

V I N T A G E

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eBooks



# Barney's Version

MORDECAI RICHLER

## Barney's Version

"A fine, funny novel.... Deft, irreverent, and affecting."

— *The New York Times*

"A satisfying experience; this is a masterfully executed novel—a funny, touching, mature work."

— *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

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— *The Washington Post Book World*

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— *The New York Times*

"A touching human work [which] celebrates the power of love, the importance of family, the

value of work, and the frightening process of aging.... [An] eloquent portrait of an impossible man.”

—*The Toronto Star*

Mordecai Richler

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**Barney's Version**

Mordecai Richler was born in Montreal in 1931. Among his most successful novels are *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, and *Barney's Version*. He died in 2001.

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*The Acrobats*

*A Choice of Enemies*

*Son of a Smaller Hero*

*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

*The Incomparable Atuk (Stick Your Neck Out)*

*Cocksure*

*St. Urbain's Horseman*

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*This Year in Jerusalem*



With Footnotes

and an Afterword

by Michael Panofsky

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# Barney's Version

Mordecai  
Richler



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*For Florence,*

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*and in memory of four absent friends:*

*Jack Clayton, Ted Allan, Tony Godwin, and Ian Mayer*

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## Clara

1950–1952

## 1

**T**ERRY'S THE SPUR. The splinter under my fingernail. To come clean, I'm starting on the shambles that is the true story of my wasted life (violating a solemn pledge, scribbling a first book at my advanced age), as a riposte to the scurrilous charges Terry McIver has made in his forthcoming autobiography: about me, my three wives, a.k.a. Barne Panofsky's troika, the nature of my friendship with Boogie, and, of course, the scandal I will carry to my grave like a humpback. Terry's sound of two hands clapping, *Of Time and Fever* will shortly be launched by The Group (sorry, the group), a government-subsidized small press, rooted in Toronto, that also publishes a monthly journal, *the good earth*, printed on recycled paper, you bet your life.

Terry McIver and I, both Montrealers born and bred, were in Paris together in the early fifties. Poor Terry was no more than tolerated by my bunch, a pride of impecunious, horny young writers awash in rejection slips, yet ostensibly confident that everything was possible — fame, adoring bimbos, and fortune lying in wait around the corner, just like that legendary Wrigley's shill of my boyhood. The shill, according to report, would surprise you on the street to reward you with a crisp new dollar bill, provided you had a Wrigley's chewing-gum wrapper in your pocket. Mr. Wrigley's big giver never caught up with me. But fame did find several of my bunch: the driven Leo Bishinsky; Cedric Richardson, albeit under another name; and, of course, Clara. Clara, who now enjoys posthumous fame as a feminist icon, beaten on the anvil of male-chauvinist insentience. My anvil, so they say.

I was an anomaly. No, an anomie. A natural-born entrepreneur. I hadn't won awards at McGill, like Terry, or been to Harvard or Columbia, like some of the others. I had barely squeezed through high school, having invested more time at the tables of the Mount Royal Billiards Academy than in classes, playing snooker with Duddy Kravitz. Couldn't write. Didn't paint. Had no artistic pretensions whatsoever, unless you count my fantasy of becoming a music-hall song-and-dance man, tipping my straw boater to the good folks in the balcony as I fluttered off stage in my taps, yielding to Peaches, Ann Corio,<sup>1</sup> Lili St. Cyr, or some other exotic dancer, who would bring her act to a drum-throbbing climax with a thrilling flash of bare tit, in days long before lap-dancers had become the norm in Montreal.

I was a voracious reader, but you would be mistaken if you took that as evidence of my quality. Or sensibility. At bottom, I am obliged to acknowledge, with a nod to Clara, the baseness of my soul. My ugly competitive nature. What got me started was not Tolstoy's *The*

*Death of Ivan Ilyich*, or Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, but the old *Liberty* magazine, which prefaced each of its articles with a headnote saying how long it would take to read it: say, five minutes and thirty-five seconds. Setting my Mickey Mouse wristwatch on our kitchen table with the checkered oilcloth, I would zip through the piece in question in, say, four minutes and three seconds, and consider myself an intellectual. From *Liberty*, I graduated to a paperback John Marquand "Mr. Moto" novel, selling for twenty-five cents at the time in Jack and Moe's Barbershop, corner of Park Avenue and Laurier in the heart of Montreal's old working-class Jewish quarter, where I was raised. A neighbourhood that had elected the only Communist (Fred Rose) ever to serve as a member of Parliament, produced a couple of decent club fighters (Louis Alter, Maxie Berger), the obligatory number of doctors and dentists, a celebrated gambler-cum-casino owner, more cutthroat lawyers than needed, sundry school teachers and *shmata* millionaires, a few rabbis, and at least one suspected murderer.

Me.

I remember snow banks five feet high, winding outside staircases that had to be shoveled in the sub-zero cold, and, in days long before snow tires, the rattle of passing cars and trucks with their wheels encased in chains. Sheets frozen rock-hard on backyard clotheslines. In my bedroom, where the radiator sizzled and knocked through the night, I eventually stumbled on Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce, Gertie and Alice, as well as our own Morley Callaghan. I came of age envying their expatriate adventures and, as a consequence, made a serious decision in 1950.

