

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a dense cityscape, likely New York City, at dusk or night. The buildings are illuminated from within, creating a warm glow against the dark sky. In the foreground on the right, the back of a woman's head is visible, with her blonde hair styled in a bun. A pencil is tucked into her hair. She is wearing a light blue collared shirt. The overall mood is contemplative and urban.

# THE RECEPTIONIST

AN EDUCATION  
AT THE NEW YORKER

JANET GROTH

*"Evocative . . . Groth is exuberantly frank about her young self, fresh from the corn belt, discovering sex and the city through two vanished worlds: The New Yorker of editor William Shawn and bohemian Greenwich Village."*

—KENNEDY FRASER, former *NEW YORKER* columnist

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JANET GROTH



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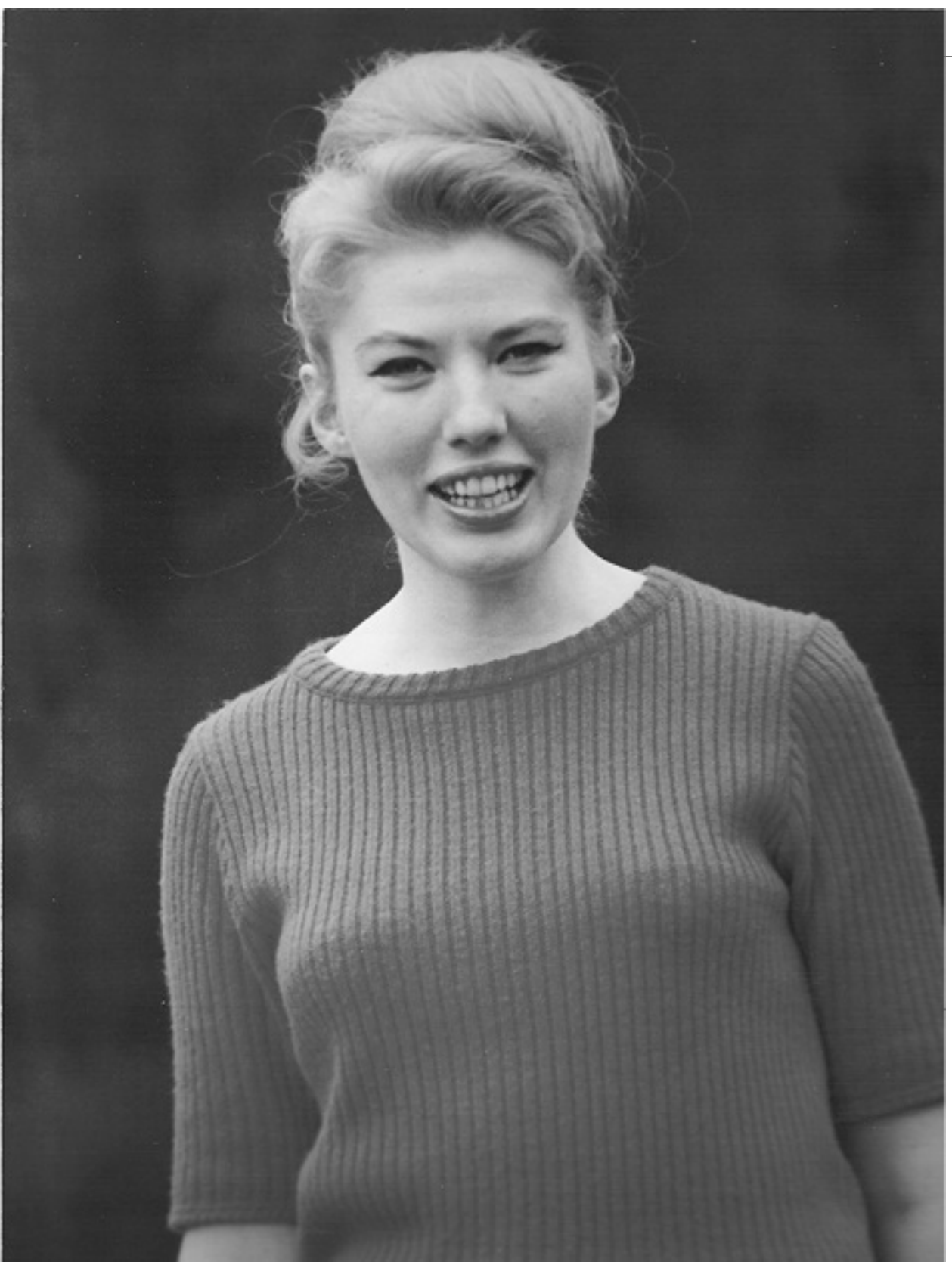
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*Janet Groth in 1962.*

PHOTO CREDIT: KEVIN WALLACE

IT ALL HAPPENED BY the merest chance. Or perhaps the heavens *were* aligned. In August 1957 I finished my BA degree at the University of Minnesota. At the same time I received a phone call telling me of some upcoming excitement in the area—a manned balloon flight into the stratosphere was being filmed for a CBS science show. Thinking that it would advance my dream of seeking fame and fortune as a writer, I managed to secure a temporary job as assistant to Arthur Zegart, the show's writer and director. It went well, and Mr. Zegart invited me to send him a copy of my résumé should I decide to come to New York. He received it three weeks later while fishing in Maine with his friend E. B. White and promptly arranged an interview for me when Mr. White returned to his office at *The New Yorker*.

E. B. White was then one of the best-known writers on the magazine, but his shyness, I found out later, was of mythic proportions, and this interview quite unprecedented. He seemed pained to be in the presence of anyone at all, much less a corn-fed girl from Iowa who was looking for a job.

“What sort of work do you envision doing, Miss Groth?” His handsome, fine-featured gray head was lowered, his eyes cast down, his voice little above a whisper. I was overwhelmed with a desire to put the poor man at ease.

“Well, I want eventually to write, of course, but I would be glad to do anything in the publishing field.”

Mr. White took a moment to absorb this information. When he could bring himself to speak again he asked, “Can you type?”

“Not at a professional level,” I said.

He coughed and looked at the résumé that Arthur Zegart had given him and that had led to me being there in his office. “What about this short story prize you won? This Anna Augusta Von Helmholtz Phelan prize,” he said. “Was that story typed?”

I told him that yes, of course it had been, but that I deliberately maintained a slow, self-devised system that involved looking at the keyboard.

“I was afraid, you see, that if I became a skilled typist, I would wind up in an office typing pool.”

For the first time Mr. White looked directly at me. “And you don't want to wind up there?” he asked.

I suspected that he had some sympathy for the course I had taken.

“No, I think anything would be more interesting to me than that,” I said. How rash and how fateful that course turned out to be!

After a few more questions, Mr. White concluded the interview by calling into his office Miss Daise Terry. I later found out she was a formidable figure around the magazine, its manager in charge of secretarial personnel. A petite woman of four feet nine or ten, no more than five feet, even in incl

and-a-half heels, she had a cap of tightly curled white hair and a slash of geranium-pink lipstick in her face dominated by piercing blue eyes. At perhaps sixty or so, she needed no glasses.

