



Chapter 5: Divine

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Chapter Five

DIDINE

"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 open 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 Soane'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 Senior "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. "We Are 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 maplewood 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.