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Genesis

By Jim Crace

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In the first Genesis, not Jim Crace's, before any directive on which fruit to avoid, God's first commandment to humanity is, "Be fruitful, and multiply."

Fertility, then, became for the Hebrews, as for all emerging civilizations, a sign of divine grace, and a fruitful Mother Earth has eternally intertwined her lushness with an omnipotent Heavenly Father in a yin/yang missionary position attaining cosmic purpose.

How does it stand, then, with Felix Dern (called "Lix") in Crace's new novel whose first line informs us, "Every woman he dares to sleep with bears his child"? In a world where television sitcom character Frasier Crane can snap at a woman, "How can you suggest that men use sex to get what they want! Sex IS what we want!" why would Crace even use "dares" to describe Lix's erotic success?

For Lix, it seems not only his fecundity that demands courage. Rather, it is aligning sex with love in an era when sex and love often feel like take-home exams in entirely separate curricula.

Crace's setting, the City of Kisses, is less an actual place than a realm of possibility. It is a world much like ours, with some of its vitality drained, its sense of direction adrift, like America after 9/11. Here, militia volunteers search citizens, no explanations given, and "you had either to stand and lose your dignity or to argue and lose your liberty."

In the first of its six chapters, one for each of his children, Lix's second wife Mouetta, 39 with a biological clock ticking with loud desperation, has been chosen by "the raven of good fortune." Her child is conceived during the "Banking Riots" when the savings of the townspeople had mostly disappeared. She and the otherwise ineffectual Lix, as if invoking Emma Lazarus to come forth, make love in Deliverance Park, "three hundred million tempest-tossed sperm, the wretched refuse of his teeming shore" forming Lix's sixth child.

The narrative unfolds in flashback and never quite keeps pace with theme. Always intelligent and often poetic, Crace employs a touch even lighter than usual, so that no character, even Lix, engages us as much as the novel's guiding idea.

His first child, Bel, results from an affair with a woman Lix had spied from a window as she sat in a café. What feels like an exciting tryst quickly becomes a near cliché: Lix the "predatory man forever wanting to make love," she the desired object deluding herself she is special, as if the erotic magnetism were hers alone.

More magnetic because more fully drawn is Freda, a young revolutionary in 1981. At 21, Lix wanted to change the world as an actor, believing that "Art was Revolution's smarter twin." But, enthralled by Freda, at a meeting of the Roesenthaler Comrades Cooperative where Freda is a leader licensed by her beauty to be able to say anything, he proposes the idea to kidnap an American chairman of a huge corporation. Lix and Freda both infatuated with Freda and intoxicated by felonious aspirations, they are led, as inebriation often leads, to sex and Lix's second child. Freda was smitten by Lix's fear and reticence, which she mistook for sweetness and compassion. A staunch feminist, she

orders Lix around in bed to serve her “right to orgasm”: “No kissing, Comrade Lix,” she commands. “It’s counterrevolutionary.” The product is son George.

Then Lix marries Alicja. Poor but happy and in love, he becomes a table singer in restaurants. They have two sons, but as success comes to each, Alicja in politics and Lix in theater, they have less time for each other. They become hot lovers cooling, their relations “if not quite corpse-like, then stiffly formal... starched and polite but unengaged.” Lix sighs in his sleep “as if even his dreams were flat and saddening. To share a bed with Lix was to wrap yourself in sheets of woe.” But, Alicja realizes, marriage is not meant to be perfect. “It has to toughen on its blemishes. It has to morph and change its shape and turn its insides out and move beyond the passion that is its architect.” They divorce in 1993, and Lix endures seven celibate years.

Then comes An, a fellow actor “famous for her Channel Beta talent show, her range of tempers, and for her fleeting love affairs with older men, younger men, men with chauffeur-driven cars, and then the chauffeurs too.” They have sex once, briefly, late one night on stage and in costume, creating daughter Rosa.

Bringing the tale full circle, Lix falls in love with and marries Freda’s envious cousin Mouetta, whose smile “promised that she’d let him stay undiscovered if that was what he wanted.” He’s happy “just reaching out and piling up his plate with her, as if she were as ready and quiescent as a slice of cake.” Once pregnant, though, Mouetta decides Lix’s purpose has been served. Like composing a novel or symphony that can outlive its creator, producing a child is one rare battle we may win in our doomed war with mortality.

Isolate and unfulfilled, however, Lix seems to have won little during his life. He becomes rather a cautionary tale for an age of romance by instant messaging and sex as drive-by acquaintance. Crace suggests that we’ve reached the point where life is a tale told by *Cosmo*, where sex is divorced from meaning, and little that the poets once reveled in still twinkles now that the stars are gone.
