

Chapter Twelve

1

My next meeting with David was coming up in less than a week's time. After that, the hearing in Philadelphia lay only three weeks away.

I needed to have the bulk of my Jesus research in the bag by then, at least in general outline, so that I could approach my decision on whether to proceed with a novel. The requirements of my position with the Age of Reason Foundation would become apparent following the creationism hearing, and I could then see the scope of the work I would face on all fronts. I had a feeling that life was about to become considerably more interesting—and more demanding.

The siren call of the Gospels was beckoning, their creation of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth who was to dominate Christian belief for 1900 years. What greater irony could be found in all human experience than the likely conclusion that the most influential man in history had in fact been a creation of the human mind?

Yet before I could cast my light on how this came about, I needed to draw out of the shadows the figure of his predecessor, the spiritual Son who had existed and acted within another creation of the human mind: the heavenly world that was perceived to lie beyond the world of the senses, where the mythical activity of all gods and goddesses took place. As Fisher had put it, the haunted dreams of the human brain had split the universe into many parts, and at the same time had divided man from himself.

The other siren call which some part of me seemed to be hearing, and which the rest of me, like Ulysses, had chained itself to resist, presented a dilemma. Could I solve the obscurities and esoteric features of this end of my research without consulting Sylvia again? That strange phone call the evening of the storm still unsettled me, not the least because it had been so enigmatic. Somehow she was reaching out to me and I was resisting the urge to respond. But what lay behind that mutual pull was still a mystery, and any overture toward her again, even if made in the context of my research, could not fail to involve something deeper. I did not sense—in myself, at least—that the motivation was a romantic one, though the incident at her office certainly showed that sexual impulses could slip into the mix. I was torn between understandable guilt in regard to my relationship with Shauna, and a different feeling of guilt, as yet indefinable, if I persisted in shutting Sylvia out from whatever she was seeking from me. That phone call was now some three weeks past. There had been no further contact between us. Yet the whole affair, maddeningly unresolved, still hovered over me and unsettled my insides. Sooner or later I was going to have to deal with it.

For now, I would survey the current subject as best I could and take things from there.

It was back to the Muratorian Project for me. For the next two days I lived within its teeming Topics Index, coming up for air to compare my findings with some of the more obscure Jewish and Christian documents outside the New Testament which I had collected from other sources. Another visit to the university Library—with no side trips to any professorial offices—netted me an assortment of books on ancient philosophy and religion. To some extent I was groping, if not in the dark, then in a twilight of inadequate understanding, in my quest to lay bare the spiritual Christ of the earliest Christians.

The layered universe my own culture had so recently inhabited had its roots in the ancient conviction that reality was dispersed through layers of matter and spirit, of which the material earth people walked on was only one tier, the basest one.

In the highest of those layers, one of pure spirit, dwelled the ultimate God: Plato's Absolute Being, the Jews' God the Father, Philo's One. Increasingly, he was being looked upon as transcendent, unknowable, inaccessible. Below that lofty realm lay descending layers of heaven, increasingly less pure. In some systems, there were seven of these spheres in all, each governed by one of the heavenly bodies or planets, themselves regarded as divine beings.

For the Jews especially, different ranks of angels dwelled in these spheres, and below them, within the layer of air underneath the moon—called 'the firmament'—lay the abode of the demon spirits. This was the lowest level of the spiritual world, one which had more in common with the world of matter it rested on than with God's highest sphere. Satan was its ruler. From his domain the demons harassed the earth itself and the men and women who lived upon it.

Through these multiple layers of the spirit world, contact between earth and God was impossible. Pure spirit could not touch base matter. To bridge the gap, a spiritual intermediary, a subordinate divinity, was required.

That intermediary had taken many forms. It had been embodied in different concepts, from the impersonal Logos, to personified Wisdom, to the idea of the Son. All of these concepts had varying mythologies attached to them. For the earliest Christians, Christ the Son was lord of the spiritual realm. By virtue of his death, he had placed all the forces below the sphere of God, good and evil, under his rule and subjection. Such ideas were expressed most clearly in Colossians and Ephesians.

In formulating my notes, I had been forced to generalize and dovetail different systems and implications in the frustratingly sparse record of ancient world mythical thought. Some Jewish documents suggested a more streamlined three-tiered universe; the strictly Platonic systems reduced it to two overall divisions. The Gnostics, with their strange and elusive blend of ideas Jewish and Hellenistic, had a riotously sectioned universe, with a multitude of parts of the Godhead; and Gnosticism itself was split into countless sects, each with its own twist on things.

Platonists envisioned a pronounced distinction between their upper and lower realities, their worlds of spirit and flesh, while Jewish apocalyptic views saw things as more blended and graded. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12, could speak of being caught up in a vision and revelation granted by the Lord 'as far as the third heaven.' But about his tiers of the spiritual world and their nature he was not more specific.

Another important trend of thought lay in the idea that within the upper layers of heaven resided spiritual equivalents of earthly things. These were heavenly counterparts to the material manifestations below. Above lay Plato's ideal forms. There too lay a heavenly Jerusalem, a heavenly Temple; both figured in the Platonic-style comparisons found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. War between human armies on earth was an extension of celestial battles between ranks of Satan's demons: so said the Ascension of Isaiah and others. The demons had their own political organizations in their sub-lunar realm, just as governments did on earth. All earthly 'copies' of higher realities enjoyed their existence and their operation by virtue of their heavenly counterparts, which were primary and superior.

Within this category of thought I had begun to form an impression which, as it turned out, would be an essential element of my view of the earliest Jewish faith in a spiritual Christ. For now, I simply called it the 'paradigm' feature.

One aspect of the overall relationship between heaven and earth was the idea that heavenly figures, divine or angelic, could serve as counterparts to humans. Perhaps the earliest version of this was the idea of the angelic champion. The archangel Michael was regarded as the guiding angel of Israel, and some documents, such as the 'Christian' Shepherd of Hermas, even looked upon him as a savior figure. Each Christian community, as shown by Revelation's letters from Christ to the congregations of Asia Minor, had its own angelic overseer, while evil nations had evil angels as their champions.

The most famous 'paradigmatic' champion in biblical literature was the 'one like a son of man' in Daniel's vision of the End-time. This figure, who in the writer's mind may have been an angel, represented the righteous elect of the Jews. When he received 'sovereignty and glory and kingly power' from God, it symbolized that his earthly counterparts were themselves destined to inherit this sovereignty and glory, and rule forever over the nations of the earth in God's coming kingdom. Daniel's 'Son of Man' would saturate much sectarian thinking in the latter part of the first century, including the Gospels.

In one section of the apocalyptic document known as 1 Enoch, written by some Jewish Enochian sect probably in the mid first century, the Messiah and Son of Man who waited in heaven for the day of judgement was the champion and paradigm of his elect believers on earth. Their righteousness was reflected in him, as the ultimate Righteous One. He himself was also called the Elect One. His glory would be translated into their glory.

I was beginning to see that this sharing of characteristics and experiences between the heavenly paradigm and his earthly counterparts was the key to understanding the earliest conception of the spiritual Son as a savior figure. Similar to the language of the Greek mysteries, the Christian believer assimilated him or herself to the divine figure of Christ. Paul spoke of being united to Christ in his death and resurrection. What Christ himself had experienced, his earthly counterparts had also known and would also achieve. Thus Christ, in a mythical setting, had undergone humiliation, suffering and death, as the righteous Jews had for centuries. But he had also been exalted to heaven, and this guaranteed that they too would be exalted. The two counterparts moved in lockstep in a pattern of likeness.

As Paul put it in Romans 6:5: 'For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.'

As I had noted in conversation with Sylvia, such ideas had grown out of more ancient views about a primordial past, found in primitive mythology around the world: that present society, through rites and sacraments, tapped into and received the benefits from the gods' original acts which had been performed during the sacred time at the beginning of things. In the period of early Christianity such mythological views had assumed a more Platonic cast, moving from a distant primordial past into God's higher, timeless reality.

These philosophic principles were a fundamental expression of mystical religions in the ancient world. Here was the common factor which linked Christianity with the mystery cults and made the two systems branches of the same tree. While the former had its own distinctive Jewish character, both were respective cultural expressions of a common and widespread religious phenomenon of the age. For these ideas we had no counterpart today, except in the surviving roots of Christian belief.

By the third day, my mind was undergoing a swing between exhaustion and intoxication. I fell into a pattern of catnaps followed by fresh plunges into my new esoteric world.

I needed to flesh out, so to speak, the actual mythical act which the spiritual Christ had undergone as the heavenly paradigm of the cultic Christians. Somehow, at some time, he had been crucified in the spiritual world, hung on its equivalent of a tree. Scripture had told of this fact, with its perceived messianic references to piercing and nailing. In that mythical realm he had been ‘of David’s seed’. Like the god Dionysos, he had been ‘born of woman’.

There was little doubt in my mind that this latter feature of the spiritual Christ, voiced by Paul in Galatians 4:4, had been based on Isaiah 7:14, a verse which was to have an immense effect on Christian doctrine. There it said that ‘a young woman—or virgin—is with child and will bear a son...’ Isaiah had meant nothing more than that before this unspecified child, one living in his own present, was to grow up, certain contemporary events would take place. Everything lay entirely in his own historical period. Later interpreters, however, were to turn Isaiah on his head and make him a prophet of the far future, presaging not only the advent of the Messiah himself but his virgin birth. Before that, cultists like Paul would read passages such as this and view them as a window onto the nature of the mythical Christ, one who in some way could be a descendant of David and born under the Law. Hebrews, too, had concluded from a reading of scripture that ‘out of Judah has sprung the Lord of us,’ though it mentioned no woman. But then, every savior god and goddess of the day had its national lineage.

The phrase in Galatians 4:4, that ‘God sent his son...’, might have been describing Jesus’ incarnation, and had always been taken as such. But a closer look showed that this was not the case. Verse 6 specified that it was the ‘*spirit*’ of his Son which God had sent; and it was God alone, not Jesus, whom Paul pointed to as the active agent in redeeming and making the believer an ‘heir’. Thus, Jesus ‘born of woman, born under the Law’ could still be located in a mythical context.

In fact, this idea of ‘sending’, or ‘coming’, was a common expression in the epistles. A fresh analysis of the texts was suggesting that it meant only that the present was a time of revelation of Christ by God, the Son’s spirit coming into the world.

I knew that one type of phrase above all needed explaining within the context of myth. This phrase involved the word ‘flesh’. Paul and others frequently used the term *kata sarka*, according to the flesh. But what exactly did these cryptic words mean?

I had encountered C.K.Barrett’s rendering of the phrases *kata sarka* and *kata pneuma* in Romans 1 as ‘in the sphere of the flesh’ and ‘in the sphere of the spirit’. This at least gave such terms something of a concrete image, though still uncertain. What they suggested was a Platonic-type contrast between a lower, earthly world of matter and its environs, and the higher world of pure spirit where God’s heaven was located. Jesus had operated in both spheres.

En sarki, in flesh, was another of these stereotyped phrases. The hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 declared Christ ‘manifested in flesh’ (and, incidentally, seen only by angels). 1 Peter told of Christ being put to death ‘in flesh’. Colossians spoke of Christ’s death ‘in the body of his flesh’, while a couple of passages in other epistles referred to the ‘blood’ of his sacrifice.

The first premise I adopted for myself was that if Platonic philosophy said that the higher world possessed ideal prototypes of earthly copies, and if the layered universe concept prevalent in Jewish thought saw earthly things as possessing counterparts in the spirit layers of heaven, then there should be no prohibition against seeing all these human-like features given to Christ as elements of his nature as a heavenly being, in his role as a paradigmatic counterpart. They did not have to refer to human and material elements of flesh, blood or body. They did not require a life on earth.

