

# **Book of Souls**

**by Jack Ketchum, 1946–**

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## **Henry Miller and the Push**

I stepped out of the office building that night into a pounding cold Manhattan winter rain. I had on the Burberry raincoat I wore every day to work but no umbrella. The rain seemed literally to be pissing on me from a great height—a nasty cruel insult of a rain, a slap in the face to a guy who'd just left his office in a perfect fury of hate for his job and bitter self-loathing.

The rain was just what I needed.

Rush hour traffic along Fifth Avenue was moving at a crawl, every passing cab either full or off-duty. I turned the corner onto 47th Street and began to walk, dodging the umbrellas that everybody seemed to have but me, dodging the wide-brim hats of the Hassidim who worked the strip of jewelry stores.

I could taste my hair by now.

My take-home work, the idiot manuscripts beneath my decidedly non-waterproof Burberry, were going to get soaked if I didn't find a cab soon. The shoes would be ruined. I glanced over my shoulder peering through the dark for a taxi and stepped into a puddle deep enough to soak my socks and trouser-leg.

I cursed God, Manhattan, my boss, the weather, the useless fucking raincoat, the taste of my shampoo, umbrellas, the hats of the Hassidim, the ridiculous cost of shoes.

I turned again and saw a cab door opening.

There was a guy stepping out holding a newspaper over his head. Why hadn't I thought of that?

I ran for it. The guy slammed the door shut and disappeared into the crowd. I pushed my way through the crowd thinking *move it, you assholes, this is my life here*. I got to the back door of the cab and was reaching for the handle when I saw another hand move for it too, a middle-aged overweight female hand with too many rings on it, a hand dripping as much as mine was dripping and I thought, *where the hell did she come from?* and I reached for her shoulder and *pushed*.

The woman staggered back, shocked.

So was I. *Jesus Christ!* I thought. What have I just done?

I saw her face compose itself and then harden, thin lips pressed tight together, eyes beneath the rain-slick glasses narrowing, glaring at me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "My god. Please, take the cab. Please."

"No," she said.

"I want you to take it. I need you to take it."

Ahead of us the light turned from red to green. The cab began to move. I reached for the door and pulled it open. The cab stopped.

"Here. Please. Get in."

I watched her hesitate, arms crossed over her ample chest and rainwater dripping off her scarf. Behind us horns were blaring. The horns seemed to decide her.

"All right. We'll share it."

"Wonderful! Fine."

Inside we sat in total silence. Hers was stony. Staring straight ahead. Mine an agony of guilt and shame. What the hell was I turning into? My mother hadn't raised me for this. Hell, this woman was old enough to *be* my mother. What on earth do you say to some lady you've just shoved out of the way to grab a flicking taxi?

"I'm not normally like this," was what I came up with.

Of course she didn't answer. It was as though I weren't even there in the cab with her. Maybe as far as she was concerned I wasn't.

"I can't believe I did that. Really. I'm sorry. I've just had this incredible bad day at work and..."

I knew how lame it sounded. *Really bad day at work*.

Asshole.

Something compelled me to go on.

"I'm just not normally the kind of person who would do that."

She gave it a beat.

"Uh-huh," she said.

And that was *all* she said. I was not going to get off the hook that easily. Clearly I was in the presence of a real New Yorker. And New Yorkers believe in the corrective value of a good nasty squirm or two. I got a nod when she got off at her stop and that would have to do by way of redemption.

She did me a very big favor, that woman. That very night I resolved to quit my job. It was turning me into a goddamn monster. There was only one thing I had to do first. I had to meet Henry face to face.

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The first book I ever stole was Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*.

*Cancer* and *Capricorn* had been published by Grove Press back to back that year but *Capricorn* appeared on the rack at my father's store slightly ahead of *Cancer*. When *Cancer* appeared on the rack I stole that too.

My father owned what in those days we called a confectionery store. In most parts of the country they've long since disappeared. We sold books, magazines, comics, newspapers, cigars, cigarettes and tobacco, candy, gum, greeting cards, over-the-counter drugs, stationary and school supplies, toys, bottled soda, bread, milk and god knows what else now escapes my memory. We had a Formica counter the length of the store with round spinner stools and a narrow kitchen and soda fountain behind it. From there we dispensed coffee, eggs and bacon, soup and sandwiches, my mother's homemade cakes and pies and ice cream and soda concoctions of all kinds—milkshakes, malts, sundaes, cherry cokes and egg creams—the whole 1950's bit. All this out of a space no bigger than the living room of my apartment.

From about the age of ten I worked there, my first job loading candy bins and untying, stacking and then retying for return the daily newspapers. Then graduating, happily, to the comic books, magazines and paperbacks upon which I was already something of an expert—*Man's Action*, *Saga*, and early *Playboy*, to *Famous Monsters of Filmland* to *Mad* and *Cracked*, to sexy Midwood novels to EC and Classic Comics—and finally in my teenage years to soda jerk.

I stole Henry in 1962 at age sixteen. It was the only way my parents were going to let me have him.

I'd read about Henry Miller in some long-forgot-ten men's mag. The pornographer-artist from Paris, bucking the censorship laws both in France and over here. I knew what censorship was because of the goddamn comics code—the bastards had gone and ruined my favorite stuff for me. I knew I needed to have this guy.

There were woods behind my house with a brook running through them and I hid him there, wrapped in wax paper, behind a rock high along the bank. Daily after work or summer school algebra class I'd visit the brook and collect him and take him deep into the woods to read a few pages.

*Capricorn* was also the first book I sipped instead of gulping. It more or less forced me to. Much of it was incomprehensible to me. Some of his lines were stunningly long and complex. Some of his words sent me scurrying home afterwards to my dictionary. But I persevered, knowing I was in the presence of some-thing fiery and brilliant—and sexy.

I could see why they wanted to burn him. Henry was the first truly subversive writer I'd ever come across unless you counted Mickey Spillane. By turns furious and joyous, philosophic and perverse. Sex was a pure pleasure to him and existed for its own sake. There was none of this love-and-romance crap to dilute its happy power. On top of that he thought that America was fucked. White-bread scared conformist citizens and not a lick of room for the artist.

Which I already yearned to be.

In a way I thought Henry was me. Or rather what I hoped I could be. Alive and bold and dauntless even in poverty, sexy, human and wise. A man of letters. An artist.

To me he was almost as subversive as Elvis. Elvis or Henry. I was going to be one or the other. As a role model nobody else back then even spoke to me.

I bought and re-read both books in college. By then a flood had washed away my copy of *Capricorn* and *Cancer* had simply disintegrated in its hideaway behind the rock. I still had to run to the dictionary a lot but at least I understood now what the hell he was talking about most of the time. I also read his three-volume *Rosy Crucifixion*—talk about subversion, all you had to do was look at the title. But it was in these books, in college, that I met and understood that a second Miller existed.

Henry the teacher.

I look at my bookshelf today. It's crammed with people Henry Miller turned me onto. Art books by George Grosz, Leger, Utrillo, Picasso, Nolde, Rodin and many others. Miller is directly or indirectly responsible for most of what I know about modern painting. But mostly it's the writing. Not just the books by his friends, people like Anais Nin and Lawrence Durrell, but Proust, Celine, Kazantzakis, Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Kenneth Patchen, Blaise Cendrars, Rabelais, Whitman, Knut Hamsun, Jacob Wasserman, Lautreamont—the list goes on and on.

No other fiction writer has so continually referenced his loves among the arts nor been so generous with his tastes and influences, nobody in history. Quite the contrary—most are at pains to conceal them. But Henry remained a fan always, a true enthusiast and proud of it. To read him is to get a priceless introduction to fine writing. To then also read the people he recommends is to emerge a goddamn educated individual.

It's part of his legacy. You may have gobbled up every piece of his own stuff as I have and yearned for more. It's a problem with writers you love—they go and die on you. But his own writing is only the tip of the iceberg. Read *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* or *Journey to the End of the Night* and in a very real way you're still reading Henry. You're still in the presence of his taste.

It was a taste I'd lived with all my adult life up to that furious moment in the rain.

I'd tried to be a writer and failed at it. Atop a lonely mountain in New Hampshire, struggling with my first novel, I'd read *Colossus of Maroussi* and wrote to Henry begging just to be able to sit at his feet for a few moments, hoping I guess to absorb what he knew and I didn't. In reply I received a postcard from an L.A. hospital saying he wished me well but was far too ill to receive visitors nowadays. I thought I heard a subtext telling me he was dying and it drove me into an

unaccustomed fit of prayer and entreaty to whatever gods may be for his health and safety. We needed Miller. At least I did. His books always seemed to heal some great gaping wound of loneliness in me.

He didn't die of course. Only my book did.

I'd tried to be Elvis too but found that going onstage was pretty much a four-martini proposition for me. Either I was sober and scared enough to forget the lyrics or too damn drunk to remember them. So I did what any failed artist eventually has to do. I got a job.

I got my job through the New York Times. Honest.

In the Help Wanted columns there was an item about an opening for a reader at a literary agency. I figured the one thing I *could* do was read.

Initially, sitting before the nice beleaguered man who was to become my supervisor, the experience was depressing. He described the job to me. The company had a fee service, he explained. Unknown first-time writers were solicited by mail. They'd send in a manuscript along with a reading fee, the amount of the fee to be determined by the type and length of the manuscript. A short story might be \$50, a novel might go for \$250. Once the fee was paid the manuscript went to a reader.

I had seen the readers' room. Half a dozen desks crammed in side to side manned by what appeared to be college kids or kids just out of college, pouring over piles of paper or typing away at their IBMs.

The reader's job was to evaluate the script's salability. In the case of an unsellable manuscript the reader would write a letter, the letter's length also to be determined by the amount of the fee—not the manuscript's complexity nor the relative difficulty in marketing it. You paid fifty bucks, you got two pages. You paid a hundred, you got four. And so on.

Ninety percent of these scripts were deemed unsellable though once in a while one would come along and the reader would recommend it to an agent who then would read it too. Ninety percent of those were un-sellable too. You can figure the numbers. Getting an unknown writer's manuscript out the door of that office and into a publisher's hands was the rough equivalent of being elected to the college of cardinals.

