

CHAPTER 1 *CASSANDRA*

He had found pleasure and satisfaction in his years at New York University. Professor Gianluca Morelli's deep understanding of European literature, his fair grading reputation, and his British accent had students filling his classes each semester. His ability to expose the essence from an author's work, to dig deep into the psyche of those writings, proved too tempting for a generation of females craving the exploits of troubadours, bards, minstrels, and poetic crooners; women filled most of the seats in his lecture hall.

His presentations came packaged in a handsome face, full head of salt and pepper hair, and a slim, trim body. His signature wardrobe was made up of worn jeans, a simple tee shirt and a black blazer. Ignoring even the worst weather, he often strolled into his classroom in his black flip flops. His humble approach to relationships, and his inclusive attitude towards persons of all persuasions, made him a much in demand invitee to all sorts of occasions. This kept him busy, and never lonely, even during holidays. Despite having no family in New York, he never spent a Christmas alone.

May of 2023 Gianluca was pushing fifty when he gave an out of character scathing lecture in response to

comments made in his class by his students. The day's topic had focused on the quiet, subliminal power of women to influence the works of Italian Renaissance writers and artists. He spoke glowingly of Petrarch's Laura, Dante's Beatrice, and of Botticelli's Simonetta. In his lecture, he had transported his students to a time when the adoration of a particular woman had been the motivation for celebrated creations of literature and art. The spark that turned him sideways that day was a comment made by one of the women seated in the first row.

"Professor, I just don't get it. When did it all end? Men today just don't have it in them to feel that way about women. I can't imagine any man possessing that kind of motivation... at least not the men I know."

Gianluca pondered the comment for a moment, knowing how he would respond. Before doing so, he asked if the other women in the class felt the same way. All agreed. He looked down at his notes, flipped the pages of Dante's *La Vita Nova* on his desk, then looked up and jumped into his denunciation of the superficiality and selfishness of modern sensitivities.

"My dear Jeanine, in a liberated world, that interplay between a man and a woman, in a heterosexual relationship, let us be clear, is sadly improbable. The liberation movements that began in the 1960s, gaining purpose and clarity over the past sixty years, have decisively altered and redefined the expectations between a man and a woman. Can you deny that you consider yourself the equal of any man? Even greater, perhaps? Can you deny that you cater to your sexual needs as openly and personally as any man? If you desire the company of man in your bedroom, or for a weekend fling let's say, would you worry about what others may think? Would you be concerned with being labeled, of violating some norm? Of course not! Am I free to speak for every woman in this class?"

No one countered his theory, so he kept talking.

"Now, if men have come to accept this modern, liberated female, the easily available sexuality, the simplicity with which they can hook up, as your generation so conveniently defines it, what incentive is there in any male to bring himself to praise the beauty, the singular attraction... nay, the very essence, the soul of a woman when his actions and

instincts are liberally guided by his penis? Why would any man want to work so hard as to write a sonnet, compose a poem in Dante's *terza rima*, or dedicate a work of art to any modern woman? Why? Can any of you give me a reason why any man would want to engage in the task of winning a woman's heart, when falling in love is so superfluous to what he really wants?

If getting laid or temporary companionship is the goal, if it is what both want equally, then there is no pressure on the part of the female to incentivize the male to first fall in love-whatever that may mean to each of us, and to commit to a romantic courtship. If the man does not believe himself in love, then there is no need to invent... namely, to compose or create something meant to be an extension of his feelings to praise the object of his passion. And if the female has no expectation of that display of affection because she is being guided by a liberated vagina, then my dear Jeanine your search for such a man will be fruitless, and please don't take this as a condemnation of your generation. If this is what you want, what you consider the better normal, then so be it... neither I nor any person or institution can stand in the way of what most of you would consider progress."

He paused to construct another argument.

"Can we still label a woman a slut who enjoys sex and has multiple partners? Can we still tolerate a dual set of standards: the virile, studly male, and the unchaste, immoral female? I don't see it. I socialize as much as any in this city, and it hasn't escaped me that nasty judgments are no longer made on those who deviate from traditional norms. There can't be, because it has become acceptable to ignore the norm, and to replace it with personalized standards... casting off the shackles of moralistic parameters imposed by institutions such as religions. Basically, society doesn't have the stomach or the power to impose a benchmark of behavior with a list of criticisms for those who refuse to abide.

While this may be a recent development, it has roots in the counterculture movements of the 1960s. Do any of the women in this hall consider themselves less than equal to any man due to an active sexual lifestyle? Anyone? Are sexually active women marginalized, ostracized, condemned to recant their transgressions with a life sentence in a convent, unqualified to be a bride? To don a scarlet letter? The answer to these questions

would have been a strong yes as few as sixty years ago... no need to go all the way back to the Middle Ages. This isn't the first time we have experienced a measured shift in social principles. It has happened before, but only small vestiges survived. Human beings seem to retreat to more conservative behaviors when things get dangerously out of hand. I can think of the period following Vietnam when there was a hedonistic need to unload all the trauma of a very unpopular war. The free-falling experiences of the Studio 54 era, the explosion of drug usage, and decaying cities gave us the Ronald Regan years when America concerned itself once again with local economies, industry, love of country, and personal wealth; a return to conservative values as a correction to how far we had strayed from the center, from the nucleus. It is said that every revolution incites a counter-revolution. So, you may be the catalyst for another revolution, but will it survive? What action will you take, what course will you follow when you find yourselves at fifty with no significant other? Will you live happily alone, capable of confronting old age and death with no one by your side? Did you put off the thought so conveniently while you were enjoying life with no concern for a future you did not fear?"

