get this through your head," I said. "First. You are not qualified to psychoanalyze me. Second. Even if you were, announcing your conclusions in an open doorway to an open hall where anybody could be listening would be unethical."

He grinned impishly. "Guess I'm outta here. Don't want to be around if you get *real* psychological." He slipped like a wraith out of my office and down the hall.

Chapter 30

That was when I experienced a big change in my spirit, or whatever humans have in place of a spirit. I lost interest in doctrines. I started rethinking everything I thought I knew about God. As you can probably guess, this is when I started writing *God and Freedom.* I felt surrounded by people who were all sure, absolutely sure, about the Big Questions. The fundamentalists at the College were so God-damned sure that they were God's chosen people and understood everything without even having to study it. The white supremacists parked out on the road did the same thing. The Keetowahs banging their drums did the same thing. Everybody was on an ego trip of certainty that God or the Great Spirit must agree with them, was perhaps obligated to agree with them. Everybody was crazy, I thought, except me and Lois. I know, it sounds like the old joke about the Amish man who told his wife, *Everybody is crazy but me and thee, and sometimes I wonder about thee.* Sorry, Sophia, my love.

While the Big Questions were driving me to distraction, that was not what was bothering Lois. She never wondered about any Big Questions. I do not recall having even one deep theological conversation with her, except one, about which more below. Lois never actually said *We'll understand it all by and by,* like a hillbilly preacher, but she said words pretty much to the same effect. What was driving Lois to distraction was the fact that there were now twenty or thirty Indian drummers, from a dozen tribes, pounding away all night on our property.

I spent all evening each evening writing the first draft of *God and Freedom*. The drums bothered me even more than they bothered Lois. Because of this, and because I needed reference books (someday this information will be available even in rural Oklahoma on the internet), I spent many evenings in my office. Lois told me this was not a problem. But I should have listened to the way she said it instead of the actual words.

And then the excavators started digging holes right in our yard.

"Wait. This is our back yard. You can't dig here," I told them.

"Oh yes we can. It's in the purchase agreement."

"Where?"

"Right here, under Miscellaneous Disclosures. We can dig right up to within three feet of your wall. So long as we don't cause any structural damage to your house."

"Lois, did you read that?" I asked one evening in the spring. Winter rain and mud had given us temporary relief from the excavators, and the drummers too.

"No. It must have been there even back when Uncle Shel had the place."

One evening I came home. Lois wasn't there. I assumed it was another long day at the bank, where she had become the chief Loan Officer. She had her own problems. She had started getting mortgage terms wrong, little things like telling customers they could borrow eighty percent of the appraised value on a refi when it turned out they could

only borrow seventy-five percent, things like that, but things that added up to an undermining of her professional credibility. I called her office and nobody answered.

When she did get home she told me that her grandfather had called her in to talk, and right there in his home office was the college president and, of course, Dominic Pester. The president asked her point blank if we drank wine.

"Well, Lois?" prompted Stewart Hundley

"You already know I buy wine, Grandpa."

"And it's okay for you to drink it, Lo. But what about Gil?"

"It depends on what you mean by drink."

"You're talking like a theologian, Lo."

"I cook with it."

"So the alcohol cooks away?" asked the President.

"Well, how can I know? Not every molecule, I suppose."

"And that's all?"

"We use it in salads."

"And that's all?"

Lois told me that, at that point, she stood up and let the men know just how stupid she considered this discussion to be. Fortunately, her grandfather, who drank wine at home, said something to the effect that he was not interested in bothering his granddaughter or her husband any further on this matter. The president and the silent Pester, whose idea this meeting had been, looked a little uncomfortable when Lois threw her little impish grin at them.

My contract renewal was up to Stewart Hundley and his opinion was now up to Lois. So far, so good, except that I did not like to have my job so dependent on the whims of such a small number of people, not even if I was married to one of them.

But it wasn't just me that things started going wrong for. Or even for Lois, with her little problems at work. But for Stewart Hundley. His competitor Paul Hillyard had started using genetically engineered loblolly pine trees almost a decade earlier, back in the early biotech days, and Hundley had not. This was just enough for Hillyard to out-produce Hundley. This lowered the price per board foot by just a little. But it was enough that Hundley had to decide to clear cut the forest all around the college. By late spring, the college looked like a scab on top of a bleeding hill. Almost no trees remained, since the college campus itself had very few. But even this was not enough to save Hundley's bottom line.

Nor mine. The drumming was too much for Lois, and she moved out. But she visited every day and we made various kinds of love, none of it passionate, but all of it, at least it seemed to me, pretty good for the circumstances. But one particular evening there was something different in her eyes.

She simply said, "This isn't working."

I could tell that the entries on the negative side of the ledger in her mind had finally outweighed the positive side. Maybe just a little bit, but enough to tip the balance. Whatever had been positive, about my work, was now at least insignificant; in fact, the college seemed less significant to her, whether I was associated with it or not; our land was eroding away in archaeological trenches, just as the college was eroding away from clear-cutting; and there had to be other nice guys in the world. I saw no hostility in those beautiful dark eyes. I saw only a love that had shallow roots, roots that could not hold down the loose soil of a complex landscape. I saw only a love that was not wild.

Except for one blessed moment. When I recall that moment, I am flooded with more love for Lois than I actually felt when we were married. What you and I have had for months, Sophia, Lois and I had for that moment.

Night after night she could tell I was tense about something. I started several times to tell her about my confrontation with Dominic Pester, who had no power over me but who could cause a lot of damage. But whenever I began an overture to my opera, she would change the subject. Finally my tension was great enough that she noticed it. Strangely, I think she put our ensuing discussion in the positive column.

"Look, Gil, I can tell something's eating you."

This was all I needed to get started. I actually gave a creditably calm summary of the events of my confrontation with Pester, though not as clear as I wrote above. At least I think I was calm, though somehow my pillow ended up in the corner and I had to go retrieve it. When I got back to bed, Lois kept getting closer, and put her arm around my shoulders. I think she would have let me weep in her bosom, if I'd felt like weeping. But I didn't feel much of anything other than a deadness that was occupying the place where I'd once housed inspiration.

"Oh, Gil. I didn't realize. I thought it was something to do with me," she said as she kissed my cheek.

"God no!" I said rather loudly, then smiled.

She smiled and whispered into my ear. "Try not to hate him. These little wars that go on in academic departments at colleges big and small all over the country are so—from my viewpoint as an outsider—boring! Like, what did that man get out of attacking you? Nothing! Nothing, not even fun! At least, it didn't sound to me like he was having fun. And he probably knows…" She kissed my ear lobe and breathed into my ear. "…down in his heart of hearts or whatever he has that he was wrong. Hell would freeze over before he would admit it, but there it is. You know," she continued as she pulled away from me and propped up her pillow to sit like Buddha. "If you looked at this whole thing—not just this conflict, but all the others going on at this pitiful little college—now don't pretend you didn't know there were other hissy-fits going on—from thirty thousand feet, it would just look like an ugly pimple on the butt of the Earth."

I faced her and smiled. "I like that. Can I use it in a book?"

"Remember to cite me in the footnote," she smiled.

[Marginal note: So that's where that came from!—SM.]

Lois continued. "How about higher than thirty thousand feet? Like, seeing the whole globe. Everywhere you look, people are suffering. Political oppression, sometimes highly visible as with 9-11…" This had just happened and we had just started referring to it by that term. "…and sometimes almost invisible, like the oppression of women in the third world. Little wars everywhere you look. And I hear big ones are on the way." The Iraq War was about to start, though we did not know it. "And in all of these cases, everyone thinks they are God's chosen crusaders, to conquer infidels or to keep women in their place." I wonder if she ever found out how right she was, once President Bush had, just briefly, named the Iraq War *Operation Infinite Justice.* "But I heard an astronaut say once…he came around to our high school…that from outer space you can't see the little red lines separating the countries on the map.

"So, anyway, Gil, don't hate him. It's not worth it."

"Actually, I don't hate him," I said. "You want to know how I feel about him? I don't want to see him suffer. I just want to see him get a shame-dog look on his face, put his tail between his legs, slink into the corner…"

Lo was snickering.

"…and have an accident…"

She started laughing out loud.

"…which, for once, somebody other than I will have to clean up!"

We were roaring. Soon we were all over each other. But not for very long.

It was an amicable divorce. There was certainly no need to spend money on a court case; we handled it in one of those Don't-fight-about-it law offices. That is why I could say so little to you about it, Sophia. There was no wrong of which I could accuse Lois. There was no formal declaration of heresy on the part of my colleagues, who were at any rate more preoccupied with scrambling for new funding sources. Divorce is grounds for expulsion of faculty from the College, according to my contract, but they had too much else on their minds to even bother with me over that. There was no point at which Stewart Hundley became no longer a rich man. It was nothing except that my calculation of a live marriage came out slightly on the positive side, and Lois's on the negative.

