

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: JOY READS

The novel had been doing well. David wanted me to do a live reading in the hopes of increasing sales. He was going to try to film it and put it on the internet. He wanted someone to play Rebecca. He thought that a dramatic reading with different characters could spice up the presentation. He found Joy through some acting friends of his. He was told that she was an up and coming performer. Even though she wasn't going to be paid much, she would take the opportunity very seriously.

There was a small local theater where we intended to do the performance. David had reserved some time for me to come in there to meet Joy.

Joy had prepared well for her reading. She drew on all her skills as an actress. She wanted to do her best. She felt that there was a lot riding on her performance. She had read the whole book a couple of times. Her copy was full of notes. She had a separate notebook with her thoughts about the role.

"I want to know what you've been thinking.

She hesitated, "Some of this, I'm going to read to you."

Joy started off very much in control. She didn't want to let on that she had misgivings about the role. She had mapped out every detail of her character.

"The voyeur thinks that he can know his subject simply by looking at her. So he studies her as if he was engaging in a conversation. He doesn't just watch her. He talks to her. And her body answers back."

"Wow, you really get it!"

"Rebecca wants to be noticed. But she also realizes the threat that the voyeur poses. So she knows how to pull back before anyone can get that close to her."

Joy wanted her reading to convey that ambiguity.

"She's always afraid that when she walks into a room that a potential opponent might be watching her. He is trying to size her up. So she never lacks a sense of assertiveness."

Joy stood up from her notes.

"I am trying to visualize this. He has completely surprised her. She is off guard. Wait a second." She paused to get her bearings. "This is not her. This is me. I am having difficulty maintaining my composure. I can't think like Rebecca. I am trying. But I am interfering with my own ability to see. To see her."

"That is wild!"

"I haven't even scratched the surface, Steven."

I encouraged her, "Go on."

"I have all these questions. Where does she work? Does she have a dog? Does she live alone? So much more."

"Interesting."

"More than that. I don't know if I can play the role."

"Really. I could get someone else if it's not right for you."

"That's not what I mean. I don't know whether you can play the role. If you have her played right. Would she be so patient with people? If she's so good, why would she hang around this grungy place."

“Marvelous. You are doing way more than I could have imagined.”

“Steven, slow down.”

“Yeah!”

“You’ve written this long novel. And Rebecca is only a brief part of it all. That’s how it seems. But you got her wrong.”

“Really.”

“That isn’t coming out right. I know it. But something isn’t the way it should be. Not in her.”

“I’m open to suggestion. You can read her any way that you want.”

“I don’t even know if I’ve got her down. We are trying too hard. It doesn’t make sense to try to put her down on the page. Not in that way.”

“How would you do it?”

“I don’t know. I’m just coming to an understanding. I feel that you have it all figured out. It’s not as if you have to change anything. I just have to come closer to what I think is really happening.”

I wanted her to develop her reading.

“Desire is a phenomenon of ownership. The voyeur see the subject and imagines that she will acquiesce to his any whim. But he can’t see himself as imposing his will on her. He has to see her body as his body. It is his to shape as he pleases. Each part offers him a higher stage of his own arousal. She feels natural to him. She undresses for him, and he is overwhelmed. He can never do this in real life. But he becomes part of her. He is inside her.”

“Isn’t desire just the first step to satisfaction?”

“The voyeur is different. Desire has to be a thing in itself. To desire in a most extreme way is satisfaction in itself. Rebecca knows this!”

She changed her focus.

“I know what it’s like going through days and days of self-doubt. There’s no way that I’d be able to project Rebecca’s casual attitude. No matter how hard I try, I can’t imagine being that confident about my body”

“How do you see it for yourself?”

“For me it’s a lot more of a temporary thing. I get that sudden burst that I try to hold just for a moment. Sort of like Cinderella. Just kiss me before I forget who I am.”

“Then what happens?”

“There are time when I’d like to remind myself that I’m still at the top of the world.”

“What stops you?”