His students remained momentarily stunned and silent. The lull was interrupted when one male student in the top row of the lecture hall stood up and loudly applauded. Gianluca was familiar with the outspoken Jason, so he challenged him to elaborate.

"Jason, you either mock me or you have found some common ground."

Jason kept his cool.

"Well, professor, I actually agree with much of your unproven thesis, but let me ask you-how many poems and sonnets have you written, and weren't those Renaissance passions more like obsessions?"

Gianluca smirked and quickly engaged.

"My good man, if those men had acted haphazardly and with little regard with their passions, then yes, we may characterize them as obsessions. An example of how this was avoided would be the passion Dante admits for Beatrice, if you recall, in *Vita Nova*, he has no problem at first professing an earthly, physical love for her which could have

sickeningly turned into an obsession. Now recall what happens—he is overwhelmed by her honesty and purity, he stifles his carnal urge, and his passion turns spiritual. Ultimately, Beatrice becomes his connection to God and Heaven in the *Divine Comedy*. I find it amazing that he would sacrifice his temporal love to elevate a woman further beyond his grasp with divinity. That is bordering on emotional suicide! My God! He serenely anoints Beatrice with sainthood and abandons his crush. There is satisfaction, I believe, in having the woman you love all for yourself, but these men found a way to quantify their love for women they could not have.

Dante and his contemporaries in literature and art were aware of not crossing that fine line, for doing so would have betrayed their truth, and we would have inherited our Renaissance version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. How sad a thought. Now to answer the other part of your question, I did write poems and letters to a girl I was sincerely in love with way back in high school. I thought her to be the most heavenly of creatures. I was smitten not only by her beauty, but by her whole being. Every smile, every word spoken, every movement, every glance was a biological work of art. However, she was the girlfriend of the best-looking guy in our school, and the best of the athletes... problem was, he was also one of my best friends, and a very likeable and humble person. I harbored my truth, I didn't cross the line, and I sent her those poems and letters incognito."

His top row nemesis wouldn't let up.

"So, Dante elevates Beatrice to something resembling a nun to fool himself into thinking she is so divine, so holy that she becomes untouchable. Excuse me for being so blunt, professor, but I think Dante had to find his best excuse to avoid the fact that he just didn't have what it took for Beatrice to notice him, you know, to consider him a potential lover. He then accepts the outcome, but he needs to manipulate the process, control the fiction to appease himself. It's like some guy who goes out to bars and clubs with co-workers or friends just to be around some woman he's crazy about who is completely out of his league. He comments on her beauty and how appealing she is to his guy friends, only to conclude that she's not worth it because a woman that amazing could never be faithful to one man. You see, he conveniently constructs his story to create the perfect reason in his mind why he shouldn't even try."

One of the girls sitting next to Jason backed him up.

“I agree professor, I think it was a major cop-out by Dante and he comes up this brilliant tribute that is nothing more than an excuse.”

Morelli’s chin sunk to his chest, and he closed his eyes in despair.

“You’re killing me. You’re applying a juvenile contemporary idiosyncrasy to a much more complex Renaissance reality. Your young man in the bar has every opportunity to act with a minimum of consequence if things go wrong. He can walk away, accept the outcome, and in a matter of minutes all is forgotten. Dante had to consider violating deeply established social norms. He would have been infringing on the sanctity of another man’s woman, and the reputation of the female and her family, with the very real risk of being exiled from Florence, likely to forfeit his life in a duel or in the extreme, a victim of a homicide in which the perpetrator is exonerated for rightly defending his honor. When you consider those factors, it is no wonder to me that he boldly nurtures his love in the only manner available to him. I refute the notion that he chose to divinely elevate Beatrice as an excuse for his impotence, and instead I am convinced it is the enlightened decision of a deeply impassioned man to extend the lifeline of the love he shelters through his writings.”

Another of the women in class, Sandra, sighed and prodded her teacher.

“Professor Morelli, do you think that these Renaissance men would have still produced their works if those women had been theirs and if they had gotten laid? Would you have written those poems and letters if that girl had been your girlfriend?”

Confidently, Morelli delivered his opinion.

“I must believe in the strongest way that those men and myself would have remained true to our feelings and continued to express our love as the relationship evolved. I mean, if you and the woman you love are together, then the spoken word becomes as powerful as the written word, it is still a manifestation of your feelings.”

She kept him thinking.

“But can two people continue to love each other with the same powerful passion for

an entire life? Isn't that a bit unnatural?"

"Perhaps it is, I can't say with certainty. I haven't had the good fortune of being that deeply in love in my adulthood. I know that in that final year in high school, I could have loved Annmarie the rest of my life. It might be a bit naïve to think things would happen exactly as you envision them, but I would rather take my chances and venture down that road than to hesitate at every challenge. If I fail at making the proposal, then I would default to my thoughts and use my words to honor my feelings.

