

# The Modern Critic



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Loyd L. Fueston, Jr.

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# Preface

It's said by some that a good story should begin in the middle.

Anyone who's read my novel *Corporate Sex* might realize that this novel seems to be some non-essential middle to that tale of courting behavior on Wall Street, though this book is about a literary world which is rarely visited these days by the sorts who are successful on Wall Street or Avenue of the Americas or even downtown Hartford. Wallace Stevens is no more and poetry is not to be written by an executive in insurance claims operations. A lawyer at that! Investment banking still more so.

Still, we could speculate this to be the sort of tale within a tale not comfortable to those cursed with a form of literacy which Thomas Jefferson labeled as 'perverse'.

An author should have enough self-respect as to write the sorts of books he would like to read.

Perhaps other, more successful, sorts of writers also write books they would like to read? "Yes" would imply one form of moral disorder and general intellectual decay and "No" would imply another form. "Maybe" would imply a more confused reality which is what it is and doesn't always provide clear answers to the questions we ask as we put the world on the rack to make it taller and better. Or maybe shorter. Or wider. Or more blue and having circles which give us a nice value for  $\pi$  such as 3.14 or  $22/7$  or – best of all – 3. Arguably, problems in base-10 can disappear in other bases, but we try not to shift bases too often as a greenish base-7 might give nasty values to almost all relationships of interest, such as that between a poorly-educated man of some intellectual ambition and talent and a vaguely well-educated woman who tries not to be serious because... I don't know why she's like that. I'm not a psychotherapist nor even a philosopher positive that Vienna exists.

I feel a moral responsibility to be intelligent but that might get in the

way of telling a story.

And, so, this fragment of a few hours in the lives of a man and a woman, a lesser period in the lives of another woman, a young woman, a bookseller, a college professor, and a waitress. . .

Could an author have once made the mistake of tearing this book from the middle of that other book? Was either book improved by this removal of the mid-spine? Should authors be courting barbarian children in the way that Wall Street geniuses will court alcoholic lawyers or corporations with extra cash on the balance sheet? Come to think of it, the lawyer was successful enough that she also generated a good income statement and might have had a good balance sheet. How similar. Maybe it's true that human beings really can be regarded as corporations? Maybe they should be allowed the greater rights of a corporation?

I don't know, but I certainly won't deny the resemblance of some of the characters in this novel to characters in at least one other novel. In my defense, other characters are different. Some very much so.

Like me in the 1990s, one of the characters who is in both books wears a magenta three-season jacket from L.L. Bean. Thus it is that I can't deny there is some resemblance between at least one character's clothing and the clothing of a man who walked the earth in that pivotal decade when my income evaporated and I was soon to be forced to buy Bean-type jackets from discount clothing stores. When I could no longer afford magenta, I turned blue, or at least turned to blue. My next jacket might well come from a thrift store or maybe as a hand-me-down from a generous soul and I wonder what color it might prove to be.

As for the atrociously bad behavior of one of the characters in this novel: I've always been scrupulously gentle about placing books back in the proper spot on the shelves of bookstores. Libraries as well. To be sure, I'm more prudent in my behavior in bookstores. As a rule, I don't pull out books that I might be tempted to toss over chandeliers.

If you haven't read *Corporate Sex* and wish to do so, you can download it at <http://loydfueston.com/downloads/corpsex.pdf>. If you don't wish to bother, you might still be able to make your way through this book without wishing to find a non-existent printed copy to toss high into the air above bookcases filled with cultural products of an technologically advanced, Christian, scientific, morally well-ordered country. Or perhaps a different country.

Enjoy, if you wish. Take pleasure if you can.

# 1 Ain't They Great

“New York City people can be strange.” With that comment and no explanation, Mary Pride led Missie Cunningham into *The Barn of Books*, the largest bookstore in New York City. “Maybe the largest in the Solar System,” added Mary with a nod toward the sign greeting patrons of the store.

“Largest isn’t always best,” said Missie without much conviction even before she explained, “At least that’s what my Grandma used to say. It wasn’t until I was twelve or so that I knew what she was joking about.”

“Well, I hope you didn’t understand it too well.”

“Not then, but now. . .”

Mary stopped and looked at Missie, forcing the young woman to stop and gaze innocently back at her silent interrogator. But the silence was broken by Mary asking, “Did your grandmother really talk like that? In front of you and other young girls?”

“Grandma was a devil, but her bark was worse than her bite in most ways. She married at seventeen and I don’t think she ever looked at another man besides grandpa. Except for the young men in the family since she was always preparing to make matches. Well, actually, she did admire men who were as rugged and hard-working as Grandpa. John Wayne in the movies and a few others like that. Robert Mitchum. Burt Lancaster.”

“She liked the tough guys.”

“Yeah, she didn’t like pretty boys. . .”

Mary had turned away from Missie and was about to walk deeper into the store, but the way Missie’s voice died off, Mary felt compelled to turn back and look at Missie again. The teenager was already flushing a light red that was quite attractive. Wondering if her maternal instinct had been activated by the girl and her problems, rather – young woman and her problems, Mary went on to wonder how dangerous this female creature

could be, to herself and to the boys around her, if she learned how to control her bubbly and innocent mannerisms. It wasn't that Mary thought Missie was all that innocent, but she had TV and movie knowledge about a lot of things that she hadn't experienced, a lot that she shouldn't have experienced at her age, and that led to a certain sort of precocious maturity that still had an air of innocence about it. At least in Missie's case. And Mary was still not sure what had happened to Missie during her days since running away from her home down in Alabama.

"Did your grandmother think you had lousy taste in young men?"

"She told me all women nowadays have lousy taste in men, except for the Amish women who go for a man who can plow a field all day and then go home and build a chest of drawers in the evening."

"That what your grandfather was like?" When Missie nodded, Mary told her, "Mine also. My father was pretty good with his hands but not as good as Grandpa. When he was younger, my grandfather had built a heating system, including radiators for all the rooms in the first house he bought, and he built it out of scrap parts he bought for a couple of dollars from the mill in town."

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary could see that Missie was smiling the slightest bit and looking nearly as relaxed as when she'd had that first sleep after coming in off the streets. "You know, Mary, you're just like the older sister I never had. I can say so many things to you that I could never say to my mother or to most grownups."

Mary nodded, wondering if she really wished to know all of Missie's secrets, though she doubted if the girl had too many wicked acts in her past. "If you really want to check out the teenaged romance books, go pick out a couple and meet me over in the literature section or at the cash register. I'll buy you two books, but I wish you'd pick out some good books instead."

Missie wrinkled up her face and said, "I read enough good books in school. Hemingway and Fitzgerald and some guys from the nineteenth century who are even harder to read. I don't want to read *War and Peace* on my own time. Even if I had a year or two of weekends to spare, which I don't."

Mary stood speechless for just a second before she told Missie, "Go pick out your books. I'll see you in twenty or thirty minutes."

"Twenty or thirty minutes? It takes you that long to pick out a book or two? When you're all alone and not talking to someone?"

“Well, if I’m going to invest a bit of my time and my energy, even a little bit of my soul, in a book, I want it to be a worthwhile read.”

“Whatever.” With that, Missie moved away in a peculiar gliding sort of a bouncy walk. Sort of graceful, but sort of clumsy as Missie wasn’t quite used to moving around in a body which was partly reshaped but still actively reshaping itself more. Mary could see Missy was going to be a young woman with a body that men would lust after, large-breasted, narrow-waisted, and a well-rounded bottom. True, her face was girl next-door plain, attractive for sure when she smiled, but not drop-dead. . .

Mary almost froze, but she forced herself to keep moving when she noticed a man in a one of those three-season jackets was standing in the section with the recent history books. The jacket was magenta and the man’s hair was dark and curly! She thought she’d seen a beard when he’d turned his head slightly to look at another title on the shelf, but she wasn’t sure. Still. . .

She thought it was him, and she began to wonder if he was following her or if she had simply found herself in a Dickens novel. If she fled to Europe, would she spot him walking in a crowd in Piccadilly Square or in line waiting to see the Sistine Chapel? Could she then flee to Australia only to see him climbing the steps to the Sydney Opera House just ahead of her? What would she say if she were seated next to him in a restaurant on Fisherman’s Wharf out in San Francisco?

Mary got hold of herself, remembering that he had witnessed her when she had stood at Jake’s side while that prostitute had propositioned them. Yes, she had propositioned them as a couple. For a threesome. Jake had hesitated in a way that had bothered Mary, but he had pulled himself together, perhaps as embarrassed as she was that they had no charitable response to such a wretched creature selling herself on the streets of New York City. And why had this young man with the curly hair been nearby. Had he been watching over his business goods? Mary shook her head and thought he had also simply seen a woman clearly high and probably needing money any way she could get it. Her next fix. . .

Mary shook her head again and had almost a warm thought about the young man when she remembered she’d next seen him in the public library on 42nd Street when he’d chased Missie through the public library. Was the man a pimp looking for a new streetwalker? Maybe, more likely, he’d been clumsy in trying to offer help to Missie. But who knew? And how could a young girl, or even a woman with some knowledge of these things. . . Mostly

from books to be sure, but Mary had talked a bit with an older cousin before coming to live in New York City.

Realizing that such thoughts and such mixed feelings were for safer and quieter moments, Mary returned her attention to that man. He had to be watched until she knew what he was up to and it was of the utmost importance she protect Missie, especially since she was an unofficial guardian, putting the young lady up until her family arrived to take her home. So it was that she managed to move on without an obvious halt in her movement, though her thoughts had been jerked over onto a different path; she was fearing he might have some sort of mirror on his glasses so that he could see her moving around behind her. And then she remembered that the fellow down in Greenwich Village had not been wearing glasses. True enough it was that he might need glasses just for reading, but...

Missie! Suppose that man really were after Missie? Mary didn't want to draw his attention to her, but she was thinking over the floor-plan of the bookstore, trying to figure out the best way to make it to the teenage romance aisle without ever being in direct sight of the man in the magenta jacket. And soon she was weaving her way through the art-books and then through the bargain books which she had once browsed and found to contain everything from collections of Einstein's essays to histories by Dave Barry to poems by teenaged rock stars. Everything from..., maybe. But Mary didn't consider that to be everything.

Mary found herself saying, "Excuse me," – several times! – as she cut through the line in front of the cash register and was about to make her way on to teenage romance when she noticed that many heads had turned to watch something happening near the front door. Afraid she might see Missie leaving with the man in the magenta jacket, Mary turned but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Then again, the woman who was standing near the front door, passing her gaze over the store's contents was a bit eccentric in appearance. Her frizzy hair, a shade lighter than dirty blond, was pouring out from under her green plaid Tam O'Shanter, her Tammie as her mother's neighbor, Mrs. Cameron, would have said. That hair was clean-looking, but Mary had to wonder if the woman owned a brush. Maybe she was always as distracted as she now appeared to be, her eyes still roaming without seeming pattern over the scene in front of her, pausing only as she took in the new book section, at which time a sneer formed on her mouth, overly large but well-formed – judging by some of the movie stars and sex goddesses of the past

century, Mary thought such large mouths on a woman to be attractive to someone, perhaps men and women alike.

Mary tore her gaze away from the woman, though not yet sure why everyone considered her entrance into *The Barn of Books* to be such a big deal. After assuring herself that Missie and that mysterious man were neither in sight of the exit, she returned her attention to the woman, whose purple rain-coat, of a very nice quality, had opened enough that Mary could see the woman was wearing a dress of a dark green color; the dress didn't quite fit her though it otherwise looked to be of custom-made quality. Maybe it wasn't the dress? Maybe it was the way the woman was moving her body around under the dress. She did stand in a strange, boyish way though her breasts and hips were well-developed. Was she one of those awkward creatures who'd never grown used to having a womanly body?



## 2 Acts of Literary Criticism

There was a strange power about the woman, a power recognized and feared by all in the store. The woman had no more than taken a step into the displays of new books when one of the clerks, a sturdy young fellow, came from behind the checkout counter and positioned himself about fifteen feet from her. She moved toward a table with new fiction laid out in pretty colors as if the books were no more than scarfs or pieces of costume jewelry. The clerk followed the woman, maintaining that same fifteen feet. When she picked up one of the books and paged through it, he didn't move any closer.

A silver-haired lady standing in the line for the checkout counter, and only a few feet from Mary, giggled before telling the man in front of her, "That's Ginnie Melville, the most prominent young literary critic in Manhattan." Then she giggled again. Mary noticed the man looked to have been enlightened by the comment. He was a scholarly looking fellow with a pile of computer manuals under his arm and one other book which Mary couldn't quite make out, but it looked to be a thick, high-quality paperback. Wondering if she had grown completely out of touch with literature and literary criticism since she'd stopped reading *The New York Times*, Mary racked her brain once more and couldn't remember ever having seen or heard the name 'Ginnie Melville'.

Ginnie Melville? The name had something of a comfortable and homey ring to it. . .

Mary saw a look of fear cross the face of the clerk who'd taken up a position near Ginnie holding a book. Ginnie sneered and she spoke loudly enough that Mary could hear her from forty feet away, but the store had grown awfully quiet, "This time she's been kidnapped and taken to Khartoum. The publishers have discovered another continent. Before you know it, they'll discover human beings have minds and souls." She turned to-

ward her escort and twisted her face into an expression vaguely reminiscent of a smile. He remained still, his face having been clouded over by what might have been an expression of Stoic acceptance, and Ginnie turned her attention to another book.

As she began a low monologue that included expressions such as “Godawful trash” and “Thank the Lord for blessing us with short memories”, the other patrons began to drift away from the new fiction shelves; a few people headed toward the exit but most seemed to be waiting for a show, at a safe distance. Mary wondered if the woman was maybe a schizophrenic; so many people were terrified by the violent words and general incoherence of schizophrenic ramblings but few realized those poor people were rarely given to physical violence, and then more likely against their own bodies.

As more people drifted forward from the back of the store, Mary caught sight of the man in the L. L. Bean jacket. She wasn’t sure what to make of him. He looked gentle enough, even seeming to be slightly repelled by the hint of violent emotions which had been growing since Ginnie Melville had walked in the front-door of the store. But the mystery man was not about to run away; Mary could tell that by the way he was staring at Ginnie Melville as she picked up one new book after another, paging through for a few seconds, stopping once or twice as if to read a few sentences, and then placing the book back in its proper place, always treating the store’s property with the appropriate amount of respect.

Then Ginnie muttered in a very loud voice, “These things should be sent to the pulping factories right now so we don’t have to kill more trees to print the next batch of mind-numbing and soul-deforming books.”

Mary felt her mind being stretched as she was trying to pay attention to Ginnie’s actions, to figure her out, and, at the same time, keep her eye upon the man in the magenta jacket. She spotted Missie standing near an elderly couple in the aisle of religious books. Since a teenaged girl could have been expected to move forward to get a better view of the action, Mary was guessing that Missie had spotted the bearded young man who’d so frightened her on the 42nd Street just the day before. With her eye on both the man and Missie, Mary felt reasonably confident she could protect the young woman if anything were to happen.

At the moment, little was happening around Ginnie except that she was quickly reviewing and panning one new book of fiction after another. The eccentric critic wasn’t even saying much, merely muttering and shaking her head. Taking advantage of the crowd, Mary worked her way back toward

the center of the store, getting closer to Missie though the bearded young man was now more directly between the two women, and the third woman, she of the body which apparently didn't want to fit itself into the nicest of dresses was muttering more loudly. Mary heard, "The syntax of a twelve year-old and not a particularly bright twelve year-old at that." Some more indistinguishable muttering was followed by, "The content indicates that our pre-pubescent literary genius must also be morally depraved."

Mary had taken a position near the bearded man; she could no longer see Ginnie Melville much at all. The woman's Tammy bobbed every so often above a book-shelf filled with books on how to construct a web-site and how to manage networks connected to the Internet. More importantly, Mary could still see Missie across the store and the young woman had spotted her. They exchanged nervous smiles and Missie retreated just a bit more behind a tall black man standing with his elbow resting upon the edge of a shelf labeled 'Religious Inspiration'. Mary could still see Missie's cheeks and nose and the tips of her young breasts sticking out a little in front of that man. And it was likely that Missie was completely out of sight of the bearded young man.

It had been nearly five minutes since Ginnie Melville had entered the store and begun her arbitrary acts of literary criticism. Little had happened, and some people, obviously those who expected a lot of excitement from life, were drifting away, toward the checkout counter which was moving again, or toward the door as if they were returning home, having decided that television provided better shows for the likes of themselves. Others were drifting toward the back of the store if they weren't yet sure and wanted some peace and quiet while they were deciding.

As Mary was keeping the edge of her attention on the young man, a couple of people near him drifted away, and she was about to back up, afraid that he would soon be able to see her directly, but a portly and dignified man took up position right next to the young man, blocking him from Mary's view but also her from his view. The man had an academic air about him; he was wearing a tan great-coat over a tweed jacket and khaki pants. He was smiling slightly as if approving of Ginnie's opinions but not wishing to descend to the level of criticizing popular literature, or perhaps he was merely amused by this commotion amongst the masses of mankind.



### 3 The Union of Mind and Commerce

When Bayard Raines and Professor Milton Upton found themselves standing so close as to be touching shoulders, they moved apart, each moving slowly, not out of a sense of outrage or disgust with the other, but rather trying to regain a certain sense of privacy which certain types of book-buyers expect in a bookstore and which they can rarely achieve in stores become one part department store, one part circus, and one part café. Professor Upton held his newly established position, and watched Ginnie with interest even as half his attention was returning to an essay dealing with Melville's claim to Hawthorne that he was seeking to be annihilated. The essay had added the claim that Melville was getting his wish. *Moby Dick* had disappeared for sixty years or so after its initial publication in 2,000 copies and its initial panning by critics, some of whom had had trouble with the English language to the point of not knowing how to build a casket, even when the process had been described halfway through the book. Now, had claimed that more insightful critic, Melville was about to disappear into obscurity once more. His works were too difficult and too critical of American thoughts and habits. Melville had held the odd opinion that love of one's country included a duty to critique it and to make it better and not just to glorify it as it was. Professor Upton also knew something that Melville had not—*Moby Dick* had received some quite favorable reviews from some critics in England but it had been panned viciously by two English critics who had publishing contracts with a number of American papers. A great literary career had been destroyed by the accidents of newspaper publishing. The books had survived to be sure, but the author had spent his last decades writing part-time while working as a government bureaucrat.

