

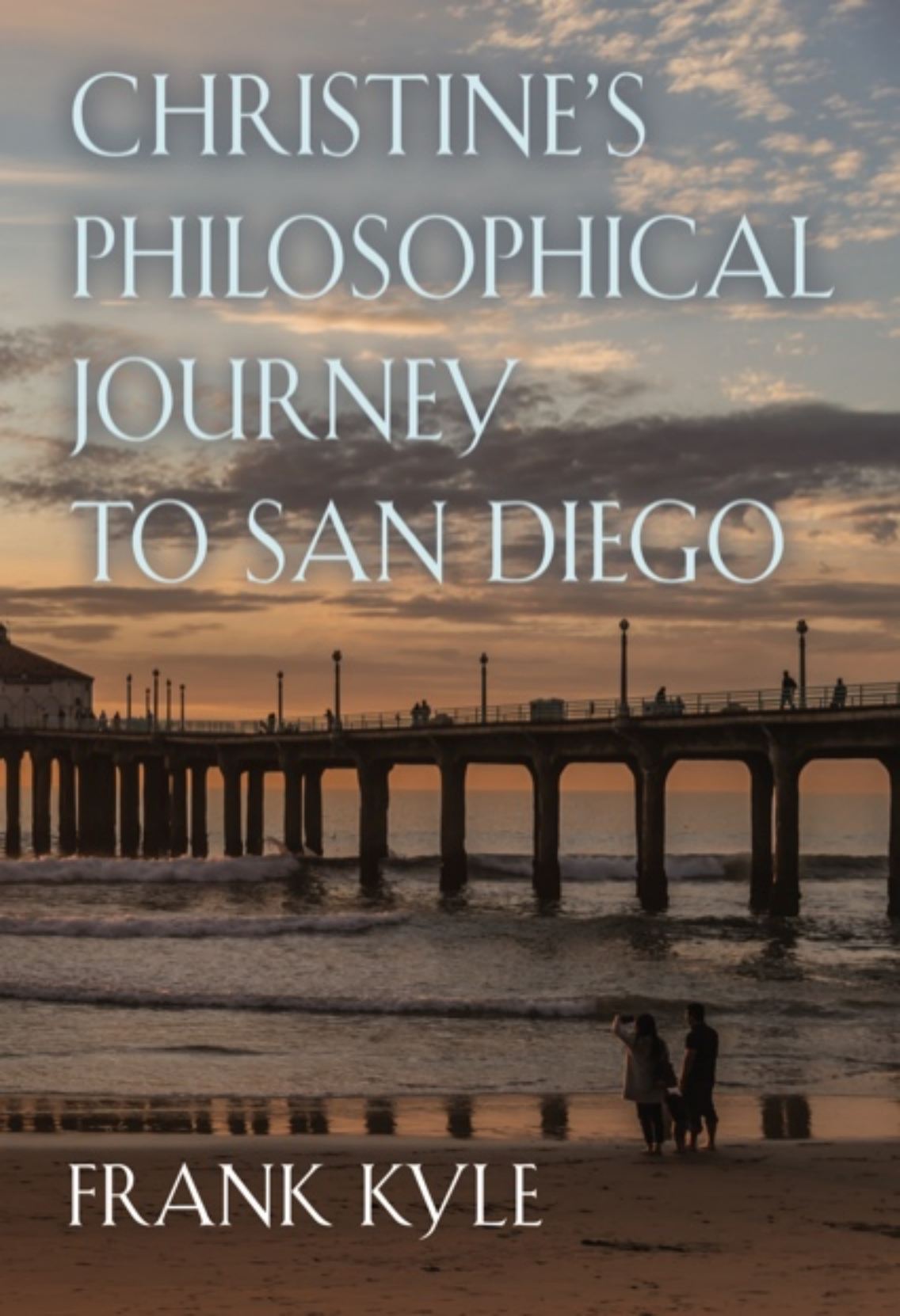
*A young woman's
philosophical Journey leads to
San Diego.*

**Christine's Philosophical Journey to San Diego:
Book One**
by Frank Kyle

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CHRISTINE'S
PHILOSOPHICAL
JOURNEY
TO SAN DIEGO

FRANK KYLE

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June 3, 198-

Dear Ruth,

I found a job. It's at Denny's restaurant in Pacific Beach. I'm really thrilled. The manager said he could use me part-time during the week for the swing shift. I didn't even know what that was. It means I'll be working from about five to midnight but he'll also use me as a back-up waitress. That sounded really good to me. I'll have most my day to myself. Still, I'm a little nervous. Robert said I could use his pickup until I got a car of my own. He told me to take it, that he's at home those hours. If not I can take the bus to work but will have to take a cab home if I work after midnight. It's only a twenty-five minute walk, but he said that I shouldn't be walking the streets at night because there are a lot of vagrants. "They're harmless for the most part, but you never know. And at that time of night a lot of young guys have had too much to drink. It's just better to play it safe."

We'll see. Apparently Robert doesn't know that we girls can take care of ourselves, but he knows the city better than I do so for now I will take his advice. He's been very kind to me. He's the one who got me the job. One afternoon when he came home from work, I was sitting outside looking over the want-ads. He walked over and asked me what I was doing. I told him. He sat down and we went over them together, but there wasn't much close by. So he told me to forget about the want-ads for now and drove me over to Denny's. He said he's known the manager forever.

"He takes a little getting used to, but he's a great guy. If he can help you out, he will."

I could tell right away that the place was one of his hangouts because the two waitresses on duty knew him. The manager is a flamboyant character about Robert's age. When we walked in, he came over and shook Robert's hand.

"Hello, Robert. Well, I can see you're coming up in the world. It's about time. *Who is this beautiful young lady?*"

"Christine."

"*Enchanté*. I'm Ralph." Still looking at me, he asked, "A girlfriend or just a friend?"

"Christine's my new neighbor, Ralph, not my girlfriend."

"A good news, bad news situation, huh? Come on, let's find you two a table." He took us to a booth.

He bent toward Robert and said in a low yet audible voice, "Don't tell me, Robert, that you have brought Christine to Denny's on your first date. It a great restaurant and all but..."

"It's not like that, Ralph. Christine is looking for a job."

"Here, at Denny's?"

"Yes, if possible," I said, intruding into the conversation. Ralph turned to me with a you've-got-to-be-kidding expression on his face.

"You, young lady, ought to be in Hollywood looking for a job."

"You mean as an actress?"

"Absolutely or a model."

"Actually, I'm a pretty private person and don't think being a movie star or a model would agree with me."

"Maybe not, and I guess you wouldn't feel comfortable being rich. Well then, if you don't want to be a rich and famous movie star or a glamorous model, I guess we'll have to put you to work at Denny's. I do need someone, but have a lot of applications. I get them every day. Still you being Robert's new neighbor and all... You know, Christine, that I'll be going out on a limb hiring you. You're going to give all the other girls an inferiority complex, and they're going to blame me." I didn't know how to respond to that.

