

Chapter Ten

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The next ten days were spent in something of a haze. I found I could not allow myself to proceed on the basis of the radical conclusion I had reached until I reconsidered the steps I had taken to get there. I reread the whole of Paul and the other New Testament epistles. I revisited the Commentaries and Indexes of the Muratorian Project. I rechecked my reasoning, considered the possibility of alternative explanations. None offered themselves in any convincing fashion. I decided I would tentatively accept the verdict that there had been no historical Jesus, at least until I had the chance to delve more deeply into the workings of ancient world mythology and see if Paul's dying and rising Christ could fit into them. And I needed to investigate the question of how the Gospels had arisen. If there were a way to see this process as developing out of a previously mythical Christ, I felt the case would be reasonably complete. I could then set about fashioning my novel.

That task, I realized, would not be easy. Instead of a vital central character whose fame and influence was unparalleled in world history, I had only a mythical idea. Instead of the colorful tale of a life and ministry, the drama of final action-packed hours in a trumped-up trial and ignominious execution, I had snippets from the pages of the Jewish scriptures, threaded and spun by imaginative minds into a morality tale whose action had never unfolded on earth.

Early Christianity no longer presented the picture of a reasonably unified movement, sprouting out of a single set of circumstances at a single place and point in time. Instead, its picture was one of diversity, of competitive doctrines. The new religion had been born in a thousand places, a spontaneous generation out of religious and philosophical trends of the age. Wisdom and the Logos. The intermediary Son. The coming Messiah. All of it fuelled by a very human passion for salvation, mystical yearnings. It was shaped by a time which held the conviction that the End was near, that the world was about to be transformed into a new order, commanded by God and directed by the Son when he arrived from heaven.

In fact, one of the many things I had noted in passing during my rereading of Paul and the epistle writers, was the lack of any sense that this anticipated arrival of the Son at the End-time—the Parousia, as it was called in Greek: the “appearance” of Jesus—was a *second* coming, a *return* of Christ. Rather, one received the distinct impression that this would be the first time anyone had set eyes on him outside of visionary inspiration.

‘Come, O Lord,’ pleaded Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians. The writer of 1 Peter promised glory and honor, ‘when Jesus Christ is revealed.’ Several writers, including John the prophet of Revelation, urged that ‘the Coming One’ would be here soon, with no suggestion that he had already come in the recent past. Paul, in looking ahead to the hour of the Lord’s descent from heaven, could say, in Romans 8:22, that ‘Up to the present, the whole created universe groans in all its parts as if in the pangs of childbirth,’ showing no sign that any of the universe’s pains had been assuaged by Jesus’ recent incarnation. In Romans 13:11-12, he had impressed on his readers how critical was the present moment. ‘Salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. It is far on in the night; day is near.’ It seemed clear that in Paul’s mind no dawn or salvation had arrived with the first advent of Jesus. There had been no recent pivot point in God’s ongoing process of salvation history.

All lay in the future, and only the missionary movement of which Paul was a part, the revelation of the secret of Christ, had begun the process toward achieving the long-awaited dawn.

Yes, indeed, that novel would be a challenge. It would be the story of a movement, not a founder figure. Of a deity held in the minds of visionaries and believers, not a man. Paul might be the story's natural focus, but that story would have to range beyond the boundaries of his work, for Jesus was an idea that had seized an age.

Yet I felt a curious lassitude about getting down to the next phase of research. And so when David Porter called, two weeks after the stormy night of revelation when the universe had lurched in a new direction, I was happy for the excuse to set it aside for a short time.

Our first meeting to plan strategy for coverage of the creationism hearing and to discuss my post as publicist for the Age of Reason Foundation was set for the following Monday at the University. Burton Patterson himself would attend, along with a Science Faculty Professor who was on the executive of the Foundation. In addition, we were to be joined by Phyllis Gramm, a freelance writer and columnist on science and social issues for an eastern newspaper chain. She had been at the launch party at the Patterson estate, but I had not been introduced to her. David said she had expressed some interest in the Foundation's activities and goals.

"If we can get a columnist of her caliber on our side, we'll be halfway there. From what I've seen, she's got an open and creative mind. I'm sure you'll find yourselves with a lot of things in common."

I refrained from pointing out that he had said the same thing about Sylvia. "What's her background, do you know?"

David chuckled. "As to education, I have no idea. As to her personal philosophy regarding...certain issues of interest to us, we'll have to see." He paused for effect. "One thing I have heard is that she's an ex-nun."

"You're kidding. How long ago?"

"Oh, I gather it's been some time. I didn't really get a chance to see her following the night at Burton's. She went out of town on some assignment. She called me a few days ago wanting to find out what new developments there were. I filled her in over the phone and invited her to our meeting, rather on the spur of the moment. Burton had some misgivings but I convinced him it was OK. I have a good feeling about her. She'll certainly bring a different perspective to any discussion."

"No doubt. But can we talk about everything in front of her?"

"Oh, we'll be starting our meeting an hour before the time I gave her. That should give us enough time to get our new resident publicist wound up and properly programmed."

"Hmmp. I'll try to remember to bring along my wind-up key."

"I thought Shauna kept that."

I had no ready retort. I was losing my touch.

As it turned out, the pre-Phyllis part of our meeting was shorter than an hour and not particularly confidential. Patterson arrived late on this beautiful Monday afternoon, and while we waited David introduced me to Theodore Weiss, formerly of the University of Florence, now Professor of Theoretical Physics at our own Alma Mater, a post he had filled

barely a year. When I remarked on his American accent so quickly acquired, both shared a laugh at my expense, since Weiss was a native of Long Island and a graduate of Columbia.

“I spent only four years in Italy. Not long enough to get the sounds of Manhattan taxicabs out of my brain, let alone my speech patterns.” Weiss was a good decade my junior, stocky and short with a head of black wiry hair that would have done the young Einstein proud.

“I hear the cabbies in Italy are even wilder than the ones in Manhattan.”

“In Rome you take your life in your hands anywhere in their vicinity. Florence is a little more sedate. Beautiful city, but a dowager’s beauty. You can only apply so much makeup to cover the ravages of age. The Renaissance was a long time ago.”

David said, just a touch ironically, “If Burton were here, he’d say we’ll create a new one.”

Weiss’s voice had a jovial boom to it. “Then I’m glad I came back just in time for the event. But we’ll have to go some to produce a new Michelangelo. Or Mirandola.”

Patterson himself arrived a short time after, without apologizing for the delay. It struck me that his good-natured cordiality was of the magnanimous sort, which only those who assume that their own opinions will inevitably win out can display. But then, I had adopted my own assumption that he was still harboring predatory designs on Shauna, which may have colored my judgment of the man. The fact that he made no mention of her during the course of the afternoon I naturally took as suspicious.

In the seminar room which David had commandeered for the occasion, small talk about the response to the Foundation’s proposals over the Net was followed by Patterson’s report on the ACLU’s final preparations for the upcoming hearing in Philadelphia. It would be our task to start thinking about how to publicize the Age of Reason Foundation’s involvement in the court case—which was largely to say, Patterson’s own. The actual legal procedures lay entirely in his hands, in conjunction with the ACLU; the Foundation would be little more than a figurehead lying behind Patterson himself. Our new litigator must have presented a compelling case to the ACLU that such an arrangement, from the point of view of public perception, would be advantageous. Perhaps the public’s eye was felt to be a bit jaundiced where the ACLU was concerned, and introducing a new kid on the block, fresh-faced and backing someone of the stature of Burton Patterson, would draw more favorable reviews. I felt an intense curiosity about this whole aspect of the affair, but I judged it not my place—or particularly politic—to ask pointed questions about it.

On the other hand, regardless of the benefits to Patterson and the ACLU in having the new Age of Reason Foundation on the masthead, there was no reason why the benefits could not flow in the other direction. I assumed it would be my job to ensure that the Foundation would grab its share of the limelight. I certainly resolved to make it my job.

Glancing at his watch, perhaps in anticipation of Phyllis Gramm’s imminent arrival, David steered the meeting toward that very subject: my position as ‘resident publicist’. He proposed the level of remuneration, which was certainly adequate, and I had no reason to object to it. The amount had obviously been cleared ahead of time with the Treasurer of the Foundation and Patterson himself.

In any case, it was impossible at this stage to tell how much work would go into such a responsibility. I graciously accepted.

When we began the discussion of just what sort of approach the new publicist would take, I took out a couple of sheets of folded paper from my jacket pocket. Over the weekend

I had jotted down a few ideas, mostly to do with the issue of creationism and the impending court hearing at the end of June, although I had added some very informal ideas about the Foundation's second planned "focus", the upcoming end of the millennium and the opportunities it offered. I had not brought a briefcase with me. Neither the occasion nor the day had seemed that formal. We were here to promote rationality to the world at large; as Patterson might have put it, to try to cast light into still-darkened corners. We needed to project the image of a new everyman, a new exhilaration in the refreshing breezes of reason and humanistic philosophy which was now available to all under the sun, a sun as part of a rational, understandable universe. Or so my notes had it.

It struck me suddenly that the narrow walls of the seminar room of a university seemed altogether too confining, too elitist. They would surely cramp our own inspiration, not to mention our image. In fact—

The thought had time to enter my mind but not reach my mouth, when a female figure came into view in the hall outside and stopped at the doorway. David turned and stood up.

"Phyllis! We're glad you could make it." His gesture drew her into the room. "Let me introduce you."

The first honors went to Patterson, of course, even though they had already met at the gathering on his estate. While he was cordial in greeting her again, I detected a hint of wariness, as though media people could be a two-edged sword: an avenue to exposure but a hazard as well.

Weiss, on introduction, fairly beamed at her. Phyllis Gramm was a pert, attractive woman in her late thirties or so, a bundle of energy as I was gradually to learn. I could not envision her wrapped in a nun's habit and pausing every three hours for prayer and contemplation. Perhaps that was a reason for the failed career.

"And a fellow scribbler, Mr. Kevin Quinter," said David, extending his arm toward me, drawing the two of us together who lived by the pen. Phyllis' handshake was as spirited as her expression, though there was a no-nonsense overtone about the woman which made Patterson's touch of caution understandable. I put on my best relaxed smile.

"Mr. Quinter's scribbles are bound to be more enduring than mine, I'm sure," Phyllis said genially. "Today's issues are only important until the next one comes along. Sometimes my columns are out of date before they even get into print."

"I'm sure you've written columns with a longer shelf life than that," I responded. "Some of the issues we're facing today are going to shape the future. A well-turned analysis by a prominent columnist can have a significant influence, I imagine."

"You're too kind."

Patterson spoke up casually, with only a trace of judicial manner. "They say the pen is mightier than the sword, but sometimes a good columnist can wield her pen more like a sword. I image you've drawn blood in your day."

I wasn't sure what motive Patterson had for expressing such a thought, but Phyllis seemed to take no offense. "Oh, I try to keep the body count down. I'd rather stimulate someone's thought processes than his white cell production." She had a ready wit, and an obvious mastery of language. I was curious to know if she had ever tried her hand at more "enduring" literary production.

David made as if to invite Phyllis to sit, gesturing toward one side of the oval table, but this was the moment to voice my interrupted thought. "Before we let Phyllis get settled in, I

would like to suggest that we could move to less constricting surroundings. It seems more appropriate to talk about fresh air and evolution in places where they're actually to be experienced...wouldn't you say?"

Four faces were now looking at me with various mixtures of surprise and expectation. I realized that I'd better make this sound good.

I looked at David. "What about Philosophers' Walk? I haven't been there in a few years, but they haven't let it get overgrown, have they? Or turned it into a skateboard alley?"

"Uh, no. I'm sure it's still there. I haven't been over myself this year."

"It comes out above the Arboretum. We could sit down and look across the bowl. The sun should be gorgeous. It'd be a great place to discuss the future shape of the universe. And whether a group of insignificant creatures like ourselves can possibly kick it in a direction it may not want to go."

Patterson gave a little grunt, as though linking the idea of insignificance with himself was a novel concept. But Phyllis chirped up, "Sounds great! Where is this place?" She was not a native of the city.

David explained. "Oh, you cross the creek by a little footbridge down behind the Engineering Building. There's a fairly wide pathway through the trees they call Philosophers' Walk. Runs about a quarter mile. It's University property, but fortunately they haven't needed it for expansion yet. It goes up at a bit of a slope and ends at the top of the hill above the city Arboretum. The Symphony people have concerts there later in the spring and summer. There used to be stone seats at the crest when we were students. Great view. I haven't checked it out since coming back, but it should be dry enough now."

"We haven't had any rain for several days," I pointed out.

Phyllis had made up her mind, and since she wielded the sharpest pen, that was that. "I'm sure Mr. Patterson's sense of adventure is up to it," she said with a sparkle.

Patterson gave the briefest of glances down to his shoes. All of us were dressed casually, though for him, casual was probably a matter of degree. He shrugged and gave Phyllis a broad smile. At least his outward demeanor was up to it.

"Sounds like a splendid idea."

2

Going by way of Weiss's office, where the sun-sensitive Physics Professor picked up hat and sunglasses—Phyllis and I were already carrying our own pairs—we made our way across campus to Fisherman's Creek, a meandering affair which at this time of year was a little too wide and active to ford on foot. Phyllis, I had the feeling, might have been tempted to take off whatever was needed and attempt the crossing, and I wondered what Patterson's response to that challenge would have been. As it was, a wooden footbridge which had seen healthier days spanned the 30-foot stream, a tributary of the city's one notable river.

It was about 2:30 in the afternoon. The sky had been painted blue with a seamless roller and afterward some artist, perhaps feeling that something was missing, had added a few deft touches to the corners and edges, wisps of creamy white shaded at the rims. The old wood of the bridge vibrated with a satisfying clunk beneath our feet. On the other side, a path led into a wooded area, not as thickly grown as it would be during the height of summer, I

remembered, but enough to deny a line of sight much more than a dozen yards through its green density.

We paused at the entrance to the woods. “Philosophers’ Walk. And what famous thinkers have trod this path, to give it its name?” Phyllis was not taking notes, unless they were mental ones, but I had a feeling she was evaluating the scene as an opening to some future column.

“More likely horny undergrads, to tell you the truth,” David answered, with a touch of cheek. “There may not have been too much thinking going on along here.” Was there a twinkle in that eye for Phyllis, it suddenly occurred to me? In our student days, David had always been reticent toward the girls. Shyness, I had put it down to. At our reunion he had told me that he never married.

“How long will it take us to reach the other end?” asked Weiss.

“Depends on your walk, I suppose. And your philosophizing. Twenty minutes, maybe.”

Patterson gestured toward the beckoning trail, like a general urging on his ragtag troop. “Let’s be on our way, then. Stragglers will not be accommodated—or fed!”

