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Sexus



Henry Miller

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HENRY MILLER BY ERICA JONG

‘What is a hero?’ Henry Miller asks in one of his books. ‘Primarily,’ he declares, ‘one who has conquered his fears.’ By that definition, Henry Miller was a hero. He did not start out fearless, but, by the end of his life, he understood that the true revelation was laughter; not anger.

Henry Miller continues to be known, to his horror (when he was alive) as ‘the king of smut’. But sex was, for him, only one of several means of self-liberation. Indeed, his most liberating book, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, has no sexual content at all.

I met Henry Miller when I was a young writer who had just published a first novel. He wrote me an exuberant letter and we began a correspondence; we met, and discovered we were kindred spirits. Because Henry was a compulsive giver, he tried to teach me what he had learned in his long life. When people criticised my books, he said, ‘Why don’t you take it as a joke?’ I am still trying to be as mirthful as Henry. When I can laugh instead of crying at misfortune, perhaps I can consider myself free.

Henry Miller still threatens people. It is not because of his reputation as a pornographer, nor even because the term ‘sexist’ has clung to him ever since Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics* in 1971. Rather, Miller is feared and hated for being a liberator; for daring to say that we can overcome our fears.

Most people are not free. Freedom, in fact, frightens them. They follow patterns set by their parents, enforced by society, by their terrors of ‘they say’ and ‘what will they think?’ and by the constant inner dialogue that weighs duty against desire and pronounces duty the winner.

‘Lives of quiet desperation’ Thoreau called such lives – though today’s version is noisy desperation. Occasionally, a visionary comes along who seems to have conquered the fears in himself and to live with bravado and courage. People are at once terrified of such a creature – and admiring. They are also envious.

Why are people so envious of heroism? Because we are inclined to blame ourselves for having lived too timidly. So the hero or heroine is often attacked, even killed, for having dared. But if we could see the hero as embodying our own aspirations, we would not need to destroy, but could emulate and learn instead.

In one of his lesser-known books, *The Red Notebook*, Henry copied out a quotation from the Buddha: ‘Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.’

He knew that even the greatest guru is not infallible. He tried to teach his admirers not to follow him blindly. In a note to the young painter, Bill Pickerill, shortly before his death in 1980, Henry wrote: ‘In the last reaches of being, there is but one true marriage: each person wedded to himself.’ I understood that a teacher could only open a door. The student had to be ready.

Like Byron, Pushkin, George Sand and Colette, Miller became more than a writer. He became a protagonist and a prophet, the prophet of a new consciousness. His writings and his life mingled to create a larger myth, a myth that embodies the human attraction toward freedom. Miller’s writing is full of imperfection, bombast, humbug. Sometimes its very slovenliness makes it hard to defend. But the purity of his example, his heart, his openness, makes him unique among writers. He will surely draw new generations of readers to him.

Miller is in many ways a world unto himself. One searches in vain for a contemporary writer

whom to compare him. *Tropic of Cancer* burst forth into the world in 1934, the same year that gave us F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*, Robert Graves's *Claudius*, Edna St Vincent Millay's *Wine From These Grapes*, and Langston Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*. Miller's characteristic style is comparable to none of these; his spirit harks back to Whitman or Rabelais. In an age of cynicism, Miller remains the romantic, exemplifying the possibility of optimism in a fallen world, of happy poverty in a world that worships lucre, of the sort of gaiety Yeats meant when he wrote of the Chinese sages in *Lapis Lazuli*, 'their eyes, their ancient glittering eyes, are gay.'

Chapter One

It must have been a Thursday night when I met her for the first time – at the dance hall. I reported work in the morning, after an hour or two's sleep, looking like a somnambulist. The day passed like a dream. After dinner I fell asleep on the couch and awoke fully dressed about six the next morning, felt thoroughly refreshed, pure at heart, and obsessed with one idea – to have her at any cost. Walking through the park I debated what sort of flowers to send with the book I had promised her (*Winesburg, Ohio*). I was approaching my thirty-third year, the age of Christ crucified. A wholly new life lay before me, had I the courage to risk all. Actually there was nothing to risk: I was at the bottom rung of the ladder, a failure in every sense of the word.

It was a Saturday morning, then, and for me Saturday has always been the best day of the week to come to life when others are dropping off with fatigue; my week begins with the Jewish day of rest. That this was to be the grand week of my life, to last for seven long years, I had no idea of course. I knew only that the day was auspicious and eventful. To make the fatal step, to throw everything to the dogs, is in itself an emancipation: the thought of consequences never entered my head. To make an absolute, unconditional surrender to the woman one loves is to break every bond save the desire not to lose her, which is the most terrible bond of all.

I spent the morning borrowing right and left, dispatched the book and flowers, then sat down to write a long letter to be delivered by a special messenger. I told her that I would telephone her later in the afternoon. At noon I quit the office and went home. I was terribly restless, almost feverish with impatience. To wait until five o'clock was torture. I went again to the park, oblivious of everything. I walked blindly over the downs to the lake where the children were sailing their boats. In the distance a band was playing; it brought back memories of my childhood, stifled dreams, longings, regrets. A sultry, passionate rebellion filled my veins. I thought of certain great figures in the past, of all that they had accomplished at my age. What ambitions I may have had were gone; there was nothing I wanted to do except put myself completely in her hands. Above everything else I wanted to hear her voice, know that she was still alive, that she had not already forgotten me. To be able to put a nickel in the slot every day of my life henceforth, to be able to hear her say hello, that and nothing more was the utmost I dared hope for. If she would promise me that much, and keep her promise, it wouldn't matter what happened.

Promptly at five o'clock I telephoned. A strangely sad, foreign voice informed me that she was not at home. I tried to find out when she would be home but I was cut off. The thought that she was out of reach drove me frantic. I telephoned my wife that I would not be home for dinner. She greeted the announcement in her usual disgusted way, as though she expected nothing more of me than disappointments and postponements, 'Choke on it, you bitch,' I thought to myself as I hung up. 'At least I know that I don't want you, any part of you, dead or alive.' An open trolley was coming along, without a thought of its direction I hopped aboard and made for the rear seat. I rode around for a couple of hours in a deep trance; when I came to I recognized an Arabian ice-cream parlor near the water front, got off, walked to the wharf and sat on a stringpiece looking up at the humming fretwork of the Brooklyn Bridge. There were still several hours to kill before I dared venture to go to the dance hall. Gazing vacantly at the opposite shore my thoughts drifted ceaselessly, like a ship without a rudder.

When finally I picked myself up and staggered off I was like a man under an anaesthetic who had

managed to slip away from the operating table. Everything looked familiar yet made no sense; it took ages to co-ordinate a few simple impressions which by ordinary reflex calculus would mean table, chair, building, person. Buildings emptied of their automatons are even more desolate than tombs when the machines are left idle they create a void deeper than death itself. I was a ghost moving about in a vacuum. To sit down, to stop and light a cigarette, not to sit down, not to smoke, to think, or not to think, breathe or stop breathing, it was all one and the same. Drop dead and the man behind you walks over you; fire a revolver and another man fires at you; yell and you wake the dead, who, oddly enough also have powerful lungs. Traffic is now going East and West; in a minute it will be going North and South. Everything is proceeding blindly according to rule and nobody is getting anywhere. Lurch and stagger in and out, up and down, some dropping out like flies, others swarming in like gnats. Eyes standing up, with slots, levers, greasy nickels, belch, pick your teeth, cock your hat, tramp, slide, stagger, whistle, blow your brains out. In the next life I will be a vulture feeding on rich carrion: I will perch on top of the tall buildings and dive like a shot the moment I smell death. Now I am whistling a merry tune – the epigastric regions are at peace. *Hello Mara, how are you?* And she will give me that enigmatic smile, throwing her arms about me in warm embrace. This will take place in a void under powerful klieg lights with three centimeters of privacy marking a mystic circle about us.

