

Louis Gallo

The Abortionist

Philadelphia 2008

My pale, salamandrine grandfather Abraham Saul growled between his yellowed teeth as he davened, “Can’t fall if you’re already lying down.” We called him The Rabbi because he always spouted off this Yiddish crap and only sometimes translated. Well, I’m lying down, Abe, which my literary acquaintance at the library tells me is no way to start a story. I am not a writer, but I do intend to tell a story. The last thing I intend.

“Why not?” I asked.

Shank relished the slow, proclamatory edict. We had played this game before. “Because the Iowans say so.”

I sucked it in, envisioned endless wheat fields, cows and freckled milk maidens rooted like potatoes in the heartland.

“Spare us what we can endure,” I said and laughed.

Shank wheezed, rattled in his rib cage. They had given him another six months.

I’ve been a businessman all my life, so I don’t know much, but during the early phase of my retirement I took quite a few courses at the university campus downtown. Philosophy, literature, art, music... everything I’d missed in my halcyon heyday, all of which I still regard as tripe. So I know what Shank meant by “the Iowans.” And I vow that no Iowan, however robust and salty, will ever dictate rules, not one, to this olive-skinned, kinky-haired-albeit-balding, apostate yid.

Oh yeah, that other caveat. Make your character sympathetic, likeable. In league with happy faces and “have a good day.”

I am thoroughly unlikeable; let’s square that away.

Thus:

Crinkled, jaundiced dawn seeps into the room and ribbons its way into my eyes, which I knuckle, while at the same time trying to loosen rheumatoid knots and stiffness from an increasingly decrepit body. In this manner, I greet the daily onslaught.

There will be a full moon tonight. I must prepare. Don’t worry, no werewolves in this neck of the woods.

I’ve wound up back in Philadelphia, actually for many decades now, here in my efficiency on Market Street. The efficiency is new. I gave up a more spacious apartment on Chestnut because I no longer have the will nor energy that frantic maintenance demands. And the rent, you would gag. I’m close enough to the Allegheny Hospital to hobble over if anything goes askew. Chinatown isn’t far, and sometimes I drift there for a meal. The Chinese don’t see me, I don’t see them, I’ve become invisible. But monosodium glutamate revs me up. I can live with the hives. Now and then I check out what’s cooking at the Franklin Institute, despite its preposterous multi-tiered, concrete entrance stairs, which tire me just looking. Recently it was King Tut, and you had to battle bus loads of pandemonious kids, from Iowa no doubt.

Be all that as it may, I think there’s something wrong with me. Other than the usual, I mean, and far more occult. Not merely that I can’t think normal thoughts anymore, you know, the mind flowing from one idea to the next like different cars of the same train, discrete yet coupled... and that’s only part of it, an attendant disorder or reverse abreaction, the condensation on a window. To relay this account, I must speak into a clunky old tape recorder; otherwise, nothing, me sitting here at my kitchen table like a golem, a vessel with no fluid, as if my mind but not my tongue has forsaken words. I am the tree that falls in the forest, a communications theory nightmare. And this is one reason I live alone—I can no longer relate to other people in any humane, meaningful, or remotely cordial manner. A few old friends still visit, Semoncioni, for instance, the retired plumber, and sometimes I frequent the local coffee houses; I still shop, drive to the post office, walk my blind old cur Peaches, browse in the library for books not yet written—but mostly I stay home, read women’s magazines, watch the Weather and History channels, fiddle around with my antique cigar label collection, keep myself as fit as possible with yoga, wheat germ, and alfalfa sprouts. The streets are dangerous. The homeless, and therefore desperate, congregate everywhere in hive-like conspiracy. This city has become outrageous. I do carry a weapon, but mum on that. Who knows into what hands this testament will pass?

Every so often even Rachel calls. I plead with her to let me alone, but she refuses. That’s Rachel for you.

