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Imperishable Bliss

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# **IMPERISHABLE BLISS**

A Novel

by

D. E. Tingle

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## CHAPTER ONE

### EROS

I put pen to paper with no thought of justifying myself, but with the single purpose that has guided me since my rebirth in God many years ago: to glorify Him and his Son Jesus Christ. I'm a humble man, conscious of my shortcomings. If I'm also strong, my strength arises from my faith and I don't apologize for it. Yet my story seems, at the outset, impossible to tell, marked by trial after unfathomable trial, by failure and embarrassment, by the world's scorn. But I will tell it, because in the end my Faith abides, and for this I give all glory to the Father.

I wasn't always a man of faith, even though born in the American Midwest between the world wars to God-fearing parents, and under the religious influence throughout my childhood of a kind, loving, Christian grandmother. I was conventionally religious until my teens, when I fell into some kind of untutored doubt, which was abetted by four years of a highly secular college education, then marriage, the birth of children, and preoccupation with building a career. Those were my years in the wilderness. As will happen in the wilderness, I lost my way. Losing my way, I fell into isolation and despair. And my despair led to the miracle through which, by the astonishing grace of God, I was saved.

There was a young girl working in a flower shop near the office where I was employed in those days as

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an administrator in a large company. Her name was Marie, a Catholic, with dark hair and large, green eyes, a soft face and body, and a look of isolation that reflected mine. We might never have met, but one day I got the idea—inspired by nothing I can remember—to bring one red rose home to my wife. I stopped in the flower shop on the way from work, and some signal passed between Marie and me in the five minutes it took to choose, wrap and pay for the rose. She knew I wore a wedding ring—saw it when I handed her the money—but some shared need made us stop and look each into the other's face with an intensity that I have never experienced in a first meeting, before or since. I was haunted. I took the rose home to my wife. She was touched and happy. But the sense of isolation that had been growing in me for years seemed to balloon at that moment. My wife was young and pretty, but I felt as if I were looking at her through the wrong end of a telescope. Our two small daughters, playing nearby, were beautiful. But I felt myself shivering and abandoned.

The following day, after work, I went to the flower shop again and bought another rose from Marie. As she handed me the rose and I handed her the money, I bent close and asked quietly, not to be overheard, to meet her somewhere away from the shop. She looked frightened but whispered "Yes."

"I'm married," I said.

"I know," she said. "And I'm engaged to be married."

I thanked her for the rose and, very agitated, left

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the shop. I couldn't take this rose to my wife; I carried it back to my office, deserted after hours, and left it in a vase on my desk.

In the days that followed I struggled to think of some means of meeting Marie—whose name I didn't yet know—without being detected by my wife. Lying was difficult for me. My religious upbringing had imbued me with the conviction that lying was a sin as grave as any, and—irreligious as I may have been at that time—the requirement to lie filled me with such anxiety and guilt that I felt sure I couldn't lie and be believed. I couldn't share my anxiety with my wife, who I was certain loved me. My despair and isolation deepened.

Eventually I thought I saw an opportunity to meet Marie without disrupting my family. Because the flower shop was open weekends, I guessed that Marie's work schedule provided for days off during the week. I was in a salaried job, with some latitude to make my own schedule. So one day at lunchtime I found Marie alone in the shop and, with great anxiety on both sides, arranged to meet her at mid-morning the next Tuesday, her day off.

What followed has seemed to me in later years the very epitome of allegiance to a false god. We met as arranged, drove out of the city in my car in order to avoid being seen by acquaintances of either of us, and fell into hellish circumstances that seemed a Heaven then.

She was only twenty years old—nearly ten years younger than I—and the only woman other than my



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wife I had ever been intimate with. I tell this story in some detail, not because I approve of what we did, but because the entire experience was unique in my life, events out of time, an object lesson in wrong behavior. From it I learned how seductive a false god can be, and how hard it can be—impossible, really, without Grace—to tell a false god from the true One.

We fell into a terrible, harrowing love that first day, each knowing barely more about the other than a name. She was engaged to be married in six months, the date and the place already chosen. She and her fiancé were taking prenuptial instruction from their priest. Marie knew I had a wife and daughters. But a vast longing, an inexplicable loneliness, an impression, though false, that God had forsaken us, drew us irresistibly together.

We drove to the country, stopped by woods, walked into them, removed each other's clothing and would have made love, but Marie was *virgo intacta* and resolved to protect this sign of innocence until her wedding. Mad with irrelation and thwarted need, we tore at each other's bodies, kissing, biting, crushing, but never penetrating. We talked and talked. We had nothing to say that wasn't of hunger and loss. She was an uneducated shop girl; I was a relative sophisticate, with pretensions to ideas and a nagging certainty of the importance of things unseen. Really, we couldn't communicate, and this failure sharpened our anguish and our sorrow. And it seemed to me we were both beautiful: she with her long, black hair spread on the pine needles covering the forest floor, her white body

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with its pink nipples and vivid thicket of pubic hair, her huge, green, beseeching eyes; I young then, with a slender body and broad, well-wrought shoulders, vibrant with physical strength and electric with sexual force, priapian, graceful. By an unspoken agreement, we did nothing that first day to give ourselves or each other physical relief. We strained for hours at the verge of detumescence, kissing and clinging to each other. Her virginity, immense and totemic, stood between us like a wall. Her fear was manifest: fear of losing her virginity, and with it any hope for the plans she had ordered for her life. I felt the complementary fear: that if I took her virginity I'd be responsible for whatever life was left for her, and would lose the life I had with my wife and children. We lay together in an agony of challenged trust, tormented by love and desperate for a shared peace and safety, while our moral irresolution turned into the physical pain of thwarted release. I could see in her eyes the pain in her congested pelvis, a reflection of the debilitating ache in my own lower torso and testicles. So we suffered. So began our passion.

Late in the afternoon we dressed and drove back to the city, and I dropped Marie where I had picked her up. Parting was cruel; we were in several kinds of pain, sunk in confusion, burdened with a mighty secret, foreseeing only difficulty. Circumspect, afraid of being observed, we kissed and separated, she to keep her own counsel with her family and fiancé, I to go home to a new regime of secrecy, lies by omission, the attendant guilt.

