

Truman Capote



Answered Prayers

TRUMAN CAPOTE
Answered Prayers



Truman Capote was a native of New Orleans, where he was born on September 30, 1924. His first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, was an international literary success when first published in 1948, and accorded the author a prominent place among the writers of America's postwar generation. He sustained this position subsequently with short-story collections (*A Tree of Night*, among others), novels and novellas (*The Grass Harp* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*), some of the best travel writing of our time (*Local Color*), profiles and reportage that appeared originally in *The New Yorker* (*The Duke in His Domain* and *The Muses Are Heard*), a true crime masterpiece (*In Cold Blood*), several short memoirs about his childhood in the South (*A Christmas Memory*, *The Thanksgiving Visitor*, and *One Christmas*), two plays (*The Grass Harp* and *House of Flowers*), and two films (*Beat the Devil* and *The Innocents*).

Mr. Capote twice won the O. Henry Memorial Short Story Prize and was a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in August 1984, shortly before his sixtieth birthday.



Answered Prayers



TRUMAN CAPOTE

Vintage International
Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York



SECOND VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL EDITION, JULY 2012

Copyright © 1987 by Alan U. Schwartz

Introduction copyright © 1987 by Random House, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. This edition originally published in hardcover by Random House, Inc., New York, in 1987.

Vintage is a registered trademark and Vintage International and colophon are trademarks of Random House, Inc.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

“Unspoiled Monsters,” “Kate McCloud” and “La Côte Basque” were originally published in *Esquire*.
Copyright © 1975, 1976 by Truman Capote.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Capote, Truman, 1924–1984

Answered prayers: the unfinished novel/Truman Capote.

p. cm.

Previously published: New York: Random House, 1987

I. Title.

PS3505.A59A83 1994

813.'54—dc20 93-43496

eISBN: 978-0-345-80304-7

www.vintagebooks.com

Cover design by Megan Wilson

Cover image © Condé Nast Archive/Corbis

v3.1_r1

“More tears are shed over answered prayers
than unanswered ones.”

SAINT TERESA

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Editor's Note

I Unspoiled Monsters

II Kate McCloud

III La Côte Basque

Other Books by This Author

EDITOR'S NOTE

ON JANUARY 5, 1966, TRUMAN Capote signed a contract with Random House for a new book to be called *Answered Prayers*. The advance against royalties was \$25,000, and the delivery date was January 1, 1968. The novel, Truman maintained, would be a contemporary equivalent of Proust's masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*, and would examine the small world of the very rich—part aristocratic, part café society—of Europe and the east coast of the United States.

1966 was a wonderful year for Truman. Two weeks after he signed the contract for *Answered Prayers*, *In Cold Blood* was published in book form with enormous fanfare and to general acclaim. During the subsequent week the author's picture appeared on the cover of several national magazines, and his new work was given the lead review in virtually every Sunday book section. In the course of the year, *In Cold Blood* sold more than 300,000 copies and was on *The New York Times* best-seller list for thirty-seven weeks. (Eventually it outsold every other nonfiction book in 1966 save for two self-help books; since then it has been published in some two dozen foreign editions and has sold almost five million copies in the United States alone.)

During this year Truman was everywhere at once, granting interviews by the score, appearing on television talk shows a number of times, vacationing on yachts and in grand country houses, and delighting in his fame and fortune. The culmination of this heady period was his still-remembered "Black and White Ball" given in late November 1966 at the Plaza in honor of Kay Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, a party that received as much coverage in the national press as an East-West summit meeting.

Truman felt he deserved this respite, and most of his friends did too; the research and writing of *In Cold Blood* had taken almost six years, and had been a traumatic experience for him. Nevertheless, despite the distractions, he talked constantly about *Answered Prayers* in this interval. But though he wrote a number of short stories and magazine pieces in the next few years, he did not address himself to the novel; as a result, in May 1969 the original contract was superseded by a three-book agreement changing the delivery date to January 1973 and substantially increasing the advance. In mid-1973 the deadline was advanced to January 1974, and six months later it was changed again to September 1977. (Subsequently, in the spring of 1980, one last amendment specified a delivery date of March 1, 1981, and further raised the advance to \$1 million, to be paid only on delivery of the work.)

