REFLECTIONS

WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

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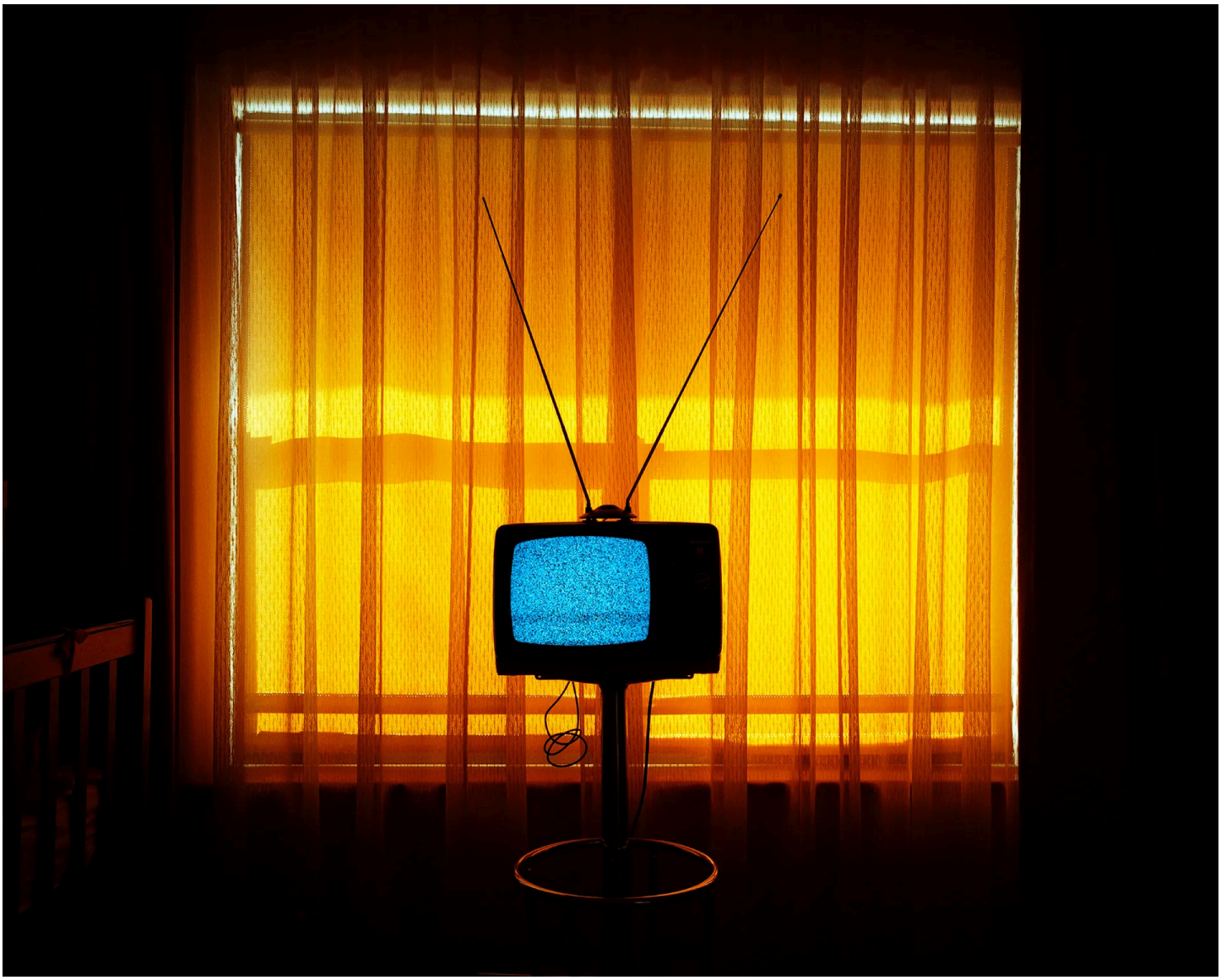

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WONDER

Wonder was the grace of the country. Any action could be justified by that: the wonder it was rooted in. Period followed period, and finally the wonder was *that things could be built so big*. Bridges, skyscrapers, *fortunes*, all having a life first in the marketplace, still drew on the force of wonder. But then a moment's quiet. What was it now that was built so big? Only the marketplace itself. Could there be wonder in that? The size of the con?

HISTORY

That movement, from wonder to the wonder that a country should be so big, to the wonder that a building could be so big, to the last, small wonder, that a marketplace could be so big—that was the movement of history. Then there was a change. The direction of the movement paused, sat silent for a moment, and reversed. From that moment, vastness was the start, not the finish. The movement now began with the fact of two hundred million, and the movement was toward a unit of one, alone. Groups of more than one were now united not by a common history but by common characteristics. History became the history of demographics, the history of no-history.

HISTORY

History had been the record of growth, conflict, and destruction.

THE NEW HISTORY

The New History was the record of the expression of demographically significant preferences: the lunge of demography *here* as opposed to *there*.

THE DECLINE OF ADULTHOOD

In the New History, nothing was judged—only counted. The power of judging was then subtracted from what it was necessary for a man to learn to do. In the New History, the preferences of a child carried as much weight as the preferences of an adult, so the refining of preferences was subtracted from what it was necessary for a man to learn to do. In the New History, the ideal became *agreement* rather than well-judged action, so men learned to be competent only in those modes which embraced the possibility of agreement. The world of power changed. What was powerful grew more powerful in ways that could be easily measured, grew less powerful in every way that could not be measured.

POWERFUL MEN

The most powerful men were those who most effectively used the power of adult competence to enforce childish agreements.

TELEVISION

Television is the force of no-history, and it holds the archives of the history of no-history. Television is a mystery. Certain of its properties are known, though. It has a *scale*.

The scale *does not vary*. The trivial is raised up to the place where this scale has its home; the powerful is lowered there. In the place where this scale has its home, childish agreements can be arrived at and enforced effectively—childish agreements, and agreements wearing the mask of childhood.

TELEVISION

Television has a scale. It has other properties, but what television has to a dominant degree is a certain scale and the power to enforce it. No one has been able to describe the scale as it is experienced. We know some of its properties, though.

Television does not vary. The trivial is raised up to power. The powerful is lowered toward the trivial.

The power behind it resembles the power of no-action, the powerful passive.

It is *bewitching*.

It interferes with growth, conflict, and destruction, and these forces are different in its presence.

"Entertainment" is an unsatisfactory word for what it encloses or projects or makes possible.

No good has come of it.

FALSE HISTORY

For a while, a certain voice continued. *Booming*. As though history were still a thing done by certain men in a certain place. It was embarrassing. To a person growing up in the power of demography, this voice was foolish.

THE AESTHETIC OF THE HIT

To a person growing up in the power of demography, it was clear that history had to do not with the powerful actions of certain men but with the processes of choice and preference.

THE AESTHETIC OF THE HIT

The power shifted. In the phrase "I Like Ike," the power shifted. It shifted from General Eisenhower to someone called Ike, who embodied certain aspects of General Eisenhower and certain aspects of affection for General Eisenhower. Then it shifted again. From "Ike," you could see certain aspects of General Eisenhower. From

"like," all you could see was other Americans engaged in a process resembling the processes of intimacy. This was a comfort.

THE AESTHETIC OF THE HIT

The comfort was in agreement, the easy exercise of the modes of choice and preference. It was attractive and, as it was presented, not difficult. But, once interfered with, the processes of choice and preference began to take on an uncomfortable aspect. Choice in respect to important matters became more and more difficult; people found it troublesome to settle on a mode of work, for instance, or a partner. Choice in respect to trivial matters, on the other hand, assumed an importance that no one could have thought to predict. So what happened then was that important forces that had not been used, because they fell outside the new scale of national life (which was the life of television), began to find a home in the exercise of preference concerning trivial matters, so that attention, aspiration, even affection came to adhere to shimmers thrown up by the demography in trivial matters. The attraction of inappropriate attention, aspiration, and affection to a *shimmer* spins out, in its operation, a little mist of energy which is rather like love, but trivial, rather like a sense of home, but apt to disappear. In this mist exists the Aesthetic of the Hit.

MEMBERSHIP

The middle distance fell away, so the grids (from small to large) that had supported the middle distance fell into disuse and ceased to be understandable. Two grids remained. The grid of two hundred million and the grid of intimacy. Everything else fell into disuse. There was a national life—a *shimmer* of national life—and intimate life. The distance between these two grids was very great. The distance was very frightening. People did not want to measure it. People began to lose a sense of what distance was and of what the usefulness of distance might be.

DISTANCE

Because the distance between the grids was so great, there was less in the way of comfort. The middle distance had been a comfort. But the middle distance had fallen away. The grid of national life was very large now, but the space in which one man felt at home shrank. It shrank to intimacy.

INTIMACY

It followed that people were comfortable only with the language of intimacy. Whatever business was done had to be done in that language. The language of "You are not alone." How else would a person know? The language of intimacy spread. It was meant to be reassuring. But during the same period, in a most upsetting way, real intimacy came to seem to be a kind of affliction.

PSEUDO-INTIMACY

Things very distant came powerfully close, but just for a minute. It was a comfort. And useful to men who wished to enforce childish agreements, because the progress of the *advertisement* is toward the destruction of distance between the product and the person who might consume the product.

LONELINESS

It was sometimes lonely in the grid of one, alone. People reached out toward their home, which was in television. They looked for help.

CELEBRITIES

Celebrities have an intimate life and a life in the grid of two hundred million. For them, there is no distance between the two grids in American life. Of all Americans, only they are complete.

CELEBRITIES

The most successful celebrities are products. Consider the real role in American life of Coca-Cola. Is any man as well loved as this soft drink is?

CELEBRITIES

A product consumed by a man alone in a room exists in the grid of one, alone, and in the grid of two hundred million. To the man alone, it is a comfort. But just for a minute.

COMFORT

Comfort *failed*. Who would have thought that it could fail? People felt teased by a promise of a national life that did not arrive and an intimacy that could not be consummated. So *teased*.

THE PROBLEM

So one or two of the babies began to experience a problem. Loneliness rose to the surface. It was a problem. No exit for the babies. Dead end for the babies. It was a problem. And *new*. A problem is a disease in the demography. A difficulty is something overcome by a man—or not. A *problem* is something enjoyed by a piece of the demography. "I'm just a Hoosier." No. No one cares. "I am Youth." Better. "I am a battered child." Very good.

THE DECLINE OF ADULTHOOD

During the nineteen-sixties, there was conflict between the generation born during (and soon after) the Second World War and the generation born during (and soon after) the First World War. There was also a debate. Although the debate

was supposed to be candid, some truths were avoided—almost shyly. Much of the debate had to do with power and the abuse of power, but no one ever asked if the men in positions of control who were being confronted with evidence of their abuse of power had any right to be considered powerful in the first place. No one inquired into the nature of the connection between the men who had fashioned conventional white society and the men of forty or fifty or sixty who were its contemporary stewards. No one asked if in fact *any connection existed at all*. A continuum of power was assumed (perhaps out of instinctive politeness or instinctive fear), and what was debated was the question of its abuse. In some instances, the assumed continuum was stretched to include members of the younger generation, with remarkable results.

THE DECLINE OF ADULTHOOD

During the nineteen-sixties, a young black man in a university class described the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century as "belonging" to the white students in the room, and not to him. This idea was seized on by white members of the class. They acknowledged that they were at one with Rembrandt. They acknowledged their dominance. They offered to discuss, at any length, their inherited power to oppress. It was thought at the time that reactions of this type had to do with "white guilt" or "white masochism." No. No. It was white *euphoria*. Many, many white children of that day felt the power of their inheritance for the first time in the act of rejecting it, and they insisted on rejecting it and rejecting it and rejecting it, so that they might continue to feel the power of that connection. Had the young black man asked "Who is this man to you?" the pleasure they felt would have vanished in embarrassment and resentment.

THE DECLINE OF ADULTHOOD

"Adulthood" in the last generations has had very little to do with "adulthood" as that word would have been understood by adults in any previous generation. Rather, "adulthood" has been defined as "a position of control in the world of childhood."

THE ADOLESCENT ORTHODOXY

Ambitious Americans, sensing this, have preferred to remain adolescents, year after year.

THE AUTHORITY OF NO-AUTHORITY

A child watching television will not encounter a discussion of how he might marry or how he might work, but he will find material relating to how he should be honest in coming to terms with his divorce, and he will encounter much material that has as the source of its energy his confusion and unhappiness.

SCALE

The permission given by television is permission to make tiny choices, within the context of total permission infected with a sense of no permission at all.

PERMISSION

An important role of a father is to give a son a sense of permission—a sense of what might be done. This still works, but since no adult is supported by the voice of the culture (which is now a childish voice), it does not work well.

EXPERTS

In the absence of adults, people came to put their trust in *experts*.

EXPERTS

Only an *expert* can deal with a problem. Only an expert or a pleasant man on television with access to experts. Only an expert or a man on television who

knows how to welcome an expert or a problem or love for a problem. An expert or a man on television or—in certain cases, resistant to therapy—a *matron*. In the age of no-authority, these are the authorities.

IMPORTANT PROGRAMMING

Important programming is programming that recognizes the problem.