As Professor Upton saw matters, the American literary establishment,

one part genteel and the other part Protestant moralistic, had considered Melville as being one part crude and vulgar and ill-disciplined and one part Satanic. Some of the Americans who had destroyed him, devout Calvinists and Evangelicals, had been personal friends of Melville, though their personal knowledge of the man and his moral nature had not stopped them from imputing evil to what he had written.

In summary of his thoughts, Professor Upton told Bayard Raines, "This country had never placed a particularly high value upon the human mind or the human soul. People whose mission is to explore such entities are not valued any higher, and that is, after all, the mission of the modern novel." He put his right elbow into the palm of his left hand, his right hand began to stroke his cheeks and chin. After no more than a second's pause, he added, "And, after all, the novel came to dominance of a sort in the Western world because its very structure, its moral inclinations, its ability to intermingle actions and ideas, was perfect for a rising middle-class who had realized, to their own great surprise, that they really were what Christian philosophers and theologians had claimed them to be, persons with minds and souls. When mind and soul are stripped out of the novel, when writing magazines and instructors at creative schools begin to deny that ideas have any place in the novel, it is a bad sign indeed, but I cannot, for the life of me, decide if it is predominately a sign of cultural decay or moral decay. Maybe the two sorts of decay are entangled so that the separate pieces can no longer be seen on their own.

"In any case, when the soul and mind have dwindled to invertebrate states, the novel is no longer needed, and it is not surprising that the novels being published are such paltry and ephemeral things as to provide an opening for the critique of that strange creature." He paused for a breath. "Still, she does seem to have some good instincts. She might have been able to accomplish something if only she'd continued her education and gotten a doctorate. Though I gave her only a 'B-', I thought she had greater potential than the other students in the class, several of whom have gone on to doctorates and prestigious fellowships and entry-level positions at good colleges."

The voice was resonant, a tenor with the ability to dip in the most naturally way toward the baritone regions. The eyes had been clear and Scandinavian blue, but now they were cloudy and focused upon something in the distance. Professor Upton turned without warning and, lost in his thoughts, he drifted to the rear of the store where shelves held the works of

Plato and Fulgham, Samuel Johnson and Pauline Kael.

And, with the massive scholar gone, the eyes of Bayard Raines met those of Mary Pride. And it was he who broke contact, in a way to make her think he was embarrassed for some reason, confused for a reason perhaps the same and perhaps not. And he was, and he was for a different reason. He could see immediately what she was fearing and he was embarrassed to think this woman would suspect him of following her around, and he was confused that he kept running into her, though then he thought again and realized he had seen her in the public library and in the biggest bookstore in the City. There was a pattern there, though he had to remember and make sense of that strange scene with the drug-addicted prostitute.

And then Bayard detected some crucial movement and he looked to see Ginnie Melville moving away from the shelves holding hard-bound copies of the latest and finest American literature. As she moved into the central aisle of the store and was turning toward the regions of fiction just published in paperback form, a bald and chubby man of middling height suddenly appeared in front of her. He wore an employee's name tag on his wrinkled yellow dress shirt.

Nearby, Mary and Bayard heard a man laugh in a sneering manner. They both looked over to see a thin man with a pencil-thin mustache upon his lean face. His black hair was slicked back. His black eyes peered out at the world through slits seemingly capable of letting through one photon at a time. But one of those slits, the rightmost one as it happened, winked in Mary's direction. He gestured at the fellow standing right near Ginnie and, in a stage whisper, told Mary, "That's Albert Biloxi, the manager of this store. Bertie."

Mr. Biloxi as he was known only to his wife and to Ginnie Melville who gave him such a hard time she felt obligated to honor him with a little bit of personal respect. Not that he appreciated Ginnie's concern. Truth to tell, he was ordinarily as sunny in disposition as the city itself, he was a 'Bertie' more than a 'Mr. Biloxi', and he was clearly summoning up harsh inner reserves as he stood there frowning authoritatively at this crusader of a strange sort. So far as he could tell, she was mostly crusading against his store selling books, trying to prevent the profits that drove the economy, that kept *The Barn of Books* alive, that paid his salary and year-end bonus. And of course, a company made healthy by profits could continue to sell the type and quality of literature which would drive forward a great culture. So went the theory. In fact, Mr. Biloxi – the man did deserve more respect

than he usually got from even his closest friends – knew that something had gone horribly wrong. He knew people did not read as many books as they used to, and he knew the quality of the books had fallen greatly even from the level of the middle-brow, book-club novels which had dominated the best-seller lists for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

But he had his responsibilities. And he had his payroll to meet and his personal bills to pay.

Ginnie, apparently unconcerned at the moment by the needs of another human being so close to her, stepped to the side and walked by Mr Biloxi before he could react. She was on her way to the *Fiction in Paperback* section the way that the Third Army was once on its way to Berlin and, unlike Patton, she had no commanding officer to divert her to a less delicate target. There were customers standing in and near that area Ginnie had targeted, but they were scattering, some with grins on their faces, some with expressions of fear as if not knowing how far this militant person would go. Ginnie picked up a paperback book which had been on the hard-cover bestseller list for an extended time, *Time to be a Nazi*, which raised the difficult question: if a man really had suffered from the unjust actions of a Jewish banker, was it okay for him to join the Nazi party? Ginnie had less trouble with the question than the author had, or the producers of the movie; the book went sailing in an arc just barely missing one of the banks of lights nearly twenty feet above the floor of the high-vaulted store.

Bayard Raines, who had moved away from Mary, heading toward Ginnie, caught the book before it could hit the floor or be damaged. Badly damaged, that is. He started walking over to the paperback section where Ginnie had moved on to some sort of political satire, *Bubba Bushton Goes to Washington*. She was paging through that work which continued the tradition of *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Confidence Man* as Bayard passed the store manager who was too civilized a fellow to do what he felt should be done. That is, he was not sure if he should take on Ginnie who'd grown into a rangy and powerfully built woman who was currently wearing a rather ugly scowl. Bayard handed the copy of *Time to be a Nazi* to the manager of the book-store and told him, "I'll pay for it on my way out."

Mr. Biloxi's immediate smile, that of a man who'd been selling merchandise for three decades, faded as he realized he had no idea who Bayard was, no idea if he was serious or making more fun of a man already feeling quite put upon. But some instinct told him not to interfere as Bayard approached Ginnie to ask her, "What's an angry bitch like you doing in a

place like this?"

Ginnie froze. She blushed. She reached up and shyly pushed a clump of entangled hair back from her face.

Bayard asked her, "You don't really read stuff like that, do you?"

At that remark, Ginnie was still more confused, wondering if maybe her actions had not been plain enough and strong enough to make the point this junk destroyed minds and stunted souls. Poisons for the non-material components of a rational animal. Having been so placid and uninvolved for most of her life and then so angry since she'd read those three pages of *Ravaged Innocence*, she really didn't understand other people. Now that she was quickly thinking matters over, it seemed plausible that she would have to be more blunt and less polite in expressing her opinions.

She was busy planning a more aggressive agenda for her rebellion against a society intent on liquidating its cultural resources in order to generate short-term profits when she noticed that the bearded man in the magenta jacket was steering her toward the front desk where he threw a bill, saying to the sales-clerk, "That's for the book that your manager is holding for me." Then he led her, more gently, out the front door and onto the busy sidewalks of Fifth Avenue. Not sure what to say, she let herself be led down the street and into a small restaurant, one which she in fact frequented after her sessions of literary criticism. As he helped her off with her coat, she noticed he was about two inches shorter than her. That made her uncomfortable and when she realized she was uncomfortable, she became angry. With him as well as with herself which made her more uncomfortable. And that made her more angry.

But not angry enough to leave this young man who seemed pleasant enough and looked to be the sort to have decent literary taste. That was the sort of fellow Ginnie had been hoping to meet. Things weren't working out with the man of her dreams, he was turning into mostly an intellectual friend, but Ginnie was looking forward to someday settling down with some fellow who would appreciate quiet nights of reading good books and all those other things that intellectual soulmates did together. Such as . . .

Ginnie tried to get her thoughts on another track and she remembered her parent's large library of tastefully bound books sitting on mahogany bookcases out of a cabinetry shop near Keene, New Hampshire. She'd spent many a happy hour in that library daydreaming over a serious book, tastefully bound, sitting open on her lap. Come to think of it, a good number of those classics had been weird enough to catch her attention,

and she'd read many of those straight through, more than once, only being careful that she was looking aimlessly out the window whenever one of her parents walked in. She had a certain reputation she was careful to maintain.

Bayard Raines and Ginnie Melville sat down in a booth near the door and did everything they could to look each other over without meeting eyes. After Bayard ordered two coffees, she commanded, "Make mine a tea, green tea if you have it today, Babs." Her voice was surprisingly gentle and quaked a little as if she were embarrassed or confused or both. That brought a smile from Bayard, but she didn't return the gesture. She was beginning to wonder how he'd managed to get her out of the *The Barn of Books* before she'd finished saying what she had to say. With half a mind to get right up and go back to critique a few more bestsellers, Ginnie looked Bayard right in the eyes, but she was a bit set-off when he returned her sputtering chain-saw glance with a smiling and gentle expression.

Ginnie didn't want to drift too far from her field of expertise, even if she were just to explain her personal motives. "You know, I've only read *War and Peace* halfway through and I just browsed *The Brothers Kamarazov* though I did read *Crime and Punishment* from cover to cover." She paused long enough to ask herself why it was she didn't want people to know she actually read some of the good books she sort of recommended in her avocation as a literary critic. Getting no answer, she spoke again: "It's not as if I really know great literature but I can tell a piece of crap when I see it, and I don't like it when a piece of crap is presented as if it were something respectable. I have read a couple of histories of literature and of publishing since I set out on my mission. . . ." At which word, Ginnie stopped to enjoy the expression of surprise upon Bayard's face.

In a soft voice, he asked, "Do you remember the song *Angry Eyes*?" She shook her head and he shrugged. "Well, you've got angry eyes."

The waiter returned with their drinks and Bayard sat quietly sipping his black coffee, Ginnie her green tea. After a couple sips, she began to study him, not with a hostile manner but she did seem suspicious. And then she returned to her line of thought. . .

"We've always had crap, especially since 1800 or so. Some of the literary historians, like Jacques Barzun who is one of our best, say that popular novels in the 18th century and earlier were of surprisingly high quality. Complex syntax, complex plots. They even had ideas in them! Even the books which were published for the peasants and laborers who could read. Many people from those classes couldn't read at all but some could read and

they read stuff that Barzun said would be too hard for modern readers to handle. The ones who think of themselves as being good and sophisticated readers.” Ginnie stopped to take a breath and to take a sip of her tea. Then she plowed on, “I don’t know good literature. Without knowing the evaluations that have already been made by history, I might not be able to tell you if Bulwer Lytton or Count Tolstoy were the better novelist, and, all of Charles Schulz’s kidding aside, good old Bulwer was actually a fine novelist by most standards, but not nearly as fine as the old Count, of course. Buuutt...” Ginnie’s right hand had risen and her index finger was making a point. “I do know crap and I can fight against any pretensions that crap is anything but.”

“Ginnie?” She looked up at Bayard, her face in a funny state. Her mouth was smiling gently at her new friend but her eyes were still scrunched up in a low-key sort of anger. “Do you maintain a constant state of anger against these people who profit off our own stupidity and irresponsibility?”

“Whatever do you mean? By the way, Bulwer Lytton was not only a popular, and better than decent novelist—even if he did have some tendency toward pretentiousness, but he was also one of the reformers of English politics in the first half of the eighteenth century. A thoroughly admirable fellow on the whole.”

“I mean you are starting to relax and calm down but your eyes are still angry.”

“You got something about eyes? Balzac did. And some of the other Symbolists, but eyes are big in any scheme of pure esthetics or abstract symbolism.”

“Eyes are the gateway to the soul and you look to have a beautiful soul, but it’s in a bit of turmoil.”

“Beautiful soul? Does that mean the rest of me could do with some plastic surgery?” Ginnie didn’t really look angry with Bayard’s comment, in fact, the wrinkles around her eyes were smoothing out as if anger were continuing to drain out of those perceptual organs.

Bayard reddened a bit and was silent for a few seconds. It was Ginnie who broke the silence. “This could be the dialog to a really bad romantic comedy, though I wouldn’t have believed a literary conversation between Doris Day and Rock Hudson. Anyway, I didn’t ask what you meant about my eyes. I asked what you mean about me being angry at people who profit off our stupidity and irresponsibility? I’m really just angry at people who sell crappy books.” Ginnie pushed her tea away from her just a couple of

inches or so and then she sat back. “I’m not entirely sure why. I’ve always read, and mostly I’ve read good books, but I’m not exactly a constant reader and, like I said, I really wouldn’t trust my judgment about books, though I’m probably more attuned to raw creativity than your average editor or literary agent, or professor of literature for that matter.” Looking up with a slight upturning of the lips which Bayard felt reluctant to interpret as a smile, she said, “My parents were so artsy, their esthetic organs must have been in great pain, constantly striving to give birth when there was nothing there to come out. I mean, they were very good at what they did, and do, which is interior design. They have exquisite taste and can adjust their standards according to the context. They’re not inclined to put the same colors on the walls of a corporate boardroom that they would put up on the bedroom walls of an antique dealer with more effeminate tastes than my mother. And she’s the type who fills a room with frills and little pieces of ceramic and wrought-iron decoration. And I know of several such antique dealers they’ve worked with. Given what my parents charge, no one can afford them anymore except corporations and successful Manhattan merchants.”

When she’d gone back to talking, Ginnie had let her eyes drift away toward the windows of the coffee-shop. She now focused her gaze entirely upon him and asked, “What was I trying to talk about? I lost my train of thought, something which happens often when I talk about my parents who are very nice people but also very, very strange. It’s easy to lose contact with planet Earth when I’m with my parents or even talking about them. My parents are very sixtiesh, oriented to making money, but only in artsy ways so that they are not part of the corrupt military-industrial complex. They call themselves socialists. Sometimes. So do a lot of other people at their tennis club. Which costs \$35,000 per year for a couple. Anyway, they are very radical, in their politics and in their esthetic tastes and I’m very conservative. Not in politics because I don’t pay any attention to Reagan and Bush and all those guys.”

“Reagan is long retired and Bush nowadays would be the son of George Bush.”

“Oh. What’s his name?”

“George W.”

“George Dubbelu? Did he change his name from ‘Bush’?”

For a second, Bayard wasn’t sure what she was asking, but then he tried to force a smile but he couldn’t get another word in before she burst out

with, “I’m very conservative esthetically. I guess it’s because I never read any of the popular novels for fun. I mean, the popular novels of the previous few centuries are fine, and I read some of those in school. And that’s where my tastes also became conservative. I was kind of disgusted by that Picasso painting that sold for more than \$50 million. It was pretty strange, even compared to his other stuff, but it... I think that even my parents were a little upset by that painting, and they are so open-minded their brains had long ago fallen out. So, my life has been sort of the sequel to *Fathers and Sons*. I’m the next younger generation trying to understand why the first younger generation is so radical and has rejected cultural and moral sanity.”

Bayard was fascinated by the woman’s eyes which had settled down from a grayish blue to a greenish blue as the anger had drained out of her. If it had drained out of her. He was wondering if she merely grew quiet on the surface and kept up a more or less constant head of steam inside of her. After a few seconds of staring into her eyes, though he found his gaze wandering a little bit to catch the smile and frown wrinkles more radiating out a short distance from her nostrils, more than from the edges of her mouth. He felt compelled to point out, “I think that idea about a reversal in the attitudes of the generations was played out in a television series a while back.”

“Well, I haven’t watched television much since they took off *Captain Kangaroo*. I really had a crush on Mr. Green-jeans. And then I heard that Mr. Rogers retired and I just assumed it had become a wasteland of sorts after those two shows were gone.”

Bayard decided his first impressions of Ginnie in the bookstore had been correct. She was a shapely woman though her awkward posture and ways of moving obscured her feminine curves, which were rather on the generous side. He was still trying to imaginatively re-arrange her body into a more graceful posture, and failing to do so, when he said, “You were talking about your ability to recognize creativity even if you weren’t so confident you could say why Tolstoy is so much better than Bulwer Lytton.” After a short pause, Bayard asked, “Isn’t Bulwer Lytton the one that Snoopy was always trying to imitate in the Peanuts comic strip?” He wasn’t sure if he were interested in this line of conversation but he felt a sudden need to determine to what extent she was pulling his leg. And perhaps pulling the legs of a lot of other people.

“I already said so, though I didn’t talk about the contest Snoopy in-

spired. Who can write the worst beginning for a novel. That's because Bulwer Lytton began one of his novels with that ringing phrase: It was a dark and stormy night. He's actually considered to be a decent novelist on the whole, a minor writer but not a hack like the ones who dominate the best-seller lists nowadays. But the modern writers are awfully so skillful." A playful smile came to her mouth and Bayard felt himself being further entranced. "Did you ever read *Anna Karenina*?"

With a nod, Bayard Raines confessed, "Only once, in a course in college. A sort of general survey of great Russian novels. We read *Fathers and Sons*, *Crime and Punishment*, as well as *The Dispossessed* as an example of a Dostoevsky novel that didn't really work out well at all, though it's probably still more interesting and more substantial than most novels being published today."