"Ralph, where are your manners?"

"That's what my mother always used to ask me. I guess I'm still looking for them."

"Not very hard. So Christine has a job?"

"Of course, let me get an application to make it look official."

I could tell Ralph and Robert were on good terms. The manager returned and gave me an application to fill out.

"Fill this out and I'll be back in a few minutes. Are you two going to eat something?" I looked at Robert.

"Sure, why not," said Robert. "Besides, if you're going to give Christine a job, we owe you that much."

"Hey, you wanna keep the place in business at least until she gets her first paycheck. Let me get Barbara to bring you some water and take your orders."

He walked off and brought back two menus and left again. Then Barbara, the waitress, came over. She said hello to Robert and introduced herself to me. Then she saw the application.

"Applying for a job here I see."

"She just moved in from New Mexico," Robert told her. Then to me, "Barbara came here from Lubbock, Texas."

"So you and Robert are both from Texas."

"Oh yeah, we were almost neighbors. When we first met Robert knew right away by my accent that I was a Texan. He grew up only a few miles from where I did."

"Where was that?" I asked.

"Earth."

"Earth?"

“I know, you’re from there too. That’s the response I always get.”

“You mean that’s the name of the town?”

“It’s not as well known as the planet.”

“I’ve been to Lubbock, though.”

“I’m surprised. Not many people visit Lubbock unless they’re interested in farming or football.”

“My father took me there once. He drills water wells and installs irrigation pipe.”

“Then that makes sense. Lots of water wells in that region. If it weren’t for irrigation, there wouldn’t be any Lubbock, Texas, which wouldn’t be such a bad thing. So here you are. It’s a small world, isn’t it? If you’re hired you will be working with me. They need a girl for the dinner hour.”

“You think I’ll get the job?”

“Are you kidding? There’s no way Ralph’s going to say no to you. You don’t have to worry about that...or him for that matter. He respects his waitresses, but he does like pretty girls. You will get the job sure and plenty of attention from the customers. That will suit me just fine. You’d think they’d leave an old lady alone. No way. Anyway, that comes with the territory.”

“You’re not old.”

“And you’re not only pretty but sweet. We’re going to get along just fine, and don’t worry about the boys that come in. They won’t bother you really. Denny’s isn’t a bar. They just gotta talk when a girl walks by. It’s some form of male dementia.” I laughed.

“We’re going to get along just fine. And you can tell me how much you liked Lubbock. Just kidding. Good to have you on board.”

“Thanks.” She took our orders and left.

“She was pretty certain I’d get the job.”

“So was I.”

Then the manager returned and sat down next to Robert. They talked while I finished the application. Then I handed it to the manager who started looking it over.

He looked up and smiled. “You’ve just moved to San Diego.”

“Yes, about a week.”

“No waitressing experience?”

“No, but I’m a fast learner,” I said.

“I’m sure you are. I see that. You’ve just graduated from college. I’m impressed. I would think you’d be looking to do something other than waitressing.”

“Like being a movie star?”

“No, I was just teasing, but... Never mind. It’s just with all that education...”

I smiled. “My degree is in art. I’m not sure what kind of job that qualifies me for. Actually, I would like to practice my art, but I can’t make a living doing that.”

"I understand. Well, right now all I have is the swing shift part-time."

"Swing shift?" I said looking puzzled. He smiled.

"You haven't worked much, have you? That's not a criticism. I have a lot of respect for someone who finishes a college degree. It's the dinner shift. You would be working from five to midnight, depending on how busy it is. It will be part-time at first, but after you're here a while, you'll be able to get on full time. Denny's is a good place to work full time. Lots of benefits, even tuition reimbursement, though I'm not sure about art classes. They paid for classes I took in food service management. I thought I'd work for a big hotel but I've been happy here, especially at this store. It's a good crowd. So what do you think?"

"It's perfect. The swing shift is perfect. I really appreciate your giving me a chance because you're right. I haven't worked much."

"I couldn't very well say no with Robert sitting here. He's been a regular even before I started at this store." He smiled. "What kind of art is it that you do?"

"Sketching, painting. I also like doing ceramics, but I need a kiln to do that. I might take a pottery class for that. I really appreciate the job."

"That's okay. I'm glad to help an up-n-coming artist. Can you start tomorrow night?"

"Yes I can."

"Come in about two-thirty. It's slow then and one of the afternoon waitresses will show you the ropes before you start your shift. Oh yeah. I'll be right back" He then got up and walked off and returned with a menu.

"Take this with you and look it over. You don't have to have it memorized by tomorrow but you should start becoming familiar with it." As I opened the menu, he said, "It's a complete menu."

"Yeah, you serve a lot of food."

"And remember we serve breakfast 24/7."

"Okay. Don't worry. I'll have it memorized by tomorrow."

"Wow, you are smart."

"The thing about being an art major is you have to memorize lots of facts for the art history classes, like dates, artists, works, and styles. It's crazy, but I could do it. It's kind of like a gift."

"Lucky you. Hey, it's none of my business, but I'm curious. When you were in college did you take classes during the summer too?"

I had to smile at his wording. "You're wondering if I worked during the summer."

He looked over to Robert and raised his eyebrows, and then looked back at me. "Didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay. It's just complicated..." I paused. Now I could see they were both really interested.

“My family life is a little complicated. In the summer I lived with my father...” I paused again. “I lived with my father and sister in northern New Mexico, not too far from the city of Taos. It was very secluded.”

“You lived out in the country then?”

“Yeah, very much so. During the winter I lived with my mother and stepfather in Albuquerque.”

“That sounds really interesting. I grew up out here in La Mesa.”

“We have lots of mesas in New Mexico.”

“La Mesa ain’t like that. It’s the suburbs. My parents are divorced too. I’m divorced, two kids.” He sighed. “It’s too bad. People just can’t seem to stay together. Robert never married. Probably the smart thing to do nowadays. Anyway, I’m glad to have you on the Denny’s team, Christine. If possible, you should wear a polo shirt and dark pants if you have them. We can discuss the uniform later.”

“Thank you, and thanks a lot for the job.”

“Not a problem. See you tomorrow. See you later, Robert.”

“He’s a nice guy,” I said as he walked away.

“Yeah, he is.”

That was it. I was surprised at how fast it happened. I think it’s going to be a good place to work. It’s lively and very friendly. I noticed that some of the customers greet one another and talk with the help. It must be the beach-town atmosphere that makes everyone so outgoing. Robert says that the customers are a cross section of the people who live in Pacific Beach, some older people who have been here most of their lives—like Mrs. Desjardins; students—who have been invading the city since the sixties; and a growing number of young couples with children—a group that he says had at one time become almost extinct.

