

The Gettysburg Review 21:3 autumn 2008

ESSAYS

- BLAKE BAILEY John Cheever in Iowa, 341
- JOYCE DAVIS Minestra, 369
- CHARLOTTE M. BROCK Hymn, 399
- PAUL ZIMMER Practicing for Doomsday, 406
- SHANNON EGAN Embodiment and Emptiness: Alison Rector's Interior
Spaces, 414
- MICHAEL BUSK Allah Akhbar, 477
- JOHN C. HAMPSEY Aestheticizing the Wasteland, Revisioning the Journey:
Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, 495

FICTION

- JESSIE MARSHALL Dogs, 355
- ANTHONY VARALLO The Girl at the Station, 383
- FRANZ KAFKA from *Amerika: The Missing Person*, 425
- TARA MANTEL Confessions, 439
- JESSICA RAIMI My Three Months with the Great Man, 455

POETRY

- ANDREA HOLLANDER BUDY Auden *and* At Mt. Lebanon Cemetery, 352
- ROBERT MCNAMARA A Life *and* Mortal Words, 367
- WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS Geographical, *Three Dancing Maidens*, *and*
November, 379
- DICK ALLEN God's Beatnik, 396
- HAILEY LEITHAUSER Apologia *and* Boys of L.A., 404
- MICHAEL HEFFERNAN Long Lost *and* The Origin of the World, 410
- CHARLES HARPER WEBB Dark Penguin, 437

My Three Months with the Great Man

When I sent my résumé to the Great Man's magazine, I expected no response. The magazine had advertised for a "fast-thinking, literate secretary" to transcribe tapes and process words, tasks at which I was reputed to be a whiz. But I couldn't believe that the prestigious magazine—even the president read it—could not find among its own some girlfriend or cousin with the requisite skills.

Six days after I mailed my application, I got a phone call from a woman with a full-bodied English voice. "This is Miss Winter, of the magazine. I have your résumé here, it's very impressive. The job is assisting me, I'm the Great Man's secretary, and it's mostly transcribing correspondence and the column, and the book later on when that comes in. The girl who's been doing this job for the last seven years has gone off to Thailand to work with the refugees. I notice you say here you've done a bit of writing, and I must warn you that this is not a writing job at all, it's strictly secretarial. But if you're still interested—" I assured her I was entirely at her service.

Later that day, I went to the magazine's offices, which were on several floors of a shabby but genteel apartment building in Turtle Bay. Miss Winter apologized as she led me into a small office. "We'll have to meet in here. It's rather a delicate situation, you see, the girl who's been here has gone off to Thailand, as I told you, and the girl who replaced her is most dreadfully slow. This is the publisher's office, I'm afraid *our* offices are rather less elegant than this." The room we were in was depressing rather than elegant. The furniture was generic, and the walls were covered with awards the magazine had won and pictures of the publisher with famous people.

"I'm Gladys Winter—I'm the one mentioned in the Great Man's books—and this is Molly O'Leary, our research director." I shook hands with a buxom young woman in a flowered dress. Gladys, who appeared to be in her forties, affected a bohemian air, with a red scarf tied around her hair and oversized tortoiseshell glasses.

We all sat down, Molly very straight with her hands folded, Gladys perched on the edge of her chair, legs intertwined.

"Now, as I said," continued Gladys, "we're looking for someone very *literate*."

The Great Man is, first and foremost, a *writer*. So we have to be very accurate here, very . . . do you read a lot?"

"Um, yes," I said. "All the time, I guess."

"What magazines do you read?"

"The magazine, of course, where I saw your ad, the *Spectator*, the *New Yorker*—"

She cut me off. "Let me just throw a name at you—Von Hayek."

I decided not to bluff. "I've never made it all the way through *The Road to Serfdom*, but I think I can summarize its argument—"

Gladys looked surprised. "Oh, that's fine, I just wanted to see if you could spell it." It appeared I had passed the test.

The magazine could not afford to pay as much as I'd made working for lawyers, but I extracted a promise that if I were hired, my salary would be reviewed after three months. Gladys asked if I had any questions. "You mean, other than, 'What is the Great Man really like?'" The ladies laughed, a good sign. Although they did not precisely offer me the job, when they said good-bye, both had a cheerful light in their eyes, as though their search were over.

The next morning Gladys phoned to offer me the job, and I accepted. I would be on three months' probation, she warned me, but I took this as a formality—understandable, since the last person hadn't worked out.

