ANATOLE BROYARD

Kafka Was the Rage

A Greenwich Village Memoir

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1

My life, or career, in Greenwich Village began when Sheri Donatti invited me to move in with her. *Invited* is not the right word, but I don't know how else to describe it. I had just come out of the army and I was looking for a place I could afford when I met Sheri at a party. She had two apartments, she said, and if I understood her way of talking, she was suggesting that I might come and look at one of them.

Sheri Donatti had the kind of personality that was just coming into vogue in Greenwich Village in 1946. This was a time when Kafka was the rage, as were the Abstract Expressionists and revisionism in psychoanalysis. Sheri was her own avant-garde. She had erased and redrawn herself, redesigned the way she walked, talked, moved, even the way she thought and felt.

She was a painter and she looked more like a work of art than a pretty woman. She had a high, domelike forehead, the long silky brown hair of women in por-

traits, wide pale blue eyes with something roiling in their surface. Her nose was aquiline, her mouth thin and disconsolate, her chin small and pointed. It was the kind of bleak or wan beauty Village people liked to call quattrocento.

Her body seemed both meager and voluptuous. Her waist was so small, it cut her in two, like a split personality, or two schools of thought. Though her legs and hips were sturdy and richly curved, her upper body was dramatically thin. When she was naked it appeared that her top half was trying to climb up out of the bottom, like a woman stepping out of a heavy garment. Her gestures and motions were a slow dance, a parody of classical poses. They were very deliberate, performed at half speed, as if she had to remember each time, to remind herself, how human beings behaved.

Yet with all this, all the affectation, there was something striking about her. She was a preview of things to come, an invention that was not quite perfected but that would turn out to be important, a forerunner or harbinger, like the shattering of the object in Cubism or atonality in music. When I came to know her better, I thought of her as a new disease.

Twenty-three Jones Street was a shabby tenement with iron stairs that gave off a dull boom and padlocked toilets on each landing. There was no bell and the downstairs door was not locked, so I walked up to the second floor as Sheri Donatti had told me to do. When she answered the door, I saw that she was bare-legged and that her dark dress clung rather lovingly to her thighs.

There were three small rooms, with the kitchen in the center. She led me into her studio, as she called it, where there were paintings on the wall and an unfinished canvas on an easel. We sat down and started to manufacture or assemble a conversation. Like everything else about her, her style of talking took some getting used to. She gave each syllable an equal stress and cooed or chanted her vowels. Her sentences had no intonation, no rise and fall, so that they came across as disembodied, parceled out, yet oracular too. She reminded me of experimental writing, of "the revolution of the word" in the little magazines of the thirties. She talked like a bird pecking at things on the ground and then arching its neck to swallow them.

She went in for metaphors and reckless generalizations, the kind of thing French writers put in their journals. Everything she said sounded both true and false. At the same time I could feel the force of her intelligence, and some of her images were remarkable.

It occurred to me that our conversation might be an interview, a test of my suitability as a tenant or neighbor, so I began to inflate my remarks. I was wearing army fatigues and she asked me whether I had been in the war. She said, Did you kill anyone?

No, I said. I wish I had. I would feel further along in life.

Just when I was beginning to think she'd forgotten why I had come, she got up and offered to show me the other apartment, which was just across the hall. I had been looking forward to this moment, imagining myself with a place of my own in Greenwich Village—but in my first glimpse of the other apartment, I realized that my thinking had been too simple. Already I could

tell that nothing about Sheri Donatti was simple, that behind each gesture there was another one. Behind the door of the other apartment, for example, there was an enormous old-fashioned printing press. It loomed like a great black animal, a bear or a buffalo, in the little kitchen.

It was an immensely heavy and powerful machine and I could tell by her manner, by the way she presented it, that it was hers. There was more to this Sheri Donatti than I had thought. This was another aspect of her. She was the driver of this locomotive. The thing took up most of the kitchen, which was as big as the other two rooms put together. I felt that I had entered its lair, its den—this behemoth lived here. The apartment was occupied. There was no room for me, unless I slept in its arms.

I glanced into the other rooms, which were piled with boxes, clothes, and paintings. The apartment was chock-full, crammed with stuff. I had the impression that I was being given a riddle or puzzle to solve. How did I fit into this already-congested space? Was she offering me the place or not? I saw that I would have to ask her. Even if it made me feel slow-witted, someone who doesn't understand the form or get the joke, I had to ask her: I can have this apartment?

She smiled at the question she had forced on me.

I'll take it, I said.

