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Septimania

Written by Jonathan Levi

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SEPTIMANIA

A NOVEL

Jonathan Levi



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To my parents,
Judith and Isaac Levi,
who lifted me onto their shoulders



PART ONE

Comfort me with apples, for I am sick with love.

—*Song of Songs*

1/0

3 September 1666

*ne garden. One tree. Two backs against the trunk, two bums on the grass, two mouths sharing a pipe after dinner.*

London is burning. Plague is riding flame and smoke, and the early September sun radiates death north to Cambridge. Henry VIII stands in stony guard over the silent Great Court of Trinity College, students dismissed until further notice. Further north still, in the garden of Mrs. Hannah Newton Smith, one of these students, her strange scholar of a son, sits with a friend. I am that friend, a foreigner—some traits cannot be disguised. But a foreigner who can think of no better way to weather the closing of the university than to share a pipe and a tree with friend Isaac.

"I was a posthumous child." Isaac blows a puff, the smoke mixing like China tea with the granules of sunlight, and passes the pipe to me. "I never knew my father, and the feeling was mutual. I was born Christmas morn, so small, I am told, that I fit in a quart pot, and so weakly that, when two women were sent to Lady Pakenham at North Witham for some herbal strengthener for my struggling spirit, they sat down on a stile by the way, certain there was no occasion for making haste as I would be dead before they could return."

"That would explain your healthy appetite." I take the pipe from Isaac.

"And yet," Isaac watches the smoke rise towards the fruit in paisleys and curlicues, "I am certain that—my mother's bitterness notwithstanding—I must, at one time, have had a father."

"And a Holy Spirit?"

"Fuck the Trinity," Isaac grabs the pipe from me and puffs again.

"The college," I ask, "or the concept?"

*"Father, Son, Holy Spirit—for an orphan like me, there is but one Father, one God—*finitum*—and all that we know, all that we are radiates forth from the One like the rays of the Sun. I suppose at heart," he smiles a smile that at sunset gives me courage, "I must be a Jew."*

"It isn't the heart that interests this Jew." I smile back with a glance at Isaac's thighs.

"A true Christian, like a true Jew, believes in the single God."

"The God of Abraham?"

"And Isaac."

"That's two gods right there," I laugh. "Never mind Trinity College and your Trinitarians. You'd be surprised to know how many of my circumcised brethren are Quarternarians."

"Quarternarians?"

"They believe, quite openly, in four deities. Some students of the Kabbalah even hypothesize the existence of seven Gods!"

"Heresy!"

"Septimaniacs," I tell him. "Septimaniacs—with a God for each of the seven heavens, for each day of the week, for every direction of space, every planet, every Pleiad, every color, every virtue . . ."

"And every deadly sin," adds Isaac. An apple falls and lands between my legs.

"Take a bite," I offer without moving.

"After you," Isaac demurs. "There are plenty of apples."

"Precisely," I say. "Welcome to Septimania."

1/1

ONE SHAFT OF LIGHT.

Louiza.

Louiza's golden head around the side of the Orchard Tea Garden, Louiza's pale chin lifting upwind, deciding direction, scenting the surprisingly balmy air of mid-March in 1978. Louiza crossing the Cambridge Road, elbows at her side, shoulders a marble channel for the faded straps of her flowered dress. Louiza's teeth-bitten fingers lifting the latch of the churchyard gate, Louiza's raspberry calves disappearing from view.

Malory.

Corduroyed Malory. Bell-bottomed Malory. Beatle-haired Malory.

Malory up in the steeple of St. George's Church, Whistler Abbey. Hesitant Malory, five-foot-six-point-five Malory perched on the tips of his boots on a stack of abandoned hymnals, his Book of Organs in one hand, his breath in the other.

Looking.

Malory looking for the demon that was throttling the church organ, keeping it out of tune and him from his lunch. Malory climbing up the steeple, looking out through the slats at a girl he had never seen, never suspected.

Louiza looking for the loo, but drawn across the road from the Orchard towards a church and a ladder.

