



# THE MADNESS OF A SEDUCED WOMAN

A NOVEL

*Susan Fromberg  
Schaeffer*

# **The MADNESS of a SEDUCED WOMAN**

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**Susan Fromberg Schaeffer**

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“That we are the breath and similitude of God, it is indisputable, and upon record of holy scripture; but to call ourselves a microcosm, or little world, I thought it only a pleasant trope of rhetoric, till my near judgment and second thought told me there was a real truth therein. For first we are a rude mass, and in the rank of creatures which only are, and have a dull kind of being, not yet privileged with life, or preferred to sense or reason; next we live the life of plants, the life of animals, the life of men, and at last the life of spirits; running on, in one mysterious nature, those five kinds of existences which comprehend the creatures not only of the world, but of the universe. Thus is man that great and true amphibium, whose nature is disposed to live not only like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds; for though there be but one to sense, there are two to reason, the one visible, the other invisible.”

—SIR THOMAS BROWNE

“I was driving the company of a stranger from Ragusa in Dalmatia to a place in Herzegovina: our conversation turned to the subject of travel in Italy, and I asked my companion whether he had ever been to Orvieto and looked at the famous frescoes there, painted by. . . .”

—SIGMUND FREUD

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# **The Upland Pasture**





# 1

It had been raining daily for almost two weeks, and so he had put off slaughtering the cow. She was more than ten years old and she no longer gave milk. If he waited any longer, the hired men would begin mumbling about how he threw out money feeding a cow who was good for nothing; they would complain about how she got loose more often than the other cows—and she did, because she followed members of the family right back to the house. She had an instinct for every hole in every hedge, every break in every fence, and there they would be, sitting in the library, he with his Plato, his daughter with her romances—he didn't know where she got them, he and his wife had given up trying to find out—his wife's nose buried in her fashion magazine (if her head wasn't buried under a pillow because she was suffering from one of her headaches), and they would hear the loud, familiar voice of Dierdre the cow, so named after one of his daughter's first fictional heroines, and then the steady bump, bump, bump of the cow's head against the pane of glass, and his wife would put down the book and start to complain, "She's going to break the window, when are you going to get rid of that cow!" And there would be the huge, wet nose prints on the windowpane; he would get up, avoiding his daughter's eyes. They both loved it when the cow nuzzled the windowpane and was puzzled each time by what kept her out. He would go outside and lead her back into the pasture or the barn, wherever the others were, while inside, his wife would be raving about him, what kind of farmer was he? Any other farmer worth his salt would have slaughtered that old cow long ago, not wasted tons of good feed fattening her up when her milk was too thin to churn and there wasn't enough of it to mention and she was more trouble than any animal could ever be worth. Then his daughter would get up, glowering at her mother, and go outside, wandering aimlessly with her book under her arm, somehow ending up next to the cow. He had often come into the barn to find

his daughter propped up against the golden tan side of the cow, reading her book—*Iris*; or, *Under the Shadow*; *Minerva*, or, *Once In a Life*—and he would always say the same thing: “Be careful, they’re skittish, they kick, we’ve lost more than one man from a kick to the head,” and she would say, “This cow won’t kick me,” and turn a page, and the cow never did, never kicked her, barely moved when she lay against her. The cow seemed to live in a half-dream while his daughter read against her, even slept against her. His wife and his daughter fought constantly now; from the day she was born they had not gotten along, but now it was worse. In the mornings, he often found his daughter asleep in Dierdre’s stall, the cow, stretched out next to her, her arm flung over the animal’s neck or her hand on a hoof. “What if the cow should turn over on you?” he asked. “The cow won’t turn over on me,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.” “But if she should,” he persisted. “Then she would turn over on me,” said Agnes, his daughter. “Everything dies,” she said; “you always say so. I wouldn’t mind dying that way.”

