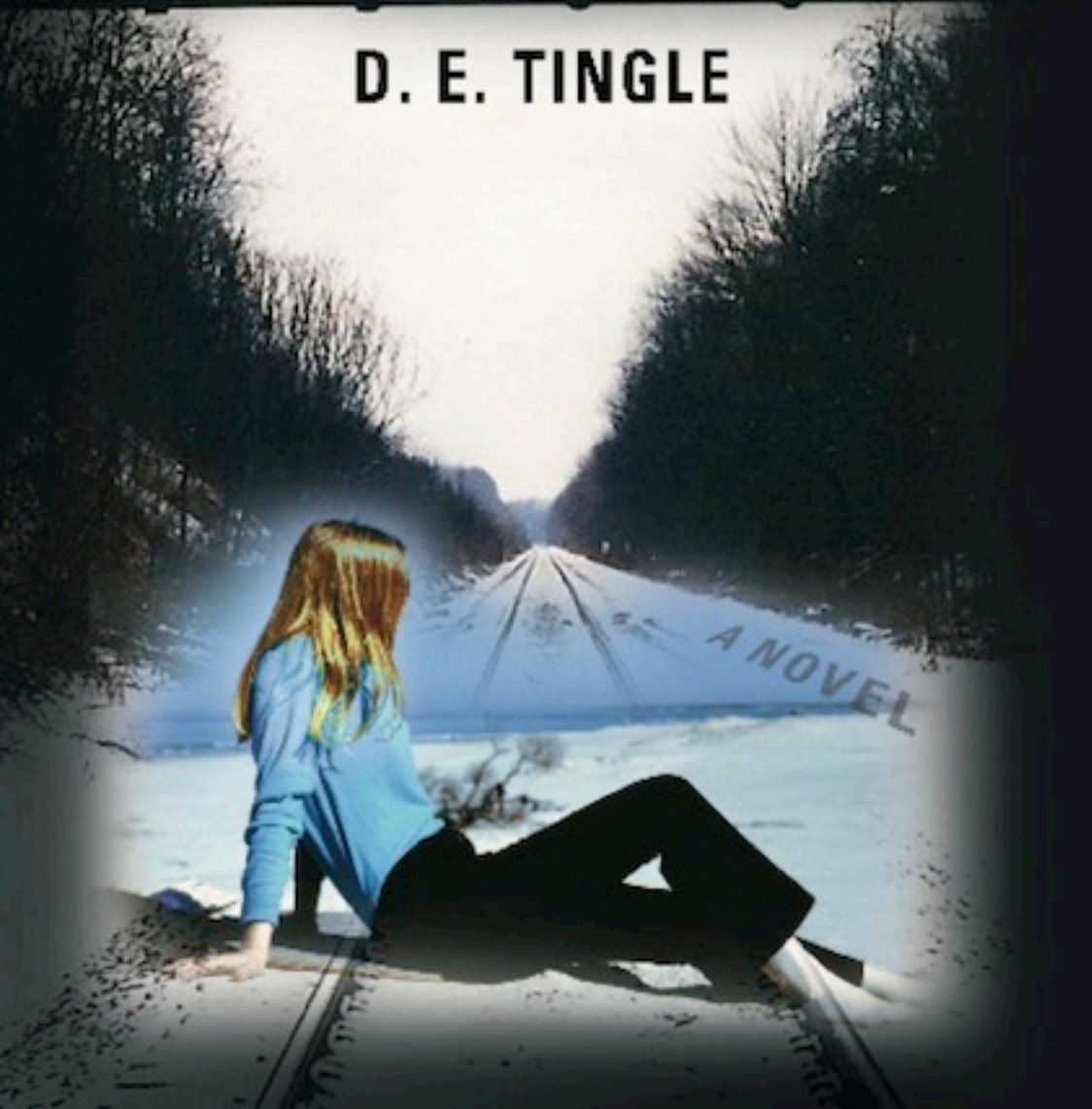
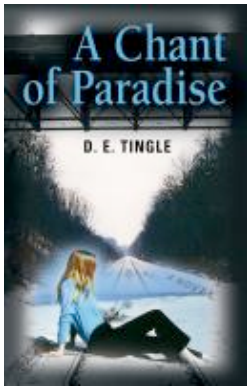


A Chant of Paradise

D. E. TINGLE





A Chant of Paradise is to male heterosexuality what Moby-Dick has been to whaling, and in similarly exalted language: a chronicle of adventure that is simultaneously a meditation on obsession and a discourse on the art, craft and traditions of its subject. Bon voyage, suckers.

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A CHANT OF PARADISE

A Novel

D. E. Tingle

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Printed in the United States of America.

The contents of this book are entirely fictitious. Anyone finding characters or events recognizable from life is either mistaken or the foil of pure coincidence.

to Edgar Sydenstricker Walsh

for every encouragement, including that of
doubting

that this book is a work of pornography

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CHAPTER ONE

FOREPLAY

How many times and in how many ways is it possible for one man to be in love? I think it depends on two things: how long the chanciness of the world lets him live, and how few preconceptions he harbors about what other people are supposed to be. When not more practically engaged, I've grown nostalgic for the history of human polygyny, even though I've seen that history as a rising curve of opportunities for bliss. I regret the centuries of odalisques and milkmaids I was born too late to meet. Yet the only middle-class sexual revolution I ever heard of struck my neighborhood when I was in my twenties and apt to scale the barricades, and Viagra was invented not six months before I found it came in handy. My name is Robert Z. Bartley, but you can call me Pollyanna.

My default mode is luxurious mooning into the eyes of a woman mooning back, mutual consumption on our minds. Probably I've spent fewer hours doing this than I think I remember, but that's the point. It's what I'd be doing right now if it were convenient, and it's what I'll be remembering when the lights go out. I noticed early that women look better the closer you get to them; and now, in the time of my presbyopia and their

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hormone replacement, it's as true as ever. Yet they're lovely at any distance.

It has come to my attention that I'm not a very interesting character. I'm as complex as you could wish, but not in a way that's calculated to engage the intellect. I don't imagine or admit that womanizing has made me shallow, or that there's nothing else on my mind. I only mean that everything I've found interesting is external to me. The women are interesting; the fact that the women are interesting is in itself interesting. Until I semi-retired at sixty-five, I drew a full-time salary in exchange for pursuing a career of no great distinction as a research physicist. Physics is interesting; the fact that we can describe the world with such certainty and in so much detail, and then marshal what we know to command the world and to learn more, is downright astounding. The fact that I did no very important science is not a reflection on my interest or my intelligence, but only on how much energy I wanted to devote to originality. It's hard to have an original thought when you're in love.

Which is *not* another way of saying they're all the same size in bed. They're emphatically not. Nor the same flavor, smell, texture, warmth, weight, color, lability, reactivity, agility or reciprocity. But sex is so totally engaging that no faculty is left idle to speculate on anything else. In a better world than this — and this one's not bad — I'd have emerged even more smug and ignorant than you find me now.

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I hope the story I'm about to tell will make the case for love over achievement, and companionship over ascendancy. Yet I was never lazy, and whenever I found myself in circumstances where it was appropriate to compete, I'd compete fiercely, and enjoy the win if I got it; but those contests were generally with men, not women. Where a woman was involved, she was the prize rather than the challenger, and some of my favorite triumphs were with women who needed to be won back from other lovers. I was glad to contest a game for a woman, but never to play tendentious games *with* women: we were allies.

As a kid, I was aware of something called the War of the Sexes, which was understood to have been under way from the time we lived in caves. Men had one set of interests and women had another, incompatible with ours. The two sexes would parley in each other's camps, but the war never ended, and the issues were never truly joined. Men were seen to be cruel, because they were physically strong and philosophically intractable, and women were seen to be querulous and evil-tempered, because they were constantly frustrated by the incongruity between men's nature and women's intentions. Nobody talks about the War of the Sexes anymore; it disappeared from popular discourse in the 1960's, replaced by Women's Liberation and the Sexual Revolution, both of which I championed.