Ah, 1950. That was the last year Bill Durnan, five times winner of the Vézina Trophy, became goalie in the National Hockey League, would mind the nets for my beloved Montreal Canadiens. In 1950, *nos glorieux* could already deploy a formidable defence corps, including mainstay young Doug Harvey. The Punch Line was then only two thirds intact: in the absence of Hector "Toe" Blake, who retired in 1948, Maurice "The Rocket" Richard and Elmer Lacombe were skating on a line with Floyd "Busher" Curry. They finished second to bloody Detroit in the regular season and, to their everlasting shame, went down four games to one to the New York Rangers in the Stanley Cup semifinals. At least The Rocket enjoyed a decent year finishing the regular season second in the individual scoring race with forty-three goals and twenty-two assists.<sup>2</sup>

Anyway, in 1950, at the age of twenty-two, I left the chorus girl I was living with in a basement flat on Tupper Street. I withdrew my modest stash from the City and District Savings Bank, money I had earned as a waiter at the old Normandy Roof (a job arranged by my father, Detective-Inspector Izzy Panofsky), and booked passage to Europe on the *Queen Elizabeth*,<sup>3</sup> sailing out of New York. In my innocence, I was determined to seek out and be enriched by the friendship of what I then thought of as the pure of heart, artists, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." And those, those were the days when you could smooch with college girls with impunity. One, Two, Cha-Cha-Cha. "If I Knew You Were Coming I'd've Baked a Cake." Moonlit nights on deck, nice girls wore crinolines, cinch belts, ankle bracelets, and two-tone saddle shoes, and you could count on them not to sue you for sexual harassment forty years later, their suppressed memories of date-rape retrieved by lacrosse psychoanalysts who shaved.

Not fame, but fortune eventually found me. That fortune, such as it is, had humble roots. To begin with, I was sponsored by a survivor of Auschwitz, Yossel Pinsky, who changed

dollars for us at black-market rates in a curtained booth in a photography shop on the rue de Rosiers. One evening Yossel sat down at my table in The Old Navy, ordered a *café filtré*, dropped seven sugar cubes into his cup, and said, "I need somebody with a valid Canadian passport."

"To do what?"

"Make money. What else is left?" he asked, taking out a Swiss Army knife and beginning to clean his remaining fingernails. "But we should get to know each other a little better first. Have you eaten yet?"

"No."

"So let's go for dinner. Hey, I won't bite. Come, *boychick*."

And that's how, only a year later, Yossel serving as my guide, I became an exporter of French cheeses to an increasingly flush postwar Canada. Back home, Yossel arranged for me to run an agency for Vespas, those Italian motorized scooters that were once such a hot item. Over the years I also dealt profitably, with Yossel as my partner, in olive oil, just like the young Meyer Lansky; bolts of cloth spun on the islands of Lewis and Harris; scrap metal bought and sold without my ever having seen any of it; antiquated DC-3s, some of them still being flown North of Sixty; and, after Yossel had moved to Israel, one step ahead of the gendarmes, ancient Egyptian artifacts, stolen from minor tombs in the Valley of the Kings. But I have my principles. I have never handled arms, drugs, or health foods.

Finally I became a sinner. In the late sixties, I began to produce Canadian-financed films that were never exhibited anywhere for more than an embarrassing week, but which eventually earned me, and on occasion my backers, hundreds of thousands of dollars through a tax loophole since closed. Then I started to churn out Canadian-content TV series sufficiently shlocky to be syndicated in the U.S. and, in the case of our boffo *McIver of the RCMP* series, which is big on bonking scenes in canoes and igloos, in the U.K., and other countries as well.

When it was required of me, I could rumba as a latter-day patriot, sheltering in the Green Cham's last refuge of the scoundrel. Whenever a government minister, a free-marketeer responding to American pressure, threatened to dump the law that insisted on (and bankrolled to a yummy degree) so much Canadian-manufactured pollution on our airwaves, I did a quick change in the hypocrite's phone booth, slipping into my Captain Canada mode and appeared before the committee. "We are defining Canada to Canadians," I told them. "We are this country's memory, its soul, its hypostasis, the last defence against our being overwhelmed by the egregious cultural imperialists to the south of us."

I digress.

Back in our expatriate days, we roistering provincials, slap-happy to be in Paris, drunk on the beauty of our surroundings, were fearful of retiring to our Left Bank hotel rooms lest we wake up back home, retrieved by parents who would remind us of how much they had invested in our educations, and how it was time for us to put our shoulders to the wheel. In my case, no airmail letter from my father was complete without its built-in stinger:

"Yankel Schneider, remember him, he had a stammer? So what? He's become a chartered accountant and drives a Buick now."

Our loosy-goosy band included a couple of painters, so to speak, both of them New Yorkers. There was the loopy Clara and the scheming Leo Bishinsky, who managed his artist

rise better than Wellington did — you know, that battle in a town in Belgium.<sup>4</sup> He left a bag to go to it. Or interrupted a game of bowls. No, that was Drake.

A garage in Montparnasse served as Leo's atelier, and there he laboured on his huge triptychs, mixing his paints in buckets and applying them with a kitchen mop. On occasion he would swish his mop around, stand back ten feet, and let fly. Once, when I was there, the two of us sharing a toke, he thrust his mop at me. "Have a go," he said.

"Really?"

"Why not?"

Soon enough, I figured, Leo would get a shave and a haircut and join an advertising agency in New York.

I was dead wrong.