“There’s a kiosk at the Arboretum,” David informed us. “Though it may not be open this early in the summer.”

“Nuts and leaves it is, then,” announced Phyllis, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself. Was she fantasizing about being lost in the woods with four men? That too, I realized, was a politically incorrect thought these days.

The path was broad enough to walk three abreast, but we fell into pairs, with myself the odd man out. Patterson led the way with Weiss at his side, I came next, and David and Phyllis brought up the rear. Years of tramping had levelled the surface of the trail and eliminated the grass, but a few innocent spring shoots had emerged which had not yet been ground down. It was summer students who made the most use of Philosophers’ Walk, I recalled, and the start of this year’s classes was still a week away.

Under the trees, the air was cool and invigorating. Dappled sunlight slid down the tree trunks. To make things idyllic, it was just a little too early for the predatory insects. All in all, I told myself, a brilliant suggestion. The only trouble was, did the outing still constitute a meeting, and would we get anything further discussed?

David must have read my mind. Behind me, he said, “Phyllis asked me when I spoke to her over the phone last week what our definition of rationality was. I had to confess we hadn’t gotten around to giving it one yet. The best I could manage was that it’s one of those things you can recognize when you see it, but giving it a simple, concrete definition is more elusive.” He paused, as if waiting for someone to jump in. There were no immediate volunteers. “So I told her all would be cleared up when she came to our meeting today, and that no doubt our new resident publicist could give her a ready answer.”

I jerked my head around and looked askance at his mischievous grin. “Oh, you did, did you? I didn’t realize I’d be put to work so quickly. Well, let me see.”

Resuming my stride, I glanced off into the passing woods. My eye was drawn upward by the soaring lines of the tree trunks, until I realized that this might be construed as an appeal to heaven for inspiration—hardly an auspicious prelude to a definition of rationality. I brought my eye down to more earthly levels, which included the broad backs of Patterson and Weiss trudging ahead of me. They, too, seemed to be awaiting my enlightened words.

“I guess any definition of rationality would have to include the principles of logic, and making reasoned inferences from concrete evidence. One arrives at a rational conclusion because certain things which can be observed and evaluated point in that direction. Moreover, you don’t make assumptions that are not supportable. We use our intellect in the process, not our emotions. And certainly not wishful thinking.” So far so good, I hoped.

“But can we observe and evaluate entirely on an intellectual level?” Phyllis asked. “Don’t our senses come into play as well? The senses can sometimes be misleading.”

David interrupted, “The Empiricists of the Enlightenment said that nothing enters the mind which has not come through the senses. Reason without involving the medium of the senses was considered an impossibility on any practical level.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “despite the ancient world idea, mostly thanks to Plato, that all philosophizing could simply be conducted in the mind, without any reference to the outside world. But today we would probably say that our senses are the tools of reason, and properly so. Science has been devoting itself for a long time to perfecting those sensory tools, and adding to them. I would say that the things we reason about should never be divorced from the human senses or the scientific instruments we’ve developed to provide an extension of them. As soon as you postulate something which can’t be verified or even pointed to by any sensory apparatus, you’re on very shaky ground. It opens up the door to practically anything anyone *wants* to believe.”

“But what about those who would include mystical experiences and intuition as part of the human sensory apparatus?” Phyllis objected. “Can they not have any validity?” I had the feeling she was arguing on a theoretical level, not necessarily from personal conviction.

“Well, the problem with those sorts of things is that they can never be shown to be other than subjective. There is no scientific way to measure or observe them. You can’t rely on intuition, even if it’s occasionally accurate. In most cases, sense perception is empirically verifiable. We can call on an unlimited number of other people who perceive the same thing, and we can support those perceptions by scientific instruments which are not subjective. But how do you measure a mystical experience? How do you compare it with someone else’s in any objective fashion?”

“You can’t,” Weiss piped up, glancing back at me. “Astrology, angels, energy flows that can’t be detected by scientific instruments: they all come in the door. I attended a conference a couple of years ago at the New York Academy of Sciences. It was called the Flight from Science and Reason. What’s happening today is that proponents of the paranormal and the metaphysical are rejecting science wholesale as a reliable avenue to knowledge—because, of course, it hasn’t supplied proof for the kind of ‘knowledge’ they’ve got an interest in. They say ‘science can’t help us understand the spiritual world,’ without allowing for the fact that if science gives us no evidence that such a world exists, then their assumption that it does is founded solely on subjective interpretation and wishful thinking. Instead of faulting or even questioning their own assumptions, they fault science for not supporting the unsupported. But if scientific measurement detects nothing during a so-called ‘out-of-body’ experience, or forces that could be operating to make astrology work, or the paranormal, what kind of ground do they think they are standing on? A psychologist in the audience denounced one of the panels for not allowing for the validity of alternative therapies in treating mental disturbances. He called himself a ‘Past Lives Psychotherapist’. Does he think this sort of fantasy is going to be conducive to mental health?”

“I understand that over a third of Americans believe in reincarnation,” David remarked.

“Yes, only a little more than believe in alien abductions. For the New Agers, there’s no death, only ‘energy transformations’. Though why they find that comforting, I’m not sure.”

Phyllis stepped in again. “But these kinds of subjective experiences, as you call them, they do exist. Lots of people have them; and have always had them. And when they compare notes, there are similarities.”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “But why look beyond the common propensities of the human brain to explain them, when science can detect nothing outside it? And the research into reincarnation and near-death experiences is notoriously biased. Yet these same people can condemn science as being tainted by the scientists’ so-called ‘values and presuppositions’. Some of them go so far as to say that scientific knowledge is impossible. Where would we be if that were the case?”

“So you think research into things like reincarnation and near-death experiences can never be objective?”

Weiss turned and began to walk backwards. We all served as his eyes, keeping watch on his blind footsteps. “Miss Gramm, what is the definition of objective? Surely it can only involve scientific principles of outside verification. Indeed, it is by definition something independent of the mind. And what do we find when we bring such factors into play? Neurologists have shown that when you stimulate parts of the brain with electrical currents, the subject sees God, or devils or angels. He gets an insight—so he believes—into some other reality. Is it real? Or an entirely subjective experience going on in the mind? Since it can be summoned on command, it’s liable to be a phenomenon of certain brain reactions. Some people are more prone to these neurological experiences than others.”

“Yes,” I seconded. “And there you have a case of using scientific sensory apparatus to come to a reasoned conclusion. If we can observe and test the brain’s responses, we use our intellects to evaluate the result, and that evaluation points in the direction of a purely internal basis for mystical experiences and hypnotically induced memories. It may not explain by itself the reasons why evolution gave our brains this propensity for religious and paranormal responses, but it’s certainly brought us a step closer toward understanding human nature and answering questions like whether there really is a God or not.”

Patterson spoke up for the first time, without turning round. In order for it to carry back, he projected his voice forward, much to the edification of the silent arboreal listeners around us.

“The existence of God does not lend itself to empirical proof, because he is a being that is never defined in any meaningful way. For a theory to be valid, it must be falsifiable. If you can declare certain evidence as ‘positive’, there must be the theoretical possibility of judging other evidence to be ‘negative’. But the believer is not interested in learning whether there is a God or not. He has already decided that there is, and he shapes his evidence and his definitions accordingly. When one definition can no longer stand up, he substitutes another. When one piece of evidence points in the wrong direction, he changes the evidential requirements. He redefines his terms. He obfuscates. He has recourse to principles of logic only he understands. When all else fails, he simply declares his faith, which becomes the sole and ultimate standard, supported by God himself.”

“‘God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish’,” I intoned softly. “1 Corinthians something or other.”

“‘To shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts as folly,’” Phyllis responded in antiphony. “1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 27. Yours was verse 20. One of our favorite passages for meditation.”

Whether she would have gone on to elaborate her experiences as one who had spent long hours in conventual meditation, we would never know, for Patterson reclaimed the floor.

“Precisely. Paul is saying that one cannot arrive at knowledge of God through empirical evidence and rationality. Such things are the wisdom of the world. God’s plan was to establish an avenue to himself that could be followed only through folly, as Paul readily admits. What a stroke of genius! Remove yourself and your convictions entirely from the realm of reason. Take pride in your ignorance. Set your own standard and reject all others. When rational minds call you to task for your illogicality, your lack of evidence, you’ve already embraced it all! You’ve consigned the rational world to outer darkness—with God’s blessing to boot! God, according to Paul, has set up faith in an irrational doctrine as the only avenue to salvation. Those who do not repudiate science, logic and painfully acquired human wisdom to embrace such folly shall perish everlastingly. And where did Paul get all this? From his own mystical experiences—which we are being asked to rank right up there beside the scientific method!”

A momentary silence followed this arresting address, and its echo in the stillness of the woods made it seem more impassioned than it had actually been delivered. In the courtroom, I reflected, the effect of the man must have been mesmerizing. In this outdoor forum, judges, attendants and jury alike made no comment as they receded behind us, rooted to their posts. Only the crunch of our footsteps intruded on their contemplative evaluation of Patterson’s words.

David was the first to break the silence. “Faith and reason inhabit two separate universes, it would seem. Wasn’t it Tertullian who said, ‘I believe because it is absurd’?”

“Yes,” I answered. “And Luther the one who announced that ‘Reason is the greatest enemy of faith’.”

“I read something by Noam Chomsky recently,” David went on. “He said that three-quarters of the population of the U.S. believe in religious miracles, which is a statistic, according to him, unlike anywhere else in the industrialized world. He said you’d have to go to mosques in Iran or do a poll among elderly women in Sicily to get numbers like that.”

“At the conference,” said Weiss, “there were many who felt that science and medicine and technology in this country are being hobbled by the breakdown in critical thinking.”

David’s tone was somber. “Chomsky suggests it is not impossible that we may see a regression to pre-Enlightenment times.”

“Surely not.” The small voice was mine, a feeble punctuation mark which evaporated into the air and drifted off into the trees. For a little time none of us said anything. The ground had already started to slope upward, and Philosophers’ Walk began to snake, turning first one way then another to lessen the demand on the legs. In spots the trail narrowed as thickets of brush thrust out into our path, and we occasionally lost our formation. The crickets had become noisy. Perhaps it was the chirp of critics, dissenting voices urging us to return to the haven of like-minded belief. Under the trees the air was becoming close and hot. We were in the thickest part of the woods, where no breezes penetrated. I for one was sweating a little as we mounted the hill, and I wondered who would be the first to voice a complaint. I was determined it would not be me, since I had proposed the outing.

It was Phyllis who intruded on the crickets' chorus. "And yet everyone has been saying for the past twenty-five years that this is the most secular age the world has ever known. Isn't there some kind of contradiction here?"

"It would certainly seem so," I said. "The outward face of society is definitely more secular than it's ever been, especially in the media and entertainment. Look at the way the established churches are drying up. Our secular expressions have been more open, more dramatic than anything in the past. But it's as though collectively we've set up this new intellectual standard, but as individuals most of us choose not to follow it. We haven't dressed for the occasion. And the party's breaking up into cliques."

Weiss cautioned, "I would say, though, that this is very much a North American phenomenon. I was living in Europe for four years and my impression was that things aren't nearly so bad over there."

Suddenly, the woods thinned dramatically. The trail broadened and became grassy. Perhaps thirty yards ahead lay the crest of the hill we had been ascending. To a man, I noticed, the four of us were puffing.

But not Phyllis. Both the walk and the conversation seemed to have invigorated her. "And so just how do you gentlemen propose to deal with this situation?" She had her mental notebook out.

We all slowed, as though now that our destination lay in sight, we could relax the effort. Our formation soon disintegrated. Weiss turned and once more let his heels lead the way.

"It was my idea to focus on education. I think that's where secularism has fallen down. We haven't insisted on teaching critical thinking—no matter whose paranoid toes it treads on. We back away from confrontation with parents who don't want the schools to endanger the religious beliefs of the home. In this age of political correctness, it seems we can't risk offending anyone's personal convictions. In Tennessee a few years ago, parents complained that favorable mention of the Renaissance in history textbooks unduly exalted man and demeaned God. In one of the provinces of Canada, I read that they actually removed the age of the sun as over 6000 years old from teaching guidelines. Some people seem to think that schools should be institutions of indoctrination. They're supposed to shield pupils from ideas, I guess, rather than expose them to as much as possible and help them develop the capacity to think for themselves. If flat-earthers were still a force to be reckoned with, we would no doubt have to drop astronomy from the curriculum. We've virtually buried evolution for fear of the creationists."

"And you want to resurrect it, do you Mr. Patterson?" Patterson had said nothing after his earlier tirade, and Phyllis was attempting to draw him out again.

"I wouldn't call it a resurrection," he asserted. "You can't kill the most firmly established scientific theory in the history of rational enquiry. What we need—" here he gestured to the invisible jury which seemed to accompany him wherever he went— "is a resurrection of our courage."

"I see," said Phyllis.

David jumped in a little hastily. "Of course, we must prevent Creation Science, so-called, from invading the classroom, and we'll probably be successful. But it may be a tougher prospect restoring evolution to its proper place. One of the things we're planning is a campaign aimed at textbook publishers and school boards. As Burton says, it may be time for the forces of reason to become more aggressive."

We had reached the top of the hill. From behind us, the slanting mid-afternoon sun bathed the grass of the crest in a vibrant light, casting shadows behind the few scattered trees which had been allowed to stand by those who had redesigned the old tree nursery on this site. Popular usage kept the Arboretum's name. The crest was not very deep and swung in a wide, gentle arc to either side, like an expanded horseshoe, pointing away from us. Ahead, at the far edge of the crest, stood a low concrete wall perhaps two feet high, broken at intervals by openings. It followed the curve of the horseshoe and was flanked on the near side by an asphalt walkway. The corner of a parking lot could be glimpsed off to the left.

We stopped at the wall and looked down a gentle slope to the focal point of the Arboretum. Summer evenings often saw several thousand people sitting or reclining on the grassy hillside, listening to concerts by the city's Symphony Orchestra or to jazz bands from around the country. The stage stood some distance off at the base of the bowl, its sound-reflecting canopies awaiting the rush of music. Today it was silent and deserted, save for a couple strolling past it, holding hands. The kiosk where refreshments were sold lay off to our right, but it too looked unattended. The trek back would be on empty stomachs.

On the grass beside the walkway on its outer side stood a series of polished stone seats arranged in clusters of three or four. They followed the crest like a line of balcony loges. From some of these one could just see the top of the concert stage over the edge of the wall, but since during performances people always sat along the wall like birds on a backyard fence, sound and sight lines were often blocked. Today, after our expedition through the wilds of Philosophers' Walk, we rested our too-sedentary bodies on stones where countless others had sat, David and Phyllis side by side on the wall, Weiss, Patterson and myself on a group of seats facing them.