I don't know exactly why I took it. The obvious answer was that I wanted Sheri Donatti, but I didn't, so far as I knew. She was attractive, God knows, but my tastes were still conventional. What I felt was not desire but a strong, idle curiosity, a sense that she was the next step for me, that she was my future, or my fate. I was

being drafted by Sheri Donatti as I had been drafted into the army.

I went back to Brooklyn, packed my clothes and books and kissed my parents good-bye. They didn't know what to say—I was a veteran now. Though I regretted the lie, I told them I'd have them over to my apartment when it was fixed up. I had called a taxi, and as it pulled away, with them waving, with me waving, I had that sense of finality all young men have under such circumstances.

When I arrived at Jones Street, Sheri showed me where to put my things. She gave me part of a closet in her bedroom and I hung myself up there, so to speak. If this was a seduction, it was very abstract. I acted as if I knew what was happening, but I was watching her for clues. I suppose it had occurred to me that it might turn out this way, but there was never a point where I was conscious of making a decision.

I'll never know why she chose me. As I discovered later, she could have taken her pick from any number of men. Perhaps she saw something in me that I hadn't seen myself—or something she could do with me that I would never have thought of.

Nineteen forty-six was a good time—perhaps the best time—in the twentieth century. The war was over, the Depression had ended, and everyone was rediscovering the simple pleasures. A war is like an illness and when it's over you think you've never felt so well. There's a terrific sense of coming back, of repossessing your life.

New York City had never been so attractive. The postwar years were like a great smile in its sullen his-

tory. The Village was as close in 1946 as it would ever come to Paris in the twenties. Rents were cheap, restaurants were cheap, and it seemed to me that happiness itself might be cheaply had. The streets and bars were full of writers and painters and the kind of young men and women who liked to be around them. In Washington Square would-be novelists and poets tossed a football near the fountain and girls just out of Ivy League colleges looked at the landscape with art history in their eyes. People on the benches held books in their hands.

Though much of the Village was shabby, I didn't mind. I thought all character was a form of shabbiness, a wearing away of surfaces. I saw this shabbiness as our version of ruins, the relic of a short history. The sadness of the buildings was literature. I was twenty-six, and sadness was a stimulant, even an aphrodisiac.

But while squalor was all right outside, as an urban atmosphere, domestic dirt brought out the bourgeois in me. It was the first flaw in my new paradise. As far as I could see, Sheri never cleaned the apartment, and for me to do it would have seemed like a breach of contract, or a criticism. I tried to ignore it, to be philosophical. Perhaps the place is squalid, I said to myself, but it's not sordid. What is dirt? I asked, just as in college we had asked, What is matter? Could this substance grinding under my feet be regarded as a neutral element, like sand? Was it like camping to live so close to dirt? After all, I argued, isn't art itself a kind of dirt?

The first night I spent on Jones Street, I woke up before dawn because I had to pee. I shook Sheri and asked her where she kept the key for the toilet in the hall.

Pee in the sink, she said.

There are dishes in the sink.

They have to be washed, anyway.

But I found it difficult to pee in the sink, because the idea excited me.

It was the same way with the bathtub in the kitchen. I could never take a dispassionate view of it; it always remained for me a kind of exhibitionism to sit in a bathtub in front of somebody else. I was the only son of a Catholic family from the French Quarter in New Orleans, and no one is so sexually demented as the French bourgeoisie, especially when you add a colonial twist.

Perhaps the hardest test for me was the way Sheri dressed. Under her outer clothes, there was only a padded bra, because she was ashamed of the smallness of her breasts. She wore no underpants and no stockings, even in winter, and I was tormented by this absence of underpants. When we walked down the street, I imagined her most secret part grinning at the world. For all I knew, she might suddenly pull up her skirt and show herself to the people and the buildings. What if the wind blew; what if she slipped and fell?

She did fall once. It was in a stationery store on West Fourth Street and she fell because she bumped into W. H. Auden. In fact, they both fell. Auden lived around the corner on Cornelia Street and I often saw him scurrying along with his arms full of books and papers. He looked like a man running out of a burning building with whatever of his possessions he'd been able to grab. He had a curious scuttling gait, perhaps because he always wore espadrilles.

He came hurrying into the stationery store just as

we were going out. Sheri was in front of me and he ran right into her. As he wrote somewhere, fantasy makes us clumsy. He also said that the art of living in New York City lies in crossing the street against the lights.

Sheri, who floated instead of walking, was easy to knock over, and Auden had all the velocity of his poetry and his nervousness. She fell backward, and as she did, she grabbed Auden around the neck and they went down together, with him on top. I was so concerned about her skirt flying up that I didn't even stop to think about whether she might have been hurt. She was lying on the floor beneath one of the most famous poets of our time, but I couldn't see the poetry or the humor of it.

