

Layers

by vic fortezza

"... Sometimes I think I'm so close to knowing what it's all about, to knowing myself, and then sometimes everything seems so hopeless, as if I haven't learned a thing."

"What are you looking for, Joe?"

"Meaning, I guess. Maybe we're not supposed to know what it's all about. Maybe if we did know we'd stop searching or stop waiting and hoping for the revelation - and then what? Maybe the only meaning there is to life is in what we ascribe to it, in what we ourselves do with our lives. How many suicides do you suppose there'd be if it were known positively that life had no meaning beyond what an individual ascribed to it?"

"Have you contemplated suicide?"

"Never seriously, and not because of a lack of meaning. There's lots of good to live for. My despair stems from loneliness and sexual deprivation, as I've told you over and over again. My attempts to break my solitude are so infrequent that the chances of my ever meeting the right woman seem minuscule."

"What constitutes the right woman?"

"Warmth, amiability, strength, intelligence, fidelity, an understanding of what's important and what's trivial - looks."

"You cite that last, almost as a throwaway. Is it really the most important quality to you?"

"At one time, when I was in my sexual prime, all my fantasies were of beautiful women. There are hundreds of women on the trading floor. Some are gorgeous, especially now with all the summer help running around. But my reaction to them is entirely mental. I have little in common with them. Not long ago I'd've been aroused to the depth of my being. The physical change that's occurred in me the last few years is frightening. It's tangible evidence that I'm getting older, no matter how young I may look. I've yet to adjust psychologically to the absence of the immediacy that used to characterize my sexuality. I miss it, even though it was burdensome

in deprivation. I feel weaker and less aggressive in its absence, although my failure to have my work recognized may have as much to do with that. I quit softball because I'd lost my aggression at the plate. I don't want to behave like an adolescent in terms of sex, like some middle-age men I know, but I am afraid of a loss of virility. I allowed the height of my sexuality to pass without capitalizing on it, and I'll always regret it, although I suppose that's childish. It's as if I've wasted years. Imagine if I hadn't played the guitar all that time - where would I be now? I'd have nothing, not even a dream."

"So sex is as important to you as your work?"

"Only because I haven't made a dent in my potential. If my experience 'd been vast, or even normal, I'm sure the thought of sex wouldn't've been at all dominant in me today."

"You realize such experiences might've changed your life in other ways, created different problems?"

"Yes, but we can never go back, can we? We have two choices - forward or treading water. I'm treading. I'd hoped it'd make me feel better to understand why I was unable to open up sexually, but it doesn't. Maybe if I'd come here thirteen years ago, when I was twenty-five. It may be too late to change now."

"It's never too late."

"I hope you're right."

"Are there any women you're interested at present?"

"Not really, beyond physical attraction, of course. There is one at work, though. Physically, she's a lot like me - dark, well-built, rough complexion, big nose. We could pass for brother and sister. I look at her and think: Why doesn't she get a nose job? I imagine she's too proud, like me. She has a wonderful air of self confidence. There must be a hundred women on the floor more attractive than her. At first I thought it was the love of myself I saw reflected in her. I wondered if she, too, was teased about her looks growing up. If she was, she must really be secure, because she shows no ill-effects at all. She's go congenial. She speaks to everyone, no matter how low a person's position may be."

"You seem troubled by that. You said amiability was something

you were looking for."

"Excellent, Doc, you've been paying attention. That's me all over - always looking for an excuse not to take action. I tell myself a congenial girl like that'd be stifled by a quiet guy like me. And I could give a damn about the market. I'm out the door at three and I don't look back. It's just a job to me, but it's her profession. Why would a businesswoman want to get involved with a struggling musician? Suppose I never attained success or even the respect of my peers, and she made millions - how would we maintain the balance essential to relationships?"

"There's only one way to find out."

"Wait, you haven't heard my other rationales. I wonder what our kids'd look like. I'm afraid they'd be hideous. I wonder what she'd look like when she got older. Our noses'd probably touch our chins. What a sight we'd be."

"No woman gets more attractive or even maintains her looks as she ages."