When the Dean told me I would have to leave the College, I really had no desire to dispute him. And I had an entire terminal year, full work and full pay, before I was required to depart, though I could always leave sooner, if I chose. I redoubled my work on *God and Freedom.* It was my life. The book contract, which I received that fall, came with a tiny advance and no prospect of becoming well known. Its sudden fame, the following spring, caught me as much off guard as Dominic Pester's attack had almost a year earlier. Finally I could smile at him as he had to stare early retirement with reduced benefits in the face. (He later became a lobbyist at the legislature for Christian-based history curricula in high schools, but this did not provide much of a supplement to his

income.) Sales of my book were enough for me to feel good about abandoning the job search in which I was engaged. I had applied everywhere, even to President Lorenzo Beanfield at Abrehum Waller Agricultural College in Georgia. Laugh all you want but it was a step up from Eastern Oklahoma Bible College. I almost regretted that my book's success came too late for Lois to include it in her calculations.

That is how I started my life over in my little house near Wappy.

I have seen trees die. When a tree dies, it does not die all at once. It might lose a crop of leaves to a late frost or to a horde of insects. Then it grows a new crop of leaves, but has to draw upon its reserves to do so. Bark beetles bore through its tender inner bark, and spread fungus. The fungus grows, but more slowly than the tree. But each passing year, the tree withdraws more from its reserve, and invests less back in, like a failing bank. And then one year, the buds simply do not open.

Alone in my house, I continued to rethink what I believed about life. I had pretty much given up believing in a God who worked things out for the best. Your arrival, Sophia, your inconvenient and beautiful and stressful and nourishing arrival, has made me rethink everything. If I ever get it figured out, you will be the first to know.

Your loving friend,
Gil
August 2, 2003

PART FOUR: GIL

Chapter 31

Sophia and I had just started to get used to the idea that she could leave the house with me and, so long as she was not in Amish garb, she would not be recognized. We still did not dare to walk out the front door, facing the gravel road. Instead we would go out the back door and slip into the car. She kept the tinted window rolled up until we were out on the highway and there were no buggies in sight. But perhaps, after all, her T-shirts, jeans, and that bill cap that said "Water" on it was a good enough disguise when we went to the discount store in Durant for items not available in Wappy. I had even gotten her to try a little bit of beer—not enough to get drunk, but just enough to relax and have expansive thoughts.

My car, with Sophia in the passenger seat, was just beginning to edge out of my driveway into the gravel road one day when Sophia said, "Quick! Pull back!" Soon after she did, I saw the Amish buggy coming down the road. I backed up, parking under the slippery elm tree, and Sophia crouched down. "Nearly everyone in our community knows me—not just because I worked at the store, but because, you know, I am an inconvenient woman—so we had better go the other way." This would take us an extra five miles, but I had no objection.

Before we had pulled out, however, a beat-up red sports car rushed past. Its engine was very loud and it was moving so fast that I could not see how it could be controlled on loose gravel. It went in the same direction as the Amish buggy. Sophia got out of the car and peered around the privet bush near the road.

"Oh my God," she said.

"What happened?" I asked as I joined her. But she did not have to answer. The car had disappeared in a cloud of dust, and the buggy was in a ditch.

"I'll go check on the buggy," I said. "You'd better stay out of sight." But before I could get very far, the buggy driver, with a gray beard and a brim hat, had gotten out of the buggy, righted it, and untangled the harnesses. The horse stood still. I stopped and watched the man get back in the buggy and resume on his way and turn on a side road.

Before I could get the car out onto the road, the red car came again, back from the way it had come and as fast as it could go. What happened next was a stage set from Heaven. A deer stood in a little cluster of persimmon trees on the side of the road opposite us, and it jumped out in front of the car just as it passed. The deer's head bashed against the manifold intake that protruded above the hood like a mushroom, and its legs splayed out against the sky, yellow shit flying from behind it. It was a perfect hit—the deer flew over the car, not damaging it other than the hood. But the car swerved, at full speed, and tilted down into the ditch. It flipped end over end, crushed its trunk, and landed on its side near the edge of a pasture. Dust rose and the engine still whirred.

My only thought was that the driver of this car had nearly killed the man in the buggy, and then had come back the same way just as fast. He was driving murderously. I was happy that he had wrecked and was hoping that he had died. I have given much theological attention to altruism, and I knew that the flip side of loving your neighbors was to hate those who hate your neighbors. I felt sorry for the deer.

I got out of the car and stood looking at the wreck.

"Aren't you going to do something?" screamed Sophia. She was not thinking clearly. Altruism again. It is an instinct to save someone who is in danger even if our logical minds tell us that the person does not deserve to be saved. I felt that instinct, but only for a second. "Gil! Do something!"

I started walking over to the wreck, but I took my time. I was watching closely in case there might be an explosion.

"Gil! Move your ass!" Sophia continued to yell.

I looked back at her with an air of wisdom on my countenance.

Sophia started running toward me about the time I got to the car. I looked in the open window on the driver side. The driver, who appeared to be the sole occupant, was slouched downward toward the passenger window. He was a young, thin man with sparse facial hair. And he was moving, trying to turn himself around and crawl out. But his forehead was lacerated and bleeding.

He saw me and said, "Help me outta here, man!" His speech was slurred and he slipped back down.

I began to lecture him. I felt all my old professor instincts coming back, and I was mad with altruistic rage. "You almost killed that man in the buggy. You homicidal maniac! You deserve to die!"

But he gave no indication that he heard me. He just repeated, "Help me."

"Prepare to meet your God!" I yelled. This time he heard me, and turned his eyes painfully toward me.

Just then Sophia reached the car. "It's the little Garvin boy!" she screamed. "He's Amish!"

"What the…"

"He's in his rumspringa. If he lives, this might make him…"

"Sophia Muth?" the young man asked as blood ran into his eyes and he squeezed them shut.

Right then I smelled gasoline, and I saw a lit cigarette wedged between the cracked windshield and the warped dashboard.

"Pull him out!" screamed Sophia.

"No!" I said. "She's gonna blow! I have to save you, Sophia, *you!"*

The kid fainted and I pulled Sophia's arm, dragging her away from the wreck. God, that woman is strong when he pours her soul into something. She pulled away from me and started back toward the wreck. Right then, the wreck began to burn. It wasn't

exactly an explosion, but it was enough to make Sophia stop for just a second. She looked back down the road with terror on her face. I looked also. The buggy was returning along the side road.

"Go hide!" I told her.

"I was a witness," she said. "I have to stay."

"We both saw the same thing, and I can stay here. Now get inside!"

"I'll dial 9-1-1!" she said, running into the house.

When the buggy arrived, a strong old man stepped out. I didn't wait for him to say anything. I started pouring out the words. "I don't know who it is. But I'm pretty sure he's dead. Cuts like that, he can't make it. And the things gonna blow! I'll go inside and call for help."

I ran across the road and into my house. Sophia was running frantically around. "I can't find your cell phone!" she said.

I knew where it was but pretended to have to look for it. I wanted that son of a bitch to die.

"That's Brother Toland in the buggy," Sophia said breathlessly. "I can't let him know I'm here. But we've got to save little Alvie!"

"He's not little any more. His car is pretty big and it's deadly to other people."

"I babysat him!" Sophia was crying.

But nothing we might have done would have made any difference. Right then, the car erupted into a ball of flame. We ran to the window and saw Brother Toland and his buggy silhouetted against the fire. He stood motionless as if he were looking into the Hell that his Savior had just conquered.

I repeated my truths and my lies to the police when they and the ambulance and the fire truck arrived. *Yes, sir, I looked in and only saw one person. No, sir, I have no idea who the driver was. No, sir, you could not have seen a woman with me. I live alone.*

The officers let me go back in my house, and let the Amish man I insisted I did not know continue on his way also. Most of the officers' effort was spent trying to get gawkers to turn around and leave, and to help the ambulance attendants pull out the corpse. I was inside with Sophia by this time. The corpse was blackened and stringy.

"Little Alvie! He was a little wiggleworm but I liked him."

"That was a long time ago, Sophie. He grew up into a…"

"Into a what?"

"Into someone who could easily have killed Brother Toland, and you, and me!"

"You could have pulled him out! If he'd lived, he would have repented, sure enough."

"I couldn't pull him out, Sophie. I don't think I'm strong enough."

"You could have tried."

"Listen, Sophie. I didn't know who he was or how badly he was hurt. If I'd tried to pull him out, and then injured him while doing so, he could have sued me."

This silenced her for a few seconds.

"What? What did you say?"

"That's what the world is like, Sophia. Maybe not among the Amish, but among most Americans every interaction of every person is tainted by the continual threat of litigation."

Sophia stalked around and gesticulated, scowling. "I just can't believe that. Even in life or death situations?"

"You'd be surprised, Sophie. I listen to the news and I've heard the most disgusting things…"

"You're a theologian, damn it, not a lawyer. How can you make a decision like that…"

"He deserved to die, Sophie."

"You think you're God, don't you?"

"No, Sophie. But every day we have to make God-like decisions, in the total absence of advice from any real God. And I'm not the only one here who has had to make decisions about human life and death."

Sophia stood in silence. I cannot describe the look on her face. It was the only time she ever really looked ugly. "You had to say that, didn't you."

"Sorry, Sophie. But you know it's true. You had a few days or weeks to think about what to do about your helpless child. I think you made the right decision, but it's not up to me to decide. I had a few seconds to decide what to do about the young adult who wielded the power over the lives and deaths of others and who abused it. Don't judge me."