If the War had lasted a decade longer, I could not have avoided marriage. In retrospect, it seems

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miraculous that an institution as old as civilization itself should have collapsed just in time to make bachelorhood safe and practical for me. I set out to liberate as many women as I could. I was fearless, prepared to meet and talk with the late enemy at any time and in any place, and devoted to the idea of lying down with her in peace. By the time I recognized my vocation, I'd already earned my doctorate in physics and landed a secure job in a semi-academic environment. I was smart and prolific enough to stay employed without evincing actual genius. I wrote compelling grant proposals, did the work, spent the money, duly advanced the state of human knowledge, wrote more proposals and carried on. I was enthusiastic about science, but passionate about women. I carried on accordingly.

Young, unmarried physicists in those days were expected to own sports cars, so I bought an Elva, a British-built, fiberglass-bodied device that moved quickly, handled extremely well, produced an assertive, snarly exhaust note, and had a propensity for shedding components and suffering random electrical misadventures that in a human subject might have looked like seizures due to brain damage. I had some talent as a mechanic, so I was able to replace what fell off, correcting the factory's design solecisms as I went along. The fiberglass body never threatened to rot away, so the car as a whole was fixable indefinitely. I hadn't owned it long before I realized that it had capabilities beyond those that could be exploited

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safely on the street, so I took to racing it on weekends in track events. The car was just like me: compact, competent, prepossessing without being beautiful, and with room for a guest. I still drive it.

The demands of my job, such as they were, and my more than superficial interest in the psychosexual dynamics of women, prevented me from spreading my war reparations as widely as I might have liked. I found that I couldn't do justice to — at most — more than four or five concurrent sexual partners. If I had to ignore one of them for more than a week, she'd begin to doubt her primacy in my affections, and at the same time I'd find myself missing her. I never construed women as interchangeable. Inevitably we would separate, but rarely on other than very good terms. Some of them left to get married, some to travel, some to chase careers. Occasionally they found lovers they liked better than me; I understood those occasions as reflecting the mystery and variety of human expectation: I didn't take their choices as invidious or experience them as rejection. And every departure was offset by the appearance or promotion of some other woman — utterly new, uniquely precious, a fresh terrain to be explored. I loved them all.

In the early days, the cultural backdrop for all this joy and discovery was social turmoil, distant war and spectacular technological change. It was the 1960's, and the country I was living in, the United States of America, was engaged in public enterprises that seem audacious even now. It was

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our declared purpose to eliminate, with all deliberate speed, patterns of racial discrimination far older and more honored than the Republic itself. We had committed ourselves to eradicating poverty from the national weal. Barely sixty years after the first, feeble flight of a powered aircraft, we were working to send manned vehicles to the moon. The space near the earth was filling up with implements of science and commerce. Unfortunately, the audacity of our public striving after progress was compromised by one retrograde undertaking of such monstrous stupidity that it threatened the success of all the rest: the war in Vietnam.

The dissension surrounding the war presented social opportunities that some in my generation might not otherwise have had. At the time of the first organized protests, women had not yet identified themselves as a political interest group apart from the general population, nor asserted their right to equal consideration as agitators and makers of public policy. Consequently, the men and boys organizing the protests tended to think of the women and girls as camp followers, and were inclined to use them accordingly. With their consciousness yet unraised, the women and girls seemed to expect no better, and the spirit of a rebellion led by men and abetted by women created an atmosphere of anarchy that extended to the erotic. Many undeserving people were having sex. It's unlikely that this situation could have obtained forever, but it was hilarious to see women's

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expectations rise drastically in 1964, when racist legislators tried to cripple the pending Civil Rights Act by adding anti-discrimination language that would protect women as well as racial minorities. To the chagrin of the reactionaries, the strategy backfired, the legislation passed and was signed into law, and women suddenly became as uppity as the worst Negroes. I was delighted. Women were my angels. I didn't want to see them controlled.

The right-wing fiasco over civil rights was only a mild example of the kind of pratfall our political leaders have entertained me with for as long as I can remember. Those occasions when ungoverned sentimentality has steered me into anarchism, or unregulated fits of selfishness have made me think I was a Libertarian, have always followed the spectacle of a politician or government functionary committing some inanity so monumental that it deranged me temporarily. More often I've remained independent, skeptical and bemused. I laugh a lot. Had it not been for the Vietnam War, I might have done little else than laugh. But the war, and every harebrained apology for it, made me peevish.

The fact that I was doing science for a living may have led me to demand too much rationality in other areas of human endeavor. I expected people in a position to affect my welfare to adhere to minimum standards of critical analysis, and to tell me the truth about the information they were using to make their judgments. Consequently, I suffered many disappointments in the public arena. Even so, although I was impatient with any fool I

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didn't know personally, and constitutionally pissed off about the war and the slow progress of racial integration, I was rarely less than happy. In the words of some advertising copy of the time, it's hard to be sad when you're eating ice cream.

The temptation is strong to reminisce at awkward length about the women I knew and the adventures we had. The result would be a Frank Harris-like memoir of cultural history as porno-biography, a work suitable for mining by generations of graduate students with no aptitude for mathematics. As it is, I will mention women, but only in passing toward a critique of life as I've observed other people living it. May graduate students avoid me in droves.

As fine a woman as I ever met was one I'll call Ingrid. (In this account, I've changed the name of every person still living whose privacy I could be invading. I haven't done much to disguise places and events, because I'm convinced that human community is so fragmented by work, distance and the distractions of a popular culture that's ubiquitous, noisy, supranational and flattening of passion, that nobody is likely to be aware enough of the continuity in which these events were embedded to stand any chance of tracing them. Or would care to.)

On what I was ever after to remember as a blessed day in a history of happy days, a Sunday afternoon in early March of 1967 in New England, when I was twenty-nine, I had my first glimpse of her. The temperature was only forty Fahrenheit,

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but the weak winter sun, on its slow way north, was shining bravely on a city park riverbank where I happened fortuitously to be searching for a woman. This was not one of my fishing expeditions: I knew the woman's name, coloration and approximate size, because I was being handed off to her by a different woman, whose interest in me, after six memorable months, had unaccountably flagged. I was at the river in pursuit of a rumor that this new prospect might be walking there.

The population of the park that afternoon, male or female, was sparse. In fact, scanning the ground, I could see just one person, recumbent on the pallid turf a few dozen yards away, dressed for the season but lounging. An exploratory pass revealed that this was indeed a woman, and of the proper coloration (blonde). Her eyes were shut. She was sunbathing, with little more than her head and hands exposed. "Are you Kitty Parker?" I asked. One eye (blue) opened.

"No," she said.

I walked on, browsing the area for another candidate, even though this one commended herself well enough. After a whole minute or two, but with no sense of continuity interrupted, I turned and walked back. "In that case," I said, "who are you?"

She opened both eyes (blue) and sat up. "Ingrid," she said, but it didn't sound like a name I'd heard before: the consonants were as supple as calfskin, the two syllables pitched a third apart like

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the opening bar of a piece of music that promised to be beautiful.

“I’m Bartley,” I said, and sat down opposite, without the slightest doubt about the propriety of doing so. She smiled as comfortably as if she knew me, and made some conventional response that barely registered, because I was immediately in the thrall of her voice: light, with an accent so lilting that it gave to her speech the aesthetic appeal of art song. “You’re Swedish,” I said, prepared to apologize if she turned out to be some other variety of Scandinavian, but I didn’t have to.

“Yah,” she said, “Ingrid Pettersson.” The name in its entirety fell on my ear all chimes and sibilance, like a tone announcing the appearance of visitors on an exotic threshold: *een(g)reedPETahSHONE*. “What is Bartley?”

“It’s my last name. I usually go by it. My first name is Rob. Robert.”

“Bartley,” she said. Her smile and coloring dazzled. Sometime later I realized she was beautiful, but the first impression was of her categorical dissimilarity to any woman I had known. Her skin was golden, her teeth white, her hair flaxen, her eyes cerulean — but one of them was set a little higher in her face than the other, giving her in repose a look of amused skepticism. And soon after, when we got around to standing up, I saw she had an inch on me in height.