Handing her my résumé, White said, “Miss Groth is looking for a job here at the magazine but would rather not be in the typing pool. Will you see if there is anything you can do for her?”

“I will,” she said, asking me to come with her.

I learned that she, too, was from the middle of the country, having left her native Kansas in 1911 to join the International Red Cross, and had wound up in New York after some years serving in Vienna.

She said, “Now, as a midwesterner, you have better sense than the Westchester County and Connecticut girls who come through this office. I always have to take them in hand and give them stern talking-to about their behavior and conduct. We want ladylike clothing and ladylike behavior all times.”

She cast her eyes over my black linen dress and black pumps. “I see I needn’t tell you that. I always think the best place to shop for the kind of thing we like to see is at Peck and Peck.”

I said I would keep that in mind.

“At the moment,” she said, “we have an opening at the reception desk down on eighteen—that’s on the writers’ floor. There is not much traffic there, but the editor or two and the half-dozen writers whose offices are down there need someone to look after their mail and messages. Do you think that would appeal to you?”

I said that sounded fine.

“Good,” she said. “You may report in to me for work on Monday morning at ten.”

We shook hands, and I was officially a member of the editorial staff.

So that is how I got my “in” at *The New Yorker*—as they always say, it’s not who you are but who you know. And so far, my story was typical, if a good deal luckier than most. There was every reason to suppose that if I didn’t leave to marry, in the course of a year or two I would be joining the trail of countless trainees before me, moving either into the checking department or to a job as a Talk of the Town reporter, and perhaps from one of those positions to the most coveted of spots, that of a regular contributor with a drawing account.

Yet with the exception of one six-month stint in the art department, I did not rise from my initial post. The William Shawn years at *The New Yorker*, 1952–87, completely encompass my twenty-one years’ employment there, from 1957 to 1978. I entered the workforce before the feminist era, and as I ponder the way women in general failed to thrive in that world, how often they were used and overlooked, I recognize that I was part of a larger historical narrative. As for my personal struggle during much of the time in question, I was undergoing a prolonged identity crisis, and the real struggle, for me, was the one that arose from my proximity to all the creative people I served. Was I or was I not “one of them”? And since I didn’t know, it is scarcely surprising that *The New Yorker* didn’t know, either, what in the world to do with me.

I THOUGHT OF THE forty or so idiosyncratic inhabitants of the eighteenth floor as “my writers” and the six or so cartoonists billeted there as “my artists.” I watered their plants, walked their dogs, boarded their cats, sat their children—and sometimes their houses—when they went away. Of course, I also took their messages. Not required in the skill set, but over the years I *received* messages, too, along with impressions, confidences, and an education in a variety of subjects. I was there, among the men and women who wrote and edited the magazine, for longer than many of them were. I watched the comings and goings, their marriages and divorces, their scandalous affairs, their failures and triumphs and tragedies and suicides and illnesses and deaths.

After leaving the magazine, I used various tactics to mask the lateral trajectory of my stay there. It was Jack Kahn (E. J. Kahn Jr., as he signed his *New Yorker* pieces) who blew my cover, and unintentionally. I’m sure he never guessed that I had been trying to keep a lid on my failure to advance at the magazine, imagining that I could hide it from the world at large as my own guilty secret.

In 1976 I taught a course at Vassar called The Contemporary Press. Jack was one of the writers from “my floor” who came up to Poughkeepsie as a guest speaker. He mentioned the event in his 1997 memoir *About the New Yorker and Me* and introduced me this way:

In many respects, *The New Yorker* belies its reputation for institutional eccentricity. We have some writers and editors around who could pass for bankers and who, as they walk toward the New York Yacht Club on West Forty-fourth Street, could not unreasonably be expected by passersby to continue on inside. And yet we do have our authentic oddities. Jan Groth is surely one. She is finishing her Ph.D. dissertation in English. She has taught that subject at a high academic level (She also writes an elegant Italian script.) But in twenty years or so she has never risen at the magazine—possibly of her own volition, though I doubt it—beyond being the eighteenth-floor receptionist, which is where she started off. We who spend many daylight hours there, mind you, are delighted with her permanence. She takes our messages when we are away from our desks, as we often are; she has learned to recognize the voices of our wives and children. As in our absences she comforts our friends, so when the occasion demands does she protect us against our enemies.

I am not sure what Jack meant by his reference to protecting him and the other writers from the enemies, but I can guess. He was endorsing my efforts to shield them from all distractions that would interfere with their work. I have more trouble with Jack’s reference to me as one of *The New Yorker* “authentic oddities.” It’s one thing to joke to my fellow Lutherans about being an oddity as a churchgoer in a club full of secular humanists. It is quite another to find myself among *New Yorker* staffers who have been so characterized in *New Yorker* lore. There was, for example, the brilliant fact checker Dorothy Dean, who gave off manic vibes so electric they created a people-free zone of a ten-foot radius wherever she went. There was the magazine’s Odd Couple (one of several such), this one

consisting of shambling, grumpy Frederick “Freddie” Packard, also a fact checker, and his spouse, the publication’s crackerjack grammarian Eleanor Gould. Miss Gould, a walking version of Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, would rank high in any listing of authentic oddities, and among our numerous hypochondriacs, Freddie outcomplained a roster of champs in that department. His best moment may have come when he famously began his reply to a colleague’s routine inquiry into his health with “Well, I’ve got these two colds . . .” Freddie would have felt vindicated by a recent piece in *Scientific Times* declaring it perfectly possible to have two colds—a head cold and a sinus cold—simultaneously.

Others with colorful, weird propensities included the editor Rogers “Popsy” Whitaker—whose, despite a perpetual frown, a thrust-forward lower lip, sagging suspenders, and a portly form, was inclined to pitch rose-laden woo at spoken-for damsels on the editorial staff—and the writers Mae Brennan and St. Clair McKelway. Miss Brennan and Mr. McKelway were once young marrieds down in the Village but in their later years, split from each other, shared histories of colorful breakdowns. Miss Brennan, hoping to add height to her tiny frame, teased her red hair into a five-inch beehive which, in her bouts of lost perspective, turned into a terrifying tangle as she forgot to give it the occasional brush. Mr. McKelway went in for crayoning the office walls periodically with shocking signs and logos that necessitated early morning scrubbing-down. The list could go on and on and include the overcoat-clad, claustrophobic editor in chief, Mr. Shawn himself. I have always loved the idea that *The New Yorker* was a place with broad limits of tolerance for unusual looks and behavior, a haven for the “congenitally unemployable,” as Rogers Whitaker and A. J. Liebling are both reported to have said, but I had never thought of myself as belonging among them.

Certainly in the beginning I fit the normal profile, being one of the thousands who come to the city from the provinces and, according to E. B. White, give New York its dynamism and buzz. In *Here Is New York* he divides residents into three types. The first are the native born, the second the commuters, and the third—the source of the city’s vitality, élan, and magical “deportment”—are those who come to it from the hinterland, the ones for whom the city is their destination, “the goal.” I can claim as one of the third type.