I despair of seeking rational causes for my ailment. (I won’t even bother you with the physical complaints endemic to anyone my age except to mention low thyroid, enlarged spleen, hemorrhoids so insufferable I have no choice but to ignore them, the throbbing bursitis of my left elbow.) Pesticides, antibiotics, and hormones in the food supply? Plastic residue from microwaved Stouffer’s? Prozac, lead, cadmium in tap water? Radioactive iodine and God knows what other leftovers from Nevada and Chernobyl? It hardly matters. Or might guilt over my abandoned heritage have amounted finally to a phase shift?

Truth is, I don't feel guilty. *Yahveh*, those mystical letters; they mean God is hidden, which explains the expulsion from Eden. And what is Eden but health? It's true, Abe, health first. You can always hang yourself later. We do not have to forgive God.

I know no other secular Jew with my particular symptom of reducing people instantly, upon first sight, to their genitalia. If I see an old man walking down the street as I drive to Food King, the wretch himself entirely disappears, and I sense only his shriveled

I am not obsessed with genitals; genitals have become obsessed with me.

gray dick dangling there like a soft, grotesque plumb bob, the balls, mossy, fetid figs. With women, it's all too obvious what I behold. Maybe, like Descartes, I have bracketed out the superfluous in order to arrive not at an immaculate, noble grail like the Cogito, but rather schlongs and pussies. Or am I closer to Freud, who shared my obsession with sexual organs, though obsession is hardly the word? With me, anyway. I have known obsession. It's a form of malignant interest stalking as you try to sleep or contemplate the infinite or listen to late Shostakovich; it is the refrain in your own demented requiem.

I am not obsessed with genitals; genitals have become obsessed with me.

When I peer into busy, intricate wallpaper or any decorative commodity, say tapestry pillows and ottomans, Oriental rugs, the first thing I notice in the patterns, the rorschachs, is women giving blow jobs. In the wood grain of my ancient pine doors and floor boards, there they are: blowjobs. I see blowjobs in the clouds as others spot dinosaurs, giraffes, ships, angels. The whole world has become a vast mural of blowjobs, great and small, shallow and deep. Oddly, I was never an aficionado. The oral embarrasses me, perhaps because I am the sole un-circumcised Jew in the universe. That discolored, wrinkled sheathe I have lived with and suffered for over sixty years—a curse upon it! I may be a reborn non-Jew, but my parents rebelled against the faith with passion and dementia. I recall partaking of the Seder's bitter herbs once, but by the time Bar Mitzvah rolled around, I too had become a saboteur, a nihilist. My parents, double suicides much later in this narrative, rejected circumcision as unnatural, a mutilation. (They had changed our name from Saul to Sol—“more Hellenistic via the Roman Empire,” my father chuckled to Abraham's black, furious sorrow.) Hence my condition. Abe used to insist that imaginary diseases are worse than real diseases, but I say, what's the difference?

Don't spare me... I sense your reasoning, anticipate it. Latent homosexuality! I assure you, I am no queer, though it would not disturb me one way or another. I happen to love women, or rather, I once loved women. If you require evidence, call Rachel. I lived with her so long that, in effect, we became man and wife, if never officially. This was in my New Orleans days when I ran the abortion clinic on St. Charles Avenue across from

Corrine Dunbar's. We called it a “women's center” to ride the feminist wave and appear respectable. I chose New Orleans because the city seemed so laissez-faire and backwards – this long before Katrina—I assumed that carpetbaggers could get away with anything. To be arrested for implementing abortion in New Orleans is like prosecution for slow motion in remote regions of Mayan Mexico—Mexico, the slowest country in the world, according to scientific surveys. (Japan, naturally, the fastest.)