In the weeks that followed, Marie and I continued

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to meet. We found a motel and moved indoors. Each meeting consisted of hours in a bed conserving Marie's hymen. The fear and diffidence of our first meeting slowly gave way to such trust that by our third meeting we could engage freely and happily in fondlings and manipulations that, without endangering Marie's intactness, gave both of us sexual release. But in that process we lost any hope of falling out of love.

Even in our ecstasy there was just one topic between us: our loneliness and isolation. We talked about the flower shop and my work, but the invariable subtext was Marie's interior estrangement from her fiancé and my felt distance from the world and the nearest part of it to me, my wife. In our motel room we clung together, not knowing where to go or what to do, neither of us willing to forsake the other or our other lives. When we tried to imagine keeping and living our secret even after Marie was married, anxiety overwhelmed us.

Then, rather soon, we got caught.

One day when Marie and I had been meeting for about two months, my wife phoned my office and was told by a co-worker that I was out for the afternoon on an unspecified errand. When I arrived home that night she asked where I'd been, and I had no answer.

If the moral training of my childhood had not disabled me as a liar, her question would have been easy to deflect. She asked it without suspicion, almost without curiosity. But the only idea that came to me when she asked was the idea of my guilt. My face discomposed itself; she saw. Her own face registered

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fear and shock, and we both began to cry.

Then followed what seems in retrospect an absurd series of gestures by the three of us—Marie, my wife and me—to save everything and lose nothing. First my wife wanted to meet Marie. I think she felt sure of the sanctity of her own relationship with me, and believed that she could convey to Marie a sense of the fitness of Marie giving me up. I loved and wanted both women; I hoped a meeting between them would inspire tolerance in my wife and confidence in Marie, so that I could love them both without guilt. Accordingly I went to Marie, told her my wife had discovered us, and asked if they could meet. Marie shrank in terror. Her green eyes started in her pale face and she seemed about to faint. I took her in my arms and held her while she regained her strength.

"Are you crazy?" she asked me. "You're crazy." We had been walking in a city park. She collapsed onto a bench. "What happened? How did she find out?"

"She just did," I said. "She asked me and I told her."

"If Kevin found out, he'd kill me. Really, I think he might kill me."

"Well," I said. "Beth won't kill anybody. She just wants to talk."

Marie sat on the park bench pressing her hands together in her lap and looking stricken. Guilt assailed me. But I sensed her poise, her courage and devotion, and I loved Marie more than ever. Finally she said, "I'll meet her if you want me to." I was thrilled and relieved. Recreant that I was, I foresaw plain sailing.

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The meeting took place one evening at my house, after our daughters were in bed. Marie arrived in her old car, pale, pretty and nervous, deferential when I introduced her. Her hair was down and she was wearing shapeless clothing calculated to disarm a woman, not the modish dresses I was used to. Beth was informal but almost imperious, as convinced of her territorial hegemony as Marie must have been of her own foreignness. Seeing these two women, lovely, vital and my sexual intimates, facing each other across the kitchen table and preparing negotiations to share me, filled me with pride and awe. I slipped away to the living room and tried to occupy myself with a newspaper. Not more than ten or fifteen minutes passed, though, before I heard their voices in the hallway, the sound of the front door, and Beth returning to the kitchen. I caught Marie at the door of her car. "What happened?" I asked.

"What do you think?" she said. "She wants me to stay away from you."

But for the idolatry I'd fallen into, this might have been the end of a misadventure that threatened destruction for so many innocents. I might have thanked Marie for her goodness to me and her courage in facing my wife, kissed her farewell and gone back indoors to my family. But when I thought of giving her up, a pit of isolation, loneliness and terror yawned in me. Marie was my necessary and only resort. I hungered for her like humanity in search of Faith. "This can't be," I said.

"What are you going to do?" She stared at me, her

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eyes forlorn but dry under the street lamp.

"My best," I said. I kissed her. She drove away and I went back indoors.

Our next gesture was to separate, my wife and I. This was the upshot of two weeks of densely concerted introspection and debate. In these circumstances she was the rationalist and I the hysteric. The less sure I seemed of my intentions with Marie, the more determined Beth became to forge some kind of certainty for herself. She would not let me temporize: I either had to declare my affair with Marie at an end and return to the *status quo ante*, or I had to move away from home and make up my mind. But I knew, whatever my intentions, that I could not give up Marie just then. So I asked for time to think, and we separated. I agreed with Beth on a schedule to visit my daughters and I went away and rented a tiny apartment—a sitting room with a bed.

All at once I was relieved of the logistical difficulties inherent in carrying on an affair from one's place of work. I no longer had to devise sites and schemes for meeting Marie on weekdays. Subject to her own ability to evade detection by her fiancé, we could meet at my apartment virtually at will. Neither of us had ever had a trysting place before. Our shared loneliness, our predilection for secrecy, the risk we were running of the loss or devastation of others we loved, the necessity to preserve the signs of Marie's virginity: these made our hours in the apartment poignant beyond imagining. We were in a continuous state of sexual and spiritual longing. This was my

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first—Godless—experience of ecstasy.

The last, best gesture was Beth's. When I came to our house to visit my daughters a few times each week, my wife let me back into our bed. I don't know what she felt. My own experience, in spite of the secrets I carried, was of greater closeness to her than ever before. It was as if, for the first time, I had in Marie a gift so privately and particularly my own that I could afford to give all of myself—except my secrets—to Beth. And so sex with my wife became an ecstasy as well.

I was in a precarious paradise. If ever a life of bliss teetered on the brink of doom, this was it. My—(*my!*)—happiness depended entirely on the maintenance of secrecy, supported on my side by lies of omission and on Marie's by lies of every kind—to her fiancé, to her parents, to her friends. My happiness even seemed to depend on the stoppage of time. We were now within four months of the date of Marie's wedding. It seemed impossible that we could continue our affair indefinitely. But we had no plans to give it up.

The crash came with no warning except for our anxiety. In my Faith, I agree with the dictum that God works in mysterious ways. In my apostasy, it was painful to see my fate being worked in sacramental ways. One Saturday Marie and her fiancé, holiday shopping a few weeks before Christmas, passed a Catholic church and at Kevin's instance went into the confessional. Marie had not confessed in several months and didn't want to confess then, but she was trapped. She could hide and wait while Kevin confessed, but the next morning at Mass, unshriven,

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she would not be able to take Communion, and Kevin would want to know why. So she made her confession to an unsympathetic priest.