I was about to say thanks but no thanks when he described a second job to me.

Only yesterday they'd fired one of their three domestic agents. Agents had to handle fees and correspondence with the so-called fee clients but they also got to work with the pros. They got to submit big projects for smaller-money writers and smaller projects for the big guys, following up by mail and telephone, making actual deals with actual editors at actual publishing houses. Clients included people like Norman Mailer, Arthur C. Clarke and Evan Hunter. Was I interested in *that* job?

You bet I was. And thereby damned myself to three long years in a level of hell Dante never dreamed of.

Sure, we were wildly overworked and shamefully underpaid. It was *glamour* job after all. You half expected that. That wasn't the problem. The problem was the fee clients.

For one thing there were so fucking many of them.

Since all their correspondence came to the three of us we spent half of each day just answering their letters. Since a manuscript would not go to a reader until the fee was paid in full, most of our letters were masterpieces of concealment and evasion, seeming to indicate that we had started working on the reading but couldn't finish it until all the money was in hand. We were flirting perilously close to fraud here and everybody knew it. So the boss reviewed each letter personally. If he found the slightest flaw in our wording it came back to us for a rewrite. Two or three rewrites sometimes.

This could be an infuriating, even heartbreaking business. I recall a woman from Georgia writing to say that she couldn't send her five dollars this week toward her hundred-dollar fee. The goats didn't give enough milk. When three months elapsed and she finally paid up and got her rejection letter I read it. Her book was an extended love letter to her late husband who'd been killed while felling a tree in the yard. The book was illiterate from the get-go and anyone looking at it would have known it instantly. I knew just from reading her letters. I had bilked her out of the hundred anyway.

Why? Because I also had real clients. I did small work for the likes of Mailer and Hunter and sold books and stories for authors who were just getting off the ground, people like Marion Zimmer Bradley and Nick Tosches. Plus I was getting an education in publishing and making editorial contacts which I thought would prove invaluable. That part was intoxicating.

Such was my bargain with the devil. Which was sealed in blood when I got Henry.

I actually had to beg for him.

Henry was eighty-five by then and his great works were behind him. His checks had never been fat. He was a terrible businessman and so was his first agent. They'd sold *Cancer* and *Capricorn* to Grove Press for a song—only \$50,000 in advance for two of the most famous and influential books of our time. Books that broke the censorship laws. They picked up *Black Spring* for a measly five grand. They had a percentage of all subsidiary rights including a whopping 15% of the motion picture money, which we routinely reserved entirely for the author. His five-book deal for *Sexus*, *Nexus*, *Plexus*, *The World of Sex* and *Quiet Days in Clichy* was unspeakably worse—\$1,500 for all five books together. Another contract contained no reversion clause, which meant that the publisher could sell however many or few copies it felt like 13 printing and still retain rights in perpetuity. Until the company folded or until the end of time, whichever came first.

When he returned to the States from Greece on the eve of World War Two, Miller had a good deal of money frozen in Paris banks against pornography charges there but not a cent in ready cash. He sent a barrage of letters to friends offering to trade his watercolors for anything they wanted to send him—shoes, shirts, whatever. He even included sizes. James Loughlin at New Directions offered him fifty bucks a month for first crack at whatever he wrote during that period and Miller accepted it gladly. It was a deal guaranteed to keep him poor for a very long time.

When he contacted us he had a contract with Capra Press in Santa Barbara, a small-press publisher who was doing some of his chapbooks. And that was all he had. He was making more money selling his watercolors than he was writing.

He was looking for representation.

My boss' attitude was, why bother? The guy's clearly more trouble than he's worth. He's got a reputation for writing long nagging letters. He isn't pulling in squat money-wise. He's way past his prime. He's in his eighties and famous and self-important and cranky. So what's the point?

The point was that he was Henry fucking Miller. Just like in my father's store that day I knew I had to have him.

I finally convinced the boss that he would not even hear the name Henry Miller. I'd handle everything. I'd keep the phone bills to California to a minimum and conduct most business by mail. If his affairs started taking up too much of my time at the office he'd become virtually a take-home client. The agency would have nothing to lose and we'd gain the prestige of having him on our list—another Big Name to drop on the fee clients. I sold him like you'd pitch an ad campaign for smokeless cigarettes and finally won.

It turned out he wasn't cranky at all. His letters tended to be short and to the point—though most did complain about lack of money. So I tried to dig it up for him.

I spent the next few months obsessing over his contracts, trying to find some way to break them. I wasn't very successful. I got a small reissue deal from Pocket for *Colossus of Maroussi* and a few shorter books, a sale to *Playboy* and various smaller-paying mags and newspapers, and a hardcover deal with Capra Press for what was to be his last full-length work, *Book of Friends*. The money never came pouring in but I had my modest successes. And I think that sending the checks to him gave me more pleasure than money ever has before or since.

He had an efficient no-nonsense secretary named Connie Perry who handled all his phone calls so even the bills weren't a problem. In the year and a half I worked for him I never once spoke to Henry on the telephone. He just had no damn use for the things.

And gradually I realized that handling his business wasn't enough for me. I wanted to talk to him. No, I still wanted to *meet* him, like I had on that mountain. I wasn't greedy about it. Once would do. But I'd been reading him almost half my life by then and I wanted to take his measure. And I guess, my own against him.

So that when—despite Henry and the other legit clients on my list—the pressure, frustration, the guilt and self-disgust over the hundreds of desperate hopeful fee people I dealt with every day finally got to me, when I pushed that wonderful unyielding New York lady in the rain and knew that I either had to get out of there or take up a new career as a serial killer, all I thought was first you've got to get your butt to California.

It was easier than I expected. I offered to fly there out of my own pocket to deliver some Capra contracts personally if my boss would give me time off with pay. I had a thousand dollars in the bank and would be spending half of it for an hour of his time. I didn't care. My boss thought I was crazy but he reluctantly consented, not knowing that as soon as I returned I was out of there. My last little bit of duplicity was going to be directed toward the fount of duplicity itself.

Nice touch, I thought.

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Pacific Palisades is no Big Sur. Neither the Pacific nor any palisades are in evidence. The community's just another attenuation of Los Angeles, its single virtue its modesty and calm. The passion for the spectacular so evident down below disappears into its gentle hills like a wandering disease. You can live here without flexing any overt financial muscle power. It's clean and comfortable. Expensive, sure—what isn't in L.A.?—but determined not to be stupid about it.

I found Henry living in a white two-story house with black shutters. It could have existed practically anywhere in America, been the home of a doctor or a dentist. The yard was small. The shrubs needed trimming. Neighbors lived close by.

There was a typed message on the front door, the words of a Chinese sage. Henry was always fond of quotes. He collected them and his books are all peppered with them. One of my favorites was at the bottom of his stationary, a Portuguese proverb

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CUANDO MERDA TIVOR POBRE NASCE SEM CU—  
WHEN SHIT BECOMES VALUABLE THE POOR WILL BE BORN WITHOUT  
ASSHOLES.

\* \* \* \* \*

Roughly translated the words on his door were DO NOT DISTURB. LEAVE THE MAN INSIDE IN PEACE. HE IS PREPARING TO DIE.

Miller had turned eighty-five this year. Just a few years earlier he'd been riding his bike every day and beating his friends at ping pong. Then he developed circulatory problems in his left leg. They sliced him groin to armpit, then down his leg to his foot. A plastic vein was sewn in. His body rejected it. Another operation followed and the result of that was a stroke, leaving him blind in one eye. Miller never had much use for science, medicine—or plastic for that matter. His distrust seemed amply justified.

So the note on the door said that the man inside was preparing to die.

I thought about this after our meeting and on my motel stationary wrote the following.

"If so this is a most active, spirited preparation. Over the past year he has published two new books...he writes every day. Paints, keeps himself fit. He doesn't go out much but his house is always open to friends...few would find this preparatory for death but then I think we've always trod a few steps behind Henry anyway. He sees preparation as an active principle, to be worked at in a calm and creative fashion, like traveling or making love. It's important that the note does not say the man inside is dying, it says he is *preparing* to die. He will not have it out of his hands, will abdicate nothing.

"So what is this preparation? A reconciliation, I think, a settling of accounts. Only a great rebel would feel the need to bother. Only a great rebel would succeed as well as he's doing. It's hard to think of any man worth his salt who does not, like Henry, contain some of the Grand Blasphemer, the sexual and moral renegade, the dreamer after other and better lands.



For most of us there exists the ruin of some former life to which we might be reconciled. In this sense we are all in need of reconciliation."

I rang the bell and his secretary, Connie Perry, greeted me at the door. If Connie ever needed cash she could easily have posed for a *Playboy* centerfold. It took me a while to connect her tall blonde beauty to the pleasant voice I was used to hearing on the phone. I'd expected her to be efficient and probably gracious but I wasn't expecting her to be lovely. I probably should have known better. It was Miller after all. All these years and he still had a knack for surrounding himself with beautiful women. At the time the model Twinka Thiebaud—probably best known as the nude behind the tree in the famous Imogen Cunningham self-portrait—was living with him.

I also hadn't thought I'd be meeting him in his bedroom. But that was where she took me.

"He's expecting you," she said. "It's just that he's asleep. He naps."

Seeing him lying in bed I felt a moment of panic, as though maybe I'd made some terrible mistake. Beneath the covers he looked awfully small and fragile—it might have been a six-year-old lying there. If he was just another unhappy sick old man our interview was going to be unbearable. What I wanted was the old Henry, the vigorous Henry. For a moment I felt the urge to tell her for god's sake don't wake him. She touched him gently on the shoulder and announced that I was here and I swear I'd never seen a man desert his sleep so quickly. In an instant he was alert and cooking, not even a blink to betray the effects of sleep, greeting me warmly, moving off the bed to his chair, asking if I wouldn't sit too. I wanted vigor, I got vigor.

