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CHAPTER 38

The Turkey Shoot

1

In the Minimum Security room to which Schiller had been escorted by the guards were a lot of people he didn't recognize. One by one, they would pass in, try not to look confused, take a folding chair and sit down. Nobody was talking to anyone else. It did not have the atmosphere of a funeral, but there was an utter and polite calm.

Then Toni Gurney walked in. For the first time, Larry saw somebody he could say hello to and chatted with her. It was not so much that he was the man who broke the ice, but at least one conversation had begun, and soon a lot of people began to converse.

After a while, Vern came over and pointed out a fellow Schiller had noticed, a rather icy-looking man, wearing an obvious toupee, accompanied by two severe-looking women. Schiller assumed the fellow was a mortician, but Vern said, "That's the doctor who's going to take Gary's eyes out."

Then Stanger came into the room and he was furious. Judge Bullock had delayed the order. Now, Gary could be executed at any time during the day. "Would you believe that, Larry?" Schiller could see that Stanger didn't want Gary to be executed, and, in fact, when Moody came up, Ron still maintained that this would be another dry run. The execution was simply not going to come down. Schiller

heard someone in the corner say, "They may keep us here three hours."

Just then a guard came running in from the back door and yelled some words over his shoulder. "Overturned," he cried out. "It's on." At that moment, Stanger, for the first time, understood that Gary Gilmore was going to be shot. It went through him like he had been kicked in the chest. Then he felt chilled. It was an appalling sensation. The strangeness of the reaction went all through him. For the first time in his life, Ron could feel the ends of his nerves. His heart could have been caked in ice. He looked over at Schiller taking notes on the back of some paper and thought, "I'm sure glad he's recording all this, because I can't even move. I don't know if I can walk."

Then they started to transfer the guests. As they led him to the car, Stanger knew he must look ready to throw up. He felt as close to death as breathing, and wondered if he were going mad, because he would have bet a million Gary Gilmore would never be executed. It had made his job easy. He had never felt any moral dilemma in carrying out Gary's desires. In fact, he couldn't have represented him if he really believed the State would go through with it all. It had been a play. He had seen himself as no more important than one more person on the stage.

2

Out in the parking lot, the reporters were being awakened. There was a lot of banging on the doors of vans. "The firing squad is coming," someone shouted.

Robert Sam Anson, covering it for *New Times*, was taking notes: *"Once again, everyone is running. A hundred yards away, in Maximum, a police car, followed by a van, has pulled close to the gate. Now Sam Smith strides toward the building, erect, determined, coatless, oblivious to the cold. At 7:47, a small party of people emerges from the Maximum door; even at this distance, Gilmore can be seen quite distinctly. He is wearing white pants and a black T-shirt. . . . 'It all looks pretty good,' one of the guards comments. 'All that's left now is the paper work,' his partner answers.*

herd spooked into stampede. Camera lights tilt crazily up into the air as their bearers struggle to shift them into position. Producers are shouting orders. Directly in front of the prison building, Geraldo Rivera, attired in black leather jacket and jeans and looking cool, the way only Geraldo Rivera can look cool, is shouting into his mike. 'Kill the Rona segment. Get rid of it. Give me air. You'll be able to hear the shots. I promise. You'll be able to hear the shots.'"

When Gary came out of Maximum Detention, he was escorted to the van and seated behind the driver. Meersman sat next to him and then Warden Smith came in, and three new guards. The van drove slowly with the seven men, the only car moving in all that quarter mile of prison streets from Maximum Detention to the cannery.

As soon as they started, Gary reached in with both manacled hands to a pocket of his pants and took out a folded piece of paper and put it on his knee so that he could look at it. It was a picture of Nicole clipped from a magazine, and he stared at it.

When the driver of the van turned the key for the motor, the radio, having been on before, now went on again. The tension in the van was sufficient that everyone jumped. Then the words of a song were heard. The driver immediately reached down to turn the radio off, but Gary looked up and said, "Please leave it on." So they began to drive and there was music coming from the radio. The words of the song told of the flight of a white bird. "Una paloma blanca," went the refrain, "I'm just a bird in the sky. Una paloma blanca, over the mountains I fly."

The driver said again, "Would you like me to leave the radio on?" Again Gary said, "Yes."

"It's a new day, it's a new way," said the words, "and I fly up to the sun."

As they drove along slowly, and the song played, Father Meersman noticed that Gary no longer looked at the picture. It was as if the words had become more important.

*Once I had my share of losing,
Once they locked me on a chain,
Yes, they tried to break my power,*

No one spoke any longer and the song played through.

*No one can take my freedom away,
Yes, no one can take my freedom away.*

When it was done, they drove in silence and got out at the cannery, one by one, disembarking in the way they had practiced in the early hours of the morning when these same prison guards had walked through the scene with a model standing in for Gary. Now, they brought him into the cannery, very, very smoothly. Meersman felt that the practice had paid big dividends.

*Last nite I flew in my dream
like a white bird through the window . . .
Tonite i will tell my soul to fly me to you.*

3

All through the trip from Maximum to the cannery, all the while "La Paloma Blanca" was playing, Father Meersman did not have any particular feelings as such. Like anything else, one had to proceed to each particular stage in order that it all run smoothly. That was the uppermost thing in his mind, to be thinking ahead to the next step, so that even getting into the van, there wouldn't be any stumbling.

It had been beautifully planned, Father Meersman thought. Even to the care with which they had arranged that as the vehicle with Gary Gilmore in it moved from Maximum to the cannery, all the traffic in the prison compound would stop with no vehicles moving while this one vehicle made its way, so that for the purposes of security, everything was protected. The authorities had timed this transfer with a stopwatch whereby they knew as far as you can humanly know how long it would take for the van to go to this corner and then to that corner, and Father Meersman had occupied himself so intensely in the logic of these steps that he did not have a feeling he could really reflect on other than his paramount concern that Gary

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Gilmore not be upset in any way through this whole thing. It was Gary Gilmore's calm frame of mind he wanted to carry through the procedure smoothly and have finished smoothly, and on the flow of such quiet thoughts, his black wintertime coat wrapped around him, Father Meersman arrived with the others at the cannery.

Now, it was important to make sure that the van be as close to the steps as possible. Gary would be wearing shackles, and uppermost in Father Meersman's mind was that he should not have a long, slow, painful walk. In fact, Father Meersman did not take his mind away from the mechanics of these activities until the entire procedure had come to its conclusion and they had mounted the nine or ten wooden steps that would take them into the room of execution, and Gilmore was set in that chair. Then Father Meersman felt they were home, and everything would go smoothly.

Gary's prosecutor

Noall Wootton left the Warden's office to walk over to the cannery. He was taking his time. With luck, it might all be over before he got there, but the Utah County Sheriff made a point of stopping to pick him up, and they drove to a door in a warehouse where the Assistant Warden, Leon Hatch, waved Wootton in. It was a big room with gray cement-block walls. That was all he could see, for he went immediately to the rear. Noall was struck with how many people were there. A lot of huge guys were in front of him. Wootton couldn't see a thing. That was fine. He didn't want to get in anybody's way. He just stayed in the back with the empty paint cans, the old tires, and the discarded machinery.

4

Out in Denver, Earl Dorius was wandering down the corridor when he noticed Jack Ford of KSL on the telephone. As soon as Jack came out of the booth, Earl inquired what was going on at the prison, and heard that they were proceeding, and the car carrying Gilmore had just reached the cannery.

This was the first time, during what Earl thought of as the entire ordeal, that it became real a man was about to be killed. Now he felt

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in his own nerves the tension that Gordon Richards had felt when Earl first gave him the message, and these feelings also gave Earl a clue to the sentiments of the prison personnel. He passed through a very heavy feeling of anguish for the Warden. It would not be easy for his friend, Sam Smith, to order the execution of a man.

Earl decided that he, however, really did not feel any pity for Gilmore. The impact this man had had on the families of his victims, even the vastly lesser impact on Earl's own life these last few months when he hardly saw his children, was not conducive to feeling much compassion. Only sorrow for the Warden.

After Judith Wolbach left the courtroom, she looked down from a high window in the corridor at the gray dawn coming in, and became aware of an emotional void in herself. The thing most disturbing to Judith at this moment was that she felt so dirty. She hadn't even had a chance to go home that night or change her shirt. Just felt sweaty and tired and really disgusted. It shocked her that she had no other reaction. She thought the Bench had exhibited despicable behavior, and she felt nasty about Dorius, and that was it.

5

Outside Minimum Security, cars were waiting for the people who would witness the execution, and at the end of a short drive, Schiller saw a camper back up against the cement-brick building they called the cannery and he said to himself, "That's the executioners." Then he heard a noise above and was startled. The press release put out by the prison had stated that the air space above the prison up to 1,500 feet was going to be off limits. But there was a copter directly overhead. Later, Schiller found out that a newspaper had been able to get away with it and take pictures of Gilmore being transferred, because the release had specified airplanes, not helicopters.

Just in back of the cannery, Schiller saw a black canvas structure that had been built out on the loading platform like an extra room, and he realized the executioners must be waiting in there. Then his car went around another corner of the building, and he saw

Vern, Moody, and Stanger get out of the automobile ahead and go up the entrance steps. When it was his turn to walk through the door, Schiller could see from the corner of his eye that Gary was to his right and strapped in a chair. What hit him before he even took a true look, was that Gary's end of the room was lit, not brightly like a movie set, but lights were on him, and the rest of the room was dark. He was up on a little platform. It was like a stage. With the chair so prominent, it felt more as if an electrocution was going to take place than a shooting.

As Schiller walked forward, the rear view of Gary's head changed to a profile, and then he was able to see a little of his face. At that point, Gilmore acknowledged his presence, and Schiller nodded back. The next thing he noticed was that Gilmore was not strapped tightly into the chair. It was the first detail that really hit him. Everything was loose.

There were straps around his arms and legs, but they all had a good inch of slack. He could have pulled his hands right out of their restraints. Then, as Schiller continued to move forward, he saw a painted line before him on the floor, and an official said, "Stand behind that," so he wheeled and faced the chair. Now, with Gilmore again on his right, Schiller could see to his left a black blind with slots in it, and he estimated the distance at twenty-five feet from himself and about the same distance from Gilmore. Then, he took a good look.

It was the first time Schiller had seen Gary in person since December. At this moment, he looked tired, depleted, thin, older than Schiller had ever seen him, and a little glassy-eyed. A tired old bird with very bright eyes.

The next thing to impress Schiller was that Gary was still in control. He was carrying on conversations, not loud enough to hear, but saying something to the guards strapping him, to the Warden, and to the priest. Maybe there were eight people around him in maroon jackets. Schiller was about to put down in his notes that they were prison officials, but that was exactly what he wished to guard against. No journalistic assumptions. So he would not suppose they were prison officials. Just people in red coats. Then, as his photographer's

eye grew accustomed to the scene, he could not quite believe what he next observed. For the seat of execution was no more than a little old office chair, and behind it was an old filthy mattress backed up by sandbags and the stone wall of the cannery. They had rammed that mattress between the chair and the sandbags, a last-minute expedient, no doubt, as if, sometime during the night, they had decided that the sandbags weren't enough and bullets might go through, hit the wall, and ricochet. But the dirty mattress repelled Schiller. He said to himself, My God, they stitched the black canvas neatly around the rifle slots for the assassins. Then he realized the word he was using.

Still, you could not ignore the contrast between the meticulous preparation of the blind, and Gary's chair with its filthy ramshackle backdrop. Even the bindings around his arms looked to be made out of cheap webbing.

6

Ron Stanger's first impression was how many people were in the room. God, the number of spectators. Executions must be a spectator sport. It really hit him even before his first look at Gary, and then he was thankful the hood was not on yet. That was a relief. Gilmore was still a human being, not a hooded, grotesque thing, and Ron realized how he had been preparing himself for the shock of seeing Gary with his face concealed in a black bag. But, no, there was Gary staring at the crowd with an odd humor in his face. Stanger knew what he was thinking. "Anybody who knows somebody is going to get an invite to the turkey shoot."

Stanger hadn't thought there would be anybody here to speak of, but there must have been fifty people behind the white line. Any cop or bureaucrat who had a little pull had gotten in. Stanger could hear Bob Moody's words about Sam Smith, so often repeated. "He's a very sincere man. It's just that he's incompetent. Totally incompetent." Here were all these Sheriffs and County Troopers Stanger had never seen before, come right out of the woodwork — how could you be respected in your profession if you weren't here?

Moody also felt anger at all the people who had been invited. Sam Smith had given them such fuss whether it would be five or seven guests. Now there were all these needless people pressed behind the line, and the executioners back of the screen talking. You couldn't hear what they were saying, but you could hear them, and it incensed Bob that Ernie Wright, Director of Corrections, was dancing around greeting people, practically gallivanting with his big white cowboy hat, looking like a Texas bureaucrat.

Moody had the feeling that the riflemen behind the blind were purposely not looking at Gary, but keeping their backs to him, chatting away in a group, and would only turn around at the last minute when given the order. Ron Stanger, situated next to Bob Moody, wanted to get up and say to all, "Here, bless your heart, you wouldn't give this man a piece of pizza before you blow his guts out." That's what he wanted to say, but he didn't dare. It would have been too hysterical. Couldn't let the man, he would have shouted, have his pizza and a six-pack of beer. Rather have it wind up in a correctional belly, wouldn't you?

Cline Campbell's first thought when he walked into the room was, my goodness, do they sell tickets to this? All the same, Campbell could feel how everybody was scared to death. It hung over the execution. The good old bureaucratic fear that somebody in an official place was going to forget something. Then there'd be all political or legal hell to pay. Campbell just contented himself with saying to Gary, "How are you doing?" and then he stood to one side of the chair and Father Meersman to the other, and Father Meersman got a cup of water and Gilmore took a sip of it as the priest held it to his mouth.

An official came up to Vern and said Gary wanted to speak to him. Vern walked over into the light that was on Gary, and his nephew looked up at him with those baby-blue eyes of his, and Vern felt he'd like to pull him out of that chair, just pull him out of that chair and make him free again. Vern was feeling a great deal of emotion. He didn't want him in that chair, really.

Gary said, "Look, take this watch. I don't want anybody to have it but Nicole." He had broken it and taped it with the hands set at 7:49. Now, he handed it to Vern. Must have been holding it all this while.

Then Gary said, "I want you to promise you'll see to it that Nicole is taken care of." How in the world Gary figured he could take care of her, Vern didn't know, but Gary had to ask somebody. They shook hands and Gary started to squeeze his hand, right there in the chair as if he could crush Vern's knuckles. He said to Vern, "Come on, I'll give you a go," and Vern said, "Gary, I could pull you right out of that chair if I wanted to."

Gary said, "Would you?"

Vern went back to his place behind the line and thought of the conversation he'd had weeks before when Gary asked him and Ida to be witnesses, and Vern had said, "I don't want Ida to see it," and Gary said, "but I want *you* there, Vern."

"I don't know whether I can take it or not," Vern had said, "I don't think I can." Gary had said, "Well, I want you there."

"Why?" Vern asked. "Why do you want me?"

"Well, Vern," Gary said, "I want to show you. I've already shown you how I live" — he gave his most mocking smile — "and I'd like to show you how I can die." Vern thought all this now must be part of what he had said then because, back behind the line, feeling Gary's hand still on his, Vern wanted to tell him, "That was so good, Gary, what you just did."

Bob Moody came next, and he shook hands. Gary had a smaller hand than Bob had expected, but neither cold nor feverishly warm, just a shock, for it was a warm, living hand like any other. Gary looked at him and said, "Well, Moody, I'm going to leave you my hair. You need it worse than I do."

Schiller was next. As he walked up, he kept worrying about the right thing to say. But when he got there, he was dazed by the immensity of it all. It was as if he was saying good-bye to a man who was going to step into a cannon and be fired to the moon, or dropped in an iron chamber to the bottom of the sea, a veritable Houdini. He grasped both of Gilmore's hands and it didn't matter if the man was a murderer, he could just as well have been a saint, for either at this moment seemed equally beyond Schiller's way of measure — and he said, he heard it come out of him, "I don't know what I'm here for."

Gilmore replied, "You're going to help me escape." Schiller looked at him sitting in the chair and said, "I'll do it the best way

that's humanly possible," and was thinking by that, he would treat it all in the most honest way, and Gilmore smiled back at him with that funny tight grin of his, just a little expression in the upper lip, as if he alone knew the meaning of what had just been said, and then the grin broadened into that thin-lipped smile he showed on occasion, evil as a jackal, subtly jeering, the last facial expression Schiller would have to remember of Gilmore. They shook hands, Gilmore's grip kind of weak, and Schiller walked away not knowing whether he had handled the moment the way he should. Didn't even know if it was a moment to be handled. He felt like he had no real relationship to Gilmore.

Vern had gone first because he was the patriarch, then Bob Moody, but Schiller had tried to be last. Stanger had thought, "You've got to be kidding, you're even doing it now," and won the maneuvering. Larry went ahead. When it came Stanger's turn, he couldn't think of anything to say. Just murmured, "Hang in there. Stick with it." Gary didn't look very tough. Wan, in fact. His eye showed the effect of all those drugs wearing off. He was trying to be brave, but just said, "Cool," like it wasn't that easy anymore to get the words out, and they shook hands. Gary squeezed real hard, and Stanger put his arm around his shoulder, and Gary moved the hand that was loose in the straps to touch Ron's arm. Stanger kept thinking that Gilmore's hands were skinnier than you'd think they'd be. And they looked in each other's eyes, kind of a final embrace.

As soon as Ron returned to his position behind the line, a prison official came up to ask if he wanted cotton for his ears. Then Ron noticed that everybody was taking cotton, so he stuffed some into his head, and watched Sam Smith walk over to the back of the room where a red telephone was on a chair. Then Sam Smith made a phone call, and walked back and came up to Gary and started to read a declaration.

Schiller, trying to listen, decided it was some official document. Not the sort, by the sound of it, that he would listen to normally but, through the cotton he could hear Sam Smith going blah, blah, blah. All the while, Gary was not looking at the Warden, but rather, leaning in his chair from side to side in order to stare around the large body of Sam Smith, practically tipping that chair over trying to see

the faces behind the executioner's blind, catch a glint of their expression.

Then the Warden said, "Do you have anything you'd like to say?" and Gary looked up at the ceiling and hesitated, then said, "Let's do it." That was it. The most pronounced amount of courage, Vern decided, he'd ever seen, no quaver, no throatiness, right down the line. Gary had looked at Vern as he spoke.

The way Stanger heard it, it came out like Gary wanted to say something good and dignified and clever, but couldn't think of anything profound. The drugs had left him too dead. Rather than say nothing, he did his best to say it very clear, "Let's do it."

That was about what you'd expect of a man who'd been up for more than twenty-four hours and had taken everything and now was hung over, and coming down, and looking older than Ron had ever seen him. Ah, he was drained out. Ron could see deep lines in his face for the first time. Gilmore looked as white as the day the lawyers first met him after the suicide attempt.

Father Meersman walked up to give the last rites, and Noall Wootton braced himself and took a peep between the shoulders of some of the big men in front of him, and remembered Gary when he had come to the Board of Pardons Hearing, very confident that day, like he was holding all the cards, the ace and everything else you might need. Now, in Wootton's opinion, he didn't have it.

And Schiller, looking at the same man, thought he was resigned in his appearance, but with presence, and what you could call a certain authority.

Father Meersman finished giving Gary Gilmore the last rites. As they came forward with the hood, Gilmore said to him, "Dominus vobiscum." Father Meersman didn't know how to describe his emotion. Gary couldn't have said anything that brought back more of an automatic response. This was the greeting Father Meersman had given to the people again and again over the ten years and twenty and thirty since he had become a priest. "Dominus vobiscum," he would say at Mass and the response would come back, "Et cum spiritu tuo."

So now, when Gilmore said *Dominus vobiscum*, Father Meersman answered like an altar boy, "*Et cum spiritu tuo*," and as the words came out of his mouth, Gary kind of grinned and said, "There'll always be a Meersman."

"He wants to say," said Father Meersman to himself, "that there will always be a priest present at a time like this."

Three or four men in red coats came up and put the hood on Gilmore's head. Nothing was said after that.

Absolutely nothing said. They put a waist strap on Gilmore, and a head strap, and Father Meersman began to think of how when they were first strapping him in the chair, Gilmore had wanted water and Father Meersman had given him water for the throat that was too dry. Then he had wanted another drink.

Now, the doctor was beside him, pinning a white circle on Gilmore's black shirt, and the doctor stepped back. Father Meersman traced the big sign of the cross, the last act he had to perform. Then, he, too, stepped over the line, and turned around, and looked back at the hooded figure in the chair. The phone began to ring.

Noall Wootton's first reaction was, God, it's just like in the movies, it isn't going to happen. Schiller was taking notes on the checks he'd been careful to remove from the checkbook holder, and he noted that the hood came down loosely like a square carton over Gary's head. Not form fitting in any way. You could not have a sense of his features beneath the sack.

Stanger, listening to the phone, thought, "It is a final confirmation of some kind." Then Sam Smith hung up, and walked back to his place behind the line, and it happened to be next to Schiller. He handed Larry more cotton and they looked into each other's eyes. Then, Schiller didn't know if Sam Smith made a movement with his arm, or didn't, but he felt as if he saw something in the Warden's shoulder move, and Ron and Bob Moody and Cline Campbell heard a countdown begin, and Noall Wootton put his fingers in his ears on top of the cotton, and Gary's body looked calm to Campbell. Cline could not believe the calm he saw in that man. Gilmore was so strong

in his desire to die right, that he didn't clench his fist as the count began.

Stanger said to himself, "I hope I don't fall down." He had his hand up to protect his head somehow. Right through the cotton, he heard the sound of heavy breathing and saw the barrels of the rifles projecting from the slits of the blind. He was shocked at how close those muzzles were to the victim. They sure didn't want to miss. Then it all got so quiet your attention was called to it. Right through the cotton, Ron heard these whispers, "One," and "Two," and they never got to say, "Three" before the guns went, "Bam. Bam. Bam." So loud it was terrifying. A muscle contracted from Ron's shoulder down to his lower back. Some entire school of muscles in a spasm.

Schiller heard three shots, expecting four. Gary's body did not jerk nor the chair move, and Schiller waited for the fourth shot and found out later that two must have come out simultaneously. Noall Wootton tried to look at Gary at that point, but couldn't see anything from the rear of the crowd and went out the door before anyone else, and straight to his car which was up by Minimum Security, got in it, drove out. There were reporters interviewing people and photographers, but he didn't stop. He didn't want to talk to anybody.

