

## Agave Americana · *Madeline DeFrees*

THE DAY AFTER the deflowering, which she thought of as a late flowering, the rains came down from the Olympics. The time had been exactly two days less than five years more than half the age presumed necessary to bloom the century plant, and, as always, very few onlookers had survived the watch.

Sunday seemed to demand this complicated reckoning. Sky and sea, collusive in their mirage of union, had exchanged positions, and land was an absence, not to be relied on. Her sign, water. His, air. She smiled down at that benign divinity, remembering that his name, also, started with a *J*.

Presumption was the first error. That storied amaryllis blooms in twenty years or thirty, but the law of supply and demand enhances the legend. Her slow gain stands out among the willing perennials, outblossoms the annuals that flash across a season and disappear while the wife who tends them between snacktime and siesta, vacations with her husband.

Meanwhile, the human need to exaggerate grows wild. The heart recognizes a rare event. The head confirms it. The hand, if it be steady or in luck, helps it happen, and the eye preserves the vintage underground.

She knew a record was required—some means of validating what had come to be, and she hoped that the letters would provide that. With the journals, they constituted an account more trustworthy than the motel register she had not seen or the bloodstained mattress cover she had.

Vermillion road-markers blocked the left-turn lane she had already entered on her way to the afternoon Mass, and it was too late to go back. With her blinkers on right, she eased into the first lane across the intersection and headed towards the airport turnoff. His plane, the one he hadn't missed, had been four hours late, and she had spent three of them in the terminal because the telephone lines were jammed and she didn't want to risk misunderstanding.

"Dear *J*," she wrote, her eye on the mounting speedometer as she retraced the highway, "this delay reminds me of another absurdist favorite, the assignment twice postponed."

After his body's refusal to drive on through her pain, they had read her notebooks together, propped against the headboard, her naked shoulder

resting against his white undershirt. He had looked at everything: the log book of her personal mail—old notes signed with love; acceptances and rejections couched in the same admiring rhetoric. Work sheets, unfinished poems, odd lines cherished, anxieties laid bare. Compulsive verbalizing of routines like dreams and visits to the doctor.

Later in the laundromat, the woman in charge had fallen into a gossipy undertone with another Saturday regular, and this morning, one of the Austins had slipped under the inside door a crumpled piece of newspaper torn from its context. She had expected it to be the *Times* reprint of a campus PR man's flat-footed interview—"Beyond the Convent"—that had already invaded what was left of her privacy. "She enjoys expressing herself as a woman," he had written, then when she had objected, "She likes to be regarded as a woman." Instead, the Austins' newspaper extract was a marvel of obscure communication. On one side, somebody was still seeking a " 'Big' Man." A Female Writer was "Back on Shelf," and one-half of a Mutual headline had been torn away. On the reverse, the front page, judging from the type, a man who could have been J's brother smiled conspiratorially, his black glasses inscrutable under "He Has Friends, Masters." She remembered very clearly using the plural *friends* in accounting for her absence—an explanation she could not omit in view of certain rituals involving lights, garage doors and routines hallowed by repetition. It had taken her several minutes to realize that innuendo was unintentional. Mr. Austin had merely presumed her professional interest in this account of a 57-year-old blind man who had earned the master's degree, serving two, Biology and Business.

The painful probing had been as urgent as the pleasure, abrupt and physical, the cries that signaled both undifferentiated; the words, when words came, foolish.

The notebooks had given her time to erase the sense of failure, and the four hours she lay beside him while he slept had given her courage. Women could fake orgasm, he had told her, but they could not simulate the nipples erect or the faint blush along the pectoral arch. Deception implied the faker's ability to tell the false from the true, the wish from its fulfillment. Surely when he wakened from that place where experience is fused, their indiscriminate needs might come together in a way their bodies witnessed, love pitching its mansion in the place of excrement.

It was 3:45 when she turned right, off the highway, but instead of going directly to the church, she stopped to post her letters. Dr. G would be amused, his touch of anticipatory anxiety released, she thought, merging smoothly with the westbound traffic. Then, instead of going to the church, she reversed direction again and headed for the motel restroom. Too much coffee. Why should anyone suffer through Father Carring-ham's monotonous homily like a child waiting to be relieved? Surely her physical needs were more important than getting to the church on time. She could forget about the Sunday ritual, count the will for the accomplished fact, avoid the further necessary choice and return to Landsend and the beginning of landladies. She liked the turn of phrase if not the interference it signified. Mrs. Austin was a good woman, no doubt, but much too curious and in the wrong directions. She had been purposely vague about the length of her absence, not knowing J's travel plans, which had already shifted several times.