I had to get out of Philadelphia anyway, for a while, to escape the fury of my brother-in-law and partner in our upscale dry cleaning chain, PristineKleen. We had equipped each unit with a little coffee shop, for God's sake! Supplied classy magazines like *W* and *Interview* and Victoria's Secret catalogs. But Ben made it pristinely clear that he would pursue me for embezzlement if I didn't leave Dodge by sundown. Fucking western movies! Not that Ben's own spindled fingers hadn't fondled the pie. I can't complain (though that's all I do) because he supplied me with modest set-up funds for new ventures in terra incognita. Think St. Charles, you think million dollar turn-of-the-century mansions, nouveau extravaganzas, but our building was a shabby, one-story construction block square with a corrugated roof. We didn't fit in, despite the wall prints by Van Gogh, Monet, Wyeth, Hopper. Or the more sedate classics piped through the rooms from our music system, calming melodies like Mozart's “Elvira Madigan,” Debussy, Vaughan Williams, Dvorak's lark. I didn't know much about art or music then; I ordered our decor from a bulk-rate office supply house in, bless my soul, Des Moines.

I ran the show in my status as what you would now call a CEO, hired two part-time Charity residents with degrees from Tulane Medical School, a registered nurse, and three young, kind-hearted, blond assistants. Like one of the founders of our country, Captain John Smith, I was partial to blonds. As the man behind the scenes, I never cut anyone. Nor did I ever watch the procedures. The sight of blood repels me to this day. Besides, there was money to be made, and money takes up all the time in the world. You don't make money wishing you had more. The heaviest load is an empty pocket. Usually, our head nurse Regina, a middle-aged, brooding, sunken-cheeked matron, or one of the more pleasant, always nubile assistants, interviewed potential clients (we used that term rather than patients); but on one particular soggy, blistering day, Regina had to rush home for an emergency – her cocker spaniel had accidentally swallowed a bottle of Librium—and one assistant, Beth, was already dealing with a client, the two others at lunch. So when this raven-haired beauty wearing a scarlet halter with no bra beneath struts in like some Persian queen, I, young then and bloated with ridiculous chutzpah, gawked with both pleasure and anguish. Anguish because I knew the thing was fated, and, if you ask me, fate never works out.

“If tongues don't have eyes,” she said, laughing at my admittedly crude salivation, offended, defensive. Though, why, I must ask still after all these years, do women dress in

such fashion if not to incite salivation? Those creamy upper mounds of breast, swelling when she inhaled, so perfectly smooth and supple. Epidermal nougat. And don't think I missed the gawky crucifix almost impaling itself into her cleavage. I didn't see blowjobs across the board in those days, but I shudder to imagine what I might espy in that crucifix if suddenly time reversed itself for everyone but me, and Rachel reappeared, out of nowhere as she looked then, in this sad room muted with shadows, regret and grief.

All I could think to say was, "How far along are you?"

She crossed her arms, pivoted back on her spine for a better view, and stared, I the specimen on a glass plate. Don't let anyone tell you women don't have the power.

"Do I look at all pregnant?" She laughed again, softly this time, friendlier, her caution melting like butter left on the counter.

At first I believed her of the tribe, the way she invested certain words with character and xylophonic shifts of resonance, and yet the accent was British—and how could I forget the hanging redeemer for one second? Well, there are British Jews too, I figured, even Christian Jews. Who knows, maybe there are Jewish Jews! Turns out that she was Welsh—imagine such an origin—and the father a member of the Cherokee nation. They're always Cherokee, never Apache or Comanche or Aztec—why is that? The two met in the ever-shifting diaspora after World War II, coupled, separated instantly. The mother, Bette, cast her line and instantly secured a befuddled young GI who escorted her and the fetus to America. If Rachel was hopelessly insane, what can I say of Bette, who, unlike her daughter, made no attempt to hide or disguise it? The woman ranted, launched into public invective over imagined slights and trifles, assailed Americans as barbarians, attended the Queen's birthday parties at the local consulate, only to be escorted out by officers at some point. Yet she could be charming, even flirtatious, and didn't look half bad for her years. Big honor when she invited you to tag along to one of the diplomatic royal affairs. I politely declined on two such opportunities availed to me, but I understand that Rachel's husband got suckered once or twice, only to be chewed out by the woman because, as she claimed, he had dressed like "the village idiot." And inevitably, the attack would turn against Rachel, that "very naugh-ty girl," which her mother never tired of broadcasting to the world. That Rachel *was* naughty is irrelevant.