IMPORTANT PROGRAMMING

If it is just a problem—teen-age alcoholics who need to talk to Matron—then it is a little boring after a while, because it is only one-half of the problem. Then the problem might have to be doubled. You might have to add Angel Dust or Runaways or Child Abuse. You might have to, because just the problem is only half of the problem.

SERIES

Or you might stick it in a series. Let Quincy deal with the problem. Quincy is *so angry*. Quincy *hates* kiddie porn. Quincy gets angry at the idea that anyone could even contemplate the exploitation of children. Just ask him.

SERIES

But it's still just half of the problem. Even if Pepper dresses up like a whore to stop whores from turning babies into whores, it's still just half of the problem.

EXPERTS

The problem is offered up to authority for healing. But Pepper shies away from healing, and so does Matron. They conduct the problem to the experts. The experts shy away a little, too. Who would have thought it? "We move toward a full

discussion of the problem," they murmur. "During this discussion, you will experience a little sense of *home*. Do you feel it now? No? Then perhaps our discussion has not been full. Is that perhaps *your fault*?"

"In what lies your authority?" a willful person asks after a time.

"Why, in the problem," an expert answers honestly.

IMPORTANT PROGRAMMING

The most important programming deals with people with a serious problem who make it to the Olympics. It is the powerful metaphor of our time—babies given up for dead who struggle toward national life and make it just for a minute. It's a long distance to come. People feel it very deeply and cheer the babies on.

PROBLEMS

An important question to ask about an association of individuals is "How does it spend its best energies?" One can imagine many answers to this question. One answer, certainly, would be "Dealing with problems." One would expect this answer from, for instance, a poor association of individuals or an association without ambition. But even from associations as impoverished as these associations might be, one would not expect the answer "Aspiring to love problems."

ADOLESCENCE

In a recent issue of the *Times Book Review*, there was an interview with a woman whose novel had been given the place of honor in the *Book Review* that week. Her

novel, according to the *Times*, traced a woman called Vida through her years in the Movement. Of the Movement, the author of the novel remembered this:

> I remember walking around with other organizers and fantasizing about what we would do after the revolution with all the buildings, what human uses they could be put to. What marvelous daycare centers and hospices they would become.

This woman was talking about New York City. Her adolescent idea had been that the revolution would bring better parks to New York, and beautiful places to live, and day-care centers, and hospices. Her idea was that New York should be human. Now, this is simply a mistake. New York is an inhuman machine put together to serve the most ambitious interests of a certain part of American secular society. It has human aspects, because human needs must be met before ambitions can proceed toward realization, but the fulfillment of those human needs is an uninteresting precondition of the life of the ambitions. In human terms, there is no reason to live in New York, and if New York were to become a city in which day-care centers and hospices were the dominant institutions it would soon be depopulated.

THE COLD CHILD

The people who undertook revolutionary activities knew one thing: they knew warm from cold. Not a small thing to know. They saw that the adult world had retreated in *presence*—in willingness to rule, or even to acknowledge, the world it had contrived. They saw that the presence of the adult world consisted of masks and lackeys—a cheerfulness that was essentially cold. They came to understand that they had been cheated. They did not understand, however, what they had been cheated *of*. As their orthodoxy began to form, it cohered around the idea of the *warm child*.

THE ADOLESCENT ORTHODOXY

The adolescent orthodoxy is the orthodoxy of growth, of becoming, of awkward search. It has embraced the most ambitious energies of the society since the

mode of the cold child was established on television. It has as its aim the undoing of the work of the cold child. It is carried out in mourning for lost childhood. Its eye is always there—on childhood.

THE COLD CHILD

Television is dangerous because it operates according to an attention span that is childish but is cold. It simulates the warmth of a childish response but is cold. If it were completely successful in simulating the warmth of childish enthusiasm—that is, if it were warm—would that be better? It would be better only in a society that had agreed that childish warmth and spontaneity were equivalent to public virtue; that is, in a society of children.

What is a cold child? A sadist. What is childish behavior that is cold? It is sadism. After generations of cold childhood, cold childhood upon cold childhood, one piling on the other, moving, *at their best*, into frenzied adolescence, certain ugly blemishes have surfaced. An overt interest in sadism, for instance, and an interest in unnatural children. Americans, unrooted, blow with the wind, but they feel the truth when it touches them. An interest in sadism is an interest in truth in that it exposes the processes of false affection. A horror of children is the natural result of the spread, across the grid, of a cold childhood.

THE COLD CHILD

As the mode of the cold child continues and the aesthetics of pseudo-intimacy become so widely accepted that forms of behavior are forgotten which require an understanding of what distance there is between different people at different moments—as this continues, it is possible, even *easy*, for the proprietors of the commercial culture to create certain new masks out of material that was thrown up by the "rebellious" adolescent orthodoxy. Out of day-care centers and hospices, for instance. The cold child is happy to embrace the warm child. Both, after all, make a point of *smiling*.

THE COLD CHILD

There is another possibility. It is possible to *embrace* the cold child, after all. To *accept* the corruption in his smile. Some artists and some terrorists have seen the space made ready for this possibility. They are quite candid that their interest is in *defacement*. Certain artists, certain terrorists, and, of course, very many children.

SMILES

Look at the girl smile. The more she smiles, the more certain it is that she represents something trivial, something shocking, or something failed.

DISTANCE

The background is distant, the sense of protection is distant—so people feel completely protected and completely unprotected at the same time.

DISTANCE

The background is distant, the sense of protection is distant. People are so frightened. There is so much distance between them and their protection. They reward anyone who can convince them that there is no distance.

DISTANCE

In the vast distance between the protection and the protected, there is space for mirages of pseudo-intimacy. It is in this space that celebrities dance.

FALSE PROPHETS

And, since the dancing celebrities occupy no real space, there is room for other novel forms to take hold. Some of these are really very strange.

FAILURE

No one, now, minds a con man. But no one likes a con man who doesn't know what we think we want.

WINNING

When the idea of winning is empty, men of integrity may fill it up. When it is full, but empty of integrity, then the only interest is in disappointment.

•

PEOPLE

People. So many people. Everywhere you look: on the streets; in the stores; queuing up for a little treat. It's a glut of people. So many. But not everyone, of course. Sometimes it's everyone, though. Hey, America. That's one group. It's a group of people. Not a small group—not by any means. It's not everyone, though—not the oldsters and the welfare cheats. Well, sometimes it's the oldsters, too, and the welfare cheats, but not often. During the news, for instance, it's oldsters. Oldsters get special attention then. *Mom's incredible. Sometimes, when her hands knot up in a kind of nineteenth-century pain, sometimes, when her shuffling steps bring stab after stab, sometimes, even then, we let her make the breakfast*. Most of the time, though, when we say Hey, America, it's a smaller group we have in mind.

People. So many people. *Too* many people. Sometimes it's a little crowded. How many? Unclear. More than two hundred million? How do you arrive at that figure? Do you go from house to house—houses formed into little units, constituting parts,

then, of larger units, which are, in turn, parts of larger units, until you get to units large enough to count on the fingers of one hand? Or do you start instead with the two hundred million and slice it up? There's a difference. Taken from one direction, people have personal histories. Taken from the other, they have characteristics. Taken in one way, little units have small histories or, sometimes, histories unexpectedly large; taken in the other way, they have characteristics. Large units—the large units resulting from the way a thing grows, step by step, year by year—have history, the record of the independent action of growing from small to large. But only from the direction of small to large. From the other direction, the direction of two hundred million sliced up, they have a share. Taking apart the share, you find characteristics. Agglomerating the characteristics so that they will stand on their own, so that you have something distinct to say about this share, as opposed to that share, you resort to sociology.

New England is history. Step One. Step Two. Do this. Do that. This happened. That happened. It all adds up to New England. It doesn't break down from something else. It is no share of anything larger. History takes a certain course, and it *adds up* to New England. Of course, once it does, you can work it in other ways. New England as a phrase means a certain thing, because certain things have added up to mean New England. But once a phrase means a certain thing, you can abuse the meaning and twist it: refer to the sense of what "New England" means to suit your purposes, which may not have correct reference to the history of New England—which may, in fact, directly oppose the essence of that history. Shot of Fabulous Old New England Inn. Look at the clapboards. So white. Look at that *porch*. So like New England, that porch. *Why, Mrs. Martin, you're pouring Silt-Whip over that old New England cherry cobbler. Of course it's Silt-Whip; nothing else is good enough for Martin's Inn.* At a certain moment, Mrs. Martin would have been whipped herself. A certain stern New England man would have taken her out and beaten her. And sent her out of town. But not now. She stands on the porch of her fabulous New England inn with her

artificial dessert topping, made from lard, engine oil, preservatives extracted from offal and animal screams. *Why is she there*? Liaison. She's doing liaison work. She stands on a little pivot. It's history. What she is is the purveyor of a motif. In her case, the motif is history used in the service of the force of no-history, and no-history is the force of the share, and the characteristics of the share, and the grid of two hundred million.

What is it? It's *television*. It's a program *on* television. A little span of time. How does it work? It's a little span of time made friendly by repetition. In a way, it doesn't exist at all. Just what does, then? A certain ability to transmit and receive and then to apply layers of affection and longing and doubt. Two abilities: to do a very complex kind of work, involving electrons, and then to cover the coldness of that with a hateful familiarity. Why hateful? Because it hasn't anything to do with a human being as a human being is strong. It has to do with a human being as a human being is weak and willing to be fooled: the human being's eagerness to perceive as warm something that is cold, for instance; his eagerness to be a part of what one cannot be a part of, to love what cannot be loved. What is it? It's family hour. What is it? It's a *program*, a little slice of time during which a man and his wife and a woman who works for him sit together behind a little desklike thing. So shoddy, the little desklike thing. Like a bit of contempt molded into a kind of cage. What do they do? They answer questions. Not questions about France, or the Battle of Britain, or what American women despise most about their husbands according to the editors of *Modern Maiden*. What, then? About what? Together, in discomfort, they answer questions designed to awaken discomfort. In this way, a little reality can be got to. You can see it on their faces. They are uncomfortable, longing for comfort. The questions make them uncomfortable, and they recognize being uncomfortable as referring to their reality. They take comfort in this reference. In that, and in the fact that they are in public. Out of their small family, which may not exist, so lonely is it, and into the grid of two hundred million.

The host is Jim Peck. So friendly, Jim Peck. He has curly hair. Fornication is what he has on his mind as he does his job. Fornication as it has reference to the little units of man, wife, woman working for the man. But no real fornication. Nothing to do with real fornication. Nothing like "Jessica, has Harold fornicated with Monica at the office?" The questions are conditional, referring to what the man will say. Prizes are awarded to wives or female employees according to their ability to guess what the man will say. It forms a little grid. A little *context*. Convincing while it lasts, but dirty. Shimmering with doubt and embarrassment. Why is it allowed? Because the embarrassment forms a context. The comfort of discomfort. The comfort of reality, which is a reality of discomfort. And *interest*. That there should be in their own sadness the means to form a little event within a context. Nobody does anything in America unless it is perceived as a step up. As the boy slices his skin to watch a scar form, he thinks how loathsome and intolerable life was before he thought to do it, and how comforting it is to belong to the new aristocracy of people who have had the imagination to have an intention to wound themselves.

TEEN-AGE ALCOHOLISM

Who is he? He's a man in business. Watch him walk. Down the hall. A smile on his face. What is it? A new *problem*. For a while, it was a new smile that counted, or a new thrill. Now, in certain parts of the building, what matters is the problem, and the little frown of recognition when the problem is mentioned, and the little stabs of pain when a baby girl or a baby boy is shown to have the problem, and then the little invocation of the therapeutic orthodoxy as people come together to talk about the problem. So openly! They talk about the problem just as if it were a menu! Or a date on the calendar, or a treat! They learn from an *expert* to talk. They didn't know how. Matron tells them how. "Did you know that Baby Judy was gulping twenty Quaaludes a day?" Matron is worried. Matron knows how to talk. She learned it in school. She knows how to talk. In a way. She knows everything in a way. She is the midwife of the problem, an important person. Matron is here to persuade us that *someone knows what to do*. Matron is here to say that open and honest *dialogue* will

help keep Baby Judy from gulping Quaaludes and drinking Night Train Express and marking her arm with razor blades.

Matron is important. She's one of the most important people in the whole world. She knows about teen-age alcoholism and drug-related deaths and child abuse and wife-beating and every other problem. She's here to help. In public. On the channels. On the special programs and in the context of a series. Ask Matron. She's the expert. She has taken courses. She didn't know a thing for a while, but then she took courses, in a school made of cinder block. She knows a crisis. She knows crisis intervention. She doesn't know about daily life, but daily life isn't coherent, so why should she know about it? Who can grasp something that's not coherent? Not Matron. That's why she sticks to a problem.

The problem comes with a lie. Matron gags on it. The problem goes down easily, but the lie sticks. In a quiet moment, perhaps as she takes a drink, Matron begins to wonder. Not about her school. Matron hated her school. She was clear about that from the start. Not Baby Judy. Baby Judy is the most boring person in the world—anyone could tell. At home, in a quiet moment, Matron wonders. She wonders what it is that bothers her; she wonders if it's time for another drink; she wonders if it would be interesting to mark up her arm with razor blades.