Still, Truman published several books in these years, though the contents of most of them had been written in the 1940's and 1950's. In 1966 Random

House issued *A Christmas Memory*, written originally in 1958; in 1968 *The Thanksgiving Visitor*, a short story published in a magazine in 1967; in 1969 a twentieth-anniversary edition, with a graceful, newly written introduction, of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, his first novel, which had electrified the literary establishment in 1948; in 1973 a collection called *The Dogs Bark*, all but three pieces of which had been written many years before. Only *Music for Chameleons*—which was to be published in 1980, and which some people, friends as well as critics, felt was not up to his earlier works—contained new material, both fiction and nonfiction.

Let Truman speak for himself about this period. In the preface to *Music for Chameleons* he wrote:

For four years, roughly from 1968 through 1972, I spent most of my time reading and selecting, rewriting and indexing my own letters, other people's letters, my diaries and journals (which contain detailed accounts of hundreds of scenes and conversations) for the years 1943 through 1965. I intended to use much of this material in a book I had long been planning: a variation on the nonfiction novel. I called the book *Answered Prayers*, which is a quote from Saint Thérèse,* who said: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." In 1972 I began work on this book by writing the last chapter first (it's always good to know where one's going). Then I wrote the first chapter, "Unspoiled Monsters." Then the fifth, "A Severe Insult to the Brain." Then the seventh, "La Côte Basque." I went on in this manner, writing different chapters out of sequence. I was able to do this only because the plot—or rather plots—was true, and all the characters were real: it wasn't difficult to keep it all in mind, for I hadn't invented anything.

Finally, over a period of a few months in late 1974 and early 1975, Truman showed me four chapters from *Answered Prayers*—"Mojave,"† "La Côte Basque," "Unspoiled Monsters" and "Kate McCloud"—and announced that he was going to publish them in *Esquire*. I was against this plan, feeling that he was revealing too much of the book too soon, and said so, but Truman, who considered himself a master publicist, was not to be deterred. (If Bennett Cerf, who was also a close friend and confidant of the author, had been alive—he had died in 1971—perhaps our combined disapproval would have dissuaded Truman, but I doubt it; he felt he knew exactly what he was doing.)

As it turned out, he *didn't* know what he was doing. "Mojave" was the first chapter to appear and caused some talk, but the next, "La Côte Basque," produced an explosion which rocked that small society which Truman had set out to describe. Virtually every friend he had in this world ostracized him for telling thinly disguised tales out of school, and many of them never spoke to him again.

Truman defiantly professed to be undismayed by the furor ("What did they expect?" he was quoted as saying. "I'm a writer, and I use everything. Did all those people think I was there just to entertain them?"), but there is no doubt

that he was shaken by the reaction, and I am convinced it was one of the reasons why he apparently stopped working, at least temporarily, on *Answered Prayers* after the publication of “Unspoiled Monsters” and “Kate McCloud” in *Esquire* in 1976.

FROM 1960, WHEN WE FIRST met, to 1977 Truman and I saw each other frequently, both in and out of the office, traveling twice to Kansas together while he was working on *In Cold Blood*, and once spending a week together in Santa Fe. I also visited him during the winters three or four times in Palm Springs, where he had a house for a few years; in addition, by coincidence he owned a house and I rented one in Sagaponack, a small farming community near the sea on eastern Long Island.

Professionally my work for Truman during this period was undemanding. (For example, virtually all of the editorial work on *In Cold Blood* was done by Mr. Shawn and others at *The New Yorker*, where it first appeared in four installments in October and November 1965.) Still, our working relationship was immensely rewarding. I recall with particular pleasure Truman giving me the chapter of “Unspoiled Monsters” to read one afternoon in 1975. I did so overnight, and found it almost flawless save for one small false note. When he called me the next morning for my reaction, I was full of enthusiasm, but did mention my cavil, a word used by Miss Victoria Self in dialogue only half a page after the reader first meets her. “She wouldn’t have used that word,” I said to Truman; “she would have said——.” (I can’t remember my suggested substitute.) Truman laughed with delight. “I reread the chapter last night,” he said. “There was only one change I wanted to make, and I was calling now to tell you to change that word to exactly what you just suggested.” It was an all-too-rare moment of mutual congratulation in the peculiar relationship between authors and editors. It was not *self*-congratulation; rather, each of us was pleased by the *other*.