With one qualification. Nothing resembling matter could exist in God's highest abode, the level of pure spirit. Neither could the experience of suffering and death take place in that holiest realm, certainly not by a divinity. Thus the usage of such terms spoke of their temporary nature. Christ the Son had assumed these features in order to perform his redemptive acts. They were a deliberate putting on of the garments of spiritual flesh.

It also meant that the savior deity, whether Christ or the various mystery gods who had performed their own redemptive acts, had to have descended to a lower sphere where such things were possible. Where human-like features and the very human experience of suffering could be taken on. This fitted the concept of the layered universe, which descended through ever degenerating levels of the spirit world until one reached the demon infested sub-lunar level just above the earth.

And in fact, this motif of descent ran riot throughout Jewish, Christian and pagan writings. I came across it at every turn. The christological hymns were built on the descent-ascend pattern. Pagan mythology contained echoes of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer. The emperor Julian, writing in the 4th century, described Attis' descent to the lowest spirit level prior to matter. Jewish and Gnostic documents spoke of the Son descending through the layers of heaven. All viewed this as a 'humbling' action on the part of the deity, an obedience to the wishes of the highest God.

Other pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The writer of Hebrews, in 10:5, presented verses from Psalm 40 (in the Septuagint wording) as the voice of Christ speaking:

'At his coming into the world, Christ says this to God:
"Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired,
but thou hast prepared a body for me...
I have come, O God, to do thy will..."'

The present tense of the writer's verb—'says'—pointed to his view that Christ resided in the sacred writings, in the 'timeless present of the scriptural record,' as one scholar had put it. This was not a reference to any historical past or moment of incarnation. The writer of Hebrews gave us no such thing. For him, Christ lived and worked in the timeless present of the mythical realm to which scripture, as in Psalm 40, provided a window. Within that realm, so the Psalm revealed, Christ had 'come into the world' and taken on a 'body', for the purpose of serving as a sacrifice which would supplant once and for all the traditional animal sacrifices of the Temple cult. Such concepts, then, could exist within the spiritual realm. The entire epistle focused on Christ's sacrifice in heaven, and one verse, 8:4, all but spelled it out that he had never been on earth.

Another puzzle piece was also a frequently recurring motif. Christ took on only the 'likeness' of a man. Not—the implication seemed to be—the full, actual nature of a human

being. The hymn in Philippians, which most scholars regarded as earlier than Paul, spoke quite emphatically and repetitively of this limited transformation:

‘...he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
becoming in the likeness of men,
in appearance being found as a man...’

Hebrews 2:14 had Christ sharing men’s blood and flesh in a manner ‘near to’ or ‘similar’ to theirs. I found an even more illuminating example of this, along with other illustrations of the whole question, in the Ascension of Isaiah. Once again, its mythic tale told of Christ descending for sacrifice to the lower spirit realms where forms and experiences were close to those of earth itself, resembling the very nature of humanity’s own. This document was destined to provide a host of key insights.

The final piece of the puzzle was the clincher. Still pursuing the word ‘flesh’, I looked up *sarx* in the definitive Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. In this exhaustive essay I learned that angels could take on the trappings of humanity, that the demonic spirit powers belonged to the realm of *sarx*, of flesh. It thus appeared that any god descending from the highest heaven to undergo suffering and sacrifice as a redeeming act on behalf of humanity, to take on the spiritual equivalent of ‘flesh’ and shed his ‘blood’, need come no further than those lower celestial spheres, to be crucified by the demon spirits who lived there and controlled them.

Such blood and flesh were close enough to the real thing that Christ had genuinely suffered. Such sacrificed blood was sufficient to provide the necessary salvific force for God’s redemptive purposes. This, then, seemed to be the meaning of the term ‘flesh’ as used by the earliest Christian writers. Such things had formed the great mystery unveiled to Paul in God’s ‘revelation’ of the secret of Christ.

Crucifixion by the demon spirits. A preposterous idea? To the 20th century mind, perhaps. From the point of view of ancient mythology, it would hardly have raised an eyebrow. In any case, I realized, Paul himself had informed us that this was precisely what had happened. From my earlier research, I knew most scholars accepted that this idea lay behind Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:8, that the ‘rulers of this age’, the demon spirits who lived in the firmament and governed the world’s present sorry fate, had unwittingly ‘crucified the Lord of glory.’ This was a deed which would lead to their own divinely planned destruction. A swirl of debate and interpretation surrounded this passage. It was so crucial to my conclusions that I knew I would have to investigate it in depth.

And that, I finally realized with my conscious mind, would necessitate a visit to Sylvia. That, and the one passage I had located in the New Testament epistles which seemed to contain a direct reference to the timeless moment, the time beyond time, when Christ’s redeeming act had taken place. I needed a mind more adept at ancient Greek than my own to confirm it.

The story of the self-sacrificing deity, God’s own son, who had descended from the upper reaches of heaven to take on ‘flesh’ and be crucified in the world of myth, was complete and fully integrated in the thinking of the earliest phase of Christianity. The story could be found in the non-Gospel documents of the movement’s first century, alongside a universal void

regarding anything to do with an historical Jesus. Some of it, I was to learn, lay in the earliest roots of the Gospel of John. And its details had been garnered from scripture.

The whole atmosphere of the Christian story fitted the same conceptual world as that of the mystery cults with their myths. The Greeks, too, could spin tales about their deities, born in caves, slain by other divinities, sleeping and dining and speaking, and none of it was regarded as taking place in history or on earth itself. In fact, the more sophisticated pagan philosophers, such as Plutarch and the fourth century Sallustius, viewed the cultic myths as allegories representing eternal cosmic processes in a timeless higher reality, not isolated events, although I considered it doubtful that the average devotees of the mysteries could view things quite so esoterically. Even to them, however, the bull dispatched by Mithras was not historical; the blood it spilled which vitalized the earth was metaphysical and mythical. No one ever searched the soil of Asia Minor hoping to unearth the genitals severed from the Great Mother's consort Attis.

To which, it suddenly struck me, one could find an exact parallel in Paul and first century Christianity: the utter disinterest everyone showed in the places and relics of Jesus' own activities.

3

It was Wednesday morning, two days before my meeting with David and the others. After a refreshing night's sleep there seemed little point in putting off the inevitable. I called the University and was connected to Sylvia's office. The voice which came on the line was a recorded one.

"I am not in the office for regular hours during the month of June. If you wish, you may leave a message, or if the matter is urgent you may call me at home. My number is..."

I grabbed a pencil and jotted down the number. It seemed a little odd that a single woman would so readily provide her home telephone number to anyone who might call her office, but perhaps it was part of Sylvia's quirky nature. On the other hand, it did occur to me that after our last conversation over the phone, and knowing that she would be largely unavailable at her office for some time, she might have indulged in this quirk for my own benefit, in the off chance that I would try to contact her.

And just what kind of fantasy was *I* indulging in?

Now that the moment had arrived, I procrastinated. For the next few hours I busied myself with straightening up the house. Since Shauna's last visit on Saturday I had let the mundane requirements of living slide, and the place was a bit of a mess. Dishes needed washing and beds needed making, and it was amazing how all available spaces on the horizontal plane could attract sundry filler materials. Then I needed to tidy up my own planes.

It was late afternoon when I called Sylvia's home number. I had no idea where her residence was located, though the telephone exchange indicated somewhere in the opposite end of the city. After two rings, she answered.

"This is Sylvia Lawrence."

This rather direct way of answering the phone took me aback and I all but lost the poise I had so carefully prepared. "Oh—yes, Sylvia, it's you....This is Kevin Quinter. I hope I haven't caught you in the middle of preparing supper."

There was just the faintest catch in her voice. “No. No, I eat rather irregularly. Just when I feel like it. It’s probably a bad habit, I guess. No, you haven’t disturbed me.”

“Are you still marking exam papers—grading essays on Thucydides, perhaps?”

The reference to our initial conversation at her office seemed to settle her. “Oh, those are all done. There weren’t many original ideas on any of the ancient historians, much to my disappointment.” Her laugh was a little nervous. “I’m sure you could outshine all of them—my students, I mean.”

“Well, I’ve had years of practical experience, you know. And when you’re studying history to make money, it’s a marvellous incentive.”

“I must read one of your novels. Perhaps this summer. Yes, I will definitely do that.”

“Actually, Sylvia, I would settle for a little more help on the one I’m working on now. I’ve come up against a way of looking at Jesus which involves some ancient mythical ideas, and I’m afraid my inadequate knowledge of things is a bit of a hindrance. I was wondering if you might have a little time to give me some advice.”

“Oh, I’d be delighted.” She seemed genuinely thrilled. “I’m not very busy these days. Would you like me to come over—or, I mean, perhaps you need to have your books and things handy...” Her precipitate offer had flustered her.

It had also taken myself by surprise. There was no way I could feel comfortable having Sylvia at my house, given Shauna’s recent penchant for unannounced visits. “Oh—no, there’s nothing here I really need. Perhaps your own reference books would be more helpful, in fact. We could meet at your office, if that’s convenient for you.”

There was a brief pause, and only later did I come to an assumption as to what mental calculations might have been going on during it. When she spoke, Sylvia’s voice was quite calm. “Oh, my office is so stuffy at this time of year. No air conditioning, you know. I have very good reference books at home. Perhaps I could extend an invitation to visit me here. It would be much more comfortable.”

“I suppose that would...sound nice—be nice. I don’t want to put you to any trouble.” I had the feeling that, wisely or not, I had just cast some dice, only I couldn’t see what numbers had come up.

“It won’t be any trouble at all. It’ll be exciting to be in on the creative process, watch a new book taking shape.”

I laughed. “Well, it’s still in a germinal stage. I haven’t yet written a single word of this book. But I must confess the research is proving rather stimulating. Lots of surprises.”

“Would you like to come tonight? I’m sure I’ll be hungry again by then and I could prepare a nice snack.” Her voice was still calm and controlled. It was my own that was sounding a little agitated.

“Oh, it doesn’t need to be that urgent.” On the other hand, there was no reason to delay things. “But—I could, actually. What else is a Wednesday night for?” I had no idea what I meant by that.

“Good.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “Will you be bringing Jesus with you?”

I was not sure how to interpret her note of humor. The remark was odd. “Oh, he’ll be along for the ride, that’s for sure. I’m not certain if we’ll be able to get him to say anything. In fact, if you can draw him out, it would be very helpful.”

“I’ll do my best. How about eight o’clock, then?” She gave me her address.

Over the next three hours I showered, shaved, and spent some time deciding how to look casual. I also seemed to spend a considerable amount of energy trying not to think about what I might be getting myself into.

Sylvia's place did indeed lie on the other side of the city, an older section than my own. Her street was tree-lined, old enough to have a quaint air, but not quite old enough to be run down. She lived on the upper floor of a duplex. The building had been handsome in its heyday, though now it showed signs of age. She had her own side entrance.

She came down to the door to answer my ring. She, too, was casually dressed and her manner was relaxed. I had brought two books along. She insisted on taking them from me as we went up the stairs to her apartment.

She tapped on the top one. "I don't have this myself. It's pretty specialized."

"The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha? It's a Library copy. And that's only volume two."

"Your research is taking you into esoteric corners, I see."

"No stone unturned, as they say."

She showed me inside. Her apartment was spacious, heavy with adornments and much furniture. Like her office, lines were strong and everything was colorful, but there was a noticeable lack of unity to it all. I could see that no interior designer had been responsible for this decor.

