



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^h "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^{wood} 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 ^{Soave} ~~Olive~~ Morgan's house. There would be
music by anyone: July on ^{the} ~~Olive's~~ upright; ^{piano} the Men's Choir; a Kate
Golightly solo; The Holy Redeemer Quartet; a dreamy-eyed boy on the
steps with a mouth organ. ^{There would be} 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. ^{Farmers,} ~~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 ^g ~~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

Ranches and wheat farming women

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 ^{dilute} 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 unhook 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 were 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 wooly head alternately rising on his neck and falling toward 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 ^{dimmed} ~~sank~~ in shame, as his flesh matched the odd lessening of afternoon light, as though it were evening, always sudden in that climate, swallowing him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merging with a false-night sky. See how this official murder, 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 ^{to} pulled ^{ed} 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 tick as he held the crossed oak in his hands, 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.

He looked up at the cross Reverend Misner was holding holding holding. Saying nothing, just holding it there until time became unbearable and the unendurable silence was sprinkled with coughs

and soft encouraging grunts. The open windows were not enough; suddenly the groom began to perspire in his beautifully cut black suit. Anger shot through him like a ^{.32 bullet} ~~bolt~~. Why was everybody using his wedding, messing up his ceremony, to extend a quarrel he could care less about? He wanted it over. Over and done with so his uncles would shut up; so Jeff and Fleet would stop spreading lies about him, so he could take his place among the married and propertied men of Ruby, so he could burn all those letters from Arnette. But especially so he could flush that Gigi bitch out of his life completely. Like sugar turning from unreasonable delight to the body's mortal enemy, his craving for her had poisoned him, rendered him diabetic, stupid, helpless. Following months of risky sweetness, she had become indifferent, bored, even hateful. In tall corn he had waited for her; in moonlight he had crept behind hen houses to meet her; spent money that was not his to entertain her; lied to get something ^{other} ~~more~~ glamorous than a truck to drive her; planted a marijuana crop for her; carried ice in August heat to cool the inside of her thighs; bought her a transistor she adored, a chenille robe she laughed at. Most of all he had loved her, an aching, humiliated ^{ing} ~~ed~~, self-loathing love that drifted from pining to stealth.

He had read the first letter he got from Arnette, but the others he put in a shoe box in his aunt's jam closet and was in a hurry to destroy them (or maybe even read them) before anybody discovered the eleven unopened envelopes posted from Langston, Oklahoma. He assumed they were all about love and grief, love in spite of grief. Whatever. But what could Arnette know of either the way he did? Had she sat through the night in a copse of shin oak to catch a glimpse? Had she trailed a beat up Cadillac all the way to Demby just to see? Had she been thrown out of a house by women? Cursed by women? And still, still been unable to stay away? Not, that is, until his uncles sat him down and gave him the law and its consequences.

So here he was, standing at the altar, his elbow holding the thin wrist of his bride; aware of the heavy breathing at his right of his soon-to-be brother-in-law; and the animosity of Billie-Marie burrowing into the back of his head. He was certain it would go on forever, this blocked rage, because Misner seemed to be struck dumb by the cross he held.

A cross the bride gazed at in terror. And she had been so happy. At last so very very happy. Free of the bleak sadness that encased her as soon as she was home from college: the unrelenting

suffocation in her parents' house; the brand new disgust that accompanied the care of her broken niece and nephew; the need for sleep that alarmed her mother, annoyed her sister-in-law and infuriated her brother and father; the flat out nothing-to-do-ness interrupted only by wonder and worry about K.D. Although he had never answered her first twelve letters, she'd kept on writing, but not mailing, forty more. One a week for the whole first year she was away. She believed she loved him ^{absolutely} ~~desperately~~ because he was all she knew about her self--which was to say, everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Marie, no one told her there was any other way to think of herself. Not her mother; not her sister-in-law. When, during her senior year, home for Easter, he asked to see her, came twice for dinner, took her to Steward's ranch to help with the Children's Day picnic, and then suggested they get married it was a miracle that lasted all spring down to this brilliant day in July. Everything perfect: her period had come and gone; her gown, made entirely of ^{Soan's} ~~Olive's~~ lace, was heavenly; the gold band tucked into her brother's vest was engraved with both their initials intertwined. The hole in her heart had closed, finally, and now, at the last minute, the preacher was acting strange, trying to hold up the

marriage, delay, maybe even destroy it. Standing there, his eyes like bullets, holding a cross as though nobody had ever seen one before.

She pressed her fingers into the arm that held hers, willing Misner to get on with it. Say it, say it! "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here... We are gathered here." Suddenly, soundlessly, in the muffled silence that Misner imposed, a tiny rent opened in exactly the place where her heart's hole had been. She held her breath and felt its increase, like a run in a stocking. Soon the little heart tear would yawn, stretch wide, wider sapping all her strength until it got what it needed to seal and permit the heart to go on beating. She was acquainted with it, thought marrying K.D. would permanently heal it, but now, waiting for "We are gathered here...", anxious for "Do you take this...", she knew better. Knew exactly what was and would always be missing.