"Well-manicured fluff being written to the pseudo-academic standards set up by the publishers and the how-to-write magazines. Follow their advice and you get stuff so ephemeral that I don't know if it will even be of interest to cultural historians in future centuries. In one of his essays about public funding of art, Professor Barzun talks about the utter failure of the well-intentioned bureaucrats of the cultural agencies in the French government. They began funding artists during the French Revolution, or maybe shortly after. Anyway, he said they went on funding through the nineteenth century and managed to miss every great French painter and sculptor, as well as those foreigners like van Gogh who were resident in France for a while. They funded a non-stop series of high-quality and highly ephemeral pieces of academic art. Art produced according to the theories of one school of thought, or non-thought as the case might have been. And that isn't the way to produce art, except maybe as school pieces to train people suited to be critics of the art of the previous generations. There are a lot of people who have good taste about established artistic matters, and a lot of people who can be trained to understand Danté, but not a lot of people who could recognize an original thought worth exploring or a new style of writing that has potential for exploring the times. I think," and she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial tone, "that the dimwits of the publishing conglomerates will manage to do an even worse job than those government bureaucrats and, without a doubt, they will do it more efficiently and more profitably. The people who live in the world of visual art should be damned glad that they rely on wealthy suckers and not on business school clones who market to grocery stores and pharmacies."

Ginnie stopped as if to gather her breath. There was a puzzled expression upon her face which fascinated Bayard as well as puzzling him. He was under the impression that she was herself a bit surprised at what had come out when she'd let herself speak freely. And then she corrected herself, "I guess historians of culture have to always be willing to read the ephemeral junk an age produces. It's part of their job, so I imagine there will be diligent and dedicated scholars a century from now who will be slogging through our best-selling novels, ruining their eyes on stuff they'd never read for their amusement, certainly not for their own edification. I guess it might be like studying the Nazi mentality. Some historians and philosophers and other people have to study how Hitler and Göering thought and felt. It's a meta-thing, I guess. If you read Hitler's writings and read about his actions to study him as an example of a perverse human being then it doesn't affect you the same way as people who actually read him to be able to think more like him. It might even improve your own moral being, if you are properly disgusted. Reading modern novels is a bit like that, except that I suspect most modern novelists, the well-regarded experimentalists as well as the best-selling authors, are even less creative than Hitler was..." A fresh expression of puzzlement came upon Ginnie's face. "I was asking you about something and then I got off-track."

Bayard Raines shrugged even as the waitress came over, smiling at Ginnie. "You want something to eat today, Ginnie, or you just going to drink that awful green tea stuff?"

"What's the soup of the day, Babs?"

"A cream of broccoli so rich it'll give you gout or diabetes or something like that before the afternoon is out."

"A bowl for me and one for my friend, Babs. And bring some of those unhealthy salt-rolls as long as I'm already damaging my arteries."

"Sure thing, Honey. And they brought in some great pies this morning."

Ginnie's eyes lit up but she shook her head. "Probably not today. I'm supposed to go to dinner at my parents' house."

"How about your friend... What's your name, Honey?"

"Bayard. Bayard Raines. Bayard Townes Raines"

"Bayard Raines. Got a ring to it of sorts, but get rid of the 'Townes' in the middle. You from Louisiana or some place like that?" He shook his head. "Oh. It's just that Southerners have better names than Northerners. A lot of the time, anyway."

Babs was still sashaying away when Ginnie got right back to business.

“What was it I was asking you about?”

“The last question I could quite understand was: ‘Have you ever read *Anna Karenina*?’.”

“Oh yeah. What are you going to wear for dinner tonight?” Bayard Raines was stuck for words, but that was all right because Ginnie paused for just a second before rushing on, “Most people dress quite casually when they go out to my parents’ house, though my father will wear his usual linen blazer of one relaxing color or another. My mother will be in a modest and understated dress that probably cost \$500 bucks off the rack at a designer shop. She’ll tell everyone it is just an old thing she pulled out of the closet at the last minute.” Ginnie smiled in a conspiratorial manner and put her hand upon Bayard’s hand which was loosely fisted up near his mug of coffee. “For her formal affairs, she won’t wear anything off the rack.” Ginnie withdrew her hand and sat back once more. Her eyes passed from Bayard’s hair down to the lower part of his chest and then moved in such a way that he imagined she was imagining what he was wearing below there, what was hidden by the Formica-topped table of a Manhattan eating place. He suddenly grew dizzy, but she said, “Let’s just get you a nice shirt. I bet you don’t have a nice sports-shirt with you.” He shook his head and she nodded hers in confirmation. “Jeans and some sort of casual shoes are okay. Some people even wear nice, blazing-white sneakers to my parent’s casual dinners, but none tonight unless they want to cause a scandal. It’s after Labor Day, after all.”

Bayard could only nod his head, agreeing it was after Labor Day, after all. And it was but he could tell from a change in Ginnie’s eyes that her mind had turned or returned to something other than Labor Day fashion rules.

“There was this episode when Madame Karenina and Count Vronsky were in Italy and they ran into an expatriate Russian painter. A very serious painter, somewhat unworldly as most are, except for Picasso who wasted more talent than any other modern painter ever had, and he was as weird as an unworldly person anyway, without any of the innocence. Anyway, Vronsky showed the Russian painter a portrait of Anna Karenina which he had painted. And Tolstoy then talked about how that painter, a very serious artist, used to grow sick, really physically sick, when he saw these technically well-executed paintings by amateurs. Probably when he saw well-executed paintings by most professional artists. And the discussion in the novel was suitably vague, but a lot of it was simply because artists, true artists do have

something to say. And artists are always intelligent. A painter might well have something intellectual to say, or he might have some moral comment upon the world, like in Picasso's famous anti-war picture *Guernica*, though if you look at that picture closely, there are a lot of weird details; even there it was more the intelligence, the great intelligence however misdirected, of his eyes and hands that drove forward the creation of that picture. The anti-war protest was an excuse, and given the despicable level of Picasso's personal morality, I doubt it was really that serious. Just an excuse, but there is no doubt Picasso was painting to make a statement about our perception of the world and about the ability of human dexterity and human ingenuity with paints and colors to communicate that insight. Much of his stuff didn't work, even if you forget the junk he produced just to get money out of the suckers, but. . ."

Ginnie looked at Bayard, pleading in her eyes. "Do you understand where I'm going with all this?"

He nodded his head in a somewhat diagonally ambiguous manner. "I think so. You're talking about the moral decay that's showing up in all the art of the modern world." His eyes lit up as if he'd been bolstered by a sudden influx of confidence. "And that moral decay is beginning to show up in a drop in intelligence as it always does. We need to reform the world, to protect the children, to help the poor and the humble to regain some sort of decent place in society, to. . ." His voice dwindled off as he noticed the look of disappointment come over her face, the slouch of her body which increased the more.

"I guess that's true, but I don't really think like that. For one thing I figure the drop in intelligence probably preceded the drop in moral standards, even if some people have called me a pseudo-Jesuit for saying that, and maybe I can't think any other way, and besides I've met some Jesuits who were wonderful men as well as serious scholars, and even my parents, good artsy liberals that they are, have some friends who are morally conservative, even a couple of friends who are involved in moral crusades of one sort or another. They are particularly inclined to making friends with morally conservative Catholics who often have an appreciation of some type of beauty, if only from their appreciation of the old liturgies." With a nod of confidence in Bayard's ability and willingness to hear dark secrets and take them for what they were worth, she confided, "The very first time I met a Jesuit, it was on the patio at my parents' house and he was arguing, politely but firmly, against abortion rights. Imagine that. At my parents'

own house. In front of all their progressively stupid friends.”

“You’re opposed to abortion?”

“Actually, I’m undecided. My comment was not intended as support of that Jesuit and his pro-life campaign. I was merely casting aspersions upon the intelligence of my parents and their artsy friends.”

Not quite sure how to phrase his question, Bayard blurted out, “They’re stupid?”

Ginnie didn’t respond immediately, sinking into her own thoughts for a few seconds before she said, “I’m sure they were born with perfectly functional brains. Some of them are quite capable, even today, of working through the occasional line of coherent and rational thought. It was the sixties that did it to them, I’m sure, though some of the younger artsy-fartsies I’ve met are pretty bad as well. Another Jesuit told me that modern people have split thinking and feeling in a way that makes no sense for a physical creature with one brain. Of course, some of these friends of my parents don’t really have a complete brain anymore.”

“You have a high opinion of these people in the art world.”

Ginnie shrugged. “Many of the artists are fine, some are even clearly geniuses, though it’s often not clear, even with powerful geniuses, if they have anything to say that will be of interest to people in the next century. To people who don’t think too clearly, it’s not at all...” With a look of embarrassment, she continued, “It’s not at all clear why *The Idiot* is a great novel, why it survived. It is a bit scatter-brained, you know. As was Dostoevsky himself. A man whose brain was ravaged by epilepsy, *grand mal* when young and *petit mal* for the remainder of his life. A man consumed by compulsions to gamble, by obsessions on the one hand of Christ-like figures and of brutal serial killers on the other hand. Dostoevsky and his work lie well beyond any regions reachable by the minds and souls of...”

Ginnie was interrupted by the approach of a great bustling and Bayard had not yet raised his eyes to the potential danger when he heard, “Sorry about the delay, kids, but the boss called to have me check on some of the supplies. He’s on his way back in after taking one of his kids to the dentist and he wanted to stop and talk to his wholesaler.” With a confidential wink, Babs added, “Abner keeps a bottle of good gin in his desk and the two of them have a couple toots of the stuff every time they get together. So Simon will be sleepy all afternoon, but he’ll revive by dinner-time.” She set the soups down, pulled soup spoons out of the pocket of her apron, and then pulled packages of crackers out of another pocket. “That it for now,

kids?” Ginnie smiled her affirmative and Babs turned and headed back toward the kitchen without looking again at Bayard Raines.

After crumbling up a couple of crackers into the soup, Ginnie tasted it and smiled. “The cooking is a bit erratic here, but when the chef does something right, he really makes some good stuff.” Then, as Bayard began to spoon creamed broccoli into his own hungry stuff, Ginnie said, “It’s not really a matter of imposing morality top-down, which is what most people think to do when they see how crappy our art is nowadays. Hell, by historical standards, our popular entertainment is pretty crappy, low-quality stuff, even if the technical standards are high. Any high quality in our modern art, popular for sure and much of the so-called serious stuff. . . Any high quality lies in the parts contributed by the engineers and the technicians. Artists should be ashamed of themselves, especially musicians and actors and directors.”

Ginnie reached over and put her hand once more upon that of Bayard Raines. His other hand stopped, holding the spoonful of soup midway between bowl and mouth. “People nowadays do have underdeveloped minds and their souls aren’t in such great shape either, but their imaginations are sickly, grub-like things, undernourished even when they’re children.” She shuddered. “The children’s books are so awful today. People would be better off doing what they used to do, reading to children from the Bible or from Shakespeare or from some of the old collections of folk-tales redacted with a bit of intelligence and a concern for the story itself. My mother did have good taste in children’s books. She used to read from mostly unexpurgated versions of the tales collected by the Grimm brothers, or the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, or E.T.A. Hoffman—boy, was he weird.” She smiled in fond memory of that weirdness. “Only children or other people who have avoided brain-damage, so far, could appreciate Hoffman’s weirdness for the intelligent non-conformity it was. I mean, *The Nutcracker* has become a so-called classic for Xmas performances, but that’s a matter of habit. His more obscure works are no weirder but they would really disturb people who think themselves able to understand and appreciate *The Nutcracker*.”

“So, it’s not simply a matter of morality and intelligence decaying?”

She shook her head. “Of course nothing is simple, but it is a matter of intelligence decaying. But the decay of intelligence probably followed the decay in imaginative powers rather than leading it. Anyway, it’s not clear that many people are able to keep their imaginative powers into adulthood—in

any age. No matter the historical period, you get the impression there are a lot of smart people who can be trained to appreciate serious art and good literature, but not many who can travel to the boundaries along with the serious artists and writers. Not many people can walk the tight-rope. . . ”

“Like the fellow in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*?”

Ginnie smiled but then her drifting eyes focused upon something that seemed to fascinate her, to draw her full attention. Something told Bayard that a person had come in and was on his or her way over to the table he shared with Ginnie. As he turned to see Mr. Biloxi striding over, Bayard Raines started to rise, raising his hands and bracing his body as best he could while standing at a slant, his feet under the table, his knees against the edge of his seat, and then he started to fall. Suddenly, he was one-handed as he had to put out his right hand against the back of the bench-seat in the booth. Still, if at a major disadvantage, he was ready to protect Ginnie.

And Ginnie laughed. “Whatever are you up to, Mr. Bayard Raines? Shouldn’t you get out of the booth before you try to stand up?”

His face turned red, less because of what Ginnie said and more because of the way that Mr. Biloxi was deliberately ignoring him, as if he were an inconsequential thing that happened to be near this woman who’d caused such misery in the life of a man trying to make a good living by selling a few books.

“I could have had you arrested.”

With trusting brown eyes opened widely over a mild smile, Ginnie pointed out, “That’s one of the problems with the world today. Weirdos aren’t at all tolerated.” Mr. Biloxi was speechless, though, after a few seconds, he did try to sputter out something. But he was making no threatening gestures, and Bayard Raines sat back with a sigh, hoping he hadn’t made too much an ass of himself. And the show was just beginning, so far as he could tell, or was it rather continuing from the scene Ginnie had made inside the bookstore. Ginnie for her part was sipping away at her tea with a quiet smile upon her face as if she were following along a pleasant line of thought. And then she reached over to grab a menu and offer it to Mr. Biloxi, without looking up at him. In a pleasant voice, she said, “This is very good soup, Mr. Biloxi. Why don’t you sit down and join us? My treat.”

To the mild surprise of Bayard Rains, Mr. Biloxi sat down; he even accepted the menu, though he put it down without opening it. Bayard pushed over so that the bookstore manager could sit directly across from

Ginnie and stare at her. Was it in wonder? Was he wondering, if he could use her currently mild mood to get to her, to ask her to stop bothering him and his clients before he had to do something he didn't want to do, such as having her arrested or taking her to civil suit or. . .

Mr. Biloxi's bushy gray mustache was quivering just the slightest bit. Bayard found himself fascinated as he wondered if it were just those whiskers which were trembling; was the man's upper lip also trembling? But the store manager did no more than to point to Ginnie's bowl of soup and gesture for Babs to bring him the same. It was only then that Bayard noted a few patrons of the diner had stood up, some looking as if about to flee and the young men sitting at the counter seemed to be ready for action. And a couple of men, one middle-aged and looking to be from India or Pakistan and the other young and African, had come out from behind the counter where they had been working the short-order grill. Were they gathering to protect Ginnie? Or merely to watch the show?

Babs brought over the bowl of soup for Mr. Biloxi and no more words had been spoken at the table before she returned to freshen up Bayard's coffee. A few people in the diner were still casting occasional glances at the table and its three occupants; Ginnie was fairly well-known in the neighborhood, more specifically in *Alexander's Diner*. She'd been focusing her literary criticism upon the books displayed in Mr. Biloxi's branch of *The Barn of Books* for nearly four months and had often come into the diner for a tea and an occasional light meal.

Having finished half his bowl of soup as if a famished man, Mr. Biloxi finally managed to catch Ginnie's eye. "You know, I work damned hard to make a good living. My wife and I have had to give up scheduled vacations to Rome twice, once last summer and once this past spring. All because of the time it takes to run a smooth operation."

"A smooth operation? Yes, you do run a smooth operation, Mr. Biloxi." Ginnie finished off her bowl of soup. "A very fine cream of broccoli. As good as any made by my mother's cook. As good as any made by the fancy catering operation that handles her parties."

Mr. Biloxi looked at her, his eyes squinting, his mouth forming a hard line. "That's right. You come from money, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"Not money, Mr. Biloxi. Money is gray and bearded. My parents made a boodle in the decorating business. Good cash flow and artsy at the same time. Its one thing to be wealthy but when you can do and also be esthetically satisfied, you're in fine spirits indeed. And my parents generally

are.”

As soon as Mr. Biloxi bent over to spoon more soup into his mouth, Ginnie winked at Bayard. The store-manager took one more spoonful and then wiped his mouth before setting his elbow upon the table, his chin into the V formed by his thumb and hand. He stared away from Ginnie, looking over to the counter where a new couple had just arrived. The man looked somewhat familiar to Bayard, but that sort of slick-haired, well-dressed man was quite common in Manhattan, some of them even being as successful and as prosperous as their manners and clothes would indicate. Still. . .

The woman was just as prosperous looking, in a showy sort of way. Not Bayard’s type at all, though he was guessing that under that make-up, the fancy layered ’do, and the expensively casual clothes, she was probably a smart woman with a degree from a good liberal arts college and a masters from some prestigious business school. Maybe a law school. Her friend, who had draped his arm around her shoulders and steered her away from the counter to a booth, looked to be more a young shark of the business world. He was a lean and hungry young man, to be sure, and that leather coat looked to be better than a \$500 investment in prosperous looks, a very good investment indeed in an age more attuned to surfaces than to underlying substances.

Bayard turned his attention back to his companions and saw that Mr. Biloxi looked about ready to speak, and sure enough. . . , “I know a lot of those books are mindless trash but I can’t sell what people won’t buy. And I run a branch of a business, not an outlet for a non-profit foundation.”

Ginnie contemplated his claim for a few seconds before responding, “I wonder what pies are on the menu today. Their strawberry rhubarb used to be good, but the last time I had it, they’d made it just a tad too tart.” Mr. Biloxi, who’d begun to relax a little bit, suddenly looked as fully exasperated as when he’d tried to confront Ginnie in the bookstore. As if wishing to calm her opponent down again, she looked directly at him, a soothing serenity showing on her unwrinkled brow and cheek, the lips that curved neither up nor down. “My friend and I have that dinner party to attend and my mother will undoubtedly overdo the desert table, as she always does. Not that she has time to cook the stuff herself, but the caterer is even better with cakes and pies than he is with Beef Wellington.” She turned and smiled at Bayard, “I think that’s the main course for tonight, though Momma always has the caterer prepare a few entrées of fish, just in case someone isn’t a beef eater.” Still not sure what was going on, Bayard simply nodded genially.

