

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: SHAME

“It’s eleven P.M., and a police cruiser patrols a lazy suburban neighborhood. As it rolls on by, the inhabitants do their best to conceal their looming desires. They want to be known for their well-groomed lawns and their devotion to order. But behind the doors lurks a cesspool of secret passions, unfulfilled lust, and reckless abandon. If their consciences were clean, they could hardly confess to their most flagrant crimes.”

“David, are you trying to steal my thunder? Is suburbia erupting in an incipient revolution.”

“You’re not the only one who can chronicle what lurks behind the hallowed halls of contemporary bliss.”

“Don’t try so hard. The reader doesn’t want to be given a harsh lesson.”

David had a purpose in exposing the seamy side of paradise. It placed an incredible moral burden on the individual. But his own paralysis overcame him from really doing anything to topple this absurd fellowship.

The writer hopes to throw the reader off the trail. She hardly wants her partner in crime to give her up to the authorities. But it is a short path from the gloriously free imagination to the narrow rigidity of experience. The burdens of work and the past can bring the hardiest chronicler to her knees. Under such pressures, the writer is only too ready to make her confession to the powers-that-be. It is up to the most committed partisans to sustain the movement.

Despite David’s prodding, I had done my utmost to stay underground. I accomplished this by a most circuitous route. I made it my undertaking to record in detail events in my immediate surroundings. Thus, I would document my trips to the grocery store. Or I would fictionalize my conversations with David and my other friends. In the end, I would use my observations as the pretext for my fiction. For a while I existed in this hazy realm. I had drawn my character’s from my reality. And my creations resembled the people who had served as my models. But I gave my characters purposes that diverged from their actual sources. On one view, I was tempted to go back to the individuals to help me in completing my portraits. On the other view, I had unearthed deeper secrets about behavior that I could hardly share with the real actors.

My critics offered a further take on my endeavor. They saw my character portrayals as aspects of my own personality. And they used their best techniques of psychoanalysis to break me down to the whimpering child who stood behind my imperious wizard. Each critic was ready to claim victory and to raise his own flag at the top of the hill.

My dreams offered further revision of the critics’ view. It wasn’t mere coincidence that held me in this hazy realm. It was as if a voice from beyond was calling me to my true vocation. The twisted revelations of the dream world were there to provide a clear path to my waking experience. I marveled that so many of my dreams put me on the road with map in hand. I did my utmost to reconstruct the travel guide to the land of nod. The further that I pursued this vision, the more my journey became intrepid. I was up for the challenges.

David hated the fact that I did not offer the remorse that he expected from my intellect. I was shirking my commitment to social discipline. He hated my lax style of narrative. In his view, I needed to direct my reader with clearer instructions how to evaluate the moral issues of

the day. Without such guidance, they would be the victims of all the temptations that I sent their way. He hated the fact that I did not respect the balance that he deemed essential to return our culture to the righteous path.

This morning I met with David for a late breakfast. He brought up an interesting question to me, “Don’t you feel shame that you don’t feel enough shame?”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to tell me.”

“As a writer, you make every effort to gratify your reader. That is why you hope that she will tolerate your self-centered pursuits. But it just seems as if you don’t have an altruistic bone in your body.”

“It’s not as if I live in opulence, and I want to avoid giving my riches to the poor.”

“You’re so focused on pleasure.”

“Not for its own sake. It’s a balance. Is desire a way to ultimately overcome the detrimental effects of work.”

“How is that? Does this mean enjoying our work?”

“More like getting paid for what we enjoy.”

“For being a peeping Tom.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Besides writing, Steven, what do you do?”

“I observe people.”

“You’re a pervert.”

I worked to deflect his criticism, “Not at all.”

“You look at women people with such an eagle eye that they might as well be naked.”

“David, that sounds a lot closer to how you see things.”

“If I ever acted like that, I’d feel pretty bad about it.”

“That only gives you the licence to do it more.”

“I’m not like that.”

But could he really control his urges? That was why he was so uptight.

“You know where all the temptation leads?”

“Steven, the knowledge is sufficient for me. I don’t need pictures to stimulate my libido!”

“You work so hard at trying to hide your intention that they’re completely out in the open.”

He tried hard to maintain the fiction of a perfect childhood.

“Why were you so concerned about getting me to talk about my mother?”

“I felt this sense of resentment in your writing. I needed you to face its source.”

Was that all? He had left me with more questions than answers.

“David, I just can’t assume your identity.”

That was part of his strategy. Now he was trying to adopt my style. I needed to emphasize what distinguished us from each other. He was trying to slow me down, to cloud my judgement.

