



A best-selling novelist says,
"The writer can't help putting his fucking nose
and prick into everybody's business."

MY UNCIVILIZED PAST

by PIETRO DI DONATO

It was a real fucked-up day in March 1939. I was a twenty-six-year-old Italian-American bricklayer who had written a novel, *Christ in Concrete*, that was ready for publication. That was the day the Book-of-the-Month Club judges were to choose between my book and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* for the September selection.

There were seven brothers and sisters I was taking care of. We lived in a rented house on the hill in Northport overlooking Long Island Sound. I hated like a sonofabitch to leave home and the symphonic radio music in the kitchen on that cold depressing morning and go all the way to the Flushing meadows to lay brick on the new World's Fair, but jobs were scarce and men were sucking asses for a day's pay.

Before I drove to the station the radio broadcast a bulletin that the Nazis had invaded Czechoslovakia and Hitler had arrived triumphantly in Prague. A few months before, when the United States recognized the Franco dictatorship that had been put in by the fascist armies, I had written letters to Chamberlain, Roosevelt, Hitler, and Mussolini, calling them every kind of a cocksucker I could think of. I was madder yet when the criminals neither answered nor got the FBI after me.

Of course the lousy Long Island Railroad got me to work an hour late. The foreman was pissed off and I had words with him.

He said, "Wise guy, if you're so smart why are you slinging brick? Now I see why they call you 'Pete the Red.'"

"Red your mother's cunt!" I said, "Fuck you!"

Having to work outdoors in winter weather for your fucking bread makes you wish you were never born. Wind came up through the snow in a crazy gust and sent an ironworker off the high steel. I saw the dying man go into quivering sleep cradled into eternity on the concrete floor by a pile of brick. His rugged hands, his athletic body were divorced from things that remained to be done. No one stopped laying bricks. It was just another case for the Workmen's Compensation death claims.

All day I could only think of the judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Was it possible for me to have some goddamned good luck? As a counter-evil-eye Italian, with every brick I laid I said aloud, "Fuck them! Who needs them? Fuck them!"

At the end of the day, sure enough, I was fired. That was the evening I had to go to the publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, then located at Fourth Avenue and 28th Street, to find out whether the Book-of-the-Month Club had chosen Steinbeck or me. Being laid off I had to take my four-foot level and big white canvas toolbag with me. I hated to carry tools in the street and subway—it made me feel like a goddamned robot slob.

I was furious about my insecurity; there was nothing glorious about being poor. The fucking Book-of-the-Month Club could change my life in a minute. A story is an author-rigged thing, but reality is a 100 percent unpredictable whore. I swore that if fortune smiled on me I would tell the world to kiss my ass.

In the novel I gave labor a soul. I made family an intimate, sacred community. I theatricalized the fable of religion, placing each scene within the framework of ritual, instinctively patterning my work after the morality plays of dark mystic times gone.

Was it possible to be an artist without prostituting oneself? When I had finished laying bricks and a building was complete, I wanted to demolish it and return it to the dust it came from. I looked around me in the subway. Why try to bullshit myself? The truth about the common man was as obvious as the sun at high noon: the mass man was just the blinding incontinent will to propagate; he was the jerk who endlessly bred jerks. Da Vinci had said he was a human sack who took food into the top hole and let it out at the bottom hole; and I saw that from the sack, from Joe Blow, came all the power and evil in society.

As the train pounded along, the nice-looking kid next to me was reading *Moby Dick*. Suddenly, he burst out laughing and said to the black woman on his other side, "This sailor rents a room that he has to share with a stranger—and do you know what? His bedmate turns out to be a cannibal with a bone in his nose and wearing a silk top hat!"