"I've got to call the police, Gil. I know who the boy was. They need this information."

"No, Sophie. I already told them I lived alone."

"Give me the phone, Gil."

"You find it."

She slapped me and ran into her room. I heard her weeping loudly. But she slowly came out when she heard me turn on my radio. A local newscaster said that an Amish elder had identified the driver as Alvira Garvin.

"I still don't understand what you did," she said to me quietly when she came out of her room. She had removed her glasses from her tear-reddened face. She looked into my eyes as she approached me. Then she backed up and looked me over as if I were a cruel and heartless man. Finally she ran back to me and buried her face in my shirt, grasping my shoulders with painful strength.

"Sophie," I said, "I'm just a man who has to figure out from one moment to the next what to do, and sometimes I don't even have a moment to think. We're all just people trying to do the best we can, except for the ones who aren't. We are trying to

make our way in the world against greater odds than a more generous God would have allowed."

Chapter 32

I was still hiding Sophia in my house, so she did not go outside except to sit with me in a chair after sunset, on the side of the house away from the road. We watched the nighthawks swooping for insects that only they could see, and we listened to the laughter of the scissortails. We sat still whenever we heard, at rare intervals, the clopping of hooves and the metallic crunch of buggy wheels on the road in front of the house. We kept talking about how wonderful it would be to take a walk along the country roads, arm in arm, stopping to look at wildflowers or even weeds. We knew that at some point we would have to go public and let her erstwhile community know where she was, and get things resolved. At some point.

At first we had interesting discussions, and I enjoyed the clean cuts of her wise mind. But as the weeks progressed she began to be afraid of the sound of her own voice. A burden was descending upon her. She was trapped, mainly by her own fear of being discovered and confronted with what she was still unable to entirely believe was not her sin. I knew she had to come up with something that would give her a purpose.

Her first idea was to write a book, like me. But it soon became clear to her that to become a non-fiction author she needed more than just good writing and good ideas. She needed credentials. Then I came up with a solution to her problem, and mine. I was so excited by it that I almost could not sleep. I got up and walked past her bedroom door and listened to her deep breathing while she slept, but I sometimes also heard her moaning and turning. I wanted to comfort her, but I knew I could not touch her. I needed to do something about my idea as quickly as possible.

Fortunately, my agent found a publisher who thought the idea was wonderful. The book would be called *The Burden of Freedom.* It was based upon the first conversation I ever had with Sophia, in which she pointed out that freedom meant groundedness in land and life. But a book, even a non-fiction book, has to have a story. This was the perfect solution: I provided the credentials, and Sophia provided the story. I would use her life as a framework for exploring ideas about how the Amish tried to find freedom within limits, but the burden was too great for them.

I wanted it to be a surprise for Sophia. I worked on the proposal during bits of time while she was cooking, or baking, or reading. When the contract for the book came, I walked into the living room—which Sophia had organized—and showed it to her, with the little space for her signature as co-author.

I expected her to be overjoyed. But she just looked at me with that puzzled owl face. Then she said, “If I sign that paper, I am committing myself to being your partner for several more months.” My heart was beating almost loudly enough for her to hear it. “This is the very decision I have been trying to make. It appears that you have made it for me. Gil,” she stood up and faced me. “Do you love me?”

"Yes," I whispered.

"Then you have to let me try something different. I…" She looked away. It was one of the few times she was unable to look me straight in the eye. "I want to go to the University of Oklahoma."

Colors swam across my field of vision and my head was light. I thought about asking her why, but I knew the answer. I thought about asking her what she wanted to study, but I knew the answer to that also. So instead I blurted out unformed questions and statements. "How can you, I mean, that costs money, I mean, you would need a place to live…"

Then she looked back at me. I knew the answer. She expected me to pay for everything. And it would of course mean that she would not have time to help me write the book, which was going to be our source of income. I did not need to explain this to her. She just kept looking at me like that.

"I, I suppose I could rent out this house and use the rent money to rent an apartment in Norman and we could live there and I could use the library to help in my writing and there would be lots of cultural things, not as much as Tulsa but…"

She kept looking at me. I knew that she needed some space without me. She also knew I still had a little money, just enough for her first semester, in my bank account. Nothing more in the world. But she knew it was for her. She was not greedy or selfish in expecting for me to pay for her to leave me. She just knew that this was the right thing for me to do.

"It's too late to apply for scholarships, or even loans," I said.

There were tears in her eyes, but she kept looking at me like that.

We were able to download all the application documents on the computer, but Sophia had to fill them out by hand and send them in. She needed two letters of recommendation, but she had only one: from me. I could honestly testify to the quality of her mind and her dedication to wisdom. Apparently my letter was enough, and they admitted her. She registered by phone for general classes. It was the last minute, but the classes she wanted still had room.

She spent the last evening alone in the bathroom plucking out little hairs.

She took very little with her when we drove to Norman. And we had almost nothing to say to one another. If either of us had started talking we would have cried. We just kept looking ahead at the road, as we drove up Route 48 then cut over on Route 9. We wanted to find her a studio apartment. There was never any question that she would not live in a boozy dormitory. Almost the only conversation we had was when I suggested she pledge for a sorority. We got a good laugh out of that one, then returned to silence.

We found the studio apartment. I gasped at the price, which I could afford for now, but if she continued another semester I would have to consider financing my house, which I owned outright (thanks to Lois's money) but which was not worth much. She had

and desired no furniture other than the futon in the back seat. I let her have my vacuum cleaner and a credit card and the cell phone; I had added her name to the account, and would get another phone soon. Her wardrobe was half of my T-shirts, the underclothes I'd gotten her when she first moved in, pants, and a couple of my extra winter coats. She planned to supplement her food budget with free meals at a campus ministry.

When the realty office, which managed the apartment, gave her the key, she asked for a second key. It was at that moment that I had to step outside so that no one would see me cry. I drove her to the apartment. She gave me the second key, then kissed me lightly and briefly. She did not look back as she went into her apartment. I never asked her whether she expected me to visit on weekends, or if the second key was just for emergencies. I drove back to Wapanucka almost in a trance, almost failing to notice the red light in Seminole. I had a lot of time to think about theology as I drove. This was love, I realized, love in its purest and plainest form, the bones of love. The fact that I realized, very clearly, that I finally knew what my purpose in life was, that helping Sophia was what my life was meant for, did not make me happy.

Chapter 33

Perhaps Sophia's departure was part of some divine plan. My mind was too numb to think about the ridiculousness of believing in a divine plan. The very day after I returned to my little house, there was a police raid.

The Wapanucka police pounded on my front door early in the morning. Through the windows I saw several patrol cars, and policemen at my back door as well. When I answered the door, they told me they had a warrant to search the premises.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"You Gilbert Harrow?"

"Yes."

"Missing person." He held out a warrant. "You know anything about a Mrs. Sophia Muth?"

I racked my sleep-addled mind to think of the most utilitarian answer. It was obvious that they had connected me with her in some way. I answered, "I've met her."

"She's been missing for a couple of months now," the officer said.

Of course, I could not say anything about the statement she had given to them, about which I was not supposed to know. All I could say was, "Well, as you will apparently soon discover, she is not here."

"Her image was identified in a newspaper photo. You were in that photo, identified by name. She's missing, and we have no other leads. We have no reason to suspect you of any wrongdoing, but we have a warrant to check the place out."

"What are the dogs for?" I asked.

But I knew the answer. They thought I must have murdered Sophia and buried her in the back yard. Under the okra. I smiled at the realization that this whole debacle would soon be over. Let them prod and sniff and leave. They wouldn't even find any of her personal items.

"You know where she might be?" another officer asked me.

"As you already know, she joined me for a protest out at the new subdivision," I said. "That's the only time I've seen her," I lied. "She said she was thinking about going to the University in Norman. You might check there."

He did.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Harrow. She is in fact registered at the university and has an address there. I'm sure you must be as glad as we are to know she is safe."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. I just said, "I wish her luck in her studies."

Chapter 34

And then one evening, when I was reading a book I did not want to read, to distract me from putting together a proposal for a book I did not want to write, to replace the book that Sophia and I were apparently not going to write, my phone rang. Maybe, I thought, it was Sophia. She had only been away for three days.

But it was Gloria.

"Hey, Gil, how's it going? Any news?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," I said. I told her that Sophia had left. I told her that I did not know whether Sophia expected to return, or whether I still had any expectation of intimacy with her.

"Oh, Gil, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Well, it's pretty hard on me. But don't be sorry. It's what she needed to do."

"How could she afford to…oh, I think I know. Gil, you're a wonderful man."

"Thank you, Gloria. I know that you don't just say things like that about everyone."

"Damn right, Gil. I didn't think Sophia would do something like…I mean, she seemed so nice…"

"Oh, she's still nice, Gloria. Everything you said about her when you met her is still true. It's just going to, for the foreseeable future, be true someplace else. So, tell me why you called."

"Do I have to have a reason?"

"No. But ever since your visit I've been wondering about you."

"Yeah. I told him to get lost."