I mount the steps and enter the arena, the grand ballroom of the double-barreled sex adepts, now flooded with a warm boudoir glow. The phantoms are waltzing in a sweet chewing-gum haze, knees slightly crooked, haunches taut, ankles swimming in powdered sapphire. Between drumbeats I hear the ambulance clanging down below, then fire engines, then police sirens. The waltz is perforated with anguish, little bullet holes slipping over the cogs of the mechanical piano which is drowned because it is blocks away in a burning building without fire escapes. She is not on the floor. She may be lying in bed reading a book, she may be making love with a prize fighter, or she may be running like mad through a field of stubble, one shoe on, one shoe off, a man named Corn Cob pursuing her hotly. Wherever she is I am standing in complete darkness; her absence blots me out.

I inquire of one of the girls if she knows when Mara will arrive. *Mara?* Never heard of her. How should she know anything about anybody since she's only had the job an hour or so and is sweating like a mare wrapped in six suits of woolen underwear lined with fleece. Won't I offer her a dance? she'll ask one of the other girls about this Mara. We dance a few rounds of sweat and rose water, the conversation running to corns and bunions and varicose veins, the musicians peering through the boudoir mist with jellied eyes, their faces spread in a frozen grin. The girl over there, Florrie, she might be able to tell me something about my friend. Florrie has a wide mouth and eyes of lapis lazuli, she's as cool as a geranium, having just come from an all-afternoon fucking fiesta. Does Florrie know if Mara will be coming soon? She doesn't think so ... she doesn't think she'll come at all this evening. *Why?* She thinks she has a date with someone. Better ask the Greek – he knows everything.

The Greek says yes, Miss Mara will come ... yes, just wait a while. I wait and wait. The girls are steaming, like sweating horses standing in a field of snow. Midnight. No sign of Mara. I move slowly and unwillingly, towards the door. A Puerto Rican lad is buttoning his fly on the top step.

In the subway I test my eyesight reading the ads at the farther end of the car. I cross-examine my body to ascertain if I am exempt from any of the ailments which civilized man is heir to. Is my breath foul? Does my heart knock? Have I a fallen instep? Are my joints swollen with rheumatism? No sinus trouble? No pyorrhea? How about constipation? Or that tired feeling after lunch? No migraine, no acidosis, no intestinal catarrh, no lumbago, no floating bladder, no corns or bunions, no varicose veins? As far as I know I'm sound as a button, and yet ... Well, the truth is I lack something, something vital ...

I'm lovesick. Sick to death. A touch of dandruff and I'd succumb like a poisoned rat.

~~My body is heavy as lead when I throw it into bed. I pass immediately into the lowest depth~~ dream. This body, which has become a sarcophagus with stone handles, lies perfectly motionless; the dreamer rises out of it, like a vapor, to circumnavigate the world. The dreamer seeks vainly to find form and shape that will fit his ethereal essence. Like a celestial tailor, he tries on one body after another, but they are all misfits. Finally he is obliged to return to his own body, to reassume the leaden mold, to become as lead, to lie prone and rigid, forever inert, to waste ennui.

Sunday morning. I awaken fresh as a daisy. The world lies before me, unconquered, unsullied, as virgin as the Arctic zones. I swallow a little bismuth and chloride of lime to drive away the last leaden fumes of inertia. I will go directly to her home, ring the bell, and walk in. Here I am, take me – or stab me to death. Stab the heart, stab the brain, stab the lungs, the kidneys, the viscera, the eyes, the ears. If only one organ be left alive you are doomed – doomed to be mine forever, in this world and the next, and all the worlds to come. I am a desperado of love, a scalper, a slayer. I'm insatiable. I eat hair, dirt, wax, dry blood clots, anything and everything you call yours. Show me your father, with his kites, his race horses, his free passes for the opera: I will eat them all, swallow them alive. Where is the chair you sit in, where is your favorite comb, your toothbrush, your nail file? Trot them out that I may devour them at one gulp. You have a sister more beautiful than yourself, you say. Show her to me – I want to lick the flesh from her bones.

Riding towards the ocean, towards the marshland where a little house was built to hatch a little egg which, after it had assumed the proper form, was christened Mara. That one little drop escaping from a man's penis should produce such staggering results! I believe in God the Father, in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son, in the blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Ghost, in Adam Cadmium, in chromium, nickel, the oxides and the mercuriochromes, in waterfowls and watercress, in epileptoid seizures, bubonic plague, in devachan, in planetary conjunctions, in chicken tracks and stick-throwing, in revolutions, in stock crashes, in wars, earthquakes, cyclones, in Kali Yuga and in hula-hula. *I believe, believe.* I believe because not to believe is to become as lead, to lie prone and rigid, forever inert, to waste away ...

Looking out on the contemporary landscape. Where are the beasts of the field, the crops, the manure, the roses that flower in the midst of corruption? I see railroad tracks, gas stations, cement blocks, iron girders, tall chimneys, automobile cemeteries, factories, warehouses, sweatshops, vacant lots. Not even a goat in sight. I see it all clearly and distinctly: it spells desolation, death, death everlasting. For thirty years now I have worn the iron cross of ignominious servitude, serving but not believing, working but taking no wages, resting but knowing no peace. Why should I believe that everything will suddenly change, just having her, just loving and being loved?

Nothing will be changed except myself.

As I approach the house I see a woman in the back yard hanging up clothes. Her profile is turned to me; it is undoubtedly the face of the woman with the strange, foreign voice who answered the telephone. I don't want to meet this woman, I don't want to know who she is, I don't want to believe what I suspect. I walk round the block and when I come again to the door she is gone. Somehow my courage too is gone.

I ring the bell hesitantly. Instantly the door is yanked open and the figure of a tall, menacing young man blocks the threshold. She is not in, can't say when she'll be back, who are you, what do you want of her? Then good-bye and bang! The door is staring me in the face. Young man, you'll regret this. One day I'll return with a shotgun and blow your testicles off ... So that's it! Everybody on guard, everybody tipped off, everybody trained to be elusive and evasive. Miss Mara is never where

she's expected to be, nor does anybody know where she might be expected to be. Miss Mara inhabits the air: volcanic ash blown hither and thither by the trade winds. Defeat and mystery for the first day of the Sabbatical year. Gloomy Sunday amongst the Gentiles, amongst the kith and kin of the accidental birth. Death to all Christian brethren! Death to the phony status quo!

A few days passed without any sign of life from her. In the kitchen, after my wife had retired, I would sit and write voluminous letters to her. We were living then in a morbidly respectable neighborhood, occupying the parlor floor and basement of a lugubrious brownstone house. From time to time I had tried to write but the gloom which my wife created around her was too much for me. Only once did I succeed in breaking the spell which she had cast over the place; that was during a high fever which lasted for several days when I refused to see a doctor, refused to take any medicine, refused to take any nourishment. In a corner of the room upstairs I lay in a wide bed and fought off the delirium which threatened to end in death. I had never really been ill since childhood and this experience was delicious. To make my way to the toilet was like staggering through all the intricate passages of an ocean liner. I lived several lives in the few days that it lasted. That was my sole vacation in the sepulcher which is called home. The only other place I could tolerate was the kitchen. It was a sort of comfortable prison cell and, like a prisoner, here I often sat alone late into the night planning my escape. Here too my friend Stanley sometimes joined me, croaking over my misfortune and withering every hope with bitter and malicious barbs.

It was here I wrote the maddest letters ever penned. Anyone who thinks he is defeated, hopeless, without resources, can take courage from me. I had a scratchy pen, a bottle of ink and paper – my sole weapons. I put down everything which came into my head, whether it made sense or not. After I had posted a letter I would go upstairs and lie down beside my wife and, with eyes wide open, stare into the darkness, as if trying to read my future. I said to myself over and over that if a man, a sincere and desperate man like myself, loves a woman with all his heart, if he is ready to cut off his ears and mail them to her, if he will take his heart's blood and pump it out on paper, saturate her with his need and longing, besiege her everlastingly, she cannot possibly refuse him. The homeliest man, the weakest man, the most undeserving man must triumph if he is willing to surrender his last drop of blood. No woman can hold out against the gift of absolute love.

I went again to the dance hall and found a message waiting for me. The sight of her handwriting made me tremble. It was brief and to the point. She would meet me at Times Square, in front of the drugstore, at midnight the following day. I was to please stop writing her to her home.