Afterwards Robert asked me if I would like a quick tour of area. I said sure. He explained that one reason he likes Denny’s is that it’s located across the street from the pier. His favorite hangout. But Denny’s is also on one of his favorite streets, which runs through three very different beach towns. We drove to Pacific Beach’s prettier, upscale sister-city a few miles north. I can see why he likes the drive because the street is lined with towering, exotic palms whose shaggy fronds sway lazily in the ocean breeze. On the way back we drove along the beach. At one beach he slowed down so I could get a better look. It was a beautiful rocky beach that would have seemed wildly primitive were it not besieged by the mansions of the wealthy. Robert lamented that human avarice had allowed the whole area to become overdeveloped, so that homes, hotels, apartments crowd upon every shore. I told him that the homes were attractive but shouldn’t have been allowed to be built so close to the shore, but that’s what people do.

“You mean ruin paradise?” he responded.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean.”

“One simply must turn away,” he said, “and look to sea, as do the sunbathers who lie or sit upon a strip of lawn or narrow beach and regard one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world.”

On the way back to Pacific Beach he pulled off and parked.

“I want to show you something, Christine.” We walked a block and were looking at the ocean from high cliffs that overlooked the beach. There in the distance stood the pier that Robert’s so fond of.

“What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.”

“This is definitely my favorite beach. If you walk down to the water’s edge, you can walk for about two miles until you reach the breakwater. I used to run to the rocks and back.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“No. I’ve gotten lazy in my old age.”

“It really is beautiful. I can see why you like it so much. I love the pier. It’s quaint, as if from another time. And the ocean is magnificent. I’m still not used to the sight of it.”

“That’s because it’s primordial. One never gets used to the primordials. I’m glad you like it. It’s meant a lot to me over the years.”

“Primordials?”

“Yeah, the earth, sky, and sea.”

“I see. Thanks a lot, Robert. For everything.”

“Hey, no problem.” We then walked back to his camper truck and drove home. I thanked him again. Then he asked me if I would like a cup of tea, saying that he was restless and wanted to sit outside for a while. I was hesitant, thinking that maybe this was all a setup, but hating my feeling that way, but after everything he had done I felt I couldn’t say no.

“Great, I’ll fix the tea. You might want to get a coat. It’s starting to cool off.”

So we sat outside and drank tea and talked, about people and cities. I told him about Albuquerque and its urban blight. He said he loved Pacific Beach but recognized that the city had been overbuilt in a haphazard fashion. He dislikes shoddily built businesses designed to minimize cost and aesthetics at the same time and the rows of apartment houses for which there is insufficient parking. I told him about Central Avenue, its gaudy signs and billboards looking like the hookers that parade themselves on the street corners, said that in comparison Pacific Beach wasn’t so bad. He laughed, a little surprised I think by my analogy. He pointed to the sky at a tangle of electrical lines.

“They’re like cobwebs. I never understood why they didn’t put them underground. Well, actually I do. The city was built in a helter-skelter fashion, and cheaply as possible. That’s become the American way.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The three fundamental principles of America are time, money and freedom. And shoddily built, unattractive cities are what you get when they are built according to those three principles. You build whatever you want as cheaply as possible, which means as quickly as possible because time is money.”

“I’ve never heard it put quite that way.”

“You know it took fifteen years to build the Parthenon and it’s a marvel of architecture, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, or should be if it isn’t. And it took only a few seconds to destroy it. It’s sad what people do to beautiful things.”

“You mean like here.”

“Yeah, when you think of the magnificent setting. Fortunately, grunge is part of the mystique of Southern California beach scene, kind of like those motel towns along the old Highway 66. I’ve driven that route plenty of times to visit my mom. I used to take photographs of old buildings, some abandoned, the kitschy objects and decorations. I loved that motel where the rooms look like tepees. It was like you were on another planet where the old civilization had disappeared for the most part but left behind remnants of itself. That’s the reason for the camper on my pickup, for my excursions into the hinterland. You ever see Andreas Feininger’s photo *Route 66*?”

“Maybe, I don’t recall.”

“It’s a black and white classic, taken in 1947. The subject is a crappy-looking desert town, Seligman, Arizona, under a big sky full of beautiful cumulus clouds. There’s a Texaco station, a Coca Cola sign, a couple of hitchhikers, and, as I recall, an old Chevy sedan. It’s really weird how the town is so ugly yet the scene breaks your heart. I think it’s got to do with nostalgia. I mean, if you walk down Garnet you will see that most of the buildings are without design, as if they were intended to be provisional until the real city could be built—that is, except for the logotype architecture of buildings like McDonald’s or 7-Eleven, which are designed like milk cartons. In some cases the buildings couldn’t be uglier. If they were they would be more attractive in a weird junk art way.” I laughed. It was sad but true.

“But I thought you loved Pacific Beach.”

“I do. I think it’s a nostalgia thing. For beach towns are like highway towns, a little grunge and a lot of tackiness is nostalgic, makes great photographs. As you know having studied art yourself, learning to see as an artist reveals more clearly both beauty and ugliness. Perhaps the true artist is able to see the beauty in ugliness. I can’t say that I ever acquired that ability...”

“But you see beauty in the tackiness and grunge of Pacific Beach,” I interrupted. “So you must have that ability to some extent.”

“You’re right. I love it when a place has a soul, and I’m not sure what I mean by that. You just feel it. What about you?”

“For Albuquerque? No. It’s a soulless city. And it’s done too much harm.”

“How?”

“Like here, it located in one of the most beautiful places in the world. To the east are the majestic San Sandia Mountains, to the west are the ancient volcanoes called The Three Sisters, which are sacred to the Indians. And between the two runs the Rio Grande River. I can't imagine what it must have been like before the blight of Albuquerque emerged like a giant spore, a humanly caused infection.”

“You really don't like the city.”

“No.” I sighed, then said, “I hate it. You know there are Indian petroglyphs carved on the rocks of The Three Sisters volcanoes but many have been vandalized and tagged with gang graffiti. It's awful, but to my mind that is what the city of Albuquerque is—vandalism. You must know. Haven't you ever driven I-40 to Texas?”

“I have, but I've never stopped in Albuquerque. I don't feel all that comfortable in big cities.”

“You didn't miss anything. But I don't understand that you don't like big cities yet you live in one.”

“Not really. I rarely leave Pacific Beach except to go to work, and it's more like a small town. I rarely go downtown or to the malls. I have no desire to and really don't have to. Everything I need is here. If I want to see a movie, I go to the Cove Theater in La Jolla or watch it on TV. Pacific Beach used to have a theater called the Roxy, but that was a while back. The best thing about Pacific Beach is being near to the shore where you can stand before nature untamed—the ocean. Right?”