He didn’t like it. If he had his way, Agnes could keep the cow for a pet forever. But he had long ago agreed that animals should be slaughtered when they were no longer useful because his wife had told him that the people of North Chittendon would laugh them out of the state if they treated their animals as pets. He had promised her that they would run their farm as if they were farmers, so it was too late now to go against his wife and say, no, this cow is not to be slaughtered, this cow should be treated like an old family friend, this cow belongs to our daughter. This cow stays alive because she means more to Agnes than either her mother or her father. A dumb animal with a big tongue, who could clean his daughter’s face with one swipe and often did. He spied on Agnes, he hated to admit it. He saw how, when she finished her taffy, she stuck her face against the muzzle of the cow and the cow licked her face clean. He could never, if the truth were told, stand against his wife.

To this day, after twenty-one years of marriage, he did not know whether this was due to a weakness of his own or his sense of his wife’s weakness. When things upset her, she began to have accidents. The iron would press against her arm rather than the arm of his shirt. She would bring a pail of berries out to the men who were stirring the huge cauldron of blackberry jam, and her foot would miss the last step, her ankle would turn, she would fall down, and her eye would be black and blue for weeks. When she stopped having accidents, she would withdraw into her room and draw the curtains and complain of headache. Then she would begin to cry. It would be weeks before she would be up and around again. And he had noticed—it would have been impossible *not* to notice—that these spells came on after a disagreement between them. They came on for other reasons as well, but if he opposed her—well, then, he could see the bedroom

darkening; he could see his wife moving away from him slowly, slowly folding herself into her bed while the rest of the world went on as usual, except that he was dreadfully lonely, and all around him, everyone behaved as if nothing were happening. They thought he would not want their sympathy or their pity, and he didn't, but he would have liked someone to talk to, and their exaggerated cheerfulness made him feel lonelier than ever. And in the midst of this was his daughter, Agnes, who moved through the rooms as if something had terrified her, who refused to talk about her mother, who, by the time she was ten, behaved exactly as did everyone else on the farm: She was cheerful, bright, as if everything were just as it should be, or better, she never asked about her mother, but she looked as if, at any moment, something might spring at her, and whatever it was, whatever it wanted, she would not be able to keep it off. And no one around her could help her. He understood that his daughter thought of him as weak, that she did not believe he could protect her from anything. She had her reasons.

For here he was, on the first sunny day in two weeks, not a cloud in the sky, leading Dierdre into one of the upland pastures where the sun would have dried out the ground so that neither he nor the animal would sink in up to their knees, and where, after he had slaughtered her, the wagon would come to fetch them back down to the barn. He had not fed the cow for twenty-four hours, believing that, before slaughter, the cow's bowels should be in an empty state, and he knew, from the way she ambled behind him, nudging him in the back every few feet, that she thought he was taking her out to pasture. He led the cow under the tree and took the rifle from his back. It was a 30.06 rifle. He placed the muzzle of the gun against the cow's forehead and fired. The cow's eyes rolled up and then down; her knees began bending. She looked, not as if she were dying, but as if she were folding herself up, preparing to lie down on the warm grass. Then suddenly she fell to one side. Even before he bent over her, he knew she was dead.

He was a very strong man. He tied her rear legs together and threw the rope over the thick branch of the cottonwood tree and he pulled her up until she was swinging from the branch, head down. She must have weighed more than three hundred pounds. He cut her throat with the sharp scythe-shaped knife he had carried up in his pack. The blood spilled onto the earth under the tree. He was about to gut the cow; he had the knife ready to make the incision from the rectum to the throat, but he thought he heard something. He turned and thought he saw someone farther down the pasture, but it was no one; it was just a huge weed. He heard the creak of the wagon wheels on the meadow road below him.

Let them do it, he thought; let them do it. They love it. They love to slaughter. They would laugh at him behind his back because he wasted a