I had a little less than three dollars in my pocket when we met. The greeting she gave me was cordial and brisk. No mention of my visit to the house or the letters or the gifts. Where would I like to go, she asked after a few words. I hadn't the slightest idea what to suggest. That she was standing there in the flesh, speaking to me, looking at me, was an event which I had not yet fully grasped. 'Let's go to Jimmy Kelly's place,' she said, coming to my rescue. She took me by the arm and walked me to the curb where a cab was waiting for us. I sank back into the seat, overwhelmed by her mere presence. I made no attempt to kiss her or even to hold her hand. She had come – that was the paramount thing. That was everything.

We remained until the early hours of the morning, eating, drinking, dancing. We talked freely and understandingly. I knew no more about her, about her real life, than I knew before, not because of any secrecy on her part but rather because the moment was too full and neither past nor future seemed important.

When the bill came I almost dropped dead.

In order to stall for time I ordered more drinks. When I confessed to her that I had only a couple

of dollars on me she suggested that I give them a check, assuring me that since she was with me there would be no question about its acceptance. I had to explain that I owned no checkbook, that I possessed nothing but my salary. In short, I made a full clearance.

While confessing this sad state of affairs to her an idea had germinated in my crop. I excused myself and went to the telephone booth. I called the main office of the telegraph company and begged the night manager, who was a friend of mine, to send a messenger to me immediately with a fifty-dollar bill. It was a lot of money for him to borrow from the till, and he knew I wasn't any too reliable but I gave him a harrowing story promising faithfully to return it before the day was out.

The messenger turned out to be another good friend of mine, old man Creighton, an ex-minister of the gospel. He seemed indeed surprised to find me in such a place at that hour. As I was signing the sheet he asked me in a low voice if I was sure I would have enough with the fifty. 'I can lend you something out of my own pocket,' he added. 'It would be a pleasure to be of assistance to you.'

'How much can you spare?' I asked, thinking of the task ahead of me in the morning.

'I can give you another twenty-five,' he said readily.

I took it and thanked him warmly. I paid the bill, gave the waiter a generous tip, shook hands with the manager, the assistant manager, the bouncer, the hat check girl, the doorman, and with a beggar who had his mitt out. We got into a cab and, as it wheeled around, Mara impulsively climbed over me and straddled me. We went into a blind fuck, with the cab lurching and careening, our teeth knocking, tongue bitten, and the juice pouring from her like hot soup. As we passed an open plaza on the other side of the river, just at daybreak, I caught the astonished glance of a cop as we sped by. 'It's dawn, Mara,' I said, trying gently to disengage myself. 'Wait, wait,' she begged, panting and clutching at me furiously, and with that she went into a prolonged orgasm in which I thought she would rub my cock off. Finally she slid off and slumped back into her corner, her dress still up over her knees. I leaned over to embrace her again and as I did so I ran my hand up her wet cunt. She clung to me like a leech, wiggling her slippery ass around in a frenzy of abandon. I felt the hot juice trickling through my fingers. I had all four fingers up her crotch, stirring up the liquid moss which was tingling with electrical spasms. She had two or three orgasms and then sank back exhausted, smiling up at me weakly like a trapped doe.

After a time she got out her mirror and began powdering her face. Suddenly I observed a startled expression on her face, followed by a quick turn of the head. In another moment she was kneeling on the seat, staring out of the back window. 'Someone's following us,' she said. 'Don't look!' I was too weak and happy to give a damn. 'Just a bit of hysteria,' I thought to myself, saying nothing but observing her attentively as she gave rapid, jerky orders to the driver to go this way and that, faster and faster. '*Please, please!*' she begged him, as though it were life and death. 'Lady,' I heard him say as if from far off, from some other dream vehicle, 'I can't give her any more ... I've got a wife and a kid ... I'm sorry.'

I took her hand and pressed it gently. She made an abortive gesture as if to say - 'You don't know ... you don't know ... this is terrible.' It was not the moment to ask her questions. Suddenly I had the realization that we were in danger. Suddenly I put two and two together, in my own crazy fashion. It reflected quickly ... nobody is following us ... that's all coke and laudanum ... but somebody's after her, that's definite ... she's committed a crime, a serious one, and maybe more than one ... nothing she says adds up ... I'm in a web of lies ... I'm in love with a monster, the most gorgeous monster imaginable ... I should quit her now, immediately, without a word of explanation ... otherwise I'm doomed ... she's fathomless, impenetrable ... I might have known that the one woman in the world whom I can't live without is marked with mystery ... get out at once ... jump ... save yourself!

I felt her hand on my leg, rousing me stealthily. Her face was relaxed, her eyes wide open, full and shining with innocence ... ‘They’ve gone,’ she said. ‘It’s all right now.’

Nothing is right, I thought to myself. We’re only beginning. Mara, Mara, where are you leading me? It’s fateful, it’s ominous, but I belong to you body and soul, and you will take me where you will deliver me to my keeper, bruised, crushed, broken. For us there is no final understanding. I feel the ground slipping from under me ...

My thoughts she was never able to penetrate neither then nor later. She probed deeper than I thought: she read blindly, as if endowed with antennae. She knew that I was meant to destroy, that she would destroy her too in the end. She knew that whatever game she might pretend to play with me she had met her match. We were pulling up to the house. She drew close to me and, as though she had a switch inside her which she controlled at will, she turned on me the full incandescent radiance of her love. The driver had stopped the car. She told him to pull up in the street a little farther and wait. We were facing one another, hands clasped, knees touching. A fire ran through our veins. We remained thus for several minutes, as in some ancient ceremony, the silence broken only by the purr of the motor.

‘I’ll call you tomorrow,’ she said, leaning forward impulsively for a last embrace. And then in my ear she murmured – ‘I’m falling in love with the strangest man on earth. You frighten me, you’re so gentle. Hold me tight ... believe in me always ... I feel almost as if I were with a god.’

Embracing her, trembling with the warmth of her passion, my mind jumped clear of the embrace electrified by the tiny seed she had planted in me. Something that had been chained down, something that had struggled abortively to assert itself ever since I was a child and had brought my ego into the street for a glance around, now broke loose and went skyrocketing into the blue. Some phenomenon new being was sprouting with alarming rapidity from the top of my head, from the double crown which was mine from birth.

After an hour or two’s rest I got to the office, which was already jammed with applicants. The telephones were ringing as usual. It seemed more than ever senseless to be passing my life away in the attempt to fill up a permanent leak. The officials of the cosmococcic telegraph world had lost faith in me and I had lost faith in the whole fantastic world which they were uniting with wires, cables, pulleys, buzzers and Christ knows what. The only interest I displayed was in the pay check – and the much talked of bonus which was due any day. I had one other interest, a secret, diabolical one, and that was to work off a grudge which I had against Spivak, the efficiency expert whom they had brought in from another city expressly to spy on me. As soon as Spivak appeared on the scene, no matter in what remote, outlying office, I was tipped off. I used to lie awake nights thinking it out like a safe-cracker – how I would trip him up and bring about his dismissal. I made a vow that I would hang onto the job until I knifed him. It gave me pleasure to send him phony messages under false names in order to give him a bum steer, covering him with ridicule and causing endless confusion. I even had people write him letters threatening his life. I would get Curley, my chief stooge, to telephone him from time to time, saying that his house was on fire or that his wife had been taken to the hospital – anything that would upset him and start him off on a fool’s errand. I had a gift for the underhanded sort of warfare. It was a talent that had been developed since the tailoring days. Whenever my father said to me – ‘Better cross his name off the books, he’ll never pay up!’ I interpreted it very much as would a young Indian brave if the old chief had handed him a prisoner and he had said – ‘Bad pale face, give him the works!’ (I had a thousand different ways of annoying a man without running foul of the law. Some men, whom I disliked on principle, I continued to plague long after they had paid their petty debts. One man, whom I especially detested, died of an apoplectic fit

upon receiving one of my anonymous insulting letters which was smeared with cat shit, bird shit, dog shit and one or two other varieties, including the well-known human variety.) Spivak consequently was just my meat. I concentrated all my cosmococcic attention on the sole plan of annihilating him. When we met I was polite, deferential, apparently eager to co-operate with him in every way. Never lost my temper with him, though every word he uttered made my blood boil. I did everything possible to bolster his pride, inflate his ego, so that when the moment came to puncture the bag the noise would be heard far and wide.