Ah, Rachel's husband. Let me draw a bead on that absurd, artsy-fart dago who, even after they separated, still occasionally sniffed at her hemlines. Remembered pussy is often as potent as the prospect of new. And yet, who can believe anything a woman tells you about her previous lovers (you may number among them soon enough)—but this guy... he pranced around the French Quarter wearing a beret and black cape! Fancied himself another Pynchon, claimed he had scribbled nine hundred pages of a *picaresque* novel. That's the word he used, *picaresque*. I only knew what it meant because of a literature class I'd taken in college. Fiction and poetry were and remain closed doors for me. Use-

less, effete, boring, fit only for women and queers. Forgive my lack of tact, my fascist pig heart. I did warn you. The politically correct crowd can take a nose dive up their own asses. Bunch of cringing, feeble noodles, ask me. So better not ask.

We spotted the wop flitting about town with one gorgeous vixen after another. You

So when the blue-black raven-haired beauty wearing a scarlet halter with no bra beneath struts in like some Persian queen, I, young then and bloated with ridiculous chutzpah, gawked with both pleasure and anguish. Anguish because I knew the thing was fated, and, if you ask me, fate never works out.

cannot account for taste; you must give up on it altogether. He liked showing them off at the Napoleon House, where—needy exhibitionist that he was—he would down two or three shots of chartreuse, feed his date the same, after which they would proceed to paw at and fondle each other in public. Rachel said he told her that he fucked one of these broads in a car parked right on Bourbon Street (you could park on Bourbon in those days) as crowds passed and gawked. We despised each other the first split second of our initial meeting, the day he came to the Center to drop off some books and cassettes Rachel had left behind.

By then, Rachel was my employee—her aim all along—what she secured via Lauren Bacall slinkiness and molten sensuality. I screwed her that very first day she showed up, in one of the Center's examination rooms—she, the furthest from blond you can imagine. And oh, how my pecker reared in pride over buttoning that dago's wife, even if they were technically no longer married. This is normal, after all. It's what we did back then: we met someone, a few hours later we screwed, screwing all the time, wives, husbands, former girlfriends of our friends, their sisters, and believe me, the women proved just as eager and sporty as we men in this tournament. No call for male bashing. In fact, half the time the women initiated it, and we wound up screwing someone whose name we didn't know or we didn't like or found loathsome. We screwed each other all the time, and I remain amazed we're not dead, though some of us are, from STDs or AIDS, because there was so much sex you couldn't keep track, and nobody used rubbers, those goofy balloons. Sometimes a new one every night of the week, all within our discrete, socioeconomic circle, with the usual cross-overs from other circles, and I'm sure the same thing was going on within each circle, all the way up to those spooky Boston Club ghosts down to the denizens of the Ninth Ward, that frenzied, non-stop, crazed, fifty-first state of the union and disunion, until—imagine—it became tiresome, and you hooked up with one or the other for a while just for relief or nostalgic longing for the old Norman Rockwell standards of home, hearth, children, white fence, station wagon, and visits to the optom-

erist.

Did I love Rachel? Of course I did.

And for all my misgivings and however sad I am to have witnessed her precipitous, agonizing descent into madness... let me celebrate here, once and for all, the astonishing erotic prowess of Ms. Rachel Wren. Never in my life has a woman ravished my brains so steadily, explosively, and thoroughly. Yes, the brain can be ravished, with or without

“Everyone is always awaking from a dream. The universe is a dream.”

protection, but you do get tired, even when relatively monogamous, and therein lies the problem. Rachel, Mt. Vesuvius of the orgasm. I guess I hated that dago husband some because no doubt he had ploughed the same fertile delta first, before me, I, Mel Sol ex-laundromat tycoon and abortion king. I laugh now at the preposterous grandiosity of it all. Old gods are dead gods. This guy, his name was Quarticio, told Rachel that I was crude, an ignorant swine, a rube. Moi, a rube! I wanted to throttle him, and I could have, too, the twerpy dilettante. But the long, wild beard alarmed me, and I gleaned Charles Manson in his perpetually languid, wet, Sicilian eyes. He claimed Roman ancestry, but doesn't every guinea? They're all from Sicily, trust me. And there idled Rachel, actually enjoying the battle, studying it from afar, gloating on her pedestal as she fed us both tidbits of incendiary information. Good enemies, bad friends... what's worse?