She bought a newspaper from the desk clerk, who appeared not to recognize her, although he called after her back to ask whether she had picked up *The Traveler* or *The Victorian*. "Yes," she said, "I have," and darted into the anteroom marked LADIES. From behind the inner door, a voice warned, "There's somebody in here." She would wait in the corridor, her watch unreliable. Another postponement. At last both doors opened. Blue jeans, then a younger woman's self-possessed smile. "It's dark in there," the girl said, "John's on the right."

She tried to remember the room-plan, already vague. Tried the light switch knowing it wouldn't work. The girl would have discovered that. One thing she did remember—the lock worked, intruders could be barred, no words required. She let the newspaper fall, turned the knob and pushed in, groped along the wall. Nearly every week she stopped here on her way to or from the church. It was clear the management felt no interest in a comfort station for country residents who roamed the Sabbath streets or the tourists without reservations. She remembered the towel, lolling like an obscene tongue ("Call 202-5557 for Service") to announce that no calls had been placed. Whatever maid service the motel budget allowed was obviously attached to the overpriced rooms with their private baths and sanitized glasses, the towels she had forgotten to use just when they would have been most helpful.

J had made the reservations, had canceled and re-made them twice. He had whisked her through a back door, transparent in her dark glasses, while he took care of whatever it was you did at the desk. She wanted to see what he had written there (his first act after presenting his cheek to be kissed at the airport had been to memorize the license of her green Nova) but when she asked him, he answered with his own street address and a guarded jest about blackmail. She thought of the out-of-state license, out-of-his-state too, and wondered how he'd gotten around that. She had remembered to remove the luggage tags, but anyone whose curiosity was serious could check the car registration. Victorians were not receptive to the Ms. Most were tenacious about the either-or. J said you simply signed—he did not say how—and gave the number in your party. That should have closed the matter. Instead, it conjured up an orgy. Group sex. Unthinkable positions.

At a local art show she had bought, on impulse, a charcoal study of a female nude. She might have ignored the invitation to the exhibit if the landlady, who read everything that did not require a letter opener, had not urged attendance. She had even been rash enough to tell Mrs. Austin about buying the piece. Afterwards, repenting the indiscretion, she had left the drawing in the studio for a month, finally mailing her check and agreeing to have the drawing delivered. She had paced the road for twenty minutes, waiting for the artist's husband, and as soon as he was out of sight, had hidden the Nude in the coat closet. Meanwhile, the near-naked Indian brave's appeal to the Great Spirit continued to dominate her fireplace beside the badly painted seascape, the maps and joyful hounds. The hours she spent in these cold quarters faced always towards the window and the changing channel, although the foreground suffered the occasional domestic intrusions of the owners.

In the motel she had invented wild explanations for the two-to-three-a.m. knocking at the room next door, repeated calls for Mr. Plummer, official as the sound of keys that didn't fit, then coarsely familiar in an unstaged whisper calculated to arouse. Then, intervals of silence before the knocking started over. Through most of this, J slept, rising once to listen at their own door and try to make sense of the whole incident, as she had tried to piece together the truth of the motel register. At last he had come back to their bed while she resumed her vigil.

In the dark water closet she imagined the towel with its scarlet lip wounds and violet shadows, a mask removed adroitly as bra and bikini, the tired traveler's welcome of the sullied touch. Precisely when delay was least acceptable she found herself losing balance. One hand had discovered the tissue—enough left there—but the other roving hand could not surprise the feel of sweating porcelain.

All direction lost, she disengaged her right hand from the roll and moved it, like a white cane, across the nap of carpet. It found the angle where the walls joined and she rose from her knees to grope, spreadeagle, along the steaming tile, until she found the door again. The hard knob, a widening crevice, she located her goal and straddled the waiting john.

Already fifteen minutes late, she went back to pick up the newspaper, thought again of the dry house, decision moving towards her on the red second hand at her wrist. The need to confess had been sophisticated into analysis. The search for absolutes outlives the putting by of lifetime habits, and the new theology invites familiar choices. What used to be called mortal sin—and fornication was surely that—had been redefined as the will to separate oneself finally from God.

