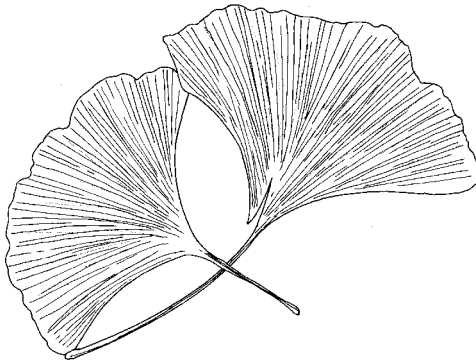


# **The Ginkgo**

An intellectual and visionary coming-of-age



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## Prologue

Once upon a time a young woman walked into my office. Although young women walk into my office regularly, this time something seemed different. She carried a sort of mental electricity and left some of it hanging in the air. Four years after that day, she sent me a thank you note. “Thanks,” it read, in handwriting I recognized instantly, although I’d seen very little of it, namely just a few words on post-it notes stuck to Times New Roman 12-point, 1-inch margin, manuscripts. “Thanks.” That’s all it said. Plus her initials.

Thanks for what? You might be curious about the answer, although you may not want to hear it. Thanks for disrupting her mother’s plans? Thanks for opening doors I knew could be opened, although I had no idea what might lie beyond them? Thanks for disconnecting her from the culture that spawned her? “Yes” is the answer to all those questions. In other words, thanks for doing my job. What is my job? Let’s see, how best to describe this work. I am an entomologist at heart; I study dragonflies, animals that have been on Earth for hundreds of millions of years. I spend an inordinate amount of time with dragonflies. You must know there is a refuge for people like me, a tax-supported refuge, called a university. I exist in this refuge. I am also a teacher. My job is to screen the human resources that will eventually be turned into health care professionals. Your pediatrician’s name is probably stored somewhere in my files, and the kid probably got an A in General Biology. And I am a student of humanity; I study your children, primarily, animals that have been on Earth for such a short time that they merge Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Abraham Lincoln into a category called “dead Presidents,” Vietnam and the Civil War

into a category called “history.” But my real job is that of idealist.

It is exceedingly difficult work, that of the idealist. Not everyone understands this work, certainly not in the same way they understand accounting, medicine, law. The attorney gets up every morning and reviews his cases, legal principles, conflicts and contracts. The physician gets up and reviews her surgical procedures, her prescriptions, her terminal cases that must be told the truth. But the idealist gets up every morning and asks: what must I do today in order to make this world a better place in which to live? On that day this young woman walked into my office, charging my stale, chemical-infested, laboratory air with her curiosity, I must have answered the question correctly because four years afterward I got a simple one-word note: “Thanks.” Plus the initials. The idealist’s consummate reward.

With thank-you note in hand I sat in this office surrounded by the tools of my trade, staring at the chair where she’d spent so much time, and thought: her story must be told. So I wrote this book about our relationship. My literary agent called the manuscript “an evocative book about ideas, exactly the kind of thing the American book-buying public is getting increasingly impatient with.” Then she declined to handle it. I understood her feelings, although at the time I thought: what happens to nations that get increasingly impatient with “evocative books about ideas”? Is this a healthy evolutionary trend for America? Probably not. So I persist in my own sense of what must be said in print, regardless of what others believe. Yes indeed; the story of this relationship needs to be told, and especially to a nation becoming increasingly impatient with evocative books about ideas.

What kind of a relationship did we have? A deep, serious, unique, rich, fun, life-changing, mutually respectful,

fulfilling, one that went on for the better part of a year then faded into an occasional hour at the local coffee house, and finally came to some kind of closure with a one-word thank-you note. In other words, a relationship quite unlike that imagined by a public increasingly impatient with evocative books about ideas. Why can't I get that phrase out of my mind? I walk downtown. The sidewalks are filled with normal, everyday, people—lawyers, housewives, businessmen and businesswomen, panhandlers, college kids, and nondescripts. Are they *all* impatient with evocative books about ideas? What are they not impatient with? Murder, narcotics, war?

Or, are they not impatient with money, politics, agriculture, health, the military, sex, sports, or religion, i.e. the very subjects she was denied all throughout the year she went exploring a tree, a museum, a sculpture garden, a gallery? Is it indeed possible that this society has degenerated into one so impatient with ideas that it will neither read nor buy an evocative book about them? I don't believe this is the case. I believe my fellow citizens are vitally interested in ideas. Why else would they flock, in droves, to churches? Why else would they gravitate to certain politicians? Why else would they be so quick to categorize then dehumanize their fellow humans? Believe me, we are very interested in ideas; they are the hands that guide our acts, all of them, both good and evil.

So I set about to tell this one young woman's story, her wonderful encounter with the world of ideas, thoughts, visions, perceptions, and the creative instinct. Most of the action is vicarious, but that does not make it less real, only that you must use your imagination in order to participate in it. Were her tales of the Johannes girls, and their interactions with the Spindler boys, important to her, a sort of catharsis? Perhaps. I only know that when it was all over, when the year had passed and I finally met her parents in the late spring, walked down Sand Creek, saw

the red-winged damselflies that had captured her fancy as a child, caught one and held it for her to study then released it to rejoin its mate, stood by the well tank and ran my hand over her horse's warm face, by then she was separated from her traditions except for one crucial link. Now, four years later, she still does not realize that one link remains. But some time in the not too distant future she will sit alone and remember the special Sandhills light, the sounds of meadowlarks, that coyote standing on the hill outside her bedroom window. Then she will take those memories and turn them into something the American book-buying public is not impatient with.

Perhaps this 'something' will be a shootout between Dalton Spindler and Carl Johannes, maybe a violent and steamy morality tale involving their respective children, all beautiful people caught in unfortunate circumstances of their own making, or even a haunting love story, in which Maria Johannes finally, against all odds, makes a lasting connection with Terry Spindler. I wish I could write those kinds of stories, but I can't. I've spent far too much time being an idealist, far too much time hunched over a microscope looking at dragonflies, breathing in the chemicals of my trade.

So what you get instead is the true story of one young woman studying a tree, visiting a natural history museum, pondering the mysteries of a sculpture garden, and finally, her courage bolstered by her own mental efforts, entering the gallery itself. Along this tour you will read her letters to me, although they were really letters to herself. We both knew that at the time, that she was writing these letters for, and to, herself, instead of to me, although the latter was her official excuse. She used them to fill in the gaps, where she kept things to herself during our conversations, those spaces in the Spindler and Johannes clans' losing struggle to keep intact tradition's wall, beyond which was an outside world.

So long as that world was only television, then everything was okay. But tradition can never completely hold at bay the social forces that drive great nations. Thus she told me what was happening back home, to Mindy Johannes, Maria, Terry Spindler, Dalton, Carl, and the rest. I listened, made notes, and eventually, converted those notes into my chapters of this book. She also wrote those long letters, which I copied, and have included in the following pages. My contribution to this story is mainly filler, context for her letters. So be patient, dear reader; in your hands you have words only a privileged few, people such as I, get to read. Besides, the letters could easily have been written by your own child, and it could just as easily be your traditions cracking instead of Carl Johannes’.

John Janovy, Jr.