She set the books down on a long coffee table in the main room. It already bore several books of her own, along with a few cups and plates and related paraphernalia, as yet empty. Flanking the table on two sides stood a heavy two-piece chesterfield set arranged at a right angle. It was rust colored and somewhat ruffled.

"I brought out a few books I thought you might need. Most of them I keep in one of the bedrooms—really a study. That's where I do most of my work for class. Can I get you something to drink? I have some white wine."

I hesitated. "Oh. Well, only half a glass. I don't want to drug the old brain cells. Might forget the difference between a genitive and an accusative."

At rest, Sylvia's face was not overly pretty. There were too many odd angles. But her smile seemed to rearrange these, and the effect was definitely pleasing. It gave her a brightness one wanted to get close to. She was wearing a light pullover sweater, suitable for an early June evening and loose enough to soften the outlines of her body. With a roomy knee-length skirt it made her look...comfortable.

"I'll remember one and you can remember the other. Then we can put the two together."

She disappeared into the kitchen and emerged a moment later with two glasses and a wine bottle. I noticed that she had not taken the liberty of placing them on the table before my arrival.

"What's your preference," she asked, as I took a glass and she poured until it was a little more than half full, "genitives or accusatives?"

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid my mastery of Greek leaves a lot to be desired. It's only recently I took it up again after too many years away from it. Then again—" I gave my head a little toss— "maybe not that many years."

She filled her own glass to a higher level. "I envy the subtleties of an inflected language like Greek. Give a noun a different case ending and you've got a slightly different meaning. Or maybe a lot different. Then again, the preposition you use will have its own effect."

I agreed that prepositions could certainly be intriguing.

Sylvia moved around the table and sat herself on the long section of the couch, flanking the wall. She curled one leg up underneath her. Despite the general awkwardness which always seemed to accompany her, it was a sensual motion.

“Why don’t you sit down?”

Instead of making a gesture, the hand holding the glass brought it to her lips. I could have followed her and sat on the same part of the couch, but I knew this would have seemed too forward. I did the more natural thing and sat on the short section which jutted out into one end of the room. This put me facing her at an angle.

I took a sip of the wine. It was a little too sweet for my taste. “I find it fascinating that sometimes the whole interpretation of a passage can depend on what case or what tense is being used. So many of the New Testament epistles are really quite informal pieces of writing. Most of them are only letters, after all. Nobody thought of crafting these things for the ages, let alone for holy scripture. Some sentences can even verge on the unintelligible. Yet a whole doctrine may hinge on such a sentence.”

“Isn’t that what makes life interesting?”

It was my turn for an involuntary smile. Sylvia had hit a nail heavy with irony squarely on its head. The entire contemporary witness to earliest Christianity lay in a handful of posted letters, some dictated, no doubt, on the spur of the moment and with a lot left unsaid. Those casual words had been studied, dissected, interpreted over the centuries, forced into meanings they never had, enshrined as inspired messages from a deity. Now they were coming under the scrutiny of more rational inquiry, and things like genitives and accusatives were tipping 2000 year dogmas into the dust. Such ambiguities had more than made the life of the last two millennia interesting, they had created its very fabric. Their fresh understanding in the new atmosphere of the late 20th century was already promising to make my own and many other lives equally interesting—in ways not all would welcome.

“Sylvia, you couldn’t be more right.”

But her comment had conveyed a certain naivete, and I wondered once again what reaction she would have at the prospect of Jesus of Nazareth’s evaporation into the mists of ancient mythology. I had debated on the way over whether I would reveal the full extent of my conclusions to her, or simply work around them. I had no idea about this woman’s background, although her involvement with the Age of Reason Foundation surely attested to the present mind of a non-believer. But human sensibilities were a funny thing. I had decided to play it safe. Besides, there was a personal consideration. I didn’t want to risk giving her the initial impression that I was some kind of crackpot. If nothing else, I would reveal my hand judiciously.

She looked at me in expectation. “So why don’t you tell me what advice you need. You have me very intrigued.”

I took a deep breath. “OK. I see you have a Greek-English New Testament there all waiting. Why don’t you open it to Paul’s letter, 2 Timothy. Actually, it’s not by Paul, just some early second century writer pretending to be him.”

She set her wine glass down and reached for the book. “It’s been years since I had occasion to read many of these things. Every once in a while I look up something in the Gospels, just for my own interest.” She smiled at me a little self-consciously. “Not that I’m still a believer, of course. That was a while ago. But I guess some of the things Jesus said can still speak to people, whether they believe he was the Son of God or not.”

“Perhaps so,” I said noncommittally. “He could certainly be regarded as a great ethical teacher. What sort of things did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Telling us to love one another was hardly original to him, I suppose. But I think he was the first to say ‘turn the other cheek’, that sort of thing. Nobody had ever laid such a great emphasis on forgiveness. That’s very important, wouldn’t you say?”

Sylvia’s voice had become softer and it gave her an air of vulnerability. She had brought the book to a position in front of her on the table and was slowly turning the pages, as though for the sensation of them between her fingers as much as searching out the passage I had indicated.

“Uh, yes, I suppose it is,” I said in answer to her question. “Although perhaps that sort of sentiment was in the air at the time. It was a renewal period, and quite religious. Jews especially wanted to persuade God to come and change things—rescue them from their own and the world’s miseries.”

“Jesus probably gave them a lot of hope that that would happen.” Her eyes, looking at me directly, were moist and candid, almost child-like. Once again, I felt that strong pull toward her, as I had at certain moments on our previous meetings.

“I’m sure he did.” I looked down at my glass, staring at the refraction of the light through the wine. “I’m sure he still does. It may well be the secret of his longevity.”

She turned back to the book. “You said 2 Timothy, right? Here it is.”

“Why don’t you read chapter 1, verses 9 and 10? Preferably in English. Though you do have a melodious way of reading Greek, as I recall.”

When Sylvia looked up and smiled I realized that any reference to our previous meeting could have volatile consequences. “Well, perhaps later,” she murmured, and turned to search out the bidden passage. “Here we are. It’s in the middle of a sentence...

‘...God, the one who saved us and called us with a holy calling...not by virtue of our deeds but according to his own purpose and grace...which was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...but now has been revealed through the appearance of our Savior Christ Jesus...who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...’ ”

She glanced over to the Greek side of the page. “Yes, it’s one of those long-winded sentences Greek is famous for. And that’s only part of it! I don’t think I’ve ever looked closely at this one.”

“I’m sure few Christians have. At best it has a pretty obscure way of putting things. But maybe you can tell me if I’m reading it right.”

I leaned forward to point to certain phrases in the text and to see them more clearly. Such a passage couldn’t be and hadn’t been committed to memory. I suddenly realized that this arrangement wouldn’t work. I would have to move over beside her. For one awkward moment we both came to the same conclusion, though neither of us said anything. With as much aplomb as I could muster, I stood up and skirted the corner of the table. Sylvia shifted to one side to make room for me—just. When I sat down, my shoulder was all but grazing her own.

“Now here,” I said, pointing, “it seems to say that it’s God who does the saving. I thought that was an odd way of putting it, rather than saying more directly that Jesus himself saved us. Grammatically, that’s correct, isn’t it? Sometimes translators have a habit of reading their own ideas into things.”

She looked at the Greek. “Yes, the genitive participle ‘having saved’ modifies God.”

“Now, as I see it, both those phrases, the one about something given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, and the next one, about something revealed through the appearance of the Savior: they both refer back to the word ‘grace’, the grace of God.”

“That’s right.”

“So wouldn’t you say that those two phrases refer to two different things at two different times? God’s grace was given ‘before the beginning of time’, whatever that means, and in the present time that grace has been revealed.” I was choosing my words carefully. “It’s almost as though he’s saying that Jesus’ act, which gave us God’s grace, or made it possible, was performed at this ‘beginning of time’ location, and then today—there’s a very definite ‘now’ in there—is the moment when we all learn about it. The grace gets revealed, or comes into effect.”

Sylvia looked intently from one text to the other. “Yes...technically speaking. But you see, here it says that it gets revealed ‘through the appearance of our savior.’ Like Jesus himself is revealing it.”

“But that’s still an odd way of putting things. Why say that the grace was given to us before Jesus appeared on earth to reveal it? It seems to put Jesus’ act before his appearance. I mean, why wouldn’t he have said that God’s grace was given *when* Jesus appeared on earth and got crucified? Something like that.”

When she didn’t respond, I added, “And also—this word ‘appearance’. It’s *epiphaneia*, as I recall.”

“Very good.” Then she gave me a little nudge with her shoulder. “You just looked.”

“No, I didn’t, honestly. I looked it up very carefully yesterday. Strictly speaking, doesn’t that word—in the verb form—mean ‘to show or reveal oneself’, in the sense of giving evidence of your presence? When it’s used of a god it simply means he manifested the fact that he was there. I read that the Greeks used this word about their gods when speaking of religious experiences in the cults, or visions in the temples. It hardly meant physical incarnation in those circumstances.”

“No, of course not.”

“So really, that phrase is using two ‘revelation’ words, *phaneroo* and *epiphaneia*. It’s really saying, ‘God’s grace has now been revealed through the revelation of the Savior, Christ Jesus.’ Through Jesus revealing himself...or perhaps God revealing Jesus.”

She looked again. “Technically, perhaps. But that’s hardly the meaning, surely.”

“Well, it’s certainly a curious way of putting things, I agree. But look what he says right after. ‘...the Savior...who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.’ That’s also very odd. I mean, you’d think he’d say that Jesus abolished death through his own death and resurrection. Instead Jesus does it ‘through the gospel’, as though it’s the preaching of the gospel that has provided these things in the present time, not Jesus’ redeeming acts themselves. In fact, he says these things were ‘brought to light’, another revelation word, as though they’d been hidden or unknown for some time. Jesus in the present seems to be linked only with the gospel being preached about him, not with his actual sacrifice.”

“Maybe he’s talking about Jesus’ own gospel, the one he preached about himself. Telling people about the meaning of his death. Didn’t Jesus say ‘I am the resurrection and the life?’”

“I don’t know if he did. But that can’t be what it means here, because in the very next verse the writer identifies this ‘gospel’ as the one ‘I was appointed to herald and preach,’ meaning Paul, since he’s pretending to be Paul.”

Sylvia’s finger fussed for a few seconds over the English passage, then the Greek. She gave a little gesture of resignation. “Well, I guess that’s what the words say, strictly speaking. I just noticed, too, that the business of abolishing death and bringing things to light could even be referring back to God, not Jesus. These two genitive participles parallel the earlier one. It’s a ways back, though that’s not too unusual in Greek.”

I peered at the text. “Yes, I hadn’t noticed that.” Such an interpretation would fit the habit all these writers had of focusing on God as the agent of everything that happened, especially salvation. “So Jesus wouldn’t be seen as doing anything in the present time except get revealed.”

“Maybe this writer was just being convoluted.”

“Maybe so.”

I took a breath, then another. The pressure of being circumspect about my analysis of the epistle was proving taxing, to which was added the effect of Sylvia’s physical presence so near beside me. There was no doubt that she herself was being stimulated by the close contact, and her inner feelings were being communicated to me in their own subtle ways. I had to push on.

“But the phrase I really wanted to ask your advice on was that ‘before the beginning of time’. That’s when God’s grace was given, somehow through Jesus. ‘In Christ Jesus’ is a kind of technical phrase meaning ‘by means of him’, or ‘through him’, I gather. So he would seem to be saying that whatever Jesus did, he did it ‘before the beginning of time’.”

