

Chapter 7

During the months that followed, Paul's new religion demanded exercise considerably more strenuous than genuflection. After his first tentative explorations, inserting himself somewhat diffidently while Ursula held her lips wide apart with her fingers so he wouldn't miss, he soon became an acceptably proficient practitioner of that art in which, curiously, only civilized man, unique among earth's creatures, requires instruction. Luckily for Paul, the quality of his instruction could hardly have been bettered. Ursula's knowledge of alchemy, Paul discovered, was rather more functional than Chaucer's, for the base metal of her body was transformed into pure gold by the philosopher's stone of her expertise.

Almost, but not quite. Sometimes as Paul labored between her legs he saw her suddenly as a ponderous animal, a sweating elephant dragging a log up a steep hill, or a beached whale, shuddering, groaning, dripping. Or occasionally she would ride triumphantly astraddle, his own personal Moby Dick, his *bete blanche*, her great white blubber bearing him down to watery extinction and no Ishmael to mourn him.

But such thoughts were infrequent and should be forgiven a hitherto fastidious young scholar. He was becoming a generous lover, repaying Ursula many times over for her tact and patience. Nor did his labors go unrewarded, for when he came, rockets went off in his skull, the thrusts pulling him clear of gravity and out into deep space, free-floating in the light of a thousand suns. He would float back to earth, gently, light as cosmic dust, back to the little mattress where Ursula lay beneath him, licking his ear and grinning like a cat.

What a relief not to be compelled to observe his orgasms and analyse them, comparing them with previous orgasms, measuring the relative intensity of his emotions, supporting their validity with copious citations, properly footnoted, from a library of amatory experts. Here at last was pleasure that was an end in itself. It was the first unmitigated, uninhibited delight he could remember.

THEY explored each other and then the city, beginning with the steep walks and wooden stairs which tumbled down the far side of Telegraph Hill towards the Embarcadero. Rickety wooden rainbows arched over jumbled gardens of petunias and untrimmed rosebushes in which a scattering of Victorian houses clung desperately to the cliffs like the heroes of early silent serials. Halfway down, a tiny crescent path led around box bushes and suddenly up against a tall scarecrow of a house, Gothic fretwork hung like cobwebs under the eaves, a mad artist's holiday of mauve and vermillion. Bachelors' buttons struggled up between the paving stones, a Siamese cat cavorted with the cabbage butterflies, and out in the bay a squat tanker

labored out to sea. If you closed one eye it appeared about to enter a second-story window. Everything seemed unreal, perspective was vertical like a Gothic tapestry. "Here there be unicorns," read a sign in a jungle of rhododendrons. It was quite plausible.

Alone back in Berkeley in his furnished flat, Paul tried to decide whether they were in love. Ursula wrote poems about their affair which were certainly indicative of strong passion, he thought, but Paul knew better than to take them at face value. Poets had a predilection for an *als ob* theory of personal history: more than one literary giant had celebrated his undying devotion to a lover soon deserted for another who more generously greased the wheels of creativity. Artists were notoriously selfish, and if they were good enough, even their victims often forgave them, readily exchanging the ephemeral delights of passion for the more substantial satisfactions of immortal fame. Whatever disillusion, whatever destructive quarrels might ensue over extravagant expenditures or straying affections, the early bloom of an untested devotion was preserved in amber like Northcote's mediaeval lovers, forever impervious to broken promises. Shortly after their first night of love, Ursula had written a Cummings-like poem, innocently exuberant and atypically free of erotic explicitness:

our love is deeper than to know
and wider than surmise
more generous than to bestow
and higher than surprise

its more bizarre than zanzibar
its softer than to purr
its closer far than where you are
and further than you were

its broader than the seven seas
its finer than a thread
more gentle than a summer breeze
more terrible than the dead

less winters sting than verdant spring
more summertime than fall
more anything than everything
less not enough than all

It was too much for Paul, unwarranted, he thought, by the facts. Though no poet, he had responded with a poetic gloss, composed in early morning post-Robbie's cynicism and consigned immediately to his filing cabinet. Decency demanded that some things be left unsaid.