Towards noon Mara telephoned. The conversation must have lasted a quarter of an hour. I thought she'd never hang up. She said she had been rereading my letters; some of them she had read aloud to her aunt, or rather parts of them. (Her aunt had said that I must be a poet.) She was disturbed about the money I had borrowed. Would I be able to pay it back all right or should she try and borrow some? It was strange that I should be poor – I behaved like a rich man. But she was glad I was poor. Next time we would take a trolley ride somewhere. She didn't care about night clubs; she preferred to walk in the country or a stroll along the beach. The book was wonderful – she had only begun it that morning. Why didn't I try to write? She was sure I could write a great book. She had ideas for a book which she would tell me about when we met again. If I liked, she would introduce me to some writers she knew – they would be only too glad to help me ...

She rambled on like that interminably. I was thrilled and worried at the same time. I had rather she put it down on paper. But she seldom wrote letters, so she said. *Why* I couldn't understand. Her fluency was marvelous. She would say things at random, intricate, flamelike, or slide off into parenthetical limbo peppered with fireworks – admirable linguistic feats which a practiced writer might struggle for hours to achieve. And yet her letters – I remember the shock I received when I opened the first one – were almost childlike.

Her words, however, produced an unexpected effect. Instead of rushing out of the house immediately after dinner that evening, as I usually did, I lay on the couch in the dark and fell into a deep reverie. '*Why don't you try to write?*' That was the phrase which had stuck in my crop all day, which repeated itself insistently, even as I was saying thank you to my friend MacGregor for the tenner spot which I had wrung from him after the most humiliating wheedling and cajoling.

In the darkness I began to work my way back to the hub. I began to think of those most happy days of childhood, the long summer days when my mother took me by the hand, led me over the fields to see my little friends, Joey and Tony. As a child it was impossible to penetrate the secret of that joy which comes from a sense of superiority. That extra sense, which enables one to participate and at the same time to observe one's participation, appeared to me to be the normal endowment of everyone. That I enjoyed everything more than other boys my age I was unaware of. The discrepancy between myself and others only dawned on me as I grew older.

To write, I meditated, must be an act devoid of will. The word, like the deep ocean current, has to float to the surface of its own impulse. A child has no need to write, he is innocent. A man writes to throw off the poison which he has accumulated because of his false way of life. He is trying to recapture his innocence, yet all he succeeds in doing (by writing) is to inoculate the world with a virus of his disillusionment. No man would set a word down on paper if he had the courage to live out what he believed in. His inspiration is deflected at the source. If it is a world of truth, beauty and magic that he desires to create, why does he put millions of words between himself and the reality of that world? Why does he defer action – unless it be that, like other men, what he really desires is power, fame and success. 'Books are human actions in death,' said Balzac. Yet, having perceived the truth, he deliberately surrendered the angel to the demon which possessed him.

A writer woos his public just as ignominiously as a politician or any other mountebank; he loves to finger the great pulse, to prescribe like a physician, to win a place for himself, to be recognized as a force, to receive the full cup of adulation, even if it be deferred a thousand years. He doesn't want a new world which might be established immediately, because he knows it would never suit him. He wants an impossible world in which he is the uncrowned puppet-ruler dominated by forces utterly beyond his control. He is content to rule insidiously – in the fictive world of symbols – because the very thought of contact with rude and brutal realities frightens him. True, he has a greater grasp of reality than other men, but he makes no effort to impose that higher reality on the world by force, for example. He is satisfied just to preach, to drag along in the wake of disaster and catastrophes, a death-croaking prophet always without honour, always stoned, always shunned by those who, however unsuited for their tasks, are ready and willing to assume responsibility for the affairs of the world. The truly great writer does not want to write: he wants the world to be a place in which he can live the life of the imagination. The first quivering word he puts to paper is the word of the wounded angel: pain. The process of putting down words is equivalent to giving oneself a narcotic. Observing the growth of a book under his hands, the author swells with delusions of grandeur. 'I too am a conqueror – perhaps the greatest conqueror of all! My day is coming. I will enslave the world – by the magic of words . . . *Et cetera ad nauseam.*

The little phrase – *Why don't you try to write?* – involved me, as it had from the very beginning, in a hopeless bog of confusion. I wanted to enchant but not to enslave; I wanted a greater, richer life but not at the expense of others; I wanted to free the imagination of all men at once because without the support of the whole world, without a world imaginatively unified, the freedom of the imagination becomes a vice. I had no respect for writing *per se* any more than I had for God *per se*. Nobody, no principle, no idea, has validity in itself. What is valid is only that much – of anything, God included – which is realized by all men in common. People are always worried about the fate of the genius; I never worried about the genius: genius takes care of the genius in a man. My concern was always for the nobody, the man who is lost in the shuffle, the man who is so common, so ordinary, that his presence is not even noticed. One genius does not inspire another. All geniuses are leeches, so they speak. They feed from the same source – the blood of life. The most important thing for the genius is to make himself useless, to be absorbed in the common stream, to become a fish again and not a freedom of nature. The only benefit, I reflected, which the act of writing could offer me was to remove the differences which separated me from my fellow man. I definitely did not want to become the artist, the sense of becoming something strange, something apart and out of the current of life.

The best thing about writing is not the actual labor of putting word against word, brick upon brick, but the preliminaries, the spadework, which is done in silence, under any circumstances, in a dream as well as in the waking state. In short; the period of gestation. No man ever puts down what he intended to say: the original creation, which is taking place all the time, whether one writes or does not write, belongs to the primal flux: it has no dimensions, no form, no time element. In this preliminary state, which is creation and not birth, what disappears suffers no destruction; something which was already there, something imperishable, like memory, or matter, or God, is summoned and in it one flings himself like a twig into a torrent. Words, sentences, ideas, no matter how subtle or ingenious, the maddest flights of poetry, the most profound dreams, the most hallucinating visions, are but crude hieroglyphs chiseled in pain and sorrow to commemorate an event which is untransmissible. In an intelligently ordered world there would be no need to make the unreasonable attempt of putting such miraculous happenings down. Indeed, it would make no sense, for if men only stopped to realize that they who would be content with the counterfeit when the real is at everyone's beck and call? Who would

want to switch in and listen to Beethoven, for example, when he might himself experience the ecstatic harmonies which Beethoven so desperately strove to register? A great work of art, if it accomplishes anything, serves to remind us, or let us say to set us dreaming, of all that is fluid and intangible. Which is to say, *the universe*. It cannot be understood; it can only be accepted or rejected. If accepted we are revitalized; if rejected we are diminished. Whatever it purports to be it is not: it is always something more for which the last word will never be said. It is all that we put into it out of hunger for that which we deny every day of our lives. If we accepted *ourselves* as completely, the work of art, in fact *the whole world of art* would die of malnutrition. Every man Jack of us moves without feet at least a few hours a day, when his eyes are closed and his body prone. The art of dreaming when wide awake will be in the power of every man one day. Long before that books will cease to exist, for when men are wide awake and dreaming their powers of communication (with one another and with the spirit that moves all men) will be so enhanced as to make writing seem like the harsh and raucous squawks of an idiot.

I think and know all this, lying in the dark memory of a summer's day, without having mastered or even halfheartedly attempted to master, the art of the crude hieroglyph. Before ever I begin I am disgusted with the efforts of the acknowledged masters. Without the ability or the knowledge to make so much as a portal in the façade of the ground edifice, I criticize and lament the architecture itself. If I were only a tiny brick in the vast cathedral of this antiquated facade I would be infinitely happier; I would have life, the life of the whole structure, even as an infinitesimal part of it. But I am outside, a barbarian who cannot make even a crude sketch, let alone a plan, of the edifice he dreams of inhabiting. I dream a new blazingly magnificent world which collapses as soon as the light is turned on. A world that vanishes but does not die, for I have only to become still again and stare wide-eyed into the darkness and it reappears. ... There is then a world in me which is utterly unlike any world you know of. I do not think it is my exclusive property – it is only the angle of my vision which is exclusive, in that it is unique. If I talk the language of my unique vision nobody understands; the most colossal edifice may be reared and yet remain invisible. The thought of that haunts me. What good will it do to make an invisible temple?