Carefully or otherwise, I was having difficulty not presenting things in an explicit fashion.

Sylvia read from the Greek. “‘*Pro chronon aionion.*’ ‘Before times eternal’, literally. That’s obscure, I must say.”

“Well, all the commentators I consulted seem to agree that no one is sure just what that phrase means. Almost every translation puts it a little differently.”

“I’m not surprised. But the ancients’ idea of ‘eternal’ was not as developed as our own. They didn’t really have the concept of infinity as we know it. So I would say that *chronon aionion* simply implies all possible recorded time, since the world began.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that interpretation. So if we stick ‘*pro*’ in front of it—”

“It would mean ‘before’ all this time.”

“Or perhaps beyond it? Or ‘outside’ it? Would a Platonist put it that way, if he wanted to refer to a higher reality? Where time was eternal. Like in the realm of God?”

Sylvia let her breath out and looked at me sideways. “I’d need some time to investigate that one, Kevin.” She gave me another playful nudge. “But not eternal time.”

My roll of the dice was becoming more clear. Too clear, in fact. Sylvia beside me was a presence I could no longer shut out. Her warmth and her odors had begun to provoke my senses, and the sweater was more than suggesting its own revelations, for she had a habit of tugging it down into her lap as she talked—no doubt unconsciously.

“Oh, I don’t want to put you to a lot of work. I just needed a general opinion, and you’ve given me that.”

“Actually, I seem to recall that *aionios* tended to be used to describe God’s eternal realities, which are different from those of normal time. But you know, this was hardly an age when technical ideas were well organized and there were universally accepted ways of defining them. A lot would be left up to the individual writer or school. If a famous philosopher put it one way, he’d usually be copied. Otherwise, you did the best you could.”

“Well, that gives me something to go on.”

Sylvia looked as though she were about to say something, then changed her mind. “I’m getting hungry. Did you have supper yourself? I hope you saved room for a little bite. I have some cheese and cold cuts.”

I gave my stomach a check and pronounced it in agreement, since I had eaten only lightly through the day. Sylvia rose and within moments had two large plates before us, an assortment of crackers bearing pieces of deli meats and wedges of cheese, obviously prepared beforehand. I attacked them as conservatively as possible. The message to keep myself in check, at least on the surface, was imposing itself on all my appetites.

“And please have some more wine, if you want,” she urged, as she returned to her place beside me. “Or have you lost track of your genitives yet?” Even though she was reaching for a sliver of corned beef on a cracker, I could detect the sparkle in the side of her eye.

“Not at all,” I said with a straight face. “We’ve just dealt with two of them quite efficiently.” This woman was an intriguing mixture of innocence and seductiveness, as though two identities co-existed in the same body. They seemed to shift from one to the other at their own will. One moment she could be playful and enticing, the next moment reserved and thoughtful. Both, I had to admit, I found extremely engaging.

“Yes, we did, didn’t we? But—” The thoughtful self asked, “What do you think this phrase signifies, *pro chronon aionion*? What do you think he was talking about?”

“Well....Sometimes it’s difficult to know what any writer has in mind in this field. But it seems to me that the verb ‘was given’ implies something rather definite which took place through Jesus at that point outside time or before its beginning. I mean, he could have used ‘was promised’ or something similar if he had only meant that God had a plan in mind. In fact, the idea of God’s promises was a common one, though they’re usually associated with Abraham in history, not before the creation of the world.”

I decided to risk a little more. “I’ve found that this kind of idea runs all through the early Christian documents. The epistle writers like to present things as though Jesus’ death took place in some spiritual realm. Almost like the mythical setting of the savior god stories.”

She paused between mouthfuls. “Why would they do that?”

“That’s a good question. The other thing is that, except for one interpolation, they never talk about Pilate, or the Romans, or the Jews, as being responsible for Jesus’ death.”

She looked puzzled, almost worried. “Who was, then?”

I gestured to the book in front of us. “Why don’t you look up 1 Corinthians 2:8? Perhaps you can tell me.”

She pushed the rest of the cracker into her mouth and brought the book onto her lap. In a moment we had Paul’s defence of Christian wisdom to the Corinthians before us. I took another cracker of my own and pointed. “Start at verse 7.”

Sylvia read: “‘We speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom hidden and predestined before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age has known it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.’ ”

“What does the Greek have for ‘the rulers of this age’?”

“*Ton archonton tou aionos toutou*.”

“What would you say the ‘archons’ is a reference to in this context? Keeping in mind the term ‘this age’.”

“Well, the word can mean the rulers in power, kings and governors, let’s say. *Aionos* is kind of broad, the present age of the world. Like our word ‘epoch’, pretty long. Actually, in an apocalyptic type context it would usually refer to all recorded history, since the next ‘age’ is the one after the Parousia, when God’s kingdom is established.”

“And in that context, the religious one, who are the ‘rulers of this age’, generally speaking?”

She pursed her mouth. “I see what you mean. They’re usually thought of as the demon spirits. They were supposed to control the world and be responsible for all the evil in it. Their power would be destroyed at the end of the present age.”

“And doesn’t the usual way of referring to these spirits use words like ‘rulers’ and ‘powers and authorities’? Ephesians talks about them in a couple of places quite clearly, with the same language as Paul uses in 1 Corinthians. Origen assumed that Paul was talking about evil spiritual beings, and so did the Gnostic Marcion. Ignatius used ‘archon’ in an angelic sense.”

“Maybe Paul was being metaphorical. He could be thinking of the spirits that were supposed to lie behind the earthly rulers. That was a current idea.”

“But is he? Since he never refers to any human agency in Jesus’ death, how can we tell? Most commentators I’ve seen admit that Paul is referring here to the demon spirits who inhabit the celestial spheres. Ephesians takes direct aim at them. ‘Our fight is not against human foes, but cosmic powers.’ No metaphors there. And when we get to the Gospels and rulers like Pilate, any heavenly dimension supposedly lying behind them completely disappears.”

Sylvia reached for another cracker, though she attacked this one with a little less gusto, it seemed. “Paul must know about Pilate even if he doesn’t mention him.”

“Does he? Look at Colossians—if that’s by Paul.” This passage, 2:15, I could recite from memory. “‘On the cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession.’ That hardly sounds like a scene on Calvary. To hear the New Testament epistles describe it, Jesus’ crucifixion didn’t even take place on earth. Only in some kind of spiritual sphere at the hands of demon spirits.”

Sylvia’s thoughtful side seemed to take a further step toward despondency. “That wouldn’t do, would it? I mean, if Jesus didn’t die on the cross, it wouldn’t be the same thing. Who would do the forgiving? Jesus died to forgive sins, didn’t he?” She caught herself. “I know that’s not really the case—in reality. But that’s what people believe. That’s what they need.” Her voice was almost plaintive.

She was looking down at the open book in her lap, at the words of Paul lying on pages hallowed by time and devotion, as though they now bore the faint odor of betrayal. I watched her intently. Laying a hand on her arm, I asked quietly, “Is that important to you, Sylvia?”

“No, of course not. I mean, not personally. I can just sympathize with those who think that way.”

She looked at my hand touching her arm. I was afraid to withdraw it, and she placed her other hand on mine. “Perhaps you should be careful about what you write, Kevin.” She looked up again at my eyes, and her own were surprisingly emotional. “I’m not sure what you have in mind, but people can be hurt.”

“I’m just trying to uncover the truth, Sylvia. And make an entertaining story out of it.” With my last words I tried to lighten the somber cloud that seemed to be hanging over us.

The effect was successful, but in an unintended direction. Sylvia gave me a sideways flirtatious smile and began to stroke the back of my hand. “There are other forms of entertainment besides writing novels.”

I did my best not to react. “Yes, I’m familiar with them.” She had shifted from one identity to the other again, from sad innocent to coy seductress, almost without blinking. I had no idea what I was going to do—or wanted to do. At the moment, my own opposing identities were struggling for supremacy. “But I didn’t come over to take advantage of you.”

She bristled just slightly at this, though her hand continued to move on mine. “I’m in control of myself, Kevin. I’m not going to accuse you of anything. I’m not a child anymore.”

All this struck me as something of a non sequitur, but my main preoccupation at the moment was with the vivid awareness that the person beside me craving some form of intimacy was anything but a child. She had crossed her leg and rolled her hips a little sideways toward me, so that the book slid off her lap and wedged between us. I had the image of it serving as a shield to prevent an even more intimate contact. Her body beneath sweater and skirt seemed warm and full. It cried out to me.

What answer would I give? I needed a reprieve.

“If you’re not a child, Sylvia, you shouldn’t be hurt by the ideas I have in mind. Adults have to put away the things of the child when the time comes, isn’t that what they say?”

She looked at me blankly, not connecting my meaning to her own recent words. I took the opportunity to unobtrusively remove my hand from her arm, which took it away from her own. “You said people could be hurt. What about you, Sylvia? Would you be hurt if you had to face the possibility that the story of Jesus is just a myth? That there never was any such man?”

She stared at me in a kind of horrified wonder, sitting straight upright. “Is that what you think? That’s—impossible.”

“The evidence seems overwhelming.”

“Why—because Paul talks about Jesus being crucified by demons?” There was no scorn in her voice, but the note of pained incredulity came through clearly.

“Oh, there’s much more than that.” But this was not the time to lay out a list of cold, technical arguments. Somehow I was going to have to deal primarily with whatever emotional reasons underlay Sylvia’s distressed reaction to the idea.

“You know ancient myth better than most, Sylvia. All about savior gods and layered universes. Why should it come as a surprise that Christianity could have started with a spiritual savior of its own? A Jewish version.” Perhaps I could impress her with one striking piece of evidence, one I had planned to discuss with her. “Here, look at this.”

I reached for one of the books I had brought, the one she had remarked on. “Do you know a document called The Ascension of Isaiah?”

“No.” She had turned calm, at least outwardly.

“It comes from around the end of the first century. It’s composite: later Christian parts added to earlier Jewish parts. The second half of the document tells about Isaiah being lifted up to heaven and receiving a vision about the redeeming Son of God—what he is going to do. The trouble is, part of this vision was written by Christians before they knew of any historical Jesus. They have Isaiah foreseeing the salvation of a righteous elect as a consequence of the Son who will descend into a lower realm, be killed and rise again. He doesn’t atone for sin, so it’s just a guarantee of exaltation thing. That’s a more primitive outlook than Paul’s, even though it was probably written later.” I didn’t take the time to explain that to her.

“Now listen to how an angel describes this future descent by the Son into the lower world. There are seven heavens, by the way, plus a firmament between the earth and the first heaven. This is where Satan and his demon angels live. They fight among themselves, just as nations do on earth. Above that, the seven layers of heaven contain different ranks of angels until one reaches God at the top. But I’m sure you’re familiar with that kind of thinking.” She made no motion.

“In the seventh heaven Isaiah is given a vision of the Son’s journey down and what will happen to him. In the course of this descent, he is going to be transformed—” I read from chapter 8, verse 12— “ ‘until he resembles your appearance and your likeness.’ Note that this is only a *likeness* to humanity; not, it would seem, an actual man. Keep that in mind. That’s a common motif in the earlier writings.”

Sylvia sat quietly beside me, but alert. Her hands were in her lap. I had the book open so that she could see it, but I could tell she was making no real effort to read the words on the page.

“Now, here in chapter 9 is the vision of the descent:

‘The Lord will descend into the world in the last days, he who is to be called Christ after he has descended and become like you, and they will think that he is flesh and a man.