bullet on his cows whereas every other farmer they ever heard of put tongs through the nostrils of the cow and a rope through the loop on the tongs and pulled the cow's head down to the floor by the rope through his nose, and, when the cow's lower jaw touched the floor, they took a heavy iron mallet kept for the purpose, and by the second or third blow on the forehead, the bone was usually driven into the brain, and the animal was insensible or dead and the throat was cut and the job was well done. But he hated it. He hated the smell of the hot blood, the rich, thick smell which hit the back of the tongue and filled the nasal passages, exploding there; a rich smell, not sweet, but overpowering, sharp somehow, an iron tang, the smell like the taste of your own blood when you bit the inside of your mouth, steaming, rising in the air like a spirit if the day was cool. It was the only thing the men were superstitious about, some of them—the blood. Some of them would not use it; some of them objected if others collected it in buckets or tried running it into a wooden trough. No, they said, the blood can't be touched. The blood is life. It gives life. Let it go into the ground. A number of the men feared the spilled blood, but the rest of the men laughed at them. You don't know what you're missing, they'd say; you let it congeal; you cook it on the wood stove in an open pan; it gets thick, like liver. You slice it; you won't ever get sick if you eat the blood. The men who said the blood holds the life of the animal were horrified by the blood eaters; they watched them and waited. If, five years later, one of the blood eaters died violently, was thrown from a horse, fell from his roof repairing his gray slate shingles after the damage of the winter's ice, they'd say, it is because he ate the blood. That's what happens to people who eat blood.

The wagon wheels were creaking slowly along the meadow road. The axles needed grease. Unless he saw to it, nothing got done. He sat down in the shade of the cottonwood tree, and the shadow of the cow, swaying slightly in the wind, fell over his feet and withdrew, falling over his feet again. He knew he should get up and gut the animal. It was taking the others longer to get here than he thought it would, but he watched the cow sway back and forth and he was sleepy. He was remembering the first time he helped deliver a calf that would not come; he remembered how his arm disappeared inside the cow, how he finally felt the calf, how he drew it toward him, how, still inside the cow, he tied its front feet together with rope and lined its head up with its front hooves, how he pulled the calf in rhythm with the cow, how finally, the calf, slimy and dazed, slid into the bed of hay they had prepared for it. "You feel the calf near you now?" asked the old man who was teaching him; "you feel his spirit around you? He's close to you now, isn't he? You feel like he's inside your hide and you're in his?" This from a rough old man he would have believed incapable of feeling anything. The other hands said the old man was so tough he made a

good breakfast of old horseshoes. "I feel him," he said. The old man put his arm around his shoulders.

The shadow of the cow passed back and forth across his legs. The shadow was flowing rhythmically, putting him to sleep. And then he could see it again, as if he were there, as if it were happening again, as if it had never stopped happening.

It is cool in the barn, and dark. Most of the doors and windows are shut to keep out the heat; outside, the heat is alive. Its intentions are not good. Rays of light cut through the greenish dusk of the farm; bits of chaff, of hay, of animal hair, float lazily in the long, sharp gold beams of light. He has come in here to sleep. He loves the odors of the animals, the odor of the hay, new cut and drying. He is high up in the hayloft when five of the men come in leading the old bull. They are all members of one family and they all work on his farm. From up here, at the top of the barn, they seem small, like players taking part in a ritual. "Well, let's get him," says one of the Browns. "He sure ain't getting no one no more," says the youngest one; "hardly worth killing him. Thin hide." He slaps the bull on the side. The bull bellows and turns toward him, but the other men yank his head forward by the rope fastened to the tong in his nose. He watches them prepare to pull the rope through the iron staple in the barn floor and watches them remember that the staple is rusted through and that they were supposed to replace it last week. The men shrug.

They go over to the horses' stalls and come back with leather thongs. They catch the bull's legs one at a time, tie the rear legs together, then the front legs. The bull falls heavily on his side. The youngest insists it's his turn to kill the bull and the others agree. He hits the bull with the iron mallet and the bull bellows. He hits him again and the bull begins to bleed from his ears. The bull lifts his head and bellows. The older men look at one another. "One more try," one of them says; "then one of us is coming in." The youngest Brown hits the bull again; there is the grating sound of a bone breaking. "Give it here," says Bill Brown. He picks up the iron mallet and brings it down on the bull's forehead. The bull's legs jerk and are still. They slit his throat. "You need practice with that thing," says Bill Brown; "once is enough. You can't get it up high enough." "*He* can't get it up?" says another of the men, and they burst out laughing. They are hauling the bull up; he is swinging, hanging by his rear legs, from a steel ring in the rafter. "You cut him," Bill Brown tells the youngest one; "you can do that." "Yeah, he can do that," says one of the other men; "the young ones know how to make the first cut." The young man's face flushes and he slits the bull open. The intestines fall out. They gut the bull. "I got the liver," Bill Brown calls out; "I get the first bite." He picks it up and smears his face with it. Then he takes a big bite of it. His mouth is raw and bloody. A raw

and bloody animal seems to be disappearing into his mouth and down his throat. "Give it here, don't eat it all," his brother says. They pass the liver around. They smear their faces; they take a bite of it; they pass it back and forth until it is all eaten.