TEEN-AGE ALCOHOLISM

The lie is in this—that the teen-age alcoholic suffers from a problem in the foreground, a problem within a context, liable to solution within the frame of the context, subject to powers of arrangement near to the hand of the organizing power of the context. The reality is this—that the problem is the only context available to the people in the problem.

CONTEXTS

Art requires a context: the power of this moment, the moment of the events in the foreground, seen against the accumulation of other moments. The moment in the foreground adheres to the accumulation or rejects it briefly before joining it. How do the manipulators of television deal with this necessity?

1. By the use of false love. The love engendered by familiarity. False love is the Aesthetic of the Hit. What is loved is a hit. What is a hit is loved. The back-and-forth of this establishes a context. It seems powerful. What could be more powerful? The love of tens of millions of people. It's a Hit! Love it! It's a Hit. It loves you because you love it because it's a Hit! This is a powerful context, with a most powerful momentum. But what? It stops in a second. The way love can stop, but quicker. It's not love. There is a distance so great between the lovers that no contact is ever made that is not an abstract contact.

2. By the use of abandoned shells. Pepper dresses up like a cop. Pepper dresses up like a hooker. Pepper has to dress up like a cop to dress up like a hooker. Now This. It's about cowboys! It's about doctors! It's about cowboys who want to become doctors. Or lawyers! Or *young lawyers*. Or girls who want to dress up like lawyers or like a city lawyer coming to the frontier who finds that the law isn't what it seems to be when he finds out *Jenny's blind*.

3. By the use of ad-hoc contexts. Just for the moment. We're here together, in a little house. It makes such good sense. But just for a moment. We're playing "Password"! Do you remember when we played "Password"? Do you remember Johnny? Yes, you do. When he squirted whipped cream on Burt Reynolds, into his trousers? Remember that? Now This.

PROBLEMS

They merge. They mate. They are seen in different combinations. The city lawyer who comes to the frontier and finds that the law isn't what it seems to be

inhabits an abandoned hovel remaining from the time when popular entertainment dealt with history or a gloss on history, with adult experience or a gloss on adult experience. Why is he in that hovel? Because the program needs some little bit of organization or it will fall apart before the commercial break. The best organization is false love. Loving Mork from Ork is the best way to get to the commercial, but it's hard. *You can't get them to love just anyone.* You can't get people to believe that they already love just anyone. You can't get them to believe that everyone else is already loving just anyone. You have to start with what they do feel and tease it toward love. *Interest* first, novelty, skin-popping little bits of abandoned reality, building a little house out of that until it's comfortable. Then bring the comfort to the surface. "You're so comfortable! It's almost like love!" It's almost like something you remember. But not the negative side of what you remember. Just the part you liked. Not the boring parts. Remember, he's a doctor only because you like a doctor. He's a lawyer because you like a lawyer; of course, you also don't like a lawyer, so we left those parts out. Not completely out. An edge of what you don't like in a lawyer, but he's going to find that the law isn't what it seems to be, he's going to find out that the law is more like what *you* think it is. He's going to learn that the law is warm and human and caring, because Jenny's *blind*. Wearing shreds of abandoned adulthood, moving through a landscape of ill-remembered history, piecing little bits of reality together, this ill-remembered shard together with that one, the city lawyer encounters something very contemporary in its glow—a problem. A person with a problem. Notice how it is, how it's changed. Melodrama from the beginning of time has shown the orphaned and the blind and the lame. Melodramas have shown the pathos in the condition of these people, and in their loneliness. The important moment has been this: the orphan peeking through the window at the happy family together around the fire. The problem of the melodrama has been this: to bring the child into the circle around the fire. The circle exists, the fire exists, the child exists; the only question is whether circumstances will allow the child to be reconciled with the community. In the television story, which is not a melodrama but a momentary fabric from outer space, with no direct connection to even those easy aspects of human perception upon which the melodrama played—in the television story, *the lonely child creates the circle*. The affliction spins the context. To a problem, like blindness or drug addiction or

cancer, to a simple state of trouble—to that state there adheres more reality than adheres to the ragged patching of abandoned realities that costume the city lawyer on the frontier. This is not to say that television producers have foolishly abandoned the productive modes of melodrama. No, no. If they worked—the modes of melodrama—they would be used. It is, rather, that very little interest any longer adheres to the accumulation of realities represented by the words "city," "lawyer," and "frontier," so far have they been debased, while the power of the idea of *affliction* has increased.

Each new birth of reality, however deformed, can be exploited in its turn. Movies are best at this. Movies are the gloss on television, and on the world created by television. To the extent that they comment on the blemishes rising to the surface of the world created by television, they are big movies. "Apocalypse Now" is not so much a movie about the horrors of Vietnam as it is a movie about the world created by television. "The Exorcist" and a hundred other movies openly admit the horror of the American cold childhood. Movies like "Jaws" and "Animal House" and "Star Wars" are powerful because they operate within a warm childishness, and thus constitute a release from the cold tease of television.

MAGAZINES IN THE AGE OF TELEVISION

Magazines are based on agreements. Some of these agreements are simple: "This magazine will report on events in the world of tennis." Some of these agreements appear for a moment to be simple but are not: "This magazine will report on events in the world of tennis but will but will but will but will do more." In the second instance, you look at the agreement and you see simple words: "report" and "tennis." The rest is hard to follow. There is a modification, a little dance, and a promise. It is seductive, possibly, and a little nervous. What is the real agreement to which the reader is asked to subscribe?

Maybe it is this: "This magazine will appear to report on events in the world of tennis but will in fact strive to make the reader envy and seek to emulate a certain group of people, who will be made to appear to be at ease in the world of tennis." Maybe it is even this: "This magazine will seek to make its readers uncomfortable by

the calculated use of certain icons associated with tennis, so that the readers will turn, for comfort, to the products advertised in our pages and buy them."

To edit a magazine that seeks to report, objectively, on events in the world of tennis is not ambitious, perhaps, but it is not ungenerous. The editors will share with their readers some knowledge that the readers do not possess. The transaction is straightforward: money and attention from the reader; knowledge from the editors. If the transaction is completed successfully, month after month, year after year, a beneficial thing will occur: a rhythm and a trust will be established between the editors and the readers, and both groups will begin to bring more to the exchange than they did at the start, which is to say that each will bring the history of the relationship to the relationship as it unfolds. For the editors, the gift of history will be the natural formation of a certain authority; for the readers, the gift will be the comfort of trust. Nothing like this will occur in the case of the magazine based on a deceptive or convoluted agreement. In this case, no natural context will grow, because the nature of the real transaction cannot be revealed without endangering the context of false authority which the editors have sought to establish.

There are very few simple magazines now; that is, very few magazines that seek to establish a simple, honorable agreement with the reader. It has been some time since there has been a *simple fashion magazine*, for instance—one in which the wearing of certain clothes by certain people has been of any importance. Instead, what has been going on for some time is that what there is in a fashion magazine is something to do with the idea of the possible existence of approval and disapproval adhering to clothes, in an abstract way that shifts and runs before the reader with a completely confusing result. What has been going on for some time is that what a fashion magazine advances is not the idea that there is one interesting thing to do or wear but the idea that there are a hundred and one possibilities existing together in a context that is never described, so that what shifts is *not the clothes in the foreground*

(which was what shifted before) *but the background itself*, which is never shown, because it is shifting in a way that the editors cannot possibly describe but that they pretend to know, because that is what their effort has been founded on—that they do know it. This has been going on for some time, and yet fashion magazines have been more successful than ever, until they have approached the context of a Hit, in which they are advertised in because they are advertised in.

Duplicity is surrounded by a nervous strength. That is its charm. The charm lasts for just a moment, but it does last for a moment and is powerful in that moment. A slot machine is interesting, for example, and a con man spinning a story. These things create a context. It's like *home*, but just for a moment. Little windows. The possibilities are cherries, bells, other things, but no things other than the ones that are there. It is comfortable. But the comfort goes away quickly. A man approaches on the street, and then a woman. They are attentive. They have a story. Attentiveness is a comfort. The context of a story is seductive. Is it greed that draws one on? Possibly. But there are a hundred ways to be greedy. Of the ways to be greedy, surely *shrewdly* is the best. But it is not acting shrewdly to put one's hope in a slot machine or in two strangers. What is it? Acting gullibly? Possibly. Yet this is not a time in which there is much gullibility or innocence or trust straight from the country. Indeed, everyone is agreed that it is a time of grim sophistication. But the times are good for gambling and for strangers on the road. Why should that be? Possibly because con games offer a kind of sense, a kind of context, a kind of home. The kind of home we have begun to think of *as* home.

What begins to appear is a hunger for authority—but authority of a particular kind. Authority that requires submission—but just for a minute. Authority that gives a sense of home—but just for a minute. It is an authority that wants to give you something—but not right now. *We can't do it right now. It will take a while before we can, but it will be great when we can, and we can because you can, because we need a little*

more and you have a little more; that's it—just a little more from you, then you can have it all!

It begins to appear that a magazine, instead of depending for its success on the successful completion of a straightforward transaction, can depend on the energy generated in the reader by *noncompletion*. It begins to appear that, provided the magazine is skillfully run, it will do no harm if the reader comes to suspect that he is involved in a transaction that he does not fully understand. It may be that occasional glimpses into the ambiguity of his position will serve to *fascinate* him, and that his sense that a transaction has been incomplete will lead him to continue to look at the magazine with interest. It may be that the success of certain magazines *depends upon* the ability of the editors successfully to stimulate doubt, to create an atmosphere of unsureness. This is not easy. No powerful accomplishment is easy. It's not easy to get a woman to withdraw money from the bank and give it to a stranger; it's not easy to get fifty million people to think of Suzanne Somers as a beautiful young woman. In life, every powerful accomplishment is hard. Just because it's not worth doing doesn't mean it won't go wrong.

GOSSIP

In August, 1976, the magazine *Esquire* (before it became *Esquire Fortnightly*, which is what it was before it became merely *Esquire* again) published an issue with this announcement on the cover:

Gossip So Hot We Had to Seal the Pages

Inside the magazine, beginning at page 59, there was a section dealing with the subject of gossip and gossip-writing which required that the reader take some instrument to an uncut page before he could read what the editors of *Esquire* had arranged to tell him. On the cover page of the "sealed" section, there was a photograph of a sleek young woman who wore a red dress with a dotted line down the middle, and the same motif (the dotted line) appeared at the edge of the page that had been "sealed." Instructions on this page read:

> Come and get it, America! If you are not home, take this magazine home. Then take a knife and cut very neatly along the perforated edge at right. Inside are fourteen pages of what everybody's talking about. Don't peek into the pages from top or bottom. Nobody likes a snoop.

It was not difficult to cut the "sealed" page, and it was very easy to quickly read what was inside. What was more difficult was to find the purpose of the effort. Was it a section of real gossip? Was the section critical of gossip? Was it critical of the process of exploiting gossip? Was it finding fun in gossip or in the possibility of exploiting gossip or in the possibility of criticizing the exploitation of gossip? The section denied nothing, admitted nothing. It was lightly here at one moment and there at another. Within the section, there were a thousand small foreground figures moving in confusion against a shifting background. First, there was a list. *Esquire*, in all its incarnations, has liked to avail itself of lists. Lists of funny things. Lists of little pieces of funny things. Lists of things that sound funny when they're juxtaposed with other things. Lists of names that create an effect. Lists of names that create an effect when they're put next to other names or to funny things or to things that might be funny or might be serious. Lists that make use of funny categories or unexpected categories, or categories that sound funny or unexpected when they're juxtaposed with certain things that might be funny or might be serious or might get hold of a nerve. This list seemed to be critical of gossip at some moments:

A Terrible Idea.
Whose Time Has Come.
People magazine.

An Even Worse Idea
Whose Time Has Come
National Enquirer

At other moments, the list seemed to be quite straightforward in its interest in parsing the world of the privileged, as when it named restaurants favored by privileged people in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. At one moment, the compilers contrived a category of "Gossips Posing as Journalists," and they implied that it was not a good thing to be a gossip posing as a journalist; yet revealed through the page like a rash rising through the flesh was the probability that the compilers were themselves gossips posing as journalists. *I'm a lady and I'm going to list all the different kinds of whores. There's this whore and that whore. Don't you love whores? There's this whore and that whore and this one who pretends to be a lady. Isn't that funny? Aren't ladies dumb? But I'm a lady. Are you sure I'm a lady? Of course I'm a lady. I'm a lady because I know what a whore does. I know the way a whore walks into the Beverly Hills Hotel. Don't you love the Beverly Hills Hotel? Don't you love the way they know me at the Beverly Hills Hotel? Don't you love the way you feel when you don't know if I like you or not? Don't you love the way you feel when you don't know if you want to be a whore or not? Would you like to be a whore? Would you like to have me arrange for you to be a whore? Am I arranging it now?*

So it is possible that the benefits of history—which are manifested in the growth of context and in the proper sense of background and foreground—are not available at the moment, because no one now wants to make himself foolish by pretending to know what a background might be or what might constitute a context.