What happened after I got there is a more complicated story.



FOR A BRIEF PERIOD in 1960 when he was in New York on academic vacation, the poet John Berryman was of the opinion that I would make him a good wife. He proposed this to me regularly. It seems he was, in the years between his second and third marriages, proposing to every halfway decent-looking woman he met. It was perhaps his way of acknowledging guilt at the failure of his previous marriage and an indication of his good intention to do better next time. Late in the sixties, at a women's group he came up when the issue of male commitment arose—as an example of overcorrection. Among the seven women in the room, it turned out that he had proposed to three of us. And that was only in New York, in his spare time. The campuses where he taught in those bachelor years, 1959–61, were checkered with other potential Mrs. Berrymans. So it was perhaps not the mark of distinction that seemed in the moment.

John Berryman came into my life in 1956 as my teacher at the University of Minnesota. He was then a clean-shaven professor of humanities, teaching the classics from the Greeks to Shakespeare. Once exposed to his electrifying classroom technique, I took every class he offered. Then, once he began to recognize me, after two or three semesters, I tagged along when he invited the best and the brightest of his students out for coffee and further discussion after class. Brilliant Jerry Downs was trained by the Jesuits, and troubled. I was bright enough to sit next to him, share notes—and Berryman. Jerry adored him, too, and when lucky enough to be asked, we would sit with him in some campus greasy spoon for an hour after class, or as long as Berryman's cigarettes held out. There, in a haze of smoke, Mr. Berryman, as we called him, held forth with ideas about everything from the text we were reading to his days at Clare College, Cambridge. He harbored nostalgic yearnings for the ivied halls, snowbound as he was in the wild terrain of northern Middle America.

A couple of years after my graduation, he reentered my life in his capacity as poet. On one of his visits to the office of Louise Bogan, the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, he discovered me behind the desk on the editorial floor. Invitations to lunches and dinners ensued.

He had a personal triangle of stopping places when he was in Manhattan, from the Chelsea Hotel to Chumley's on Bedford Street, to the White Horse on Hudson. My apartment was on Jane Street and so formed an insert in the baseline of his larger configuration. He would stop by, shouting his newest Henry poem, more pleased by it, more acute about its merits, chagrined about its weak lines, and acutely about those, too, than any outside commentator could be.

His courting was full of high-flown compliments about the magnificence of my face, the golden flamingness of my hair, the metamorphosis of my body from its former student shape into what he perceived as its present womanly glories. But these remarks had a professorial, ex cathedra air about them. The real text of his conversation was more likely to be concerned with what he was writing

where he was reading his poems, how he was faring on one of his projects or another, or, with lapses into intimacy, something that his son—on a postdivorce visit—might have said to him as he watched his father shave. Berryman's talk was fast and compounded of so many diverse elements that ran into each other at such dizzying speed that I found it impossible to react. I felt vaguely stunned in his presence.

He never touched me except to draw his stretched-out second finger down the side of my face. I saw little of him, far too little to have justified his conviction that I would make him a good wife. There was only the occasional visit with a new poem and heavy compliments, or a telephone summons to meet him at one of the points on his triangle, where there were sure to be others present. Youngsters, out on a date, hugged themselves and their beer mugs with delight at having stumbled on an evening with an authentic genius—eccentric, a poet, and in his cups.

So we made the rounds, or rather the angles, John dropping the great names of his famous friends: Cal and Saul and Delmore, and, when he was at the White Horse Tavern, of Dylan Thomas, another poet who drank more than was good for him. I sensed that he was both hurt and angry that he was not included in the ranks of those great and famous friends, had not achieved more, been recognized more. I knew, too, that he was hoping for the offer of a chair at Columbia—with what encouragement I am not sure, but he spoke of it as the hinge on which to swing our marriage. It did not seem to be forthcoming. I could not have married him anyway, for I was in love with somebody else. But it was clear that John was going through a bad time, and the time never seemed right for me to tell him that.

When I managed a diplomatic refusal, he went back to Minnesota. In the following year he married a young woman from Saint Paul called Kate. I became a person he looked up when he came into town from his many travels, to India and Dublin and elsewhere. Kate waited at home in Minnesota with a new baby and hopes of his recovery from alcoholism. He would call asking me to meet him somewhere, and I would arrive, only to discover that in the interim he had moved on. I might or might not go after him. If I did not, I would be treated to an early-hour rousing out of bed to find a weary cab driver supporting him on my doorstep. He had remembered, with sorrow, our broken date. I might get him to take a little coffee or tea as he sagged on my living room couch, smoking French cigarettes. He would not hear of sleep, not even when he was unfit for conversation. What helped was music. Certain Mozart quartets or any of the Brandenburgs commanded his reverent attention even when he could not speak.

The last time I saw John he was bearded and very famous indeed, having won a Pulitzer for *Dream Songs*. He, drunk and shirtsleeved and rambling; his publisher, Robert Giroux, sober and correct and embarrassed; and I, also sober, also correct, also embarrassed, met, supposedly to lunch, at Giroux's apartment on the Upper East Side. John came to the door bearing a water tumbler of bourbon in his trembling hand. Beads of cold sweat stood out on his forehead. Bob Giroux and I bounced worried suggestions off him about food and doctors, rest and warm baths. He would not hear a word from either of us. His talk was difficult to follow but brilliant. Among other, more personal commen-

about how fine I was looking and what sort of terms he hoped to get for his next book, he delivered a tercentenary tribute to Jonathan Swift and told us about a visit he had paid when he was a student at Clare College to the aged and oh-so-awe-inspiring Yeats, at which, as John recalled it, he tried to one-up Yeats. Then he shouted a few poems at us. Then, out nearly cold on the sofa, he made heartrending reference to what he knew he was doing, couldn't seem to stop himself from doing, to his wife—whose temporary retreat to New England with their child he applauded as “awfully wise.” The outburst was followed by the emotionless invocation, “Please, God, let me be dead soon.” It seemed as if he might at least sleep.

But his stick-thin frame was shaken upright again by the ringing of the doorbell. Lunch arrived. He began again on the bourbon and cigarettes. Would not take hold of a morsel of bread, much less a bit of a sandwich. I could not conceive that he could give a public reading that night. Yet at 8:00 p.m., I sat in the third row at the Guggenheim, next to Jane Howard, who was to write about him for *Lit* amid several hundred New York literati, and saw him do it. He was shaky, but he was eloquent, and his weaving and slurred speech only seemed to add to the drama and interest of the occasion.

Then one day I opened the newspaper to discover a photo of the bearded Berryman. Like everyone else in the literary world, I was shocked to read that on January 7, 1972, John had left his home, walked to the bridge that crossed the Mississippi on the left side of the Minneapolis campus, and jumped. I imagined him briefly looking down at the river as a block of ice floated by, waving to a young couple kissing on the campus-side bank. Whether he performed either of those actions, he did jump a hundred feet to his death, a pocket of his overcoat yielding only one document, a blank check.

