

Excerpts: And Ye Shall Be As Gods

I.

The desert makes no judgment. It is.

It neither punishes nor rewards, forgives nor sanctifies. It is the epitome of indifferent nature. It places all—stone, lizard, grain of sand borne through ceaseless pilgrimage on protean winds—naked before ourselves. There is no escape from the searing desert sun that strips you bare of all pretension. Even under the ephemeral shade of a mesquite or anacahuita tree, all affectations are burned away in waves of stifling heat. Its ineluctable light dances off granite, obdurate as our fanciful self-image. It inveigles itself in porous sandstone, bubbles off the occasional blacktopped road, and freckles among the windblown dust that cuts and bleeds the skin dry. The desert sun finds us all, shining amoral and ceaseless on the darkest shadows of our hearts.

It is the desert that bleeds my spirit dry—and keeps it whole. Its vast swallowing expansiveness, aching sparseness and changeless sun, its remorseless wind making sport of tumbleweeds and forcing ineradicable mesquite trees to bend in quiet subservience, its blinding light that saps color and tone forcing quiet surrender to dull gray harmony, are all tattooed on my soul. Though they may drive me from it, I am never free of it. And I shall never be.

It is open and free, so vast as to be terrifying. It swallows you whole, so that you vanish like the tiny puddles left after a once-in-a-lifetime summer squall. The space has a ravenousness in its search for moisture and variety. You must know yourself, be comfortable in your soul's skin like an old pair of slippers that never pinch or chafe of conscience. For there is no place, no sullen rock nor tree nor leaf to hide your nakedness. The light, the skin-flaying, all-betraying light, will always find you.

II.

“I don’t know why I want to tell you, Jacob. Maybe it’s because I’m dying and no one else is here. But if my daughter and grandkids were here, I wouldn’t tell them still. I just...I can’t explain it.

“When I first got to the camp, there was this boy. This...delicate child was taken from one of the women prisoners. The kommandant, for what deranged reason I don’t know, but he took this little Jewish boy and made a pet of him; perverted his soul into the stench and rot that was his. He taught him to look on his own people with the same disgust and hate that he and the rest—and they all, all of them saw us as less than animals, as a bacteria, a plague infecting the German volk.

“This was the greatest evil I saw, Jake—far beyond the unspeakable horror and degradation we went through. They made a little SS uniform for him. The kommandant bought him a pony and soon the two of them would ride about the grounds and compete, compete, Jacob, to see who could shoot the most Jews from their horses. He did it with joy and laughter, this boy—with joy and laughter he did it!

“And they kept his mother alive, too. And I think, I think it was actually so that she could see what had become of her son; or what her son had become, rather. It was greater

torture than all the beatings and whippings and degradation and working you to death with one piece of bread a day, stale and hard as fieldstone. They wanted her to know that out of her loins had come this monster.

“One day...one day while we were doing some stupid, pointless task, this woman...just went crazy, I guess. Her son and the kommandant were there, this time *clubbing* people to death. And laughing...laughing. And all the guards were enjoying the show and laughing along.

“Well this boy’s mother just suddenly stopped working—just dropped the stones she was carrying and started to walk toward the boy. She knew it was certain death to do it, but she didn’t care. As she walked, the guards were yelling and screaming like wolves, like hyenas, and lashing her with whips that shredded her shirt and tore open the flesh across her back. You could see the bone gaping through the bloody mess. She fell once, twice, again. But always she got up. How, I couldn’t say. I don’t know why they didn’t just grab her. Maybe they didn’t want to touch, I don’t know.

“Then I saw. The kommandant had stopped them. He wanted to know what this little Jew turned Jew-killer would do. He was waiting to see how far into the depths of hell he had taken him.

“She finally made it to the boy...her son. Where she found the strength, I can’t imagine. He looked down at her. By that time everyone had stopped to watch. I could feel it coursing through all the prisoners like a lost spirit of hope. It pulsed from one to the next. We were all breathless, wishing, praying that some little shred, some little morsel of humanity might be left in that boy.

“He looked down at her. He looked down at her with eyes, Jake, with eyes that seared coldly like the vile hollows of hell—like he was looking at plague-carrying rot...like his own mother was a noxious virus spreading filth and disease. And, as he took his pistol from its holster and leveled it at the eyes that looked up at him, begging, wishing, pleading for one last shred of hope before she died... Oh God, Jacob, I swear to you, a little toothless grin came across his face—a frigid, bestial sparkle to his eye...

“And he blew her brains out over the field.”

III.

I often wonder about the origins of the antipathy among my elder siblings and me. How did it work its leprous filth through the web of our lives? I have an aching memory of a golden era safe and warm ensconced on grandmother’s lap. It sways in cottony swaddles on the rocking-chair of reminiscence. It was a time we played, with the wondrous innocence of children, games of “I Spy”, “Mother, May I”, and Red Light/Green Light”.

As we lay on our backs in the cooling grass of a spring afternoon, clouds impersonated roaring bears, towering cyclopes, coffee cups, and delicate-petaled flowers. With roller-skates keyed on our shoes, we’d pause at the graceful waltz of honeybees, drunk with the glory of pollen-sated queen’s crown. Then full-moon eyes would devour the grace of giant swallowtails, docile at the fountain of desert roses and Queen Anne’s lace. And there was always time to roll amid ice-blue bonnets spread in soothing tones of earth and sky.