

# A TRAGIC HONESTY

THE LIFE AND WORK OF RICHARD YATES

BLAKE BAILEY

**PICADOR**

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*For Mary*

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That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of its frequency has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind, and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

—GEORGE ELIOT, *Middlemarch*

Americans have always assumed, subconsciously, that every story will have a happy ending.

—ADLAI E. STEVENSON

# Prologue

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From the moment Richard Yates was taken off his plane in a wheelchair back in August 1990, his associates in Alabama expected him to die there. He looked all but dead already. Still an unrepentant four-pack-a-day smoker—despite his being diagnosed with “a touch of emphysema” some twenty years before—Yates had just learned the hard way that he could no longer fly without almost suffocating to death. Blue-lipped, ashen, and gasping, he was taken from the airport straight to the hospital. Members of the English department were already casting about for some other personage to fill the Coal Royalty Endowed Chair in Creative Writing, when Yates returned from his ordeal newly equipped with oxygen tanks—feeling better, or so he said. At any rate smoking as much as ever. Graduate student Tony Earley, head of what was furtively called the “Yates Task Force,” worried that the great author would burst into flames on his watch. “You can’t smoke with oxygen tanks,” Yates’s daughter Monica admonished him. “Media hype,” Yates replied.

Before Alabama, Yates had been living in Los Angeles, a place he hated in every conceivable particular—the people, the weather, the sprawl, the buildings, the “fucking film business” that lured him out there time and again with the promise of easy money, which for Yates meant more time to write. It hadn’t worked out before, and it hadn’t worked out this time. “Can you believe it?” Yates would say to the few friends who saw him out there. “Remember I said I’d never do this shit again. Yet here I am.” *Here I am*: a phrase to which Yates was much given—wherever he was—as in *How did this happen?* Bemused, stoical, a little sad, perhaps, but willing to find the humor that was somewhere, surely, in his present predicament: *How did I get here?* “Getting out of here is an appealing idea,” he told an interviewer from the *Los Angeles Times*. “But then, as long as I’ve lived getting out of wherever I am has seemed an appealing idea.”

As ever, his friends and admirers wanted to help, from whatever distance they kept themselves and perhaps none was so devoted as Andre Dubus. A few years back Dubus had been the “chair writer” at the University of Alabama, and even then it occurred to him that this would be an almost ideal sinecure for his old friend. Basically it was a lucrative four-month vacation: For \$27,500 (almost seven times what Yates had gotten at the Iowa Workshop in 1964) one was expected to teach a single upper-level literature course and deliver a public reading, as well as occasionally comment on student manuscripts. The chair writer was lodged near the football stadium in a large furnished house, the Strode House, previously occupied by such distinguished writers as Russell Banks, Margaret Atwood, Wright Morris, and Dubus himself.

Dubus had likely broached the matter as early as 1985, when an ailing Yates was struggling to finish *Cold Spring Harbor* at his usual painstaking pace, having run through his latest advance—state of affairs that, give or take a nuance or two, was status quo throughout his career. Don Hendriks, the director of the Alabama writing program and a former Iowa student, wondered even then whether

Yates was well enough to take the job. He talked it over with George Starbuck, the poet, another friend from Iowa who'd retired to Alabama after the onset of Parkinson's disease. Starbuck agreed with Dubus: It would be a nice thing to do for Dick, who certainly deserved whatever help he got. And so it happened that several years later, with no other salvation in sight, Yates was at last welcomed to Alabama: "The host of Yates fans in these parts," Hendrie wrote, "are delighted that you will come and are looking forward to your stay."

It wasn't long before Yates was figuring a way to get out of Alabama. "I don't want to die in fucking Dixie," he told friends over the phone, amid gasps and coughing fits. Certainly he wasn't expected to like it in the South. Never mind the eloquent speeches he'd written for Robert Kennedy at the height of the civil rights movement—Yates was a New Yorker, and almost anywhere else was what his old friend Vonnegut called "up the river." Yates had spent a lot of his adult life up the river, sometimes by choice as well as necessity, but in the end he'd always planned to come home. Nevertheless, when his chair semester ended at Alabama he moved into a cheap apartment near campus and, while the many months went by, gave no sign of leaving. Said Tony Earley, "We were touched that Dick stayed in Tuscaloosa because he'd made friends there who looked out for him and were kind to him. Still, there was a sense of sadness that he'd ended up living among grad students who'd been strangers only six months before—this writer who'd once been considered on a level with Styron and Cheever." That said, the main reason Yates stayed was that he simply couldn't afford to leave. Not yet, anyway. And this was another incentive to finish the book he'd been working on for several years, with whatever energy he could still muster. It was a novel titled *Uncertain Times*, based on his Kennedy experience, which just might prove a salable subject.