7

Vern just heard a great big WHAM! When it happened, Gary never raised a finger. Didn't quiver at all. His left hand never moved, and then, after he was shot, his head went forward, but the strap held his head up, and then the right hand slowly rose in the air and slowly went down as if to say, "That did it, gentlemen." Schiller thought the movement was as delicate as the fingers of a pianist raising his hand before he puts it down on the keys. The blood started to flow through the black shirt and came out onto the white pants and started to drop on the floor between Gary's legs, and the smell of gunpowder was everywhere. Then, the lights went down, and Schiller listened to the blood drip. He was not certain he could hear it drip, but he felt it, and with that blood, the life in Gilmore's body seemed to lift off him like smoke. Ron Stanger, feeling dizzy, said to himself, "You're the only

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one that's going to pass out, and it will be embarrassing to end on the ground with all these people here," and he staggered backward from the force of the contraction in his back, put his arms out, grabbed hold of somebody to steady himself, and turned back to get another look at the body. That was when he saw Gilmore's right hand lift.

Ron closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the blood was a pool in Gary's lap, running to his feet and covering his tennis shoes, those crazy red, white and blue tennis shoes he always wore in Maximum. The shoelaces were now blooded over.

A doctor came along with a stethoscope and shook his head. Gilmore wasn't dead yet.

Ron thought of the day when Gary was in Fagan's office for a moment, and in that ten seconds Gary was all over his desk like a butterfly. He opened the desk drawer and took out a spoon, and shoelaces, went through everything like a guy leading an orchestra. It was beautiful. Gilmore was a *talented* thief, after all, and finished just as Fagan said, "Yeah, okay, Joe." By the time the Lieutenant turned around, old Gary was sitting there calm as a nodding owl, and Stanger on the other side of the glass had his eyes wide open.

Gary made jokes about the shoelaces after that. They were good enough to hang himself by, he would tell Ron, and now the hand that had done the stealing moved up in the air and came down. It could have been pointing at the blood on the shoelaces.

They waited about twenty seconds. Then the doctor went up again, and Father Meersman came up, and Sam Smith, and the doctor put the stethoscope to Gary's arm once more, turned to Sam, and nodded. Sam Smith unloosened the waist strap, slid Gilmore out from underneath the head strap, and looked behind the body at the shot pattern where the holes came through.

Stanger was furious. The moment Gilmore was shot, everybody should have been walked out, and not served for a party to all this. Even as Sam was examining the body, Gary fell over into Meersman's hands. The padre had to hold the head while Sam went fishing all over Gilmore's back to locate the exit wounds. Blood started com-

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ing onto Meersman's hands, and dripped through his fingers, and Vern began to weep. Then Father Meersman wept. An officer finally came around and said to the people standing behind the line, "Time for you to leave." Schiller walked out saying to himself, "What have we accomplished? There aren't going to be less murders."

All the while Father Meersman and Cline Campbell were unbuckling Gilmore's arms and legs. Campbell kept thinking of the importance of the eyes. He said to himself, "Why doesn't somebody move? We've got to save the eyes."

8

Over at the Warden's office, just a few minutes earlier, Gordon Richards had received a phone call from an Assistant Clerk in the U.S. Supreme Court, who was saying that the full Court — with Justice Brennan not participating — had just acted on the application for a Stay from the ACLU and had denied it. Richards got a little upset. This Clerk who was named Peter Beck had been told nothing about "Mickey from Wheeling, West Virginia." Well, did Mr. Beck know, Richards asked, where Mr. Rodak was born and what his nickname was? "Is it Mike?" said Beck. Richards then asked if Mr. Rodak could call him. Before he knew it, he got put on hold. "Hurry, please," Richards called out to Beck, "it's crucial." There he was sitting with unconfirmed information from the Supreme Court. So he called out to the prison officials there with him in the Warden's office, "Tell them to hold at the cannery." The officials shook their heads, however. The execution had just been carried out.

Three minutes later, Rodak came on the line. Richards asked for his nickname and his birthplace. The nickname was Mickey, he said, but he had been born in Smock, Pennsylvania.

"What about West Virginia?" asked Richards. "I was born in Smock," said Rodak, "but I went to West Virginia. I'm a member of the West Virginia Bar."

Had he offered this information to Earl Dorius? asked Richards. Didn't think so, said Rodak. Finally, he remembered. "Oh, yes, the fellow wanted to make sure that he didn't get any false telephone calls." Right. "Is," asked Rodak, "the execution over yet?"

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THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

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DESERET NEWS

Start

Emotions High Before Sunrise

By Tamera Smith

Deseret News staff writer

Utah State Prison, Jan. 17 — Anticipation, resignation, anger, disappointment, frustration and confusion were emotions that followed close upon each others' heels during the early morning hours today in Gary Mark Gilmore's prison quarters.

At 4:07 P.M., Gilmore's last meal was brought to him in his cell. It consisted of steak, potatoes, bread, butter, peas, cherry pie, coffee and milk. He had only coffee and milk.

Between 8 and 9 P.M., he asked prison staff members to call Radio Station KSOP and request two of his favorite songs — "Valley of Tears" and "Walking in the Footsteps of Your Mind."

Two switchboard operators spent the night taking calls from all over the world.

From Munich, Germany, one woman called 17 times.

"My husband died in a concentration camp," she said. "The same thing is happening there. America's no better than that," was her repeated contention.

Another woman caller cried, saying she had a dream three weeks ago that Gary should not die.

~~Schiller had reassigned Jerry Scott from watching over the office to meeting up with Gary's body in Salt Lake. Jerry was to make certain no kooks tried something while the autopsy took place.~~

On the drive from Orem to the hospital, Jerry Scott was mulling over how he had been the one to take Gary to Utah State Prison from the County Jail right after his trial, and now, he'd probably be the last

one to view the remains. That was a large enough coincidence to occupy your mind.

The autopsy room on the fifth floor at the University of Utah Hospital was good sized with two slabs and Jerry, by way of his police work, was familiar with it. Postmortems for the State were held there. This morning, they had just brought in the body of a woman who had drowned in a river north of Salt Lake, and they had her beside Gary, the two tables about ten feet apart.

At first, it was hard to tell who were the doctors what with three males and three females all around the tables, and a couple of them busy removing Gilmore's eyes, and then another team on the organs for the transplants. They all seemed to be working in a great rush, and obviously had to get everything out pretty quickly. All the same, another doctor, watching, kept saying, "Can you hurry? I have a lot of work to do," and just a little later, "Aren't you done with him yet?" Finally, the last of the special doctors said, "Yes, he's yours," and the regular autopsy crew took over.

Jerry Scott stood only three or four feet away. He was curious to see what was going on, and the medical examiner told him he could be a witness to the postmortem, and took his name, plus the name of Cordell Jones, a Deputy Sheriff whom Jerry Scott was glad to see there, because Jerry expected trouble later with the people outside when Gary's body would be transported from the hospital to the crematorium. In fact, he asked Cordell Jones to help on crowd control. Jerry had counted at least twenty people down below at the hospital door of which only a couple were bona fide newsmen, and, more than a good dozen, oddballs and thrill-seekers. So, at the least, Jerry was expecting problems and a confrontation, possibly with agitators.

The doctor who had been getting the transplants had left Gary open from above the pubic hair to his breastbone. Now, the autopsy crew washed him down and the examiner took a scalpel, and continued the incision up the breastbone to the neck, and continued the cut on out to the shoulder on each side. Then, he started pulling up.

He skinned Gilmore right up over his shoulders like taking a shirt half off, and with a saw cut right up the breastbone to the

throat, and removed the breastplate and set it in a big, open sink with running water. Then, he took out what was left of Gilmore's heart. Jerry Scott couldn't believe what he saw. The thing was pulverized. Not even half left. Jerry didn't recognize it as the heart. Had to ask the doctor. "Excuse me," he said, "is that it?" The doctor said, "Yup."

"Well, he didn't feel anything, did he?" asked Jerry Scott. The doctor said, "No." Jerry had been looking at the bullet pattern earlier, and there had been four neat little holes you could have covered with a water glass, all within a half inch of each other. The doctors had been careful to take quite a few pictures. They numbered every hole with a Magic Marker, and turned Gary over to photograph where each bullet exited from his back. Looking at those marks, Jerry could see the guys on the firing squad hadn't been shaky at all. You could tell they'd all squeezed off a good shot.

Of course, Jerry was always thinking about getting shot himself. It could happen any time on duty. He had to keep wondering what it would be like. Now, looking at the heart, he repeated, "He didn't feel anything, did he?" The doctor said, "No, nothing." Jerry said, "Well, did he move around after he was shot?" The doctor said, "Yes, about two minutes." "Was that just nerves?" Jerry asked. The fellow said, "Yes," and added, "He was dead, but we had to officially wait until he quit moving. That was about two minutes later."

After this, it got really gruesome. Jerry had to admit it. They started removing different parts of Gilmore's body. Took his plumbing out, stomach, entrails and everything, then cut little pieces out of each organ. One guy was up at the head just working away. Next thing you knew, he had Gilmore's tongue in his hand. "Why take that?" asked Jerry Scott. He didn't know whether his questions bothered the doctors or not, but since he had to witness, he thought he might as well find out what was going on. The dissectionist answered, "We're going to take a sample of it." Put the tongue down on the slab, cut it in half and sliced out a piece. Put it in a bottle of solution.

Jerry Scott had seen a lot of bodics, and gone to a lot of plane wrecks, and he knew what a person dismembered could look like, but

just sitting there, watching them cut away, got to him. These fellows were really good at it, and kept talking back and forth, but they couldn't have been less excited if they were in a meat stall doing a job on a quarter of beef. Once in a while they'd call across to some other medics working on that woman who had drowned. She was so fat, that when they cut her open, her stomach hung over her thigh. Kept working like it was nothing.

Now, the fellow who was at the head of Jerry's table made an incision from behind Gary's left ear all the way up across the top of his head and then down below to the other ear, after which he grabbed the scalp on both sides of the cut, and pulled it right open, just pulled the whole face down below his chin until it was inside out like the back of a rubber mask. Then he took a saw and cut around the skull. Picked up something like a putty knife, and pried the bone open, popped the top of the head off. Then, he stuck his hand inside the cavity and pulled the brain out, weighed it. Pound and a half, it looked like to Jerry Scott. Then they removed the pituitary, put it aside, and sliced the brain like meat loaf. "Why are you doing that?" asked Jerry Scott. "Well," said one of the doctors, "we're looking for tumors." They started explaining to him about the different areas of the brain, and how they were looking to see if there were any problems in Gary Gilmore's motor system. Everything, however, looked to be just fine.

Then they took pictures of his tattoos. "Mom" had been written on his left shoulder, and "Nicole" on his left forearm. They took his fingerprints, and then they took all the organs they did not need for dissection and put them back into the body and head cavities, and drew his face up, pulled it right back taut over the bones and muscles, like putting on the mask again, fit the sawed-off bone-cap back on the skull, and sewed the scalp, and body cavity. When they were all finished, it looked like Gary Gilmore again.

During all of this, Jerry Scott noticed that Gilmore only had two teeth on his bottom gums and none on the top. Then they put his false teeth back. Looking at him now, reconstituted, Jerry Scott was amazed to see he had quite a layer of body fat for a fellow as skinny as he was. Still, he looked in pretty good shape, practically the build of an athlete, but for that belly fat.

Jerry looked at his watch then. It was one-thirty in the afternoon. He had been there four hours. Then the fellow from Walker Mortuary came over, and they put Gilmore on a rollaway-type bed with sheets covering him and a nice blanket over the top, and scooted him out to the street and loaded him in a hearse where they took him over to the Shriner Crematorium in Salt Lake. Maybe because of the four hours it took, there was no crowd waiting outside the hospital, and although they had two other police to meet them when they arrived, no crowd was at the crematorium either.

Since the coffin would be incinerated with the body, they had only a welfare-type casket waiting. It was made of plywood, although covered in maroon velvet, and it had silver rails on the side, and nice white satin on the inside, plus a real nice satin pillow. It was better than just a plain wood box, although nowhere near one of the fancy metal jobs.

Among Jerry Scott's orders this day was to make sure the right guy was being burned. So, just before they put the casket into the furnace, he lifted the sheet to verify Gary's face. Then they lifted the big oven door they had slammed down earlier to protect against the four-foot flame that shot out during the preheating, and inserted the box and body. Once it was in the kiln, and burning for a few minutes, they opened the door another time for Jerry, and the guy who ran the place took a long poker and knocked off the head of the casket. Then they stared through a furnace hole about fourteen inches by fourteen through which Jerry Scott could see Gary's head. Already the scalp was burning and the skin was falling off to the side.

Scott could see Gary's face going, and the top flesh blacken and disappear. Then the muscle began to burn, and Gilmore's arms which had been folded on his chest came up from the tightening, and lifted until the fingers of both hands were pointing at the sky. That was the very last recognition Jerry Scott had of him. He kept this picture in his head all the while the body was burning, and that was plenty of time, for he had gone to the furnace at two-thirty, and the work wasn't done until five when there was nothing left but a bit of ash and the char of the bones.

1979)

1967

Novelist Shelved

Norman Mailer passed away yesterday after celebrating his fifteenth divorce and sixteenth wedding. "I just don't feel the old vim," complained the writer recently. He was renowned in publishing circles for his blend of fictional journalism and factual fiction, termed by literary critic William Buckley: Contemporaneous Ratiocinative Aesthetical Prolegomena. Buckley was consequently sued by Mailer for malicious construction of invidious acronyms. "Norman does take himself seriously," was Mr. Buckley's reply. "Of course, he is the last of those who do."

At the author's bedside were eleven of his fifteen ex-wives, twenty-two of his twenty-four children, and five of his seven grandchildren, of whom four are older than six of their uncles and aunts.

At present, interest revolves around the estate. Executors have warned that Mailer, although earning an average income of one and a half million dollars a year, has had to meet an annual overhead of two million, three hundred thousand, of which two million, two hundred and fifty thousand went in child support, alimony, and back IRS payments. It is estimated his liabilities outweigh his assets by eight million, six hundred thousand.

When asked on occasion why he married so often, the former Pulitzer Prize winner replied, "To get divorced. You don't know anything about a woman until you meet her in court."



1968

At the memorial service, passages from his favorite literary works, all penned by himself, were read, as well as messages from prominent Americans.

His old friend, Truman Capote, said, "He was always so butch. I thought he'd outlive us all."

Gore Vidal, his famous TV and cocktail-party adversary, commented sadly, "Norman did lack the wit that copes. I would add that he had the taste of a Snopes, but why advertise William Faulkner, who's responsible for everything godawful in American penmanship—one can't call it letters."

Andy Warhol said, "I always thought Norman kept a low profile. That's what I liked about him so much."

Gloria Steinem stated: "A pity. He was getting ready to see the light."

Jimmy Carter, serving his fifth consecutive term as president, replied in answer to a question at his press conference this morning, "It is my wife's and I regret that we never did get to invite Norman Miller to the White House, but we will mourn his passing. He did his best to improve the state of American book-writing and reading, which we all need and applaud."

(end)

from Boston Magazine
May, 1969

1969

~~PROPS~~

1977

✓ After Death Comes Limbo

~~Channel 1~~~~Redacted text~~

Limbo was a house of many mansions. Mailer's spirits, while hardly free — they whipped around his soul like electrons orbiting a ring — began, nonetheless, to awake. The telling monotonies of Limbo (all those faceless fornications that rang in the ears, those stupors that drifted like bad weather, apathies piling on apathies like old newspapers, the crackle of static, and the playback of cocktail gabble, the gluttony of red wine taken after white wine on top of harshly cooked food, or the holes in one's memory now plugged with electronic hum, plus the horror of contemplating drops from heights where one did not want to find oneself, and all the stations of the cross of feeling empty while waiting for subway trains and airline shuttles and waitresses in busy lunchrooms) all such items having been so far experienced in Limbo as direct punishment, now began to partake of ecological logic. ~~It may be that Lish's letter had something to do with it.~~

Mailer began to believe that this enforced immersion in every sensation, episode, glut, glop, and repellent handle of experience (his vision filled with nothing but the faces of digital watches, the smell of pharmacies, the touch of polyester shirts, the wet wax-paper of McDonald's hamburgers, the air of summer when traffic jams, and shrieks of stereo as the volume is mis-laid, the little nausea that plastic highball glasses will give to the resonance of booze) were not necessarily items to scourge him around one eternity before dispatching him to another, but might be instead his own natural field of expiation. In place of his soul expiring, or suffering some whole damnation now, he might still be part of his own karmic chain and going through a purification of those misspent hours before being thrown back into the contest again. A joke resounded in his ears. "It's a great day for the race," said the elevator operator in the acrylic uniform in the Formica-paneled cage. "What race?" said the passenger. "The human race," said the elevator operator and laughed his way up the ascension.

All who died were guilty. In part, at least, they were guilty, and conceivably they were innocent in part, and Limbo, thought Mailer, might even be the charity to suppose that innocence, if it wanted to go back to the race, was in need of education. Limbo, on the consequence, took all those moral stances embedded in concrete, and

wrenched them askew. In the mansion, there was that human, for instance, who held the award for the most faithful church attendance over two decades in the American Midwest; now, he was pissing and moaning up a storm at the injustice of being here. Still, he was guilty. The inhabitants were all judged by one fine measure: had they or had they not wasted more of the soul's substance than was required by the exigencies of their life? Since the first perception offered here was that the most consumable substance of the soul was nothing other than time; that Time, whole and mysterious bed of light, electricity, and force, was invested, like the true fund of the realm, in every soul, it followed as a consequence that Time was not to be wasted, but rather, whatever the warp of one's upbringing, was to be spent, all neurotic, psychotic, screwball, timid, stingy, spendthrift, violent or fear-filled habits taken into account, was still to be spent as wittily, cheerfully, and/or bravely as possible.

That was the standard of Limbo. Time was not to be wasted. It came over one, even on emerging from the first stupefying sleep (and therefore beginning to suffer monotony, apathy, and the boredom that comes from being out of Time) that this dreadful experience, these appalling emptinesses of the spiritual gut which now made up the hours — could one presume to speak still of hours: rather was one not living in seamless non-dark non-light units punctuated by no breath? — was, while a doleful experience, steeped in torpor, still a course in orientation over spiritual ills. For instance, the Midwestern churchgoer now inhabited a cell (in this penitentiary of the heavens) next to one of the world's worst cons, a man who had killed three prisoners before dying himself over the twenty years of his Lewisburg stretch. Yet the con was here for another kind of crime — he had put in more man-hours watching TV than any other convict in the federal system. All the same, the two were installed side by side — their crimes against the cosmos were apparently not dissimilar. They had both wasted their stuff, and egregiously. The churchgoer had perpetrated this by the brute sterility of his attendance: the complacency of his performance (that is to say, the spiritual stagnation at the center of his complacency) had been a powerful miasma to lay on the spirit of three young ministers who in succession grew old at accelerated rates looking into his professionally empty eyes — he had certainly spoiled more of existence than he sustained. The con, in his turn, had poisoned the livelier possibilities of many a young wolf and punk whose burgeoning shit-oriented libidos would somehow drain out of them after saun-

Church

tering past that corner of the inmates' lounge where the con was ensconced by the set. Considering how immense was his potential violence, just so flattened had been the mood by that act of his will which chose to do time quietly, watch TV, and get out — at which, in fact, he failed, for he kept killing other convicts. The con's real mission in life, and he knew it, was to outwit guards, stifle alarm systems, and climb unclimbable prison walls. The logics of Limbo were not easily available, and yet the message, as one took it through the now non-corporeal equivalent of one's pores, was that something in the cosmos could have prospered more if the con had climbed the wall instead of imbibing TV, even as the churchgoer could have stirred beneficial forces in the universe by catching an X-rated movie or two.

Given the iron law of such logic, Mailer came to recognize that he would have done better in his life to go to church once in a while on Sunday (not even Limbo suggested a synagogue for him!) rather than increase the total of his appearances on television.

Indeed, it was this particular piece of moral knowledge he was obliged to ingest right after his emergence from the first stupefying sleep-out. It was to recognize that every dull thing one had done to the universe (filling out crossword puzzles one did not wish to fill, taking the Eastern Airline shuttle when other transportation was available) every hour one had voided thereby of its fresh and keen desire to be used, the air around one, in consequence, suffocated by psychic exhaust, had now to be breathed again, the air of the stifled past to be swallowed, digested, suffered, and then stuffed into the ongoing baggage of one's karma. This mansion of Limbo was here to bring you face to face with those sins for which there are no tears, even as a husband and wife cannot weep if they lose a potentially heartfelt piece of ass by watching TV all night; yes, this corner of Limbo (a clean and well-appointed place whose appurtenances were suggestive of the interior of a picture tube on a black-and-white set — that is, all curved, silver, and gray, an odorless impalpability of fluorescence in an eternity of flickering) was now apparently ready to teach him, that is, teach his soul, something new. That meant, on reflection, that he might still have a soul. Something in himself exactly like the Old Center seemed certainly not to have ceased, that part at least of himself he had always thought wiser than the rest of him (that part which took pains to mash an invisible egg on his head after a rotten remark) was coming to recognize that his tour through Limbo (if indeed a tour and not an ongoing pun-

ishment) would ask him to meditate at length and presumably to purpose on those yaws and palls of his life which had passed through TV. He was going to be obliged to regard his own wretched collaboration with the multimillion-celled nausea-machine, that Christ-killer of the ages — television. (Let us say it takes a Jew not wholly convinced of the divinity of Christ to see that is who the tube is killing.) And he shuddered through the now-familiar, if minimal, retchings of Limbo while remembering how on numerous occasions with each of his seven children he had closed the doors of his own resistance to TV and let the little fuckers keep looking at the screen because it *pacified* them, which is to say took the lividity of their five-year-old nerves and slowly (that is, faster than sight) and buzzingly, cauterized their nerve ends just the right bloody bit, no blood seen. Again the guilt that cannot be alleviated by tears stirred like sludge in his own small part of the great cosmic gut. Yes, there was a malignancy present in the bowels of communication, and it was video. *END*

So could he meditate now for his next karma, or at least for this part of his next karma, by brooding over the nature of television. As soon brood over the nature of cancer gulch! Might they not be the same? A piece of plastic in the tissues of communing, a pollution in the avatars, good old anti-matter living next to matter.

He prepared therefore for the meditative journey that proves most excruciating in Limbo, a rounding through the past, a trip back! It is a venture full of perils. For the glassy sluggish surface of the past, once disturbed, would offer every encouragement to mosquitoes, insomnia, the rash which issues from deodorants, and more Limbo.

To meditate on TV would prove equal, however, to writing a recollection of an enemy one had never met and could not quite believe in. How can one conceive of an enemy who is without personal animosity? It is like writing a memoir on an oxymoron. Limbo set its tasks.