“Anyway,” said she while turning her attention back to Mr. Biloxi, “I understand you are in a bad situation, but so is everybody. That seems to be the problem, a very complex problem for my uneconomic and unpolitical mind. No one is responsible. The corporations are beholden to make the greatest profits possible or they will be sued by stockholders and maybe the Federal government or the states. Inside those corporations and all those government agencies with the ugly acronyms are numerous people just carrying out their responsibilities as dictated to a people who are no longer independent moral decision-makers. The editors and marketing agents just want to dumb everything down to the lowest possible level, so that every book they publish could have a chance to be a mass-marketing success at the grocery stores and chain drugstores.” Letting her expression grow sad, Ginnie added, “And it doesn’t matter even if those editors and marketing people have children of their own. Knowing this stuff is trash even by the past standards of a country which has never paid much attention to intellectual and moral matters, except to the extent they can turn morality into an irrational revivalist movement. . .”

Ginnie’s voice had faded off as she had lost her track of her train of thought. “Anyway, the point is that people even produce and sell this trash knowing their own children are the targets for this dumbing down process.”

Mr. Biloxi looked embarrassed for just a deep breath but then he regained his confidence and went on the attack. “Do you really think there is some sort of conspiracy to dumb down the people in this country?”

When Ginnie didn’t come up with a quick response, Bayard Raines jumped in to say, “A conspiracy isn’t necessary to do the trick. I know that well because I was a teacher for a few years and I saw a faster-moving version of the process working in the educational textbook and supplies business.”

The bookstore manager looked over at Bayard in surprise as if having thought he was there for moral support but not to speak. “I’m not in the textbook business except for some computer manuals that double as textbooks in some courses and maybe one or two history books or collections of literary essays.”

“It’s the principle. A country which is based on competition on short-term results is almost guaranteed to have shoddy, entertaining products marketed in both the educational and cultural markets. It’s what the students will take to most easily; after all, they grew up in front of television

or playing in age-segregated groups. Rather than aiming, or being aimed, at achieving a high level of skill, they settle down at a level which is already comfortable. And that works to the advantage of both government and business. The government needs people who have no other Daddy but Uncle Sam, the corporations wish to fill the role of mommy, feeding and clothing us. Corporations need to break up family involvement in the economy so it can be clear to everyone where their loyalties lie and so they can control the adults in a . . .”

“Corporations? Now we’re bringing in the corporate angle? You sound like my nephew and he got himself thrown in jail for protesting at one of those economic summits.”

Bayard Raines waved his hands in a lame manner. He hadn’t heard anything to indicate that the current wave of anti-corporatists had anything approaching coherent ideas. He was wishing he had already started on his course of research and reading at the public library instead of walking around the streets half the night long. In a voice as lame as the movement of his hands, he said, “Well, someone told me that Adam Smith didn’t really like corporations. He thought we would be more free if everyone owned property directly and everyone was responsible for his own actions instead of corporations owning so much and people being able to pass the buck.”

“Someone told you, young man?” Mr. Biloxi looked as if about to let Bayard Raines have it, but he sat back, his body sagged a little, and he sighed. Shaking his head and placing his right hand over his eyes, he chanted, “Someone told him, someone told him, someone. . .” He dropped his hand and looked Bayard Raines directly in the eye. “Has it ever occurred to you that, if we are a dumbed down people, you are definitely one of us?”

The face of Bayard Raines reddened. “I guess. . .” It hurt more than helped when Ginnie patted him on the hand as if to encourage him to speak bravely.

“Well, I have read some of Adam Smith’s writings, as well as some commentary upon those writings. Years ago. I can tell you that you are largely right, though it isn’t exactly a sign of a morally applied intelligence that you quote a man without having read him directly or that you throw out conclusions without being able to justify them by a well-reasoned argument.” Mr. Biloxi sighed again and looked almost apologetic when Bayard Raines looked away in embarrassment. “You know,” he said as he turned his gaze back toward Ginnie who thought she could detect a tear forming in his left eye, “I try not to read too much of that stuff I sell. I read almost entirely

from the so-called classics aisles. Not all of them are classics, some are the better-quality popular writers of the forties and fifties, but that's some sort of sign of quality, at least middle-brow quality, that they've managed to stay in print so long." He put out his hands in a gesture of pleading. "I have a daughter in an expensive college. It's a small, liberal-arts college that actually teaches students how to study and enforces study hours, for freshmen, maybe not for others. I've talked to some of the administrators and they realize they have to take on a remedial teaching role, developing habits and skills in these eighteen year-olds that would have been better developed when they were thirteen. Instead, they were spending five hours a day playing organized sports or computer games. Even my daughter who liked dancing and drawing more than field-hockey and video-games, but she did what her friends did so she could be with them and be able to talk with them about... About those things that didn't interest her."

Mr. Biloxi grimaced. "If there is a conspiracy to dumb down children, it has been carried out in a very clever way even if no one is really in charge. To a large extent, parents have lost the power to control the development of their own children without separating them from a mass culture which is both monotonous and attractive because it appeals to many of our legitimate needs." He grimaced again but then made a strong and largely successful effort to smooth out his face. "The last thing I need is to start thinking like one of those conspiracy theory nuts. Anyway, she has probably gotten a less rotten education than most Americans and I want her to make something of her life. Not that I expect her to be a scholar, but I do agree that a person should develop his or her mind. It's an end itself and not just a means to getting a bigger pay-check. At least it should be an end. I *need* my pay-check in order to keep her where she may acquire the attitudes so that she doesn't get herself stuck in a corporate rat-race."

Bayard Raines tried to keep the look of triumph off his face, for he was still ashamed of himself and for good reason, but he knew he sounded a bit gleeful as he pointed out, "But she'll be stuck in the same position as you, and her children will be dumbed down a bit more. She can probably read and understand things beyond the mediocre students of a better age, but she is almost certainly far less developed intellectually and morally than the good students of previous centuries..."

"Go back far enough, and the people didn't have schools and they weren't even literate enough to understand much of what was read to them in churches." Mr. Biloxi rose and stepped into the aisle. He took a few

dollar bills out of his pocket and threw them onto the table. “We’ve estimated you cost us a few hundred dollars in sales every half-hour you’re in the store. If you come in again and make a scene, I’ll have to call the police and then you’ll end up with a restraining order to keep you out of the store completely.” He was looking a bit sheepish as he explained to Ginnie, “The corporate legal department already drew up the request for a restraining order once, against my wishes. I won’t even try to stop them from filing with the court the next time.”

## 4 Autumn in New York City

Two young outcasts had taken a bench in a small park nestled in between two skyscrapers. They were both still flying high – emotionally. If Ginnie tried to keep a calm exterior the better to deploy her sardonic wit – if that was the proper description for her expressed views; if Bayard was a naturally quiet and low-key fellow; they were both excited by what had happened and what might happen. The future was open to two kindred souls who had the courage to face up to a future which looked to be more a steam-roller than a parade of triumphant humanity. “Yes,” thought Bayard with a smile upon his face, but then he wondered how long the future could last for two creatures in front of a steam-roller.

Still . . .

If feeling triumphant, morally righteous and spiritually justified, they still felt themselves to be outcasts, though outcasts in a sort-of communion with each other, though outcasts convinced that was the only allowable social role for a morally upright person. Like were they unto non-conformists in parts, if not in whole, but those non-conforming parts were rather important. At least to a human being, who wished to remain such. In the strongest sense. Not that Ginnie felt people stopped being human beings just because they had willfully done much damage to their own minds and souls, as well as the minds and souls of others. But the point was . . .

“Your mind is what you think and what you think includes what you perceive,” spoke Ginnie to Bayard, but her voice, silent for most of the walk to the Park, was communicating a despair which had suddenly fallen upon her no matter her immediate attempts to return to the spirit the two had felt before Mr. Biloxi had presented them with some problems which were not quite so easily categorized as mostly moral and certainly not as mainly practical. With a “Pardon?” he shifted over on the bench as if needed to hear her better but then he put his arm around her shoulders and gave her

far shoulder a gentle squeeze. “What can people be thinking while they’re reading books about stuff they would profess in their better moments to be evil? What can they be thinking when they abandon their minds to the flow of stock images from the cheapest and most exploitive of movies and television shows?”

Suddenly sobered by the drop in Ginnie’s ecstatic emotions, Bayard managed to respond in terms he had disdained to use for his past year or so of increasingly radical contemplations upon the state of society, “Apparently, they can be thinking about making enough to pay the tuition at an expensive college. Or making mortgage payments. Or affording that trip to Spain they’d been dreaming of since they first got married but decided to have the children first.”

“Boy, you’ve pooped out pretty easily, Bayard. I’ve got to get you in better spirits before we go out to my parents’ dinner party. Otherwise, Momma will take me aside and tell me ‘to get rid of that ‘hung dog’ or whatever it is she says at times like that. Not that I’ve gone through too many times like that with her, since most people who come out to the house are unintelligently bubbly.”

“I’m tired. Haven’t been able to sleep well.” He pulled his arm back from around her and leaned forward upon his knees, burying his face in his hands.

Ginnie was feeling his need for her to be strong, but she hesitated, not from a lack of strength, but rather from a fear that the joke was going too far. It wasn’t as if her crusade were merely a lark, a way to kill time; in fact, she was quite serious in her joking. She had sometimes compared herself to the jesters in the courts of Medieval kings who were valuable counselors; their position, their sheer foolishness and willingness to laugh, allowed them to sometimes be the only honest man in the kingdom. A king with a good and honest jester did not have to worry about going out in public without any clothes on, for the jester would have been pointing to the king and laughing well before he reached the hallway leading to the drawbridge. Ginnie rather enjoyed that role of a jester and, while she felt sorry for the people like Mr, Biloxi who were trapped in the system, she was enough of a poor, little rich girl that she was able to often push aside concerns about the feelings and thoughts of other people.

That task of pushing away inconvenient feelings and thoughts, that is to say – the feelings and thoughts of others, was currently impossible; Bayard was feeling rotten and he was sitting thigh to thigh with her. Every time

she turned to look at his hunched-over, disconsolate self, she felt her breast press against his shoulder, a very pleasant feeling thought she, and she turned away several times so that she could turn back again. And it was a feeling conducive to the sympathy she was feeling for this young man. She'd only felt that sympathy twice before and both times. . .

Ginnie smiled at Bayard but he was still looking down at the ground, his forehead resting on his hand. A tingly feeling started in her breasts and then moved south, a feeling she knew, in a sense very well though she had not experienced it that often. Just three times before and two. . . Well, there were those two times.

Brad, a young man in one of her Russian literature classes at Columbia, and Erskine, an older man she'd met in an art gallery run by one of her mother's distant cousins, Paula Padua. Erskine had been a bit rough around the edges, a painter from Lithuania. Actually, an incompetent from Lithuania though he'd made good money when he gave up bad painting and went into animated art with the Disney computer studios. That had only been a one-nighter. Brad had been a long-term love affair: nearly her entire junior year. Ginnie had thought that was it. She'd even brought Brad out to visit her parents several weekends. With a little bit of a shock, she realized she'd been seeing Brad for a month or two before bringing him out to meet her parents and she was prepared to take Bayard out to meet them the very day she met him.

But how to prepare him to meet Myra and Oskar, her lovable and dingbat parents, artistic people who produced such esthetically pleasing cash-flows? Well, Ginnie decided she was going to have to tell him the truth about her parents, though it might be best if she broke it to him gradually.

"I guess I can understand your concern about corporations because my parents formed a sort of corporation. I was a start-up subsidiary, of sorts, but I didn't have any real representation at their board meetings." Trying to make him feel better and stronger, trying to prepare him for one possible future – however unlikely, she realized she'd stumbled onto something. "Even though they had an artsy sort of business, interior design if I didn't tell you, they were actually more inclined to business instead of art. Oh, they had all the mannerisms of modern fashion-buyers from Manhattan and they always knew what colors were fashionable, often they even knew what colors would be fashionable the next year. . ." She leaned over against his upper back, massaging it gently even as her cheek rested against his shoulder blade. He started as if to pull away from her and Ginnie pulled back

from Bayard in response.

And he turned to her, anguish showing on his face, surprising her by not speaking of his intellectual woes but rather, “I didn’t mean to pull back like that. I like it when you touch me. It’s just that I’m not used to being touched by another human being. My parents weren’t touchy-feely sorts and, since I was young. . .”

“That’s all right, Bayard. ‘Touchy-feely’ has nothing to do with it. My parents would gush verbally while hugging and kissing everything in sight and it was maybe better than not touching at all, but it wasn’t the same as a quiet hug and a sit-down talk.” Ginnie rested her head against his shoulder, and he responded by sitting back and putting his hand up to comb through her hair, she told him, “Momma and Poppa were always so busy, you would be surprised to know that wasn’t the reason they had so much trouble conceiving me.” She laughed and said, “And look what they got instead of that boy-genius poet they were aiming for.”

Bayard seemed lost for a response for several seconds before he asked, “Boy-genius poet?” But that seemed inadequate to the situation.

“My full name is Virginia Woolf Melville, and the Melville does come from the Dutch New Yorker family that produced Hermann himself. We’re distant relatives of his, I guess.” She giggled. “I told one of my father’s friends once that I was a cousin to Moby Dick, and he asked me if I didn’t mean Moby Grape, and I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, but I found out later there was a rock group named Moby Grape and that ding-bat of an architect had probably never even heard of Hermann Melville and maybe he would have remembered Moby Dick if someone had told him that Ray Bradbury wrote the screenplay and Gregory Peck played the morally insane captain of a whaling ship. Anyway, is your place near here?”

Bayard simply nodded, but then he confessed, with some embarrassment, “It’s pretty small, just a room. I guess you’d call it a cross between a closet and a studio apartment.”

“As long as it’s private. My parents’ house has fifteen rooms and you have to lock a door behind you to have any privacy, with the strange people they always have out there.” Ginnie looked over at Bayard and proposed, “We could go to my parents’ apartment on the upper west side, but we couldn’t be sure who might be coming in there. Last time I went there to relax and get away from it all for a day or two and some sculptor from Crete showed up with a couple of bimbos from some slum in London where

they breed dumb girls with large breasts. That was bad enough, but he decided to do me the favor of seducing me, trying to seduce me – that is, and I had to get the hell out of there. Stayed at the Y for a couple nights of blissful rest and then went back out on the Island to my parents’ house and arrived as the guests were showing up for a weekend blowout of a party. A blowout for aging artsy folks. And it was pretty raucous for the mood I was in. The house was filled with flabby sixty-five year-olds in various states of undress and mostly lesser states of sobriety. Bad enough but some of the personalities attached to those bodies. . . .”

Ginnie shuddered and Bayard failed to keep himself from laughing. She looked at him, half in feigned anger and half in appreciation for his appreciation of her tale of woe. She’d told it five or six times, only to people she trusted, and it had taken those practice runs to get down the right mixture of humor and pathos, that is to say, little pathos because. . .

“You really were a poor little rich girl, weren’t you?”

Ginnie took a deep breath and then confessed, “We weren’t exactly the Rockefellers, but I did grow up under privileged circumstances. Not that I didn’t have problems. Everybody has troubles. . . .” She looked over at Bayard and remained silent until he agreed to let her eyes lock his in a gaze more loving than honest. If ‘loving’ was the right word. “Being wealthy only eliminates one of many troubles in life, though it is a big one, to be sure, but it can also open up other possible troubles for some people.” She released his eyes and looked off into the cloudy October sky. “My biggest troubles came from my spacey parents. Well, ‘spacey’ is perhaps not so accurate as ‘adolescent’. I don’t think anyone ever told them they were no longer sophomore design majors. Not that people always grow up, especially when they get to do what they want from the beginning of their lives to the end. My parents didn’t grow up rich, but they both grew up as only children in middle-class families and that allows children to be spoiled as if they were rich. Worse. Middle-class people with good cash-flow, and certainly the *nouveau riche* often spend money unwisely while people who have been rich for generations are sometimes cheapskates.”

Ginnie smiled as she remembered Todd Westerman, a friend whose parents had been in the same circles as the Melvilles. They’d been just as eccentric as the Melvilles in just the same way, and much like them in more ordinary ways and even owned a beach house just two lots away as well as a co-op apartment in the same building as that of the Melvilles. Instead of interior design artists, the Westermans owned an art gallery and an an-

tique furniture wholesale business which involved the acquisition of entire estates in Europe or in older parts of the East Coast, the sorting of the goods acquired into various categories, the selling of most of it to ordinary used furniture or art dealers, and the selling of the better quality stuff to retail dealers or auction houses. It had been a “very good racket” at one time, as Todd had explained to her once, but it was a hard way to make a living once there were a lot of amateurs and professionals alike scouring every estate sale and garage sale in older neighborhoods in New London or over the pond in Birmingham. Even in towns in Vermont so far north that French was spoken as much as English. Life in general had become hard for the Westermans, not just their means of making an income: Todd, Jr. and Bessie had both gone bad in more ways than one. Todd had three children by two women, neither of whom he’d seen in a year or more though his parents were supporting the two women and the three children. Bessie had a successful real estate career but she was a lush and was married to a man who was even more successful than her, and he also drank even more than her.

Still, Ginnie had been spoiled rotten and largely left to grow up on her own while her parents paid a lot of attention to the wallpaper of their big clients. At that, she didn’t think she’d turned out that badly even if she was a bit unsettled and more than a bit eccentric. So far as she could see the world needed more eccentrics. Some of those eccentrics might even develop into geniuses.

“If only. . .,” she said out loud without further explanation.

