

Spring 1985

Jonathan leans into the wind as he makes his way up the bluff overlooking the Pacific near Fort Ross. It is spring break, and he has decided he needs some personal time and space. Things with Daniel have been a bit tenuous of late, and the wild Pacific Coast promised to provide the elixir and refuge needed to process. He could not pass up the opportunity to explore San Francisco, from the bay to the breakers, on his own, even though he is not much of a city person, preferring the outback to challenge and find himself. But for as long as he could remember, San Francisco, is one of three cities—New Orleans and Boston being the other two—that have held a fascination for him, causing him to wonder if he didn't have a previous life in each.

San Francisco did not disappoint. In fact, it gave Jonathan more than he had hoped for. From Fisherman's Wharf to the bars in the Castro, he absorbed every ion of energy, inhaling magical air he found curiously enervating. Three days of the magical elixir were enough though, so he rented a car and headed north on Highway 101 through the Napa Valley and past Santa Rosa to the Guerneville exit. From there he followed the Russian River down and west to the small enclave where he discovered an open culture and community of men to his liking.

Finding lodging at a gay-oriented resort, he decided to hold off on the venture into the village and donned his running shoes for a trot up to a nearby redwood cove. It was late afternoon and warm, so he was surprised at how few others were present. That was okay because while their voices did not reverberate, the few wandering through or sitting on benches still cracked the silence of the tree village. It was the first time he saw the enormous trees in person and walked in awe among them. Noting how soft and cushiony the ground was, he removed his

shoes and walked barefoot. The sensations he felt through the nerve endings in his feet were intoxicating and brought back boyhood memories of running barefoot through the woods, the soles of his feet coarsened and tough as leather.

A natural seat between two of the protruding massive roots provided a place for him to sit, and he settled into its embrace, then stretched his legs out to feel the ground through his bare skin. Pulling his left leg up to allow his sole to caress the ground, he focused all his thoughts on the feelings of the stones, the tiny branches, and the root to feel every indenture, bump, and sharp edge. He switched feet and sat meditating on the experience.

After slipping his shoes back on, he ran back to his cabin, showered, and dressed for the evening. He decided on dark gray casual trousers with a lavender pullover top and slipped into his cordovan penny loafers. For a second, he panicked, thinking he had left the matching belt at home, but found the belt curled and nestled between his boxers and socks. Thankfully, disaster was averted.

The bars were hopping, which surprised him given the size of the town. In the first one, he beamed when he saw a shuffleboard table. Jonathan is good, able to slide the puck along either rail with the right amount of spin and just enough velocity to let it sit snugly at the farthest edge of the board. If his opponent failed to knock him off, he unfailingly “put pants on it” by placing the next one a few inches in front to prevent it being knocked off the next time. He decided it was going to be a fun evening, and it was.

His name was Joseph, and he was as gorgeous as his last name, Rose. He was the bartender and after several shots and increasingly more personal banter, he asked Jonathan to stay after closing. The next day they spent hours of endless touching, fondling, caressing, and entering in Jonathan’s cabin. Two days later, Jonathan took a scenic drive along the coast on

Highway 1, hoping he would not plunge into the ocean, not because the road was precarious, but because he could not help gaping in awe at the power of the waves.

Now he finds sitting atop the bluff this Friday afternoon to be exhilarating despite the powerful surf winds pounding the shore. Jonathan's fear of water might prevent him from going to see what Moby Dick saw in the deep, but he can sit transfixed near the ocean for hours exploring in his mind what he is fearful of exploring with his body.

Dressed in his standard casual attire of hiking shorts, runner's T-shirt, and running shoes, Jonathan sits on the ground with his knees pulled up in front of his chest, zips up his windbreaker, and wraps his arms around his legs to give him stability. Spring break could not have come at a more perfect time. He rolls "more perfect" over in his mind. The phrase irritates him despite it being in the Preamble to the Constitution. Precision in expression, written or spoken, has become an obsession with him. Less than perfect is what we are, yet ironically, it is in our imperfection that we are perfect, he reasons.

In an ongoing battle with the wind, he wraps his windbreaker tighter, pulls his baseball cap down, and pulls the hood of the windbreaker up over it. As a tern swoops overhead, he reflects on the last reading he did with his honors American lit class before spring break. British lit is not his strength, but he enjoys reading *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* after wrapping up *Moby Dick*. He tries to get his students to understand that the ancient mariner, along with Ahab and the rest of the sailors, serve as archetypes. He has found it is easier to get a concept across when it is discussed in context. In one quarter, his students will be seniors in his friend Denise's class, and she appreciates the idea of his giving them a taste of her curriculum before they enter their last high school English class, which will be advanced placement level. Then they will stand a fighting chance of doing well with her demanding expectations.

One of the challenges he enjoys most in the classroom is moving his students to a deeper appreciation of fiction. “Well-written fiction,” he explains, “is truer than nonfiction because it deals with universal truths. Your truth and my truth always conflict because each person filters everything through their personal senses and the lens of their socialization.”

Universal truth; personal truth. At what point will he own up to his? When will he act with courage and finally be true to himself. Coming out will more than likely cause the fabric of his family to be irrevocably torn. He thinks about the Islamic revolution in Iran and correlates the culture there to that of his own tribe. Both are led by an ayatollah, different only in matters of faith. Dogma, the art of codifying the will and mind of God, knows no singular tradition. Across the globe, people live in worlds defined by such inanities, some on a grand scale and others in their tribes. The Greeks fought to the death at Salamis 2,500 years ago to defeat that notion. And here we are again, progressing towards that same theocracy because we insist, as Camus held, on placing history on the throne of God.

Fixing his gaze on the tumultuous waters of the Pacific with the windbreaker drawn tight and his knees to his chest, Jonathan notices his mind darting from one story, one allusion, to another. It is okay to him. It might be chaotic to others, but he finds an interconnectedness among the stories that makes sense to him. Unlike the ancient mariner, Jonathan has not committed some unforgivable act. He has shot no albatross, though he is fully aware that when Theodore learns his truth, God’s wrath will descend.

Jonathan’s eye is caught by the sight of a gull landing on a rock formation to his right. Turning his attention to it, he says, “You tried to fly faster than any gull, and for that you’re condemned and ostracized. You asked the right question when you wondered why it is so hard to convince a bird that he is free and could prove it to himself. Well, Mr. Gull, I don’t know myself.

Is it because we're full of fear that we will be humiliated, demeaned, and degraded? Shame is a most powerful tool to get someone to submit to another's will.

“You tell your disciples that their bodies are nothing more than thought and that they can break the chains of their bodies by breaking the chains of their thoughts. But here's my conundrum, Mr. Gull. If I live my life according to a lie and deny my truth, I'm a coward. That's not honorable. But if I speak my truth, I am shamed.

“The tribe, with its strictures and taboos, has power. To break the chain of thought, conditioned and hardened in that crucible of one's youth, is the tough part. No wonder Jesus sweated bullets in Gethsemane, anticipating his crucifixion. I don't believe that was fear of his impending torture. He had the advantage of being the Son of God, for God's sake. Surely he could endure the pain, as excruciating as he knew it would be. It had to be something more.

“To be shamed—that's the crux of it. You were ordered to stand in the Center for Shame because you violated the Gull family rules. The ancient mariner shrives his sin to the hermit. But to whom do I confess my truth? Confess it, as if I'm sorry for being what I am? No, proclaim it!”