Old age seemed to disappear around him, this sudden energy calling into question the observable frailty of the body, his mind animating flesh so paper-thin that it might almost seem to dematerialize inside his bathrobe. I relaxed immediately; almost ashamed of myself for thinking it would be any other way. He had a wonderful broad-faced smile and long soft hands that touched you often as he spoke—the hands of a painter or a pianist. In his way he was actually beautiful.

At first we just talked business. He complained about Doubleday's lack of success with *INSOMNIA*. He'd just been notified that the book was being remaindered.

"Better luck next time, Doubleday says. Ha! What makes them think there will be a next time for me? This book for instance."

He pointed to a huge chart on the wall, his outline for the *Book of Friends*.

"All these people to write about! Hell, I'll never live long enough to finish it. But I don't suppose that matters much. The pleasure's in the doing it, don't you know. I'm not pressed to write these days. Not the way I was when I was younger. Still, better luck next time. What a thing to say to me!"

He was in a wry good humor. Complaining about money and Doubleday was more a matter of principle than anything else, of believing that a writer ought to be compensated for a life devoted to art—money being simply the affirmation of art's healing function, its value, a reward from those who benefit by it. He knew he would never again find himself destitute. The watercolors he once traded for shoes now sold for about \$1,500 each. The books brought him a steady, if not enormous,

income. And should all else fail him, he said, he'd bet that by now there were probably hundreds of admirers who would rush to his aid if he ever needed ready cash.

He was right. I'd probably have been one of them. He felt immune to poverty now. Business interested him, but from a distance.

"You know, they speak well about your boss," he said, "but in a very terrible way. They tell me he's ruthless, a shark. I suppose that's his function, though. My son says, 'you've got this guy working for you, what, don't you ever tell him to hold out for more money?' I tell him I'm loved, I'm respected, I have thousands of readers. But I've never had money. Were you aware that they recently sold an original Paris edition of *Cancer* for \$150,000? That's more than Hemingway, more than Fitzgerald, more than any of 'em!"

He laughed. His speaking voice was rough and deep, the laugh light and musical. "I only wish I had a copy," he said.

I wasn't doing much talking. He clearly loved to speak and he was good at it. Initially I'd felt intimidated. The urge was to try to turn a phrase nicely yourself, to make some sort of impression. The problem was that even the simplest phrases seemed to elude me.

But Henry had a way of loosening you up. Whatever you said, however you said it, he was interested. I gave up on making an impression—it wasn't necessary. I could stumble. He seemed to like honest effort far more than easy successes and finally, much more at ease, I began to say some of the things I'd come to say.

I told him about stealing his books when I was a kid. About my plea to him from the mountain. I told him about all the writers and artists I'd found through him and thanked him for that—and characteristically, though he'd heard this sort of thing many times before, my confession still delighted him. Also characteristically, it brought to mind not his own achievements but someone else's.

"I once met a woman," he said, "who told me that not only had she read every book of mine but she'd read every fucking book I ever *mentioned* in my books! Can you imagine that? I think that's wonderful."

That was how it continued. If I admired his work on *Book of Friends* he asked if I'd read Erica Jong. If I admired his thinking on a subject, somebody else had said it better. I told him I liked his watercolors very much and he asked if I knew the work of his good friend Emil White. It turned out I did, again because he'd mentioned him so many times in his books. More than anything else I was able to say to him this seemed to please him enormously.

"Emil will be delighted to know he has a fan in New York City!"

Here was a man, I thought, grown thoroughly geotropic and phototropic, turning ever outward. I had never expected to meet someone who so spontaneously embodied the principle of humility. One learns—especially as an agent—not to hope that a writer will live the philosophy of his books. But Miller seemed every inch his books, obscene, gentle, gracious, raucous, funny. Seemingly discordant words escaped him. If he was free with the word *fuck* at meeting me for the first time he would also speak freely to a stranger about the *eye of god*, of love and matters of the heart. I was struck by the sense that anything could be expressed here. No restrictions.

Besides writing and painting his chief enthusiasm had always been his friends. By his own definition a friend was something "as close to you as your skin." His own included the long dead—like Lawrence, Rimbaud and Whitman—as well as those "living books" he was honoring in *Book of Friends*. The time available to him for meeting new people was limited but he was not interested in living in a world circumscribed by old relationships either. I found that it was not possible, for instance, to meet him on a purely professional basis even had I wanted to. He wanted to know all about me. I felt *let in*.

I suppose most people did, that this was part of his gift. Not long ago, he told me, he'd fallen in the bathroom and badly bruised his head. He was terrified the fall would affect the vision in his good eye—indeed that it had affected it already. Unconvinced when his ophthalmologist gave him a clean bill of health he mentioned the matter to Noel Young, his publisher at Capra. Noel knew an ophthalmologist in Santa Barbara who was an admirer of Henry's and thought he might be willing to drive up to L.A. on the weekend for a second opinion.

The examination determined that the eye hadn't been damaged at all. That in fact it was an extraordinary eye for a man of Miller's age. Much relieved, Henry fancied that he was seeing a whole lot better already and took the doctor for a tour of his watercolors. What followed was a discussion of mind-over-matter, art and various esoteric psychologies which lasted most of the day.

Noel himself is a good example of how easily Miller's friendships could be born. They'd met in 1946 during Henry's impoverished days at Big Sur. Henry had already written and sold all the Paris books but Noel was still unpublished, a runaway from a wife and three kids. They discovered they shared the same birthday. Evidently Henry thought that was enough to explore things further. Together they built a stone retaining wall around the house at Partington Ridge, which was perched on the edge of a high cliff over-looking the Pacific, to keep Miller's two-year-old daughter Val from crawling to her death on the rocks below.

"He conceived this house as a Japanese paradise up above the fog," Noel told me, "with a pond and a weeping willow tree. We'd go down to the dunes and get sand and mix it with mortar, hauling up in an old Jeep station wagon. He was working hard shoveling the sand and mixing it with cement with me, though he didn't really know what the hell to do with it."

Much later Miller launched Capra Press with his chapbook *On Turning Eighty*, its success allowing Young to go on to publish people like Anais Nin, Lawrence Durrell, Ray Bradbury, Thomas Sanchez, Leonora Carrington and many more. The two men remained friends until the day Henry died.

Norman Mailer must have sensed this openness too. A few days before I met Henry, Mailer had come to visit him for the first time. He was in the process of editing an anthology of Miller's works and writing a series of long critical essays on the material, later to be published as *Genius and Lust*. Whether both words referred to Henry or one was *Genius* and the other *Lust* only Norman can say. But they'd obviously had a good time together.

"I think he's a charming man," Henry said. "The man's got a marvelous sense of humor. I have to confess I can't read Mailer. I think it's terrible to say that because he's always been my advocate, my defender. But he's wordy, he's unclear sometimes, I think sometimes he loses the track. My son Tony came in though,

and asked him for an autograph. He had one of Norman's books with him. And you know what he wrote? 'From Norman Mailer, at the foot of the master.' How do you like that? Oh, I tell you, the man has charm!"

It tickled him that Mailer, who'd just landed a million-dollar contract that year, should be paying him homage.

"You know, people often make the strangest, most wonderful confessions to me. I remember James Loughlin came to visit me in Big Sur. He'd just published *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* but I hadn't yet released it to him, he hadn't my permission. He sure hadn't paid me. And I hadn't a penny then so I was angry. He came to visit and apologized, saying that he thought we'd gotten off on the wrong foot together. You know why? Because I reminded him of his father. Isn't that the damndest thing?"

Henry never did live by the clock but I was aware that I was getting more than double the agreed-upon hour of his time. At last he said, "you'll pardon me, but I'm tired now," and I got ready to leave. I'd brought along three books with me, New Directions' limited edition of *The Nightmare Notebook* and a rare two-volume British edition of selected prose. I asked if he wouldn't mind signing one of them, whichever he liked. He went to his desk.

"Hell, I'll sign them all," he said. "My desk's a flicking mess though. I get up in the middle of the night to write ideas down. My head's buzzing with ideas. In the morning Connie comes in to see what I've written. There's always something."

He signed them and in *The Nightmare Notebook* wrote, "To Dallas/on his first visit to 'The Master'/Henry Miller" and then, embarrassed by himself I think, added, "(Just a Brooklyn Boy)." He dug around in his drawers and handed me two sets of postcards—Emil White's watercolors. Then two more sets, his own. Finally he signed a print of his painting *Three Heads* from the collection of the astrologer Sydney Oman.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked.

I suspected he'd give me his nightshirt and bathrobe if I asked for them.

I thought, as in his writing, so in his life. Take with both hands and give everything you've got. I felt he'd given me quite enough.

I'd brought two small presents of my own, though. I'd just finished reading *Sisters of the Road* by Boxcar Bertha and Ben L. Reitman and thought if he hadn't come across it, the book might have some special appeal for him. He reminded me that reading was hard now.

Then he looked at the cover and said, "Wait a minute! Ben L. Reitman. I knew this man! He was a great anarchist, an amazing fellow. They tarred and feathered him once. He almost died. Hell, I'll give it a try."

I'd also brought a pair of Sotheby Park Bernet catalogs, well-thumbed, which contained works by artists I knew to be among his favorites—Leger, Grosz, Utrillo and others—minor works mostly which I thought he might not be familiar with. One Picasso in particular caught his eye.

"You know," he said, "you think you know a man's work but he'll always surprise you. There's always some corner of his soul which has eluded you, that you've not looked into. This is a marvelous gift. Thank you."

He was plainly exhausted. We shook hands and I said goodbye.

"Stop by again, won't you?" he said.

I told him I was flying back to New York the following day.

"That's a shame. Well, say hello to the goddamn town for me. It spawned me and I survived it, so there's a bond there, don't you know."

Connie took me for a tour of the house. The graffiti wall, the watercolors.

"It must be good to work for him," I said.

"Good? It's wonderful. He's the gentlest man in the world," she said. And suddenly turned away from me.

The current of emotion in her voice was startling. It ran at my own feelings like an oncoming train. I could feel tears well up in my own eyes.