David’s feeling of guilt must have started when he was young. But he made every effort to make it seem as if his feelings were simply the result of a process of rational analysis.

“Steven, I’m not like you. I never had any problems with my mother.”

Why was he so conscientious about reminding me of my shortcomings? Since I had so little recollection of my own feelings, I felt that he could easily shape me into whatever he wanted me to be.

“You helped me with the book, but that’s where it ends. I can stand on my own two feet now.

But he wanted more.

“David, you’re trying to teach me some deep lesson. You get off on the pain of others.”

“That’s a little harsh!”

“Then it’s more about knowing how to inflict pain on the self. You call it purification.”

“Are you saying that people like to be persecuted? They deserve their fate.”

“I think that persecution is the only metaphor that sufficiently expresses how I feel about my experience of growing up.”

“You know that if you choose such an extreme description, you’re not going to have the option of a more acceptable alternative.”

“The description fits.”

“But you still want to blame yourself for what happened.”

“I’m not like you. It wasn’t my mother’s fault.”

“But you said that it all happened when you were growing up.”

“I’m not ready to be psychoanalyzed.”

“But you’re pushing this idea of shame.”

“Let’s just say that it’s helped me to become more comfortable with my body.”

David did what he could to hide his intention from the observer. His clothes were immaculate. He had fine taste in suits, but nothing too ostentatious. He did his utmost to obscure his origins.

Try as I may I couldn’t find the source of his feelings. He found simple pleasure in impressing his narrow vision on the world. And he had made every effort to break me down. But he resisted my attempts. He refused to reveal his weakness.

“The way that you act, you might as well handcuff yourself to the desk.”

He corrected me, “You’re the writer. You’re the one with the imagination.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t have to act out my fantasies. I know how to draw the line. You just dwell on this stuff until it drives you crazy.”

“At least, I admit what’s really bothering me. I don’t bury it until it eats away from the inside.”

“You’re talking in the abstract again. You can’t sell novels if you keep on like that.”

“I tell you things.”

“I wonder. I think that you make up all this stuff to throw me off the trail.”

I tried to explain it to him, “I write fiction. I make it up.”

“You make up the part where you satisfy your own desires. It gives you the courage that you lack.”

“If that gives me a sense of power, then it’s better than getting crushed by the world.”

“That’s not what I do.”

David had been promoting the idea of his own shame. It was almost as if he was angling to do something really nasty so that he could offer himself the requisite forgiveness. This was a lot like his story of the police cruiser. The residents waited until the law was out of sight until they started. Some people would suffer over what they never did. Others would push out into the darkness to risk their reputations for a silly reward.

“You’re not going to set yourself free!”

“Look at your struggle.”

“For all the self knowledge, I don’t know what I’ve got. From here on in, I need to enjoy myself.

“Just remember that when you’re having fun, somebody’s working hard to allow you to have a good time.”

“You’re view of the world is twisted.”

He replied, “How would you have it?”

“I’d look at history.”

“History confirms what I’ve been saying.”

“There was a time when a man’s toil measured his place in the world.”

“Steven, that’s an acceptable story.”

I felt that I was rambling just like David. But I needed to play his game. Like any good historical novelist, I was embellishing my story based on the facts that we knew. I had my intentions, “So his reward was measured by how much he applied himself during the daylight hours. And he rested at night. This is all part of your moral tale.”

“You are very convincing.”

“His reach did not exceed grasp.”

“He was content.”

I summarized the description, “Man the mechanic. The more refined his tools, the more he could affect his world. He reached beyond himself.”

“And his tools allowed him to get a hold of what he desired.”

He repeated the lesson, “Again, his immense toil was the measure of his world.” I thought that I was getting somewhere.

“Good. But once the products of his toil were harvested, his take could be laid end to end with that of his neighbor. Thus there was born a comparison. And in this competition, man spurred his speculative side. How could he increase his yield?”

David wondered, “You really believe this stuff?”

“Never did. But I think these simple stories have a great appeal for you. I’m sure that you would like me to spice up my narrative up with these object lessons.”

“One man’s potatoes are not another man’s oranges. And vice versa?”

“So it goes until the body became electric.”

“How was that?”

“The whirr of the dynamo. The water wheel turned the great turbines. And the electrical engine powered the mechanical devices far beyond their initial capacity.”

“What are you telling us, Steven?”

“The electrical engine offered a greater output for its user. The change was exponential. It rearranged the body to access the power of electricity.”

“Marvelous.”

“And from that Eden, the internal combustion engine propelled us into the hubbub of the modern world.”

“Where have we traveled?”