To me, it felt like an odd confluence of souls: two writers, two professors and one attorney-millionaire, perched on a hilltop where music could still be heard to echo and nature herself still had something to say. For those of us present—presuming I could include Phyllis—that voice had sounded down long eons of slow, struggling evolution. No doubt for others who had occupied the same seats, the voice of God could be heard in the sounds of nature, a nature many believed was only a few thousand years old. Could anything possibly reconcile the two views? More important, could anything reconcile the two groups which held those views?

"This is a beautiful spot," Phyllis remarked in a tone of deep satisfaction. "I don't get out into the country like this often enough." She had drawn up one foot to place it on the edge of the wall, so that her hands rested on her knee a little below her chin. David, I noticed, had seated himself beside her, just close enough to create a suggestion of intimacy, yet not so near as to assume it. I had no idea whether Phyllis was picking up his subtle signals, or whether she might be interested in them if she were.

David said, "I don't know whether this qualifies as the country, Phyllis. If you look past the Arboretum, you can catch a glimpse of the downtown skyline through the tops of the trees." His tone, too, had just the faintest suggestion of intimacy.

Phyllis didn't turn to check. "Well, when most of your living has been done in a big city core, or inside the walls of a convent, a spot like this constitutes communing with nature."

"It's not so pristine when summer gets into full swing and people are tramping through with their snacks and soft drinks. They're communing more with Beethoven or Keith Jarrett. But right now, we're catching it in a virgin state—at least for this year."

“Renewable virginity.” Phyllis gave David an unchecked smile, not without its own touch of intimacy, and at that proximity it must have produced some pleasurable shock waves in him. Phyllis had what I might have called a face that had seen a lot—though what that had been was anyone’s guess. But she was a mature and seemingly secure woman, one not to be underestimated. David would have his hands full.

“Or reincarnation,” Weiss offered wryly from one of the stone seats. These were all backless, and the Physics Professor was bending forward, elbows resting on his knees, chin in hand. The hat had perched itself at an odd angle. Patterson nearby had his legs stretched out in front of him. He was leaning back, hands resting at the corners of the stone to give him support. He struck me as having only one ear on the conversation, the rest of him wandering vistas that only began with his immediate surroundings. The man was an enigma, it seemed to me, one who probably revealed very little about his true self. I, sitting cross-legged roughly between them, felt strangely out of place.

Phyllis looked skyward. “It must be beautiful at night. So many stars, I imagine. Don’t you think that nature itself is responsible for producing a feeling of spirituality? We stand in awe of things which are so much bigger than ourselves. It’s no surprise that people get caught up in ideas and emotions which you label non-rational.”

I jumped in. “Oh, there’s nothing wrong with feeling a sense of wonder at the universe, Phyllis, even of being overwhelmed by it. There’s nothing irrational about that. Someone like Carl Sagan encourages a sense of wonder. He thinks it’s an essential part of a proper scientific orientation. But we need to understand how we fit into that larger whole. And it’s only scientific investigation which can tell us that.”

“Is it? Perhaps science can only detect and measure the pieces, the connecting forces. Can it understand the meanings? That’s where one turns to ‘spirituality’—for want of a better term.”

“But where do such meanings exist?” I objected. “They are either part of the physical structure of the universe, in which case we should be able to detect them, or they exist only in our own minds—the meanings we choose to give to the impersonal world around us, to create for ourselves.”

Patterson said, surprisingly neutrally: “The spiritual person would say they exist in the mind of God, whether that God is a personal, cognizant being or a force inherent in nature.”

“I have no objection to the latter,” I pointed out, “as long as we let nature herself tell us whether in fact she has any meanings in her mind. What I object to is imputing to nature whole other dimensions of reality when nature gives us no indication that she possesses such dimensions.”

Weiss grunted into his hands. “Perhaps she’s schizophrenic and isn’t aware of her other personalities.”

“Does anyone remember that ‘Harmonic Convergence’ thing back in 1987, I think it was?” David asked. “People gathered around the world to hold ceremonies that were supposed to usher in a new age of global harmony and peace. They held hands and chanted along the shores of lakes and various sacred places to set up some kind of cosmic energy flow that would reorient the world along more harmonious lines.” He seemed to be avoiding an overly skeptical tone. Was it for Phyllis’ sake?

“Can you be sure that they didn’t?” she asked, with a touch of humor.

“The evidence would seem to indicate otherwise,” Patterson muttered.

“Nature, as you say,” remarked Weiss, sitting upright, “gives us no evidence that people acting in such ways can produce these desired results. It would be far more fruitful if they spent their energies on things which *do* have detectable effects. Like depleting less of the world’s energy resources, or having fewer children. Or better caring for the ones we have. These people must have disrupted global harmony far more by driving their cars to these sacred sites, than any chanting or hand-holding would have accomplished in the opposite direction.”

Phyllis had lowered the one leg and now dangled both over the edge of the wall, clapping her feet gently together. It was an engaging bit of playfulness which she was probably not aware of. I had a feeling that David was quite aware of it.

“But you are missing my point, gentlemen. Our urge toward spirituality is there because we desperately want to be a part of some larger whole. We need to sense a wider significance than the one we can find in our own paltry lives. It doesn’t have to be a feeling of dependence, or worship—just belonging. We need to feel a connection to something outside ourselves as individuals. Otherwise, for most people the feeling of isolation and meaninglessness becomes overwhelming. It can even lead to suicide.”

I assured her that I had no objection to that analysis. “These are basic human needs, I admit. But we have to recognize them for what they are and start from there. Then we proceed carefully and investigate what might actually be out there which could fill those needs. But to create a whole mystical superstructure to the universe, one that never gets founded on or verified by rational evidence: that’s committing *intellectual* suicide. Look at the supposed workings of reincarnation: the Karma system, astral bodies, an interregnum between lives. The whole thing is so complex it makes Einstein’s theories look like some sandbox construction—and there isn’t a shred of scientific evidence for any of it. We create these fantasy worlds for ourselves and meanwhile we neglect the real world where we might have some genuine prospect for achieving happiness.”

“There’s also a distinction between seeing yourself as part of a larger whole, and wanting to transcend yourself.” David was dangling his legs as well and he leaned toward Phyllis as he said this, not quite to the point of contact. “The transcendence of self has always been the mystic’s dream. Leave your body and ascend to some higher plane. Join some astral force, or God, and realize true happiness and your true destiny. That has to be a destructive philosophy. As Kevin says, it negates the only world we can be sure exists, and the only self we can be certain of, our present bodies and minds. In the absence of concrete evidence, everything else is made of fairy dust.”

Phyllis would not be dissuaded. “Perhaps the spiritually oriented mind, or the religious one, would claim that it has a different standard of rationality, different ways of measuring evidence. It would say that we can arrive at an alternate view of reality.”

She did not seem to mind playing devil’s advocate against the four of us, if that were her intention. It was difficult to know where her personal sympathies lay. I had the feeling she was being the consummate professional columnist: sounding us out, uncovering all the ramifications of the subject under discussion. I wondered if everyone had the impression I did, that we and our ideas were under a microscope. And how would the findings be presented by this influential scribbler? The public image of the Age of Reason Foundation might well lie in the hands of such as her. I knew these things were supposed to be part of my own job, but at this point I was hardly in the same position as Phyllis Gramm.

Patterson stirred himself and slowly stood up. Every eye swung in his direction even before he opened his mouth.

“I would say that the question which needs asking of these people is: what beneficial effects have proceeded from their alternate view of reality?”

He took a stride or two onto the paved pathway just beyond the point where Phyllis and David sat. For a moment he stood with hands loosely on his hips, looking out over the bowl of space beyond the wall. His voice was quiet, but he made it seem as though it would carry even to someone standing on the stage below.

“Every advance humanity has made in recorded history has proceeded from the application of rational principles. Enlightened laws are enlightened because they have become more reasonable and humane. They are founded on the premise that we are all rational, responsible human beings whose fate in this world is deserving of consideration. When you lose that principle, you start to burn people at the stake for incorrect belief in order to save their souls for another world.”

He began to pace, almost without effort, moving within the space bounded by his audience of four. The force of his presence, the charisma of that mellifluous voice as it became subtly more impassioned, seemed to warp the circle of our space until we felt as though we sat at one of the focal points of the universe.

“Every improvement in living conditions, in health, in human control over the environment has proceeded from the application of science and the scientific method, even if used instinctively, because someone has put a value on our happiness in these bodies and in this world. As soon as you denigrate that happiness, or postulate a deity who has other plans for us, you condemn lightning rods for foiling God’s punitive purpose in sending the storm, or deny someone the right to end a painful terminal illness through departing his life as he sees fit. Where is the single advance in technology or the single understanding of nature we have achieved through focusing on the spiritual world? Has a belief in angels kept one person from drowning or crashing in a plane or dying of a disease? Will we find a cure for cancer by entering into a personal relationship with a savior? What about Eastern mysticism—has it helped us to understand the workings of the atom or the origin of life? As for Shirley MacLaine’s endless books on reincarnation, or the Celestine industry created by James Redfield: have they contributed one iota to the betterment of the human condition—other than the condition of their own bank accounts?”

Patterson’s eye fell on me, as though turning from the court at large to the jury box. No doubt this was a favorite courtroom technique, to single out one member of the jury and convey the sense of a direct appeal to one specially perceptive individual. I felt transfixed by that intense gaze, which fortunately he diverted occasionally to a point above my head.

“We got together today to discuss the issue of combatting Creation Science. If a creation scientist were standing here at this moment, what would he have to say about the effects of his doctrine as opposed to evolution? First he would say that at the doorstep of evolution lie most of the world’s evils: abortion, sexual promiscuity, women’s liberation, homosexuality, euthanasia, sex education, pornography, alcoholism, crime in general—because, of course, without the literal interpretation of Genesis, everything else in the bible is suspect and relative, thus undercutting the dependability of God’s word and the divine basis for all morality. Evolution, for the fundamentalist, has become the flagship doctrine of secular humanism, because it destroys the reliability of literal biblical inerrancy.”

“Creationism, on the other hand, does more than just describe how the world came about. Providing an explanation for the universe’s existence is hardly the prime reason for the creationist’s dogged insistence on his doctrine. Rather, the creation story places all human life and purpose in the hands of God; everything proceeds from his whim and direction. Human will, initiative, desires: these are not only inconsequential, they are denigrated. For in the story of creation lies the Fall, in which mankind suffers through its pride of self and thirst for knowledge and enlightenment. One of the morals of the story is that such human initiative leads to pain, suffering and death, the casting out from Eden, the loss of the favor of the Deity. The Fall is made the responsibility of Eve, and since the process God followed in creating the two sexes supposedly holds up the male as superior, this supports the fundamentalist’s blatant sexist philosophy which sees the modern equality of the sexes and the feminist movement as one of the greatest evils of our time.

“The story of Noah and the Flood is also of essential importance in the creationist’s account of the world’s beginnings, because it shows that God’s punishment is a force to be feared and reckoned with—and it came about, so one would gather from fundamentalist propaganda, as a result of the too widespread practice of homosexuality, another of the world’s great evils in their eyes. And we mustn’t forget, of course, that the whole concept of the Fall and guilt and sin is absolutely necessary to the creationist viewpoint, for without man’s fallen nature he wouldn’t have needed a Savior, and this would severely undercut the need for Jesus and cast doubt on the meaning of his death—perhaps even that he died at all.”

As Patterson had been largely directing this phase of his speech at me, I gave a little start at this. How would the man react to the theory of the non-existence of an historical Jesus? Was the idea ‘out there’ to a greater extent in the collective unconscious than I myself had been aware of? Eventually, I knew, I would have to bring up the matter of my research with the group—even to consider how, if at all, we might make use of it. But not today.

Patterson swung his attention back toward the group as a whole, and his delivery became increasingly more vigorous. “And so what effect has the alternate reality of the creationist had on modern society? Or promises to have if his assault on the classroom is successful?”

We waited for the answer.

“We have the disparagement of human pride and initiative, the rejection of the entire concept of human wisdom. We enshrine the words of a collection of primitive ancient writings as providing exclusive, indisputable answers to the universe, rather than modern scientific investigation and our own intellect. We sanctify the denunciation of reason and critical thinking. We return women to the kitchen. We consign to outer darkness a sizeable portion of mankind—and womankind—for their innate sexual orientation. We construct the scientific edifice of the 21st century: biology, anthropology, genetics, geology, paleontology, archaeology, astronomy, physics, around an antique myth which says that a Creator produced out of nothing these billion billion suns only 6000 years ago, that the infinite multitude of life forms we see around us is his whim, that all geological deposits—as well as extinct fossils—were laid down in a world-wide flood a few thousand years ago which eight humans survived by building a boat out of gopher wood, 150 yards long, to hold all the creatures of the earth, and that all humans and animal life forms across the planet today are descended from the denizens of this aquatic expedition which came to ground on the slopes of Mount Ararat.”

He came to a stop and cocked his head in a gesture of mock astonishment. “And out of such an alternate reality we are expected to produce the scientists and philosophers and leaders of tomorrow.”

We all sat spellbound. One could almost believe that to the top of this little hill the whole world was tuned in, and that Patterson was reaching all five and a half billion of us. Was he rehearsing for the moment of the court case, some six weeks away in Philadelphia? Somehow I felt that the scope of the hearing might not allow for such a sweeping denunciation of the opposing side.

Phyllis asked incongruously, “Why astronomy?”

Patterson looked at her with a somewhat bemused expression. She enlarged on her question. “Why does creationism compromise astronomy?”

He gave this jury member an understanding smile. “Because if astronomical observation places certain stars more than 6000 light-years away, then either the universe has to be more than 6000 years old for the light to have reached us, or else light travelling through space has not always behaved as science says it does. Creation Science, in fact, postulates that light has slowed down in the last couple of centuries. It used to travel much faster, you see, so that it could have covered those vast distances since Bishop Ussher’s starting date in 4004 BC. To support this contention, creation scientists call up certain minute inconsistencies in the early measurements of the speed of light, failing to concede that a century and a half ago such instruments were hardly as precise as the ones we have today.”

Weiss snorted. “And we are expected to give ‘balanced treatment’ in the classroom to this kind of reasoning? ‘Unbalanced’ would be more like it.”

Phyllis took a deep breath and let it out in a slow audible whoosh. Like the rest of us, she had clearly been moved by Patterson’s skillful harangue, but she wasn’t ready to accede the entire day to him.

“Well, I would certainly agree that creationism, and perhaps fundamentalism in general, is a clear case of irrationality, but I still think that spirituality as a whole is a natural human expression which seeks to provide answers to our questions. You talk about effects, but religion and mysticism have given a lot of people answers that have satisfied and even enriched their lives.”