“I agree. Maybe you should get on the city council and have that row of boxes on Garnet colorized like they do for the old black-and-white movies.”

“I don't think they should colorize those old movies.”

“Neither do I, but it couldn't hurt the row of boxes on Garnet. With a few splashes of paint the *box is a box is a box is a box street* could become *an azure box, vermilion box, saffron box, and vermilion box street.*”

“I see what you mean. Just a little imagination is needed. You know where that would have to come from, not the owners of the buildings, who are only investors, and the only color they know is green. It would have to come from the owners of the businesses, who often are loaded with imagination but not loaded with cash. If everyone pitched in, I think the street could be transformed into something remarkable.”

“So are you going to run for city council?”

“No. I accept the town for what it is. If it improves, fine. If not, fine. You know about a half-dozen miles from where my mom lives is an old red-brick schoolhouse just off a country dirt road. It's surrounded only by fields. As I recall there's not even a farmhouse to be seen. It was boarded up long before I came into the world, sometime during the Great Depression. My mom loved to have me drive her on the country roads and we'd always end up passing that schoolhouse. I probably asked her about it but forget now what she said. She didn't go there. But you know that vacant schoolhouse meant more to me than if it had been operating with kids

running around. We stopped there once in the winter. I got out of the car and walked around. It was freezing Jack Frost cold, so my mom stayed in the car. As I walked around the schoolhouse, I was moved, almost to tears. I kept imagining ghosts from the past, kids who were now dead or old men and women. It saddened me, and yet I felt a great love for life, for those people who had been there as children and were now old or dead. Sometimes old, ugly things can be beautiful. It's odd, Christine, when I go to the pier or the ocean, and actually I don't very much anymore, but when I did I always found myself thinking about my life as a child in Texas. I loved the winters, the gray and dreary days. They forced me to think more deeply about the reality of life. I need to shut up, don't I?"

"No. I understand how you feel. I think when I'm as old as you I will probably be thinking a lot about the life I left behind in New Mexico. I think that's one reason I'm drawn to the ocean. It reminds me of that world I left behind, that place where the primordials dwell, as you put it. They won't be ignored."

"Maybe that's it. The high plains of Texas are like a vast sea that can be calm for weeks on end and then become frighteningly turbulent."

It's true. The ocean is marvelous, Ruth, like our own desert, but seemingly alive—fearsomely and powerfully alive. She imposes limits upon our destructive expansion and reminds us of that primordial world that will one day wash over the ruins of our cities. Then there is the pier. "A magical place," is what Robert calls it. I told him I understood how the pier could be magical and why he so appreciates the men who fish at night and the birds, the ocean itself, but then he said there was something more, that it was a state of mind, which he could not describe. It is something I would have to experience for myself. Then he announced that he wanted to introduce me to the pier so that I could see the magic for myself. I asked him if everyone who visited the pier could see its magic.

"No," he responded. "Well, yes. I mean the pier is magical in different ways to different people. To tourists it's one thing. To the fishermen it's another. To lovers who walk out upon it it's something else. To the surfers it's an ancient monument to what they do, which is magical enough. To the children who play below in the sand and surf it something even more enchanting like far off castles and mysterious caves where dragons sleep. It's strange that what the pier actually is is not what it means to most people, but simply allows those other meanings to occur."

"I don't think I follow, Robert."

"Actually, the pier is a bridge that reaches a short distance out into the sea. That's all, though to me there is something magical even about that."

"In what way?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's because it says something about people, about how they are drawn to the sea, want to be a part of it. The pier allows them to walk on water, or at least above it. Anyway, its meaning changes for all those who visit it. In that way the pier is like the Greek sea god Proteus who changes shape to those

who see him. I can't tell what the pier's magic will be for you, Christine, but I would like to be the one who introduces you to it."

When he said this, at first I could only smile in response. Suddenly Robert had become a mystery to me, and I have to admit that my wariness of men's motives returned. Then I simply concluded that there is something both wise and childish about Robert, but never a hint of meanness or selfishness. Later, after our conversation had ended about midnight, I expected him to follow me to my door or something like that and was hoping he wouldn't, and he didn't. Instead he simply told me that he was happy that I got the job and really enjoyed our conversation. I was grateful that he didn't try to hit on me like other guys would have. Right now I don't want to get too close to anyone, but once again I decided to trust him, so I smiled, and told him I'd be glad to have him introduce me to his magical pier. And, Ruth, isn't that what you did many years ago, introduced me to the magical places among the mountains and mesas of your homeland?

Have I been homesick? No, not really. I don't miss Albuquerque, obviously. I wish I could say I have missed my family, but I can't, I suppose mostly because I try to avoid thinking about them. The people I have met here have treated me with kindness and accepted me without question. I'm afraid Albuquerque is no longer my home. I don't think it ever was. It sickens me to think and say that because I feel that I have betrayed my family, who were not always strangers to me. Or was it I who became the stranger? I don't want to think about all that right now.

I do think a lot about you, Ruth, and I miss you. I think of that time when I was sent to live with you. I had left the hospital and would talk to no one. I did not want to tell anyone what had happened to me, and having to describe in a courtroom what had happened destroyed me with shame and guilt, even though I had done nothing to deserve what happened to me. So after the trial I was sent to stay with you and your famous father for the summer. You never asked me to tell you what happened, though I knew that you had been told that I had been raped. But we didn't talk about it. You knew I would eventually confide in you when I was ready. Instead, we spent the summer playing as two children would in the wild country. And then, suddenly, there was only one week left, so every evening we would hike up to the big rock where we could see the desert spread out in the distance like a waterless sea, and it was there that I finally told you about what happened. You were thirteen, dark as chocolate from playing in the sun for an entire summer, and your dark eyes were as mysterious as the night. You listened to me. And when I cried, the tears ran down your dark, silent face. You said nothing. What can one say to girl who has been raped? So, you held me, and from that moment on I knew our friendship would be unique—sisters—and I would never again confide to anyone else about what happened.

And then, what seemed a lifetime later, I found myself again in the hospital, so ashamed that I had not died. And again I would not speak to anyone. I wanted only

you, but I could not have you. I was so ashamed. Yet, you would have understood. No evil ever surprised you; I know that. You accept everything. Your dark eyes are not afraid of evil, whereas my light blue eyes are scorched by it. You are able to follow the currents of life without fear. If you have ever known fear, it was only for me. Perhaps evil does not exist for you. Yes, it exists. You simply accept it, even flirt with it, like the Hopi who dance among rattlesnakes. I was never afraid with you. And maybe after I have become brave like you, and have learned to understand the world as you do, I will return. And then we will be sisters, brown and white—well, we are it seems. But I don't think I have the strength to become like you, Ruth. Or maybe it's not strength but a kind of wisdom. You are able to accept the darkness, the sin of the world, and remain untouched by it. How? I had always thought of myself as...if not pure at least good. Yet now I feel completely defiled. Oh, how I love you, Ruth. You are untouched by this awful world. You are beauty and life, yet there is an aura of death about you, like a dark halo. You are my mesa girl. I miss your strength, your love, your tears, and your beauty. You are beautiful in a world defiled. I must sleep now.