She told me that story on Monday evening while we lay fully dressed on the bed in my apartment. Her forlorn green eyes searched my face for advice, and as usual I didn't know what to do. If I had been two people, one of them would have undressed Marie and consummated our love, body and soul. The other would have lifted her to her feet, wept to express the depth of that love, and let her go forever. I did neither. We lay there immobilized by our sorrow and my fear. But I knew she would leave me. And soon after Christmas she did.

At the saddest season of the year for a Christian apostate, I found myself alone in a bed-sitting room, suddenly unaware of any reason to live. I still had a wife and children, but I felt helpless to go back to them. With the loss of Marie, Beth became strange to me again and I was impotent. We wept. I couldn't tell her what was wrong, because I couldn't tell her what had been right before. My depression was profound. At work I was barely able to maintain appearances. Compulsively I walked past the flower shop for a glimpse of Marie. I feared death, but I feared living more. I consulted a psychiatrist.

Like most of his fraternity in those days, the doctor's training was Freudian, and by the second meeting we had begun to construct an edifice of myth and symbology around my agony. The myth was a lugubrious one and made me weep, but none of its



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insights conduced to make me well. My depression deepened; it governed my waking hours and disturbed my sleep. I must have looked as gaunt and terrible to the doctor as I looked in my mirror; after a few more meetings he resorted to medicating me.

The medication he prescribed was one of the recently developed mood elevating drugs, fifty tiny, oblate, reddish-brown pills in a plastic cylinder. I began taking these according to instructions, three per day at eight-hour intervals. My despondency did not remit; I even exacerbated it by driving past the flower shop. After four days I emptied the remaining pills onto a table top and counted them; there were thirty-eight. I gathered them back into the palm of my hand. And then, whether impatient or insane, I swallowed them at a gulp. I took a glass of water to sluice the last few down my throat.

That God intervened in my life in those hours is beyond doubt, but I have never known whether He did it before or after the overdose. I lay down on the bed that Marie would never visit again. I felt calm, satisfied to have acted and indifferent to danger, and mourned my loss. A kind of dizzy anesthesia curled around me, my body numb and heavy and my mind sinking into it, as if by gravitation. I might easily have slept then and had no second chance. But as I felt the drug overcoming me, in a wave of pity I remembered my little daughters. I had not made up my mind to die; I had acted impulsively, and now I seemed likely to die a death that could never be justified to them. I had to stop. I found the telephone and gave the dial one full turn for

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help.

I don't remember that call, but it succeeded. I remember the remote crash of my apartment doorframe breaking before the onslaught of a police ambulance crew, the paramedics shouting in my ears and slapping hard and harmlessly at my face, cold air, snow under my dragging feet. I vomited into the snow, thinking: "My body is trying to save itself. My mind doesn't care."

I was unconscious for two days, from Friday until Sunday. I awoke very hungry but well rested, and not surprised, as soon as I remembered myself, to see that I was in a hospital bed. Outside the window it was dark; a lamp burned beside me on a table. In a chair nearby, Beth sat sleeping. She looked sad, distant, exhausted, pathetic and vulnerable. I felt great pity for her, but no longer any love. I thought of Marie and felt no love for her either. It seemed to me my life had started over. I didn't know exactly where I was, or how long ago my old life had ended, but I felt something like exaltation—a calling to a life of Perfection. In the silence and subdued light of the hospital room I sensed the presence of Divinity. After years of my neglect of Him, it was clear that God had saved me, and for some purpose.

I resented Beth's sleeping attendance then. I wanted to be alone with my experience of God, without this unwelcome residuum of the sinful existence from which I knew I had been saved. I thought of my children; they seemed unimportant next to the enormous certainty of Duty and Salvation. I understood

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that my previous life was over. God had ended it, forgiven me for it, and presented me with a new and thus-far sinless one, and for this I owed Him my devotion and my constant effort to follow a Christ-like path of faultless dedication to His Truth. I felt humble and exalted at the same time—whereupon God tested me.

Beth stirred, awoke, raised her head and saw me looking at her. She started, gasped, burst into tears and threw herself on me, clasping her arms around my neck, kissing my face and sobbing violently. I sought to comfort her by holding her to me and patting her shoulder, but I could not share her emotion. I was in such awe of my covenant with God, and of His expectations of me, that my survival to see my wife and children again seemed trivial.

I foresaw at that moment that my life of faith would entail obligations incompatible with the obligations of my old life. To think of getting lost again in the quotidian particulars of a secular job, family breadwinning and superficial friendships—this oppressed me. The idea of pursuing an illicit love affair filled me with disgust. I believed that my covenant with God required a clean break from old entanglements, so that the burden of any new fault or failure would be entirely my own. I resolved to be divorced from Beth.

The news, when I conveyed it on the day of my release from the hospital, seemed to devastate her. She wept miserably, and I felt tremendous regret. But for my determination to keep faith with the God of my Salvation, I might have faltered in this first step. My

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daughters, too young to appreciate their parents' struggle, had their mood subsumed in their mother's, and they wailed and clung to my legs when they understood that I was to leave. The tribulations of those first few days were vast.

I returned to the bed-sitting room long enough to pay the landlord for the damage done by the ambulance crew, and then I left, driven out by the unhappy associations of the place. I found another, as small and monkish as the first, but I consecrated this one to my quest for the Godly perfection I could never attain, and the Covenant I would never forswear. I devoted much of my time at home to prayer and meditation. For many years nobody, man or woman, visited me in that place.

Although I knew that I had been saved and that God was real, I struggled to see His face. The war then under way in Vietnam caused me particular distress. I understood that Communism, as a militantly atheistic force, had to be defeated if God's hegemony were to be realized on earth. But I saw the sacrifice of thousands of seemingly innocent noncombatants; I saw friendly-fire accidents in which the righteous killed the righteous; I saw horrendous suffering where quick death would have been the merciful alternative. I prayed to God to understand His purpose in that war. I didn't for a moment doubt His goodness or His mercy, but I longed to see it whole, the better to bear witness among doubters, of whom there were plenty around me.