When the lawyer I worked for told me Gladys had called for a reference, he said, "Watch out! I've met that type before."

"How so?"

"Oh, I don't know. She just seemed awfully . . . intense. I told her you were great but that she should know you really like to be left alone to do your work."

On my arrival the first morning, before I even got a tour of the office, I was directed to photocopy the typescript of the Great Man's new introduction to one of his old books. The book, which I had read, was called *High Gear: A Diary*. It narrated a typical week in the Great Man's life, during which he hobnobbed with the secretary of state and a famous violinist, taped his television show, wrote three nationally syndicated newspaper columns, lectured in Boston, Des Moines, and Salt Lake City, entertained a famous historian and a former astronaut, and went to the ballet and a hot discotheque.

The Great Man was heir to a steel fortune and unapologetically patrician, and he had founded the magazine in his youth to disseminate his conservative views. He was a devout Catholic and a serious intellectual who could end a newspaper column on the subject of some heinous crime or natural disaster with "Let us

pray." On the program, he was a tough, Socratic interviewer, enjoying argument as a route to the truth. He had opinions on our relations with the Soviet Union, the tax system, congressional scandals, public health and morals, and many other things; he was never at a loss for subjects for the column or guests for the program.

The book's new introduction took issue with the early reviewers, many of whom mentioned with irritation the chauffeured limousine in which the Great Man commuted between his house in the country, his East Side apartment, and the office. The Great Man could not understand why the critics were so annoyed. The limousine was an absolute necessity: it enabled him to put in an average of eight hours a week at his correspondence and telephone calls as he rode from place to place.

Gladys interrupted my reading to ask me to help with the mail. She sorted all the incoming mail for the Great Man's many-faceted operation, and had done so, I was later to learn, all the twenty years she had been with him, as had her predecessor.

She explained her system as she sorted and stacked the envelopes. "Along these filing cabinets goes the mail for accounting, then Molly's, then circulation, then for the television program, then advertising. On my desk toward the front goes the Great Man's mail and anything to be forwarded, such as for the book-review editor, he only comes in every few weeks, I'll handle that. Then on the appointment book goes the publisher's mail, the assistant publisher's goes on this card file, editorial's on this chair, all the classifieds go to editorial as well . . ."

My next task was to transcribe a tape of correspondence the Great Man had dictated. When he was on a lecture tour, as he was now, his system was to send back stacks of letters received accompanied by cassettes bearing his replies in the same order, so that he did not have to dictate spellings or addresses for the replies. Since I did not know how to operate the computer I was later to use, I was given permission to use a regular typewriter. I was to do everything in draft, which Gladys would go over, and then retype everything in final version (the computer would save retyping), double-spaced, name and address of recipient at the bottom, not the top, date aligned with signature, one carbon for the files, and the carbons had to be perfect as well, because all the correspondence eventually went to the archives at Princeton.

The Great Man's tape was of very bad quality, dictated in an airplane. Announcements by the pilot and offers of drinks were audible in the background.

The Great Man had a habit of starting to speak before he turned on the tape recorder, and he was justly celebrated for his mumbling. In fact, I was startled to hear him sound exactly as he did on television. He had been playing himself all along.

As I discovered in the weeks that followed, much of the Great Man's mail fell into distinct categories, as did his responses. There were requests for jobs ("The magazine is a tiny operation, and people do not tend to leave except when they die or are cashiered, neither of which happens very frequently") or contacts ("I'm afraid I don't mix with the sort of people capable of bankrolling a project such as yours"), invitations to openings and receptions (Gladys would note "phoned regrets" on these), requests to appear for free at colleges ("Please understand that the magazine runs at a deficit and depends substantially on the fees I receive for speaking"). Requests for articles were sometimes considered ("Please call my agent"), interviews never ("a form of theater"), contributions rarely ("Unhappily I am a terrible cook and therefore not qualified to give you a favorite recipe for your compendium"). There were requests to sit on boards ("I do not permit any such affiliations, and thereby leave myself free to write about worthy organizations such as your own without being suspected of partisanship") and requests to review manuscripts or write blurbs ("Sounds interesting, but I simply don't have the time"). Some of these requests received a form letter signed by Gladys Winter (Miss), Secretary: "The Great Man has asked me to interdict all requests—for articles, interviews, appearances, etc.—for the next six months, as he is drastically in arrears on commitments he has already made." Some requests were simply marked "NA" for "not answered."