I looked ridiculous myself, wearing a beret, a Prince Albert dress coat with a velvet collar, Lee work pants, and Sears-Roebuck's best cement-stuccoed work shoes. I had bought the formal coat at Rogers Peet at 41st and Fifth Avenue with a part of the money Arnold Gingrich had sent me for *Esquire's* purchase of my first short story, "Christ in Concrete." William Saroyan, with Armenian acumen, had taken me to the young men's department where the prices were lower. My Prince Albert, and a pearl gray homburg, gray gloves, and spats, were to provide a proper literary appearance at the Plaza party given for me by Gingrich and Meyer Levin.

Hemingway had come to the party, thinking he'd see a gorilla-like, swarthy, Hoboken-Italian laborer (I was born and raised in Hoboken). But I was slender and aesthetic; I didn't smoke or drink. He said to the blonde with him, "He has the writing juice, but this bricklaying Donati cocksucker ain't so tough!"

I told him my name was not Donati but Di Donato. And I'll swear that squeaky-voiced, beady-eyed Hemingway had the most disgusting, dirtiest mouth I ever heard.

Then Clifford Odets, Ben Appel, Millen Brand, Mike Blankfort, Louis Adamic, Louis Bromfield, and other famous authors of the day came out to Northport, like visitors to a zoo, to look me over. They came from curiosity, expecting to see some horny-handed phenomenon and found instead an angry, articulate, self-appointed missionary. I felt like Jesus about his cousin, John the Baptist, when he said to the sight-seeing gawkers, "What did you come out to the wilderness to behold? A reed being tossed by a wind? Really then, why did you come out? To see a prophet?"

I wrote because it is impossible to communicate directly and honestly with people. I was at war with society, and I said as much to the famous authors who came to look me over. "You fucking scribblers, though you write with the cunning of journalists, the erudition of professors, and the privileged advantages of angels, you're full of shit and your books shall vanish like a fart in a storm!"

I wrote because it is impossible to communicate directly and honestly with people. I was at war with society, and I said as much to the well-intended pilgrims, "You fucking scribblers, though you write with the cunning of journalists, the erudition of professors, and the privileged advantages of angels, yet have not a scorching hard-on for justice, you're full of shit, and your books shall vanish like a fart in a storm!"

I came up from the Lexington Avenue subway a couple of blocks from Bobbs-Merrill. It was dusk—sleeting, and gloomy. Tired and hungry, I went into a restaurant. At my table was a Greek. He told me that he never traveled without his own special garlic, lemons, and olive oil. He ordered a dish of something and gave the waiter the three things. The waiter, bringing my soup, tripped and spilled the whole bowl of god-damned chicken gumbo right down the front of my Prince Albert. He promptly took hot black coffee and doused it on me to cut the soup.

In the publisher's building the elevator operator was about to close the door. He had a woman passenger. I stopped the door with my foot. The greaseball runt looked at my level, toolbag, chicken-and-coffee-stained coat and mortar-caked shoes; he barred my way and snidely said, "Where do you think you're going, Pal? Pal, use the stairway or the service elevator, Pal!"

I dropped my level and toolbag, grabbed him by the throat and thrust him up against the wall of the elevator.

"Don't 'Pal' me, you guinea prick! No, you're not even a prick—a prick's a part of a man! Now move your ass and take me up to the editor's floor!"

He started the elevator and mumbled, "You don't look like an author or talk like an author."

"Fuck you!" I said.

He said, "There's a lady here."

The woman was behind me. Without turning I said, "Fuck her too!"

The woman also got off at the editor's floor. She was probably old enough to be my mother, but she was perfectly curved, beautiful. She smelled of cool, fresh-crushed Concord grapes. She smiled. I felt foolish.

The editor, Lambert Davis, a Southerner who had left the *Virginia Quarterly* to come to Bobbs-Merrill, and pink-cheeked, mustachioed Ross Baker, head of promotion and sales, hurried from their offices as though God had arrived and greeted her with fawning respect. Mr. Davis introduced me. She was the widow of President Woodrow Wilson. I had been a tiny kid when he was President, Commander-in-Chief, and all that jazz. I remember looking at the Hoboken newspapers after the end of World War I and seeing Wilson with Pershing in the victory parade. But all I knew about Mrs. Wilson was that she ran the government after the President became a vegetable and the old joke—*Question*: "What did Mrs. Wilson say when President Wilson asked her to be his wife?" *Answer*: "She fell out of bed."

