

Author's Note

"And I will give him the morning star."

That is from Revelation—once again. I have stolen more quotes and thoughts and purely elegant little starbursts of writing from the Book of Revelation than anything else in the English language—and it is not because I am a biblical scholar, or because of any religious faith, but because I love the wild power of the language and the purity of the madness that governs it and makes it music.

And there is also the fact that I spend a lot of my time on the road, renting typewriters and hustling FAX machines in strange hotels and always too far from my own massive library at home to get my hands on the wisdom that I suddenly realize—on some sweaty night in Miami or a cold Thanksgiving Day in Minneapolis—I need and want, but that with a deadline just four or five hours away is utterly beyond my reach.

You cannot call the desk at the Mark Hopkins or the Las Vegas Hilton or the Arizona Biltmore and have the bell captain bring up the collected works of Sam Coleridge or Stephen Crane at three o'clock in the morning. ... In some towns Maria has managed to conjure up a volume of H.L. Mencken or Mark Twain, and every once in a while David McCumber would pull a rabbit like Nathanael West's *Cool Million* out of his hat or his own strange collection in his office at the Examiner. . . .

But not often. Fast and total recall of things like page 101 from *Snowblind* or Marlowe's final judgment on Lord Jim, or what Richard Nixon said to Henry Kissinger when they were both on their knees in front of Abe Lincoln's portrait in the White House on some crazed Thursday night in July of 1974 are just about impossible to locate after midnight on the road, or even at noon. It simply takes too much time, and if they've been sending bottles of Chivas up to your room for the past three days, they get nervous when you start demanding things they've never heard of.

That is when I start bouncing around the room and ripping drawers out of the nightstands and bed-boxes and those flimsy little desks with bent green

blotters that they provide for traveling salesmen—looking for a Gideon Bible, which I know will be there somewhere, and with any luck at all it will be a King James Version, and the Book of Revelation will be intact at the end. If there is a God, I want to thank Him for the Gideons, whoever they are. I have dealt with some of His other messengers and found them utterly useless. But not the Gideons. They have saved me many times, when nobody else could do anything but mutter about calling Security on me unless I turned out my lights and went to sleep like all the others. . . .

I have spent half my life trying to get away from journalism, but I am still mired in it—a low trade and a habit worse than heroin, a strange seedy world full of misfits and drunkards and failures. A group photo of the top ten journalists in America on any given day would be a monument to human ugliness. It is not a trade that attracts a lot of slick people; none of the Calvin Klein crowd or international jet set types. The sun will set in a blazing red sky to the east of Casablanca before a journalist appears on the cover of People magazine.

It is always bad business to try to explain yourself on paper—at least not all at once—but when you work as a journalist and sign your name in black ink on white paper above everything you write, that is the business you're in, good or bad. Buy the ticket, take the ride. I have said that before and I have found, to my horror, that it's true. It is one of those half-bright axioms that can haunt you for the rest of your life—like the famous line Joe Louis uttered on the eve of his fight with Billy Conn: “He can run, but he can't hide.”

That is a thing you want to remember if you work in either journalism or politics—or both, like I do—and there is no way to duck it. You will be flogged for being right and flogged for being wrong, and it hurts both ways—but it doesn't hurt as much when you're right.

There are times, however—and this is one of them—when even being right feels wrong. What do you say, for instance, about a generation that has been taught that rain is poison and sex is death? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring rain on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal blue lake into

a puddle of black poison scum right in front of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation.

It's a strange world. Some people get rich and others eat shit and die. A fat man will feel his heart burst and call it beautiful. Who knows? If there is, in fact, a Heaven and a Hell, all we know for sure is that Hell will be a viciously overcrowded version of Phoenix—a clean well-lighted place full of sunshine and bromides and fast cars where almost everybody seems vaguely happy, except for the ones who know in their hearts what is missing. . . . And being driven slowly and quietly into the kind of terminal craziness that comes with finally understanding that the one thing you want is not there. Missing. Back-ordered. No tengo. Vaya con Dios. Grow up! Small is better. Take what you can get. . . .

Heaven is a bit harder to figure. And there are some things that not even a smart boy can tell you for sure. . . . But I can guess. Or wonder. Or maybe just think like a gambler or a fool or some kind of atavistic rock & roll lunatic and make it about 8-1 that Heaven will be a place where the swine will be sorted out at the gate and sent off like rats. With huge welts and lumps and puncture wounds all over their bodies. Down the long black chute where ugliness rolls over you every 10 or 16 minutes like waves of boiling asphalt and poison scum. Followed by sergeants and lawyers and crooked cops waving rule books. And where nobody laughs and everybody lies and the days drag by like dead animals and the nights are full of whores and junkies clawing at your windows and tax men jamming writs under your door and the screams of the doomed coming up through the air shaft along with white cockroaches and red stringworms full of AIDS and bursts of foul gas with no sunrise and the morning streets full of preachers begging for money and fondling themselves with gangs of fat young boys trailing after them. . . .

Ah . . . but we were talking about Heaven ... or trying to . . . but somehow we got back into Hell.

Maybe there is no Heaven. Or maybe this is all pure gibberish—a product of the demented imagination of a lazy drunken hillbilly with a heart full of hate who has found out a way to live out there where the real winds blow—to

sleep late, have fun, get wild, drink whiskey and drive fast on empty streets
with nothing in mind except falling in love and not getting arrested. . . .

Res ipsa loquitur. Let the good times roll.

HST

Paradise Valley