\* \* \*

Around noon on November 7, 1992, Allen Wier was informed of Yates's death at the Birmingham VA hospital a few hours earlier. Wier was director of the Alabama writing program by then, and he must have seemed as good a person to call as any. He was an admirer of Yates's work, of course, but also felt a kind of protective fondness for the man—which might explain why he can't remember who called him that day with the bad news. Amid the shock and pathos of the moment, his only definite memory is of the caller's almost hectoring urgency: *What is being done to secure Yates's manuscript?* "The implication," Wier recalled, "was that we were remiss in not barricading Yates's apartment until the manuscript was saved. The caller had no idea how uninterested the average Tuscaloosa resident was in Yates's writing."

Wier didn't have a key to Yates's duplex apartment on Alaca Place, but that wasn't a problem since Yates hadn't had one either (he just kept losing it, so why bother?). The fact that Yates's apartment was always unlocked was widely known among people who also knew there wasn't much to steal, and to whom it would never occur to intrude except to offer help. Nor would any self-respecting burglar be likely to linger on Alaca Place, a brief stretch of road with a series of compact semidetached red-brick bungalows on either side, where graduate students and the odd retiree lived.

Yates's unit was the last of a chain where the street ended in a cul-de-sac.

Yates tended to tidy up for visitors, which usually meant putting things in their proper piles and more or less clearing the floor of debris, but he wasn't much for detailed housekeeping. Friends who had seen the inside of his apartments in New York, Boston, Los Angeles—anywhere he'd lived as a bachelor—remember the arc of cockroach carcasses around his desk (casually stamped as he swiveled to and fro in his chair), as well as the curtains of whatever color turned grayish brown with dust and cigarette smoke, the one filthy sponge in the kitchen, and so on. Yates had been a very sick man when he left for the hospital in Birmingham, but he probably hadn't expected to die after minor surgery for a hernia; in any case he hadn't bothered to tidy up before he left. "There was a trail of wadded Kleenex all over the floor," said Wier, "like Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs." There was also a shirt box full of pennies, nickels, and a few dimes—no quarters, as Yates had used those to buy the *New York Times*—which overflowed onto the floor amid the Kleenex: about two hundred dollars' worth in all (his daughters counted it later). There were a few pieces of vinyl and chrome furniture with the stuffing coming out, most of it bought at the Salvation Army. Nothing in the kitchen but a jar of mustard and a few empty bottles of Heineken. And several books scattered over every surface throughout the five small rooms, as if Yates had opened them one after the other but soon lost interest and let them drop.

Wier followed a skein of surgical tubing into the bedroom—to a large oxygen tank at the foot of an unmade bed. He searched the closet for a manuscript and was struck by Yates's wardrobe: two identical herringbone tweed jackets, three or four identical pairs of khaki pants, and several identical blue button-down shirts; a few pairs of size 10½ Brooks Brothers black shoes and two pairs of so-called desert boots—ankle-high, sand-colored, crepe-soled suede shoes popular in the fifties and sixties. There was also a stack of five or six sets of slate blue bedsheets, still in their store wrapping; apparently Yates had just put down a new set whenever the old ones got dirty. Finally there was a pile of Jiffy mailing envelopes preaddressed to the pharmaceutical company where Yates got his medication (a tranquilizer and the anticonvulsant Tegretol for seizures and mania). But no manuscript. For a while Wier kept looking and finally went to get help.

By the time he came back with a couple of graduate students, Wier's heart had begun to sink, fraught with the implications of what he'd seen. Yates's place seemed part of some bleak motel: There was nothing that smacked of the personal except for photographs of his three daughters—carefully arranged on an otherwise blank wall—and an L-shaped desk with several sharpened pencils and a large cigarette burn. Apart from an old Mazda rusting in the sun, the only thing of value was an Olivetti typewriter, its owner's manual wrapped in the original plastic. But still no sign of Yates's novel.

"Not much for one of the twentieth century's greatest writers," said Wier. "Doesn't seem right."

They were loading a pickup truck with Yates's belongings, such as they were, when Wier had a little epiphany. Suddenly he knew, he was sure, where he'd find *Uncertain Times*. He walked into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and there it was: at least four hundred pages in a box, and on the last page

was written, in proud capitals, "END." Wier read no further (Yates wouldn't have liked that), but ju held the manuscript and savored his own exaltation: In that freezer, that poor man's fireproof saf he'd found the one thing that mattered to Richard Yates.