Channel 2

Mailer, nonetheless, had a few tricks. The virtue of having lived as a professional writer was that one's soul — much punched-out bag — had acquired a little craft for dealing with the peculiar prop-

1973

THE HARBORS
OF THE
MOON

I know
a town
~~which~~ that
sails
the
sun

I know
a town
where
light
is dry
and
boats
come
home
with
silver
in their
hold

where
boats
come
home
with
silver
in their
hold

(Do not
grieve
the
death
of
little
fish
They
are
lights
~~that~~ that
~~small~~ small
the
deep)

I know
a town
with
sighs
of sea

white
with
the
tides
of me

white
as the
spine
of the
sea.

1983

My dad was Scots-English; my mother's Dutch-Irish, strange combination. All the pirates and people who were kicked out of everyplace else.

—CLINT EASTWOOD

BACK IN 1967, I WAS TRYING TO CAST *THE Deer Park* for Off-Broadway and needed a tall, young, clean-cut American to play the hero. Only you could not find talented actors in New York with such looks—they were all on the West Coast. One day, drinking a gloomy beer, I happened to glance at an old black-and-white TV set which had been muttering in the corner all afternoon and noticed a man on a horse. "There's the guy," I cried—it was much like a scene out of films one used to see—"that's the man we want. There's our Sergius O'Shaughnessy."

The director's name was Leo Garen, and he looked at me in pity. "Yes," he said, "he'd be wonderful. But we can't afford him."

"Why?" I asked. "It's a soap opera. He's probably dying to get into a play."

"No," said Garen, "this is an old rerun of *Rawhide*. The actor you're looking at is the hottest thing around right now."

That was my introduction to Clint Eastwood. Now, looking back on his years of starring in films which return prodigious profits, it is obvious he satisfies some notion in hordes of people of how an American hero ought to look.

NORMAN MAILER: *I've seen an awful lot of Presidential candidates, and you're one of the few people who could go far that way.*

CLINT EASTWOOD: *(laughs)*

MAILER: *I'm not kidding. There's one guy in 500 who's got a Presidential face and usually nothing else.*

EASTWOOD: *If I've got the Presidential face, I'm lacking in a lot of other areas.*

MAILER: *Well, all lack it.*

EASTWOOD: *I don't feel I could get up and say a lot of things that I know I couldn't perform on. Yet they have to do that to win. The ones that are honest about what they can or can't do don't have a chance.*

Let us assume we are strangers and searching about for a topic of conversation at dinner.

We discover we are both interested in Clint Eastwood.

Yes, I admit, I happen to know him.

Immediately, your mood improves.

Well, I say, I don't know him very well, but he's an

All The
Pirates
and
People

1974

①

estimated
13 pages

Parade Magazine

1975 (2)

interesting man. He's hard, however, to understand.

Do you like him?

You have to. On first meeting, he's one of the nicest people you ever met. But I can't say I know him well. We talked a couple of times and had a meal together. I liked him. I think you'd have to be around for a year before you saw his ugly side, assuming he has one.

It would take that long?

Well, he's very laid-back. If you don't bother him, he will never bother you. In that sense, he is like the characters he plays in his films.

Since my new partner is a good listener, I begin to expatiate. I describe Eastwood on our first meeting. I talk about his tall presence, which is exceptional—exactly as one would wish it to be in a movie star. He certainly has the lean, self-contained body that you see only in the best dancers, rock climbers, competition skiers, and tightrope walkers. His face has the same disconcerting purity. You could be looking at a murderer or a saint.

Here, my partner makes a face.

No, I say, it's true. Men who have been in prison for 20 years sometimes have such a look, and you can see it on monks and certain acrobats with fine and tragic faces.

Is he very good-looking?

I'm not used to thinking of men as that good-looking, but he is.

And you liked him?

He's marvelously friendly. Just saying hello. He has no fear of others. At least, he shows none. I tell you, it was splendid. I rarely liked a man so much on first meeting.

Good Lord. What did you talk about?

Well, Eastwood said right off, "Do you know I tried to get into *The Naked and the Dead* back when they were making a movie of it years ago, but they didn't

want me.

"That's fair," I told him, "we tried to get you for *The Executioner's Song*. I wanted you to play Gary Gilmore."

Had he read the book, my dinner partner wanted to know.

I don't think so. Clint only answered: "What would you say Gilmore was like?"

"Oh," I said, "he was a funny man, Gilmore. Very spiritual on the one hand with a real mean streak on the other."

Eastwood gave a happy grin. "Sounds as if he would have been just right for me."

That conversation took place outside a shabby Spanish-style stucco motel near the beach in Santa Cruz, California. Eastwood was on location making his latest movie, *Sudden Impact*, and the small crowd watching us stood outside the company barrier. They had been hanging around for hours in the hope they would get a look at him. In the background you could smell boardwalk popcorn and hear the downrush of the roller coaster after a long clanking up the first rise. Some kids with orange hair were standing next to a black girl outside the movie company rope, and a couple of old ginks with slits in their sneakers and patience in their eyes were waiting beside blank-faced kids, all waiting behind the rope, never getting bored. Once in a while, Eastwood walked in and out of the movie trailer trucks or mobile dressing rooms parked along the side street off the motel, and it was then they would have their glimpse of him. He might even offer a line as he went by. "Still with us?" he would ask. "Oh, yeah, Clint," they would reply. Merely by standing behind this rope, they felt glamorous.

One fellow, tall, not bad-looking, with a dark suntan to set off his dark goatee, was brought up to Eastwood by one of the company people. "Clint, this fellow has a gift for you."

It was a short leather cape of the sort Eastwood used

to wear in Sergio Leone westerns near to 20 years ago when Clint played the cowboy who had no name, rarely spoke, and walked about with the stub of a pencil-thin cigar in his mouth. A killer stared back at you then—the stills taken from those spaghetti westerns certainly made him famous in Italy, then all Europe, then the world.

Now, Clint Eastwood said softly to the man bearing him the gift, "You keep this."

"I want you to have it, Clint."

"Better not. You might change your mind in time to come."

"I never wear it," protested the man with the goatee. "This cape is right for you."

Eastwood, however, was accepting no gifts he would cast away later. That could leave a bruise on the mood.

"No," he said softly, "I really don't need it. I have a number of capes already."

You make him sound good, my partner remarked.

Since we were warmed up, I went on about commanders in forward companies during the Second World War and how you could tell at once if they were respected from the mood that came off the first gun trained on your approach. Forward companies in Luzon lived on outposts miles apart in the hills and sometimes had no visitors for a week at a time. To drop in on them was a little like boarding a ship. You never had to guess about morale. The mood told you immediately how the men felt. If the company commander was well-liked, morale was as high as the greeting you get from a large, happy, impressive, slightly crazy family. Everybody feels manic in the wealth of their people.

The same, I suggested, could be said of movie sets. They are able to offer great morale, awful morale, or anything in between. Eastwood might be renowned for bringing in pictures ahead of schedule and under budget, but he was also most popular with his crew. That was apparent. They adored him.

Of course, not everyone might wish to be adored by a movie crew. They have a great sense of humor for jokes that go with a few beers, but little tolerance for a fancy mix. They are good enough trade unionists to

suspect that art is phony and would never trust any male who could not lift his own weight in movie equipment.

His crew obviously loved him. Eastwood could put back a few brews himself. Beer was his drink of choice. Besides, for movie crews, he had another virtue—he knew how to use animals. In the movie he was making now, there would be a big, doddering old English bull, fat, short-legged, asthmatic, pooped-out and smelly. This dog would be a total hit on-screen. The script called for the English bull to piss on cue. At each right moment, the beast would raise one mournful leg and make water on a fallen villain. The crew loved the idea. That was cutting the mustard.

But how do you train an animal to do such things on cue, asked my partner.

I had put Eastwood to the same question. He came back with a glint in his eye. The modesty of the solution appealed to him. "Oh," he said, "you attach a monofilament to the leg and give a tug." He had to grin before the powers of conditioned reflex.

To fill the pause that followed, my partner now said: You do seem sure of a lot of things about Eastwood.

Well, I know him, I guess.

You said you didn't.

I do, I confessed. Eastwood is an artist. So I know him well. I know him by his films.

I also like his films, said my partner, but surely you aren't going to say he's much of an artist?

I'll go further. I'll say that you can see the man in his work just as clearly

as you see Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms* or John Cheever in his short stories. Hell, yes, he's an artist. I even think he's important. Not just a fabulous success at the box office, but important.

You do admire him.

No, I said, I'm angry at him. He doesn't know how good he is. I don't think he tries hard enough for what's truly difficult.

Did you tell him that at lunch?

No. He was making a movie.

Our discussion was now at an impasse. Besides, it was time to talk to the partner on the other side. So the conversation on Eastwood was never finished. I had to think about it later, however. A talented author once remarked that he discovered the truth at the point of his pencil in the act of writing. It occurred to me that I usually came across the truth while talking. I would say things and by the tone of my voice they would seem true or not. When I said Clint Eastwood was an artist, I liked the ring. It was true. It might also be true that he was a timid artist.

That made a nice paradox. For, by any physical terms, he was a brave man. Once, after a plane crashed at sea, he saved his life by swimming three miles to shore. He did a number of his own stunts in movies and learned to rock climb for *The Eiger Sanction*. The film was embarrassing, a prodigiously multi-colored plot equal to ice cream on turnips, but Eastwood's rock climbing was good. He rode a horse well. He did car racing. He even looked, on the basis of *Every Which Way But Loose* and *Any Which Way You Can*, as if he might make some kind of boxer. He had a quick left jab with good weight behind it. He could certainly draw a

crowd



1980

(7)

if it came to great box office movie stars competing in a decathlon, Eastwood would hold his own. ~~He~~ ^{larger the} was also capable of fine acting. With a few cautions, he invariably understood his role and did a good deal with the smallest moves. Critics had been criticizing him for years over how little he did on film, but Eastwood may have known something they did not.

The plot of a film works, after all, for the star. The ~~same~~ ^{larger the} emotion that a story will stir in an audience. the more will the audience read such feeling into the star's motionless face. Sometimes the facial action of the movie star might offer no more movement than a riverbank, yet there is nothing passive about such acting. A riverbank must brace itself to support the rush around a bend.

I always was a different kind of person, even when I started acting. I guess I finally got to a point where I had enough nerve to do nothing. . . . My first film with Sergio Leone had a script with tons of dialogue, tremendously expository, and I just cut it all down. He thought I was crazy. Italians are used to much vocalizing, and I was playing this guy who didn't say much of anything. I cut it all down. Leone didn't speak any English so he didn't know what the hell I was doing, but he got so he liked it after a while.

*There is a moment in *Play Misty for Me* when Eastwood's character, an easygoing disc jockey, realizes that he has gotten himself into an affair with a hopelessly psychotic woman. As the camera moves in, his stare is as still as the eyes of a trapped animal. Yet his expression is luminous with horror. He is one actor who can put his soul into his eyes.*

The real question might have little to do, however, with how much of an actor he could be. What separated

Eastwood from other box-office stars was that his films especially since he had begun to direct them) had been able to speak more and more of his own vision of life in America. One was encountering a homegrown philosophy, a hardworking everyday subtle American philosophy in film.

Burt Reynolds also gives us a private vision of the state of life in America, but it is not so much a philosophy as a premise. Eat high on the hog, Reynolds attests. The best way to get through life is drunk.

Since it's possible that half the male population of America under 40 also believes this, Reynolds is endlessly viable. Of course, like many a happy drinking man before him, he takes no real chances, just falls and smacks collisions. The car gets totaled, but Burt is too bombed to be hurt. He leaps to his feet, pulls the fender off his neck with a sorry look, and we laugh. The best way to get through life is drunk.

Eastwood is saying more. If you discount his two worst films in these last 10 years, *Firefox* and *The Eiger Sanction*, if you bypass *Dirty Harry*, *Magnum Force*, and *The Enforcer* as movies made to manipulate audiences and satisfy producers, you are also left with *High Plains Drifter*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Every Which Way But Loose*, *Bronco Billy*, and *Honky-Tonk Man*.

The protagonist in each of these five films stands near to his creator. Eastwood has made five cinematic relatives, and they are spread over more than 100 years, from the Civil War to the present, and the action is in different places west of the Mississippi, from Missouri to California. They are Okies and outlaws, truckers, rodeo entertainers, and country and western singers, but they come out of the odd, wild, hard, dry, sad, sour redneck wisdom of smalltown life in the Southwest. All of Eastwood's knowledge is in them, a sardonic, un senti-

mental set of values that is equal to art for it would grapple with the roots of life itself. "When things get bad," says the outlaw Josey Wales, "and it looks like you're not going to make it, then you got to get mean, I mean plain plumb dog mean, because if you lose your head then, you neither live nor win. That's just the way it is."

One has to think of the Depression years of Eastwood's childhood when his father was looking for work and taking the family up and down the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, out there with a respectable family in a mix of Okies also wandering up and down California searching for work. Those Okies are in Eastwood's films, as must be the gritty knowledge he gained over the seven years he worked on *Rawhide*. How many bit players and cowboy stunt men passing through *Rawhide*'s weekly episodes were also a part of that migrating country culture that was yet going to present itself to us by way of CBs and pickup trucks and western music? "You've got to outlast yourself" was the only way to talk of overcoming fatigue. The words happen to be Eastwood's, but the language was shared with his characters, brothers in the same family, ready to share a family humor: It is that a proper orangutan will not miss a good opportunity to defecate on the front seat of a police cruiser, as indeed it did in *Every Which Way But Loose*. Smalltown humor, but in *Honkytonk Man*, his last film before the one he was shooting now, it became art.

MAILER: *How did you feel about Honkytonk Man before it came out?*

EASTWOOD: *I thought it was good, as good as I could do it. I did it in five weeks, five weeks of shooting, and I felt good about it. I felt it might find a small audience somewhere that might enjoy it. I wasn't looking for a big film. I just figured sometimes you have to do some things that you want to do and be selfish about it.*

Honkytonk Man starts in the Oklahoma dust bowl of the Thirties and follows a drunk, all-but-destroyed country singer named Red Stovall on his car trip east to Nashville. He has been given an invitation to audition at the Grand Ole Opry and it is the most important event of his life. Red Stovall has very little left: ravaged good looks, a guitar, and a small voice reduced to

a whisper by his consumptive cough. He's a sour, cantankerous, mean-spirited country singer who smokes too much, drinks too much, and has brought little happiness to man or woman, a sorry hero but still a hero. He will die before he will deviate from his measure of things. So he drives over the bumpy stones of his used-up lungs to get to the audition.

On stage at the Grand Ole Opry, out front before the producers, there in the middle of singing his best, he has to cough. Worse. He is so stifled with phlegm that he must stagger off the stage. The picture is about to end in disaster. Still, he is given a reprieve. A man who makes records is also at the audition. He has liked Red's voice and comes forward with a proposal. Red, given the treachery of his throat, can hardly perform before an audience, but maybe he can do a record session. They can lay the track between the coughs.

So he is able to sing on the last day of his life and makes one record before he dies. His whispery voice, close to extinction, clings to the heart of the film.

*So I lost my woman and you lost your man
Who knows who's right and who's wrong?
But I've still got my guitar and I've got a plan,
Throw your arms 'round this honkytonk man.*

*Throw your arms 'round this honkytonk man.
And we'll get through this night the best way we can.**

It is as if every economy Eastwood has picked up in acting and directing found its way into the film. Something of the steely compassion that is back of all the best country singing is in the movie, and the harsh, yearning belly of rural America is also there, used to making out with next to nothing but hard concerns and the spark of a dream that will never give up.

Honkytonk Man was the finest movie made about country plains life since *The Last Picture Show*, and it stood up to that comparison because of what Eastwood did with the role. A subtle man was brought to life with minimal strokes, a complex protagonist full of memories of old cunning deeds and weary sham. It was one of the saddest movies seen in a long time, yet, on reflection, terrific. One felt a tenderness for America

1984

11

while looking at it. The miracle seemed to happen now and again. Once in a great while, movie stars become artists, and that was always moving. It gave a little hope. We are not supposed to get better once we are very successful.

MAILER: *Those must have been incredibly tough years for you when you were scuffling as an actor.*

EASTWOOD: *Oh, I hated it, absolutely hated it. I tell people if you really want to do it, then you must be willing to study it and stick with it through all opposition and having to deal with some of the most no-talent people in the world passing judgment on you. They're going to pick the worst aspects of you or of anybody else that they cast. If you can take all that and keep grinding until some part comes along that fits you and your feelings, then sometimes the odds will come up for you. But you have to have that kind of perseverance.*

MAILER: *How did you handle the rudeness?*

EASTWOOD: *I hated it. I wanted to pull people out of their seats and say, "Don't talk to me that way."*

MAILER: *I just realized that in a lot of the Dirty Harry movies, you've got a deep well of anger to dip into.*

EASTWOOD: *(laughs) Oh, yeah, it's easy. People think I play the anger well. All you have to do is have a good memory.*

It would be agreeable to end right here. Not every movie star pays his dues, takes his bad years, becomes an artist, does it his way, and leaves us with an ongoing inclination for the dry wisdom of his stuff.

Eastwood, however, has another side. If his best movies come out of a real need to comprehend his part of our American roots, there is another category of film he makes, and most skillfully, which is full of manipulation. He also knows how to press the secret buttons in his audiences.

Art is democratic. It is the hope that you may arrive at a truth with your audience. Something happens in

1985

(12)

the heart of the ticket-buyer exactly because there wasn't a calculated attempt to twitch his feelings like reflexes. Of course, art is thereby made difficult, and so it rarely works as well as manipulation.

The reviews for *Honkytonk Man*—the most quietly daring film Eastwood ever made—were, for the most part, cruel. Reviews usually came in bad for Eastwood films, but it did not matter. His films could bring in large box office with the most terrible reviews. *Honkytonk Man*, however, did not. It was a disaster critically and financially.

Eastwood once said, "I was never a discovery of the press," and the remark is crucial. He had been discovered by the box office. He could forgo favorable reviews but not good box office.

Now, after the jolting failure of *Honkytonk Man*, there was pressure from all sides to do another film about Dirty Harry Callahan. Of the five movies bringing in Eastwood's greatest profits, three had been about Dirty Harry Callahan, an outlaw cop who did things on his own. Callahan broke villains in two with his Magnum. Audiences cheered.

Eastwood had tired of making profitable movies about Dirty Harry Callahan. After filming three in the years between 1971 and 1976, he had shot none since. But now he accepted. He would act in and direct *Sudden Impact*.

I wasn't intending to do any more of these characters. I never particularly wanted to. I thought I'd done all I can with it, and I might have, I don't know. But everybody kept asking about it.

One cannot say how much will be retained in the finished film, but the script of *Sudden Impact* shows us three men fatally shot in the groin by a woman. It is in

1984

13

retaliation for being raped by them. Dirty Harry knocks off eight sleazos himself. There are also six flashbacks to the rape.

It is a Dirty Harry Film. But for the new emphasis on woman's rights (which moves Callahan to allow the girl to go free at the end), there are no new elements. The script gives us 40 killings, rapes, fights, and other condiments. It is as full of ingredients as the first *Dirty Harry*.

That film bears summary. It is not just the amount of violent action, on average something new every three minutes, but the choice of items. There is something for everyone in *Dirty Harry*.

Right off, a girl swimming in a bikini is shot in a rooftop pool. We see the blood on her back. Soon after, a naked black is gunned down. He had to shoot the fellow, Callahan explains, because the man was chasing a girl up an alley while brandishing a butcher knife and an erection.

We hear of a 13-year-old girl buried alive. As proof of her existence, a detective holds up a bloodstained molar that has arrived in the mail. It was sent to her parents. Later, we will see the child removed from a manhole, nude, covered with dirt, dead, but chastely photographed.

A priest is seen in the sights of a sniper's rifle: When the priest moves, the sniper shoots a 10-year-old black boy instead.

A man ready to jump from a high ledge is informed by Dirty Harry that he will leave a mess on the pavement if he jumps. This so horrifies the prospective suicide that he threatens to throw up. Dirty Harry requests him not to vomit on the firemen below. He

replies by trying to pull Harry with him.

Now, with the aid of another detective's binoculars, we look across into an apartment window. A naked girl opens her door to welcome a couple. They begin to make love. The sniper has them in his sights but is interrupted and guns down a cop instead. Then he shoots out a 30-foot neon sign reading JESUS SAVES in flame-red letters.

We find the killer. His name is Scorpio, and he gets Dirty Harry—almost. Callahan has lost his guns, is down, and is having his face kicked in, but comes up with a last weapon, a long-bladed knife taped to his ankle. He throws it into the killer's thigh—to the hilt. The killer screams, staggers off. Harry picks up his Magnum, begins to track the man, finds him later, fires, hits him in the shin. Scorpio's leg is now broken. Harry steps on it to make him confess.

In between these episodes are quiet vistas of Callahan walking the street or going down long halls. Full time is taken for such shots. Despite its violence, the beat of the film is laconic. The movie is almost as open in its space as a western. Maybe that is why the violence works. For the movie, when seen, is considerably less graphic than this description of it. The violence is not so much unendurable as frequent and successful—like a cruise with many ports of call. Dirty Harry looks as clean and well turned out as any young Senator with a promising future. In scenes where we see him striding down the street, he could be walking from one campaign stop to another. Eastwood knows the buried

1988

15

buttons in his audience as well as any filmmaker around. Is it out of measure to call him the most important smalltown artist in America? One of the buried secrets smalltown life is about is knowing how to press other people's buttons—that is, the ones concealed from themselves. That's why it takes so long for things to happen in a small town. Unless you're a genius, years can go by before you find each button.

MAILER: *Does the question of moral responsibility weigh on you?*

EASTWOOD: *How do you mean?*

MAILER: *You can have arguments whether Dirty Harry reforms more criminals than he stimulates.*

EASTWOOD: *I never feel any moral problems with these pictures. I felt they're fantasy.*

MAILER: *Come on. In Sudden Impact, three men are shot in the groin by a woman. It's possible that some man or woman out there who never thought of doing that before, may now.*

EASTWOOD: *I don't think my movies are that stimulating. People in the audience just sit there and say, "I admire the independence. I'd like to have the nerve to tell the boss off or have that control over my life." In the society we live in, everything is kind of controlled for us. We just grow up and everything's kind of done. A lot of people are drawn to an original like Dirty Harry. The general public interpreted it on that level, a man concerned with a victim he'd never met. Like everybody says, "Boy, if I was a victim of violent crime, I'd sure like to have someone like that on my side. I'd sure like to have someone expend that kind of effort on my behalf." And I think a lot of people believe that there isn't anybody who's willing to expend that kind of effort if they were in that situation.*

MAILER: *There may not be.*

EASTWOOD: *There may not be. Right. That may be the fantasy—that there might be someone interested in*

1589

(16)

my problem if I was ever in that spot. That preys on people's minds these days with crime in America, in the world. Jesus, is there somebody there, is there anybody there?