“From the man the mechanic to man the engineer. We have learned to transform one energy into another. We have edged towards the atomic age.”

“Why the gloom?”

“Once man can touch the far reaches of his world, he is no longer a subject of the realm. He has overthrown the empire. But he now faces victimization by new machines which measure the fruits of his labor against the whims of its user. “

”Is there no hope?”

“You tell me David. You have my book. What are you going to do with it?”

“Put it in the hands of as many people as possible.”

“We are no longer readers.”

He offered a new solution, “We could sell the idea behind the book.”

“Good man. I am already there. Do you really want that idea? What if it disrupts your marketing plan. A good novel teaches the reader to be cynical. That is how she achieves freedom.”

“By standing up for herself.”

“More than that. By seeing the web of humanity.”

“Lovely generalization, David.”

I challenged him, “The alternative is a nightmare.”

“How is that?”

“As a byproduct of video games, a man does a bunch of push ups, and he thinks that he can dominate the world.”

“The New Butterfly Order.”

“He sculpts his body to resemble that of his beefed-up surrogate. So he’s ready for any opponent. Let all the sleeping dogs wake up to his wrath.”

“Show them no mercy.”

“His personal demands now determine how the supply of oil and food are obtained and allocated. Pump up!”

“Steven, you’re sounding like a renegade. What’s your complaint?”

“What’s yours? You want me to feel shame.”

“A man can only have so much.”

“Not if he builds a new wing to the warehouse. Keep employment at a high enough rate.”

“Things are heating up too fast.”

“David, I can’t give you logic. You already claimed that there were factors beyond our ken. Disease and storms. Your run of the mill catastrophes.”

“Rational thought has its limits.”

“So does stupidity. It’s not like you’re the god of storm clouds.”

“Whenever people have a plan, the gods mess with them.”

“But you’re trying to defend people who never take a real risk in their life. They speculate according to time-worn precepts. And then they pat themselves on the back for their

own rebelliousness.”

“You shouldn’t take silly risks.”

“Just breathing the air is starting to be one of those silly risks. Let silliness abound.”

David was becoming impatient.

“It’s not as if I advocate hurting people.”

“You’re preemptive. You made it an art to hurt yourself. Suffering is part of personal salvation.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“I won’t. You’ve stuffed enough in there already.”

“We’re back where we started.”

“Only you have more gold than the rest of us. Nothing like a crisis-driven economy to bring out the best in people.”

He was very studious, “You should take advantage of every opportunity.”

“Like betting failure against failure to succeed! You can’t lose!”

“You’re making a mockery of free enterprise.”

“So you have a better idea. I think that you learned this from Corneille. It’s not what you have, it’s what you think you have.”

“I think that he said just the opposite.”

“David, it’s not what you say. It’s what you do!”

“Why are you messing with me?”

“I’m learning from an expert.”

He had said too much already. But he didn’t want me to have the last word

“David, you’re been pushing this washed-out version of nostalgia. If you see a hunched-up urchin carrying firewood up the hill, it’s part of the ennobling experience of mankind. You’re not interested in unburdening the poor creature. Instead, he endures his pain to expiate the world of its sin. You extol martyrdom because you have no room for liberation. The world pushes down from up top.”

He hated my wood-cut image of his world.

“I’m not a tyrant. If the young boy can make learn the rules, he can make his efforts pay him back a thousand fold.”

“I’m sure that Dickens could have used a more conscientious editor in his day.”

“Pizza delivery guys grow up to own a franchise.”

“On your view, there is no real present. Only the promise of an up and coming future.”

“How are you going to make things different,” he asked me.

“By not ignoring the world around me.”

“You stay in your room and write all the time.”

“I see people. Jena at the grocery store. Felix at the gas station. Edwin at the gym. I keep my eyes open.”

“More material for your stories.”

“I want my stories to move with real flesh and blood.”

“Come out of your delivery car.”

“You know that I don’t deliver anymore.”

“You’re even more remote than you’ve ever been.”

What was David's excuse? He had always been cut off from the world.

"Steven, I've seen horrors that you've never even dreamed of."

"Where, at one of your literary cocktail parties?"

"I've had a rich life. I worked on a farm one summer. I also was a waiter at a Mexican restaurant. I haven't made up stories in a lonely attic cut off from the world."

"You're about to make money off of my made-up stories."

"That doesn't make them more real. I'm trying to make you more of a real person."

I followed up, "Not a wood cut-out."

"You're all stopped up. Your stories just start to come to life, then you kill them off and go on to something else."

"My characters don't have the luxury to stay in one place. They're working all the time. They run out of money. They end up with messed up people. So they have to adjust to the adventure."

