



Dr. Louise Fuller exits her house on Bristol Way promptly at three, the bells of St. Michael's tolling the hour as she makes a right at the corner and strides down the sidewalk. It will take her exactly fifteen and one-half minutes to walk to Stanley Hall, wherein are located the offices and classrooms of the university's English department. After fourteen years, during which this time has never varied, not even once, Louise accepts it in the same way she accepts the other constants in her life and with the same lack of concern.

An hour from now she will be delivering a lecture to a class of freshmen that, based upon collectively dismal scores for the first test of the semester, she has concluded doesn't care the least about American literature and, thus, will greet her topic for today—the unparalleled symbolism of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*—with nothing short of a complete lack of either enthusiasm or interest.

Making a left onto University Drive, Louise swings her brown leather briefcase and increases her already rapid pace. Before class she has to meet with a student and discuss his poor academic performance, although if he's expecting sympathy, he's in for a letdown since, in her estimation, the young man needs either to take his studies seriously or to accept the fact that perhaps a vocational environment would be more suited to his level of commitment. Louise frowns as she glances, unseeingly, at Ms. Thelma Melrose's immaculate bed of chrysanthemums. Of course, she wouldn't be dealing with such problems if the university adopted a more stringent admission's policy that recognized higher education as the privilege of the qualified few instead of the inalienable right of the masses.

At the intersection of University and Front Campus Drive, Louise crosses the street. From here she can see her destination through the early autumn foliage of the university's oaks. Situated directly across the quad, Stanley Hall looms against the blue expanse of September sky, and the dignified old building—four stories of weathered, ivy-covered brick, massive columns, and high, arched windows—is as architecturally impressive as any cathedral she has ever seen, including those on a European tour three years ago. Of course, as isn't the case with such houses of formalistic idolatry, Stanley Hall elicits Louise's heartfelt reverence, given it perpetuates enlightenment and truth instead of religious dogma and superstition.

Turning down the brick walk that leads to the quad, Louise skirts a cluster of students, their voices reminding her of the animated chatter of magpies.

On the other hand, though she can't imagine admitting as much to anyone, what she sometimes feels in Stanley Hall may very well be classified as a 'religious' experience, at least of sorts. The last occurrence was a week ago today. She was sitting in her office and could hear people exiting the building, in a rush as they are every Friday, and when everyone finally departed, scurrying to their parked vehicles, she was alone amid a hushed, somehow expectant, stillness. It was then she heard it—as she had on several other occasions—the mechanical hum of the central air system echoing through the vents and down the empty corridors. But the strange thing was, the sound was more like the muffled beating of a gigantic heart, a measured rhythm that vibrated in the walls as if within the chamber of a cavernous chest, and she found herself thinking, as she had before, that she was in the presence of the one thing worthy of being known as 'God.'

Louise lets her eyes linger fondly on the humanities building. Personally, though others may disagree, she finds nothing amiss in her feelings, not in the least. After all, within Stanley Hall are taught the wisdom and genius of the greatest and most creative minds ever to live; and if called upon to do so, she could present a valid argument that this building, unlike churches and synagogues and cathedrals, offers mankind genuine redemption, though it is redemption from ignorance and not some fairytale called *original sin*.

Passing the library, Louise starts down the steps immediately above the quad.

Then again, other people wouldn't so easily dismiss her sentiments if they too had endured the same wretched childhood as she. What a travesty it was. Her with her keen mind and hunger for knowledge growing up in the kudzu-choked fields of rural Georgia, a place where ignorance was the norm and intellectual blindness encouraged, where the only book one's parents ever opened was the *Holy Bible*, a mind-stultifying tome of superstition and myth that as yet shaped their however distorted worldview and beliefs. Louise hears herself snort, the sound sharp with disgust. But no, unless someone knows firsthand, the way she does, what it's like to grow up surrounded by vacuity and specious logic, there is no comprehension of the yawning chasm it creates, one that can only be filled by the enlightenment and ultimate truth found in settings such as Stanley Hall.

With a sigh, Louise shifts her briefcase from her left hand to her right. But what is the point in dwelling on a past she has left behind? And she has left it behind, just as she's risen above the narrow-minded, Bible-thumping sophistry it so blindly embraced, and this is what matters, this and only this.

A young woman, bowed beneath a monstrous book bag, is approaching Louise. She shifts the cumbersome burden, smiles, and quickly looks away, but not before Louise detects a flash of amusement in her blue eyes. Yet, what a spectacle she must be. This tall, angular woman, all elbows and toothpick legs, striding along as she mumbles to herself—rather like a female version of Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane traveling pell-mell through the streets of Sleepy Hollow. Louise takes a deep breath and makes an effort to shorten her stride. Only then does she notice all the commotion around her and realize she completely forgot about Student Activities Day.