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*The Caliche Road: 1926-1939*

If the prerequisite of any great writer's life is an unhappy childhood, then Richard Yates was especially blessed. It was not something he liked to talk about as an adult except in the most oblique terms. Once, as he walked past one of his many childhood apartments in Greenwich Village, he pointed to the iron bars on the window and remarked to a friend, "My little legs stuck out of those bars and I used to kick the bricks—kick, kick, kick..." If pressed, he might explain that he was sitting alone in the dark, staring outside and waiting for his mother to come home. And if he was drunk and sad enough, he might talk about his mother's alcoholism, or her involvement with strange men; sometimes he'd even say that he hated her. But that sort of thing was rare.

Yates aspired to a high standard of decorum both in art and life. A passage he cut from an early draft of his story "A Natural Girl," has the Yates-like protagonist David Clark announce to his young wife, "I must've had the most fucked-up childhood in American history. I've told you a lot about my parents and all that. But I've always held back. I've never gotten down to the pain of it. I've been hiding and pretending all my life." It's easy to see why Yates cut this. First of all, it doesn't quite ring true in terms of the character (as Yates liked to challenge his students, "Would that character say that? I don't think so"), but also David Clark's damaged psyche can be suggested in far more satisfying aesthetic terms—for example, his willingness to wear his hair "in the manner of the actress Jane Fonda" because he thinks his wife will like it that way. Such details objectify the matter nicely, and no mention need be made of the character's fucked-up childhood. And so in life Yates contented himself when sober and at his best, with the image of a barred window: "Kick, kick, kick..." He knew that direct explication rarely told the whole truth, and above all he was determined to be truthful. And one of the essential truths of Yates's childhood—of his whole life, perhaps—is that he loved and admired his mother at least as much as he later claimed to despise her. She was a source of pain he never could evade, though writing about her helped.

She was born in Greenville, Ohio, the seat of Darke County (she later spelled *Darke* without the *e*, perhaps by way of suggesting a general benightedness). Greenville, in the far western part of the state near the Indiana border, was a town of some five thousand souls in the late nineteenth century, and to this day preserves some of its frontier ethos. Annie Oakley is and will always be the town's favorite daughter—she joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1885, six years before Yates's mother was born—and one may attend the annual "Annie Oakley Days" festival there, or see the many local examples of antique steam-driven farm machinery, or visit the site where the Treaty of Greenville was signed once the Indians were subdued and this outpost secured in the name of progress. Progress meant farms and schools and Main Street merchants, and of course churches: By 1875 the citizenry was divided among eight Protestant churches and one Catholic. It was a world perhaps best evoked

the pages of *Winesburg, Ohio*: “Men labored toohard and were too tired to read. In them was a desire for words printed upon paper. As they worked in the field, vague, half-formed thoughts took possession of them. They believed in God and in God’s power to control their lives.”

Yates’s grandfather, Amos Bigelow Maurer, was one of sixteen children born to German immigrants, Henry and Julia Ann (Bigler) Maurer. Amos was twenty-two in 1871, when he left the hamlet of Bradford for a session of schooling in Greenville, about ten miles away. He planned to clerk for a dry-goods merchant that summer, but first he needed to perfect his penmanship, the better to write out orders and receipts with a credible flourish. His teacher in Greenville was Fannie Hatfield Walden, and her own penmanship was impeccable—full of ornate curlicues and so forth, such that the sense of what she wrote was liable to be lost amid the finery, which was just as well. At any rate she subsequently corresponded with her favorite pupil and “dear friend Mr. Maurer,” who in turn did his tremulous best to emulate Miss Walden’s skill. With a well-meaning travesty of loops and swirls, he wrote her from such towns as Minster, where he worked at a private auction on behalf of his employer Mr. Sharpe: “He says I am the best clerk for a beginner that he ever seen. I was in the store until ten o’clock, sold about forty dollars worth. I have learned a great deal in the way of dry goods.” But the Minster letter ends on a doleful note. “I don’t like this town a bit. Because the people are all German,” Amos explained, without detectable irony, and Fannie replied: “I should like to have seen you when you sold the first yard of goods. Would it not be nice if you could be a clerk for Mr. Sharpe a while and do so well. After a while be clerk for yourself.” The two had been corresponding for more than a year before they attained this level of intimacy.

In October 1873 the hand of Providence pressed them together at last; with the end of their long courtship in sight, the letters suggest the kind of life they envisioned in the heart of Darke County. Fannie, but a week away from moving out of Widow Adams’s boarding house on northeast Main Street, described a funeral she’d attended for one of the more venerable citizens of nearby Uniontown: “[He] was buried in the honors of the Odd Fellows last Tuesday his name was McFeely and there were five different lodges here. His remains were conveyed to the cemetery in the new hearse which was seen at the fair.” Such were the rewards of a busy life devoted to faith, family, and friends—five lodges!—and Amos was as anxious to get on with it as Fannie. He wrote her a prenuptial poem to that effect: “I know thine’s no worldly heart,” it began accurately, then went on a bit and ended with,

*And now the day’s close at hand.  
But, dear, it’s far enough away,  
Yet soon we’ll be one happy band.  
I’ll close wishing you a good day.*

For the honeymoon they went to Dayton.