MAGAZINES IN THE AGE OF TELEVISION

There is very little gossip now. This is thought to be an age of gossip, but that is because people know that it is a small time and they assume that the small things they hear discussed are gossip because they feel, correctly, that the things they hear and want to hear and insist on hearing are beneath history. What is not realized is that the age is beneath gossip, too—that most of what is spoken of as gossip cannot

aspire to that title but is, rather, synthetic talk, contrived to meet a supposed need for talk, as television programs are contrived to meet a supposed need for entertainment.

Gossip depends on violation. If it does not provide a sense of violation, it does not exist. When gossip involves a high violation, it comes close to being history. If the violation rests on a simple human impulse that would not be remarked on in an ordinary human being but is perceived as a violation because of the very high station of the figure who is revealed as possessing it, it will overpower the public imagination. The romance between Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson was the source of the best gossip of this century. The gossip had a foreground of violation and a background of dignity, and the violation was an ordinary action. And also this: the story gave form to the powerful urge that flowed into this century from the nineteenth century and is only now beginning to recede—the urge to shed any context perceived as inhibiting and in conflict with the possibility of personal satisfaction. And also this: the story gave form to the ambiguity of motives adhering to any transaction that involves the shedding of a powerful context, for no one doubted that it was the context of kingship which attracted Mrs. Simpson to her husband. And also this: the story gave form to the question of the real condition of contexts supposedly powerful, for no one doubted that Edward VIII found in his relationship with Mrs. Simpson a context more powerful and more necessary than the context of British history, of which he was the manifest representative.

It is recognized that the magazine *People* is an important contemporary magazine. It is sometimes criticized as purveying *gossip*. It does not purvey gossip. Nor do most "gossip columns" purvey gossip (with its attendant sense of violation)—not in the way that Walter Winchell once did, for example. Instead, *People*, like most of the efforts in print that reflect its concern with celebrities, provides an ad-hoc context within which may be placed, each week, certain scraps of synthetic talk which have been judged to have the power to reinforce the ad-hoc context so that the ad-hoc context may, for a moment, seem to exist. What is the function of the synthetic talk enclosed within the ad-hoc context of *People*? It is to unite, for a moment, the two remaining grids in American life—the intimate grid and the grid of two hundred million. This is achieved by discussing the intimate life of celebrities who have their home in the

grid of two hundred million and by raising up to national attention certain experiences of Americans as they live, lonely, in the grid of intimacy. A subsidiary activity is to report on events taking place within certain eccentric contexts (like the context of an odd sporting event) or to report on quite straightforward events (in the world of science or medicine, for instance) as though they had taken place within an eccentric context. All this is, of course, within the mode of the television talk program —the most effective of all ad-hoc contexts. It is difficult to translate into print. How is the translating done? By skill, first of all, and then through the evocation of a voice, a *breath* of a voice—not loud enough to be heard but with sufficient force to be felt in the ear. What is the nature of the voice? It is the voice of American assurance. Assurance of a kind. Of a kind of sense of history. It is the voice, reduced to a whisper, of the magazine *Life* as it was under Henry Luce.

It is the idea of *People* to treat its material as if it were history and, what is more, as if it were the history of a happy period. Thus, the self-loathing induced by the sense of intrusion that accompanies a surfeit of *gossip* is overcome. Also the awkward question occasioned by a surfeit of gossip; Where is the other side of this gossip? Where is the dignity that this is meant to peck at? When the gossip has no balance, when the intruder feels that the figures discussed have no life apart from their life in gossip, then there is an urge to turn away: not because of the influence of restraint (although that may be independently at work) but because the reader comes to feel the reality of the situation—that the cost of the transaction is being deducted from his own shred of dignity, and not from some public figure's ample store. Gossip is small, shameless history. It sets out to tell the trivial about the great or about those connected to the great. It thrives on awkwardness (that was the essential appeal of the Windsor gossip: the endless awkwardness of it), because it assumes dignity somewhere. "Somewhere else, you're getting a different story," gossip says, with a knowing look, "but this is what you wanted to know." *People* does not assume that you're getting a different

story elsewhere. *People* does not assume dignity or powerful history, nor does it assume that the figures it is writing about are actually very important.

People does not develop celebrities or announce them or help them up. The figure on the cover is someone so well known that that person can give a little sense of home. That the figure is often bereft, himself, of a sense of home is ignored at first and then is exploited if the exploitation promises to give us some comfort. So Farrah is a story, and Farrah having a problem is a story, and Farrah talking about her problem is a story. Approval or disapproval of Farrah is not a story; Farrah's talent or lack of talent is not a story; what Farrah has done or left undone is not a story. The only story is in the movement of Farrah's energy and the question of its magnitude. Is Farrah's energy so vast that it is undeniable? Have we given her so much that we can take comfort in the vastness of what we have given? The question has to do with something that is hidden, of course, But it's a different secret. Nothing to do with violation. Does Farrah do what we do? We know that she does. Farrah doesn't stand on her dignity. Not for a second. Nothing she does can give us a sense that she has violated herself. We don't wonder about that. We wonder if she *exists*. And if she knows that we wonder if she exists. And if it hurts when she feels that we wonder if she exists. That's what we wonder. Just that.

It was the habit of *Life* to offer different covers in different categories but always with this idea: that there was in the possession of the editors a sense of the variety of American life and American history to which they had agreed to give the reader access. Sometimes the cover showed a man of history, a general or a politician, and the sense conveyed was that this man was a man well known to the editors—especially, of course, to Henry Luce. In Luce publications, the world of eminent men of history had a particular flavor during the years immediately following the Second World War. In my mind, it is the flavor of Mr. Luce's house in Greenwich. The flavor of a small table, perhaps, on which there is a sterling cigarette box engraved with the

name of an eminent man. Grand but *easy*. It was Mr. Luce's grace, during the years of his greatest influence in America, to bestow on his magazines, especially *Time and Life*, a sense of easy history. The reader felt elevated, in a way, and was encouraged to think, Yes, indeed, history was difficult, and, yes, problems were hard to solve, and, yes, stakes were very high, and, yes, decisions in this context must be very hard to make. But he was encouraged to find it all very simple, too. It was as though Mr. Luce had made an effort to show a person the most advanced mathematical system and then immediately made an effort to reassure the person that what he had seen was all based on the simple arithmetic he already knew.

Life also, very often, published covers that drew on the energy of a more accessible celebrity. It is instructive to compare these covers with covers of *People* issued on a corresponding day some years later. On January 8, 1979, *People's* small cover lines were

Rock's Little Richard: from sin to salvation

How old is man?
Ask Richard Leakey

Sybil's shrink diagnoses a rapist with 10 personalities
Body Snatchers prey. Brooke Adams

The large cover line was

It's. SUPERMAN!

The photograph on the cover was of the actor Christopher Reeve in a Superman costume. The explanatory text under the photograph was:

And it's Chris Reeve
in the cape because
McQueen was too fat,
Stallone too Italian,
Redford too expensive
and Eastwood too busy

In addition, the cover gave the date and the price of the magazine (seventy-five cents), and it carried that ugly little black mark that appears on magazines now as an aid to retailers.

Life of January 8, 1951, had a photograph of a young woman, the date, the price (twenty cents), and the phrase "Circulation Over 5,200,000." The cover line, in small print under the photograph of the young woman, was

STARLET JANICE RULE

When the two magazines are placed side by side, there are obvious differences between them. The photograph on the cover of *Life* is black-and-white. The photograph on the cover of *People* is in color. *People* is eight and a quarter by ten and three-quarters inches. *Life* is ten and a half by fourteen inches. *People's* cover is filled with copy, mentioning many names. *Life's* cover mentions only one. The tone of *People's* copy is friendly. The tone of *Life's* simple cover line is austere. But the important difference is, of course, that the name on the cover of *Life* is not a very famous name. The graphic design of the two magazines emphasizes the difference here, which is a difference in stress on what the foreground of the magazine is and what the background is. The issue of *Life* for January 8, 1951, like all its issues at that period, had a cover with a *frame*. There was a strong red band, one and a half inches wide, at the bottom, and, at upper left, a strong red rectangle, two and an eighth inches by four and an eighth inches, enclosing the name *Life*, which was shown as strong white space against the red. This design made it clear that the magazine constituted a background against which, week by week, different foreground figures would appear. It also made it clear that this constant background was something of more weight than any particular foreground it might enclose. In the *Life* of January 8, 1951, there was no sense that Starlet Janice Rule outweighed the institution of *Life* in the American context. Rather, the reverse. There was a sense that the editors of *Life* had arrived at a certain authority over the American context and had decided to grant, for a week, the favor of their emphasis to a thing chosen, by them, almost at random. The favor might be granted to a girl identified (on the cover of the issue dated August 20, 1951, only as "400 Meter Swimming Champion," for instance, or to

an unknown woman called "Beba" Spradling (on the cover of the issue dated April 2, 1951), who was on the cover because she had something to do with something that the editors of *Life* had decided to call the "South American Riviera."

The cover of *People*, by contrast, is without a frame. It is a foreground that suddenly appears—like a shout, or like teasing whispers building to a shout—and then vanishes. Its attempt is to create a foreground so powerful by being intimately connected to what one already loves that one picks up the magazine to find out the secret of one's own affections. Every cover of *People* says the same thing: "This is what you love. Who can you be?"

The cover of *People* dated April 2, 1979 (corresponding to "South American Riviera/'Beba' Spradling" in *Life*), read like this:

> Kate Millet's battle for women's rights in Iran
>
> Ronstadt's protegee Nicolette Larson
>
> Wall-to-wall celebs at Phyllis George's second marital flyer
>
> Steve Allen's son in a cult of God & Love

The main cover line was

> Who will cop the OSCAR?

The principal photograph on the cover was of Warren Beatty, with smaller photographs of Jon Voight and Robert De Niro. The three actors were shown as they had appeared in movie roles. Warren Beatty was in a sweatsuit, and Robert De Niro in jungle camouflage; Jon Voight was in a wheelchair.

The cover of *People* dated August 20, 1979 (corresponding to "400 Meter Swimming Champion" in *Life*), read like this:

> WOODSTOCK REVISITED: WHERE ARE THEY NOW!
>
> TV's giddiest guest, Charles Nelson Reilly
>
> The woman who checks 15,000 consumer items for your safety
>
> High seas violence to save the whales

The cover photograph was of Farrah Fawcett. The cover line was

> WHY FARRAH SPLIT

The cover copy was

> "I am confused and frightened," she says of her separation from Lee Majors, "but I'm determined to survive."

I talked to Richard Stolley, the managing editor of *People*, in his office, in the Time-Life Building, in New York.

"There is a difference in the kind of attention we give to the cover and the kind of attention we give to the rest of the magazine," he said. "We are a reportorial magazine, and we would like to keep it that way. When someone criticizes *People*, I ask, 'Do you read it?' There is a lot of good writing in this magazine, and a lot of good reporting. But we depend on single-copy sales—eighty-five per cent of our circulation is in single-copy sales—and we are not a service magazine, like *TV Guide*, for instance, so the cover is crucial. We have developed criteria for cover material, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. First is timing. We put someone on the cover when certain outside forces are at work. A hit record. A hit movie.

“Best of all, a television special or a major news story. It is important that the attention that that person is getting not be exclusively the attention of *People*. It must be a coming together of forces. Recognizability, of course, is a factor. Attractiveness. And the cover should not be too much like last week’s. Obviously, the forces we need do not always converge in exactly the right way. We do not have much control, really. In certain ways, the situation is maddeningly diffuse.

“For covers, the right moment is later rather than sooner, unless there is a real event going on. That’s a difference from the way we worked on *Life*, for instance. The old way was ‘Let’s get it on the cover and be first.’ Now you wait until the peak and maybe a little bit past it. Our ‘Amityville Horror’ cover is an example of how we create covers. ‘The Amityville Horror’ was the surprise hit movie of the summer. We didn’t create the hit; in fact, from our point of view the movie had no redeeming value. The movie wasn’t that good, and the story behind it seems to be a hoax, but it grossed forty million dollars in the first month and we decided we could take advantage of its popularity. Now, we’d already done a story on Margot Kidder, the star, so we didn’t feel that it was appropriate to do that again. So we did this. We did a story on ‘ “The Amityville Horror”: Hype, Hoax, and Heroine,’ taking advantage of the fact that the movie was an incredible piece of flackery. Then we held it for a while. Each week, I’d look at the movie figures. I’d ask, ‘Is it still building? Is it still growing?’ Then, when I felt that the movie was beginning to collide with the new TV season, I ran the story. There was no point in holding it any longer, because the new TV season usually provides us with some covers.

“Now, the Farrah cover—‘Why Farrah Split’—was the first Farrah cover we’d had in a while. We had felt that she was beginning to pale. We laid off, because she didn’t seem to be working. People were sick of her. But then we heard that she was saying that she was trying to be a more liberated woman, and that added interest, and then when she left Majors that added enough interest to justify a cover. In a case like that, we have to have a face-to-face interview. If we can’t get it, we will decline to do the story. A story like this is a kind of comeback story; it involves a certain expiation on her part. There is a certain technique here—for us and for the subject. The smarter celebrities can use a *People* interview to keep from slipping.