It is the beginning of the new semester, and taking advantage of the dean's largesse, clubs and organizations have set up tables and hoisted banners, from beneath which their representatives smile, wave at passersby, and implore them to action: 'Join the student ACLU,' one group shouts, while another chants, 'Save the Rain Forest,' and yet another, 'Stop the slaughter of innocents in Afghanistan.' Louise knows she is frowning and can do nothing to stop herself. Yet it irks her that college students never change, just their idealistic causes, and what each generation fails to grasp is how much better spent their fervor would be if directed toward getting a quality education instead of something so fruitless as tilting at proverbial windmills.

Louise passes a boy and girl who are holding hands and whispering words she cannot understand. All that idealism, she thinks, and upon graduation, the majority of these same young people will embark into the real world, one of corporate takeovers, downsizing, financial planning, and big-screened TVs, and once there, they will just as adamantly believe in nothing.

Louise then smiles, though she realizes the faint curve of her lips contains more than a trace of smug condescension. After all, she still believes in that which she embraced when she herself was an undergraduate—the pursuit of knowledge—but then, her own 'sacred cow' was always destined to endure, unlike mere ideological whimsy.

Swinging her briefcase back into her left hand, Louise glances at a crowd of students on the knoll ahead.

They are standing beneath a banner stretched between two mammoth oaks. 'Union of True Believers,' the banner proclaims as it flutters then snaps in a sudden gust of wind. Several youthful members are holding posters aloft. One reads, 'The Second Coming Is Now!' Another, 'Jesus Christ Walks Among Us!'

Louise tightens her shoulders. In her opinion, a university campus is hardly the appropriate place for evangelical extremism; yet when she mentioned this at a faculty meeting, the dean informed her that, though he agreed, the university must be careful 'when it comes to actions that may be misconstrued as infringements on anyone's civil liberties.'

Averting her eyes, the heels of her brown loafers clicking a staccato beat on the weathered bricks of the walkway, Louise switches the briefcase again into her right hand. The problem is she cannot avert her ears.

'Are you a believer?' shouts a young man.

Louise picks up her pace.

'Jesus is Lord,' he adds and hefts a poster reaffirming this dictum in blood-red magic marker.

Keeping her eyes trained on Stanley Hall, now approximately a hundred feet away, Louise watches her reflection in the high front windows. It grows larger with each step.

The young man yells, 'He lives among us!'

Louise blinks as the September sun emerges from behind a cloud and sweeps blindingly across the face of the building.

'Hey, Dr. Fuller!'

The voice, high and shrill, giddy with the exhilaration of youth, is that of a young woman, and it rises above the determined bass of the male student as he admonishes, 'Jesus is your only hope.'

Nodding curtly, not recognizing the girl's round wholesome face, Louise doesn't stop.

The young man shouts, 'He's now separating His flock!'

The lining of Louise's tweed skirt swishes about her thighs and calves.

'The last days are upon us!'

From nearby, somewhere in the thick, intertwined branches of a white oak, a squirrel chatters in displeasure over an event that has disrupted its usual peaceful routine.

'Be prepared! Accept Christ as your savior today!'

The sun reappears and so does Louise's reflection—short, dark hair in disarray, long arms swinging—a scarecrow rushing along a walkway as if fleeing the legions of the damned.

Several students pass Louise and hurry up the steps of Stanley Hall, their voices as insubstantial as contrails of heat and smoke that dissolve in their wake. 'Tomorrow will be too late' spirals across the quad, and Louise shudders as she grips the door's ornate handle, swings the door open, and enters the shadowed sanctuary that is Stanley Hall. Only then does she feel like she can breathe.

Standing on stage in front of the lecture hall, Louise rolls a piece of chalk between the fingers of her right hand. 'Though Melville's works are classified under the later Romantic Period,' she says, 'they definitely reflect early realism in their portrayal of characters and events.'

In the front row, a brunette coed yawns.

'Yet bear in mind, Melville was one of our three *brooding* Romantics, the others being Poe and Hawthorne, and each of these men deviated from the romantic mind-set in that they explored the nature of evil and wrote about a world of perversity and disorder.'

To the brunette's left, a tall redhead closes his eyes.

'More specifically.' Louise points with the chalk at a young man wearing a Dallas Cowboys jersey along with a look of unmitigated disinterest. 'Melville was, indeed, an early realist, and his writing also exhibits many of the traits associated with the school of Naturalism.'