\* \* \*

Over the next eighteen years Amos and Fannie had seven children, at least four of whom, it’s safe to say, were made more or less in their parents’ image. The oldest daughter Ida lived to the virtuous age



of ninety-one, and spent her dotage painting flowers in watercolor and collecting *Saturday Evening Post* covers in bound fifty-two-page volumes, one for each year.\* Margaret, Mina, and Love Maurer married young and moved away from Greenville; later they joined Ida and their parents in ostracizing their brother Rufus, who'd gone to Washington, D. C., and married a Jew. Elsa Maurer was different somewhat; at least as respectable as her sisters, and deeply spiritual, she inherited these qualities without quite the dose of provincial bigotry that went with them. Rather late in life she married a male professor who, within a few years, drowned off the coast of Galveston; before and after this event Elsa devoted her life to contemplating the Infinite and helping her sister Ruth, the youngest and most wayward of the lot. As with Rufus, the rest of the family would have little to do with Ruth and vice versa—which left Elsa, who always had both time and a bit of money to spare.

Ruth Walden Maurer was born December 31, 1891, though her entry in *Who's Who of America Women* gives her birthday as exactly five years later, as do her entries in all the various artist directories and even her Social Security application. Indeed, it's likely that her own children—which she called her "Dookie" to distinguish her from her daughter and namesake—were unsure of the mother's age until a sad day in 1961 when circumstances forced them to find a birth certificate ("you know how Pookie's always been about her age," says Sarah Grimes in *The Easter Parade*). But such fudging was a minor detail in a vast reinvention that began almost at birth—a quest for self-realization by a woman who was, as her son wrote of her model in *A Special Providence*, "remarkable and gifted and brave":

How else could anyone explain the story of her life? At the turn of the century, when all the sleeping little towns of Indiana had lain locked in provincial ignorance, and when in that environment a simple dry-goods merchant named Amos Grumbauer had raised six ordinary daughters, wasn't it remarkable that his seventh had somehow developed a passion for art, and for elegance, and for the great and distant world of New York?

Give or take a few syllables, the passage sticks to the facts, as does most of Yates's fiction about his family. Just like Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence*, Dookie left her hometown before she finished high school, and was in fact one of the first female students at the Cincinnati Art Academy, where she studied China Painting and Drawing from Life. At the time she had only a vague idea of becoming an artist, and wouldn't settle on a particular métier until much later. Her immediate goal was to gain the skills to get out of Ohio and find a job in New York, and never to look back except in scorn and derision. For the rest of her life Dookie scoffed at everything that struck her as bland and bourgeois, though in one respect (at least) she never left Greenville: No matter how bohemian she later affected to be, or how destitute she often became, Dookie was always proud to call herself a "good Republican." "[S]he had probably grown up hearing the phrase 'good Republican' as an index of respectability and clean clothes," Yates speculated in a later story. "And maybe she had come to relate her standards of respectability ... but 'good Republican' was worth clinging to."

Dookie would later say she married beneath her, and no doubt she meant a number of things by that; at least in one respect, though, she married about as far above herself as she could get. For Richard Yates's lineage on his father's side is very distinguished indeed—what's more, Yates was

aware of this. "I know," he replied, when his nephew Peter (an amateur genealogist) told him they were direct descendants of one of the country's first great men, Governor William Bradford of Plymouth. The most powerful colonial governor, a man of legendary virtue, Bradford is perhaps best known as the self-taught author of *History of Plimouth Plantation*—a classic among literary annals notable for its directness of style, the author's determination to tell the truth in the plainest possible language. Yates, if he gave the matter much thought (and there are reasons to suspect he did), may well have been proud of such an ancestor.

The Bradford connection came through Yates's paternal grandmother, Clarissa Antoinette Cleveland, a member of the same illustrious, many-branched family that produced Grover, the country's twenty-second and twenty-fourth president, and Moses, the founder of Cleveland, Ohio. In 1864 Clarissa married a seminarian, Horatio Yates, who later became one of the most active and respected Methodist clergymen in central New York. The followers of John Wesley stress the social responsibility of Christians, and Horatio Yates clearly took that aspect of his calling to heart. After moving his growing family from one tiny pastorate to another throughout Cayuga County, Yates became chaplain of Auburn State Prison in 1887, a year after the birth of his eighth and last child, Vincent Matthew, the father of Richard Yates. Vincent's formative years, then, were spent (happily or not) in the parsonage of a prison that was infamous for its brutality. The so-called Auburn system was informed by the spirit of Calvinism, a belief in the utter depravity of humankind, and its foremost mandate was to break the prisoners' spirits through beatings and floggings, forced labor, solitary confinement, shaved heads, striped suits, and lockstep. Such a life was conducive to thinking about one's heavenly reward, and in 1826 the Auburn warden, Gershom Powers, conceived the idea of a resident chaplain—a man "activated by motives of public policy and Christian benevolence," he wrote. "Residing with convicts, and visiting their solitary and cheerless abodes, they will consider him their minister, their guide, their counselor, and their friend."