FRUITION

Our love is like a hot-house bloom
Untimely brought to flower.
The bud that blossoms in a day
Will wither in an hour;

And if it were allowed to take
Its natural course unhampered,
A premature demise would prove
The price of being pampered.

But rose that's wrenched from off the bush
Before it starts to languish
May save the stem a drop of sap
(And us an hour's anguish).

So now that this one perfect flower
Has sprung from mutual need,
Let's pluck it in the bloom of youth
Before it goes to seed.

Not that Paul had any claim to moral superiority. Whatever his finer feelings, he had to admit that he had used Ursula for experience, of which, God knew, he had little enough. She had taken him on, an unlicked bear-whelp, and molded him into shape (the metaphor had a literal exactitude), curing him of a deficiency he was confident would never trouble him again.

Perhaps the truth was that they had "used" each other in a manner which made such an accusation irrelevant, giving and receiving in equal measure an indispensable service. More cynical, perhaps, than the "love" celebrated in innumerable popular fantasies, but less naive and certainly less hypocritical. So long as they didn't demand the impossible, stretching it on the rack of a thousand Hollywood pot-boilers, it would run its course without destroying the benefits it had bestowed.

The benefits, for Paul, were not confined to the sexual. He was beginning to suspect that Ursula's taunt of voyeurism was relevant, by extension, to his whole way of life. He had taken the university and its values for granted, but now he began to wonder if, beneath its surface, it was essentially parasitic.

Not in the sciences, or course: these were now utterly dependent upon the wealth and stability of a powerful institution living off the compulsory

largess of the nation's involuntary tax-paying philanthropists, passed along in the form of government grants. The idea of a free-lance nuclear physicist was absurd. But in the area he knew best, wasn't the university extracting the essence of literature without contributing to its growth? Or making only a minimal, sterile contribution: pale, quivering, delicate little poems, deprived of air and sunlight, the sort of sickly offshoots you found on a vine which had blundered into a cellar through a crack in the masonry and was blindly circling the walls in quest of the unobtainable.

Ursula's crowd on the other hand, some of them, seemed to be onto something real, if only he could put his finger on it. But whatever it was, he doubted if it was something he could participate in. He was just as much a spectator there as in the world of Chaucer, merely sitting in the audience and applauding in the right places. Even if he had that kind of talent, which he doubted, he was too sceptical by disposition to follow the lifestyle of these neo-romantics, proclaiming before all the world the exclusive validity of his private vision. Still, it would be awfully reassuring to have one....

That elusive sense of purpose again. Was there something he could do—anything—that someone else couldn't do better? Not unlike several million other young men, he wanted to make a unique contribution. But apparently, unlike most of them, so far as he could determine, he did not want to fool himself, or anyone else for that matter. The moral code of the advertisers had infected even the university and success was whatever you could get away with.

Not that he was immune to the academic disease of bookmanship; the demand for apparent omniscience was too strong and even his professors sometimes referred knowingly to obscure books they had swatted up in Baugh. The scholar who never lied by implication would never make it past Bonehead English. But afterwards he always felt he had lost another minor skirmish in the endless fight for integrity.

It was his nagging Puritan conscience again, routed on one battlefield and fighting now on another, which kept Paul from embracing unreservedly Ursula's anti-academic rhetoric. No, that wasn't quite right; he was confusing his metaphors, setting up mutually contradictory lines of battle. Furthermore, why "battle"? His mental habits and the figures of speech which reflected them always referred back to his protestant upbringing, in which every virtue was a decoration awarded for a painful victory. Maybe that was why he was attracted to Zen—not to its religious aspect, but to the effortless joy, the freedom from tension, the instantaneous reconciliation of all the monumentally opposing forces in western civilization. He was tired of all those double-headed arrows.

But North Beach was as full of phonies as the university—of that he was quite certain. Zen phonies, nature-boy phonies, caveman phonies, sex phonies, the lot. Most people seemed to put on their principles like suits of clothing, first finding friends and then adopting the prevailing group-philosophy. Their loyalties were tribal, their minds omnivorous and indiscriminating. But, as Ursula kept reminding him, he shouldn't dismiss the whole Beat movement prematurely, not before he'd met the really good writers like Sojak and Nobilia. Next week, at a party Ursula was taking him to, he'd have that opportunity.