She clung to Auden, who was sprawled in her arms. He tried desperately to rise, scrabbling with his hands and his espadrilles on the floor. He was babbling incoherently, apologizing and expostulating at the same time, while she smiled at me over his shoulder, like a woman dancing.

Until this time, most of the sex in my life had had an improvised character. It was done on the run, in borrowed, often inconvenient spaces, sandwiched between extraneous events, like the arrival or departure of parents or roommates, or the approach of daylight. Now I could have, could enjoy, sex whenever I chose. It had evolved from an obsessive idea into a surprising fact, an independent thing, like a monument. It was perpetually there when I had nothing else to do.

I had always believed, perhaps sentimentally, that

lovemaking clarified things, that people came to understand each other through it. Yet it didn't work that way with Sheri—in fact, she grew more mysterious to me all the time.

She made love the way she talked—by breaking down the grammar and the rhythms of sex. Young men tend to make love monotonously, but Sheri took my monotony and developed variations on it, as if she were composing a fugue. If I was a piston, she was Paul Klee's Twittering Machine.

She was like one of those modern black jazz singers who works against the melody and ignores the natural line ends. Most people agree on some kind of rhythm in sex, but Sheri refused all my attempts at coordination. She never had orgasms—she said she didn't want them. I did want them, but I had to get used to arriving at them in a new way. Instead of building or mounting to orgasm, I descended to it. It was like a collapsing of structures, like a building falling down. I remember thinking once that it was the opposite of premature ejaculation.

I had conceived of lovemaking as a sort of asking and answering of questions, but with us it only led to further questions, until we seemed to be locked in a philosophical debate. Instead of the proverbial sadness after sex, I felt something like a semantic despair.

Our sexual progress reminded me of a simultaneous translation. But then, every once in a while, we would speak the same language; she would allow us to chime, to strike the same note at the same time, and it was as if I were suddenly acoustical, resounding, loud in the silence.

When we stayed home in the evenings, I would sit

with a book in my lap and watch her paint. But if she glanced around and saw me reading, she would put down her brush and come over and turn all her art on me. She distrusted books. I never saw her read one. I think she believed I might find something in them that would give me an advantage over her, or that I might use against her.

I felt the same way about her painting. She was an abstract painter and I couldn't follow her there. She left me outside, like a dog that you tie to a parking meter when you go into a store. I had never been comfortable with abstract painting. I had no talent for abstraction, didn't see the need for it, or the beauty of it. Like liberal politics, it eliminated so many things I liked.

Yet if I could understand her paintings, I thought, our sex would be better. We would exist in the same picture plane, pose for each other's portraits, mingle our forms and colors, make compositions. We would be like two people walking through a gallery or museum, exclaiming over the same things.

I began to read up on abstract painting. In the library in the Museum of Modern Art, I rummaged through the shelves, studying for my new life. I had come to think that modern art was an initiation into that life, like the hazing before you get into a fraternity. When I was at Brooklyn College, everyone urged me to join the Communist party, but I refused because I thought it was an uninteresting quarrel with the real. Modern art, though, was a quarrel that appealed to me more. Even if I never got to like it, I enjoyed the terms of the argument. I was impressed by the restless dissatisfaction, the aggressiveness, ingenuity, and pretension of all the theories.

I discovered that you could always find your own life reflected in art, even if it was distorted or discolored. There was a sentence, for example, in a book on Surrealism that stuck in my mind: "Beauty is the chance meeting, on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella."

2

Taking advantage of the GI Bill, which paid my tuition and gave me a monthly allowance, I enrolled at the New School for Social Research on West Twelfth Street. I'd had a couple of semesters at Brooklyn College before going into the army, but I was bored because I didn't know what I wanted to do with what I was learning. I couldn't see any immediate use for it. But now going to school was part of the postwar romance. Studying was almost as good as art. The world was our studio.

Like the Village itself, the New School was at its best in 1946. After a war, civilization feels like a luxury, and people went to the New School the way you go to a party, almost like going abroad. Education was chic and sexy in those days. It was not yet open to the public.

The people in the lobby of the New School were excited, expectant, dressed to the teeth. They struck poses, examined one another with approval. They had

a blind date with culture, and anything could happen. Young, attractive, hip, they were the best Americans. For local color, there was a sprinkling of bohemians and young men just out of the service who were still wearing their khakis and fatigues, as young matrons in the suburbs go shopping in their tennis dresses.