A smile was still transforming the often slack face of Virginia Woolf Melville as she went on to dreamily speak of the past: “A friend of mine who studied the history of science told me that there is a thesis that the moral characters of mathematicians stagnate at the age when their genius first showed itself strongly. He said some of the greatest and most dignified mathematicians of modern times, even when they seemed to have somewhat noble souls, had the moral attitudes and behavior of twelve or thirteen year-old boys, an age when I guess they often show their genius. Actually, he said that’s almost the latest they can show their genius. Usually, those who develop their mathematical talent after they grow up never reach the highest ranks of genius. Then he gave me a lecture on the need for theories before you can have facts, and he said that the theory that mathematical geniuses are like that has driven the recognition and collection of certain facts and perhaps has led historians to ignore other facts relating to our

culture and its restrictions on ways of growing up. He said people of the modern West typically have renounced their own imaginative powers by the time they are adults. He said some, but not nearly enough, people are more attached to their imaginations, perhaps because they simply like to re-arrange reality some times, a skill as important to truly great statesmen as it is to a poet. Anyway, he said that someone who tries to keep his imagination alive might have trouble growing up into a conventional social role in our world. My friend was trying to write a paper on the relationship between Charles Dodgson's creative work in mathematical logic, his creative work in literature as Lewis Carroll, and his eccentricities. He preferred the company of children to adult society, and it was my friend's proposal that this was due to his unwillingness to accept certain types of brain damage we have to accept to become what our culture defines as an 'adult'."

I think my friend is both insightful and full of crap. Especially about mathematicians. I know some good ones and they are perfectly mature though they talk about some of their colleagues and. . . Sometimes, my friend is right. Human nature and moral issues are so complex that only novelists and poets can handle them properly. That's why we need good ones and not the idiots in the *Barn of Books*."

And then Ginnie returned to her current circumstances, taking a firm grasp of the left hand of Bayard Raines and raising it, kissing it before suggesting, "Let's skip the dinner party at my parents' house. . ."

"I wasn't exactly committed to going in the first place."

"Whatever. We can go to your place and talk about books or the horrors of a world where persons are useful only as building blocks to all these horribly huge organizations."

Bayard Raines suddenly felt his skin crawling, not from fear and not from a sudden surge of passion. He wasn't sure why it was happening and he pulled his hand away from Ginnie, but only to place it on her upper back where he ineffectually massaged her tenseness through her coat and sweater and feminine dainties. And he wondered what she did wear under her clothes, but he hoped not to find out, just yet. He was formulating plans, even as he felt his skin crawling as it was about to be sloughed off his person.

Meekly did Ginnie allow herself to be led by the hand, though knowing he was taking toward the east side of lower Manhattan. For some reason, the young woman who had failed to be born a boy, thus failing to have any chance of being a boy-genius of poetry, was wondering deeply. Not

about anything in particular. Just wondering. Full of wonder, one might say, though there was no awe as she had sometimes felt when wondering while she stared into the sky or when she'd read that poetry by that Spanish priest, John of the Cross. Her father had been fluent in Spanish, her mother merely conversant, but neither had shown any signs of being attracted to the Spanish language or Spanish culture other than that one collection of love poems on their bookcase. Ginnie had studied Spanish at school for nearly four years before she'd figured out the love poems were directed to God, and that made it more of a mystery to her because she'd never heard her parents say anything more religious than "God Bless You," and usually they said "Bless You" in a more agnostic sort of a manner.

Not that she'd known much about Christianity, her mother being half non-practicing Presbyterian and half non-practicing Episcopalian. Her father had belonged, nominally, to a fossil of the Dutch Reformed Church, considered by Ginnie to be no more than "One of those godawful, or maybe Godawful, churches where the members spend their lives making money or accumulating political power because those are the only forms of amusement allowed by their beliefs." In any case, the entire subject of what her parents believed didn't interest her since she knew their most passionate beliefs concerned such issues as the morality of choosing art to match the wall-paper rather than to please the eyes or the soul. She knew that that issue had bothered them for years before they'd settled the matter by deciding that toleration for other people's taste was at least as important as aesthetic standards.

And she had an urge to confess, to tell the tale of how she came to be, a story of passion which was beyond the control of merely human powers. So it was that Ginnie took Bayard's right hand in both of hers and looked into his eyes, pleading in hers, hope in her heart that he would listen and listen with sympathy.

"I want to tell you about myself. It might sound egotistical but I've started writing an autobiography, though I've written it as a third-person biography. It's not that I'm making any particular claims to objectivity but..." And she reached into her pocketbook and pulled out a small sheaf of paper. Waving it in front of Bayard, she said, "You can read it when we get to your apartment. It will explain much." With that announcement, she returned the manuscript to her pocketbook with Bayard noting only that it seemed to be less than ten pages though those were typewritten.

## 5 Lust Most Holy and Most Literate

As they walked down the concrete pavement and past the woman who was sitting in a cardboard box, wonder of a sort filled Ginnie, for reasons beyond her, but not, so far as she knew, for reasons important to St. John of the Cross, a poet who played a role in the story of her parents' passion and her conception. She suddenly felt very close to the man walking by her side, wondering if Bayard Townes Raines was her soul-mate, a term she didn't quite understand but accepted as being a statement of a fact, Everyone had someone to love. Everyone had someone to be loved by. Everyone had a soul-mate. She wasn't quite so convinced that everyone had a soul, but the existence of a soul-mate was, more or less, a given, though she also wasn't convinced that everyone managed to connect with their soul-mate, no matter how extensive their network of contacts, no matter how active their social life.

There was no sign of that wonder on the exterior of Ginnie, unless one were to count her submissiveness to this man she'd decided to trust with all her being, her soul and body. Was he not her soul-mate? Was he not likely to be her body-mate as well? She pondered the matter as they hiked out of Central Park and over to Lexington Avenue where they soon descended a concrete and stone entrance to a dank cave that smelled of urine and dead things, though not strongly so. Maybe, thought Ginnie, it is no more than a few dead rats in the tunnels. Or maybe an alcoholic who died while huddling a short ways down the tunnel. Ginnie shivered with the atmosphere so, so...

"What is the proper adjective for Poe?"

"What?" Bayard was distracted by his purchase of a couple of subway tokens, fumbling as he was for the money, realizing as well as the people

behind him that the simple matters of life were so complex and absorbed so much mental and emotional energy when you didn't have the right habits. All the people behind him had the money already out and ready to throw into the bin under the glass which protected, sort of, the ticket-seller, a frowning Black woman making her way from the middle years to her golden years.

He shivered as he turned to hand a token to Ginnie. The smell down in these subway stations, the atmosphere in general – it was dark and looked to be the insides of a mausoleum from a culture more devoted to construction than to maintenance – seemed not to be appropriate to a great center of Western Civilization.

He shivered again and noticed that Ginnie was also shaking though there was this odd smile upon her face as if she enjoyed being down in a cave that was a combination of grave and latrine.

“Poe wasn't easy to understand, as a man or as a poet. Perhaps it's fitting there is no easy way to turn his name into a good adjective.” Bayard smiled his assent to her statement though he didn't know what the hell she was talking about. It did give him some clue why she was smiling as she breathed in the odors of death and piss, and it scared him. Not that he was afraid she'd turn out to be an axe-murderer or the type of weirdo who might slip an exotic poison into his drink, but... Bayard had known some girls back in high school who'd been obsessed with Poe's writings and, whatever was cause and whatever effect, they had worked their way into morbid, even suicidal, states of mind. One of those girls had disappeared for a month or two during her junior year of high school and there had been rumors she'd been in the hospital after swallowing a bottle of her mother's Valium. Bayard looked over at Ginnie and forced a smile even as he shivered again. She just smiled and said, “The train is approaching.”

Soon enough, they were back out on the streets, near the Brooklyn Bridge, a region of Manhattan that, truth to tell, didn't smell all that much better than the subway stations. And the closer you got to the massive foundation of the bridge as the road was lifted up onto the steel, river-spanning structure, the darker and danker it got. A massive, above-ground cave that was a mere side-effect of a great feat of design and construction. Separately but in parallel, Ginnie and Bayard were contemplating the many signs and symbols which were generated naturally as a result of man's activities in cultivating the world and building cities upon it. If only, those signs and symbols could be seen more clearly, it might become more possible

to describe the state of a world in which the race of man had continued to build, a social insect expanding and improving upon the nest, even as men had lost sense of any reason to be doing such things, other than the proper but inadequate reason of raising the standard of living.

Ginnie was worried about the transfer of any and all expectations, and increasingly any and all realizations, of intelligence to the technologists. Were not poets and novelists to have thoughts? Apparently not, according to most modern theories of the activity of writing. Painters had managed to retain their form of perceptual and conceptual intelligence, and van Gogh's depictions of a world fragmenting into its different perceptual components was not all that much different from the depictions by Dostoevsky or Stevenson of men fragmenting into an empirical piece and other pieces which could be labeled as spiritual or moral but certainly could not be labeled as being concretely real. How was the artist, or the sympathizer with the artist, to re-integrate the world? Ginnie was realistic enough to know it would have little to do with escaping the Brooklyn Bridge and a lot to do with integrating it into man's perception and conception of his world. Men, including artists, had no deeper understanding, no proper inner vision, of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Bayard was also thinking in terms of the Brooklyn Bridge but he was more worried about something seemingly in opposition to the worries of Ginnie: how was one to get the Brooklyn Bridge out of one's mind and soul? He might have conceded that man had been fragmented and that some sort of re-integration was desirable, even necessary for man to even dream once more of becoming a god-like creature. And yet, the problem that worried him most was the lost of the private self, the invasion of the innermost regions of a person by the images and implicit commands of a philistine society. The Brooklyn Bridge was inside of each American and most people in other Western countries along with bits and pieces of Lucy in the chocolate factory and helicopters swooping over the jungles of Viet Nam. Bayard knew that the experiences of the real world were what formed a person; for good and bad, he along with other Americans had been formed by those images of technology, by the images televised so profitably by the entertainment industry including its news subsidiaries. The problem then became one of mediation, how to filter and control those images so private spaces could re-form inside the persons of the United States and of the West. Men, including conscious and thinking men, had massive, intrusive presences inside of their minds and had no way to drive them out in order

to get the space in which to form a proper, personal, rational understanding of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Befuddled separately yet so close to one another, they climbed a flight of stairs, and then another, and still two more. Bayard was fumbling with his keys even as they were climbing those last few stairs. His hand was shaking and it took three tries for him to get the key into the hole, but finally the door was open and they entered into an apartment which was all that Bayard had promised: a cross between a studio apartment and a closet.

Entering the small one-room apartment, Ginnie and Bayard felt surprisingly far apart, though they did not realize their shared cultural concerns hid a radical difference, one of the two young critics more concerned with the application of intelligence to esthetic matters and the other more concerned with rescuing a sphere of privacy from an intrusive culture. But perhaps that was not the best or most complete explanation for the way that Ginnie sat on his day-bed, deliberately trying to loosen her body – no, her entire self, but not being able to look directly at Bayard. But he was also not looking at her.

Ginnie suddenly realized: “If soul-mates we are, then the human soul must be a thing of paltry substance.”

“What?!!”

“Nothing of immediate importance.”

Still, if Ginnie was backing away from her looseness, yea, she was sitting rather rigidly straight upon the day-bed, Bayard was still merely confused. He was stumbling toward an act of the sort he despised, the degradation of two human bodies under the assumption, implicit or otherwise, that a person can do something to his or her body without it affecting some inner reserve that. . .

He sat down next to Ginnie and said, “You know, there is, or at least can be something inside a human being that is private that is beyond communication, in a sense – beyond the reach of the physical world. And I don’t believe in this business about a soul that’s somehow thrown into a lump of clay. Still, there’s something that can form inside a person, something that has to form inside a person. . .”

A troubled young man looked over at a young woman whose face and body were once more relaxing, once more loosening, as if her troubles were melting away. Wishing to get the development of their relationship back on track, she told him in a quavering voice, “You know, for someone who’s so

badly educated and so poorly read, you can think pretty powerful thoughts. I don't know for sure that I understand what you're getting at. I mean I understand the need for a private part to a person, but I think most people have that private part. I know I do."

"Well, I'm sure you do. But what's inside it? Is that inner space furnished with images based on your concrete experiences and perceptions? Or is it furnished with images meant to appeal to every possible consumer so that they mean nothing to any one of those consumers? How many people are there who know what a Klingon chair looks like but haven't a clue what chairs were like in Colonial Boston or in the homes of their great-grandparents who cultivated the great plains of Nebraska or Kansas? In fact, how many people nowadays have a clue what country their ancestors came from? What languages they spoke? What conditions of freedom or repression they lived under? How many even know what conditions of freedom the Constitution was meant to restrict?"

"Restrict freedom?"

"Yes. The Articles of Confederation granted more freedoms to the states and, potentially, to individuals. The country quickly started decaying into a state not so much different from a modern-day banana republic, and then the younger, and surviving, Founding Fathers stepped in. Wrote a document which gave a stronger structure to the country and. . . The point is that the Constitution was written under the assumption that people need structure because they can't provide enough moral order for their own lives. . ."

"Which is an argument going upstream in your general thought?"

Bayard put his arm around Ginnie, in a manner more friendly than seductive, and nodded. "The point is that I need some inner space. I'm one of those people who can't live my life entirely as a public person and I'm not content to simply remain quiet while the images and ideas of the public fill my insides. Hell, the only types of personalities that people can admire nowadays, the only types they can recognize as being unique, are those of rock stars strutting across the stage to impress the teeny-boppers or the celebrities who play out their drunken disordered lives on the stands at the checkout counters."

"Increasingly, that includes our statesmen as well as our movie stars."

Ginnie was pressing her tongue against the insides of her right cheek, but it kept moving about on her, shifting the bulge in her cheek in a way that irritated Bayard Raines as he sat her down on the day-bed which served

him for both sleeping and sitting. He had longed for the recliner in his mother's living-room, feeling that might put him in the mood to read a good, difficult book, as it often had when he was young and for the three years he lived at his mother's house while teaching in the local high school.

Irritated? In ways both delicious and . . . irritating.

He was wondering if he'd found the woman he'd want to spend the rest of his life with, and he was wondering how to keep her happy without bedding her down on the first day they'd met, which was not ordinarily such a concern to him but she seemed to be steering him in that sort of a direction. Having a generous estimate of the moral corruption of the modern world, he wasn't at all surprised that even a decent, intelligent woman would cheapen herself if she met a nice guy. Bayard knew he was a nice guy though he didn't overestimate the attractiveness of that category to women in the modern, corrupt world. And he felt himself heating up again, realizing that his body was following his mind. The hormones would start flowing every time he started thinking fast and in an exciting manner about these moral and social problems; it was as if his brain was his primary sex organ and his genitals merely followed the lead of his thoughts.

Virginia Woolf Melville was also still wondering and though she wasn't quite sure what she was wondering, she felt her brain heating up as it was working on something . . .

And some vague awareness of her situation, less conscious and less self-conscious and certainly less explicit, caused her to wonder about her wonder. And that in turn caused her to wonder about the relationship between red and anger, green and calm, lions and courage, skunks and romance. She fell into such states of wonder, and other states of wonder about her wonder, every so often as much as she had tried to fight against it, feeling the duty to get her mind back on track that she might be the poet her parents had wanted her to be. Her mother had taken every creative writing course she could fit in between her art courses and required courses at Radcliffe. And Myra, a woman with the natural instincts of a teacher, had tried to help her daughter out, even going so far as developing a schedule for daily writing exercises. She'd set goals, quite modest for an apprentice creative writer, and Ginnie had failed to get so much as a page per day finished. And that was a page handwritten, certainly not much more than seventy or eighty words on wide-ruled paper and certainly not much for someone who might hope to someday publish something substantial, something worth reviewing space in *The New York Times*.

Ginnie had learned early on that it was her inability to easily bring forth well-formed thoughts or even scattered phrases that had kept her from becoming any sort of poet, let alone the great poet her parents had thought she'd become, despite her congenital inability to grow an impressive Whitmanesque beard. At that, some of her beardless friends had been able to spill sonnets and couplets from the tips of their tongues; they'd been published in their school papers and in the literary magazines of their colleges. Ginnie's mind had always drifted from the effort to commit words to paper. In her sophomore year of high school, she'd made an honest effort to discipline herself in the way advocated by her teachers and by some writing magazines which she had been receiving as Christmas present subscriptions – Myra had not given up hope. Not completely. All the effort by Ginnie and Myra and a number of teachers over the years had done no good, The lines she'd dribbled forth had been flat and meaningless beyond their word-by-word denotations. And sitting there working away like a rat on a treadmill drove her crazy.

It had been more comfortable, or at least more comforting, to drift away in a fog of the poorly formed images that often bothered her day and night. She'd enjoyed watching the sea-gulls soar more than reading text-books on the steps to becoming a competent poet. Once, she'd actually felt a hint of inspiration while watching the gulls soar. Some words had resulted:

Sanctifier of the vulgar sky,  
 pure-white shown to the world,  
 not a word to form a lie,  
 just garbage in the gut.

That was all Ginnie could remember of what she'd written, words not nearly as pretty as the lyrics her school-mates were writing about the glories of love discovered for the first time, nor so intense as their other poems about despair and the glories of suicide. After seeing how much ingenuity her friends could muster to say, "I'm horny, you stud, take me tonight and show the world what non-conformists we are," or "Life is meaningless, so I'll find myself a nice, high roof and go off the edge with my fellow non-conformists," Ginnie hadn't felt her paltry attempts at poetry to be worth the time or calories they burned up. And she wouldn't have wanted anything she'd ever written to be published. It would have been embarrassing to see stuff like that over her name; she had never even showed it, or other efforts like it,

to her parents despite their constant queries – when she was yet young – about her latest efforts in versifying. She had other stuff she tried to write under the guidance of Myra or one sympathetic teacher or another; those she showed, all three or four lines she'd be able to produce before losing the trend of her thoughts.