Gladys forged the Great Man's signature on all the letters and on all the autographed books and pictures sent out. I never found out whether those who wanted freestanding autographs for their collections got real ones. Perhaps Gladys kept a supply. On one of his correspondence tapes was an aside, "Gladys, send him a copy of *Broken Spyglass*—no, come to think of it, wait until I get back, he has another one I signed and he might notice the difference."

There were love letters—from men: "You are simply the most articulate conservative spokesman around, and this country would be even deeper awash in liberalism without your efforts," and from women: "When the magazine arrives in the mail, my husband and I both make a grab for it, and whoever gets to it first doesn't relinquish it until it's completely devoured—which sometimes takes days!" To the men, the Great Man wrote, "Thank you for your cordial letter"; to the women, "What a charming note, which I will treasure." There were friendly

letters, the men enclosing clippings, the women writing, "In 1957 we summered at Nantucket, where I once went to tea at your brother's lovely home. Since my husband passed away, I have moved to Florida and have not been to Nantucket in many years . . ." These too received replies, "What fun! Thanks for sending it along," or "Your note brought back happy memories. I will remember to ask my brother about you."

Then there were the wits, who wrote, "Dear Miss Winter: I know you open all the Great Man's mail, so I'm imploring you to let him see this." They enclosed manuscripts, usually comic dialogues between world leaders at the gates of hell, or clumsily drawn cartoon strips of similar hue. The Great Man wrote to one such, "I am impressed by your irreverence, your cheerfulness, and your bounce, but your satire just doesn't make it, and therefore I am returning it."

The Great Man had an international crowd of regular correspondents—professors, clergymen, musicians, lawyers, ambassadors, even President Reagan. To them he wrote, "You are a scholar and a patriot. . . ." "No one has unraveled the complexities of the Middle East situation as skillfully as you. . . ." "Your rendition of the Second Partita was simply ravishing. . . ." His many brothers and sisters sent clippings and invited him to their country houses; nephews and nieces thanked him for graduation gifts. He too sent clippings around, sometimes to several people at once, often to his wife and son, and he diligently forwarded a copy of any letter he received praising someone else to its subject.

The first few weeks, I also sent out hundreds of copies of an editorial in which the Great Man apologized for a recent cover the magazine had run. The design in question had included an insulting word for Chinese people, and while the article it illustrated was an attack on affirmative action—a philosophy the Chinese in New York supported as little as he did—the Chinese community had mobilized, and hundreds of form letters and petitions were coming in. (The Great Man wrote to one of his friends, "We ran the word *chink* on the cover and five billion Chinese have complained.")

Some letters went unanswered. "I went running today, five miles, I felt a little better afterwards. Do you know how lonely it gets on this campus? Everyone on their own little trip. I don't know if you even read these letters, but I believe that you do"; "You are the most putrid scum ever to slither around the country spreading your fascist message"; "Possibilities of influence by electronics, by brain control programmes upon human's mind, upon his behavior, upon his policy are boundless. *It is a reality of our days.* I affirm it as a long recipient, as an experimental rabbit of KGB's scientific-vivisectionic group, whose brain was used

and is being used now (without my knowledge and consent, of course). I'm recent emigrant from the USSR and yet badly in English. Our priest corrects my mistakes." For the unsigned crude drawings captioned with racial epithets, Gladys kept a file called Hate Mail.

On my third day at work, the first correspondence tape finished, I was sitting in my office taking a breather and thinking about the computer, when Gladys burst in. She had a way of flinging open the door as though she had heard there were a barracks-wide crap game going on in my room.

"Now then," she announced, "I think it's about time you started using the computer."

"All right," I said.

She sat down at the machine. "Now, I really think the best thing to do is go through this *step by step*." She reached for the WordStar manual. "Now, I think we should just start from the beginning. So first, we turn the machine *on*. Where—"

"On the right," I said.

"You turn it on *here*," she said, flipping the switch. She stared at the screen but could make nothing of the blinking letters that appeared. "I think the best thing would be if you called Mark," she said. "He's our computer consultant and you must call him whenever you have a question."

"All right," I said.

"But you really *must* start using the computer, you'll just have to dig in and learn how to do it. And of course the Great Man can show you things too, when he gets back next week, he knows all about it." I said nothing, thinking, If you'll get out of my chair and let me at the damned computer, I'll try to figure it out, and I didn't do it before because I thought you wanted me to get some work out before I embarked on a lengthy apprenticeship. Finally she stood up and said, "Why don't you call Mark *now*," and left me alone.