We who used to fill to capacity the auditoriums of the universities and museums in which he read met once more at the Donnell Library for a memorial service. Poet friends read, but John stole the show. His familiar voice—on tape—made what had been a solemn and bleak occasion rocket toward hysteria with its power to evoke in us a mixture of laughter and grief.

In the years after his death, as I heard a sardonic Frenchman put it, “the dissertation bells went off all over the country.” I hated it when I heard the way he was being talked of by junior professors at Modern Language Association conventions and reedy-voiced sophomores in poetry coffeehouses—expounding on his death wish, lumping him together with three or four others who happened, like him, to be dead by their own hand.

I found that those who had known him wrote or told about it as if the frazzled, badly behaved neuroses were *him*. How unjust! To me his value lay neither in the titillating gossip of his riotous life nor in the private gratification of having been admired by him. It is not the poems he left behind, though the poems loom large. It is the poet sage.

Since I could not watch John make his poems, the next best thing was to watch him teach. As poet-teacher he so invested his ego in his work that he was ego-free, a fleshless, selfless lover and sharer of enlightenment, pure spirit. This part of him is neither personal nor notorious nor recorded anywhere at all except in his poems and in the memories of his students, where he exists as the child

item in the little library of hours we've brought away from our lives in the university.

For those of us who took his humanities course, this meant fifty minutes a day, five days a week for five trimester terms. The course, called something like Western Civ, covered everything from the Greeks and Romans to Flaubert. As he taught it, it became a remarkable monument to the life of the mind—or whatever real education had better be called, now that to call it education is to give it a bad name.

He came in a little late, but faithfully. They say now that he was often hung over, or on ambulator leave from some local drying-out clinic or halfway house or mental ward. Perhaps the latter were only facets of the later years of his tenure. I recall his missing only one class in the one and a half years I attended the course. The occasion must have been more serious and predictable than a spate of illnesses when he was merely ill, he came. On that one day, he had arranged for a substitute chosen to make up for us for his absence—and perhaps in the case of anybody else's absence, it would have done.

He sent us his friend Saul Bellow, a visiting professor from Chicago, a figure who should have delighted our glamour-loving selves. Yet the one who came in John's stead struck us as dull stuff, a burned-out case to the likes of us, who had been fed on real flames of a real spirit. The day passed. Back came our man, passing the light and culture of the past through the shining honeycomb of his passionate personality, informing it with life and intelligence. With him we entered once more into the world of sacrifice and ritual, of meaning and conflict and beauty. Existential truth emerged and took on life and breath before us.

The more I hear this man reduced to the wasteful contours of a faintly ridiculous fame as one of the "confessional poets," the more necessary it seems to proclaim his real worth as manifested in his classroom.

He was, as I said, usually a few minutes late—a deliberate design on his part. There were no chummy huddles with the prof up front broken up by the bell, no fidgeting at the blackboard while stragglers got to their seats. He got straight to the business at hand. There was a sense of ceremony in his greeting—"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen"—and in the way he set his bulging briefcase down on a chair beside the front desk, opened it, and extracted the text of the day. He'd lay it on the desktop and walk to the windows that ran along the right side of the room (his right, our left), twisting the cord of the window shade into spirals as he began the discussion.

It never became clear why he brought the books that caused the bulge, since he referred only to the text at hand, and to his notes, if he brought any, not at all. Still, it was functional in a way, an outward and visible sign of all the background material he had gone through that now stood bulwark-like behind the easy command he displayed of his subject.

There was no talking down. If, in the course of opening a book, he paused to give us a disquisition on the correct way to open books, it was never with an air of condescension. Rather, he managed to convey the idea that there was always a best way to do even the simplest things, and to credit us with wanting to know that best way.

He began by pressing a few pages in from the back, opening flat, smoothing; pressing a few pages in from the front, opening flat, smoothing; then from the back a few, then the front, and so on, a few pages at a time, until he could lay the book open flat from the middle without breaking its spine.

In the same spirit of making us his confreres in technical inquiry, he took us into his confidence regarding his choice of which translation of a given classic we would be using. He went far beyond the point where any of us could hope to follow him in his comparison of the Rieu versus the Lattimore version of the *Iliad*, for example, or the Cohen versus the Putnam translation of *Don Quixote*. What did come through to us was the sense of what a tricky, delicate, and complicated thing it was to transfer poetic expression from one language to another. He showed a regard for our pocketbooks, too, assigning works in paperback, or, if he assigned hardcover books, seeing to it that the campus bookstores were stocked with inexpensive used copies.

He'd give us sample passages from rival translations whenever another version seemed to have an edge over the one we were using. But however good he thought the translation he had settled on, he never let us forget that we were getting only a fraction of the power inhering to the original. He read aloud to us in the original so that we might not altogether miss the aural contours of a work. This method made a vivid impression on me in two instances in particular. One, in a term dominated by Dante's *Inferno*, came in the Paolo and Francesca episode.

We were using the Ciardi translation, but we had samples of Longfellow, Sayers, and others as well. We were also grounded in the nature of the sin for which this pair of innocents had been condemned to circle through the whirlwind entwined in one another's arms. He put it to us that in Renaissance Italy, romantic love was downright seditious, an act of wanton rebellion on the part of marriageable children. Noble parents engaged in delicate negotiations to secure the perpetuation and, if possible, enlargement of their properties through marriage.

In such an environment the reading of any book of romance—certainly the book of Lancelot—the company of a member of the opposite sex was flagrant disobedience. It was a reckless thing to do, never mind Francesca's disclaimer, as we first met it in Ciardi's notes: "We were alone, suspecting nothing." Even those of us who knew no Italian gained a greater sense of poignancy from the original: "Soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto." Though I suppose it would require the timbre of his voice as he read it to convey the full pressure of Berryman's feeling for these lines.

The second instance was a line of Hebrew from the poem of Job that knocked us out. By the time we got to it we were already veterans of the historical-critical method of biblical study practiced by Bultmann and others. We were aware of the folk origin of the beginning and end of the book of Job—the story of Job's initial state of happiness and the last images of how, after his tribulations, God restores everything he has lost and doubles it. We knew that these "frame narratives" were most probably added later than the core poem, which was the work of one "maker."

We plunge immediately into the opening lines of the authenticated poem, noting the progressive intensity with which Job calls down oblivion upon himself. The earliest stage of erasure is relative

impersonal: “Let the day perish wherein I was born,” et cetera. But see the fanaticism of his curse the successive degrees by which he seeks to expunge his own existence. He will call back, first, the day and the night in historical time of his birth, then the calendar dates, then the weather, the light, the meteorological and chronological particulars—all expunged in the specifics of the curses he hurled forth. Finally, Berryman tells us, the poet builds his poem in the Hebrew to a crescendo of outrage and horror and revulsion over the moment of his conception, a cry so inadequate to the resources of English that the language cannot do it justice: “The night in which it is said, There is a man child conceived . . . That night, let thick darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. Lo, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it . . . Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning; because it did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes.”

“Listen,” said Berryman, “and you shall hear the cry of a woman in sexual climax RENDERED INTO WORDS!”

We heard it. We who had never heard such a sound coming out of our own mouths—or the mouths of anyone we knew. We heard it, right there in room 123 of Johnston Hall.

