

The Dionysian Alliance

**A Novel of Sex,
Religion, and Murder**

Jack Rinella

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Strange Letters

1

Chicago, 1988

It came as no surprise when Mom announced she was selling her home and moving. Since her retirement two years earlier, she had found life in rural Ohio less and less tenable and saw no reason to fall in line with the blue-haired ladies who lived in her neighborhood.

So my brother John and I pitched in to help her sell things, haul them to the trash dump or parcel them out as gifts and mementos wherever they best fit. Forty years in the same house is a lot of time to accumulate almost as much junk as the Collyer brothers could fit into their trash-filled mansion. That's how I ended up with a box of old books, never thinking that they would lead me to a sex cult and a murdered priestess.

The box attracted me because the title on the top of the stack was a theology book that Great-Uncle Jonathan had given me when I was in high school some 25 years earlier. I hadn't read it then, but now I was curious as to why he had given it to me and, by the way, whatever happened to him? So I stashed the box in the trunk of my car, went back home to Chicago and put the box on the dining room table.

Since I was still single, the dining room didn't get used very often. The extent of my home cooking was hardly more than to make coffee in the morning before I went off to my job at the "ad agency." Well, it wasn't really an ad agency. To be honest, it's a front for a detective agency, but there were few people who knew

that since our client list was select, wealthy, influential, and very demanding of discretion. Our payments from them were always handled discreetly.

Moving Mom was a slow process as she had to sort through the trash and the treasures, find a place to live in the summer, sell the Ohio property, and decide whether what she was going to keep would be sent to her new place (wherever that was) or to the winter house in Florida. In either case, John and I spent a lot of time last spring piling boxes in the barn until Mom was ready to call the movers.

I didn't get to that box of books very quickly. I had spent a good deal of time in Ohio, so when I returned to work the stack of papers on my desk was a strong distraction. Two weekends later, March weather being what it is, I thought I ought to see what was in that box. I put the theology book on the stairs to my bedroom, thinking I'd read it when I went to bed. If nothing else it might help me fall asleep.

The box held a collection of other old books, mostly about theology, philosophy, and Eastern and ancient religions. Since our family hadn't been especially religious, it seemed strange that my parents would have had such a collection in their home, though it really must have been more my mother's collection, since Dad had died when I was young.

What I hadn't expected was the pile of letters in the bottom of the box. They were still in their original envelopes and neatly bound with a very faded red ribbon, postmarked Louisville, Kentucky, and dated between 1930 and 1962. The return address simply read PO Box 2187, Louisville, KY 01.

"Kentucky?" I wondered.

I pulled out a chair from the table and sat down to see what the letters contained. There were seventy letters in all, and whoever had assembled the package had done so with care. They were in chronological order and most, except for one or two, had been written by Uncle Jonathan.

Uncle Jonathan wasn't really my uncle. He was my mother's uncle and I had only met him on the occasions of a family festivity and the times he had spent with us on vacation so I really didn't know him very well. Mom had a sweet spot in her heart for the old man, but was about the only one in the family who did. The others wouldn't listen to news about him and generally seemed to despise his rumored lifestyle. I'm not sure if the feelings stemmed from his religious life or the hint that he was queer. Whatever the reason, I hadn't heard enough stories about him to draw any serious conclusions. Reading the letters soon changed all that.

Most of them were simply breezy hellos that Jonathan had written to various members of our family. Some were to his grandmother Sarah (my great-great-grandmother); others to his brother (and my grandfather) Ben, and many to my mother.

The ones with some real news in them revealed a religious monk, schooled in his religion by his grandmother in some strange, small, and secretive fertility cult. As I read them I decided to take notes.

The PO Box return address on the envelopes attested to the fact that he lived in a monastery called Eagle Ridge somewhere near Louisville, Kentucky. He was in an organization called the Alliance that seemed to be quite wealthy and to have influential connections around the world.

The last of the letters, written to my mother in 1962, was about me and said:

I've finally finished the series of journals for Ben. It'll be in safe-keeping for the day when he's ready to seek his place in our holy fraternity.