Known as the "University in Exile," the New School had taken in a lot of professors—Jewish and non-Jewish—who had fled from Hitler on the same boats as the psychoanalysts. Because they were displaced themselves, or angry with us for failing to understand history, the professors did their best to make us feel like exiles in our own country. While the psychoanalysts listened in their private offices—with all the detachment of those who had really known anxiety—to Americans retailing their dreams, the professors analyzed those same dreams wholesale in the packed classrooms of the New School.

All the courses I took were about *what's wrong*: what's wrong with the government, with the family, with interpersonal relations and intrapersonal relations—what's wrong with our dreams, our loves, our jobs, our perceptions and conceptions, our esthetics, the human condition itself.

They were furious, the professors, at the ugly turn the world had taken and they stalked the halls of the New School as if it were a concentration camp where we were the victims and they were the warders, the storm troopers of humanism. The building resounded with guttural cries: kunstwissenschaft, zeitgeist and weltanschauung, gemeinschaft and gesellschaft, schadenfreude, schwarmerei. Their accents were so impenetrable that some of them seemed to speak in tongues and the students understood hardly a word.

We admired the German professors. We had won the fight against fascism and now, with their help, we would defeat all the dark forces in the culture and the psyche. As a reaction to our victory, sensitive Americans had entered an apologetic phase in our national life and there was nothing the professors could say that was too much. We came out of class with dueling scars.

I took a course in the psychology of American culture, given by Erich Fromm. Though he had just arrived, he knew America better than we did, because it impinged on him. His *Escape from Freedom,* which had recently been published, was one of those paeans of lyrical pessimism that Germans specialize in, like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Spengler. Sitting on a platform behind a desk, like a judge in criminal court, he passed his remorseless judgment on us. We were unwilling, he said, to accept the anguish of freedom. According to him, we feared freedom, saw it as madness, epistemology run amok. In the name of freedom, we accepted everything he said. We accepted it because we liked the sound of it—no one knew then that we would turn out to be right in trying to escape from freedom.

Fromm was short and plump. His jaws were broader than his forehead and he reminded me of a brooding hen. Yet, like everyone else, I sat spellbound through his lectures. I'll never forget the night he described a typical American family going for a pointless drive on a Sunday afternoon, joylessly eating ice cream at a roadhouse on the highway and then driving heavily home. Fromm was one of the first—perhaps the very first—to come out against pointlessness. It was a historic moment, like Einstein discovering relativity or Heidegger coming up against nothingness.

I also studied Gestalt psychology with Rudolf Arnheim, but here I confess I was disappointed. It seemed to me that Germans were sometimes stunned into a kind of stupor by an ordinary insight, which they would then try to elevate into a philosophy or a system. Colliding with a modest fact in the midst of their abstraction, they just couldn't get over it.

The Gestalt psychologists had discovered that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—something everybody already knew—and Arnheim spent most of the semester demonstrating this. I kept waiting for him to go on, but he just gave us more experiments, more evidence. It all depended on rats. We never talked about people—only rats. In the advanced courses, it was apes.

Max Wertheimer, the father of Gestalt psychology, made a guest appearance in the class. He was a small man, dressed in a frock coat, and he wore his hair *en brosse*. The high point of his lecture was a demonstration of requiredness, a key term in Gestalt thinking. It meant, if I understood him, that each thing implied other things, or a context, something like a counterpoint of structures. He showed us what he meant with a little experiment of his own. First he taught us a complicated African hand clap, and then when he had us clapping away, he himself set up a weird howling accompaniment.

I attended a special lecture in the auditorium, given by Karen Horney, on the psychology of women. Like Fromm, Horney was a Freudian revisionist. In one of her books, she had said that, in a sense, the neurotic was healthier than the so-called normal person, because he "protested." Protesting was like testifying. Since everyone at the New School proudly considered him- or her-

self neurotic—it wasn't respectable not to be—Horney's message was just what we wanted to hear.

I don't remember much of the lecture, but it had an unforgettable aftermath. A woman with a fur coat draped over her shoulders rose from her seat and asked a question. But what about penis envy? she said. You haven't said anything about penis envy.

There was a shocked silence. It was like the time, when I was a child, that someone threw a stink bomb in a neighborhood movie house. Horney just sat there on the platform without speaking, gazing at the woman like an analyst contemplating a hopeless patient she had taken against her better judgment.

Her face seemed to swell. She raised one hand above her head and then the other, as if she would try to climb up out of the auditorium and the New School. Then, closing her hands into fists, she slammed them down on the desk. What about it? she said. Her voice rose to a shriek, What about it? I don't have a penis. Can you give me one?