To see and hear Berryman lecture on a text he loved was to be in the presence of the transcendent. To describe it otherwise would be imprecise—and he was ever one for precision.

ALTHOUGH HE SAID HE doubted it, Jack Kahn posited my twenty-year employment flatline as my own eccentric choice. Closer to the truth than you knew, Jack. The choosing was all unconscious, however, so how much “choice” entered into it?

The dream I had of being a writer, a dream I carried with me to *The New Yorker*, began in my teens with the conviction that I was meant to be one. I had long harbored these yearnings—inevitable, I suppose, since I had spent many adolescent hours immersed in novels about the artist as a young man. (The gender switch was made easily enough; these were fantasies, after all.) I even wrote and submitted an entry to *Mademoiselle’s* short story contest. More of a teen angst reverie than a story, really, called “Night Thoughts,” it featured the ineffable sense of loss that swept over the night thinker when a car’s headlights moved from one corner of the bedroom ceiling to another and was gone. I didn’t win that contest. Another blond with daddy problems won that year. Name of Sylvia Plath.

The dream went with me when I left home in September 1954. I started my adult life as a scholarship student living in a large Victorian house on the edge of the University of Minnesota campus. It was called, quaintly enough, Mrs. Smith’s Tea Room. The scholarship covered books and tuition, the job at Mrs. Smith’s covered room and board, and Mom and Dad sent three dollars a week for pocket money. My gig was cutting pies into difficult-to-calculate numbers of equal pieces—Mrs. Smith wanted seven slices out of the six-slice tins and nine out of the eight. A wonderful Kerouac look-alike whose name, miraculously, was Jack, liked to josh with me while he waited to pick up the desserts and serve them at his tables—full of adoring girls—in the front dining room.

On my own at last, I found I need no longer be lonely. Suddenly I was among other people who liked to read. In the back room, tables full of graduate students—most of them male, with interestingly scruffy clothes and brooding looks—conducted passionate discussions about Miguel de Unamuno and Wallace Stevens within earshot of my pantry. I learned to smoke. I tried to look sophisticated in a blond chignon and mascara-darkened lashes and bought a trench coat—the first of a long line of trench coats—with epaulets! I was in heaven.

Exempt from freshman English, I took a creative writing course, turning my adolescent trauma into short stories. My writing teacher, Morgan Blum, a frog-like man from a place he called “Louisiana,” sat hunched over his desk in front of the beat-up lecture room in Folwell Hall, making no attempt to appreciate things like literary flashbacks, use of dialect, the Southern grotesque, and such. Professor Blum was especially well suited for Katherine Anne Porter and Faulkner, whose “A Rose for Emily” he brought to vivid life. Several of the stories I wrote for him appeared, along with some poems I wrote for another course, in the campus literary magazine called the *Ivory Tower*.

All seemed to be going smoothly until I discovered a near-pathological shyness in myself. In the

writing classes I took, student work was regularly read for discussion. I soon realized that I suffered inordinately whenever attention was called to my writing. It mattered not that it was favorable attention. This nervousness rose to near trauma at a literary evening held at the Pillsbury Mansion the winter. I knew it would be attended by Allen Tate, a star of the English faculty and a major American poet. His "Ode to the Confederate Dead" was in all the anthologies. In anticipation of having to read one of my stories aloud in front of him and the assembled company, I developed a migraine so severe that I asked the hostess to show me the nearest bathroom in which to be sick. She did, and afterwards with great understanding, she helped me to a darkened room. There she insisted I lie down on her own bed and pressed a damp washcloth to my brow, assuring me that someone else would read the story in my stead.

By the time sherry and biscuits were served following the readings, I was well enough to join the others. I was introduced to Professor Tate as the author of a story he'd heard earlier in the evening. I muttered something about wanting to tell him how much I liked his class in English poetry, but I stammered that I was "having trouble verbalizing it." He looked kindly into my face and said in that deep and mellifluous voice with which he mesmerized his classes, "My dear child, that is *not* your difficulty." Such encouragement only seemed to worsen my self-consciousness. I went home in a state of helpless mal de mer, though the only water, the Mississippi River, was blocks away.

Crowning the paroxysms of self-doubt that accompanied each distinction bestowed upon my work was the Delta Phi Lambda spring banquet in my third and final year. I was to be one of the honorees. First at cocktails, and then at the white-linen-draped table on a dais in the hotel ballroom, I went through agonies of discomfort. I was barely able to force down the overcooked peas and rubbery chicken, dreading the moment when I would have to stand, be applauded, and receive a stiff parchment signifying that I'd won the Anna Augusta Von Helmholtz Phelan award for my short story in fiction. Thankful that I was not expected to speak, I took the parcel handed me and, had it been possible, would have pressed my left wrist and rendered myself invisible. Wonderful comic book heroine, that. Wonderful heroine, Invisible Scarlet O'Neil.

Why this brutal self-punishment should have accompanied my every moment in the sun was to be a matter of much discussion in later years of psychoanalysis. In that spring of 1957 I could only suffer.

The difficulty pursued me to New York. It wasn't as if I got no help from the writers all around me. In the early days of his tenure, and mine, at the magazine, Paul Brodeur was in the throes of his first novel. His office was directly behind my desk, which afforded us lots of opportunity to compare notes. Paul discovered that, in true *My Sister Eileen* fashion, I had a novel, too. Its first chapters lay on that very desk, in my bottom drawer. Paul did me the honor of taking it seriously and set up a meeting for me with Seymour Laurence, a publisher just beginning his own imprint at Delacorte. Mr. Laurence and I had a drink together at the Harvard Club after he'd read a chapter or so. He was impressed, I said, and would look forward to seeing more.



The novel in the drawer, instead of being completed and shown to the encouraging Seymour Lawrence, was discarded in a melodramatic gesture during a trip home to Minnesota in 1963. Before going down to visit Mother and Dad, I arranged to have a drink at the Radisson in Minneapolis with my old professor Morgan Blum, to whom I had sent the novel in progress. He wasted no time delivering his opinion. "I am very disappointed in you, Janet." His finger tapped the manuscript which he'd hauled out of his battered briefcase. "I used to admire the honesty of your writing very much." (He had, after all, arranged for me to win the fiction prize seven years before.) "Now," he continued, "you are not only smoking with a cigarette holder, you are *writing* with one. I used to feel the humanity of the parents and adolescents you wrote about. These people!" Another tap. "I wouldn't want to spend a moment with these people, and I don't see how you can expect any reader to waste time with them." There was more, but that was the burden of the message.

I protected myself from the full force of it, making a semigraceful retreat from the hotel. I didn't know it then, but it would be the last time I was ever to see Professor Blum. He wrote me an ill-typed note from a hospital bed in Shreveport later that year. After describing at length the indignities he had suffered from a stroke, he said he hoped to be able to get home to New Orleans to die. Within a month he got his wish.