"She's also Jewish, Doc. No offense, but it's something I can't help but consider. Sometimes when a Jewish broker bids, I sneer inwardly. I do the same at others brokers too, but not in a spirit of bigotry. The instances are rare and make me ashamed, but they're reality."

"You don't think she ever lapses into prejudice?"

"I suppose she does, but I could never understand why a Jew would marry outside his faith, considering all that's happened to the race through the ages. If I were Jewish I'd have too much pride to marry a gentile. I wouldn't allow my daughter to marry one. Would you?"

"You'd restrict yourself to an Italian-American?"

"I know where you're going - if the ideal union is a communion of souls, the right woman may be any race, color or age. I suppose 'soul-mate' is another of my rationales. Then again, despite all the things this woman and I seem to have in common, I don't feel a communion with her, and it bothers me because I think I should."

"Why?"

"I've already told you about the similarity of our looks. She also reads serious literature. I wonder if she's an artist at heart, not a businesswoman."

"It's not possible to be both?"

"I can't see how one can have divided dedications. A broker expends an extraordinary amount of energy trading."

"You see her carrying those books? That's a perfect way to initiate conversation."

"I tell myself she's probably not serious about them. I wonder if she truly understands them or carries them just for show. She often wears a Walkman when she reads."

"But that means she likes music, too. That's another avenue to conversation."

"I tell myself she probably likes artists I can't stomach. You're not telling me anything I haven't gone over in my mind a thousand times, Doc. There's another rationale - her age. I doubt she's older than twenty-eight. She may even be as young as twenty-four. It's hard to tell because of her complexion. She's the type, like me, who'll probably look young for a long time once she hits thirty. She's in great shape. She's a marathon runner."

"Exercise is another link between you."

"I know. Why do I feel something's not right? I'm always watching her from a distance. She's easy to pick out. She's always wearing these funky clothes. I don't know how she's not embarrassed by them."

"Is that the problem, then?"

"No. Artists are supposed to be eccentric. The problem is I should be attracted to her and I'm not. Something's missing. Her hair's as black as a witch's. Her teeth are dim, too. God, it's a lot like that Shakespearean sonnet, isn't it? She's striking from a distance, though. I'm tempted to tell her that. That'd go over big, wouldn't it? She'd probably infer that she didn't look as good up close."

"Why invest so much thought in someone you're not going to approach?"

"She's not the one. I know it. Trouble is, if she isn't, who is?"

"How do you know that by just looking at her?"

"Any woman I've been nuts about I've known at first glance."

"Yet you're still alone, so maybe that's the wrong approach."

"Maybe. I did talk to her once. It was one of those rare moments when someone else seems to take me over. I asked who she worked for. That'd always baffled me. She walks around without charts or customer orders. I thought she might've worked for a news service. It turns out she trades for herself, out of a booth. I felt pretty foolish when she flapped her membership badge. I sensed she was insulted. I'm sure she worked hard to set herself up. She works for a company based in Chicago. I asked if she was from the midwest. To my surprise, she's a native New Yorker. I told her she didn't sound like it at all. She was pleased about that. And then I froze. Maybe I was afraid she was an Upper West Side liberal. She walked away. I saw her standing with her back to the wall, mumbling to herself angrily. She's not the first woman I've pissed off with my slow hand. Now it's as if we've never spoken. We pass without recognition. I wonder if she felt I looked down on her because she was a trader."

"Do you?"

"I suppose so. Classical guitar and commodities trading seem worlds apart. My failures make me resent the instant success so often prevalent on the floor. I tell myself that the yelling and screaming the brokers do lacks dignity, but I wonder if it's me who's lacking, who doesn't have the drive it takes to be successful in the real world. Maybe my resentment is based in envy and not superiority. Maybe the reason my music hasn't been recognized is because I haven't been aggressive enough in having it heard."

"Suppose the woman has no intention of maintaining a career there?"