It's been said that we should allow ourselves to fall in love even if it dwells exclusively inside of us and causes us pain. The poets spoke of the spasms in love, of the sweet agony of having loved, and I agree that it comes with emotional risks, but that one can mitigate those risks by understanding the good in that pain. It's the feeling perhaps that one has at end of an intense two-hour game of basketball, an intense workout, or at the end of running a marathon. Yes, there is an abundance of soreness and aching, but there is also a deep sense of satisfaction that you endured the torture, and as your body regains its strength and heals, one can't deny the accomplishment. In the same sense, one's heart heals and there is fulfillment in knowing that the pain transforms itself into a memorable testimony of that love. I believe the message they were sending us down through the ages was one which places a high value on suffering for another. There are obvious religious undertones promoting the willingness to take on the most impossible of devotions, such as never having the woman you love, and despite that, to still squeeze a few drops of spiritual nectar from those afflictions... enough perhaps to stimulate one to leave an imprint in the form of poetry, literature, and art; in essence, to salvage the best of one's existence even in the depths of despair.

They could have given in to their depression, rotted away and died off. They chose, instead, to lift pen and brush not to pity their torment, but to celebrate the power those women had over them, and I think that was courageous and to be celebrated. In Christianity, particularly in Catholic teachings, to endure injury to advance the condition of others, is an undertaking rewarded by God. Therefore, God looks favorably on those who did not give in to their weaknesses. Think about it... Dante gets to stay in love with Beatrice, and he retains the good favor of God. There could be no greater happy ending:

Dante experiences eternity in the company of Beatrice in Heaven.

Those events would find no appeal in a generation preoccupied with the here and now. There may be no value in focusing on the afterlife for most of you, but to that generation, it was the perfect alternative... the life to come being superior to the one on earth. Now excuse my expression, but that is fucking amazing!”

A less outspoken female found she needed to add another dimension to the discussions.

“That was intense. I understand exactly what you are saying, but I have found all those feelings very much more evident and honest in another woman. I have been in a long-term lesbian relationship, and I must say that two liberated vaginas work so much better together.”

The others laughed and applauded approvingly.

“I mean, there is much less stress with very clear expectations. I find there are no *head* games if I may use that expression. No battle of the sexes, with less selfishness and a greater urge to cater to the needs of my lover. I find there is more romance, and a stronger commitment to make the other happy. This is not an attack on hetero people, nothing against the *dicks* here, but I confess I tried that, and no matter how *deep* my disappointment, I stayed friends with my male lovers. Turning to another woman for my emotional needs seemed so much more natural. I know this would have confused the crap out of your Renaissance poets, but I would like to think that they would have sided with love in any form.”

Perplexed at first, Gianluca found his best response.

“Okay, I can appreciate the monkey wrench tossed into this, I can respect your situation, and I would want to agree with you, however, based on their deep religious indoctrination, our Renaissance men would have dwelt on the sinfulness of a homosexual relationship. If they had a friendship with the two lesbians, they may have cryptically expressed affections for them, but the heresy would have haunted them as well. Dante, for instance, would have had no choice but to place them somewhere in hell, most likely in one

of the less tempestuous circles. I would think he would have attempted to treat them as he did *Paolo* and *Francesca*, but I'm not sure he would have gotten away with it. You are all familiar with the adulterous couple, and you recall how Dante may have been an admirer of their love, but he sadly meets them in the second circle populated with the lustful who forfeited reason to their illegitimate passions and sexual desires. Not sure Dante would have mentioned homosexuality outright, but I have to believe he would have treated it with compassion."

Morelli then noticed Tracey itching to get another comment in as she shook her head in disagreement. Not convinced with the argument he had made about courage and motivation to act, she insisted that Morelli give up more of his past.

"You speak of courage; now wouldn't it have been more courageous to win the female over completely? I mean, why not put your guts out there and just tell her face to face? Why did you give up on Annmarie?"

Morelli betrayed a bit of annoyance in his response.

"Tracey, your questions seem filled with the presumption that one should go out there and claim what they want. That sense of entitlement has always been one of my criticisms of your generation. Many of you walk into these classrooms with the notion that you are entitled to an "A" because you have self-evaluated long before you entered college, convinced that it's the only grade that can validate your genius.

Just because you profess love for another, it can hardly mean you are entitled to have that person. In the very least, I would have had to consider the feelings of my best friend, and the fact that Annmarie was securely involved with someone she already loved, even if it was a teen love that still had some maturing to do.

Here's what I have learned, and what I believe to be a better truth: there is no courage exhausted in a bold-faced affirmation of one's love for another. The bravest action is to confront yourself, peel away all the artificial layers of indoctrination, discover your most organic, quasi-primitive condition, and ignore the entitlements... deny yourselves what the system has taught you to demand. In the process you will learn to appreciate, even

love the life that others project. If there are insurmountable obstacles to having the person, or to have your love rejected, then love the life, and not the person. I know that is asking much given that in our contemporary culture that option would be considered too unselfish.”

His words became stingingly sarcastic.

“Why would you want to waste your time fantasizing about what you can’t have when you can just move on to someone more available to feed your ego. I mean, you might end up writing the most beautiful sonnet ever to memorialize the power a woman had over you. Now why would you want to make that contribution to humanity?”

Jason stood up again and played into the professor’s challenge.