I quote again from Truman’s preface to *Music for Chameleons*, a few lines farther on:

... I did stop working on *Answered Prayers* in September 1977, a fact that had nothing to do with any public reaction to those parts of the book already published. The halt happened because I was in a helluva lot of trouble: I was suffering a creative crisis and a personal one at the same time. As the latter was unrelated, or very little related, to the former, it is only necessary to remark on the creative chaos.

Now, torment though it was, I’m glad it happened; after all, it altered my entire comprehension of writing, my attitude toward art and life and the balance between the two, and my understanding of the difference between what is true and what is *really* true.

To begin with, I think most writers, even the best, overwrite. I prefer to underwrite. Simple, clear as a country creek. But I felt my writing was becoming too dense, that I was taking three pages to arrive at

effects I ought to be able to achieve in a single paragraph. Again and again I read all that I had written on *Answered Prayers*, and I began to have doubts—not about the material or my approach, but about the texture of the writing itself. I reread *In Cold Blood* and had the same reaction: there were too many areas where I was not writing as well as I could, where I was not delivering the total potential. Slowly, but with accelerating alarm, I read every word I'd ever published, and decided that never, not once in my writing life, had I completely exploded all the energy and esthetic excitements that material contained. Even when it was good, I could see that I was never working with more than half, sometimes only a third, of the powers at my command. Why?

The answer, revealed to me after months of meditation, was simple but not very satisfying. Certainly it did nothing to lessen my depression; indeed, it thickened it. For the answer created an apparently unsolvable problem, and if I couldn't solve it, I might as well quit writing. The problem was: how can a writer successfully combine within a single form—say the short story—all he knows about every other form of writing? For this was why my work was often insufficiently illuminated; the voltage was there, but by restricting myself to the techniques of whatever form I was working in, I was not using everything I knew about writing—all I'd learned from film scripts, plays, reportage, poetry, the short story, novellas, the novel. A writer ought to have all his colors, all his abilities available on the same palette for mingling (and, in suitable instances, simultaneous application). But how?

I returned to *Answered Prayers*. I removed one chapter* and rewrote two others.† An improvement, definitely an improvement. But the truth was, I had to go back to kindergarten. Here I was—off again on one of those grim gambles! But I was excited; I felt an invisible sun shining on me. Still, my first experiments were awkward. I truly felt like a child with a box of crayons.

Unfortunately, some of what Truman writes in the two excerpts quoted above can't be taken at face value. For example, though a thorough search was made of all the author's effects after his death by Alan Schwartz, his lawyer and literary executor, Gerald Clarke, his biographer, and myself, almost none of the letters, diaries or journals he mentions has ever been found.‡ (This is particularly damning, since Truman was a pack rat; he kept virtually everything, and there was no reason to destroy such papers.) Moreover, there was no evidence of "A Severe Insult to the Brain" or of that last chapter which he claimed in his preface to have written first. (It was to be called "Father Flanagan's All-Night Nigger-Queen Kosher Café"; other chapters that he mentioned in conversations with me and others from time to time were "Yachts and Things" and "And Audrey Wilder Sang," a chapter about Hollywood.)

After 1976, Truman's and my relationship slowly deteriorated. My hunch is

that it began when he realized that I had been right about publishing the installments in *Esquire*, though of course I never taxed him about this. He may also have realized that his writing powers were waning, and feared that I would be too stern a judge. Further, he must have felt both guilt and panic about his lack of progress on *Answered Prayers*. In the last few years he seemed intent on fooling not only me and other close friends about his work on it, but even the public at large; at least twice he announced to interviewers that he had just completed the book, had handed it in to Random House and that it would be published within six months. Thereafter our publicity department and I would be inundated with a flurry of calls, to which we could only reply that we hadn't seen the manuscript. Clearly Truman must have been desperate.

The last factor in the erosion of our relationship was Truman's mounting dependence on alcohol and drugs from 1977 on. I now realize that I was not as sympathetic about his plight as I should have been; instead I focused on the waste of talent, on his self-deceptions, on his endless ramblings, on the unintelligible 1:00 A.M. phone calls—and above all on the loss of my delightful, witty and mischievous companion of those first sixteen years whom I selfishly mourned more than I did his increasing pain.