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She read the apology—and something else—in my eyes.

"Charmed," I said. "Mrs. Wilson, it is my particular honor and pleasure to meet you." I thought that the prissy old horsefaced Presbyterian Princeton prude had sure snared her a succulent cunt.

Mr. Davis said, "The First Lady has written her White House memoirs; a treasure for literature, a human document, a landmark in American history."

I said, laying it on thick, "To think that I, the son of illiterate immigrants from the pagan mountains of Abruzzi, am in the presence of the lovely wife of a towering president of the greatest nation on earth is truly wonderful, completely overwhelming. . . ."

Mr. Davis said, "Mrs. Wilson, Mr. Di Donato had to leave school at the age of twelve to become a bricklayer, picking up his father's bloodied trowel to support his widowed mother and three brothers and sisters—"

"Seven brothers and sisters," I said.

"Yes, yes, I know, Pietro, but three sounds less incredible than seven. Mrs. Wilson, Mr. Di Donato is a creative diamond in the rough—he doesn't write with mind or discipline, he writes with his flesh. Pietro is the Hoboken Wordsworth—'Strange fits of passion have I known' and 'dear imaginations realized . . . up to their loftiest measure, yea and more.'"

I didn't even know that there had been a Wordsworth. And just then I didn't care. I was too busy wondering when the bastards would say something about the Book-of-the-Month Club and if the judges had gotten off the pot.

Mrs. Wilson said, "I have reason to believe Mr. Di Donato speaks impressive English. Mr. Di Donato, if your book is a success will you continue to lay bricks?"

I'd like to lay you, right here, I thought. I said, "No, my dear Mrs. Wilson. My being a mason is a socioeconomic circumstance. I disdain bricklaying. It is beast-of-burden stuff. Monkeys can put on hard hats and be taught to lay bricks—better."

Davis said, "You don't mind waiting, do you?"

I said, "Take your sweet time."

As he led Mrs. Wilson into his office, he said, "Hitler has now violated the Czechs."

"I heard it on the automobile radio," she said, "It's deplorable! Our dear, dear boys will be going 'over there' again. May God help them all."

The Bobbs-Merrill place was musty as an attic; with a few additional touches it could have been something right out of Dickens, or maybe vintage *Saturday Evening Post*. I actually saw cobwebs in the ceiling corners and wondered why spiders would settle for such a dingy location. The clerks, both male and female, all seemed to be octogenarians

in a printing-house wax museum. In the small, uncomfortable sitting lobby there were photos of fuddy-duddy Frank Baum who wrote *The Wizard of Oz*, Bruce Barton, author of *The Man Nobody Knows*, and that famous guide for armchair adventurers, Richard Haliburton, who only a week later was to go down with his do-it-yourself junk in the China sea. They had not yet put up either Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's sugary, smiling picture or my own in a Byronesque pose from the waist up, wearing soiled Army-Navy Store winter underwear.

A phone rang, and a minute later Ross Baker ran out shouting, "We made it, Pietro! We made it! They've turned down *Grapes of Wrath* and chosen *Christ in Concrete*! The Book-of-the-Month judges are taking you to

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lunch tomorrow and will hand you a certified check for twenty-five thousand dollars!"