I know it's hard for you not to share our secret with your own two sons but they must come to Dionysos in their own time and their own way. Be at peace, my dear niece, for come they shall, when they are ready.

At the end of some three hours of reading I had a list of clues leading to my great-uncle. I folded the list and decided to talk to Robert, the agency's manager, on Monday. If our agency couldn't find out what had happened to Uncle Jonathan, no one could.

"Why don't you just ask your mother?" Robert asked after I had told him my Uncle Jonathan story.

"Honestly," I said, "I don't know. First off, of course, I feel strange about asking my mother if she is a member of a secret fertility cult. If she wanted to have told me by now, she certainly had enough chances. From what I've read about this Alliance outfit, she'd be put in a difficult position if she blabbed all their secrets to me.

"Besides," I went on, "I'd rather she not know that I know. That way, if it's something I want to avoid, she won't have any incentive to try and talk me into it."

The Appointment

“Well, Ben Kramer. How interesting to finally meet you. Tell me, what brings you to my office, here in Cincinnati?” the lawyer asked. His question took me off guard. After all, I had expected that he would be answering my questions, not I his. I would have guessed he was in his early sixties, with more gray hair than black, a closely cropped mustache and receding forehead. He was some six feet tall and rather trim for his age.

The paneled walls of mahogany, the obviously old tomes on the rows of shelves, and his large desk cleared of the usual businessman’s papers made me feel as if I were before a judge, rather than a man who had invited me to visit him in order to answer my questions. He seemed a gracious enough guy, though “guy” is hardly a word that would have suited his demeanor. Rather he was more the gentleman, kindly and older than I would have expected, with both the slight airs of a college academic and the stern manner of a federal prosecutor.

Indeed, the building to which I had been invited appeared to house law offices, though the small wooden plaque outside of his office read only “Richard Ceznat, Esq.” I assumed this man simply worked for my uncle’s religious order, but it was a bit disconcerting to think that this place was their representative’s office. It seemed more appropriate as an office for some agent representing the Rockefellers, Mellons, or Carnegies, rather than a monastery.

Our research on Mr. Ceznat, on the other hand, revealed that he had few clients; his name only occasionally appeared in a

court filing. However, he was a member of several prominent and highly selective social clubs and served on several corporate boards and trusts, most of which were involved in high end real estate and holding companies.

I knew very little about Uncle Jonathan but it did seem that Mr. Ceznat was knowledgeable about the monastery; ostensibly he was their lawyer of record, though I found no paper trail to have proven it. We had found his name in searching the ownership of the post office box. His firm paid the yearly rental fee. The post office box had led us to Ceznat, though the records showed a long list of names that had used the box over the years. Even at that we wouldn't have ferreted out Ceznat's name if we hadn't been able to pull in a favor or two from friends in Washington.

"Well," I answered, "as you might know, my great-uncle Jonathan was a monk on Eagle Ridge. Many years ago he gave me a book of rather esoteric theology. I was in high school at the time and didn't pay much attention to it. Last spring while my brother and I were emptying Mom's house because she was moving, I found it in a box of books in the basement.

"It's strange for that book to have reappeared some twenty-five years later, but now I find it interesting, even alluring. It's taken me nearly five months to track you down, and the truth is that I want to find out more about my uncle's life."

"I thought that might be the case," he replied. "When I received your letter I researched your uncle and found your name in our archives. Your uncle had listed you as a next of kin in his will with the instruction that if you ever came seeking him, you were to be given this packet. Whatever is in it is written, I can assure you, in his own hand. He would be pleased to know that you have finally received it."

With that, he handed me a leather pouch inscribed with the words: "To my great-nephew with love, Uncle Jonathan." It certainly could contain the journals that I had read about in those letters. My curiosity was piqued by this little surprise. "Was it the journals?" I

asked myself. After all, Uncle Jonathan, as far as I knew, had been dead for many years. I wondered why the contents hadn't just come to me when his will was probated.

“For now, Mr. Kramer, that’s all I can tell you. I suggest you study the materials your great-uncle has left for you and if your desire for more information remains, feel free to call me and we can arrange for a more enlightening meeting.”