“It’s not really me.”

I tried to expand the picture, “You just can’t change your outlook over night.”

“I know. It takes one glance in the mirror to remind me who I really am. The mirror cracks from side to side.”

“So the transformation has to be gradual.”

“I can’t get into the role like that. I don’t have all the time in the world.”

I clarified my thoughts, “I can be patient.”

“I ‘m not sure if I can!”

“You don’t have to become Rebecca. You only have to read the part.”

“It’s not that simple. Was it that simple for you? Maybe you were missing something about her.”

“I don’t really know her.”

Joy was insistent, “Do you want to know her?”

“I don’t know if I can. So much of my story stands in the way.”

“Besides the story, what do you know?”

“Very little.”

“I read your book. You claimed to know so much more.”

“A belief. My book was all about this sort of belief. I want it to mean more.”

“The voyeur doesn’t stop there.”

I pursued her thought, “And Rebecca?”

“She knows they’re watching. She’s afraid of them. But that doesn’t stop her. She keeps on with the game.”

“Pool?” I asked.

“No. She’s so different than me. You’ve got to know what it’s like. Like buying a really loud outfit after completing a boot camp exercise program. Just letting everyone know that you’re a superstar.”

Her delivery was slow and drawn out. She was teaching me.

“It’s not just how she dresses. It’s a whole attitude that she brings to the room. She gives so much of herself. Guys just feed off of her like vampires. I don’t think that I could be like that. I’m not going to give that much of myself unless I get something back in return. It’s a slow process to get me to open up like that.”

“You must get crazy once in a while. What about getting drunk on your birthday?”

“Sure I’ve done that. But that’s only a once in a while thing.”

“But aren’t you a little vulnerable in a situation like that?”

“It makes me feel lonely. I admit that it’s easy to take advantage of me when I’m like that. But if I did that all the time, it would mess with my mind. I’d have to do a lot to make up for my mistakes.”

“Let’s say that you got good and fucked up on your birthday. And you were lonely. And you ended up sleeping with someone that you didn’t want to get with.”

“I’d find some way to gracefully make an exit. And I’d never talk about it again.”

“What if it did happen again?”

“I’d have to do some stock taking with my life. Quit my job. Move to a new town.”

“Just for sleeping with the wrong guy.”

“I don’t really allow myself to make silly mistakes.”

Joy was trying so hard to put on a front. She knew that she would have to break it down if she was going to play the role.

“I hate to say that I feel inhibited. I just feel that Rebecca has no control over her intimacy. If she gives so much of herself, it is so hard to get anything back. So she floats in this world trying to get her bearings. I want more than that.”

“You’re not willing to risk anything.”

She corrected me, “On the contrary, I’m risking it all.”

“But you believe that Rebecca has lost her ability to keep things in check.”

“I don’t know. She’s a game player. But she doesn’t play games. Everything about her is serious. She can joke with her buds. But she is always focused. And she can let go completely because she plays the odds. She knows that she can win. She fears losing. And it is always a possibility. But when everything is on the line, she knows how to succeed. She can reach into chaos and pull out order. But she keep it chaotic. And every so often she is rolled over by the currents.”

“How do you relate?”

“Part of me cannot relate. That’s the puzzle. I would have to be as good as she is. I’d have to learn how to practice. She has so much time on her side. More than that, she has learned to stretch out time to craft her own history. She has changed the world, and we can only watch. It is the brilliance of her game playing.”

“You can tell this.”

“I know this. This is the key to playing the role. I just can’t find it in myself.”

It didn’t make sense to me, “How can you see it and not discover it in yourself?”

“It’s a skill that Rebecca has. I want to have it. But I do not.”

“I’m trying to make sense of what you’re saying.”

“It sounds so trite. But it’s a mystery of the universe.”

“You told me that I was exaggerating about this girl.”

“Now I believe you are right.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have to study her more!”

Joy was afraid that the role seemed to be overcoming her.

