

## CHAPTER TWO

### TIGHT AND COMPLICATED

"After the man of flowers came a period of darkness. I was catapulted from the touch of Heaven to the resonant ramifications of Hell.

"Hell, as Dante has elucidated, is a multi-faceted place. Today a similarly poignant Dantesque image of Hell might be The Mall of America. So many options for the individual, so many ways to pass the time, so many variations on a theme. Hell is paved, not with good intentions exactly, but with goodness itself. Goodness is not multi-faceted, and, as all things in and under heaven will be put to use, goodness's singleness of purpose, it's flatness is often used for paving surfaces and building walls. We walk The Mall of Hell on a surface of goodness, contained within an enormous structure, all walls, bearing walls, dividing walls, bathroom walls, courtesy of goodness.

"Hell's damnation is frustration. You can never get anywhere when you're there. You walk and walk and you are still there, going there, coming from there, there. If you choose to visit the playground, the amusement park in the middle, the source of all that noise, stimulus, excitement, frenzy and pseudo joy, you may reach a center of sorts but you are head to tails, wheels within wheels, all those rides going circles, or up and down, the cross section, the cranky part, of a circle. Nowhere really. Topsy turvy. Nauseous. Wanting more.

"There you are, in Hell. And you thought you were going shopping. Maybe you were looking for a birthday present for a friend. Maybe you were lonely, tired, bored. Maybe you thought spending some money or wasting some time would help you get through a difficult moment of your journey of self discovery. Maybe your friend talked you into going with her. Whatever the reason, there you are.

"Shopping, walking, looking around, dealing with the noise and the sensory input is formidable. You close down a little bit, to deal with the extraneous stimuli. You find yourself focusing tighter, distinguishing suddenly becomes judgment.

*"Look at that fat woman over there. Have you ever seen anything that gross in your whole life? Maybe she has a condition. How much does she eat to get that way? Look at that kid. Can't his mother control him? Three children, how could she have so many? Doesn't she know about over population? Do you think she actually believes in that shit the Pope spews out? Maybe she's too dumb to know about birth control. Maybe she likes kids. She has enough of them. Why don't they behave better? If I had kids they wouldn't embarrass me in public like that. If they did, I'd never take them with me again, ever. Look at her. She's so skinny her legs look like giant pinky fingers. That's disgusting. Shouldn't she get help? What does she look like in a bathing suit? A dog! Oh, it's a*

*blind person's dog. I'd hate to be blind. It must be weird in here to be blind. If he had a cup I could give him some money.*

*"Then you see yourself in the mirror.*

*"Look at her. Doesn't she know how to dress? What kind of idiot would wear shoes like that with short legs? And that hair. That's me. Oh.*

*"But it's too late, the noise of Hell has moved into your mind. Your grid has shifted. Everything that happens now will conform to your fresh, sharply delineated values, your new, shiny, precise, like a Japanese knife, grid, your raw crystal mirror shine. The shine is on forty eight hours a day in Hell.*

*"I knew that something was wrong right away but I couldn't figure out what. I didn't know where my bad feelings were coming from. I was ok with the man of flowers leaving to go to India. I thought that my life would work out then, that my true love would now appear and I would live happily ever after. But for weeks I didn't even date anyone, nothing interesting happened to me. I was getting really bored with myself, with my girlfriends. I felt like I was getting old. I ran every day.*

*"I'm a good person. I'm ready. I'm over the death of my mother. So where is he? Who is he? He's late. Am I going to yell at him when he finally gets here? My hair looks great and there's no one to see it. Hurry up. I can't live with myself one more minute.*

I was at a play and sitting next to me was this man and he was alone and I was alone and he was very good looking for his age which I knew must be going on advanced but he was tan and tight and very energetic, polite. He noticed that I was alone. The play was dumb. We continued our complaints in the restaurant next door afterwards. He was interesting. He had lived places, done things and he wanted me. I could tell. I could feel his hunger, his appetite. It made me feel young. To be wanted was exciting and made me feel powerful. We went to his place because that was more romantic than my place since I was sick of myself. He acted like a teacher. He was always explaining, illustrating his stories with examples taken from his long and varied life. His loft was also a studio space where he made jewelry. He promised to make me some but I never got any. To credit the sanity I had left, I didn't care. I wanted companionship, love and sexual fulfillment. I wanted to give myself away. I wanted to experience satiation and I wanted that experience from men.