From his hayloft at the top of the barn, he cannot believe what he sees. Bill Brown beats his chest and roars. The others do the same. "Let's skin him and get it over with," says the youngest one. "Do it right," says Bill; "if we nick that hide, we'll catch it from Mrs. Dempster." "Here!" cries the youngest, and he throws something at one of his brothers. "What's this?" asks the brother; whatever it is drops down the front of his shirt. His younger brother collapses, helpless with laughter. "What the hell is it?" his brother demands, and fishes down the front of his shirt. When he pulls it out, the others explode with merriment. It is the bull's testicles. They begin throwing the testicles back and forth at one another. Their hilarity knows no limits.

Up in the hayloft, he is trying to keep as still as he can. He wants to retch but he does not want to make a sound. He wants to fight down the disgust he feels toward these people he lives with and works with every day, but he cannot. He knows that they are only farmers; they are not criminals; they are not so bad; they are not bad at all, but they are utterly alien to him, alien and repugnant. If they were animals in his herd, he would slaughter them. Their faces are still smeared with the blood from the bull's liver, and when the sun touches them, their faces are like old battle masks, rusted iron, caked with earth. They are drinking deeply from the flasks they always carry with them: apple whiskey. Now that they have tired themselves out, they begin skinning the bull. He sees that they do not wrap their hands in towels, as he has asked them to do; they slide their hands between the hide and the meat without even rinsing them.

Drunk as they are, they use the sharp, scythelike knife to free the skin from the meat. Even from his perch in the hayloft, he can see that this hide will be free from cuts and nicks. Every now and then one of them stops, searches around in the hay, finds the bull's testicles and throws them at one of his brothers, and the skinning stops; the laughter starts up again. Eventually, they get through; they go out to get the wagon to take the meat to the ice house, to get the hired man who butchers the meat, cutting it into quarters, then the smaller cuts for Mrs. Dempster's kitchen. He comes down the long, long ladder as if he were climbing down to earth from another planet. Everything wavers in front of him. He goes out in back of the barn and throws himself on the cool rock under the apple tree. He knew how it was. He had to see for himself. He lies there for some time, as if dead. He does not see his daughter steal out of the barn's side door. Buried in the hay of a horse's stall, she has watched the whole thing.

Later—now—he seemed to know that. The sun had moved down the sky. The shadow of the cow covered him up to his breast. The creaking wagon was moving toward him and stopped as it reached the huge beech tree. “Well, here it is,” he said, getting up. Just then, he saw someone walk out of the trees which bordered the far side of the pasture. He saw Agnes stop. He saw her raise her pail of berries and press it to her chest. She stared from him to the cow swinging from the tree. He could not see her face, but he knew the look of betrayal and contempt she turned on him. He waved to her as if there were nothing wrong. She did not wave back, but turned back into the woods.

He remembered his father talking about a cow, the best milk cow he had. But she had only male calves, he said; males were useless. All you needed was one for a whole herd. When he was young, he hated to hear talk like that. Now he saw it for himself. The farm was like a woman bearing hundreds and thousands of children, some growing in the womb of the earth, some in flesh and blood. He was responsible for everything on the farm. One bull might be enough for a herd. One man was not enough for even a small family. When he saw himself in his daughter’s eyes, he knew he was weak. He did not approve of the nature of things, but he could not change it. What was worse, he could not accept things as they were. He pretended to accept it all—his wife, her headaches, her spells, her treatment of him, of their daughter—but he did not.

That night, before going to her room, Agnes paused before his chair in the library. “Mother told you to do it, didn’t she?” she asked; “the two of you did it together, didn’t you? You never cared about me!” He did not know what to say, but before he had a chance to catch his breath, she had disappeared upstairs. A moment later, he heard the bolt in her door slide shut.





# **North Chittendon**