“Fine, I think I get it. There’s a woman in this class that I greatly admire, I mean borderline in love with, but I have seen her on campus with another guy. I can easily compose a poem or a sonnet, as you insist, to memorialize (waving his hand above his head as if to trivialize the notion) how she makes me feel. Now, do I give her what I write in person, do I email, do I drop it off incognito at her dorm room door, or do I publish my work with the hope that future generations will get a chance to read them with commentary from some professor who will be teaching the stuff in the year twenty-five hundred?”

Chuckling and whispers from his full class of twenty-six filled the hall as they eagerly anticipated Morelli’s answer. He took a moment testing his response in his head hoping to avoid contradictions.

“Good try. It would be foolish to think that I could ask you to apply the same fatalistic process as a Renaissance poet. I can’t imagine it would work the same way or that it would have any value. I am bestowing on you instead, the opportunity to change the narrative; to apply a modern standard that could be praised in the future for its own uniqueness, on its own merit. Write your poems and your sonnets and deliver them to the deserving female. Let us in on the reaction if you so desire, with no need to reveal the person. Will your attempt be successful, or will you be forced to retreat to your cave to

commiserate with the ghosts of our friends from the past? Point being that you can still feel the sweet convulsions of love and find a way to reconcile should you be rejected. Then you will be on equal footing with the greatest of destitute lovers. Question is, will you continue to praise your love in prose and elevate her to some mystical platform to be admired by future generations? You must admit it makes for a timeless story about the tribulations of a bankrupt suitor; bringing sighs and tears to those who will read your passages. In my gentle opinion, I believe it to be a fate more interesting than those of men who realize, who conquer the object of their love. Sadly, my guess is you will confidently give up and move on, leaving little trace of your amorous excursion.”

Jason became inquisitive as he amplified the discussion.

“So, have there not been stories of those famous writers who won over their love? I mean, stories of men who did have an affair with the woman of their dreams, even if the results were tragic? Aren’t those just as interesting, just as powerful? I can think of Guinevere and Lancelot, for instance. It involved adultery, betrayal, and clearly, they had sex.”

Morelli became more determined. “Where’s the tragedy?”.

“Professor, it obvious! King Arthur loses his wife’s affections to one of his knights who has sworn loyalty to him.”

“Fine, but these are tales where there is consummation, and most of these are narrated by an author, a third party. The resulting union of two bodies is the culmination of the energies spent, of all the talk and the courtship... and that’s where it ends; they either die in each other’s arms or they live happily ever after, as we are made to believe. The poets we are talking about lacked similar opportunities, and as such, spoke to us about the experience of bodies that never became one in their own melancholy words. So, people who have had unrealized loves in their lives make this deep connection to these works because they suggest a path to lessening their trauma in favor of singing the praises of a would-be lover. You may one day experience the same trauma by falling deeply in love with an impossible someone, but you can lessen it not by singing her praises, but by finding a replacement that will keep you busily involved, helping you to forget... and even if you

don't feel the same intensity, you *have* moved on. Not sure if it's clear, but I can't imagine imposing on yourself the same emotional constraints as our Renaissance friends... there are other options, and contemporary writings mimicking those of the past may today be ridiculed, condemning the poor romantic to order a pepperoni pizza or a gallon of ice cream to help get over it. It just seems that we have gotten to a point where losing a lover is no big deal, and certainly nothing to write about."

Tracey reacted as if in a trance.

"Professor, excuse the expression, but that's fucked up! I'm sad to say that you're right. I understand the differences between then and now. I understand what you mean by the liberated vagina... like, I really don't give a crap if my lover picked up and walked out on me. I would be somewhat hurt, but not because he doesn't love me anymore, but because maybe I did something to get him to leave. Still, I would get over it in a week or so, and then just kinda move on, you know, keep living my life. I don't think I could ever need someone so intensely to have me get sick over it. And I also want to say that these poets were all men. It seems that today a woman would write about an impossible love rather than a man; and I don't want the guys here to think I'm sexist or rude, but I just don't think men today care enough to fall in love and to have those kinds of emotions... I don't think they have it, at least based on the dates I have been on, or even the men I have spent a few months with. And you may be right about not having to work hard for a woman's affections because, once again, they are dealing with our liberated sexuality; you know, women that are ready and willing to hook up. I'm not sure what I prefer more: a romantic guy willing to court me and work a little harder for my affections, or being a liberated female who enjoys calling my own shots on dating and sex... I enjoy that freedom, and maybe today's women are also losing their need to be pursued and married. I'm in no rush right now, but I feel that as I get on in years, I would want something more traditional, some other person to share my life with and to grow old together. My parents have been married for twenty years and I still admire the love they have for each other and how caring they are... they have been each other's best friend since high school. I don't know... I get so confused about this shit."

Gianluca's reaction was already hanging on his lips.

“My dear girl, I think the confusion is as common today as it was in the fourteenth century, indeed throughout human history. Those poets and artists were probably much more confused about life considering the inability to make sense of the restrictions on their free spirits. They thought of life as a vast empty canvass or a book of blank pages ready to record experiences as they lived them, yet their creations could have been censored, even burned as heresy. They would have loved living in our century, even if for only a short time, but I’m not so sure they would have produced at the level they did. Freedom is double-edged... you can have uninhibited minds creating and inventing beyond even our imaginations, or it can stifle a mind that needs an impulse, a cataclysm to create. Our poets and artists had to work within constraints that would be unacceptable today, and I believe those restrictions fueled their desires to invent. Then again, who knows. We can only predict with so much certainty how things would have turned out. So, much of what I’m saying is pure conjecture, and knowing these geniuses as well as we do is still no guarantee we can factually construct their every decision.”