Some job, I thought. Attending to a man living in a state of grace. Lucky woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

*A state of grace.*

I thought about it as I drove down the canyon, battling back unpredictable sudden tides of joy.

I felt I'd met a man who was unsusceptible to harm. Wasn't that something like grace? He'd never be poor again. He and the world would see to that. Nor would his body support any lingering debilitating disease—he'd go very quickly when the time came.

And as to death itself, he was ready for it. He'd go back to the Wheel without a goddamn qualm.

I thought over what I knew of his life. The struggle to love and understand June—the impulsive, reckless woman of *The Rosy Crucifixion*. The struggle to master word and line and form. His rage against the country and the woman who bore him. The search for god in himself and for heroism in a much diminished race. Most of all, the struggle to push himself to his limits, to make at least one man, himself, into what he felt a man might truly be. It was fitting that he should find his soul in Greece, that "man-sized world," and that there, where in its Golden Age man and gods and art were so inextricably entwined, he should devote his life to what he called the recovery of "the divinity of man." That reconciliation with all that had come before and would come.

"There is something colossal about any human figure when that individual becomes truly and thoroughly human," he wrote. In that frail little figure on the bed I felt I had met such a man. Impervious to moral harm now as he was to the physical. He had come by that grace by living hard and well, brutally and tenderly, by living in the gut and in the spirit and seeing no contradiction whatsoever between the two. He was still at it, polishing his creation. If his writing was no longer brilliant he had never lost his genius for living.

The man inside was preparing to die.

Holding gently, firmly, to what was precious.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1980 I heard on the evening news that Miller was dead. He was eighty-nine. I had been writing professionally for about four years and was working on what was to be my first published novel, *Off Season*. The courage to dare to do any of this was in no small way born of that single two-hour meeting.

I phoned Noel Young and found that his death had been quick and peaceful, that he had been surrounded by friends. I'd expected nothing less.

We talked awhile and finally I said, "you know, driving back to L.A. that day I was driving like a crazy man, laughing and crying, whooping into the air, slamming at the steering wheel. Any cop would have arrested me on the spot. You can't believe the sheer fucking hope he gave me. That a man like that could still exist! I felt I'd met the closest I'd ever meet to a living fucking saint!"

"I think you did, Dallas," he said. "I think you did."

That night I raised a glass of good French wine to him and thanked him. For that long-ago meeting, of course, but also for the books and enthusiasms, for all he'd shared with me over all the years.

I thanked him just for being.

### **Author's Note**

*I wrote this piece at the insistence of Phil Nutman, to whom I'd told the basic story in some long-forgotten bar at some long-forgotten horror convention. It was published in a 1996 issue of Bruatrian Magazine under the title As Close To You As Your Skin. I have yet to figure out why. The magazine was having trouble at the time and the font and murky background for the font made the thing essentially unreadable.*

*When my first limited-edition story collection was published two years later—The Exit At Toledo Blade Boulevard—I decided to add it on at the end as a kind of feel-good coda to all the dark goings-on which preceded it.*

*I restored the title.*

*The font was readable.*

*Sometimes the author wins.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **The Dust of the Heavens**

Kenneth is dying of AIDS.

His ex-wife called me.

He's in a Pennsylvania hospital which Helene says he'll never leave because he's much too weak to walk and there's no one to care for him at home nor any money for hospice care. So they'll keep him in the hospital the two months or so it takes him to die.

That's all they give him, two months.

Which means, among other things, that he won't be coming after me any more.

I can call off the dogs.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He arrived at the hospital via the cops...*

Kenneth is my age, forty-seven. His son Colin goes to college in New Jersey. Helene and Colin had seen him over Christmas and noted that the anti-psychotic pills seemed to be working. He was calm and relatively reasonable. Though he did look *physically ill*. Alarming so. They suggested he get himself a checkup right away but suspected he'd ignore that advice. Apparently he did.

Knowing, I'm sure, just how much good a checkup was going to do him.

Then in April he must have gone off the pills or else he was experimenting with his dosage again because Colin started getting calls at the dormitory, crazy calls, the kind Kenneth makes from time to time, and finally he wouldn't speak to his father any more. To his father, Colin just wasn't in. So Kenneth responded by telling whoever was fielding the calls for him that he'd better hear Colin on the line *right now* or he was coming over there armed and dangerous and there was going to be a whole lot of blood on the floor by the time he left. When he hung up they phoned the New Jersey police who in turn called the Pennsylvania police who arrested him for making terrorist threats to innocent college kids and Kenneth was back in the hands of the system again.

Not the first time.

In fact the last I'd heard he'd gone to jail was less than a year ago. He'd walked into a police station to accuse Helene of child abuse. Walked in with a paper bag over his head to protect his anonymity because he knew that there was a warrant out for his arrest on charges of threatening his mother's life.

Kenneth—the Unknown Plaintiff.

It took the cops a few hours to convince him to remove the bag. Eventually, he did.

Anyhow, by the time the blood-on-the-floor incident rolled around the police in Pennsylvania already knew him better than they'd ever wanted to. Still they did the decent thing. Instead of taking him to the slammer they brought him to a state psychiatric facility and checked him in.

Kenneth is a paranoid schizophrenic. Has been for many years now.

A fine, brilliant soul living in a jungle-maze of misfired synapses and biochemical warfare which sooner or later might well have found him lost and dead anyhow. Had not the AIDS come along.

He's also my oldest friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

We go all the way back to junior high together. To 1958 I think, though we may have met even earlier. Oddly enough Kenneth would be the one to know this.

I bet he could pin the year down cold. My own grip on dates, time and events has always been shaky at best and grows worse as I get older. But Kenneth collects events—real or imagined—*or a mix of both*—the way a squirrel collects nuts for winter. The way, the old joke goes, a woman stores her grievances. Dates and times always seemed to center him, to pin him down to reality. Even then.

"Great art," he wrote me once, "is the dust of the heavens."

Sad thought—but beautiful too.

*This in the midst of a long rambling letter that detailed how the State of New Jersey was out to destroy him.*

But it was art and the love of art that threw us together—his for painting, mine for books. We couldn't help it. We were both precocious as hell. Nor could we help the fact that caring about either of these two things was bound to set us apart from everybody else we knew, from every other kid we hung around with. Nobody else was going to get passionate about Shakespeare or D.H. Lawrence or Michelangelo or Paul Klee. Nobody else was going to sit up all night during a sleepover leafing through art books and reading Ray Bradbury aloud. Not a soul. We were stuck with each another.

Fine. I was amazed to even have *found* a kindred spirit in our little suburban New Jersey town. Certainly not somebody so enthusiastic and so generous, so much into sharing his enthusiasms. Without even quite knowing it we set out to educate each other. Especially the kinds of stuff you weren't going to find in school. We were teenagers after all. In the grip of our gonads. In a repressive place and time.

So I turned him on to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Henry Miller's *Tropics* and *Justine* by de Sade. He introduced me to the German Expressionists, their grim perversity, to romantic pre-Raphaelite nudes sexy as anything in *Playboy* and to Lautrec's dancers, drunkards, whores.

He started writing some. I tried painting. We'd go down into my damp dark basement and Kenneth would set up a canvas for me and hand me the paints and I'd do awful, ridiculous imitations of Jackson Pollack.

I couldn't even get the drip right. Never mind the smear.

While he worked in oils and produced these amazing abstract studies on the other side of the room in the same time it took me to realize that I'd failed again. Shapes like catacombs filled with light, like Nemo's Nautilus gliding through a cavernous sea.

He was much more advanced in his craft than I was at mine. It didn't bother me.

Though later on, it bothered him. In time it came to bother him a lot.

*And I think it was then that I began to fear him slightly, that I began to draw away.*

We got into photography. With his savings from work after school he bought some second-hand equipment and set up a darkroom in his basement. I photographed girlfriends. Or would-be girlfriends. He photographed forests, brooks, trees. Human subjects didn't much interest him. We spent practically every Saturday in his basement for a while, developing, fudging, cropping and printing, awash in the smell of chemicals and silent under the dim red lights.

It was just about the only time I ever saw his house. And even that was fleeting. Barely a moment to gaze at his mother's Japanese prints on the wall or pass his father's World War II model airplanes, wave a quick hello to whichever one of them was at home at the time—they never seemed to be together there—and then hit the stairs.

I remember Kenneth in dim lights.

The red light from the basement.

The night-light by my bedside.

Sleepovers were big then, all through high school. Kenneth slept at my house many times.



I at his house—never.

The reason was, ostensibly, that his mother didn't like having company around when she got up in the morning. That didn't make a whole lot of sense to me but then I hardly knew his mother. She was just a college teacher like his father who smiled at me whenever I showed up at his house and who collected Japanese art. She had a nice smile. It was hard to believe she was the awful bitch that Kenneth said she was. That she'd lock him out of the house at night if he was five minutes late. That she was prone to frequent rages, trying to slap hell out of him over some imagined affront. That she went through his drawers and stole his money.

She was just this little dumpy Italian lady with a pretty smile. That's all I saw.

Certainly my mother didn't believe him.

We'd talk after he left.

"How could a mother *be* that way?" she'd ask me. "A *mother*?"

She figured he had to be exaggerating. It was impossible to blame her. It would be years before TV and media started showing us babies dropped out of windows or scalded to death or drowned and dumped in dumpsters.

Was Kenneth an abused child? I don't think anybody will ever know for certain. Like my mother I thought he was exaggerating at the time—even then he was given to bouts of self-aggrandizing, mysteriousness, wild flights of fancy. It was part of his charm. Part of his precocity.

Now I'm not so sure. Knowing where he went and the hard road he took to get there it seems likely to me that he was telling us the truth. But nobody really bought it then. Not even me.

But you had to see that something strange was going on.

I've never seen a kid spend so much time at somebody else's house as Kenneth spent at mine. Not before or since. Overnights, after school, weekends. Many nights he ate dinner with us before the two of us started our six-to-ten shift at my father's soda-fountain-candy store. My dad was not fond of Kenneth or of having him at his table. He'd hired him only at mom's insistence.