MAILER: *Do you think this is one reason why blacks like your movies so much?*

EASTWOOD: *Well, maybe the blacks feel that he's an outsider like they felt they've been.*

I let it go. He was making a film, and I did not know that I had the right to argue with a fellow artist when he was at work. Professionalism, in the absence of other certainties, becomes your guide.

Besides, I was not sure how I felt. Violence in films might have no more impact on future deeds than violence in dreams. Who could separate the safety valve from the trigger spring?

I let it go. I liked Clint Eastwood. Kin to him, I trusted my instincts. What if several hundred bodies were strewn across the 30 films he had made? It did not matter. In his movie gunfights, those bodies flew around like bowling pins. The violence happened so quickly that an audience was more likely to feel the kinetic satisfactions of a good strike in a bowling alley than savor the blood. Besides, nobody of virtue was ever killed by Eastwood. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps it was fantasy. How else account for the confident sense of duty in his person, his character, and his deeds?

What an American was Clint Eastwood! Maybe there was no one more American than he. What an interesting artist. He portrayed psychopaths who acted with all the silence, certainty, and gravity of saints. Or would it be closer to say that he played saints who killed like psychopaths? Not all questions have quick answers. Sometimes, it is worth more to dwell with the enigma. In the interim, he is living proof of the maxim that the best way to get through life is cool. 

Oct 1983
Esquire

1990

①

3 pages
celebrity

the Prisoner of Celebrity

Jehovah would permit no graven images of Himself, and savages feel a part of their soul is stolen when a photograph is taken. What do they do when subjected to flashbulbs? The last time I saw Jackie Kennedy Onassis was at a benefit and the cameras were going wild. At one point it was my turn to stand next to the lady, and while I have seen a few such lights, I can testify that my eyes never knew this kind of bombardment before. There is celebrity, and then there is the white heat of celebrity when paparazzi are out, but for sheer impact, for the literal blast of the media at its highest voltage, get your picture taken next to Jackie. It is equal to the blaze of five machine guns turned on you at once.

I remember she stood it with the sad, soldierly dignity of a much-wounded veteran. In the middle of the racket, for the electronic voice of flashes and strobes seems to mount exponentially, I whispered to her—who does not, since part of the penalty of being Jackie Kennedy Onassis is that everybody wants to offer some bright exchange in her presence?—"Yes," I said to her, "the reason we're all such idiots is these damn lights."

I think it is true of Jackie Kennedy Onassis in social situations—which is the only way I know her—that but a fifth of what you say ever seems to reach her, so deep is her detachment, her star. Yet, of that fifth it could be said that it goes all the way in, and she ponders the portion she accepts. So she nodded and gave her far-off smile. “Yes,” she answered, “do you think that is the reason?”

For celebrities are idiots more often than you would expect. Few of one's own remarks should still offer pleasure, but I do like “Fame? Fame is a microphone in your mouth.” To celebrities, the wages of success are those flashbulbs in the eye. If one were hit with no more than ten good jabs every day, the brain would soon reflect its damage; the flashbulbs are worse than jabs and sear one's delicacy. They even jar the last remains of your sensibility. So celebrities are surprisingly flat, bland, even disappointing when you talk to them. Their manner has something in common with the dull stuffed-glove feel in the handshake of a professional boxer. His hands are his instrument, so a fighter will guard his hands. Personality is the falling currency of overexposed celebrities, so over the years they know they must offer less and less to strangers. Those flashbulbs cauterize our souls.

1992

(3)

Problems of this nature take on, however, another order of magnitude with Jackie Kennedy Onassis. For she is not merely a celebrity, but a legend; not a legend, but a myth—no, more than a myth: she is now a historic archetype, virtually a demiurge. It hardly matters whether in private life she is a good mother or a materialistic woman, generous or greedy, possessed of fine taste or merely well guided by others; indeed, it does not even matter whether she has found more or less happiness, integrity, fulfillment, and all those other words. We will never truly know, and she may not, either.

There are a few people in the world whom the media have projected right out of themselves. They will never again find their identity any more than a space probe sent out to explore beyond the solar system will come back to earth. Of this number, Jackie Kennedy may be the first, since history cast her as the leading lady in what must have been the greatest American drama of them all (at least, if drama has the power to make us all react as one). While we are, on balance, a nation more fortunate than most, ~~the most~~, and not all that many of us have known tragedy in our personal lives, we are close to tragedy through her. In our

1993



history she is the only living symbol of Greek drama. Did the shades of Aeschylus and Sophocles agree for once and say, "Let her now be remarried to a Greek who will be a little like one of our mighty blood-stained kings"?

If so, they did it for the Greeks, not for us. In our national depths (if we still have any) a part of us will never forgive ~~Jackie~~ *Jackie* Kennedy for marrying Onassis. She had no right to do that, Americans will always feel. She was ours. She did not belong to herself. She was twice ours, once as the most beautiful and romantic legend we had ever had in a First Lady; afterward she was ours as the first monumental American widow. We are a country of weeds and frontiers and innovations and hideous designs for mass living, gargantuan corporate structures with all the architectural éclat of a cardboard carton and cancer gulch through all the hours of a universe of day and night TV. We are an overloaded garbage can the size of a universe; we teem, we swarm, we lose ourselves in details and gobble our media like a freak takes pills. But in retrospect we can say that once we had a romantic heroine and she was married to one of the more handsome men in America, and they were President and First Lady, and so our dream life thrived. We dwelt in an iridescent landscape of secret hopes and daring desires; there was a lift of promise in one's work and the prospect of pleasures after

5 with us



1994

the chores. I exaggerate, but then, our dream life lives in the special logic of exaggeration, and so there was something more exciting about America when we had such a heroine, such a beautiful and mysterious lady in such a place. The schizophrenic halves of our nation were bound together. The Hollywood dream life and the superhighways of technology came closer for a little while.

Then the assassinations fell upon us, and the strangest of our American heroines became a Greek heroine. Our nation knew tragedy in the circle of each family as we had not known it since the death of Abraham Lincoln. And we mourned as one nation. We mourned for her as our tragic widow.

Yes, she has lost her identity forever. The shy, still strange, doubtless witty, probably decent, much-harried lady of that second self who would only like to do with her life what each of us would like to do with ours—that is, get a little better, a little wiser, a little classier, a little sweeter, and a little more entitled to love—is lost in isolation. Through no fault of hers, she can never rejoin our high-tech humanly reductive race. She may be lonely within, or mature and become splendid, but we will never know, and she will never reach us. All that is left is to photograph the dignity of her shell. We have dispatched her to the gods, and from those divine fields no legend ever returns.

1993
Esquire

1976-1982

Estimated
9 bars p. 10

The
best move
lies very
close to
the worst.

1995

ONE MORNING at the Gramercy Gym on East Fourteenth Street in New York, a friend of one of our regulars came along to join us for the Saturday-morning workout. He had never put on gloves before, but he was quietly confident. Having finished the New York City Marathon in

1596

close to three hours, he was even ready to get in the ring on his first day, and that was notable since it usually took a couple of months to build up to such a moment. Of course, the marathoner was in superb shape.

He sparred for three minutes with his friend and by the end of that round was too used up to go another. The answer was to be found in the special nature of boxing. If our visitor had been playing baskets one-on-one for the first time, or running after a tennis ball, he might have felt talentless, even foolish, but he would not have been wholly winded in three minutes.

Boxing, however, is not like other tests in sport between one athlete and another; it arouses two of the deepest anxieties we contain. There is not only the fear of getting hurt, which is profound in more men than will admit to it, but there is the opposite panic, equally unadmitted, of hurting others. Part of this second fear rests, of course, on the well-comprehended equation that the harder you hit your opponent, the more he is going to feel free to bang back on you, but it goes a long way beyond that. To be born into that middle class, which is two thirds of America by now, is to be brought up not to strike others. Probably it is worth noting that General S. L. A. Marshall's classic study of infantrymen in battle for World War II, *Men Against Fire*, came to the con-

1997

clusion that the large majority of soldiers in combat for the first time could not bring themselves to fire their rifles.

No surprise then if it is difficult to deliver a good punch. It not only requires about as much coordination as to throw a football in a spiral for thirty yards, but, in addition, the punch must find some inner sanction. You have to feel justified. The marathoner wore out because two wholly opposed anxiety systems had been working at full thrust in him. It is one thing to be frightened—some part of yourself can sometimes pull you through. When your cowardice and aggression are both in a flurry, however, quick exhaustion is the consequence.

Be it said that for professionals such opposed fears still exist—it is just that the ante has gone up. Now, you can kill a man in the ring or be killed yourself.

Muhammad Ali once paid a press-inspired visit to Floyd Patterson's training camp in the Catskills a few weeks before their championship match in Las Vegas, and on arrival proceeded to savage Floyd. "You're nothing but a rabbit," Ali told Patterson in front of the reporters, and then decamped in high operatic disgust. Patterson managed to throttle his visible perturbation down to a wry grin. "Well," he said, "I won't have to worry about motivation with that guy, will I?"

One can take one's pass at Ali's premise: For a man like

1998

Patterson, an overload of sanction could prove disastrous. He would feel too murderous. On the night that the bout took place in Vegas, Floyd was so tense that his lower back went out on him in the second round. He managed to keep on his feet, fighting from one contorted position after another until the contest was stopped in the twelfth round, but he never had a chance. Ali was a genius.

In the ring, genius is transcendent moxie—the audacity to know that what usually does not work, or is too dangerous to attempt, can, in a special case, prove the winning move. Maybe that is why attempts are made from time to time to compare boxing with chess—the best move can lie very close to the worst move. At Ali's level, you had to be ready to die, then, for your best ideas.

For our pugilistic fold, however, out there on Saturday morning in the gray, grimy, now-closed Gramercy Gym, where even the ropes and the canvas were gray, and the windows, summer or winter, were a greasy patina of dishrag gray, it was enough that we were ready to show up, each at our own private frequency—some regularly once a week, some once a month, and all variations between—were, yes, ready to wake up on Saturday morning with

1999

the knowledge that no legitimate excuse was there on this occasion to get us out of it. We were not hung over, had had enough sleep, yes, we would have to show up. Nonetheless, it was also true that once there, one did not have to box; one could merely work out, hit the speed bag, the heavy bag, do sit-ups, jump rope, shadowbox, or even less—there were no rules, and no obvious rewards, and virtually no shame for doing too little, other than a faint and subtle queasiness concerning macho matters.

Or, one could get into the ring. Sometimes there were weeks in a row when you went one or, better, two three-minute rounds on every Saturday. It varied. No one judged anyone else. Given our separate lives, we were nonetheless not that unlike when it came to our guts and our skill. Most of us did not have a great deal of the latter. We were there to make delicate adjustments on our ongoing workaday ego. Sparring honestly for several weeks in a row, just that once-a-week submersion into three minutes or six minutes of high-speed (for us) boxing, did wonders for the self-esteem one could bring back to one's social life.

Of course, most of us went our separate ways outside. We had among us a cabdriver, a bearded editor of a porny magazine, a high school English teacher who suffered a broken jaw one Saturday morning, an actor who worked nights as a dealer in a gambling joint and purchased headgear with a vertical bridge to protect his handsome nose—which we all found ludicrous until he went on to become a star in a TV crime series.

We also had a couple of young writers and one Golden Gloves aspirant who lost his first and only bout, and we had an established older writer, myself. For the record, I didn't hang up my fourteen-ounce gloves until I was fifty-eight, but by then my knees were gone, I had beaten them half to death jogging on sidewalks, and if you cannot do a little running for the requisite three times a week, you certainly don't have the wind to box on Saturday. It does not matter then how much you know about boxing's systems of anxiety; the fact is that when you have no wind, you cannot be any kind of pugilist unless you are as sly as Archie Moore or as wise as George Foreman. For an average man to go into the ring without wind is equal to going in with-



2001

out blood. So I gave it up, I eased out of it, and have never felt as virtuous since.

We had others who came on Saturday morning, transients. A criminal lawyer was there for a few weeks and a Greek fencer who could never come up with a way to convert fencing to boxing, although he did muster a kind of long left jab. The friends of friends showed up for short periods, and there was one year when we had an instructor, a fast Puerto Rican bantamweight professional, who was too small and too good to impart anything to us that was not in slow motion. He had been brought in by José Torres, our resident dean, who used to enjoy sparring with all of us despite the fact that he had been light-heavyweight champion of the world. Torres won his title from Willie Pastrano in 1965 by a TKO in the ninth round at Madison Square Garden and, after several successful defenses, lost it to Dick Tiger in 1966 in fifteen rounds in the same place in a very close fight.

Why Torres enjoyed getting in the ring with us, I never quite understood. It bore comparison to the bemused pleasure Colin Powell might take in teaching close-order drill to recruits. On the other hand, we all enjoyed being

able to say we had been in with a former light-heavyweight champion. He was impossible to hit and that was an interesting experience—you felt as if you were sharing the ring with a puma. Be it understood, part of his honor was not to hurt anyone. When you made a mistake, he would tap you. If you repeated the error, he would tap you harder. Defensive reflexes developed in the student. One's offense, however, had to fend for itself. Over ten years of boxing with José Torres I was able to catch him with a good right hand twice, and the first occasion was an event. He ran around the ring with his arms high in triumph crying out, "He hit me with a right—he hit me with a right!" unconscionably proud that day of his pupil.

It was thanks to José that we had the use of the gym. The management had provided him with the keys. When he did not show up on an occasional Saturday, a poet who lived in a fourth-floor loft above the third-story gym would let us in by opening his begrimed window long enough to drop a key down to us in a rolled-up sock, and when we climbed the stairs, the premises still reeked of the serious sweat of the professional and Golden Gloves aspirants who had trained there from Monday to Friday.

Such was our club. But for one or two clear exceptions, we were all more or less equal, and we went at it like club members. There were few wars, and most of us went out to eat and drink together afterward. We worked on what we considered most lacking, a better left hook, a sharper jab, a hook off the jab, a heavier or faster right hand. Some of us

2003

even ventured into combinations, but never too far. Mediocre condition was the scythe that cut into the rate of one's improvement. It is hard to describe how tired you can get in a three-minute round when you are forced to labor at your utmost. Two-minute rounds, the duration employed in the Golden Gloves for subnovices, would have been a considerably more satisfactory interval for us, but at the Gramercy, our bell was set on a three-minute professional interval, with only that quick sixty seconds of rest before it rang again. So we worked through three-minute rounds, and paid the price: The last thirty seconds of a three-minute round can get to feel as long as the first two and a half minutes. Going a couple of such rounds in a row (which total of six minutes is equal to a three-round subnovice bout), you often got tired enough to find it considerably easier to take the other's arm-weary punch to your head rather than to raise your own bone-dead arms in defense.

Ryan O'Neal came to join us, however, and our Saturdays were altered. Ryan was making a movie in New York that season, and José Torres was his friend; José had worked as a boxing adviser on *The Main Event*, a comedy O'Neal had made with Barbra Streisand. Now, each Saturday morning, after five days of shooting on his film, O'Neal would come into the Gramercy.

He was good enough to have been a ring professional. When they boxed, Torres could not play with him, and once Ryan even managed to catch José with a shot to the mouth that drew a little blood. That was equal to sacrilege. Torres nodded curtly, and stepped out of the ring. It was a sizable rebuke. The retaliation he had chosen not to express was as palpable as the air in summer before a storm and

2009

O'Neal looked sheepish, like a man who is too far from home to be caught without a raincoat.

After that, he and José did not box too frequently, and when they did, all the parameters were kept in place. O'Neal began to work out instead with whoever was there. By our measure, he was in impressive condition. He would take us on serially, each of us going for a round or two depending on our ability to continue, and by the end of his workout he had boxed his way through eight to ten rounds against such easy opposition. Then he would go off to play racquetball with Farrah Fawcett.

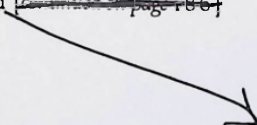
Getting in the ring with Ryan O'Neal became not only the focus of each Saturday, but the point to what some of us had been half-looking to do for years, that is, get extended a little in the ring. Ryan could be mean as cat piss. Even when he was carrying a man, he would punish him, and when he had dislikes, he liked to take them out on the opponent. In spite of every love affair in his private life, public fodder for more than a decade to the gossip columns, Ryan had his dry spot—the puritanism of the Irish. He took a secret dislike to the bearded editor of the porny magazine who happened to be not much of a boxer. The editor was awkward in the ring, so it was not hard to play tricks on him. He had surprising stamina, however. Until Ryan came along, the pornographer had, in fact, the most notable stamina of any of us. Maybe Ryan equated that ability to sexual prowess and disapproved of its presence in so unworthy a vessel, maybe he just disliked hirsute New York lumpen intelli-

2005

gentsia, but, in any case, he all but disemboweled the man, throwing cruel left hooks to the stomach until the editor collapsed, still conscious, in the middle of the second round, wholly unable to go on. What made it worse was that the pornographer's lady love, a good-looking girl who worked in a massage parlor, was witnessing it all at ringside. Something in their love—and it was, after all, *their* love—was lost that day.

I happened to be next in the ring with Ryan, which proved to be my good luck. After every discharge of mean feelings, Ryan would turn angelic. A little ashamed, I expect, of what he had just done to the pornographer, he was not now boxing like a movie star—he certainly did not protect his face. Since the man he had hurt happened to be a sweet guy, extraordinarily optimistic about life (which is probably how he had gotten into pornography in the first place), I liked the editor. When I saw him take this beating, I recognized that I saw him as a friend. If this seems something of a digression, let me say that it helps to carry the auctorial voice around the embarrassment of declaring that I boxed better on that day than I ever did before, or since. I was in a rare mean mood myself, mean enough not to be afraid of Ryan, and—it is very hard to do any kind of good boxing against a superior without some premise to carry you—I was feeling like an avenger. And here was Ryan boxing with his face. It was hard not to hit him straight rights, and he reacted with all the happiness of seeing a beloved senior relative get up from a sickbed. In our first clinch, he whispered, "You punch sharper than anyone here." "Go fuck yourself," I told him.

We fell into a mutually pleasing pattern. He would give me his face for a target, I would ~~continue on page 186~~



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~~Continued from page 64~~ bop it, and he would counterpunch. He hit harder than anyone in the club but that was the day when my two systems of anxiety were in quiet balance, and I never enjoyed boxing as much.

Following that Saturday, Ryan and I took up predictable weekly behavior. I would invariably be the first to box with him (mainly, I think, so I could enjoy watching the others now that I was done) and he would continue to spar with his hands low, daring me to catch him. I would, often enough, and he would counterpunch. How much he took off his blows I do not know—at whatever level he gunned down his motors for me, his punches still took your head half-around, or left a space in your gut, and I, in turn, reduced my punches very little for him. Whatever the equilibrium, we had found it, and it was as close as it ever came for me to gain some knowledge of how a professional might feel in a real bout for money with a hard-hearted crowd out there and the spirit of electricity in the ring lights. Damn, it was exciting. I even came to understand what it was to feel

2007

love for the man you were fighting because he had forced you to go a little beyond yourself, and I never took as many good punches or threw as many as in those one or two rounds each Saturday with Ryan O'Neal.

Life, in the form of Luce publications, caught up with this romance. Ryan, having produced my Saturday illumination, would then box with another three or four of us and kept to his habit—I always thought it was penance for having become a movie star—of showing that good-looking open face, so relatively easy to score upon.

There came a day when I popped him in the left eye a few times running and the boxers who came after me did approximately as much in the same place, and when he was done, he had a mouse. That little animal got into the papers. One of the gossip columns recounted how Norman Mailer had given Ryan O'Neal a shiner.

People magazine called up. They were ready to do a story. The dangers were obvious. We would all be famous for too little. So I turned the reporter from *People* over to José Torres. José would know how to protect Ryan.

He did. For my money, he protected him too well. "Ryan could have eas-

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2008

ily beaten Norman up," said Torres for publication—which was exactly true. I understood that it was true with all the hard objective core of my pride in being a writer who would always look into the eye of the truth, that severe gray lady, gray as the Gramercy Gym, but, José, José, I whispered within, how about a little transcendence?

Torres was much too agile, however, to sacrifice one friend altogether in order to protect another. So, for *People* magazine, he added: "Norman could whip Sly Stallone in one round."

"Yes," I said later to José, "and what happens when I run into Stallone?"

José shrugged. More immediate problems were usually waiting for him around any corner.

I do not recall if it was one year or two or three before I encountered Sylvester Stallone, but it did happen one night in a particularly dark disco with a raked floor.

"I understand," said Stallone, "that you're the guy who can beat me in one round."

He had never looked in finer shape.

"Yeah," I said, applying all the thickener I could muster to my voice, "I remember when José said that, I said to him, 'Yeah, swell, but what

2009

happens if I don't knock Stallone out in one round?" and José said, "Oh, then he will *keel* you."

Stallone gave his sad, sleepy-eyed smile. "Mr. Mailer, I can assure you, I don't go around killing people."

It was gracious. One could only respond in kind. "Mr. Stallone," I said, "I don't go around getting in the ring with people who can do one-arm push-ups."

"Ah," he said sadly, "I can't do them anymore. I hurt my arm."

We grinned at each other, we shook hands. I think we were in silent league (for the modest good it could do) against the long reductive reach of the media.

Afterward, I would smile at the cost of such knowledge. It had taken me ten years of boxing to come up with a glimmer of pugilist's wit—what if I don't knock him out in the first round?—yes, one boxed for the better footing it could offer in the social world, and one could even believe, yes, absolutely, that boxing was one of the sixty things a man should learn if he is to get along in this accelerating world, so, farewell, Gramercy Gym, gray lady of my late middle age, I will always be loyal to you. *u*

~~1983~~
~~1984~~
1983
or
1984

Tough Guys Don't Dance



Norman
Mailer

~~Read directly~~
~~in full~~

pp 1-45
~~64-65 pp~~
~~143-143~~
~~143-143~~
~~143-143~~
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Random House
New York

2011

One

At dawn, if it was low tide on the flats, I would awaken to the chatter of gulls. On a bad morning, I used to feel as if I had died and the birds were feeding on my heart. Later, after I had dozed for a while, the tide would come up over the sand as swiftly as a shadow descends on the hills when the sun lowers behind the ridge, and before long the first swells would pound on the bulkhead of the deck below my bedroom window, the shock rising in one fine fragment of time from the sea wall to the innermost passages of my flesh. *Boom!* the waves would go against the wall, and I could have been alone on a freighter on a dark sea.