"We made it!" That was a belly laugh. The graceless, bugging ambitions, the mediocrity and double-mouthing of the publishing carnival make about as much sense as a one-eyed black Hasidic jug-fucker. Originally, Simon & Schuster had possession of the manuscript, but they threw it back in my lap, saying with compassionate profundity that it wasn't a book and couldn't ever be a book. Bobbs-Merrill sent Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's expensively printed and bound proofs to the Book-of-the-Month Club. My novel only got there by a fluke. My sister was managing a dress shop and met a woman there who needed medical help for her husband. I got a doctor pal to treat the

guy for free, and his wife, while expressing her gratitude, told my sister she worked at the Book-of-the-Month Club. My sister said that her brother, Peter, had written a book called *Christ in Concrete*; the woman said she'd get a proof copy through her job and called Bobbs-Merrill. That copy got into the hands of the special readers who recommended it to the judges!

My life was transformed immediately. I was ushered into the sanctum sanctorum, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson dear-boyed me, the champagne was brought out, and I was accorded the full goose-who-laid-the-golden-egg treatment. One moment I was a day laborer and the next moment I was a rich guy. In a flash I became a careless phony like all the self-loving celebrity shits—I had been surfeited with character, but now it was going to be fun being no fucking good. I was soon to fully understand the rich: they are a breed unto themselves. There is the animal kingdom—the insect, the fish, the winged creature, mammals, the family of man, and the rich.

The Aladdin's lamp of wealth makes for elegantly long torsos and limbs, darling straight noses and close-fitting shell ears, equine skulls, teeth as unmarred as dentures, skin like living porcelain, and the frigid eyes of a fish. The rich have the transparent all-seeing orbs of the great horned owl—gem-clear eyes like the beatified, except that they do not mirror immorality. Their bodies do not cast shadows and their stance obviates soul. The unharassed young have an air of maturity, they are as insolent and confident as the planets, while the old have an ageless semblance of youth.

To die is a merciful escape for the disenfranchised who live only in hope that never fruits, but death for a millionaire is Greek tragedy—an irrevocable farewell to ego, power, *la dolce vita*, lovely orgies, a myriad pleasures, drinks, servants, cute deviations, multiple lives, and—most of all—gourmet cuntlapping.

F. Scott Fitzgerald delineated the anatomy of the leisure class—but not quite completely. The rich have super style; they're the exquisite ones, gods on earth and positive that their shit is ice cream. But they sadly lack one thing: a caste mark made by a bullet—Pow!—precisely between their motherfucking eyes.

Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and the publishing people quaffed the champagne—the fucking beautiful Book-of-the-Month Club bonanza champagne! The editor conveniently forgot that he had recently told me, "We're going to spend a pile promoting the First Lady's memoirs, so—I've got to be frank with you, Pietro—aside from token ads your novel is going to have to sink or swim on its own. You see, the story of a primitive Italian laborer killed in construction work can't in a thousand years compare with life in the White House." Then he got witty: "But, of course, if you shot the President of the United States, say, the publicity would automatically put *Christ in Concrete* on the bestseller list." The prick!

I called my friend Saroyan at the Great Northern Hotel, where he was staying, and told him about my jackpot. He got me a room. Then I took a cab to Brooks Brothers and outfitted myself from head to foot with the best they had. At the hotel I showered, shaved, and changed. Saroyan invited me to see parts of his two Broadway hits, *My Heart's in the Highlands* and *Time of Your Life*, and then go out and do the town and get a piece of ass.

There was something I had to do. I made a bundle of my dirty sweat-stinking work-clothes and shoes. I took the bundle, my four-foot level, the bag of tools, and an empty Coca-Cola bottle and went by cab to Saint Patrick's Cathedral. I told the cabbie I'd only be a minute. Inside, I signed the cross, genuflected to the Madonna, and thanked her for influencing the Book-of-the-Month Club judges. On my way out, I stopped at the font and filled the Coca-Cola bottle with holy water.

Every poor, tawdry, ball-busted, day-dreaming bricklayer has cursingly vowed that—when his ship comes in, when a rich relative in Rangoon dies and leaves him a fortune, or when he wins the Irish Sweepstakes—he's going to throw his fucking tools off the Brooklyn Bridge.