Patterson waited just long enough for the silence to become pregnant, then delivered his baby, one I could not believe had just been spontaneously conceived. “Science asks questions about the unanswered,” he said in measured tones. “Religion answers questions about the unanswerable.”

Phyllis couldn’t keep herself from smiling in wry admiration, while David involuntarily clapped his hands in a single note of applause.

Patterson made no acknowledgment. “Therein lies the relative merits of the two approaches, I would say. Lives are quite capable of being enriched by a fantasy. As for myself, I would much prefer a satisfaction grounded in actual reality, regardless of what that might be. And the only dependable avenues I know of to that end are reason and science.”

David jumped the six inches to the walkway and after a gesture toward Patterson, turned to Phyllis and laid a hand briefly on her arm. “How about a compromise?” It had given him an excuse to touch her, the first physical contact I had noticed between them. “I’m willing to admit that we need to take the concept of spirituality into account—or the better expressions of it. Perhaps we need a less emotional word, one less compromised.”

“Spirituality is essentially *about* emotions, wouldn’t you say?” I suggested.

“If it is, then you ignore it at your peril,” Phyllis cautioned, sliding to the ground herself and giving the back of her slacks a brush or two. “All the rational ideas in the world won’t appeal to most people if you ignore their emotions.”

Weiss stretched and stood up. “Emotions and rationality. A potent mix. All we have to do is design a way to get them to work together.”

David grinned at me. “We’ll get our resident publicist to whip something up on it by tomorrow morning.”

“He’d better hurry,” Weiss returned wryly. “On the way into town I read two bumper stickers that said, ‘One Hour Nearer Jesus’ Return’ and ‘Beam Me Up, Lord’. Pretty soon we’ll have no one left to preach to but the converted. The rest will be in heaven where the laws of rationality are probably illegal.”

A movement to one side caught the attention of all of us at the same time. The couple we had earlier noticed strolling down near the Arboretum stage had by some drawn-out route reached the upper walkway and were approaching us. Both looked to be in their early 20s, casually but neatly dressed. They might have been university students, though no classes were currently in session. Whatever their life’s pursuits, they seemed to be successful at them.

The two smiled at us as they came up. They stopped when Phyllis asked cheerily, “Excuse me. We’re taking an informal survey today. If you had children, which book would you want to give them to help them understand the true nature of the world?” I silently commended Phyllis for her question, fashioned on the spur of the moment. It held enough ambiguity that answering it could bring any number of revealing prejudices into play.

The two stood in some surprise, still holding hands. The woman, a fresh-faced brunette with a generous mouth and intelligent eyes, turned to her companion and said, “What’s that book by Stephen Hawkins...*A Brief History of Time*?” The man gave a little shrug. She turned back to Phyllis. “Yes, I think that would be a good choice. He talks about black holes and things.”

Phyllis smiled. “A good choice, certainly.” She looked expectantly at the companion, a crew-cutted fellow who looked mildly into body building. He seemed momentarily uncomfortable, but still managed a good face. “Well...I can’t say I’ve read anything like that recently. I used to like Isaac Asimov when I was a kid—mostly the science-fiction stuff.” He found a straw he could grasp at. “I guess the Bible is always a good bet. If you know how to interpret it, as they say,” he added knowingly.

Phyllis gave him an equal smile. “Yes, sometimes these things can be a bit cryptic. The world isn’t always what it seems.” Neither had a comment on this remark.

Patterson said nonchalantly, “I like reading about alien visitations and abductions. I can’t quite make up my mind about those things.”

The young woman said earnestly, “Neither can I. But I think we shouldn’t close our minds to anything.”

“You’re quite right, we shouldn’t,” Phyllis answered, and she seemed earnest herself. “Well, thank-you. It’s been nice talking to you.”

“You too,” the woman said. “Have a nice day.” They went off, still hand in hand, toward the parking lot.

When they were out of earshot, Weiss mumbled, “There’s a relationship that must take some compromise.”

“You think so?” Phyllis asked. “I doubt she’s really read Hawking’s book—at least not enough to remember the writer’s name properly.”

“Still, the fact that she knew of it and would think to recommend it is promising,” said David. “And I rather think he thought of the bible out of cultural conditioning.”

“And because he couldn’t think of anything else,” Weiss remarked dryly.

Patterson spoke up and he sounded surprisingly optimistic. “What they represent between them is a mind that could go either way. Reasonably intelligent, not set, not especially informed but not indoctrinated either. Precisely the mind we want to reach—and could, I imagine. It’s minds like theirs that will make all the work worthwhile.”

“On the other hand,” said David, “we’d better be the first to reach them. I have a feeling that both of them would be quite capable of adopting their own share of bizarre views.”

Phyllis gave him a nudge. “But remember what the woman said: ‘We shouldn’t close our minds to anything.’ That has to be promising, wouldn’t you say? We might all take a cue from those sentiments.” Her little stress on the ‘all’ had been obvious.

“As long as we don’t confuse an open mind with an empty mind,” Weiss cautioned, getting to his feet. His tone sounded almost embittered. I had noticed, in the course of our journey through the thickets of irrationality, that the jovial mood he had shown on our first meeting had become progressively more somber. Was there something in his personal background which had led to his joining the Age of Reason Foundation? Though evidently Jewish, the man was clearly too young to have experienced the Holocaust. “Ignorance,” he said, “can give rise to a host of devils: bigotry, intolerance and cruelty among them. Rationality and education are the best antidote to fanaticism.”

Phyllis turned and stepped over to the wall, looking down at the wide hooded stage below. Perhaps she had had enough of heavy discussion about the instabilities of the human mind.

“I would like to hear some music here. Stretch out on the grass and let violins wash over my skin and clarinets tickle my ears.” Scribbler indeed, I thought. “I like Mendelssohn and Mozart. They’re so fresh and alive.” She turned to David. “When do the concerts start?”

He had come up beside her. “Early June, usually. Perhaps you’d like to come back and attend one with me. I could get hold of a schedule and let you know.”

Her head gave an animated nod. “Yes, let’s do that.”

We all stood momentarily, gazing over nature’s silent concert hall, as though each hearing his or her own melodies. When Patterson started to speak, it was so unobtrusive that his first few words seemed to merge with that mental music.

“I was at the Hollywood Bowl two years ago. A marvel, that place. The Los Angeles Philharmonic played the Fifth Symphony by Carl Nielsen, the Danish composer. The first movement is unlike anything else in music. It starts very quietly, very tensely. The atmosphere is dark and ominous. The themes are in fragments and everything seems bogged down, unable to develop. You get a sense of some lurking, intimidating force. Then a few minutes into the movement, it appears: the snare drum enters like some sinister overseer and proceeds to pound out a single-minded, repetitive rhythm. The rest of the orchestra falls into line, no deviation possible. Lots of bluster, but no beauty or development. Then the snare drum withdraws, leaving the rest of the instruments milling about.”

Patterson had not moved a muscle. He stood, still speaking quietly, a conductor with hands in his pockets. We found ourselves listening, each hearing the music he was describing in one's own way.

"Then an absolute wonder occurs. A slow theme on the strings starts in a new key. It's warm and expressive and spine-tingling. It unfolds and soars and modulates and it sounds like the embodiment of everything that is good and creative and generous in the human spirit. The rest of the orchestra gradually joins in. But now a tension builds. Nervous figures on some of the instruments herald the approach of danger. Some return apprehensively to the former rhythm of the drum. Suddenly, in a frenzy the snare drum returns, pounding out its rhythm, determined to regain control and destroy the new theme. Forces are ranged on either side. Before long the snare drum abandons its rhythm altogether and launches into a frantic cadenza. Neilsen instructs the drummer in the score to try to stop the advance of the music. The battle rages until the theme manages to heave itself against the force of the opposition and reach a crest. It washes over everything in an overwhelming statement of affirmation, completely swamping the snare drum.

"Then the music calms. The drum, defeated but not destroyed, marches off defiantly, alone, still beating out his rhythm. He's warning his former subjects that their new strength had best be maintained and their vigilance never relaxed."

The silence over the group was complete. Presently Patterson said, "Neilsen wrote it just after the end of the First World War. Next door in Denmark, I imagine he'd been able to hear the guns of fanaticism and irrationality pounding away in the distance."

After a further pause, Phyllis said softly, "You should have been a music critic, sir."

Weiss asked, "I don't know that work—how does the rest of it go?"

"There's only one other movement. I think Neilsen tries to convey the struggle to create, amid pitfalls and human limitations, but he achieves a transcending triumph at the end. His music as a whole blazes with life. Hearing it outdoors at the Hollywood Bowl was an inspiring experience."

There was little more any of us could say. We gathered ourselves for the walk back to the university. I glanced at my watch. It said 4:30 PM. The sun was almost touching the treetops, gilding their edges.

As we moved down the hill toward the opening to Philosophers' Walk, I caught up to David and Phyllis who were walking side by side. I was regretting that I had not had the chance to lay out the ideas I had put together on the creationism issue. I said as much to David.

"Don't worry about it, Kevin, there'll be other opportunities. We'll be having another meeting in a couple of weeks."

"I don't think you have any cause for complaint, any of you," remarked Phyllis. "You certainly batted around a lot of stimulating and controversial ideas today. I'm going to follow your group with considerable interest, especially the hearing. Don't be surprised if the Times features an article about the Foundation in a few weeks."

David knew well enough not to suggest any clearance of the content of such an article with himself, even though, for a mix of reasons, I knew he would dearly love the right of consultation. Then Phyllis went part way toward solving the dilemma for him. "You won't mind, I hope, if I get in touch with you should I need any more information—which I'm sure I will."

David's response was not particularly subtle. "Not at all. Please call me any time. I'd be delighted to give you whatever you need." Apparently infatuation could loosen tongues—even rational ones."

Further conversation was no longer feasible, as we entered the wood and followed the twisting path at a greater pace than on the trip out. Most of it was now downhill and the afternoon was waning. Patterson and Weiss were out of sight. Phyllis and David pushed on ahead of me, and while I could see them talking together I could not hear their words. Presently I lost sight of them.

I decided I was in no particular hurry. The softer light of the late afternoon woods was enchanting and my mind was ringing with some of the things Patterson had said. Where had this man come from? What had inspired his outlook, the forces that drove him? The ideas I had been so eager to lay before the others now seemed paltry and unexciting beside the power of this man's convictions. As for the delivery of those ideas, I could not hope to hold a candle to him. I would indeed have to rely on my scribbles. The pen may have been mightier than the sword, but could it equal the voice of one such as Patterson's?

Perhaps that was always the case. The pen was more enduring, but the immediate day lay with the charismatic preacher, the orator, the one who could draw men and women in with the sound of the spoken word, the dramatic declamation, delivered in physical flesh and blood. History had shown that the content was not always important, nor even required to make sense. But with the right idea, the right voice to deliver it, a new movement might be irresistible. Weiss had been a bit cynical, but was there a way to turn the exercise of rationality into something that would seize the imagination, play to those emotions Phyllis was so anxious we not overlook? Could I possibly do with the pen what Patterson could do with the voice? Might we join the two together? After our conquest of Philosophers' Walk and that magic hour on the hill, almost anything seemed possible.

I paused for long minutes to meditate upon the flow of water under the footbridge. By the time I straggled back onto campus, David and Phyllis were bidding goodbye to Patterson at the exit of the parking lot. I could not make out the type of car the millionaire was driving, but it was a classy one. I waved at him from the edge of the Quad, some 20 feet above the level of the lot, but he seemed not to notice me. Weiss was nowhere to be seen.

Leaning on the railing, I watched David accompany Phyllis to her own car, one of more modest style. From this distance I could not tell if their parting handshake held any romantic promise, but they did seem to hold it for a little longer than necessary. As if feeling my eyes on him, David turned and they both waved at me. Then Phyllis got into her car and drove out. The lowering sun seemed to be smiling.

David came up the little stair a moment later. "Don't say anything. It's up to her. I've misread women before. Anyway, I have to be careful so as not to jeopardize things for the Foundation."

I gave him a grin. "Business before pleasure, is it?"

"Life is a juggling act."

My own car stood off at the far corner of the parking lot. I had not gone to it, in case David had intended any further consultation with me. My premonition had been correct.

"I hate to put a damper on this day—by the way, your idea to get outdoors was brilliant. But I've got something to show you. We've had another communication from our friends, the Ascended Masters. It came in last night, and I haven't mentioned it to anyone yet."

I made as if to follow him. “No, just wait here. I’ll run up to the office and get it.”

He dashed off. As I waited, the university campus seemed deserted. A center of learning. Learning: such a precious thing. Hard won, and even harder possessed. Knowledge—did it exist as an entity in itself? The sum of current human wisdom and investigation. But even here, it had its existence only in the minds of those who transmitted it and those who absorbed it. It was a fluid, fragile creature. How many of the ideas contained in the Library’s million-odd books were real, how many outdated, how many simply wrong? How many languished between unopened covers, uninterpreted, unapplied? The intellectual life of a society was an intangible thing, as vulnerable as a vessel tossed on a sea whose deeper currents were rarely exposed to the sun of rationality.

David came back into the sun with a piece of paper. He handed it to me without speaking. I looked at its handful of words. They were familiar and ominous. Another passage from Revelation—or derived from it.

‘Clue number two: Those who think themselves great men, and the rich and the strong, shall call to the stones: Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath none can stand before.’

“I’m trying to decide whether to notify the police or the FBI and have them look into it. I think these things could be construed as a threat, don’t you?”

I read the e-mail message again. “It’s hard to say. Essentially they’re just quoting scripture. With alterations. Unless we can show some cryptic message buried in those alterations, there’s probably not much the police would try to do about it. I take it this one came in with a dummy return address as well?”

“Yes. The police would probably have the authority to put a trace through the detour route, but so far the person I asked to check the first two messages hasn’t been successful. I’m going to call him tonight and see if he might have better luck with this one.”

“I’ll take this copy and check it against the actual passage. If anything suggests itself I’ll let you know right away.”

David accompanied me to my car. “I guess even Patterson wouldn’t be able to move the Ascended Masters,” he said glumly.

“David, don’t get your hopes up too much. The Age of Reason Foundation is a good idea, and I know it’s going to have an influence. But religious and paranormal beliefs are too firmly entrenched in the human psyche to accomplish anything dramatic overnight. And to be quite frank, Phyllis is right. Spirituality fills an awful lot of needs, and not all of it is destructive. We’re simply not going to be able to offer a substitute for it just like that. Rationality and secularism have to be given time to take root. The seeds have been there off and on over the centuries, but you and I were still born before the end of the Middle Ages. Humanism, or whatever we want to call it, is still a young shoot. Instead of trying to produce a forest, we’ve got to set our sights on nurturing a few tender plants. Personally, I have a feeling we can get a nice nursery going. It’ll be an exciting challenge.”