Later, when I was back at the apartment, sitting in my usual chair and watching Sheri paint, I thought about Horney, and it seemed to me that there were lots of other, better things she could have said to the woman. She could have said, Why does everyone think it's so terrific to have a penis? I myself, for example, had a penis, but it didn't help me now to imagine what went on in Sheri's mind as she filled in a ragged area of the canvas with muddy green paint. It seemed to me that a penis was a very primitive instrument for dealing with life. Besides, Horney was wrong. Sheri did have a penis—mine belonged to her more than it did to me.

3

I hadn't been living with Sheri very long when Dick Gilman tried to take her away from me. There was nothing underhanded about Dick. He simply came over to the apartment one night and explained that I was not the right person for Sheri, and that he was.

His opening remarks were so elegant, so hermeneutic, that I didn't realize at first that he was talking about me. Dick hardly ever referred to real persons, and my initial impression was that he was describing an unsatisfactory character in a novel.

When I finally understood what he was doing, I was more surprised than angry, because I thought of Dick as a friend. This was no way for a friend to behave. Yet what he said sounded just like the friendly discussions of books we carried on in Washington Square or in the San Remo. And it was this blurring of the boundaries that confused me.

Dick was odd in a lot of ways. In his reading, for

example, he was a serial monogamist. He'd fall in love with a particular author and remain faithful to him alone, reading everything by and about him. He would become that author, talk like him, think like him, dress like him if possible. If he could find out what his current favorite had eaten and drunk, Dick would eat and drink them, too. He took on his politics, his causes, his eccentricities. At one point in his D. H. Lawrence phase—this was after his Yeats and Auden phases—Dick actually went to Mexico and tried to find Lawrence's footprints in the dust.

He was a very fast reader, so these affairs came and went fairly quickly. No author can survive that kind of identification for long. When he came to the apartment, Dick was still in his Lawrence phase, so perhaps he saw himself stealing Frieda from Ernest Weekley. Could it be that he had fallen for Sheri as he had for Lawrence and Yeats and Auden?

All the same, Dick was a formidable rival—a brilliant talker, an attractive man. He might even have been handsome if his face had not been just a bit vainglorious with all the books he'd read. As Harold Norse, a Village poet, said, "Dick was only twenty-one and he had read more books than Hemingway."

He had told me he was coming to see us and I had thought this meant he wanted to be better friends, because he was rather standoffish and had never visited us before. Now that he was here, I offered him a beer and asked him to take a chair, but he refused both, like a policeman who doesn't drink or sit down while on duty.

He began with a prologue, or prologomenon. He had examined his motives, he said, and was satisfied that they were disinterested. For a moment I thought he was going to say that, like art, he was a mirror held up to nature. What he did say was that I was not serious. There was, he said, an incongruity in my relation to Sheri. At that time we were all very much under the influence of the idea of incongruity in art. But while incongruity was good in art, it was, apparently, bad in life.

We were in the kitchen. Out of a kind of tact, Dick hadn't advanced farther into the apartment. I had taken a chair and Sheri leaned on the metal cover of the bathtub while Dick paced back and forth between the sink and the stove. Since they were only three or four steps apart, he kept whirling around. He was like a lecturer in front of a class, or a peripatetic philosopher. No doubt he had read Nietzsche, who said that the best thoughts come while walking.

Using words like *unconscionable,* he sounded as if he was recommending himself to Sheri more as a critic than a lover. He gesticulated a lot, chopping the air with stiffened fingers, like someone helping to park a car. He had a rather high, cracked voice—the voice of the brilliant talker—and I listened to it with a detached fascination as he explained, in effect, that his sensibility was bigger than mine.

How little he knew about us! He actually saw me as trifling with Sheri, taking advantage of her. As he went on, building his sentences, piling up clauses, I began to get angry. The hell with this, I thought. I ought to punch him in the mouth. But I couldn't. He had turned the situation into a seminar, and you can't punch people in a seminar. Besides, he talked so well—it would be like punching literature in the mouth. And he had a

disarming way of appealing to me—to me!—to confirm a point. He was asking me to testify against myself.

Yet even though he addressed himself to me, I don't think he saw me as he marched back and forth ticking off my shortcomings. He was too caught up in his arguments. I was too—they were so persuasive that I began to believe them myself. Yes, I thought, it was probably true—I wasn't right for Sheri. She was too much for me. But that was why I wanted her, why I had to keep her. As Dick described the life she might have with him, I resolved that, if she stayed with me, I would do all the things he was enumerating.

At last, in a splendid peroration, Dick wound up with several striking tropes, like the final orchestral cadences of a classical symphony. He was breathing hard and smiling a little, as if at a job well done. It was impossible to be angry. God bless him, he thought of a woman as a kind of book.