I directed the cabbie to the Brooklyn Bridge and had him pull over to the railing near the middle of the graceful nightlit span. I pissed into my tin hard hat and poured the Coca-Cola bottle of holy water into it also. Then I sprinkled the sacred liquid over both the cheap, soiled, unlovely clothes of my recent past and the tools and said, "*In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti—fuck you forever!*" And I threw, one by one, the hard hat, the large Rose trowel and the pointing trowel, my ordinary Stanley six-foot lock-joint folding rule and my brand-new-brick-course Lufkin spacing rule, the hand-square and the carborundum rubbing stone, the brick hammer and the lump hammer, the scutch hammer and the chisels, and all the lines and line-blocks and pins and slickers and tape measures and canvas gloves and brushes and the Johnson & Johnson first-aid kit and my fucking Union card stamped with a twenty-five cent photo of me . . . and with each toss I cried, "Fuck you!"

Shake the dust from thy feet. That which offends thee, cut it off and cast it from thee. Let's settle something once and for all: I've spent most of my life laying bricks, and I know what I'm talking about when I say unequivocally that so-called honest character-building toil is a crock of shit. Straining, dull, repetitive, treadmill labor does not enhance, encourage, ennoble, or edify; it simply just fucking-well degenerates, brutalizes, and beats the mass robot into a zombie. And that's no shit!

The irremediable crime of my existence has not been ravaging sensuality, incest, betrayal, broken promises, prejudice, lies, violence, obscenity, or just pettiness—but simply staying too long at bricklaying, putting up stupid walls proving nothing, like a

fucking idiot fool. My crime was not being true to my only self—by squandering price-less hours, weeks, months, and years that Christ himself can't bring back—when I should have put all my brothers and sisters in an orphan asylum and freely wandered the fucking beautiful world, screwing to the hilt and writing about it all. Kiss and fuck and tell. Beware of deadly habits like daily work—fuck that slave habit! I want "WASTER" chiseled on my tombstone.

Going uptown to rejoin Saroyan I regaled the cabbie with my fantastic day.

He said, "We're all jerks and slobs until we get a break. So today you got rich and famous! Well, I'm glad a working stiff is getting a break for a change. How come to a

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writer so many interesting things happen?"

I told him the truth, "Because the writer can't help putting his fucking nose and tongue and prick into everybody's business."

"You should hump the president's wife you met—it will give you status and you can tell your grandchildren about how you banged someone from the White House."

I said, "No kidding, do you think I should fuck the wife of a president of the United States of America?"

"Vy not?" he said, "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson—I remember her. Who doesn't? So what if she could be your mother? The Talmud Torah says, 'More better an old hen for the best chicken fat.' Give her a bang for me too. I can't get it up no more . . . like trying to

shove a wet noodle up a tiger's asshole in flytime. At my age now it's no more with the pisser . . . only with the kisser. You wanna do me a favor? Bring me a souvenir from the president's wife—maybe a pair of her panties . . . used . . . unwashed . . . all nice and goppy in the crotch!"

Saroyan and I went to the Copacabana, where the manager took us backstage to the showgirls' dressing room. The girls were breathtaking. Bill brought out a small fancy rug from his coat pocket—an Oriental prayer rug. He took off his shoes, knelt on the rug, and praised Allah and the girls.

Both Saroyan and I fell for a gorgeous dancer, Tamara. After the floor show we wine and dined her and took her to her Greenwich Village apartment to listen to classical music and to bullshit. I wanted to lay Tamara in the worst way. Saroyan wasn't a bad-looking guy in the Armenian manner, but I felt quite sure she favored me. I figured I'd ditch Bill and then come back and fuck her—if I could.