Go know that forty years later Leo's atrocities would be hanging in the Tate, the Guggenheim, MOMA, and The National Gallery in Washington, and that others would be sold for millions to junk-bond mavens and arbitrage gurus who were often outbid by Japanese collectors. Go anticipate that Leo's battered Renault *deux-chevaux*<sup>5</sup> would one day be succeeded, in a ten-car garage in Amagansett, by a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, a vintage Morgan, a Ferrari 250 *berlinetta*, and an Alfa Romeo, among other toys. Or that to mention his name today, in passing, I could be accused of name-dropping. Leo has appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in Mephistophelian guise, replete with horns, magenta cape and tail, painting magic symbols on the nude body of a flavour-of-the-month starlet.

In the old days you could always tell who Leo was screwing, because, *tout court*, a white bread-and-cashmere-twin-set young woman out of Nebraska, working for the Marshall Plan, would turn up at La Coupole and think nothing of picking her nose at the table. But today renowned fashion models flock to Leo's Long Island mansion, vying with one another to proffer pubic hairs that can be worked into his paintings along with bits of beach glass, bluefish skeletons, salami butts, and toenail clippings.

Back in 1951 my gang of neophyte artists flaunted their liberation from what they, *de haut en bas*, denigrated as the rat race, but the sour truth is, with the shining exception of Bernard "Boogie" Moscovitch, they were all contenders. Each one as fiercely competitive as an *Organization Man* or *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, if any of you out there are old enough to remember those long-forgotten best-sellers, modish for a season. Like Colin Wilson. Or the Hula Hoop. And they were driven by the need to succeed as much as any St. Urbain Street urchin back home who had bet his bundle on a new autumn line of *après-ski* wear. Fiction was what most of them were peddling. Making it new, as Ezra Pound had ordained before he was certified insane. Mind you, they didn't have to cart samples round to department store buyers, floating on "a smile and a shoeshine," as Clifford Odets<sup>6</sup> once put it. Instead, they shipped their merchandise off to magazine and book editors, enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Except for Boogie, my anointed one.

Alfred Kazin once wrote of Saul Bellow that, even when he was still young and unknown, he already had the aura about him of a man destined for greatness. I felt the same about Boogie, who was uncommonly generous at the time to other young writers, it being understood that he was superior to any of them.

In one of his manic moods Boogie would throw up lots of smoke, deflecting questions about his work by clowning. "Look at me," he once said, "I've got all the faults of Tolstoy."

Dostoevsky, and Hemingway rolled into one. I will fuck just about any peasant girl who will have me. I'm an obsessive gambler. A drunk. Hey, just like Freddy D., I'm even an anti-Semite, but maybe that doesn't count in my case as I'm Jewish myself. So far, all that's lacking in the equation is my very own Yasnaya Polyana, a recognition of my prodigious talent, and money for tonight's dinner, unless you're inviting me? God bless you, Barney."

Five years older than I was, Boogie had scrambled up Omaha Beach on D-Day, and survived the Battle of the Bulge. He was in Paris on the GI Bill, which provided him with one hundred dollars monthly, a stipend supplemented by an allowance from home, which he usually invested, with sporadic luck, on the *chemin de fer* tables at the Aviation Club.

Well now, never mind the malicious gossip, most recently revived by the lying McIver, that will pursue me to the end of my days. The truth is, Boogie was the most cherished friend I ever had. I adored him. And over many a shared toke, or bottle of *vin ordinaire*, I was able to piece together something of his background. Boogie's grandfather Moishe Lev Moscovitch was born in Bialystok, sailed steerage to America from Hamburg, and rose by dint of hard work and parsimony from pushcart chicken peddler to sole proprietor of a kosher butcher shop on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side. His first-born son, Mendel, parlayed that butcher shop into Peerless Gourmet Packers, suppliers of K-rations to the U.S. Army during the Second World War. Peerless emerged afterward as purveyors of Virginia Plantation packages of ham, Olde English sausages, Mandarin spare ribs, and Granny's Gobblers (frozen, oven-ready turkeys) to supermarkets in New York State and New England. *En route*, Mendel, his name laundered to Matthew Morrow, acquired a fourteen-room apartment on Park Avenue serviced by a maid, a cook, a butler-cum-chauffeur, and an English governess off the Old Kenilworth Road for his first-born son, Boogie, who later had to take elocution lessons to get rid of his cockney accent. In lieu of a violin teacher and a Hebrew *melamed*, Boogie, who was counted on to infiltrate the family deep into the WASP hive, was sent to a military summer camp in Maine. "I was expected to learn how to ride, shoot, sail, play tennis, and turn the other cheek," he said. Registering for camp, Boogie, as instructed by his mother, filled out "atheist" under "Religious Denomination." The camp commander winked, crossed it out, and wrote "Jewish." Boogie endured the camp, and Andover, but dropped out of Harvard in his sophomore year, in 1941, and joined the army as a rifleman, reverting to the name Moscovitch.

Once, responding to persistent inquiries from an earnest Terry McIver, Boogie allowed that in the opening chapter of his discombobulating novel-in-progress, set in 1912, his protagonist disembarks from the *Titanic*, which has just completed its maiden voyage, docking safely in New York, only to be accosted by a reporter. "What was the trip like?" she asks.

"Boring."

Improvising, I'm sure, Boogie went on to say that, two years later, his protagonist, riding in a carriage with Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his missus, drops his opera glasses as they bounce over a bump in the road. The archduke, big on *noblesse oblige*, stoops to retrieve them, thereby avoiding an assassination attempt by a Serb nutter. A couple of months later, however, the Germans invade Belgium all the same. Then, in 1917, Boogie's protagonist, shooting the breeze with Lenin in a Zurich café, asks for an explanation of surplus value, and Lenin, warming to the subject, lingers too long over his *millefeuille* and *café au lait*, and misses his train, the sealed car arriving in the Finland Station without him.

