

Thomas Jefferson came naked out of Lake Michigan, the waves choppy about his ankles. He saw a woman staring at him. He simply gave a raised-eyebrow glance, one not associated with mortification, just a slight form of bother at being pulled out of an exalted past for scrutiny.

“You are Mr. Jefferson of Virginia.”

“I have Virginia roots, yes ma’am,” he responded with barely a look of annoyance. “You have had the occasion to know me?”

“I’ve seen your bust.”

“You’ve had the advantage of me.”

Emily Dickinson turned her eyes downward, not because of Jefferson’s play on words. And not wholly because of the blue body exposed bare to the world but more that she felt so aware of where she found herself, far from her Amherst rooms. Her darting eyes, while fearless, seemed to need a place alone to reflect on this incongruent imagery on a beach.

“I have no intent to alarm you, dear lady, either by my form or words.”

“Far from alarmed, sir,” she said. “My response is because of my own presence here more than yours.” Without looking up at him, she slipped away to the ornate window overlooking the lake’s bluff.

He could feel she was watching him. He looked over at her. Blond curls scattered. Beneath the quilt was a body carefully exercised, skin whitened by the wind of the north. He wished she would go away.

“We should go away,” Clare said.

“Meaning?”

“Take off. Just the two of us. It would give us the chance to really get to know each other. Get away from all this church crap.”

Stephen had known Clare Zeedotter when they were just kids in elementary school but hadn't seen her since they were in the fifth grade when her family moved away to Kalamazoo. He had some good memories of her back then when they were childhood sweethearts but after living with her less than a month he wished she hadn't come back into his life.

“We know quite a lot about each other already.”

“I doubt you'd recognize my real self if you tripped over it on the street.”

“I really can't get away right now. There's too much going on.”

“You know within a week you could arrange whatever you'd need to and get out of here. And if your church wanted to dump you for it, that would be the best thing whether you realize it or not. Let's just go someplace where we can be alone with each other. No ministerial duties. Get away from your music for awhile – away from my art litter.”

He glanced at the ceramic pieces about the room, even on the floor.

“Where did you have in mind?”

“I don't know, Stephen. Some place. China. Spain. Hollywood. I don't think it matters.”

He watched Clare sit up, pulling pillows behind her, and take a cigarette from the pack next to the bed.

“I know. You don't have to say it again. I'll probably quit at some point. Just give me time.”

She huddled her shoulders as she lit the cigarette, circling around herself regardless of anything she said about their getting to know each other better. Even curled up in bed at night after sex, her back toward him, she didn't like to be touched.

“Just going somewhere doesn't change things,” he said, opening a window for ventilation despite the cold air coming in. “Where is it you'd want us to be?”

“Wherever. I told you it doesn't matter.”

“I don't think it's the geography that matters. Besides, would we need *Hollywood* for us to see each other?”

Clare blew smoke straight out in front of her and looked at him.

“Is it you don't want to go anywhere right now or is it you don't want to go with me?”

He glanced around. The rectory bedroom seemed more a place for work than sleep – desk, computer, a stand-up composer's desk, musical scores and instruments – but with a king-size bed. Clare's pieces lay about like occupying forces left to secure a territory.

Why had he let her move in with him? It probably had a lot to do with their early connections, with her having shared in a part of his childhood, from kindergarten through the fifth grade. And there was also that she was attractive, in a way that she seemed ready any moment to erupt into passionate sarcasm. He could remember those same looks from when she was a young girl. But even so she now left him feeling bored and usually annoyed with her for no apparent reason.

“Right now, the only place I want to go is in search of a blurry character.”

“How about going to Virginia, then? Or Washington? I thought you were getting somewhere with Jefferson.”

“Perhaps he's used up for awhile. There's been a lot written.”

“Then why try to use him?”

He was sure she really didn't care what his reasons were so he simply said, “Maybe because Jefferson was a fairly good fiddler.”

But for himself he tried to justify his thoughts and efforts a little more seriously. He felt Jefferson had passed around the collection plate, you might say, to the ancients for ideas that might guide the formation of the American system of government – a *way of life* to some extent. It seemed the nation had been able to go a long way on those noble ideas. They helped a people keep creating who they were and who they were becoming, particularly through their relationship to the ideas of liberty and equality that Jefferson helped bring to the forefront of a nation . . . setting up the tension today of trying to snatch the pursuit of happiness – and especially a system of values – from those ideas in conflict. Forms of tithes, if he stuck with the collection plate image.