Love,

Chrissie

VI

June 3, 198-

As this letter closes an abyss seems to open before the reader, an abyss filled with dark confusion. It is the abyss which Christine stands before. She looks down into its endless depths and ponders its significance. She wants to flee from it, yet she is drawn to it, not from morbid curiosity but in order to know whether it is merely a nightmare or something more fundamental. She doesn't know. In fact, she sees only glimpses of it, reflections of her own life and experience. How could the good fortune of finding a job and a pleasant tour of Robert's favorite beaches lead to such thoughts? Did the darkness already reside in her heart? Or did the darkness seep in from some disharmonious element in the new world that goes unseen by those who are attracted to the beautiful beaches to stroll, swim or sunbathe, who see only the sun, sky, sand, and sea, and who marvel enviously at the beautiful homes that line the broad strips of green lawn that border the sea like a picture frame? Her own artist's eyes appreciate all these things even more than does the casual visitor, even more so, given that she sees the city of her birth as a desecration upon the land. Yet in this new world she can see that something has been lost. That even here, perhaps even more so here where the human world itself has become a restless sea, something eternal has been lost, not destroyed but hidden from view and thus forgotten. If she had not given much thought to this before, certainly her conversation with Robert has drawn her attention to it. But Robert seems more willing to accept the imperfections regardless of how much he regrets them. Perhaps it's his age and experience that enable him to accept what he cannot change.

I find the conversation about cities, architecture, art, beauty, and ugliness remarkable because it reveals something about the way humans see, reflect, and appreciate. I was especially taken by Robert's talk of nostalgia. I find the idea very mysterious. The word means to long for that which no longer exists, longing for a time that once was but is no more. What I find mysterious is that humans live in the present but carry the past with them. This was shown most clearly in what Christine tells Ruth. This longing is odd given that that the past has not been kind to either Christine or Robert. Does nostalgia overlook the bad things that occurred or are they somehow part of it? Certainly, neither of the two wishes to revisit the bad things that happened—but in their imagination they do so often. Perhaps the past speaks more clearly, yet also more mysteriously and certainly more romantically to a person than does the present. Perhaps what it says is *such is life*,

in the way that old black and white photo speaks to Robert. I am not sure. So much of reality for humans is colored by their feelings.

Situated in her new home, Christine says she is not homesick for her old home. Yet, I am not convinced, and I do not believe Christine's new home is a home at all but a place of waiting. Ours is an age of homesickness, which is a malady of the soul's longing for its true home. The philosopher Plato thought the true home of the soul was a spiritual place, and perhaps he is right. In reality, Christine longs for her childhood home, which may be more a state of mind than an actual place, but again I am not sure. It does seem that the homesickness of the modern age is unique; the question is in what way. Certainly humans have always been departing. They are very much a nomadic species. But today there is so much restlessness that homesickness is often felt as a longing for a home that one never had. The homesickness of the modern world seems to be more than just a separation from a place or a time. War separated Odysseus from his childhood home of Ithaca, where his faithful dog, wife, son, and old father awaited his return. Still, he was not without a home but only separated from it.

The homesickness of today is something else, I think... Or perhaps the experience of home has changed so that homesickness is not a longing for the home one once had but simply a longing for a home anywhere. Today, home, like so many other things in the modern world, has become streamlined, reduced to a couple with a child or two or none. In that way home is as moveable as a silver Airstream trailer. I do find it frightening that people can live without that unique heartfelt attachment to a single place and community, as if all places and communities are interchangeable. Or if one place is preferred over others it is only because it offers such advantages as a mild climate and shopping malls—as does San Diego. Still, I do not believe home can be reduced to a person living alone, though I am not sure about that either. I would think that, at the very least, home should be a place where one never feels lonely even when alone.

Even hermits have an attachment to a particular place that provides them with friends and family of the nonhuman sort. And then there are those old women who are at home with a house full of cats. Still, such people do not seem quite normal. But who is to say? "Home is where the heart is," goes the old saying, which I take to mean home is where one longs to be and one begins to suffer homesickness if away from it too long. So where would that be? It appears that we have arrived at the beginning of the discussion of nostalgia without much progression. Is home different for different people, as Robert says the pier is? I would think home is where one feels loved, safe, and happy. You will notice that the *happy* category allows a certain flexibility, which is a necessity when discussing human beings.

Returning to Christine, her nostalgia makes her appear old fashioned in spite of her being very modern in other ways —such as being an independent, self-reliant woman. As for the city, she has moved to, we shall see that it is not truly home for many of the people Christine meets there. Like her, they seem to have just ended

up there like a leaf caught in a river eddy. If home is a place where one is perfectly content, then the mysterious Ruth would have such a home, the wild, enchanted lands of her people. I recall someone having said or written that home is a place where one feels to be at the center of the world. Certainly Ruth feels that way about her homeland. Who would ever choose to leave such a place? Perhaps people do not always choose to leave but are forced to. Think of the Indian peoples who were forced to leave their lands—or die. Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden by their sin and a God who was not at the time in a forgiving mood. Christine was eventually driven from her home by evil—twice, once from the home of her childhood and then from the paradisiacal home of Ruth.

Or perhaps one simply must leave home when the world becomes larger and beckons to be explored. Humans are by nature homebodies, but also by nature very curious. And maybe one can find a new place that is the center of the world, which apparently is happening to Christine. I am getting ahead of myself. Whatever home is, it does seem essential that people have a place available to them where they feel at home in the world. In that regard, I consider myself fortunate to have such a home, which is Christine's story told through her letters. And though I often long to escape my disembodied self, I never long to be someplace else than in Christine's story. Her story provides me with all I need. I even feel that in a way I do exist at the center of the world.

The time that Christine describes in her letter was bittersweet for her. It was a crime that brought her and Ruth together. Christine had been raped by a small, smiling Mexican man who had come to her door and asked her if he might use her phone because his car had broken down. Christine looked at the dark, smiling face that looked as if it had seen many years of hard, honest work, and then let the man into her home. And when the man had determined that she was alone, he took a knife from his pocket and told Christine what he wanted to do and that if she let him do it and did not scream, he would not kill her. And she said yes because she did not want to die. So it was evil that brought Christine to Ruth, and the evil would remain with Christine all her life. It had become a black sticky substance that she could not remove from her body no matter how many times she bathed. Not even Ruth could remove the stain.