And the god of that world will stretch out his hand against the Son, and they will lay their hands upon him and hang him upon a tree, not knowing who he is. And thus his descent, as you will see, will be concealed from the heavens, so that it will not be known who he is. And when he has plundered the angel of death, he will rise on the third day and will remain in the world for 545 days. And then many of the righteous will ascend with him.’

Can you see anything in here which even hints at a familiarity with the Gospel story? And if Christ is only *thought* to be flesh and a man, surely that implies that he isn’t. When he gets down to the lowest level, who crucifies him? It’s ‘the god of that world’, meaning Satan, the one who rules the firmament. He and his forces ‘lay their hands upon him and hang him on a tree.’ They’re the ones who don’t know who he is, because he changes his appearance as he descends through each level of heaven until he resembles humans. Then after he’s dealt with Satan he rises, waits 545 days and finally brings up the righteous dead with him. Where’s the life of Jesus? Where’s his ministry, his teachings? Where’s the trial and crucifixion by Pilate? Who would compose a vision of Christ’s incarnation and simply ignore all this?”

Sylvia treated the question as rhetorical and said nothing.

“I’m sure you can see the parallel to Paul’s 1 Corinthians reference about the rulers of this age crucifying the Lord of glory.”

This time she spoke in a small tight voice, “I suppose so.”

I glanced down at the book again. “A little later, God gives directions to the Son about what he is supposed to do in the lower world, and it’s all about judging and conquering the demon spirits and the gods of death and raising the righteous dead from Shoel, the Jewish Hades. Salvation for the elect. That’s the extent of the mission God sets for him. He doesn’t have a word to say about the life described by the Gospels.”

“So there’s no forgiveness of sin, you say.” There was a certain sadness in her voice. “Who would want to bother with a Christ like that?”

“It’s all about paradigms, which I won’t go into. But there’s something else in this document that should interest you.” I gave her a little smile as though trying to cheer her up. “As an historian. Seeing how ideas evolve. It’s quite fascinating.” I still didn’t know what I was dealing with here, why Sylvia Lawrence, non-believer, member of the Age of Reason Foundation, should be so disconsolate at the evaporation of a living—and forgiving—Jesus of Nazareth.

“At a later stage of this document someone has inserted a crude account of a life on earth, the bare bones of a Gospel story; most of it’s a Nativity scene quite unlike Matthew or Luke. It has to be later because out of three classes of surviving manuscripts, only one contains this passage, and it doesn’t make sense that the others would cut it out. Besides, it’s an obvious insertion; you can see the seams clearly.” I flipped to chapter 11, verses 2 to 22.

“Jesus is born in Mary and Joseph’s home in Bethlehem, to everyone’s surprise. Then he grows up to perform great signs and miracles in the land of Israel. He gets crucified by ‘the ruler’—whoever he is; there’s no mention of Pilate—descends to Shoel, then rises from the dead. There’s little pieces that seem tacked on, indicating that even this section was progressively doctored. Right in this one document we can see the evolution from a spiritual Christ operating in a supernatural setting, involved only with angels and demon spirits, to a physical Christ living a life in an earthly setting among humans. No reference yet to teachings, though. And no sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.”

Sylvia was looking at the book, but she was not seeing the words. “Perhaps the solution is: don’t commit sins,” she said neutrally. “Especially if there’s no one to forgive them.” She looked up with sad, artless eyes. I sensed in their quivering depths that something in her wanted desperately to come out. Perhaps if I probed carefully—

“I think we’re not as sinful as some people would like us to believe. Certainly not enough to have a god come to earth to be tortured and murdered for us. What could we possibly do to require such a thing for our forgiveness?”

She looked down again, at her hands resting in her lap. She began to pull on the tip of one thumb. “You might be surprised. Some things can’t be forgiven by anything less. Now, if you’re right, we don’t even have that.”

“I should think almost anything could be forgiven. If one was repentant enough. And stopped doing whatever it was.”

I closed the book and set it back on the table. The room was becoming dimmer, as twilight descended outside. Only a single lamp at the far end of the couch cast a soft light over the room.

“But suppose you did something over and over again. Even though you tried not to. Even though you knew you were hurting someone.”

Sylvia's voice was getting smaller, more distant. The silence around us suddenly became a presence in the twilight. As though the gods of forgiveness were indeed listening. Or were they accusing?

I turned toward her solicitously, but I did not touch her. "Sylvia, that's the kind of thinking that religion instills. First they make you feel weak, helpless, an innate sinner. Their catalogue of sins is so great and encompasses so much which is only natural human expression that you can't help but feel you're unredeemable, an habitual sinner who can never break their pattern of evil."

Her eyes remained downcast. "You don't know," she murmured.

"I do know. I know that if you listen to them, you'll always need them. You always have to keep running to them, putting your life, and your soul, in their hands. The irony is, they're the ones who need. They need you. You're the source of their power."

"Who?"

"Priests, of course. Priests and prophets of gods from time immemorial. It's their greatest weapon, their only hold over you—sin and guilt. And fear of divine punishment only they can avert....Sylvia? What is it?"

She had looked up at me at the mention of priests. Her eyes had quickly become glazed, staring.

"That's not true. He was a good man. And I ruined him."

Something in Sylvia was hanging by a thread. I did not know whether to try to support it or snap it. I waited a few seconds, long heavy seconds while she continued to stare, almost unseeing.

Considering that I had never had children, I was surprised that I could sound so paternal. "Sylvia, what could you possibly do that would ruin a man? A priest—" The deduction had been inevitable.

The transformation was startling. Or it would have been, if surprise hadn't been submerged in a welter of other reactions at what Sylvia did next. Her eyes lost their stare and softened. A curtain of sultriness descended over her face, now flushed and glowing. Her voice was all hushed sensuality.

"I'll show you."

She moved as lithely as a cat, for all her height and fullness. In one motion she managed to straddle my lap and push me back against the couch, while at the same time lifting her skirt above her hips. Involuntarily I turned my head aside, and her mouth came in contact with my ear.

"I know you want me, Kevin. I know you can't help yourself."

"Sylvia— I don't think—"

Her body from groin to chest began to move against me. After a moment she relaxed the pressure and tugged the sweater up until it cleared her breasts. By that time, it was clear to me that her outer clothing was all she was wearing. Her seduction, or the fantasy of it, had been premeditated.

"Sylvia," I blurted, "I don't think this is a good idea." My body thought otherwise, but I felt sure she was expressing something which came from beyond our immediate situation.

My head was still turned, and she was kissing me on the cheek. "I know you can't help yourself, Kevin," she said again. "I tried not to tempt you, I tried to hide myself. It's not your fault. It's mine."

So many of the things she was saying tonight seemed to involve inherent contradictions. As though wires between reality and perception—or was it memory?—were being crossed.

I could not hold my head to the side much longer, and not only for reasons of discomfort. I turned forward and let her find my mouth. She kissed me with a hungry passion, making little sounds which seemed halfway between arousal and despair. My hands of their own volition began to wander over her back, the sides of her breasts. They wanted to move down, craving heat and moisture. I knew if this continued much longer, I would be lost.

“Sylvia...you are a beautiful woman...more beautiful than you realize.” I had to turn my head again. “But we can’t make love. Sometimes things aren’t right.”

Her pelvis was moving in brazen rhythm against me. I knew she could feel my body’s response. “It’s all right, Kevin. You’ll see. Take what you want. We can always be forgiven.”

My mind forced itself to take control, to think. “Is that what he told you? Sylvia, is that what the priest told you?”

Her agitation changed quality. The quickness of her breath took on a hint of panic, of sobbing. Against my ear she began to reiterate in a hoarse whisper, “I will never be forgiven...I will never be forgiven...” The cadence fell into rhythm with her body’s wanton motions. I was beginning to feel her wetness.

I turned and took her head between my hands, holding her face near mine. I spoke sharply. “Sylvia, what have you done that needs forgiving?”

She stopped her movements and looked at me. She began to sob. “I ruined his life. I ruined his career. They had to send him away. First he said that Jesus would forgive me. Then he said that I would never be forgiven if I told them.”

“Forgive you for what? For telling them what?” I could detect a wetness on her cheeks. Her eyes in the soft shadows were flushed, frightened, grieving.

“For seducing him. Over and over. Every time I went to ask for forgiveness from Jesus, I did it again. Even if I didn’t intend to.”

I moved my hands down to her shoulders.

“What do you mean? Are you saying you lost control of yourself?” I added silently: like now? She placed her hands against my chest. There was confusion in her eyes, and she sniffled. “No, not exactly. It’s just that I was too—sexual. I made him want me too much. He couldn’t help himself. It was my fault.”

I looked at her carefully. I would let each layer peel off as it came.

“What exactly did you do?”

She misunderstood me. “We had intercourse. Or, I put my mouth on him. First it was in the church basement, next to the meeting room. Then in the rectory. Once it was in the bathroom off the sacristy. I—he lifted my skirt and I sat on him...like this.”

It crossed my mind that I should lower her sweater, but her arms were in the way.

I tried to speak reassuringly. “Sylvia, why should it have been all your fault? Adults are responsible for themselves. He just as much as you. He knew he was breaking his vows.”

Her breath was becoming shallower. Short gasps followed by longer pauses. From passion and agitation, her face took on a hollow anguish. “I made him break his vows so many times. He said Jesus would forgive us, but I know he was hurting. And it destroyed him when they found out.” She lifted a hand to brush at her cheek. “It was such a disgrace. Especially with—someone like me.”

Her face was close. I brushed at her hair, the wetness of her cheek. “What do you mean? Were you married, or something?”

Her eyes widened in a kind of child-like surprise. Her glance skitted off mine. “Oh, no.” It was a small sound.

I looked at her intently, and a cold tingle began to spread down my back.

“Sylvia?” I cupped my hand against her chin and gently turned her face until she was looking at me again. I asked her quietly, “Sylvia—how old were you?”

The gods were listening, too. But they already knew the answer.

She stared at the end of my nose, eyes red in a face that had lost all expression.

“Eleven and twelve.”

For a long moment I couldn’t breathe. I watched a tear reach the edge of her lip. I wanted to kiss it away. But would I be kissing the adult or the child? I wiped it with my finger.

“Sylvia. He was using you. You were only a little girl.”

Her voice was heavy with emotion, but at the same time there was a note of release. The words eased their way past the broken dam. “I was overdeveloped for my age. I was—feeling things.”

“Every child does. That was no excuse. He not only used you, he made you feel responsible. He raped your body and your mind.”

A little of the agitation returned. “He said he couldn’t help himself. That I was giving off seductive messages because I had a sinful, lascivious streak in me.”

I stroked the sides of her face, pushing back the wayward strands of hair. I made a further deduction. “And he told you that Jesus could forgive you—but only through him.”

The little gasps had stopped. She was breathing more deeply and evenly. “Yes. I was not to go to confession to anyone but him. Because he could intercede with Jesus better than anyone else.” The tear-matted cheeks seemed to sag. “Sometimes after confession he would take me downstairs and we would—do it again. We always prayed for forgiveness afterwards.”

I pulled her to me and nestled her head against the side of my neck. “How did it end? How was he found out?”

“A woman from the parish came in on us one day. He went into a panic. He started screaming at me and accusing me.”

I placed my hands lightly on her back. The skin was sticky and cool. “It wasn’t your fault, Sylvia. He was in a position of trust. He was the adult and you were the child. Surely they didn’t put any blame on you.”

She began to sob again. “The bishop took him away from the parish. My father never spoke to me nicely until the day he died. My mother still hugged me, but she always looked hurt. Before he left, Father Cameron told them that I was a seductive little whore.”

