



## Chapter 5: Divine

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## **Chapter Five**

**DIVINE**

**"Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody in order to get some thing or some place you want or you believe it has to do with how your body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you but if so doing it for your own good.**

**"Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.**

**"You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love because just because you want it. You can only earn--by practice and careful contemplation--the right to**



express it and you have to learn how to accept it. Which is to say you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God--carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love. Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it.

"How do you know you have graduated? You don't. What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn, and therefore interesting to God who is interested only in Himself which is to say He is interested only in love. Do you understand me? God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest.

"The couple who enters the sacrament of marriage and is not prepared to go the distance, is not willing to get right with the real love of God cannot thrive. They may cleave together like robins or gulls or anything else that mates for life. But if they eschew this mighty course, at the moment when all are judged for the disposition

of their eternal lives, their cleaving won't mean a thing. Amen."

Some of the amens that accompanied and followed Reverend Senior Pulliam's words were loud, others withholding; some people did not opening their mouths at all. The question, thought Anna, was not why but who. Who was Pulliam blasting? Was he directing his remarks to the young people, warning them to shape up before their selfish lives collapsed? Or was he aiming at their parents for allowing the juvenile restlessness and defiance that had been rankling him since 1973? Most likely, she thought, he was bringing the weight of his large and long Methodist education to bear down on Richard. A stone to crush his colleague's message of God as a permanent interior engine that once ignited roared, purred and moved you to do your own work as well as His--but if idle rusted, immobilizing the soul like a frozen clutch.

That must be it, she thought. Pulliam was targeting Misner. Because surely he would not stand before the bride and groom--a guest preacher asked to make a few (few!) remarks before the ceremony to a congregation made up of almost everybody in Ruby only a third of whom were members in Pulliam's church--and frighten



them to death on their wedding day. Because surely he would not insult the bride's mother and grandmother who wore like a coat the melancholy of tending broken babies, and who not only had not chastized God for this knockout blow to everything they dreamed of, but whose steadfastness seemed to increase as each year passed. And although the groom had no living parents, surely Pulliam did not intend to embarrass his aunts--to put the feet of those devout women to the fire for caring (too much perhaps?) for the sole "son" the family would ever have now that Olive's boys were dead and Dovey had none, and who had not let mourning for either of those losses tear them up or close their hearts. Surely not. And surely Pulliam was not trying to rile the groom's uncles, Deek and Steward who behaved as if God were their silent business partner. Pulliam had always seemed to admire them, hinting repeatedly that they belonged in Zion not Calvary where they had to listen to the namby-pamby sermons of a man who thought teaching was letting children talk as if they had something important to say that the world had not heard and dealt with already.

Who else would feel the sting of "God is not interested in you."  
Or wince from the burn in "if you think love is natural you are blind".

Who else but Richard Misner who now had to stand up and preside over the most anticipated wedding anyone could remember under the boiling breath of Senio "take-no-prisoners" Pulliam? Unless, of course, he was talking to her, telling her: cleave unto another if you want, but if you are not cleaving to God (Pulliam's God, that is) your marriage is not worth the license. Because he knew she and Richard were talking marriage, and he knew she helped him organize the young disobedients. "Be the Furrow".

Rogue mint overwhelmed the flower arrangements around the altar. Clumps of it, along with a phlox called Wild Sweet William, grew beneath the church windows that at eleven o'clock were opened to a climbing sun. The light falling from the April sky was a gift. Inside the church the maple pews, burnished to a military glow, set off the spring-white walls, the understated pulpit, the comfortable almost picket-fence look of the railing where communicants could kneel to welcome the spirit one more time. Above the altar, high into its clean clear space, hung a two-foot oak cross. Uncluttered. Unencumbered. No gold competed with its perfection or troubled its poise. No writhe or swoon of the body of Christ bloated its lyric thunder.

The women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no



harlot's perfume. So the voluptuous odor of phlox and sweet william, disturbed the congregation, made it reel in anticipation of a good time with plenty good food at Olive Morgan's house. There would be music by anyone: July on Olive's upright; the Men's Choir; a Kate Golightly solo; The Holy Redeemer Quartet; a dreamy-eyed boy on the steps with a mouth organ. The press of good clothing; silk dresses and starched shirts forgotten as folks leaned against trees, sat on the grass, mishandled second helpings of cream peas. There would be the shouts of sugar-drunk children; the crackle of wedding gift paper snatched from the floor and folded so neatly it seemed more valuable than the gift it had enclosed. Farming men and women would let themselves be yanked from chairs and clapped into repeating dance steps from long ago. Teenagers would laugh and blink their eyes in an effort to hide their want.