Once she had mustered the courage to show some of her more private poems, or rather – beginnings of poems, to another person, Kyle Young, and he'd kind of shrugged them off before telling her about his latest songs, most of which had the singer killing himself in the midst of success and riches because... Because... Because there was nothing that could make life meaningful except a high roof. Or maybe a needle. Or a bottle of sleeping pills. She'd never been quite sure what might have made life meaningful to people whose minds and souls seemed to have been filled with the most horrible images, and she really hadn't been much sure that Kyle, or others like him, had had a clue about the whole subject though he had learned about minor chords by listening to country-rock bands. And learning those minor chords had given him greater insight into healthier sorts of melancholic moods. At least, Ginnie had thought so.

The entire episode had made one thing crystal clear to Ginnie: she didn't understand rock-and-roll lyrics except for those which were teenaged and somewhat incompetent versions of tin-pan alley songs, love songs and the rest. That had settled the matter of the content but Ginnie had been forced to recognize she really could not force herself to write lyrics because she didn't have it in her to write anything that could be set to the rhythms of rock-and-roll. And, so, she'd stopped trying.

"How can you drink so much of that stuff without bouncing out open windows?" she asked, stopping him in the process of making a pot of coffee. Before he could answer, she asked, "You ever read poetry?"

At the sink, it might have been labeled a 'sinkette', Bayard pulled the carafe out of the stream of water and turned to her. Their eyes met and, in an embarrassed manner, shook his head. "Why not?" He shrugged and she admitted with no embarrassment at all: "I don't read poetry very much myself. My parents tried to get me to read it all the time. And they used to try to get me to write it. When I wasn't even in school, they used to examine every phrase for the slightest hint of lyrical talent or mystical insights on nature." After a pause, she added, "Of course, they were also very squeamish about me eating Jello when I was young, and they didn't keep it in any of their apartments or houses. Still, they seemed to know

they couldn't keep me from being exposed to it at school and other people's houses."

Ginnie looked up and winked at Bayard with her left eye and then laughed at the odd mixture of fascination and confusion on his face.

"Bayard Townes Raines is really your name?" When he nodded, she critiqued, "It's almost a great name but it doesn't quite pan well. It's not quite as bad as Babs seemed to think, despite..." She paused and thought for a moment, moving over to Bayard's side as he stood with the carafe in his hand. And she let her hand drift over to rub the forearm hanging loose at his side. "You should either get rid of the 'Townes' or the 's' on 'Raines'. On the other hand, my name doesn't pan very well either. Virginia Woolf Melville."

"Isn't that a mix of styles?"

She couldn't hold back a giggle as she drew back from him. "You know, off and on, I've felt the desire to seduce you. Or to let you seduce me. And I thought it would happen." She looked at him, her eyes a bit moist and her lips a bit slackened downward. "Part of me still wants you to bed me down, but it wouldn't be smart. We might be soul-mates in some way. That's what I've been thinking since you pulled me out of the *Barn of Books*, but I don't think... I mean, it might ruin a beautiful friendship. And that's too bad because it's not often I meet someone I want to hug or kiss."

Bayard looked away for just a second before he looked back at Ginnie, a playful smile upon his face. He put down the carafe and took a step toward her, his arms open wide. "Good friends can still hug, even though kisses can be pretty dangerous."

After a time neither short nor long, they broke apart and Ginnie went to her pocketbook to retrieve the short manuscript. Handing it to him, she said, "It's no more than a draft of the beginning of my life's story." She walked past him to the small refrigerator and opened it to take a beer. Raising it to him, she asked, "How'd I know a guy coming to a new city would stock up on beer before bothering to get any food?" After opening it, she offered it to him. "This might go better with my story than a coffee."

Soon, she was cuddled up on the daybed, beer in hand, while Bayard sat at the small table with the manuscript in front of him. He began to read even as he took a sip of his beer.



## 6 Children for Art's Sake

Virginia Woolf Melville would be born to parents who took seriously the responsibility of a noble and honored surname. So intent were they on producing a great artist, one to burst the bonds of American mainstream culture – as had the cousin several times removed of Oskar's great-grandfather, that they decided they should even conceive the child under conditions reflecting the highest possible esthetic standards.

At first, they didn't have the courage of their convictions. They started using electronic reproductions of great music and reciting poetry to each other in their untrained voices. Mozart's music had been shown by scientists to be good at stimulating activity in the language centers and verbal reasoning centers of the left brain. And, so, they made love on the sofa and on the coffee-table and on the carpet and on the window-ledge to the melodies of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* while chanting descriptions of pastoral scenes from Wordsworth's attacks upon the hornèd industrialists.

On another night, as they could see snow fall on the other side of their kitchen window, even as they finished their meal of smoked oysters and oyster stew and roasted oysters, all juices of which were sopped up with a garlicky and buttery oyster bread, Myra, of a sudden, swept the dishes from the table. Oskar, no fool, knew what was coming, and he did the only thing necessary under the circumstances.

He ran from the room to fetch his copy of Byron's *Don Juan*.

On the way back in, he caught sight of Myra writhing on the table with the loaf of oyster bread partially crushed by her buttocks and sticking out between her legs. As exciting as the sight was, he was distracted by a vision of desert sitting on the counter – a strawberry gelatin mold with fresh bananas and strawberries and kiwis. Realizing it had been a mistake to put the fruit in the mold, he nevertheless picked up the desert and ran the two steps to Myra. After a number of microseconds, they were engaged

in the messy and kind of reddish task of trying to conceive a great poet – though they'd decided a novelist would do so long as he were to chant odes that were ever the wonderfulest. They'd made a couple of attempts at conceiving a poet when they slipped off the table, and, as if the gods were with them, the shock-waves turned on the CD player. *Jupiter* slammed into their ears and pressed them to the floor, against each other, and what could they do but go for attempt number three, as buttery as Myra's buttocks were by that point, as sickeningly sweet as might have been the mingled odors of garlic and bananas and other organic substances.

After weeks of useful but apparently fruitless practice, they made it to the Stuyvesant Museum of Art. With their stopwatch. Which they used to time the period between visitors passing through the most deserted galleries in the place. After all, it was Tuesday morning, and they figured few people would be interested in Rembrandt or Picasso at that time of the week and day. An impressionist gallery was deserted, save for Myra and Oskar, for five minutes and seventeen seconds, and then for three and twenty-three, and then for seven and eighteen. Not quite sure of themselves, they moved to a cubist exhibit and sat beneath a portrait of a creature which seemed to be a young woman with a penis sticking out of her chin. Or maybe it was her chin. Or maybe she was growing from. . .

That seemed unlikely but such thoughts passed quickly on as they were so dedicated to the task of conceiving a child in the midst of great art. Thus it was that Myra sat, suppressing the occasional shudder and scratching her chin, while Oskar worked the stopwatch, but he got no better results than one minute and thirty-seven seconds in that gallery holding a product of the noble imagination of a great artist. That was surely not enough time, no matter how inspiring the artwork. They moved to a far distant part of the building where was a display of Japanese prints.

Underneath a print of courtesans working on every appendage of the body of a recumbent man, they found themselves in the midst of a constant stream of art-lovers. Clearly was time moving fast in the presence of such a work of art. Having heard a few rumors about modern physics, Oskar was convinced that it was movement of physical objects that brought time into being, or at least defined time, and he could see that Japanese artists were sometimes interested in painting scenes that could accelerate nearby people to the speed of light. And that implied an infinite number of people would pass through in less time than it took to conceive a poetic genius. . .

And, so, on they moved to early American portraits. Under the stern

visage of that old rascal Benjamin Franklin, they found themselves alone for at least two minutes, fourteen seconds at a time, and once for a full four, thirty-seven. To be sure, it was unlikely they'd need that much time if they were really anxious to get it over with, but Oskar grew reluctant; in truth, he was fearing he could not reach the high standards of old Ben and he was a bit embarrassed. How prolific the forefathers and how the descendants had fallen to such lesser states!!

They moved on to an exhibit of American paintings of the nineteenth century, mostly of a Western genre. There was something about the half-naked Cheyenne warriors that seemed to appeal to Myra, but...

No, there was a constant flow of mothers and nannies escorting their broods. Probably not a great poet amongst them, but how many great poets had the American West produced? Not many, and not a one of those were cowboys or Cheyennes so far as Myra and Oskar could recall.

After a room of display cases filled with decorated eggs from Russia and another of what appeared to be weathered stones on pedestals—they were from Central America, Myra and Oskar made old-fashioned use of a broom closet outside a roomful of portraits of Victorian Age notables from both the United States and England. Desiring to keep their voices low, they found themselves to be so inhibited that their memories were suppressed; the best they could manage for verbal stimulation was a limerick from the Nantucket school of poetry. That lasted only a few seconds, and they lasted a little longer, realizing as they came to a climax that they were reciting *Jack, Be Nimble*. As they straightened their clothes in the dark, each was hoping they had not really conceived that time. They opened the door of the closet to see a small crowd had gathered around; they'd been reciting Mother Goose rhymes louder than had been wise under the circumstances. As the applause began, they also realized their recitation techniques were improving with practice.

No baby came, great poet or otherwise, but they didn't give up hope. They found a bush in a quiet, dark region of Central Park near a stage where played a string quartet. One of the late quartets of Beethoven. So understated. So rational. So lacking in emotion. Once more Oskar and Myra hoped they'd been unsuccessful, since neither one felt up to the task of raising a physicist.

And their prayers were answered. No baby came.

Feeling a need to be a bit more radical, they played Berlioz in the background and recited some of Baudelaire's poems about cats and some of his

other poems about lesbians working their way into Hell. That made Oskar uncomfortable since he found himself getting equally excited by descriptions of cats and by damnations piled upon the heads of lesbians. He had to spend several days cleansing his imagination with the aid of a stack of *Playboys*. Oh, the beauties of the perfect eighteen year-old female body, unblemished by so much as a mark of character upon the face.

Moving on to the distonal noise of Bruckner and the depressing rants of the young T.S. Eliot, they found themselves spiraling into a despair so deep as to stop their efforts to conceive a baby. They also stopped eating and sleeping for days at a time. Just when it seemed that suicide was the only way out, a friend who had studied Spanish literature told them about the love-poems of St. John of the Cross.

O night that has united  
The Lover with His beloved,  
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Upon my flowering breast  
Which I kept wholly for Him alone,  
There He lay sleeping,  
And I caressing Him  
There is a breeze from the fanning cedars.

To be sure, the theologian of the early Renaissance had written those love-poems to God, but, hey...

They were erotic in an off-beat way, providing stimulation that didn't come in Byron's high-flying prose and complex syntax, not in Baudelaire's poetry about felines and about lesbians seeking hell, not in the poems by Ginsburg about himself and his flaccid, aging organ, and...

Oh yeah, a young man. Or an almost grown boy who wished to be kind to a man old enough to be his grandfather. Kindness was big in the modern world. Though sometimes a bit flaccid as well. And often more than a bit self-absorbed.

Oskar and Myra had read Ginsburg's collected works just a week before discovering St. John of the Cross. In between, in the moments when they would emerge from their common despair, they read some of the works of William S. Burroughs, a novelist, but one said to be quite lyrical in his use of language. For example, in his descriptions of his heroin-soaked dreams

of breasts growing and his pubic regions becoming feminine even as his homosexual lover mounted him. . .

Anyway, there was no doubt he'd been a talented writer, but Oskar thought, at times, and at other times he felt he was being prejudiced in thinking, Burroughs showed a certain modernistic tendency to view as perverse forms of sex that might lead to the conception of a child, and. . .

Tolerance was one thing, but Oskar thought it should be extended to people whose tastes were. . .

Old-fashioned?

That is. . .

God was another matter. All-powerfulness was an attractive trait in the dominant partner, and. . .

A confusing few days followed while Oskar and Myra tried to decipher this apparent belief of St John of the Cross that all human beings were feminine and submissive before God. Oskar grew quiet and tearful over those days; he didn't make so much as a verbal pass at Myra while they were dealing with that important issue. Then, they happened to attend a poetry reading by a Jesuit priest. When they talked to him afterward, they mentioned their confusion and he told them, "By tradition, by linguistic gender classification in most languages, and in truth in all languages, the human soul is feminine and, when healthy, submissively responsive to God's advances. That has no effect on our physical or emotional relationships with each other. A man is still a man and a woman. . ."

The priest was still talking when Oskar remembered a woman was, or at least could be, a vessel for carrying new life, including unborn poets. He noticed Myra was still hanging on to every word from the mouth of Father Bert, just as if he were speaking truths of everlasting life. Oskar was ready to get back to their calling, their mission; he was compiling a grocery list and getting no further than:

- five packages of strawberry gelatin
- no fresh fruit
- three pounds fresh oysters
- two packages smoked oysters
- one can oyster stew

The oyster bread had proven to be a bit of a messy mistake and there seemed no real need for cheese or milk or peanut butter, though Oskar wasn't sure what foods might be delectable to the refined tastes of a poet. Not that Byron's tastes were always refined, nor those of Shakespeare or his brawling, whoring friend Ben Jonson, poetry consultant to the translators of the Book of Psalms in the King James Bible – though it might have been odd he wasn't consulted on the tales of the brawling, whoring patriarchs.

As Oskar dragged Myra out of the Bronstein's apartment, he heard her whisper:

Where have You hidden,  
Beloved, and left me moaning?  
You fled like the stag  
After wounding me; I went out calling You, and You were gone.

“I ain't leaving you, Babe, not tonight anyway.”

Myra was in ecstasy as they climbed in the cab; she'd never heard Oskar speak in such poetic words of his own. And that meant a lot to a woman; it had meant so much to that woman in that story about John somebody and that other guy who went the distance but couldn't speak for himself.

The cabbie looked as if he'd finally heard a new one when Myra breathlessly chanted:

Be still, deadening north wind;  
South wind come, you that waken love,  
Breathe through my garden,  
Let its fragrance flow,  
And the Beloved will feed amid the flowers.

And the cabbie looked positively happy when Oskar threw him a wad of tens and twenties as the happy couple dashed onto the pavement and up the stairs and almost through the locked door to their apartment building on 67th Street.

What followed was a series of conceptive attempts which seemed to be quite original and floridly creative at the time. There were chap-books as well as a longer volume of the works of Robert Burns, himself a man not well-behaved when it came to the wenches. There was whipped cream and even a small jar of sticky cherries. Furniture with ruined finishes; carpets

with stains in the most unlikely spots with no children in the apartment but only hopes of one to come. There were the sounds of Beethoven's Ninth and the words of Schiller. Sounds and words of triumph. A poet of pagan hope and a deaf and grumpy man who nevertheless knew something known only by a few. Oskar and Myra, to be sure, knew what Beethoven had known, but only for scattered seconds through that night to be remembered. It's likely they even had a glimpse of what St. John of the Cross had known, though it's also likely that the loving couple had somewhat misinterpreted what they had glimpsed – not totally, only somewhat.

For all the doubts of clinicians and scientists that a woman knows exactly when she conceives a child, there is some reason to believe that Myra was right, her only daughter, Virginia Woolf Melville, may well have been conceived that night; after all, that little bundle of joy came into the world 287 days after that blessed night.

Early that Spring, when the doctor confirmed that Myra was pregnant, Myra and Oskar decided to turn their design firm and its 59 employees over to the supervisors for a week or so, and they headed out to the Hamptons to catch some sleep in separate bedrooms. They left their copies of the spiritual writings of St. John of the Cross at home and made sure not to pick up oysters at the grocer on their way out to the beach.

Ah, blissful sleep. A time of peace and quiet at the end of years of hard work toward a noble goal.

And they were not yet bothered by the knowledge of the disappointment the child would prove to be. In that she was a girl that is. It wasn't that either of them had a prejudice against girls. It was just that an image had grown up in the minds of Myra and Oskar, separately and as a couple. They thought they would be having a son who would grow up to be a slender, almost anorexic fellow, dark-skinned and able to endure extraordinary sufferings for the sake of poetry. Waves of hair pouring out from under a wide-brimmed hat and a full beard in the style of Whitman, the athletic skills of a Byron – without the bum leg, Stag willing.

Virginia would prove to be an entirely different person from that though she was attracted to men and she was a good swimmer.



## 7 An Author Covers Her Tracks

Bayard finished turning the pages and had grown still and quiet, only occasionally taking a sip of his beer, and Ginnie let him be for a while before she said, “You know that view out the one window in your apartment really is atrocious. All you can see is that alley. It has no more than a dumpster in it and the brick building across the way is covered with five decades of soot and grease.” Ginnie was somewhat startled by the pained expression on Bayard’s face at the very mention of . . . something in that view; she knew not what. But she moved on, enjoying the groove she was in, yes, her fuzzy thoughts and feelings were coalescing in a strange manner. It wasn’t that they were coming into better focus. It was more than that; those fuzzy thoughts and feelings were taking over her entire mind and soul, as if they were becoming a single image and that image was her own mind in its current action. The thinker and the substratum of her thought were no longer at odds, nor was she sure where the barriers lay between the thoughts and the objects of those thoughts, or rather the concepts forming as she perceived objects, most of which were not present.

It was as if the objects had been somehow been brought into her mind, to form abstractions of themselves.

“Would it be blasphemy,” she asked in a faraway voice that led Bayard to believe she was talking to herself, “or simply a revelation of the possibilities of redemption if the sea-gull, on its way from the garbage dump to the shore, were to pick up a Eucharistic wafer dropped by a priest, perhaps impious and perhaps merely careless. So lost in the cares and worries of the day that he is forgetful of what remains when all else has died.”

“Maybe your parents’ hopes were not misplaced after all.”

Ginnie returned to her surroundings and wrinkled up her face, only

partly in response to Bayard's comment and largely in response to the mysterious actions of the man who'd just dumped a barrel of garbage into the dumpster in her mind. The fellow, a son of the Orient, was inscrutably looking all around it as if looking for something important, or perhaps dangerous, but all he stirred up was a couple of rats who ran along the building, heading for a dumpster where men would respect the privacy of other creatures.

While Ginnie was pondering the ugly turn in her vision, she heard Bayard add, "And maybe a poet is not capable of creating blasphemies of her own but only of pointing out blasphemy that is already implicit in her culture and in her fellow-citizens."