She had never wanted that. Had, in fact, thought less of separation than of union, needing to believe that it was not too late to join the human race. She had hoped to find him in places less remote, shorn of his forbidding capital, his too-proper name. Still, she knew when she had agreed to sleep with j that the second question would be whether to sleep through the sermon. And if she decided to keep on attending Mass, the next would be whether a defiled virgin (the phrase wore an odd, archaic ring) a defiled virgin—willingly defiled—could presume to share the Eucharist. She felt certain she would not risk telling Father Carringham: his labels were unreliable. The century plant again. Sex divinized or turned demonic, it came to the same lie at the last. Besides, she was not sorry, so it would be a mockery of Penance. Whatever confession she made would have to be of the more enlightened kind, and her doctor had programmed her to open like a passion flower. That was a triumph in itself, considering the brevity of his letter in response to her longer, more ambivalent one. He had said he felt very positive about the encounter, that she shouldn't get spooked. And his letter had arrived in the same mail with one from j, who had suggested that they must not expect too

much. Orgasms are nice, he had written, but love can climax in so many other ways. Then, quite improbably, the purse in her closet had yielded up the keys lost earlier, and she had read that as a favorable omen.

The double assurance of sage and lover had put her conscience to bed long before she joined it. Authority can be liberative, too, a way to ease the burden of responsible decision, though she no longer required a guarantee of salvation, only the thin promise of a lifeline, a momentary freedom from the single night. She remembered a dry time, now far behind her, when carnal knowledge—and she had always valued knowledge—could be imagined only as rape, experience without responsibility. Her move towards liberation was out of step in a world of rising feminism, but she pardoned herself and resisted current forms of compromise.

She had even been afraid that they would find a necessary part missing or atrophied with disuse. That the ruptured disc in her spine would collapse in instant punishment or the ache in her arm subside into paralysis. It was learning to drive all over again: accidents and natural disasters, the imminence of catastrophe. She had checked off all the reasons that would make him turn away from her. The call she had made against her better judgment, his cold voice at the end of the line, her timing off in some unforgivable way. That had seemed like a DEW signal, and for a while she had considered returning his letters with no explanation. Instead, she had resumed the customary waiting. The next morning he had telephoned with a simple story about a visit from his son. She wanted to believe him, regretted her inconstant faith. And yet she could not help the scenes that came uncalled for from some extended sex tour of the North American continent, a sacrilegious fantasy she had admitted, waiting for him to begin, in the first flush of their nakedness. And she had followed that confession with reassuring words, her reiterated promise to file no claims, her conviction that she was lucky to be included on the tour. He had said, "I doubt if there are that many stops left in the old boy."

She had been more cautious this time even though it was the need to forsake caution that impelled her. She must remain cool, one part of her detached, not overpowered by that stormy, irrational need that had first sent her to Dr. G three years earlier. Her choice of a younger, interested and interesting sex partner had gone well so long as they merely talked of pot and poems, and he had driven five hundred miles to tell her that the

homage was appreciated but the execution was untimely. One month later he had returned to tell her how she had changed his life, directed him to the Scriptures. By summer's end he was on his way to South Dakota to be ordained assistant pastor in a Gay Liberation church.

Two weeks before j's visit, when she discovered athlete's foot, she had fallen into mild panic, had written a frantic letter to her R.N. friend begging for an instant cure. She had forgotten accusing herself to the notebook of this parasitic growth, had really written it down only because of the way it had sharpened her sense of aging. She hated the very words *athlete's foot*, the way she had once hated *masturbation*. The names betrayed some carelessness, promiscuity even, not unlike the specter of VD, less fearsome as *social disease*, a milder disorder from which she had always suffered. In the lopsided instruction received along the way, VD was a modern version of the Egyptian plagues. It stood for efficient retribution.

She had, at least, avoided the tempting indirection: *When the kids used to get a fungus infection*. . . and had asked the pharmacist to suggest a nonprescription remedy for athlete's foot. There was, she remembered, a painful, though highly effective purple mixture for a footbath. He had laughed at her, said *that* treatment dated back twenty-five years; that today most doctors recommend Tinactin.

j had read the anecdote, leafing through. She waited for him to turn fastidious, to make excuses. Instead, after one of his trips to the bathroom, he had showed her his own prescribed tube of the patent remedy she had purchased. It made her think of the way Dr. G stretched out his hand to take her tear-soaked kleenex instead of passing the wastebasket. After that, she stopped asking j, "Is this my drink?" when he offered either of the bourbon glasses from the bedside table—on *his* side of the bed—between them and the one waiting empty.