"Hello up there!" Louiza.

"Yes?" Malory's own voice in the pinched register of a crumhorn.

"May I come up?"

Louiza and Malory.

They took refuge from their embarrassment in the view of the dappled fire through the windows of the Orchard. Then, from the far side of the steeple, the specter of the blasted yew—planted four thousand years ago, the vicar claimed, twice as old as our Lord—in whose hollowed trunk Malory had been known to conduct the younger nose-pickers of the parish in elementary hymns. Malory pointed Louiza to the northern reach of Whistler Abbey, and in the distance, the reclaimed marshland and hamlets of Rankwater and Silt, beginning to thaw in the early spring sun. Malory fought valiantly not to be discovered examining the corona of sunlight around Louiza's jaw, the dusting of wheaten hairs that softened the rims of her ears, the way her nose in profile, as she followed the direction of his finger towards some distant Norman church, pointed towards a narrow upper lip and a chin thrust slightly more forward than classical beauty might have recommended. Malory wrestled with the magnetic attraction of Louiza's left breast, its silhouette refracted by the prism of her cotton dress, its parabola hard with the defiance of youth, refusing to acknowledge gravity and raising the nipple towards an astonishing and hopeful zenith. Most of all, Malory struggled towards intelligence, realizing that the more he talked to this girl about the history of Cambridgeshire and the draining of the fens, the more his own voice fell out of tune.

"May I ask you a question?" Louiza turned away from the view and fully into Malory's face. Her eyes drew the blue of the afternoon into the steeple for a moment, with a force Malory had never imagined possible—not, at least, within the universe of Newtonian physics, which was, after all, his universe. The power of her eyes, the unity of their focus, as devoid of color as they were full of hope, convinced Malory of what he had already decided. Louiza was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, or at least the most beautiful girl he had ever seen at such proximity. And this discovery rendered Malory incapable of saying anything other than—

"Yes?"

"What are you doing up here?"

Malory told Louiza how he had bicycled down from Cambridge, how he had arrived at St. George's just after eight in the

morning, intending to tune the organ and return to the Tea Room of the University Library for the first scones of the day. He was the Organ Scholar at Trinity, he mumbled, without going into great detail about the cold matins and inconvenient vespers he had to play, the acrobatic rehearsals whenever the Trinity Choir decided to premiere some optimistic composition by the Choirmaster.

Tuning the nineteenth-century organ of St. George's Church was a private arrangement, normally the job of a single hour. But fifteen minutes into the tuning that morning, Malory found something wrong with the D-sharp in the reeds of the organ. He slipped the rod a quarter-inch and brought the pipe into tune, only to find that the problem migrated to the G-sharp. Solving the G-sharp only spread the oddity to two other pipes. Sometimes it was a defect of pitch, sometimes it was complete strangulation. All morning he chased the blockage, from pipes to stops, from bellows back to console. The reeds were only fifteen feet above the paving stones of the nave and easily examined by means of a wooden A-frame that the warden kept with the mop and bucket behind the safe in the Lady Chapel. But as scones lost out to lunch and Malory still hadn't left the church, the demon of the organ continued to elude him.

It was after three when Malory climbed from the chancel, by way of a staircase behind the reeds and then up a vertical ladder, fifty-two rungs—so he told Louiza as she twisted a strand of hair around a wheaten ear—to the bell tower. He wasn't certain what he'd find up there among the webs and guano. There was no clear link to the organ twenty feet below. Certainly the bellows drew air from up here through the four sets of slats cut into the sloping steeple, although it drew air, one might say, from everywhere. He needed a change of scene but wasn't prepared to leave St. George's until he had slain the dragon. Perhaps if he did not play, the demon would not appear.

"It's like Schrödinger's cat," Malory said.

"Don't know him." Louiza bowed her head, casting a tangle of gold over the front of her eyes in an embarrassment that Malory immediately regretted.