In some ways I felt more lost at this time than I had felt during my period in the wilderness. I knew that God expected everything of me and that I owed

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everything to God, but I felt unsure of the path. At night in my tiny apartment I removed my clothes and looked at myself in a long mirror. I was quite beautiful: tall, blond, with a high forehead, deep-set blue eyes, a straight nose, a fine mouth in a line that bespoke my earnestness, a strong jaw, broad shoulders and well-muscled arms, a deep chest tapering to a narrow waist and hips, long, well-formed legs, graceful ankles, gracefully arched feet. It was easy to believe that God had made me in an image close to His and that He had made me for His purposes. But near the geometric center of this beauty was my penis, pale and smooth and rather large, surmounted by a pale shock of pubic hair. I looked at my naked image in the mirror and I shivered. I felt my soul and body at risk. I had no confidence that my penis would not of its own volition rise up against God. I knew that God could break and burn my fragile body whenever He liked. My penis glimmered in the lamplight like a slumbering threat, its role in my salvation problematic. I understood that I must banish every manifestation of sexuality until God had made his purpose plain.

This understanding became the source of my greatest trials. I was young and vital, and my physiology seemed to have a life apart from my will and the life of my spirit. It was the rare morning when I didn't awake with an erection and have to clasp my hands in prayer until the hazard passed. I had lurid dreams of sexual encounters with Beth or Marie, or with women I didn't know but had seen on the street. Usually I'd awake from these dreams in dread and

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physical frustration, but sometimes I'd sleep through a consummation and awake later with the sticky evidence of my unwilling onanism. My confusion on these occasions was complete. I loved God and was faithful to Him, but the body He had given me seemed to rebel against us both. Yet however weak my flesh, or however strong the Devil's habitation of it, I vowed that my Soul, at least, would never surrender to temptation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AGAPE

When I met Solveig, she appeared first as a doer of God's work. There was a rally against the war in Vietnam, and I went out of curiosity, still watchful for the meaning at its center. Solveig was one of half a dozen speakers on the dais; she had gone to South Vietnam as a medical doctor and worked in a children's clinic until the South Vietnamese government discovered her previous stint as a medical volunteer in North Vietnam and revoked her visa. She spoke in musical, Swedish-accented English about the damage the war was doing to Vietnamese children in the North and the South. The rally was outdoors. Her voice arrived out of phase with itself from several sets of loudspeakers. I pushed through the crowd and stood closer to the platform. She seemed as tall and blond as I was, and nearly as beautiful, as if God had set her apart. I felt sure that God meant us to be allies in the work of justifying His purpose in the war; I felt sure that Solveig would help me to see the parts of the mystery that so eluded me up to that time. And I was lonely.

Before I ever spoke to her, I had assigned a significance to Solveig that I saw later was more from myself than from God. She had the same name as the faithful woman in Ibsen's play. I had read *Peer Gynt* and knew the ending; I had seen as much adventure as I wanted. I thought: Maybe this is the woman I'm to come home to.

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When the rally was over, I waited for the small crowd that had gathered on the platform to disperse, and then I approached her. She was crouching, collecting an assortment of books and papers from beneath a chair. Her hair was straight and blond, and it fell over the eye nearer to me as I stood at the right distance for speaking to her, but unsure of myself. She must have sensed my presence, because she pulled her hair aside and glanced up. Her eyes were of a limpid, unsaturated blue; they seemed to size me up faster than I could think to frame a greeting to her; she smiled at me before I could speak.

"Carry your books?" I blurted.

She laughed. And I realized with a thrilled sense of unearned intimacy, as if I were being admitted into a secret, that she was laughing in Swedish. It was a warm, musical, rising laugh. She stood up and handed me the books; "You are so nice to ask!" she said. The lilt of her laugh invested her speech.

She threw a purse strap over her shoulder and we began to walk. She was my height—nearly six feet—and wore a blue jersey a little lighter yet than her eyes, a denim miniskirt and leather sandals. It was spring; we were walking in the green campus of the university; her hair gave back golden highlights from the slowly northering sun. From the quietly charismatic presence I had first seen on the dais, she had become—effortlessly—my companion, walking at my side and waiting for me to speak. I told her my name and made one hand free from the books I was carrying so she could shake it. Her hand was as large as mine. She felt



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like an equal. Neither of us gripped.

On the street a block down from the campus gate we sat at a sidewalk cafe table and ordered croissants. It was a relief to unload Solveig's books onto the tabletop. It was an innocent pleasure to sit across that white surface from her and admire her smiling beauty glowing in the sun, all blues and yellows, the colors of her country's livery.

"Are you living in the States?" I asked her.

"For a few months only," she said. "I have to go back to Sweden for my work."

"What do you think is happening in Vietnam?"

Her smile became less dazzling but didn't entirely disappear. "Did you hear my speech?" she asked.

I nodded. "You talked about the effect on children. But is anything good happening there?"

"Some people are fighting for freedom," she said. "That might be good."

"Which are the people fighting for freedom?"

"The Viet Cong are fighting for freedom. They get help from the North and the Soviets, but they are fighting for freedom."

"But the Viet Cong are Communists. If they were to win, who would be free?"

"It's a good question." Her smile had still not disappeared. "What is your interest in the war?"

"That of a sponsor, I'm afraid."

"Then you like it."

"No. I hate it. But I pay for it. And I've voted for it."

"Time to repent," she said, and laughed again in

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Swedish. I was stunned. She seemed to know of my rebirth. She even seemed to be challenging me to find my vocation.

"What must I do?" I asked.

"Everyone must do what is right. I do whatever to help the little kids. Nobody can do everything."

Many years later, as I write down my best recollection of Solveig's words, they seem less than a clear call to a lifetime of privation, temporal failure and ultimate spiritual triumph. But the injunction to do right so resonated with the decision I had already made that I felt an alliance with her. I imagined us yoked together, animals of the same size and strength, preparing the ground for God's kingdom on earth. I even dared, there at the cafe table, to imagine us equally yoked in the sight of God, a couple in Christ, and myself no longer lonely. I felt powerfully moved and excited. I saw that her golden hands were bare of jewelry, as now were mine. So much matter for thought and process swelled in me that I was confused and knew that I needed to withdraw for a while.

"I want to think about what you've said today," I told her. "May I call you? This stuff seems very important to me."

