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**REPERCUSSIONS: FREDERICK EXLEY'S
BURDEN OF GRIEF AND GUILT**

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Near the conclusion of *Last Notes from Home*, the final novel of Watertown writer Frederick Exley's trilogy (*A Fan's Notes* and *Pages From a Cold Island* were the first and second novels respectively), the narrator—"Exley"—says: "If my work has frequently evidenced a hatred for women, it is not women I hate but a woman" (*Last Notes* 315). That woman was Cassandra "Cass" McIntyre.

Exley does indeed hate Cass, but in fact he no doubt hates himself as well. His self-hatred arises out of what happened the summer night that Cass offered her virginity to him. Having deflowered her and been subsequently discovered with her in *flagrante delicto* by a pair of policemen in her Uncle Fairley Parish's home, Exley betrayed her when he "cowardly and cringingly laid it all at Cass's feet, spitting out unforgivable things like, 'She's screwing everybody in town,' and so forth" (*Last Notes* 313). Cass believed she was in love with Exley, and his betrayal devastated her. That September she failed to return to high school because, as one of her friends reported to Exley, she was "awful sick" (*Last Notes* 315). Then in October she succumbed at the age of 16 to *anorexia nervosa*, a disease unknown and unnamed in the 1940s in Exley's hometown of upstate Watertown, New York. Cass's "suicide" by starvation left Exley "with a grief and guilt so burdensome it is something of a marvel that I survived" (*Last Notes* 315). Exley's "cowardly" lie ("She's screwing everybody in town"—in fact,

Cass was technically a virgin) is at the root of his grief and guilt, and his grief and guilt are at the root of his professed hatred of Cass and his implicit self-hatred. He is indeed "unforgivable," can never atone for his betrayal because Cass is dead, a betrayal more bitter with the passage of time because with maturity Exley eventually sees that "we hadn't—or at least Cass hadn't—done anything at all" (*Last Notes* 315).

In *Misfit: The Strange Life of Frederick Exley*, Jonathan Yardley's biography of the Watertown writer, Yardley speculates about the "'wound,' the 'rage'" that so haunted Exley, and alludes to the betrayal of Cass as a possible explanation:

In *A Fan's Notes* he [Exley] describes telling a psychiatrist about "something from my past that I had told to no one before him, nor will ever tell again," and says no more. In *Last Notes from Home* he describes in painful detail—we have no way of knowing whether the story is true or invented—his betrayal of

a girl who, when both were young, had given her virginal self to him, and writes: "What happened that night, as well as the repercussions therefrom, I would shut from my mind for years. I could not have functioned in the world otherwise." ... This incident may have been what permanently altered him. (79-80)

Chief among the "repercussions," of course, was Cass's death and Exley's resultant "grief and guilt" (it should also be noted that in his twenties Frederick Exley was confined to an insane asylum on three separate occasions).

Exley, at least in part, blames his "cowardly" betrayal of Cass on the times in which he grew up, the forties and fifties, of which he writes:

no one who didn't live through the forties and fifties has any comprehension of the tyrannical precepts, decorums, rules, and restrictions with which we were instilled and to ... [engage in sexual intercourse] was a good deal more damning to the participants than a simple loss of innocence, it was absolutely, believe me, nothing less than a fall from grace and a consignment to eternal hellfires. (*Last Notes* 304)

He further writes of those decades "I shall never cease shouting what a stifling, stultifying world the forties and fifties were ... [and] how we all bartered our soul to the rigidly puritanical image the public held of itself" (*Last Notes* 313). He admits, though, that faulting the times in which he grew up "does not in any way exculpate the lies I told about Cass" (*Last Notes* 313), but it does suggest a partial explanation of why he betrayed her: Exley 'bartered his soul' to conform to that "rigidly puritanical image the public held of itself," and so he, in a more or less self-protective reflex, lies about Cass and sacrifices her reputation to save himself from what he imaginatively described in the above quotation as "a consignment to eternal hellfires."

During the forties of Exley's childhood and adolescence, the prevailing attitude toward female sexuality was deeply ambiguous: it was at once 'puritanical,' which is to say any woman who engaged in fornication was 'tainted;' but at the same time "sex was," according to Exley's older brother, Bill, "the best of life and that I [Exley] should enjoy" (*Last Notes* 289); like Mr. Blue, the fantastical aluminum siding salesman of *A Fan's Notes* who was "hypnotized by the ambivalent notion that such oral endearments [as cunnilingus] would either defile him utterly or unlock the gates to Rosicrucian insights" (274), Exley can't reconcile the ambivalence.

