



A Desert of Pure Feeling

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Like its author Judith Freeman, the narrator and protagonist of A DESERT OF PURE FEELING, Lucy Patterson, is a novelist. In a reading to the passengers on the cruise ship Oceanus, she explains that the title means “clarity and separateness,” which one experiences at times of “profound emotion.” Her aim in the story is to preserve the clarity but overcome the separateness.

Except for her writing, Lucy’s life is a series of losses. She has an affair and falls in love with her two-year-old son Justin’s heart surgeon, Dr. Carlos Cabrera, but loses him to his wife Isabella. Having been brought up as a Mormon in Utah, she loses her faith after the affair. Later, Justin becomes a Mormon missionary in Guatemala, and she loses him, for he vanishes, possibly killed by a bomb.

On the Oceanus, Lucy meets Carlos again after twenty-five years. His wife has died in a plane crash, and he and Lucy renew their affair. Lucy’s past love reawakens. Unfortunately, Carlos’ past betrayal of a childhood friend reawakens as well. Josef Himmelfarb, a passenger on the ship, accuses Carlos of handing his brother Oskar over to the Nazis. Carlos, whose father was a Guatemalan diplomat in Europe, wanted sex with Oskar, but Oskar refused and Carlos observed that he was circumcised.

This old dishonor drives Carlos to suicide. Having lost him once again, Lucy feels drawn to her own death. She resists, however, and goes to Las Vegas to re-invent herself in her writing.

She meets Joycelle Johnson there, a stripper and prostitute. Lucy admits, “I feel something dangerous and reckless and wonderful about her,” a “challenge . . . to let go of all my restraint and sadness.” Joycelle has AIDS, and Lucy ends up taking care of her on her ranch in Idaho. The love they share uplifts Joycelle and diverts Lucy from self-interest.

While writing may give Lucy the clarity she needs, it is love in the present, not the past, that saves her from isolation.

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