“What are you doing in my country, sitting here on my riverbank?” I asked her. (I’ve always believed

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that women respond well to men who are on the attack.)

“I have papers,” she said, with such bright, blue-eyed, smiling *éclat* that I wanted to kiss her for relieving me of any obligation to be deferential. This is probably one of the many forms of love at first sight.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “Can I take you somewhere for a sandwich? You can show me your papers. I’d show you mine, but I really don’t have any.”

“I would eat a sandwich,” she said.

If you’d like to be vicariously, existentially happy, put yourself in my place on that snapping bright day in the madcap decade of the 1960’s. I had just met a woman whose importance to me I perceived immediately, and I knew nothing about her. Finding out would be a feast. We stood, she slightly upgrade from me on the embankment, palpable and towering. I was thrilled.

We walked a couple of blocks to a sandwich shop, a college hangout mere feet from where I had earlier parked the Elva — convenient now for spiriting her farther away, should that seem feasible. From the deli counter I bought a Reuben to split. We took a booth and surveyed each other. I don’t know what she saw. I saw that asymmetric, candid face, its gold and azure dazzle subdued only a little in the absence of sun. “So tell me,” I said.

“In Sweden I am a doctor,” she said. “What are you?”

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“In America, I’m a doctor of physics. But in my heart I could be anything. You’re a medical doctor?”

“Yah,” she said. “A physician.”

“In Sweden. And here?”

“Unlicensed. I was in Vietnam working with kids caught in the war.”

“Vietnam. We should talk about that.”

“Were you there?”

“No,” I said, intending to let her own the conversation.

“And you are a physicist. Do you at least build nuclear weapons?”

“Not that either,” I said. Absent any bone of contention, we smiled. “North Vietnam? South?”

“Both,” she said.

“And who sent you home?”

“The South. Well really, the Americans.”

“Something you said?”

She rewarded me with the very first of the long suite of musical laughs I was to hear from her in my privileged life. “It was complicated. My visa came up for renewal, and the Saigon government somehow thought I was there with the U.S., so my papers went to the American Embassy, where somebody was unhappy with what Stockholm was saying about the war, and told the Vietnamese I was a security risk. So my application from the Swedish consulate was denied. But I had met this nice American guy at the embassy, and he said I should apply for a work visa in the U.S. He said I would like it.”

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“That seems odd,” I said.

“Yah, I think so,” she said.

“So I’m guessing you’re a spy,” I said. “I’m just not sure who’s running you.”

“The best hypothesis to account for all of the evidence is that the world is a complicated place,” she said. There came again the dazzling smile. Had I been less tolerant of ambiguity, and anything but on the make, this provocation in a foreign accent, albeit Swedish and presumably benign, might have sent me on a tangent.

“ ‘The best hypothesis’,” I repeated. “We’re in agreement about how much of the truth it’s possible to know.”

“Yah?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m glad we could get that out of the way.”

She laughed, working on her half of the Reuben. “The truth is not so important to my job here. I’m the secretary for a year to a professor in economics, a Swede. I just have to type truly and answer the telephone truly.”

“That could require some craft. You shouldn’t be too modest about it.”

“But the hard work of the truth is not paid. That is trying to get people to resist the war. I try to organize.”

“On a work visa?”

“No. On my own.” She dabbed her lips and dropped the napkin in front of her. “Should we go for a walk instead of sitting here? It’s a nice day.”

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“A very nice day,” I said. “And getting better.”

Outdoors again, the moment seemed right to introduce the Elva. “Look! A sports car. The perfect conveyance for getting to prime walking territory. And it’s mine. Want to go?”

“Where?” She bent over the car and inspected the open cockpit. The top edge of the door described a line across her legs midway between knee and hip, but I didn’t doubt that she’d fit.

“How about a nature walk? Wetlands! North American flora and fauna still in their winter livery.”

“Is it far?”

“Twenty miles.”

“Okay,” she said, and without preamble she stepped over the door and dropped into the passenger seat, her hair golden again in the sun. It had been a day of continuous improvement.

We drove to a large nature preserve in the distant suburbs, walked hand in hand, talked and admired the waterfowl and the amphibians. Ingrid’s political predisposition against the war gave us common ground, and we might have talked at length and in depth about Vietnam, but we didn’t. Each of us knew instinctively what the other thought about a subject that was, in the parlance of the day, a downer. We talked instead about everything else, and as will happen under the influence of youthful vigor, native amiability and perhaps the pheromonal enticements of coming spring, we found our way to my apartment and went inside, both of us as trusting as if charming people were never psychopaths. The

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phone was ringing as we unlocked the door. I answered it forthrightly, wary of offering any hint that I might have an agenda with Ingrid capable of distorting my life's routine.

At the other end of the line was Susan.

This narrative has just begun, and already we confront a classic dilemma in the art and practice of what I'll call humane womanizing. By its nature, the humane or non-coercive form must be spontaneous, reciprocal and respectful of privacy. It cannot depend on mendacity or disregard for the psychic integrity of the subject, but it can't be transparent either. All involved must understand what's happening, but that particulars affecting the privacy of third parties are not to be revealed. A coercive womanizer in my situation would have cut the conversation short, hinting at a wrong number, or a business call that could wait until later. The advantages to the coercive womanizer would have been to obfuscate to Ingrid the existence of the second woman until he had successfully had his way with Ingrid, and to put Susan on notice that she was expendable. As a humane womanizer, I was determined to stay on the phone with Susan long enough to reassure her that I cared about her call, but not so long as to be impolite to Ingrid, and to signal to Ingrid that she could trust me not to mislead her about the generality of my relations with the opposite sex. Here was an opportunity to build confidence on two fronts.

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“Oh, Dr. Bartley,” Susan said — or rather intoned. “I’m so depressed. Will you bring me a cheeseburger?”

I took the receiver away from my ear and waved Ingrid toward the living room couch. “Sorry,” I said. “Try to make yourself comfortable. Emergency.” She smiled quizzically and sat down.

“How long can you live without a cheeseburger?” I asked Susan. “I have company.”

“Oh, Dr. Bartley. I can't live long. Our friend is treating me like shit. I love him, Dr. Bartley. I'm so bummed. Bring me a cheeseburger,” all of this delivered in tones of whiny tragedy that were self-consciously theatrical. Susan was a complex woman, and more troubled than I'd have preferred. She called me Dr. Bartley for comic effect, because, while we were co-workers and the honorific was proper on the job, in the context of our off-site relationship it was nearer slapstick. The friend reported to be treating her like shit was Lew — another co-worker, and the nearest thing I ever had to a boon companion who was not a woman. Lew and I had spotted Susan at the same time, and only weeks later did it come to our attention — because we had both been solicitous of her privacy — that both of us were having sex with her. Soon after that, it began to be apparent that Susan hungered more for Lew than she did for me, perhaps because it was the 1960's, Susan was of the Jewish middle class, and rebellious above all, and Lew was of the stamp known at the beginning of the decade as Negro, and at the end as Black.

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He referred to himself variously as a “spade cat” or a “brother”. In a society less given to urgent racial assignment, he would have been merely an urbane, charismatic, kinky-haired mechanical engineer who played an aggressive brand of company soft ball and danced far better than I did, which was not hard to do. I recognized the possibility that the reason Susan hungered more for Lew than she did for me was not that he was forbidden, but that she found him the better lover. The idea never threatened me: I know all about the unaccountability of taste.

“You're at home, I suppose?”

“Oh, Dr. Bartley.”

“All right.”

“No onions,” she said.

I hung up the phone, flopped on the couch and took Ingrid's hand in mine for the *n*th time that day, savoring a stage of intimacy dispensed with entirely by less cultivated lovers. Every physical contact with her was pleasurable. “It looks like I have to go and comfort a sick friend,” I said.

She smiled the same quizzical smile I'd seen before and said, “Oh, my.”