She tore a scrap of paper from a sheet among the pile of books and wrote her name and a telephone number on it. I folded the scrap and put it in the breast pocket of my coat. I put down money for the croissants. I stood and took Solveig's hand in both of mine, shook it again, and thanked her for her company. "I'll call you," I said, and hurried away to my apartment.

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I spent the next couple of days in considerable agitation. I had a vivid dream in which Solveig and I were traveling in an unfamiliar country. She walked ahead of me, although I tried to keep abreast. Her straight, blond hair lofted from her shoulders, and I had a quartering view of her face—and then only the cheekbone and forehead. I realized I didn't remember what she looked like. I hurried to catch up, but my feet dragged and my body felt heavy. The land was gray and featureless and the sky overcast. In the far distance, crepuscular rays penetrated the cloud cover and picked out something on the ground. I understood that the war was there and we were going to find it. Solveig stretched a hand back to me. "It's God," she said. "We've got to hurry." I reached for her hand. I awoke in my bed.

I spent much of each workday in my office with the door shut, preoccupied. For the first time since my initial employment out of college, I felt sure that I had missed my vocation. I suffered in nervous anticipation of phoning Solveig. It seemed to me that I had reached another of many recent crises in my life. If I were to call Solveig, it would have to be for reasons of the Holy Spirit working in me, and I would have to dedicate myself entirely to whatever project He, through her, might reveal to me. I foresaw that I would have to resign my job. After much struggle, I girded my loins for spiritual battle and phoned the number on the scrap of paper.

Her voice when she answered was even more musical than I recalled, and her accent more

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pronounced. I identified myself. She remembered me and sounded pleased that I'd phoned. Rather keyed up, I proposed to meet her sometime in the course of the following weekend to talk about her work.

"Oh, I so sorry I can't," she said. I was simultaneously stung with disappointment and bemused by her childlike ellipsis. "I going away for the weekend with my friend. We're going car-racing."

"Your friend."

"Ya. He's one of your nice American guys."

I felt cold and foolish. A moment later I was ashamed of my feelings. I had not called Solveig as a prospective lover, but as an aspiring ally and co-worker, and I believed that the spiritual importance of my relationship with her could not be jeopardized by a relationship of whatever description with some other person.

"Well. What a disappointment," I said as cheerfully as I could. "Maybe we could meet sometime next week."

"There is anti-war group Monday at seven p.m. We could meet there and talk afterwards." She gave me the address and I hung up with my morale a little tattered, but unswerving in my purpose.

I went home that evening from work, kept to my tiny apartment, and prayed at length for guidance in the next part of my life. God seemed to be requiring me to give up my job. The thought gave me great anxiety and I prayed harder. I had a good income, much of which went to support Beth and my children. I knew, if God had a plan for me that entailed quitting my job, that He would provide. I knelt on the floor at the edge

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of my bed, squeezed my eyes tight shut and prayed aloud, hoping to see Him. I grew tired and fell asleep. I awoke sometime later, stiff and still kneeling, the right side of my face hot against the bedspread. He had not spoken yet, and I felt as far as ever from seeing His face. I crawled onto the bed and continued to pray. Late in the evening I got up, undressed, brushed my teeth, put on pajamas and got into bed for the night. I prayed then for patience. God granted me patience and I fell asleep.

The next day God answered me with a sign. In my mail at work there was a letter from Beth telling me of her plans to remarry. It was formal and somewhat cold, but it meant I would be released from alimony payments. The balance of disbursements allocable to child support was small. God had begun to show me how He would provide. I asked the receptionist to hold my calls, closed the door of my office, fell on my knees and prayed silently beside my desk. My fear evaporated. I thanked God, climbed back into my swivel chair and spent the rest of the morning composing my letter of resignation.

The weekend was a trial. I found myself thinking of Solveig, away somewhere with her friend, engaged in something she had called "car-racing". All I knew of this subject was that it existed and could be seen from time to time on television. My impression, based on very little exposure, was that it was a blood sport and obscenely dangerous. Except when something went spectacularly wrong, the activity seemed boring and idiotic, a parade of impractically loud vehicles jostling

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one another for what—judging by the space allotted in the television listings—must have been hours at a stretch. I tried to imagine Solveig's interest in so unedifying and irresponsible a sport, but I couldn't. Even less could I imagine her in the company of what I visualized the devotees of "car-racing" to be: hulking troglodytes with defective hearing and a degraded sense of the sanctity of human life. But I shamed myself and—I'm sure—disappointed God with these uncharitable judgments of people I hadn't even met. It occurred to me that the secret underlying my confusion might be charity itself—Solveig's charity, which I knew to be great, at the service of worthy sufferers. I imagined her volunteering medical assistance to the battered survivors of the frequent crashes. But the cheer in her voice on the phone had not suggested any such dolorous scenario. And then I realized that I didn't know if she had gone racing as a spectator or as a participant. Could she herself, strapping blonde that she was, be a driver?

I got my answer on Monday night at the anti-war gathering, convened in the basement of a Unitarian church near the university. Solveig appeared with her friend in tow, and oddly transformed since our first meeting. From her Swedish blue and yellow she had become—American?—red, white and blue. She was sunburned, as was her friend, and the sun seemed to have bleached her hair. The eyes were still dramatically blue, and she was wearing red slacks and a white blouse. I had not noticed before how white her teeth were. She smiled happily when she saw me, took

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my hand and introduced her friend. "This is Bartley," she said, and she told Bartley my name.

"Bartley," I said, shaking the hand he offered. "Bartley what?"

"Rob Bartley, actually," he said. "Most people call me by my last name."

"Why is that?"

"I have no idea." He smiled inconsequentially.

It seemed we might be about to run out of conversation, but Solveig provided a dynamic by taking Bartley's arm in hers and squeezing him to her side. She tilted her head and bumped it lightly against his; they turned their faces to each other and exchanged a kind of loopy grin; they behaved as if they were in love.

I inspected Bartley, trying to apprehend the nature of their attraction. He was a little shorter than Solveig; he had nondescript brown hair, slightly receding; his face was open and pleasant but not handsome. Watching their body language, I realized all at once that they had just come from bed. I was desperate to change the subject.

"What's this racing you were doing on the weekend?" I asked neither of them.

"Bartley has a sports car," Solveig said.

Bartley told me the name of his sports car, but it was just a series of letters and meant nothing to me. "We drove it in time trials upstate," he said. "Solveig's pretty good." Solveig smiled happily.