The Cowboys' fan shifts in his seat.

Louise says, 'Excuse me—Mister?'

'Wade,' he says, 'Sean Wade,' his tone leading Louise to conclude he thinks she should know his name and not have to ask. What Sean Wade doesn't know is that she has better things to do with her time than waste it learning the names of a particularly unpromising group of freshmen. But she just nods and says, 'All right, Mr. Wade it is.'

He flashes a smile at a blonde Phi Mu sitting two seats to his left.

Louise says, 'Perhaps Mr. Wade will define the school of Naturalism for us;' then she steels himself for his reply.

Wide shoulders roll beneath the blue and white jersey before Mr. Wade says, 'Guess it's one of those schools where folks go to study trees, animals, and stuff like that.' Obviously pleased with his wit, he directs another smile at the blonde as appreciative laughter ripples through the lecture hall.

Louise turns to the board, scrawls 'Naturalism' across it in large letters, and proceeds to explain the ideas and attitudes reflected in the works of the Naturalist writers of the late 1800s, after which she adds, 'Therefore, since Melville was addressing such questions as the destructive force of nature, some scholars argue that in his masterpiece, *Moby Dick* . . .' Louise pauses, waiting for the snickers of adolescent amusement to die. When they do, she adds, 'The great white whale represents all of nature, and nature is taking revenge against man for years of wanton disregard and destruction.'

A few of the more industrious students scribble in their notebooks.

'Yet, given that Melville, like his character Captain Ahab, was obsessed in his own right, not with just the enigma of evil and what he saw as the shadowed heart of the universe, but with questions about the existence of God and mankind's relationship with him, other interpretations support *Moby Dick* as being symbolic of that god.'

Again the rustle of pen against paper.

'Yet this god represented by *Moby Dick* is not the merciful god of the *New Testament* but he of the *Old Testament*, the Lord God of Israel, the god who said, 'vengeance is mine,' then destroyed entire nations, the innocent along with the guilty, in order to get his point across. This being the case, Captain Ahab is the spokesman for mankind, and he's both protesting what he sees as supreme injustice and questioning the compassion of such a god.'

Midway back in the auditorium a hand stabs the air.

Louise looks at the young black man to whom the hand belongs. 'Yes, you have a question?'

Smooth-shaven, his dark eyes trained on her face, he says, 'Dr. Fuller, with which interpretation do you agree?'

Louise finds something quite disconcerting in his eyes and tears her own away. ‘They’re both valid interpretations, as are others upon which we have yet to touch.’

‘But how do you yourself see *Moby Dick*?’ he insists.

Louise shrugs and tries to smile. ‘Perhaps, he’s merely a whale.’

Several giggles ripple around the room.

‘No,’ she says, ‘I was being facetious. *Moby Dick* is hardly what he appears on the surface, especially in light of the fact that Melville’s novel is, as scholars agree, highly symbolic and nothing is as it appears on the surface.’

The Phi Mu brushes an imaginary speck from her snug pink top.

Louise nods at the young black man. ‘Mister?’

‘Jesse Coleman.’

‘Well, Mr. Coleman, like I said, all scholarly interpretations concerning *Moby Dick* are valid, and who’s to say if one is more valid than another.’

‘But don’t you find one more acceptable?’

‘Yes, I guess I do,’ Louise admits.

‘Which one?’ he asks.

Inexplicably, Louise suspects that Mr. Jesse Coleman already knows the answer. She can see it in his eyes.

Still, he waits for her reply, his head tilted to one side.

‘From my own analysis of the novel,’ she says, ‘plus, knowing what I do about Melville and his personal demons, I personally think the giant white whale represents the Lord God of Israel, who is determined to show Ahab, i.e. mankind, that people have no control over their own destinies, regardless of how hard they struggle or try to wrest and maintain any semblance of control.’

Jesse Coleman frowns as he says, ‘But doesn’t that paint, well, an ugly picture of God?’

Louise shakes her head. ‘Maybe it simply paints an accurate picture of God.’

His frown deepening, Jesse Coleman keeps his eyes trained on her face.

Louise looks away. She *has* to look away.

‘Dr. Fuller,’ he says, ‘Do you believe in God?’

Louise switches the chalk from one hand to the other as she swallows and glances toward the back of the room. Now why is he asking her such a thing? Her personal belief or disbelief in God has no bearing on the topic at hand.

‘Dr. Fuller,’ he repeats, ‘do you believe in God.’