"Or in her own mind as being a citizen of that culture."

"True."

And Ginnie laughed so hard that the beer bottle slipped out of her hand and she barely caught it. She was still gasping for breath when she looked up at Bayard who was quite mystified by her fit of laughter. And she explained: "We sound like perfectly pompous asses."

"Well, as long as we're perfect at being asses, we can at least say we have high standards."

"Yes, my almost-lover, we do both advocate high standards."

At that Bayard grimaced. His remark about high standards had been partly brought about by an irritated conscience. He was still bothered by what Mr. Biloxi had said...

But he wasn't willing...

No, Bayard was accumulating a list of those things he wasn't willing to do or to talk about. For now his thoughts were re-organizing themselves, seeking some sort of stability necessary for future movement, but he as yet had no more than lists of taboos. It was too rigid a structure, though one that he thought to be compatible with modern styles of thought.

He could feel some important parts of his insides being squeezed into cages...

Feeling a little dizzy, he noticed that Ginnie was looking at him with some sort of pity showing upon her face. He grew angry. Friend or not, she had no right...

"It's amazing," and he was speaking in a dazed voice, "that so many trends worked to one purpose. One might almost think that there really is a Satan and he's working to make the world fit for his son." Ginnie was staring at him, a strange look of concentration upon her face. At first

he wondered if she was doubting his sanity and then it came to him that she knew he was thinking through a line of thought; he might be traveling pathways alien to her but she was not one of those who thought to score cheap points by attacking an interesting or useful line of thought in its vulnerable childhood.

As if suspecting his fears, she explained, "I realized a long time ago, listening to the radicals and reactionaries amongst my fellow students that the birth of an idea can be painful and bloody, just like the birth of a child."

When Bayard remained silent, Ginnie put her hand upon his and squeezed gently. He looked up to a smile of encouragement and she decided he needed to be drawn forward; he seemed oddly timid whenever he began any interesting line of thought. "When I was at Columbia, I took a literature course where we had a really brilliant graduate student as a teaching assistant. He's at home in philosophical thought as much as literary thought; in fact, given his tastes and his opinions, there's a gray area where many great works of literature merge into philosophy and many great works of philosophy are magnificent works of literature." When Bayard still remained silent, Ginnie winked at him and then walked over to fetch the last two beers from his refrigerator. She noted it was "Time for a shopping trip," and then walked over to hand him one of the beers. And still he was not ready to speak, and she knew from her own experiences that it might take hours, maybe even years, for his current line of thought to bear digestible fruit. She walked back to the daybed and settled in before going on with her tale.

"His name is Steven Church, and he has masters degrees, from Oxford and from Notre Dame, in literature and in philosophy. He's an expert in Dostoevsky and in Kierkegaard and in Sartre, but he knows more about the major lines of literature and of philosophy than a young man could possibly know. He gave an informal talk once, invitation only... I think he was working out some lines of argument for his doctoral dissertation though he wasn't planning to formally present it for another couple of years. Anyway, he talked about the different modes of philosophical 'exploration'... I think that was the word he used." Ginnie took another sip of her beer and a faraway look came into her eyes. Bayard could feel himself relieved of a great pressure, but also maddened somewhat, as he realized that Ginnie was deeply in love with that graduate student who might well be a professor somewhere by now.

"He told us that Aquinas spoke in a discursive language, more rigid in its structures than the modern essay often said to have come into maturity

with Montaigne. Plato wrote philosophical dialog with a dramatic structure as clear as that in any play by Sophocles. More recently, Nietzsche wrote a somewhat loose mixture of parables and essayic paragraphs and allegories and poetry. Steven considered Kierkegaard to be the most interesting of all. At first sight, Kierkegaard's sermons as well as his philosophical discourses and his theological writings seem to be essays in the modern sense. Then, you look closer and you pay attention to the flow of his words and arguments, his very style and you realize this is stuff as deeply personal as St Augustine's *Confessions* which is often considered to be the first novel even if it was nonfiction."

Bayard's eyes lit up as if his self-confidence was coming to life, though Ginnie knew his confusion continued in an intense and highly turbulent form. "I think I've read about that. It's in line with the idea that the novel is a moral form of literature, a form which is suited to the exploration of the inner private self that came into awareness of itself with Augustine and then blossomed with the development of the modern bourgeoisie."

Ginnie laughed and responded, "You seem to respond very well to anything that deals with the private self. Anyway, Steven talked a little about *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* which is properly read as an attack upon the psychological incoherencies brought on when a man forces himself to live by rigid moral rules without reforming his own insides to match up with those rules. If it would have even been possible for Dr. Jekyll to be truly the role he'd taken on."

Ginnie sighed and sat back against the wall for a moment before going on, "Steven, and these are mostly Steven's ideas, told us that the the modern bourgeoisie have created a new problem by convincing themselves they really are what they think they are."

Bayard asked himself, "Is she still in contact with this fellow who seems to be in many ways what I want to be. What I could have been with a different upbringing and better schooling?"

"What did you mutter about school?"

"Nothing, I'm just thinking while you're talking and I'm regretting that so many of these ideas are new to me. Even the possibility of such ideas is new, and I've got a degree in history from a respectable university... The University of Vermont. I can understand why so many people have so little inner substance that they have to kill time by watching television every evening for three hours. Or more."

While silence fell over the small studio, Bayard wondered if she would

be doing something with her writing. He hoped so and thought that the tongue-in-cheek story about her own begetting showed signs of some talent in giving humorous statement to serious ideas, but he was annoyed by her current train of thought. . .

“Steven’s in Europe for another few weeks, and I really don’t get a chance to see him much even when he’s here. . .” In a voice that quavered just a bit, she interjected, “He’s pretty serious about a old flame who moved to Princeton and now she’s a renewed flame,” before returning to the subject: “You would enjoy meeting Steven though he might overwhelm you at first. He’s so damned well-read and so well-educated. His father was a professor of physics at Harvard and a very highly cultured man from what I understand; as a young man, he had to choose between science and a career as a concert pianist. Anyway, Steven attended some old-fashioned liberal arts high school in Cambridge and his father supplemented his studies with a lot of directed personal studies. It’s still amazing to me that a physicist could have such good taste in literature and philosophy. But he was a musician as well as a scientist.”

“Well, let’s leave Steven to the side, for a while. For all your clowning about in the bookstore, and for all your denials that you are well-read or well-educated, you seem to be both well-read and well-educated.”

Ginnie smiled nicely but then dismissed his comment with, “Maybe by modern standards, but I feel like a real ignoramus when I’m around Steven. Not that he makes people feel dumb on purpose. He’s a very considerate fellow and very attuned to other people’s feelings.”

She paused as an unattractive emotion expressed itself on Bayard’s face, but he quickly settled down and she continued, “So. . . my new and dear friend would like to hear how an esthetically conceived baby could be shaped into a nice girl like me, even in a world that isn’t so conducive to niceness?”

Bayard nodded and Ginnie said, “Well, I don’t really like talking about myself very much, but I’ll try to tell something in a coherent way. Maybe I learned enough from those books I didn’t read so that I can construct something like a true novel, a tale of an inner moral being. . .”

Ginnie seemed to settle in for a moment or two, as if she were concentrating her energies and maybe trying to retrieve some old memories nearly lost. And then she sat up straight and met Bayard’s gaze for just a moment before adopting the gaze of a story-teller, a person living not quite in the present, nor quite in the past, and a person smart enough to know the present can be presented as a prophecy of the future but prediction isn’t a

gift given to men.

Not quite ready, she muttered something like, “Virginia Woolf Melville, that is me but a ‘me’ who often seems alien to me as if I were looking at her from above and from a short distance away.”

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself now that I’ve learned how you were conceived.”

“You really want to hear about me? Well, even if that’s true, you got a better deal. My parents might be weird, but they’re much more interesting than me, even if they are successful business-humanoids. I’ve not led the sort of life that would keep your attention.”

“And how could you tell stories like that about your parents?”

“I once took a course in experimental psychology and they taught us how to regard a human being as nothing more than an interesting object for the studying. Being a cold-blooded bitch by nature, I took to that sort of an attitude like a fish to water.”

“Fish don’t take to water, they’re born in it and live their entire life in it.”

“Whatever.”

“You aren’t a cold-blooded bitch by nature, only when you’re making jokes or when you have an important point to make.”

“Actually, when I was a little girl, I used to give Mother Teresa lessons in compassion.”

“I doubt that as well.”

“Whatever.”

“But you still haven’t told me much about yourself. It was a silly fictionalized story about how your parents conceived you and there was probably not a word of truth in it.”

“Fiction often contains more truth, at least truth less distorted, than attempts to literalistically lay out so-called facts.”

“You keep changing your beliefs, or at least the beliefs you state to me.”

“So, I have a sense of humor.” She forced a laugh and said, “This conversation is starting to sound like something from an artsy movie set in a coffee-shop. And this apartment is getting a bit small.”

The next few minutes were a blur before Bayard realized he was a little tipsy on only two beers. His head started to clear in the cold air of an autumn evening in New York City. Truly, truly, it was getting cold rapidly as the sun sank behind the skyscrapers. Ginnie and Bayard walked vaguely northward until they reached a street where there was some traffic and

Ginnie began signaling when a cab was approaching. It took only a few tries before one stopped and she pushed Bayard in before giving the driver an address on the upper west side of Manhattan.

“Are you kidnapping me?”

“I’m taking you to my parents’ apartment where I’ll chain you up and keep you as my sex slave.”

The cabbie laughed even as he took a right on two wheels. “There are worse fates than that, buddy.” In the mirror his face could be seen to grow serious, even a bit sad. “Just last week, I picked up a youngish couple who had to come to New York to pick up their son and take him back to Osh Kosh. The kid was no more than 14 and he was a mess. Don’t know exactly what happened to him, but I think he may have been raped, more than once by some perv. The kid was lucky he was still alive and not maimed. There are some awfully weird and cruel people in this city and some of them prey on children.”

“And half of them are probably acting out things they saw on television or in the movies.” Bayard thought he’d shed the slur in his voice, but he was still feeling a bit lightheaded and wasn’t even able to keep track of where they were as the cabbie flew through the streets, heading up toward by upper west side by way of movements in all sorts of directions. It wasn’t anything that worried Bayard since Ginnie was sober and he figured she would know Manhattan pretty well.

The cabbie picked up something from the seat beside him and stuck it in his mouth. It was a well-chewed and never-lit cigar. “You know, you two make a cute couple. If you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Yeah, we remind ourselves of Dick Tracy and Audrey Hepburn.”

The cabbie chuckled and confirmed, “Yeah, you’re a cute couple for sure. I’ve picked up a lot of cute ones over the years too. On my very first night, a guy threw a wad of bills at me, he was so anxious to follow his chick. . . sorry, his lady friend, out the cab and into their apartment building. She was reciting some strange, high-falutin’ poetry at him and he was just a’panting and ready to. . .” The cabbie coughed. “You know.”

“Of course we know,” spoke Ginnie in a reassuring voice. “In New York City in the new millennium people probably don’t even wait to leave your cab to do you-know.”

In a suspicious voice, Bayard asked, “How many years ago did that happen? With the couple and the guy who threw the wad of bills at you.”

“I don’t know. I been driving for 28 years now.”

“What a coincidence, I’m about 27 years old.”

“That doesn’t seem like that much of a coincidence, Lady.”

“It does to my good friend here. He doesn’t realize what a small city this is. Everybody knows everybody else. At least, they’ve met everybody else.”

While Ginnie was talking, the cab passed near the apartment where that woman had taken the runaway girl. Bayard wasn’t sure exactly what street that had been; he was not yet used to this New York City idea of keeping track of the numbers for streets running in a regular grid. It was too easy and it confused minds used to mapping out curved streets, some of which were named after oceans and some after states and some after. . .

The cab had stopped in front of an apartment building, Ginnie had paid the man, and they were out and standing on the sidewalk before he accused her, “You made up that whole story, no matter what the cabbie said.”

“I made up parts of it but not the part about the cab. Besides, the general ideas wasn’t even original, Bayard. That’s not the first time a story-teller has promised to tell the tale of her life and started out by getting side-tracked into the story of her conception, the weirdness of that blessed moment, and how it affected her entire life.”

“Then it wasn’t very creative of you.”

“Will Shakespeare, a great author that I’m not related to, or named after, stole all of his plots and many of his characterizations. By the time he did wonderful things with all that loot, people raved about his creativity.” Bayard didn’t respond in any way, not even to chuckle politely, and Ginnie asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Now that you’re claiming it’s fiction, I’m beginning to wonder if the story is true. Parts of it anyway.”

“I told you fiction is often more true than screwy attempts to relate so-called facts in a literalistic manner. And it can certainly be more interesting. Especially in my case.” She smiled at him as the elevator door opened and a middle-aged couple got out. Ginnie exchanged greetings and smiles with them as they passed; as soon as she got in the elevator with Bayard, she muttered, “Horny old bitch.”

“Pardon?”

“Mrs. Fowler. She’s been trying to bed my father down for years.”

“She wants to break up your parents’ marriage?”

Ginnie looked over at him as if he were crazy. Just then the elevator reached the third floor and opened. As they were walking out in the empty

hallway, Ginnie asked him, “What kind of people do you think my neighbors are? Marriage-breakers? Why would that be a necessary part of bedding down the man next-door? He can stay married to my mom so far as Mrs. Fowler is concerned. She just wants to bed him down. Wasn’t that clear from what I said?”

“You’re suddenly in a bad mood.”

“This,” said Ginnie with her teeth grinding even as the key turned in the lock, “is the time of afternoon when my PMS bothers me.”

“It’s that time of the month for you?”

“What month are you talking about?” Ginnie peered down the hallway leading to a living room overlooking the Hudson River. No one could be seen. She turned to Bayard. “I’m the hottest and most fertile bitch you’ve ever met. My periods run daily.”

“You did say the time of afternoon, I guess.”

“Now you’re learning to listen. You’ll be able to prove Mr. Biloxi wrong yet.”

“I still don’t believe anything you say.”

“That’s why I like you so much.”

A short while later, Ginnie had made up some green tea for herself and a coffee latté, only so she could play with some of her mother’s kitchen toys. Bayard thought her mood had swung somewhere else by the time they were sitting in the den, surrounded by shelves of expensively bound books. The furniture was all upholstered in glove-soft leather and the recliner had just the right amount of give to it as Bayard settled into it, Ginnie placing his cup of latté on the side-table. As she settled at the end of the couch to rest her right arm, Ginnie announced, “I think I’ll be your muse.”

“What? Aren’t muses for creative people? I set out to be a social critic or something but I’m realizing Mr. Biloxi was right. I’m ill prepared for the role. I’m as ignorant as the people I’m criticizing for being ignorant.”

“Acchh,” protested Ginnie in her most guttural brogue. “What does Mr. Biloxi know? You are poorly read and you have an inadequate store of facts, but you seem to be able to think at some rudimentary level and that puts you well ahead of the game in this day and age. Remember what they say: in the land of television and best-seller lists, the man with one poorly formed thought is a genius.”

“He’ll also be told to shut up so everybody can hear the show.”

Ginnie suddenly sat up straight, looked at Bayard, and then rose to hurry over to a nearby book-case. Seeming to know exactly what she

wanted, she headed to the right shelf and took no more than a few seconds before pulling out a book. Walking over to Bayard, she presented it as if giving him a diploma. “If I’m to be your muse, I should be serious and helpful.”

Bayard took the book, not at all sure he could judge when Ginnie was trying to be serious; he was not even sure what ‘being serious’ meant to her. When he looked down at the spine, it said *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The author was Smith.

“Adam Smith?”

“Of course. You’ve never heard of this book?”

“Well, I’ve heard of *The Wealth of Nations*, and I knew he wrote some histories of science and some literary criticism. . . .”

After a deep sigh, Ginnie informed him, “We’ve got some serious work to do over the next few years, but you might wish to read a bio of the old Scotsman some day. It might inspire you. He went down to Oxford at a time when the educational experience was particularly bad. He would have been better off remaining at one of several good Scottish universities except for the contacts down at Oxbridge. Anyway, he educated himself over the four years he was there. After his first week or so, he never again attended a lecture. Spent all his time in the library, teaching himself, then he took the tests on schedule, passed with flying colors and returned to Scotland to begin digesting what he’d learned. Did lead to some bad habits from what I understand. He wrote books like an autodidact, not properly checking his facts so that he got a lot of quotes wrong, sometimes wrong enough to reverse the actual intended thought of the author. But he was a genius. Got everything right except the supporting facts. Kind of the opposite of a modern journalist, though in recent years, they’ve started to mess up on the facts as well and no one cares anymore.”

“You that big an Adam Smith fan?”

“For his genius, yes. Actually, I read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and a couple books about him and his ideas. Never tackled that wealth business. And much of my understanding is second-hand from Steven Church and he admired Adam Smith greatly but thought his theory of human nature was ptui, to use a technical philosophical word. One thing that was good about the old Scotsman was his weirdness.”

“He was weird?”

“More so than me at my worst. With Adam Smith, being eccentric was so natural, he didn’t have a clue he was weird. He really didn’t understand

when people were put off by crazy behavior that seemed to be mocking them or something they held sacred, but he didn't have a malicious bone in his body, so he really wasn't insulting them. He was just eccentric to the core of his being."

"Maybe a rich inner life, a life separate from our corporate involvements, makes a person eccentric, or at least seem eccentric. They won't be marching, at least not always marching, to the same beat as everyone else. And that brings us back to you. You certainly don't always march to the same beat as other people."

"I do, I do, Sir. I protesteth the implications of thy statement. No, you cad, no matter how you might impugn my honor, my virtue, my virginity of body and mind and soul, I behave as a good girl of our era is expected to behave. I turn over my wardrobe at least once a year, making sure I pay double prices for the privilege of carrying someone's advertisement upon my ass or where my breasts proudly push out the corporate logo. I have a closet full of recordings by every blond sixteen year-old bimbo who's not ashamed to gyrate her athletic little hips and show off her perky little titties so the world may see her talents."