As more students became involved in the discussions, another girl, in gothic attire, indigo-colored lips and nails, raised her hand to ask her professor about his future.

“Professor, I have two questions. Considering your age, have you planned for your future? I mean, not with money, but with companionship. I gathered from our discussions that you have never been married and have no children. Is it getting a bit late for you? And secondly, what about those who acted on their desires and hooked up and did the nasty, what happened to them?”

The others whispered a string of indecipherable comments as Gianluca dealt with the sharp intrusion into his personal life.

“Wow, you have me dead and buried. My dear Cassandra, your concern is well taken; it’s a dilemma I have been dealing with. It hasn’t escaped me that time is becoming my oppressor, but I have come to terms that I may be able to live out my years alone in the company of myself. I have dated, and have had steady relationships that lasted several years, but I succumb to my selfish interests like many urbanites. I mean, this city has been my constant companion, and it has served my needs as well as any woman could have...

except for the physical intimacies, of course. I confess I have enjoyed the perks of our liberated world in that it makes no demands on us to settle down. In that way I'm no different than your generation."

He paused to gather his thoughts.

"Yet, in my heterosexual world I have yearned for an honest love affair, but I have no expectations that it will happen, nor am I easily swayed. It would take an exceptional woman, and I don't mean exceptional in beauty or personality, but one capable of defeating my self-worship, to break me down, and conquer me with all her virtues. I'm convinced no such person exists, at least not for me. Why would any woman want to take on that task? So, I live my days blissfully capitulating to the impossible. As for your second question, there were individuals back then who acted on their desires, some real, some fictional. In most cases things did not turn out well. Best example I can think of again is the fate of Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno Canto Five*. Dante enters the second circle of hell where he meets actual sinners. Remember, the lower the circle, the more serious the sin, and therefore the more intense the suffering. The souls in circle two are those who gave in to their carnal impulses and betrayed social and religious laws. While the sins are unforgiveable, Dante expresses a deep compassion for the two lovers, as if condoning their actions because he is such an admirer of true love; in fact, he faints at the thought of seeing them in hell, and to witness the depth of their misery. They are there because Francesca has committed adultery with Paolo, the brother of her deformed husband. Paolo has fornicated with a married woman... no good. This was really bad stuff back then. Paolo's brother kills them both when they are discovered. They necessarily end up in hell unwilling to have acted on conscience; they ignore the morality which would have kept them from sin, aware of their wrongdoing but did it anyway. Dante has no choice; he must place them in hell, or his work will be seen as a betrayal of Christian teachings and lose credibility. Since they are both killed in the act, neither has time to repent, to admit to their sins and express remorse. They were lovers in life, and they remain lovers in hell, but they are tossed around incessantly by furious winds never allowed to escape the torment. Think about this-they retain the intensity of their love for each other but lose the mortal powers they had to act on it. Imagine that kind of suffering for eternity. Remember, to the

Renaissance mind, heaven and hell are eternal, whatever happens in those places goes on forever. So, here you have an example of two who did the nasty, as you put it, and are duly punished. Hell was a real place to them. Manipulating your conscience from steering you on a righteous path increased your chances of sinfulness, and therefore a one-way ticket to hell.”

She wanted to know more.

“Bottom line professor, the woman you describe for yourself doesn’t exist, so you are not willing to compromise or consider a companion that falls a little short? Is there no room in your view for love to grow, for a woman to learn, to have the chance to kick your narcissistic ass?

As for Paolo and Francesca, I would have done the same. I would have consumed the affair if I felt that strongly about my lover. I would think that living the truth would appeal to God in any form. If God is the purest truth, then why wouldn’t God validate the truth by rewarding the lovers and only punishing the murderer? Paolo’s brother was guilty of rejecting the truth and living his own lie: the falsehood that he deserved Francesca. I’m so sick of God’s hypocrisy, of how powerless he seems when human morality would have easily forgiven the two lovers. Why would God be so determined to enforce punishment on the truth? I don’t get it.”

The rough inquisition from Cassandra generated an uneasy abstraction that had him searching for some balance.

“That’s a powerful statement—well said. But why leave something so profound to chance? I prefer to have my ego kicked around and trashed in a first encounter. If the spark is there after only a few dates, then your weakness is rewarded, and you can start planning a future together. As for the God thing, the very notion of a supreme, almighty being with the power to judge was meant to sort the good from the evil, and not truths from untruths. I don’t think God gives out brownie points to those who live sinful truths. Paolo and Francesca may have been truthful to themselves in the acts they committed, but Dante is powerless to place them anywhere other than hell, and his deep tenderness and mercy for the lovers is not enough to displace the Christian dogma that demands

condemnation. At least the first two circles of hell are described as much less hard core than the lower circles where punishments are much more in line with Medieval tortures.”

As his frazzled voice dwindled to a whimper, he murmured his final thought as the period ended.