Drifting with the flux – because of that little phrase. This is the sort of thinking that went on whenever the word 'writing' came up. In ten years of sporadic efforts I had managed to write a million words or so. You might as well say – a million blades of grass. To call attention to this ragged law was humiliating. All my friends knew that I had the itch to write – that's what made me good company now and then: *the itch*. Ed Gavarni, for example, who was studying to become a priest: he would have a little gathering at his home expressly for my benefit, so that I could scratch myself in public and thus make the evening somewhat of an event. To prove his interest in the noble art he would drop around to see me at more or less regular intervals, bringing cold sandwiches, apples and beer. Sometimes he would have a pocketful of cigars. I was to fill my belly and spout. If he had a ounce of talent he would never have dreamed of becoming a priest ... There was Zabrowskie, the crack telegraph operator of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America: he always examined my shoes, my hat, my overcoat, to see if they were in good condition. He had no time for reading, nor did he care what I wrote, nor did he believe I would ever get anywhere, but he liked to hear about it. He was interested in horses, mudlarks particularly. Listening to me was a harmless diversion and worth the price of a good lunch or a new hat, if needs be. It excited me to tell his stories because it was like talking to the man in the moon. He could interrupt the most subtle divagations by asking whether I preferred strawberry pie or cold pot cheese for dessert ... There was Costigan, the knuckle-duster from Yorkville – another good stand-by and sensitive as an old sow. He

once knew a writer for the *Police Gazette*; that made him eligible to seek the company of the elect. He had stories to tell me, stories that would sell, if I would come down off my perch and lend an ear. Costigan appealed to me in a strange way. He looked positively inert, a pimple-faced old sow with wiry bristles all over; he was so gentle, so tender, that if he had disguised himself as a woman you would never know that he was capable of shoving a guy against a wall and pummeling his brains out. He was the sort of tough egg who can sing falsetto and get up a fat collection to buy a funeral wreath. In the telegraph business he was considered to be a quiet, dependable clerk who had the company's interest at heart. In his off hours he was a holy terror, the scourge of the neighborhood. He had a wife whose maiden name was Tillie Jupiter; she was built like a cactus plant and gave plenty of rich milk. An evening with the two of them would set my mind to work like a poisoned arrow.

Of friends and supporters I must have had around fifty. Of the lot there were three or four who had some slight understanding of what I was trying to do. One of them, a composer named Larry Hunt, lived in a little town in Minnesota. We had once rented him a room and he had proceeded to fall in love with my wife – because I treated her so shamefully. But he liked me even better than my wife, and so, upon his return to the sticks, there began a correspondence which soon became voluminous. He was hinting now of coming back to New York for a little visit. I was hoping that he would come over and take the wife off my hands. Years ago, when we had just begun our unhappy affair, I had tried to palm her off on her old sweetheart, an up-State boy called Ronald. Ronald had come to New York to ask her hand in marriage. I use that high-flown phrase because he was the sort of fellow who could say a thing like that without looking foolish. Well, the three of us met and we had dinner together in a French restaurant. I saw from the way he looked at Maude that he cared more for her, and had more in common with her, than I would ever have. I liked him immensely; he was clean-cut, honest to the bone, kind, considerate, the type who would make what is called a good husband. Besides, he had waited for her a long time, something which she had forgotten, or she would never have taken up with a worthless son of a bitch like myself who could do her no good ... A strange thing happened that evening, something she would never forgive me for were she ever to learn of it. Instead of taking her home I went back to the hotel with her old sweetheart. I sat up all night with him trying to persuade him that he was the better man, telling him all sorts of rotten things about myself, things I had done to her and to others, pleading with him, begging him to claim her. I even went so far as to say that I knew she loved him, that she had admitted it to me. 'She only took me because I happened to be around,' I said. 'She's really waiting for you to do something. Give yourself a break.' But no, he wouldn't hear of it. It was like Gaston and Alphonse of the comic strip. Ridiculous, pathetic, altogether unreal. It was the sort of thing they will do in the movies and people pay to see it ... Anyway, thinking of Larry Hunt's coming visit I knew I wouldn't repeat that line. My one fear was that he might have found another woman in the meantime. It would be hard to forgive him that.

There was one place (the *only* place in New York) that I enjoyed going to, particularly if I were in an exalted mood, and that was my friend Ulric's studio uptown. Ulric was a lecherous bird; his profession brought him in contact with stripteasers, cock-teasers, and all sorts of sexually bedeviled females. More than any of the glamorous lanky swans who walked into his place to undress I liked the colored maids, whom he seemed to change frequently. To get them to pose for us was not an easy job. It was even more difficult, once we had persuaded them to try it, to get them to drape a leg over an armchair and expose a little salmon-colored meat. Ulric was full of lecherous designs, always thinking up ways to get his end in, as he put it. It was a way of emptying his mind of the slops he was commissioned to paint. (He was paid handsomely to make beautiful cans of soup, or corn on the cob, for the back covers of the magazines.) What he really wanted to do was to make cunts, rich, juicy

cunts that you could plaster over the bathroom wall and so bring about a pleasant, agreeable bow movement. He would have made them for nothing if someone had kept him in food and pin money. As I was saying a moment ago, he had an extraordinary flair for dark meat. When he had arranged the model in some outlandish position – bending over to pick up a hairpin, or climbing a ladder to wash a spot off the wall – I would be given a pad and pencil and told off to some advantageous spot where, pretending to draw a human figure (something beyond my powers), I would feast my eyes on the choice anatomical portions offered me whilst covering the paper with bird cages, checkerboard pineapples and chicken tracks. After a brief rest we would elaborately aid the model to regain his original position. This necessitated some delicate maneuvering, such as lowering or raising the buttocks, lifting one foot a little higher, spreading the legs a little more, and so on. ‘I think that about it, Lucy,’ I can hear him say, as he deftly manipulated her into an obscene position. ‘Can you hold that now, Lucy?’ And Lucy would let out a niggerish whine signifying that she was all set. ‘We won’t keep you long, Lucy,’ he would say, giving me a sly wink. ‘Observe the longitudinal vagination,’ he would say to me, employing a highfalutin jargon which Lucy found impossible to follow with her rabbit ears. Words like ‘vagination’ had a pleasing, magical tintinabulation for Lucy’s ears. Meeting him in the street I heard her say to him one day – ‘Any vagination exercises today, Mister Ulric?’

I had more in common with Ulric than with any of my other friends. For me he represented Europe, its softening, civilizing influence. We would talk by the hour of this other world where art has some relation to life, where you could sit quietly in public watching the passing show and think your own thoughts. Would I ever get there? Would it be too late? How would I live? What language would I speak? When I thought about it realistically it seemed hopeless. Only hardy, adventurous spirits could realize such dreams. Ulric had done it – for a year – by dint of hard sacrifice. For ten years he had done the things he hated to do, in order to make his dream come true. Now the dream was over and he was back where he had started. Farther back than ever, really, because he would never again be able to adapt himself to the treadmill. For Ulric it had been a Sabbatical leave: a dream which turns to gall and wormwood as the years roll by. I could never do as Ulric had done. I could never make a sacrifice of that sort, nor could I be content with a mere vacation however long or short it might be. My policy has always been to burn my bridges behind me. My face is always set toward the future. If I make a mistake it is fatal. When I am flung back I fall all the way back – to the very bottom. My only safeguard is my resiliency. So far I have always bounced back. Sometimes the rebound has resembled a slow-motion performance, but in the eyes of God speed has no particular significance.