"Some of those blond bimbos are now older than sixteen and their perky titties aren't so little any longer."

"Ah, all the better to sell good music to the connoisseurs." Ginnie looked over at Bayard in triumph. "So you do watch those music videos, probably even *Beverly Hills 666* or whatever is popular now." When Bayard reddened, she softened and offered him an explanation: "I suppose you watch the stuff only to critique it, in the manner of Ignatius Reilly?"

"Ignatius who? Was he one of your Jesuit friends?"

"Hardly. He was a character in a modern novel both silly and serious, but we'll leave it at that for now since you are such a fan of mine that you wish to hear still more about me. Not that I'm such an interesting person. The story of my parents trying to conceive a poet was far more interesting. Parts of it are also true."

"Hardly a a word of it is true, so far as I can guess."

"Guess. It is that sort of act of playground intellectualism that make the hackles rise upon Mr. Biloxi's grisly back. You did to him what the bad guys do to Arnie and Sly in the movies, turning such gentle and loving men into seekers of vengeance. Anyway, how could it all be true? I wasn't there. And my parents didn't really explain why it was that they didn't want Jello around the house. Maybe my mother just fell and slipped on a glob of the

stuff when she was five and she developed some sort of phobia. But they do have nicely bound copies of all those poets of love and romance.”

“Including St John of the Cross.”

“Yes, Juan de la Cruz, I believe.” She nodded toward the innermost wall of the den. “Probably over there. That’s where they keep most of the volumes of poetry. Except what they need to decorate the shelves in the den out on the Island.”

With hardly a glance toward that storehouse of cultural achievement, Bayard pressed on, an expression of determination upon his face: “And you have memorized a lot of his poetry?”

“Not a lot. I mean, I’ve memorized some poetry.” In a lighter voice, she asked, “Would you like to hear Kipling’s *Gods of the Copybook Headings*? Or maybe *The Hunting of the Snark*? Believe it or not, I have memorized that entire poem. It may not be quite the same as memorizing *The Inferno* in the original Medieval Italian, but it’s pretty good by modern standards where children are no longer taught how to use their memories to store great poems or Biblical verses or speeches of heroes of the struggle for liberty.”

“That leaves more room to memorize the lyrics of the songs sung by sixteen year-old bimbos with perky titties, little or not.”

“Exactly.”

“So, are you going to tell me about your self?”

“I don’t know. I bore the hell out of my self when I talk about my self. It is perhaps the way in which I am most strongly in opposition to modern cultural traditions suited to those many who have emptied their selves of knowledge of their world and their culture; consequently, if they have a need to speak, they are forced to talk either about the latest lyrics of sixteen year-old bimbos or else about their fascinating interior deserts.”

“You are even more a cynic than I am.”

“That’s because I’m sick of living in an age dominated by barbarians who piss on altars but don’t even know how to conquer and hold if only for practical reasons.”

Ginnie looked over to the wall with the books of poetry and asked, “I don’t know if I should be bother more by the crimes or the stupidities.”

Bayard looked at her, smiling but afraid she was referring to something he should know. And didn’t. He smiled sadly and looked over toward New Jersey for just a second before telling her, “Test my ability to tolerate boring stories. As you pointed out, I have at times watched more television than is good for my brain. I’ve even sometimes watched something so boring and

brainless as a State of the Union Address. Or at least I did it once when I was in high school.”

“Who was President?”

“Ford.”

“That was it. He was probably talking about that real nice dog he had and telling football and hunting stories and other things that men like.”

“I was a high school sophomore who wasn’t much interested in sports except for baseball and chess. . . .”

“You consider chess a sport?”

“It takes a lot of endurance and. . . .”

“So does being a mom. Are we going to have an Olympic pentathlon someday with women racing to get their crying little brats to school without getting a speeding ticket? And then the next event would be power shopping during a half-hour lunch break? And then. . . .”

“Forget it.”

“I never forget anything.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“I doubt it. Men never remember anything important unless it concerns baseball or big titties or. . . chess.” And she barely got the word out before her voice broke up into giggles. When she saw his cheeks going red, she said, “You’re not tough enough to make it around my parents. You might get your feelings torn to shreds really quickly.”

“I thought they were gentle artsy types.”

“I said they were artsy. Sort of. I never said they were very gentle. After all, they’ve made a fortune in a business filled with surprisingly nasty people. Besides they’re not really cruel, just stupid when it comes to matters of human thought or feeling. It’s amazing how modern they’ve become without even taking in much of modern entertainment waste-products.”

“All businesses have their share of very nasty people.” After a short pause, he pleaded, “Now will you tell me about your self?”

“Wouldn’t you rather hear about my Uncle Toby? He came from a Puritanical culture with lots of euphemisms for body parts. And when he suffered an injury to his intestines just above his groin, the general euphemistic description made it sound like he’d seriously injured a very important part of the male body. And, just because he could only speak in polite euphemisms, it took years before even his brother understood that Uncle Toby’s special organ was intact after all. Some women who were interested in him were never sure if he could have really been a husband in

the complete sense. Which was all right since Uncle Toby was better off as a bachelor. He was as naive as you are and he preferred to play war-games in a field behind his house.”

“Did this Uncle Toby live in the fifties?”

“No, he lived much earlier than Eisenhower. He was much older than my father. From an earlier marriage of my grandfather.”

“Well, sounds fascinating, but you promised to tell me about your very own self and not just your parents’ romantic adventures. Those sorts of promises should always be kept.”

A strange melancholy came over Ginnie, as it often did. Her eyes took on the look of a long-distance stare and she sighed and then set off on her tale...

## 8 Wasting Time

As unlikely as it might seem, Virginia Woolf Melville didn't turn out the way her parents had expected. Instead of a dedicated artist, she proved to be a stubborn little girl. Instead of a poet, she was a dreamer, capable of wasting vast amounts of time. It wasn't that she had no intellectual or artistic interests; it was simply that she would sit, with a fine leather-bound edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* upon her lap, while she stared out the window though there would be nothing but clouds and an occasional sea-gull heading from Long Island Sound toward some garbage dump. Taken into the City to spend a day at the art museums or to hear some good afternoon practice sessions at the Lincoln, she would disappear if her parents' attention drifted for an instant, forcing them to leave their seats in panic to find her. A few times they were greatly relieved when they found her staring at the sides of buildings, stone and brick, clearly studying their texture that she might one day weave lyrical poems about the stuff of Manhattan, though they didn't fully deny the possibility she would one day be a great painter or sculptor informing her fellow human beings about the proper ways to see the materials and structures of modern civilization.

Ginnie she came to be called, to her great indifference, for she was not so cute and bubbly as that name might have indicated. As Ginnie, she drifted through her infancy, her early childhood, and her adolescence. She got good grades as a result of a high intelligence, but her mind was quite undisciplined and largely undeveloped, not at all what Myra and Oskar would have expected from a great poet. Ginnie was in the chorus in high school, off and on, depending on whether she felt like going to practice during a particular semester. She wrote an occasional story pronounced "well-written but I don't understand what it's about" by one teacher and then, the next year, received a similar comment from another teacher; Ginnie gave up the year after that. Though trying every so often, she failed to put more than half a

line of poetry on paper at any one time. If all her half-lines from her high school years had been assembled, a page or so would have resulted.

She made it through two years of college as the most uninvolved student her parents could have imagined. She was uninterested in class, developed few close friends, and rarely attended theatrical or musical productions. She was merely befuddled the one time her parents sat her down and suggested she participate in these activities which she clearly felt to be beside her.

Then, one fine day several years later, but a few years before other crucial events in Ginnie's life, a member of her mother's bridge club left a book that had been popular at the time, or perhaps at another time. This abandonment of property had not been a mistake. That good friend thought Myra would enjoy a good read. Myra, always too gentle and polite for her own good, had not had the heart to reject that piece of literary effort so concerned with the troubles of a young girl kidnapped and taken to Seoul to spend her life as a sex slave. Or maybe it had been Singapore. Or Bangkok or Rangoon. Someplace where there were a lot of foreign people with a taste for doing perverse things to young blond American girls. Or boys. Or retrievers. The story was quite unclear to Myra, even by the time she'd reached page 126. The sentences were short. The words were those she might have expected to find in a sixth grader's text-books, though they were put to the purposes of a story that wasn't appropriate for a healthy sixth grader who expected to remain healthy. In a great moment of painful insight, she wondered about her own health that she'd gotten so far into the book.

Still, she read on. . .

Every so often, Myra would even stop and read a page several times, wondering if the entire thing had been put together by a computer instructed to minimize syntactical complexity and to make sure a word, other than 'the' and 'a', was not used more than once every three pages, especially if it had two different meanings in those two uses. She wasn't used to such silly ideas of what good writing entailed.

The problem was beginning to interest her a tiny bit when she closed the book on her finger at page 221, and she wandered through her house, out to the deck and then back in the kitchen entrance. Isabella was sitting watching TV on her break, and a vague idea occurred to Myra. It was a strange and wonderful idea, one she would have to discuss with Oskar when he returned from San Francisco the next day. Standing next to Isabella, she thought of ways to word the question and realized it would need some

effort. She shivered in delightful anticipation. The design company had been a bit boring lately. With 63 full-time designers and a total staff of 213, she spent most of her time negotiating insurance contracts and settling disputes between Bruno and Tex about whether dissonant colors could be used in the same room. She hadn't felt lately as if she were able to use her Vassar-trained brain to its full potential.

And, so, Myra came to be standing beside Isabella and watching a talk-show which kept flashing a caption, *I was a willing sex slave*. A commercial came on, and after smiling at her employer, Isabella flicked the remote control and some sort of action show came on. A floral display was being delivered to a hospital. After sending the deliveryman down the hallway to the correct room, one of the nurses said, "I thought no one was supposed to know Mr. Bernard was here." A few seconds later, Mr. Bernard was trying to throw the display, clearly a bomb, out an unbreakable window.

The idea was taking firmer shape in Myra's mind. Modern books, of the best-seller type, weren't books so much as they were a flowing set of references of various sorts, references back to television, the movies, and popular music. "The books most people read reflect the world-views they've learned from their culture." Isabella smiled at her once more, but that second smile was a bit more forced, when Myra remembered that television had only become popular during the 1950s, and, even back then, Rod Serling had not known how to relate a meaningful tale when a dozen bunnies danced across the screen every five minutes, selling more TVs to people who already had one in each room but the water-closet. Of course, if it hadn't been for all the wonders of modern technology, people wouldn't have had jobs or incomes. And ol' Rod did make a heck of a lot of money writing and producing shows that he didn't like himself.

Myra was starting to lose focus – her eyes and the rest of her as well, the way her daughter often did, when she realized that Isabella was still smiling politely at her. She got the hint and turned to wander elsewhere. After all, the cleaning lady was on her break and if she wanted to spend it in front of the television set, that was her business. The enlightened designer wandered off, wondering if a day would be sufficient to form her question properly. Oskar had not been using his brain much more than Myra lately, and he might need some help understanding the point she was making.

As she passed through the library, she saw a catalog of Dali prints and set down *Ravished Innocence*. Her latest and wealthiest client, Mrs. Bingerbee, was ready to spend as much as was necessary to acquire some

high-toned artistic jokes she wouldn't ever be able to understand. That was all right with Myra who was soon enough lost in images that gave an illusion of realism as long as you didn't really look at them. "At least Dali's jokes were...joke-like, unlike some other painters in the modern world. That makes a big difference in a world where some people can no longer distinguish..." Myra shivered as an image came into her mind of a young woman with a penis growing out of her chin. Had Picasso meant that to be some serious statement about his perceptions of the world around him? Or had it been a big joke that was taken seriously by a lot of gullible collectors and museum directors. There were times when Myra was happy that her artistic talents had proven to be so limited after her precocious start as an eight year-old drawing every thing and every creature in sight. Life was a lot easier when art was limited to upholstery fabrics and to choosing paintings or collections of finely-bound books to coordinate with the color scheme.

A few minutes later, Ginnie, who had grown bored after looking out the dining-room window for the previous three hours or so, passed through the library. She was about to pass her eyes over the spines showing from that large collection of great novels, great poems, great essays, and great works of science, all bound in leather dyed to an elegantly dull burgundy, when something caught her interest. On the coffee-table near her mother's chair was a book with a cover which seemed at that distance to be no more than untasteful smears of magenta and lime-green. Not used to such a sight in her parents' house, Ginnie went right to the book, to discover it was entitled *Ravished Innocence*. It didn't seem to be her mother's kind of book. Isabella didn't read books; she watched television. The cook, Mrs. Garcia, didn't speak English; it didn't seem likely she would be reading a novel written in English...

Opening the book and paging through, she caught something on page 57 about perky little breasts... Looking down, she saw what she already knew – her own breasts were a bit generous but also a bit too unexciting to casual view to be labeled as 'perky'. She wondered if they might be more exciting to the man of her dreams, but then she realized she had never formed an image of such a man and didn't know if the entire topic interested her so much. She liked men, but she was a bit embarrassed about her own body, more so every time her mother scolded her for being awkward and graceless in the way she carried herself and the way she moved around. "Ginnie," her mother had said more than once, "you move as if you're constantly surprised to find you have large breasts and female hips."

Once Ginnie had shocked her mother by replying, “You mean I have big, shapeless boobs and a fat ass.” She’d then turned and run crying toward her room, though, when she had run out of the kitchen and into the front hallway and through to the living-room where she’d had to push her way through a small party of colorfully dressed people of indeterminate sex, each smoking a fragrant, dark, and slender cigarette. She was on her bed with her face in her pillow when her mother reached her; the following scene, though sparse in words, was so badly botched by both women that it took days before they’d even look at each other.

But Ginnie had eventually accustomed herself to a life of hardships and had gotten on with. . .

Actually, she’d always known her biggest problem was her short attention span and her tendency to get bored, even when she was with people she liked, doing things she liked to do. That had led to the secondary problem that she had spent much of her time staring out the window at birds going by, at sailing vessels way off in the distance, at cars coming up to the driveway.

Pushing her personal problems to the side to pursue something that seemed of interest, Ginnie returned her attention to the book and found something on page 196 about someone named Cal who had shoulders that bulged and sinews that were stretched to the limit as he battled someone named Hung Li or Hung Lo or something like that. She’d closed the book at that point, no longer much interested in the details though she stared in fascination at the cover art: a young blond girl with saucer-plate eyes, no more than fourteen though she was a rather curvy fourteen, in the arms of a blond hunk who must have been Cal. His gaze had dropped down to take in the bubs which, little as they were, seemed about to pop out of her shirt.

“What godawful crap,” she cried, and then something told her she’d found her life’s work.



## 9 A Memorial Post-mortem

“You’ve told that story many times.”

Ginnie looked at him, her eyes wide opened in a denial, a protestation that she was an innocent young thing. . .

“You’ve remembered it, or re-invented it so many times, you tell it in the third person.”

“I grew up in front of the television. It accounts for my bad shopping habits and for my tendency to see even my own life as if I were watching through a camera as my own self suffered her daily boredom.”

Bayard nodded and tried to look harshly at her, but he laughed and drank from his cup. And his expression soured. “Gads, you weren’t talking that long but my latté has congealed into a cold, foam-like mass.”

“Gads’? What century are you from, my dear Bayard?”

Her words were still those of a humorously cynical observer of her times, but there was a quavering in her voice that bothered Bayard and hinted that it was time for him to leave. As if realizing he’d guessed her need to be alone, she rose and told him, “I’ll lend you one of my canvas back-packs and pick out a couple more books that might at least let you understand the way in which I told my tales today, and they were not so much tall-tales as you probably think.”

Ginnie sent Bayard away with a list of telephone numbers and addresses where she could sometimes be reached, though she warned him, to no surprise on his part, that she sometimes moved around, even occasionally spending long periods with friends outside of the City. He had given her his mother’s address in Vermont as a last-stop way of finding him, but she had told him, “I know where you live and I imagine you’ll contact me before long. Besides,” she had added with a smile, “rich people can always hire someone to find people or things for them.”

Not sure how to put order to his thoughts or feelings, and not really

feeling compelled to do so at just that moment, Bayard set off, five substantial books in the back-pack which Ginnie had managed to find for him. Into the City...

*The City.*

THE CITY.

The center, and perhaps the source, of so much that was good in the United States. The city which had provided the horrible slums that had proven to be the jumping-off points for so many prosperous families; those same slums having also pushed some of the more talented Jews and Blacks and Italians into radical beliefs, sometimes anti-American beliefs. The city which provided the strongest base for opera and, perhaps, the other music of great, dead, composers; the same city providing the base for vulgar entertainments forms without even the vitality of burlesque. The city whose proud street of drama and music-hall performances had seen the recent productions collapse into so many re-makes, so many stagings of various mediocre movies and television shows, so many empty-hearted and spiritless displays of technical expertise.

As he turned onto the street where that corporate executive of a woman lived, Bayard wondered how many artists there were producing the seeds of far better stuff, unrecognized as those artists were. As unrecognizable as they were to the trained monkeys of academia and to the more garishly dressed trained monkeys running the entertainment industry.

And he felt his innermost parts heading off in two directions. He softened at the very thought of that mystery woman, corporate executive or not. And he wondered if Ginnie would have encouraged that line of thought. He knew she would have made fun of it. Without a malicious thought or attitude behind her desperate efforts to defend herself in a world where she'd been hurt. Hurt by what? Bayard wondered if he would be better able to understand that woman who dressed like a corporate executive.

# Appendices



## Colophon

This book was typeset using the LaTeX typesetting system created by Leslie Lamport and the memoir class written by Peter Wilson.

The LaTeX typesetting system is a set of macro commands using the TeX typesetting system written by Donald Knuth. The body text is set 10/12pt on a 33pc measure with Computer Modern Roman designed by Donald Knuth. Other fonts include Sans, Smallcaps, Italic, Slanted and Typewriter, all from Knuth's Computer Modern family.