"So many brokers talk of leaving, but where are they going to find anything as lucrative as trading? She must think I'm crazy, the way I stare at her, and I suppose that's not far from the truth. Maybe she doesn't think of me at all. Maybe she's involved in a satisfying relationship. I sense she has troubles in that too, though, which is

illogical, considering her congeniality. Once, she came in with her hair braided in long, moist, thin strands, like the queen of an African tribe. I admired her guts, even though it was weird. She wears boots in the summertime, and miniskirts! God, I hate them. Ninety-nine out of a hundred women don't look good in them."

"What does all that have to do with a communion of souls?"

"I'm a weirdo on the inside. She's one on the outside. Is that a match?"

"You've evaluated her without ever having gotten to know her."

"Maybe I just want to be alone - did you ever think of that? I'm not sure I'm willing to compromise, and isn't compromise what relationships are all about? And how would I ever be able to love someone if I continue to be a failure, and continue to be frustrated and angered by it?"

"Suppose your music was recorded and universally panned by critics - wouldn't that be failure?"

"In the arena, and there'd always be the possibility they were wrong, as they were about certain masters, like Mozart. In the least I'd be able to delude myself. How's that for ego, by the way, likening myself to Mozart?"

"Suppose you date the woman and it's good for a year, or even a month or a single night - wouldn't it be worth it? Why does it have to be the love of a lifetime?"

"I'm thirty-eight, Doc. Ol' time's a flyin'. You're right, though, there's no legitimate excuse for my not asking her out. I create the excuses. Only one has a measure of validity. I know she's not the one, and I want to be free when, if, the right girl ever comes along."

"How will you know?"

"I will, that's all. I suppose it's romantic claptrap to you, but I really believe it."

"But you believed it before and it didn't work out."

"Right again. Maybe I'm just too afraid of rejection. After having my work rejected so often, I don't know how I'd handle being rejected by a woman."

"Are those consequences potentially more harmful than not

reaching out at all?"

"It's one of those dilemmas that make life so interesting, isn't it? You haven't heard the last of my rationales - the sexual. She's just approaching her peak - and I'm well past mine. Yet despite that, despite the fact that my sexuality's lost its immediacy, I'm still afraid to make a commitment because I've yet to fulfill the kinky fantasies I've always had. I dream of meeting someone and doing all those things in a week's or a month's time, or however long it takes, hoping it'll satisfy me and allow me to pursue a whole relationship."

"What types of things?"

"Your ears've perked up, Doc. I'm glad to see you're no longer bored by my whining."

"What types of things?"

"French, anal, fluid-swapping, fun with ice cubes, menage a trois, group - things a classical musician should be ashamed of."

"Those aren't any different from the fantasies of other professionals I see. I've heard things a lot more bizarre from 'model' citizens. Sexuality depends on the spirit in which it's performed. Is there a desire to humiliate or a sense of self degradation in yours?"

"No. I'd want the women to be as excited by these things as I am, as excited by me as I am by them. The participants have to be guiltless, willing and eager. If it were a question of degradation, I'd hire pros. To me, that's not sex, even if the hooker is the most high-priced in the world."

"And yet you're troubled by these desires."

"Because they don't have anything to do with love, which is a human being's highest calling, which is one of the things that distinguish him from the beast. It is descent, not ascent. I'm also afraid it wouldn't end with curiosity. I'm afraid it'd become a black hole with no escape. I used to attribute that fear to upbringing, but other guys who grew up under the same circumstances aren't as troubled by it as I am, so it must be more than that. Are those things really bad, though, even coming on a woman's breasts or in her mouth?"

"Not if they're consensual."

"It's semen, after all, from which life is formed. It's not urine or feces. Maybe what worries me most about it is that nature, evolution has dictated that copulation be done a certain way. It seems unnatural, wrong for a phallus to be put anywhere but inside a vagina, for semen to be cast anywhere else, even if one has no intention of reproducing. God, this is so lurid."

"That would eliminate even masturbation. In fact, it'd eliminate human nature entirely from the act. As long as there's no meanness involved, variations on the act are healthy. Let me ask you - would you be able to do these things with someone you loved, with a wife?"