In the week that followed, I spent a lot of time on the phone with Mark, who patiently instructed me in the mysteries of WordStar, a word-processing program insufficiently explained in the manuals, and LYNC, the program controlling the modem that allowed the Great Man to transmit things he'd written on his computer in the country to my computer in the office. Both these programs gave me endless trouble, and I stayed late several evenings to catch up, Gladys promising me an afternoon off at some future time.

The Great Man returned from his lecture tour during my second week. In spirit, of course, he had never been absent. The hallways were closely hung with

framed caricatures of him from magazines, and photographs of him on his sailboat or on the phone, or with family, friends, or dogs. A large crayon drawing depicting him in long hair and love beads was signed by many Princeton classmates; there was also an accurate likeness in collage made entirely of repetitions of his name clipped from magazines and newspapers. Boxes of his books were stored in the bathroom. My own office, next door to Gladys's off a common hallway, was a cubicle stuffed with filing cabinets and dominated by a huge advertising layout for one of the spy novels he wrote during his annual skiing vacation in Switzerland. The novels featured a young, dashing CIA agent whose Catholicism did not prevent him from having liaisons with beautiful patriots. A number of the Great Man's female fans claimed to be in love with the character.

The Great Man's arrival in person was heralded at intervals by Gladys: "He's just called, they're at the George Washington Bridge, he'll be here in twenty minutes," and then suddenly the halls echoed with his unnaturally cheerful greetings, "Hallo, Gladys! Hallo, Molly!" There he was, more grizzled and red faced than he appeared on television, smiling the famous twinkly smile (some critics called it a leer). His chauffeur followed, carrying several briefcases. Gladys burst in to ask me to make coffee, black with two saccharines for the Great Man and just black for herself.

The Great Man greeted me by name that day and shook my hand. I was never to get much better acquainted with him. I had no occasion to go into his office except to deliver his cup of instant. In any case he was rarely in the city, and then usually out to lunch with notables. Sometimes when Gladys was at lunch, I would go into his office and stare at the yard-wide globe of the world that lit up (Gladys had shown it to me my first day at work), the bronzed boating shoes, the snapshots of his dogs.

He did come in a few times to help me with the computer. The first time, he showed me a nifty way to erase a bunch of files all at once. "You'll find this very useful," he said, crouching next to the keyboard and reaching over. "You get out of WordStar—hit *X*—then type *E, R, A*, space, and the name of the file you want to erase—let's say you want to erase all your backup files. So you type an asterisk, that's a kind of wild card, then dot, then *B, A, K*, return. That's all there is to it." He left me to my work. I tried to retrieve the file of letters I had been typing but could not find it. Nor could I find several other files, including one of my own manuscripts, which I'd been working on after hours.

I reported the missing files to Gladys. "That's impossible," she said. "Are you sure you didn't erase them?"

"No, I'm positive."

"I thought you told me things couldn't just get lost in the computer."

"That's just it, I don't see how—"

"Well, call Mark, maybe he'll know." But Mark had no clue either.

Later on the Great Man came in. "I heard about the files getting lost, and I just don't understand what could have caused it. I'd apologize, except it really wasn't my fault. I hope it wasn't a terrible inconvenience."

"Well, I was angry for about five minutes," I said, "but I know you didn't mean to do it. I didn't lose all that much, really."

One rainy night after Gladys and I had worked late, we went out for beer, over which we exchanged life stories. She had grown up in London, the daughter of Austrian Jews named Weinman. Her father, a tailor, had died young, leaving nine children. "Being the eldest, of course, I was rather a surrogate mother to the younger ones, although my mother coped quite well. She was very insistent that we all get an education, though she herself never went beyond eighth grade. She does read quite a bit, even if it's just Agatha Christie. My brother who's next in age to me is a psychologist, my youngest sister is an actress. She's always been the baby of the family, she's quite a free spirit . . ."

In her youth Gladys had yearned to go on the stage, and at seventeen had won an important audition, but her mother wouldn't let her leave home. Later, she had done some writing. "Oh, just silly fashion pieces for a newspaper. Terrible stuff. I would be ashamed of it now."

Gladys had a way of gazing into the distance as she talked, as though addressing a larger audience. She would hold her arm across her body, her hand on the opposite shoulder, in a gesture both seductive and self-protective. She was, she said, friends with a famous playwright, naming one of the major British authors of the century. "Oh, yes," she went on, as though I had expressed disbelief. "We were at the Royal Academy together, back in the dark ages when I studied acting. He wasn't a very good actor, in fact of the whole crowd of us, he was the one considered least likely to make it." I dared not ask why she had left the business, and she asked me nothing about my career as a playwright, which she had presumably seen on my résumé.