But Ruth, in her quiet way, could teach Christine to accept the evil that had entered into her body and life. Christine discovered that Ruth accepts all things equally, even those things that are evil. It is not that she cannot distinguish good from evil, but that she accepts the fact that both are as natural as odd and even numbers, that evil is not an aberration in a world that is inherently good because the world is just what it is, neither good nor evil except for thinking it so. This was the wisdom passed on to Ruth by her ancestors, who had endured ten thousand years of hardship. Christine understands that Ruth is wise but cannot accept her fatalism because even though, as you shall soon discover, Christine does not

consider herself religious, her worldview is very much the product of the Christian worldview, which believes that the creator of the world is himself perfect and when he had given the world to humans it too was perfect, a perfect garden. But then all of nature suffered a fall because of the misbehavior of the mother of humanity. Eve had allowed the serpent to convince her to act contrary to God's wishes, an act which introduced evil into a perfect world. With that one bite from the apple or whatever fruit it was the entire world quaked as if struck by a giant asteroid and was forever transformed. Eve's action was like the striking of a match that would destroy an entire pristine forest that would be replaced by thin, stunted trees growing sparsely upon eroded hillsides. Such is the devastation that sin can cause.

But you see the young half-breed and her people are part of another tradition, one which is formed by nature itself, not by a book of what the old fisherman calls wish-fulfilling tales. Intuitively, Ruth understands that good and evil are creations of human preference; thus to live is good and to die is evil. This is not to say that the concepts of good and evil are meaningless. They are not, and certainly her people understand very well the devastation that sin can bring. It is only to say that good and evil have more to do with humanity's longing for a perfect world than with the world itself. In fact, if the world could speak, and I suppose its voice would be that of nature, it would likely say that what humanity conceives as a perfect world is one that is perfect for humanity, not for all the creatures that inhabit the earth. If these other creatures could speak, they would say that the world became even less of a garden when God created humanity. Given his disappointment, God would probably agree.

Ruth's untamed, unashamed acceptance of all aspects of life has always appeared to Christine as troublesome, suggestive of evil itself, yet it manifests itself in Ruth as form of playfulness. Imagine children playing their games in a graveyard. The idea seems horrid, but is not the earth a graveyard, and do not all living creatures live their lives where billions of creatures once lived? And yet beneath Ruth's carefree manner lies an understanding and appreciation of being in the world that is more profound than even Christine's sensitive awareness of life's imperfections. It just that the way of her people is to accept life's hardships with stoical detachment because to complain, as the Biblical Job does, is ignoble. You may recall Job complains that he has been treated unfairly, and God's answer to him is that Job is ignorant, that the ways of the world lie beyond his understanding. The lesson of this for the Jew and Christian is that there is a greater good that lies beyond the apparent evil that occurs in the world. I believe the old fisherman would say that within the story the greater good is the game being played by God and Satan for their own amusement.

The wisdom of Ruth is that there is no greater good served by evil. Evil simply happens just as good does. One could argue that had Christine not been raped by the smiling little Mexican man, Ruth would never have become an integral part of her life, but usually good does not result from evil. In fact, the little Mexican man

had never planned to allow Christine to live. He hated her from the beginning, and when he was finished he had picked up the knife and was about to cut her throat when he heard the sound of laughter outside. Understanding then that he might be caught, he decided it was better to be charged with rape than with murder because he could tell the authorities that Christine, even though still a young girl, had enticed him when he asked to use the phone. So he smiled, put away the knife, tied her up, and gagged her. Later he would discover that he had done the right thing because he would serve less than five years in prison. He would go on to rape three other women before being stabbed to death one night outside a tough South Valley bar.

Over time Christine came to better understand of Ruth's view of life, even though she could never fully embrace it. What Christine valued most in Ruth was that she always accepted her without questions, and so Christine embraced her new friend whose own wildness seemed to enable her to accept evil as if it were nothing more than an eccentric who just could not live in society without causing trouble. During a conversation some years after the incident Christine told Ruth that she still thought the Mexican was evil, in an angry response to Ruth's having said something like "he's just what he is." Ruth smiled at Christine's exasperation and said, "The man is a predator, nothing more, nothing less, and the world is full of predators because they are just as natural in the scheme of things as the prey they feed upon."

Christine turned and thought for a moment. She was angry that Ruth was right. She wanted the man who raped her to be something vile and malignant.

"What he did was beastly, inhuman," she said.

"I understand that," said Ruth. "I'm just saying that beasts are not only natural but that humans themselves are beasts. The man who raped you was not inhuman but thoroughly human. And those special qualities you attribute to being human can be found in animals as well. I would even say that animals are generally better behaved than people. I have had dogs and cats and horses who loved me unconditionally and who would never harm a soul. If there is evil in the world, it's uniquely human because true evil is the enjoyment of doing harm and hurting. But if that's true, then evil is a sickness. So you were either raped by a natural beast or a sick one. You want people to be better than they are, Christine, but they are just what they are. You were unlucky. But I love you."

Christine looked into the wild girl's dark, wise eyes and her anger turned to gratitude for having Ruth in her life. She had learned much from the young half-breed who moved easily from the traditional home of her mother near the great Colorado River and the home of her reclusive white father near the Rio Grande River. She would stay with this girl and learn from her, and by doing so would be led into another world, an old world almost forgotten, yet forever present.

This problem of evil is a difficult one. It was God's greatest challenge and weakness, and it is humans' as well. I certainly can add little to the understanding of the problem of evil and nothing to its solution. I do sympathize with Christine's belief that evil is real, as real as the wind and stars, yet I am fascinated by Ruth's claim that good and evil both are more a matter of perspective than reality, like beauty and ugliness. The terms, in other words, do not describe an independent reality but only what humans like and dislike. I suppose if a gazelle suddenly achieved self-awareness it would think that lions are evil for wanting to eat it. And if the gazelle pleaded its case before humanity, it would be told that the lion is not evil because eating gazelles is what lions do. And it does seem that there is an element of human selfishness embedded in the concept of evil, in the sense that humans consider evil that which threatens what they value, but not that which threatens what other creatures value. Humans think genocide is evil, yet are morally indifferent to the destruction of entire species of plants and animals.

Perhaps the concept of evil came into being when humans decided to impose a set of rules for human behavior so that people would no longer do simply what they wanted to do but would be required to do what others wanted them to do. I believe it was the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who first explained this in detail; though two thousand years before, that ruffian sophist Thrasymachus claimed that might determines what is right. For Hobbes the natural state of affairs was something like a Darwinian free-for-all in which humans used force and cunning to take what they wanted. Then even slaughter was not evil, and all people were willing to abuse another to their own advantage if they could get away with it, but only the strongest could do so with any real hope of success and impunity. So weaker people decided to outlaw the abusive behavior that threatened them, not because they thought such behavior was evil but because they did not want to be abused, which was most likely to occur to them since they were the weaker members of society. They themselves were still quite willing to engage in abusive behavior if they thought they could get away with it. So there was no evil before rules against undesirable forms of behavior were invented by people who were weak, vulnerable, and thus fearful.