But more than joy and children high on wedding cake, they were looking forward to the union of two families, and an end to the animus that had soaked the members and friends of those families for four years. Animus animus that centered on the maybe-baby the bride had not acknowledged, announced or delivered.

Now they sat, as did Anna Flood, wondering what on earth



Reverend Pulliam thought he was doing. Why cast a pall now? Why diminish the odor of rogue mint and phlox; blunt the taste of the roast lamb and lemon pies awaiting them. Why fray the harmony; derail the peace this marriage brought?

Richard Misner rose from his seat. Annoyed, no, angry. So angry he could not look at his fellow preacher and let him see how deep the cut. Throughout Pulliam's remarks he had gazed expressionless at the Easter hats of the women in the pews. Earlier that morning he had planned five or six opening sentences to launch the sacred rite of matrimony, crafted them carefully around Revelations 19:7,9, sharpening the "wedding feast of the Lamb" image, coring it to reveal the reconciliation this wedding promised. He had segued from Revelations to Matthew 19:6, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh," to seal not only the couple's fidelity to each other but the renewed responsibilities of all Morgans and Fleetwoods.

Now he looked at the couple standing patiently before the altar and wondered whether they had understood or even heard what had been laid on them. He, however, did understand. Knew this lethal view of his chosen work was a deliberate assault on all he believed. Suddenly he understood and shared Augustine's rage at the "proud

minister" whom he ranked with the devil. Augustine had gone on to say that God's message was not corrupted by the messenger; "if [the light] should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled."

Although Augustine had not met Senior Pulliam, he must have known ministers like him. But his dismissal of them to Satan's company did not acknowledge the damage words spoken from a pulpit could wreak. What would Augustine say as anodyne to the poison Pulliam had just sprayed over everything? Over the heads of men finding it so hard to fight their instincts to control what they could and crunch what they could not; in the hearts of women tirelessly taming the predator; in the faces of children not yet recovered from the blow to their esteem upon learning that adults would not regard them as humans until they mated; of the bride and groom frozen there, clasping hands, desperate for this public bonding to pacify their private agony. Misner knew that Pulliam's words were a widening of the war he had declared on Misner's activities: tempting the young to step outside the wall, outside the town limits, shepherding them, forcing them to transgress, to think of themselves as civil warriors.

Suitable language came to mind but, not trusting himself to deliver it without revealing his deep personal hurt. Misner walked



away from the pulpit to the rear wall of the church. There he stretched, reaching up until he was able to unfasten the cross that hung there. He carried it, then, past the empty choir stall, past the organ where Kate sat, the chair where Pulliam did, on to the podium and held it before him for all to see--if only they would. See what was certainly the first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. As children, their fingers drew it in snow, sand or mud; laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen tundra and broad savannahs; as pebbles on river banks; scratched it on cave walls and out croppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Zulu, Laplanders and Druids--all had a finger-memory of this original mark. The circle was not first, nor was the parallel, nor the triangle. It was this mark, this, that lay underneath every other. This mark, displayed in the placement of human facial features. This mark of a standing human figure poised to embrace. Remove it, as Pulliam had done, and Christianity was like any and every religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into

the perpetual dark of choicelessness. Without this sign, the believer's life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits interest due on a debt that could never be paid. Or, as Pulliam put it, no one knew when he had "graduated." But with it, in the religion in which this sign was paramount and foundational, well, life was a whole other matter.

See? The execution of this one solitary black man propped up on these two intersecting lines to which he was attached in a parody of human embrace, fastened to two big sticks that were so convenient, so recognizable, so embedded in consciousness as consciousness, being both ordinary and sublime. See? His woolly head alternately rising on his neck and falling on his chest, the glow of his midnight skin dimmed by dust, streaked by gall, fouled by spit and urine, gone pewter in the hot dry wind and, finally, as the sun sank in shame, as his flesh matched the lessening light, evening, always sudden in that climate, swallowing him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merging with the nighttime sky. See how this execution, out of hundreds, marked the difference; moved the relationship between God and man from CEO and supplicant to one on one? The cross he held was abstract; the absent body was real, but



both combined pulled humans from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives. This execution made it possible to respect--freely, not in fear--one's self and one another. Which was what love was: unmotivated respect. All of which testified not to a peevish Lord who was his own love, but to one who enabled human love. Not for His own glory--never. God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and die knowing it.

But Richard Misner could not speak calmly of these things. So he stood there and let the minutes <sup>and tick</sup> tick as he held the crossed oak in his hands, ~~hoping~~ urging it to say what he could not--that not only is God interested in you; He is you.

Would they see? Would they?

For those who could see it, the groom's face was a study in travel.