Against her will, Louise looks back at Jesse Coleman.

His expression is solemn and expectant.

Who is he, she wonders. What does he want from me?

The room is now silent, and Louise hears the muffled beating of her heart echoing in her ears. She knows all eyes are upon her. Yet only one person matters. 'Mister Coleman,' she stammers, 'I don't see how that's relevant to our discussion.'

He doesn't respond, but his dark eyes look sad, heavy with disappointment.

Whipping around to face the board, Louise wipes her damp palms on her skirt and, gripping the chalk so tightly her knuckles turn white, she scribbles, 'It is not the mask but the thing behind the mask that heaps me,' and the words bleed together before her eyes.

In the back of the room, a cell phone rings. Once. Twice.

Louise turns back around. All she can see is the face of Jesse Coleman. His eyes are locked on her, unblinking, mesmerizing in their intensity. 'This quote,' she manages to say as she glances desperately at the Phi Mu who is watching the Cowboys' fan with obvious admiration. 'This quote . . .' She shifts her gaze to a girl sitting in the last row. Heavy set, wearing unbecoming, too small glasses, the girl smacks her gum and stares. 'It, it captures the depth of the symbolism in Melville's novel.' The girl blows a bubble as she looks down and pens this important fact into a thick spiral-bound notebook. Louise can feel Jesse Coleman's eyes yet upon her, and she shivers, helpless to do otherwise. His eyes. She can't escape his eyes. 'Ahab,' she says, 'Ahab is telling Starbuck, his first mate, that all things are but cardboard masks and, and it's not the mask that's real but the thing behind the mask.' She glances at her watch. 'This quote is important because it, it eludes to how nothing in the novel is what it appears to be on the surface.' *Three minutes left of class. Three minutes. An eternity.* 'Not even Ahab, and certainly not Moby Dick.' She swallows, her throat suddenly parched. 'Never mind,' she says, 'we'll take up here Monday.'

Louise stands behind the lectern until the last student departs, but even with every seat empty, she can still feel the eyes of Jesse Coleman upon her.

Seated at the desk in her office, Louise stares out the window at the sky. The earlier sunshine has surrendered to an onslaught of thick, roiling clouds. It's going to rain and soon, but Louise doesn't mind. She enjoys a rainy day almost as much as a rainy night. It's nice to be inside, all snug and dry, while trees lash against the sky and rain patters on the roof. She hopes the rain continues through the evening. If it does, she'll light some candles, curl up under an afghan, sip a glass of Chardonnay, and read. After all, it's Friday, and she doesn't have to think about lectures or students again until Monday. Smiling, she sighs and closes her eyes, relishing the thought. Reading is her passion, her only passion, and though she's always read voraciously, there are still so many great books that remain unopened. So many in fact, that, if not for the time-consuming and often tedious business of teaching, she would devote every moment of every day to reading.

Louise opens her eyes and watches a gray squirrel scamper along a branch of the oak immediately beyond the window. Like a furry acrobat, it leaps onto another limb, teeters precariously for a moment, rights itself, then disappears among the boughs, headed toward some destination only it comprehends.

In the hall beyond the closed door, are the sounds of hurried footsteps and giddy voices as her colleagues begin their exodus home.

Louise again shuts her eyes, and as she does, like a holographic image projected onto her retinas, the face of Jesse Coleman appears.

Dr. Fuller, do you believe in God?

Louise opens her eyes to a room suddenly alive with flickering shadows as the sun makes one last valiant attempt to triumph over the coming storm, but the clouds prevail, plunging the office into murky dimness.

Switching on the desk lamp, Louise thinks about Jesse Coleman. There is something strange about that young man. After all, why would he ask such a bizarre question? She sniffs, the sound one of derision. Of course, he probably

belongs to that ridiculous organization she saw earlier on campus, and fanatical fundamentalist that he is, he makes a habit of asking everyone with whom he comes in contact if he or she believes in God.

Beyond the window, a sudden gust of wind rustles the dry leaves of the oak.

Yet had another student asked the same thing, Louise knows she would have, if not totally dismissed it, given a curt but honest reply. She would have said, 'No, Miss or Mister Whoever You Are, I find no substantiating evidence to support a belief in some abstract deity.' And the subject would have been closed.

But it wasn't another student who asked that question. It was Jesse Coleman.

Louise sighs, remembering her childhood—the tent revivals, daylong prayer meetings, hell-fire-and-brimstone sermons, and tortuous Bible studies, and she knows, as she has always known, that these things had a profound influence—all of it negative—upon her outlook on both religion and God.