“Isn’t that just like that fucking Ilyich?” says the leader of the delegation come to greet him on the platform. “Now what is to be done?”

“Maybe Leon would get up and say a few words?”

“A few words? Leon? We’ll be standing here for hours.”

Boogie told Terry he was fulfilling the artist’s primary function — making order out of chaos.

“I should have known better than to ask you a serious question,” said Terry, retreating from our café table.

In the ensuing silence, Boogie, by way of apology, turned to me and explained that he had inherited, from Heinrich Heine, *le droit de moribondage*.

Boogie could yank that sort of conversation-stopper out of the back pocket of his mind propelling me to a library, educating me.

I loved Boogie and miss him something awful. I would give up my fortune (say half) to have that enigma, that six-foot-two scarecrow, lope through my door again, pulling on his Romeo y Julieta, his smile charged with ambiguity, demanding, “Have you read Thomas Bernhard yet?” or “What do you make of Chomsky?”

God knows he had his dark side, disappearing for weeks on end — some said to a *yeshiva* in Mea Shearim and others swore to a monastery in Tuscany — but nobody really knew where he went. Then one day he would appear — no, materialize — without explanation at one of the cafés we favoured, accompanied by a gorgeous Spanish duchess or an Italian contessa.

On his bad days Boogie wouldn’t answer my knock on his hotelroom door or, if he did, would say no more than “Go away. Let me be,” and I knew that he was lying on his bed, high on horse, or that he was seated at his table, compiling lists of the names of those young men who had fought alongside him and were already dead.

It was Boogie who introduced me to Goncharov, Huysmans, Céline, and Nathanael West. He was taking language lessons from a White Russian watchmaker whom he had befriended. “How can anybody go through life,” he asked, “not being able to read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov in the original?” Fluent in German and Hebrew, Boogie studied the Zohar, the holy book of the Cabbala, once a week with a rabbi in a synagogue on rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, an address that delighted him.

Then, years ago, I collected all eight of Boogie’s cryptic short stories that had been published in *Merlin*, *Zero*, and *The Paris Review*, with the intention of bringing them out in a limited edition, each volume numbered, elegantly printed, no expense spared. The story of his that I’ve read again and again, for obvious reasons, is a variation on a far-from-original theme, but brilliantly realized, like everything he wrote. “Margolis” is about a man who walks out to buy a package of cigarettes and never returns to his wife and child, assuming a new identity elsewhere.

I wrote to Boogie’s son in Santa Fe offering him an advance of ten thousand dollars, as well as a hundred free copies and all profits that might accrue from the enterprise. His response came in the form of a registered letter that expressed amazement that I, of all people, could even contemplate such a venture, and warning me that he would not hesitate to take legal action if I dared to do such a thing. So that was that.

Hold the phone. I’m stuck. I’m trying to remember the name of the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Or was it *The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt*? No, that was written by

the fibber. Lillian what's-her-name? Come on. I know it. Like the mayonnaise. Lillian Kraft No. *Hellman*. *Lillian Hellman*. The name of the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* doesn't matter. It's of no importance. But now that it's started I won't sleep tonight. These increasingly frequent bouts of memory loss are driving me crazy.

Last night, sailing off to sleep at last, I couldn't remember the name of the thing you use to strain spaghetti. Imagine that. I've used it thousands of times. I could visualize it. But I couldn't remember what the bloody thing was called. And I didn't want to get out of bed to search through cookbooks Miriam had left behind, because it would only remind me that it was my fault she was gone, and I would have to get out of bed at three o'clock anyway to piss. Not the swift bubbly torrent of my Left Bank days, nosirree. Now it was dribble, dribble, and no matter how hard I shook it, a belated trickle down my pyjama leg.

Lying in the dark, fulminating, I recited aloud the number I was to call if I had a heart attack.

"You have reached the Montreal General Hospital. If you have a touch-tone phone, and you know the extension you want, please press that number now. If not, press number seventeen for service in the language of *les maudits anglais*, or number twelve for service *en français*, the glorious language of our oppressed collectivity."

Twenty-one for emergency ambulance service.

"You have reached the emergency ambulance service. Please hold and an operator will come to your assistance as soon as our strippoker game is over. Have a nice day."

While I waited, the automatic tape would play Mozart's *Requiem*.

I groped to make sure my digitalis pills, reading glasses, and dentures were within easy reach on the bedside table. I switched on a lamp briefly and scooped up my boxer shorts to check them out for skid marks, because if I died during the night I didn't want strangers to think I was dirty. Then I tried the usual gambit. Think of something else, something soothing, and the name of the spaghetti thingamabob will come to you unsummoned. So I imagined Terry McIver bleeding profusely in a shark-infested sea, feeling another tug at what's left of his legs just as a rescuing helicopter is attempting to winch him out of the water. Finally when the remains of the lying, self-regarding author of *Of Time and Fevers*, a dripping torso, is raised above the surface, bobbing like bait in the churning waters, sharks lunging at it.