THERE ARE THREE THEORIES ABOUT the missing chapters of *Answered Prayers*. The first has it that the manuscript was completed and is either stashed in a safe-deposit box somewhere, was seized by an ex-lover for malice or for profit, or even—the latest rumor—that Truman kept it in a locker in the Los Angeles Greyhound Bus Depot. But with every passing day these scenarios seem less plausible.

The second theory is that after the publication of “Kate McCloud” in 1976 Truman never wrote another line of the book, perhaps partly because he was devastated by the public—and private—reaction to those chapters, perhaps partly because he came to realize that it would never achieve those Proustian standards he had set for himself. This theory is compelling for at least one reason: Jack Dunphy, Truman's closest friend and companion for over thirty years, believes it. Still, Truman rarely discussed his work with Jack, and in the last years they were apart more often than they were together.

A third theory, to which I hesitantly subscribe, is that Truman did indeed write at least some of the above-mentioned chapters (probably “A Severe Insult to the Brain” and “Father Flanagan's All-Night Nigger-Queen Kosher Café”), but at some point in the early 1980's deliberately destroyed them. In favor of this theory, at least four friends of Truman claim to have read (or had had read aloud to them by the author) one or two chapters besides the three that appear here. Certainly he convinced me that more of the manuscript existed; over and over again at lunch during the last six years of his life, when he was often almost incoherent because of drugs or alcohol or both, he discussed the four missing titled chapters with me in great detail, even to the

point of quoting lines of dialogue which were always identical even when he recited them months or even years apart. The pattern was always the same: when I asked to see the chapter in question he would promise to send it around the next day. At the end of that day I would call and Truman would say he was having it retyped and would send it over on Monday; on the Monday afternoon his phone would not answer and he would disappear for a week or more.

I subscribe to this third theory not so much out of a reluctance to admit my gullibility, but because Truman was so convincing in his description of those chapters. Of course it is possible that those lines existed only in his head, but it is hard to believe that at some point he did not put them down on paper. He had great pride in his work, but also an unusual objectivity about it, and my suspicion is that at some point he destroyed every vestige of whatever chapters he'd written other than the three in this volume.

There is only one person who knows the truth, and he is dead. God bless him.

—JOSEPH M. FOX, 1987

* A mistake, probably on the part of Random House; it was actually St. Teresa of Avila.

† Originally “Mojave” was to have been the second chapter of the novel and was ostensibly an attempt by its protagonist, P. B. Jones (a sort of dark Doppelgänger of the author himself), to write a short story. But some years later Truman decided that it didn't belong in the book, and it was published in *Music for Chameleons* as a short story.

* “Mojave.”

† Only the *Esquire* versions of the three chapters in this book have been found.

‡ What was found—enough to fill eight large cartons—was sifted through, page by page, and roughly catalogued by Gerald Clarke and the editor in 1984 and 1985. The material consisted of holograph originals and typed first, second and third drafts of several stories and novels; *The New Yorker* galleys of *In Cold Blood* corrected by the author; a few pictures; many newspaper clippings; notebooks containing interviews of the characters in *In Cold Blood*; copies or galleys of other magazines (*Esquire*, *Redbook*, *Mademoiselle*, *McCall's*) in which his articles or stories had appeared; half a dozen letters—and a few pages of early notes about *Answered Prayers*. In 1985 all of this was donated to the New York Public Library by the Capote estate, and today it can be seen by scholars in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division at the Central Research Library at 42nd Street.

PART ONE

Unspoiled Monsters



SOMEWHERE IN THIS WORLD THERE exists an exceptional philosopher named Florie Rotondo.

The other day I came across one of her ruminations printed in a magazine devoted to the writings of schoolchildren. It said: *If I could do anything, I would go to the middle of our planet, Earth, and seek uranium, rubies, and gold. I'd look for Unspoiled Monsters. Then I'd move to the country. Florie Rotondo, age eight.*

Florie, honey, I know just what you mean—even if you don't: how could you, age eight?

Because I have *been* to the middle of our planet; at any rate, have suffered the tribulations such a journey might inflict. I have searched for uranium, rubies, gold, and, en route, have observed others in these pursuits. And listen, Florie—I have met Unspoiled Monsters! Spoiled ones, too. But the unspoiled variety is the *rara avis*: white truffles compared to black; bitter wild asparagus as opposed to garden-grown. The one thing I haven't done is move to the country.