She passed the crude sign advertising winter pears, the world still for her an unripe metaphor. What kind of mansion is it, thrown up like a tent? It could be a house of the zodiac, one reading that appeared believable. The superstitious mix of lust and ignorance, the crude, addictive reliance on unknown heavenly bodies. A pseudo-science or quasi-science, in which we read our fears and wishes before we act them out.

Teresa of Avila had written of the Interior Castle in a long tradition merging the sacred and the secular. Her own attempted poem had begun, "All the signs say *Merge*." From that diamond-shaped opener it had

hurtled rapidly into wrecks and rude investigations, and she had decided to give it up. Teresa's ecstasy, religious as it was, was human too, persuasive as the frying pan she gripped with both hands while levitating in the kitchen. Old as the Cantic of Canticles, this kind of synthesis enjoyed a current revival among writers who fused the mystical and the obscene in ways more convincing than the opposites she had been brought up on.

*Agape*, the love feast, the Eucharist, was the opposite of *Eros*, that dark and dangerous love. *Eros Turranos*, a poet had called it. An earthly and a tyrannical love, she presumed. Another bondage just when she was moving towards what looked like freedom. And *agápe* was nearly *agáve*, although the stresses were different: that once-in-a-lifetime flower, the slow rich opening that prefigures death. A difference of one letter, and she had almost overlooked the distinction.

j had arrived tired, and after the first awkward explorations had pulled away for a nap. In a few minutes, aided no doubt by the bourbon, he was snoring. The intimacy of that unromantic regular sound made her unaccountably tender. She let her hand graze his body, and the breathing altered, then resumed its former pattern. After a while she tried reading, but the light was too dim and she did not want to risk disturbing him. She rose, moved closer to the lamp, put on her glasses. The story could not engage her. As quietly as she could, she rummaged through her suitcase until she found the nightdress chosen with such care. More useless baggage. Yet she put it on, tried again to read and failed.

She was beginning to feel hungry. She had eaten nothing since breakfast at seven, afraid of missing a single instant of j's arrival. She peeled and ate the banana stashed away in her briefcase with the notebooks, a leftover from last night's contingency plan for meeting j's plane. The loaf of sourdough bread j had brought rested on the table. He had asked about buying wine for their unceremonious meal, but he had already overslept the hour when the liquor stores closed. It was uncivilized to prohibit the sale of wine in grocery stores, but in this region, one confronted these historic restrictions everywhere, the restaurants flashing neon invitations: *Licensed Premises*. Still hungry, she mourned the absence of the wine, waiting for him to awaken.

At last he came to, looked at his watch, yawned, asked about restaurants. They avoided the motel coffee shop, went finally to the Peacock, where



she declined a drink, refused wine even, because they would share that tomorrow.

The Peacock, no gourmet's paradise by any standard, displayed a bird bleached common as the sea gull that should have been repainted. The best thing about the place was the general seediness of its patrons. She had looked about quickly, hoping not to identify a fellow-parishioner or a campus colleague, though it mattered less here than in the motel. The shrimp chow mein she ordered was an ungodly mixture, and j's pork was not on her low-fat diet. j served their plates family-style before an improvised grace. The Chinese waiter hovered.

Attentive in an undiscerning way, the waiter had forced them to express satisfaction with the entree they had scarcely touched. He accomplished this at the same time he managed to ignore the cups repeatedly waiting to be filled, and he pressed them to try exotic desserts—mandarin oranges and lichee fruit—that, when he brought them, were clearly straight from the can.

She looked cheerfully towards the next day's lunchtime. Bread and wine—maybe cheese—the simple, honest sharing. But they had found the liquor store closed—it was Election Day—the processed cheese tasted like plastic, and the bread was stale. They had gouged it from the loaf passed back and forth like a common roll, using their teeth because its age and general conformation, as well as the absence of cutlery, resisted more genteel handling.