“In a way, we are very dependent on certain celebrities and on the movie studios and the networks—particularly the networks. There are only certain people we want, and they know it, and we know they know it. When you get beyond that small group into marginal people, you have problems of one kind or another. So we have to surrender a certain control at times. But we are able to determine the timing. We have fought for that. For instance, the network always wants us to do the story the week before the show, to build audience. We want to do it the week of the show, to build sales. We’ve won that one.”

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THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

The work of television is to establish false contexts and to chronicle the unravelling of existing contexts; finally, to establish the context of no-context and to chronicle it.

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

Soon it will be achieved. The lie of television has been that there are contexts to which television will grant an access. Since lies last, usually, no more than one generation, television will re-form around the idea that television itself is a context to which television will grant an access.

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

On cable: Flo Kennedy talks to Gary Indiana about Gary Indiana’s new movie. In Gary Indiana’s new movie, Gary Indiana performs a sexual act while an actress tap-dances on a driveway.

Channel 2: “Newsbreakers.”

Channel 2: Promotional Announcement. Made-for-television: A girl explores the world of porn when her sister is killed.

Cable: "Love for Lydia." Alex drowns himself.

News: Iranians continue to hold Americans hostage. Bazargan government folds.

Cable: A man interviews his son about his sex life.

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

A man interviews his twelve-year-old son about his sex life. Father and son agree that the most important issue is *communication*.

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

A man interviews his twelve-year-old son about his sex life. In a state of weakness, the intimate grid imitates the mode of the grid of two hundred million, which it perceives as powerful. What could be more powerful than a talk between a father and a son? Many things. An *interview*, for instance, or something on videotape, or a discussion invoking the work of experts who have turned their attention to how a father might talk to a son. Pathetic, of course. It is as though, their little legs and feet gone into atrophy, people began, by the use of ingenious adapter kits, to fashion automobiles for use in the undertaking of chores around the house, all the while talking about "the need for transportation within the family."

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

As television goes into panic, the truth of what it is will rise to the surface. *CBS and You. TV 6 and You. WRGB, Schenectady. Together: TV 6 and You*. It makes it clear. Nothing else exists. Just CBS and you. No city. No state. All those places where the series take place: *It's Boulder! It's Chicago! It's Indianapolis: Hoosiers!* All those

places are *lies*. People will panic and want more in the way of company. A call on the telephone to a friend on public-access cable, for instance.

THE CONTEXT OF NO-CONTEXT

Television has problems with its programming, because the frame of all programs on television is television—nothing else—but, to get through the day, frames other than the frame-of-just-television have to be used. Baby-play backgrounds. The West. A brave pioneer family pushes across the continent. Now This. But not all programs fight it. There is a superior candor in certain places. There has always been a candor in game shows and talk programs and daytime stories. Daytime stories are just television loneliness. Talk programs are just the television context of no-context. Game shows have come to admit that they refer only to themselves. ("For ten thousand dollars and a chance to join the one-hundred-thousand-dollar playoff, according to what you just said, what did you say?") Very rarely are contestants asked about the old history, the history before demographics became the New History. When this older, more distant world is invoked, it is made obvious that this world is mystifying and too difficult to be comfortable with. One game-show host asked a question about the First World War and then described the First World War as "certainly a military event of considerable importance." He was assuring his audience that the First World War *was popular in its own day*.

AN INTEREST IN HISTORY

People understand that certain things are "healthy" and certain other things are "not healthy." Recently, they have come to understand that certain things are "healthy" and certain other things are "decadent." To many people, a move to the country, the cultivation of a garden, the installation of a wood stove, by a man who had lived in the city and was driven nearly mad there, would seem "healthy." Similarly, to many people a stage show during which a group of young people damaged themselves and then destroyed a car would seem "not healthy," and possibly "decadent." But certainly it could be argued that the reverse was true—that the man

who had moved to the country had abandoned any hope of having a share in the public culture of his time, while the young people who were damaging their flesh were involved in a legitimate attempt to form an aristocracy.

AN INTEREST IN HISTORY

What characterizes the culture of those generations born during and after the Second World War is, first of all, their dominance. Since the history of their time has been demographics, and not history, what they have been and what they have wanted has been the history of their time. Do people wonder why high prices are paid for Mickey Mouse watches? It is because of a hunger for history.

AN INTEREST IN HISTORY

So when popularity is the measure things that were popular in the past can give a comfort. This works two ways. Very different. Not to be confused. But arising out of a single cause: the hunger for history. First, the purchase of objects from one's childhood. Second, the purchase of objects from someone else's adulthood. The first accounts for the Mickey Mouse watch. The second accounts for the rich young man who has had his duplex apartment arranged to resemble the public spaces of the Normandie. It is in an interest in *style* that an interest in hierarchy and history is first expressed among people trained to think of hierarchy and history as expressions of preference concerning trivial matters.

ADOLESCENCE

The culture, for reasons having to do with the working of the marketplace, did not make available any but the grimmest, most false-seeming adulthood. Childhood was provided. An amazing, various childhood, full of the most extraordinary material possibilities. That was it. Nothing more. Just childhood. An adolescence had to be improvised, and it was. That it *was* improvised—mostly out of rock-and-roll music—so astounded the people who pulled it off that they quite

rightly considered it the important historical event of their times and have circled around it ever since.

PARODY

Parody. Parody is very popular. Parody is an art form for children who have had imposed upon them a meaningless iconography or a trivial iconography or an iconography of excrement.

DEFACEMENT

When people grow older, they come to be responsible for what they know. If they then continue to refer to an iconography of excrement, they have to embrace excrement as worthy of their attention, and direct the enthusiasm of their fellows to excrement—not just to the discovery of the truth about excrement but to excrement. This is the movement from the excrement-childhood of television to a parody of television, to "Pink Flamingos" and "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," or to the punk-art forms of excrement.

DEFACEMENT

Punk art is allied to what an extraordinary prisoner might do in his cell. Not ask for parole, for instance, or bone up on his case, but etch crazy feathery patterns into certain secret places. There's arrogance in it, and pride, too.

DEFACEMENT

Much advertising now lets the children in on the joke, and many American babies are coming to loathe the joke.

DEFACEMENT

Babies are babies, but they know when they are despised. But what if there is evidence, very powerful evidence, that the *way to comfort* is to join the body of the despised?

"You said . . ."

"Our survey said . . ."

"You said . . ."

"Our survey said . . ."

"You said . . ."

"Our survey said . . ."

You said . . ."

"Our survey said . . ."

•

NO AUTHORITY

Questions. "What is your name?" is a question. "Do you know your name?" is a question. "How many times have I asked you a question?" is a question. "How many spots, physical spots, has your boss kissed on you?" is a question asked on television. It is possible to get it right. That is the trick of American con games. *You make it easy for people to think they've got it right*. All you have to do is give the answer the man gave. The man said, perhaps, "I've kissed eleven spots, physical spots, on her," and if the secretary guesses the number he said she wins a point. If the wife guesses

the same number of spots, physical spots, that the man said, then she wins a point. They can get it right if they try. He has got it right by definition.

NO AUTHORITY

The important moment in the history of television was the moment when a man named Richard Dawson, the "host" of a program called "Family Feud," asked contestants to guess what a poll of a hundred people had guessed would be the height of the average American woman. Guess what they've guessed. Guess what they've guessed the *average* is.

"You said . . ."

"Our survey said . . ."

PEOPLE

It is the superior candor of *People* to acknowledge that this is the process of history now. More ambitious magazines, or magazines descended from more ambitious magazines and continuing the names of more ambitious magazines—these magazines have to continue a dance in which they can attempt to obscure their loss of authority and confidence, their loss of the *active* principle. Magazines like *Esquire* and *Vogue* and *Time* and *Newsweek* have it as their function to dispense authority of one kind or another, but they know now that they have no authority apart from the demographic makeup of their audience. Consider it: All transactions involving authority involve an attempt to alleviate the sense of loneliness that is a condition of life. But when all partners in a transaction are passive, when the active principle consists only in describing the characteristics of the passive principle and playing on them, then no transaction has taken place, and the sense of isolation implicit in *no transaction* is increased, and everyone knows, deeply knows, that the attempted connection (which was coded in the syntax of success) has failed and left a dangerous residue, like an obstruction in the throat, which will make the next attempt much more difficult to complete, or even to fake.

The transactions of the American marketplace are very often criticized, but almost always what is addressed is the question of fairness. What if this were abandoned, perhaps only for a moment, and another question were asked: "Does this transaction add to my dignity or detract from it?" Or a still simpler question: "Does this transaction *exist?*" When people are involved in transactions that do not exist, it is not only their common sense that is put in danger but also their imagination. Indeed, imagination faces the larger danger, because in such a transaction common sense is ignored but the imagination is misused and debased.

CON

The con man does give you something. It is a sense of your own worthlessness. A good question to ask: "Does this event exist without me?" If the answer is no, leave. You are involved in a con game. When the con man tells you that he is about to present you with "a wide range of options," ask for one thing he will absolutely stand behind. Or beat him up. If he has some authority, you have a right to see what it is. If he is only describing the authority he senses in you, then do as you please.

The idea of choice is easily debased if one forgets that the aim is to *have chosen* successfully, not to be endlessly choosing.

1951: "Life" at the Beginning of the Age of Television

SOUTH AMERICAN RIVIERA

"BEBA" SPRADLING

What does "South American Riviera" mean? What does " 'Beba' Spradling" mean? What does it mean, the way she smiles, shows a smile of teeth? What does it mean, what it says on the cover?

20 CENTS

APRIL 2, 1951

The insouciance of the rich, first of all. Their juxtaposition of steel mills and baby talk. How little care they take! How little care they need to take! Self-enclosed but, in a way, accessible. Through their flaws or through their baby talk. All those steel mills turned into a smile. And baby talk. You don't know her. Never heard of her. Spradlings have lived and died and you never cared. But you know who she is. It's the Riviera. Not the old Riviera, the one we know, the one we know about and want to know more about—but only under certain circumstances. No. This is the *new* Riviera. The South American Riviera. There is a whole new Riviera. Better, possibly. It *exists*. But no one knew. But people know what a Riviera is, and what novelty is, and what a pretty girl is, and that rich people call each other baby names, because to one another they are just little babies, although they own steel mills and automobile factories and ranches running the width of the pampas. This is not quite history, because no one claims that anything in particular has happened this week (or any other) on the novel South American Riviera. But it makes use of a saddened, vaguely remembered sense of what history was. It evokes a place in history, and it announces, without excuse, a person who exists in a context, her own—the context of a South American Riviera—which continues on its own, without reference to its popularity among the mass of Americans.

It's not quite history. But it's almost reporting. There is, almost, a place known as the South American Riviera. There is, almost, a figure of importance called Beba Spradling. But not quite. And it's not quite reporting. Because they're quite interchangeable, a person has to notice—this South American Riviera, and this woman called Spradling—with a lot of other things. The message is presented with a certain authority, a little, self-assured baby voice of authority: "This is the South American Riviera. You really ought to know about the South American Riviera. This is Beba Spradling. You ought to know about Beba. Don't you want to know Beba?

Know about Beba? We can help. She won't fight." But it's all a joke, because it's only a little general envy that's invoked, a small chip of envy and loneliness with Beba's face on it. No need for Beba. It could be Bobo. Sometimes it *is* Bobo. It could be Baba or Baby, or anyone. And it could be a new Riviera in South America or in any place at all with the right distance. It's not history, because nothing has happened, and it's not reporting, because it's no one from nowhere. The territory is loneliness and envy and the promise of access to a sense of ease. The truth, the history, is partly in 20 cents, partly in April 2, 1951. The principal truth is: Circulation over 5,200,000.

ANDREA WHIPS

At one moment early in the nineteen-seventies, at a time when Max's Kansas City had ceased to attract the people who had made its reputation but continued to attract other, newer people, because this reputation had been made, a thin girl named Andrea Feldman, who liked to be called Andrea Whips, used to put on something called "Show Time" in the back room. Andrea Whips was a minor Warhol girl at a bad time for minor Warhol girls, and "Show Time" had about it not just the flatness of diction associated with many Warhol girls but also *frenzy*. Once Andrea Whips had begun "Show Time," it was hard to get her to stop. She used to climb up on a table or a banquette and repeat something over and over. "She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes" was something she repeated. As she chanted, she gave very specific readings to each of the words. At times, she would emphasize "coming;" at other times, "mountain." There was great purpose in her manner. Everyone in the room fed off it. If anyone had asked (as no one did) why she had chosen to stress "coming" during one recitation and "round" during the next, she would not have answered. If anyone had insisted on knowing, she would have answered with a drop-dead look or a scattered gesture. Andrea accompanied her chant with stylized movements. At one point, she would hike up her skirt; at another, perhaps as she was stressing a word—"coming" or "mountain"—she would tip her head to one side and allow that side of her body to relax. In these movements, too, she showed purpose. It was clear that to Andrea Whips at any one moment only one movement and no other, only one emphasis and no other, only one repeated act and

no other had meaning. It was recognized in the back room of Max's that Andrea Whips was psychotic, but everyone knew she was on to something.