After a moment, she pulled upright and looked down at herself. “I guess he was right.”

She brought her sweater down and moved awkwardly off my lap. Tugging self-consciously at the skirt, she perched herself on the edge of the couch. The world was quiet. “I haven’t any energy left for an apology, Kevin, I’m sorry.”

“Sylvia, you have nothing to apologize for, then or now.” I came upright beside her.

“But you need to talk to someone about this, someone who can help you. You’ve carried all this guilt and shame for too long. You’ve been subconsciously acting things out.”

I asked hesitantly, "Have you never told anyone? Outside your family?"

She sniffed and took a tissue from a box on the table. "I tried to tell a friend once. A female friend. She didn't want to hear about it. I think she never respected me as much after that."

I took her hand and she squeezed it greedily. It was a different type of craving. "Sylvia, I respect you. You are one of the nicest persons I've ever met. You're intelligent, you have a clever mind. You've accomplished good things in your life." With my other hand I gestured to our books on the table and joked, "Some people call it stuffy, dull stuff, but we know better, don't we?"

I gave her hand a playful little shake, and she gave me a snuffle of a laugh in return. I added more seriously, "They might all be better off if they understood a little more about that stuffy stuff."

She looked at me squarely, eyes puffy but relaxed, and managed the suggestion of a smile. "Thank-you, Kevin." Her voice was soft, with a note of fatigue.

There were so many emotions running through my own body. Anger, anger at that dim distant figure who had so compromised her life, anger at the system which had made it possible. Sympathy and solicitation. Love. But love was a complex of elements, and who had ever sorted it all out? I wanted to stroke her and even make love to her, could that have healed her. But these were not the right circumstances. There were too many raw edges it would brush up against, irritate. I would settle for the love of acceptance, of comfort, of being there for her.

My eyes had wandered a little, heavy with my own thoughts, and she must have believed I was feeling uncomfortable. Looking anxious, she placed her other hand over the one holding hers. "Please don't go, Kevin. I wish—"

"I'll tell you what," I hastened to say. "It's only ten o'clock. I can stay for a while. But you look exhausted. Perhaps you'd like to rest. I know a nice way of doing that."

There was a cushion resting on the other seat. I reached for it, then settled myself against the back where I sat, my arm against the rumpled arm of the couch. In the angle between this and my lap I placed the cushion. Sylvia watched me with an artless anticipation.

I patted the seat beside me. "Kneel here." She did so and I gently pulled her across me, so that her legs were stretched out along the couch and her upper body lay at an angle across mine, facing me, part of its weight on the cushion. She gave a little sound of euphoria and our arms went around each other in an easy embrace. Her head settled to my shoulder. I let my hands rest on her back, without stroking.

After a few moments of listening to her breathe softly, I said, "I'm glad you told me about that, Sylvia. You can't keep things like that bottled up inside."

"There was never anyone to tell. The few men I was involved with—I was afraid to say anything about it. I was sure they would never have forgiven me."

"Sylvia, you don't need forgiving. The blame was his. He dishonored himself and his position."

"Then why do I feel that I need this great weight lifted off me?"

"Forgiveness is the wrong word, Sylvia. You need to become free. Free of all that guilt and sense of responsibility. He put them there, to serve his own ends. He had no consideration for you. And probably no understanding of what it was going to do to you. Or maybe he just didn't care."

“And why should anyone care about me now?”

I breathed with her, realizing I would have to tread prudently. I could not promise things I would not be in a position to deliver. “Because you are worthy of being cared about. That’s what you have to start feeling. I care about you, and David cares about you. I’m sure the rest of your colleagues do. Even if they knew—which they don’t have to. You just have to learn to care about yourself.”

Her head seemed to be getting heavier, and I brought up one hand to cradle the back of her neck. This warm, feeling, incredibly complex human being in my arms was an overwhelming creation, a mystery of the universe. For all our evolving understanding, would we ever plumb its subtle depths, the wonders and sad fallibilities which lay within ourselves? Rational Man and Woman was only one small portion of this bewildering organism, though I had to believe that it was a critical one. We needed every guiding instrument at our disposal, cast upon the sea of this mysterious voyage we were all embarked upon, its horizons but dimly perceived and its destination enigmatic.

I found that I was stroking her back gently.

I spoke softly. “We don’t need Jesus to forgive us, or any other deity in some spirit world outside our own. We can forgive ourselves and each other. And if someone places himself beyond forgiveness, then it’s up to him to come back within those boundaries and ask for it. We don’t need to take all the best parts we possess, our potential for good, our own innate capacity for wisdom, and place them outside ourselves, embody them in some idealized, superhuman entity in heaven and leave only the dross to claim as our own. Then we turn around and say that the strains of such divine attributes we can detect in ourselves are not derived from within, but from that glorified external embodiment. We are only the crude and unworthy reflection of a higher perfection we can never hope to attain. That, too, has always been the message of the priests.”

Sylvia stirred in my arms, but made no sound.

“When we’re free of all these debilitating dogmas we’ve been saddled with, we can mold ourselves as we wish. We’ll find a source of strength inside, our own sense of self-worth. You can’t undo what happened to you, Sylvia. But you can learn to overcome it and leave it behind. I’ll try to do whatever I can to help you do that.”

I smiled down at her. “Besides, who else do I have to talk to about those stuffy old Greek historians?”

Her eyes were closed. The lids lay still and peaceful. I realized she had fallen asleep.

While Sylvia slept, I had only my own thoughts to keep me company. I had gained an answer to the question I had long asked myself: what had drawn me to this woman? Somehow I was able to sense and relate to the great imposition her childhood experience had placed upon her. Her rape had been literal and traumatic. I had passed through the same medieval world in a less graphic fashion, but perhaps my own experiences had been no less a submission, a stifling of potential. We all needed to emerge from the same prison, breathe a freer air. Perhaps 2000 years was enough. Perhaps, at long last, the great myth had run its course and would have to be retired to the dustbin of history. Could I help it along?

When Sylvia awoke almost an hour later, I had all but fallen asleep myself. Her first reaction was embarrassment, and she raised herself from my lap, though I thought I could detect a certain reluctance to do so.

After repeating some of my reassurances, as well as my urgings about getting assistance for her problems, I told her that I should be getting home.

“But I want you to feel free to call me if you need some advice, or if you just have to talk to someone. These days I’m usually in.” I gestured to the books on the table. “Trying to make some kind of sense out of all this.”

Sylvia made no further comment about my conclusions in regard to Jesus. We both stood up and I retrieved my books from the table. Her eyes were heavy, but they gave her a beguiling look, and with all that had happened between us, and the hidden things she had laid bare to me, I knew that in her presence temptation would always rear its head. Had it not been for Shauna—

It seemed to me that Sylvia also sensed the blocked potential. Still, there was no resentment in her voice when she said, “Thank-you, Kevin. I’ll try not to impose too much on you. You have other commitments, I’m sure. Your lady friend is very fortunate.”

I simply smiled. It crossed my mind that I was probably going to have to reveal the situation to Shauna—discreetly. And very gingerly.

I said, “You’ll get in touch with someone about things. And let me know. Promise?”

We were at her door. “Yes, I will.”

She kissed me on the cheek. I saw myself down the stairs and out into the cool midnight air. I drove away under a crystal clear heaven whose layers had evaporated into an infinity of space. Their legions of angels and spirits had been forced to find domicile elsewhere.

Chapter Thirteen

1

There were five at the Friday meeting plus two who arrived in my briefcase. We gathered in the familiar seminar room at the University, but today there would be no repairing to Philosophers’ Walk. A partially overcast sky hung on as the remnant of an overnight rain and it dampened the lure of the outdoors, though it might have been forecasting the developments that were to follow the meeting.

Except for Phyllis, the complement of the earlier gathering was present again today: myself, David, Patterson and Weiss. The fifth member was a quiet young man in his early twenties named James Franklin, an undergraduate in David’s faculty and an officer in the student union. He had also joined the Age of Reason Foundation, and his computer skills had proven an invaluable asset to the core group around David. One of his specific tasks, and the reason why he was present on that day, I was to find out only at the end of our session.

Burton Patterson was the first to take the floor. I was expecting some dry recap of preparations for the hearing in Philadelphia. Instead, our formidable civil liberties attorney had an unabashed gleam in his eye.

“Gentlemen, it looks as though the hearing is actually going to proceed.”

David was taken aback by this. “You mean you were expecting it wouldn’t?”

“In situations like this, our creationist friends have been known to back down at the last minute, especially in view of their poor track record in past attempts. I half expected they would this time.”

I could see the note of relief in David’s face at the rescue of the Age of Reason Foundation from unexpected collapse into obscurity. Then he looked worried. “But there’s almost three weeks to go. How do you know it won’t still happen?”

Patterson smiled the smile of the champion who has just learned that his inevitable victory is going to be a worthy one. “Because the state of Pennsylvania has just switched its chief attorney. The merits of creationism as a science are going to be argued by Mr. Chester Wylie. Mr. Wylie is from Maryland, and he is not your dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalist. Nor would he have accepted to run the case on the basis of some simplistically-minded ‘every word of Genesis is literally true’ position. The problem is, I know that the Moral Rebirth Coalition was behind the latest push to get creationism into the classroom. It was their backroom boys who were behind the choice of Georgia and Pennsylvania as a new testing ground, and I can only assume they’ve been in on the switch of legal counsel. I’m really not quite sure what to make of it, but it promises to be interesting. With Wylie in, there’s no question of them backing out now.”

I asked, “I gather your inside information hasn’t extended to learning just what their specific strategy is going to be?” The thought was a natural one, but I knew it was also a subtle dig at the man whom I now assumed had some elaborately planned designs on Shauna involving a private lovenest in Philadelphia after court was adjourned for the day.

Or maybe not so subtle. My suspicious brain read a wealth of inuendo into Patterson’s rejoinder and accompanying smile. “Don’t worry, Mr. Quinter. I’m working on a lot of things. Doors can be opened in three weeks, even well protected ones.”

I said cavalierly, “I’m sure we’re all as confident as yourself, Mr. Patterson. And no doubt you’ve already laid plans for a victory party, or something of that nature, once the hearing follows its inevitable course.”

David must have sensed some subtle sparring going on, or at least my perception of such, for he jumped in. “The agenda committee’s handling anything of that nature, Kevin. We’ve got a reception on the list, mostly to capitalize on the media attention the hearing’s going to get, but it’s still in the planning stage. Anyway, that’s one of the things we’re here to discuss—media publicity and how to handle it. Or rather, engineer it, if possible.”

I decided I’d better settle down. Patterson’s phone call to Shauna about the reception may have been no more than an expression of the man’s natural bravado. For now, I could hardly accuse him of a planned seduction on such a flimsy basis.

David was saying, “We need to present the issue of creationism vs. evolution in some kind of combination with the overall principles that the Age of Reason Foundation stands for. We want to make the event seem part of a larger picture, so that in reporting on the hearing itself, the Foundation and its ideas will automatically be drawn in.”

And that was where I came in. Over the next half hour I trotted out ideas I had been playing around with, at the center of which lay the two other guests to the meeting that day: Rational Man and Rational Woman. On the whole, they received a warm welcome—by David, an enthusiastic one. Patterson himself seemed to turn them over in his mind, examining them from a number of angles. He ended up giving them cautious approval as motifs that could be developed. If I could read the man, he was trying to balance two initial

responses. One regarded the figure of Rational Man, if too vividly presented, as a possible competitor for the limelight. The second, on the other hand, might solve the first: a natural association would be of himself as the embodiment of Rational Man. I had the impression the second interpretation had won out.