“In a more tribal setting we were meant to minimize our personal needs, abide by rules of mutual survival, and to live and produce for others.”

The lecture hall had almost emptied when Cassandra approached him.

“You know, I’m not totally convinced that your Renaissance heroes were any more concerned about humanity than the average guy. I think they produced their works as a way of justifying their weaknesses, their lack of courage to go after what they really wanted out of life. Paolo and Francesca did just that. When Dante meets them, he may be showing sadness for them, but I also think he is beating himself up for not being more like them. I have to go, but I would love to talk to you more about this topic. We only have one class left, and I’m graduating in two weeks, so do you have time to meet. Do you know the Poet’s Café’ on Bleeker and Sullivan?”

“Yes, I spend hours there, you can imagine.”

“Fine, how about tomorrow around six?”

He nodded hesitantly, captivated by the shadows that shrouded her eyes. She smiled and confirmed.

“Great, see you tomorrow.”

As she disappeared down the hall, Gianluca leaned against his desk anticipating the difference of opinions that would probably characterize their encounter the following day. He couldn’t help wondering about Cassandra’s growing interest in the class. She had fulfilled the course requirements admirably, never missing a class, handing in all her work, receiving high grades. What confused him was her semester long silence in class. She hardly said a word, paying close attention to lectures and discussions. He kept the thought alive as he retreated to his apartment after picking up food at his favorite Korean take out.

The following day he had no classes, but a full schedule of department meetings and an appointment with the university publisher's office to review an edited version of the first five chapters of his new book-*Insights into the Writings of Jane Austin*. The afternoon was spent researching at the university library. That evening he prepared to keep his appointment with Cassandra.

It was a short stroll to the café from his apartment. Cassandra was there early sitting at a small bistro table for two in a backroom corner. The eclectic décor included rows of books by famous poets stacked on bookshelves harnessed precariously to the stucco walls. Framed posters from the Poetry Foundation hung to fill open spaces, while visitors added their own graffiti poetry on tables, furniture, and any uncovered spaces on the walls. The atmosphere had a Beatnik quality to it, with Dylan and Joan Baez songs, and other folk artists from the fifties and sixties playing from tiny speakers dangling from ceiling brackets. Stacks of old books sat in bins for sale at a dollar each. Paintings by art majors sat lined up on the floor against the wall like file folders waiting for curious buyers. Morelli had purchased several in the past to decorate his loft apartment in Greenwich Village. Cassandra greeted him with a smile as she took one last drag of a joint before extinguishing it and tucking the unused half in her blazer pocket. As Morelli took his seat across from her, he noticed that much of her gothic makeup had been replaced by a more relaxed, preppie look. He also picked up on the school crest stitched on the right side of her blazer. He leaned over to read: Saint Catherine Academy for Girls.

“Is that your real high school blazer?”

“Yep, it is my high school blazer, and yes, I was raised to be a good Catholic girl. I still wear it, but only to remind me of all the things I hated about my teenage past.”

Perplexed, he asked why she had such ill feelings about her high school years.

“I fought my mother to keep me out of an all-girls Catholic high school, but she insisted and won. They were four miserable years that still haunt me.”

“I know high school can be an issue for many, but I hardly hear talk of hating it. What got you so irritated?”

“The fucking hypocrisies. We wore conformist uniforms while they talked about free will. The girls all acted out their lies about chastity, and the make-believe role models they were supposed be, when in truth they were total bitches and sold out on their virginity as soon as they found a dick they liked. They did it so they wouldn’t lose the guy to some other chick. The richer girls advertised their shit every day, and the super smart ones would freak out on you if they didn’t get straight A’s. I didn’t match up on any level. I struggled with grades, my mother worked two jobs to pay the tuition, and girls like me had to wait in line for attention. The ones with the power couple parents, you know, lawyers, doctors, bank presidents, were treated with white gloves. The school knew that with those people it wasn’t just about the tuition, but more so about the big money donations they would make to the school’s endowment. I didn’t have the money to start college right after high school, so I worked and here I am thirty-five and just now getting out of college.”

“Yes, but why such resentment? Did you expect those girls to overcome their wealth and power privileges to create a more equitable environment? Did you truly think they would ever be that concerned with you, and wasn’t it just another example of how things work? You must know, your experiences have been around for centuries, there’s nothing new here. Equality is an impossible utopia. Some will always have more or want more than others, and they will find a way to get it. Humans are not capable of equality by nature and habitat. Our distant ancestors who first discovered that it was better to live in a cave than to brave the outdoor elements, developed means to keep that cave theirs. Those on the outside, without a cave, realizing it offered a better chance at survival, developed the means to take it away, to conquer it, even in a Machiavellian way. It was that human nature that kicked in and is still around because it evolved with us. Obviously, factoring in evolution, we keep creating the means to compete and dominate. Every attempt at creating more equitable societies will always have this time bomb built into it, and it is the reason why past attempts have failed. Forgive me, it’s in my nature to lecture, I didn’t mean to turn you off. Your mom’s struggles have paid dividends. You seem to be well focused on doing something meaningful with your life. I gather your dad wasn’t around”.

She attempted a cold, indifferent response, but it was clear the topic carried some pain when she lost eye contact with Morelli.