THE POINTER *SISTERS*: 1973

The Pointer Sisters were four black women—Ruth, Anita, Bonnie and June—who wanted not to be poor, not to be unknown, not to live in Oakland, California. For a while, they were back-up singers. Then, under the influence of their manager, David Rubinson, they began to sing songs in the style of the forties, in clothes in the style of the forties, in a manner that was Negro rather than black.

One night, they went by car out from San Francisco to a suburban place to see a performance by Josephine Baker, a black woman from St. Louis who wanted not to live in St. Louis, and who in the twenties learned how to embody one aspect of glamour and coquetry, and who, after that had a sustained vogue in France. It was not the idea of the Pointer Sisters to see Miss Baker. A group of white fans had suggested it.

Down the street. Dark night. Certain flashing lights. "CONDOR . . . TOPLESS." Bonnie, looking pretty, said, "I just love to drive down this street. I can't help it. I just love those ladies." Bonnie had a nice fur coat, new. The Pointer Sisters drove right out of town. Things dispersed.

The theatre was like a bunker—something in cement. The Pointer Sisters walked in. Inside, the theatre was like a round room, with a small circular stage at the center. The room was not half full. People were scattered all around—gaps everywhere. Nothing tight. The Pointer Sisters walked past a door in the perimeter of the hall—a little door, a door with a curtain over it. Not a door at all, just something with a curtain. Behind the curtain, Josephine Baker prepared to make her entrance. "Why

did they seat people at the back?" the voice of Josephine Baker asked from behind the curtain.

The Pointer Sisters walked down an aisle covered with a gray substance not much like carpeting—like something to keep the dust down, like something to cover cement. Soon after the Pointer Sisters were seated, the lights went down, and Josephine Baker *ran*—almost ran—to the stage: down the aisle, and over the gray substance, which must have been a pad for a proper rug that had been taken up. Josephine Baker wore a peach-colored costume, tight-fitting and studded with sequins. She looked just like a dream. Several things at once. A star, but that was just the start. Then a *lady*, but that was just the start. Then a lady who knew when not to be a lady, and how to please, and how to have a little moment of this and one of that. Not teasing—*flirting*. Does anyone know the difference? A tease is a con. You press a spot because you know that it can be pressed, and while the sucker is feeling the pleasure or the pain resulting from the pressure, you take something from him. "Do you have the money? Good. Good. She'll be right down. Wait here; she'll be right here." And then, nothing. A flirt doesn't do that. A flirt does a dance within the context of giving pleasure. Referring to this, referring to that. And suddenly, following the references, you find a little surprise. Nothing enormous. Nothing like "Feed on me." Nothing like that. Something small with a bow on it. It's a pleasure. A surprise, and a *gift*.

Reaching the stage, Josephine Baker thrust up her hands in a gesture of exaltation. There was applause from patches of people around the room once they saw that applause was expected.

"Am I thin?" Josephine Baker asked.

Her coquetry dissipated in the round room. Nothing came back. It was a specific coquetry. Once, the line must have been "Am I pretty?" Her features, small and unusual, made it not quite arrogant to ask.

"And it took four or five hours to make myself more or less presentable," she said demurely.

“Why did she say that?” Bonnie Pointer asked.

“She is thin,” Anita Pointer said.

Then Josephine Baker said, “I have an idea. It may be a bad one. You see, I’m being very impolite. I hate to be impolite, but in this great big round room I’m always turning my back on someone.” Then, like a general, like someone who knew what it was to organize a raid on a trench, she gathered everyone in the sad, round theatre into one section of the room and faced that section. Then she said, “Oh, ladies, you are so absolutely divine. You look like flowers out there.” Then she held up a rose. She addressed the rose. “You’re so stately and dignified,” she said. She passed the rose to a man in the front row of the audience and told him to pass the rose around the theatre. Her artifice drained into the room. Her artifice had depended on the effectiveness of certain small collisions—between things archetypically feminine, archetypically masculine, archetypically Negro, archetypically white. Essential to her performance was the idea of violation, and the idea that a violation could produce pleasure, and not damage.

In the round room, no reference had meaning. Josephine Baker referred to Paris as though it would mean a thing, and it didn’t mean a thing. And Florence Mills, and this one and that one. She described a black actor but did not mention him by name. A man in the audience shouted, “Paul Robeson!”

“I didn’t want to mention his name, because I thought you’d forgotten,” Josephine Baker said.

Later, she said, “Thank you for coming and having the *courage* to stay.”

Anita said, “What a sweet remark.”

Later, Anita said, “You have to have more these days. People expect more. It’s not enough just to come out and do a dance.”

“Especially if you’re too old,” Bonnie said.

“She *is* thin,” Anita said.

After about a year, there was a little dip in interest in the Pointer Sisters. Later, it got better. They left David Rubinson and forgot about the idea of the fabulous style of the forties, and it picked up. But for a while there was a slight dip. During this period, they were booked into the Club Harlem in Atlantic City. A big room. Crowded tables, A little idea of the previous vogue adhering to it. The vogue for glamour. That continues in certain black places, the vogue for glamour. In some ways, black people are more ruthless than white people about what they like and whom they like, and the power of fashion is well established among them. But certain vogues are of very long standing—the idea of glamour, for instance. The Club Harlem was one room in which what the Pointer Sisters did made no sense. It made no sense to refer to Negro modes as though Negro modes were new and fresh and amusing. It made no sense to refer to glamour as though glamour were an idea in need of help. It made no sense—that’s all. Civilization went on at the Club Harlem in a more continuous way than it went on in the white world. The Club Harlem represented a real context. In retreat, but still in existence. The fact that the Pointer Sisters had been equipped with a little ad-hoc context, a chimerical background for the foreground of their performance, did nothing to justify their performance from the point of view of the Club Harlem. The Pointer Sisters were unhappy. The juxtapositions that had supported them were gone. They were black women performing for black people in a black club, and no one got the point. “Why did David want us to take a *step backward*?” Bonnie asked.

About this time, I made friends with a black man named Donald. He was a criminal, more or less. He lived in what he called a penthouse. What it was was a room on top of a hotel that was a hotel for whores. In a way, it was a penthouse. It was at the top of the hotel, and there was a ladder up to the roof. In a way, it was just nothing at all. Sometimes Donald talked about his room as if it were a penthouse. Sometimes he talked about it as if it were just nothing at all. He always needed money. He got pieces of money from the whores, although he was not a pimp. On the one hand, he conned money out of them. On the other hand, he ran a lot of errands, and so forth. He would give a whore a line and she would give him some money, so he was on top, but then she might ask him to go and get some cigarettes from the machine in the lobby. He said, "Who I admired when I was coming up were the white gangsters. In the movies. I'd go see any movie about white gangsters." He also said, "You see, the trouble is you can get *con-goofy*. You don't know where the con is anymore in *your own head*."

DRUGS

And then this happened and that happened, and people changed drugs. Marijuana is the drug of breaking continuity; cocaine is the drug that makes a context for people interested in authority. On cocaine, people tell a different kind of story. And people are polite when they ask for it. It's not here? It's not in the next room? Is it, possibly, within fifty blocks? Could you, possibly, make the call? Would that be all right? Shall we go with you? Will you go alone? You're sure you won't mind? Naturally, there is money. That question. Naturally, we share in that. Suddenly, people so pretty, so well dressed, bring out their money, and it turns out that they have twenty dollars. Just that much. Or forty. Just that, and a few dollars for a cab home. What the mugger leaves you—money for a taxi home.

When people take cocaine, they tell stories that have in them an interest in context. They tell stories about a deal, for instance—how one thing is put together with another thing in a way that may result in a movie, or they tell stories about a problem, or a special scene. A thing looms all at once. It isn't there, and then it is there,

complete. It makes sense. Like a problem. A problem makes sense. A disease. A disease can make sense. If it pulls things together into the disease, then it makes a kind of sense.

SWEET BABIES

One of the sweet babies said, "He may have what kids have who have crib death. He was so laid back, this kid, that he stopped breathing. He was so laid back that they had to have a special belt, you know, like a sensor belt, all around him all the time, so that the parents could know."

One of the sweet babies said, "I had a virus and then I never had it again. When you have this, your sinuses expand and expand and expand and expand, until your whole face almost bursts. I had it, and when the nurse came in she looked just like an angel. Then I woke up and she didn't look beautiful at all."

One of the sweet babies said, "I went to an S. & M. club off Fifth Avenue. I couldn't believe it. It was *right off Fifth Avenue*."

One of the sweet babies said, "I thought he was straight with me, until right now. Except, when I went over, I knew that this girl he was seeing had left for the weekend to spend the weekend with someone else; I knew that, and he knew that I knew, and he said that he *understood* that she had to go, and then he said that she *hated* to go, and he said that she was so worried about him that she *filled his icebox* with groceries to last the whole time she was gone. And then he went out to get cigarettes or something and I looked in the icebox and there was just nothing."

One of the sweet babies said, "When I was on the cover of *People*, they chose the worst picture. And then I couldn't read what they wrote. It was confusing. It was *about me*, but it was confusing."

WORLD'S FAIR

When I was twenty years old, and again when I was twenty-one, I worked for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. I did not just work *at* the New York World's Fair, I worked *for* the Fair, which is to say that I worked for Robert Moses. This was the one time in my life I have had any benefit from the network of connections which was supposed to be a feature of my upper-middle-class education. Because I needed a job, I talked to a friend whose father was the mayor of the city, and he talked to his father, and his father mentioned me to someone at the Fair Corporation, and I was given a job as Guide in the Office of the Chief of Protocol at the Fair Corporation, for seventy-five dollars a week.

We had several different kinds of writing paper. Writing paper was a feature of the Fair Corporation. The standard writing paper was so filled with embossed information that it resembled a puzzle. The name of the Corporation, of course. And Mr. Moses' name, of course. And then the name of the division to which the writing paper particularly belonged, and then, perhaps, the name of the person to whom the writing paper belonged. And the word "Unisphere," of course—for the vaguely atomic-looking construction that was the symbol of the Fair—and then a little ® by the word, and a picture of the Unisphere with another ® beside it, and, at the bottom of the page, this sentence, always: "UNISPHERE ® presented by United States Steel." In the years since the Fair, I have often had my pleasure spoiled by a sense of the contract behind the event. I was less easily offended then, but I did dislike the Unisphere writing paper and preferred to use another sort we had, which said merely, "Office of the Chief of Protocol."

It did not bother me, nor did it bother anyone in our office, I think, that people sometimes confused our office with the Office of the Chief of Protocol in Washington. There was even a sense that we had a claim to a superior dignity.

Certainly our standards were very high. We routinely had telephone calls *from* Washington, and we were instructed to say that we arranged Protocol Visits for "Cabinet level and above" only. We referred congressmen and senators to the United States Pavilion, which we regarded as an inferior institution, rather like a consulate. When a daughter of President Johnson came to the Fair, we handled the visit, but otherwise we saw very little of the government in Washington. We did see a number of governors, but this was because governors attended State Days—promotional events arranged by the Corporation to honor states that had agreed to build pavilions. There was a State Day nearly every day, and it was a low-priority event as far as we were concerned, and assignment to State Days was not sought after by the Guides. In fact, we treated state delegations rather shabbily, although we were rarely overtly rude. They were met at the gate, greeted by one of the Assistant Chiefs of Protocol, and then taken out "on the site" by a Guide or two Guides. I do not remember that any member of any state delegation was ever taken to meet Mr. Moses.

We all came to know very quickly not just the hierarchy of possible visitors but also the hierarchy of pavilions. Planning a Protocol Visit thus became a question of matching the level of the visitor with the level of the pavilion. We were very good at this. In arranging State Days, for instance, we had several conflicting imperatives to keep in mind at once, and we weighed them all. The first of these imperatives was our own lack of interest in arranging these visits and a deep dread of being trapped at a meal by a state official who had the mistaken idea that we would want to sample the hospitality of his state. The second was the fact that a State Day delegation was usually very large, and therefore many of the most desirable pavilions would be reluctant to take it. Third, we knew that the visitors could be fooled *just so long*, and would insist on seeing one or two of the most popular exhibits.

We developed a little rhythm and a clever sense of misrepresentation: what could be represented as a good time, what could be represented as an obligation, what could be represented as special treatment, what could be represented as a sense of home. We started with a real treat. Most state delegations were given a *Glide-a-ride* in which to make their visits. A Glide-a-ride was a little motorized people-mover built by the Greyhound Corporation. Then we took them to *Illinois*. The Illinois Pavilion had

several advantages. It was a state pavilion (the only state pavilion one could plausibly visit), so the issue of courtesy could be introduced—one state paying a visit to another state. It featured one of the Walt Disney automatons that were the hit of the Fair. And it was just inside the gate. The best part was, it was so boring and stupid that it was never, never crowded and the Protocol Contact at the Pavilion Guest Relations Office could be counted on to take any number any time.