We reached my car, a five year old model that Patterson’s sleek sedan probably sneered at as it passed by. “I’ve already started to recast some of my ideas on the way back from the Arboretum. Let’s see what I can put together before our next meeting.”

A handshake and a clap on the back sped me on my way.

Chapter Eleven

1

“Now, I want you to tell me what’s wrong with this picture.”

Actually, it was a mural. My time chart on the study wall had grown over the weeks. I was now using larger, lined Post-Its to represent the documents of the first and second centuries so that I could record brief notes on them. I had been forced to expand the chart’s dimensions, with the result that it took a turn at the corner and continued along the right hand wall. The split coincided with the year 100 CE, a clear turning point in Christian development. A continuous paper strip running along both walls above the fluttering Post-Its now bore elaborate markings: divisions into decades and years, together with symbols representing important contemporary events and emperors’ reigns.

For this demonstration I had fashioned a lightweight pointer, a little longer than a conductor’s baton. I didn’t know what kind of music I could create out of the cacophony of early Christian documents, but the orchestra was ready and my audience had her ears perked. The problem was, my musical score was missing some key notes.

On a chair facing the corner of the room sat Shauna. The first century advanced along the left of her vision, the second swept toward a Christian future on her right. The greens, reds and blues of the Post-It notes created a marching kaleidoscope against the pale cream walls, tickling the eye. On a table to the right of her chair I had placed a bowl of popcorn, to tickle her taste buds. It was ideal fare for a Saturday afternoon.

“So here we have the traditional starting point to it all,” I said, lifting my baton. “Some time around the year 30, Jesus is crucified in Jerusalem. Or so the Gospels, aided by scholarly calculations, tell us.” I had drawn a bold red cross on my time strip which I proceeded to tap with my baton. It stood directly above the computer monitor.

I moved to the right. “Perhaps two to five years later, Paul is converted to the new faith.” I tapped on a large “P” drawn on the strip in the mid-thirties. “It can’t be any more, because Galatians tells us that either 14 or 17 years elapsed between Paul’s conversion and his visit to Jerusalem for a conference with the Apostles, and most calculations put that in the year 48 or 49. It isn’t until the year 50 or 51 that Paul starts writing letters, or at least letters which have survived to reach us.” The baton waved over a violin section of seven green Post-Its spread through the fifties. “During the next several years Paul writes the epistles known as 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans and Philemon, not necessarily in that order, and at least one of them, 2 Corinthians, is an edited composite of two or more separate letters.”

Paul’s music was fairly harmonious. “There is not a word in these epistles, aside from an acknowledged interpolation in 1 Thessalonians, which clearly refers to a Christ who was a recent historical man, and the only Gospel-like scene one can find is the account of Jesus’ words at the first Lord’s Supper—which I would label a mythical story to explain features of the cult’s community meal. Everything to do with Jesus’ Gospel teachings, with the trial and crucifixion scene on Calvary, with the story of the empty tomb, is nowhere to be found.”

Shauna nodded vigorously, like a keen and observant pupil, though her enthusiasm may have been directed as much at the bowl of popcorn as at my presentation. The former had just taken up a new position in her lap.

“The same situation of silence exists in all the New Testament epistles written over the next half-century.” My baton gave the cue to various woodwinds as I worked my way along the left-hand wall. “James and Jude, both possibly written before the Jewish War which came to a head in the year 70...” The pointer sailed up and onto a six-pointed star enveloped in flames which I had crafted at the seven decade mark on the time strip. “Hebrews might have been written before the War as well, or else a little after; it can’t be too much later. In Hebrews we find a couple of references which have been labelled ‘allusions’ to Gospel details, but even the scholars will admit that they don’t quite fit a Gospel context and usually interpret them as a product of the author’s study of scripture.”

“Such as?” Apparently Shauna had decided to keep me honest. Maybe she felt she had to do something to earn the popcorn.

“Well—” I checked my notations on the Post-It. “For example, 13:12 says that Jesus ‘suffered outside the gate’. But no mention is made of Jerusalem or even a city. In fact, the point is made in a discussion about the practice of animal sacrifice in the earliest days of the priestly cult in the desert of Sinai, at the time of the Exodus. The writer talks about parts of the sacrifice being performed outside the Israelite *camp* and compares Jesus to that. So it’s probably a case of him tailoring his Christ myth to the scriptural precedent on Sinai. Comparing Moses’ establishment of the old covenant and Jesus’ establishment of the new one is the central theme of the epistle. Which makes his silence on all the earthly settings and details of Jesus’ work so startling. Instead, he presents Jesus’ sacrifice as part of a heavenly scene in a heavenly sanctuary—it’s very Platonic—and never mentions Calvary. Nor does he mention the Last Supper, even though that’s when Jesus is supposed to have identified his body and blood as the sacrifice sealing the new covenant. On top of that, he completely ignores the resurrection in his theology of redemption.”

“It sounds like he was on a different planet from Paul.”

“And from every other surviving document as well. It’s this kind of radical diversity of beliefs about Christ which foils any attempt to see the Christian movement as arising from a single founder and point of origin.”

Details like these, and of the day’s presentation to Shauna as a whole, were to a great extent the product of almost two weeks of study following the outing at the university. I had decided the next day to begin tackling the question of the Gospels: when had they started to show up in Christian thinking? Could I arrive at any rough dates for their composition, and could I start to get some idea of how they had come to be written if Jesus had originally been a mythical deity? I had only begun to get my feet wet on this vast and complicated subject, but Shauna had expressed interest in keeping abreast of my research, and this gave me the opportunity to bounce my investigations off someone at regular intervals.

My pointer moved on to the violas and cellos. “Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians: written by Paulinists a decade or more after Paul’s death. Still no Gospel details, no Jesus of Nazareth anywhere on their pages. The writer of 1 Peter, perhaps in the 80s, claims he was ‘a witness to Christ’s sufferings,’ and many translators still insist on taking this as meaning eyewitness, but in the religious context, *martus* means to testify to one’s faith in something,

and everything ‘Peter’ says is based on scripture, which is clearly where he gets his information. No Gospel details in sight.”

Next, the French horns. “Then here we have the epistles 1, 2 and 3 John.” Three staccato taps near the corner. “Fascinating stuff. The big one, 1 John, seems to be a layered document, reflecting maybe three successive stages of belief on the part of this community. Do you know what one of the disputes is that the letter has to deal with?”

Shauna shook her head, since her mouth was full of popcorn.

“Whether Jesus Christ has come in the flesh or not. The writer claims he has. The dissenters he is condemning have denied it. In other words, they deny that the spiritual Christ was incarnated to earth. And yet it’s possible for the deniers of this doctrine to still be considered Christian!”

“So this is when people started to believe that there had been a human Jesus?”

“It would seem so. In this community anyway, probably in the nineties. But they have nothing historical to say about him. And get this—where do they derive this doctrine? There’s no mention of any information coming through apostolic channels going back to the time of Jesus. The epistle never even specifies an historical time for his incarnation. The writer has gotten this doctrine through ‘the spirit which comes from God.’ In other words, through inspiration, probably from reading scripture. The dissenters are accused of being victims of a false spirit from Satan.”

I checked my notations on the paper. “Chapter 5: the writer talks about accepting God’s own witness to his Son and to the eternal life which is found in him. There’s no mention of any witness by Jesus himself, in his own life and ministry. This Christian knows of the Son because of a revelation by God! It’s right there in black and white.”

“So why doesn’t everyone see it that clearly?”

I shrugged. “It’s a tribute to the power of the human mind not to see what it doesn’t want to see. Oh, there are attempts to interpret the meaning of the words in other ways. But when you have to do that in passage after passage—not just in 1 John—then any validity in such interpretation breaks down. At some point you have to start accepting that the words in all these documents by all these writers are probably saying what they seem to be saying.”

“So where do the Gospels fit in here?” Shauna asked, gesturing toward the wall.

“I’ll be getting to that. Keep your shirt on....On second thought—”

She pointed peremptorily. “The Gospels, please. No distractions.”

“If you insist.” I turned to the desk on which the computer stood. There I had four green Post-Its waiting. I picked up the one labelled MARK in large letters.

“Now, here we have the earliest written Gospel of the Christian canon: Mark. It wasn’t put together by any ‘Mark’, of course. A later church tradition says that it was written by John Mark, an assistant to Paul and later Peter, and represents Peter’s reminiscences. We don’t know who the real author was, or even when it was written, except that it was outside Palestine, since it makes mistakes about Palestinian geography and offers interpretations of Aramaic phrases. And it was written for Gentiles, since the writer provides explanations for Jewish customs.”

“How do they know it was the earliest one?”

I sighed. “I was hoping you wouldn’t ask that. It’s a complex question. The church always said that Matthew was the first Gospel. Basically, a close literary comparison of the Synoptics—that’s Matthew, Mark and Luke, since they’re so close they can be compared

side by side—shows that Mark had to be the principal source of the other two. Matthew and Luke, probably working independently and unknown to each other, revised Mark each in his own way and added in the lost document known as Q, supposedly a collection of Jesus' sayings. That's one of my next projects, doing a study of Q."

"What's that mean: 'Q'?"

"It's a modern term. It stands for the German word "Quelle", which means "source". It's the source of the sayings that were seen to be common between the two Gospels."

"Got it."

"Anyway, Mark is obviously the most primitive of the three, especially theologically. Matthew and Luke very often 'clean up' his scenes and change his terms and titles in directions which are more advanced. Also, Mark lacks all the great teachings of Jesus such as the Sermon on the Mount, and he has no Nativity scene or resurrection appearances—though somebody added a few of those later to make up the shortfall. Those who prefer to see Matthew as the earliest have no good explanation for why the writer of Mark would simply have cut so much important material, if he were the one doing the copying. What would be the purpose of such a Gospel? And their own theory of priority creates more problems than the Markan one."

Shauna raised her hands. "OK, I'm sorry I asked, too. So where are you going to put that thing?" She pointed to the Post-It I was holding.

"How about...right here!" With a flourish I pressed the adhesive strip against the wall, just beyond the line of the year 70 and the conflagration of the Jewish War. "At least, that's where most scholars like to put it. Because the Little Apocalypse in Mark 13 talks of great upheavals and woes and the destruction of the Temple, which took place in 70, they think Mark wrote in the late stages of the Jewish war or soon after."

"But you don't think they're right."

I stood back. "I don't think that such an early date is necessary. Or proven. There were vivid apocalyptic expectations among both Jews and Christians until at least the end of the century, and the memory of the war certainly didn't fade soon. It's a little like some later generation to ours deciding that any 20th century work which talks about the fear of nuclear war should be dated to 1962, the year of the Cuban missile crisis. Just because that was the most prominent nuclear scare doesn't mean that the fear and the concern couldn't be voiced at any time before the end of the Cold War. In fact, if you read Mark 13 carefully, you can see that Jesus is actually prophesying that the End is *not* imminent, even when the war arrives. This would tend to indicate that Mark wrote some time after it. And the situation envisioned for the actual End emphasizes a time of persecution rather than war, which fits the later reign of Domitian better. So there is nothing in Mark that should require him to be dated earlier than the year 90, let's say."

"So why don't you put him there?"

"Because I want to see what the traditional picture gives us." I turned back to the desk and picked up the two Post-Its marked MATTHEW and LUKE, one in each hand.

"Now, conventional wisdom has it that Matthew and Luke made their revisions of Mark within a decade or so—Matthew in the eighties, Luke perhaps ten years later." I placed them in those positions. "Matthew used 90% of Mark, Luke not quite so much. But both their Passion stories are almost carbon copies of Mark with a few extra details thrown in."

Shauna reacted to this with a look of curiosity, but said nothing. I went on.

“John is a separate case. His Gospel contains a picture of Jesus quite unlike the others, but there are elements in it which suggest he might have incorporated Synoptic traditions, especially in his Passion story. John likes to do things his own way—he has his own theology and editorial purposes to plug—but scholars seem to have tentatively decided that his Passion account is ultimately based on Mark or some stage of the Synoptics. So this means that all four Gospels, in their story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, really go back to a single source: whoever produced the first version of Mark.”

I retrieved the final Post-It from the edge of the desk. “So we place John around the year 100, which is the traditional date usually given it. And now we have a string of Gospels, the four which ended up in the canon, running through three decades at the end of the first century. By the way, none of the other three Gospels were written by their traditional authors, either. All the names are later church ascriptions. Even as late as Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century, the Gospels are anonymous. Justin calls them “memoirs of the Apostles” and never gives any evangelist’s name.”

Shauna placed the bowl of popcorn, now half empty, back on the table. She wore a thoughtful expression which I had long ago come to recognize was the signal for some insightful comment. I waited expectantly.

“It seems you’re saying that each of the Gospels was produced in a separate community, that some of them didn’t even know what the others were doing.”

“Right. It’s pretty clear that Luke didn’t know Matthew, and vice-versa. And John is always regarded as though his community inhabited some universe of its own—except that he would have had contact with Synoptic traditions in shaping his Passion story at least. But they probably all came from various regions of northern Palestine and Syria.”

“Well, shouldn’t there be something odd about this situation, if Jesus really existed? If Matthew belonged to some Christian community that was different from Mark’s—”

“Yes, it certainly wasn’t the same one. Mark and his community are undoubtedly Gentile, while Matthew works in a much more Jewish milieu. He was probably a Jew himself.”

“So one would think,” Shauna said slowly, still working out the idea in her mind, “that each of these communities would have remembered Jesus in its own way and developed its own traditions about him. You’d think the story of his trial and crucifixion would have taken shape differently—to some extent, anyway—with different details and ways of telling it. But if Matthew is almost a carbon copy of Mark, as you say, and Luke from another separate community also copies Mark, it sounds like neither of them had developed *any* traditions about Jesus’ death. Otherwise, their own ways of telling the story would have taken precedence over Mark’s account. They wouldn’t have copied him so slavishly.”

I looked at her in some admiration. She hadn’t disappointed me. “That’s a very perceptive observation, Shauna. I agree, you’d have to think that they knew nothing about the details of Jesus’ life until a copy of Mark came into their hands.”

I thought a moment further. “But, you know, there’s more to it than that. There were Christian communities all over the Mediterranean by the later first century. Oral traditions about Jesus’ words and deeds were supposed to be their life’s blood. We would have every reason to expect that many of them would have produced some written version of those traditions. And each community, as you say, would have had its own way of telling the story. Yet all we have are four Gospels, three of which are almost like peas in a pod.

Matthew and Luke are essentially reworkings of Mark with a collection of sayings added. As for John, his Passion story is a pea in the next pod. And they all come from only one general area of the empire.”