"The veep of you-know-what?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's not really what I've been wondering about. You moved over to Greenpeace yet?"

"Nature Conservancy, actually."

"Congratulations on your cut in income! Now you won't have to figure out which pair of shoes to put on when you go to work."

"I hadn't thought of that. Thanks, Gil. You're not going to believe this. Right after I quit, I found out that my position with the corporation was going to be eliminated anyway. Like it was foreordained or something. I need to discuss this with a theologian."

She drove down from the Tulsa Nature Conservancy office after work on a Thursday, for a long weekend. I fixed her a really nice dinner, with lots of fresh tomatoes and okra. Gloria said she was going to bring some baklava pastries from a Lebanese store in Tulsa. But she also brought chocolate beer. I let her identify the main dish. She was confident that it was chicken wings.

"Go back about a hundred million years," I said.

She had one of the "chicken wings" sticking out of her mouth when she stopped and looked at me. "You mean…" she said, with her mouth still obstructed. She pulled the "chicken wing" out and said, "Frog legs?"

"Oklahoma's finest," I said.

She smiled and kept eating. She told me about her work, raising money to buy up some extra land adjacent to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, which already took up a substantial portion of Osage County west of Tulsa.

"And guess what I found there?" she said while stuffing another amphibian leg into her mouth. "A really beautiful wildflower."

I knew what she was going to say. It was perhaps foreordained.

She looked at me somberly. "Gil, what did I say? You have this funny look on your face."

"Blue wild indigo was one of the plants, in full and magnificent bloom, at the prairie where Sophia and I…and she kissed me…Sorry, Gloria. Why did I say that?"

Gloria rushed over and put her arm around my shoulders. "You still care about her, Gil. She's gone. That was her decision. But we don't have to think anything bad about her."

I stood up and put my arms around Gloria. We started kissing. When I began to cry, she drew my face down onto her shoulder. She pressed her body fully against mine. She was crying also. Then I did something I had never done with her, but only with Sophia: I kissed her eyes. She cried even more.

"I didn't come here to do this," she whispered in my ear.

"Maybe it was foreordained," I whispered back.

"You have protection?" she asked.

"Yes. I bought them when Sophia came. I haven't used any of them."

"Oh, Gil, you're a real man. You know how to do it, and you know when not to do it. I think I came to the right place."

We were about to leave all the leftovers, and even her baklavas, on the table where ants would probably get them.

"I just have to visit the bathroom," she said.

She turned, and I saw my new cell phone. I knew I should turn it off. I reached for it. At that moment, it rang, and Gloria stopped, without turning around. I hesitated.

"Answer the phone, Gil." She turned around. "It's probably my assistant calling you for a donation. I put your number on the list."

"You know perfectly well that's not who is calling."

Gloria looked at me with moist eyes. "Gil, answer the phone."

"She can leave a message."

"Gil, damn it, answer the phone!"

I pressed the answer button, but it took several seconds before I got the phone to my ear. “Hello,” I said. Then, after several seconds, I said, “This may not be a good time.”

Gloria started to get an angry look on her face.

“Maybe I can talk to you tomorrow,” I said to the phone.

Gloria grabbed the phone from my hand. “Hello. Is this Sophia? I thought so. Yes, this is Gloria. Hi! Glad to hear from you. You can talk to Gil right now. Oh, I have it on good authority that he loves you.” She stuck her arm out, the phone in her fist, and she looked away.

After a few seconds, I said into the phone, “Yes I do.” After several more seconds, “I can be there tomorrow morning.” I pressed the button to end the conversation.

Gloria turned from me and said, “You know you love her, Gil. I refuse to get in the way of that.”

“But, she didn’t say she was coming back to be my partner or something,” I answered. “She just decided that going to the university was a big mistake, and she wanted me to bring her back here so she can keep taking weeks and weeks to decide what she wants to do and she expects me to just put everything else in my life on hold for her…”

“Gil, you love her.”

“She has no right to expect me to do this, or to not, you know, with you…”

“You’re answering the wrong question, Gil. Funny a philosopher type like you would do that. The question is not whether she has a right to expect anything of you. The answer to that is clearly NO. The only question that matters is, *do you love her?* And I told her the answer to that one.”

“So did I.”

Gloria moved for the night into the empty room that would soon again be Sophia’s. And the ants did not, after all, get a chance to swarm all over the leftovers. The last thing that Gloria said, before going to the bathroom to brush her teeth, was when she held up a baklava for us to eat. “To love,” she said, with the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her face.

Chapter 35

"You want to tell me about it?" I asked a silent and pensive Sophia as I drove her back from the university.

"It's not very dramatic," she said. And we said nothing more.

We were at home eating fried okra when she told me her story. She didn't ask where the baklava pastries came from or where Gloria had gone.

"The first day of the first class, I was really excited," she began. "All the students around me were griping about having to take Freshman English, and they were envious of their acquaintances who had 'tested out' of it. I didn't realize that was an option, but it wouldn't have mattered. I actually wanted to write papers, learn how to cite references other than the High German Bible and the *Ausbund* and *Martyr's Mirror,* and have an honest-to-God professor tell me that my writing was good. Okay, Gil, you're an honest-to-God professor, or you were, and you told me that my writing is good, but I wanted a professor who didn't know me as a…personally to tell me. And maybe criticize me too. Sorry, Gil, I just don't see you criticizing me very effectively. But I was ready to spend hours in the library, researching and writing and printing on the equipment there. This class didn't have any tests, just papers, with all the rules spelled out. I was ready for rules, the exact format for citations and all the rest. They had a list of potential topics that we could write about, and all the topics sounded interesting."

"Sounds like exactly what you wanted."

"Oh, yes, Gil. But then this guy noticed that I was walking out of class by myself and walked over to me." Then she told me the story.

"Hey."

"Do I know you?"

"No. You don't know anybody here. I can tell."

"Then why would I want to know you?"

"That's not a nice thing to say to a guy who's just being friendly."

"Sorry. Hi. I guess I'll see you around."

"Ready for that first paper? I mean, it's due the second week!"

"So? It's not a big paper. More of an essay. Plenty of time."

"Right, unless you got as much partying planned as I do."

I didn't take the bait, so he continued.

"Yeah, as much partying as I do all semester. But me, I'm not worried. You worried about getting all those papers done?"

"No."

"Well, if you do get worried, just talk to me."

"I don't understand."

"I mean, think about it. What's your name? Sophia. Think about it, Sophia. What a waste! All over the country, at, like, what is it? Three thousand colleges? Five thousand? And every one of them has hundreds or thousands of freshmen writing essays. And where do those essays go? They eventually just get thrown out or deleted. All those words. You'd think there would be a more efficient way to do it. Well, there is. And it doesn't cost much."

"I don't understand."

He opened his notebook and showed me a list of titles.

"Interested in any of these?"

The titles were things like *Karl Marx in Context, Mark Twain and the Problem of Evil, Where Have All the Flowers Gone, a Retrospective on Pete Seeger's Legacy…*

"Pete Seeger's still alive," I told Sophia. "I met him a few years ago."

"Well, I guess he has a legacy, though," Sophia answered. "Some of the titles were creative, like *Animal Rights and Animal Wrongs.* There was one about gun control called *Armed to the Teeth*."

"Those were fairly predictable," I said.

Then she continued her story.

"Interested in any of these for your first essay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sheesh, girl. Okay. I'm selling essays. They're cheap. I have a website, you can check them out. I've posted the first few lines of each. Any you like, just write me a check and I'll print you out a copy. With your name on it! Sorry, I can't give you an electronic copy. You'd sell it to someone. Or maybe you wouldn't. You have this innocent look on your…stop looking at me like that! And, you see, I keep track of who is using which one, so that your professor won't get identical essays from two different students. Not even in consecutive semesters! My friend over at OSU, we trade our essays off each semester. Now, you buy an essay from some no-name website, you don't have the protection of knowing that somebody else hasn't used the same…what's with you, girl? Girl like you, you must have better things to do than to sit around and write essays and term papers…Stop looking at me like that! Everybody does it! Okay, not everybody, but plenty of people. Hey, I'll bet you're smart. You look real smart. Hey, I like that. Love them glasses. Really, I mean it. Girls with glasses turn me on. You know, instead of buying essays, you might want to sell *some. I'd take a cut, but you'd do pretty well. You look like the kind of girl who enjoys writing essays. Do tell. Well, this class requires three essays and two term papers. You could write thirty essays and twenty term papers, and get paid for it! Whaddaya say? You look like you could use some money. That ain't exactly Prada you're wearing. No offense, you're cute enough that you don't need fancy stuff, I'm just sayin' that I'll bet…Same to you! I was just trying to be nice! Sheesh!"*

"What did you say to him?" I asked Sophia.

Sophia did not answer my question. “That night I called you.” Their classes started on Thursday; the first three days had been orientation.

“Look, Sophie. Just because some people cheat doesn’t mean you’d have to. Everything you went to the university for, you could still do.”