When the little Mexican man decided to rape and kill Christine, he thought neither was wrong; to the contrary, doing both would have given him pleasure. Christine thought, and still thinks, I presume, that he was evil, but she was the victim. What determines who is really correct? The moral and legal laws of the land made up by humans who do not want to be victims themselves but are willing to go against morality and break the law if they can get away with it? Who is really right—the predator or the prey—and how are we to know? *God*, you say, lays down the law for humans. Yet, where is God to be found? Is he, like evil, simply another figment of the human imagination, an invention to give authority to the rules that weak people want strong, cunning people to obey, such as "Thou shall not murder, commit adultery, or steal"? And yet most puzzling of all did he not

encourage the slaughter of non-Jewish peoples, the Canaanites, and stealing their property only because they worshiped other gods?

I believe what Hobbes said humans fear most is uncertainty, and I can understand that as humans became increasingly aware, they, unlike animals, could keep before their mind's eye all that threatened them and became neurotic with fear. Lacking imagination, animals experience fear only when actually threatened, but the human imagination kept the threats ever present. And the greatest threat was that individuals, families, and even communities would not be able to protect themselves against the human predators that constantly lurked in the darkness. It was an unruly world in which humans existed in a constant state of anxiety. Something had to be done if humans were not to go mad. Rules had to be invented. And actions that threatened one's person and property had to be demonized as aberrant forms of behavior when in reality they were as natural as rain.

Soon disease, old age and death would be added to the list of evils. And what emerged from the rules was an imagined utopia, like the Garden of Eden or Aldous Huxley's brave new world. Yet, utopia existed only in the human mind, not in reality. Certainly, humans could try to create such a place, a real-world Disneyland, but such place would be nothing more than the concretization of a human idea and ideal, no more or less real than the game of chess. Once the game was *invented*, then so was evil, which in the case of human behavior is something like cheating, not playing by the rules, but having no meaning outside the game itself.

So it seems that the world's notion of evil is derived from an ideal; what Ruth thinks about good and evil seems to come from what she has witnessed in the real world. She has largely abandoned what most of humanity considers to be the civilized world, and I wonder if that hasn't given her a more realistic perspective on the ways of the world and on such notions as good and evil. She does not hate or even repudiate evil as the majority of people do. She is simply indifferent to it. For her, it is a word without significance outside the games humans play, just as the rook or bishop is meaningless once removed from the chess board. Consequently, evil does not exist in any substantial way for her. She understands its ways as well as Christine does; but what Christine considers to be human evil, Ruth considers to be merely human foolishness, destructive foolishness, yes, but, foolishness, nonetheless.

Why foolishness rather than instinct? Ruth would say that foolishness is choosing to be less than a beast by choosing to be a beast. Why is that less than a beast? Because the beast does not have the choice not to behave beastly, and we know that Ruth believes that the behavior of beasts is usually more restrained, moderate, noble, and in the case of pets more faithfully loving than among humans. I am sure the reader is familiar with the story of the American bison that roamed the Great Plains for ten thousand years and numbered between thirty and sixty million. For millennia the American Indians used the bison as a source of food, clothing, building materials and tools. Then in less than a century the white man

slaughtered, mostly for the pleasure of doing so, the bison almost into extinction—a mere six hundred animals. These, too, would have been slaughtered had the hunters (or is *killers* the more apt word?) gained access to them.

That reminds me. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, of whom the old fisherman speaks later in the story, introduced the notion of the *übermensch* or higher man. For Ruth and Christine, or any other woman perhaps, the *übermensch* might be the overcoming the foolish man by living with the restraint usually shown by animals, ironically, by refusing to surrender himself to his animalistic impulses as men too often do. The question that comes to my phantasmal mind is what kind of men would the slaughterers of the bison be? First of all, let us take a quick look at the natural enemy of the bison, the wolf. Wolves killed bison to eat, not for the sake of killing. Once fed wolves would no longer continue to kill, and would not even if they had the endurance to do so. Does this imply that man is morally inferior to the wolf? Perhaps, if waste and cruelty are the criteria we use for judging the two creatures' behavior—and in doing so are we making a moral judgment? And what of the Indian who hunted the bison for food and other necessities of life yet like the wolf did not kill for sport? Who is the higher man? Who is the lower? Whose behavior is savage? Whose is enlightened? Are the Indians who respected the bison higher men, and those who slaughtered them lower men? Is the latter a lower animal—even lower than the wolf?

At the very least, we would say that if the white hunters were not immoral in their slaughter of the bison, they were at least foolish men—because they wasted a lot of perfectly good meat. But that was meat the Indians depended upon, so perhaps the white men were not foolish, just selfish and even cruel, a quality that seems to belong to humans alone. Could it be that as humanity evolved and became more knowledgeable, it became less wise and more foolish, which would mean that knowledge and wisdom are different species of understanding? The interesting question then is how do knowledge and wisdom differ. However, I wish to return to the earlier digression, the *übermensch*, so I will let the reader decide that question for herself. The question concerning the *übermensch* is who might this higher man be. From what I already know of Christine's story, I would say that higher men (and women) have always been present throughout human history, that they are not something new, but perhaps something very old, yet nevertheless something that remains to be achieved.

What does Nietzsche have to say about his *übermensch*, since the idea is his? I think he said too much, such as the higher woman would be the woman who dedicates herself to giving birth to little *übermenschen*. Perhaps it would be better for the reader to consider for herself the qualities of these higher people. However, what Nietzsche did say that is interesting is that *man is something which ought to be overcome*. He also said that *man shall be for the higher man—a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment*. Now a good deal of confusion occurs. Who is the laughingstock—the wolf, Indian, or the slaughterer of bison? Perhaps it is the wolf

and Indian who, like the bison, were both driven almost to extinction who are the laughingstock. But only the slaughterer of the bison, the wolf, and the Indian would be laughing. Then there is the question of who is the wiser—the wolf, Indian, or the slaughterer of bison? Once again I will let you decide, but I will say this much. It seems to me that the higher man is defined more by what he is not than by what he is. “*For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest,*” said Jesus, but any wise man would have said the same. Would that also mean the higher man is the lowest, poor in possessions but rich in contentment?

Again Jesus, “*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?*” And can a man gain much power and wealth yet lose the world—perhaps in the way that humanity has gain great power and wealth but in doing so lost the world, which once belonged to Indians because they did not seek to possess it? This is why I am not sure Nietzsche can be trusted on this point—because he despised the philosophy of the lesser man. On the other hand, he seems to associate the higher man with self-configuring man, the man or woman who transforms his or her potential into something splendid, which would mean less acting upon the world than acting upon oneself. Clearly I have gotten carried away. It really is not my place to be philosophizing. That is what the old fisherman of this story does. He addresses this matter of what kind of people should be considered to be of the higher sort. So I shall return to Ruth and let you decide for yourself who are the higher and lower people, or, if you wish, postpone any decision until you have listened to what the old fisherman has to say on the matter.