I yawned and said that between bricklaying, the weather, suspense, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, and the emotional stress of my *Christ in Concrete* winning over John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, it had been a rough day—and that I'd have to be in shape to meet tomorrow with Heywood Broun, William Allen White, Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Harry Sherman, my good angels of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

We didn't know what to talk about, so Bill tried to make literary conversation, asking me what I thought of Steinbeck. It didn't occur to me that he was stalling and up to something. I said Steinbeck's sophomoric, sentimental, simulated, self-serving sympathies were just a lot of lamp-smelling *tour de force* shit. As a boy, Steinbeck had lived in a twenty-six-room Victorian mansion in Salinas, California, while I was housed in a fucking cold-water railroad flat on the Hoboken Dardanelles, companioned by immigrants, lice, bedbugs, roaches, and rats. I said that Steinbeck was a reactionary idealist poseur who milked the pathos of the downtrodden for gain. (And remembering now that this "friend of mankind" ended up hawking in the front ranks of the cowardly gung-ho Vietnam war criminals, I wasn't so wrong back then after all.)

Saroyan finally said that he'd better call it a day and go home and have his yogurt and sleep. We said goodnight to Tamara and took a cab back to the hotel, where we bade each other an over-friendly good night.

Later, I sneaked out of the hotel and took a cab down to Tamara's place. In the hallway I heard Tamara screeching, the crashing of furniture, and other unmistakable sounds of the chase. I turned away and walked back down the hall, for I knew only too well what I would find if I opened that door.

September came and Bobbs-Merrill and the Book-of-the-Month Club brought out *Christ in Concrete*. There were full-page ads in the

New York Times, and some very flattering reviews (the best was by the tragically fated movie star, beautiful Frances Farmer, in the Communist *Daily Worker*). As a smash best-seller it was the subject for pulpit sermons, and before long I was classified as a leading writer—almost a theologian! Soon I was an asshole buddy of all the big shits at the top of the heap—the glamorous ones like Mayor La Guardia, Bennett Cerf, George Balanchine, Rube Goldberg, Nathan Milstein—and then there were meetings with Pearl Buck, Professor Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt—oh hell! I could go on and on. Getting to know writers was a joke; they were all homely megalomaniacs who looked and acted as though they needed a good bugging enema. And as for authors being tough brave guys—well, Hemingway, Mailer, Breslin, and all the rest of the writing slobbs lumped together couldn't punch their way out of a paper bag.

Once I got my head above the tide in the anonymous human cesspool and became a Name, life became an excitingly different flesh-and-blood movie every day. Most of my fan mail avowed: "Oh, what I've been through . . . my life would make the greatest book!" Each writer had had some deathless original experience like incest, sexual relations with an animal, or perhaps been given a blow-job by a denizen of outer space. One correspondent, a Catholic prelate to the Vatican, well known for work with youth and morals, insisted that I meet him in the city to allow him to tell me how much he appreciated *Christ in Concrete*.

This Monsignor took me to the Copa for dinner. His teeth were too white, his lips too red, and his eyes too bright. He was the traditional Irish-American baseball nut. As I was gnawing a turkey leg and salivating over the dancing showgirls, he said with brio, "I know Jumpin' Joe. . . . After the games at the Yankee Stadium I take showers with the sluggers in the locker room. Why, Pietro, some of those guys have got pricks like baseball bats!"

Clifford Odets—and, by the way, what kind of an aborted concoction is 'Odets'?—well, anyhow, Odets gave me a newspaper clipping about a guy in Philadelphia who left a copy of my book on his bed opened at page 286 (which described a bricklayer falling off a skyscraper), with the following lines underscored: "Paul looked over the scaffold rail and through staring mouth and eyes sent his soul to catch his Godfather who flung out his arms and rested on the speed of space that sucked him down. . . ." The Philadelphian then made an expert jump from his tiny toilet window on the twentieth floor.

A doctor phoned me from the Bellevue morgue to come and see a hood encased in a good concrete mix—with a missal and a gaudy rosary in his crossed hands—all in a carpentered plywood box dug out of the East River muck by sandhogs. This Brooklyn romantic had been garroted with baling wire. As I watched the skull-sawing brain-

scooping autopsy, thoughts of both steak and cunnilingus became most extremely unappetizing.