I was riven by disappointment at this hint that Solveig might be capable of frivolity. The evening was starting badly. I thought of excusing myself and going

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home to my apartment to be spared whatever pain might be in the offing, but my dedication stayed me. As I hesitated over how and where to steer this unsatisfactory conversation, the meeting was called to order and the three of us settled onto folding chairs near the front of the room, with Bartley and me proprietary at Solveig's flanks.

The chairperson of the meeting—or chairman, as he was still known in those days—was a young, bearded academic of some sort. Because there were only about two dozen people present, the chairman proposed to have each of us stand, identify himself and give a précis of his position on the war. Considering that no one at all stood to defend the American policy, there was a remarkable divergence of opinion as to what was wrong with it. Some thought Vietnam a just war with the United States on the wrong side. Some thought the war was simply unwinnable. Some thought that all American government declarations were lies, and that America was therefore under a moral obligation to fail. A pudgy fellow with a lower-middle-class accent and a look of paranoia had to be cut short before he was well begun on a Marxian analysis of war in general. Bartley, when his turn came, cited the so-called "domino theory" of Communist expansion from country to country through Southeast Asia as the only rationale he'd been offered for the American war in Vietnam, and he rejected it as not equal to the occasion. Solveig stood next, beautiful and impressive again, and offered the opinion that no political program justified the killing of children. Then all eyes turned to me and I



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stood, perhaps beautiful, said my name, and then heard only a silence echoing in my head. I looked down at Solveig. Her eyes were turned up to me; she smiled expectantly. I couldn't meet her gaze. I raised my eyes and looked past the attentive faces of strangers to the far wall, gripped by stage fright. The silence grew louder. And then I said to the wall: "I have no opinion about this war. I don't understand the first thing about it. It's a mystery to me. I hate it." There was applause, the first I'd heard. I sat down. Solveig kissed me on the cheek.

The rounds of the audience continued, but my mind was no longer on what was being said. I had expressed what was in my heart, without knowing in advance what I would say; I had moved an audience and Solveig had kissed me. All at once it seemed that I might be called to preach. I closed my eyes, bowed my head and prayed silently. After several minutes, when I had finished praying and felt encouraged by God, I opened my eyes and glanced at Solveig, who must have been watching me. She nodded. She smiled. For the first time I knew my vocation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PHILIA

The news that I was resigning my job to enroll in seminary created a small sensation at my employer's. My record there was excellent; most people assumed that I was on a career path to the top of the company. My boss tried to keep me on by offering an immediate promotion; it was clear he had no idea of what was at stake. The demands of duty and conscience that had made me such a good employee now called me away.

Anxiety to begin my task tormented me. I felt sure that Solveig was to be yoked with me in the work, but she had said that she was going home to Sweden at the end of the summer. There would be no opportunity for me to enroll in seminary until the fall. I chose a non-denominational Christian seminary within a few miles of my tiny apartment, applied and was accepted for admission. I looked carefully for any sign of doctrinal divergence between the seminary's Confession of Faith and my own convictions about the nature of God and His Son and Their relation to the world, and I was satisfied that there was none. We believed in the inerrancy and Divine inspiration of Scripture, in the historicity, deity and virgin birth of Christ, in the reality of His miracles, that He atoned for man's sins with His death, that He was resurrected in His body and ascended into Heaven, that He will return. We professed the Heidelberg Catechism.

The spring continued to warm and summer came

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on. I stayed at my old job, having given enough notice to complete tasks I'd made myself responsible for and to leave in good order, with my successor ready and able to carry on. But I attached myself to Solveig's projects. When she appeared at a rally or a teach-in, I was there. I attended the same weekly anti-war organizing meetings that she attended, and usually in her immediate company. But as often as not, Rob Bartley was in her company too. I wished he would go away, but I didn't pray that he would. Jealousy is the province of a God jealous of idols, not of a mortal man seeking to be Godly. I would not make an idol of Solveig, even though I loved her, and sexual jealousy was out of the question, although I had to pray long hours to fend it off. I hoped that God would lead Solveig into a narrower path of virtue. I prayed for Solveig in that spirit. I wanted her to be as good as I wanted myself to be. But Bartley seemed to be a fixture in her life, and the physical pleasure they took in each other's company was unmistakable. Their hands were rarely out of contact; they touched, bumped and butted each other constantly. Their displays caused me anxiety, regardless of the childlike innocence that surrounded them. They smiled, laughed and fondled like Adam and Eve before the fall. It was almost possible to imagine that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge had passed them by entirely. And it was impossible to dislike them together. And because I loved Solveig and Solveig appeared to love Bartley, I supposed that I must love Bartley too, just as my faith told me that God also loved Bartley. But my trials at that time would have

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been less if Bartley had been absent.

Vietnam remained an enigma. Solveig characterized it as a proxy war between two equally unworthy Great Powers, fought on the territory and in the bodies of a dispossessed people who only wanted to be let alone. Bartley's main objection seemed to be that his government was fighting under false pretenses. He regarded every official pronouncement as a probable lie, and he was as resentful as if the lies had been addressed personally to him. He presented himself as cheerfully disposed, but I sensed some anger, subterranean and non-specific, that Solveig's sunny presence regularly disarmed before it could rise up. One evening after a war-resistance meeting, we sat on a sofa before the television in Solveig's apartment and watched the President, Lyndon Johnson, address the nation. From Solveig's opposite side I heard Bartley grumble: "What an oleaginous, smarmy, murderous, hypocritical sleaze-ball! Don't you just want to...?" As he groped for the appropriate sanction, Solveig leaned away from me and snuggled Bartley with such conviction that the sofa shook.

"Hit him in the face with a pie?" she ventured. "Yes, Bartley, I do!"

I peered sidelong to see if Bartley was soothed. He had his arm around Solveig's shoulder and their heads were together. They gazed with dreamy smiles at the President, as if he were not the actor at the center of the world's woes. I smiled too. Solveig seemed capable of bringing the lion to lie down with the lamb, of initiating the Rapture all by herself. (To hear myself

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say this, these many years later, I realize again how dangerously close to idolatry I came in my relations with her.) I was determined that we should work together.