"No, no. Schrödinger was a physicist, German, back in the 1920s. He tried to describe why looking for things was, well, difficult.

How looking changed what you were looking for." Malory was so flummoxed by his own attempts at explanation that he could barely look at Louiza. "Schrödinger presented a problem—a cat is in a box along with a bottle of poisonous gas and a tiny piece of uranium. The uranium spits out radioactive particles at random, like a popcorn popper at Strawberry Fair. We can never tell when a particle will come whizzing out, or in which direction it will fly. But when enough uranium particles finally hit, the bottle of poisonous gas will explode."

"And then?" Louiza asked.

"The cat will die," Malory said. "Painlessly," he added, although he was pleased to see that Louiza was more interested in the intellectual problem than in feline sensibilities. "So we make our experiment—we put the cat in the box with the gas and the uranium and seal it tight and let the clock tick. After a minute or so, we ask the question, is Kitty dead or alive?"

"Yes," said Louiza.

"Yes!" Malory whooped. "That is the answer of the old physics. Yes, the old physics would have said—the cat is either dead or alive."

"Hmm," Louiza hummed.

Hmm? Was Louiza making fun of him, or did she already know the joke, or was she simply bored and he was losing her? "The new physics," he continued, "quantum mechanics, says until we open the box, the cat is possibly dead and possibly alive."

"Or nibbling on popcorn at Strawberry Fair?" Louiza smiled, and Malory felt the pipes in his chest rise up half a tone.

"Anything is possible," he whispered, "until we look."

"And afterwards?" Louiza asked.

"What do you mean?" Malory hadn't reckoned on questions, only a little sympathy for an organ tuner who had missed his scones in search of a dead cat.

"After the box is opened," Louiza said, as simply as Pandora. "Once we look inside, is anything still possible?"

"Well," Malory said, "some physicists believe that there are two worlds that exist after the box is opened. In one world is the cat we see, in the other the cat we don't. In one world, the cat is being chased by worms. In the other, he is raring to catch mice. The only problem

is, neither world knows anything about the other. Live Felix doesn't know Dead Felix exists. But they both do."

"Ah!" said Louiza, and clapped her hands. "That's what I hoped."

"You did?" Malory said, pleased if confused by his ability to provoke such delight in this angel.

"Yes!" Louiza said, jumping up and reaching for the high beam of the steeple. "You see, that's where I come from, a world of half-dead cats."

It was then that Louiza explained to Malory what she had never explained to others. She told him of the soggy schools and playgrounds of the Norfolk marshes, where the teachers and children insisted on reading and writing in a language of letters that made no sense to Louiza. She talked of her mother, who tried to drill the rudiments of language into her uncomprehending daughter, while her father grumbled over reheated shepherd's pie. Finally, Louiza told Malory about mathematics, how mathematics connected her to the world.

"It was very simple," she said. "If I could link a word with a number—say, the word *cat* with the number negative 57—if I could turn a word into a formula, then I could read the world."

"Why negative 57?"

"Because the world of my teachers, my enemies, my own father was all so negative. 'Louiza can't read'—negative. 'Louiza can't write'—negative. 'Doesn't focus in class'—negative. 'Never amount'—negative. My whole life, one big negative. Naturally, when I began to think in numbers, I made *z* negative 1, *y* negative 2, up to negative 26 for *a*. So *cat* is negative 24 plus negative 26 plus negative 7—equals negative 57.

"I am negative one," Malory said, aiming at wit with sympathy.

"No," Louiza said, "*i* is the square root of negative 1." Her eyebrows rose to emphasize the italics.