Next I made myself a scruffy fourteen-year-old again, and unhooked, for that first whoopee time, the filigreed bra of the teacher I shall call Mrs. Ogilvy, even as one of those nonsense songs was playing on the radio in her living room:

Mair-zy Doats and Do-zy Doats and lid-dle lam-zy div-ey

A kid-dle-y div-ey too, would-n't you?

To my astonishment, she didn't resist. Instead, terrifying me, she kicked off her shoes and began to wriggle out of her tartan skirt. "I don't know what's got into me," said the teacher who had awarded me an A+ for my essay on *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I had cribbed paraphrasing here and there, from a book by Granville Hicks. "I'm robbing the cradle." Then, in my mind's eye, she spoiled everything, adding, with a certain classroom asperity, "But shouldn't we strain the spaghetti first?"

"Yeah. Sure. But using what thingamajig?"

"I fancy it *al dente*," she said.

And now, giving Mrs. Ogilvy a second chance, hoping for a better return this time, travelled back through memory lane again and tumbled onto the sofa with her, incidental hoping for at least a semi-demi-erection in my decrepit here and now.

“Oh, you’re so impatient,” she said. “Wait. Not yet. *En français, s’il vous plaît.*”

“What?”

“Oh, dear. Such manners. We mean ‘I beg your pardon,’ don’t we? Now then, let’s have ‘not yet’ in French, please.”

“*Pas encore.*”

“Jolly good,” she said, sliding open a side-table drawer. “Now I don’t want you to think me a bossy boots, but please be a considerate lad and roll this on to your pretty little willy first.”

“Yes, Mrs. Ogilvy.”

“Give me your hand. Oh, have you ever seen such filthy fingernails? There. Like that. Gently does it. Oh yes, please. *Wait!*”

“What have I done wrong now?”

“I just thought you’d like to know it wasn’t Lillian Hellman who wrote *The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt*. It was Mary McCarthy.”

Damn damn damn. I got out of bed, slipped into the threadbare dressing-gown I couldn’t part with because it was a gift from Miriam, and padded into the kitchen. Rummaging through drawers, I yanked out utensils and named them one-two-three: soup ladle, egg-timer, tongs, pie slicer, vegetable peeler, tea strainer, measuring cups, can opener, spatula ... and hanging on a wall hook, there it was, the thingamabob used to strain spaghetti, *but what was called?*

I’ve survived scarlet fever, mumps, two muggings, crabs, the extraction of all my teeth, hip-socket replacement, a murder charge, and three wives. The first one is dead and The Second Mrs. Panofsky, hearing my voice, would holler, even after all these years, “Murderer, what have you done with his body?” before slamming down the receiver. But Miriam would talk to me. She might even laugh at my dilemma. Oh, to have this apartment resonate with her laughter. Her scent. Her love. The trouble is, Blair would probably be the one to answer the phone, and I had already blotted my copybook with that pretentious bastard the last time I called. “I would like to speak to my wife,” I said.

“She is no longer your wife, Barney, and you are obviously inebriated.”

He would say “inebriated.” “Of course I’m drunk. It’s four o’clock in the morning.”

“And Miriam’s asleep.”

“But it’s you I wanted to talk to. I was cleaning out my desk drawers here and I found some stunning nude photographs of her when she was with me, and I was wondering if you would like to have them, if only to know what she looked like in her prime.”

“You’re disgusting,” he said, hanging up.

True enough. But, all the same, I danced round the living room, doing my take on the great Ralph Brown’s Shim Sham Shimmy, a tumbler of Cardhu in hand.

There are some people out there who take Blair to be a fine fellow. A scholar of distinction. Even my sons defend him. We appreciate how you feel, they say, but he is an intelligent and caring man, devoted to Miriam. Bullshit. A drudge on tenure, Blair came to Canada from Boston in the sixties, a draft-dodger, like Dan Quayle and Bill Clinton, and consequently, a hero to his students. As for me, I’m dumbfounded that anybody would prefer

Toronto to Saigon. Anyway, I've got his faculty group fax number and, thinking of how Boogie would have taken advantage of that, I sit down and wing one to Blair occasionally.

**Fax to Herr Doktor Blair Hopper né Hauptman**  
**From Sexorama Novelties**

ACHTUNG

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Herr Doktor Hopper,

Pursuant to your inquiry of January 26, we welcome your idea of introducing to Victoria College the old Ivy League practice of requiring selected coeds to pose naked for posture photographs, front, profile, and back. Your notion of introducing garter belts and other accessories is inspired. The project has, as you put it, great commercial potential. However, we will have to assess the actual photographs before we can take up your suggestion to market a new set of playing cards.

Sincerely,  
DWAYNE CONNORS  
Sexorama Novelties.

P.S. We acknowledge your return of our 1995 TOY BOYS calendar, but cannot send you a refund due to the many stains, and the fact that the August and September pages are stuck together.

Twelve forty-five a.m. Now I held the spaghetti thingamajig in my liver-spotted hand, wrinkled as a lizard's back, but I still couldn't put a name to it. Flinging it aside, I poured myself a couple of inches of Macallan, picked up the phone, and dialled my eldest son in London. "Hiya, Mike. This is your six a.m. wake-up call. Time for your morning jog."

"As a matter of fact, it's five forty-six here."

For breakfast my punctilious son would munch crunchy granola and yogurt, washed down with a glass of lemon water. People today.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and his concern just about brought tears to my eyes.

"In the pink. But I've got a problem. What do you call the thingee you strain spaghetti with?"

"Are you drunk?"