“Didn’t anyone ever find this curious?”

“I guess not. I’ve never seen the point raised. Christianity really owes its story of Jesus to one document: the first version of Mark.”

“Was there more than one version?”

“That seems to be the latest understanding. Some scholars figure that each of the Gospels went through multiple stages of writing and editing, adding newer pieces of material and excising others. Apparently Clement of Alexandria gives us some evidence of two or three versions of Mark, and John is thought to have gone through three to five stages of construction during the first half of the second century. Don’t forget that in the earliest phase these writings would not have been regarded as sacred scripture. There would be nothing to prevent anyone from revising them to keep pace with never developments. In fact, we see the process right in the New Testament, with Matthew and Luke being revisions of Mark.”

“I guess there wouldn’t be any objection if they were telling a story about a figure nobody was familiar with.”

“Yes, and after the upheaval of the Jewish War, reliable links to the past to verify these things would have been lost. Besides, if Matthew and Luke can so readily change the things Mark wrote, they certainly didn’t see themselves as writing strict history.”

I turned back to my right-angled orchestra pit. “Anyway, Miss Rosen, you’ve gotten me sidetracked. Let’s say we leave the four Gospels in the spots where scholars commonly date them and continue with our picture. We’re looking for signs of the Gospels in other Christian writings of the time. We’ve reached the Johannine epistles in the nineties. Nothing so far. Not even the concept of apostolic tradition, things traced back through a chain of teaching and authority to Jesus himself. Not a single teaching ever attributed to Jesus, except for those couple of sayings called ‘words of the Lord’ in Paul.”

“I remember!” Shauna exclaimed. “They’re considered to be directives Paul thinks he’s received through inspiration. From the spiritual Christ in heaven.”

I offered my congratulations and took up my baton again. The trumpets needed cueing. “Next, Revelation, written in the mid-90s, so most scholars think, though some place it in the early stages of the Jewish War. The spiritual Christ writes letters and makes predictions about the coming end of the world, but there’s no sign of the Gospel Jesus. In fact, there’s no sign of a human life for this heavenly Christ at all.” I referred to my notations. “In chapter 12, ‘a woman robed with the sun’ has a child, who is immediately snatched up to heaven by God to escape the clutches of a dragon, and there he awaits the End when he will take over the rule of the earth. This is clearly the Messiah, and the imagery is drawn from Jewish and Greek mythology. But the complete absence of any suggestion of a life and ministry on earth for this child has had scholars scratching their heads. Or ignoring the whole problem.”

“And no birth in a manger in Bethlehem, either, I take it?”

“No. The Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke don’t show up in Christian writings until the middle of the second century. Except for a little piece of curiosity in the Ascension of

Isaiah.” I pointed at a Post-It on the right wall, which I had placed under the year 115, and peered at some closely written scratchings.

“There’s a section in it which is regarded as one of several Christian insertions in an older Jewish document. The dating of individual parts is very uncertain. This passage gives us a little story about how Mary had a child at her and Joseph’s home in Bethlehem. But Mary is surprised and hasn’t been forewarned about who this child is. There’s nothing about mangers or shepherds or Magi; no Herod or flight into Egypt. It must be an early version of a nativity story for Jesus, one which Matthew and Luke may have enlarged on, each in his own way. The Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke are totally different, by the way, except for the location in Bethlehem, which would have been drawn from a well known prophecy in Malachi that the future king of Israel was to be born there.”

“Where do you think the names Mary and Joseph came from if they never existed either?”

“Who knows? Perhaps from some mythmaking Christian prophet. In Exodus, Miriam is the sister of Moses, and his birth legends have elements similar to the one attached to Jesus. But it’s impossible to say.”

“Does that make the Star of Bethlehem a myth as well?”

“Many famous figures of the ancient world, real or imagined, had some astronomical portent attached to their births. And often some kind of dangerous situation, like Moses. In fact, the slaughter of the innocents by Herod in Matthew is so close to the legends surrounding Moses’ birth that there had to be a conscious borrowing. The fact that Herod executed so many of his own family over paranoid fears that they were plotting against him may have contributed to Matthew’s story. But no historian of the time records any official slaughter of Jewish children. Or any star, as you say.”

Shauna adopted a bit of a despondent look. “We seem to invest so much in things which have no basis in reality. I guess every religion and culture is the same.”

“We create the things we need for our own edification,” I said. “And the past is the only place to put them.”

“I suppose so. Sorry, I keep interrupting. Go on.”

My baton went out to the year 96. Miscellaneous instruments were contributing to the score. “Here we have the earliest surviving Christian document which did not end up in the canon: 1 Clement, a letter written from Rome to Corinth. Now, there’s an odd situation in 1 Clement. The writer talks about ‘the words of the Lord Jesus which he spoke in teaching,’ and then gives a few maxims about mercy and forgiveness which vaguely resemble parts of the Sermon on the Mount. This makes him the first Christian writer outside the Gospels to refer to Jesus as a teacher. Yet in other places he can offer sentiments very similar to other elements of the Gospel teachings and make no attribution at all, or else he assigns them to the Old Testament. He also shows himself to be abysmally ignorant about Gospel details, like the miracles and the figure of John the Baptist. As for Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, he seems to know nothing and simply draws on Isaiah for his information. So the consensus among scholars is that Clement knew of no written Gospel. Personally, I think his reference to Jesus as a teacher may simply be to the spiritual Christ speaking through scripture. The word for ‘spoke’ Clement also uses of the Holy Spirit in exactly that context. The whole epistle is built upon the idea of scriptural justification. Even the spot where he says the Apostles were sent out by Christ could be a reference to a spiritual call like Paul’s.”

I noticed that Shauna's fingers were scraping the bottom of the bowl. "Do you think you'll want more popcorn? I can get another packet started."

"Oh, no. I want to save some appetite for later. I'm sure you'll be wanting to take me out for a movie and dinner after this very detailed dissertation."

I managed to look a bit sheepish. "Yes, of course. I'll try to speed things up."

I turned back to the wall. "Now we turn the corner, almost literally. The letters of Ignatius, around the year 107. Seven of them. Here we find the barest bones of the Gospel story: Mary, Pontius Pilate, even Herod gets a mention. But no Gospel. Ignatius never appeals to one. He never even appeals to apostolic tradition as a way of supporting his assertions about Jesus' historical data. And no teachings. Not even the fact that Jesus was a teacher is mentioned anywhere in his letters. He has one Gospel-like scene, in the letter to the Smyrneans: Jesus appearing to Peter and his companions after the resurrection and letting them touch him. Ignatius wants to prove that he came back to life in actual human flesh. But he gives no indication of his source for this little anecdote. We're almost a decade into the second century and still no sign of a written Gospel."

My baton dropped down a little. "Next, the Didache, around the same time as Ignatius. A resounding silence about Jesus' teachings, even though it's got many ethical directives resembling his. A couple of them, including the Lord's Prayer, are even attributed to God. No establishment of its eucharistic meal by Jesus, no linking of it with his death. In fact, no death of Jesus at all, and no resurrection. Everything's oriented toward God, with Jesus getting a mention only as his child or servant. He seems to be regarded as some kind of revealer who makes known God's 'life and knowledge'. There's no apostolic tradition going back to Jesus, not even when discussing the legitimacy of wandering prophets and the validity of their teaching. Again, the consensus is that this writer could not have known any written Gospel. Or writers, because the document was put together in stages, they think. Most of it probably goes back into the first century, which is why it hasn't a hint of any historical Jesus."

"So now we're 30 or 40 years after Mark is supposed to have been written, and no sign that anybody's read it yet." The popcorn bowl was all but empty.

"Now you're catching on. Can we really believe that if Mark had penned the first story of Jesus as early as 70—some scholars like to place it even earlier—that it would take several decades for Christians in other parts of the empire to take notice of it? By the end of the century, there were supposed to be four different Gospels available."

"No fax machines?"

"No photocopiers either. But this isn't the Ice Age. The Christian world should have been hungry for information about Jesus. There were disputes all over the place, on many important matters. Some authoritative record of what Jesus had said and done would have been in great demand. These Gospels should have been on everyone's lips—and pens."

"So when do they surface?"

"Well, not in the rest of the New Testament. Not even in the epistles that were written in the second century." My baton cued the double-basses: the three so-called Pastoral letters, written in Paul's name: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. These I had placed around the year 115, a compromise on the various datings by scholars. "Some would argue that this isn't the case in 1 Timothy 6:13, where we find a clear reference to Pontius Pilate—the first one in any epistle. But there are so many glaring silences in the Pastorals, especially in regard to

the teachings of Jesus, that I would have to regard the Pilate reference as a later interpolation. It offers a kind of parallel-in-passing to the situation the recipient of the letter is in—it's supposed to be Paul's friend Timothy. But a few scholars have pointed out that it really doesn't fit that situation very well, and they question whether it might be an addition by a later copyist."

I checked my notations on the Post-It. "And in fact, a few verses before that there's a phrase which clearly looks like an interpolation. The Pastorals six times refer to 'wholesome teachings' but never indicate that these are from Jesus—except here, where a phrase is stuck in that sounds like it was originally a marginal gloss. Scholars generally agree that it looks suspicious."

"But couldn't it be a reference to revelation by the spiritual Christ, like Paul's 'words of the Lord'?" Shauna asked. She was happy to get some mileage out of her memory about Paul.

"I suppose it could. But I rather think the passage has the flavor of an interpolation, and if so, it would support the idea that an ill-fitting phrase nearby, the one about Pilate, is also a later insertion."

"You should be careful, though, not to label too many inconvenient passages as interpolations."

"Oh, I agree. There were phases of critical scholarship in the past which dismissed passages right and left as interpolations. But as far as I can see, the one about Pilate in 1 Timothy and the one about the Jews killing the Lord Jesus in 1 Thessalonians are the only ones I would really need to claim. And everyone agrees on the latter one."

The popcorn bowl was empty. Shauna wiped a tantalizing streak of butter from her lower lip and then crossed her hands in her lap. "Next."

"Next. Yes, that would be the latest epistle of the New Testament: 2 Peter." I pointed with my baton; a document with an incongruous sound, perhaps part of the trombone section. "Even though it usually gets dated around 120, there are still many telling silences about Jesus. The writer is concerned about the coming Day of the Lord, yet he offers none of Jesus' pronouncements about that event. In fact, he tells his readers to 'remember the predictions by God's prophets,' so it seems impossible that he knew a Gospel which contained all those prophecies by Jesus himself about the End time."

I looked more closely at the Post-It. "And this epistle has a very fascinating scene. The writer is pretending to be Peter, and at the end of chapter 1 he says that he and others saw the Christ on a holy mountain, 'invested with honor and glory.' This is very reminiscent of the Gospel scene known as the Transfiguration, but in the epistle no setting during an earthly ministry of Jesus is provided. Everything fits the occasion of a vision of the spiritual Christ. Perhaps this was a tradition about something that had happened to Peter, and the writer draws on scripture to elucidate it; the scene is loaded with scriptural allusions. He's saying that Peter's vision is a foretaste of the Parousia, a guarantee of Jesus' power and the promise that he would come in glory at the End time."

Shauna interrupted. "If the writer wanted to give an example of Jesus' power, why didn't he offer the resurrection?"

"A very perceptive question, one which some scholars have raised. Of course, they don't consider the possibility that for this writer there had been no physical resurrection, because there had been no human Jesus. But in the Gospels, this tradition about Peter is turned into

an incident during Jesus' ministry, and it serves to give a foretaste of his resurrection, not of the Parousia."

"So they still had apocalyptic expectations this late?"

"Apparently so, even though scoffers were saying that these promises had been around for too long without being fulfilled."

I reached for my New Testament on the desk. "But there's a bizarre passage right after this scene. Here: 'All this only confirms to us the message of the prophets...which is like a lamp shining in a murky place until the day breaks...' The writer is presenting Peter's vision of Christ only as a support for the primary testimony about the coming kingdom and Christian hopes for the future. And what is that primary testimony? Scripture! Isn't there something wrong with *this* picture?"

After a moment, Shauna raised both eyebrows. "I see what you mean. Why would scripture be considered the lamp for Christians waiting in the dark for salvation, and not Jesus' recent life and the things he had promised?"

I nodded. "Which are things the writer of this epistle never appeals to. Wherever 2 Peter was written, and we don't know where that was, we can see that even two decades into the second century some Christian writers still have no Gospels and don't show any awareness that Jesus was ever on earth."

"Incredible," Shauna exclaimed. "This is really like a detective story, isn't it? You look for clues, you use your magnifying glass on the texts to see what they're really saying—"

"And *not* saying—"

"You come across red herrings, like interpolations—"

"And unfounded interpretations by scholars based on established preconceptions."

Shauna clapped her hands. "So where's the first clue to the Gospels? Where do we see the first unmistakable sign?" Her animation showed that I finally had her complete and rapt attention.

I couldn't resist a wry comment. "In New Testament scholarship, my dear, nothing is ever 'unmistakable'."

I turned back to the chart. "Now, a scholar like Helmut Koester, who's done a lot of work on tracing Gospel development over the years, concludes that up to and including Barnabas, the Apostolic Fathers and other early writers seem not to have known any written Gospels. When they sound vaguely like Gospel material, they're drawing on oral traditions which were themselves incorporated into the Gospels."

I tapped on another trombone around the year 120. "Now, Barnabas here is also a curious case. He seems to show some crude knowledge of historical information. He also gives two quotes that are very similar to sayings of Jesus in Mark and Matthew, but he doesn't identify them as coming from any Gospels, and he misapplies them. On top of that, he is still woefully ignorant of any teachings of Jesus, and for details about his Passion he relies entirely on scripture. So this is another writing which is at least two decades into the second century and still shows no sign of a written Gospel. Then around the same time, or perhaps earlier, we have the longest surviving document of the early Christian writings, the Shepherd of Hermas, a huge mystical thing, but it talks about the Son of God without even mentioning the names Jesus and Christ, let alone any reference to a human life!"

Shauna tapped her finger on the arm of the chair. "A clue, please," she said, with a stern expression. "I'm still waiting for some sign of the Gospels."

I saluted with my baton. “OK, Koester points to the letter of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.” And so did I. “It’s made up of two parts written at two different times, the larger and later part probably around 130. Koester thinks that Polycarp knew Matthew and Luke, because he has a couple of quotes close to those Gospels. He also draws on a passage from 1 Clement, the one giving maxims from ‘Jesus in teaching,’ which we saw earlier, and he alters the wording so that it’s closer to the Matthean version. The problem is, Polycarp never uses the term ‘Gospel’ and it still sounds as though he is quoting from some kind of oral material. Moreover, if he knew Matthew, why quote it via 1 Clement? And why does he go to 1 Peter’s quote of Isaiah for a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion? Why not draw directly on Matthew’s Passion story?”