“This is very disappointing,” I said. “I'm flattered that you'd trust me enough to come here, and now I have to leave.”

“I'll come back,” she said.

“Wow,” I said, mustering as much solemnity as could be coupled with that interjection. We got up from the couch and I drove her home in the Elva. She lived with two other Swedish women in a flat

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near the university. I took her phone number, kissed her hands and motored off to find a cheeseburger without onions.

When I got to Susan's apartment, she was looking like hell, puffy-faced and in pajamas and a bathrobe. Either she'd been sleeping in the afternoon, or she hadn't dressed that morning, or both. She had an impish, ironic smile that never seemed to change with her mood, and she greeted me with the same *shtick* she'd used on the phone to get her cheeseburger.

"Oh, Dr. Bartley. You've come to save me."

"Maybe," I said. "What's required?"

"You have to get Mr. Graffenried to come and see me." Mr. Graffenried was Lew.

"I wish I had influence in that area," I said.

"You're his friend," she said in her stagey whine.

"Don't I know it," I replied.

At that period in my life I was both more sexual and more relaxed than at any time before or after. On account of some combination of my age and estate, the evolving social conditions, and the demographics of the city I lived in, the world had become a Garden of Eden, where fruit hung heavy on the vine and there was as yet no sin. Without a doubt, there would be a woman when I needed one. I could afford to deliver a beautiful woman unmolested to one address in order to wrangle a sandwich for a sad and sorry-looking woman at another, because I was entirely free. Susan seemed too depressed to want sex, but it was anybody's guess. I had a cheeseburger and a serving of fries

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in a paper bag, and I had my good will, my hormonal system and my generative parts tucked conveniently into my clothing, so I was certain that in one way or another I could be of service. A concerned citizen desires no more. "I brought you something to eat," I said helpfully.

"Oh, Dr. Bartley." She took the bag from me, shuffled into her small kitchen and sat at the table.

I sat opposite and watched her unbundle the food. She was fun to sleep with, but a conundrum in every other way. She expended a lot of intellectual capital maintaining a persona that was comic in its expression but tragic in its outlook. She seemed to need rescuing, but I didn't feel devoted enough to undertake a long-term project with a woman I had yet to understand. It might have been convenient to fob her off entirely onto Lew, but he was less service-oriented than I was, and socially even busier. Susan munched the burger and looked forlorn. By way of assaying the situation, I lifted my chair around to her side of the table, drew up one leg of her pajamas and, through the parting of her bathrobe, kissed the front of one thigh just above the knee. A hand on the back of my neck would have been a signal to press on, but no signal came. Rather than stop there and leave a poor artistic impression, and perhaps a hint of incomplete engagement with the things that were bothering her, I undid the first button of her pajama top and kissed the skin over her breastbone. Then I sat up and checked her signs. She was still munching and still forlorn. Absent a

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strong agenda of my own, it appeared I was not going to get laid.

“Why didn't you call Lew?” I asked her.

“Oh, Dr. Bartley, I did. He's not answering his phone.”

“Not at home,” I said.

“He never answers his phone when I'm there with him.”

“Very shrewd and understandable,” I said. I looked her over, trying to decide what kind of intervention I wanted this to be. She was not at her best, but the frumpiness didn't extend to her body, which I knew to be pale white, with pale blond embellishments at pubis and (yes) axillae, almost classically proportioned, but too narrow through the hips, and much firmer than average, which had prompted Lew to describe her once as “built for speed”. The ethical considerations seemed few and simple, although with Susan one was always working with too little information. I didn't want to take advantage of her emotional fragility, if it was real, but I did want to take advantage of her body if that were morally permissible, filled as I was with happy memories of one or two earlier encounters. The French fries seemed undersubscribed, so I nibbled a few of them while I watched Susan's spirits improving under the influence of the cheeseburger. After a few minutes I got up, brought a moistened washcloth from the bathroom and mopped the patina of care, along with the odd crumb, from her sardonic face, sat straddling her lap and kissed the mouth just vacated by the

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sandwich. Not to be waggish, there was relish on both sides. The purely natural contours of her body, loosely wrapped as it was, swelled under me, and we rolled onto the kitchen floor. I arrived there first, to absorb any small punishment occasioned by the fall. She said, "Oh, Dr. Bartley," one last time, in the same tone of comic chagrin as before, as her robe fell aside, and I pulled the top of her pajamas up and off her head.

CHAPTER TWO

OSCULATION

My man Lew was the occasion of much social engagement in those days, since he was a member of the foremost suspect class of the time, the Black male. Everything he did was newsworthy, or at least culturally significant. Women were becoming a suspect class as well, but they'd always been culturally significant to me, and I'd have been fascinated by them whether anyone else cared or not. In the offing as sociopolitical gunpowder were male homosexuals, and directly after them, mostly through strenuous self-promotion, were to come the female homosexuals. In the decade that followed, the 1970's, everybody in America capable of identifying himself, herself or — lest I seem to discriminate — itself according to some definition that excluded at least fifty-one percent of the population, perceived inequity crying out for remedy. The nation sundered, except as International Communists were from time to time detected or suspected underneath our beds, and then we reunited until the danger passed or was forgotten.

In the game of predation of and by women, Lew and I were excellent stalking horses for each other. As I was White by acclamation, just as he was Black according to the same test, my attendance in a business suit meant that Lew was a safe Negro,

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far enough evolved from his jungle origins for middle class girls to adopt as a statement. And his presence in a Nehru jacket signified that I, though male, was a human being of rare sensitivity and imagination. Women seeing us together in public places understood us as avatars of a vision that could feminize the world. Accordingly, we made hay.

It was gratifying to know, after careful examination of their relations with us, that our attitude toward women was no more exploitative than theirs toward us. Lew loved women as much as I did, and he was similarly generous to them, both materially and in bed. If he had a vice that wasn't mine, it was to watch television from bed with his lovers at a time when color was supplanting monochrome. If a new woman had a black and white TV, Lew tended to upgrade her at his own expense to the new standard — hence his sometime nickname, the Gentleman of Color. But when the new love relationship had run its course, Lew would withdraw and the new TV would stay behind as a trophy. He spent many hundreds annually in that way.

Although we traveled as a seduction unit through the emerging fleshpots of the middle class, Lew and I had very few lovers in common — or so I think. We were utterly discreet about the women we slept with, so that even now, decades later, I occasionally learn from an old girlfriend, suddenly candid, as if some statute of limitations had passed or she regarded me as too decrepit for

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resentment or umbrage, that I have shared her with Lew. Susan was the rare one whose dual devotion I knew of when it was current.

Not that Lew and I didn't talk about women. We did; it was probably our first topic, although we were bright and curious enough to talk about much else as well. We talked about women in the abstract, as a discipline worthy of study and discovery, not in the particular, as objects of exploitation whose confidence should be violated for vulgar amusement. I don't mean to suggest that because we respected women we regarded them as delicate, or that because we found them fascinating, exotic and ultimately unfathomable we regarded them as beyond the pale; on the contrary, we thought them the best, most complex, exciting, mind-expanding, heart-breaking adjuncts to sexuality on the face of the earth. We couldn't get enough of them, although we tried.

In all my life I haven't met a woman who could be exchanged for another without something being lost. The size and the poignancy of the loss will vary from woman to woman, but no woman is entirely replaceable. Some are so complex, so smart, so beautiful, and so purely sexual that they can be seen to count as more than one woman, and when you lose such a woman, you experience a deficit that can't be filled by fewer than two or three fresh attachments. In my meeting with Ingrid, I sensed that I was in the presence of such a woman — one capable of occupying several slots,

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and of crowding out or deferring other candidates for my regard.

Later in the week of the mission of mercy that had diverted me from Ingrid to Susan, I found Ingrid's number and phoned her. "We were interrupted," I said.

"Yah," she said. "Should we try again?"