But how and to what end? I was fiercely anti-Communist and a committed Christian; Solveig seemed indifferent to political categories and behaved like some kind of Nordic pagan. I had not actually broached the subject of religion with Solveig, even though I thought of little else, and it seemed crucial for my salvation that I evangelize her. One day in June I invited her to the Sunday service at the church I attended.

"Would I have to wear a hat?" she wanted to know.

"Most of the ladies do," I said.

"Okay," she said.

Still equipped with a car in those days, I picked her up at her apartment at 10:45 a.m. and drove her two miles to the church. She looked stunning: taller than ever—and taller than I—in heels, a dark blue dress longer to the hem than was usual for her, but still above the knee, nylon stockings (or pantyhose?) with straight, dark seams, and a summer straw bonnet with a wide brim that framed her head like a halo, made her blue eyes dramatic, and reduced her clearance in doorways by a further three or four inches. "Do you go to church when you're at home in Sweden?" I asked her as we drove.

"Sometimes," she said. "We have a church in Stockholm that performs a whole Bach cantata every Sunday as part of the service. It's very nice. I go for the music."

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"Bach," I said.

"Ya," she said, "it's beautiful. Bartley took me to a Negro church once with a black friend of his. That music is so great too."

My church, then as now the Gospel Church of the Redeemer, had for music an organist and a congregation singing traditional hymns. I offered a little prayer that Solveig might find our music appealing. We parked in the lot, arrived at the church door just on time and went inside, turning heads. I led us to my usual pew; the congregants there smiled and shook hands and made room for Solveig and her hat.

I no longer remember much of the specifics of that service. A few of the flock went forward to witness. Solveig joined in the hymn singing; she may have known some of the numbers already, but I think she sight-read from the hymnal. At least once I followed her strong, bright voice singing the alto part. I've entirely forgotten the subject of the sermon, although our pastor was charismatic and compelling as always. I thought of myself in the same role in years to come. My introduction to homiletics was to happen that fall.

Out of a sense of pride in my friend that was not altogether appropriate and may even have been sinful, I felt impelled after the service to introduce Solveig to the pastor, who in his smiling progress down the center aisle during the recessional hymn had looked twice at her. We greeted him at the exit. He called me Brother, then took Solveig's hand and squeezed it as I presented her to him. He nodded his head in a courtly half-bow and said, "God bless you this beautiful morning. Thank

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you for joining us." She said something in reply and he heard her accent immediately. "Will we be seeing you again?"

Solveig's smile shone down from on high like the sun upon Gibeon. "Maybe not," she said. "I'm a visiting Lutheran."

"Our sister in Christ," the pastor said, and handed us down the church steps. "Bring her back, you hear?" I felt somewhat giddy, and conscious again of the attention Solveig attracted by her height and coloring. Faces in several parts of the parking lot were turned toward us. I took her hand and stopped her.

"I think the ladies are serving lunch in the basement. Would you like to eat?"

"Oh, I can't, I'm sorry," she said. "Bartley is coming for lunch. But you could have lunch with us."

"I don't want to crash your party."

"Don't be silly," she said. "I cooking eggs Benedict and Bartley is bringing orange juice. He thinks it's breakfast."

"Gosh, thank you," I said. "I'd enjoy that. Is there something I can contribute?"

"Maybe more orange juice. In case Bartley doesn't bring enough."

On the way back to her apartment we stopped at a convenience store and I ran in for the juice. There were bouquets for sale in a refrigerated case. I bought one of those too. "How nice!" she said, and smiled happily when she saw the flowers. There was no doubting her sincerity then or at any other time. Her candor was complete. I felt thrilled by her friendship, grateful that

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she had gone to church with me, and hopeful of the outcome.

"What did you think of the church service?" I asked her.

"I had fun," she said. "I like those hymns. It's interesting to see how different churches can be."

"Did you hear anything you especially liked? I mean in the testimony or the sermon or the prayers. Anything that seemed very true to you?"

"It was familiar," she said. "The testimony was different. I have never seen that before."

When we arrived at Solveig's building, Bartley was sitting on the front steps reading a book, a supermarket shopping bag beside him. He stood and embraced Solveig; they kissed quite a lingering kiss, their limbs intertwined more than would have seemed possible for people standing upright. Solveig had removed her bonnet for the ride in the car and not put it back on. She dropped it on the pavement, but held on to my flowers, when Bartley kissed her—or when she kissed him: she was distinctly the taller of the two and could have been construed the aggressor. After several seconds Bartley disengaged his right arm, planted his chin on Solveig's shoulder so he could see me past her blond hair, and offered his hand. "Hi!" he said. "How was church?"

I shook his hand. "Ask Solveig," I said.

"Okay," he said, "I will."

Bartley hoisted his shopping bag, Solveig retrieved her hat, and we went upstairs. Solveig kicked off her heels and we all went into the kitchen, where Bartley



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spread the contents of his bag on the counter top: a half-gallon of orange juice and two bottles of champagne. "Mimosas for throats parched by joyful noise," he said. I believe he meant no disrespect; nevertheless I took some offense, which I didn't show, and which I promptly forgave. He mixed the mimosa cocktails, distributed them and offered a toast. "To human love and friendship," he said. We clinked our three glasses and sipped.

"To Divine Love," I said. We lifted our glasses and sipped again. It occurred to me that I had never offered a religious toast, nor—on second thought—ever heard of one. I felt all at once that I'd committed a terrible act of profanation. One invokes God for His help in all things, not to congratulate Him on the quality of His mercy. I felt cold with shame. I closed my eyes for a few seconds and prayed silently for forgiveness. But then things got worse.

I should mention that my church held no position on the question of the drinking of alcohol. A substantial minority of my friends in the church—or it may even have been a majority—disapproved of drinking and never imbibed. I had always drunk in moderation and found the sanction for it in many places in Scripture. But this day, without my volition and regardless of my preference, something went wrong.

Bartley and I sat on stools at the kitchen counter while Solveig cooked, and Bartley asked me about my church. This seemed at first a God-given opportunity to begin the work of bringing Solveig to my faith, and perhaps to bring Bartley, whom I liked and God loved,

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along as well. He asked me to repeat the name.

"The Gospel Church of the Redeemer."

"So—" he said. "Christian, Protestant, evangelical."

"That's right. We believe—I believe—that Jesus died on the cross to atone for our sins, and that I have the obligation as a believer to tell that good news to everyone, because knowing it and believing it and acting on it is the only way in the world to salvation."

