



Three-Martini Lunch

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‘Nobody ever became a writer by just wanting to be one.’

– F. SCOTT FITZGERALD,

in a letter to his daughter and aspiring writer, Scottie



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CLIFF

Greenwich Village in '58 was a madman's paradise. In those days a bunch of us went around together drinking too much coffee and smoking too much cannabis and talking all the time about poetry and Nietzsche and bebop. I had been running around with the same guys I knew from Columbia – give or take a coloured jazz musician here or a benny addict there – and together we would get good and stoned and ride the subway down to Washington Square. I guess you could say I liked my Columbia buddies all right. They were swell enough guys but, when you really got down to it, they were a pack of poser wannabe-poets in tweed and I knew it was only a matter of time before I outgrew them. Their fathers were bankers and lawyers and once their fascination with poetic manifestos wore off they would settle down and become bankers and lawyers, too, and marry a nice debutante. If I'm being honest, I'll admit I was mostly pissing away my time in school and not trying very hard, on account of the fact I'd lost the interest. With every passing day I was becoming increasingly convinced academia was for the birds, and the more time I spent below Fourteenth Street, the more it was becoming obvious to me that the Village was my true education.

When I finally threw in the towel and dropped my last class at Columbia, My Old Man came poking around my apartment in Morningside Heights. He *ahemed* quietly to himself and fingered the waxy leaves of the plants in the window and finally sat with his rump covering a water stain on a hand-me-down Louis XVI sofa my great-aunt had deemed too ugly to keep in her own apartment. Together we drank a couple of fingers of bourbon neat, and then he shook my

hand in a dignified way and informed me the best lesson he could teach me at this point in my life was *self-reliance*. His plan mainly involved cutting me off from the family fortune and making long speeches on the superior quality of *earned pleasures*.

Once My Old Man broke the news about how I was going to have to pave my own road, it was all over pretty quickly after that. I threw a couple of loud parties and didn't pay my rent and then the landlord had me out lickety-split and I had to go looking for a new place.

Which is how, as I entered into my study of the relative value of earned pleasures, I found myself renting a one-room studio in the Village with no hot water and a toilet down the hall. The lid was missing on the tank of that toilet and I remember the worst thing I ever did to my fellow hallmates was to get sick after coming home drunk one night and mistake the open tank for the open bowl. But even without my whiskey-induced embellishments the building was a dump. It was a pretty crummy apartment and when it rained the paint on the walls bubbled something awful, but I liked being near the basement cafes where people were passionate about trying out new things with the spoken word, which was still pretty exciting to me at the time. In those days you could walk the streets all around Washington Square and plunge down a narrow stairway here and there to find a room painted all black with red lightbulbs screwed into the fixtures and there'd be someone standing in front of a crowd, telling America to go to hell or maybe acting out the birth of a sacred cow in India. It was all kind of bananas and you were never sure what you were going to see, but after a while you started to come across the same people mostly.

I had seen Miles, Swish, Bobby, and Pal around the Village, of course, and they had seen me, too. We were friendly enough with one another, all of us being arty types. I knew their faces and I knew their names but the night I really entered the picture I was in such a sorry state, it was a real act of mercy on their part. I was slated to read my poems for the first time ever at a place called the Sweet Spot. Earlier that afternoon I had been looking over my pages when it suddenly struck me they were no good. The discovery had me seized up with fear until my whole body was paralysed and I sensed I was rank

with the stench of my impending failure. The poems were bad and that was the truth of it. My solution was whiskey, and by six o'clock I had managed to put down half a bottle before the poems finally started to look better than they had at 3 p.m. In my foolish state I decided finishing the other half of the bottle would be the key to gaining at least a few more increments of poetic improvement. By the time I took the stage I could barely hold myself upright. Somehow I managed to get off two poems . . . more or less . . . before I heard the wooden stool next to me clatter to the ground as it fell over and I felt the cold sticky black-painted floor rise up like a swelling wave to my hip and shoulder and, seconds later, my face.

When I came to I was lying on a couch in Swish's apartment with the whole gang sitting around the kitchen table, talking in loud voices about Charlie Parker while a seminal record of his spun on a turntable near my head. After a few minutes Pal came over and handed me a cool washcloth for my bruised face. Then Bobby whistled and commented that I had '*some* kind of madman style' in an admiring tone of voice that made me think perhaps the two poems I could remember getting off hadn't been so bad after all and maybe it was even true that in getting wasted I had actually made the truest choice an artist could make, like Van Gogh and his absinthe. I could see they were all deciding whether I was a hack or a genius, and the fact they might be open to the second possibility being true fortified me and filled me with a kind of dopey pride. Then Swish boiled some coffee on the stove and brought it over to me. He told me his religion was coffee and he couldn't abide his guests adding milk or sugar and so I shouldn't ever expect him to offer any of that stuff. The coffee was so thick you could have set a spoon in the centre of the mug and it would've stood up straight and never touched the sides. Later when I learnt more about Swish he told me that was how you made it when you were on the road and once you'd had your coffee like that everything else tasted like water. I guess some of Swish's romantic passion about cowboy coffee wore off on me, because after that night I sneered at anything someone brought me that happened to have a creamy shade or sweetened taste.

Swish's given name was Stewart and he was nicknamed Swish because he was always in a hurry. He was one of those wiry, nervous guys with

energy to spare. After I'd taken a few sips of Swish's coffee and managed to work my forehead over some more with the washcloth, I was feeling well enough to join them at the kitchen table and dive into the talk about Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, and all of a sudden it was like I had always had a seat at that table and had just never known it. The frenzied tempo of their chatter was contagious. They conversed like musicians improvising jazz and I hoped some of this would find its way into my writing. Between the five of us we finished off a pot of coffee and two packs of cigarettes and fourteen bottles of beer and shared the dim awareness that a small but sturdy union had been formed.