At that my host rose, came around his desk and offered me his hand, obviously meaning to end the meeting and show me the door. I was taken aback by the shortness of the visit and at how little I had learned. On the other hand, that was not unwelcome, as I wanted to head back to my hotel room and see what I had just inherited.

The taxi cab ride to the hotel went quickly, my brain buzzing with all sorts of questions. In fact, it’s probably no surprise that the meeting had left me with more questions than answers. Originally I had merely assumed that I would have been met by a kindly old monk or a prelate of some sort who would have offered to tell me about Uncle Jonathan, show me around some clerical manse, give me a few religious tracts, and eventually end the meeting with some offer to pray for me to the God of whatever religion Uncle Jonathan had believed in. When I learned that I would be meeting with a lawyer, I became suspicious that there was more to be learned than I suspected. Now I was left with the firm idea that whatever it was, it wasn't very open to the public.

My agency’s research had confirmed as much. The boards that Ceznat sat on were all privately-held corporations, many of which were simply holding companies for other corporations. Even at that, their yearly IRS filings showed huge assets, generally of a very conservative nature.

We had found no record of Jonathan’s death, though that meant only that he hadn't died in Kentucky or Ohio, the two states where we had looked. On the other hand, he wasn't listed on the Social Security Death Index either.

Uncle Jonathan, as I remembered, hadn't seemed very eccentric to me, but then I was a kid and he was a great-uncle. He was single, which was probably the dubious source of the rumor of his homosexuality, but didn't show any traits of being part of some strange cult. Besides, monks were supposed to be single, weren't they? Sure, he didn't go to church with us when he visited, but he bowed his head for grace, never tried to convert me or my brother, and generally was just a quiet, older guy who liked Claire, his niece and my mother.

I wondered where Eagle Ridge was. Though I had some sneaking idea it was in Kentucky, I really did not know for certain. It did come to me that for all the vacations we had taken as a family we had never once gone to visit him. On the other hand, I guess a monastery isn't quite the place you bring your kids for a vacation, and after Dad had passed away, Mom had to curtail our vacations anyway, finances being what they were.

It was a short ride back to the hotel, up the elevator and into my room. "What," I wondered, "do I have in my hands?"

The leather pouch was handcrafted and kept closed with a few buttons, which I undid, revealing a letter written to me and a stack of notebooks like those I used to use in high school. As the lawyer had promised, I recognized the writing as Uncle Jonathan's. Dated Aug 1, 1962, it read:

Dear Ben,

There's a good chance that I will be long gone from this earth before you see this package but when you do, let me begin by saying that I'm pleased you've arrived thus far. I will be among the first to admit that we in the Brotherhood don't make it very easy to find us, but as you'll soon learn there are good reasons for our secretiveness. After all, we have suffered no small number of burnings at the stake in the past two millennia -- and that from a religion founded on the premise to love one

another as well as to love your neighbor as yourself. But this communication is not about them, it's about us.

Your mom assures me that you're open to the material I've gathered here for you and, having watched you closely during my visits over the years, I believe I can safely say that I agree with her. Nonetheless, I will warn you that learning about our fraternity is no easy task. Even Uncle Jonathan's great-nephew will have to prove his trustworthiness. Now don't let that scare you off if, as your Mom suggests, you find our faith-life attractive.

By now you're probably wondering just what this old man is talking about.

I remember how much you groused about your parents' insistence that you take Latin in high school when all your friends were taking Spanish. There was a reason for that (your attendance I mean). Your folks wanted to be certain that your education included a strong basis in classical languages and literature. Your struggle over "Arma virumque cano" and the like was not without purpose.

You see, your Mom and I follow the ancient faiths of Greece and Rome. That pantheon of gods means something to us. It's not just a bunch of fairy tales made up by primitives waiting for the Christ child. I expect that having said that much you see why we keep this fact a secret. From the time of the Roman Senate's decree in 163 B.C.E. which outlawed the Bacchanalia, the systematic eradication of people of our faith has been nearly all too successful.