“And another thing,” Shank gasped, his throat full of phlegmy rhizome, “you can't tell too much. You've gotta show.”

This exchange took place at a coffee house where we sometimes met, a place with bright brass railings and spiffy solid oak floors and fake Tiffany lampshades.

“Show and tell.” I laughed. “You mean like kindergarten? Show, tell... what's the difference? I vow to tell everything. Strike three, eh?”

“And never start with someone waking from a dream.”

“Everyone is always awaking from a dream. The universe is a dream.”

“Or use bar rooms as sites of action.”

“I no longer frequent bar rooms, but I will re-open the story. Because I can't, I will. We're in a smoky, murky, Sammy Davis, Jr.-type lounge, swilling—I like that word—swilling martinis, vodka straight up with an olive or two. A swanky club. No, change that to the Seven Seas down in the Quarter, no doubt the roughest white bar in the city, where you could get absinth, I kid you not. The place smells of rot, sweat, hormones, paleolithic stench, and they crowd in like your typical sardines.”

“No clichés.”

“I intend to employ every cliché in the book, itself a cliché. Clichés are clichés because

they're true, and I want truth for a change, finally, bone-strong, glass-clear truth, though I know in my heart there's no such thing.”

“You are an obstinate man, my friend.”

I never saw Shank again after that exchange but caught his meager obituary in the paper a week later. I didn't show up at the funeral. What's the point? May no one show up at mine.

Despite it all, those were the days down in balmy, licentious, exotic New Orleans, a place unlike any other in North America, for which we must thank the Catholics, blacks, and Creoles. Money rolled in with the minutes. I drove a black Jaguar convertible, wore Gucci and jewelry and v-necked my shirts. If pierced ears had been *de rigueur*, I would have had my lobes drilled. We dined at Galatoire's every Friday night, met friends at the Napoleon House or Blacksmith Shop afterwards, lived without regret or remorse. About five years into it, my sister Robin, Ben's wife, called about our parents. They had left behind a note—*life is for the young*—before careening to their deaths off some mountainous dark road in West Virginia. Young? I am far older than either of my parents were at the time of their demise. They were right, of course; *life is for the young*. Not many have their courage. And it goes without saying that the young are, collectively, an assemblage of aimless, hysterical morons who will, most of them, plummet off their own West Virginia cliffs in due time.

Legally speaking, my father owned PristineKleen, and no doubt it had something to do with evading taxes. So by rights, Robin and I inherited the chain, despite Ben. Robin wanted nothing to do with business—she tended to lock herself up in dark rooms and weep and receive visits from a local Baal Shem, a fraud if you ask me—and promptly handed over her share to her husband. Ditto I, for a good price. I rolled in the greenbacks, dismissed the future as too distant to count, basked in filthy lucre, fucked Rachel (though my eye had roved to one of our new assistants, Leslie from Newcomb College, a voluptuous, tawny-haired, freckled Californian who gazed at me with intent, she nearly half my age). I was not bad looking in those days; I worked out at the Tulane gym, swam fifty laps a day, watched the calories. But I had to keep it subtle with Leslie because Rachel had taken over our books, and woe unto you if a jealous woman works the ledgers. Rachel, no stranger to violence, either. She told me more than once about the time she attacked that shvitzer Quarticio with a kitchen knife—I mean a big one—and aimed for his heart. He lurched backwards, wound up with a gash on his shoulder. They had just returned home from the grocery. She yanked a carton of eggs from one of the bags and hurled them at him one by one, missing every time, and the slimy albumen and yokes crashed against then slid down the kitchen wall. (No one ever cleaned up the mess, by the way. The egg fluid hardened over the weeks, become resin-like, glued to the wall. Rather than

scrub, they just moved—to the outrage of their landlord, who seized the appliances they planned to pick up.) When she rushed him with the knife again, he sideswiped her, and she deflated to the floor; he pinned her down and tied her up with some clothesline they had bought. He swore between panting that he would untie her after she calmed down. She started rolling herself across the linoleum, laughing raucously from the belly, cursed and launched into her favorite Streisand songs, all the while bound in the straight-jacket of nylon clothesline. The story alarmed me; I knew instantly that it was only a matter of time before I packed my bags. The woman was, as her mother put it, “daft.” And this isn’t the only incident involving that wop. Once he rushed her to the emergency room, so they could pump her stomach after she swallowed an entire bottle of aspirin.