“I know, Gil. I just lost interest all of a sudden. I guess that I started thinking that maybe a college degree doesn’t prove anything, I mean, if you can get other people to do your work for you. I decided that if I was going to drop out, I’d better do it right away, during the drop-add period. They cancel some of the charges that way. I didn’t want you to pay for something I wouldn’t be…I missed you, Gil, but I’m glad you didn’t rent out the house or anything. Thank God we didn’t have a lease on that studio. I still had my bookstore receipts and they gave me refunds, except for a processing fee.

“And, Gil. You know what I’m going to say. I still haven’t decided if I’m going to stay with you.

“Well, it sounds like you had a pretty exciting time when I was gone. Police? Dogs? Way cool.” She was eating her second cup of plain yogurt. She hadn’t been at OU long enough to get very many groceries, and we had to bring most of those back with us. “Well, it looks like I’ll be signing that book contract. You don’t look very excited.”

“Oh, Soph, this has been something of an emotional roller coaster for me too.”

“Gil…”

“Don’t apologize. We both know you had to do this. Anyway, once we get started working on the book I’m sure I’ll get excited. Either that or I’ll have writer’s block. Doesn’t matter. We’ll just call up your friend at OU. Sorry, forget I said that, it was a poor attempt at humor.”

Chapter 36

Sophia screamed. The scream was dull, like a well-worn scythe. I held her trembling hand and waited for her breathing to settle down. I started to say, “It was just an armadillo,” but did not. The image of the dead or almost dead animal retreated in my rear-view mirror, hidden by the hazy hot bright sunrise, as we continued to drive down the road. I started to say, “I couldn’t help it,” but she already knew this. She also knew that there was nothing I could do. Damn it, she knew everything.

All she said was, “I’m not sure about this.”

“About what?” I asked, trying to get my bearings again.

“We’re going too fast,” she said.

“I’m well under the speed limit—oh, that’s not what you mean,” I said when my brain caught up with my mouth.

“Maybe I was too hasty in leaving my Amish life behind,” she said. “Buggies never create roadkill.”

“Sophia,” I started to lecture her, “you will never be absolutely sure. Every decision...”

“I know!” she yelled, not screaming. “And it would be hasty and reckless for me to run back to them, as well. I just don’t have it figured out yet. I know, in your book you said nobody ever would. But it sounds like *you* do. *You* have *me* all figured out...”

“Sophia, please...”

“...and you have our life together already figured out, and you just know that it is only a matter of time until I choose you as my new husband...”

“Sophia, what are you suggesting we do?”

“Nothing. I’m just telling you...”

“No, there’s obviously something that you want to change...”

“I don’t know what I want,” she said. “After all this time, I still don’t know.”

We arrived at my house and I drove the car into the old garage. We got out, and Sophia walked through the kitchen door.

We had settled into a private routine. She left the house early each morning, going into the back yard to greet the sunrise, taking her journal with her. I actually wrote more and better essays than I ever had before. I had actually started work on my new book. I wrote, and Sophia wrote, each morning. But this morning had been different—a little emergency trip to the C-store for something we thought we needed—and it had disrupted our routine. Dewey wasn’t there. Usually I drove by myself, but this morning Sophia wanted to stay with me, even though she had to lie down in the back seat while I was parked. I should have suspected that it would be an unusual day.

About nine o’clock, the same hour upon which the Pentecost disciples had spoken in tongues, I heard the metallic wheels of a buggy grinding in the dust of the road through

the open door. I was not alarmed until they stopped. There was a light knock on the screen door. An elderly but strong Amish man stood in traditional black and white garb with a little black ribbon tie.

"Mr. Harrow," he addressed me. I saw the buggy and horse resting obediently in the shade of my box elder tree. He was alone.

"Yes?" I responded.

"I am searching for Mrs. Sophia Muth. Could you help me locate her?" The man's voice was rough but clear. He had the voice and words of a scholar rather than a country farmer. He and—who was it? Somebody Eash—must have done all the Bible study and theological thinking for the community.

"Who are you?" I asked.

I felt warmth approach behind me. "It is Brother Toland," Sophia said.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Sophia. I unlatched the screen door. The old man, damp with sweat and dusty from the road, was untouched by the earthiness of compromise or doubt as he stepped to the seat to which I directed him.

"How did you find me?" Sophia burst out, not moving from the door.

"That is not relevant," he answered softly.

"Yes it is," I said. "The end does not justify the means, and I want to know by what means you found her."

"This is true," he said, like Sophia. "Mrs. Muth, your photograph was in the newspaper."

"You don't read the newspaper," she shot back.

"We started, upon your departure," he said. We? "And there you were," he continued. "And Mr. Harrow was in the background of the picture. The caption indicated that your identity was unknown, but had arrived with Mr. Harrow, whose address is in the telephone book."

"The police have already been here," I said.

"They were in contact with us," said Brother Toland. "We already knew that we would not find your corpse here. They were the ones that were worried about that. I came to talk to the living woman, Mrs. Sophia Muth. Now Mrs. Muth, you have done a very evil thing, leaving your husband. But you are not an evil person. You have a good heart. I am therefore not surprised to find you taking refuge with a humble and decent man, a man who chose to visit your parents' store."

"When did you see me there?" I asked.

"Mrs. Muth's mother recognized you. She vouched for your apparent decency of character, perhaps in a desperate attempt to console herself regarding her daughter's moral safety. Now tell me, Mrs. Muth, have you had sexual relations with this man?"

"That is not relevant," I told him.

"Shut up," Sophia told me. To Brother Toland she said, "No, I have not. Gil has been so kind as to not press his desires upon me in this manner. However, it appears that you have already passed judgment on me. What good is it to be chaste if one is condemned anyway? Accordingly, after you leave, which will be very soon, I plan to have sexual liaison with him." She was wearing a pair of jeans that had become tight on me but were loose on her; she loosened the buckle.

My heart began to race, but Brother Toland was not flummoxed. "Mrs. Muth, you err if you assume that I have judged you already regarding adultery. I am here to confront you only with breaking your vow of subordinate companionship with your husband."

"Whom you have brought with you, I assume?" asked Sophia.

"No. He cannot possibly deal with this situation wisely. He would create only smoke and heat. Mrs. Muth..."

"Stop calling me that," Sophia said, sotto voce, not looking at him.

"That is who you are," said Brother Toland, not looking at her.

"Stop calling me that," Sophia said, raising her eyes to pierce him.

"That is who you are." He parried her gaze with his own sharp eyes. "It is a vow you made."

"It is a vow he broke. Or didn't you know that?" she intoned.

"It is a vow you made. As for your husband, he has to answer to God himself for whatever he may have done." Brother Toland sighed and looked away. "I have done what I came to do. We will not beg for your return, and may God have mercy on your soul for your sin, and for violating the *ordnung*. It is with regret that we must submit you to the *meidung*."

"That's shunning," Sophia reminded me.

"I regret having to do this, because in a world of evil people, after all, you are one of the good ones," Brother Toland concluded. He had already looked Sophia in the eye for the last time.

"Am I?" Sophia drew out her syllables. "Am I so? That doesn't sound like the way you and the church council described me after the *affaire des bois d'arcs.* And after the affair with the pink house. But before this affair. I had made no vow to not climb trees, or to not paint houses, yet you treated me like a breaker of covenants."

"I deeply regret that." There was silence for a moment. When Brother Toland said, "Sophia..." the air in the room tore like the Temple veil in Old Jerusalem ripping asunder at Christ's last breath. "We were wrong to treat you so hastily. Please forgive us."

Sophia stood motionless. A slight breeze stirred a lock of her hair.

"You have a responsibility to forgive us if we truly apologize," said Brother Toland, still not looking in her eyes.

"Very well." Sophia looked down at her bosom, which rose with nervous breaths under my Reconciliation Of All Faiths T-shirt. "Only for that."

Brother Toland rose. “I place you now in God’s hands. You remain in His judgment as long as you are away from your husband, but remain always one step away from God’s abundant mercy.” He looked at me. “And you too. Just one step. Remember that.”

He went towards the door, not looking at me, as if I were irrelevant to the whole process. So I spoke. “I will keep her safe and treat her with great care. You have no need to worry about her.”

Brother Toland wheeled around and looked in my face. He continued his unwavering gaze for many long seconds.

I finally broke. “Stop looking at me like that!” I yelled.

Brother Toland said, “As long as you encourage her...”

“I am not encouraging her. I simply allow her to stay as long as she wants.” Brother Toland began that stare again. I was ready. “It won’t do you any good to look at me like that.”

Brother Toland looked away. “As long as you create a smooth, and therefore inviting, pathway to continue in her rebellion against the *gemeinde,* I must consider her to be in moral danger.”

He walked out the door, closing it gently behind him. As a precaution, I latched the screen door. We watched him vanish down the path through my front yard. We heard the clattering of hooves, the dry grind of wheels, and the creaking of metal shock absorbers.