As a matter of fact, I am writing this on Y.M.C.A. stationery in a Manhattan Y.M.C.A., where I have been existing the last month in a viewless second-floor cell. I'd prefer the sixth floor—so if I decided to climb out the window, it would make a vital difference. Perhaps I'll change rooms. Ascend. Probably not. I'm a coward. But not cowardly enough to take the plunge.

My name is P. B. Jones, and I'm of two minds—whether to tell you something about myself right now, or wait and weave the information into the text of the tale. I could just as well tell you nothing, or very little, for I consider myself a reporter in this matter, not a participant, at least not an important one. But maybe it's easier to start with me.

As I say, I'm called P. B. Jones; I am either thirty-five or thirty-six: the reason for the uncertainty is that no one knows when I was born or who my parents were. All we know is that I was a baby abandoned in the balcony of a St. Louis vaudeville theater. This happened 20 January 1936. Catholic nuns raised me in an austere red-stone orphanage that dominated an embankment overlooking the Mississippi River.

I was a favorite of the nuns, for I was a bright kid and a beauty; they never realized how conniving I was, duplicitous, or how much I despised their drabness, their aroma: incense and dishwater, candles and creosote, white sweat. One of the sisters, Sister Martha, I rather liked, she taught English and was so convinced I had a gift for writing that I became convinced of it myself. All the same, when I left the orphanage, ran away, I didn't leave her a note or ever communicate with her again: a typical sample of my numbed,

opportunistic nature.

Hitchhiking, and with no particular destination in mind, I was picked up by a man driving a white Cadillac convertible. A burly guy with a broken nose and a flushed, freckled Irish complexion. Nobody you'd take for a queer. But he was. He asked where I was headed, and I just shrugged; he wanted to know how old I was—I said eighteen, though really I was three years younger. He grinned and said: "Well, I wouldn't want to corrupt the morals of a minor."

As if I *had* any morals.

Then he said, solemnly: "You're a good-looking kid." True: on the short side, five seven (eventually five eight), but sturdy and well-proportioned, with curly brown-blond hair, green-flecked brown eyes, and a face dramatically angular; to examine myself in a mirror was always a reassuring experience. So when Ned took his dive, he thought he was grabbing cherry. Ho ho! Starting at an early age, seven or eight or thereabouts, I'd run the gamut with many an older boy and several priests and also a handsome Negro gardener. In fact, I was a kind of Hershey Bar whore—there wasn't much I wouldn't do for a nickel's worth of chocolate.

Though I lived with him for several months, I can't remember Ned's last name. Ames? He was chief masseur at a big Miami Beach hotel—one of those ice-cream-color Hebrew hangouts with a French name. Ned taught me the trade, and after I left him I earned my living as a masseur at a succession of Miami Beach hotels. Also, I had a number of private clients, men and women I massaged and trained in figure and facial exercises—although facial exercises are a lot of crap; the only effective one is cocksucking. No joke, there's nothing like it for firming the jawline.

With my assistance, Agnes Beerbaum improved her facial contours admirably. Mrs. Beerbaum was the widow of a Detroit dentist who had retired to Fort Lauderdale, where he promptly experienced a fatal coronary. She was not rich, but she had money—along with an ailing back. It was to alleviate these spinal spasms that I first entered her life, and remained in it long enough to accumulate, through gifts above my usual fee, over ten thousand dollars.

Now *that's* when I should have moved to the country.

But I bought a ticket on a Greyhound bus that carried me to New York. I had one suitcase, and it contained very little—only underwear, shirts, a bathroom kit, and numerous notebooks in which I had scribbled poems and a few short stories. I was eighteen, it was October, and I've always remembered the October glitter of Manhattan as my bus approached across the stinking New Jersey marshes. As Thomas Wolfe, a once-admired and now-forgotten idol, might have written: Oh, what promise those windows held!—cold and fiery in the rippling shine of a tumbling autumn sun.

Since then, I've fallen in love with many cities, but only an orgasm lasting an hour could surpass the bliss of my first year in New York. Unfortunately, I decided to marry.