We have speculated that Ruth shows indifference toward morality, and it may be that she feels a similar indifference toward the truth, given that truth and morality are related. She certainly never pursued it for its own sake. This is not to say she repudiates truth in the way she does good and evil, though I am not sure. She has devoted much of her short life to understanding the ways of her own people, but I think if you asked her if she was looking for a truer way of life, she would say that there is no such thing, that some ways of life are more meaningful and less destructive than others, but that does not make them truer. I think she would also say that the truth really does not make much difference in the great scheme of things. I will offer an illustration in her place. Is the way of life of modern America more true than the old way of life lived by the primordial peoples of North America—the Indians? How can a way of life be true or false? Certainly, the way of life of modern America is based on more scientific information, but has that made life in modern America truer, or for that matter more meaningful and less destructive?

Apparently, I had more to say about evil than I thought and perhaps much more than a disembodied being like myself should be concerned with, which just goes to show you that there must be an important connection between evil and having a body. There does not seem to be anything that can do me harm since I am

insubstantial. Though I suppose someone could threaten to destroy all the copies of Christine's story, which would mean the end of my existence. So, is her story something like my body? Still, one day inevitably they will be destroyed along with everything else as the sun expands into a red giant, as science says it will in about five billion years. Long before then the biosphere will have been destroyed and the oceans will have evaporated, and eventually earth will become a dead planet of molten rock. The destruction of such a beautiful planet does seem evil, yet Ruth would say it is not but just the way the world works. Nature must act according to her own laws, but she and those laws are indifferent to humanity's notions of fair play. I understand why millions of humans hope to escape earth's fate by becoming like me—disembodied beings—and escaping into another story where they will live happily ever after with their creator.

Is all this really worth thinking about? Are human beings better off playing their games and not asking questions about their validity, especially if asking such questions only brings back the anxiety that the games were designed to eliminate in the first place? The old fisherman says that the purpose of human existence should be the pursuit of truth because humans are the only creatures capable of pursuing the truth, even if the truth does not turn out to be very friendly to humans. I suspect that he would also say that ignoring the truth is an unwise habit. So it seems we have those who shun the truth when it is unfriendly, and those, such as the old fisherman, who believe that truth is humanity's highest calling, and those, such as Ruth, who are indifferent to the truth because they value living more than knowing and believe in the end the truth will save no one.

Let me end this rambling commentary with a story about these two women, Ruth and Christine, though they were only teenagers at the time. They had been driving from Albuquerque to the north country and decided to stop the car to look at the mesa land that opened to the west. They walked a ways down toward the river and stopped to sit together on a big rock that overlooked the narrow band of green that wound down through the sunbaked land. Looking south, they could see a reddish-orange haze lying just above the horizon. Its source was more than a hundred miles away.

"It comes from Albuquerque," Christine said somberly.

"Yes," responded Ruth without emotion.

They both knew the source of the pollution. But only Christine was angry.

"One day all the land will be poisoned," she said, her voice filled with frustration.

"Perhaps, but their poison cannot kill the river, so let's go to the river and forget about the poison," said the dark girl smiling.

"Don't you care, Ruth?" Christine asked, more puzzled than angered by Ruth's seeming indifference.

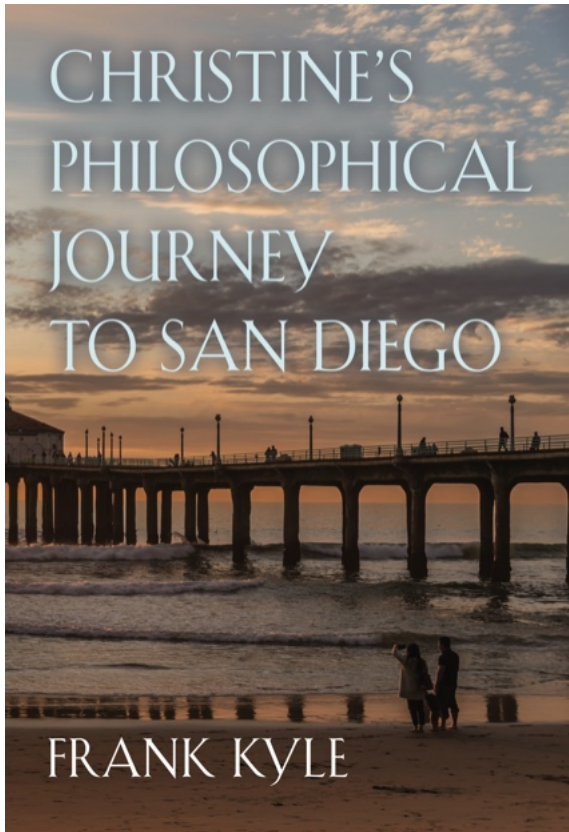
“No, there is no room in my heart for that. It is finished. Let’s go to the river and swim naked.”

“What if we drown?” Christine asked half seriously.

Ruth smiled her playful, sweet smile and said, “Then someone will have to come for the car.” The smile touched Christine’s heart because it was for her, but in Ruth’s dark eyes was something, mysterious, wise and loving, which did not belong to Christine. I think it belonged to the river that day, and on other days to the wind or mesa or the cactus or the sun or the moon. I believe Ruth is a capricious lover. How could such a person be otherwise?

I understand why some people believe that indifference is a soil that allows evil to flourish, and would even think that the indifferent person is also evil. But I do not think this is the case with Ruth’s indifference, which is more like a colorblind person’s indifference to color. Ruth may not recognize evil as a reality but she is aware of suffering. A number of times she has found an injured, sick, or starving animal and took it in and nursed it back to health. Once she even found a red tail hawk that had been shot by a rancher for no other reason than having a gun at hand. She took the hawk in and tried to save it, but the bird died. She did not consider the killer evil for killing an animal for no other reason than just to kill it. She might have thought him stupid, callous, and blind to beauties of wildlife, but she would not have considered his behavior an aberration. To the contrary, she believed that most people are stupid, callous, and blind in the way the shooter was.

Had Ruth been in the house when the little Mexican man held a knife to Christine’s throat, she would not have hesitated to try to kill him. In some mysterious way Ruth exists beyond good and evil, like the hawk perched upon the highest rock, looking keenly and indifferently upon the world below. Ruth remains as much a puzzle to me as she does to Christine, yet in a way her view of things makes a good deal of sense to me, as disturbing as it might be.



*A young woman's
philosophical Journey leads to
San Diego.*

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