"*Certainly not.*"

"Didn't Dr. Herscovitch warn you that if you started up again it would kill you?"

"I swear on the heads of my grandchildren, I haven't had a drop in weeks. I no longer even order *coq au vin* in restaurants. Now will you answer my question, please?"

"I'm going to take the phone in the living room, hang up here, and then we can talk."

Mustn't wake Lady Health Fascist.

"Hi, I'm back. Do you mean a colander?"

"Of course I mean a colander. It was on the tip of my tongue. I was just going to say it."

"Are you taking your pills?"

"Sure I am. Have you heard from your mother lately?" I blurted out compulsively, having sworn I'd never ask about her again.

"She and Blair stopped over here for three days on October fourth, on their way to conference in Glasgow."<sup>7</sup>

“I don’t give a damn about her any more. You don’t know what a pleasure it is not to be reprimanded because I forgot to lift the seat again. But, speaking as a disinterested observer I think she deserved better.”

“You mean you?”

“Tell Caroline,” I said, lashing out, “that I read somewhere that lettuce bleeds when you chop it up and carrots suffer traumas when you pluck them out of the ground.”

“Dad, I hate to think of you all alone in that big empty apartment.”

“As it happens, I have what I think they now call ‘a resource person,’ or is it ‘a sex worker’ staying with me tonight. What boors like me used to call ‘a skirt’. Tell your mother. I don’t care for her mind.”

“Why don’t you fly over and haunt our house for a while?”

“Because in the London I remember best the obligatory first course in even the most stylish restaurant was grey-brown Windsor soup, or a grapefruit with a maraschino cherry sitting in the middle like a nipple, and most of the people I used to hang out with there are dead now and about time too. Harrods has become a Eurotrash temple. Everywhere you turn in Knightsbridge there are rich Japs shooting movies of each other. The White Elephant is kaput, so is Isow’s, and L’Étoile ain’t what it used to be. I have no interest in who’s banging Di or whether Charles is reincarnated as a tampon. The pubs are intolerable, what with those noisy slot-machines and pounding jungle music. And too many of our people there are something else. If they’ve been to Oxford or Cambridge, or earn more than a hundred thousand pounds a year, they are no longer Jewish, but ‘of Jewish descent,’ which is not quite the same thing.

I’ve never really been rooted in London, but I was once there in the fifties for three months, and another time in 1961 for a stay of two, missing the Stanley Cup playoffs. Mind you, that was the year the heavily favoured Canadiens were eliminated in six games, in the semifinals, by the Chicago Black Hawks. I still wish I had caught the second game, in Chicago, which the Hawks won 2–1, after fifty-two minutes of overtime. That was the night referee Dalton McArthur, that officious bastard, penalized Dickie Moore, *in overtime*, for tripping, enabling Murray Balfour to pot the winning goal. An outraged Toe Blake, then our coach, charged onto the ice to bop McArthur one, and was fined \$2,000. I had flown over to London in ’61 to work on that co-production with Hymie Mintzbaum that led to such a nasty fight, resulting in our being estranged for years. Hymie, born and bred in the Bronx, is an Anglophile, but not me.

You simply can’t trust the British. With Americans (or Canadians, for that matter) what you see is what you get. But settle into your seat on a 749 flying out of Heathrow next to an ostensibly boring old Englishman with wobbly chins, the acquired stammer, obviously something in the City, intent on his *Times* crossword puzzle, and don’t you dare patronize him. Mr. Milquetoast, actually a judo black belt, was probably parachuted into the Dordogne in 1943, blew up a train or two, and survived the Gestapo cells by concentrating on what would become the definitive translation of *Gilgamesh* from the Sin-Leqi-Inninni; and now — his garment bag stuffed with his wife’s most alluring cocktail dresses and lingerie — he is no doubt bound for the annual convention of cross-dressers in Saskatoon.

Once again Mike told me that I could have their garden flat. Private. With my own entrance. And how wonderfully dreadful it would be for his children, who had adored *Frida the 13th*, to get to know their grandfather. But I hate being a grandfather. It’s indecent. In m

mind's eye, I'm still twenty-five. Thirty-three max. Certainly not sixty-seven, reeking of decay and dashed hopes. My breath sour. My limbs in dire need of a lube job. And now that I've been blessed with a plastic hip-socket replacement, I'm no longer even biodegradable. Environmentalists will protest my burial.

On one of my recent annual visits to Mike and Caroline, I arrived laden with gifts for my grandchildren and Her Ladyship (as Saul, my second-born son, has dubbed her), my *pièce de résistance* reserved for Mike: a box of Cohibas, acquired for me in Cuba. It pained me to part with those cigars, but I hoped it would please Mike, with whom I had a difficult relationship, and it did delight him. Or so I thought. But a month later one of Mike's associates, Tony Haines, who also happened to be a cousin of Caroline's, was in Montreal on a business trip. He phoned to say he had a gift from Mike, a side of smoked salmon from Fortnum's. I invited him to meet me for drinks at Dink's. Pulling out his cigar case, Tony offered me a Cohiba. "Oh, wonderful," I said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. They were a birthday gift from Mike and Caroline."

"Oh, really," I said, lumbered with another family grievance to nurse. Or cherish, according to Miriam. "Some people collect stamps, or bookmatch covers," she once said, "but with you, my darling, it's grievances."