In fact, I was awakening alone in bed, on the twenty-fourth drear morning after my wife had decamped. That evening, still alone, I would celebrate the twenty-fourth night. It must have proved quite an occasion. Over days to come, when I would be searching for a clue to my several horrors, I would attempt to peer through the fogbanks of memory to recall just what acts I might or might not have committed on all of that twenty-fourth night.

Little came back to me, however, of what I did after I got out of bed. It may have been a day like all the others. There is a joke about a man who is asked on his first visit to a new doctor to describe his daily routine. He promptly offers: "I get up, I brush my teeth, I vomit, I wash my face . . ." at which point the doctor inquires, "You vomit every day?"

"Oh, yes, Doctor," replies the patient. "Doesn't everyone?"

I was that man. Each morning, after breakfast, I could not light a cigarette. I had no more than to put one in my mouth and was ready to retch. The foul plenitude of losing a wife was embracing me.

For twelve years I had been trying to give up smoking. As Mark Twain said—and who does not know the remark?—"It's nothing to stop. I've quit a hundred times." I used to feel I had said it myself, for certainly I had tried on ten times ten occasions, once for a year, once for nine months, once for four months. Over and over again I gave them up, a hundred times over the years, but always I went back. For in my dreams, sooner or later, I struck a match, brought flame to the tip, then took in all my hunger for existence with the first puff. I felt impaled on desire itself—those fiends trapped in my chest and screaming for one drag. Change the given!

So I learned what addiction is. A beast had me by the throat and its vitals were in my lungs. I wrestled that devil for twelve years and sometimes I beat him back. Usually it was at great loss to myself, and great loss to others. For when I did not smoke, I grew violent. My reflexes lived in the place where the match used to strike, and my mind would lose those bits of knowledge that keep us serene (at least if we are American). In the throes of not smoking, I might rent a car and never notice whether it was a Ford or a Chrysler. That can be seen as the beginning of the end. On one occasion, when I did not smoke, I went on a long trip with a girl I loved named Madeleine to meet up with a married couple who wanted to have a weekend of wife-swapping. We indulged them. Driving back, Madeleine and I had a quarrel, and I wrecked the car. Madeleine's insides were badly hurt. I went back to smoking.

I used to say: "It's easier to give up the love of your life than to kick cigarettes," and suspect I was right in such a remark. But then last month, twenty-four days ago, my wife took off. Twenty-four days ago. I learned a little more about addiction. It may be simpler to give up love than dispense with your smokes, but when it comes to saying goodbye to love-and-hate—ah, that reliable standby of the head shrinkers, the love-hate relationship!—why, ending your marriage is easily as difficult as relinquishing your nicotine, and much the same, for I can tell you that after twelve years, I had gotten to hate the filthy stuff just so much as a bitter wife. Even the first inhale of the morning (whose sure bliss once seemed the ineradicable reason I could never give up tobacco) had

now become a convulsion of coughing. No more might remain than the addiction itself, but addiction is still a signature on the bottom line of your psyche.

That is how it was with my marriage, now that Patty Larcine was gone. If I had loved her once while knowing her frightful faults—even as we smoke like happy fiends and shrug away the thought of a lung cancer still decades away, so did I always perceive that Patty Larcine could be my doom around the bend of some treacherous evening—yet, so be it, I adored her. Who knew? Love might inspire us to transcend our dire fevers. That was years ago. Now, for the last year and more, we had been trying to kick the habit of each other. Intimate detestations had grown each season until they rooted out all the old pockets of good humor. I had come to dislike her as much as my morning cigarette. Which, indeed, I had at last given up. After twelve years, I felt finally free of the largest addiction of my life. That is, until the night she left. That was the night I discovered that losing my wife was a heavier trip.

Before her departure, I had not had a cigarette for all of a year. Patty Larcine and I might, on the consequence, fight ferociously, but I was quits at last with my Camels. Small hope. Two hours after she drove off, I took up one coffin nail from a half-empty pack Patty left behind, and was, in two days of battling myself, hooked once again. Now that she was gone, I began each day with the most horrendous convulsion of my spirit. God, I choked in cataracts of misery. For with the return of this bummer habit came back every bit of the old longing for Patty Larcine. Each cigarette smelled in my mouth like an ashtray, but it was not tar I sniffed, rather my own charring flesh. Such is the odor of funk and loss.

Well, as I indicated, I do not remember how I spent my Twenty-fourth Day. My clearest recollection is yawping over that first cigarette, strangling the smoke down. Later, after four or five, I was sometimes able to inhale in peace, thereby cauterizing what I had come to decide (with no great respect for myself) must be the wound of my life. How much more I longed for Patty Larcine than I wished to. In those twenty-four days I did my best to see no one, I stayed at home, I did not always wash, I drank as if the great river of our blood is carried by bourbon, not water, I was—to put a four-letter word on it—a mess.

In summer it might have been more obvious to others what a sorry hour I was in, but this was late in the fall, the days were gray, the town deserted, and on many a shortening November afternoon you could

have taken a bowling ball and rolled it down the long one-way lane of our narrow main street (a true New England alley) without striking a pedestrian or a car. The town withdrew into itself, and the cold, which was nothing remarkable when measured with a thermometer (since the seacoast off Massachusetts is, by Fahrenheit, less frigid than the stony hills west of Boston) was nonetheless a cold sea air filled with the bottomless chill that lies at the cloistered heart of ghost stories. Or, indeed, at many a séance. In truth, there had been a séance Patty and I attended at the end of September with disconcerting results: short and dreadful, it ended with a shriek. I suspect that part of the reason I was now bereft of Patty Larcine was that something intangible but indisputably repulsive had attached itself to our marriage in that moment.

After she left, there was a week when the weather never shifted. One chill morose November sky went into another. The place turned gray before one's eyes. Back in summer, the population had been thirty thousand and doubled on weekends. It seemed as if every vehicle on Cape Cod chose to drive down the four-lane state highway that ended at our beach. Provincetown was as colorful then as St. Tropez, and as dirty by Sunday evening as Coney Island. In the fall, however, with everyone gone, the town revealed its other presence. Now the population did not boil up daily from thirty thousand to sixty, but settled down to its honest sediment, three thousand souls, and on empty weekday afternoons you might have said the true number of inhabitants must be thirty men and women, all hiding.

There could be no other town like it. If you were sensitive to crowds, you might expire in summer from human propinquity. On the other hand, if you were unable to endure loneliness, the vessel of your person could fill with dread during the long winter. Martha's Vineyard, not fifty miles to the south and west, had lived through the upsurge of mountains and their erosion, through the rise and fall of oceans, the life and death of great forests and swamps. Dinosaurs had passed over Martha's Vineyard, and their bones were compacted into the bedrock. Glaciers had come and gone, sucking the island to the north, pushing it like a ferry to the south again. Martha's Vineyard had fossil deposits one million centuries old. The northern reach of Cape Cod, however, on which my house sat, the land I inhabited—that long curving spit of shrub and dune that curves in upon itself in a spiral at the tip of the

Cape—had only been formed by wind and sea over the last ten thousand years. That cannot amount to more than a night of geological time.

Perhaps this is why Provincetown is so beautiful. Conceived at night (for one would swear it was created in the course of one dark storm) its sand flats still glistened in the dawn with the moist primeval innocence of land exposing itself to the sun for the first time. Decade after decade, artists came to paint the light of Provincetown, and comparisons were made to the lagoons of Venice and the marshes of Holland, but then the summer ended and most of the painters left, and the long dingy undergarment of the gray New England winter, gray as the spirit of my mood, came down to visit. One remembered then that the land was only ten thousand years old, and one's ghosts had no roots. We did not have old Martha's Vineyard's fossil remains to subdue each spirit, no, there was nothing to domicile our specters who careened with the wind down the two long streets of our town which curved together around the bay like two spinsters on their promenade to church.

If this is a fair sample of how my mind worked on the Twenty-fourth Day, it is obvious I was feeling introspective, long-moldering, mournful and haunted. Twenty-four days of being without a wife you love and hate and certainly fear is guaranteed to leave you cleaving to her like the butt end of addiction itself. How I hated the taste of cigarettes now that I was smoking again.

It seems to me that I walked the length of the town that day and back again to my house—her house—it was Patty Lareine's money that had bought our home. Three miles along Commercial Street I walked, and back through all the shank of that gray afternoon, but I do not remember whom I spoke to, nor how many or few might have passed in a car and invited me to ride. No, I remember I walked to the very end of town, out to where the last house meets the place on the beach where the Pilgrims first landed in America. Yes, it was not at Plymouth but *here* that they landed.

I contemplate the event on many a day. Those Pilgrims, having crossed the Atlantic, encountered the cliffs of Cape Cod as their first sight of land. On that back shore the surf, at its worst, can break in waves ten feet high. On windless days the peril is worse; a sailing vessel can be driven in by the relentless tides to founder on the shoals. It is not the rocks but the shifting sands that sink you off Cape Cod. What

fear those Pilgrims must have known on hearing the dull eternal boom of the surf. Who would dare come near that shore with boats such as theirs? They turned south, and the white deserted coast remained unrelenting—no hint of a cove. Just the long straight beach. So they tried going to the north and in a day saw the shore bend west, then continue to curve until it even turned to the south. What trick of the land was this? Now they were sailing to the east, three quarters of the way around from the north. Were they circumnavigating an ear of the sea? They came around the point, and dropped anchor in the lee. It was a natural harbor, as protected, indeed, as the inside of one's ear. From there, they put down small boats and rowed to shore. A plaque commemorates the landing. It is by the beginning of the breakwater that now protects our marshes at the end of town from the final ravages of the sea. There is where you come to the end of the road, to the farthest place a tourist can ride out toward the tip of Cape Cod and encounter the landing place of the Pilgrims. It was only weeks later, after much bad weather and the recognition that there was little game to hunt and few fields to till in these sandy lands, that the Pilgrims sailed west across the bay to Plymouth.

Here, however, was where they first landed with all the terror and exaltation of encountering the new land. New land it was, not ten thousand years old. A strewn of sand. How many Indian ghosts must have howled through the first nights of their encampment.

I think of the Pilgrims whenever I walk to these emerald-green marshes at the end of town. Beyond, the coastal dunes are so low that one can see ships along the horizon even when the water is not visible. The flying bridges of sport-fishing boats seem to travel in caravans along the sand. If I have a drink in me, I begin to laugh, because across from the plaque to the Pilgrims, not fifty yards away, there where the United States began, stands the entrance to a huge motel. If it is no uglier than any other vast motel, it is certainly no prettier, and the only homage the Pilgrims get is that it is called an Inn. Its asphalt parking lot is as large as a football field. Pay homage to the Pilgrims.

No more than this, no matter how I press and force my mind, is what I remember of how I spent my Twenty-fourth afternoon. I went out, I walked across the town, I brooded on the geology of our shores, loaned my imagination to the Pilgrims, and laughed at the Provincetown Inn. Then I suppose I must have walked on home. The gloom in which I lay

in the grasp of my sofa was timeless. I had spent many hours in these twenty-four days staring at the wall, but what I do recollect, what I cannot ignore, is that in the evening I got into my Porsche and drove up Commercial Street very slowly, as if afraid that this night I might run into a child—the evening was foggy—and I did not stop until I came to The Widow's Walk. There, not far from the Provincetown Inn, is a dark stained pine-paneled room whose foundations are gently slapped in the rising of the tide, for one of the charms of Provincetown I have neglected to pass along is that not only my house—her house!—but most of the buildings on the bay side of Commercial Street are kin to ships at high tide when the bulkheads on which they rest are half submerged by the sea.

It was such a tide tonight. The waters rose as languorously as if we were in the tropics, but I knew the sea was cold. Behind the good windows of this dark room, the fire on its wide hearth was worthy of a postcard, and my wooden chair was full of approaching winter, inasmuch as it had a shelf of the kind they used in study halls a hundred years ago: a large round platter of oak lifted on its hinges to enable you to sit down, after which it ensconced itself under your right elbow to serve as a table for your drink.

The Widow's Walk might as well have been created for me. On lonely fall evenings I liked to entertain the conceit that I was some modern tycoon-pirate of prodigious wealth who kept the place for his amusement. The large restaurant at the other end might be rarely entered by me, but the small bar of this paneled lounge equipped with its barmaid was all for myself. Secretly I must have believed that no one else had a right to enter. By November, the illusion was not difficult to protect. On quiet weekday nights most of the diners, good senior Wasps from Brewster and Dennis and Orleans, out for a smack of excitement, found their thrills in the sheer audacity of daring to drive all of thirty or forty miles to Provincetown itself. The echo of summer kept our evil reputation intact. Those fine Scotch studies in silver—which is to say, each Wasp professor emeritus and retired corporate executive—did not look to tarry in a bar. They headed for the Dining Room. Besides, one look at me in my dungaree jacket was enough to steer them to the food. "No, dear," their wives would say, "let's have our drinks at the table. We're starved!"

"Yeah, baby," I would murmur to myself, "starved."

Over these twenty-four days, the Lounge at The Widow's Walk had become my castle keep. I would sit by the window, study the fire, and watch the changes in the tide, feeling after four bourbons, ten cigarettes, and a dozen crackers with cheese (my dinner!) that I was, at least, a wounded lord living by the sea.

The compensation for misery, self-pity, and despair is that fed enough drinks, the powers of imagination return with force. No matter that they are lopsided under such auspices; they return. In this room my drinks were well stoked by a submissive bar girl doubtless terrified of me although I never said anything more provocative than "Another bourbon, please." Yet, since she worked in a bar, I understood her fear. I had worked in a bar myself for many years. I could respect her conviction that I was dangerous. That was apparent in the concentration of my good manners. In the days when I used to be a bartender, I had watched over a few customers like myself. They never bothered you until they did. Then the room could get smashed.

I did not see myself as belonging to such a category. But how could I say that the waitress' dire expectation did not serve me well? I received no more attention than I wanted and every bit I might need. The manager, a young and pleasant fellow, much set on maintaining the tone of the establishment, had now known me for more than a few years, and as long as I had been accompanied by my rich wife, considered me a rare example of local gentry no matter how obstreperous Patty Lareine might get on drink: Wealth is worth that much! Now that I was by myself, he greeted me when I came in, said goodbye when I went out, and had obviously made the proprietorial decision to leave me strictly alone. As a corollary, few visitors were steered into the Lounge. Night after night, I could get drunk in the manner I chose.

Not until now have I been ready to confess that I am a writer. From Day One, however, no new writing had been done, not in more than three weeks. To see one's situation as ironic is, we may agree, no joy, but irony becomes a dungeon when the circle is closed. The cigarettes I gave up at such cost to my ability to write had, on this last return to the domain of nicotine—it is no less than a domain—cut off all ability to come forth with even one new paragraph. In order not to smoke, I had had to learn to write all over again. Now that I could manage such a feat, the return to cigarettes seemed to have tamped out every literary spark. Or was it the departure of Patty Lareine?

2019

These days I would take my notebook with me to The Widow's Walk, and when drunk enough, would succeed in adding a line or two to words I had set down in less desperate hours. On those random occasions, therefore, when visitors were actually sharing a predinner drink in the same public room with me, my small sounds of appreciation at some felicity of syntax or my bored grunts before a phrase that now seemed as dead as an old drinking friend's repetitions must have sounded strange and animal, as unsettling (given the paneled gentility of this Lounge) as cries made by a hound absolutely indifferent to any nearby human presence.

Can I claim I was not playing to the house when I would frown over a drunken note I could hardly read, and then chuckle in pleasure as soon as these alcoholic squiggles metamorphosed into a legible text? "There," I would mutter to myself, "studies!"

I had just made out part of a title, a bona-fide title, sufficiently resonant for a book: *In Our Wild—Studies among the Sane* by Timothy Madden.

Now, an exegesis commenced on my name. *In Our Wild—Studies among the Sane* by Mac Madden? By Tim Mac Madden? By Two-Mac Madden? I began to giggle. My waitress, poor overalerted mouse, was able to flick a look at me only by setting herself resolutely in profile.

Yet I was giggling truly. Old jokes about my name were returning. I felt one rush of love for my father. Ah, the sweet sorrow of loving a parent. It is as pure as the taste of a sourball when you are five. Douglas "Dougy" Madden—Big Mac to his friends and to his only child, myself, once called Little Mac, or Mac-Mac, then Two-Mac and Toomey and back to Tim. Following the morphology of my name through the coils of booze, I giggled. Each change of name had been an event in my life—if I could only recover the events.

In my heart I was now trying to launch a first set of phrases for the initial essay. (What a title! *In Our Wild—Studies among the Sane* by Tim Madden.) I might speak of the Irish and the reason they drink so much. Could it be the testosterone? The Irish presumably had more than other men, my father did for certain, and it made them unmanageable. Maybe the hormone asked to be dissolved in some liquor.

I sat with pencil poised, my sip of bourbon near to scorching my tongue. I was not ready to swallow. This title was about all that had come to me since Day One. I could merely ponder the waves. The waves

outside the lounge-room window on this chill November night had become equal in some manner to the waves in my mind. My thoughts came to a halt and I felt the disappointment of profound drunken vision. Just as you waddle up to the true relations of the cosmos, your vocabulary blurs.

It was then I grew aware that I was no longer alone in my realm of The Widow's Walk. A blonde remarkably like Patty Larcine was sitting with her escort not ten feet away. If I had no other clue to the profound submersions of my conscious state, it was enough that she had entered with her bucko, a nicely tailored country-tweed-and-flannels, silver-winged-pompadour, suntanned-lawyer-type fellow, yes, the lady had sat down with her sheik, and since they now had drinks in front of them, must have been talking (and in unabashed voices, hers at least) for a considerable period. Five minutes? Ten minutes? I realized that they had sized me up, and for whatever reason, had the confidence, call it the gall, to ignore me. Whether this insularity derived from some not easily visible proficiency the man might call upon in the martial arts—Tweed-and-Flannels looked more like a tennis player than a Black Belt—or whether they were so wealthy a couple that nothing unpleasant ever walked up to them in the way of strangers (unless it was burglary of the mansion) or whether they were exhibiting simple insensitivity to the charged torso, head and limbs sitting so near them, I do not know, but the woman, at least, was talking loudly, and as if I did not exist. What an insult at this beleaguered hour!

Then I understood. From their conversation I could soon divine that they were Californians, just as loose and unselfconscious in deportment as tourists from New Jersey visiting a bar in Munich. What could they know of how they were degrading me?

As my attention went through those ponderous maneuvers of which only a human in deep depression can speak—the brain lurches like an elephant backed into its stall—I climbed at last out of the dungeon of my massive self-absorption to take a look at them, and thereby came to realize that their indifference to me was neither arrogance, confidence, nor innocence but, to the contrary, theatrical to the hilt. A set of poses. The man was highly keyed to the likelihood that a glowering presence such as mine was hardly to be ignored as a source of real trouble, and the woman, true to my premise that blondes believe it obscene not to

comport themselves as angels or bitches—each option must be equally available—was stampeding along. She wished to provoke me. She wanted to test her beau's courage. No mean surrogate was this lady for my own Patty Lareine.

But let me describe the woman. It's worth the look. She must have been fifteen years older than my wife, and thereby, not far from fifty, but what a splendid approach! There used to be a porny star named Jennifer Welles who had the same appearance. She had large, well-turned promiscuous breasts—one nipple tilted to the east, one stared out to the west—a deep navel, a woman's round belly, a sweet buoyant spread of buttocks, and *dark* pubic hair. That was what encouraged the prurience to stir in those who bought a ticket to watch Jennifer Welles. Any lady who chooses to become a blonde is truly blonde.

Now, the face of my new neighbor was, like the porny star, Jennifer Welles, undeniably appealing. She had a charming upturned nose and a full pout on the mouth, as spoiled and imperious as the breath of sex. Her nostrils flared, her fingernails—the Liberation could go screw it—were scandalously well-manicured with a silver varnish to catch the silver-blue toning above her eyes. What a piece! An anachronism. The most complacent kind of West Coast money. Santa Barbara? La Jolla? Pasadena? Wherever it was, she must certainly come from an enclave of bridge players. Perfectly groomed blondes remain as quintessential to such places as mustard on pastrami. Corporate California had moved right into my psyche.

I can hardly describe what an outrage this seemed. As well paste a swastika outside the office of the United Jewish Appeal. This blonde reminded me so directly of Patty Lareine that I felt obliged to strike. Do what? I could hardly say. At the very least, gore their mood.

So I listened. She was one immaculately dressed full-bodied lady who liked to drink. She could take them back to back. Scotch, of course. Chivas Regal. "Chivvies," she called them. "Miss," she told the waitress, "give me another Chivvies. Lots of diamonds." That was her word for ice, ha, ha.

"Of course you're bored with me," she said to her man in a loud and most self-certain voice, as if she could measure to the drop just how much sex she might be sitting upon. A powerhouse. There are voices that resonate into one's secret strings like tuning forks. Hers was one. It

is crude to say, but one would do much for such a voice. There was always the hope that its moist little relative below would offer something of the same for your preserves.

Patty Lareine had such a voice. She could be diabolical with her lip around a Very Dry Martini (which, of course, count on it, she would insist on calling a Marty Seco). "It was gin," she'd say in all the husky enthusiasm of her hot-to-trot larynx, "it was gin as done the old lady in. Yes, asshole," oh, and she would include you most tenderly in this jeer, as if, by God, even you, asshole, could feel all right if you were being kept around her. But then, Patty Lareine belonged to another kind of wealth, strictly derivative. Her second husband, Meeks Wardley Hilby III (whom once she most certainly tried to persuade me to murder) was *old* Tampa money and she drilled him good but not between the eyes, rather up his financial fundament thanks to her divorce lawyer, a whiz bomb (who, I used to assume to my pain, was probably massaging the back wall of her belly every night for a time, but then, one cannot expect less of a dedicated divorce lawyer—it pays off in presenting the witness). Although Patty Lareine was trim to bursting in her build, and in those days, peppy as a spice jar, he modulated the moxie of her personality down to more delicate herbs. With the aid of intense coaching (he was one of the first to use a video camera for rehearsal) he showed her how to be tremulous on the stand and thereby turn the judgmental eye into—forgive me!—one fat old judge melting away. Before they were done, her marital peccadilloes (and her husband had witnesses) came out as the maidenly mistakes of a desperately beleaguered and much abused fine lady. Each ex-lover appearing as witness against her was depicted as one more unhappy attempt to cure the heart that her husband had shattered. Patty may have begun life as one good high school cheerleader, just a little old redneck from a down-home North Carolina town, but by the time she was ready to divorce Wardley (and marry me) she had developed a few social graces. Hell, her lawyer and she grew equal to Lunt and Fontanne in the manner they could pass a bowl of soup back and forth on the witness stand. One scion of old Gulf Coast Florida money was certainly divested of a share of his principal. That was how Patty came to belong to wealth.