Even Malory, flustered by Louiza's parry, knew that mathematicians since the time of Newton have written the king of imaginary numbers as a lowercase, italicized *i*. The force behind Louiza's pronunciation of the letter was, perhaps, born from the vertigo of those

early mathematicians as they pondered the square root of –1, afraid themselves of tipping over with the effort of imagining such a thing. The square roots of negative numbers, after all, did not exist in the real world any more than half-dead cats. What number, times itself, would give you a square with an area of –1? When you squared a number, a positive number or a negative number, it gave you a positive answer. +2 times +2 equals +4. –2 times –2 equals +4. That was how it went. That was cricket. Those were the rules. All numbers, when you squared them, when you multiplied them by themselves, gave you a positive number. So the question, *What is the square root of –1?* was just, well, clearly not a question you should ask. Nevertheless, it was easy enough, with a piece of chalk and a board, or a pencil and paper, to scribble down equations like:

$$x^2 + 1 = 0$$

For many people, these scribbles, these equations not only existed but demanded answers. Subtracting 1 from both sides of the equation, whether in the smoky, chintz parlor of Louiza's Norfolk farmhouse or the drafty, gothic classroom of Malory's King's College Choir School led to:

$$x^2 = -1$$

and then:

$$x = \sqrt{-1}$$

which a sixteenth-century mathematician decided to baptize with an italic *i,* perhaps to keep it from infecting the real numbers, the ones you could see and touch and chew.

$$i = \sqrt{-1}$$
$$x = i$$

"I was eight," Louiza said, "when I asked my father what was the square root of negative 1. He thought the question was nonsense. Negative numbers he could understand, as years on a timeline, as negative *befores* in contrast to positive *afters*. But the square root of negative 1? I might as well have asked him what was the square root of

the Magna Carta or a sugar beet. It was my mother who couldn't be bothered with her own ignorance and asked the maths teacher at school.

'Louiza, meet *i*,' he said to me. '*i*, Louiza.' And after *i*, the brothers of *i*, the distant cousins, the family tree of imaginary numbers built around *i*. Suddenly *i* became my escape. I found a home in a world peopled with histories and futures and pets dead and alive, a nook in the universe where reading and writing made sense."

"And that's what you're studying for your BA?" Malory asked.

"PhD actually," Louiza looked down. "Studied. I passed my *viva* this morning."

"This morning?" Malory steadied himself with a hand on the rough boards of the roof.

"Would you like to hear my thesis?" Louiza reached up to Malory's belt and pulled him down into a conspiratorial squat, her cotton hem riding up above a pair of knees that Malory thought might just fit in his mouth.

"Of course," Malory said, still dizzy at the thought that this young woman—could she even be twenty?—was about to graduate with a PhD and had just happened to climb up the steeple of St. George's Church, Whistler Abbey, and find him, Malory, who had spent the past ten years avoiding his own doctorate on Sir Isaac Newton with an alternating diet of organs and scones.

"$i = u$"

"I equals you?"

"$i = u$." Louiza took Malory's Book of Organs and wrote the formula on a blank page in a sharp, decisive hand. "$i = u$," she repeated, slowly tracing the letters on Malory's receptive chest. "In *italics*."

"Italics," Malory repeated in idiotic rapture at the touch of Louiza's finger on the flannel of his shirt.

"I," Louiza said, "Louiza. You?"

Malory told her. He told her about his rooms in Great Court next to the chapel; as Organ Scholar of Trinity College—on call from matins to vespers, from baptisms to funerals—proximity to the chapel was essential. He told her about his sitting room, which looked out onto Trinity Street and the apple tree planted in 1966 in honor of the three-hundredth anniversary of Newton's *annus mirabilis*, the year

the great man ran from the Plague back to his mother's garden in Lincolnshire and discovered the law of gravity, the nature of light, calculus, and half a dozen other Promethean treasures. He told her about the summer mornings when he would awaken to the desperate cramming of field mice in his rubbish bin and winter mornings when a prism of thawing ice rode the bobsled of gravity from the windowpane to his head. As a graduate student writing a doctoral thesis on the great Sir Isaac, it was foregone and fitting that Newton's rooms, if not his genius, should come to Malory.

"But you," Louiza said. "Who are you?"