For me, once home in Austin, there was no more delay. I spread the manuscript out on the kitchen table and reread it. The truth of what Morgan Blum had said, and the pain of acknowledging it, took me by force. I had one of those moments of renunciation I thought happened only in Henry James. It was as though each previous positive reinforcement of my talent had only been waiting for a real resounding piece of negative criticism. Before it, I lost any confidence I'd had and yielded to the negative view, giving up without a struggle. I gathered the manuscript in my arms, went out the back door, and threw it in the garbage can. After closing down that lid, I no longer dreamed of becoming a novelist. But I never lost the sense that inwardly, in some essential way, I belonged in the writing game.

A quite unexpected booster of my low morale as a would-be writer and a definite vote for me being "one of them" was my friend and longtime lunch companion Joseph Mitchell.

Among his peers at *The New Yorker*, Joseph Mitchell was the most admired writer of fact in the magazine's history. The articles he turned in from 1937 to 1964 were not numerous, but they managed to give sharp, clear pictures of whole worlds now largely passed from the scene: the old Bowery, the New York Harbor life of tugboats and shad fishermen, the Fulton Fish Market, and the old neighborhoods and graveyards of Brooklyn and Staten Island. In them he created indelible portraits of Irish barflies, lowlifes and prostitutes, Scandinavian sea captains and Italian fishmongers, and a Gypsy subculture residing in Manhattan—people he defied any reader to denigrate by identifying them as "little people": "They're as big as you are, whoever you are," he admonished.

His fact pieces, some of which were collected in *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* in 1943, were recognized by other writers as models of their kind and have since been identified as precursors of the

nonfiction novel and the new journalism, terms coined by Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe to describe what they had been doing when they wrote *In Cold Blood* and *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. Of course, incorporating into nonfiction such fictional techniques as foreshortening dialogue, and artfully arranged scenes structured so as to bring out underlying themes was a method that had been employed not only by Mitchell but by A. J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, and numerous other *New Yorker* writers (and, Joe told me, by newspapermen writing features and sports) for decades. After Capote and Wolfe discovered it in the 1960s, the method was used to good effect by Hunter S. Thompson and others, including Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. But no one's employment of it surpassed Mitchell's.

Joe could cover the life of a historic Irish bar by cataloging in vivid detail the hundred years' worth of yellowing photographs and framed memorabilia that lined its walls. And his drawing of a character through speech and gesture in "Professor Sea Gull" was worthy of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The "Professor" was Joe Gould, a Village vagrant, fallen from high estate, who cadged drinks by asking patrons to support his epic writing project, an "Oral History of the World." Gould told Joe that this "Oral History" was "my rope and my scaffold, my bed and my board, my wife and my floozy, my wound and the salt on it, my whiskey and my aspirin, and my rock and my salvation. This is the only thing that matters a damn to me. All else is dross." Joe's marginal people may have been eccentric, but they were never cute. The Gypsy scam artist in "The King of the Gypsies" is a case in point: Joe follows her through a *hokkano baro* (wallet switch) in which she systematically fleeces an old woman of her life savings by preying on her fear of cancer. It is bone chilling.

Joseph Mitchell was a slender, handsome, straight-featured man of average height whose hair had silvered early and seemed to go with his impeccable tailoring and courtly southern manners. When he died, in 1996, *The New Yorker* filled five pages with three generations of *New Yorker* contributors pouring out their tributes. That Joe, a writer of clearly superior talent, was known to be struggling with a monumental writer's block, which prevented anything of his from appearing after 1964, only seemed to increase the sympathy and esteem of his fellows.

He had a distinctive way of speaking, too, that one of his admiring chroniclers described as "stammering with a marvelous coherence"—one sentence never quite getting completed "before the next . . . tumbled from his brain."

When I was the eighteenth-floor receptionist, I saw a good deal of Joe. Not at first, since his office was on twenty and there was not much visiting between floors. However, we happened to fall into conversation on the F train one evening as he was traveling the four stops down to his home in Greenwich Village and I was going downtown by the same route to attend a graduate seminar in the Elizabethan lyric at NYU. Joe remembered that encounter and used it as part of the letter of recommendation I asked him to write for my application to the NYU doctoral program. (It would take me fifteen years to earn that PhD—but more of that later.) He said the passion I expressed for Shakespeare's courtship sonnets on that occasion had impressed him as the mark of a potential

scholar, and remarked that it was all the more impressive because it followed eight hours' labor at a not very relaxing hub of journalistic industry. This must have been in about 1968. Our innocent yet not quite innocent friendship really began in earnest in 1972 when we were part of a group of people who left a gallery showing of the *New Yorker* artist Ed Koren's work to have drinks at Costello's, a bar (and former speakeasy) originally located under the tracks of the Third Avenue El.

The place had long been a hangout for *New Yorker* writers: John McNulty, James Thurber, and Joe Liebling among many others, including Dorothy Parker and Edmund Wilson. Something somebody said prompted me to paraphrase Lily the cloakroom maid in Joyce's story "The Dead." "Oh the mo'nowadays is only all palaver and what they can get out of ya," said I. Joe, whom I later discovered to be an enthusiastic member of the James Joyce Society, attending meetings every month or so in the upstairs rooms of the Gotham Book Mart, perked up immediately and, for the rest of the night, directed his attention exclusively and intensely to me. Although we did not have a copy of *Dubliners* before us, nothing would do but that we should go over "The Dead" nearly line by line—both of us having read it many times—in order that we might trace the way Joyce moves the story more beautifully and meaningfully toward Gabriel's epiphany, with the snow falling and casting its universal glow of reconciliation generally, "all over Ireland" (symbolizing, we agreed, the descent of the Holy Spirit).

From then until I left the magazine in 1978 we had lunch together every Friday. (The exceptions were during the term I taught up at Vassar, when, because my classes were on Friday, we switched to Monday.) When it became clear that my lunches with Joe were to be a regular thing, I thought it only polite to offer to pay my own way. Joe laughed and said it was all taken care of—he was paying for them out of his "Scandinavian royalties."

I learned a great deal from Joe in the course of those luncheons, about his enthusiasm for writers other than Joyce, among them Siegfried Sassoon and Kafka. I also heard a fair amount from him about his own work. Some of the intensity and humor of our mutual involvement in these conversations is captured in the photo Jill Kremetz took of us at the fiftieth anniversary party. There we stand—much too close. So inappropriate. It is February 21, 1975, in a ballroom at the Plaza Hotel. *The New Yorker* is celebrating its own birthday, as it does every year, only instead of being basically a supper-dance after office hours, usually at the St. Regis, this year everybody is in formal attire and the waiters are passing glasses of champagne. Jill Kremetz, a photographer who often supplied the author photos for book jackets, is snapping photos of the event at the Plaza in a low-key, unobtrusive way. Joe and I are clearly not even aware that our picture is being taken. We found out only months later when we were—as was everyone on the staff—offered the opportunity to buy five-by-seven black-and-white glossies, as many as we wanted, or could afford, at Ms. Kremetz's price of twelve dollars apiece.