"Let's. The beach? I know you like to sunbathe." It was still March and the temperature was still forty Fahrenheit, but she made no objection. "Saturday noon? I'll pick you up. If the sun's not shining we'll do something else." She said yes. "This'll be great," I said.

And the sun *was* shining. We put the top down on the Elva and drove an hour north of the city to a prime stretch of ocean beach with dunes behind and modest surf in front. Spring was just a few days away and the temperature had improved to the low fifties. We left the car in the empty public lot and climbed over the dunes. A few adventurous types, bundled against the sea breeze, were beachcombing, or treasure hunting with battery-powered metal detectors. Ingrid and I spread a blanket in the lee of a small dune and went to ground. Conditions were better in every way than I could have hoped: the sun was warm, the surf mesmeric, the seagulls graceful and picturesque. And it was here, on this beach, that Ingrid and I discovered the one activity we did better with each other than with anyone else on earth: kissing. That night, back in my apartment, when we got around to actual, full-on lovemaking, we made love well

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enough. But our kissing was Olympian, ambrosial, a voyage of constant discovery. We kissed so well and happily that making love was not enough to stop us. In my experience with other women, orgasm tended to deplete the urge to kiss, if not to hug, but Ingrid and I kissed as much after orgasm as before. Our kisses were of such weight and profundity that we could do them with our eyes open and not be distracted. Gazing into the blueness of Ingrid's eyes an inch away from mine only added to the complexity of the experience. We kissed constantly both in private and in public, sometimes causing those less blessed to honk horns and shake fists, as if we were depriving them, or stealing something from the world.

The afternoon at the beach was a long exploration of how happy Ingrid and I were going to be. There was no urgency to do anything in particular, so we watched the birds and the beachcombers and we kissed. We understood the logic of going home, where we could lie naked and enlaced, but while the sun was warm and we could feel the approach of spring, there was no hurry.

I said before that Ingrid was as good a woman as I ever met. Why, you may ask, did I not stop looking when I found her? I've also said: no one woman can fully replace any other. And I should add: I'm probably an idiot.

When Ingrid and Lew eventually met, they formed an axis of mutual admiration. Lew saw in her exactly what I saw, but he accepted that I had seen her first, and he realized quickly that she was

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monogamous by nature and inclination. If Ingrid had passed the least signal that she might be available to him, he would have acted on it. But no signal passed. For her part, Ingrid liked Lew for his humor, his friendship with me and his obvious generosity. If Lew had seen her first, no doubt I'd have ended up the admiring onlooker — not jealous, but happy to know, for what it meant about *my* prospects, that such creatures existed in the world.

I fell in love with Ingrid in the first hour we spent in bed, and never fell out. Everything I ever learned about her ravished me: her astonishing kiss, the smell of her body and breath, the temperature of her skin, the music in her voice, that Swedish accent, the color of her hair and eyes, the tone and texture of her flesh, the fact that I could barely cover her length with mine, the gumdrop resilience of her nipples between my teeth, the humid, yielding softness of her cunt, her universal kindness, her humor, her intelligence, the fact that she loved me. If we had lived together, I suppose, a reckoning might have come, some intrusion into our paradise by dire necessity. But we were to have only a few months before she went home to Sweden, with widely spaced meetings after that, on this side of the ocean or the other.

When we'd been together for only a few weeks, Ingrid acquired a friend so peculiar that in some perverse way I took him to my heart. This was Eric Patz, a sort of born-again Christian seeker, very bright, very curious, but very strange. Ingrid

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picked him up at one of her anti-war rallies. He was on the run from something. I was never able to determine what it was, even though I knew him intermittently for years, even after Ingrid had gone out of his life. At times I thought Eric was on the run from rationality itself, although he seemed to take pride in his powers of analysis. He was imposingly good-looking. In that better world I mentioned before, I'd have had his looks and he'd have had mine; then Ingrid and I could have turned heads everywhere, and Eric's terminal earnestness would have traveled in a plainer wrapper.

Eric showed up at an evening anti-war planning meeting that Ingrid and I had rolled out of bed to get to, and Ingrid introduced us. His looks impressed, but something about his affect suggested that his way was strewn with white-hot bowling balls. He watched his step, and his face in repose was glum and stolid — even a bit censorious, as if the world were not meeting his smallest expectations. When he actually engaged you, though, that stern look could dissolve into modest animation and a smile that was attractive and seemingly sincere. As I grew to know him, I became aware that the smile was entirely sincere, as was everything else about him. His sincerity was frightening and limitless. In anyone else, such sincerity would have come across as fatuous, as a degree of presumption about people and things that no amount of evidence could support. But Eric's sincerity seemed to have been won at some

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huge, unnamed expense, and to bear a continuing cost to him in moral energy. Many of his ideas struck me as inane, but the man himself did not. As a religious man and a moral philosopher, he took the same interest in the workings of the world that I did as a physicist. But he struggled with it vastly harder, as if he felt responsible for the outcome. By contrast, I was thoroughly relaxed. I wanted to know — and realized that I wouldn't live long enough to find it out — the whole truth of what the world was, but I had no vested interest in the answer. My money was on no particular horse. If the universe turned out to be flat, mirrored and fifty miles in diameter, that would be fine. It would be astonishing, but it would be acceptable, as long as the proof was elegant and the model survived the harshest scrutiny. Eric was not so easy-going.

I saw immediately that Eric was in love with Ingrid. That made two of us. My sympathy for him increased on that account, but not to the extreme that I thought he deserved any kind of intimacy with her. He was too freaky and too desperate; he'd have worn her out. Generous and loving person that she was, Ingrid treated him with full credit and respect. He hung out with us, but not enough to make himself unwelcome. If he didn't feel superfluous, it was because he was engrossed with whatever relationship he imagined he had with Ingrid, and I liked him well enough to share their bond, and to share his discomfort on those public occasions when his diffidence and his earnestness

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crossed purposes with each other and he was visibly embarrassed.

The latter happened in a church basement the very night we met, when those attending the antiwar meeting were invited to stand and offer their views. When his turn came, Eric stood and froze. I was pained enough to be wishing that one or the other of us were elsewhere, when Eric's earnestness rescued us both with an emotive blurt, remarkable for its conciseness: "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!" He sat down with a flushed face to an uncharacteristic round of applause and an encouraging kiss on the cheek from Ingrid.

Within two weeks of knowing her, I had handed the keys of the Elva to Ingrid and let her drive us around the countryside. She was a natural — less aggressive than I was, but skillful and appreciative of what the car could do. Had she been more aggressive, she'd have discovered what I had discovered years before: that the car belonged either on a racetrack or in a police impound. I had to point it out to her, but she understood immediately and was game to go racing. The first competition weekend of the spring was set for the end of April. I bought Ingrid an approved safety helmet and a pair of goggles, and we went.

In those days I practiced two different degrees of racing. In the first, when there was no more to the competition than time trials, I simply drove the car to the track, removed every component that

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was both superfluous to driving fast and easy to take off, shoe-polished my number on the doors and trunk, and competed. In the second, when a wheel-to-wheel race was planned, I stripped the car more thoroughly, fitted it with racing tires, and hauled it to the track on a trailer. This April event was a time trial.

As a novice, Ingrid was required to ride some demonstration laps with an instructor from the club organizing the event, and then to take over the wheel and prove her competence by driving a few laps with the instructor on board. I stood back and let them take my car, then climbed into the grandstands to watch. The instructor drove fast and smoothly, but hadn't the presumption to match my lap times, recognizing that the car was not his to reduce to rubble. When he traded places with Ingrid, the car went slower, but not much slower, and just as smoothly. I was encouraged and impressed. Smoothness is a prerequisite for speed. I knew she'd get faster.

I donated all of our practice time to Ingrid. Her second lap without the instructor was as fast as the instructor's laps — but of course the car was ten percent lighter without him. Some of her later laps were faster still. Immediately I wished we were in bed. To have a competent woman deign to sleep with you is a feather in your cap.