“I hate to think that Rebecca is starting to possess my body. But I want to attain the assertiveness that I lack.”

“How is that?”

I can’t imagine a girl wearing shorts that skimpy to a bar.”

I wondered, “You wear a bathing suit to the pool.”

“I cover up before I go into the water.”

“What’s the big deal.”

“My legs aren’t that attractive. You can see the contours of Rebecca’s muscles. Besides, I can’t imagine guys staring at my butt.”

“Look at yourself. You work out. You’ve got a healthy metabolism. You got a thin frame. You look more in shape than Rebecca.”

“I don’t feel it in the same way. I can’t imagine giving in to that kind of thinking.”

“What are you talking about?”

She was adamant, “I hate guys looking at me like that. Like I’m a piece of meat.”

“You’re almost implying that Rebecca has no soul.”

“I’m not saying that at all. She exudes self-confidence. I’m not like that.

“What are you afraid of?”

“People trying to steal my soul. I can cover up. I can be myself. I can own my world. Rebecca never knows if a guy is looking her in the eyes or checking out her body.”

I advised her, “You can’t control the world.”

“I’m not trying to. But I do need more say over what happens in my life. I can’t just go

along with whatever is happening around me.”

“That’s not Rebecca., You know it’s not.”

Joy answered back, “But it is me!”

“Can you do the reading?”

“Yes, yes, yes! I just need to find it in myself.”

“You’ve never played anyone like her before.”

“I’ve played strong women. But none of my roles have been so physical. I play girls who live in their dreams. All of Rebecca’s dreams are wrapped up with her physical body. I can do tender. But there is something else about Rebecca that is new to me.”

I wanted to be patient. I was the writer. Joy was the actress. I needed her to find the role.

“Look me in the eyes,” I said to her. “Tell me what you are saying to yourself.”

“I don’t know if I can put it all into words. I just feel as if I’m breaking down.”

“Do you want to stop. That is an option. I will understand.”

“I need to do this for myself. I’m just afraid where I’m going to end up.”

“How is that?”

“I don’t know if I can go back to being me. I don’t want to feel so exposed. But I realize to reach that point, there is no turning back.”

“It’s only a role. You can quit if it s too uncomfortable.”

“That’s just it. It’s more that. I’m afraid that I will enjoy it. I afraid that I can’t resist the flattery. That is what I admire about Rebecca. She can get close to the flame, but she doesn’t get burned.”

“You can’t hide from life.”

“This isn’t life. It’s a hideous distortion.”

“Tell me what is bothering you,” I wanted to do my best to guide her.

“In the heat of the passion, these are people who care about nothing but total stimulation. This is the annihilation of any other feeling. It’s like an addiction.”

“You are trying to be too precise with your emotions.”

“You’re the damn writer. You expect to be totally in control. I’m not Rebecca. I’m not going to strip for you so you can see everything about myself.”

“Isn’t love all about letting go?”

“I don’t want to love that way. That’s dependency.”

“But love works that way. It holds you, and it won’t let go.”

“That’s an affliction. You don’t know how to love, Steven.”

I looked intently into her eyes, “Do you really mean that?”

“I’m not sure what I’m supposed to mean. This role is turning me into a monster.”

“You can let it go.”

“It’s too late for that. It’s inside me now. I can’t cut it out.”

She had been standing all this time. She felt a little exhausted,

“I’m going to sit down. Can you get me some water?”

I brought her a bottled water.

“I need to start over. I’ve been thinking about this too much.”

“We could stop.”

“No, not at all. This is how I work. I’ve only begun.”

I needed to know more, “Where is this going? You’re confusing me?”

“I’m getting closer to the role. You need to give me the chance to do that.”

“Of course, I don’t want to interfere.”

“You see me as I am. I’m a very inhibited girl.”

“You’re a lovely girl.”

“I’m just terrible with my emotions.”

“But you’re an actress.”

“Right. I’m good at playing other people. But not so good at playing myself. If only I could keep my personal life in check.”

“How?”