On that visit Mike and Caroline settled me into an upstairs bedroom, everything mod, from Conran or The General Trading Company. A bouquet of freesias and a bottle of Perrier on my bedside table, but no ashtray. Opening the bedside-table drawer, searching for something I could use, I blundered on a pair of torn pantyhose. Sniffing them, I recognized the scent at once. Miriam's. She and Blair had shared this bed, contaminating it. Yanking back the sheet I searched the mattress for tell-tale stains. Nothing. Har, har, har. Professor Limp Pricer couldn't cut the mustard. Herr Doktor Hopper né Hauptman probably read aloud to her in bed instead. His deconstructionist *pensées* on Mark Twain's racism. Or Hemingway's homophobia. All the same, I retrieved a canister of pine spray from the bathroom and fumigated the mattress, and then remade the bed after a fashion before climbing back into it. Now the sheets were riding up on me, a maddening tangle. The room stank of pine scent. I opened a window wide. Freezing cold it was. An abandoned husband, I was obviously destined to perish of pneumonia in a bed once graced by Miriam's warmth. Her beauty. Her treachery. Well now, women of her age, suffering hot flushes and confusions, sometimes unaccountably begin to shoplift. If she were arrested, I would refuse to be a character witness. No, I would testify that she had always been light-fingered. Let her rot in the slammer. Miriam, Miriam, my heart's desire.

Mike, bless him, is filthy rich, which he atones for by still wearing his hair in a ponytail and favouring blue jeans (Polo Ralph Lauren's, mind you), but, happily, no earrings. Or Nehru jackets any longer. Or Mao caps. He's a property baron. Owner of some choice houses in Highgate, Hampstead, Swiss Cottage, Islington, and Chelsea, which he accumulated before inflation hit, and converted into flats. He's also into some things offshore, which I'd rather not know about, and deals in commodity futures. He and Caroline live in modish Fulham, which I remember before the DIY-trained yuppies invaded. They also own a dacha high in the hills of the Alpes-Maritimes, not far from Vence, a vineyard running down its slopes. In three generations, from the *shtetl* to the makers of Château Panofsky. What can I say?

Mike is a partner in a restaurant for the smart set. It's in Pimlico, called The Table, the chuder than he is talented, which is *de rigueur* these days, isn't it? Too young to remember Pearl Harbor, or what happened to the Canadians taken prisoner at — at — you know, the impregnable outpost in the Far East. Not the one where the dawn comes up like thunder, not but the place where the Sassoons struck it rich. Singapore? No. The place like the name of the gorilla in that film with Fay Wray. *Kong. Hong Kong.* And, look, I know that Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, and I remember who wrote *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Came to me unbidden. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was written by Frederic Wakeman and the movie starred Clark Gable and Sydney Greenstreet.

Anyway, too young to remember Pearl Harbor, Mike invested heavily in the Japanese market in the early days and dumped everything at the propitious moment. He rode gold through the OPEC scare, whipping his stake past the finishing line, doubling it, and made another killing speculating in sterling in 1992. He had bet on Bill Gates before anybody had heard of e-mail.

Yes, my first-born son is a multimillionaire with both a social and a cultural conscience. He's a member of a trendy theatre board, a promoter of in-your-face plays wherein top people's leggy daughters feel free to pretend to shit on stage and RADA guys simulate burlesque fucking with abandon. *Ars longa, vita brevis.* He's one of the more than two hundred backers of the monthly *Red Pepper* magazine ("feminist, antiracist, environmentalist, and internationalist"); and, not without a redeeming sense of humour, he has added my name to the subscription list. The most recent issue of *Red Pepper* includes a full-page ad, an appeal for donations by London Lighthouse, which features a photograph of a sickly young woman, her staring eyes rimmed with dark circles, looking into a hand-held mirror.

"SHE TOLD HER HUSBAND THAT SHE WAS HIV+. HE TOOK IT BADLY."

What was the poor bastard supposed to do? Take her to dinner at The Ivy to celebrate?

In any event, as Mr. Bellow has already noted, more die of heartbreak. Or lung cancer speaking as a prime candidate.

True, Mike shops for shiitake mushrooms, Japanese seaweed, Nishiki rice, and shiromiso soup at Harvey Nichols' Food Hall, but, emerging on Sloane Street, he always remembers to buy a copy of *The Big Issue* from the bum lurking there. He owns an art gallery in Fulham that has proven itself, as it were, having twice been charged with obscenity. He and Caroline make a point of buying works by as-yet-unknown painters and sculptors who are, in Mike's parlance, "on the cutting edge." My up-to-the-minute, state-of-the-art son is into gangsta rap, information highways (as distinct from libraries), "dissing," quality time, Internet, all things cool, and every other speech cliché peculiar to his generation. Mike has never read *The Iliad*, Gibbon, Stendhal, Swift, Dr. Johnson, George Eliot, or any other now-discredited Eurocentric bigot, but there isn't an overpraised "visible minority" new novelist or poet whose book he hasn't ordered from Hatchard's. I'll wager he never stood for an hour contemplating Velásquez's portrait of that royal family,<sup>9</sup> you know the one I mean, in the Prado, but invited him to a *vernissage* that promises a crucifix floating in piss or a harpoon sticking out of a woman's bleeding arsehole, and he's there with his chequebook. "Oh," I said, determined to keep our transatlantic phone call going, "I don't mean to pry, but I do hope you've spoken to your sister recently."

"Watch it. You're beginning to sound just like Mom."

“That’s no answer.”

“There’s no point in phoning Kate. She’s either just rushing out, or in the middle of a dinner party, and can’t talk now.”