Perhaps what I wanted in the way of a wife was the city itself, my happiness there, my sense of inevitable fame, fortune. Alas, what I married was a girl. This bloodless, fishbelly-pale amazon with roped yellow hair and egglike lilac eyes. She was a fellow student at Columbia University, where I had enrolled in a creative-writing class taught by Martha Foley, one of the founder/editors of the old magazine *Story*. What I liked about Hulga (yes, I know Flannery O'Connor named one of her heroines Hulga, but I'm not swiping; it's simply coincidence) was that she never wearied of listening to me read my work aloud. Mostly, the content of my stories was the opposite of my character—that is, they were tender and *triste*; but Hulga thought they were beautiful, and her great lilac eyes always gratifyingly brimmed and trickled at the end of a reading.

Soon after we were married, I discovered there was a fine reason why her eyes had such a marvelous moronic serenity. She was a moron. Or damn near. Certainly she wasn't playing with a full deck. Good old humorless hulking Hulga, yet so dainty and mincingly clean—housewifey. She hadn't a clue how I really felt about her, not until Christmas, when her parents came to visit us: a pair of Swedish brutes from Minnesota, a mammoth twosome twice the size of their daughter. We were living in a one-and-a-half-room apartment near Morningside Heights. Hulga had bought a sort of Rockefeller Center—type tree: it spread floor to ceiling and wall to wall—the damn thing was sucking the oxygen out of the air. And the fuss she made over it, the fortune she spent on this Woolworth's shit! I happen to hate Christmas because, if you'll pardon the tearjerker note, it always amounted to the year's most depressing episode in my Missouri orphanage. So on Christmas Eve, minutes before Hulga's parents were supposed to arrive for the Yuletide hoedown, I abruptly lost control: took the tree apart and piece by piece fed it out the window in a blaze of blown fuses and smashing bulbs—Hulga the whole while hollering like a half-slaughtered hog. (Attention, students of literature! Alliteration—have you noticed?—is my least vice.) Told her what I thought of her, too—and for once those eyes lost their idiot purity.

Presently, Mama and Papa appeared, the Minnesota giants: sounds like a homicidal hockey team, which is how they reacted. Hulga's folks simply slammed me back and forth between them—and before I conked out, they had cracked five ribs, splintered a shinbone, and blackened both eyes. Then, apparently, the giants packed up their kid and headed home. I've never heard a word from Hulga, not in all the years that have gone by; but, so far as I know, we are still legally attached.

Are you familiar with the term “killer fruit”? It's a certain kind of queer who has Freon refrigerating his bloodstream. Diaghilev, for example. J. Edgar Hoover. Hadrian. Not to compare him with those pedestal personages, but the fellow I'm thinking of is Turner Boatwright—Boaty, as his courtiers called him.

Mr. Boatwright was the fiction editor of a women's fashion magazine that published “quality” writers. He came to my attention, or rather I came to his,

when one day he spoke to our writing class. I was sitting in the front row, and I could tell, by the way his chilly crotch-watching eyes kept gravitating toward me, what was spinning around in his pretty curly-grey head. Okay, but I decided he wasn't going to get any bargain. After class, the students gathered around to meet him. Not me; I left without waiting to be introduced. A month passed, during which I polished the two stories of mine I considered best: "Suntan," which was about beachboy whores in Miami Beach, and "Massage," which concerned the humiliations of a dentist's widow grovelingly in love with a teen-age masseur.

Manuscripts in hand, I went to call on Mr. Boatwright—without an appointment; I simply went to the offices of the magazine and asked the receptionist to tell Mr. Boatwright that one of Miss Foley's students was there to see him. I was certain he would know which one. But when I was eventually escorted into his office, he pretended not to remember me. I wasn't fooled.

The office was not unbusinesslike; it seemed a Victorian parlor. Mr. Boatwright was seated in a cane rocking chair beside a table draped with fringed shawls that served as a desk; another rocker was placed on the opposite side of the table. The editor, with a sleepy gesture meant to disguise cobra alertness, motioned me toward it (his own chair, as I later discovered, contained a little pillow with an embroidered inscription: MOTHER). Although it was a sizzling spring day, the window curtains, heavy velvet and of a hue I believe is called puce, were drawn; the only light came from a pair of student lamps, one with dark red shades, the other with green. An interesting place, Mr. Boatwright's lair; clearly the management gave him great leeway.

"Well, Mr. Jones?"

I explained my errand, said I had been impressed by his lecture at Columbia, by the sincerity of his desire to assist young authors, and announced that I had brought two short stories that I wished to submit for his consideration.