“The fucker left when I was three. Saw him only on Christmases for a few minutes. Haven’t seen him since I graduated from high school. He didn’t show for that, and last I heard he was shacked up with a woman somewhere upstate with two kids. I don’t think he ever wrote any poems to my mother. They never married, and she got pregnant when she was eighteen. The wimp couldn’t handle the responsibilities, and he wasn’t able to hold a job long enough to pay the rent. Mom moved back in with her parents. I was pretty much raised by my grandparents in the Bronx.”

Morelli’s compassion kicked in attributing his upbringing to good fortune. “I was a bit luckier. Problem is we can’t choose our parents when we are born. Mine were very much in love. They had me early, and then concentrated on their work as professors in Italy. They spent much time researching and writing their books, but they never ignored me. They took teaching jobs at NYU, so they moved to New York when I was about to enter high school. I lived an eccentric existence in the company of friends my parents cultivated from the university. They eventually retired to their home in Padova. They enjoy a very bohemian life in a small cottage near the city. But this isn’t the reason you wanted to meet. You had some need it seemed to follow up on something we discussed in class.”

Cassandra leaned back on her chair, and turned away toward the large smokey window, her eyes tailgating each passing car. She remained silent, ignoring the café chatter. With her mind made up, she revealed how little her request to meet had to do with the class.

“What about the British accent?”

“I was dropped off at a boarding school in London from the time I started middle school. I was eleven. Throughout those years into high school, I came back to New York only during the summers. The accent came easy-I picked it up quickly because I liked it.”

“Look, you’re a lot like those poets, and I think you also lack the balls to say what you want. You prefer to clothe yourself in abstractions so that others can’t define you. You live this shady existence somewhere between reality and the romanticism that shapes your views of relationships, and I think you refuse to side with either. Are you settling on the same fate as your poets? You would choose to deny yourself the pleasures of any

relationship so you can pity yourself in some pathetic romantic delusion? Why are you so into loving the illusion instead of falling in love? You don't have to be in love to love, you know. It can be a process. You start with liking the person, finding common ground, doing shit you both enjoy, and then you grow into each other. You do share a certain kind of love in a relationship that doesn't initially set you on fire." She paused, scanned the room.

"I can't stand men like you, but I admit I find you weirdly appealing. It's like I have this urge to blow your mind in a wild fuck, but then I think I'm only feeding your arrogance. In the end what matters is that we satisfy our needs and curiosities... neither of us gets over on the other. Is that something you can deal with?"

Morelli sat dumbfounded, unable to find the words that would either express a moral displeasure to change the topic, or to keep the conversation alive, succumbing to her truth. He decided to follow her lead to see where it would take him.

"I'm not sure how to react. Part of me wants to walk away from the conversation, but I know that would be artificial and cowardly. You've shown the greater audacity, making me feel quite small. I want to disagree, but I can't deny some of the truth in what you say. I admit I would want to experience the same convulsions as my poets, and I understand the futility in that, but to take it to that level would be to push the human-to-human experience to its greatest climax... if I'm allowed to use that word around you. You see, what stimulation is there in achieving the conventional, to make a choice in a partner, marry, have children, pay off a mortgage, grow old and die? It is a mind-numbing path, dictated by norms and social expectations. I want to be challenged by the unconventional, the improbable... to be totally consumed in a mental and emotional battle with the promise of an alternate nature, something that guides us way beyond our human limitations. I would think something akin to a high from a strong hallucinogenic, but without the drug. A high driven exclusively by our own atoms. Shit, listen to me, I'm going off on stuff that just seems wacky to people. I'm so sorry... I should save this for my classes."

She had taken her shoes off while he juggled his thoughts and words. Her toes flirted with the inside of his leg in a feathery caress causing his next sentence to fall apart like a disbanded puzzle. He refused to panic, so he pulled a pen from the inside pocket of

his blazer and started composing words on his napkin. She pushed aside her shoes and walked barefoot to the counter, returning with two double espressos and a small bowl of panna.

“Writing me a poem?” She asked sarcastically.

“That might come next, but right now I’m simply trying to record what I want to say, since your toes are making it extremely difficult to concentrate.”

“Well then let me continue since I’m enjoying that side of you; weakened and confused.”

Her toes picked up where they left off. She anticipated him pulling away, but his leg became a willing participant. She doubled down by pushing closer to his crotch pleasantly aware that it wasn’t only his leg that had stiffened.

“Professor Morelli, if I didn’t know any better, I would think you’re ‘growing’ in love; you’ve responded so well to the stimulus... bravo!”

He moved his hand slowly below the table attempting to guide her foot away long enough to manage his erection, only to sense that touching her toes did more to prolong it.

“So, is this your big tease? Am I supposed to give in at this point and invite you back to my apartment? I wouldn’t expect such a cliché move on your part; I thought you much less counterfeit than this.”

She ran her hand over the top of her head brushing back the long midnight hewed strands, sighing as if bored with the professor’s predictable reaction.