When it came to the trials, I drove the Elva in the class where it was normally assigned on the basis of its capability, but Ingrid was assigned to a catchall ladies' class, women being regarded as

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systematically slower than men, and there being too few women competing to make up vehicle classes of their own. Instead, the woman's best time was compared with that posted by the man driving the same car, and the women were then ranked in order of percentage of the man's time. I finished second in the class containing the Elva. Ingrid finished first in the ladies' class. Which certified my judgment that she was the most desirable woman at the track that day.

Later in the summer, when Eric Patz had attached himself to us, Ingrid invited him along on one of the wheel-to-wheel weekends, taking him aboard the Elva for a couple of high-speed laps during a practice session. He emerged from the experience even quieter than usual, and although I asked for his impressions, I was never able to figure out what he thought, or even whether he'd liked the ride or hated it. He was one thoroughly odd duck.

In the few months of Ingrid's stay in the States, I spent less time with Lew, and none of it trolling for women. There seemed no chance at all that Ingrid and I could outgrow our love affair before she was to return to Sweden, so I had no desire to ration my time with her. Lew and I continued to socialize, but in a threesome with Ingrid. There were two advantages for Lew: one was that Ingrid and I made him seem even more the safe Negro than my business suit had done; the other was that Ingrid's presence removed me as competition. For her part, Ingrid prized the access Lew afforded

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to a segment of American society she might not otherwise have seen. He took us to Black clubs, bars and churches, all of which thrilled Ingrid with their decidedly un-Scandinavian vitality. She loved the music. In the clubs, Lew demonstrated to her just how little I could dance.

If either of us, Ingrid or I, was inwardly conflicted with the awareness that the paradise we shared was going to end, we didn't talk about it. She was too kind for that. In retrospect, it shames me to realize that her generosity exactly complemented the intransigence that my maleness imbued me with. Testosterone trumps sentiment. There was no way, in those days, that I could cede so much as a fraction of my independence.

And so, when at the end of the summer Ingrid returned to Sweden and her medical career, I found myself adopting three women to take her place. I missed Ingrid every day, but not in the forlorn way of someone not knowing when or how he might see his beloved again. I knew I could buy an air ticket to Stockholm. I wrote letters and she wrote back. When I needed to remind myself why I was a happy man, it was Ingrid that I dwelt upon.

But I resumed humane womanizing with a ready will. In the few months of Ingrid's hegemony, I'd neglected the regular mending of fences with other women. Susan, for example, had wandered so far as to marry a Black man unknown to either Lew or me, taking Lew's color TV with her. Coincidentally, less than one week after Ingrid's departure, I found a second woman named Susan.

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For her privacy, and to distinguish her from the first Susan, whose surname began with an N, I'll call her Susan Gold. She also was Jewish, but of an entirely different flavor from the Susan who had walked. N was blonde, pale, firm-bodied and a psychological conundrum. G was a little shorter than N, had black hair, dark brown eyes, olive skin made satiny with subcutaneous fat, and a manner that was direct, to the point of alluding to the varied charms and the relative skills of her other lovers. She visited this subject with as much candor and assurance as she talked about movies she'd seen and authors she liked. By the time she got married and I lost track of her, in the horse race that was her sex life, I had placed, a neck behind a guy named Leo. Susan G was a study in compound curves, all of them exciting to look at and delectable to touch. She was also sexually athletic, reliably orgasmic, and beautiful in a soft, boneless way that would have disqualified her entirely as a fashion model. A decade after I met her, there appeared a movie actress named Barbara Bach, to whom she bore an astonishing resemblance. Susan Gold was delicious: there is no other word. The worst discomfort I experienced with her was the occasional friction burn to a knee or elbow caused by the sizing in her Marimekko bed sheets, which she seemed to replace new almost as readily as she laundered them.

The next post-Ingrid woman was a blonde as sumptuous as Ingrid herself, but far short of her in brains, charisma, humanity and — the purest gift,

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because I never earned it — love of me. This woman bore a name I never met before or since: Aurelia, and she had one attribute that's also unique in my experience: a perfect complexion, flawless from her head to her feet. The rap on Playboy magazine centerfolds was that they didn't look like real women, because an artist with an airbrush had removed every sign that they were finished in actual human skin. But the Playboy centerfolds did look like Aurelia, whose skin, by its color, seemed to have been applied from a blender filled with milk, honey and lingonberries. Over the entire surface of her head and body there was no freckle, pimple, clogged pore, scar, bruise, scrape, cut, scratch or extraneous hair. Whether she was aware of this fact before I mentioned it, I don't know. She liked to be pushed, rolled, tugged at and examined, so she let me inspect her as long as it took me to confirm that there were no flaws. This happened one afternoon when we were out for a drive and had stopped at a rugged section of seacoast, where privacy among the rocks was complete. We had taken off our clothes, it being the obvious thing to do, and the sun glimmering on her body made me curious about defects. I searched for an hour without finding one. I began to worry that the examination itself might do damage: the sun, though lowering, threatened her color balance, and we were lying on bare rock, whose uneven surface ought to have been denting Aurelia's flesh in some unsightly way, but the flesh was so resilient that it retained no marks. I tried

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biting here and there, but those marks, too, faded immediately. Aurelia rolled over and returned a bite to the nape of my neck, and at that point the examination became mutual, disorganized and somewhat frantic. Aurelia would have had no trouble finding defects on me: I was a compendium of defects; but they no more disabled me from engaging Aurelia on the rocks than her physical perfection doomed her to life on a pedestal. We accepted what we had, and we made of it everything it was possible to make.

CHAPTER THREE

ANHEDONIA

Years after the fact, I still marvel at how rich I was then in the things that were important to me but had no price. I was young, blessed with a job that paid me to ask questions I'd have been glad to ask for free, and surrounded by women who appeared to gain precisely the same benefits from me that I gained from them. Life promised to go on forever. I'd been on earth as long as I could remember, and I'd be on earth indefinitely longer, enjoying its scrumptious fruits. It was thus I made a case for a kind of immortality that didn't depend on having a soul separable from the body that housed it, this body that provided all of the soul's input, maintenance and capacity for expression. I reflected that I had come into the world with no history and no memory, and that I'd someday go out of it with no future and no repercussions. The time between was all I had and all I'd ever know. My entire experience would be the experience of life; I'd no more remember the trauma of my death than I had anticipated the trauma of my birth. That's as good as what most people mean by immortality, and far less tiring. Or so I supposed.

In Ingrid's absence I found myself dabbling in this and similar metaphysics. Like all metaphysics, it was silly stuff but selectively reassuring, and it conferred a powerful sanction in favor of ever-wider

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devotion to the yin. Susan G and Aurelia were good continuity, but not ardent enough to fill all of the time vacated by Ingrid. I took to socializing once again with Daphne Spencer-Underhill, a co-worker and former first-echelon lover of mine. Daffy and I had had a sexually torrid but affectively placid affair a year earlier that had lasted for several months, then tapered off as her fascination with me — not entirely explicable in the first place — began to wane. Daffy was drawn to men of power and wealth, either of which I had in very modest amounts. Her favorite situation was as the mistress of a man capable of flying her to assignations in five-star hotels in Paris or Rome. She was a woman of no conventional beauty at all, but glamorous beyond easy description. She dressed with flawless taste in all the proper labels, was extremely intelligent and well read in English and French, spoke in a voice that seemed confected from silver chimes, and packed a wit that could amputate limbs. At the piping peak of our sexual relationship, although her body looked like nothing better than a knackwurst fitted with the human parts required for foreplay and intercourse, she could seduce me with a smile and drain me like a succubus.

In this second, post-Ingrid round of our relationship, sex was infrequent but, if it happened, as spectacular as before. To stand any chance at all of making my way into bed with Daffy — or to inveigle her against a convenient wall, over a piece of furniture or to the floor of an intentionally-

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stalled elevator — I had to be careful not to remind her of my relatively low estate in the world. If I could manage to be funny without being modest, or zealous without seeming desperate, Daffy could be had. I never ceased to try.