“I love how brilliant Rebecca is. I don’t you as exaggerating that. But it’s so easy for her just to slip back into a routine. A Tuesday here, a Tuesday there. That is how she lives.”

“Would you do it differently?”

“If I was me. But I don’t even know what that means anymore.”

“Go on.”

“I’m still learning where to go from here. Rebecca is a really complex person. But all of it is tied up with the roles that she plays. I’m not so good at doing this like that. I need it all in black and white. There is too much gray with her. I need to tell you a story.”

“Go on.”

I let her tell me the story. I listened without interrupting her.

“I knew this girl Lacy. She might as well have been me when I was younger. She was a cheerleader and a gymnast and a dancer. And she strove to be the perfect specimen. Sleek. Her body was sleek. As a cheerleader she wore the tightest little costumes. In her cheer routines, she’d shake her ass around for everyone to see. She’d writhe and thrust and leave nothing to the imagination. But deep in her heart, she thought all of this was wrong.”

“She believed that it was OK to regard a lovely face and see the glorious kiss of the Lord on such a splendid creature. But only a truly damned soul would allow the eyes to stare at a perfectly round ass and derive physical pleasure from such a gaze. She did her best to understand how truly sinful such an act could be. She recognized the perverse intent that had the eyes follow the contours of the butt along to its natural expression in the beckoning gap of ineluctable tissue. Under such an incentive, the self felt the strains of its carnal awakening. That phenomenon captured the essence of the phrase, *the near occasion of sin*. In surrendering to this influence, the sinner condemned his immortal soul to an eternity of exile in the depths of hell.”

“Indeed, Lacy knew that there was a community of such hapless individuals who devoted their entire lives just to taste this pleasure. She recoiled in horror from direct contact with these degenerates. Nevertheless, she was willing to do what she had to shape her body into the ideal vehicle for such expression. Oh, it seems almost sacrilegious to observe her ultimate intent. Only God had the right to stare at her perfect ass and marvel on the accord of his creation.”

“Given her apprehension with regards to these matters of faith, one might have thought the poor girl would be motivated to hide her body. But she realized that God had destined her to do just the opposite. While tempting man with her elusive contortions, she was meant to extend the word of righteousness to all those who thought that they could see with divine eyes. Where other girls would wear swimsuits that elegantly covered their butt cheeks, her suit was cut across

the globes to remind the tempted of their inevitable fate. And the most daring Lucifers would find the branding iron white hot when they caught a glimpse her shiny smooth legs riding up to the sweet appeals of apocalyptic extinction.”

“Through it all, there was this incredible pale upon the rest of creation. How could so many believe that a commitment to the animal side of our nature could offer apprehension of the lofty reaches of paradise? Fashion magazines had nurtured their readers with an inner eye that could catch any imperfection in the butt. These girls knew how to look from the back of their head. Such practices only served to establish a holy order based on devotion to the attributes of the physical body. After all, Lacy’s precept was central to the Lord’s attendant view of her inimitable backside. Her extrasensory perception did not stop with the sculpting of her body, but carried over to her crafting of the facets of the soul.

“Her mission in life seemed somewhat misdirected. But Lacy’s musings distilled one of the great mysteries of humanity. She would make every effort to whip her body into shape. And her male audience was driven to greater heights in trying to comprehend her enigma. No doubt she was motivated to a more extreme practice by the efforts of her followers. More than that, she discerned a mode of being where she remained untouched by their prurience. This only brought her closer to union with her savior. But it also convinced her watchers that the physical realm offered its own form of redemption.”

“While her friends seemed more willing to accede to desires of their male suitors, she was holding out for a greater offer. She expected the revelation of a more elemental truth that had nothing to do with the snares of the physical world. So Lacy remained zealous in her quest to unite herself with eternity.”

I commented, “She didn’t know how to let go.”

“That is the struggle. She need to understand her own lesson.”

“How is that?”

“She needed to come naked to the Lord,”

I wondered, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It was an exercise that we did in my improv class.”