The more I listened to the lady in *The Widow's Walk*, however, the more I could discern that she was of other ilk. Patty's wits were *true* wit—that was all she had to stand between her and the crass and crude.

This new blonde lady now transforming my evening might be short on wit, but then, she had small need for it. Her manner came with her money. If all else was right, she would probably meet you at her hotel-room door attired in no more than white elbow-length gloves. (And high heels.)

"Go ahead, say you're bored," I now heard clearly. "It's to be expected when an attractive man and woman decide to go on a trip. To be thrown together for all these days creates the fear of disenchantment. Tell me if I'm wrong."

It was obvious that her interest in his reply was less than her pleasure in letting me know that they not only were not married, but were, by anyone's estimate, on a quick and limited fling. It could wrap itself up on any turn. Taken as a beast on the hoof, Tweed-and-Flannels shouldn't be too hard to replace for a one-night stand. This lady had a body language to suggest that you would be given one thoroughgoing welcome on first night—only later would difficulties arise. But the first night would be on the house.

No, I'm not bored, Tweed-and-Flannels was telling her now in the lowest voice, not bored at all, his voice droning into her ear like white noise put on the audio system to dull your synapses to sleep. Yes, I decided, he must be a lawyer. There was something in the confidential moderation of his manner. He was addressing the Bench on a point of law, helping the judge not to blow the case. Soothing!

Her text, however, was obstreperous! "No, no, no," she said, giving a light shake to her ice cubes, "it was my idea we come here. Your negotiations take you to Boston, well then, I said, my whim also takes me. Do you mind? Of course you don't. Daddy is mad about brand-new mama. Et cetera," she said, pausing for a sip of the Chivvies. "But, darling, I have this vice. I can't bear contentment. The moment I feel it, everything says 'Goodbye, my dear!' Moreover, I'm an avid map reader, as you have learned, Lonnie. They say women can't read directions. I can. At Kansas City, way back in—wait, it comes to me—in 1976, I was the only Jerry Ford woman in our delegation who could read a map well enough to drive from the hotel to his headquarters.

"So, there was your mistake. Showing me a map of Boston and its environs. When you hear that tone in my voice, when I say, 'Darling, I'd like to see a map of this region,' beware. It means my toes are itching. Lonnie, ever since I was in the fifth grade and started geography stud-

ics"—she squinted critically at the melting diamonds in her glass—"I used to stare at Cape Cod on the map of New England. It sticks out like a pinkie. You know how children are about pinkies? That's their *little* finger, the one close to them. So I wanted to see the tip of Cape Cod."

I must say I still didn't like her friend. He had that much-massaged look of a man whose money makes money while he sleeps. Not at all, not at all, he was telling her, laying his salad oil on her stirred-up little sorrows, we both wanted to come here, it's truly all right, and more of such, and more of such.

"No, Lonnie, I gave you no choice. I was a tyrant about it. I said, 'I want to go to this place, Provincetown.' I wouldn't allow you to demur. So here we are. It's a whim on top of a whim, and you're bored stiff. You want to drive back to Boston tonight. This place is *deserted*, right?"

At this point—make no mistake about it—she looked at me full out: full of welcome if I took it up, full of scorn in the event I did not reply.

I spoke. I said to her, "That's what you get for trusting a map."

It must have worked. For my next recollection is of sitting with them. I may as well confess that my memory is damnable. What I recall, I see clearly—sometimes!—but often I cannot connect the events of a night. So my next recollection is of sitting with them. I must have been invited over. I must, indeed, have been good company. Even he was laughing. Leonard Pangborn was his name, Lonnie Pangborn, a good family name in Republican California, doubtless—and hers was not Jennifer Welles but Jessica Pond. Pond and Pangborn—can you understand my animosity now? They had the patina that comes off a TV screen from characters in a soap opera.

Actually, I began to entertain her considerably. I think it is because I had not spoken to anyone for days. Now, depression or no, some buried good humor in me seemed well rested. I began to relate a few stories about the Cape, and my timing was vigorous. I must have been as energetic as a convict on a one-day pass outside the walls, but then, I was so well on my way to getting along with Pond that it came near to lifting me out of my doldrums. For one thing, I soon divined that she was drawn to substantial property. Fine mansions on good green lawns with high wrought-iron gates gave her the same glow a real estate agent derives from bringing the right client to the right house. Of course, I

soon figured it out. To the money she was born with, Jessica had added her own pile. Back in California she was exactly that, a successful country real estate agent.

What a disappointment Provincetown must have been to her. We offer our indigenous architecture, but it is funky: old fish-shed with wooden-stairway-on-the-outside Cape Cod salt-box. We sell room-space to tourists. One hundred rented rooms can end up having one hundred outside stairways. Provincetown, to anyone looking for gracious living, is no more uncluttered than twenty telephone poles at a crossroads.

Maybe she was deceived by the delicacy of our site on the map: the fine filigree tip of the Cape curls around itself like the toe of a medieval slipper! Probably she had pictured swards of lawn. Instead, she had to look at honkytonk shops boarded up and a one-way main street so narrow that if a truck was parked at the curb, you held your breath and hoped nothing scratched your rented sedan as you went on through.

Naturally, she asked me about the most imposing house our town can point to. It sits on a hill, a five-story château—the only one in town—and is fenced about in high wrought iron. It is far removed from its gate. I couldn't say who lived there now, or whether he owned or rented. I had heard the name and forgot. It is not easy to explain to strangers, but in the winter, people choose to burrow down in Provincetown. Getting to know new arrivals is no simpler than traveling from island to island. Besides, none of my acquaintances, dressed as we were for winter (dungarees, boots and parkas) would ever get past a gate. I assumed that the present seigneur of our one imposing house had to be some kind of rich gink. So I drew on the rich man I knew best (who happened, indeed, to be Patty Lareine's ex-husband from Tampa) and I moved him all the way north to Provincetown and loaned him the château. I did not wish to lose momentum with Miss Jessica.

"Oh, that place belongs," I said, "to Meeks Wardley Hilby the Third. He lives all alone there." I paused. "I used to know him. We went to Exeter at the same time."

"Oh," said Jessica after quite a pause, "do you think we could pay him a visit?"

"He's not there now. He rarely stays in town any longer."

"Too bad," she said.

"You wouldn't like him," I told her. "He's a very odd fellow. At Exeter

he used to drive all the deans crazy by tweaking the dress code. We had to wear jackets and ties to class, but old Wardley would get himself up like a prince of the Salvation Army."

There must have been some promise in my voice, for she began to laugh happily, but I remember that even as I began to tell her more I had the strongest feeling I should not go on—just as irrational as an unaccountable smell of smoke—do you know, I sometimes think we are all of us equal to broadcasting stations and some stories should not be put on the air. Let us leave it that I had an unmistakable injunction not to continue (which I knew I would ignore—that much is to be said for an attractive blonde!) and at the moment, even as I looked for the next words, an image came to me across the years, bright as a coin from the mint, of Meeks Wardley Hilby III, of *Wardley*, gangling along in his chinos, his patent-leather pumps and his old dinner jacket that he wore every day to class (to the consternation of half the faculty) his satin lapels faded and scuffed, his purple socks and heliotrope bow tie standing out like neon signs in Vegas.

"God," I said to Jessica, "we used to call him 'goon-child.'"

"You have to tell me all about him," she said. "Please."

"I don't know," I replied. "The story has its sordid touches."

"Oh, do tell us," said Pangborn.

I hardly needed encouragement. "Attribute it to the father," I said. "There has to be a powerful influence coming from the father. He's dead now. Meeks Wardley Hilby the Second."

"How do you tell them apart?" asked Pangborn.

"Well, they always called the father Meeks and the son Wardley. There was no confusion."

"Ah," he said. "Were they at all alike?"

"Not much. Meeks was a sportsman and Wardley was Wardley. In childhood, the nurses used to tie his hands to the bed. Meeks's orders. It was calculated to put a stop to Wardley's onanism." I looked at her as if to say, "This is the detail I was afraid of." She gave a smile, which I took to mean, "We're by the fire. Tell your tale."

I did. I worked at it with great care, and gave them a full account of the adolescence of Meeks Wardley Hilby III, never stopping to chide myself for this outrageous change of venue from the palace on the Gulf Coast to the northern estate here on the hill, but then, this was only

Pond and Pangborn I was telling it to. What would they care, I told myself, where it took place?

So I went on. Meeks's wife, Wardley's mother, was sickly, and Meeks took a mistress. Wardley's mother died when he was in his first year at Exeter, and soon after, the father married the mistress. Neither of them ever liked Wardley. He liked them no better. Since they kept a door locked on the third floor of their house, Wardley decided that was the room to get into. Not, however, until he was kicked out of Exeter in his last year was he ever home long enough to find his father and the new wife away for a night. On the first evening that that happened, he worked himself up sufficiently to inch along an exterior molding of the mansion's wall three stories up from the ground, and went in through the window.

"I love this," said Jessica. "What was in the room?"

He discovered, I told her, a large old-fashioned view camera with a black cloth, mounted on a heavy tripod in one corner, and on a library table, five red vellum scrapbooks. It was a special pornographic collection. The five scrapbooks contained large copia photographs of Meeks making love to his mistress.

"The one who was now the wife?" asked Pangborn.

I nodded. As described by the son, the first pictures must have been taken in the year Wardley was born. Each successive volume of the scrapbooks showed the father and mistress getting older. A year or two after the death of Wardley's mother, not long after the new marriage, another man appeared in the photos. "He was the manager of the estate," I said. "Wardley told me that he dined with the family every day."

At this point Lonnie clapped his hands together. "Incredible," he said.

The later photographs showed the manager making love to the wife while the father sat five feet away reading a newspaper. The lovers would adopt different positions but Meeks kept reading the paper.

"Who was the photographer?" Jessica asked.

"Wardley said it was the butler."

"What a house!" Jessica exclaimed. "Only in New England could this occur." We all laughed a great deal at that.

I did not add that the butler seduced Wardley at the age of fourteen. Nor did I offer Wardley's statement on the matter: "I've spent the rest

of my life trying to regain property rights to my rectum." There was probably a fine line of propriety to tread with Jessica. I had not found it yet, so I was cautious. "At nineteen," I said, "Wardley got married. I think it was to confound his father. Meeks was a confirmed anti-Semite and the bride was a Jewish girl. She also happened to have a large nose."

They enjoyed this so much that I felt a few regrets at going on, but no helping it now—I also had the ruthlessness of the storyteller and the next detail was crucial. "This nose," I said, "as Wardley described it, curled over her upper lip until she looked as if she were breathing the fumes of her mouth. For some reason, maybe because he was a gourmet, this was indescribably carnal to Wardley."

"Oh, I hope it turned out all right," remarked Jessica.

"Well, not exactly," I said. "Wardley's wife had been well brought up. So, woe to Wardley when she discovered that he, too, had a pornography collection. She destroyed it. Then she made it worse. She managed to charm the father. After five years of marriage she succeeded in pleasing Meeks enough for the old man to give a dinner party for his son and daughter-in-law. Wardley got very drunk, and later that night, brained his wife with a candlestick. She happened to die from the blow."

"Oh, no," said Jessica. "It all took place in that house on the hill?"

"Yes."

"What," asked Pangborn, "was the legal upshot?"

"Well, believe it if you will, they did not use insanity for a defense."

"Then he must have done some time."

"He did." I was not about to mention that we had not only gone to Exeter together but actually met each other again in the same prison at the same time.

"It sounds to me as if the father was directing his son's case," said Lonnie.

"I think you're right."

"Of course! With a plea of insanity, the defense would have had to bring the scrapbooks into court." Lonnie locked his fingers together and flexed them outward. "So," he said, "Wardley took the fall. What was going to jail worth to him?"

"One million dollars a year," I answered. "Put in a trust fund each year for each year he served, plus a split with his stepmother on the estate after the father's death."

"Do you know for a fact whether they paid it over to him?" Lonnie asked.

Jessica shook her head. "I don't see such people honoring their agreement."

I shrugged. "Meeks paid," I told them, "because Wardley had filched the scrapbooks. Believe me, when Meeks died, the stepmother kept the bargain. Meeks Wardley Hilby the Third came out of jail a wealthy man."

Jessica said, "I love how you tell a story."

Pangborn nodded. "Priceless," he said.

She was pleased. The trip to this strange place seemed to have come to a few good minutes, after all. "Does Wardley," she asked, "plan to live in the house again?"

I was hesitating what to say to this when Pangborn replied, "Of course not. Our new friend here has made it all up."

"Well, Leonard," I said, "remind me to hire you if I need a lawyer."

"*Did* you make it up?" she asked.

I was not about to give a small smile and say, "Some of it." Instead I said, "Yes. Every last drop," and emptied my drink. Leonard, doubtless, had already made his inquiries about who owned the estate.

My next recollection is that I was alone again. They had gone into the dining room.

I remember drinking, and writing, and watching the water. Some observations I would put in my pocket and some I would rip up. The sound of paper as it was being torn set off reverberations in me. I began to chortle within. I was thinking that surgeons had to be the happiest people on earth. To cut people up and get paid for it—that's happiness, I told myself. It made me wish Jessica Pond was next to me once more. She might have given a glad howl at the thought.

It comes back to me that I then wrote a longer note which I found in my pocket the next day. For some reason I gave it a title: RECOGNITION. "The perception of the possibility of greatness in myself has always been followed by desire to murder the nearest unworthy." Then I underlined the next sentence: "*It is better to keep a modest notion of oneself!*"

The more, however, that I read this note, the more I seemed to install myself in that impregnable hauteur which is, perhaps, the most satisfy-

ing aspect of solitary drinking. The knowledge that Jessica Pond and Leonard Pangborn were sitting at a table not a hundred feet away, oblivious to what might be their considerable peril, had an intoxicating effect on me, and I began to contemplate—I must say it was with no serious passion, rather as one more variety of amusing myself through another night—how easy it would be to do away with them. Consider it! After twenty-four days without Patty Lareine, this is the sort of man I had become!

Here was my reasoning. A clandestine couple, each of whom is obviously well-placed in whatever world they inhabit in California, decide to go to Boston together. They are discreet about their mutual plans. Perhaps they tell an intimate or two, perhaps no one, but since they drive off to Provincetown on a whim, and in a rented car, the perpetrator need only—should the deed be done—drive their car one hundred and twenty miles back to Boston and leave it on the street. Assuming the bodies have been well-buried, it would be weeks, if ever, before any concern for the man and woman as missing persons might stir newspaper publicity in these parts. By then, would anyone at The Widow's Walk remember their faces? Even in that event, the police would have to assume, given the location of the car, that they returned to Boston and met their end there. I lived within the logic of this fine scenario, enjoyed my drink a little more, enjoyed the power I possessed over them by thinking thoughts such as these, and there . . . it is precisely there . . . I lost the rest of the evening. In the morning I would no longer be able to put it together to satisfy myself.

What I can't recollect is whether or not I began to drink again with Pond and Pangborn. It is as likely, I should think, that I boozed by myself, got into my car and went home. If I did, I would have gone directly to sleep. Although that, by the evidence of what I found when I awakened, was not possible.

I also have another scenario, which is certainly clearer than a dream, although I could have dreamt it. It is that Patty Lareine returned and we had a terrible quarrel. I see her mouth. Yet I do not recollect a word. Could it have been a dream?

Then I also have the clearest impression that Jessica and Leonard did indeed join me after they ate, and I invited them to my home (to Patty Lareine's home). We sat in the living room while the man and woman listened to me with attention. I seem to remember that. Then we took

a trip in a car, but if it was my Porsche, I could not have taken both of them. Perhaps we went in two cars.

I also remember returning home alone. The dog was in terror of me. He is a big Labrador, but he crept away as I came near. I sat down at the edge of my bed and jotted one more note before I lay down. That I recall. I dozed off sitting up and staring at the notebook. Then I woke up in a few seconds (or was it an hour?) and read what I had written: "Despair is the emotion we feel at the death of beings within us."

That was my last thought before I went to sleep. Yet none of these scenarios, nor very little of them, can be true—because when I woke in the morning, I had a tattoo on my arm that had not been there before.

Two

I have much to tell about this day, but it did not begin with any great rush to arise. The truth is that I stayed in bed for a long time and did not trust my eyes to the light. In that self-imposed darkness, I tried to decide on what I could remember of the night after I left The Widow's Walk.

The procedure was not strange to me. It did not matter how much I drank, I could always get my car home. I had returned my car safely on nights when others who had swallowed as much would have been slumbering at the bottom of the sea. I would enter the house, reach my bed, and come to in the morning with my brain feeling as if it had been split by an ax. I remembered nothing. Yet if that proved the only symptom, and I knew no other uneasiness than the debauch I had put upon my liver, it was all right. Others would tell me later what I had done. If I felt no dread, then I could have done nothing too terrible. Short-term amnesia is not the worst affliction if you have an Irish flair for the sauce.

Since Patty Lareine left, however, I had been encountering new phenomena, and they were curious. Did drink have me chasing for the root of the wound? I can only say that my memory would be clear to me in the morning, but shattered, that is to say, in pieces. Each fragment was sharp enough, yet like puzzles that have been thrown together, not the pieces seemed to come out of the same box. Which is equal to I suppose, to saying my dreams were now as reasonable as my memory or my memory was as untrustworthy as my dreams. In either event

I could not tell them apart. It is a frightful state. You wake up in pure confusion over what you might or might not have done. That is like entering a labyrinth of caves. Somewhere along the way, the fine long thread that is supposed to lead you back has been broken. Now at each turning it is possible to be certain that you have come this way, or, equally, that you have never been here before.

I speak of this because I awoke on Day Twenty-five and lay nearly still for an hour before I chose to open my eyes. I was feeling dread with an intimacy I had not known since I came out of prison. There were mornings in the penitentiary when you got up from sleep with the knowledge that somebody bad—far beyond your own measure of how to be bad—was looking for you. Those were the worst mornings in prison.

Now I had the conviction that something would happen to me before the day was done, and in this anticipation was my dread. Yet with it all, I had one surprise. Lying there with a ferocious headache, trying behind closed eyes to keep my memory in view—it was like following a film with numerous breaks—a weight of apprehension lying in my stomach mean as lead, I still had an erection, an honest-to-God all-out ram of an erection. I wanted to screw Jessica Pond.

I would be reminded of this little fact in the days ahead. But let us take it in order. When your mind is a book where pages are missing—no, worse, two books, each with its own gaps—well, order becomes as close a virtue as clean floors in a monastery. So I say only that it was because of this erection that I was saved the shock of opening my eyes on my tattoo, but remembered it instead. (However, at this instant, I could picture neither the parlor nor the face of the tattoo artist.) Somewhere I had registered the fact. With all my distress, it was still curious. How many facets memory could utilize! To remember that an act had been undertaken (although one could visualize none of it) was like reading about someone in a newspaper. So-and-So embezzled \$80,000. The headline is all one perceives; the fact, however, is registered. Ergo, I was noting this fact about myself. Tim Madden had a tattoo. I knew it with my eyes closed. The erection reminded me of it.

In prison I had always resisted acquiring one. I felt enough of a con. All the same, you cannot give three years to the slammer without picking up a considerable amount of tattoo culture. I had heard about the rush. One man in four or five received a real rush of sexual excitement

while the needle was being pricked into him. I also recollected how horny I had been for Ms. Pond. Had she been about while the artist was doing my watermark? Could she have been waiting in my car? Had we said goodbye to Lonnie Pangborn?

I opened my eyes. The tattoo was crusty, and sticky—some kind of glorified Band Aid had come loose during the night. Still, I could read it. *Laurel*, it said. *Laurel*, in a curlicue script of blue ink within a small red heart. Let no one say I had special taste when it came to engravings.

My humor broke like a rotten egg. Patty Lareine had also seen this tattoo. Last night! Abruptly I had the clearest vision of her. She was shrieking at me in our living room. "Laurel? Are you daring to inflict Laurel on me again?"

Yes, but how much of this had actually happened? It was obvious to me that I could conceive of conversations as easily as I could live them. Was I not a writer, after all? Patty Lareine disappeared twenty-five days ago with a black stud of her choice, a tall, sullen, beautifully put together dude who had been hanging around through the summer, ready to capitalize on that carnal affinity toward black men which lives in the hearts of certain blondes like lightning and thunder. Or, for all I know, smolders in the heart like oily rags behind a barn door. Whatever she felt, there was no mistaking the results. Once a year, give a season or two, she would have a fling with Mr. Black. Some big black. He could be heavy, or he could be as quick as a basketball player, but he was always big. The size put them out of my physical reach—I think it delighted her contempt for me that I was not man enough under such circumstances to load my pistol and do a down-home chase-off. "Just like your dad would in North Carolina?" I asked. "You bet!" she'd reply, with all the sassy, spiteful, untrammelled mouth of an eighteen-year-old in cutoffs at some Dr Pepper gas station. God, she was unafraid of me. I was terrified I would indeed get my gun, but never to chase Mr. Black. He was just appropriating what I, too, would grab if I could fill his jockstrap and sweat properly in his black logic. No, I was afraid I would get my pistol and never leave the house before emptying a magazine into her all-superior fuck-you face.

Still! Why had I chosen to inflict the name Laurel on my wife? I knew she was the one lady Patty would never forgive. I was with Laurel, after all, when I met Patty, except that her name was Madeleine Falco. It was Patty who had insisted on calling her Laurel the day they met. I learned

later that "Laurel" was short for Lorelei—Patty did not like Madeleine Falco. Had I chosen the tattoo to punish Patty? Had she truly been in the house? Or was I living with some fragment of last night's dream?

It occurred to me that if my wife had indeed come to visit, and then departed, some evidence must remain. Patty Lareine usually left half-consumed objects behind her. Her lipstick must be on our glasses. It was enough to get me dressed and down the stairs, but in the living room there were no traces of her. The ashtrays were clean. Why, then, was I now twice certain our conversation had taken place? Of what benefit were clues if one's mind was stimulated to believe the opposite of the evidence? It came upon me then that the only true test of the strength, the veritable muscle tone, so to speak, of one's sanity, was the ability to bear question upon question with not an answer in sight.

It is good I had such a perception, for I soon needed it. In the kitchen, during the night, the dog had been ill. The treasures of his belly befouled the linoleum. Worse, the jacket I had been wearing last night was hanging on a chair, crusted with blood. I felt of my nostrils. I suffered from nosebleeds. Yet the passages seemed clear. Now the dread with which I had awakened took a turn. A whistle of fear stirred in my lungs when I inhaled.