“So we’re *still* without a clear written Gospel, AND NO CLUE, even—”

“Even 60 years after Mark was supposedly written. However—” I went on hastily, lest she throw the popcorn bowl at me. “Now we get to Papias. Bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor, who wrote around the same time as Polycarp. Or at least we get to him through Eusebius, the church historian who quotes him about two centuries later. All of Papias’ works are lost.”

“Lost. So this is a clue buried in someone else’s clue.”

“Precisely. A second hand clue, assuming Eusebius is giving us the accurate goods.” I pulled the Post-It off the wall to consult the notes on it. “Actually, it’s a third or fourth hand clue, because Eusebius says that Papias says that the Elder John told him that ‘Mark was Peter’s interpreter and he had set down all that Peter remembered about the Lord’s sayings and doings, though not in order.’ Now, that seems anything but a clear reference to a narrative Gospel. Papias is also quoted as saying that ‘Matthew compiled the Lord’s sayings in the Hebrew language and everyone interpreted them as best he could.’ This one is certainly not a reference to a narrative work, and in any case it can’t be the canonical Gospel of Matthew, since that was a work written in Greek and derived from the Greek Gospel of Mark. Papias himself doesn’t use the term Gospel, and according to Eusebius he disparages written records anyway, saying that he prefers oral traditions.”

“Does Papias not quote from these things?”

“It would have been handy if he did, wouldn’t it? But Eusebius doesn’t give us any quotations. Which makes it highly unlikely that Papias even saw these documents he speaks of. Several Christian commentators quote things from Papias’ lost work, *Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord*. Many of them are weird anecdotes about things like the gruesome death of Judas, or a story about a believer who drank serpents’ poison unharmed. But there’s not a word that could have been drawn from a narrative account of Jesus’ life. If Papias had really quoted from Matthew and Mark, or discussed them in any depth, it would be impossible that no one would have mentioned it.”

“All of which means—”

“That his Matthew and Mark are chimeras floating on the wind. At best, they may indicate that collections of sayings and anecdotes were circulating which derived originally from unknown sources and became attached to an historical Jesus early in the second century, then got associated with certain legendary apostles’ names.”

Now Shauna genuinely looked as though she was about to throw the popcorn bowl at me.

I plunged ahead dramatically. “But now, at long last, our search bears fruit. Not 40, not 60, not 80, but 85 years after the first Gospel is reputed to have been written, we find the

first clear reference to narrative accounts of Jesus' life written by his reputed followers, and the first unmistakable quotations from them." With a flourish I cued the timpani, two Post-Its set in the mid-150s. "Justin Martyr, writing in Rome just after the middle of the second century. Scholars are pretty certain he's quoting from Matthew and Luke, and perhaps Mark. He apparently doesn't know anything about John."

"Pretty certain?"

"Well, unfortunately, Justin's quotations don't usually agree with the present canonical texts, and he refers to his sources only as 'memoirs of the Apostles'. Are they from the Gospels we know, or perhaps from some earlier versions or even a harmony of the sayings?"

I dodged. The popcorn bowl sailed through the air and struck the wall below my Post-It mural. Fortunately, it was made of light plastic. Then we both laughed.

"Eighty-five years to get Mark to the capital of the empire?" Shauna shook her head. "I thought the Romans were famous for their efficient road system." She stood up to retrieve the bowl which had rolled back into the center of the room. "So when do we get Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?"

"By name? Only with Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, around 180. He says it's fitting that there are four Gospels because there are four winds and four corners to the earth. But actually, Tatian, a pupil of Justin, composed a harmony of the four, probably a decade earlier. And in fact, the earliest use that we know about of some primitive version of a Gospel was made, ironically, by one of the great enemies of the Roman church, the Gnostic Marcion. This was in the 140s. The Gospel he used seems to have been a proto-Luke. We know that from Tertullian's detailed condemnation of him later in the century."

"More clues within clues. I guess it really is quite fascinating, if you can put all the pieces together."

"Well, Marcion's Luke is further evidence that the Gospels went through stages of revision in the early period. His Luke wasn't the same Luke we have today. And it almost certainly didn't have the Acts of the Apostles attached to it. It's quite possible that Acts wasn't even written before the time of Justin. Justin himself shows no knowledge of it, and there are no traces to be found of Acts, or even of any source elements, before the year 170. And yet the traditional scholarly position is that it was written in the late first century; some even say in the sixties!"

"A 110 year journey to Rome, is that it?"

"Right. A few scholars are more sensible and think that Acts was written in the mid-second century by the same writer who revised Luke. The Roman church wanted to create a more acceptable picture of Paul, as well as a particular view of Christian origins. In Acts Paul was painted as completely subordinate to the Jerusalem Apostles and preaching an orthodox gospel. You see, Paul had been claimed by some of the heretical Gnostic sects as one of them, so he needed to be rehabilitated before the orthodox church could welcome him back into the fold. That's why Acts' portrait of Paul is so at odds with what Paul tells about himself in his letters. There are also huge discrepancies between the two accounts in the picture they create of the early Christian movement."

"Doesn't that bother people?"

"Rationalization is a wonderfully potent thing."

"So where does that leave the early history of Christianity, if that's what Acts was supposed to provide?"

“In limbo. A very murky limbo. Acts is no longer considered reliable history. The more progressive scholars realize that much of it is sheer fabrication. I guess we have to fall back on the early documents, like Paul, and ask ourselves what they are really saying.”

Shauna moved up to the wall and gave the Post-It labelled MARK a little flick with her finger. “So do you have any idea where these things ought to go?”

“Actually, the traditional dates may not be that far off, in some cases. I’d rather see Mark around 90, but Matthew and Luke can’t be too far into the second century, because the picture they paint of the so-called ‘parting of the ways’ between the Christian sect and the Jewish establishment—at least in the Palestine-Syria area—fits the turn of the century period. The same goes for John, though his gnostic-leaning ideas would probably pull him further into the second century. But remember that these dates would be of the earliest versions of the Gospels.”

“And I suppose that if these stories were about someone nobody was familiar with, it might have taken some time for other communities to accept them.”

“Yes, that’s probably the case. If they went against the grain of current knowledge and belief, they would have enjoyed only limited use and isolated reworking, all within the same general area. Perhaps for as long as a generation. Bits of ideas would start to circulate, but the total package about an historical Jesus might have taken a long time to get established. I have the impression that all parts of the Christian movement didn’t really get on board until the latter half of the second century.”

Shauna was peering more closely at the notes on my Post-Its. “So you think Ignatius got his information about Mary and Pilate from where?”

“Well, that’s difficult to say exactly—probably impossible. I think the tendency to historicize Jesus, at least to place him at a specific point in history, may have occurred in certain preaching circles before it solidified in literary ones. The bare setting of his birth and ministry would start to develop and circulate before any full Gospels were written—or at least before they were disseminated. Paul had said that Jesus was ‘born of woman’, in a mythical context. But the tendency to regard that as an historical statement and come up with a name for this woman was probably irresistible. And Paul also called James ‘the brother of the Lord’. That was eventually misinterpreted to mean a sibling of Jesus when originally it could well have been a title for James as head of the Jerusalem brotherhood. Christian apostles are regularly called ‘brother’ in Paul, and 500 of them are said to have received a vision of the Christ in 1 Corinthians. They can’t all have been siblings of Jesus.”

“Mary would have been a busy woman.”

“Especially for a virgin.”

Shauna drew the tips of her fingers over several of the Post-Its, as though stirring them to life, urging them to release the dormant secrets of the documents they represented. “But we both know there’s a lot more in the Gospels than just a few names, virgin or otherwise. Are you going to be able to explain where all this material came from? It can’t all be sheer invention.”

“It depends on one’s definition of ‘invention’. The world of scripture and myth was very real to those people. What I’m starting to get a sense of is that the Gospel stories were originally meant as a kind of metaphor for deeper spiritual processes, new spiritual truths. But I can’t say yet whether the earliest evangelists felt they were writing some form of history or not. You’ll have to ask me those questions again later.”

“And all these other ones—the blues and reds?”

“More work is what they are. Various Jewish and pagan writings I have to take a closer look at. To see what, if anything, they have to say about an historical Jesus, and how they fit in with my theory. I’m already familiar with some of them, Josephus for example. You’re probably right: it’ll be the end of the next millennium before I’m ready.”

The sun was streaming in the study windows, reflecting off the polished wood floor onto my multi-colored mural. “Speaking of the next millennium,” Shauna said, taking my hand, “how about if we indulge in a little bit of this one before it’s over.”

I put my arms around her waist. “I’m quite willing to indulge with you any time you wish.”

She gave me a brief kiss. “That kind of indulgence we can save until later. It’s summer and we should be outdoors, at least while the sun’s so cooperative. Why don’t we take a stroll over to the mall, see a sexy movie, then we can grab my car and go eat somewhere where it’s all candlelit and romantic. Then if you’re still in the same mood...” She trailed her voice and her finger tip down my shirt front.

2

That shirt was almost the undoing of our mood. I had worn it two days before on a brief walk to the park, alone. In its pocket I had brought along for further rumination a piece of paper on which I had jotted down the two clues from the Ascended Masters. It still rested in the same pocket when Shauna and I emerged into the June sunlight and wended our way toward the local mall, a sprawling complex of shops, recreation areas and theaters almost a dozen blocks away.

Before I became aware of its presence, however, a different subject came up. I said, “I have an idea for the promotion of the Age of Reason Foundation, but I need a term, and I’m caught between punch and political correctness.”

“Uh oh. Guess which one’s going to win out. What is it?”

“Well, I realized after my day with David and the others that no matter what you’re selling, whether it’s vacuum cleaners or rationality, you need effective imagery. I think there’s a principle in salesmanship which says that you don’t sell by extoling the virtues of the product per se. You do it by making the prospective buyers associate themselves with the product in a positive way. You promise them excitement, pleasure, fulfilment: all they have to do is buy and use the product.”

I pointed to a red sports car passing crossways through the next intersection. “That fellow doesn’t own a car like that for pragmatic purposes. He was sold on it because he sees it as creating an image of himself. It becomes an extension of his personality, his interaction with the world.”

Shauna gave me a poke. “Why are you assuming the driver was male? You couldn’t see from here. It might easily have been a woman. Or don’t you think women have needs like that, too?”

I cringed in my best show of sexist guilt. “Oh, I’m sure they do. Well, I can see that political correctness is definitely going to be the winner. Trouble is, none of the neutral words work. You see, we probably shouldn’t extol rationality itself. The product is too dangerously dry and intellectual. What we have to promote is the exercise of rationality, the

idea of a man or woman *being* rational: what this entails and how exciting and rewarding that can be. So. I want to create and dramatize the image of—” I paused for a silent flourish— “Rational Man!”

Shauna looked sidelong at me with narrowed eyes. “I assume that includes women as well. Or do we fall into a different category?” She was going along with the game.

“So now you see my problem. Somehow Rational Human, or Rational Person hardly has the same ring to it. I even tried to think of names that are common to both genders, but Rational Sam didn’t cut it either.”

That brought forth a laugh. “How about Rational Vivian?”

“Very funny.” I took her hand. “So what do I do?”

We reached the intersection where our unisex driver had passed a few moments ago and waited for a walk signal. Shauna said, “Well, perhaps we don’t need to be lumped together. We could stand side by side, bravely facing a universe without gods and without ghosts, championing science and reason and human pride hand in hand.” A flourish with her free arm complemented the flourish in her voice. “Rational Man and Rational Woman! Or, for shorthand, Rational Man and Woman. How’s that for a powerful image? And the long way you get to say your key word twice. Don’t the rules of salesmanship say something about repetition, too?”

I was genuinely impressed. “Shauna, you may have something there. The double term would open up all sorts of possibilities as far as imagery is concerned. It might even strike a blow for sexual equality—uh, bringing men up to the level of women, of course.”

“You see, it does work. You’re becoming more rational already.”

We crossed the intersection.

“So, what exciting things are Rational Man and Rational Woman going to do together?” Her tone was just a little too ingenuous. It had inuendoes written all over it.

“Oh no—I’m not going to touch that one! But one thing they *will* do is take pride in their ability to think. To think for yourself and come to judgments based on the exercise of your own reason: I can’t imagine a greater source of self-satisfaction than that.”

“So Rational Man and Rational Woman are standing side by side, thinking. What are they going to think about?”

We were passing middle-class suburban homes, well-tended for the most part, though in this neighborhood they all bore the same developer’s stamp. One of the impediments we faced in thinking for ourselves was the herd instinct. When your neighbors all think in one way, it’s often hard to stand up for your own convictions.

“Well, I would say that one of the first things they aim for is an understanding of the world around them. How can you function efficiently in the world if you see it through unscientific and superstitious eyes? If the universe is governed by natural laws, how can you believe in miracles, or some vast network of forces engineering reincarnation? How are you going to make the right decisions in life if you rely on palmreading, or tarot cards, or psychics? When you understand the forces that govern the world, you don’t have to grovel before some higher power, you don’t beg for the intervention of an unpredictable deity, and you don’t fear the unknown. Fear and ignorance make you a slave. Understanding brings freedom. Science and rationality are not substitute gods; they’re servants. We can use them to better our lives and the world we live in.”

Shauna cleared her throat. “It sounds like Rational Man is also Theatrical Man.”

“Ha! You should have heard Burton Patterson the other day at the Arboretum. That was theater! Fortunately, it’s theater with substance. The problem is, he seems to make others around him feel inadequate by comparison.”

“Maybe that’s the way he expects you to feel. You’re letting his superiority complex get to you.”

I said a touch glumly, “I guess human personality and emotions can’t be avoided.”

“Rational Man and Woman would be pretty boring without them.”

“Right. Boring is a no-no. Dynamic, questing, bright-eyed...”

“Naked?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you see this Rational Man and Woman of yours standing side by side without clothing? After all, wouldn’t that symbolize freedom from shame, from a sense of sin? I take it the concept of sin isn’t rational?”

“Well, not when it’s indoctrinated as being an inherent part of humanity’s nature—which is one of the dogmas most religion has always upheld. Of course, it’s all part of the outlook which glorifies suffering, self-abnegation and the condemnation of everything worldly. Heaven forbid we should be proud of ourselves and the world we grew out of.”

“Heaven does forbid it—isn’t that the idea?”

“Yes. The question is, where did such an idea come from? What flaw in our evolving intelligence gave rise to something which has caused so much misery and crippled our human potential?”

“I should think that such a question is unanswerable. How can we uncover the mental processes of men and women who lived millennia ago?”