He said, his voice scary with cute sarcasm: "And why did you choose to submit them in person? The customary method is by mail."

I smiled, and my smile is an ingratiating proposition; indeed, it is usually construed as one. "I was afraid you would never read them. An unknown writer without an agent? I shouldn't think too many such stories ever reach you."

"They do if they have merit. My assistant, Miss Shaw, is an exceedingly able and perceptive reader. How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty in August."

"And you think you're a genius?"

"I don't know." Which was untrue; I was certain I was. "That's why I'm here. I'd like your opinion."

"I'll say this: you're ambitious. Or is it just plain push? What are you, a yid?"

My reply was no particular credit to me; though I am relatively without

self-pity (well, I wonder), I've never been above exploiting my background to achieve sympathetic advantage. "Possibly. I was raised in an orphanage. I never knew my parents."

Nevertheless, the gentleman had knee-punched me with aching accuracy. He had my number; I was no longer so sure I had his. At the time I was immune to the mechanical vices—seldom smoked, never drank. But now, without permission, I selected a cigarette from a nearby tortoise-shell box; as I lighted it, all the matches in the matchbook exploded. A tiny bonfire erupted in my hand. I jumped up, wringing my hand and whimpering.

My host merely and coolly pointed at the fallen, still-flaming matches. He said: "Careful. Stamp that out. You'll damage the carpet." Then: "Come here. Give me your hand."

His lips parted. Slowly his mouth absorbed my index finger, the one most scorched. He plunged the finger into the depths of his mouth, almost withdrew, plunged again—like a huntsman drawing dangerous liquid from a snakebite. Stopping, he asked: "There. Is that better?"

The seesaw had upended; a transference of power had occurred, or so I was foolish enough to believe.

"Much; thank you."

"Very well," he said, rising to bolt the office door. "Now we shall continue the treatment."

NO, IT WASN'T AS EASY as that. Boaty was a hard fellow; if necessary, he would have paid for his pleasures, but he never would have published one of my stories. Of the original two I gave him, he said: "They're not good. Ordinarily, I'd never encourage anyone with a talent as limited as yours. That is the cruelest thing anyone can do—to encourage someone to believe he has gifts he actually doesn't possess. However, you do have a certain word sense. Feeling for characterization. Perhaps something can be made of it. If you're willing to risk it, take the chance of ruining your life, I'll help you. But I don't recommend it."

I wish I had listened to him. I wish that then and there I had moved to the country. But it was too late, for I had already started my journey to the Earth's interior.

Am running out of paper. I think I'll take a shower. And afterward I may move to the sixth floor.

I HAVE MOVED TO THE sixth floor.

However, my window is flat against the next-door building; even if I did step over the sill, I'd only bump my head. We're having a September heat wave, and my room is so small, so hot, that I have to leave my door open day and night, which is unfortunate because, as in most Young Men's Christian Associations, the corridors murmur with the slippered footfalls of libidinous Christians; if you leave your door open, it's frequently understood as an

invitation. Not from me, no sir.

The other day, when I started this account, I had no notion whether or not I'd continue it. However, I've just come from a drugstore, where I purchased a box of Blackwing pencils, a pencil sharpener, and a half-dozen thick copybooks. Anyway, I've nothing better to do. Except look for a job. Only, I don't know what kind of work to look for—unless I went back to massage. I'm not fit for much anymore. And, to be honest, I keep thinking that maybe, if I change most of the names, I could publish this as a novel. Hell, I've nothing to lose; of course, a couple of people might try to kill me, but I'd consider that a favor.

AFTER I'D SUBMITTED MORE THAN twenty stories, Boaty did buy one. He edited it to the bone and half rewrote it himself, but at least I was in print. "Many Thoughts of Morton," by P. B. Jones. It was about a nun in love with a Negro gardener named Morton (the same gardener who had been in love with me). It attracted attention, and was reprinted in that year's *Best American Short Stories*; more importantly, it was noticed by a distinguished friend of Boaty's, Miss Alice Lee Langman.

Boaty owned a roomy old brownstone town house; it was far east in the upper Eighties. The interior was an exaggerated replica of his office, a crimson Victorian horsehair mélange: beaded curtains and stuffed owls frowning under glass bells. This brand of camp, now *démodé*, was amusingly uncommon in those days, and Boaty's parlor was one of Manhattan's most populated social centers.