*"This old man's life had been dedicated to food and sex. He had a Ph.D. in basic appetite skills. He was an epicure, terrific in bed, athletic, generous. I came. He came. We came together all over again. We laughed. He was very open and honest. He took me to strange parties, people from I had never heard of, little African countries and some big Arab ones. I met some interesting people. I felt so empty that I began to have trouble getting up in the morning to go to work.*

"I told him that I couldn't see him anymore. He was sad, a little. He said he had met twins. He would spend more time with them. "See," he said, teacherly, "How life has a way of working out for the best? You have your freedom and I have the twins. Can I take your picture before you go?" I said no.

"I was no closer to finding my true love no closer at all.

"He was curious, since his purpose in life was to learn all he could about women's sexuality and food, why I was ending our affair. I wasn't sure. It wasn't his age. He admitted to sixty five, he was closer to seventy. But he was gorgeous. I've met guys of twenty five who were not as firm of flesh or nearly as funny. But I wasn't prepared to be so clinical about sex.

"Ah," he proposed his theory, "we are too good together. Your religions don't let you feel pleasure without the nonsense of relationships."

"Maybe." I said, "But I feel sad when I think about what we're doing."

"No," he said, "you must not feel sad. You must live. You are right. You must leave me now. I insist."

"I learned that there's no need to worry about sex over sixty. I learned that I was looking to love with my soul. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic, that's what they say. But I'd lapsed. I definitely didn't want a Joseph, I wanted a Saint Christopher. Even though the Catholics kicked him out of their pantheon, which doesn't seem at all the act of a loving mother church but rather utterly the act of a harsh judging father, I wanted, well, a cross between Christopher carrying kids, George slaying dragons and Jesus sharing bread and discipleship with women, defending odd balls, hanging out with whores, creating wine from water, displaying mercy from mountain tops, that's what I wanted.

"Maybe saints raise unreal expectations. Maybe men only come in the Joseph, Augustine and Paul varieties with a few Herods thrown in for pepper.

"I began to see misogyny everywhere. I noticed all the crannies where contempt had seeped into the three dimensions of love. I began to see hate everywhere. I felt a rage in me rising to meet the cruelties I perceived in others. *This is Hell. I am confined by rage and cruelty.* It was dark in my heart, and heavy. But I was horny. I craved union. I was still waiting for the prince of love to come and rescue me, be honorable and gentle so I could love him gracefully. I waited in vain. My hair looked nice. I was bored.

"I did some mean things. I once let a man I thought was disgusting, slobbery, take me out. He was a computer geek. Baggy pants, tight, thin, brown leather, belt, a loose lower lip, a balding head, he smelled ok, no dandruff but his eyes

were cagey blue. Grids exploded from his eyes, nets thrown over everything he saw. He spotted me on a bus stuck in a rush hour standstill. He blabbered on at me. First I said no, no, no, no, no thank you, no, no. Then I got angry. I could feel the net thrown over me, a grid with itty bitty squares shrinking tighter and tighter. My rage rose and covered me, I said, ok, I'll meet you tonight at such and such a place at such and such a time and we'll go to the movies, ok?

"Without missing a beat he went on about all the money he had, then how pretty I was, the size of his stereo, how much money he was going to make. Finally he got off. *I'll stand him up.* Trying to shut him up I said yes. I really didn't like him.

"When I got home something funny happened. The phone rang. It was a wrong number. But the woman was so upset, she was crying so hard that she couldn't hear me tell her that she'd gotten the wrong party. She said how could I have done it? "How could you sleep with my husband? How could you destroy my life? " I let her talk. I knew I couldn't stop her. When she ran out of mean, angry hurt things to say, she cried, sobbed. She said, "I hate you. But I hate him more." And then she hung up. It put me in a daze. It put me back into missing my mother. It put me in a place of pain. It put me in a desert of women in love, trees gnarled with trying to go on, children eating bark when the sap has dried up, the first fruit gone, the branches bare. It put me in a landscape of dark moons grieving for suns swallowed by low horizons, winds of fatigue pushing sage brush silently through abandoned pathways.

"I went to meet him at the movies."