Billie-Marie
?

With or without chaw in his mouth, Steward was not a patient man. So he was surprised to find himself calm watching Misner's behavior. All around and in back of him the congregation had begun to murmur, exchange looks, but Steward, believing he was less confounded than they were, did neither in spite of no soothing wad of tobacco. As a

small boy he had listened to Big Daddy describe a sixty-five mile journey he'd taken to bring supplies back to Haven. It was 1920. A sickness called rocking pneumonia gripped Haven and Big Daddy was one of the few able bodies able to go. He went alone. On horseback. He got what he needed in X County and, with the medicines bundled under his coat, the other supplies tied to the horse, he lost his way and found himself after sunset unsure of which way to go. He smelled, but could not see, a campfire that seemed to be fairly close by on his left. Then, suddenly, to his right he heard whoops, music and gunshots. But he saw no lights in that direction. Stuck in darkness with invisible strangers on both sides he had to decide whether to ride toward the smoke and meat smells or toward the music and guns. Or neither. The campfire might be warming robbers; the music might be amusing lynchers. His horse decided. Smelling others of its kind it trotted toward the campfire. There Big Daddy found three Sac and Fox men sitting near a fire hidden in a hole. He dismounted, approached carefully, hat in ^{hand} ~~hat~~, and said "Evening." The men welcomed him and learning of his destination warned him against entering the town. The women there fight with their fists, they said; the children are drunk; the men don't argue or debate, but

speak only with firearms; liquor laws don't apply. They had come to rescue a family member, who had been drinking in there for twelve days. Already one of them was searching for him. What's the name of the town Big Daddy asked. Pura Sangre they answered. At its northern edge was a sign: No Niggers. At its southern edge a cross. Big Daddy spent several hours with them and, before light, thanked them and left--backtracking to find his way home. When Steward heard the story the first time he could not close his mouth, thinking of that moment when his father was all alone in the dark, guns to the right, strangers to the left. But the grown ups laughed and thought of something else. "No niggers at one end; a cross at the other and the devil loose in between." Steward didn't get it. How could the devil be anywhere near a cross? What was the connection between the two signs? Since that time, however, he had seen crosses between the titties of whores; military crosses spread for miles; crosses on fire in negros' yards, crosses tattoed on the forearms of dedicated killers. Whatever Misner was thinking, he was wrong. A cross was no better than the user. Now he fingered his mustache and saw his twin shift his feet and grab the pew in front of him.

^{Soan}
Olive, sitting next to Deek, hearing him breathe, knew she had made a mistake. She was about to touch her husband on the arm to caution him from rising when Misner lowered the cross at last, and spoke the opening words of the ceremony. Deek sat back and cleared his sinuses, but the damage was done: peace and goodwill were shattered. The reception at her house would be a further digest of the problem and, unbeknownst to others, ^{Soan} Olive had made the mistake of inviting Connie and her house guests to the wedding reception. ^(over)
Finally Kate Golightly touched the organ keys, and ^{when} the couple turned around to face the congregation, ^{Soan} Olive cried. Partly at the sad bright smiles of the bride and groom, partly in ^{dread} anticipation of the mess ^(over) ~~about to unfold.~~

^{fence}
The children shone like agate; the women were brilliant in their still fresh Easter clothes; the men's shoes squeaky new glistened like melon seeds. At the beginning everyone was trying hard not to rile one another because the division between Misner-thinking people and Pulliam-thinking people was clear. Reverend Pulliam ^{was} ~~is~~ there bending toward Mrs. Fleetwood, nodding and smiling. Misner ^{had} ~~has~~ not arrived, ~~nor has Anna Flood.~~ The laughter ^{is} ~~was~~ low, cautious. The coos

She was about to hostess
one of the biggest messes
Ruby had ever seen.

~~all set to return~~ ^{set roaming now and}
~~unleashed~~ malice, ~~unleashed~~ ^{unleashed} ~~unleashed~~
on its way to her house.

over the gift table excessive. Everything ^{was} ~~is~~ carefully cheerful for a while ^{Then} ~~until~~ the Cadillac ^{Came.} ~~arrives~~. It took just ten minutes for the people in the parlor and on the porch to give up trying to concentrate on the bride's dress, the food, the antics of sugar-drunk children because it was hard, too hard to ignore the scene developing around the Oven.