In fact, archeologists believe that, except for a few fragments, the mysteries we celebrate are long gone. Fortunately the gods don't disappear that easily. Little do they know that the Bacchanalia is still celebrated by the monks of Eagle Ridge.

There, my dear nephew, you have the gist of our

secret. Having passed it into your hands, I trust you will honor the memory of your mother's uncle and not put my brethren in peril with loose talk.

What I am passing on to you are my journals, though they can be called that only in the loosest of terms. They are more a *mélange* of my musings, assorted clippings, quotes that meant something to me, and an occasional diary entry. There is no rhyme or reason to their compilation nor to the order in which they appear, except that they reflect my thoughts and feelings, as well as the books I was reading at the time of each entry and the musings I was having that day.

I didn't actually write the journal with you in mind, but over the years it slowly became my legacy to you. I hope you will study these pages. They are my effort to shed some light on the subject. If your heart wishes to follow this path, these books will help. If not, destroy them or return them to the brotherhood as you see fit.

Fare thee well, nephew.
Your loving uncle,
Jonathan Caminsky

Well, that was a mouthful. Just as the letters had indicated, the old man was no pious Christian at all. It's no wonder that my uncles and aunts didn't like him. Their one-way Jesus path left no room for those with other ways of thinking. My Mom, on the other hand, hadn't cared for their form of intolerance.

So he was a pagan. Until I had read those letters, I'd have never guessed that. After all, who ever heard of a monastery of pagans? Stonehenge, the Parthenon in Athens, even primitive tribes in Asia, I suppose, but a monastery full of pagans sounds strange to me. On the other hand, since some folks think that Buddhists are pagans, it is a reasonable idea.

But now that book he had given me when I was younger made a

little more sense, as did the other books that Mom had packed in the basement. I guess if I wanted to know more I'd have to dust them off and see what they had to say.

Jonathan had left me seven notebooks in all, many of them bound in cardboard which was printed with a black and white design, with lined pages sewn together, like I used in high school. Other, older ones were simply packets of sheets, numbered and quite orderly. Some entries were hand written, others were copies of quotations, or handouts of some sort. Each book was simply numbered, without any other title. The first entry in Book One read:

September 14, 1933 The novice master suggested today, though his demeanor was hardly that of one making a suggestion, that we begin our lives under his tutelage with the keeping of a journal. He said it would be ours in which to write, copy, or quote whatever we wished and that we would find it of great value as we made progress in the mysteries of which we wished to gain knowledge.

Thus began my study of my uncle's life and faith.

He was living at the time in a place called the Lodge, part of Eagle Ridge, and a retreat center of some sort where he attended classes and ceremonies devoted to his ancient gods. The most important one was obviously Dionysos, who was called Bacchus by the Romans.

From his writings the lodge seemed like a large well-appointed cabin hidden away from regular traffic and easy notice. There was a small staff dedicated to the indoctrination of applicants to this Order of which Jonathan eventually became a life-long member.

I knew that he had been born in 1905, and from the journal entry that he had joined the monastery at the age of 28. It didn't take too much reading to learn why the Order was so secretive. As a

clipping pasted under that first entry explained:

Dionysos, the Greek god and son of Zeus, called Bacchos (Bacchus) by the Romans, was a popular god with incredibly diverse forms of worship.. Thought to have originated in Thrace, he also had connections with Phrygia and perhaps Crete. He had numerous forms: a mighty bull, signifying animal maleness or more effeminate, as man with fair skin and long curls. His followers sometimes clothed themselves in fawn skins and carried thyrsi (the long poles, topped with ivy or vine leaves) and roamed forests and mountainsides. His rites also included theater as he was the god of drama.

Myths about Dionysos were numerous, including his birth from the thigh of his father Zeus, his mutilation and death at the hands of the Titan, and his descent (twice) into Hades to redeem his mother Semele and then Ariadne, who become his wife.