Collecting the hood's cadaver for the 'Boys' was Big A, king of the riverfront and an honorary associate of Murder Incorporated. We met and he displayed a propensity for culture by admiring me. The next morning he took me to the Waldorf to have breakfast with Frank Costello, who was *elegantissimo* until he opened his Italian-accented "dese, dem, and dose" trap.

Later, I was a guest at Big A's estate in the Hamptons, and I learned that the Wasp millionaires there didn't dare complain about Big A's wife's freshly manured vegetable garden, or her pigeons, chickens, nanny

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Big A told me the whole inside mobster-syndicate story while fat little Mrs. A gorged me with homemade ravioli and wine, repeatedly kissing holy pictures and blessing herself and Big A. She insisted that Big A never transgressed the Law, but that all the *capos* he mentioned were *male carne*, that is, "bad meat." The word "Mafia" was never used by us Italians.

Big A had been brought as a snot-nosed kid from Palermo, Sicily, to the Brooklyn docks. I asked him how he summed up the New World.

"I'm a 100 percent true-blue American," he said vehemently. "I believe in the Stars and Stripes. Lemme tell you—other coun-

tries stink! This fuckin' America was made for me—Big A. I got it by the balls!"

Bennett Cerf, Harold Ross of the *New Yorker*, Dorothy Parker, Walter Winchell, Arthur Kober (Lillian Hellman's ex-husband), I. F. Stone, at that time editor of the *New York Evening Post*, and I—as a group—attended the opening night of Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*. Later, backstage, before a large adulating congregation of the precious and famous, the star, Tallulah Bankhead, asked me how I liked the play. I told her honestly that it had put me to sleep.

Tallulah shouted, "You goddamned greasy wop bricklayer! What could you possibly know about the theatre!"

Then on to the party for Lillian Hellman at the mansion of the Jewish-Swiss international Midas, Frohneknicht. I was sentimental about Maggie Frohneknicht—well, either about her or her gold mines? Maggie's plain sister was married to Erich Leinsdorf, and what stands out in my mind from that evening is the memory of the pallid, bald, bespectacled, guttural Leinsdorf spitting into his wife's face while saying, "Bubbee, what do you think of me now?" In the embarrassed hush that followed, she looked up to him with a beatific smile and answered, "Erich, you are wonderful!" I whispered to Maggie Frohneknicht, "This conducting character has never heard of the Madonna," and dark, neurotic Maggie said, "Oh shit."

Bennett Cerf and I made a strange tomcatting pair. I asked him the secret of his success, and he said, "Pete, I know how to listen." Bennett had been divorced from the actress, Sylvia Sidney, but his secretary was an exact look-alike for her and was madly in love with him. But Bennett fell in love with Ginger Rogers's niece, Phyllis, and I was forced to go pussy-hunting alone.

The night of Bennett's marriage to Phyllis, I wore a custom-tailored tux, patent-leather pumps with bows, and tan imported French-pleated shirt. Leonard Lyons said I was the tops in formal clothes, and Dorothy Kilgallen flattered me by saying I was one of the ten best-looking men in America.

The brownstone townhouse had an interior court, complete with trees, bushes, flowers, statues, and fountains. I ran into a couple who latched onto me and helped me get drunk. He was tall and patrician and she glittered passionately. To this day I don't know how I ended up in bed with her in their St. Regis suite, but in the middle of the night I awoke there. She had her back to me and was snoring. I automatically let her have it—and she screamed, "Wrong place!"

In the daylight she was a withered, toothless harridan, as ancient and decrepit as the Cumaean Sibyl. I had to vomit.

The last thing I recall is the three of us in the elevator descending to the lobby, and the old, old man weakly protesting, "There is such a thing as people!"

Envoi: The public wishes to believe that the creative artist comports himself with *the mystery and poise of God*. 