Immediately Sophia burst into action. “Get your condom,” she said, tugging me into the inner room of the house, away from windows. She pulled violently to get the shirt over her head. As she threw the shirt aside, her spectacles rattled to the floor. She pulled her brassiere up, turning it inside out. I had never seen her breasts; I barely saw them now, as she fought against the bra straps that tangled into her hair. “Git!” she yelled as she hurled the stretched brassiere onto the floor. Unaccustomed to cursing, she confused “goddam” and “shit.” She unbuttoned and unzipped the pants, but perspiration made them stick as she hopped around on one foot then the other, pulling them off. She crammed the jeans into a little ball, which unfolded into their normal shape as she hurled them also. She stopped and looked at me for a moment before bursting into activity again, tearing off her underwear, rolling them into a fragrant pretzel, and casting them like a frisbee across the room. As her chest was heaving, a bead of perspiration dangled from each hard brown nipple. Her breasts were not large, but were just the right size for my small hands. Despite the heat of the room, she sprouted gooseflesh. I admired the soft reflection of light on her abdomen. I suddenly realized that she had shaved again. When she depilated her old life, she did so completely, even the abdominal hair I had once briefly touched. Small and large moles were negative images of craters formed by random rage of asteroids on a moon newly ripped from magma’d earth.

"Behold," she commanded me. "Here I am. Even though I have shaved, you can still see that I am a freaking mutant, all covered with moles. I am the product of generations of repression, of genes and minds crammed into ever smaller and smaller boxes." She closed her eyes, and put her hands behind her head, pointing her elbows out, lifting her breasts. Her armpits were smooth and hairless. "Come for me. I sacrifice myself to you."

"You will not sacrifice yourself to anybody," I heard myself say.

She opened her eyes, ran her fingers through her hair, then approached me with arms outstretched. As much as I wanted to gaze more at her body, my eyes were drawn to her eyes. This is why I was surprised that she, coming close, grabbed my crotch. Gently.

"You desire me. You are hard," she whispered.

"Of course I desire you, woman!" I nearly yelled. "Damn it, what do you expect? A beautiful naked woman standing in front of me..."

"I am not beautiful," she insisted.

"A woman I would esteem as beautiful even if she were a wizened hag or a bulbous butterball, because I love her mind, I love her soul, I love, I love... but she is honestly beautiful. Although," I squeaked as Sophia squeezed my crotch a little more, "I must admit that I am not in a position at the moment to be impartial in my judgment."

"Make…love…to…me," she insisted, pronouncing each word with distinct intensity.

"I have been making nothing but love to you for three weeks," I said. "The true love of friends, what the Greeks called *phileo...*"

"Damn it! Cut the theology! You are hiding behind it." She scowled. "Here is reality: a woman whose life is in your gentle hands stands before you begging you to make her feel like a woman."

She looked unwaveringly into my eyes. She released my crotch and put her hands on my shoulders. She did not breathe. An unmeasurable minute passed.

I burst out, "Stop looking at me like that! You're the one who's naked—I should be staring at *you!*"

She nestled against me. I smelled my shampoo in her hair. My arms gyrated in indecision. I said, "You told me to disregard your request for intimacy..."

"I guess back when I said that to you I was still trying to cling to my Amish life, however tenuously," she whispered into my ear before kissing it. Her chin rested on my shoulder. "Thanks, but today I have burned my bridges to the past. I am updating my request."

She reached her hands down, grabbed mine, and guided them to her hips. At first hesitantly, then in Hieronymous-Boschlike delight, my hands began to explore the landscape of her back and her buttocks. I pulled her yet closer, as she rammed her pubic bone against me.

"You have burned your bridges," I said, "but you have not yet begun your journey past the bridges. So, are you sure about this? Also," I didn't give her a chance to answer, "you are utterly desirable, but am I? You see, I want you to desire me, not just as the convenient male who is your stallion-ride to freedom, but for my own qualities, such as they are."

She pulled away from me. "Do you mean," she intoned, "that you think I am just using you as a...a stallion?"

"I didn't mean it that way," I said.

"Then... Oh God, never mind," she spat the words into my ear. She placed her chin back on my shoulder.

"All I meant, Sophia," I said into her ear as my hands stopped moving, "is that I want you to *choose me* as your companion on the road ahead, the way I, you recall, chose you. After you make your definite stand—after filing for divorce—then we can seal our covenant together with sweat, with blood, and with tears."

She closed her eyes. I kissed them over and over, drinking in their silent torrents of salt. Her back, where my hands clasped, moistened with sweat.

I do not know how long we stood there. We would have stood longer, but we heard the screen door rattle.

Sophia and I jerked apart. Terror was in her eyes. Her chest was dry, no longer decked with pearls of sweat, because their imprint remained on my T-shirt.

"It's him," she whispered hoarsely.

Had her husband heard us? The door was wide open! I thanked God that we had been silent for the last few moments.

Sophia sprang into activity. She knelt to pick up the pants, brassiere, underwear, shirt, and glasses.

I was suddenly awash with desire. If I had felt like that a few minutes earlier, I would have immediately made love to her, right there on the cheap rug. If we had, we would have been in no condition to respond to the man at the door. I thanked God, for the second time in one minute. I thanked the God that might or might not confer blessings upon us. Sophia stood up, crammed on her glasses, and scampered out of the room.

In shock, I walked to the door.

I was expecting a strong farmer ready to impale me with a pitchfork. Instead I saw what I should have expected: a small man, with a scraggly dark beard, and moles. Displaying the same mutations that Sophia had. But he did have the kind of wise face, or face that had once been wise, that Sophia had loved. He wore overalls and a straw brim hat.

"You know who I am and why I am here," he said.

"No, I do not," I said, both truthfully and not.

"I know she is inside. Brother Toland stayed too long to have done got the wrong address."

"You followed him," I said.

"Somebody told me you were a real smart feller," he said.

For a moment I felt indignant at his words, until I remembered that, after all, I had just finished embracing his naked wife.

"She isn't here, whoever you are seeking," I lied. I wondered if he noticed the sweaty imprint of his wife's torso on my shirt.

"I suppose you can let me see for myself," he said.

"You suppose wrongly," I said.

"This is true," he said, looking down. "But you suppose wrongly that I cannot do consid'able damage to this house."

"I was just leaving. Perhaps you could come back some other time?" I tried.

"Somebody told me you were a real smart feller," he started again. He stared into my eyes. Well practiced by now, I did not flinch. But I was unprepared for him to ram his hand through the screen, find the latch, and push open the screen door.

"Do not enter my house," I said.

"If you are telling the truth you have nothing to worry about." He slipped into my living room, and into the workroom, where he saw a drying rack with brassieres and panties.

"Very interesting," he said.

"They belong to my wife," I said, just that moment inventing a new truth.

He slipped over to the hall. He opened closet doors. He found Sophia's bedroom. "Books," he said. He saw everything in the closet and under the bed, but did not know her Amish clothes were now in a cardboard box. The bathroom was naked.

I became desperately worried when he found no one in the kitchen or pantry. Where *was* Sophia? Her husband apparently did not notice my look of panic as he said, "I already checked the garage. Sorry to disturb you at this time." He gave a slight emphasis to the last three words.

I knew he meant he would be watching the house. "If you plan to remain on or near my property, I will report you to the sheriff," I said.

"You won't be seeing me for a while," he said, turning to leave. "I'll let you go wherever 'twas you were going." Yes, I realized, I will not see him, but he will be watching me. Without looking back, he exited the front door. Then he turned and asked, "Where is your wife, anyway?"

"At work," I said. "I have to go shopping and do the laundry. You got a problem with that? A modern marriage."

He just turned and walked out my front gate.

I immediately grabbed my keys and billfold and went out to the garage. Sophia was already crouching in the back seat of the car. She had, of course, put her clothes back on, but she also had a bag with her clothes and toiletries. And of course a book. "Cover

me," she ordered. I reached back for a blanket, which I draped over her. "Now, where can we go?" she asked.

I told her that maybe we could drive to another town and get her a motel room. From there I could find her an apartment. Maybe she could find a job as a store clerk. I tried to imagine her using a barcode scanner. Maybe she could drive over to Tish, otherwise known as Tishomingo, so she could take classes at the two-year college there, or even down to Durant, where the university has a good biology program. Again, I tried to imagine her submitting to the tutelage of popinjay professors like my former colleagues or myself. Yes, this woman would be a real Tyll Eulenspiegel, tripping up the wise to incriminate themselves with folly so she would probably get herself into the newspaper again, and here would come Brother Toland again, and, of course, Clay. Then once again we would have to go even further away, wouldn't we. Out to one of those desolate towns in the Panhandle moonscape? I backed out the car and began to drive, trusting to the invisible guidance of an invisible God.

Chapter 37

When we got out of town, I told Sophia it was safe for her to come out from under the blanket, but to remain as low in the seat as possible.

"Where do you want me to take you?" I asked her. Her mouth was clenched shut in silence. I told her I would take her to a motel, then live alone at home a few days, with the window shade sheets removed, so that her watching husband would know she was not there. As my mind wandered, the curves of Route 78 took me by surprise and we swerved, past the pasture that only the old people remember as Twelve Mile Prairie, since it was no longer a prairie; past wooded creeks and limestone outcrops and tumbled houses; around farm vehicles and lethargic jalopies; over decomposing skunks and opossums, scaring away crows and vultures. It finally occurred to me to wonder how Clay had gotten to my house—I had seen no buggy, nor could he have followed Brother Toland's buggy on foot. I asked Sophia about it.