Well, you understand why I eventually had no choice but to exorcize Rachel from my life. Or why I plead with her not to call, even now, so many years later. The calls intensified after Katrina. She had scraped together a little money and put some down on a modest cottage in this dreary, dying neighborhood called Gentilly Ridge, but Katrina pretty much destroyed the place—ten feet of water, fungus, wild dogs, the usual—and she wound up in a FEMA trailer propped right beside the ruins of her house. She spends her days tearing down molded drywall, shoveling debris, salvaging whatever can be salvaged. By dusk she’s exhausted—she’s no spring chicken either, though she claims not to have sprouted a single gray hair (must be that Cherokee DNA)—locks herself in the trailer and gets drunk on Sloe Gin, the foulest spirits ever concocted by man. “I have this portable television, a four-inch screen,” she recently sobbed into the phone, “and I watch one horrible reality show after another. No cable yet. Nothing.” I told her I’d send her a few bucks, but I haven’t yet. Give an inch, they take a yard. Besides, how much money have I already sent?

What destroyed our nest back then had nothing to do with love or lust or sex or anything remotely personal, not even my doubts about Rachel. Yes, I pined for Leslie, but nothing came of it. I was either too busy working or frolicking, too pussy-whipped, too afraid of that looming kitchen knife (what is any story if not a warning?), too old maybe, even then when I was young. A singular event, happenstance, a blurb on the five o’clock news is what changed everything. One day you’re in business, the next, it’s all over. I should have anticipated the likelihood, given the swelling discontent among the city’s pro-lifers—they had begun to form protest lines outside our doors, on the sidewalk, lines of them, dour and stern, wearing placards, waving signs on behalf of embryo rights, holding news conferences. Nothing unusual, happening all over the country at the time. (I know, Abe, snakes deserve no pity, but it’s not pity I seek, nor forgiveness, nor absolution, nor leniency. I am what I am and have done what I’ve done.) Not once did I question the legitimacy—you could say morality—of our operation; not once did I pause to *think* about what these maniacs were trying to convey. Embryo, fetus... guppies in broth,

certainly not human, why not claim rights for an appendix or kidney or tonsils? And why shouldn’t a woman raped, say, by Hitler, deserve her own rights of abortion? But enough, you can argue until Doomsday... or you can secure a weapon, a simple revolver, invade, fire at random, massacre the staff, seek out doctors and, of course, the CEO.

July, 1978. A slim, young, long-haired man wearing John Lennon glasses, a JESUS IS LORD t-shirt, and patched jeans saunters into the Center and nervously approaches the receptionist’s desk. Nothing odd, everyone who comes here is nervous. The receptionist, Judy, smiles, *Can I help you?* at the very moment Regina, defined by her nurse nametag and white uniform, enters from a side room to retrieve a file. The young man whips out a Taurus 85, clutches the wrist of his shooting hand with the other, takes precise aim, and shoots Judy between the eyes. Regina receives a bullet in her neck, which perforates the external jugular. Two of the blondes rush into the room, shriek, and the assassin whips around. Leslie drops to the floor with a slug in her hip. He shoots the other, Joan, through the heart. Within an instant, it’s a blood bath. I’m secluded in my office, and one of the Charity interns, Dr. Coleman, is washing his hands in the operating room, preparing for surgery, his patient partially anesthetized. JESUS IS LORD scouts the place, finds Coleman, fires, and Coleman drops; he inserts the pistol’s barrel into the vagina of our patient, an eighteen-year-old girl from Tupelo, Mississippi. “Death to the murderers!” he screams, rants, over and over, a howl I will never forget. My office is practically sound-proof, and I thought I heard a few slight *pops*, only to dismiss them as outside firecrackers and maybe a female scream or two, but “Death to the murderers!” comes across with the clarity of an air raid siren.