Connie did not come, but her boarders did. Mavis drove the Cadillac with Gigi and Seneca in the back and a somebody new in the passenger seat. ^{None of them was} ~~They were not~~ dressed for a wedding. They piled out

of the car looking like Go-go girls: painted eyes, no lipstick, obviously no underwear, no stockings. Jezebel's storehouse raided to decorate

arms, earlobes, necks, ankles and even a nostril. ^{TK} ~~Mavis and Olive~~ ^{Soan} ~~chatting on the lawn are uncomfortable.~~ The other women survey the food tables, say "hi" and wonder if there is anything other than

lemonade and punch to drink. There isn't, so they do what a few other young people have already done: drift out of ^{Soan and Deacon Morgan's} ~~Olive's~~ yard and stroll past ^{Ann's} ~~Anna Flood's~~ ^{store} to the Oven. The few local girls that are there clump together and withdraw to the oak tree, leaving the territory to the Poole boys: Apollo, Brood and Hurston. The Seawrights: Timothy

and Spider. To Destry, Vane and and Roy. Menus joins them, but Jeff does not. Neither does the watchful groom. Dovey is removing the fat from a ham slice when the music hits. She cuts her finger and sucks it while Otis Redding screams "Awwwww, lil girl...." Out side the window and on down the road the beat and the heat are merciless. The Convent women are dancing, throwing their arms over their heads they did this and that and then the other. They smile and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies. The local girls look over their shoulders and snort. Brood, Apollo and Spider, steel muscled farm boys, sway and snap their fingers. Hurston sings accompaniment. Two small girls ride their bikes over; wide-eyed they watch the dancing women. One of them, with amazing hair, asks can she borrow a bike. Then another. They ride the bikes down ^{Central} Main street with no regards for what the breeze does to ther long flowered skirts, or how pumping pedals plumped their breasts. One coasts with her ankles on the handlebars. Another rode the handlebars with Brood on the seat behind her. The other two laugh with the rest of the boys.

Anna and Kate walk to the edge of ^{Soan's / the ?} ~~Olive's~~ garden.

"Which one?" whispered Anna.

"That one there" said Kate. "The one with the rag for a blouse."

"That's a halter," said Anna.

"Halter? Looks like a starter to me."

"She the one K.D. was messing with?"

"Yep."

"I know that one, ^{there's} ~~Mavis~~. She comes in the store. Who the other two?"

"Beats me."

"Look. There goes Billie-Marie."

"Naturally."

tr. tk

The hair at the top of her head, sectioned off with a red plastic barret, would have been a small pompdour or a curl had it been longer than two or three inches. In the event, it was neither. Just a tuft held rigid by the child's barret. Two other hair clips, one yellow, one powder blue, also held fingerfuls of hair at her temples. Her dark velvet face was on display and rendered completely unseen by the biscuit size discs of scarlet rouge, the fuschia lipstick drawn

crookedly beyond the rim of her lips, the black eyebrow pencil that trailed down toward her cheekbones. Everything else about her was dazzle and clunk: white plastic earrings, copper bracelets, pastel beads at her throat and much, much more where all that came from in the bags she carried: two BOAC carrier bags and a woven metal purse shaped like a cigar box. She wore a white cotton halter and a little bitty red skirt. The hose on her short legs, a cinnamon color thought agreeable to black women's legs, was as much a study in running as her high heels were in run-over. Inner arm skin and a small, sturdy paunch suggested she was about fifty years old, but she could have been eighty or thirty. The dance she danced on the up escalator, the rolling hips, the sway of her head called to mind a by gone era of slow grind in a badly lit room of couples. Not the electric go-go pace of 1976. The teeth could have been done anywhere: Kingston, Jamaica or Pass Partner, Louisiana; Addis Abbaba or Warsaw. Stunning gold, they dated her smile while giving it the seriousness the rest of her clothing withheld.

Most eyes looked away from her--down at the floating metal steps under foot or out at the Christmas decorations enlivening the

department store. Children, however, and Dee Dee Truelove stared.

California Christmasses are always a treat and this one promised to be a marvel. Brilliant skies and heat turned up the gloss of artificial snow, plumped the green and gold, pink and silver wreaths. Dee Dee, laden with packages, just managed to avoid tripping off the down escalator. The woman with the rouge and gold teeth distracted her. In spite of the difference in circumstances, Dee Dee and the woman favored one another. There was no question that both were unattractive, but once in a while a close friend would look at Dee Dee, shiver, and wonder if she was more than that--actually revolting. The shiver would pass quickly, however, along with the friend's shame at having had such a thought because the earrings that hung from Dee Dee's lobes were 18 carat; the boots on her feet were handmade; her jeans custom made and the buckle on her leather belt was handsomely worked silver. In addition Dee Dee drove a red Toyota with built-in 8 track tape deck, and lived in a magnificent house with two servants. Her father was a lawyer with a small client list but two were big-time, cross-over black entertainers. As long as Milton Truelove kept them on top, he didn't need to acquire more, although

he kept a look-out eye for other young performers who might hit the charts and stay there.