Malory told her that his own Christian name was Hercule (his mother Sara being French-born) and that the last name on his birth certificate was Emery (being his mother's alone). "But everyone calls me Malory, with one *l,*" Malory said to Louiza, whose eyes widened in what Malory could only believe was the usual astonishment. "I know what you're thinking," he rushed on. "Malory as in Thomas Malory who wrote about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. You know, Lancelot and Guinevere, Galahad the Pure?"

"No," Louiza whispered, "it's not that." But Malory didn't hear her message, eager as he was to confess something he'd never told anyone else. That Malory was the name of a father who had never seen his son. That Malory, like the great Sir Isaac, was posthumous at birth, his fisherman of a father having died after failing to judge the proper speed of the Irish ferry on which his mother was arriving to marry him. That was as much as he knew of the old man—the surname, the fatal eagerness with which he'd loved young Sara—and that much he had gleaned from his mother only after it was clear, shortly before his tenth birthday, that she too would be leaving him, and without much more than this one story.

"Malory," Louiza whispered again and looked at him, Malory thought, as if she were really, really interested in him, his name, his history. And he also thought, hoped, dreaded that Louiza would kiss him—his first kiss, he was ashamed to even think, his first girl. Twenty-six years old and he would finally kiss a girl. Not that he'd been a man's man. There had always been something too homuncular about him to make him a target of the older boys at King's College

Choir School or later. There had been dozens, millions of times, actually, from childhood through to the present, when he would have gladly cuddled up to anything human: male, female, or child. But there had never been occasion. He had to content himself with pencils, small rocks, horse chestnuts, the edges of worn sweaters that, with their smells and their textures, kindled enough of an image of affection to stave off his hunger. But now, this girl, this Louiza, of imaginary numbers and cats—

"Is this it?" Louiza reached around Malory.

Malory sat for a moment, still waiting for the kiss, still trying to make sense of the brief equation Louiza had traced on his chest and his equally brief confession. And then he focused, with an attempt at equilibrium, on the lightly dusted hand holding an apple pip in front of his face in the slanted light of the steeple. An apple pip. Between two perfect, if nail-bitten, fingers, Louiza was holding an apple pip that she had pried loose from between two slats of the shutters. And although Malory needed ten minutes of chromatic variations on Bach's "Come Now, O Savior of the Gentiles" to prove that this singular Pip was the demon that had asphyxiated the organ, the demon he had chased from one key to the next, he knew, beyond a doubt, that Louiza—in any of her many possible worlds—could solve all problems without looking.

The kiss, the undressing of flannel shirt and cotton dress, the exploration and all the rest followed with calm, with passion and a sense of musical inevitability. Yet there was so much that was unpredictable in Louiza's movements, such a matrix of unsuspected jumping-aways and lunging-togethers that it wasn't until afterwards, with the afternoon sun casting a final five-line shadow on the eastern wall of the steeple, that Malory stopped to wonder why. Why him? Why now? Why here in the steeple of St. George's Church, Whistler Abbey?

"Your name," Louiza said. "Malory, your name equals negative 78." Louiza traced the unitalicized equation on Malory's unshirted chest. "So does my name, Louiza. Negative 78. I equals you."

He did the maths. Of course she was correct—*m* plus *a* plus *l* and so on equaled *l* plus *o* plus all the gorgeous things that had just happened, that had just happened to him. But being Malory, being a

student of Isaac Newton and a tuner of organs with an ear that wouldn't be satisfied, he had to ask.

"What does it mean, my equation?" Louiza's cheek was resting on his thigh. Her voice was soft, but it resonated through his body as if she were whispering in his ear. "How can my equation, how can $i = u$ change the world?"

"Yes," Malory said. "Something like that."

"The implications," Louiza began. "The implications are extraordinary. And quite possibly dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Malory sat up.

"I'll explain next time," Louiza said, springing to her feet and stepping to the ladder.

"Next time?" Malory said, in some desperation that this time seemed to be drawing to a close. "Where? When?"

"Wherever you find that cat," Louiza said. "Whenever." She handed him the Pip with those slender, teeth-bitten fingers. "Remember: $i = u$." And disappeared.