How could I ever clean the kitchen? I turned around, went back through the house and out the door. It was not until I reached the street and felt the damp air of November pass through my shirt that I realized I was still in my slippers. No great matter. I took five strides across Commercial Street and peered into the windows of my Porsche. (Her Porsche.) The passenger seat was covered with blood.

What a curious logic to these matters! I had a startling lack of reaction. But then, the worst hangovers are always like that—they are simply full of the most unaccountable spaces. So I did not feel frightened any longer but exhilarated as if none of this had anything to do with me. The rush from the tattoo came back.

I was also feeling very cold. I returned inside and brewed myself a cup of coffee. The dog, ashamed of the mess he had made, blundered about in every danger of compounding it until I let him out.

My good mood (which I treasured for its rarity the way a patient in a terminal illness is grateful for an hour without pain) lasted all the while I was cleaning up after the hound. With my hangover, there was gagging aplenty, but also the most thoroughgoing and satisfying expiation for

the sins of my drinking. I might be only half-Catholic, and that all but untutored, since Big Mac never went near a church, and Julia, my mother (half-Protestant, half-Jewish—which is one reason I did not like anti-Semitic jokes) was prone to steer me to so many different cathedrals, synagogues, Quaker meeting houses and lectures at Ethical Culture that she was never much of a religious guide. I couldn't claim, therefore, to see myself as a Catholic. Yet I did. Give me a hangover, put me on my knees cleaning dog poop, and I would feel virtuous. (Indeed, I almost managed to forget how much blood had been spilled over the right seat of the car.) Then the phone rang. It was Regency, Alvin Luther Regency, our Acting Chief of Police, or rather, his secretary, asking me to wait until he came on the line, long enough to strip me of much good mood.

"Hello, Tim," he said, "you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm hung-over, but I'm fine."

"That's nice. That's good. I woke up this morning feeling concerned about you." He was going to be a modern police chief, that was for certain.

"No," I told him, "I'm all right."

He paused. "Tim, would you drop in this afternoon?"

My father always told me that when in doubt, assume a confrontation is brewing. Next, get to it quickly. So I said, "Why don't I come over this morning?"

"It's lunchtime now," he said reprovingly.

"Well, lunch," I said. "That's all right."

"I'm having a cup of java with one of the Selectmen. Make it after."

"Fine."

"Tim?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I think I am."

"Will you clean your car?"

"Oh, Christ, I had a terrible nosebleed last night."

"Yes, well, some of your neighbors ought to belong to the Good Snoopers' Society. The way they phoned it in, I figured you lopped somebody's arm off."

"I resent that. Why don't you come over and get a sample? You can check my blood type."

"Hey, give me a break." He laughed. He had a real cop's laugh. A high-pitched soprano whinny that had nothing to do with the rest of him. His face, I can tell you, might as well have been made of granite.

"All right," I said, "it's funny. But how would you like to be a grown man with nosebleeds?"

"Oh," he said, "I would take good care of myself. After ten shots of bourbon, I would be punctilious about drinking a glass of water." *Punctilious* had just made his lunch hour. He gave a big whinny and signed off.

I cleaned the inside of my car. That did not feel nearly so unhazardous as the dog poop. Nor was my stomach taking the coffee well. I did not know whether to be agitated at the effrontery and/or paranoia of my neighbors—which ones?—or to live with the possibility that I had gotten sufficiently unhinged to break one or another blonde lady's nose. Or worse. How did you lop off an arm?

The difficulty is that my sardonic side, which had been designed, presumably, to carry me through most of a bad day, was, when all is said, not a true side, but only a facet—one stop on the roulette wheel. There are thirty-seven others. Nor was anything put to rest by my increasing conviction that the blood on this seat did not come from anyone's nose. It was much too abundant. So I was soon revolted by the task. Blood, like any force of nature, insists on speaking. It is always with the same message. "All that lives," I now heard, "clamors to live again."

I will spare you such details as the rinsing of the cloth and the trips with pails of water. I had friendly conversations about nosebleeds with two neighbors who passed while I was on the task, and by then I had decided to walk to the Police Station. Truth, if I brought the vehicle, Regency might be tempted to impound it.

There had been times over the three years I was in prison when I used to wake up in the middle of the night with no sense of where I was. That would not be unusual but for the fact that of course I knew exactly where I was, down to my cellblock and cell number, yet I would not accept it. The given was not permitted to be given. I would lie in bed and make plans to take a girl to lunch or decide to rent a catboat for a sail. It did no good to tell myself that I was not at home but within a cell in a medium-security prison in Florida. I saw such facts as part of the dream, and thereby at quite a remove from me. I could get off on

my plans for the day if only the dream that I was in prison would not persist—"Man," I would say to myself, "shake these cobwebs." Sometimes it would take all of a morning for me to get back into the real day. Only then could I recognize that I would not be able to take the girl to lunch.

Something kin to this was being perpetrated on me now. I had a tattoo I could not account for, a good dog who was frightened of me, a car interior just washed of its blood, a missing wife whom I might or might not have seen late last night, and an ongoing, nicely simmering tumescence for a middle-aged blonde real estate lady from California, yet all I could think of as I took my walk to the center of town was that Alvin Luther Regency ought to have a reasonably serious purpose for interrupting a writer's working hours.

Now, the fact that I had done no writing in twenty-five days was not something I bothered to take into account. Rather, like those mornings in prison when I could not enter my day, so was I now like an empty pocket pulled out, and as much without myself as an actor who leaves his wife, his children, his debts, his mistakes, and even his ego in order to step into a role.

In fact, I was observing the new personality that walked into Regency's office in the basement of Town Hall, for I stepped through the door like a reporter, that is, I did my best to give an impression that the Police Chief's clothes, expression, office furniture, and words were all of equal import to me, as equal as the phrases that would go into a feature story of eight good paragraphs of approximately equal length. I entered, as I say, in the full concentration of such a role, and thereby noted like a good journalist that he was not accustomed to his new office. Not yet. His personal photographs, framed testimonials, professional licenses, paperweights and memorabilia might all be laid out or tacked to the walls, two file cabinets could flank his desk like posts at the gates of an ancient temple, and he might sit erect in his chair, like the military man he used to be, his close-to-the-scalp crew cut marking him as an old Green Beret, but still it stood out: he was not at home in his office. But then, which office would be at home with him? He had features that would ask a sculptor to use a jackhammer on the stone, all promontories, ledges and overhangs. In town, his nicknames abounded—Rock-face, Target Shoot, Glint-eye—or, leave it to the old Portuguese fishermen: Twinkletoes. The townspeople were obviously not ready to buy

him yet. He may have been Acting Chief of Police for six months, but the shadows of his predecessor hung over the office. The last Chief, around for ten years, had been a local Portuguese who studied law at night and moved up to the Attorney General's Office of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Memories of the last Chief—considering it was Provincetown, an unsentimental place—were now well-spoken.

I didn't know Regency well. In the old days, if he had come to my bar, I would have been certain, doubtless, that I could read him on the spot. He was large enough to play professional football, and there was no mistaking the competitive gleam in his eye: God, the spirit of competition, and crazy mayhem had come together. Regency looked like one Christian athlete who hated to lose.

I offer this much of a portrait because, in truth, I could not figure him out. Just as I didn't always say hello to my day, so Regency didn't always fit into the personality one knew him by. I will provide some details by and by.

Now he pushed his chair straight back with military rectitude and came out from behind his desk to draw up a chair near me. Then he stared thoughtfully into my eyes. Like a General. He would have seemed a total prick if somewhere along the way he had not been implanted with the idea that compassion also belonged to the working police officer's kit. The first thing he said, for instance, was "How is Patty Lareine? Have you heard from her?"

"No," I said. Of course, by this one small remark he wiped out my hard-held stance as a journalist.

"I wouldn't get into it," he said, "but I swear I saw her last night."

"Where?"

"At the West End. Near the breakwater."

That was not far from The Widow's Walk. "It's interesting," I said, "to hear she's back in town, but I know nothing of that." I lit a cigarette. My pulse had gone off on a race.

"It was just a glimpse of a blonde at the end range of my high beams. Three hundred yards, probably. I could be wrong." His manner said he was right.

Now he took out a cheroot and lit it, exhaling the smoke with panache enough for an old macho commercial.

"Your wife," he said, "is one attractive lady."

"Thank you."

On one of our drunken evenings this August past, in a week when we had in-the-water-at-dawn parties every night (Mr. Black already casing my home) we had made the acquaintance of Regency. Via a complaint about the noise. Alvin responded personally. I am sure he had heard of our parties.

Patty charmed him to the puttees. She told everyone—drunks, freaks, male and female models, half-nudes and premature Halloween types in costume—that she was turning down the stereo in Chief Regency's honor. Then she jibed at the sense of duty that restrained his hand from taking a glass. "Alvin Luther Regency," she said. "That's a hell of a name. You got to live up to it, boy."

He grinned like a Medal of Honor winner being commemoratorially kissed by Elizabeth Taylor.

"How did you ever get a name like Alvin Luther in Massachusetts? That's a Minnesota name," she said.

"Well," he said, "my paternal grandfather is from Minnesota."

"What did I tell you? Don't argue with Patty Lareine." She promptly invited him to the party we would be giving the following night. He came after duty. At the end, he told me at the door that he had had a fine time.

We started a conversation. He said he still kept his house in Barnstable and (Barnstable being fifty miles away) I asked if he didn't feel a bit out of place working here in all the melee of the summer frenzy. (Provincetown is the only town I know where you can ask such a question of the police.)

"No," he said, "I asked for this job. I wanted it."

"Why?" I asked. I'd heard rumors he was a narc.

He cut that off. "Well, they call Provincetown the Wild West of the East," he said, and gave his whinny.

After that, when we had a party, he'd drop in for a few minutes. If it continued from one night through to the next, we'd see him again. If it was after duty, he would have a drink, talk quietly to a couple of people, and leave. Just once did he give a clue—it was only after Labor Day—that he had taken on some booze. At the door he kissed Patty Lareine and shook hands formally with me. Then he said, "I worry about you."

"Why?" I did not like his eyes. He had the kind of warmth, when liking you, that reminds one most certainly of granite after it has been heated by the sun—the warmth is truly there, the rock likes you—but

the eyes were two steel bolts drilled into the rock. "People have told me," he said, "that you have a great deal of potential."

Nobody would phrase things that way in Provincetown. "Yes, I fuck up with the best," I told him.

"I get the feeling," he remarked, "that you can stand up when the trouble is brightest."

"Brightest?"

"When it all slows down." Now his eyes at last showed light.

"Right," I said.

"Right. You know what I'm talking about. Damn right I'm right." And he walked out. If he had been the kind to weave, I would have seen it then.

He was more together when drinking at the VFW bar. I even saw him get into an arm-wrestling match with Barrels Costa, who got his name by flipping barrels of fish up from the hold to the deck, and at low tide, from the deck up to the wharf. When it came to arm wrestling, Barrels could defeat every fisherman in town, but Regency, to stake a claim, took Barrels on one night and was respected for not hiding behind his uniform. Barrels won, but had to work long enough to get a taste of the bitterness of old age, and Regency smoldered. I guess he wasn't in the habit of losing. "Madden, you are a fuckup," he told me that night. "You are a damn waste."

The next morning, however, as I was going down the street to get the newspaper, he stopped his squad car and said, "I hope I wasn't out of line last night."

"Forget it." He irritated me. I was beginning to fear the end result: a big-breasted mother with an enormous phallus.

Now, in his office, I said to him, "If the only reason you invited me here was to say you saw Patty Lareine, I wish you had told me on the phone."

"I want to talk to you."

"I'm not good at taking advice."

"Maybe I need some." He said the next with pride he could not conceal, as if the true heft of a man, the brand mark itself, was in the strength it took to maintain this sort of ignorance: "I don't know women very well."

"If you are coming to me for pointers, it is obvious you don't."

"Mac, let's get drunk one night soon."

"Sure."

"Whether you know it or not, you and me are the only philosophers in town."

"Alvin, that makes you the sole thinker the right wing has produced in years."

"Hey, let's not get testy before the bullets are fired." He started to show me to the door. "Come on," he said, "I'll walk you to your car."

"I didn't bring it."

"Were you afraid I'd impound your heap?" That gave him the sanction to guffaw all the way down the corridor and out to the street.

There, just before we parted, he said, "Do you still have that marijuana patch in Truro?"

"How do you know about it?"

He looked disgusted. "Man, what's the secret? Everybody talks about your home-grown. I sampled some myself. Why, Patty Lareine dropped a couple of rolled ones in my pocket. Your stuff is about as good as I used to get in Nam." He nodded. "See, I don't care whether you're a Left-Winger or a Right-Winger, I don't care what kind of fucking wing you fly. I love pot. And I will tell you. Conservatives aren't right in every last item of the inventory. They miss the point here. They think marijuana destroys souls, but I don't believe that—I believe the Lord gets in and wrestles the Devil."

"Hey," I said, "if you ever stop talking, we might have a conversation."

"One night soon. Let's get drunk."

"All right," I said.

"In the meantime, if I had placed my stash in a patch in Truro . . ."

He paused.

"I don't keep a stash there," I said.

"I'm not saying you do. I don't want to know. I'm just saying if I did leave something there, I would contemplate getting it out."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you everything."

"Just want to tickle my stick?"

He took a good pause before he replied. "Look," he said, "I've been a State Trooper. You know that. And I know them. Most of those guys are all right. They're not high on humor and they never would be your kind, but they're all right."

I nodded. I waited. I thought he would go on. When he didn't, I said, "They are not nice about marijuana."

"They hate it," he said. "Keep your nose clean." He gave me a whale of a buffet on the back and disappeared down into the basement offices of Town Hall.

I found it hard to believe that our State Troopers, who considered it part of their job description to be lazy in fall, winter and spring so that they would be gung ho for a prodigious three months of suffering through summer traffic and its associated madness on Cape Cod, were now, in November, going to come pouring out of South Yarmouth Barracks in order to search Down-Cape through every petty field of marijuana in Orleans, Eastham, Wellfleet, and Truro. Still, they might be bored. They might also know about my plot. Sometimes I thought there were as many narcs as dopeheads on the Cape. Certainly in Provincetown the trade in dope information, disinformation, deals and double-crosses had to be the fourth largest industry right behind the polyester day tourists, the commercial fishing, and the congeries of gay enterprise.

If the State Troopers knew about my field—and maybe the proper question was, How could they not?—should I assume they were also well-disposed toward my wife and myself? One could doubt that. Our summer parties were too famous. Patty Lareine had large vices—madness of the heart and serious disloyalty being two I could name on the instant—but she also had the nice virtue of not being a snob. It might be said that she could hardly afford to be, given her redneck commence-ments, but who did that ever inhibit? If, after the trial, she had stayed in Tampa or made a daring move to Palm Beach, she would have had to play by the tactics that ambitious predecessors had perfected: slice, snip, soft-claw, and tenderize her way into marrying even higher respectability than Wardley—that was the only game with high stakes for the ego that a rich and notorious divorcée could play on the Gold Coast. An interesting life, if those are your talents.

Of course, I never pretended to understand Patty. She may even have been in love with me. It is hard to find a clearer explanation. I am a great believer in Occam's Razor, which states that the simplest explanation accounting for the facts is bound to be the correct explanation. Since I was no more than her chauffeur in the year before we got married, and since I had "crapped out" (those were her words) for

deciding I did not care to murder her husband; since I was also an ex-con who could certainly assist her up no marble stairways in no mansions in Palm Beach, it was never comprehensible to me why she should desire my medium-attractive presence in marriage unless she did feel a salubrious melting in her heart. I don't know. We had something in bed for a while, but that can be taken for granted. Why else would a woman marry down? Later, when it all got bad, I began to wonder if her true passion was to reveal the abyss beneath my vanity. Devil's work.

No matter. Once we got to Provincetown, my only point is that she proved no snob. You couldn't move to Provincetown if you were a snob, not if social advancement was your goal. Some year I would like a sociologist to crack his teeth on the unique class system of our local society. The town, as I would probably have enjoyed explaining to Jessica Pond if I had had the chance, was once, a hundred and fifty years ago, a port for whalers. Cape Cod Yankee captains made up our establishment then, and they brought in Portuguese from the Azores to man the boats. Then the Yankees and Portuguese intermarried (just as the Scotch-Irish and Indians, Carolina cavaliers and slave women, Jews and Protestants were wont to do). By now, half the Portuguese had Yankee names like Cook and Snow, and by whatever name, owned the town. In winter the Portuguese dominated just about all of it, fishing fleet, Board of Selectmen, St. Peter's Church, the lower ranks of the police force, and most of the teachers and students in the grade school and high school. In summer the Portuguese also presided over nine tenths of the rooming houses and more than half of the bars and cabarets. Yet they were a down-in-the-grease up-to-the-elbows gearbox of an establishment. They kept to themselves, and enjoyed no high houses on any hills. The richest Portugee in town might, for all you knew, be living next to one of the poorest, and but for the new coat of paint, you could not tell the houses apart. No Portuguese son I heard of went to any great university. Maybe they were all too respectful of the wrath of the sea.

So if you wanted to look for some little splash of money, you waited for summer when enclaves of psychoanalysts and art-oriented well-to-do members of the liberal establishment came up from New York to be flanked by a wide panorama of gay society plus the narcs and dope dealers, and half of Greenwich Village and SoHo. Painters, presumptive painters, motorcycle gangs, fuckups, hippies, beatniks and all their chil-

dren came in, plus tens of thousands of tourists a day driving in from every state of the Union to see for a few hours what Provincetown looked like, because there it was—on the extremity of the map. People have a tropism for the end of the road.

In such a stew, where the townsfolk were the only establishment we had, and the grandest summer houses (with one or two exceptions) were beach cottages, *medium* beach cottages; in a resort where there were no mansions (but one), no fine hotels, no boulevards!—Provincetown owned only two *long* streets (the rest were hardly more than connecting alleys)—in a bay village where our greatest avenue was a pier, and no pleasure yacht with deep draft could come in free of agitation at low tide; in a place where the measure of your dress was the logo on your T-shirt, how could you advance yourself socially? So you didn't give large parties to strike a note. You gave them, if you were Patty Lareine, because one hundred interesting-looking—that is to say, bizarre—strangers in her summer living room were the minimum she needed to offset the biles and jamborees of her heart. Patty Lareine may have read ten books in her life, but one of them was *The Great Gatsby*. Guess how she saw herself! Just as bewitching as Gatsby. When the parties went on long enough, she would, if the moon was late and full, get out her old cheerleader's bugle and there in the night blow a Retreat to the moon—don't try to tell her it was the wrong hour for Retreat.

No, the State Troopers would not like us. They were as stingy as airline pilots, and never was so much spent on parties where so little was accomplished. Such waste would irritate State Troopers. Besides—for the last two summers—cocaine was sitting on our table in an open bowl, and Patty Lareine, who liked to work the door, hand on hip, next to whoever was serving as bouncer (almost always some local lad built like two) was never the lady not to take a chance on a new face. Everybody crashed our portal. Narcs sniffed as much of our coke as any other inflamed septum.

I can't pretend, however, that I was privately cool about that open bowl. Patty Lareine and I fought over putting it on display. Patty, I decided, had hooked into cocaine more than she recognized, and I now hated the stuff. One of the worst years of my life had been spent buying and selling snow—I took my trip to the penitentiary for a cocaine bust.

No, State Troopers would not like me much. Yet to think of them arrayed in spiritual vengeance against my little marijuana plot was hard

to believe this cold November afternoon. In the frenzy of summer, yes. The summer before this, in all the frantic August madness of a tip that a raid was near, I ran out to Truro in the heat of the day (when it's considered gross to harvest your crop—spiritually disruptive to the plant) and chopped it down, and spent an irrational night (what with having to explain my absence from a number of parties) wrapping the fresh-fallen stalks in newspaper and storing them. It was none of it done well, and so I didn't trust Regency's warm regard for the quality of that year-old product (maybe Patty Lareine had slipped him a couple of Thai nicely rolled and told him they were home-grown). All the same, my next crop, harvested just this last September, did have a flavor, call it a psychic distinction. Although it smelled a hint rank from the Truro woods and bogs, still I believe it offered something of the mist endemic to our shore. You can smoke a thousand sticks and never know what I'm talking about, but I did grow marijuana with a fine edge. If one wished to entertain the illusion that one could commune with the dead, or at least put up with the possibility that they were whispering to you, then my pot was fine. It was as spooky as any stuff I ever smoked. That I attribute to many factors, not least of which is that the Truro forests are haunted. Years ago—it is now more than a decade—a young Portuguese in Provincetown killed four girls, dismembered their bodies, and buried them in several graves in these low woods. I was always immensely aware of the dead girls and their numb, mutilated, accusing presence. I remember that when I harvested my crop this year—and again I was in a great hurry, for a hurricane (which later wandered out to sea) was expected to strike us, indeed, the gusts were gale-force—on a hot, overcast, wind-inflamed mid-September day while a fearful surf was smashing on our bulkhead back in Provincetown, and townspeople were racing around to nail up storm windows, I was sweating like a swamp rat among the near-hysteria of the bugs in the Truro woods eight miles away. What an air of vengeance was about!

I remember I sliced each stem with a ceremonial patience, trying to feel the instant when the life of the plant passed through the knife into my arm and the plant was cut down to the half-life of its future. Now, its spiritual existence would depend on its ability to commune with whichever human—evil, wicked, contemplative, comic, sensual, inspired or plain disruptive—was ready to smoke it. I tried, in effect, to meditate while I performed the act of harvest, but (it may have been the

rabid panic of the bugs or the bodeful imminence of the hurricane) I rushed the job. Despite myself, I began to slash at the roots and gathered the plants too quickly. In compensation, I tried to cure them with care, converting a large closet in our cellar, never used before, into an impromptu drying room, and in the dark air (I had set up bowls of baking soda to keep the product dry) the Mary Jane was provided a real chance to rest over the next few weeks. After I stripped its leaves and buds, however, and packed them in small glass coffee jars with red rubber pressure-washers (I detested Saran-Wrap or plastic bags for stuff as fine as this) and actually began to smoke it, I found that something of the hour of its violent harvest was in each poke. Patty and I had fights to strike new notes of ugliness—we would pass from bouts of detestation to blood rage in the throat.

Moreover, that crop of marijuana (which I took to calling Hurricane Head) began to bring exaggerated effects down on Patty's head. It has to be understood that Patty Lareine believed she had psychic powers, which, speak of Occam's Razor, gives all the explanation one may need for why she chose Provincetown over Palm Beach inasmuch as the spiral of our shore and the curve of our sea contained, she claimed, a resonance to which she was sensitive. Once, in her cups, she said to me, "I've always been a swinger. When I was just a cheerleader in high school, I knew I was going to swing. I thought it would be a damn shame if I didn't get to fuck half the football team."

