

# From Scenes Originating in the Garden of Eden

## *Chapter 1. The Flasher in the Cathedral*

On its limestone hill the cathedral sits, sunning itself and lording it over the city. Its triple towers rise like decorated lemon lollies against a peacock-blue sky. Tufts of ivory clouds layer a countryside golden in the full bloom of summer: fields of oats, and wheat and barley open to the hot ripening sun, scarlet poppies nodding at their edges; white and red-brown butterflies, birds of all kinds, pollinating bees - all of rural life encloses the luminous city, with its cathedral, which Flora Penfold and her friends have come to visit, up there on the hill.

The west front of the cathedral is being renovated; scaffolding and noticeboards cover the great twelfth-century frieze. Jim and Marilyn Hoskins, Flora's visitors from California, arc disappointed to have come all this way merely to see scaffolding. Jim, who is a poet, wants to see the whole exterior structure of the building first before going inside, as this is how he writes poetry: by envisioning an empty architecture, and then filling it with words. Flora, who is hot, wants to go inside straight away, because it will be dark and cool and restful. So in she goes, while the Hoskins walk off, carrying their guidebooks, and with their arms round each other's thickening denim waists. Flora imagines the touch of flesh in this heat - ugh!

Inside the cathedral, a smiling woman with a choker of pearls round her lined pink neck hands her a leaflet. It's not dark inside, though it is darker. Flora's eyes adjust slowly to the shaded, vaulted luminosity: a light at once thin, clear and crisp like a mountain stream, and heavy with the debris of history - dust, dead cells and choruses of voices caught in the etiolated atmosphere. The interior is huge; one's eyes go from side to side and then up and up beneath the ribbed Gothic roof, trying to take in the acreage of claimed space - like a child trying to grasp the concept of life that evolves, but is at the same time finite; like Flora herself trapped in an appraisal of her own existence, this creature, Flora Elizabeth Amaryllis Penfold, shifting as though propelled by some neat plan through the closing years of the twentieth century.

But whose plan is it? Who schemed for Flora to be born on St Valentine's Day 1952, to be called Flora, to be living in a so-called garden flat in Thornough Road, London N19, with a self-centred, often out-of-work actor, two moody cats and a collection of dying indoor plants? Who ordained that she should be earning £30,000 per annum as Director of the Islington Arts Centre, should work a twelve-hour day taming the capricious temperaments of those who call themselves artists, and should blow her silver flute melodiously in an amateur chamber music group from time to time? And who decided that for these few days in August 1990 she should be chauffeuring her American friends round some of England's best and least acclaimed tourist sights? Flora's mould is that of late-twentieth-century liberated woman - monthly salary deposited in a Midland Bank Meridian account, and coil-sprung diaphragm deposited, though without interest similarly accruing, in her vagina, the two guaranteeing those

sine qua non of autonomous female existence, financial and bodily viability. Flora can pay her bills without incurring any that she's not chosen. And not only the diaphragm but all of it fits; the plan works. Except that lately she's had more than a minor sense of chafing at her chains - for chains there are...

Flora moves on down the nave towards the carved wooden pulpit in the middle. Outside the cathedral, the sun, bursting the seams of the heat haze for a few moments, scatters the colours of the huge thirteenth-century stained-glass window in a jewel of brilliance on the floor - red, blue, green, yellow, purple, silver. The refracted colours of the Last Judgement swim and slip in a soft blurry pond on the inhospitable stone. Flora half-believes that it'd feel like a thick decorated pile carpet beneath her feet if she walked there; the air would smell of spring flowers decking a Swiss mountainside. Images, perfumes, fancies crowd her head. Looking up at the clear-cut geometric patterns filtering the sun from sky to stone. she recalls the angular uncompromising text of the Chagall windows in Jerusalem, which she'd seen once with her father many years ago. Too many experiences, she thinks, are had in a manner that strips them of their meaning. But what's the message of that - that one should do only what one truly wants? Flora shakes her head to clear it of these silly thoughts. When her eyes refocus themselves, she's looking straight at one of the thick pillars that hold the cathedral erect; she to it and it to the cathedral are, she imagines, like fleas to an elephant leg. But the pillar and the cathedral, unlike elephants, are not on the move. Interrupting the tangle of idle thoughts in Flora's head, a man steps out from behind the pillar, placing, as he does so, one foot in the splattered flower bed of colours. It's a jerky, provoking action. Something about him is odd, and draws Flora's eyes up that leg to ... Cold with sweat, Flora Penfold finds herself looking at a flasher in the heart of the cathedral. The flasher is wearing a raincoat in this heat - one of those light nylon ones that fold up small and were popular when she was a child; she remembers her mother making her take one on a school trip - a white one, with a white nylon ribbon to fasten the hood. The flasher's raincoat is open, he's holding it open with one hand, while his other hand grasps his erect penis, which is an ungainly polished reddish-purple, not at all like the soft jewel of colours on the floor spread there benignly by the sun. For a long sweaty moment Flora Penfold stares at the flasher - or rather, at his hand and its contents which, rudely nestled, seem to grow even as she looks. It isn't quite what she came in here to look at. Nor what she imagines the other people came for - where are all the other people? Taking her eyes off the flasher for a moment, she looks around her - they've all gone. They must all have moved up towards the chapels, the choirs and the cloisters. Only the pearl-hung woman is behind her, but she's facing the other way, watching for what comes in, not for what has come.

When Flora looks back, the flasher's gone. Where he stood displaying his wares is air only, dusty and disassembling the secrets of time. Staring hard doesn't bring him back. What it does bring, by a strange concordance of time and intent, is the staccato burst of the organ above and ahead, trumpeting into Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', and diverting Flora's consciousness of Man from this, his fleshly representation.