Weiss volunteered that the concept might be best conveyed with the aid of a logo, which would then lead naturally to an explanation of the joint figure. This produced an animated discussion of the whole concept. Franklin spoke up for the first time to suggest that the statue of The Thinker had over the years become associated with the freethought movement but that it was now out of date and conceivably, in this politically correct era, sexist. Moreover, we all agreed that the statue's stance by its very nature did not allow it to say anything, let alone take action. Weiss pointed out that the International Humanist logo of a stylized human figure was smart and catchy, but abstract. It, too, couldn't be made to do or say anything. Rational Man and Woman, however, could take on whatever life we might choose to give them.

David was so keen about the possibilities in the double logo that he resolved to look at once into commissioning some suggestions for artistic representation. "We could unveil it at the reception."

Patterson, however, had his doubts that a project of this kind could be gotten off the ground so soon. And I had to agree with him.

He said, "We can't shoot the bolt, so to speak, before all the details of the idea are in place. Your Rational Man and Woman need to be fleshed out. And anything involving visual representation always takes time. But I agree, we could certainly float the concept at the time of the hearing. See what response it raises."

"I'd like to try the idea out on Phyllis," David said enthusiastically.

We all gave him a surprised look, and he turned sheepish. David's use of the name had definitely rung with overtones of familiarity.

"Yes, well, I met with her for dinner the other day, and she's already drafted an article for the Times on the Foundation's involvement with the creationist hearing. I think she's going to be very much on our side."

I couldn't resist a good-natured dig which also sported a second prong in a different direction. "Well, it looks as though someone else has been working on some inside channels. Did you get the door open far enough to see a draft of this article?" Patterson showed a keen interest in my question as well.

David played along. "Now, gentlemen, that would have been unethical. And I wouldn't want her to think of me as manipulative."

"That will come," Patterson said matter-of-factly. "When it does, let me know immediately what she's writing about us. If it promises to create a problem and there's still a day or two before the piece is due to appear in print, I'll pull a few strings at the Times." When we all looked at him somewhat astonished, he said, "We're engaged in a war, gentlemen. Do you think our fundamentalist opponents are going to play by rules? We have to meet fanaticism with our own brand of the same thing."

"I'm not sure I can agree with that philosophy," David murmured. Patterson made no comment, but the remark seemed to serve as the signal for the meeting's adjournment. The attorney stood up.

“I think we’ve covered enough today,” he said. “We’ll all be in touch one way or another as the hearing gets closer. The real work will come afterwards. That’s when we have to play the thing for all it’s worth. I hope no one has too much planned for the month of July—personal or otherwise.”

Any number of retorts offered themselves, but I wisely decided to let them lie. After a brisk round of leave-taking, Patterson strode from the room.

David apparently felt the need for some sort of apology, though I was not sure if it was on Patterson’s behalf or his own. “I guess we have a bit of a tiger by the tail in Burton, but I’m sure his assets outweigh his handicaps.”

“Let’s hope so,” Weiss muttered, standing up. “I’ll be off, too. Other duties call, I’m afraid.” With a wave, he went out the door.

David sighed. I said to cheer him up, “No organization is without its personality conflicts. I’m sure you’re right about Patterson.” I joked, “We’ll just have to keep him on a tighter leash.”

David made a wry grimace. “Whose leash is on whom?”

He turned to the young man who sat a little bemused on the other side of the oblong table. “Now this chap is someone we don’t need to put a leash on. Even though he’s turned out to be a first-rate tracking dog.” He paused for effect. “We now know who and where the Ascended Masters are.”

I turned to James Franklin with an expression of amazement. “Really? How did you accomplish that?”

“I tracked their detour route by asking around the Web for advice on how to use one myself. Then it was a fluke. When I told the people they’d been using I wanted to send a message to the Ascended Masters they pointed out that I would be routing it back to myself. They didn’t notice that it wasn’t from exactly the same outlet.”

My expression revealed my lack of comprehension.

David enlightened me in hushed, dramatic tones. “In other words, Kevin, the Ascended Masters have been e-mailing us from this University.”

I sat back in my chair, genuinely flabbergasted. “You’ve got a group like that here at the University?”

“Not exactly,” answered Franklin. “What we’ve got here is a chapter of the Campus Crusade for Christ. It’s their account the Masters have been using. Obviously, they had connections with someone in the Crusade. With a bit of detective work I found out that this someone joined a group late last year who’ve rented a farmhouse about 30 miles outside the city.”

“Another Waco operation?” I exclaimed. “I hadn’t heard of anything like that in this area.”

“It hasn’t yet reached those proportions,” David said. “There seem to be only a handful of people actually living there.”

“And they’re all men,” added Franklin. “The group is only open to males, apparently.”

“Shades of Qumran,” I grunted.

“Of what?” asked David.

“The people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Or at least that’s where they holed up—a place by the Dead Sea in Israel. They were a Jewish apocalyptic sect, probably Essenes, who withdrew to the desert in protest against the way the Temple in Jerusalem was being run.

They were going strong during the supposed time of Christ. Very ascetic, totally disavowing women, and waiting for the end of the world in a final great war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Sectarian lunacy at its best. When the Romans overran the country during the Jewish War they hid a bunch of their writings in caves, where they weren't discovered for almost 2000 years."

"Don't some theories make Jesus an Essene?" asked David.

"Not reputable ones. Some scholars like to see Essene influence on Jesus, perhaps through John the Baptist, but the only Christian writings that seem to contain anything related to Qumran ideas are the epistles and Gospel of John. Even John the Baptist's connection to the Essene sect now seems unlikely."

"Well, I don't know if the Masters are writing any scrolls, but they're still sending us messages about their own end of the world." David reached into his briefcase. "Here's clue number three. Four days ago. It helped James track them down. I'd like us to decide what we should do about this. Just between the three of us."

"You haven't told Patterson?"

"Not yet. But if I'm going to alert the authorities—especially now that we know where they're coming from—I guess I'll have to bring him in on it."

I took the piece of paper from David.

"*'Clue number three: And the fourth poured his bowl on those sons; and it was allowed to burn them with its flames. But they only cursed the name of God, and refused to repent.'*

"Revelation, chapter 16, I think. One of the seven angels pouring out the bowls of God's wrath on the earth." I reached into my own briefcase. "Is Rational Man allowed to be psychic? I must have had a premonition of some kind, because I brought a New Testament along."

"Maybe you subconsciously realized it was time for another clue," David offered with a smile. "I think we can live with the subconscious. Lots of scientific evidence to support it."

"Here we are: Revelation 16:8." I read, "The fourth poured his bowl on the sun..." Now that's quite a change. From 'sun' to 'son'. Hardly an inadvertent misunderstanding, one would think. Or a deliberate word play in interpretation. If it is, it would rule out any of the Masters being familiar with Greek. The words are not homonyms the way they are in English."

Franklin volunteered, "What about the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness you mentioned?"

"Good observation, James," David remarked.

"Yes," I agreed. "Though there's nothing in Revelation about ideas like that. Nor is there any connection between John the Prophet who wrote Revelation and Qumran. At least, not that anyone's uncovered. They come from widely different geographical areas. But I suppose there's no reason to think that the Masters had to limit themselves to Revelation for inspiration. They may have adopted Qumran-type terms to signify the forces of good and evil in their own minds."

"Then why not the complete term?" asked Franklin.

"Because it isn't in the Revelation text?" David suggested.

"Possibly. There are also little snips made from the original text, but I can't see that they're significant."

“So what are we dealing with here?” David asked in worried tones. “Are these loonies simply pointing us to prophecies of some impending apocalypse we’re all going to be caught up in? Or do they have one in mind for us in particular?”

“It’s possible they’re interpreting these passages as some divinely appointed destiny for groups like ourselves. Atomistic biblical interpretation has always been the hallmark of extremist sects. They’ll make the words say what they want them to say.”

“But why the ‘clues’?”

I shook my head in frustration. “Don’t know. They seem to be pointing to something. But is it a concrete threat? There’s no way to tell.” I turned to Franklin. “Is it feasible to talk to any of these guys?”

David grunted. “They’ll hardly let you in on their conspiracy, if they’ve got one.”

Franklin waggled his finger. “No, but they just might be willing to talk about themselves. This sort of fanatic can never resist a chance to sound off. Especially to a skeptic.”

I considered a moment. “Have they ever received any publicity that you know of?”

“I don’t think so. They seem to be a very new group.”

I tapped my chin, then scratched it. “I think I’ll take a little drive out into the country tomorrow. Why don’t you give me the location of the schoolhouse? Who knows, I might just find myself stopping and having a chat.”

“Are you serious?” David was looking at me in mild wonder.

“Why not? I know you’re worried about these messages and your impulse is to go to the authorities. But I would be afraid that somehow it might backfire on us. We don’t want to give the press any reason to ridicule the Age of Reason Foundation before it even gets off the ground. We don’t have enough to go on yet. Let me try and sound them out. We’ve got nothing to lose.”

David saw my point and gave my proposal grudging approval. Franklin checked some notes he had with him and gave me the information I needed. The dregs of the meeting broke up and David and I made our way to the parking lot.

“Tell me something,” he said, as we reached my car. “When you were talking about the Essenes, you said that they were doing their thing in the ‘supposed time of Christ’. What did you mean by that?”

“Yes, I did say that, didn’t I?” I looked off beyond the lower expanse of the campus and toward the city skyline, now gleaming in the light of a newly-emerging sun. From this vantage point I felt very much a part of the vibrant, ever-enlightening air of the late 20th century. But was there any suitable time or setting for broaching such a momentous idea?

“I’ll tell you what. Give me another week or so on my research, and we’ll get together and discuss some interesting observations which the Foundation may or may not want to use. In fact, we might even bring Phyllis in on this, if she’s available.” There was just a touch of slyness in my sideways glance at him. “Would you have any influence there?”

“I might. I’ll sound her out on Sunday, when I see her next.”

“Ahh...”

“But you won’t give me any more to go on than that?”

“Just tell her she won’t be bored, I guarantee. Nor will you.”

And at that we left it. I promised to call him in 24 hours to let him know what had transpired in my country jaunt the next day.

The schoolhouse was nestled on a V-shaped property formed by a fork in a winding county road. Red brick and generally faded, it came from an era of more openly Christian education, for it bore a rusted metal cross mounted over the church-like wooden doors. Some recent renovations, nothing too extensive, were in evidence. The yard behind the building sported a couple of pitched tents.

I parked the car at the edge of the roadway near the side gate. Two young men were working in a garden in the yard, and one took notice of me when I stepped onto the grass. I adopted an air of no great urgency. I looked about at the schoolhouse and its grounds as though these were of interest to me as much as anything else.

The young man came up on the other side of the fence near the gate. He was tall and somewhat gangly, but with no visible manifestations of the wild-eyed prophet, let alone a would-be terrorist. His face and hands were smudged. “Can I help you?”

“Well, perhaps you can. I’ve been given to understand that this property has been acquired by a religious group. I’m a freelance writer on religious issues—among other things—and I thought I’d come out and see if there was a story behind it.” Since yesterday I had gone over the possible approaches I could take, and this seemed the most promising. I would begin neutrally and press things from there as the situation developed.

“And where did you hear that?”

I gave him an easy smile. “Oh, writers like myself don’t tend to reveal sources, you know. We wouldn’t enjoy confidences for very long. But there’s nothing sinister about it. There are a lot of groups forming this close to the end of the millennium. It’s a social phenomenon, and readers like to be informed on such things. Even get an inside track.”