I met Jean Cocteau there—a walking laser light with a sprig of *muguet* in his buttonhole; he asked if I was tattooed, and when I said no, his overly intelligent eyes glazed and glided elsewhere. Both Dietrich and Garbo occasionally came to Boaty's, the latter always escorted by Cecil Beaton, whom I'd met when he photographed me for Boaty's magazine (an overheard exchange between these two: Beaton, "The most distressing fact of growing older is that I find my private parts are shrinking." Garbo, after a mournful pause, "Ah, if only I could say the same").

In truth, one encountered an exceptional share of the celebrated at Boaty's, performers as various as Martha Graham and Gypsy Rose Lee, sequined sorts interspersed with an array of painters (Tchelitchev, Cadmus, Rivers, Warhol, Rauschenberg), composers (Bernstein, Copland, Britten, Barber, Blitzstein, Diamond, Menotti) and, most plentifully, writers (Auden, Isherwood, Wescott, Mailer, Williams, Styron, Porter, and, on several occasions, when he was in New York, the Lolita-minded Faulkner, usually grave and courtly under the double weight of uncertain gentility and a Jack Daniel's hangover). Also, Alice Lee Langman, whom Boaty considered America's first lady of letters.

To all these people, the living among them, I must by now be the merest memory. If that. Of course, Boaty would have remembered me, though not with pleasure (I can well imagine what he might say: "P. B. Jones? That tramp. No doubt he's peddling his ass to elderly Arab buggers in the souks of

Marrakech”); but Boaty is gone, beaten to death in his mahogany house by a heroin-crazed Puerto Rican hustler who left him with both eyeballs unhinged and dangling down his cheeks.

And Alice Lee Langman died last year.

The New York Times printed her obituary on the front page, accompanied by the famous photograph of her made by Arnold Genthe in Berlin in 1927. Creative females are not often presentable. Look at Mary McCarthy!—so frequently advertised as a Great Beauty. Alice Lee Langman, however, was a swan among the swans of our century: a peer of Cléo de Mérode, the Marquesa de Casa Maury, Garbo, Barbara Cushing Paley, the three Wyndham sisters, Diana Duff Cooper, Lena Horne, Richard Finnochio (the transvestite who calls himself Harlow), Gloria Guinness, Maya Plisetskaya, Marilyn Monroe, and lastly, the incomparable Kate McCloud. There have been several intellectual lesbians of physical distinction: Colette, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles; and, in altogether another category, simple endearing prettiness, both Eleanor Clark and Katherine Anne Porter deserve their reputations.

But Alice Lee Langman was a perfected presence, an enameled lady marked with the androgynous quality, that sexually ambivalent aura that seems a common denominator among certain persons whose allure crosses all frontiers—a mystique not confined to women, for Nureyev has it, Nehru had it, so did the youthful Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley, so did Montgomery Clift and James Dean.

When I met Miss Langman, and I never called her anything else, she was far into her late fifties, yet she looked eerily unaltered from her long-ago Genthe portrait. The author of *Wild Asparagus* and *Five Black Guitars* had eyes the color of Anatolian waters, and her hair, a sleek silvery blue, was brushed straight back, fitting her erect head like an airy cap. Her nose was reminiscent of Pavlova’s: prominent, slightly irregular. She was pale, with a healthy pallor, an apple-whiteness, and when she spoke she was difficult to understand, for her voice, unlike most women of Dixie origin, was neither high nor rapid (only Southern men *drawl*), but was muted, as cello-contralto as a mourning dove’s.

She said, that first night at Boaty’s: “Would you see me home? I hear thunder, and I’m afraid of it.”

She was not afraid of thunder, nor of anything else—except unreturned love and commercial success. Miss Langman’s exquisite renown, while justified, was founded on one novel and three short-story collections, none of them much bought or read outside academia and the pastures of the cognoscenti. Like the value of diamonds, her prestige depended upon a controlled and limited output; and, in those terms, she was a royal success, the queen of the writer-in-residence swindle, the prizes racket, the high-honorarium con, the grants-in-aid-to-struggling-artists shit. Everybody, the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Council on the Arts, the Library of Congress, et al., was hell-bound to