It was in Ulric’s studio not so many months ago that I had finished my first book – the book about the twelve messengers. I used to work in his brother’s room, where some short time previously a magazine editor, after reading a few pages of an unfinished story, informed me cold-bloodedly that I hadn’t an ounce of talent, that I didn’t know the first thing about writing – in short that I was a complete flop and the best thing to do, my lad, is to forget it, try to make an honest living. Another nincompoop who had written a highly successful book about Jesus-the-carpenter had told me the same thing. And if rejection slips mean anything there was simple corroboration to support the criticism of these discerning minds. ‘Who *are* these shits?’ I used to say to Ulric. ‘Where do they get off to tell me these things? What have they done, except to prove that they know how to make money?’

Well, I was talking about Joey and Tony, my little friends. I was lying in the dark, a little twilight floating in the Japanese current. I was getting back to simple abracadabra, the straw that makes bricks from the crude sketch, the temple which must take on flesh and blood and make itself manifest to all the world. I got up and put on a soft light. I felt calm and lucid, like a lotus opening up. No violent pacing

back and forth, no tearing the hair out by the roots. I sank slowly into a chair by the table and with pencil I began to write. I described in simple words how it felt to take my mother's hand and walk across the sunlit fields, how it felt to see Joey and Tony rushing towards me with arms open, the faces beaming with joy. I put one brick upon another like an honest bricklayer. Something of a vertiginous nature was happening – not blades of grass shooting up but something structural, something planned. I didn't strain myself to finish it; I stopped when I had said all I could. I read it over quietly, what I had written. I was so moved that the tears came to my eyes. It wasn't something to show an editor: it was something to put away in a drawer, to keep as a reminder of natural processes, as a promise of fulfillment.

Every day we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heartache when we read those lines written by the hand of a master and recognize them as our own, as the tender shoots which were stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty. Every man, when he gets quiet, when he becomes desperately honest with himself, is capable of uttering profound truths. We all derive from the same source. There is no mystery about the origin of these things. We are all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all musicians; we have only to open up, only to discover what is already there.

What happened to me in writing about Joey and Tony was tantamount to revelation. It was revealed to me that I could say what I wanted to say – if I thought of nothing else, if I concentrated upon that exclusively – *and* if I were willing to bear the consequences which a pure act always involves.

Chapter Two

Two or three days later I met Mara for the first time in broad daylight. I was waiting for her in the Long Island depot over in Brooklyn. It was about six in the afternoon, daylight-saving time, which is a strange sunlit rush hour that enlivens even such a gloomy crypt as the waiting room of the Long Island Railroad. I was standing near the door when I spotted her crossing the car tracks under the elevated line; the sunlight filtered through the hideous structure in shafts of powdered gold. She had on a dotted Swiss dress which made her full figure seem even more opulent; the breeze blew lightly through her glossy black hair, teasing the heavy chalk-white face like spray dashing against a cliff. In that quick, lithe stride, so sure, so alert, I sensed the animal breaking through the flesh with flowery grace and fragile beauty. This was her daytime self, a fresh, healthy creature who dressed with utter simplicity and talked almost like a child.

We had decided to spend the evening at the beach. I was afraid it would be too cool for her in the light dress but she said she never felt the cold. We were so frightfully happy that the words just bubbled out of our mouths. We had crowded together in the motorman's compartment, our faces almost touching and glowing with the fiery rays of the setting sun. How different this ride over the rooftops from the lonely anxious one that Sunday morning when I set out for her home! Was it possible that in such a short span of time the world could take on such a different hue?

That fiery sun going down in the West – what a symbol of joy and warmth! It fired our hearts, illumined our thoughts, magnetized our souls. Its warmth would last far into the night, would flow back from below the curved horizon in defiance of the night. In this fiery blaze I handed her the manuscript to read. I couldn't have chosen a more favorable moment or a more favorable critic. It had been conceived in darkness and it was being baptized in light. As I watched her expression I had such a strong feeling of exaltation that I felt as if I had handed her a message from the Creator himself. I didn't need to know her opinion, I could read it on her face. For years I cherished this souvenir, reviving it in those dark moments when I had broken with everyone, walking back and forth in the lonely attic in a foreign city, reading the freshly written pages and struggling to visualize on the faces of all my coming readers this expression of unreserved love and admiration. When people ask me if I have a definite audience in mind when I sit down to write I tell them no, I have no one in mind, but the truth is that I have before me the image of a great crowd, an anonymous crowd, in which perhaps I recognize here and there, a friendly face: in that crowd I see accumulating the slow, burning warmth which was once a single image: I see it spread, take fire, rise into a great conflagration. (The only time a writer receives his due reward is when someone comes to him burning with this flame which I have fanned in a moment of solitude. Honest criticism means nothing: what one wants is unrestrained passion, fire for fire.)

When one is trying to do something beyond his known powers it is useless to seek the approval of friends. Friends are at their best in moments of defeat – at least that is my experience. Then they either fail you utterly or they surpass themselves. Sorrow is the great link – sorrow and misfortune. But when you are testing your powers, when you are trying to do something new, the best friend is a man to prove a traitor. The very way he wishes you luck, when you broach your chimerical ideas, is enough to dishearten you. He believes in you only in so far as he knows you; the possibility that you are greater than you seem is disturbing, for friendship is founded on mutuality. It is almost a law that when a man embarks on a great adventure he must cut all ties. He must take himself off to the

wilderness, and when he has wrestled it out with himself, he must return and choose a disciple. It doesn't matter how poor in quality the disciple may be: it matters only that he believe implicitly. For a germ to sprout, some other person, some one individual out of the crowd, has to show faith. Artists like great religious leaders, show amazing perspicacity in this respect. They never pick the likely one for their purpose, but always some obscure, frequently ridiculous person.

What aborted me in my beginnings, what almost proved to be a tragedy, was that I could find no one who believed in me implicitly, either as a person or as a writer. There was Mara, it is true, but Mara was not a friend, hardly even another person, so closely did we unite. I needed someone outside the vicious circle of false admirers and envious denigrators. I needed a man from the blue.

Ulric did his best to understand what had come over me, but he hadn't it in him then to perceive what I was destined to become. How can I forget the way he received the news about Mara? It was the day after we had gone to the beach. I had gone to the office as usual in the morning, but by noon I was so feverishly inspired that I took a trolley and rode out into the country. Ideas were pouring into my head. As fast as I jotted them down others came crowding in. At last I reached that point where you abandon all hope of remembering your brilliant ideas and you simply surrender to the luxury of writing a book in your head. You know that you'll never be able to recapture these ideas, not a single line of all the tumultuous and marvelously dovetailed sentences which sift through your mind like sawdust spilling through a hole. On such days you have for company the best companion you will ever have – the modest, defeated, plodding workaday self which has a name and which can be identified in public registers in case of accident or death. But the real self, the one who has taken over the reins, is almost a stranger. He is the one who is filled with ideas; he is the one who is writing in the air; he is the one who, if you become too fascinated with his exploits, will finally expropriate the old, worn-out self, taking over your name, your address, your wife, your past, your future. Naturally, when you walk in on an old friend in this euphoric state he doesn't wish to concede immediately that you have another life, a life apart in which he has no share. He says quite naively – 'Feeling rather high today, eh?' And you nod your head almost shamefacedly.

'Look, Ulric,' I said, bursting in on him in the midst of a Campbell's Soup design, 'I've got to tell you something. I'm bursting with it.'

'Sure, fire away,' he said, dipping his water-color brush in the big pot on the stool beside him. 'You don't mind if I go on with this bloody thing, do you? I've got to finish it by tonight.'

I pretended I didn't mind but I was disconcerted, I pitched my voice lower in order not to disturb him too much. 'You remember the girl I was telling you about – the girl I met at the dance hall? Well, I met her again. We went to the beach together last night ...'

'How was it ... *good going?*'

I could see from the way he slid his tongue over his lips that he was priming himself for a juicy yarn.

'Listen, Ulric, do you know what it is to be in love?'

He didn't even deign to look up in answer to this. As he deftly mixed his colors in the tin tray he mumbled something about being possessed with normal instincts.

I went on unabashed. 'Do you think you might meet a woman some day who would change your whole life?'

'I've met one or two who've tried – not with entire success, as you can see,' he responded.

'Shit! Drop that stuff a moment, will you? I want to tell you something ... I want to tell you that I'm in love, madly in love. I know it sounds silly, but this is different – I've never been like this before. You wonder if she's a good piece of tail. Yes, magnificent. But I don't give a shit about

that ...'