She barely managed to speak. "I suppose he could have driven the truck, though he is supposed to use it only for work. And then there's Roger. He has a pickup truck."

"Like the one behind us?" I asked regarding a vehicle a quarter mile back.

Sophia refused to look.

I realized I could not hide Sophia from him now. I figured out a plan; it was flawed, but it was at least a plan. I pulled over on the dry weedy shoulder and turned around. As my car and the pickup came closer, I saw the heads of two men. I did not need to tell Sophia to hide.

Suddenly the pickup swerved broadside in front of me. A wall of rusted red body paint loomed before me as I lurched to the left onto the shoulder. That is, it should have been a shoulder, but it was a shallow ditch. Dry ragweeds and sneezeweeds crunched against my car's chassis, and the low-slung bumper screeched against rocks. I was stuck. My car was light enough to push out, but not strong enough to pull itself out of this little groove of fortune. I heard a voice that must have been Roger saying, "You little S. O. B., grabbin' the wheel like that."

I clambered out of my car just as Clay reached me. Sophia sat up, there being no point in continuing to hide.

"You damned liar," he said to me. "You wife-stealer."

"I came to him of my own free will," Sophia announced. "I imposed myself upon him. He had no choice." I turned around and watched her face.

"The man is always in charge, and is always responsible," I heard Clay's voice say simply.

"You call him damned," said Sophia, her face expressionless. Her teeth were locked as if in tetanus, from the deep wound she had carried most of her life. "But if you use that gun, you are the only one who is damned."

Gun? Oh, that gun. I whirled around and saw the pistol in Clay's hand, not pointed at either of us. Clay lifted it and showed it to us.

"You will come back to me, and love me, and I will love you," he said to Sophia.

"You *order* me to love you? You do not invite me; you order me. Obviously you do not know what love is. You say my book-learning is evil; but your ignorance comes not from a failure to read, but a failure to discern even the simplest part of God's will in the world." Her voice was firm and calm.

"Clay, what're you doing with that gun?" Roger asked with an Okie twang as he approached. He was fat, tan, and strong. "You didn't tell me you brought it. You crazy son of a bitch. You're going to get us all in trouble. It ain't worth it." He wiped sweat from his brow and from his little eyes onto a kerchief without removing his cowboy hat.

"Roger, this here is an important moment. I'm-a-gonna do this right. I am the instrument of God's judgment," said Clay.

"Brother Toland used to say we were instruments of God's mercy. He said nothing about being instruments of justice." Sophia continued resolutely calm.

"We gotta take a stand sometimes," said Clay. "Like you did out in that prairie. I actually admire you a little for that, showing that gumption."

"Clay, you crazy son of a bitch," Roger repeated. He reached for Clay's gun.

Clay pulled away. "Don't make me use this. I am a soldier who must sometimes do what in normal life would be called, I think, an atrocity. I am not crazy. This gun is the sword of the Lord, and I will use it if you, who have rejected His dominion..." He was using words he had learned from Brother Toland's sermons. "...continue to resist His Will."

"You arrogant bastard." Sophia spoke each word with intense separateness. "You think that whatever notion pops into your mind is God's will, as if you are the very spring from which all God's wisdom gushes."

"She's right," said Roger. "You git some blame notion in your head, and think its God talkin' to you."

"Holy matrimony is not a blame notion I just now come up with," Clay said slowly, looking intently into Sophia's eyes.

"Indeed not," said Sophia. "But what you call holy matrimony is neither. You impose your will upon me as master upon slave. This is not holy, nor is it a marriage of two fellow servants of Christ. And besides that, Mr. Righteous, I know all about your little visit to that titty bar."

After a moment, Clay said, "So I make a mistake, and you think you can just leave me?" He was finally breaking into a whine.

"It was no mistake," said Sophia. "It was a repeated pattern of not loving me. It was a symptom of the lack of love in your heart. Love is not just giving me a house to live in. Love is not the tingling you feel in your phallus." She gave a little smile at her husband's shock at hearing her say this. "You have penetrated me many times, when you

needed relief from lust, or from having a poor self-image," said Sophia. I looked back at Clay, who straightened up, offended at being analyzed. "But love is what Gil has shown me, he who has never penetrated me. I shouldn't have to explain this to you. Don't you see?" She began speaking louder. "It is not Gil who has taken me from you, nor I who have taken myself, from you. It is the very laws of the Earth itself. It is my duty to all history and creation to develop my talents. You stood in the way of this."

"Is this a shootin' match or a philosophy match?" asked Roger, spitting.

"What happened to the Clay I knew who could taste colors?" asked Sophia.

"He married a woman who killed our child," came the answer.

Clay hid his gun behind him as a car whisked by, narrowly missing the pickup whose rear end still protruded into the highway. Then Clay pulled the gun back out. "The people in that car—they didn't stop and ask if we needed help. That's not the Okie way. That means he's on his way to call the sheriff. So we have to get this resolved right now," Clay concluded. "Woman, get in the truck with me, and come home."

"No."

"Sophia!"

"Shoot me, Don José," she said, referring to the man who loved Carmen. "Your choices are, let me go, or shoot me. Either way, you will not have a woman in your house."

"Sophia, don't make me do this," said Clay. "I will not permit this sin to continue..."

"Crazy S. O. B.," interjected Roger, who lurched towards Clay. Swift as a trigger on a tripline, Clay lifted the gun in his right hand and steadied it on a horizontal left forearm, aimed right at Roger's heart.

Clay finished his sentence, "...but we will enter God's kingdom pure."

"Oh no you won't, you little shit," said Roger, who dared not move further. "You'll have blood on your hands, you will. You might send Sophia to God, and maybe that little skeeter-bug friend of her'n, but you ain't gonna make it into Heaven. I'm no damn theologian, but I can figure that out."

"As for entering God's kingdom pure," said Clay, "we are going to be a sacrifice at His altar. Remember this gun has more than one bullet."

"Why you crazy…" Roger spat. "You gonna shoot yourself too? Listen," Roger relaxed and gesticulated. Clay did not relax. "You've already ruined everything. You ain't gonna get your wife back, nohow, not now. Go home, have a beer with me, throw out that gun, ain't no good for huntin' squirrels with..."

Clay slowly turned the gun towards Sophia, who sat straight in the back seat, sweat forming a diamond-studded death shroud on her cadaverously white face.

Then Clay stepped away from the car and pointed the gun down. He shot the earth four times: once facing north, in the direction of cold severity; once facing east, in the direction of morning hope; once facing south, in the direction of tropical wildness; once

facing west, in the direction of pioneer dreams. Then he shot the sky and its silent God. The Earth, over which the winds blow round and round and from which the rivers drain day after day and year after year, in unutterable weariness, lay dead below him. He handed the gun, handle first, to Roger. He stooped in utter tiredness. Roger took the gun, supported Clay with his arm, and led him towards the truck.

"Don't think you'll see him again," Roger told us. "I'll help you outta that ditch. And we'll all just go home, okay? Wherever home is for you, little lady. That's up to you and God." He deposited Clay in the passenger seat of the truck, threw the pistol with the trigger locked into the back of the truck under a pile of burlap. He hooked the winch cable onto my car, while I watched Sophia sitting inside. He pulled his truck around, and skillfully tugged us onto the shoulder of the road. "Make sure your car will start," said Roger. I started the car. In the dead heat the fan was almost cold against my perspiration. The air did not reach Sophia in the back seat. "If you don't mind, I'm gittin' us outa here." Roger's old truck rumbled away.

I looked into Sophia's eyes. I saw there a calm strength. My lungs suddenly filled with exhilaration. "Sophia, you were magnificent. You were so brave! So calm! So wise, even in the very face of death! I marvel at you. You... stop looking at me like that." Her gaze into my eyes was almost murderous. She blinked and blinked like an owl and kept cocking her head. She sat silently.

"Sophia..." I began again.

"NO!" she screamed hoarsely. Her hair flew in a whirl, her arms propelled her delicate fists against the seats and straps and windows. I was stunned when she hit me. The sweat burned into the fractures that her fist seemed to have left on my face. "No! No! God damn it, stop it!" She grabbed the door handle, wrenched open the door, and fell out of the car right onto a fire ant nest. She got up but did not brush away the ants that had instantly and furiously swarmed on her. They stung her in a frenzy of drowning in her acrid sweat. "Just stop it!" she spat at me. She jumped up and down, swinging her arms in fury. "Stop it! Stop it!"

I got out of the car and approached her, almost wanting her to hit me again. Which she did. "What have I done? Why are you angry at me..."

"Stop it!" said Sophia to the sky. "Leave me alone!" Then to both me and the sky she said, "Damn it, I'm not some blasted heroine, or the embodiment of wisdom, some perfect person who handles every situation like I'm some female clone of Sweet Jesus. I'm just a woman. I'm just a human, just muscle and blood and skin and bone and nerves, frazzled tattered nerves, I'm just meat and water and salt and atoms and atoms and atoms." She looked straight at me. "Stop looking at me like that! If you expected me to be your savior, when Clay had the gun on us, you're out of your freaking mind. When I was sitting there, sounding calm, I was scared shitless. I'm not some goddess of wisdom who can talk a man out of using a gun, or pull Achilles' hair from behind and make him deflate his sword. I don't fly around and eat ambrosia and shit honey. I'm a human

woman from the Earth, and I am tired. Tired. Tired," she quavered and wavered. She accepted my arm and shoulder of support as I guided her back to the car and let her slip into the passenger seat. I buckled her in and kissed the dew off of her lip. Her eyes closed.