Art, in my dad's book, was not a man's game. But then, neither was literature. He had no say in it though because by then Kenneth and my mother had sort of adopted each another. Once again, I had no problem with that. I was an only child. I liked the company. But these two were truly diligent in their relationship and serious about maintaining it. There were nights I'd fall asleep on the couch while the two of them sat up and talked far into the night. It was my mother—not Kenneth's—who received cards and gifts for Mother's Day. Whose birthday he remembered.

He spent every Christmas with us for eight years.

Even my dad got a present.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was hard, eventually, to tell my mother that the Kenneth she knew wasn't the same anymore, wasn't sane anymore. That he scared me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Helene thinks and I agree that the worst of it began with his marriage and then took a quantum leap after Colin was born.

Before that, through college at Rhode Island School of Design and work at design firms like Germaine Monteil he'd shown constant promise—if a tendency toward high egoism and defensiveness that often found him butting heads with the bosses. But his work was getting noticed. He had paintings at the OK Harris gallery in Manhattan, sharing space with Warhol and Jasper Johns. Art mavens Ivan Karp and Leo Castelli were admirers.

Through all those years we kept in close touch.

I remember a lot of firsts with Kenneth. The first time I ventured into Newark after dark was with him—to see Mamie Van Doren *Live!* at the Art Theatre after her nude appearance in *Playboy*. My first trip to Manhattan without my father was also with him, to a party hosted by Andy Warhol, during which I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, that I'd somehow managed to pick up the most beautiful woman in the room until she turned around to get a drink at the bar and the dark tufts of hair down her backbone told me I'd picked up the most beautiful guy in the room instead. The first time I smoked hash was in his dorm at RISDI. I had my first cognac there too. Unfortunately, the same night.

*And he was the first to tell me and make me believe that it was possible that I could someday write as well as the people I was reading—that in me lay the potential for at least a speck of artistry.*

As the seventies rolled around I got involved with a woman and moved to Manhattan and Kenneth married and settled across the river in New Jersey. Meetings were sporadic. And most often, uncomfortable. It was like he wasn't talking to us anymore, he was putting on a show instead. His Kenneth-the-Genius show. It was important to pour over the paintings, admire them, and to talk about them in great detail, to talk endlessly about his plans for future works, their technology, subject matter, where and when he was going to show them when the time was exactly right. It was important to allow him to rant bitterly at his cheapskate bitch-witch of a mother. It was important to listen to him blast away at all those critics and dealers who weren't exactly pounding the doors down to get his stuff.

Helene didn't help. I think she was in awe of him at first. For a woman with little artistic talent of her own to speak of and only a moderate education Kenneth was a pretty heady brew. I'd seen him bowl over people far more sophisticated. You couldn't blame her.

One day he announced to me that she was pregnant.

There was going to be no abortion. Kenneth was going to be a father.

I tried like hell to talk him out of it. So did my girlfriend. We stressed the practical reasons—like he wasn't making a whole lot of money and why did he want the burden of a kid just then—but I think we were both well aware that Kenneth's ego was already beginning to run amok. That his ego could *swamp* a kid.

Which I guess it almost did.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last time I saw him he arrived unannounced at my apartment in the middle of the day. I'd been working.

I was surprised—to put it mildly. He'd obviously been put off with me for about a year now. The reason was mostly that both Paula and I refused to take him terribly seriously when he talked about the elaborate murder conspiracy he was documenting which had, he said, already taken the life of a New Jersey doctor and a teenager, Kenneth's second cousin—a faked suicide in a police-station holding cell—and which involved high-level Mafioso types with political ties to both his mother and other members of his mother's side of his family.

Nor would we take seriously that he had recently acquired a direct psychic mainline to both Mother Teresa and the Dali Lama.

Nor his assertions that Helene was abusing Colin and that his mother was engaged in slowly poisoning his father to death.

And certainly not his notion of avoiding child-support payments to the by-now-hated bitch Helene by faking a new Social Security number and tax returns and then fleeing to a concrete bunker of his own design and execution somewhere deep in the Pennsylvania hills, surrounded by wild bears which he would train with jars of honey and coyotes he would tame to guard him against all trespassers—Mafia, police, or FBI. All of whom were supposedly on his case by now.

Paula and I were buying in to none of it.

There was too much dope in his life for one thing. And too many pills.

My own individual offenses were worse. I had suggested that now as a couple of times before a hospital was where he belonged. That he was doing himself no good this way. That he needed help.

Which made me part of the problem. The problem was that no one would believe what he *knew to be true*.

The mafia, the murders, Mother Teresa.

The whole damn ball of yarn.

He'd resented me for quite a while.

His own career had faltered, while I had just published my third novel—and if I wasn't getting rich out here in writing-land I was at least holding my own, making a living, doing what I'd always wanted to do, what so many years ago we'd talked about doing. It looked like the pupil had somehow slipped by the master, to him at least. He made it known to me that beyond my first book he had never read me and didn't intend to. That I had sold out in his judgment—I had written a *popular novel*. And while he could admire its craft...well, craft was part of the problem too.

There wasn't any room for an artist these days.

Just guys like me.

Copouts. Sellouts. Panderers.

Adding insult to injury I'd managed a long-term relationship with a woman while Kenneth's own marriage had ended bitterly, explosively. Since then he'd been screwing a guy here, a lady there. Nothing that held. Nothing that worked. It didn't help the situation that my particular woman had no patience with him—with his monologues, his wild complicated stories and his artist posturings. She'd challenge him at every turn. I tried to mediate. It never worked. Not for a minute.

I think he began to hate her long before he started hating me.

I think it galled him that I hung on to such a bitch. *Yet another bitch.*

\* \* \* \* \*

So I was surprised to see him at my apartment that day.

We sat down at the table over coffee. He was thinner—too thin I thought—nervous, and seemed to have trouble getting the words out. As though his lips or teeth were bothering him. Coke, I thought. Drugs again.

He wasn't staying long, he told me.

He'd only come to warn me about something.

His own phone was tapped and he suspected that as a friend of his, so was mine. Otherwise he'd have phoned me.

He had proof, finally.

*That his mother was a witch.*

He wasn't talking metaphor. According to Kenneth his mother had revealed herself to him as the genuine article—a bona fide minion of Satan.

He'd gone to New Jersey to confront her with the knowledge that she'd been systematically poisoning his father and demanded to see him. His father was too ill to be disturbed, she said—he was dying of bone cancer. They argued. Kenneth insisted.

She flew into a rage.

And, he said, he watched, stunned, *as her head did a three-hundred-sixty-degree turn on her shoulders. A la Linda Blair. A la The Exorcist.*

It might have been funny.

It wasn't.

In fact no horror movie has ever chilled me so completely.

It was the solemnity, the openness—openness even to ridicule this time—the absolute *conviction* that he had seen what he had seen that was so scary. However impossible, however *crazy* this was, for the first time I saw that not only did he believe what he was telling me—just as he believed the conspiracies and the open line to Mother Teresa—but that somehow he had actually *seen* this thing. *Observed* it.

It wasn't imagined reality. It *was* reality.

And this time I didn't deny him. I listened carefully. Respectfully.

I asked questions. I poured him a second cup of coffee.

I wasn't humoring him. Whatever this construct he'd made for himself was, you simply had to respect it. That's how big it was. It had power, pure and simple. A power that to him was undeniable and irresistible. There was a sort of truth here, I realized—there was also genuine terror. The end result for me was humility. I listened.

And it became clear that for some reason he needed to get this story out specifically to me. I didn't know why.

We just sat and talked. About the impossible.

At the end of it he actually seemed satisfied. Relaxed. The two of us oddly more at peace with one another than we'd been in a very long time.

A few moments passed in silence I remember. Then I could see him tense again.

And I finally understood why it was me he had to say this to.

*His mother, he told me, was capable of doing anything now. She was going to try to hurt him. Hurt him bad. He knew that. And he was preparing for it. I shouldn't worry--not about him.*

*But he was seriously afraid she might try to get to him through his friends.*

*Especially through me.*

He said he felt I was in danger.

So he was not going to see me again. Not for a very long time. He was changing his phone number and he wasn't going to give me the new one. If she didn't think we were in touch anymore then maybe she'd leave me alone. It was worth trying. Other than that he was afraid he couldn't protect me.

He was worried.

He'd write once in a while. If that was okay. I said it was.

There were tears in his eyes. Kenneth never cried. I reached over and took his hand.

*It was only much later, after a late-night phone call, that I realized where those tears were coming from and why—and what he was really saying to me.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I walked him out of the apartment. I said I had some errand or other but what I really needed was a drink. That and to get him out of there.

He'd shaken me.

The day was bright and sunny—summer in the City. I remember that we didn't have much to say.

Then just as we reached the subway station a rock came out of nowhere and landed right in front of me – not two steps away. It hit hard and I watched it bounce about fifteen feet into the air.

It easily could have killed me.

My nerves didn't need this. Not today.

I looked up to see if there was some kind of construction going on in the highrise above us but couldn't see any. In my mood I was basically looking for someone to sue I think.

I looked at Kenneth. He was *smiling*.

"*Watch your step*," he said. "*See?*"

For the second time that day I felt a chill along my spine.

Because at that moment I shared his fear completely, I embraced it and it was mine. I felt her hand reach out to me and it was a cold hand and unyielding. For that single split-second he made me a believer. That it was possible. That *anything* was possible. I could almost grasp, almost feel, exactly how small a step it was from my reality to his.

And his was terrifying.

Then it was gone. I was back in my world again.

Safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

From Pennsylvania he wrote, "eventually the manipulation of the environment around me began. I got images on my TV set that were pure nightmares.

The stores I bought from had things on the shelves that were impossible to sell because of legality and utter rarity. I was surrounded by impersonators who would repeat my private telephone conversations loud enough for me to overhear. The effort to drive me crazy was so expensive I understood it could break the county

budget. The local residents who have witnessed this spectacle have gone into revolt, scared by this high-tech invasion of rural nowhere."

By the time I got the phone call, the Kenneth I knew was gone, sunk beneath the weight of a thousand fears and fancies.

What was left was paranoia. And rage.