It wasn't short, the show at the Illinois Pavilion. You could put the state delegation in and have half an hour to yourself. What it saw, the state delegation, while it was in was something almost sadistic in its absurdity. The Illinois people had paid the Walt Disney organization to contrive an automaton to resemble Abraham Lincoln. It was a sombre automaton. The automatons at the General Electric Pavilion gestured and smiled and moved and did this and did that just the way a certain sort of person would, but the Lincoln automaton was less ambitious. He sat there, just the way he does at his great memorial in Washington—in that pose—and then he stood up, and talked and talked, putting forward a pastiche of his great words, and then, at a certain moment, he moved a finger of his right hand in a kind of twitch. Then, at the end, at a time when people in the audience were beginning to retch with boredom, he sat down. The pastiche he was speaking began to take on the form of the Cooper Union address, and he sat down. The sky behind him began to go blood red. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" began to play, and the sky resolved itself into an American flag, and he sat down. It was not so impressive, his sitting down, as it was when he *stood up*. It was the important moment of the show when he stood up. He did it in two movements. He pushed himself forward, head down, and propelled himself out of his chair. Then he raised the top half of his body. He stood. It was poignant that he *could* stand. After I saw this spectacle a few times, I realized that Lincoln was being portrayed *as a cripple*.

We often took state delegations to the Federal Pavilion after their visit to the Illinois Pavilion. This was a little dangerous, as the Federal Pavilion was very boring, but it was just across the way from the Illinois Pavilion and we were able to invoke the official aspect of the visit to make the boredom into a kind of duty. There were three parts to a Protocol Visit to the Federal Pavilion. The indispensable part was signing the book, which was the act of official courtesy. The second part was viewing the exhibits: something that could be done quickly—at a run, if necessary. The third part was taking the ride. The ride was an event that threw people deep into gloom. There were no amusing automatons, no singing dolls. Rather, a tall, narrow seat, something like a pew, moved slowly past a series of movie screens while an imbecile narration poured out from a speaker lodged in the pew at ear level. This narration had to do with American History, and it had a *booming* quality. The syntax was that of Walt Whitman, within a public-relations framework. *America* was made personal in a way that made her sound like a smug bully. "So you conquer a continent, etc." Emerging from this ride, one wanted never to hear another word about America or any event associated with America, and one wanted never to hear again any sentence cast in the historical present. Our office was careful never to send anyone important on this ride. Important guests came and signed the book and looked at the exhibits. Very important guests came and signed the book and left. It was embarrassing sometimes. A well-dressed official attached to the Pavilion would be waiting with the book, and it was embarrassing to bring someone in and an official of the Pavilion waiting and then to leave right away when the Pavilion had expected a longer visit. "Don't you want to take the ride?" the official would ask. He was a grown-up man with a career in the State Department. He was an adult working in the service of the most powerful government on earth, and his pavilion was not popular, and he knew it. After a while, we began to warn our Contact at the Federal Pavilion at the time we made the appointment. "Just the book, I'm afraid."

State delegations went on the ride, however, and by the time they emerged they were likely to be glum. They had been at the Fair for an hour and a half, and they had seen nothing, just nothing. Their special Protocol Treatment had involved them in two pavilions that no informed child would agree to visit. So then, as a treat, we took them to General Motors.

I can remember quite clearly what constituted a standard tour for a person of unquestioned importance: Ford, General Motors, the Vatican, Johnson Wax, and I.B.M. in the morning; lunch at the Spanish Pavilion; General Electric and du Pont in the afternoon. I can remember because I visited these pavilions more than fifty times each summer. I sometimes think that I saw more of them than any other living human being did. There were variations, of course. Johnson Wax and I.B.M. might be in the afternoon and General Electric in the morning. Someone with children (or with a reputation for taking the Global View) might request the Pepsi-Cola Pavilion, where there were hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of tiny dolls singing "It's a Small World" in many, many languages, all at once, like polyglot peepers. Johnson Wax (the most exclusive pavilion) might decline even an important visitor if the timing was wrong, and we would have to suggest the film at the Protestant and Orthodox Pavilion. But generally an important visit consisted of Ford, General Motors, the Vatican, Johnson Wax, I.B.M., General Electric, du Pont, and lunch at the Spanish Pavilion.

Lesser visitors, or delegations of unwieldy size, could not count on a tour of all these pavilions, however. Usually, we could arrange General Motors and Ford (not the V.I.P. lounge, just the ride), but not always. The Guest Relations Departments of General Motors and Ford, while friendly, had been set up with the aim of offering hospitality to automobile dealers, and they were sometimes dubious about the importance of people we recommended to them. They were interested in all forms of standard energy, but exotic titles failed to impress them, and I remember, in particular, having difficulty in arranging the visit of His Holiness Mar Shimun, Patriarch of the East—the leader of a sect of Asian Christians. I was very aggressive, and I inflated His Holiness's importance as far as I dared. "He is the spiritual leader of two hundred million Christians," I said. The Contact at General Motors demurred. I abandoned

the distanced tone we usually adopted. I said, "His Holiness really wants to visit General Motors. He's counting on it." Our Contact said nothing. I said, "You don't have to greet him. Just let him cut the line at the Futurama ride."

I knew what pavilions were important, and I knew what visitors were important. Pavilions that were important were pavilions that were totally persuasive. Pavilions that left no room for doubt. Pavilions that had solved every problem and left no room for doubt. Pavilions that had solved every problem and, from the surplus of what they had, had agreed to supply a sense of the-transaction-as-entertainment. Visitors who were important were important because they were important to Mr. Moses. Congressmen and senators were not particularly important to Mr. Moses, but they might come along on State Days, although those were more for governors. People from England and France were not important to Mr. Moses, because England and France had declined to build pavilions. In fact, people from England and France were the reverse of important to Mr. Moses.

Our building, the Administration Building, which was the seat of authority, was dreary in a certain way. Certain things were available—electric typewriters, for instance, and writing paper, and Touch-Tone phones. But not sunlight. Or very much space. One of the things that were available was a very long hall. You came in the door. Into a little vestibule. In the vestibule (1964 season only), there was a special little instrument that counted down the days until the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Sometimes I came into the vestibule and just stood with this, as you would stand with a friend. It was busy, full of purpose. Then down the long hall. Off to the right was another hall, not quite so long. This led to the International Division, the division of the Fair Corporation which had failed to persuade the governments of France and Germany and Great Britain and the Soviet Union and Canada, for instance, to build pavilions. International was headed by Governor Charles Poletti, who had been Governor of New York State for a month in the early nineteen-forties,

after the retirement of Herbert Lehman. Governor Poletti was always called Governor Poletti. Walking farther down the long hall, you came to the Industrial Division on the left and the Office of the Chief of Protocol on the right, and then, at the end of the long hall, there was another hall off to the right, and at the end of that hall was the office of Mr. Moses.

I saw Mr. Moses twice during my time at the Fair. The first time, he called me to his office expressly to congratulate me on the completion of a project I had undertaken. I meant to be winning, and I was prepared to be talkative, but Mr. Moses said something almost immediately about Yale, which showed quite clearly that I had been summoned to his office to share a Yale moment. Mr. Moses was full of that Yale spirit, which spans generations and reduces to nothing the distance between the head of the Corporation and its most insignificant trainee, but since I had not been to Yale and knew almost nothing about Yale, I was silent until I was allowed to leave.

The second time I saw him, I was in the company of President Park Chung Hee, of South Korea. It is important to understand that Mr. Moses, having built the Fair, had no particular interest in what actually happened at the Fair, and no interest at all in people like President Park. Several layers of elaborately titled people were ranged around Mr. Moses to deal with people like President Park. There were elaborately titled people in the Office of the Chief of Protocol and in the International Division. In cases requiring special attention, Thomas J. Deegen, Jr., the chairman of our Executive Committee, was usually prepared to be helpful. But, unfortunately, President Park, in his long study of the modes of American power, had learned just who Mr. Moses was, and he was very certain not only that he was going to meet Mr. Moses but that he was going to have lunch with him. Now, Mr. Moses did sometimes have lunch, but it was not a usual circumstance, and it was very rare that he had lunch with someone who was not a friend or a member of his family or a member of the Class of 1909 at Yale. The moment was a difficult one. I left President Park at the little place where the long hall crossed the hall to Mr. Moses' office, and passed the desk of his secretary, Hazel Tappen, who had been with him through the twenties and thirties and forties and fifties and the parkway system and the Triborough Bridge and the Long Island Expressway and the building of the Fair and the building of the

Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, and I went into the private office of Mr. Moses and told Mr. Moses that President Park was expecting to have lunch with him.

"What?" Mr. Moses said.

I explained.

"Deegen will do it," Mr. Moses said.

I explained that President Park had met Mr. Deegen but was not content.

"Deegen's the chairman," Mr. Moses said.

I explained that President Park knew that he, Robert Moses, had built the Fair. There was a moment's silence. Mr. Moses was reputed to soften under the influence of the verb "to build" in any of its forms. I asked Mr. Moses if he would go to lunch with President Park at the Spanish Pavilion.

Mr. Moses thought for a moment more and then said, "No, Medal only."

I then went out and brought President Park into Mr. Moses' office.

Mr. Moses rose slightly, then sat back down and gazed rather sweetly at President Park. "So what do you like about the Fair?" Mr. Moses asked.

"President Park is just about to go out on the site now," I said.

"Well, be sure you write and tell me what you liked," Mr. Moses said cheerfully. Then he rummaged in his desk and found one of the rather cheap medals we sometimes gave to visitors, and almost shoved it at President Park. Then, very soon, President Park left, and I followed. Just before I left, Mr. Moses said in a loud voice to me, "Don't worry. It's not a very important pavilion." I spent the rest of the day with

President Park and five Korean plainclothes security men. At the Korean Pavilion, President Park gave *me* a medal even smaller and cheaper than the one we gave him. It read, "Distinguished Visitor, Pavilion of Korea."

Out on the site: So many different forms of transportation. A bus around the Meridian Road, just like a real bus. The little Glide-a-rides, and the little Escorters. Just like a private pram, the Escorter was. In our office, we sometimes had other things—special things—in the way of transportation. Cushman Cars, for one thing. Little electric golf carts. Not always. But sometimes. I had a friend, a woman in the Industrial Division, who had access to Cushman Cars.

Sometimes she took me out on the site. She staged *raids* and took me along. It was the successful division, Industrial. Something more like the big time. Something less like Estoril. There wasn't a single exotic title in Industrial. They didn't have a governor or an ambassador or a princess. Just people who knew how to get from A to B. The thing about the people in Industrial was that they were going to have *jobs* after the Fair closed. And they had *standards*. Some things didn't meet their standards, and they *raided* those things.

My friend took me out in a Cushman Car. We went to raid the Hall of Education. So embarrassing, the Hall of Education. It wasn't exactly a Hall of Education. It was a Hall of a number of things. There was the *Daily News* Public Opinion Poll, and that was educational, and there was a place where you could sign up for the Encyclopædia Britannica, and that was educational, but some other things were less educational. We went into the Hall of Education. The Hall of Education was a sort of box. It was a box that had been meant to be divided into smaller boxes and then divided again. It had been meant to be kind of a maze. And it was a maze, but only for a while. After a while, the maze gave way to an empty space like a dirty clearing. For a while, there were cheerful exhibits, and then, all at once, there was just nothing. I came with my friend into the empty space. Someone had set up a little stage there; it was empty, like the space. My friend and I looked at it. She had heard about the stage. It was *illegal*. It was not in the contract of the speculators who had erected the Hall of Education that they should allow a sorry little stage. Then two people came

in. There was a woman of middle age and a child—a boy. They were in costume. The woman looked at my friend in something like a panic.

My friend told me about the Garden of Meditation: "It was the World of Food Pavilion. Elsie the Cow was its big attraction. It was speculation, of course, but it looked all right, with the commitment from Borden. But it wasn't all right. Construction had started, but it wasn't all right. The money wasn't there, the commitments weren't there—just Borden. The building was about to go up, and suddenly it was very, very wrong. It was just before Opening Day, and it was very, very wrong. We went to Mr. Moses. He had everything out in twenty-four hours. Demolished. Out. It became the Garden of Meditation. There wasn't time for trees, I'm afraid—just grass. We moved Elsie to Better Living."

In some ways, the Fair was the loneliest place in the world. Usually, around the Court of the Universe it was crowded, but sometimes even there you could sense an empty space. There was a solid line of pavilions, naturally, but some pavilions were very lonely.

The Tower of Light. The Tower of Light was very lonely. Hardly anyone ever went there. It was such a good *location*. Near the Court of the Universe, the very heart of things. Near General Electric, which was so popular, and not far from Pepsi-Cola, which was so popular, and near Clairol, the Clairol Pavilion, where women lined up hours at a time to get advice on their hair—the color of their hair, how their hair should be arranged. It was a good location, but it was lonely. Once, on purpose, I arranged for a person I didn't like to go to the Tower of Light. I put him in the Tower of Light and went away. When I came back, he was *so glum*. I had a big smile. It was one of my most American moments: meeting someone who was glum because I had pretended to do him a favor and hadn't done him a favor at all.

My friend in Industrial had a daughter, a beautiful blond girl. She was the daughter of my friend and a man who had been married, at another time, to Gypsy Rose Lee. The daughter came to work at the Office of the Chief of Protocol. One day, she brought Andy Warhol to the Fair. He was very quiet. He came with people. This was at the time when he came with people and stayed quiet. The other people talked and talked, but he didn't say a word. The other people referred to him, though. Without him, they would have had to shut up. In some way, he gave them permission to speak.