As I got into the car, a sheriff's car pulled up. "I heard there was a problem around here?" the deputy asked from behind his sunglasses. If it was the guy who was with Sgt. Pudge that day at the prairie, he didn't act as if he recognized me. "A little car and a pickup? Would that be you?"

"No," I said. "No pickup here. My wife is just exhausted with the heat."

"I can understand that," the officer said. "Little cars without much A/C. Be careful now. You all right, ma'am?"

"I'm going to be *just fine*," Sophia smiled, not opening her eyes.

Chapter 38

I took Sophia to the courthouse to file her divorce papers the next day. She slept most of the rest of the day. A royalty advance check on the new book came almost in the exact amount the lawyer estimated we would need.

I nursed Sophia back to health. I bought her more clothes. We considered, and dismissed, all options for her education and employment. “I must see more of the world, and at some moment I do not expect, my future will become clear to me,” she said. But one thing we both knew: we would enter that future as partners.

I had to be, for Sophia, everything that her family and church had once been to her—an impossible task. But whenever she began to be impatient with me, I simply reminded her that I was not a god who could fly around, eat ambrosia, and shit honey. I was just a man. She liked that.

We had simply assumed, since Sophia was under the bann, another term they use for meidung, that she would never hear from her family and old friends ever again. If she went to see them they would not drive her away but would be obligated to not look directly into her face and to seat her at a separate table, or at least at a part of the table with a separate tablecloth. Sophia chose to not go and see them rather than to see them under those conditions. She knew her father’s health was declining rapidly, and she knew that she would have to attend his funeral at some point in the future.

Early one morning, when Sophia and I lay in bed together, I heard a faint noise from the gravel road. It sounded like the wheels of an Amish buggy. They have a fairly distinct sound. The Amish want to remain in contact with the Earth, so their buggies never had rubber tires. Their metal buggy wheels conveyed every little joggle from every little piece of gravel into their bodies. Even when they were not aware of it, the nerve endings inside their bodies would register the presence of the gravel. I heard the sound stop just briefly in front of the house, my house, our house, God’s house. I slipped out of bed, wondering if was Clay, or if the saga of the meidung was going to have a new chapter. It did, but not the way I was expecting. The buggy began to move again and was down the road before I got to the door. When Sophia got up and came into the kitchen for the *café con leche* that we had begun to share each morning, she saw, on the table, the item that had been left on our doorstep. It was a plate of cookies, covered with wax paper, that her mother had brought.

Sophia knew immediately where they had come from, and she began to cry, long and deeply. Tears of sadness? Of joy? With Sophia it was hard to tell, and perhaps her tears were always both. I was the one who found the note in with the cookies. I did not tell her about it until later. It simply said, “Im your mom and will always love you no matter what please dont tell anyone I sent this I could get in trouble oh and your dad loves you too and so does everybody else but we just cant say so Love always mom.”

*

And we *did* work on that sequel to my book.

*

One day, the next month, we had everything planned out. At 9:30 a.m., Sophia signed the divorce papers at the courthouse, in the presence of our lawyer and Brother Toland, to whom Clay had given power of attorney. I stood aside and watched. Brother Toland never looked Sophia in the eye, not once. But when she was looking at the document, his eyes did wander to her, and I imagined that I saw in them a glimmer of admiration.

Then Sophia and I looked at each other and grinned. I looked at my watch. We burst out of the court chambers, and tore down the hall to the justice of the peace, who was waiting for us; she pronounced us wed. I looked at my watch again. Sophia had been single for four minutes and fifty-two seconds.

"So you are no longer Amish," I said to her as I fixed her a late breakfast immediately afterwards.

"No," she said. "But I'm living with a man who doesn't use his television, a man who agreed when I suggested we get a wood stove, who sprays his garden with soap water rather than pesticide, a man who says Let us be quiet to hear the voice of God. Before, I was trapped in a world that pretended to be Amish. Now I have freely chosen to live within the limits of space and time and gravity and love, inside the circle of carbon and water on this good round fragrant soft hard Earth." She smiled in conclusion, a smile both as enigmatic as that of a Cheshire cat and as clear and simple as that of a crusader.

"Welcome home," I said as I slipped mushrooms and eggs onto her plate. "Your words, right now, Sophia, I've got to write them down, they were so wise... You're looking at me like that again. Okay, I know you are not the goddess of wisdom. You are a woman. Welcome home to the good Earth." She smiled.

I had just two wedding presents for her. For the first, I had puzzled her by mysterious disappearances. She trusted me, though. Then the morning after our marriage I handed her a small box with a necklace in it, which I had made from crinoid fossils. For the second, I had to drive off halfway across the state to Sunshine Prairie Nursery to get something that none of the local nurseries had. It was the rootstock of a blue wild indigo, which I planted in what was now our yard.

*

Sophia said she wanted to see the world. So, after the blue wild indigo had grown enough roots to survive, we loaded the car and began a journey without a destination beyond the present morning or afternoon. As we drove away, we looked forward both to our journey and our return. We stopped at the C store to say hello to Dewey, who still worked there. He was happy for us. When we got back in the car, Sophia leaned back in the seat, and stretched back the arms that emerged from a sleeveless blouse. Her armpit hairs had just begun to grow again.

As we drove, a large bird flew ahead of us, slowly flapping its wings. It was neither egret nor heron; it was not a raptor; it was not a dark crow or vulture; it was not a skittish killdeer or pugnacious blackbird or skittering swift or sleek swallow. I did not know what it was. It flew at the same speed as I drove, and at the junction of State Route 7 and US 377, north of Tish, it turned right, and I followed it as it flew straight north.

Author's Notes on *Blue Wild Indigo*

The name for this novel was inspired by the song of the same name written and performed by Ann Zimmerman, a singer-songwriter in Salina, Kansas. Any movie adaptation of this book should begin with this song. It starts with a powerful, low melodic line, *Come, my love, and walk with me…* as the little car is driving toward the Amish store.

The information for this novel came to me from reading books by and about Amish, and my observations of an Amish community in Oklahoma.

The idea for this novel came to me as I drove on State Route 48 in south central Oklahoma and I saw an Amish man and woman beside a tractor. The man wore Amish work clothes, which would not seem too out of place on the street, but the woman had the full traditional garb, including the bonnet. Why should women be in greater subjection than men? I remember telling myself, *'Tain't fair.*

Gil's house and housekeeping was very much like my own for 21 years.

The historical information, including about Columbus CUTTING OFF THE HANDS of Natives, is factual.

My observations of Durant and rural Oklahoma in general come from 24 years of living there. It all happened, including the escaped convict and the Patriots' Conference. The last native prairies near Durant are being rapidly developed as real estate.

All Tulsa scenes come from my own observations as a long-time resident.

The story of the archaeological digs in eastern Oklahoma came from visiting Spiro Mounds archaeological site. I tell about this site, as forgotten as it is important, in my book *Forgotten Landscapes*.

Author's notes on the *Under the Sun* novels

The novels in this series are each independent of the other, and can be read in any order. What brings them together in a series is the theme. All four novels have emerged largely from my decades of close study of the Bible, at first as a fundamentalist, then as a reader who, emerging out of fundamentalism into an undefined faith, could appreciate the power and wisdom of the thoughts behind many of the books in the Bible. If you think you understand the Bible because you go, or went, to church, be prepared for some surprising things the preachers have not told you. These novels represent situations, across millennia, in which people have had to *think about what God's will might be, and why an all-powerful God would allow evil things to happen to good people.* In particular, all the novels contain extensive, almost verbatim quotes from Song of Solomon, which is explicit in its joyous sexual details, and Ecclesiastes, which is an almost agnostic book that says that humans are no different from animals: We just die, and that's the end of the story. Not only that, but these books have a powerful beauty that the millennia have not diminished. These are the books preachers of conservative churches and of isolated religious communities don't want young people, or old, to read. Rather than to just present these passages to the reader, I wanted to show imaginary people—Solomon's scribe, Jeremiah's female friend, Heloïse and Abélard, and an Amish woman—giving careful thought to these passages and confronting them in their own experiences.

Part of my motivation, in all four novels, was to break away from reading the Bible in a kind of religious sanctimonious trance, and to experience it as an intense work of living art. When you do this, the Bible becomes a document throbbing with life and love, on the level of any novel or movie, and not something to just be read in a church lectionary.

Another major motivation of the first two novels is to show the kings and prophets as flawed human beings. The Old Testament historical chapters present Solomon as a wise man, and incredibly rich. Archaeologists (see *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman) have found no evidence of this. But even the Bible itself does not try to conceal Solomon's sins. Anyone reading Solomon's stories will see him as a shrewd politician who used wisdom as a tool rather than as a way of life. Jeremiah was just plain weird, no two ways about it, though not actually crazy and delusional like Ezekiel.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.