"Man!" Bartley said. "Your work is cut out for you. You're operating in a society where everybody has a Constitutional right to his own theory. What do you do to sell yours?"

"I tell the story and trust the truth of it to do the selling. And I try my best to exemplify it in my own life."

"How's it going?"

"I fall short."

Bartley sipped his drink and surveyed me with an indulgent smile. "From the little I know, I'd say you meet or exceed most people's standard for virtuousness."

"I'm a sinner."

"How can you tell?"

"I fall short of Godliness in more ways than I could hope to enumerate. I know what He wants of me, and I fall short in thought and deed."

"Gee," Bartley said. "That's tough."

I reviewed the tone of that remark. I replayed it in my head, listening for the inflection of irony. There seemed to be no trace. Bartley sipped again and said, "You know, I feel quite virtuous. I may be one of the

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happiest people in the world. And I couldn't be happy if I didn't feel virtuous. And I don't believe that you're in any way a worse man than I am. Is my standard so low? Or are you measuring yourself against a standard not meant for human beings?"

"I'm measuring myself against a standard that isn't worldly."

"But isn't the world where the action is?"

"The world is where the fight for salvation is. The action is in Heaven."

"This is funny," Bartley said. "You're the unhappy Christian, and I'm the blissful secularist trying to shrive you of the conviction of sin. Who will save whom?"

I felt a stab of fright. Satan adopts any guise necessary to outflank the wary Christian. I looked at Solveig, who was puttering happily at the stove, and saw her for the first time as the Other. I set down my mimosa glass, bowed my head and prayed to God for guidance and protection. I asked Him to show me if I had stumbled into the den of the Adversary. I shook with fear. After several seconds the fear passed, and I understood that God was with me as always, that I was safe, and that my task was to witness to Bartley and Solveig, who were not Satan's agents but his targets. I picked up the glass and moistened my dry throat.

Bartley was still talking. "Solveig likes you. I like you too, but it's not the boon that being liked by Solveig is. That's why I'm knocking myself out trying to come up with the formula to convince you that you deserve to be happy."

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"I am happy," I said. "Joyful, actually. My faith gives me joy."

"Really? I hope so."

"I hope so too," Solveig said.

"Because I'm thinking," Bartley said, "that maybe you've tied into a set of metaphysical obligations that the human mind was never meant to confront or designed to understand. I mean, if God is running the world, how do you account for Vietnam? I want to retire God and put Solveig in charge. On the strength of the evidence before me, Solveig is kinder and more loving than God."

Bartley's monstrous, unexpected blasphemy took my breath away. I glanced again toward Solveig, almost hoping not to see her there. But she was there, seemingly oblivious to Bartley's remark and assembling the egg servings. I asked God to forgive the three of us and to sustain me.

"But Bartley," I managed to choke out, "there can't be any comparison. Solveig's love is human love. God's love is Divine love. They're just not understandable in the same terms. When God was on earth in Jesus, He appeared as a man filled with love that was recognizably human, even though it was subsumed in the Divine. But God's love is not human. You can't look at it and say you understand it."

"Amen," Bartley said, and laughed. He laughed! Then he climbed down from his stool and sat at the dining table, leaning back, placid, with a smile of seeming contentment. After a moment his face grew serious and he said, "Do you understand it?"

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"No, of course not," I said. "But I hope to."

"Here's what I don't get," said Bartley. "If we are made in God's image and God requires certain behavior of us if we are to be called good, why is the world he's given us to live in such an ethical nightmare? I mean, shouldn't it make moral sense to us? Shouldn't we, as God's simulacra, be able to see the pattern of his commandments for us reflected in the human condition?"

"Don't we?"

"I don't think so. Tornados chop up trailer parks and kill children and poor folks. Their survivors weep and wail, lie awake nights for months or years afterward, wondering why they were punished. What is that about? What lesson are we supposed to learn from such an example? Surely God doesn't want us killing children and leaving their parents to suffer indefinitely. He's told us he doesn't. So why does he do it himself? Why does he sponsor a world that seems utterly indifferent to human happiness, where there's no detectable correlation between virtue and reward, where his creatures go to war, mistreat and murder one another in generation after generation? Why does he require me to believe in his goodness if I'm to be saved, but deny me the capacity to believe? That's what I don't get."

"It's a profound mystery," I said. It would have been better if I had ignored the generality of Bartley's observations and remonstrated instead that God denies no one the capacity to believe, that He has imbued every human creature with free will; but I was oddly off

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my form.

Bartley stretched in his chair, folded his arms behind his head, and turned to watch Solveig at work. "You know," he said, "I don't think I've ever been happier in my life."

I felt somewhat dizzy, as if my mind had projected itself partway out of my body and uncentered me. I looked at the glass on the counter and saw that it was empty. I realized too that I had emptied it once or twice before in the course of my conversation with Bartley, and that Bartley had refilled it each time. Now I looked at him and tried to organize my thoughts. I felt quite engaged with Bartley, as if he were my friend and ally, and that some exalting revelation might be in the offing. I turned to look at Solveig. The turning disoriented me; I felt myself tipping. I placed a steadying hand on the counter top until I could regain my balance and focus my eyes, to discover Solveig looking back at me. She flashed her dazzling smile. Without forethought, and to my own amazement, I reached for her, took her hand and kissed it. The revelation that I had anticipated seconds before now struck: that I yearned for her, body and soul. Her face seemed so beautiful that tears welled in my eyes. Something like a sexual wind swept through my body, and I felt stirrings of an erection. Fear seized me and I dropped her hand and sat back, folding my arms across my chest, aware of my heartbeat, my head suddenly clear. Solveig reached out with the hand I had kissed and patted my cheek. "Are you ready for food?" she asked.

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We sat at the table and Solveig served. I offered to ask the blessing and was accepted, then ate mostly in silence, although Solveig's eggs Benedict were done to perfection, and Solveig told Bartley about her morning in church. I had switched from mimosas to orange juice, and I had promised God that I would not drink alcohol again until the Work was finished.

I watched my two friends talking happily together. But for the solemnity of my covenant with God, their intimacy might have made me envious.

The tragicomic history of a seeker after the truth of his own life, and the truth of the death of his best friend. "May be the saddest story I ever read...very subtle and very funny."

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