Rage against Catholics, Jews, governments, friends and family. Employers, galleries—the entire world which could not see what he could see.

I was not exempt.

He called late one night and started shouting. That I had betrayed him. That Paula had betrayed him. And that *anybody* who betrayed him—*everybody* was going to pay. They were going to pay with blood and pain because he wasn't going to take this lying down anymore, he was done forgiving. Done forever. His voice was thick with meanness.

He scared hell out of me.

The following day I bought an answering machine.

I left it on all day and all night. I described him to the doormen in my building and gave them his name and told them that we were never at home to this person, never, not under any circumstances whatsoever.

On the machine he left a single message—a loud "*fuck you!*"

Full of fury.

The hang-up calls, the long empty silences, went on and on.

\* \* \* \* \*

I realize now that he'd warned me about this. That this day might come.

He'd told me it was his mother I had to worry about. But it wasn't.

It was him.

And then, because he couldn't help it, he'd cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

When a friend of yours disappears into madness there's not really any time, any moment to mourn his passing. These things happen gradually. They creep up on you like a goddamn thief. You know that your friend is somewhere out there *in* the world. He's still alive. He's not himself but he's there. And maybe he haunts you the way Kenneth haunted me.

Frustrating you. Pissing you off.

*Frightening you.*

There's anger and a sense of waste.

But no love. Not really.

*You can't love insanity and that's what he is right now, that's who he is.*

It defines him.

The man, the boy I was such good friends with has been gone from me for a very long time, in and out of a wrongheaded marriage and a botched career, in and out of mental hospitals, in and out of jails. I stopped answering his long, rambling, often accusatory but meticulously hand-written letters three years ago. Just a few months ago, he finally stopped writing.

But I guess that because I knew he was still alive somewhere in Pennsylvania, because I was scared of him and frustrated by what he'd become and because I

didn't want to see him—and maybe because I'd known him so long in so many incarnations it was damn near impossible to imagine a world without Kenneth in it—I'd never mourned him.

I'm mourning now.

"*I feel sorry for you,*" Kenneth wrote bitterly in his last letter to me, "*because you do not have one good story to tell.*"

He was taking me to task for selling out again.

*Kenneth, I hope that this, at least, proves you wrong.*

I wish you could read it. The old you. Not the later you and certainly not the dying.

Goodbye, old friend.

I miss you.

## Afterword

In one way at least, Kenneth beat the rap.

Shortly after *Bruatrian* published this piece I learned that some brand-new chemical cocktail had drummed his disease into full retreat. So he was not going to die after all. At least not imminently. And it occurred to me that he might have been amused to know that his departure had already been announced. But as of this writing I don't believe he does. I sure didn't tell him. I have, I think, good reasons why.

\* \* \* \* \*

In May of this year, three months ago, I received my first letter from Kenneth in a very long time. It was addressed to me, to both my real name and Jack Kersey (sic), to the woman I live with, to her sister, and to a mutual friend from our college years who lives a few blocks away. The sister's and friend's names were also misspelled though Kenneth knew both of them quite well. From the letter I learned that he now held stock in Citibank, Bell Atlantic and AT&T and that he was living with a woman. "She is beautiful," he said, "she is exquisite. She is not blunt and coarse." The woman would inherit all his earthly goods eventually. Not his son. "The parlor game of Colin and Helene is finished," he said.

He went on to tell me that he'd received his transcripts from our high school just that day.

"In my senior year," he said, "all my grades were censored. The blackmail from you, Kevin, Jack and Maryann explodes in my official transcript. I am censored at seventeen.

"Pennsylvania did its very best to do me in, however Pennsylvania ran into:

"American Express

"CHRISTIES

"MOMA

"Nabisco

"The Newark Museum

"The Missionaries of Charity, Calcutta, Bronx, Newark

"The Reformed Buddhist Church of TIBET "Tsuru Gallery

"Japan Gallery  
"Ronin Gallery."

I have no idea what kind of blackmail he might have been thinking of and my guess is that the other three people he mentions, all high school classmates, wouldn't either. The letter ends with one-line references to his garden, his house being warm and dry, his plans to go back to school and then teach, spring weather and various other bits of business. But he's not quite done with me yet.

"Your paperback books are so tired. All the clichés of the macho flake."  
Ouch.

"I have to get a White Pine now. Too hip gotta go."

~ \* ~

Then in June another letter. Stranger still, especially as it refers to me.

"It seems to me that your little world rests on Colin... you have no son to work over. You have the shallow side of life. Sit and type and then go to a bar. Computers. I have Bears, Deer, cars to drive and I know every Policeman in the U.S.A... your answering machine plays police sirens. But I have police touch me to feel the flesh... you and Colin are connected. But you have no son.

"My looks are coming back."

My name is scrawled across the page along with that of William Jefferson Clinton, yet *another* old high school friend and Elvis Costello.

I don't think I've had a real talk with Colin in my life.

On the second page of the letter there's a typed communication from one John R. Thomas, Supervisory Special Agent for the Philadelphia Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It's dated June 1st, on FBI letterhead shrunk down to fit the upper right-hand corner of the page. It says in part, "in reference to your telephone call and subsequent mail... this matter is not handled by the FBI. It is handled by your local telephone company... contact (them) and have a block placed on your telephone, so that your long distance carrier cannot be changed without your written consent. No Federal violation that is under jurisdiction of the FBI has occurred."

There's no direct explanation as to what this is about. Instead he goes on to tell me to "fly to Greece at your age and prance about. I drive for ten and a half years now. My auto is famous. Colin is a nobody. You are a nobody now too." He quotes a few lines from *The Bristol Stomp* and then says, "you were a high school english teacher in Boston. I went to Yale. I went to JAIL. Of all the "Party Boys"... I am the only international one of the lot. You, Helene, Colin, Mom, Debby, Paula, Neil, are all buying and selling on my story. I know who I am seeing in the Allentown Office of the FBI. I know who is shadowing me in N.J. The cage door is open now... you are like a house cat. Now cats in P.A. are being dropped on the streets I drive."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Writing this now I slip the letter back into its envelope and notice something. Something I'd missed when I received it. Inside the envelope is a two-inch square of paper. I guess I'd just overlooked it. But as I discover it now I see that it my own writing, my own hand, my last name and address snipped off the envelope of some*



*letter I'd sent him god knows when. I turn over the square of paper and it says "FAKE Dallas writing—you write in script honey"*

I don't. I'm a lefty and script is painful for me. Once Kenneth would have known that.

But even my handwriting's suspect now.

\* \* \* \* \*

The answering machine stays on twenty-four hours a day.

Because Kenneth's right about one thing. You can hear a police siren in the background underneath the message on my machine. If you live in New York long enough you get so you barely even notice sirens of any sort no matter how long and loudly they wail away and the day I retaped it some cop was racing full-tilt to somewhere or other up Amsterdam Avenue.

The letter arrived in June...

That means he's called me lately. Or tried to.

Friends, especially out-of-towners, usually get a kick out of the siren. It reminds them that they're calling the City.

I think I'll let it stay.

—August, 1998

### **Author's Note**

*I gave Bruatrian another chance in 1997 with this one and they did a much better job this time. They even left my title.*

*A year or so later James Cahill came to me asking if I had something which hadn't been seen much for him to do as a chapbook. I suggested this piece and he produced a beautiful little hardcover limited with an introduction by Edward Lee. And by then I had the news that Kenneth had recovered so I asked if I could do an epilogue to set the record straight.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Risky Living: A Memoir**

### **Author's Note**

This one bears some explanation up front.

In 1984 Ballantine published their second novel of mine, *Hide and Seek*. When the woman I call Jen here read it, she phoned me and said, this is about me, isn't it?

She was right of course. There is absolutely nothing in the novel—not a single incident—that would tip that hand to anybody but her but she was right nevertheless. The entire book was a metaphor for our relationship.

When Barry Hoffman at Gauntlet asked to reprint it in trade paper last year he requested an afterword. Barry likes his bells and whistles. I consented only grudgingly because I'd already written about the making of *Hide and Seek* in a couple of other contexts. Then I thought, wait a minute. Why not write about the woman who drove the book, the woman behind the character?

The section headings presented here are lines from the novel and you perhaps have to read the thing to fully understand how they apply.

Come to think of it, not a bad idea.

~ \* ~

## 1.

### **THERE'S A WHEEL IN MY HAND BUT I CAN'T STEER**

The first real love of my life was hooked on speed. She mainlined crystal meth.

1967 was a long time ago so I don't recall exactly how we met. She was a student at Emerson in Boston—a sophomore to my junior when she started shooting the stuff—so I'd hazed her the year before. I'm sure I met her then but the specific circumstances elude me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remember hazing?

The thinking was this. You put a new class of kids through a week of pure hell. You're a sophomore and they're lowly freshmen so they're at your bidding. You went through the same thing the year before but now it's your turn. They tote and fetch for you. They go down for pushups or sit-ups or run in place. You make them eat mysterious "desserts"—like mango chutney straight from the jar. You call them names. They call you sir or ma'am. You can do practically anything to these kids except physically push them around or make them late for class.

Sooner or later they gather together. There's talk of rebellion. Hell, their parents are *paying* for this shit! Leaders emerge. Bonds form. Plans are made and discarded. Clear-headed "advisors" from the junior class, who are otherwise not involved in all this, urge them to keep the peace.

Hell Night rolls around finally and you heard them into an auditorium and wander amidst them for a half hour while the abuse flows like poison. Groans and screeches and harsh metal discord issue from the sound system. Lights are low. Then gone altogether, replaced by flashlights darting into freshman faces. They're screaming, yelling. *You're* screaming and yelling even louder. All hell's about to break lose there.

The stage lights rise to dim. One of their leaders is there. Blindfolded, tied up hand and foot. Then what *isn't* supposed to happen, happens. Suddenly the guy's getting the living shit beat out of him. It looks absolutely real! He's in on it of

course but the crowd doesn't know that yet and just before they rush the stage and punches start to fly the house lights come up and the whole sophomore class is grinning and applauding and embracing the enemy. Welcome! You're one of us! Aren't you *happy*?