'Oh, you don't? Well, that's something new.'

'Do you know what I did today?'

'You went to the Houston Street Burlesk maybe.'

'I went to the country. I was walking around like a madman ...'

'What do you mean – has she given you the gate already?'

'No. She told me she loved me ... I know, it sounds childish, doesn't it?'

'I wouldn't say that exactly. You might be temporarily deranged, that's all. Everybody acts a bit queer when he falls in love. In our case it's apt to last longer. I wish I didn't have this damned job on my hands – I might listen more feelingly. You couldn't come back a little later, could you? Perhaps we could eat together, yes?'

'All right, I'll come back in an hour or so. Don't run out on me, you bastard, because I haven't a cent on me.'

I flew down the stairs and headed for the park. I was riled. It was silly to get all steamed up before Ulric. Always cool as a cucumber, that guy. How can you make another person understand what is really happening inside you? If I were to break a leg he would drop everything. But if your heart is breaking with joy – well, it's a bit boring, don't you know. Tears are easier to put up with than joy. Joy is destructive: it makes others uncomfortable. 'Weep and you weep alone' – what a lie that is! Weep and you will find a million crocodiles to weep with you. The world is forever weeping. The world is drenched in tears. Laughter, that's another thing. Laughter is momentary – it passes. But joy, joy is a kind of ecstatic bleeding, a disgraceful sort of supercontentment which overflows from every pore of your being. You can't make people joyous just by being joyous yourself. Joy has to be generated by oneself: it is or it isn't. Joy is founded on something too profound to be understood and communicated. To be joyous is to be a madman in a world of sad ghosts.

I couldn't remember ever seeing Ulric positively joyous. He could laugh readily enough, a good healthy laugh, too, but when he subsided he was always a bit below par. As for Stanley, the nearest semblance to mirth he could produce was a carbolic-acid grin. There wasn't a soul I knew who was really gay inside, or even resilient. My friend Kronski, who was now an intern, would act as though he were alarmed if he found me in an effervescent mood. He spoke of joy and sadness as if they were pathological conditions – opposite poles in the manic-depressive cycle.

When I got back to the studio I found it crowded with friends of his who had arrived unexpectedly. They were what Ulric called fine young blades from the South. They had come up from Virginia and North Carolina in their trim racing cars and they had brought with them a few jugs of peach brandy. I didn't know any of them and I felt a bit uncomfortable at first, but after a drink or two I limbered up and began talking freely. To my amazement they seemed not to understand what I was talking about. They excused their ignorance in a sly and embarrassing way by saying that they were just common countryfolk who knew more about horses than books. I wasn't aware of having mentioned any books, but that was their way, as I soon discovered, of telling me off. I was definitely an intellectual, say what I would. And they were very definitely country gentlemen, with boots and spurs. The situation was getting rather tense, despite my efforts to talk their language. And then of a sudden it became ridiculous, owing to a stupid remark about Walt Whitman which one of them had chosen to address to me. I had been exalted for the better part of the day; the enforced promenade had sobered me up somewhat, but with the peach brandy flowing and the conversation all at loose ends I had gradually become exhilarated again. I was in a mood to combat these fine young blades from the South, more particularly because what I had on my chest to get off was being squelched by the

senseless hilarity. So when the cultured young gent from Durham tried to cross swords with me about my favorite American writer I was at him hammer and tongs. As usual in such circumstances I overshot the mark.

The place was in an uproar. Apparently they had never seen anyone so earnest about a unimportant matter. Their laughter made me furious. I accused them of being a bunch of drunken sons of bitches, ignorant prejudiced, the product of good for nothing whoremongers, cetera, et cetera. A tall, lanky chap, who later became a famous movie star, rose to his feet and threatened to crack me down. Ulric came to the rescue in his suave, silky way, the cups were filled to the brim and a truce declared. At that moment the bell rang and a good-looking young woman made her way in. She was presented to me as the wife of somebody or other whom the others all seemed to know and to be very solicitous about. I got Ulric to one side to find out what it was all about 'She's got a paralytic husband,' he confided. 'Nurses him night and day. Drops in now and then to have a little drink – it's getting too much for her, I guess.'

I stood apart and sized her up. She looked like one of those oversexed females who, while playing the role of the martyr, manage somehow to get their needs satisfied. She had hardly gotten seated when two other females buzzed in, one of them quite decidedly a trollop, the other just somebody's wife, and rather rusty and shopworn at that. I was hungry as a bear and getting fantastically tight. With the arrival of the women I completely lost my combativeness. I thought of only two things – food and sex. I went to the can and absent-mindedly left the door unlocked. I had backed up a bit because of a slow poisonous hard-on which the brandy had induced and, as I stood thus, pecker in hand and aiming at the bowl in a high curve, the door suddenly opened. It was Irene, the paralytic's wife. She made a smothered exclamation and started to close the door, but for some reason, perhaps because I seemed utterly calm and nonchalant, she stood at the doorsill and while I finished my piss, she talked to me as though nothing unusual were happening. 'Quite a performance,' she said, as I shook the last few drops out. 'Do you always back up that way?' I caught her by the hand and pulled her in, locking the door with the other hand. 'No, please don't do that,' she begged, looking thoroughly frightened. 'Just one moment,' I whispered, my cock brushing against her dress. I fastened my lips to her red mouth. 'Please, please,' she begged, trying to squirm out of my embrace. 'You'll disgrace me.' I knew I had to let her go. I worked fast and furiously. 'I'll let you go,' I said. 'Just one more kiss.' With that I backed her against the door and, without even bothering to lift her dress, I stabbed her again and again shooting a heavy load all over her black silk front.

My absence wasn't even noticed. The Southern boys were clustered around the other two females doing their best to get them cockeyed in short order. Ulric asked me slyly if I had seen anything of Irene.

'I think she's gone to the bathroom,' I said.

'How was it?' he said. 'Are you still in love?'

I gave him a wry smile.

'Why don't you bring your friend around some night,' he went on. 'I can always find a pretext to get Irene over. We can take turns at giving her consolation, what?'

'Listen,' I said, 'lend me a dollar, will you? I've got to eat, I'm famished.'

Ulric always had a way of looking bewildered, nonplussed, when you asked him for money. I had to take him short like that or he'd hedge out of it in that smooth, irresistible way he had of refusing. 'Come on,' I said, taking him by the arm, 'this is no time to fumble and stammer.' We went to the hall, where he furtively slipped me a bill. Just as we were approaching the door Irene came out of the bathroom. 'What, you're not going, are you?' she asked, coming up to me and slipping her arms

ours. 'Yes, he's got to hurry off now,' said Ulric, 'but he's promised to come back later.' And with this we put our arms around her and smothered her with kisses.

'When am I going to see you again?' said Irene. 'I may not be here when you return. I'd like to have a talk with you.'

'Just a talk?' said Ulric.

'Well, you know ...' she said, finishing it off with a lascivious laugh.

The laugh got me in the scrotum. I got hold of her again and pushing her into a corner I put my hand on her cunt, which was blazing, and slid my tongue down her throat.

'Why do you run away now?' she murmured. 'Why don't you stay?'

Ulric stepped in to get his share. 'Don't worry about *him*,' he said, fastening on her like a leech. 'That bird doesn't need any consolation. He's got more than he can handle.'

As I slipped out I caught a last imploring signal from Irene, her back bent almost in half, her dress up above her knees, Ulric's hand creeping up her leg and fastening on her warm cunt. 'When will you be back?' what a bitch! I mumbled, as I slid down the stairs. I was faint with hunger. I wanted a steak smothered in onions and a schooner of beer.

I ate in the back of a saloon on Sixth Avenue, not far from Ulric's place. I had what I wanted and it was still ten cents to the good. I felt genial and expansive, in a mood to accept anything. My mood must have been written on my face because, as I stood a moment at the doorway to take in the scene, a man airing a dog saluted me in friendly fashion. I thought he had mistaken me for someone else, something which frequently happens to me, but no, he was just friendly inclined, perhaps in the same glowing mood as myself. We exchanged a few words and presently I was walking along with him and the dog. He said he lived nearby and that if I cared to join him in a friendly drink I might accompany him to his apartment. The few words we had exchanged convinced me that he was a sensitive, cultured gentleman of the old school. As a matter of fact he intimated, almost in the next breath, that he had just returned from Europe, where he had been living for a number of years. As we reached his apartment he was relating a story about an affair he had had with a countess in Florence. He seemed to take it for granted that I knew Europe. He treated me as if I were an artist.