“You actually got naked.”

“Only in our minds. But it was all about reviewing every offense that we thought that we had committed against the Lord. A judgement day thing.”

“This was a religious group.”

“Not at all. I said that it was an exercise. A memory exercise.”

“Memories?”

“Bad memories. We had all repressed these memories. And in the improv we had a chance to bring them out.”

“It must have been way over the top.”

“It was like a regular battle.”

She was trying to resolve her own insecurities about the role.

“I don’t know if I can get naked with the role?”

“How is that?”

She tried to imitate Rebecca’s squat at the table. Then she shook it off.

“You’re not afraid that I’m staring at your ass.”

“Didn’t Rebecca wear those shorts tight?”

“You could almost see her butt cheeks bursting out of the sides.”

“That is tight. Too tight for me?”

“You could wear them tighter.”

“What if I didn’t have it in me? What is that thing that you’re offer. You’re just a pervert.”

“I could close my eyes walking into that room, and it would all be the same.”

“She knows you’re there. She’s been waiting for you.”

“As in a showdown.”

“But she knows how to end it every time. You are going to leave every time. The voyeur can never get any closer to her.”

“What’s the next step?”

“I told you. You leave.”

“But I have her figured out.”

“So fucking what. She is never going to give you what you want. You are never going to really see those sweet cheeks pop out of those jeans shorts.”

“I don’t have to. I have my imagination.”

“Come on, baby. You know that you want it.”

I needed to stop her from taking it any further: “She’s not a stripper.”

“I didn’t say that she was. But that’s how you see her.”

“Not at all. She plays pool.”

“You will never play her game. You don’t want to lose. You don’t want her to send you home packing.”

“How is that?”

“No stripper can send you home. Just rush off to the ATM for more.”

“A stripper can clean you out.”

“Not the same thing. That is what you resent about Rebecca. She won’t let you get close.”

“This is not about me. I’m not trying to play a role.”

“You’re not. That’s why I had so much trouble with Rebecca. You’ve been watching me all along. For once, Rebecca is talking to you. Because I don’t know how to defend myself. Give me a pool cue.”

I didn’t want to go along with her logic.

“I’ve gone over this a thousand times.”

“Of course you have.”

“Do you really want to do this?”

“What are you going to do, Steven? Take the role away from me.”

I thought that we were really getting sidetracked.

“I know that you need to do this to get into the role. But I am not the bad guy.”

“Who is? Do you like to watch?”

“Of course, I do. But I know when to draw the line.”

“Like with me. I was feeling pretty vulnerable. Do you want to go home with me?”

“I didn’t want to go home with Rebecca.”

“You saw those smooth legs. And her dance. She practically got naked for you. Are you telling me that you had the will power to say no?”

“It never became an issue.”

“Ah, it was an issue. You were practically drooling. And you went back to see her again. You were falling for your own creation. And she said no. She made you want her. But you didn’t even know how to play pool. She just beat you. She told you that this game means everything in the world. It’s almost like being in heaven. But you couldn’t beat the odds. You couldn’t figure out a thing about what to do to recover. You had no game. You could only watch her helplessly.”

“Joy, I know what you’re doing. And it’s not working.”

“How can you know what I’m doing when I don’t know what I’m doing?”

I didn’t know if she wanted me to answer her question, “There’s a role, Rebecca. And you’re playing it!”

“Let me shove my ass in your face. What are you going to do now, hot shot? Lick it?”

“I’m not prepared for this.”

“Were you prepared for Rebecca?”

“Maybe not. That’s not the point. We’re just too different.”

“What do you want from her?”

“She was an interesting person. And I wish that she could have a conversation with me.”

She interrupted, “About what? About pool?”

“Not exactly.”

“About sex. Do you want to talk to her about fucking?”

“I didn’t say that.” Joy wouldn’t stop. I felt that she was getting carried away.

“It’s not your story anymore. That’s what you don’t like.”

“It never was my story. But I still wrote it up.”