The weird thing was that for most of us this actually worked. It had for me the year before. I'd emerged as one of the angriest of the whole damn class, then afterward embraced the ruse wholeheartedly. And this year—perhaps because of that—I was class President. So that along with the Hazing Master and Hazing Mistress I was god to these kids.

I loved the part. I played it half Dracula and half Wolfman. Alternately quiet slinking evil and utterly ravenous.

The following year when Jen—I'll call her Jen—moved into the basement apartment below my own third-floor apartment she told me that at first she was actually afraid of me.

A few months later she was scaring *me* on a daily basis.

Taking risks.

## 2.

### **I DON'T BELIEVE IN OMENS, BUT I THINK YOU CAN KNOW WHEN YOU'RE IN TROUBLE.**

Jen was the first to turn me on to marijuana. She and her girlfriend and I smoked a joint in my apartment and then in the midst of this strange new sensation which was nothing like the beer-highs I'd been used to and under the influence of which I felt at once elated and confused somebody decided it would be a good idea to take a walk. Nice night.

I no sooner hit the streets of Beacon Hill when paranoia descended like an oncoming Angus bull. Streetlights seemed more like spotlights, preternaturally bright. The distance between my feet and my eyes was way too far—as though I were walking with somebody else's feet. Every passing car was brimming with cops.

The girls were used to getting high of course so they went their merry way chattering about whatever while I shambled along behind them in the grip of something very much like existential terror. Even their chattering frightened me.

*How could they be so normal? Had they actually smoked that joint? Had they maybe poisoned me? Revenge for the goddamn hazing?*

When they turned into an alley—an alley for godsakes!—that connected West Cedar Street to Charles Street without saying a word to them I hightailed it back home to my apartment. With the door locked behind me I felt safe again. At least I did initially. Then I thought, what if they come back looking for me? I bet they will. I'd been a total coward, that was clear enough. And I already had the beginnings of a major thing for Jen. What in the world was I thinking? What would *she* think of *me*?

More paranoia.

My solution to the problem was to turn off all the lights and sit huddled in the dark of my living room. Nobody home.

And after a while I heard a knock at the door and Jen and her girlfriend calling me and more knocking and then a kind of puzzled laughter as they drifted away downstairs.

The next day I told her I'd missed their turn into that alley somehow and wandered the streets of Boston for an hour or so looking for them.

She laughed. More importantly, she bought it.

I smoked a lot of dope with her after that mostly down in her apartment and gradually we became lovers of sorts.

I say *of sorts* because her first love was speed. I learned that early on.

### 3.

#### **BUT RIGHT AWAY SHE SCARED ME**

She'd go into the bathroom and come out a different version of herself suddenly all bright and cheerful when moments before she'd been depressed as hell talking about her troubled relationship with her father back in New Jersey and all the shit that was going to hit the fan once her mom and dad discovered she'd dropped out of college or the break with her former boyfriend or whatever, but she'd be moving around the apartment now like a woman with a mission—*cleaning*, my god, I remember her cleaning practically every surface of the place over and over—switching cuts on the record player and talking about the songs, the records, the Beatles' lyrics or Donovan, searching out books on her bookshelf to reference this point or that or else poems by Rilke or Baudelaire or Rimbaud to read to me and this could go on all night and well into the mornings and usually did.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she confessed to me the source of all this energy I wasn't that surprised. I'd already tried the occasional Dexedrine to finish up a paper here and there. Even the occasional Black Beauty. It was only that she was *shooting*. It was the needle I was scared of. What if she overdosed? What if some innocent air-bubble in the works exploded in her brain?

Whenever she'd disappear into the bathroom I was afraid it was for the last time. Afraid I was never going to see her again.

Not alive anyway.

To try to keep up with her jaggging I started snorting the stuff myself. I was holding tight to my class-schedule but weekends we'd go without any sleep at all and the crash after two nights running and living on nothing more than OJ to keep up the good old Vitamin C was brutal.

And in the end I *couldn't* keep up with her. Not if I wanted to stay in school. She'd already rejected that option.

So had most of her friends, none of whom I either liked or trusted. But while I was hanging in there attending to classes she'd be gone with them for days on end. To god knows where. Cambridge maybe. Some crash-pad way up on the Hill.

You never knew. There were days and nights I literally waited by the phone for a call which never came unless she'd arrived back home again. There were fights. Recriminations. I felt I had a right to know where she was at least—and even who she was with. We loved one another, didn't we? *Well, then?*

Beneath it all was the fear of that goddamn needle. Fear that it would get to her sooner or later. That it almost had to.

There was a saying, rightly or wrongly attributed to William S. Burroughs. *There are old junkies. But no old speed-freaks.*

I'd heard it many times.

#### 4.

### **THAT NIGHT WE SLEPT TOGETHER ON MY BED. IN THE MORNING SHE WAS GONE...**

Did we make love? Of course we did—though not very well. Speed is the natural enemy of orgasms. Or as she told me, shooting speed was a powerful orgasm in itself and the real thing just didn't compare. But I loved her body—her generous mouth, the softness of her skin. I loved simply holding her. And I held her a lot. The downslope of Jen's high after two or three nights of riding it and despite the grass or downers we used as buffers as often as not was a case of total emotional meltdown. The sadness in her seeping through like some slow quiet flood of dark water. I remember holding onto her until her body gave in and the shakes stopped and finally she slept. They say that the sense of taste is the most powerful agent of memory. I believe I can still recall the taste of her tears.

#### 5.

### **„WHAT DO YOU WANT, CASE? WHAT'S WORTH HAVING?“**

I did a terrible thing.

I got her a kitten.

I believe I was a little insane by then because I damn well should have known. She was already much too thin. Her jaunts into the Boston wilderness had gotten longer and longer. Each crash harder. But I thought, what she maybe needs is some responsibility here, a really good reason to live and do so somewhat normally, someone or something to give her full-time love to. I knew she was very much capable of love.

I knew she loved cats. So I went to the ASPCA. I went to the market on Charles Street and bought cat food and a cat box and litter. Then the kitten and I—a tiny black and white tuxedo—waited in my apartment for the phone call that would tell me that she finally had returned to hers. And while I petted and scratched him and he purred against my chest I instructed him in his duties. *Out loud.* Through

tears of what seemed to me hope and joy at the time but were probably more like desperation. *He was to purr a whole lot just like he was doing right now. He was to sleep with her every night. He was to be good and sweet and love her like crazy.*

When the phone call came I slipped him into the pocket of my coat and went downstairs and from the look on her face when I presented him to her I knew I'd done the right thing. She adored him immediately. Couldn't believe I'd done this for her. We found makeshift toys for him and played well into the night. There is nothing quite so beguilingly ridiculous as a kitten playing in a new environment and the night was simply lovely.

*What'll we call him?* She wondered. Jen was very fond of Kenneth Patchen, *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* in particular. A book at once lyrical and drenched in a sense of loss and fear and suffering.

Had I not been so happy for all three of us I might have seen it right there.

*Albion*, she said. *We'll call him Albion.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I don't think it was a month later that Albion was gone. Jen was as devastated as I'd ever seen her.

She'd taken her kitten with her one night to show to some friends.

She didn't remember where.

## 6.

### **THERE WAS NO WAY TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT IT, NO WAY AT ALL...**

"Come here. I want you to see it," she said. "Then maybe you won't be so goddamn scared all the time."

Or something to that effect.

She was in the bathroom and this time the door was wide open.

We'd been having a fight. I'd begged her to cut it out, to get help. Probably for the hundredth time. *I'm doing what I do for godsakes—I'm shooting up and then I'm going out. No you're not. Yes I am.*

And this time I was just mad enough to say all right, fuck it. So I stood in the doorway and watched her tie off. Use the dropper and the spoon and the match, use the needle. Almost a cruelty about her now, a kind of awful pragmatism, as though she were saying to me, this is the real world, asshole, my world—the one you're too damn chickenshit to watch. Well, watch it now. Watch me swoon.

So I did.

\* \* \* \* \*

If my saying *I don't remember exactly* seems almost like a motif here it's important to imagine the changes I'd been through—the changes and the times. In the course of a single year I'd gone from Class President, who you could often catch in suit and tie, to tie-dye long-haired hippie. Elvis had been replaced in my

affections by the Beatles and the Byrds and the Stones. Not only was I snorting meth and smoking dope and hash but I was tripping on acid and mescaline too.

So I really don't remember exactly what prompted me to call Jen's sister.

I know that by then it was not only a case of my fearing the needle but fearing for her mind and body as well. You rarely bothered to eat on speed—it seemed irrelevant—so that over the past few months she'd gotten so damn skinny that her breasts were disappearing and her skin stretched tight over her hips and ribs. Her color was gone. Her eyes were bruised from lack of sleep. Her memory was shot. Her crashes got so bad and so prolonged that I feared for the strength of her heart.

Her family knew nothing of this. The one thing she was always dutiful about were her calls to mom and dad and she'd skipped coming home on school vacations. They didn't seem to mind or worry. They trusted her.

So as I say, *I don't know exactly* what incident prompted it. Or if there was any incident at all but merely a desperate cumulative exhaustion of the spirit.

But I called her sister and turned her in.

Tell your parents, I told her. Tell them to come get your sister.

I think she's dying.

It was not easy to make this call because it was going to be the end of us, of Jen and me. Jen would not forgive this phone call. How could she? I was betraying her deepest secret, revealing her naked in deepest pain. It was going to throw not only her but her entire family into a world of grief

I wasn't kidding myself. I knew that part of this was also a matter of self-preservation. If possibly I was saving her life here then I was trying to save my own life too. I'd carry more than a little guilt around for this. But I could not any longer bear the constant ache and sorrow of loving someone who seemed not to love herself.

I could only hope that in time she'd forgive me. In time she did. But it was the end of us all the same.

## 7.

### **THE DEATH FREAK IN HER WAS DEAD...**

Therapy worked its slow and agonizing wonders. Jen married, had a child. Divorced and married again.

The last time I heard from her she seemed happy.