Sometimes Andy Warhol said something. It was simple, what he said, but it was not a comfort. He was *so polite*, but it was not a comfort. He used simple words, words that honored the idea of simple agreement—"Oh, it's so big!" and "Oh, yes!" and "Oh, he was so cute!"—but there was no comfort in the agreement. And sometimes the agreement turned a corner. "Oh, he was so cute! But all he was interested in was drugs."

Andy Warhol looked like a little god. It was so comforting the way he made everything uncomfortable. And the way the damage rose to the surface around him. The people around him had this in common, at first: a sense of sin. They knew what was damaged and what was whole. Andy Warhol knew, too. But sometimes he was coy. Sometimes he wouldn't tell. People around him wondered if they had got it right. People around him wondered if they should be more damaged or more whole. It was hard to tell.

Popular pavilions: Ford. You got in a car, a Ford car, and the car drove itself along a track. A voice came out of the radio. Then you saw the history of the world shown by Walt Disney automatons. It was not complete. The Future was shown as empty highway. Suddenly, there was just nothing. In the sky, there was a kind of glowing ribbon. Just that.

General Electric. First, there was a display of Atomic Energy. It was a demonstration in a room that looked like a planetarium. A man (or sometimes a woman) stood in a white coat with a microphone and described the experiment. Then, after a while, he (or she) pushed some buttons or moved some dials, and there was a loud noise and a vivid flash, and the experiment was presumed to have been completed. There was a board showing the number of "successful" and the number of "unsuccessful" experiments carried out. It was convincing. The number of "unsuccessful" experiments was very small. One day, a man in a white coat who was conducting the experiment had a heart attack or a stroke or a seizure of some kind. People stood around him. People summoned other people. Meanwhile, the experiment, and the voice describing the experiment, went on.

Du Pont. Actors and actresses put on a show that honored various du Pont products. One product was Corfam. There was a song about Corfam. In 1964, the song began, "We're going to have shoes like we never had shoes before." In 1965, the song was a different song. Corfam failed.

WORLD'S FAIR

People didn't like the Fair. People tried to like it, though. They agreed to like it. The Fair was hard to like, but they agreed to like it. Not to like it was the same thing as to break the agreement that was all that stood between them and being alone.

WORLD'S FAIR

The message of many things in America is "Like this or die." It is a strain. Suddenly, the modes of death begin to be attractive.

WORLD'S FAIR

Who we were, in the Office of the Chief of Protocol, was something I did not ask myself. It did occur to me at the time that we were not all Americans. It occurs to me now that we were all refugees. The man who bore the title Chief of Protocol was an unsalaried political appointee: the Honorable Richard C. Patterson, Jr., former Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Guatemala, and Switzerland—Uncle Dick to my friend the son of the mayor. Not only did he have no duties; he did not have an office. He was a genial and polite man, but it *was awkward* when, on the odd impulse, he decided to come to work. For a while, on these occasions, we adhered to the fiction that the little lounge where the Guides assembled was his office, and when he came we went into the cafeteria for as long as we could stand it. But Ambassador Patterson was too kind a man to allow this once he found that he was subjecting us to inconvenience, and he asked for a little screen to put around one of the desks in the room, so that he could have some privacy. But this was so embarrassing an idea that we never got him one.

Our real boss was a stylish and sweet-tempered man from the North Shore of Long Island. He was a graduate of Yale and the son of an old ally of Mr. Moses. He drank quite a bit in a way that was entirely attractive. He was very loyal to us and rather contemptuous of the Fair except for the Spanish Pavilion. Once, when the Guest Relations Department of the General Electric Pavilion complained about me, he wrote back a note that said simply, "George can do no wrong."

There were others. There was a woman from a Polish princely family, a man from a Pakistani princely family, a man who had formerly been with the State Department, and Guides with every sort of unimportant social and political connection. But the stars of our office, the two Officers who defined the purpose of our operation, were Major Selma Herbert, who had formerly been a Wac officer with Army Public Information, and Dr. Roberto de Mendoza, who had formerly been Cuban Ambassador to London under Batista, and who was one of the last gentlemen in the

world. Major Herbert and Dr. Mendoza did not get along in the ordinary sense, but they complemented one another in a way that was impossible to ignore. Major Herbert had angles; Dr. Mendoza sloped. Major Herbert had one kind of urban voice; Dr. Mendoza had another. Major Herbert was practical down to the last detail; Dr. Mendoza was a little *superstitious*. Major Herbert wore open-toed shoes; Dr. Mendoza wore luxurious ties, which he claimed he had bought from an elevator boy who stole them. Major Herbert never mentioned the Army; Dr. Mendoza never mentioned Cuba. Major Herbert called Dr. Mendoza "Ro-beh-toe" in a way that eclipsed all other pronunciations of the name.

The most memorable day I spent at the Fair was spent with Major Herbert and Dr. Mendoza. Together, we made possible something called Conference of American Armies Day. Dozens of Latin-American Army officers were there. The Chief of Staff of the Brazilian Army and the future military dictator of Argentina. And General Anastasio Somoza, the head of the Nicaraguan National Guard. We had them in a Glide-a-ride. It was a long visit. It was long. We took them everywhere. The day stretched on. Every visit seemed so long. They liked everything. They were friendly. Dr. Mendoza was very sweet to them. We all were. We took them to General Motors, where they went on the Futurama ride, and to Ford, where they rode in new Ford cars through the history of the world. They saw Johnson Wax—the famous and popular movie "To Be Alive." They signed the book at the United States Pavilion. They stayed deep into the night. They looked just like little boys. They stayed and stayed. We grew tired, but we did our job well. We took them back to the gate near the Administration Building, and they got off the little Glide-a-ride and got into regular cars. Cars with drivers. Black limousines. They looked a little different then, but the friendly, tired feeling continued. What I remember is Dr. Mendoza and Major Herbert *leaning over* as each limousine came by with our new friends. Dr. Mendoza leaned over and waved. Major Herbert leaned over and waved and called "Goo-*bye!* Goo-*bye!*"

Because it was so late, I took a taxi back to the city with Dr. Mendoza. Usually, I declined to go with Dr. Mendoza, because he always insisted on paying, but it seemed right to go with him that night. Sometimes, I'm afraid, I turned Dr. Mendoza into a

father. Sometimes, for instance, I said something in the way I used to say a thing to my father—to provoke a story. There were favorite stories I liked to hear Dr. Mendoza tell. His voice had all the time in the world and a gentleness that couldn't make distinctions. In some deep way, he wanted only to please.

"Ah, there's the Tower of Light," I said as we left the Fairgrounds.

"The Tower of Light," Dr. Mendoza said. "The Tower of Light. When I first came to the Fair, before the Fair was built, when it was only the idea of the Fair, we used to have meetings with Mr. Moses. They were very serious, those meetings. I have attended other meetings in my life, but none were so serious as those, I think. Mr. Moses had great hopes for the Tower of Light. It was going to be a 'cathedral of light.' They said that, over and over. That and 'from Boston to Washington.' It was to be a cathedral you could see from Boston to Washington—the beam of light. But it didn't work out. There must be some reason. You can't see it except in Queens."

What the Fair was: The Fair was so small. It was just tiny.

WORLD'S FAIR

What was the Fair? It was the world of television but taken seriously. A serious tone of voice. That was what remained from the previous orthodoxy—the booming voice. At the Fair, one could see the world of television impersonating the world of history. It was the world of television, but they wouldn't let you in on the joke.

This was what it was like when the orthodoxy of false authority gave way to the orthodoxy of television childhood. What will it be like now when, the absence of authority noted, a *vogue* for authority passes through the orthodoxy of television

childhood? What are *children* like who are asked to salute? Some pout and won't do it. Some grin and do it badly. Some do it surprisingly well.

What is so defeating is this everlasting *good-spiritedness*, the application of enthusiasm against loneliness. The expression of the force that seeks to go with the grain—actually to become the grain—is, everlastingly, a smile. But the smile is a lie, and it makes people glum. And the glumness then flows against the grain, being confident of its bit of truth: *that there is a lie in the smile*. In our time, nearly all art has been made from glumness and has had very little power, because it feeds on this tiny bit of truth: *that there is a lie in the smile*.

It's so little to feed on. That little bit of truth. Feed on it only and you go mad. Nourished by just that little truth, how can you have strength enough to resist your enemies? The smile, for instance?

How lonely the white men are. They are not the grain that goes with the grain, nor can they bring themselves to dye their hair green. They thought they would have both things: the flow of history, because they knew history; and the *edge*, because they had talent. But history belongs to children, and the edge belongs to adolescents, so they have neither. What they have is a kind of superior whining, and the one freedom they have been able to make use of is the freedom carved out by certain adolescents to make an aesthetic out of complaint. So this is what they inhabit now: a tiny space where they struggle toward a sense of history and a sense of edge by refining their whimpers. *Something happened. What went wrong? I want to tell you about my divorce*.

Literary men now routinely tell their readers about their divorces. In newspapers. In columns in newspapers. Special columns devoted to the personal papers of literary men. One literary man who reviews books wrote, in reviewing a study of Ruskin, that he had never read a book by Ruskin but that the study confirmed him in his belief

that he didn't want to read a book by Ruskin. This man very often writes about his family life.

Is he a fool? No. Absolutely not. He is doing what is appropriate. He is following a sound instinct. Instinet is so important. You have to go with the gut feeling. The gut feeling is that nothing could matter less than Ruskin. The gut feeling is that there isn't any grid to support Ruskin. The two grids left are the grid of enormous success —the grid of two hundred million—and the tiny, tiny baby grid of you and me and baby and baby's problems and my problems and your problems and *can we keep even this little baby grid together*?

And comfort? What is comfort? It's *focus*. You bring this grid together with that grid, you get the images to overlap, and suddenly things have a bit of focus, as in a certain sort of 35-mm. camera. What shall we bring together? The two grids. You and me and baby and baby's problem breathing and the grid of two hundred million. *It is such a comfort*. So it is a comfort when the literary man who knows no Ruskin tells us how it feels in his marriage when a friend brings home a pretty young girl. And it is a comfort when a comedienne whom we know, whom we love, whom we've known for years and years, whom we've loved for years and years, tells us that there has been a drug problem in her family. Suddenly, the grids merge. You and me and baby and drugs together on the grid of two hundred million. It's so intimate. It's like waking up with a friend. But just for a minute.

DIARY

Excerpt from a diary, 1975:

When I was very young—four years old, that is, and five—it was my habit in the late afternoon to stand at a window at the east end of the living room of my family's house, in Cos Cob, Connecticut, and wait for my father to come into my view. My father commuted on the New Haven Railroad in those days, and walked home from the station. When I spotted him, I waved. I usually saw him before he saw me, because my eyesight was much better than his. When he saw me, he waved back and

walked (I believe) at a faster pace until he was at our door. Once inside, he put down the bundle of newspapers he carried under his arm (my father, a newspaperman, brought home all three evening newspapers and, often, one or two of the morning papers as well), and hugged my mother. Then he took his fedora hat off his head and put it on mine.

It was assumed that I would have a fedora hat of my own by the time I was twelve years old. My father had had his first fedora hat at the age of nine, but he said he recognized that the circumstances of his bringing up had been different from the circumstances of mine (it was his opinion that his mother, my grandmother, had been excessively strict in the matter of dress), and he would not insist on anything inappropriate or embarrassing. He said that probably it would not be necessary for me to wear kid gloves during the day, ever. But certainly, he said, at the end of boyhood, when as a young man I would go on the New Haven Railroad to New York City, it would be necessary for me to wear a fedora hat. I have, in fact, worn a fedora hat, but ironically. Irony has seeped into the felt of any fedora hat I have ever owned —not out of any wish of mine but out of necessity. A fedora hat worn by me without the necessary protective irony would eat through my head and kill me. I was born into the upper middle class in 1943, and one of the strange turns my life has taken is this: I was taught by my parents to believe that the traditional manners of the high bourgeoisie, properly acquired, would give me a certain dignity, which would protect me from embarrassment. It has turned out that I am able to do almost anything but act according to those modes—this because I deeply believe that those modes are suffused with an embarrassment so powerful that it can kill. It turns out that while I am at home in many strange places, I am not free even to visit the territory I was expected to inhabit effortlessly. To wear a fedora, I must first torture it out of shape so that it can be cleaned of the embarrassment in it. ♦++

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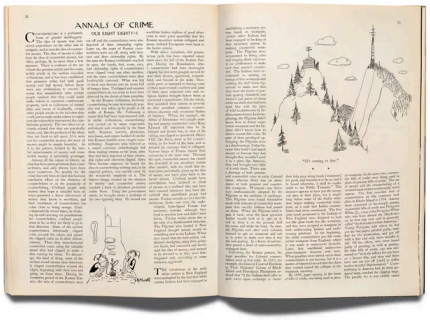

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LIFE AND LETTERS

A Forgotten Queen Bee of Modern Poetry

A débutante, a burlesque dancer, and a poet, the shape-shifting V. R. Lang—who died at thirty-two—wrote some of the most aching, entrancing lines of the twentieth century.

By Anthony Lane