Even without sex, moving in Daffy's company was worth the attendant trouble. Those friends who were not her lovers were nearly all gay men. She liked their subversive propensities and their inclination to read Marcel Proust. I felt the same way, and furthermore they flattered me with attentions that required no strenuous activity on my part. They required only that I be decorative and amiable, and provide a rationale for their continuing invasion of Daffy's privacy. After brunch one Sunday, her parting guest Anthony pecked her on the cheek and offered me some flaccid fingers, affected a tragic moue and said, "What a sad world, where you kiss the women and shake hands with the men." Such fun!

Except for an occasional round of slumming with mediums, tarot readers and the *I Ching* — and these things happened only when she was emotionally stressed by a transition among lovers — Daffy was as skeptical, impatient with hype and scornful of credulity as anyone I ever knew, man or woman. She was a mathematician by profession, and unwilling to accept an answer she didn't see supported. My favorite words to hear in her silvery voice, even if they were directed at me, were an exasperated, "Oh, *please*."

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These women — Susan G, Aurelia and Spencer-Underhill — two kinds of gold and perhaps a mine, accounted for my available time in the first few months after Ingrid went home to Sweden, although writing letters to her was another of my preferred activities. One Saturday afternoon, Susan G and I were making our way to a New York-style deli she favored, when we met Ingrid's friend Eric Patz on the street, him of the impressive look and timorous demeanor. I introduced la Gold, who was looking succulent as usual. Eric gave her an appraising glance, behind which almost anything might have been going on, and asked after Ingrid.

"We write," I said. "She's doing medicine in Stockholm. She asked about you, too. I'll tell her you said hi."

"Thank you," Eric said. "She's a beautiful woman."

"How're you doing?" My last previous news of Eric was that he had quit his job and entered seminary.

"I'm doing well," he said, and I seem to remember that he assigned to God the credit for his success. "I've discovered I have the calling to preach."

No revelation of Eric's ever truly surprised me, but this one was notable. The only time I'd seen him in front of a group of people — at the antiwar meeting where Ingrid had introduced us — he'd looked petrified, and on that occasion he was only trying to make a short statement. In close company

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he was given to introspection and long silences. The notion of Eric making a career of public speaking seemed preposterous, but I recognized that I might have seen him that first time on a bad day; and of course it's possible to be shy and insecure in company, but commanding before an audience. Some actors, reassured by pseudonymity and a script, are said to be like that. Eric was unknowable enough that anything seemed possible. "The calling to preach!" I said. "Are you going to do it?"

"Certainly," he said. "No one hearing a vocation from God could think of turning it down."

"I suppose not," I said, imagining how I'd respond if the sky opened and a Voice addressed me. "When do you start?"

"I've already begun," he said. "In a homiletics class, and once before a congregation."

"Wow!" I said. "Sounds daunting."

"No," he said. "Not daunting. When you're called, God gives you the means."

"Can I hear you sometime?" I was fascinated.

"Of course," he said. "Nothing could gratify me more. I expect to preach a couple of times this summer. I'll invite you."

"Wonderful!" I said. "I look forward to it. You still have my number?"

"Yes," he said.

We shook hands. He smiled tentatively, gave a quick nod of his head, which must have been an abbreviated bow in the direction of la Gold, and

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turned away. Susan and I walked on. "What was that about?" she wanted to know.

"You have nearly as much information as I do. A friend. More like a friend of a friend. Pretends to be cultivating a close working relationship with God."

"Which one?"

"The invasive, New Testament one."

"Oh," she said. Then she added, "Pretty fine-looking guy."

"Yeah," I said. "Interested? Feeling ripe for conversion?"

"Always feeling ripe." She was kind enough to grab my ass, which prompted me to stop, back her up against a parking meter and kiss her out of sympathy and gratitude. "Carry on," she said.

The thought of Eric's preaching beguiled me for a couple of days. I didn't foresee such an occasion as an aesthetic triumph, but I was determined to attend anyway, recalling Samuel Johnson's take on the horse that played a trumpet: not good, but impressive nonetheless. I included the news in my next letter to Ingrid, largely without comment. I couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't snide, and Ingrid's radical kindness shamed me. She must have heard my skepticism anyway, because she wrote back something to the effect that Eric might do well, that his passion was authentic, and where his faith was concerned he seemed fearless. Her remarks gave me hope that I wouldn't see Eric embarrassed.

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Several weeks passed before Eric phoned to announce the date and place of his sermon, a Sunday in June, at the same church, as I later learned, where he had once dragged Ingrid for what he hoped would be her religious edification. On the day, I left Aurelia airbrushed and asleep, put on a suit and proceeded to the Church of the Redeemer, taking in sights, sounds and smells that to me were quite exotic. The place was full of white flowers, green bunting and a low order of organ music, heavy on pedal and sparse on counterpoint. The church building was of recent vintage and didn't appear to have much money behind it. There were stained-glass windows featuring the usual Biblical cast, but the colors were plain and poor. I sat in back, hoping to spare Eric from eye contact, should my worst fears be realized. I spotted him sitting in a chair behind the pulpit, dressed in black robes, just like a real cleric, while fifteen or twenty minutes passed in invocations, prayers, hymn-singing (to which I didn't contribute) and the passing of the collection plate (to which I did). He looked calm, centered (as some of my friends had grown fond of saying) and ready to go. I believed he stood a chance.

When he stepped into the pulpit, my confidence increased. He moved with utter assurance, met every eye in the house, mine included, and began speaking in a voice of quiet, firm insistence. I sat back, prepared to enjoy myself. I ended by being amazed, and more entertained than I'd been at any public lecture in years. What he delivered was a

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jeremiad of astonishing complexity, fluency and auditory dynamics. In the process he decried virtually every phase of human sexuality of which I had personal knowledge. He wrenched Biblical passages from their context, which was the cultural mores of tribes that flourished in the deserts of Asia Minor thousands of years ago, and shaped them into rhetorical tools to rip the hearts, lungs and guts out of the audience he was holding in his thrall. He quoted Scripture that prescribed the death penalty for adulterers, and the stoning (also to death) of both partners in any adventure leading to the deflowering of a virgin by someone other than her betrothed, and recommending prophylactic self-mutilation to anyone at risk of sexual temptation through any of the senses. This last was Jesus according to St. Matthew — the thing about plucking out the right eye. My own experience suggested that a scrupulous Christian so advised would have to sacrifice every organ of the body if he hoped to feel secure: in my time I'd been seduced by every imaginable combination of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, not to mention the unprovoked activity of many glands, both ductless and otherwise. The Old Testament injunction to stone to death hapless virgin prospective brides and their seducers specified that the punishment should occur outside the city walls — a fine point perhaps having to do with the relative availability of loose rocks. If any of what Eric said had made the least practical sense beyond that poor standard, he might have terrified

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me. As it was, I almost wished I could sing along. His music was far more intricate than the organist's.

Eric's performance lasted nearly half an hour. By the end of it, many in the congregation showed signs of having taken the message seriously. Some were weeping, some appeared to be praying silently for their lives. It was a show unlike anything I'd seen. I couldn't wait to meet Eric and clap him on the back.

The organ poured forth the recessional, up-tempo but dour, and I flashed a thumbs-up at Eric as he marched past me in his vestments on his way to the church door. When the congregation began standing to leave, I dodged into the aisle and got to Eric near the front of the line. "Brilliant! Great! I loved it!" I told him. He smiled a little ruefully, I thought, and asked if I was alone. I was. He said he was sorry, although he didn't say why, and invited me to stay for lunch in the church basement. Of course I accepted. I was eager to talk with him about his sermon, and anyway it was time to eat. I moved onto the church lawn to make way for others leaving.

I watched the succession of parishioners congratulating Eric. After a couple of minutes I saw him point me out to one of them, a small, trim blonde woman in a green jacket, matching skirt and brown heels, with a green pillbox hat on her head. The woman descended the steps and walked toward me with her hand extended. "Are you Mr.

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Bartley?" she asked. "Eric says you're a friend of his."