The evidence suggests that Horatio Yates was all these things. One of his grandson's most cherished possessions was a violin lovingly carved by a prisoner for Chaplain Yates, with a woman's head at the end of the fingerboard and a mother-of-pearl inlaid case.\* Horatio Yates's devotion to his wayward flock became a matter of public record in August 1890, when the country's first capital punishment by electrocution took place at Auburn State Prison. William Kemmler had killed his common-law wife Tillie Ziegler with a hatchet, and was held in a single cell for almost a year waiting for death. Horatio Yates visited the man several times a week, and read to him from a picture Bible (Kemmler was mentally deficient). The prisoner's last hours were spent in prayer with the kind chaplain, who proved such a comfort that Kemmler insisted he be one of the twenty-six witnesses at the execution. "Gentlemen, I wish you all good luck," said Kemmler as he was strapped to the chair. "I believe I am going to a good place and I am ready to go." Horatio Yates, having convinced the poor man of God's infinite mercy, sat and watched with the others as shock after shock failed to kill him—as he gasped and gurgled, his teeth grinding audibly, the capillaries bursting on his cheeks, the room filling with the stench of roasting flesh and feces, until several witnesses fainted and the district

attorney ran retching for the door. Chaplain Yates's reaction went unrecorded, though the episode might have put things in a curious perspective for a while. In any case he continued to serve as chaplain for seven more years, and his passing in 1912 was noted at respectful length by all the Auburn newspapers.

His son Vincent was destined for a life of comparative obscurity. A small man of average good looks and few apparent pretensions, he made little impression on his son or the world at large except in a single respect: He had a lovely tenor voice, though not quite enough talent or monomania to make a career out of it. "I think he sang professionally a few times," Yates surmised in *A Good School*. To imagine he joined the General Electric Company in Schenectady as a delaying action, in order to have a few dollars coming in while he continued to seek concert engagements, but before very long the company swallowed him up." This is Yates being characteristically scrupulous; most likely he knew very little about his father's life, and even in a piece of fiction (albeit one published as a "autobiographical foreword" in the *New York Times Book Review*) he would not pretend otherwise. It is quite possible that Vincent Yates tried to sing professionally, failed, and then accepted the truth of his relative mediocrity and spent the rest of his life, sadder but wiser, as a small-time corporate drone—that he was, in short, a kind of Yatesian hero: the modest man who refuses to live a lie. That, anyhow, is the way Yates portrays him in the fiction, though it appears to have been a somewhat revisionist view.

Outside his work Yates rarely discussed his father. To his friends, family, and even his psychiatrist he dismissed Vincent as a cipher, someone he hardly knew. But imaginatively he tried hard to father this rather dull but decent man who spent most of his adult life as an assistant regional sales manager for General Electric (Mazda Lamp Division); who was patient and reliable in meeting the demands of a flamboyant, profligate ex-wife; and who had a fine singing voice but at some point gave it up for good. Yates's fullest fictional treatment of his father is "Lament for a Tenor," his second published story, written eleven years after Vincent's death.\* It seems to reflect a rather guilty impulse to pay belated homage to the man. The protagonist is a sixteen-year-old boy who tries to find something to mourn in a dead father he'd always neglected; among other things he recalls one of his infrequent visits to his father's office, where a framed photograph of a salesman's outing at Tupper Lake had caught his eye: "[H]e came upon his father ... between two heavy bald men whose glasses flashed in the sun.... He looked as if he'd tried all weekend to get into the spirit of the thing ... [but] was lonely and tired now, anxious to go home and even beginning to feel sorry for himself, an operatic tenor lost among the salesmen." A series of further flashbacks culminates in an epiphanic moment when, as a very small child, the protagonist actually heard his father sing: "When his voice came, it was amazingly big and rich, filling the room: '*La donna è mobile/Qual piuma al ven-n-to...*'" And though his father botches the final high note with a cough ("my wind's shot"), the son is "too full of pride and love to speak."