In the silence that followed, it seemed to me that someone should have applauded. I looked at Sheri, who hadn't moved all this time. Her face was unreadable. She was a marvelous actress and knew how to hold the moment. Then, very deliberately, she changed her position a little in leaning on the bathtub, so that she was in an infinitesimally more nonchalant attitude. I was the first to catch on, and when I started laughing, Dick slammed out of the apartment. He could still be heard booming down the iron stairs when I lifted Sheri onto the bathtub cover.

When you look back over your life, the thing that amazes you most is your original capacity to believe.

To grow older is to lose this capacity, to stop believing, or to become unable to believe. When Nemecio Zanarte came to the apartment a couple of weeks later and repeated Dick's performance, I was able to believe at first that he too had simply been struck by Sheri, like Dick.

Nemecio was a Chilean painter. He was tall, dark, thin, and very handsome in the stark, suffering, aristocratic way that only pure Spaniards seem to have. His high, narrow nose and his deep eye sockets were as superbly carved as an El Greco portrait of a cardinal or pope. I imagined that even Nemecio's feet were beautiful, like Christ's in a twelfth-century painted wooden crucifixion.

His voice was soft, deep, and cultivated and his manners were a history of civilization. Yet here he was, like a priest of the Inquisition, invading what was now my home, telling me that, as a gentleman, it was my duty to remove myself and give Sheri her freedom. His English was not fluent and he said "give to Sheri her freedom."

I felt like a man being persecuted. While Dick might be explained as a kind of literary mistake—a misreading?—Nemecio could not. For this exquisitely polite man to do what he was doing, my failings must have been truly flagrant. What was it about me, I wondered, that inspired everyone to interfere in my life? Did I really behave so badly? Could it be that people actually saw Sheri as a quattrocento Madonna?

At least Nemecio had the decency to appear uncomfortable. Personally, he said, he was fond of me—it was not a question of that, but of symmetry. There was not the necessary symmetry between Sheri and myself. His long, graceful fingers moved as he spoke, as if he was

trying on gloves. Everything he said could have come right out of Lorca, only his imperfect English spoiled the effect. "Why you don't go?" he said. "As a gentleman, you must go." He kept falling back on that "Why you don't go?" As a speaker, he was not in Dick's class.

He rambled and repeated himself; he seemed to be confused by emotion. His English began to slip and bits of Spanish seeped into his speech. I knew some Spanish, and his enunciation was so fine that I could make out most of what he said. On a certain level, in matters of love, honor, and conscience, all languages are similar.

Nemecio was much better in Spanish. He could make a moral drama of the word *consideración. Apesadumbrar,* which means "to afflict, vex, or grieve," was a beautiful word, too, but it was I, not Sheri, who was afflicted. And each time Nemecio used the word *caballero,* I wanted to say, But I am a *caballero sin caballo.*

I had studied Spanish in school and kept it alive in Spanish Harlem, where I used to go to the Park Plaza on 110th and Fifth to hear the music. When the band played a particularly good piece, the whole audience would cry, *¡Fenómeno!* or *¡Arrolla!*—which means "to gyrate or spin." Now, without thinking, I cried *¡Fenómeno! ¡Arrolla, hombre! ¡Así se habla!*

Nemecio looked at me in astonishment. He hadn't realized that I spoke Spanish, and this put an entirely different complexion on the matter. I was a compadre of sorts, a more civilized creature than he had supposed. He felt that it was impossible now to carry on the deception. His eyes turned to Sheri in a mute appeal. He looked like an exquisite dog, an Afghan or saluki.

Even I, blinded as I was by her, could see that she had put him up to it. After Dick, she got the idea of

asking Nemecio too to come over and denounce me. She might even have encouraged Dick in the first place.

Nemecio gave up. He drooped like a flower. *Perdóneme,* Anatole, he said. I have been a fool.

It takes a brave man to be a fool, I said. I was so relieved that I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. And then he was gone.

Well, I thought, what now? On the bathtub cover again? No—absolutely not. I wasn't going to be played with like this. I refused to enter into the game. I refused for all of five minutes.

4

Five or six weeks after moving in with Sheri, I opened a bookshop on Cornelia Street. This was something I had decided to do while I was in the army. It started with some money I made on the black market in Tokyo, where a suit of GI long johns brought $120. I was thinking about what I might do with the money.

I was working the night shift in Yokohama harbor and I was lonely, cold, and bored. Yokohama was a sad place that had been flattened by bombs and the inhabitants were living in shacks made of rubble, propped up in fields of rubble. Since they couldn't lock up these shacks, they took all their belongings with them when they went out. They carried their whole lives on their backs, wrapped in an evil-smelling blanket or a sack that made them look like hunchbacks.