“We don’t consider ourselves to be part of a phenomenon.” There was no overt animosity in the young man’s response, but I had definitely made contact with a sectarian mentality.

“Well, yes, I realize things look differently when you’re on the inside. We all like to think we’ve plugged into the actual truth, I guess.” When he made no response, I asked, “Are you part of the ‘Rapture’ movement?”

He made a scoffing sound. “That’s nonsense. No one’s going to be lifted up to heaven in a new body. God and the Lamb will establish their 1000-year kingdom here on earth.”

“Ah, your ideas are more millenarian, I see. I take it you get a lot of your predictions from Revelation. Isn’t that where the Lamb comes in?”

“Yes, it is.” There was a note of wariness in the eyes, but I could tell that Franklin was right. Such people did feel an urge to proclaim their beliefs.

“And what about the false Messiah? Where does he come in? I understand that’s the going concept in millenarian expectations these days.” I tried to avoid any false note of sympathy for such views, but also any obvious scorn for them either.

“More nonsense. That’s a complete misunderstanding of scripture. The Antichrist will be recognized for what he is, and people who follow him will not be deceived in any way. We’re not part of the ‘going concept’.” The neutral tone had given way to a more edged delivery, though the control was still being maintained. He was, after all, talking to a complete stranger.

Don’t push too fast, I told myself.

I looked around at the setting. The day was warm and sunny. “You’ve got a nice spot here. Far enough out to be rustic, but not too far that you can’t get in to enjoy the night life.” I winked.

His smile was condescending. “We don’t go in for that sort of thing.”

“Ah! Cut off from the wicked world, you mean. Well, sometimes I feel the need for that myself. It can get a bit overwhelming. TV, telephones, the Internet. As well as other things best left unsaid.” I glanced overhead. “I can see telephone lines, so I guess you’re not completely cut off. Are you online as well?”

“Not here—I mean, no.”

“I see. Well, listen. How would you feel about me doing a little article about your group? What do you call yourselves? Someone said they thought it was Reborn...something or other.” I couldn’t show too acute a knowledge, and I felt that this could not help but provoke a response.

But only after a little hesitation. “We’re called the Ascended Masters.” It was almost as though he expected me to laugh, and as it was, the title did strike me for the first time as something profoundly and hilariously pretentious. I kept my reaction from reaching my face only with difficulty.

“And that means?”

“It means that we’ve already achieved salvation. We ascended to a new status with the acceptance of Christ’s resurrection. Those of us who perceive the truth, of course.”

“I suppose that would be referring to a special truth known only to yourselves.” That came out tinged with overtones more snide than I had intended. We both knew that this was exactly what it referred to, but I could tell that the young man took offence, perhaps at the implication of ridicule.

It turned out not to matter. I hadn’t noticed that the other gardener had disappeared inside the house. Now he and an older man emerged from a side door and moved with alacrity toward the two of us conversing over the fence.

“Is there something I can do for you?” He seemed concerned, a man closer to my own age, with greying temples and a notably stern countenance, acquired no doubt from a steady diet of poring over the meaning of works like Revelation. I knew without being told that this was the head of the Ascended Masters.

I repeated the story I had given the gardener, who had now withdrawn to one side in deferential fashion. When I threw in some of the information I had gained from him, the older man threw a scowl in his direction.

“Jeffrey has been with us only a short time. He may not have given you the right impression. But you’re the first to seek any kind of information about us.” The scowl remained in place. “We’re not interested in public attention.”

That I doubted. “I see.” I decided that devious approaches would not work with this man. Some straightforward prodding might be in order. “And just what are the Ascended Masters interested in?”

“What we’re interested in will soon be evident, since events are already unfolding as foretold. We’re here to fill our role. And reap God’s reward.” I had the impression his righteous manner of speaking was as much for the benefit of the two acolytes beside him as for myself. I would have liked to get him alone.

“Are you telling me you expect events to unfold in the manner described in Revelation? I wouldn’t have thought anyone these days could accept such predictions literally.” This time I did not trouble to disguise a degree of contempt in my voice.

The man seemed unfazed. “The prophecies are flexible. They were designed to apply to each generation. When God finally decides which generation is worthy to enjoy the implementation of his plans, those prophecies will be seen to apply accordingly.”

Now there was a new twist, perhaps a clever one. Its subtlety might appeal to those who still possessed a modicum of intelligence, for it disposed of the problem of Revelation’s outdated nature and the vast delay in the fulfillment of its predictions.

My next question was based on an impression about ancient sects which had emerged in my recent reading. “And I take it that your work, whatever it is, has been designed to convince God that this generation is indeed worthy?”

The head of the Masters gave me a penetrating look, as though he wasn’t quite sure what to make of me, but rather thought I might be dangerous. “We believe God is open to suggestion. Holy Scripture indicates as much. The ancients knew that when you know God’s secret name he has to listen to you. We say that when you know God’s will, he has to act. If we can convince him that now is the time to implement his long intended purposes, what greater task could anyone devote his life to?”

I made a gesture toward the old schoolhouse. “And you expect a handful of sectarian zealots in one little corner of the United States are going to force God’s hand? You think you’re finally going to persuade him to schedule the Second Coming?” By this time I was simply trying to provoke the man into some revealing outburst, whether about the group’s intentions toward the Age of Reason Foundation, or anything else.

“We have a larger network than you might think. And all of it is in the service of the truth.”

“The truth.” I looked skyward. “How fortunate that you possess such an elusive quantity. But I’d be curious to know what your views are on those who do not hold your brand of the truth. What should be done with them?”

“They, too, will serve God’s purposes. Their fate has already been laid out in the sacred writings, provided you know how to decipher it.” The man was maintaining his righteous manner, though something in his eyes suggested that he may not have been as much of a fool as his words would indicate. Did every would-be Messiah save some secret part of himself as a refuge for sanity? It crossed my mind that the complete and unalloyed fanatic could never make an effective leader. That quality was best reserved for the ground troops.

“Ah, yes. The inerrancy of the bible is so often dependent on the particular interpretation one places on it. A convenient approach.”

I looked at the two young men standing to either side of him, both listening with widened eyes. I wondered what elements in their experiences, their personalities, had led them to this spot at this juncture in their lives. “And you believe that this is part of God’s purpose as well? To alienate young men like these from their families, as I have no doubt they have been? Or to create a world for them in which competing sets of beliefs alienate people from other people, whole societies from other societies? Is that what your truth accomplishes?”

“It is not my truth. It is God’s truth.”

Despite my attempts to remain calm, an anger was rising from wells sunk deep. “Absolute Truth! The flaming sword of every sectarian group that thinks it has a direct line

to the mind of God! And where is this truth leading us? To the ruin of minds like these. To the fragmentation of society into “we” versus “them”, the elect and the damned, where the primary preoccupation is the condemnation and even the destruction of the non-believer. Is that why God created the world, to pour out bowls of wrath and fire on the vast majority of it, as Revelation would have us believe?” I was still in sufficient possession of my faculties to try to steer him toward a telltale response regarding the messages to the Foundation.

Unfortunately, he was not. Throwing me a look filled with malevolence, he said, “Come, Jeffrey, Steven. We have better things to do than stand here and listen to one of Satan’s deceivers. I do believe he was sent to tempt us.”

I threw the last vestiges of my self-control after their retreating figures. “Yes, Jeffrey; yes, Steven. Go with him! Follow his truth! Ignorance and superstition! That’s what he’s offering you. What better way to spend your lives? What better road to happiness and success? I wish you well!” They disappeared inside the schoolhouse.

Well, that was that. I had blown it. Probably it had been inevitable. Reason and religion: never the twain shall meet. The ultimate division which slices the flesh of the human organism. No medicine had yet been devised to heal the split.

As I skirted the front of my car to return to the driver’s side, I saw an old open mailbox on a post near the gate. The corner of an envelope was just visible inside. Apparently no one had emptied the box today. I acted on impulse. Three strides brought me to the thing and I reached inside. It took two seconds to pull out the letter, register the name on it, and shove it back. I didn’t bother glancing toward the house.

Another five seconds and I was into the car and driving away. Nothing in the rear view mirror indicated that my intrusion had been witnessed. I was still reproaching myself. Could I have handled the encounter any differently? Neither side had a monopoly on emotion or self-righteous dudgeon.

Well, I had a name. Robert Cherkasian. The envelope had had a rural route address on it, but no reference to the Ascended Masters. And a return address of somewhere in Philadelphia had registered on me peripherally. Philadelphia. What were the chances of that being a coincidence?

Once again I berated myself. Why had I not taken the time to make a fuller note of where the letter had come from?

Had I found out anything concrete? Although it seemed likely that this Cherkasian was the one responsible for the e-mail messages to the Foundation, I still had no idea what he intended by them. He had spoken of persuading God to implement the predictions of Revelation. That such prophecies could have their own evolving meaning for each generation, including today. The piercing, the falling stones, the bowl of fire. Was the twisted logic simply to remind God that occasions existed to fulfill such End-time prophecies? Did those occasions relate to the Age of Reason Foundation and its plans for Philadelphia? Perhaps the ‘clues’ were the Masters’ little piece of humor pointing us toward that apocalyptic potential.

The hot pavement was making the tires sing. Or perhaps it was a more sinister sound. My sensitized, adrenalin-shot brain was making the summer landscape shimmer with newly perceived forces. The scene around me became a world populated with spirits, metaphysical powers, strange disturbances not previously suspected. They hovered in the air, watching, threatening. Where before I had seen an atmosphere permeated only by the

modern rational demons of pollution, radioactivity, acid rain, I now perceived one impregnated with the spirit of vengeance, psychotic voices from the past, dire influences that induced fanaticism, aberrant behavior, turning child against parent, parent against educator, community against community. With the approach of the millennium these forces were churning themselves into an even greater frenzy. Christianity had come full circle. From obscure beginnings in a sectarian conviction that the transformation of the world was at hand, it had travelled 2000 years to return to its roots: Raptures, false and true Messiahs, a fire and brimstone destruction in the fevered visions of Revelation.

As soon as I got in I gave David a call. I could tell he'd been waiting by the phone.

"Do you know anyone named Robert Cherkasian?"

"No."

"How about a Jeffrey or a Steven? Did James Franklin mention the name of the fellow at the Campus Crusade group?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I think it was Jeffrey something."

I relayed to him all that I could of my conversation with the local Masters. David asked for certain things word for word, as close as I could remember them.

"So you think they might be just trying to put the Ascended Masters' equivalent of a hex on us. I mean, since they don't really have their finger on the apocalyptic button, it's all just a lot of empty threats, wouldn't you say?"

"My first instinct would be to say yes. But with people like that, you never know. They don't think like you or me. If their expectations are frustrated, who knows how they might react?"

I could almost hear David's silent wail over the phone. "So what do I do? Do I talk to the police, or what? Do I tell Burton?"

"Well, our own police won't do much good if the reaction is going to happen in Philadelphia. I still feel we have to tread carefully. But why don't you make some discreet inquiries with the FBI and see if they have anything on this group, especially any branch located in Philadelphia? Break the ice with someone. They may have a current interest in millenarian groups. They may take it from there. As for Burton, well, you'll have to use your own judgment on that."

David sighed. "I'll sleep on it. It doesn't sound like anything earth-shattering will happen overnight. Your suggestion may be the best. And Kevin—thanks. For jumping into the lions' den."

"Pfah! Not much of a den. One ageing lion, two pussycats."

"Let's just hope they've got no hidden claws."

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