The Dionysian rituals included eating the raw flesh of wild beasts, drinking goblets of wine, a phallus hidden in a winnowing basket, and (among the Orphics who also worshipped Dionysos) in the immortal human soul. Those who were confronted with the vision of Dionysos and possessed by him felt his power in various ways: in ecstasy, in drunkenness, in sexual activity, and in spiritual bliss. Followers of Dionysos became one with the god and were called Bacche (feminine) or Bacchos (masculine) after the god himself.

Knowledge of the actual mysteries of Dionysos as long been lost but seem to have been as diverse as the manifestations of the god usually included eating and drinking. In the archaic and savage mysteries of Dionysos, as portrayed in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, those initiated into the cult were said to tear animals to pieces (sparagmos)

and eat the flesh raw (omophagia) as a way of assimilating the Dionysian power embodied within the animal. In more serene Bacchic rites, such as those held in Athens, the rite was reduced to a simple banquet. The holy drink that initiates of Dionysos drank was wine, the special gift of the god. Sexual practices were also a part of Dionysian ritual.

Jonathan then continued the thought with his reflection that “Little do they know that a great deal is known of the ‘actual mysteries of Dionysos.’”

If that entry wasn’t enough to pique my interest, the one written on the second day at the Lodge was.

Today our classes began in earnest, yesterday having been taken up with unpacking and a general orientation of the Lodge and the surrounding property. It seems the Brotherhood owns a great deal of these lands, the rest of which are primarily federal forest reserves. It must be quite the estate, as the ride up the driveway took more than 45 minutes.

There are three of us applicants: myself, an older man named Karl, and a young woman named Stephanie. I guess I might better stop calling this a brotherhood, in deference to the maiden who is my classmate, but I rather think that Brotherhood as a general term is quite acceptable. On the other hand, it is well-known, even by the mundane world, that the most notorious worshipers of Dionysos were women.

This fraternity takes no time in asserting itself in an applicant’s life. Frater David, the novice master, told us that tomorrow begins our week of abstinence. We are to have no sexual activity, either with one another, a fellow Brother or Sister, or even alone. I can’t believe that masturbation is off-limits. An idea like that is enough to send me home, though since it’s only for a week, I’ll do my best to manage it.

F.D. then went on to talk about the First Gift. It seems that our first official rite has something to do with offering seed to the gods. Well, after a week, I'll certainly be ready for that.

The entries that followed were all rather short and non-descript until:

September 22, 1933 Tomorrow is the Autumnal Equinox and the Rite of First Gift. I hope I can hold out until then. I'm not cut out for this abstention thing. After all I was raised to know that sex is a healthy exercise and ought to be readily enjoyed.

F.D. took time today to explain the rite to us and to finally answer our questions about it. This past week has been filled with way too much theology about Father Zeus and the Pantheon of gods.

During the week, each of us was interviewed by small groups of monks, as if they hadn't grilled us rather incessantly at meal times, in the gardens, or at any other opportunity for that matter. I feel like I've been under a microscope ever since I arrived here. I guess that's to be expected, inasmuch as the Order is very uptight about admitting an ill-suited candidate to its most sacred inner circle. I've actually had an easier time of it than Karl since my grandmother Sarah was rather well-known by several of the older members and she had taken me under her wing from a very early age, teaching me the way of the craft at her kitchen table.

All in all, I'm looking forward to one Hell of an orgasm tomorrow night, though doing so publicly, and in front of women for that matter, feels awkward.

As you can imagine, I was more than intrigued by those paragraphs. Unfortunately there was no entry for the next day, nor

for several days afterward. That turned out to be the case with most of the notebooks. Though there were hints of what was going to happen, the Journal turned out to be more a book of pre-Christian Theology than a graphic, or should I write pornographic, treatise. It took me about two weeks to read through them all and another month or so to scan the books I had inherited from my mother. They weren't very enlightening either, though they obviously dealt with witchcraft, spells and potions, and all sorts of psychic phenomena.

When I got through my reading I certainly had a different opinion of Uncle Jonathan and of my mother as well. I resolved to pay a second visit to that lawyer and find out more. This time I would make sure I had a chance to ask my questions. I got really busy at work for the next few weeks, so I wasn't able to schedule a return trip until mid-October.