

CHAPTER 1

WALKING WITH yourself in the land of the sky blue people and hating yourself for the ache that pumps and pumps in your lonely flesh is not my idea of a good time.

Now let's get this straight:

The flesh spins to the skull, and discharging in the skull lives the brain, jackpot brain, passport to a future, mardi-gras destiny drowning in confetti and wine. The future belongs to you, you are the future. Very elementary, my dear brain. Paste yourself to the bandwagon. Be the spoke in its wheel, you bitter American Dream brain, brain most likely not to succeed as a spoke, brain not knowing where it's going, but it's going. Oh, it's a good brain as far as good brains go, but as far as good brains go it went. There's one in every household.

Yes, passport to a future, the future of a jar! Rare, exquisite specimen! Stunning contribution to science! A brain by any other name stinks! Very elementary!

Oh, psychiatrists of the world, parade this brain before the population, you have nothing to lose but your Freuds!

Well, start the day with a smile. The day is so clear you can see a bum bum a dime on Columbus Circle. And today is Thursday. And it's in the morning. And on this Thursday morning of Our Lord and My Life I will benefit society by parking in front of the Rialto Theatre. I light a cigaret. Observe the grace of the flame and the hole in my pants.

Female models for the Beef Trust pass me and don't notice me, and down with them if they don't notice me, says I, the bored young man of Times Square. I narrow my bloodshot eyes and blow smoke in their lumpy faces, the smoke that satisfies.

My culture is pained by the cheesecake film at the Rialto, and

so I give the front of Child's the distinction of my company.

Fifty-eight cents for a veal cutlet. Fifty-eight cents for a veal cutlet? I spit at their veal cutlets, tomato sauce and one vegetable. Don't spit in the street, son. Remember the Johnstown Flood! But, hell, my Pop spits at steaks. Steaks, he hates! Well, my Pop will never be accused of being a mental giant, since he thinks I'm the strong boy of the world. My Pop thinks he's right and if he thinks he's right let him think he's right and let it go at that. My Pop, right or wrong, my Pop.

How's my hair and dig my tie, and a terrible curse on that cock-amamie, Emily Post and her goddamn Bible on Formal Introductions, for mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of a tight sweater and a short skirt, and her face is so pale, and oh how red her lips are, and don't sell her long hair short!

Come to me, my paleface baby, cuddle up and don't be pale. I nod so nicely and she passes me so swiftly. That's a very cruel thing to do, Miss Red Lips. Can't you see that you're for me? Long is my truelove's hair! Short is my truelove's skirt!

Yes, today is Thursday, and it's in the morning, and the hunt, the luscious hunt is on! Picture yourself on the hunt in the morning, and don't be ashamed of yourself if you can't picture yourself. I am a guy with a remarkable constitution. I read Joyce's "Ulysses!"

Don't stop me if you've heard this before, but where oh where is that sweater taking that girl? I, so and so, hereby declare priority rights on that! I will make love to that and that will make love to me, and I will marry that. Then I will meet the parents of that, and that will say to them: introducing my husband . . . Boy meets that. Boy marries that. Get me Hollywood! Hello, is that you Zanuck?

Her parents will be proud of their new son. They will look me over and I will look them over, and they will know and I will know that their daughter discovered gold, and money will be collected to build her a monument for choosing me. That's a fact, and can you push around facts?

When a body meets a body coming through the rye. My girl's body, the body of the month. Priceless, handle with care. Silence, man at work. I will say: pardon me, but didn't I—no! My girl has class and will not fall for didn't I. I will say: you must remember me. That's it! The so very original line, feeble enough to creep alongside Old Ironsides! Then she will smile and I will smile and we will talk about the party where we never met, and I am laying odds right here and now that we will be the Act of God of our time. I met my wife on a Thursday morning!

You can run me, and, oh, sweet Christ, please don't walk me, to the nearest ungraded class if I try to pick her up in front of the Paramount when Charles Boyer is at the Paramount. Say I'm wrong and you're saying to hell with the opinion of American Womanhood. Inspect it this way: Boyer has a continental lingo and I was born in East St. Louis, and no cracks. My sister had a crush on the Darling of France that ran to 25c a week for photographs, and don't forget the enclosed postage. I said to her: wipe the drool from your lips. She said: Charles, you were meant for me and I was meant for you. . . . My sister was not very bright.

My girl snubs the French Thrill and ganders at dresses. She has an eye for the green dress. I don't go for green dresses, but is it a crime to wear a green dress, and if it's good enough for my girl isn't it good enough for you?

I can pull the act now. I can be smooth. I can say: a green dress fits your personality. And she will look up and say: really? And I will say: really. Profound dialogue! But no! I am strictly the you-must-remember-me type. She's passing up the green dress. That's copacetic with me, since I don't go for that, but if my girl wants it she gets it, and is it not the inalienable right of every American girl to wear any damn dress she pleases? Where the hell do you think you are—in Berlin?