"I honestly don't know, Doc. I'd hope so, unless of course she didn't like those things. I'd never force her. That'd ruin it for me. That'd be degradation. Maybe the fact that I'd like to do these before I settle down proves that I wouldn't want to do them with the love of my life, and that's hypocrisy, isn't it?"

"It's setting limits, which everyone does to varying degrees. Have you fantasized about the woman in question?"

"In flashes. I don't want to. I'm afraid it'd ruin the spontaneity, should we ever couple. I guess I'm superstitious. When I masturbate I fantasize about women I haven't seen in years."

"Is it satisfying?"

"It hasn't been lately. I'm afraid I'm starting to lose hope that the fantasies will ever become reality, or worse, I'm afraid I may be losing interest in sex altogether."

"For one who's losing interest in it you sure do talk about it a lot."

"Sometimes I go two days without masturbating."

"That's not even close to unnatural. "

"Maybe for someone who's had a fulfilling relationship. I wish I'd never read Masters and Johnson's. I look for symptoms."

"There's only one way to conquer this - you have to take action. You don't need me. You know yourself."

"No one is more ashamed of this pathetic whining than I am. My parents are probably turning over in their graves. You should've thrown me out after my second visit. Fortunately, you're the only one

who knows about this."

"You're brutally honest. I wish there was something I could do or say to help, but there isn't. You're on your own. Approach this women, and if it doesn't work out, approach someone else, and keep doing it until you find what you're looking for."

"I'm sure you have patients with real problems."

"Your problems are real. They're just not severe. Yours are the quiet desperation all humans suffer. You're a good man. Stop punishing yourself. Take action."

"I think it's my destiny to be alone."

"It will be if you allow it to be."

"It all seems so futile sometimes. I forget the good in life. The other day I heard whimpering in the hall. A little old lady'd shut herself in the incinerator room. 'My brother's dead,' she told me. 'I called him and there was no answer. The ambulance came and took him away. He just fell on the floor. "Get up," I told him, but he didn't. He was such a nice man, too.' She was so lost. It reminded me of my mother in her last years. 'Are you sure?' I kept asking her, wondering if she'd just had a bad dream, like my mother used to, and thought it was reality. I asked her if there was someone I could call. 'What?' she kept saying. I didn't know if she was hard of hearing or just confused. We kept repeating the same dialogue over and over. And all the while I knew there wasn't a thing I could do but keep on holding her hand and listening to her. I wondered if she noticed the tears in my eyes. I hoped she'd feel better knowing someone empathized with her. Yet at the same time I was thinking how nice I was for what I was doing. 'It's not your fault,' I told her, sensing she blamed herself for her brother's death. For all I know, he might've died twenty years ago. It was so sad and painful, and still, underneath it all, I was thinking: 'See what a great guy I am, girls.' Just how many layers do we have, Doc? How many do we have to peel away to find out if we're decent or not? Or is there really only one - the self?"

"Is it bad if it encourages one to do good? Compassion is always positive. You understand that all human beings suffer, even the most

fortunate. Don't punish yourself for that. That'd be worse than the old woman blaming herself for her brother's death. She can't help herself. You can."

"I feel base just relating it. It seems a violation, a betrayal of her trust. It's reprehensible to burden anyone else with what I saw, especially when all I seek is praise."

"One of your problems is you don't praise yourself enough. You did nothing wrong. Burdens should be shared."

"It felt like someone had a stranglehold on my soul. In that old woman I saw not only my mother's suffering but my own fear of what I might become. And it made me doubt the existence of God. What possible reason could there be for that poor woman to suffer like that? It infuriates me. I persuaded her to go into her apartment for a nap - when what I really wanted was to get out of there, to shut her away behind a closed door and forget her."

"What else could you have done?"

"'Yeah,' she said, looking into my eyes; 'I'll go sit in my chair.' - Alone! Unloved! Forgotten! Another minute and I would've dropped to my knees in despair. As it was, I was crying as I went out onto the stairwell. My insides were screaming. I pressed my head against the wall and held my T-shirt to my eyes. Typically, I was worried that some attractive woman'd happen by, see me like that, and think I was nuts. How absurd. God, it was terrible. The pain..."