“Well, anthropologists and cultural historians do theorize, based on a study of ancient myths and other things. But most of them seem to place sexuality at the center of our psychological problems. Once we moved beyond the instinctual sex of the animals, human sexuality became something volatile and obsessive. It needed repression in order for society to function in the ever more complex world of civilization. It’s no accident that the Hebrew myth has Adam and Eve covering their genitals when they leave Eden for the outside world.”

“So shame and guilt are our fig leaves, is that it? But why suffering?”

“Actually, Vardis Fisher offers an interesting view of the question in his fifth novel of the Testament of Man, *The Divine Passion*. It’s set just before the dawn of recorded history. The title refers to sex, of course. Once people came to understand the male role in procreation, the gods were regarded as the embodiment of the procreative principle. Communion with the gods was attained through sex. That’s why primitive agricultural societies have always tended to have rituals involving sexual practices and orgies, the surrendering of virginity to the gods, things like that. They say this was part of the matriarchal line of thought, but it persisted as an undercurrent even after societies became more patriarchal.”

“So who brought out the chastity belt?”

“Let’s see if I can remember how Fisher puts it. His third and fourth novels were about the matriarchal phase and the first shift toward male dominance, which at the same time created religion as we know it. In *The Divine Passion* he suggests that the sun, which came to be seen as a reflection of the male principle, had become the chief deity. Before, it had

been the moon, with its governance of the menstrual cycle. But now the sun's astronomical movements became the focus of humanity's thinking and behavior, at least of the peoples living in the northern hemisphere. The sun was seen as undergoing suffering and the threat of death. Each day it sank into an underworld of darkness, and in the winter it battled its enemies who were pulling it ever further south. Vegetation died, warmth receded, and life and light seemed in danger of extinction. Donations and sacrifices were required to give the god strength to conquer and return. Fear and anxiety led to cruel customs. The world was seen as full of evil forces. Sacrifice became the symbol of salvation."

"That's ironic. To think that the earth's own life-giving patterns of movement would induce its intelligent life form to develop all that metaphysics of magic and misery."

"Yes. Nothing highlights the impersonal nature of the universe and its workings more than evolution itself. Darwin certainly gave us the most dramatic and disturbing revolution that science ever produced. We're still reeling from it. And there are those who still fight against it tooth and nail."

"But where did the sexual repression come in?"

"A lot of it involved the male reaction against matriarchal dominance. But as we moved further and further from instinct, Fisher suggests that there was a greater focus on all the perceived evil in the world, together with a more acute sense of self and separateness. In *The Divine Passion* he brings in a symbolic character, a prophet, who decides that evil is the result of the culpability of society's behavior, and that the practice of sex is the primary sinful cause. Woman, as the erotic force acting upon males, is the source of that evil. The only solution is asceticism and castration—real or symbolic. The divine passion became an evil passion."

"With women as its high priestesses," Shauna murmured. "Poor Eve."

"Yes, and sex was divorced from the gods, who now required its suppression. The world became a place to reject, the body an entity to spurn in the search for the good pure soul that humanity shared with the good and pure gods. Of course, this was not a development every society followed. But it's a mark of patriarchal cultures generally, and it was strongest in the Near East where it came to be embodied most fully among the Semitic peoples. The Western world has inherited it through the Judaeo-Christian line."

"Oh, great. Now we've got something else to feel guilty about."

No doubt by coincidence, we were at that moment passing a Christian church. It sported one of those modernistic designs which dotted and blended so well into American suburbia. The building's slanted, almost rakish lines suggested that even religion could keep up with more free-spirited times. Its slender metal cross, unadorned, rose unobtrusively from an unpretentious steeple.

"The sense of sin is the life-blood of religion. Without it, the whole structure would collapse. That cross up there keeps the image planted in every believer's mind. The son of a god is throwing a life-preserver to us sinners mired in a world of evil. He goes through suffering, self-denial and death. Sacrifice is still the only avenue to salvation. The only good we can ever know is through a resurrection to another, perfect world. Has there ever been a more counterproductive philosophy hatched in humanity's fevered brain?"

"Oh, I don't know," Shauna said wryly. "It hasn't been counterproductive for clergy and evangelists. Look at the employment it creates."

“Yes, although a better word might be ‘power’. Those who can save your soul from eternal damnation and put you on the path to a blissful eternity can pull the strings of your deepest responses and volitions. If they want you on your knees, they have the power to put you there. Rational Man and Woman will never allow that. They’ll stand free and proud—yes, I’m getting theatrical again. But there’s no reason why the rational mind can’t arrive at its own enlightened ethical behavior.”

“You might not get everyone to agree with that. They’ll ask how you can establish a proper ethic without divine directives. And how you can enforce it.”

“We use the best of human judgment—just as we’ve been doing for the last few million years. Humanistic philosophies have already come up with good principles for ethical behavior. Judging an act by its consequences, for one—something the divine directive system rarely takes into account. We’ll hone our own wisdom. It’ll be a lot more productive than opening the pages of some ancient book and pointing in abject submission to words that are supposed to be true for all times and all circumstances. That’s a surrender of all our faculties. We might as well close up shop and put our brains out to pasture.”

And yet I wondered just how long it would take to retire those books which had proven so stubbornly enduring. Perhaps for evolution as much as for God, a day was as a thousand years. In the end, it did not matter to either of them.

“It’s also dangerous.”

Shauna had spoken after only a brief pause, but my mind had wandered. “What is?”

“Dangerous to rely on the words of an ancient book. Who’s going to interpret them, or ensure that they’re properly applied? Who’s going to decide if they still make sense?”

“Dangerous is right. One line in the Old Testament was the cause of hundreds of thousands of women’s deaths in Europe from the 13th to the 18th centuries: ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’ It’s somewhere in Exodus. Then Jesus was supposed to have said, ‘Compel them to come in,’ as part of a parable about inviting people to be part of the kingdom of God. The Dominicans took this as a proof-text justifying the Inquisition. Between the two we have the medieval equivalent of the Holocaust. Such are the perils of the mindless application of sacred writings.”

“What about that line the fundamentalists are always quoting against homosexuals?”

“Leviticus 18:22. It’s become a mantra. ‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as one lieth with womankind; it is an abomination.’ ”

Shauna actually stopped. I couldn’t decide if she sounded offended, or was merely exercising her ready wit. “If that’s the word of God, he must be speaking only to men. It obviously can’t apply to women, or else he’d be forbidding heterosexual relations to the female sex.” Then she added with an impish grin, “On the other hand, I suppose the ‘abomination’ could be a reference to men.”

I ignored her last bit of cheek. “The whole passage is directed toward men. It’s about God’s requirements for holiness. I guess the recent attitude that women were not legally persons and not capable of moral decision-making extended back to biblical times and even into heaven itself.”

We resumed walking. Shauna said, “How convenient for the homophobes that God expressed himself so bluntly on the matter.”

“Isn’t it? The trouble is, the same section of Leviticus also has other divine directives which are not so convenient. Or so eagerly quoted.”

“Such as?”

There’s one a couple of verses earlier: ‘You shall not have intercourse with a woman during her period of menstruation.’ Why don’t the fundamentalists spend as much energy championing this particular sexual proscription?”

“Why, indeed?”

“How often do you get paid at the lab?”

She looked at me curiously. “Every two weeks. Why?”

“Well, you should admonish your employer for contravening the law of God. A verse in the next chapter of Leviticus says that ‘You should not keep back a hired man’s wages till next morning.’ I don’t notice the bible addicts pushing for every-day paychecks.”

“The business community would blow a gasket.”

“And most of us break the law of God when we’re *not* running around naked.”

Shauna rolled her eyes as she looked sidelong at me. “All right, what’s that one about? Or should I ask?”

I took my tongue out of my cheek to quote Leviticus 19:19: “ ‘You shall not put on a garment woven with two kinds of material.’ ”

Shauna looked at me with open mouth. “Are you kidding? Is that what it says? I guess we’ll have to go back to animal skins.”

“I suppose once the religious right gets into power and institutes their biblical law, they’ll throw the likes of Calvin Klein and Yves St. Laurent in jail along with the gays and lesbians for their ‘unnatural joinings’.”

“Or the makers of polyester. Now there’s an abomination!”

“It just shows you the folly of declaring any piece of writing true for all time, instead of seeing it for what it is: something very human which reflects the realities and prejudices of its period. But then, even those who declare the bible inerrant in every word are very selective in their application of it. They also conveniently ignore the chief concern of Leviticus: conducting ritual animal sacrifices to the Lord God, from pigeons to oxen. If God can so clearly change his mind about—shall we say outgrow—his need for slaughtered flesh and the odor of burnt offerings, might we not assume his capacity to become less homophobic over the course of three millennia?”

3

From images of a crude stone altar to a Hebrew god, stinking with the burnt flesh and smeared blood of countless millions of animals, a monstrous echo from a time of primitive remoteness, our senses came up against an altar to a more modern deity, with its own assault on the sensibilities. Just ahead lay the major thoroughfare dividing my piece of suburbia from the city proper, a six lane boulevard of asphalt and concrete. Above it rose the din of its fanatic creatures of scurrying metal, each carrying the fire and stench of sacrifice in its own belly. Beyond it lay the highest god of modern living, the sprawling urban mall, and many were the donations made to its priestly coffers. Of salvation, it offered its own diverse kinds.

The mall itself followed the shape of a squat hexagon. In the broad open center lay the amusement area where, from the theater lobby on the upper level, I had occasionally looked out over children squealing on the elaborate network of slides. Was it only a coincidence

that the mall god had arisen at that moment of the world's conversion to secularism some four decades earlier?

We trotted across the busy boulevard and started up the long pedestrian swatch which cut its way through the parking lot, the outer court of the inner Temple. It suddenly occurred to me to ask, "What should Rational Man and Rational Woman make of this monument to consumerism?"

Shauna responded, "It's places like this that drive people into survival cults in the wilderness. I can almost sympathize."

It was at that point I remembered the piece of paper in my shirt pocket. "Speaking of cults—I forgot to tell you that David gave me another message from the Ascended Masters that day at the university. I happen to have it on me. I should show it to you and see if you have any impressions I may have missed."

Beyond the foyer of the main entrance lay the stairway to the upper level theaters. Here, current films and their starting times were advertised to catch the passerby's notice. Since Shauna had suggested a "sexy" movie, we picked the most promising of the three and found that we faced a waiting time of 30 minutes. To fill the gap we sauntered over to the main corridor and sat by a bubbling fountain in a silver ceramic pool. The sound of the water spoke of sinister currents.

I took the piece of paper out of my pocket.

"Clue number two: Those who think themselves great men, and the rich and the strong, shall call to the stones: Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath none can stand before."

Shauna shook her head sadly. "Why don't they just get a life?"

"I suspect that a life is just what they're searching for. It's usually the disaffected who start new movements. They're already shut out from the mainstream establishment, either by their social and economic position, or their innate instability. Even Christianity is supposed to have begun as a religion of slaves and disenfranchised misfits—though that's an oversimplification. Paul moved in a fairly sophisticated circle of educated and intelligent people. And yet there are certainly intimations of instability in his letters. Some think he was a repressed homosexual. Non-practicing, of course. His faith was a way of dealing with his inner conflicts, and he ended up discarding the Jewish Law, which prescribed the death penalty for that kind of sexual orientation. He decided to rely on faith in Christ to give him salvation."

"So what's bugging these Ascended Masters? Are they like the Waco group?"

"We have no way of telling. Koresh based his philosophy—and his own messiahship—on Revelation as well. But then, most crackpot millenarians do. The Masters obviously don't like what the Age of Reason Foundation stands for. Whoever they are, they seem to have found out early on about our anti-creationist intentions and Burton Patterson in particular."

"You mean through inside information?"

"That's what David suspects. But until we can track down who and where they are, it's difficult to know what they're intending—if anything. How does this latest message sound to you?"

"Threatening."

“Yes, that’s my impression, though Revelation itself is one big psychotic threat. The Masters changed the actual passage a little: from ‘great men’ to ‘those who think themselves great men.’ And the original call is to ‘the mountains and the rocks’, not ‘stones’, which is a different word in Greek. I’m not sure if there’s any significance in the change of word, but almost all the translations I’ve seen use ‘rocks’; none uses ‘stones’. They’ve shortened the quote itself, but not in any meaningful way that I can see.”

“What was the first clue like? I don’t remember it.”

“I’ve got it here, too.

“ ‘Clue number one: *This is the revelation given by God to Jesus Christ. The hour of fulfilment is near. Behold, every eye shall see him pierced, and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse. So it shall be. Amen.* ’ ”

“That one sounds ominous, too.”

“David says he’s tempted to call the police about it. He thinks they’re definitely threatening us.”

“Do you?”

“The references to ‘clues’ make it clear that they’re using the quotations to point to something. I suspect if we get another one—and we probably will—David will alert the authorities.”

“Maybe you should do it yourselves. Investigate, I mean. Can’t you find out where these messages are coming from?”

“David’s working on it.”

Shauna was staring at the cascading water. “I would have thought Burton Patterson would have connections for that. He seems to have ways of getting at anybody he wants.”

“I get the impression David isn’t too anxious to let Patterson in on this little irritant. But you might have a good idea there.” Then her last comment sank in and I blurted, “What do you mean? Has Patterson been in touch with you?”

Shauna looked up at me with an exaggerated expression of innocence. The light from the fountain reflected its sparkle in her eye. “Who, me? Now why would some high and mighty millionaire show an interest in someone like me?” She was playing off my involuntary outburst of jealousy.

I gave her the answer she was looking for. “Because like all men, he couldn’t resist your charm, wit and intelligence. Not to mention certain other attributes. And he’s just the sort who would assume that you’d be swept away by his.”

“Hmm. Well, be that as it may, he called the other day just to extend an invitation that I be at the hearing in Philadelphia. Apparently he’s planning some social occasion attached to it and he wanted to be sure I would be there.”

I scowled. “And did he think I wouldn’t be inviting you myself? Anyway, that’s the first I’ve heard of any ‘social occasion’. Are you sure he wasn’t referring to some candlelight dinner for two?”

She thought for a moment. “Well, now that you mention it...”

She was teasing now, and with my hand trailing in the water beside us, I was sorely tempted to perform a little retaliatory ablution.

“Don’t you dare.” I had forgotten she could read my mind. She leaned over to my ear. “After we’ve seen this movie, we can go over to my place and you can get me as wet as you want.”

I pretended it might take some extra special recompense to make up for her dalliance—even though most of that had been taking place in my own mind. I realized that my reaction of jealousy was not because Shauna had ever given me reason to doubt our unofficial commitment. It was the effect of Patterson himself. If the man could be so confident of the intentions I was imputing to him, could even Shauna prove resistant? The attorney struck me as one who had never given himself reason to doubt the success of any of his ventures or expectations.

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