Joe is looking his usual dapper self, while I am in my "babe" mode, blond hair drawn back in a chignon, wearing a slinky gown of floor-length black jersey, the hem just touching my black suede pumps. I am holding my glass of champagne at a dangerous angle, nearly tipping the contents over the

brim. Joe is much more firmly in control of his goblet, but as I happen to know, that is only because the contents of his are no more tipsiness-producing than good-quality ginger ale. We stand leaning intimately into one another no doubt partly for better audibility in the noisy ballroom, but a much funnier explanation is provided in the “caption” Joe presented to me as a farewell present when I left the magazine.

May 18, 1978

Dear Jan:

It is entirely possible that some people may not believe it, but what is going on in this picture, as you and I know, is a discussion between two Bible students. An exegetical discussion. My recollections of some of the events at The New Yorker’s Fiftieth Anniversary party are quite hazy (after all, it was over three years ago), but I distinctly remember that just before Jill Kremenz took this picture you and I were talking about the New Testament and you interpreted a certain verse in Galatians, I think it was, as seen in the light of a similar verse in Second Thessalonians, and at the exact moment Jill took the picture I was telling you how very much I admired your interpretation.

As ever,

Joe Mitchell

Joe thought I should frame the picture and caption and hang them in my new office when I got to the University of Cincinnati, where I was headed to an assistant professorship. Perhaps foolishly, I regarded them as too personal and hung them in my office at home instead. The real cream of Joe’s jest is that it held a good degree of truth. Whatever we may have been saying in that moment at the party, a lot of our conversation over the six years or so when we met on those Fridays and lunches together, concerned, if not biblical, certainly literary passages, having to do with whatever books the two of us happened to be reading at the time. Indeed, our long quasi-platonic movable feast was made up largely of book talk.

Joe was having a problem with drinking in those days, and a few times after that evening at Costello’s he called me at home or simply showed up at my door and came in for some rather lachrymose talk about Joyce and the dead and Irish literature and his many topics of interest. They were very uncomfortable visits from my point of view. I had a much-loved alcoholic father who still caused me great pain from time to time in consequence of his being unable to handle drink. To have attracted the attentions of an older man I admired (who was an unsuitable companion for me not only because he was old enough to be my father but because he was married), and to have him, too, turn out to be a drinker, seemed a pattern I was destined to repeat over and over in my life. At the University of Minnesota it was a professor of sociology; in New York thus far it had been not only Joe but half a dozen other writers and editors from the magazine. Here, there was greater confusion and pain for me than there had to be, since it was I who kept getting my father into the act.

I insisted that these nighttime visits stop, and after that, things went much better for our friendship; gradually it took the form of a daytime hour or two spent discussing poetry, drama, reportage, and fiction. We even called them our “literary lunches,” and at some point in the 1970s came in for some special treatment because of them. Harriet Walden was Miss Terry’s successor and manager of the secretarial staff. It was part of her mandate to accommodate senior writers’ predilections whenever possible. Mrs. Walden recognized the ritual of these Friday lunches as so important to keeping Mr. Mitchell happy that she always instructed my lunch-hour replacement to arrive early so as not to miss her midday meal if I were to come back, say, half an hour or even an hour late. How do I know that this consideration was being shown not to me but to Mr. Mitchell? I don’t. It was just one of a thousand little points about my job and my role at the magazine that were tacitly understood. I may have made them all up. But I don’t think so.

In the early years the places we went were already long venerated as lunch spots by Joe and his partner Joe Liebling. The two of them once took me to their favorite seafood restaurant, the Red Devil, on West Forty-Eighth Street. There they thought it great fun to see me squirm as the waiter brought the order for me: baby squid prepared in its own ink, a hairy concoction that seemed to sprout seaweed and feelers and eyes. Everything at the Red Devil got served in its own ink, or its own shell, or with its spine and bones intact. There was no such thing at the Red Devil as eater-friendly food. Bibs were routine, and old-timers like the two Joes knew how to dismantle, debone, deshell, and generally suck the daylights out of all the creatures of the deep that came before them. I was mightily relieved when the Red Devil lost its lease and was forced to close.

Our next stop was the Blue Ribbon, a general favorite with *New Yorker* writers, and I had gone there with Brendan Gill and others. But after Liebling’s death and the closing of their old haunt on West Forty-Eighth Street, Joe and I often sought out this ancient German *Brauhaus* on West Forty-Ninth as a welcome refuge. Other ethnic restaurants followed, like the Teheran on West Forty-Fourth between Fifth and Sixth, a Middle Eastern restaurant, where the little lamb croquettes and dolma never varied and always pleased. There was also a Greek restaurant called the Parthenon on Eighth Avenue between Forty-Sixth and Forty-Seventh Streets, which hung on long after the Blue Ribbon was demolished for new construction. Here the waiters were old and tended toward the surly (“No! No more roast lamb. Too late!”). But Joe would only smile at me behind the huge grease-stained menu and drawl, “As my mama would say, ‘We’ll just have to rahse above it.’ ” The Parthenon served a lovely lemon souvlaki, excellent lamb (when we were not too late) and new potatoes, rice in grape leaves, and baklava or even nicer, kataifi, a honey-and-nut mixture in a shredded wheat-like base.

While on our luncheon circuit, Joe always insisted that I have a drink, conveying the idea that even if he was “on the wagon” it gave him pleasure to know that others could still enjoy a glass of chilled retsina at the Parthenon or appropriate white wines with our seafood at the Red Devil. We would often arrive separately, a gesture, I think, toward discretion, should our regular departures together through the lobby of the *New Yorker* office building be noticed and gossiped about. (As indeed we all gossiped

about the frequently sighted comings and goings of Lillian Ross and Mr. Shawn, arm in arm.)

One day as Joe arrived for our lunch at the Blue Ribbon, his color was ashen. I asked him why he was so pale and sweaty and looked so unwell. He told me that he was the victim of really vicious migraines and that he felt one coming on that noontime. “I even know what *brought* it on,” he said, wrinkling his nose and leaning forward in the confiding posture that often accompanied his most intensely felt revelations. The cause had been Zoë, as I shall call her here. She was the second wife of a rather famous professor who had written for *The New Yorker* from time to time. His first wife was an even more famous writer, known mainly because one of her *New Yorker* short stories was an often anthologized favorite with students of high school and college English. Joe told me that soon after the professor was widowed he married one of his students, Zoë. Five years later, the professor, too, died. Joe went on: “For some reason—well, it was a great deal my own fault for feeling that I ought to provide a sympathetic shoulder—Zoë formed a habit—I was barely aware of it until it was too late to back out of it easily—of coming in on the train every month or two and dropping by my office to ask me if I would take her to lunch, which very soon began to be a burden to me, and when I heard from her this morning that she was coming into town—and even though I was able to avoid lunch—I wasn’t altogether able to avoid a drop-in visit to my office, a visit of the most exquisite torture.” Here Joe paused for a full stop before winding up. “And *that* is what brought on this goddamned migraine.”

I reconstruct the breathless sentences as best I can, but I am sure they were better constructed when they came, fully edited, tumbling out of Joe’s mouth. Distraught as he was, he insisted on staying around seeing me have a proper meal and would not leave until I had finished. He even had a cup of coffee for himself, because he very much wanted one in any case, but also because it was thought to bring relief to sufferers of migraine by opening the blood vessels of the brain.