"They seek aimlessness."

"You're the one who extols suffering."

"It's part of the learning process. I repeat *learning*. People have to learn to move on."

"They start out as the jailed, and then become the jailer. Great progress."

He looked into my eyes, "Do you hate me?"

"No, I'm trying to be sympathetic. But you're leaving me no room."

"You're trying to avoid the lessons of life."

"Give me the book, and I can take a peek."

I was cynical about his method, "I'm not pretending that there is one answer."

"Of course, you are. That's what makes you a dear teacher."

I asked him, "Do you even want to listen?"

"You're not giving me a chance."

"I don't try to make an amusement park out of my pain."

"That seems a little crass to refer to someone else's pain as an amusement park."

"I know it's a terrible description. But it's a million time worse to live the experience than to use to description."

How does that work?"

"People are afraid to admit how truly helpless that they are. So they give you this act that the sky is falling. But it's not just that the sky has fallen. All of heaven has dropped its load."

"Your jokes are so unfeeling."

"What's really unfeeling are people who run from their own pain."

"What do you want them to do? Enjoy their suffering."

"That's your thing."

People want forgiveness. Give 'em a break."

"You can't take a break from yourself."

"I'm losing you."

"If you're really down, don't take the first car that comes along for a joy ride."

"Pardon?"

"A lot of people feign that they're down and out. But it's just so they don't have to deal with their own shit. The minute that they catch a break, they're back tap dancing on stage."

“More metaphors.”

“If it’s so bad that you can’t do a thing, then you realize are doing terribly, and nothing is going to get you out of the doldrums. But a lot of people teach themselves how to be learn to be good actors.”

David disagreed, “Where’s the act.”

“Do you want to see the stigmata? I can show you.”

“Steven, that is your problem. You have no sympathy.”

“I’m weighed down with sympathy. We’re talking about people who won’t admit to the full extent of their problems. When you’re really about to help, they confess to feeling sorry for themselves. That’s your style, David. You want public confession.”

“How is it an amusement park.”

“They’ll take you on a tour of the rides. They’ll tell you how they get nauseous on the merry-go-round. How they feel afraid on the roller coaster. How they want to jump off the ferris wheel at the top. So you’re ready with the damn net, and they’re off to get cotton candy.”

“That’s part of the disease.”

“Then admit it is. Don’t run circles around those trying to help you.”

David had his own version, “People need to be able to fix themselves!”

“You don’t really want it that way.”

“Why not?”

“It’s another way to wash your hands of the whole matter. After all, you’ve been pushing individualism.”

“It’s not as if your book is a community project. It justifies your isolation.”

“I’m ready to share. I’m out there with my characters.”

“Characters? You’re still trying to stay distant from them all.”

“I’m not a puppet master.”

David claimed, “You like to pull the strings.”

“I’ll cut all the strings if they want to move on their own.”

“A revolution of marionettes.”

“Pinocchio would be proud.”

“If he could get a word in edgewise.”

What was David’s problem? Maybe I was laying it on a little too thick.

“I just can’t get how we’ve become so overwhelmed by our own public grief.”

“What does that have to do with what we’re talking about?”

“It’s the source of our shame.

“Think about it. A disaster and she has spent all day in front of the TV. She is waiting for some news, just a sign of hope. Will they find any survivors? It doesn’t look good.”

“Who is she?”

“The TV watcher. Why should I care? How can she care?”

“Don’t you have a sense of humanity.”

“I want to express my concern. But I can’t react for every event that occurs on TV. A killing everyday. Floods and earthquakes.”

David pleaded, “You have to have a conscience.”

“That how you feel that your conscience is clean. You empathize in this public theater.”



“What’s wrong with that? It shows me that I’m alive.”

“I don't understand such displays of public grief. She doesn't know any of the victims. And she's perfectly deaf to her own daughter when she talks to her about problems at school.”

David had an explanation, “The problems at school aren't as urgent as the deaths in a rail accident. She believes that her prayers can help. She only wants to feel part of something bigger.”

“But you can never get a straight answer out of her because there’s always something catastrophic in her life that trumps your problems.”

In his own way, David wasn’t very different. He didn’t want to do anything to solve the problem. He just wanted to get off on the rush. I looked for the handcuffs.

“Sometimes there is no forgiveness.”

“Steven, you’re sounding like God now.”

“I thought that was your role.”

“You’re coming off as the unfeeling one.”

“If your emotions were connected to a real action, I’d be sympathetic.”

“You’re the one who gets your kicks from watching.”

“It’s the same thing. You just don’t admit it. You love that split in your personality. It’s what keep you together.”