My outfit, a stevedore battalion, had arrived right after MacArthur, and my first job as a dock officer was

to scrape a solid crust of shit off a dock a quarter of a mile long. I didn't realize at first that it was human shit. As I figured it out later, Japanese stevedores and embarking soldiers had had no time for niceties toward the end and had simply squatted down wherever they stood. The entire dock was covered with a layer that was as hard as clay. The rain and traffic had packed it down.

I had my own company of 220 men to supervise the job and I was given 1,500 Japanese who would actually chop the stuff away. We provided them with axes, shovels, sledgehammers, picks, crowbars—whatever we could find. We had no bulldozers. They chopped and scraped for three days and then the Medical Corps hosed down the dock with chemicals.

It was on this same dock, where you could still smell the chemicals, that I was working the night I got the idea of the bookstore. I had two gangs unloading the forward hatches of a ship and I was leaning on the rail, under the yellowish overhead spots. It was about three o'clock in the morning and I felt a million miles from home, from anywhere. For something to do, I was thinking about books, trying to see if I could quote passages or whole poems the way some people can.

Mostly it was only single lines I remembered, perhaps because I was tired. Wallace Stevens was my favorite poet and I murmured a few scraps from his books to myself: "Too many waltzes have ended." "Apostrophes are forbidden on the funicular." "The windy sky cries out a literate despair." "These days of disinheritance we feast on human heads." It was reassuring to think, in the middle of the night in this foreign place, that there were people in the world who would take the trouble

to write things like that. This was another, wonderful kind of craziness, at the opposite end from the craziness of the army.

We were unloading boxes of condensed milk and as I watched a pallet swing over the rail, I thought that when I got home I would open a bookshop in the Village. It would be a secondhand bookshop, specializing in twentieth-century literature. I remember that the idea made me feel warm. I took my hands out of my pockets and squeezed them together. To open a bookshop is one of the persistent romances, like living off the land or sailing around the world.

After a couple of months of looking, I bought out an old Italian junk dealer on Cornelia Street. I paid him three hundred dollars and agreed to move his stock to a new location. I hired a truck and we carried out old boilers, radiators, bathtubs, sinks, pipes of all sizes, and miscellaneous bits and pieces of metal.

Nineteen forty-six was a good time for a secondhand bookshop, because everything was out of print and the paperback revolution had not yet arrived. People had missed books during the war, and there was a sense of reunion, like meeting old friends or lovers. Now there was time for everything, and buying books became a popular postwar thing to do. For young people who had just left home to go live in the Village, books were like dolls or teddy bears or family portraits. They populated a room.

When I left Brooklyn to live in the Village, I felt as if I had acquired a new set of relatives, like a surprising number of uncles I had never met before, men who lived in odd places, sometimes abroad, who had shunned family life and been shunned in turn, who were

somewhere between black sheep and prodigal sons of a paradoxical kind. An aura of scandal, or at least of ambiguity, hovered over these uncles, as if they had run away with someone's wife or daughter. There was a flaw in their past, some kind of unhealthiness, even a hint of insanity.

These uncles were, of course, my favorite authors, the writers I most admired. I felt them waiting, almost calling out to me. They were more real than anything I had ever known, real as only imagined things can be, real as dreams that seem so unbearably actual because they are cleansed of all irrelevances. These uncles, these books, moved into the vacuum of my imagination.

They were all the family I had now, all the family I wanted. With them, I could trade in my embarrassingly ordinary history for a choice of fictions. I could lead a hypothetical life, unencumbered by memory, loyalties, or resentments. The first impulse of adolescence is to wish to be an orphan or an amnesiac. Nobody in the Village had a family. We were all sprung from our own brows, spontaneously generated the way flies were once thought to have originated.

I didn't yet see the tragedy of my family: I still thought of them as a farce, my laughable past. In my new incarnation, in books I could be halfway heroic, almost tragic. I could be happy, for the first time, in my tragedy.

I realize that people still read books now and some people actually love them, but in 1946 in the Village our feelings about books—I'm talking about my friends and myself—went beyond love. It was as if we didn't know

where we ended and books began. Books were our weather, our environment, our clothing. We didn't simply read books; we became them. We took them into ourselves and made them into our histories. While it would be easy to say that we escaped into books, it might be truer to say that books escaped into us. Books were to us what drugs were to young men in the sixties.

They showed us what was possible. We had been living with whatever was close at hand, whatever was given, and books took us great distances. We had known only domestic emotions and they showed us what happens to emotions when they are homeless. Books gave us balance—the young are so unbalanced that anything can make them fall. Books steadied us; it was as if we carried a heavy bag of them in each hand and they kept us level. They gave us gravity.