Vincent is an essentially idealized figure in the fiction (*too* idealized in the case of "Tenor," which might explain why the story was never collected): His typical function, at least in the later work, is

serve as foil to the selfish, pretentious characters based on Yates's mother, and both parents suggest a larger dialectic between realistic and romantic viewpoints—that is, between people like Vincent who refuse to deceive themselves, who don't insist on their own importance, and people like Dookie who do. To some degree Vincent may have been such a paragon (certainly he was good about paying alimony), but in everyday life, at least, his son wasn't particularly sentimental about him, and was even somewhat equivocal about who neglected whom. "I didn't give a shit about *why* he wasn't home," said Yates. "I just wanted him there."

\* \* \*

Dookie and Vincent were married on July 3, 1920. She was pushing thirty, and he was on the brink of premature middle age, and one assumes that both were lonely. Later Dookie would deplore having married such a tedious man, and perhaps God alone can measure the magnitude of Vincent's regret, but at the time it might have made a kind of sense. Both had fled from rather claustrophobic home lives—in Vincent's case a literal prison, no less—where each had been the youngest and least conventional of a large family.\* Both had a degree of artistic talent, and all the better for Dookie that Vincent had given up his own *manqué* striving to devote himself to a mundane but respectable career; he could thus support her growing desire to become a sculptor. And finally, by most accounts, both were alcoholics, as both their children would be.

Their daughter, Ruth, was born August 4, 1921, and spent her first eight years in the picturesque village of Hastings-on-Hudson, ten or so miles upriver from Manhattan. Later Ruth would say that those early years in Hastings had been the happiest of her life—as much a reflection on the relative happiness of her adulthood as on that idyll by the Hudson. Be that as it may, her parents' marriage was two-thirds over when her brother, Richard Walden,\* was born on February 3, 1926, in a Yonkers hospital. He later wrote that his sister's nostalgia for the Hastings era made him envious "because [he] could scarcely remember it at all." And since Yates wasn't inclined to write about things he couldn't remember in terms of mimetic mood and detail, his fiction gives only a faint glimpse of that time—in *Cold Spring Harbor*, when the father's "look of ruddy health after the first few swallows of whiskey" reminds his son, vaguely, "of rare and unexpected Christmas mornings, long ago." Hardly a vision of Proust-ian enchantment, but for Yates it would have to suffice. By the time he was three, the best of his childhood was over.

To understand why his parents divorced one may look in a number of directions. Dookie's artistic pretensions had become more desperate with time, and it may have been that Vincent didn't take them seriously enough, or at any rate balked when she asked him to pay for a year of study in Paris. And perhaps, for Dookie, all this was part of a greater malaise—a sense that she was being "stifled" like her counterpart Pookie in *The Easter Parade*, who "always used to compare herself with the woman in *A Doll's House*." As for Vincent, there were probably times when the dull grind of breadwinning got him down, and like the father in *A Special Providence* he may have been driven to the odd bout of debauchery ("he would disappear for three and four days at a time and come home reeking of gin, wi

lipstick all over his shirt”). And perhaps, too, it was partly a matter of Vincent’s enthusiasm for Democratic Party politics, his friendships with “dreadful little Irish people from Tammany Hall,” and the Dookie surrogate (a “good Republican”) puts it in “Oh, Joseph, I’m So Tired.”

In sum they seem to have been very different people after all, with little more in common than a fondness for liquor and cigarettes. Dookie left after nine years and took the children—but more particularly she took her son. As Yates wrote in *A Good School*, he and his father had an “unspoken agreement”:

I had been given over to my mother. There was pain in that assumption—for both of us, I would guess, though I can’t speak for him—yet there was an uneasy justice in it too. Much as I might wish it otherwise, I did prefer my mother. I knew she was foolish and irresponsible, that she talked too much, that she made crazy emotional scenes over nothing and could be counted on to collapse in a crisis, but I had come to suspect, dismally, that my own personality might be built along much the same lines. In ways that were neither profitable nor especially pleasant, she and I were a comfort to one another.

By the time Yates wrote these lines he’d had fifty years to reflect on just how alike he and his mother were, indeed to be reminded of it again and again, and while he despised his mother’s failings all the more for seeing them in himself, such an awareness certainly improved (and in some ways was limited to) his art. As a young man he discovered Flaubert, and Dookie became his foremost Emma in his sense of her, and hence humanity, proved vital to his bleakly deterministic worldview. As he explained in a 1972 interview, his characters “all rush around trying to do their best—trying to live well, within their known or unknown limitations, doing what they can’t help doing, ultimately and inevitably failing because they can’t help being the people they are. *That’s* what brings on the calamity at the end.” Yates’s compassion for human weakness, for the flaws that make failure so inevitable, is everywhere in his work—with the occasional exception of certain characters based on his mother, which range from the rounded and essentially forgivable Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence* to Dickensian grotesques such as Pookie in *The Easter Parade* and Gloria Drake in *Coal Spring Harbor*. Tellingly or not, Yates also tended to be hard on characters based on himself. But all are worthy of our sympathy in at least one respect: They try to do their best but fail because of limitations over which they have no control. “After all, she was only human,” Yates liked to say of his mother, having just relieved himself of some scathing diatribe on the subject.