What causes a person to think about it all the time? So much so that he can't do anything else. He knew that there was something deviant about his desire, but he couldn’t stop. He had watched Chelsea until she had grown into a young woman. He understood how she wanted to make the world a better place. And she had bestowed her grace on everyone else around her. She had no idea about the cruelty of others.

His imagination had previously wandered in its confusion. But now he felt that she offered him a desired focus. He did not want to let her go. He concentrated his gaze until he could imagine her talking to him. And he was careful when she talked back. He wanted her approval.

He knew all about his shame. But she had promised to ignore what had happened. This was his chance to start all over again.

There was a point that he might have seen that he was going too far. But he couldn’t catch himself. He only gave in. Her lovely presence filled him with the feeling of a great reward.

Once she had smiled back at him. He took this to mean more than he could know. He had been touched by heaven. Other girls were more random with their world. Chelsea left nothing to chance.

He observed how her tight dresses hugged her body. Her shorts complemented her long legs. Her lean stride expressed all the confidence of her being. He didn’t want to disturb that harmony. He wanted to be part of it.

What could he tell her to make her understand? He didn’t have the words to express his feelings. But he wanted her to give him a chance. This was his art. If only she listened to his story, she would sympathize

He gave her a script. Her every gesture spoke the consent that he was seeking. He didn’t want her to pity him. He wanted her to embrace his vision. This was his poetry. And it was no

longer a fantasy. She had made it real. Every abstract thought that had fed his desire was now a concrete fact of his observation. He could see the truth when he looked at her body.

He wanted more than this reality. He wanted her to carry him to paradise. If he had any doubts about providence, those doubts were finally dispelled by her presence. When she finally acknowledged him, he would have everything that he was looking for.

“David, I don’t want to give him permission.”

“You have done more than that. You have justified his actions.”

“I’m not like that.”

“But you were the one who told me about Chelsea.”

“Told you. But there was nothing shameful in my telling.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong. He has a secret. And he has the need to confess.”

“But the confession gives him the motivation to pursue things further. He’ll think that he can get away with anything.”

He was pitching a new idea to me.

“He wants absolution. Give it to him.”

“Why me?”

“This is your fantasy!”

I objected, “I’m not like that.”

He threw my words in my face, “You said so yourself. There’s nothing wrong with the imagination.”

“This is giving him the help to plan his crime.”

“Your crime. Now do you feel shame.”

“I wouldn’t do anything wrong.”

“You’d keep it above board. Get her to make the first move. Get her to make all the moves. But why would she?”

“What do you want me to do, David?”

“The same thing that I’ve always wanted you to do: confess!”

“I have nothing to confess.”

“Then do something really bad so that you can enjoy the opportunity.”

“Is that how your sick mind works.”

“You’re the same. You just won’t admit it. You plan it out in detail so that you won’t be detected. You’re the ideal voyeur. You can take it all in in a glance. Boom.”

“I don’t dwell on my fantasies.”

“The hell you don’t!”

He was trying to entrap me again. He loved the Chelsea story more than I did. I should have never said a thing.

“I just want to know why the blonde at the bar goes home with that loser.”

“Appearances are deceiving?”

“His?”

“No, hers. You just see what you want to see. Maybe they’re perfect for each other.”

“She could be perfect for me.”

“But that’s the same motivation that gets our psycho all revved up.”

“You take his fantasy further. You let Chelsea talk. You give her a soul. Then you get

all freaked out when she ignores you.”

I wasn't going to bite. He kept dangling the bait for me. But he did strike a nerve. I wanted Chelsea to walk in that door. I wanted her to resist all these influences. To fight for her loveliness. To tell the guy at the bar to fuck himself.

“That guy at the bar could be you,” David reminded me.

“Trying to read my thoughts again.”

“It works every time.”

What if Chelsea followed the program to the letter? She'd have to learn the rules. Throw herself into the game. Fall the floor now and then. And when she picked herself up, she'd realize that it all wasn't in her head. She'd give in. She did it all the time. The boy next door, her mom.

“You are weird!”

“I'm giving you freedom.”

“I've taken all the freedom that I need.”

“You've used up what they've given you. There is so much more.”

“I have cheerleading camp. I have voice lessons. I have to get ready for college.”

“What if your college closed? What if they didn't need anymore cheerleaders? What if your voice went silent?”

“The only way that you could ever get closer to me is if you destroyed my world. Doesn't that make you feel ashamed.”

David has penetrated my dreams. I needed to shake it off.

“I'm not sorry for anything that I might have admitted to you.”

“Steven, you don't want to ruin the fun.”