“That doesn’t sound like Kate.”

“Come on, Dad. As far as you’re concerned, she can do no wrong. She was always your favourite.”

“That’s not true,” I lied.

“But Saul phoned yesterday to ask what I thought of his latest diatribe in that neo-fascist rag he writes for. Hell, it had only arrived in that morning’s mail. He’s incredible, really. It took him fifteen minutes to bring me up to date on his imaginary health problems and work difficulties, and then to denounce me as a champagne socialist and Caroline as a pennypincher. Who’s he living with these days, may I ask?”

“Hey, I see the British are up in arms, because calves are being shipped to France, where they’re confined to crates instead of being booked into the Crillon. Has Caroline joined the demos?”

“You can do better than that, Dad. But do come and see us soon,” said Mike, his voice stiffening, and I guessed that Caroline had just floated into the room, glancing pointedly at her wristwatch, unaware that I was paying for the phone call.

“Sure,” I said, hanging up, disgusted with myself.

Why couldn’t I have told him how much I love him, and what pleasure he has given me over the years?

What if this were to be our last conversation?

“But death, you know,” wrote Samuel Johnson to the Reverend Mr. Thomas Warton, “hears not supplications, nor pays any regard to the convenience of mortals.”

And what if Miriam and I were never to be reconciled?

## 2

We have all read too much in literary journals about the unjustly neglected novelist, but seldom a word about the justly neglected, the scratch players, brandishing their little distinctions, *à la* Terry McIver. A translation into Icelandic, or an appearance at a Commonwealth arts festival in Auckland (featuring a few “writers of pallor,” as the new nomenclature has it, as well as an affirmative-action *mélange* of Maori, Inuit, and Amerindian good spellers). But, after all these years as a flunk, my old friend and latter-day nemesis has acquired a small but vociferous following, CanLit apparatchiks to the fore. That scumbag is ubiquitous in Canada these days, pontificating on TV and radio, giving public readings everywhere.

It was through that self-promoting bastard’s father, who is also traduced in *Of Time and Fevers*, that I met Terry in the first place. Mr. McIver, sole prop. of The Spartacus Bookshop on St. Catherine Street West, was the most admirable, if innocent, of men. A scrawny Scot bred in the Gorbals, he was the illegitimate son of a laundry woman and a Clydeside welder who fell at the Somme. Mr. McIver would urge books on me by Howard Fast, Jack London, Émile Zola, Upton Sinclair, John Reed, Edgar Snow, and the Russian, you know, Lenin laureate, what’s-his-name? Anathema to Solzhenitsyn. *Come on, Barney. You know it. The*

was a splendid movie made in Russia about his memoirs of childhood. Hell, it's on the tip of my tongue. First name Max — no, Maxim — surname like a goyische pickle. Maxim Cornichon? Don't be ridiculous. Maxim Gherkin? Forget it. *Gorky. Maxim Gorky.*

Anyway, the bookshop had to be negotiated like a maze, towering stacks of secondhand books here, there, and everywhere, that could be sent tumbling if you didn't mind your elbows, as you followed Mr. McIver's slapping slippers into the back room. His sanctuary. Where he sat at his roll-top desk, elbows peeking out of his ancient, unravelling cardigan, conducting seminars on the evils of capitalism, serving students toast and strawberry jam and milky tea. If they couldn't afford the latest Algren or Graham Greene, or that first novel by that young American, Norman Mailer, he would lend them a brand-new copy, providing they promised to return it unsoiled. Students demonstrated their gratitude by pilfering books on their way out and selling them back to him the following week. One or two even dipped into his cash register, or stiffed him with a bad cheque for ten or twenty dollars, never turning up at the bookshop again. "So you're going to Paris," he said to me.

"Yes."

This, inevitably, led to a lecture on the Paris Commune. Doomed, like the Spartacist League in Berlin. "Would you mind taking a parcel to my son?" he asked.

"Of course not."

I went to pick it up at the McIvers' airless, overheated apartment that evening.

"A couple of shirts," said Mr. McIver. "A sweater Mrs. McIver knitted for him. Six tins of sockeye salmon. A carton of Player's Mild. Things like that. Terry wants to be a novelist but ..."

"But?"

"But who doesn't?"

When he retreated to the kitchen to put on the tea kettle, Mrs. McIver handed me an envelope. "For Terence," she whispered.

I found McIver in a small hotel on the rue Jacob and, amazingly, we actually got off to a promising start. He flipped the parcel onto his unmade bed, but slit open the envelope immediately. "You know how she earned this money?" he asked, seething. "These forty-eight dollars?"

"I have no idea."

"Babysitting. Coaching backward kids in algebra or French grammar. Do you know anybody here, Barney?"

"I've been here for three days and you're the first person I've talked to."

"Meet me at the Mabillon at six and I'll introduce you to some people."

"I don't know where it is."

"Meet me downstairs, then. Hold on a minute. Does my father still run those advertising symposiums for students who laugh behind his back?"

"Some are fond of him."

"He's a fool. Eager for me to be a failure. Like him. See you later."

Naturally I was sent an advance copy of *Of Time and Fevers*, compliments of the author. I've struggled through it twice now, marking the blatant lies and most offensive passages, and the morning I phoned my lawyer, Maître John Hughes-McNoughton. "Can I sue somebody for libel who has accused me, in print, of being a wife-abuser, an intellectual fraud, a purveyor of

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