A strange link between us remained over many years. Now and then I'd call her. Not on birthdays or holidays but always just out of the blue. She'd invariably tell me that it was uncanny. That whenever I called she'd been down and depressed. As though I somehow sensed over great distances that she needed to talk with me and only me at exactly that time and that our talks always served to soothe her.

...AND I'D NEVER MISS IT.

We lost touch years ago. I have no idea where she is now and we have no friends in common of whom I might ask.

So wherever you are, Jen, I hope you're well and peaceful. And forgive me again. This is merely a poor sketch of you and by no means does you justice.

I'll never miss the risks you took with your life or those we took together. But you always miss the ones you love, don't you? I think you must. Alive or dead, happy or troubled. It's a human imperative I think. Something which fades only when you fade.

And sometimes with great good luck it even lives awhile further, in between the lines, in the pages of a small book.

—Jack Ketchum June, 2007

## Us Again

(with Carolyn Kessaratos Shea)

### PROLOGUE: E-MAIL FROM GROUND ZERO

10/21/2001

2:53 AM, Sunday morning

#### **Surfkitty:**

Went down to World Trade today. I've never seen so many shattered faces. The tourists were out with their cameras thick around Fulton because it was a beautiful summer-like day, but if you got off the subway at Chambers Street where only a sliver of the Trades would have been—not the major photo-op Fulton presents with all that empty sky—walked out and smelled the burning and wondered, as you almost had to, exactly WHAT was burning, looked into a sky bright and blue and tarnished with plumes of blonde smoke and then turned around, you saw all these shattered, stricken faces. People barely able to hold back the tears or not able to at all, wiping them away, old people and young people and little kids. Walk a block and maybe one person in thirty is smiling. This, in New York City! On a window at a filthy, closed, boarded-up Chase Bank the entire surface of the glass is ID shots of cops and firemen dead—the entire window, Kitty, all these young men looking out at you. The walk leaves a taste in your mouth. You can't get rid of it. And the silence. Broken only by a truck rolling by or fire-engines—today I guess they hit another hot-spot and needed reinforcements—sounds of distant dredging. But we, us survivors, silent. And all the way to the court buildings, barely a hint of a smile. All along the avenues.

Just me, testifying.

Love,

D

\* \* \* \* \*

10/21/2001



3:14 PM

Hi, D.

Did my own pilgrimage today down to the Village, had to see something that had NOT changed—from before everything, from the past when there was a kind of innocence. There were people smiling, enjoying the cafes and each other and the beautiful morning. It was brunchtime and the restaurants were packed, with laughter and conversation oozing out the windows. Relief! Normalcy on a bright sunny day in autumn! Then you listen to snippets of conversation as you pass. A couple about nineteen were talking about anthrax and gas masks for godsakes. Another group were saying nuke 'em all. And another were debating whether they should go to Ground Zero to see it for themselves or go across the river to look at the gap in the sky. Dammit there's A GAP IN THE SKY. Where there used to be discussion about going for a drive for foliage season or antique shopping, there's talk beyond anything we could ever have imagined littering our everyday conversation. So I guess EVERYTHING has changed. My city, as I know it, is gone. I cried again.

Back atcha I guess.

Love,  
Kitty

\* \* \* \* \*

10/21/2001

3:54 PM

Kitty —

Of course you cried. I did too. I know I will again. Crying's all right. It's what you do when you're in mourning, right? But I still like this story—which I read in the *International Herald Tribune* over in Greece—probably because I think it says as much about New Yorkers and what we're capable of as suicide runs say about the Taliban.

The week after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the *New Yorker* ran no cartoons—which it hadn't done since Pearl Harbor I think—and the staff debated running any the week following. Finally they settled on one, and one only. It's a well-dressed, sophisticated New York woman sitting at a bar, and next to her is this guy in a real bad checkered suit. And the caption, best I can recall, reads, **I thought I'd never laugh again. Then I saw your suit.**

Cheer up, Kitty. Think of all those suits out there.

Love,  
D

\* \* \* \* \*

There will be *other important topics of conversation* in New York City beyond the events subsequent to the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

But not for a while I think.

At a dinner party last night I found myself holding forth mightily—maybe too mightily, it's possible, since my talk was fueled by a fair amount of scotch and to some extent at least, the attractive woman sitting beside me—about post-World

Trade Manhattan, about the climate of irrational and not-so-irrational fear we're living in now. Most of it, happily, I don't remember too well.

But one thought might bear repeating.

We're no longer a city of cynics.

New York has always prided itself in being the most sophisticated town in a pretty sophisticated nation. We Manhattanites are generally not fools and we certainly don't suffer fools gladly. We didn't come here from all the way across the river or across the country or across the Big Pond to be hornswoggled or fucked with.

In fact we can usually spot who's attempting to fuck with us before they even get their pants down. It's a good thing, a virtue peculiar to us and well worth cultivating in the nation as a whole I think. Some will say we're so adept at this, at spotting the con and shuck because we're so good at the con and shuck ourselves and I won't argue that. We are, after all, the birthplace of Madison Avenue. Be that as it may, we New Yorkers have learned to use this to our defensive advantage. It's a rare Manhattan writer, for instance, who gets screwed by a Hollywood contract. And no New York native, to my knowledge, has ever once bought the Brooklyn Bridge.

But sophistication and a don't-even-think-of-messing-with-me attitude should not be confused with cynicism and as I pointed out at the party, we've been confusing them here in the City since the end of the last war in which a great many Americans lost their lives. Vietnam.

If you think on it, there are some pretty strange-bedfellow similarities between the Vietnam Era and the one we've just embarked upon. And a major one, for me anyway, is that the fires of cynicism, such as they are, are being pissed on from some very high places.

My Websters' defines cynical as *scornful of the virtues or motives of others and contemptuously and bitterly mocking*.

It seems interesting to me that we're actually giving our leaders a chance these days. Even those who, before September 11<sup>th</sup>, wouldn't have had a prayer in New York City public opinion. Think Bush, Guiliani. Not that Bush doesn't still have to prove himself but we've reserved judgment on him for now—unusual in this city. We are not *immediately scornful of his virtues or motives* at the moment and there's been precious little *contemptuous and bitter mocking* that has made its way to me. It's almost as though—dare I say it?—we want to trust him and his cabinet and coalition to somehow make sense of this mess and do the right thing.

Trust politicians? To have the right motives and do the right thing? We haven't seen that attitude since the days of George McGovern, Clean Gene McCarthy—and among the hawks if not the doves—Lyndon Baines Johnson.

If you're old enough to remember at all you'll recall that the sixties and early seventies were years packed with fervent idealism. Whether you were a hippie or an SDS type—that's Students for a Democratic Society for you youngsters out there—a member of the NAACP, a Black or White Panther or a card-carrying member of the VFW or NRA you cared. You cared pretty damn passionately about where the country was going and what it was doing. And to whom. It didn't matter which side you were on, if you were sliding a daisy into the barrel of a National Guard rifle or if you were the poor kid carrying that rifle in the midst of a scary

crowd, you knew something important was going on. Either you were directly involved yourself or somebody else near and dear to you was, some son or daughter slogging through the paddies in 'Nam or getting shot at Kent State.

Caring. What a concept.

And we care again, finally.

It's been a long time between drinks.

\* \* \* \* \*

I think the reason then as now is that we only seem to give a damn when we feel at risk—whether morally, physically or financially. Disco may be long dead but its *what the hell, who cares what time it is? what's your name again? gimme some of that coke* spirit has lived on in its high-stepping vapid way straight through into the millennium. That spirit, if you can call it spirit at all, was laid to rest on

September 11<sup>th</sup> and I don't think I'll miss it one bit.

Because the other great similarity between then and now is that not only do we care but we actually seem to care about one another. We've at last been reminded that we're not alone in this Big City nor even on the planet. To me, the eighties and nineties were terribly lonely. Not that I felt alone in any active way but I was. We all were. We walked and rode around town, played and worked within a very small extended family in this enormous place and that family was composed of individuals very much like us—in financial and social status, in ethnicity and goals and expectations for the future. We felt secure and protected by these myriad small human surrounds. Safe, each within each. But we now know what writers—horror writers in particular—have been warning us of all along. You aren't safe and protected. Not from anything. Ever. All these surrounds are illusion. And you really don't want or need them either. All they do is dull the spirit and dull the heart.

If you need for some reason to drive this point home for yourself, try reading the biographies in the New York Times of all the World Trade dead.

*They came from everywhere.*

*They died in one place only.*

And we, all of us, seem to care very much about that. About strangers.

It's about time.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's an old saying—*there's always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area.*

You need to recognize it of course, to see it clearly for what it is or else it'll elude you. But maybe that's the other thing the World Trade Center should remind us of—a refresher course if you will and bought at an awful human price—the renewed knowledge that that *little bit of heaven* is, in all probability, walking right straight toward you right now, right out here on the street. It's embodied in someone you've never met or even seen before but with whom you share just about everything that matters.

Recognize that. Smile and say hi.

—November, 2001

"A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage."  
—Bertrand Russell, 1927

### **Author's Note**

*Since writing this Bush and Guiliani have of course reverted to type.  
We trust them accordingly.*

*I was on an island in Greece when the Trade Center went down and the woman I'd been living with for over thirty years was working for Morgan Stanley in the South Tower. I was alerted to the first hit and watched the second one live on CNN. For four hours I was completely sure that she was dead. That I'd seen it happen. I'd seen her die in, flames.*

*I was wrong. She'd gone down the stairs with the rest of her co-workers almost immediately after the North Tower was hit. She'd survived.*

*But I didn't know that at the time.*

*Standing there in front of me at this small Greek cafe watching it live on CNN was a young woman of whatever nationality and indeterminate age who must have heard me sobbing behind her and who turned and smirked at me as though to say, you fucking Americans. Seated to my right was an older German woman, probably in her fifties, who asked me what was wrong and when I told her, took my hand and said, she'll be all right. She got out. You'll see.*

*I still feel grateful for that woman. And still feel sorry for the girl.*

*JK, December, 2007*