For much of Yates’s early life, though, he and Dookie were a comfort to one another. Daughter Ruth was something of a comfort as well, but she was more her father’s child, and after the divorce she continued to visit him as much as possible; at one point she even pretended to need weekly (rather than monthly) orthodontia as a pretext for going into the city. But Richard had never really known his father and never really would; he preferred to stay home with Dookie, a kindred soul whom he resembled not only in temperament but appearance—from the great mournful eyes and dark pouches beneath them to the never-corrected overbite that made his plump upper lip protrude slightly—features he despised.

\* \* \*

The first thing Dookie did after the divorce was take that trip to Paris. She'd been accepted by the Académie Julian to study under the eminent sculptor Paul Landowski, but also she wanted to expose her precocious three-year-old to the kind of high culture that only Paris could provide.\* She left Ruth behind with her sister Elsa, a decision that was likely a mutual one. There was the expense of taking both children, and while it seems reasonable to take a sentient eight-year-old for company rather than a toddler, Ruth was probably only too happy to stay behind, knowing even then what a trip abroad with Dookie might entail.

What Dookie hoped to achieve was perhaps more complicated than she was willing to admit: On the one hand, she meant to learn her craft from a great master and perhaps achieve greatness herself; but the girl from Greenville might also observe Continental manners firsthand, and refine the kind of sophisticated persona that might enable her, along with her reputation as an artist, to be admitted into the highest social circles. "The art of sculpture and the idea of aristocracy had always appealed to her equally," Yates wrote in *A Good School*, a notion he explored further in "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired." "Her idea was that any number of rich people, all of them gracious and aristocratic, would soon discover her: they would want her sculpture to decorate their landscaped gardens, and they would want to make her their friend for life." It's possible that Dookie's artistic aspirations were animated to some extent by petty snobbery; but it's also fair to point out—as many do—that she worked hard to realize such talent as she had, and often under circumstances that were far from aristocratic. And then too, it's hard to blame her for hoping to make friends with the sort of people to whom it might never occur to collect *Saturday Evening Post* covers in bound volumes.

Whether Dookie found what she was looking for in Paris is impossible to say. What was meant to be a year of study was cut short after six months or so, when the stock market crashed and she had to come home. The toddler Richard remembered little or nothing of the whole expedition and rarely spoke of it, though he reported in his fiction that it had been "confused and unpleasant" for his mother—who could hardly pronounce, much less speak, French, and who was almost certainly broke most of the time (no matter how much she later milked the subject for conversational purposes). As for her work as a sculptor, it must have improved somewhat, since she began to have her first minor successes not long after her return, and certainly she liked to invoke Landowski as one of her mentors.

But perhaps the most significant impact was psychological: Dookie seems to have become even less conventional after Paris, a liberation that may have begun amid the studios and cafés of the Levee Bank, or else was just the inevitable letting-go of a lonely divorcée at loose ends (in Depression-era Greenwich Village, no less). Somewhat paradoxically, though, she remained much concerned with matters of propriety: reluctant to speak of indelicate things, and always an elegant dresser—though also rather loud and crude at times, and her well-chosen clothes tended to be stained in some sad and obvious way. Perhaps all this was reconciled in the name of worldliness, or nobility at odds with circumstance, but one can't help wondering how it affected her son, who inherited the same contradictions to a remarkable degree. Also (as a young man anyway) he cherished the dream of Paris as a place where one might find oneself as an artist and a man, though in this respect his mother



wasn't the only influence.

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For a while after her return, Dookie and the children were all but alone in the world. Her family hadn't approved of the divorce, and later relished the chance to spell this out by refusing to come to Ruth's wedding. In the meantime they simply stayed away. Dookie's older sister Elsa was the one exception, and since she lived nearby and was willing to help (her ill-fated husband lay a few years in the future, she must have been a comfort—anyway up to a point. "Elsa was very sensible in contrast to Dookie," Yates's first wife Sheila remembered. "But she rode it pretty hard." The woman appears as the "bossy, meddling, and meddlesome and condescending" Eva in *A Special Providence*, who disapproves of her sister's marriage and then of her divorce; still, Elsa deserves a certain amount of credit just for sticking around, as she did for the duration of Yates's childhood and beyond, amid sporadic (and no doubt salutary) estrangements. Her grandnephew Peter described her as "a stable center" in the children's lives, suggesting the lack of that quality in every other respect. And while Yates would sometimes complain that it was his lot to live among women—a mother, sister, and maiden aunt; later two wives and three daughters—he seemed grateful to Elsa for propping his mother up through her marital misadventures.