"Which half?" I asked.

"The Offense."

That was rote between us. It soothed the waters. She could give her large laugh, and I might offer two slightly widened lips.

"Why is your smile so evil?" she would ask.

"Maybe you should have fucked the other half."

She loved that. "Oh, Timmy Mac, you are nice at times." She took a deep puff of Hurricane. Never did the ravages of her hunger (for what, I cannot name—I wish I could) show so vividly as when she drew in smoke. Then her lips curled, her teeth showed, the smoke *seethed*—like a strong tide going through a narrow gate. "Yeah," she said, "I commenced as a swinger, but as soon as I got divorced the first time, I decided to be a witch. I been one ever since. What are you going to do about it?"

"Pray," I said.

That broke her up. "I'm going to blow my bugle," she told me. "There's a real moon tonight."

"You'll wake up Hell-Town."

"That's the idea. Don't let those motherfuckers sleep. They get too powerful. Somebody's got to keep them down."

"You sound like a good witch."

"Well, honey, I am a white witch. Blondes are."

"You're no blonde. Your pussy hair says you're brunette."

"That's carnal taint. My pussy hair was bright gold until I went out and scorched it with the football team."

If she had always been like that, we could have kept drinking forever. But another toke put her on the promontory of Hurricane Head. Hell-Town began to stir.

Let me not pretend I was immune to her occult claims. I had never been able to make a philosophical peace with the notion of spirits, nor come to any conclusion. That you might die but still remain alive in some vale of our atmosphere seemed no more absurd to me than the notion that every part of your person ceased to exist after death. Indeed, given the spectrum of human response on any matter, I was ready to assume that some who died remained near, and others went far away, or were altogether extinct.

Hell-Town, however, was a phenomenon. When you smoked Hurricane Head, it became a presence. Over a hundred and fifty years ago when whaling was still active in these waters, a whore town sprang up on the other arm of Provincetown harbor, where now there was nothing but a long-deserted spit of sand. In the years after whaling ended, Hell-Town's warehouses and brothel cribs had been put on rafts and floated across the bay. Half the old houses in Provincetown had those sheds attached to them. So while much of what was most crazy in our moods on Hurricane Head may have come to us compliments of Patty Lareine, part of the manifestation emanated, I think, from our house itself. Half of our holding of sills, studs, joists, walls, and roof had been ferried over from Hell-Town more than a century ago, and thereby made us a most material part of that vanished place. Something of a perished Klondike of whores and smugglers, and whalers with wages hot in their pockets, lived in our walls. There had even been unspeakable cutthroats who, on moonless nights, would set a beach fire on the back shore to encourage a sailing vessel to believe it was rounding a light. Thereby the

ship might come around for port too soon and run aground on a shoal. Whereupon these fiends would plunder the foundering vessel. Patty Lareine claimed she could hear the cries of the sailors who were slaughtered trying to fight off the marauders' long boats. What a Biblical scene Hell-Town must have offered of catamites and sodomites and whores passing the infections of the ages on to each pirate with blood in his beard. Provincetown, then, was just far enough away to be able to keep up the Yankee proprieties of widows' walks and white churches. What an intermingling of the spirits, therefore, when the whaling ended and the shacks in Hell-Town were floated over to us.

Some of that rut was added to our marriage during the first year we lived in our house. A bawdy force came down to us from one-night stands of whores and seamen more than one hundred years dead. I would, as I say, not enter into disputes about the real or unreal possibility that they lived in our walls—I only say our carnal life did not suffer. In truth, it thrived on the lusts of our unseen audience. It is nice when a marriage may feel like an orgy each night without having to pay the toll—that is, having to look on the face of the neighbor who is screwing your wife.

If the wisest rule of economy, however, is that you can't cheat life, it may as well be true that the most vigorous law of the spirit is: Do not exploit death. Now that Patty Lareine was gone, I had to live most mornings with the unseen presence of much of the population of Hell-Town. For if my wife was not with me, her much-vaunted sensitivity still seemed to be on loan to my psyche. One reason I could not open my eyes in the morning was for the voices I heard. Let no one say that a century-old New England whore does not snicker on a cold November morn. There were nights when the dog and I slept together like children cuddling before a fire that is out. Once in a while I would smoke Hurricane Head by myself, but the results lacked clarity. Of course, such a remark can hardly be understood unless marijuana is your guide. I was convinced it was the only nostrum to take when sailing the seas of an obsession—you could come back with answers to questions twenty years old.

Now that I was living alone, however, the Hurricane Head stirred no thoughts. Desires arose, instead, that I did not care to name. Serpents were laboring up from the murk. So, for the last ten days, I had not been near my own reefer.

Can this explain why I acted with such reluctance to so generous a piece of advice from my Chief of Police?

While I did, so soon as I returned home, get into my car and drive out to the highway and there took the direction to Truro, I was still not at all certain that I would actually move my cache of Hurricane Head. I hated to disturb it. On the other hand, I most certainly did not want to be busted.

What a nose Regency had for my habits! I could not even say why I had chosen to keep the stash so near my marijuana field, but I had. Twenty glass coffee jars filled with carefully harvested crop were packed into a steel footlocker varnished and oiled against rust. That had all been placed in a hole in the ground beneath a most distinctive tree two hundred yards down an overgrown trail from a one-lane humped sandy road in the forest.

Yes, among all the hollows of the Truro woods to choose, I had nonetheless concealed my stash close to the stubble of my garden-size plot. That had to be the worst place to keep one's private store. Any hunter blundering through on the same trail (as they did a few times a year) might recognize the character of the agriculture practiced there, and so devote a little effort to examining the environs. I kept only an inch of soil and some much tamped-down moss over the rock that closed the burrow where I stowed the footlocker.

Yet this particular site was important to me. I wanted the product kept near its home. In prison, where the food we ate had been shipped to us out of the entrails of the largest food corporations in America, there was never a bite that did not come out of a plastic wrapping, cardboard package, or can. Taking into account the trip from the farm to the processing factory, and from there to us, I figure most of the food must have voyaged, on average, two thousand miles. So I saw a panacea to the world's ills: Let no one look to sup on food grown farther away from his home than the distance he can carry it on his back in a day's walk. An interesting idea. I soon ceased to look for ways to implement it. But it left me fierce about respecting the origins of my marijuana. Like wine that mellows in the shade of the vineyard where it grew, so would my Mary Jane be stored close to the earth out of which it sprouted.

I felt one good full dread, therefore, at shifting the stash, and it was close to the fear with which I had awakened this morning. Truth, I

needed to leave everything as it was. Nonetheless, I took the turn off the highway to the country road that (by way of a crossroad or two) would lead eventually to my sandy lane in the middle of the forest. Driving slowly, I began to realize how much I had been calling upon gifts of balance through this day. How else account for one's aplomb—everything considered!—during the dialogue with Alvin Luther? After all, where *had* the tattoo come from?

At that moment I was obliged to pull the car over. Where *had* the tattoo come from? This thought might as well have come upon me for the first time. With no warning, I was near to being as ill as the dog.

I can tell you that by the time I was able to move forward again, it was with the absurd caution a poor driver brings to his wheel after a missed collision. I crawled.

That way I passed through the back roads of Truro on this chill afternoon—would the sun never appear again?—and I studied the lichen on tree trunks as if their yellow spores had much to tell me, and stared at blue mailboxes on the road as though they were security itself, even halted by a green-bronze sign at a crossroads to read the raised metal letters commemorating a local boy who died in an old war. I passed many a hedge in front of many a gray-shingled salt-box whose white crushed-shell walks were still offering their whiff of the sea. In the woods, the wind was strong on this afternoon, and whenever I stopped the car, a murmur came to me like a high surf washing over treetops. Then I was out of the woods again and drove up and down abrupt little hills and passed by moors and quaking bogs and kettle bowls. I came to a well I recognized by the side of the road, and stopped and peered into its bottom where a green moss I knew would gleam back at me. Soon I was in the woods again, and the paved road was gone. Now I had to drive in low gear down the sandy lane, scratching first one side of the Porsche, then the other, on thickets and briars, but the hump in the middle was so high that I did not dare to ride the ruts.

Then I was not certain I would get through. Rivulets crossed the road, and in several places I had to ford shallow pools where the trees grew together overhead and formed a tunnel of leaves. On sunless afternoons I had always liked to drive through the mournful, modest lay of these Truro hills and woods. Provincetown, even in winter, could seem active as a mining town in comparison with such sparse offerings. Up on any of these modest summits, if there was a high wind like today,

one could watch the seawater in the distance thrash through a millrace of light and whitecaps, while the color of the ponds in the hollows remained a dark and dirty bronze. All the palette of the woods seemed to accommodate itself between. I liked the dull green of the dune grass and the pale gold of the weeds, and in that late autumn panorama when the beef's blood and burnt orange are out of the leaves, the colors came down to gray and green and brown, but with what a play between! My eye used to find a dance of hues still left here between the field grays and the dove gray, the lilac gray and the smoke gray, the bracken brown and the acorn brown, fox brown and dun, mouse gray and meadowlark gray, and the bottle green of the moss, and sphagnum moss and fir green, holly green and seawater green at the horizon. My eye used to dart from lichen on a tree to heather in a field, in and out of the pond weeds and red maples (no longer red but wet-bark brown) and the scent of pitch pine and twist of scrub oak were in the still of the forest with the wind in the leaves overhead coming again in the high sound of the surf: "All that has lived clamors to live again" was the sound of the surf.

So I parked my car where I could look from the pond to the sea and tried to calm myself with these soft and wistful colors, but my heart was pounding now. I drove on until I came to my trail off this sand road, and there I stopped and got out of the car and tried to recover that immaculate sense of being alone which these woods had given me before. But I could not. People had been here in the last few days.

As soon as I stepped onto my trail, half hidden by shrubs from the road, this sense became more keen. I did not halt to look for traces, but doubtless some could be found. There are subtleties to a stale presence that only the woods can reflect, and as I walked the hundred steps from the road to my stashing box, I was sweating again in the way I had before on that hot September afternoon when the advance of the hurricane hung over us all.

I went by the marijuana field and its stubble had been beaten to the ground by rain. Some shame at the haste with which I had cut the stems this September left me now as uneasy as one feels on encountering an ill-used friend, and so I came to a stop as if to pay my respects, and indeed my little plot had the air of a cemetery ground. Yet I could hardly pause, a panic was too much on me, and therefore I hurried farther down the trail past the clearing and in and out of thicket and stunted pine, and there, another few steps along, was the most curious

tree of all. A dwarf pine poked up from the crest of a small sandy ridge that had pushed through the loam of these woods, a fearfully twisted little force of a tree, its roots clinging to the uncertain rise, its limbs all contorted together on one side and trammed down before the wind like a man kneeling, only, at the last, to thrust up his arms to the sky in prayer. That was my tree, and at the foot of it, under the roots, was a small cave not large enough to hold a bear cub, and my door to this burrow was a rock with its moss many times raised and patted back into place. Now I saw it was much disturbed, the edges as raw as a dirty bandage pushed up on end by the swelling of the wound. I removed the stone and felt into the hole in front of the footlocker, my fingers scraping and searching into this soft loam like field mice at the edge of food, and I felt something—it could be flesh or hair or some moist sponge—I didn't know what, but my hands, fiercer than myself, cleared the debris to pull forward a plastic garbage bag through which I poked and saw enough at once to give one frightful moan, pure as the vertigo of a long fall itself. I was looking at the back of a head. The color of its hair, despite all the stains of earth, was blonde. Then I tried to see the face, but when to my horror the head rolled in the bag without resistance—severed!—I knew I could not go on to search the features, no, I pushed back the bag and then the rock with hardly an attempt to replace the moss, and flew from those woods to my car, driving down the humpbacked road with speed to compensate for the caution with which I came in. And it was only after I was back in my house and deep in a chair trying to calm my shivering with bourbon neat that the realization came over me in all the burning woe of one wall of flame falling upon another that I did not even know whether it was the head of Patty Lareine or Jessica Pond lying in that grave. Of course, I also did not know whether I should be afraid of myself, or of another, and that, so soon as night was on me and I tried to sleep, became a terror to pass beyond all notions of measure.

[1981]

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Alive at 100.

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A review of

Huckleberry Finn (at 100 years
of age)

- Also a poem on T.S. Eliot
a poem on E.E. Cummings

1984

HUCKLEBERRY FINN, Alive at 100.

8 pages
(20 lines)

6 book pages

Is there a sweeter tonic for the doldrums than old reviews of great novels? In nineteenth-century Russia, *Anna Karenina* was received with the following: "Vronsky's passion for his horse runs parallel to his passion for Anna" . . . "Sentimental rubbish" . . . "Show me one page," says *The Odessa Courier*, "that contains an idea." *Moby Dick* was incinerated: "Graphic descriptions of a dreariness such as we do not remember to have met with before in marine literature" . . . "Sheer moonstruck lunacy" . . . "Sad stuff. Mr. Melville's Quakers are wretched dolts and drivellers and his mad captain is a monstrous bore."

By this measure, *Huckleberry Finn* gets off lightly. *The Springfield Republican* judged it to be no worse than "a gross trifling with every fine feeling . . . Mr. Clemens has no reliable sense of propriety," and the public library in Concord, Massachusetts, was confident enough to ban it: "the veriest trash." *The Boston Transcript* reported that "other members of the Library Committee characterize the work as rough, coarse, and inelegant, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people."

All the same the novel was not too unpleasantly regarded. There were no large critical hurrahs but the reviews were, on the whole, friendly. A good tale, went the consensus. There was no sense that a great American novel had landed on the literary world of 1885. The critical climate could hardly anticipate T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway's encomiums fifty years later. In the preface to the English edition, Eliot would speak of

"a masterpiece . . . Twain's genius is completely realized," and Ernest went further. In *Green Hills of Africa*, after disposing of Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau, and paying off Henry James and Stephen Crane with a friendly nod, he proceeded to declare, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

Hemingway, with his nonpareil gift for nosing out the perfect *vin du pays* for an ineluctable afternoon, was more like other novelists in one dire respect: he was never at a loss to advance himself with his literary judgments. Assessing the writing of others, he used the working author's rule of thumb: if I give this book a good mark, does it help appreciation of my work? Obviously, *Huckleberry Finn* has passed the test.

A suspicion immediately arises. Mark Twain is doing the kind of writing only Hemingway can do better. Evidently, we must take a look. May I say it helps to have read *Huckleberry Finn* so long ago that it feels brand-new on picking it up again. Perhaps I was eleven when I saw it last, maybe thirteen, but now I only remember that I came to it after *Tom Sawyer* and was disappointed. I couldn't really follow *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The character of Tom Sawyer whom I had liked so much in the first book was altered, and did not seem nice anymore. *Huckleberry Finn* was altogether beyond me. Later, I recollect being surprised by the high regard nearly everyone who taught

American Lit. lavished upon the text, but that didn't bring me back to it. Obviously, I was waiting for an assignment from the *New York Times*.

Let me offer assurances. It may have been worth the wait. I suppose I am the ten-millionth reader to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is an extraordinary work. Indeed, for all I know, it is a great novel. Flawed, quirky, uneven, not above taking cheap shots and cashing far too many checks (it is rarely above milking its humor) — all the same, what a book we have here! I had the most curious sense of excitement. After a while, I understood my peculiar frame of attention. The book was so up-to-date! I was not reading a classic author so much as looking at a new work sent to me in galleys by a publisher. It was as if it had arrived with one of those rare letters which says, "We won't make this claim often but do think we have an extraordinary first novel to send out." So it was like reading *From Here to Eternity* in galleys, back in 1950, or *Lie Down in Darkness*, *Catch-22*, or *The World According to Garp* (which reads like a fabulous first novel). You kept being alternately delighted, surprised, annoyed, competitive, critical and finally excited. A new writer had moved onto the block. He could be a potential friend or enemy but he most certainly was talented.

That was how it felt to read *Huckleberry Finn* a second time. I kept resisting the context until I finally surrendered. One always does surrender sooner or later to a book with a strong magnetic field. I felt as if I held the work of a young writer about

thirty or thirty-five, a prodigiously talented fellow from the Midwest, from Missouri probably, who had had the audacity to write a historical novel about the Mississippi as it might have been a century and a half ago, and this young writer had managed to give us a circus of fictional virtuositities. In nearly every chapter new and remarkable characters bounded out from the printed page as if it were a tarmac on which they could perform their leaps. The author's confidence seemed so complete that he could deal with every kind of man or woman God ever gave to the middle of America. Jail-house drunks like Huck Finn's father take their bow, full of the raunchy violence that even gets into the smell of clothing. Gentlemen and river rats, young, attractive girls full of grit and "sand," and strong old ladies with aphorisms clicking like knitting needles, fools and confidence men—what a cornucopia of rabble and gentry inhabit the author's river banks.

It would be superb stuff if only the writer did not keep giving away the fact that he was a modern young American working in 1984. His anachronisms were not so much in the historical facts—those seemed accurate enough—but the point of view was too contemporary. The scenes might succeed—say it again, this young writer was talented!—but he kept betraying his literary influences. The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had obviously been taught a lot by such major writers as Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck; he had certainly lifted from Faulkner and the mad tone Faulkner could

achieve when writing about maniacal men feuding in deep swamps; he had also absorbed much of what Vonnegut and Heller could teach about the resilience of irony. If he had a surer feel for the picaresque than Saul Bellow in *Augie March* still he felt derivative of that work. In places one could swear he had memorized *The Catcher in the Rye*, and he probably dipped into *Deliverance* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* He might even have studied the mannerisms of movie stars. You could feel traces of John Wayne, Victor McLaglen and Burt Reynolds in his pages. The author had doubtless digested many a Hollywood comedy on small town life. His instinct for life in hamlets on the Mississippi before the Civil War was as sharp as it was farcical, and couldn't be more commercial.

No matter. With a talent as large as this, one could forgive the obvious eye for success. Many a large talent has to go through large borrowings in order to find his own style, and a lust for popular success while dangerous to serious writing is not necessarily fatal. Yes, one could accept the pilferings from other writers, given the scope of his work, the brilliance of the concept—to catch rural America by a trip on a raft down a great river! One could even marvel uneasily at the depth of the instinct for fiction in the author. With the boy Huckleberry Finn, this new novelist had managed to give us a character of no comfortable, measurable dimension. It is easy for characters in modern novels to seem more vivid than figures in the classics but, even so, Huckleberry Finn appeared to be more alive than

Don Quixote and Julian Sorel, as naturally near to his own mind as we are to ours. But how often does a hero who is so absolutely natural on the page also succeed in acquiring convincing moral stature as his adventures develop?

It is to be repeated. In the attractive grip of this talent, one is ready to forgive the author of *Huckleberry Finn* for every influence he has so promiscuously absorbed. He has made such fertile use of his borrowings. One could even cheer his appearance on our jaded literary scene if not for the single transgression that goes too far. These are passages that do more than borrow an author's style—they copy it! Influence is mental, but theft is physical. Who can declare to a certainty that a large part of the prose in *Huckleberry Finn* is not lifted directly from Hemingway? We know that we are not reading Ernest only because the author, obviously fearful that his tone is getting too near, is careful to sprinkle his text with “a-clutterings” and “warn’ts” and “anywheres” and “t’others.” But we have read Hemingway—and so we see through it—we know we are reading pure Hemingway disguised:

“We cut young cottonwoods and willows, and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim . . . then we set down on the sandy bottom where the river was knee-deep and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywheres . . . the first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t’other side; you couldn’t make nothing else out;

then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more . . . by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off the water and the east reddens up and the river."

Up to now I have conveyed, I expect, the pleasure of reading this book today. It is the finest compliment I can offer. We use an unspoken standard of relative judgement on picking up a classic. Secretly, we expect less reward from it than from a good contemporary novel. The average intelligent modern reader would probably, under torture, admit that *Heartburn* was more fun to read, minute for minute, than *Madame Bovary*, and maybe one even learned more. That is not to say that the first will be superior to the second a hundred years from now but that a classic novel is like a fine horse carrying an exorbitant impost. Classics suffer by their distance from our day-to-day gossip. The mark of how good *Huckleberry Finn* has to be is that one can compare it to a number of our best modern American novels and it stands up page for page, awkward here, sensational there—absolutely the equal of one of those rare incredible first novels that come along once or twice in a decade. So I have spoken of it as kin to a first novel because it is so young and so fresh and so all-out silly in some of the chances it takes and even wins. A wiser older novelist would never play

that far out when the work was already well along and so neatly in hand, but Twain does.

For the sake of literary propriety, let me not, however, lose sight of the actual context. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel of the nineteenth century and its grand claims to literary magnitude are also to be remarked upon. So I will say that the first measure of a great novel may be that it presents—like a human of palpable charisma—an all but visible aura. Few works of literature can be so luminous without the presence of some majestic symbol. In *Huckleberry Finn* we are presented (given the possible exception of Anna Livia Plurabelle) with the best river ever to flow through a novel, our own Mississippi, and in the voyage down those waters of Huck Finn and a runaway slave on their raft, we are held in the thrall of the river. Larger than a character, the river is a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them, fling them apart, float them back together. The river winds like a fugue through the marrow of the true narrative which is nothing less than the ongoing relation between Huck and the runaway slave, this Nigger Jim whose name embodies the very stuff of the slave system itself—his name is not Jim but Nigger Jim. The growth of love and knowledge between the runaway white and the runaway black is a relation equal to the relation of the men to the river for it is also full of betrayal and nourishment, separation and return. So it manages to touch that last fine nerve of

the heart where compassion and irony speak to one another and thereby give a good turn to our most protected emotions.

Reading *Huckleberry Finn* one comes to realize all over again that the near burned-out, throttled, hate-filled dying affair between whites and blacks is still our great national love affair, and woe to us if it ends in detestation and mutual misery. Riding the current of this novel, we are back in the happy time when the love affair was new and all seemed possible. How rich is the recollection of that emotion! What else is greatness but the indestructible wealth it leaves in the mind's recollection after hope has soured and passions are spent? It is always the hope of democracy that our wealth will be there to spend again, and the ongoing treasure of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it frees us to think of democracy and its sublime, terrifying premise: let the passions and cupidities and dreams and kinks and ideals and greed and hopes and foul corruptions of all men and women have their day and the world will still be better off, for there is more good than bad in the sum of us and our workings. Mark Twain, whole embodiment of that democratic human, understood the premise in every turn of his pen, and how he tested it, how he twisted and tantalized and tested it until we are weak all over again with our love for the idea.