Clare stared at him impatiently. A potter in a teddie that exposed one of her breasts in the bed of a composer and priest who now didn't want to be with her. Who, she probably saw, was not only still looking for an indistinct Founding Father but also the right woman for his life.

“So what if you're struggling with this particular work.” She shrugged. “If I start a pot I don't like, I throw it on the floor. Sweep up the dead pieces later. I don't know why you even go through all this ‘dialogue’ shit. It just gets in the way of creating your music.”

He couldn't keep his irritation from showing but didn't say anything. Clare put out her cigarette, using one of her ceramic pieces as an ashtray.

“I'm going back to sleep.”

Suddenly the cellphone buzzed, startling them. Standing by the desk, he answered it. It was his friend, Cliotus Wilson. Cli was an assistant professor of history that Stephen had known most of his life. They had scheduled their usual Saturday lunch, but Cli wanted to meet earlier.

“We’re not up, yet, my friend.”

“So, I’ve caught the specter at a low point in its historical passage. Rise or fall?”

He glanced at Clare. She still sat up, one nipple outside the teddie, but her eyes had wandered to a ceramic pot on the floor. Her mind seemed far away, yet bound by her Midwestern upbringing. Even her voice didn’t range far beyond a cynicism mothered by the comforts of a middle-class family.

“Neither.”

“It’s one of those mornings. I better talk to you later. By the way, I found a new book last night. I bought him and have him here with me now to give me fleeting pleasure.”

“We’ll talk about him at lunch. What’s his name?”

“*History: Death Warmed Over.*”

Stephen ended the call smiling.

He closed the window and wandered about the bedroom, not looking at Clare, gently moving her pottery out of the way with his foot. She slipped down in the bed and pulled the covers over her head. He stood quietly. In a few minutes, he could tell she had fallen back asleep.

Emily Dickinson stood next to Stephen when he wandered over to the window. He looked out at the beach below.

Jefferson pulled on the knee-length jacket he'd left on the sand and walked along the shore – his wet pubic hair seen dangling from his skeletal frame as the breeze blew the jacket open.

He thought Emily Dickinson was pale though her eyes were unfaded. She had aged well by staying out of the sun. Underground, as it were.

“How old was she when she died?”

“Fifty-five,” Stephen answered. “Kidney disease, they think.”

Jefferson pulled his collar up to protect his neck from the wind.

“She was a poet, you say. Tell me, how would you characterize her work? Briefly.”

“It has a tingling quality,” he said.

“Out of scientific curiosity, with no disrespect intended to Miss Dickinson, could we speculate her remains are in a virgin state?”

He was surprised at the question but assumed Jefferson was thinking about the relationship between artistic ability or inspiration and physical states. He stood quietly for a moment at the window, with Emily Dickinson's shoulder almost touching his, before he answered.

“Her remains, I'd say, are just as she lived – affected most by words.”

“Are you suggesting that words contributed to her becoming a woman?”

“I suspect that, like you, words gave her her world. How she embraced the world. As she matured it was really only words she let up the stairs of her house – that she let enter her rooms.”

“The house as refuge. I also have that in common with her. Monticello was *my* refuge. My womb. Not unlike my words.”

Stephen looked at the horizon. The rising sun was rimmed with red tissue breaking away in strings, creating, at least to his composer's ears, heartrending sounds.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of what might be a refuge of the heart for him. He immediately saw the house his great-grandparents had passed on to him, though for now he lived at the rectory of Domwith Chapel and Peace Center. Everything to do with their house seemed suspended in time back to when his great-grandmother, GrandTatyana, nee Tarakhanova, lived in it. She had had a long life. Over ninety. Had survived the Russian Revolution in St. Petersburg and died in a distant beachfront property in Michigan. He supposed their house was something of a refuge for him, but wouldn't call it a womb. The womb, he would guess, were the fields where his mother, the child of sharecroppers gone North, taught him music as she worked to help pay the bills, while his father sought something in retreat.