Yet, she has come too far to go back. After all, she now knows that religion is merely a refuge for people who are too afraid and too weak to accept their own mortality. As for God? Well, Nietzsche was right: God *is* dead. In fact, he never existed, except in the desperate imaginations of humankind.

Rubbing her forehead, Louise watches the limbs of the oak sway against the dark sky as the first raindrops tap against the dusty windowpanes.

There is something about Jesse Coleman that disturbs her, profoundly so.

Blown by the wind, the rain now streams like dirty tears down the face of the window.

She knows. It's his eyes.

Louise shivers in a room grown suddenly cold.

Such dark, soulful eyes they are. Somehow infinitely wise, filled with understanding and compassion far beyond their years, as if they see all there is to see. In fact, if she allowed herself to do so, she could easily imagine those dark eyes searing her flesh, boring through bone, and stripping away the mask behind which she has been hiding for so long.

The wind shakes the window in its frame.

It is not the mask but the thing behind the mask.

The air in the room has grown heavy with the advancing storm.

And those eyes hold such pain—no, *agony*—as if upon his frail shoulders he bears centuries of brother slaying brother, men dying on blood-drenched battlefields, and people crying out in desperation and despair.

Louise watches the dark clouds churn across the sky.

Yet, he bears this pain because he must.

Removing a cardigan from the back of the chair, she wraps it around her shoulders and clasps it across her breasts. She's cold, so very cold. Perhaps she is ill. Yes, feverish, even delusional. *Either that or mad*, she thinks. Jesse Coleman is just another student, no different from any other student she has ever taught. He sees nothing. The idea is ludicrous. He has no special insight into anyone, especially her. How could he even begin to fathom what makes up Dr. Louise Fuller? He's no more complex or intuitive than that silly Phi Mu or Neanderthal of a Cowboys' fan. And the pain she imagines in his eyes is no more than self-centered adolescent angst.

Thunder growls in the west and rumbles, reverberating across the heavens.

Louise sees those dark eyes searching her face, feels them looking into her soul, probing it, turning it inside out, and finding it lacking in some essential, all-important element needed to make it whole.

Dr. Fuller, do you believe in God?

Louise briskly rubs her arms. She cannot bear remembering the disappointment she saw in his eyes.

The branches of the oak click wooden fingers against the glass.

But she could have avoided it. All she had to do was to look at him, straightforward, without flinching, and say, 'Yes, Mister Coleman, I do believe in God.' These few words would have been enough.

Yet he would have known it was a lie.

Rocking in the chair, Louise chastises herself. 'Well, if this were true,' she murmurs, 'why'd he bother to ask?' To embarrass her? To make some point only he understood? She looks back toward the window, where windblown leaves fall, sodden and heavy, toward the ground. If he knows her so well—which he doesn't—then this Jesse Coleman also knows that if she admits she believes in his god, it will be nothing short of blasphemy. Worse, it will negate everything, all the years of study, the books, the debates, the discussions and intellectual exchanges. To believe in some omnipotent being will mean her grueling journey toward education and enlightenment was but a travesty and completely in vain.

Another peel of thunder echoes through the room.

And she will not allow these things to crumble into dust. Nor will she be left with nothing to show for her life but ignorance and superstition—no better off than her parents, with their blind faith in some abstract, mythological deity as ephemeral as air.

Through the rain-streaked window, the campus is a blurry twilight world of fluidity and undulating movement.

She does not need Jesse Coleman's or anyone else's approval or acceptance. Let him condemn her with his eyes. Let him sit there and stare all he wishes. Dr. Louise Fuller will not drown in those liquid pools.

Holding a red umbrella, a female student runs barefoot across the quad. Stopping, she laughs, splashes in a puddle then continues on, water spraying around her ankles.

Yet the drowning would be sweet.

In the hall, the secretary's musical voice wafts by the door as she calls, 'Goodnight, Raymond,' to the janitor, who calls back, 'Night, Ms. Manus, have a good weekend,' before the elevator chimes, and its doors whoosh open then closed.

But Louise Fuller refuses to drown.

The steady tread of Raymond's footsteps echoes down the corridor and fades into silence.

She also refuses to think about Jesse Coleman ever again.

The hush left in Raymond's wake settles in the room.

Louise leans back in the chair, the cardigan still wrapped tightly across her chest. She listens, straining to hear, and there it is, growing stronger then stronger still—the heartbeat of Stanley Hall. Even above the sound of the storm, she can hear its measured cadence. The sound is comforting, reassuring. Sighing, Louise closes her eyes.

As long as she has this, she has no need of God.