“What do you want from me?”

I calmly pointed out, “I want you to play the role.”

“Am I playing the role?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you want me to shove my ass in your face?”

“If you’re playing the role, I don’t want you to shove your ass in my face.”

“But Rebecca is all about that. She wants you to eat her out. That is how she does it in her world.”

I didn’t know how to slow her down anymore. I had no idea where she was taking me.

“I am getting a kick out of this.”

“Go on!”

“What if I want to stop? Will that make you frustrated?”

I really wanted a drink. Something to take the edge off. I couldn’t hold on any longer.

“Are you playing a role? Or is this really you?”

“What do you need? A performance.”

I went off, “Let me put it in really simple terms. When I was writing the book, I had these ideas. Fantasies if you want to call them. But the book is finished. Those influences are no longer part of my life. I don’t know Rebecca. I don’t know Monroe. I have no desire to

know them. That was good for while. It entertained me. It gave me a reason to write. But all that is done. Closed book. And you're trying to bring it back to life."

"I am cutting close. Showing you real life."

I contradicted Joy, "It never was my life. I didn't go back to Rebecca's place. I never got her phone number. There was absolutely nothing between us."

"You held her at distance."

"You'd admit as much yourself. We weren't close. And if it was all a fantasy, it was my fantasy. I didn't take anything from her that wasn't mine."

"You took her body until it burned on your brain. You just got off on that image over and over again."

"That wasn't the philosophy of my book. I wanted to get closer to her. I couldn't. That was the end of it."

"Why couldn't you? You couldn't control it. You couldn't control the intimacy."

Joy's transformation was total. No more was she the meek girl. As she paced around me, she threw her body in the exact same manner as Rebecca. She confirmed it for me. It wasn't just physical. It came from the idea. But Joy was right. I wanted to talk to Rebecca about my discovery.

"Joy, do you see what is happening?"

I didn't feel that I could get her back. She had become an adversary.

"I don't know what's happening. You're just interfering."

"Is there something that you need me to say?"

"I need you to be quiet."

I obliged. I realized that she couldn't play the part. But she was Rebecca. And it really made me afraid.

"There's nothing that you can do, Steven."

"How do you mean that?"

"There's nothing that you can say. This is no longer about you."

"How is that, Joy? Or do you want me to call you Rebecca?"

"I really had you going."

I asked, "Was it all an act?"

"What?"

She smiled. But I still wasn't sure. I could say anything more.

Joy had really taken me for a loop. More than reliving my writing of the novel, she had opened up new territory. Part of me wanted to take the book back and start over.

"Are you still up for the role?"

"That was all part of the act."

We were carrying on from where we had left off.

"Do you feel as if I'm pressuring you? Not giving you the space to breathe?"

"You can do whatever you want, but I don't want you breaking my heart."

"Are you really going to say that?"

"I need to control the intimacy?"

"Just let yourself go."

"I'd never do it like that!"

The reading went well. Better than I had anticipated.

“The audience were crazy about her. She’s got to do the movie.”

I asked him, “Will any studio let her?”

“If they cast some names around her?”

“Doesn’t she need more experience.”

“Once they see her, they’ll give her the green light.”

David was toying with me about the idea of a movie. But I felt the same thing about the novel. And our sales were good.”

“What do you think it was that finally got people interested in the novel?”

“We knew that we had a good book. But we needed an idea for our marketing campaign. I wish that we had Joy on board from the beginning.”

“I think that she thinks that it’s her story now.”

Joy had me thinking of Rebecca’s story again. It was all about selling Rebecca’s sense of confidence.

“Do you think that Rebecca was weak?” I asked Joy.

“Maybe from the outside she seems weak. She’s playing a game. But it’s kind of cosmic for her.”

“Just like a voyeur thinks.”

“More than that. Sometimes you actually have to play the game.”

“Do you like to play?”

“Only when I know more of the script.”

She was still going for that ambiguity. I thanked her again for helping us.

“Any time!”