JESUS IS LORD heaves against my door, rips it off its hinges, and bursts into the room. He steadies himself, legs V’d in predatory stance, lifts the Taurus toward my face. I am too stunned for fear and robotically raise my hands in surrender. The realization that I am in effect dead floats serenely in some other part of the universe; the “I” standing behind my desk merely gazes, almost with disinterest, at the Angel of Death. I lower my eyes and note that dust has gathered on my glass paperweight. I meant to Windex the thing but never got around to it—always another phone call, errand, consultation, whatever. JESUS IS LORD and I maintain our respective positions for what seems a frozen moment. Sweat glistens on his forehead; his tawny hair hangs long in greasy festoons; his pale blue eyes radiate not hatred but the impossibility of love. He seems to age precipitously on the spot, a demented Moses facing not burning bush but satanic flame. I feel exhausted, bored, impatient, and compelled to speak. “Ok, my man, let’s get this over with, shall we? What’s today, Tuesday, right?”

JESUS IS LORD grins, looks me in the eye, lowers his piece. Radiant, composed, probably stoned, he stands limply, actually curls his finger around the trigger, which, and I cannot say *why*, alarms me.

“Whoa, man, got that safety on?”

He waves the pistol back toward my face. “I killed them all, your minions.” He speaks softly but with intense pleasure. “Death to the murderers,” now more whispered, muted.

What is he waiting for? He wants to watch me squirm, but I have eased beyond squirm. I assume my parents knew a similar release, a sanctity, as the tires of their van rotated in mid-air.

“You are an abomination,” he almost sings in childish fashion. So there.

He cocks the trigger, moves closer, aims again between my eyes. *I shall fear no evil.* And I don’t, though my body betrays me, and a rush of urine besplotches my trousers.

“Look at you,” he says, “you coward. You *will* be haunted.”

I expect to be shot instantly, but JESUS IS LORD yelps in triumph and abruptly jams the barrel against his own temple. He fires in a grand finale of annihilation. His body lurches backwards, shudders, then sinks to the floor as gracefully as a ballerina executing her adieu. The man’s brains are splattered all over one wall, the ceiling, my desk and paperweight, my clothes.

Rachel missed all the action. It was her day off.

Within minutes, police and medics swarm through the Center, and I realize that I am out of business. Turns out JESUS IS LORD was a philosophy instructor at the University of New Orleans lakefront campus, one Stephen Miller, ABD. No radical activist, no previous record, no principled warrior of fanaticism. His wife had secretly aborted their baby three weeks prior, informing him afterwards as she packed her bags. Just another schlemiel driven to the brink, crazed with grief. But of course the pro-lifers seized their opportunity and initiated legal action against me. So again I chose to slip out of Dodge before sundown. Without Rachel. That sizzling, humid September, 1978, a year when the People’s Republic of China released its ban on the works of Shakespeare, Aristotle, and Charles Dickens; when vandals stole Charlie Chaplin’s casket; when police captured Ted Bundy; when the Red Brigade kidnapped Aldo Moro, killed him and dumped his body in a parked car; when John Paul I reigned as Pope for 33 days; when Alice Cooper got out of rehab—

Lousy times.

Thirty years ago as the buzzard flies.

Midnight approaches during this night of lunar fullness, and I sit on a kitchen chair jammed against the window for full effect, my legs stretched painfully over its left and right edges, my lower back insecure, brittle, pinched with spasms. Milky light filters through the smudged glass, a shroud-like haze, the moon at its most florescent apex, a disc of mirrored platinum. I am blank, as usual when not connected to either transmitter or receiver, whether human or machine, and sense the invasion as physical mayhem,

a visceral envelopment, the fugue of internal organs, chromosomes, mitochondria. An ancient fête. It begins like salty mist in the face when standing on a beach overlooking the sea, a wet silt-like ablution charged with negative ions. Then the intensification, that old knowledge that it’s time to leap off the train before its steel wheels churn any faster and there’s no return. And it is true that for many years I leapt, too cautious, too afraid to pursue such madness. I am too old for madness, though old age is by definition madness.