After the death of Joe’s wife (his beloved Therese, always pronounced reverently by Joe as “Tai-ehz”), our luncheon repertoire expanded. Joe would find that he was not expected at either his daughter Elizabeth’s or his daughter Nora’s of a Saturday—he was, I believe, regularly in the company on Sundays—and so would call to see if I was free. We then made pilgrimages to places like Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn and to restaurants important to Joe the travel time to which couldn’t be accommodated during the week, even by the relaxed standards of my office lunch hours. I remember having soft-shell crabs at Gage and Tollner, shad roe at Sloppy Louie’s, lutefisk at the Norwegian restaurant in Greenpoint. The South Street Seaport was an abomination to Joe, but the waterfront had been *his* scene, and he took me for a scornful look around at what was left of it. On another occasion we paid a mournful visit to Bleek’s on Fortieth Street, even though he was on the wagon at the time, because the old newspaper hangout he’d loved from his days on *The World* and the *Herald Tribune* was about to close. He made sure that I had a Dewar’s and soda and that I took my time about it.

One day we neither ate nor drank but stopped by Grace Episcopal—a lovely church on lower Broadway where Joe was a vestryman. I could never quite get a handle on Joe’s degree of religious

faith. It seemed to me that he found it easier to admire the *Book of Common Prayer* for its excellent prose than to suspend his disbelief over the key points in its creed. He did, however, take considerable interest in the fact that I was not only ready to identify myself as a believer but also served on the church council at my Lutheran church in Midtown Manhattan. True, it was a congregation so advanced in its views that it would have been practically unrecognizable out in Iowa where I was born. I also served on the jazz committee (which involved trips up to Duke Ellington's house, birthday parties for Eubie Blake, and chicken and waffles on 125th Street), participated in a young people's play-reading group heavily weighted toward theater of the absurd, and attended discussions more theologically sympathetic to Martin Buber's *I and Thou* than to the catechism of Martin Luther—though we did like to quote the instruction Luther gave to his children to “sin boldly because the Lord loves a sinner. I think Joe considered me something of an oddity, combining in one (he thought) shapely body a fondness for both bohemia and Buber. Well, how about him? As he liked to say whenever a pot-kettle situation arose, “The one called the other one one and come to find out I was one hisself!”

Other restaurants—in which we had migraine-free lunches—included the Cortile, running between Forty-Third and Forty-Fourth Streets in the building next door to the *New Yorker* offices. Chosen mainly for comic relief, or to avoid inclement weather, the Cortile was a most unconvincing attempt to re-create a Creole establishment. At the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum, there was a wonderful backroom Italian restaurant called something like Casa Roma on West Forty-Fifth Street toward Sixth. This place was so seductive, its menu so glorious, its waiting staff so European in its quiet deference and efficiency, and its atmosphere so conducive to long talks and gustatory pleasures that my lunch hour when we ate there invariably stretched to two hours instead of one. After that place, too, closed, much to our sorrow, we began to substitute an old French restaurant, Pierre and Tunnel, which Joe liked because it served tripe and brains, the mammalian equivalent of the repellent squishy dishes of vaunted Red Devil memory, or an equally old Italian restaurant, La Strada, in the West Forties farther over toward Eighth in the theater district. I would drink Lillet at the French restaurant and Punt e Mes or Martini & Rossi at the Italian place before the glass of red or white wine. Joe encouraged me to have with our entrée, so those Friday meals were full European midday breaks. Though the food at virtually all the places Joe chose (the utilitarian Cortile excepted) was excellent and we took it and the pleasure it gave us very seriously, the real feast of these occasions, for me certainly and, I like to think, for Joe, too, was the accompanying talk.

What did we talk about?

Mostly we talked about death. Books, of course, but they, too, were mostly about death in one way or another. It was extraordinary, really, how many of our meetings took on the aspect of a wake. We were both solemnly and merrily celebrating and commemorating death in so many of them. On the surface it might be the death or the doom and impending death of the pub we were in or the restaurant we were in or the part of the city we were visiting. At bottom it was the death of our fathers that drew

us together. Joe touched me forever by tracking down my parents' phone number in Minnesota and calling me on the day of my father's funeral. In Joe's case, he thought of his father's actual death as a second death, their falling-out over Joe's leaving the family tobacco and cotton farm to come to New York having been the first. Arrived in the city, young and grieving for his absent father, Joe had formed a close attachment to a crusty Italian fisherman, Tony Fabrizziano, as I shall call him, patriarch of the Fulton Fish Market. In the late 1970s that bond, too, was threatened. Though it clung on for a few more years, the Fulton Market had already received its death sentence, and by then his old friend Tony had died under the strain. In that double death, Joe found his subject. He realized it was of this he told me, that he had been trying to write for years—weaving into a seamless whole the passing of the old South, symbolized in the death of his father, and the passing of the old port-and-market New York, symbolized in the passing of Tony Fabrizziano. A grand subject, a subject with scope and ramifications that he was willing to follow through all its twists and turns until he could not only capture it, render its sights and sounds and smells and voices, but redeem its sins, reconcile its contradictions, and elevate it like a host to heaven in praise of the Lord. Oh, Joe, what a cross you constructed for yourself, and how you crucified yourself upon it! The first ten years were the relatively easy part—it had taken Joyce seven years, and more, to write *Ulysses*. But as the first decade moved toward a second and as the notes in the drawers of his desk remained notes and refused to shape themselves into manuscript, watching it happen and listening to the note of suppressed pain in Joe's voice as he tried—and he could only occasionally bring himself to try—to talk about it, I began to catch a glimmer of what it was about his choice of subject that was defeating him. I didn't know I'd caught it, and I wouldn't know until my own struggles toward articulation would bring me face-to-face with it that it was his congenital shyness and reticence about himself and his own depth of feeling that were getting in his way.

On the one hand there was the difficulty of his trying to write two books into one. He wanted to do justice to subjects as stubbornly unmixable as oil and water; the cotton and tobacco fields of North Carolina would never smell right in the fish and saltwater and concrete and brick of Lower East Side New York. It was as if Joyce had tried to write a day in Dublin *and* a day in Trieste. Even Joyce did not try that. And those who have succeeded in moving back and forth between two disparate settings in time and space, have done so in the frame of an epic novel held together by one consciousness. By tackling the work in journalistic terms, leaving himself out, he was depriving himself of a literary character in whom he would invest authority, the authorial point of view, a literary persona to be the teller of his tale. It was as though Joe were trying to write *War and Peace* without Pierre, *The Great Gatsby* without Nick Carraway, *Great Expectations* without Pip, *You Can't Go Home Again* without Eugene Gant. Most nearly a parallel of all, he was attempting *Remembrance of Things Past* without the youthful Marcel to register it. And however skillfully Joseph Mitchell was attempting to do it, he was defeating him, and he knew it and he couldn't do anything about it. That was painful to witness. And it is more painful still to bear witness to. Yet the story is not without its poignancy or its heroism.



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