Does she know I'm on the hunt? Is she saying: come on you, you with that stare in your 20-20 vision, pick me up, I'm your girl.

Yes, you are my girl, and I will whisper my name and how I hope your name is Kathleen. I will take you home, Kathleen, and you will take me home, Kathleen. Oh, darling, how much do I love you, I'll tell you no lies, how deep is the ocean, how high is the sky? Oh, look at me, your lover when the moon hangs low, your lover when there is no moon, and I'll knock you out in the rain or under the sun. I will take you home, Kathleen. You must remember me!

My girl stops at the Astor. The story of our romance begins at the Astor. Oh, the hunt and now the kill. When I grow old I will tell my grandchildren how I met their grandmother at the Astor. If you ask me, I can write a book.

Kathleen, you have made me happy. I was never really happy before. I sleep with two brothers in one bed. Can you be happy with three in a bed? But now life will be as fine as wine, cold in the summer, warm in the fall, hot in the winter and that ain't all! We will have a bed of our own, and a hunk of you and me will be born in this bed, and we will label her Sylvia. My mother's name is Sylvia, and what a portrait I have of how you will love my mother. I will say: Mamma, meet my wife!

Kathleen, dear wife, here I come! Here comes your husband, his heart on his face! You must remember your husband! You must remember your husband! Oh, dear wife!

But who the hell is this old man, this matinee idol of 1898 with the flush of good food in his face? What law gives him the right to hold you like that? Take your hand off my wife's ribs, the mother of my child! Kathleen, must you give him that toothpaste smile? Mister, where are you taking my wife? Kathleen, don't break your husband's heart! Mister, you're an old man with grey hair and the way you clutch my young wife makes me want to cry! Kathleen, observe my tears!

Say, can he be your father? How do you do, sir? I'm your daughter's husband, your son-in-law, born on the fourth of July. With your daughter by my side I'll be a text for Dale Carnegie. And, sir,

if you are alone and in need of a home, why, just come home and live with us. The invitation is for life! You, me, Kathleen and Sylvia, your grandchild! And when I come home at night we will sit down and eat and after we eat we will smoke a cigar and after the cigar we will put Sylvia to bed and watch her fall asleep, and then I will build a fire and we will light up fresh cigars and discuss the news while Kathleen knits and reads the manufactured novels of Kathleen Norris. What I promise is no lie, sir! May I call you Poppa, sir? May I call you sir, Poppa? My hand is my bond, sir! Buy a bond, Poppa!

But, man to man, are you her father? Kathleen, is this lush your old man? Is this Civil War Vet the grandfather of our daughter? Kathleen, you must tell me these things. I'm by your side. I can touch your hand. I can touch his hand! I can smell your perfume. He smells, too! And that strange sound you hear is my groan. Please tell me, my wife, why does he hold you like that and why do you let him hold you like that? And where are the two of you going? Oh, God, they will not let me live these days!

Look how they walk to the desk, cheek to cheek, the pathological Romeo and the sex-starved Juliet. Look how the clerk smiles at the old man. I do not like that smile.

I die inch by inch while I see the clerk with the funny smile hand the old man a key, and I'm so dead, so dead when the old lips of the old man kiss my wife's lips that are oh so young, and I think of ruined men watching castles fall, and I say: for God's sake, Kathleen, don't enter that elevator with Mr. Methuselah! I know now he is not your father. Fathers do not kiss their daughters the way he kissed you . . . I went down to the St. James Infirmary, pronounced Hotel Astor, to see my baby there, she was stretched out on a long white table, so sweet, so cold, so bare.

Kathleen, Kathleen. Kathleen. The elevator shut in my face and I saw it go up. I saw the clerk with the funny smile whisper something to a bellhop with a funny smile, and I stumbled out of the

hotel, crying and ashamed, alone and lonely. A drugstore on the corner had a sale on razor blades. I thought of my wrists.

Dear wife, you may read this story. You may remember me following you. You may remember Charles Boyer and the green dress and Mr. Methuselah. And you may remember the clerk with the funny smile. But, Kathleen, you do not know me, you do not know me. But I know you. You are my wife and I am your husband and we are the parents of Sylvia, and after you went and did it at the Astor I went home on that Thursday morning with a terrible sickness.

Oh, Kathleen, did you ever watch sugar in hot tea? It sinks quickly, melts quickly, dies quickly. I went to sleep that night with my two brothers, Joe and Skinny, in one bed, and the bed was hot, and I began to sink very quickly, melt very quickly, and Skinny saw me and asked why a misery was sticking out of my face, and I said: go to sleep, Skinny, go to sleep. And he said: can I sleep when a misery sticks out of your face? And I said, quote: I will tell you the truth, my little brother, I do not like what is going on in America. Unquote.

Oh, Kathleen, I am dying very quickly.

There will now be a two minute silence for my dead heart.