Over time, the intensification itself intensifies, exponentially. It began four years ago when ghostly fingers, spirit yet flesh, the bones of the dead, stroked and clasped my fingers. My heart palpitated, and the fingers withdrew tenderly as if aware, too much too soon. You do not want your victim to drop dead on the starting block. Victim I assumed I was, though the touch of that supernatural hand had the reverse effect of peaking my interest and longing. And I waited several moons before it deigned to return, the same fingers, and I let them explore a bit further as they fondled my bare arms, my face, my naked back. I craved their touch and lived only for the next, each month at midnight. The spirit grew ever bolder, manifesting more of itself, pressed its ribs into mine, wrapped its arms around my torso, rubbed my cheek with its cheek, kissed my lips.

Tonight, as I wait, my grandfather Abraham comes to me in a dream. “You are not the first prey of the dybbuk, Melvin. The dybbuk has roamed the universe since before time. It acquires many guises and is in this sense manifold. Do not be afraid.”

I am inclined to identify this particular dybbuk as the soul of Stephen Miller’s aborted child, if only because I can guess no other, unless each lunar communion represents a plurality of souls, all my aborted children. Talk about soap opera titles! Ay, no time for joking, though what better time to joke than when beyond salvation, kaput? I have become the aborted; I am the abortion. And tonight the demon promises absolute subsuming. I feel it in every cell of my body, every pore, the way you know a phone will ring.

An owl flies between my window and the moon, hanging like a hawk for a moment, then dropping from view.

The light coalesces, condenses; the air thickens, and I slide easily into the realm of Abraham’s dream. From a distance more vertical than vast, I hear his chanting, my grandfather, the tzerddik, the holy man, whose wisdom I rejected. *He will deliver thee from the snares of the fowler, and from noisome pestilence.* And yet I do not believe. The light twists in noisome eddies about me; the eddies gel into rope-like strands as they further evolve into sinew, tendon, membrane, flesh... *Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flieth by day.* “It’s too late, Grandfather,” I try to wail, but my voice has disappeared, evaporated like morning fog, because there is no one real enough to receive it. *Nor the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor of the destruction that wasteth at noonday. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.* Next should come the command to rout the dybbuk, but Grandfather, too, has diminished, faded from my ears

The Abortionist

and eyes... I have willed it, fought him, for I desire the demon's wrath and torment... and it comes, taking the form of a mouth of light hovering above. I sit stiffly in need, in great need, of its succor, its retribution, because only in extremis can we know the full weight of that pain which by some mystic process reverses all misery before and after. "Behold this Evil Eye," I cry silently as the orifice descends, its rubbery eelish lips consuming me slowly, wholly, my entire body engulfed. My silence claws at the silence of the universe. I am mute, blind, dumb, paralyzed. The mouth sucks me in, spits me out, sucks me in, spits me out, like a piston, the mouth, corporeal vision born of darkness, as I, brittle, erect ziggurat, a delirious appendage, submit meekly to its hunger, offer myself in homage as tribute and sacrifice, without scruple, trembling with the blackest of joy.

And afterward, as if stillborn, I awaken once again on the floor encrusted with fine moist ash. It seems years later, but only a few hours have elapsed. I grasp the edge of the windowsill and pull myself up, now face-to-face with my reflection. Its face takes a greenish hue, has shed its skin and seems composed entirely of small fragile bones and darkened veins. Its bulging, jet eyes, fish-like and unblinking, gaze with neither remorse nor wonder; they see without seeing and judge nothing. I am monstrous, reptilian, a throw-back to some eon before evolution. I straighten up, wipe the ash from my shriveled, appalling old body, and await the countless rebirth.