This ambivalent view of female sexuality shows up in all three of Exley's novels, but it is quite conspicuous in *A Fan's Notes*, chronologically the first novel of the trilogy. In it he evokes the paradoxical image of female sexuality in a barroom exchange, "the kind of Chicago conversation I remember:"

Somebody said, "You know, if I was a broad, I could see bein' a fucking queer." ... "Broads are different. I mean—they're delicate and clean and all. I mean, I don't have any trouble visualizin' a couple of well-scrubbed broads ... " Someone started singing, "The girl that I marry will have to be ... " Someone else, in obvious agreement with the sarcasm of the singer, said, "Clean? Go take a look in the lady's can. You wouldn't—and you're kind of a grubby bastard—even sit down on the goddam toilet seat!" (*Fan's Notes* 146)

In a similar vein Exley recounts his failed Chicago love affair with the 19-year-old Bunny Sue Allorgee (her surname suggests Exley's ambivalence toward her), a character who appears to be an amalgam and in that sense a creation of Exley's imagination and not a 'real' character as Cass McIntyre was most likely 'real.' As a symbolic character, Bunny Sue personifies Exley's ambivalence toward female sexuality.

On the one hand, she is ethereal, Exley's demure and virginal 'dream' woman. Of her Exley writes that she was "Hudson's Rima, Spenser's Una, Humbert Humbert's Dolly. ... Wordsworth's Lucy, Tristan's Iseult, Poe's Annabel Lee. ... [and] within moments of looking at her, I knew it was she" (*Fans's Notes* 149-50). So in Exley's eyes Bunny Sue was "different": she was "delicate and clean and all." However, Exley is afflicted with a "cruel and ironical" impotence and is unable to perform sexually with Bunny Sue because he "couldn't seduce a dream" (*Fan's Notes* 172), and Bunny Sue was his dream realized, his Miss America. But, though she is his 'dream' woman, she is at the same time a "tainted" Lolita:

For some weeks I had been disturbed by the sexual expertise with which she [Bunny Sue] strove [unsuccessfully] to please me, thinking that such abandoned mastery might derive from experience. And the next time we met I made her relate that experience. ... Oh, my God, yes! I made her tell me against her will ... not admitting that I knew, that each word she uttered—between each terrible sob (and what pleasure I derived from those sobs!)—put her that much further from me. It was not a pretty picture. Miss America, it seems, was a Lolita after all and had been indulging herself, with a remarkable lack of discrimination, since a high school fullback had taken her at a scarcely pubescent fourteen. I heard all the names after that, Tom and Dick and Harry, and all the sordid details. ... [I discovered] that I was not worldly at all but Farmer Freddy Exley from up in the cow country with dreams of pure and virginal worlds populated with glimmering and upright people, ... that I was incapable of loving that which was tainted (damn you Hollywood and Herman Wouk!). (*Fan's Notes* 170-1)

Bunny Sue is "tainted" because she is not a virgin and does not embody the "the rigidly puritanical image" that prevailed in Exley's America of the forties and fifties. The same self-protective impulse that led Exley to betray Cass, prevents him from "loving that which was tainted."

Exley hates Cass—and himself—because he selfishly betrayed her to protect himself. It is entirely believable that Cass's death, as Yardley suggests, "permanently altered" Exley. Exley writes in *Last Notes from Home*, "as ridiculously ironical as it may seem, considering my own cringing cowardice in the matter, I never did forgive Cass" (316):

It took me a quarter of a century and a lot of living even to say good-bye to Cass. One autumn day I bought a dozen long-stemmed white roses, went to the lovely shaded Brookside Cemetery on the south side of the city, and asked the caretaker to direct me to Cass's grave, which, as it happened, wasn't far from my father's stone. Believe me when I say I'd fully intended to tell Cass I'd forgiven her as well as myself. But when I got to the grave I found I was sobbing so uncontrollably that snot was leaking from my nose, between terrifying, gasping sobs I spat out, "Fuck you, Cass," then walked to my father's grave and laid the long-stemmed white roses there. (*Last Notes* 316)

Just as Exley never forgave Cass, it's likely that he never forgave himself, that he never escaped the "repercussions" of the summer night that Cass gave herself to him.

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