Swish regaled us with his adventures riding the rails across America like a hobo and about the year he'd spent in the Merchant Marine. Even though he'd never finished high school he had still managed to feed his mind all sorts of good solid stuff. In talking to Swish I realised all those guys at Columbia who thought they had the edge over you because they went to Exeter or Andover were all pretty much full of horseshit because here was Swish and he was better read than anybody and his education had been entirely loaned out to him from the public library for no money at all. I worried that maybe I'd offended Swish because I said something to set him off and he went on to give a big argumentative lecture all about John Locke and Mikhail Bakunin and about Thoreau. But my worries about having offended him were unfounded because I later realised Swish was one of those guys with a naturally combative disposition.

After he'd finished harping on old Mikhail's theories about anarchy, I asked Swish what he did for a living now that his hobo days were over.

'Bicycle messenger,' he replied. 'Miles here is, too.'

I regarded Miles, who seemed like an odd fit for this group. He was a slender, athletic-looking Negro with sharp cheekbones that would've made him appear haughty if they had not been offset by his brooding eyes. He wore the kind of horn-rimmed glasses that were popular all over the Village just then. He nodded but didn't comment further and I gathered that being a bicycle messenger wasn't his primary passion and figured him for a jazz musician. He had the name and the look for it, after all.

Anyway, the topic of conversation turned to me and what my ambitions were, and sitting there at the table I already felt so comfortable and everything seemed so familiar, I found myself confessing to the fact I'd recently come to the conclusion that I'd decided to become a writer. Only problem was, ever since I'd arrived at this decision, I'd been having a spell of writer's block.

'I'll tell you what you do,' Swish said, his wiry body tensing up with conviction. 'You hop on the next boxcar and ride until you're full up with so many ideas you feel your fingers twitching in your sleep.'

'Well, I for one think a good old-fashioned roll in the hay would do the trick,' Bobby chimed in. 'It's important to keep the juices flowing.'

'Says the fella who's so busy balling two girls at once he can't make it to any of his auditions,' said Swish. I asked them what they meant. It turned out Bobby wanted to be an actor but his great obstacle in achieving this ambition was his overwhelming beauty. Under ordinary circumstances this wouldn't be a problem for an actor but in Bobby's case it kept him far too busy to get onstage much. Wherever he went, loud-shrieking girls and soft-spoken men alike tried their best to bed him and because Bobby liked to make everyone happy he went along with all of it and was loath to turn anyone down. He was presently keeping two girls in particular happy. One girl lived with a roommate over on Morton Street and the other lived in the Albert Hotel on East Eleventh and this left Bobby constantly hustling from one side of the Village to the other.

Bobby's recommendation that I ought to ball a girl (or two or three) to get over my writer's block appeared to disturb Pal's sense of chivalry and make him shy: he shifted in his chair and set about studying the label on his beer. He was by far the quietest and most difficult guy to read of the pack. Later I found out Pal's real name was Eugene and he was named after the town in Oregon where he was born and, as far as first impressions go, he often struck people as something of a gentle giant. He was a couple of inches over six feet and had the sleepy blue eyes of a child just woken up from a nap and when he read poetry or, even when he just spoke, his voice was always full of a kind of reverence that made you think he was paying closer attention to the world than you were.

‘How ’bout it, Miles?’ Swish said, continuing the conversation. ‘What do you think helps with writer’s block?’

I didn’t know why Swish had directed the question to Miles. It unnerved me that after I mentioned dropping out of Columbia, Bobby had let it slip that Miles was due to graduate from that very institution come June. The lenses of Miles’s glasses flashed white at us as he looked up in surprise.

‘Well,’ he said, considering carefully, ‘I suppose reading always helps. They say in order to write anything good, you ought to read much more than you write.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about all that,’ I said. I was suddenly in an ornery, contrary mood. The way he had spoken with authority on the subject antagonised me somehow. ‘The most important thing a writer’s gotta do is stay true to his own ideas and write. I don’t read other people’s books when I try to write, I just read my own stuff over and over and I think that’s the way the real heavyweight authors do it.’

Miles didn’t reply to this except to tighten his mouth and nod. It was a polite nod and I sensed there was a difference of opinion behind it and I was suddenly annoyed.

‘Anyway, fellas, I think I’ve given you the wrong idea about me because I’m not really all that stuck,’ I said, deciding it was time for a change of topic. ‘I’ve written piles and piles of stuff and I’m always getting new ideas.’

This was mostly true, and the more I thought about it now the more I began to think perhaps it wasn’t writer’s block at all but more a case of my energies needing to build up in order to reach a kind of critical mass. Back then everyone in the neighbourhood was talking about a certain famous hipster who had written an entire novel in three weeks on nothing but coffee and bennies and about how he had let it build up until it had just come pouring out of him and about how the result had been published by an actual publisher and I thought maybe that was how it might work for me, too. If I just soaked up the nervous energy of my generation and let it accumulate inside me until it spilt over the top, I was sure eventually a great flood would come. Swish and Bobby and Pal all seemed like part of this process and I was very glad they had inducted me into the group. Even Miles was all right

in the way that a rival can push you to do better work. Perhaps it was the mixture of the whiskey and coffee and beer and bennies but I suddenly had that high feeling you get when you sense you are in the middle of some kind of important nerve centre. I closed my eyes and felt the pulse of the Village thundering through my veins and all at once I was very confident about all I was destined to accomplish.