And Elsa had every reason to be exasperated, of course. A notable cause of Dookie's loneliness then as later, was her singular lack of compunction where money was concerned. Her only income at the height of the Depression was whatever small amount Vincent could spare in the way of alimony and child support, and yet she insisted on a standard of gentility—large apartments in the Village or rented homes in "nice" suburban neighborhoods—that she couldn't remotely afford to maintain. When the money ran out, as it always did, she'd sponge off friends and neighbors until there was nobody left, and it was time to move on. "Dook's fantastic schemes have a horribly dreamlike almost nightmarish quality when they begin to crash about her ears," Sheila Yates wrote her husband in the fifties, when such disasters had become a dreadful theme in their lives. But the whole "hysterical odyssey" had begun some twenty years before, as Dookie's determination to be an artist—to vindicate herself in the eyes of a patronizing, provincial family and ex-husband—distracted her almost entirely from the more practical aspects of motherhood.

And while the bills went unpaid and the family was evicted from one place after another, Dookie became all the more emotionally dependent on her children. She encouraged them to view their chaotic lives as an adventure—the three of them against the world. "She was a free spirit," Yates wrote in "Regards at Home." "We were free spirits, and only a world composed of creditors or 'people like your father' could fail to appreciate the romance of our lives." As part of the romance, Dookie would read aloud from *Great Expectations* when they were hungry or awaiting another eviction. The children could further identify with Dickens in terms of their seedy clothes, which made them conspicuous at whatever new school, in whatever "nice" neighborhood, they found themselves from one year to the next. At the time Yates adored what he perceived to be his mother's "gallant

and goodness,” and since he made few friends—perpetually being “the only new boy and the only poor boy”—he became almost desperately attached to Dookie, and vice versa. For the rest of his life he was terrified of being left alone, and during childhood his shattered nerves were evidenced by (among other things) a bad stammer, which later seemed to return in the form of a chronic cough that became more pronounced when he was ill at ease.

And what about the art for which all these sacrifices were made? “She wasn’t a very good sculptor,” Yates put it bluntly in “Joseph,” referring mostly (if not entirely) to the “stiff and amateurish” quality of her early work, circa 1932. Her specialty, after Paris, was modeled garden figures cast in lead—nymphs and geese and pipe-playing Pans that were meant to decorate the lawns of the wealthy but usually ended up as part of a growing clutter that followed the family into their new living space, however modest. But Dookie remained undaunted; a big sale or “one-man exhibition” was forever in the offing, and while occasional little coups did occur, they never brought much in the way of money or acclaim. Meanwhile Dookie’s favorite model for her faunlets, often posed in the nude, was the small, obliging Richard; in *A Special Providence* the mortified four-year-old son Alice Prentice hunches over to cover his genitals, “round-eyed with humiliation,” while neighborhood children laugh at him from a studio window.\*

Many years later Yates told his youngest daughter, Gina, that what he remembered best about his mother was her body odor—that she smelled bad, no matter how hard she tried to clean herself. Doubtless the “rotten tomato” smell he attributes to Gloria Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor*. And body odor is one of many ignominious, nasty physical details that recur among Dookie’s fictional personas: rotten teeth, lipstick smeared outside the mouth, stained clothing, sweat-darkened armpits, and so on—most of which work to suggest the essential instability of the woman, her sweaty incipient hysteria. In many cases Yates makes the matter explicit, as in “Regards at Home”: “It had often occurred to me that she was crazy—there had been people who said she was crazy as long as I could remember.” Gloria Drake is flatly described as “mentally ill,” and everywhere in Yates’s work there are scenes of screaming, writhing fits thrown by mother characters (“after she’d lost all control and gone on shouting anyway”). In short, it seems far from implausible that Dookie suffered from a degree of mental illness, possibly the manic depression that afflicted her son (a disorder that’s almost entirely genetic in origin), or perhaps some other form of mood disorder. And even if there weren’t such a hereditary link, the chaos she always engendered would have certainly taken a psychological toll. As happened, Yates later complained of “cruel, bullying voices” in his head that made it hard to sleep and often horrific to dream—voices that evoked some bizarre tantrum or another that he’d overheard as a child.

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After a couple of years in a rural Connecticut farmhouse (though it was far beyond Dookie’s means, its chief virtue was a large barn where she could work on her sculpture), the family moved to its first and perhaps best Greenwich Village apartment—the place on Bedford Street so lovingly described



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