No rest from words, specious reasons. And yet . . . if *agape* was linked to Penance, its whole reality confined to that single distinctive *p*, it had not always been so. For the primitive Christians, it had been a meal, a sharing, whatever threats of unworthiness had accumulated after. *Agave*, not Biblical but Latin, took its special character from the V. Virtue. Strength, the Romans called it. *Virility*: what it means to be a man in the general sense. Virginity could as readily be the interpolation, as some feminist theologians had been at pains to document.

That was what she had written Dr. G; that she felt she couldn't skip any of the stages of growth. She had borrowed words from him to build a wall against the guilty flood, the gates of Eden closed.

Claudiel had made his hero, intent upon adultery, invoke the Virgin's aid in pursuit of a woman. She had thought that marvelously ironic at

the time; had even pitied the blindness of that fictive fellow-Catholic. But the link between giver and gift, strengthened by well-oiled joints, had moved her towards a similar petition. She had found it necessary to remind herself that one does not pray for violation, and she had ended her letter to Dr. G with, "Hoping to stay on the highway until I hear from you."

The customs official had tiresomely insisted on the failure of her temporary driving permit to cover any driver except herself. That was why they had agreed on the most obvious motel. It equalized the risks. She drove badly under tension. His unfamiliarity with the car and the island might steer them both head-on into the law. They took their chances, taking turns.

He had been driving on the morning of the second day when they decided to tour the peninsula. She had told him exactly where to turn to get to Landsend—they would stay well away from the house—but just as they had passed it they ran directly into the landlady's husband returning from an unscheduled walk on the road. Wiser now, she had asked j to slow down, waved to Mr. Austin in an eager, obvious way behind the dark glasses. In any case, he would have recognized the car, and he had smiled in a faintly insolent fashion when she told him not to leave the garage lights on for her. After she had returned from j's departing plane she had been ready for Mrs. Austin's questions: "How long did you say you were in the convent? . . . How do you manage to adjust so well? . . . Why don't you come to town with Dad and me?" She heard the landlady's husband rev the motor as she tried to bring the conversation to a stop. "Well, *enniway*," the landlady said, moving into second gear, "every time you go out of here to go out you look like one of those—what's that New York place?—Powers! like one of those Powers models! The sisters at the hospital weren't like that *a-tall*, but I always knew they liked the men. They were always talking to them in the corridors."

And when the landlady had returned from town, she had brought flowers—chrysanthemums, golden and bronze, those sturdy fall flowers that survive the frost. In the cold basement room they had turned frowzy as acrylic wigs while the single tea rose j had bought her after she had learned enough control to let him in, opened wide, lingered like a blessing.

During those three hours of hanging on the flight bulletins she had

noted that the only customs inspector she knew, the one from the ferry terminal, had been transferred to the airport. Between dodging him and evading the female professor en route to Mexico with her husband, some of the other anxieties had been dispersed.

She was nearer to the church now on this zigzag revisit to the scenes of the crime, this pilgrimage of veneration or atonement. Both words broke down in satisfying ways, rooted as they were in contradiction. She reviewed the stations: the airport vision, the motel shrine, the restroom abandoned, the mansion conjured out of deprivation. The good names were not right either.

In the church lot as she bypassed the scant room next to the Austin to park the car in the only remaining space—a tight fit between an old Dodge and an Alfa Romeo—she felt quite certain she would not see j again, would not be offered that alternative. It would be beautiful, she thought, to have a god you could count on for both wisdom and love. She was already making up the next letter to Dr. G as she stood with the late-comers in the vestibule for the last of Father Carringham's too literal exegesis of today's end-of-the-world extravaganza. When he had run out of rhetoric, she tried to slip quietly into the end of a pew, but the faithful women would not be budged from dead center, forced her to negotiate a tangle of legs and rosaries in embarrassing confusion. She settled, after much shuffling, beside a young man who surprised her by offering to share his missal. At the offertory collection, she resisted the impulse to substitute a five for her usual two-dollar bill. Then she joined the singing.

*Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done  
In whom his world rejoices. . . .*

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*Preserve us in his grace  
And guide us when perplexed  
And free us from all ills  
In this world and the next.*

A few minutes later, while a fortyish couple in her row hung back, she climbed over their feet, seeing them nailed to the pew by French-

Canadian guilt as she had been chained to the dark decades that told the cult of the Virgin. The flowers on the altar, looking slightly used—they must be left over from the potluck—veered towards the candles. In the narrow aisle, hands folded, she joined those other innocents, their faces lost in no expression, steadily propelled towards the new communion.