The apartment was rather sumptuous. He immediately brought out a beautiful box of excellent Havana cigars and asked me what I preferred to drink. I took a whisky and settled down in a luxurious armchair. I had the feeling that this man would be putting money in my hand before long. He listened to me as though he believed every word I uttered. Suddenly he ventured to ask if I were not a writer. *Why?* Well, from the way I looked around, the way I stood, the expression about the mouth – little things, undefinable, a general impression of sensitivity and curiosity.

'*And you?*' I asked. 'What do *you* do?'

He made a deprecatory gesture, as though to say, I'm nothing any more. 'I *was* a painter once, a poor one, too. I don't do anything now. I try to enjoy myself.'

That set me off. The words just fell out of me, like hot shot. I told him where I stood, how messy things were, how things were happening nevertheless, what grand hopes I had, what a life lay before me if I could only take hold of it, squeeze it, marshal it, conquer it. I lied a bit. It was impossible to admit to him, this stranger who had come to my rescue out of a clear sky, that I was a total failure.

What had I written thus far?

Why, several books, some poems, a batch of short stories. I rattled on at top speed so as not to be caught in trivial questions of fact. About the new book I had begun – that was to be something magnificent. There were over forty characters in it. I had made a great chart on my wall, a sort of map of the book – he must see it some time. Did he remember Kirillov, the character in one of

Dostoevski's works, who had shot or hanged himself because he was too happy? That was me all over. I was going to shoot everybody off – out of sheer happiness ... Today for example, if he could only have seen me a few hours ago. Completely mad. Rolling in the grass by the side of a brook; chewing mouthfuls of grass; scratching myself like a dog; yelling at the top of my lungs; doing handsprings; even got down on my knees and prayed, not to ask for something, but to give thanks, thanks for being alive, for being able to breathe the air.... *Wasn't it wonderful just to breathe?*

I went on to relate little episodes out of my telegraphic life: the crooks I had to deal with, the pathological liars, the perverts, the shell-shocked bums sitting in the lodging houses, the slim hypocritical charity workers, the diseases of the poor, the runaway boys who disappear from the face of the earth, the whores who try to muscle in and work the office buildings, the cracked pots, the epileptics, the orphans, the reformatory lads, the ex-convicts, the nymphomaniacs.

His mouth hung open like a hinge, his eyes were popping out of his head; he looked for all the world like a good-natured toad that had been hit with a rock. *Have another drink?*

Sure! What was I saying? Oh yes ... in the middle of the book I would explode. Why not? There were plenty of writers who could drag a thing out to the end without letting go of the reins; what we needed was a man, like myself for instance, who didn't give a fuck what happened. Dostoevski had gone quite far enough. I was for straight gibberish. One should go cuckoo! People have had enough plot and character. Plot and character don't make life. Life isn't in the upper storey: life is here now any time you say the word, any time you let rip. Life is four hundred and forty horsepower in a two-cylinder engine ...

He interrupted me here. 'Well, I must say that you certainly seem to have it ... I wish I could read one of your books.'

'You will,' I said, carried away by internal combustion. 'I'll send you one in a day or two.'

There was a knock at the door. As he got up to open it he explained that he had been expecting someone. He begged me not to be disturbed, it was merely a charming friend of his.

A gorgeously beautiful woman stood in the doorway. I rose to greet her. She looked Italian. Possibly the countess he had spoken of earlier.

'Sylvia,' he said, 'it's too bad you didn't come a little sooner. I've just been listening to the most wonderful stories. This young man is a writer. I want you to know him.'

She came close and put out her two hands for me to grasp. 'I am sure you must be a very good writer,' she said. 'You have suffered, I can see that.'

'He's had the most extraordinary life, Sylvia. I feel as though I haven't even begun to live. And what do you suppose he's doing for a living?'

She turned to me as if to say that she preferred to hear it from my own lips. I was confused. I had not been prepared to meet such a stunning creature, so full of assurance, so poised, and so thoroughly natural. I wanted to get up and place my hands on her hips, hold her thus and say something very simple, very honest, as one human being to another. Her eyes were velvety and moist; dark, round eyes that glistened with sympathy and warmth. Could she be in love with this man who was so much older? From what city did she come and out of what world? To say even two words to her I felt that I had to have some clue. A mistake would be fatal.

She seemed to divine my dilemma. 'Won't someone offer me a drink?' she asked, looking first at him and then at me. 'Port, I think,' she added, addressing herself to me.

'But you never take anything!' said my host. And he rose to help me. The three of us were standing close together, Sylvia with empty glass upraised. 'I am very glad things have turned out this way,' he said. 'I couldn't have brought together two people more opposite in every way than you two

I am sure you will understand one another.'

~~My head was spinning as she raised the glass to her lips. I knew that this was the preliminary~~ some strange adventure. I had a strong intuition that he would presently find some excuse to leave alone for a while and that without a word being said, she would pass into my arms. I felt too that would never see either of them again.

In fact, it happened precisely as I had imagined. In less than five minutes from the time she arrived my host announced that he had a very important errand to run and begged us to excuse him for a little while. He had hardly closed the door when she came over to me and sat herself in my lap, saying as she did so – 'He will not be back tonight. Now we may talk.' I was more frightened than startled by these words. All sorts of ideas flashed through my mind. I was even more taken aback when she added after a pause – 'And what about me, am I just a pretty woman, perhaps his mistress? What do you think my life is like?'

'I think you're a very dangerous person,' I answered spontaneously and with truthfulness. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you were a famous spy.'

'You have strong intuitions,' she said. 'No, I am not a spy, but ...'

'Well, if you were you wouldn't tell me, I know that. I really don't want to know about your life. Do you know what I'm wondering? I'm wondering what you want of me. I feel as if I were in a trap.'

'That's unkind of you. Now you're imagining things. If we did want something of you we would have to know you better, wouldn't we?' A moment's silence, then suddenly: 'Are you sure you want to be nothing more than a writer?'

'What do you mean?' I retorted quickly.

'Just that. I know you *are* a writer ... but you could also be other things. You're the sort of person who could do anything he chose to do, isn't that so?'

'I'm afraid it's just the contrary,' I replied. 'So far everything I've tackled has ended disastrously. I'm not even sure that I'm a writer, at this moment.'

She rose from my lap and lit herself a cigarette. 'You couldn't possibly be a failure,' she said after a moment's hesitation in which she seemed to be collecting herself to make some important revelation. 'The trouble with you,' she said slowly and deliberately, 'is that you've never set yourself a task worthy of your powers. You need bigger problems, bigger difficulties. You don't function properly until you're hard pressed. I don't know what you're doing but I'm certain that your present life is not suited to you. You were meant to lead a dangerous life; you can take greater risks than others because ... well, you probably know it yourself ... because you are protected.'

'*Protected?* I don't understand,' I blurted out.

'Oh yes you do,' she answered quietly. 'All your life you've been protected. Just think a moment ... Haven't you been near death several times ... haven't you always found someone to help you, some stranger usually, just when you thought all was lost? Haven't you committed several crimes already, crimes which nobody would suspect you of? Aren't you right now in the midst of a very dangerous passion, an affair which, if you weren't born under a lucky star, might lead you to ruin? I know that you're in love. I know that you're ready to do anything in order to satisfy this passion ... You look at me strangely ... you wonder how I know. I have no special gifts – except the ability to read human beings at a glance. Look, a few moments ago you were waiting eagerly for me to come to you. You knew that I would throw myself in your arms, as soon as he left. I did. But you were paralyzed – a little frightened of me, shall I say? *Why?* What could I do to you? You have no money, no power, no influence. What could you expect me to ask of you?' She paused, then added: 'Shall I tell you the truth?'

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