If it hadn't been for books, we'd have been completely at the mercy of sex. There was hardly anything else powerful enough to distract or deflect us; we'd have been crawling after sex, writhing over it all the time. Books enabled us to see ourselves as characters—yes, we were characters!—and this gave us a bit of control.

Though we read all kinds of books, there were only a handful of writers who were our uncles, our family. For me, it was Kafka, Wallace Stevens, D. H. Lawrence, and Céline. These were the books I liked, the books that I read, and they wouldn't fill more than a few shelves, so I went over to Fourth Avenue, which was lined with bookshops, and bought books by the titles, the subjects, the bindings, or the publishers. I was given a 20 percent dealer's discount and I thought I could charge my customers fifty cents or one dollar more for the pleasure of finding these books in a clean,

well-lighted place. Although I had never read Balzac, I bought a fifty-volume uniform edition of his novels in a red binding with gold-edged pages. I got it for only nineteen dollars.

There were people in the Village who had more books than money, and I appealed to them in the literary quarterlies. Like someone buying a dog, I assured them that I'd give their books a good home. But it was an unhappy business, because many of these people suffered from separation anxiety. Those who were depressed by letting their books go tended to devaluate them, while others who were more in the hysterical mode asked such enormous sums that I knew it was their souls they were selling. Pricing an out-of-print book is one of the most poignant forms of criticism.

Seeing how young I was, everyone gave me advice. Get Christopher Caudwell, they said. Get Kenneth Burke, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, Paul Valéry. Get Nathanael West, Céline, Unamuno, Italo Svevo, Hermann Broch, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead.* Edward Dahlberg, Baron Corvo, Djuna Barnes—get them too. But above all, at any cost, I must get Kafka. Kafka was as popular in the Village at that time as Dickens had been in Victorian London. But his books were very difficult to find—they must have been printed in very small editions—and people would rush in wild-eyed, almost foaming at the mouth, willing to pay anything for Kafka.

Literary criticism was enjoying a vogue. As Randall Jarrell said, some people consulted their favorite critic about the conduct of their lives as they had once consulted their clergymen. The war had left a bitter taste, and literary criticism is the art of bitter tastes.

A thin, intense young man with a mustache came into the shop and instructed me in bibliophilic etiquette. A bookshop, he said, should have an almost ecclesiastical atmosphere. There should be an odor, or redolence, of snuffed candles, dryness, desuetude—even contrition. He gazed at the shelves, the floor, the stamped tin ceiling. It's too clean here, he said, too cheerful.

I had imagined myself like Saint Jerome in his study, bent over his books, with the tamed lion of his conquered restlessness at his feet. My customers would come and go in studious silence, pausing, with averted eyes, to leave the money on my desk. But it didn't turn out like that. What I hadn't realized was that, for many people, a bookshop is a place of last resort, a kind of moral flophouse. Many of my customers were the kind of people who go into a bookshop when all other diversions have failed them. Those who had no friends, no pleasures, no resources came to me. They came to read the handwriting on the wall, the bad news. They studied the shelves like people reading the names on a war memorial.

There was something in the way a particular person would take a book from a shelf, the way it was opened and sniffed, that made me want to snatch it away. Others would seize upon a book that was obviously beyond them. I could tell by their faces, their clothes, by their manners, the way they moved, that they'd misread the book or get nothing out of it. The kind of person who is satirized or attacked in a book is often the very person to buy it and pretend to enjoy it. As Mallarmé said, "If a person of average intelligence and insufficient literary preparation opens one of my books and pretends to enjoy it, there has been a mistake. Things must be returned to their places."

It was the talkers who gave me the most trouble. Like the people who had sold me books, the talkers wanted to sell me their lives, their fictions about themselves, their philosophies. Following the example of the authors on the shelves, infected perhaps by them, they told me of their families, their love affairs, their illusions and disillusionments. I was indignant. I wanted to say, Wait a minute! I've already got stories here! Take a look at those shelves!

While I pretended to listen, I asked myself which were more real—theirs, or the stories on the shelves. "The familiar man makes the hero artificial," Wallace Stevens said. In the commonplaceness of their narratives, some of these talkers anticipated the direction that American fiction would eventually take—away from the heroic, the larger than life, toward the ordinary, the smaller than life.

As they talked on, I thought of all the junk I had carried out of the shop—the boilers, bathtubs, and radiators. These people were bringing it all back—all the clutter, the cast-off odds and ends of their lives. It was more than I had bargained for. Literature was tough enough, with its gaudy sadness, but this miscellany—these heartaches off the street—was too much for me. In the contest between life and literature, life wins every time.