“Gianluca, your performance is the cliché. So predictable for a man, even one as worldly as you. I have no intention of fucking your brains out just for the sake of a fuck. How sad of you to think that I need to prove how good I am in bed. Men think that the goal of all premeditated actions is to feed one’s sense of self-worth. I have no desire to prove how unconditionally I can conquer your penis... to have you capitulate, and then to unravel you, so you finally understand who you are. You see, I don’t think you know who you truly are, and I have this weird need to challenge you till you acknowledge it. I’m

convinced that the philosophies you advocate for in class are as weak as you are. That your kind of love is an invention, a false state of mind. That your willingness to eternally romance a woman that doesn't exist is the ultimate surrender, the ultimate cop out, and you can't continue to believe that what you teach should be an aspiration for others. You see, I think that you can shed all the bullshit, and fall in love with the sex and not necessarily the woman."

Perplexed, he asked why.

"Why is that so important to you? I think you miss the point. We have two avenues when it comes to the impossible: we can either make it possible or accept its impossibility. If making it possible is impossible, then we should romance the impossibility. I'm perfectly happy with that choice. Look, I have a need to romance what constitutes the greatest impossibility in my life. I choose to walk away from an improbable love not because I am too weak to try, but because I am convinced it will never be reciprocated, that circumstances will not allow her to share the same feeling for me. I refuse to drive my affliction into a dead end. I want to exhaust its intensity in praise of what is not mine. I think it's wrong of you to believe the aspiration to be delusional." She snapped.

"Holy shit, Gianluca! There it is again, that need to own a woman so you can love her. If you can't own her or make her yours, you have no right to love her, just let it go. How can you fucking love someone you haven't had in any capacity? I mean, if you never held hands, if you never took a bath together, if you never laid in bed naked, never discovered each other's bodies, each other's being, then how can you declare your love? Give me the chance to prove that you can have me, love me, love the moment, and still not be in love. I promise it will change your life. You can't wait until your dying day in the hope that you will have your Beatrice... look at what happened to Dante. He spent the rest of his life romancing someone he never had. Fuck, that path should be the least of two choices, and only when an alternative doesn't present itself. I'm your alternative."

She paused, sipped her coffee, and waited for a reaction. Nothing. She became irritated.

"Are you seriously going to avoid life? It's almost as if you are hoping to fall in love

with a chick who doesn't know you, willing to piss away your days thinking you can recreate that artificial ideal from centuries ago. Your poets and artists have you captivated and brainwashed, and you are an enabler... you really want that... you fucking want to go through the same persecution, the same torture. So, if this magical female should cross your path, you will fall absolutely in love, she will even repay your affections, but you will be the ultimate dick and refuse to consume it just so you can place yourself on a par with your martyrs. How pathetically amazing that you've known this all along. You have no intentions of ever allowing any woman to mess up your sick plan. Worse yet, I can't believe that your debilitated mind makes me want to fuck you even more. I have this crazy urge to conquer your ass, and then you can go off in search of your shit. And what if you are incapable of leaving some footprint, some fossil of yourself for future generations to discuss you in a classroom. Then what? You will have pissed away the chance to fulfill yourself sharing a common destiny with someone, and no one will ever learn about it. You'll be a forgotten gravestone in some overpopulated cemetery."

She took a deep, exasperated breath, and angrily gave her ultimatum. "So, we need to test each other. Your place, a nice hotel, or a weekend in my favorite town Newport."

He covertly scanned the area around him wondering if anyone had listened in on her words. Secure in the fact that her voice had not risen above the chatter of others in the café, he lowered his eyelids, and in thought he begged himself to suffocate his logic and to follow the scent laid down by Cassandra.

When he came to: "You are inviting me into your bed. Doesn't it bother you that I'm the guy teaching a class you're enrolled in? That I'm fourteen years older, and that we seem to have little in common? I've been to Newport. I would love to experience it in your company, but I don't want to fuck, I have such a hard time getting that word out."

She smiled, ran her foot up his leg one more time. "My dear professor, I will spend the time between now and then thinking of a way to change your mind."

He finally allowed the leg massage to relax his posture, slumping further into his chair. "Fine, let's deal with your obsession. I'm curious, doesn't the age difference bother you. Is this a daddy thing?"

She sarcastically, almost angrily chuckled a bit louder. “You know, fuck you! You just had to go down that road. I don’t have a daddy issue because I hardly know what it is to have a real dad. I got over that many years ago. That was totally fucked up! You’re a project for me... an experiment. You need to be your age, someone younger wouldn’t work. I need your stoicism, your patience, your maturity to carry this out. Younger men would fight it. They would want to control, or at least share control of the process, and therefore sabotage it. This is not a head game... I explained it. I need to know if subliminal love, the love that is forced to dwell in the subconscious is superior to the love that is consumed.

You challenged us to think in those terms, now I challenge you to prove it. Can you resist me in bed? And if you can, I need you to come clean. If you can’t, then I need a reason that will leave no doubt in my mind that there was no love exchanged, that you felt no love in the act itself. You understand this has nothing to do with your orgasm, and nothing to do with being in love with me. It has all to do with control. Will you be able to keep your quest for the impossible separate from what is real, from the skin that touches yours, from the breasts you want to touch, from lips that fuse to yours generating those violent shivers as they peel away, and finally from a body that has offered itself unconditionally?”

Morelli held his own, refusing to surrender to the sexually charged monologue.

“I need to be assured that you will not forfeit your friendship, nor your company should your experiment fail. I would hate to think that a relationship could fall prey to a misunderstood weekend. Will you deny me that in the event things work out differently?”

“Gianluca, you think so little of me. I have known for months that I could enjoy your company in any capacity