"Rob Bartley," I corrected her. "Yes, we're friends. Who are you?" I took her very small hand and shook it.

"I'm Vera Reed," she said. "Eric is a friend of the family. My husband is one of his teachers at seminary."

"My congratulations to whoever taught him to preach," I said. "Eric's a phenomenon."

"He has the calling," she said. I looked her over. She was quite attractive, if bony, not more than five feet tall, and probably ten years older than Eric or I. Her eyes were greenish-grey, with something I can only describe as a questing look. There was no diffidence in her gaze. She stared straight at me, as if on a scavenger hunt of some urgency. Had I been more perturbable, she might have made me nervous.

"Who taught him to preach? Not your husband?"

"No, no," she said, and named a different professor. "But he brought the gift with him. He didn't need to be taught much."

"Interesting," I said.

"Have you known him long?"

"A little over a year, I guess. And not terribly well. We had a friend in common. But Eric's an interesting character. I wanted to keep track of him."

"He's more than interesting," she said. "He's important." I waited for her to elaborate, but she

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said no more, only turning her body half around to watch Eric greeting his congregants. After several seconds, she turned back to me. "Eric says we'll be having lunch together."

"Oh, good!" I said. "I'm glad you're invited. Maybe you can help interpret him to me."

"What do you mean?" The grey eyes were still probing.

"I wish I knew," I said. "He's a study. As a woman and a family friend, maybe you have the insight that provides the key."

"'As a woman'?"

"Sure. Women know how to evaluate the stuff that men don't know how to measure. It's not an invariable rule, but it gives me hope for lunch. Will your husband be joining us?"

"He's out of town, I'm afraid."

"Then we'll have to do without his input."

She nodded.

"So you've known Eric for just a few months. Or did you know him before he started seminary?"

"No. We met him last fall."

"You talk about him with a certain solemnity. Is that a clue?"

She laughed. "I suppose it is," she said.

"Here he comes." Eric had seen off the last of his flock, and he must have ducked inside the church door to doff his vestments, because he now approached us in a coat and tie. "Maybe solemnity's in order," I said. "He makes a powerful impression."

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She smiled and turned to look at Eric. "I think he's beautiful," she said.

"I don't deny it," I said.

Eric arrived looking feverish. "You've met, then?" he asked superfluously.

"We have," I replied. "And are ready to break bread." Looking no less feverish, Eric escorted us to the scene of the repast, an air-conditioned, low-ceilinged room below ground, with a buffet along one wall and two long, covered tables with folding chairs for the diners, some of whom were eating already. Evidently the saying of the blessing was being left to individuals and their affinity groups.

We filled our plates at the buffet with hearty stuff: hamburger sandwiches, baked beans, two or three kinds of potato salad. I was entirely satisfied with the selection. Eric steered us to a vacant section at one of the tables; we sat, and Eric said the blessing. It's not easy in retrospect to imagine why, but I harbored the notion that a lively conversation might ensue about the substance and merits of Eric's sermon. I had some ideas of my own that would no doubt have placed me in a minority, but I thought they were worth airing. I didn't suppose I'd be very effective in this group as an evangelist for humane womanizing, but I thought there might at least be room for a humanist counterpoint to Eric's screed in defense of chastity-no-matter-what. Consequently I was disappointed when the conversation devolved into a farrago of commonplaces about the weather, sports teams and baby care. The only idea in the

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room to engage my attention was the idea of eating, so I resorted mostly to that.

As the titular host, Eric was gracious in the midst of so much mind-numbing triviality. Although I had yet to deduce how he ordered matters in his brain, I had to suppose he was ineffably bored. Vera Reed was quiet and may have been bored as well, but she was animated enough to divide her attention equally between Eric and me, a detail that was easy to ascertain, because her grey eyes fixed on us in turn with the same intensity I'd seen on the church lawn. In the absence of anything better to think about, I considered her potential as a sex partner. She was substantially older than I, married, and a conservatively turned-out churchgoer, so the auguries were unpromising, to say the least. On the other hand, I knew from observation and experience that she was equipped with the same necessities for lovemaking as, for example, Daphne Spencer-Underhill, and on a body that evidently could not in fairness be likened to a knackwurst. The more I examined her green suit and her blond hair, the less I hewed to my original judgment of boniness, and the more I thought of her as fit, petite, and perhaps capable of clinging to my body like a crazed vervet. I even considered inviting her home with me. Such are the vagaries of the under-stimulated mind.

If I hadn't been fairly certain that Aurelia was by that time up and gone from my apartment, my native devotion to sex might have driven me out of

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the church basement without further delay, and back to her airbrushed beauty, perfect though familiar. Instead I had to soothe myself with a third helping of potato salad and a speculative inventory of Vera Reed's secret treasures.

Half an hour into the spread, guests with a smaller capacity than mine began to excuse themselves and clear the hall. With the inconsequential nattering thus reduced, I tried again to engage Eric. "You are some preacher," I said. True to a propensity I was to notice in him throughout the years of our infrequent meetings, he shuffled all praise (and logically, although he'd have denied it, all blame) to the shoulders of his deity. God made him do it. "But while you were up there," I went on, "I was thinking: how's he going to sell this, really? Everybody in this room comes from sex. Maybe they won't say it in church, but they know it. And they want and value it. And here's old Eric, trying to discourage every natural impulse, or at least putting such strictures on their exercise that sedation looks preferable."

"Well," he said. "Don't you think that responsible, moral people should regulate their impulses?"

"Sure," I said, "but they should regulate them with reference to their potential harm to themselves and to other people."

"I think that's what I was preaching," he said.

"Yeah, but you were taking on a tiny fraction of sexuality and ignoring the vast majority of human experience with it. I've almost never seen sex do

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harm. Maybe I'm just lucky, but I keep seeing it doing nothing but good. It makes people happy. Women look better after sex. It's good for skin tone.”

Eric was a little ruddy at the temples, but composed. I had no wish to make him uncomfortable, and I admired his sermon as cultural curiosity and *tour de force*, but it seemed to me that some of its implications needed answering. He glanced sidelong at Vera Reed, who was still dividing her attention between us; and because it was Eric's turn to speak, her eyes were on him. It occurred to me to wonder about the nature of their relationship. She seemed to hang upon his words as if they carried more freight than I could find in them, but the subject was sex, about which Eric perhaps knew nothing at all. I had to assume that her attitude toward him was that of a mother surrogate, delighted by his precocity and confident of his preferment. Really, no other bond seemed plausible. Evidently the time would never come when she'd be obligated to tell Eric about the birds and the bees, since he appeared determined to have no use for such information.

“It hardly seems likely that God gave us our sexuality for its cosmetic benefits,” Eric protested. “Surely something so powerful, in combination with the free will that He also gave us, is meant as a test of our fidelity to Him and a means of establishing a Godly, Christian bond between man and wife. Any other use must be a perversion.”

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“Then perverts reign,” I said. “Consider masturbation, and ask yourself how many adherents it boasts compared with Christian marriage.”

“I have no idea,” he said, “but I know which cohort God approves.”

“That's quite a claim.”

“It is written.”

“In a book that also describes the earth as flat.”

“What passage is that?”

“Help me,” I said. “Something about four angels standing at the corners of the world.”

“Yes,” he said, unperturbed. “In Revelation. ‘I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.’”

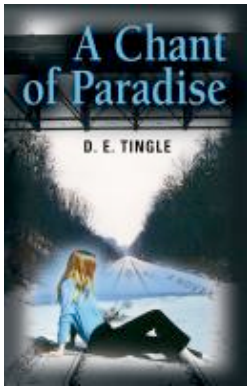
“Somewhere else it says that the four winds are north, south, east and west. So the description is of a sort of rectangular slab with its corners pointing in the cardinal directions of the compass. If that's the earth, then maybe the pattern laid out for human nature also needs work.”

“The Bible doesn't need work,” Eric said.

“And the earth is flat.”

“If that's what it says, yes.”

Good old Eric. “Okay,” I said. “You're a hard guy not to like.”



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