After that evening, we had other personal conversations, and I found her entertaining. We shared some opinions not common to most of the magazine's employees. The Great Man usually hired people who like himself believed that God smiled on free markets, frowned on homosexuality, and abhorred legal

abortion as a second Holocaust. Gladys and I were almost the only Jews on the premises, and we both considered the existence of God and his opinions unprovable. On other subjects, our tastes diverged: She had little use for jazz, I knew nothing of opera (except that I hated it, which I didn't mention); I loved Jane Austen, she admired Jean Rhys.

By this time I had figured out how my predecessor, Betsy, had done the letters and was keeping pace with the Great Man's outpourings of correspondence. But if Gladys could not find a typo in the stack of letters I delivered to her, she would bring one of the items back to me saying, "Would you mind awfully just running this one out again? On rereading it, I think it ought to be rephrased." She was not always so polite. Once she burst in waving an envelope, saying, "*This* came back! *This* was mis-addressed! *Will* you redo this!" I thought one letter returned out of the hundreds I'd addressed was a pretty good average but could not say so. "You really *must* be careful, the Great Man's correspondence must be done *exactly* right!" When I occasionally came across a typo in a carbon of a letter she had typed, I would fantasize striding into her office, waving the offending paper, crying, "Gladys, you really *must* pay attention! *All* the correspondence goes to *Princeton!*"

Molly told me that Gladys was pleased with my work and that I shouldn't take it personally. "I know how difficult she can be," she said. "I had your job the first year I was here and she drove me nuts. But she knows she's like that, and she means well." I wanted to believe that, and there were times when Gladys seemed well disposed toward me. Once, when the state lottery jackpot had reached eleven million dollars and all over town people were standing in line for tickets, she insisted on buying me a chance. I protested that I wasn't one for gambling but finally conceded. "Well, if I win, I'll take you to lunch."

"Nonsense, ducks, you'll buy me a house!" she said. But neither of us won.

Now that I was keeping up with the work, Gladys was challenged to find things for me to do. During one week when the Great Man was sailing in Hawaii, I redid the list of his articles published in other magazines (it ran to eighteen pages), updated Molly's subject index to the columns, updated Gladys's separate index to the same, retyped the Great Man's curriculum vitae, and revised the in-house telephone lists.

I also spent a day cleaning out my room. Betsy had been a pack rat, and the two desks were filled with old address lists, stacks of index cards, extension cords, unidentified keys, instruction books for office machines long since replaced,

pennies covered with goo, and an ancient reel-to-reel tape recorder. The filing cabinets were piled high with folders of clippings mentioning the Great Man's books or reporting his wife's attendance at charity balls. I threw away boxes of stuff, but some of it looked as though it ought to be saved, and I asked Gladys to help me go through it. She gave me one hour but after that was always too busy. Her own office was stacked with unacknowledged books and unfiled papers, and I sensed that order was not a privilege she would allow a subordinate. She once remarked, "I can't stand to see a neat desk. It looks as though nothing is *happening*."

It was clear that I didn't work for the Great Man, but for Gladys, who mediated everything. When the Great Man sent the column by modem (always a terrifying prospect—I never could get the hang of the LYNC program, and one did not waste the Great Man's time by making him try the transmission over), she liked me to print it out exactly as he had typed it, so that she could authorize every correction, even of transposed letters. And it annoyed me no end that the Great Man addressed himself exclusively to her on his correspondence tapes ("Oh, Gladys, be sure to enclose that clip from the *Times* and send a blind copy of this to my editor"), as though unaware that she didn't transcribe them herself. My presence was a detail he had delegated.

I had never met anyone with as many people to minister to his needs as the Great Man. Along with the magazine's staff, there were his chauffeur (who could be called upon to hook up a personal computer) and his television producers; and then his agent, his book editor, his newspaper syndicator, accountants, lawyers, tailors, computer consultants, doctors, the retired lady who came in once a week as a volunteer to help Gladys with the filing, the captain and cook he hired for voyages on his yacht, and a harpsichord maker in Switzerland.

In his books the Great Man described the felicity of his home life, brilliantly managed by his wife. I never met her, but I often saw her picture on the society page of the *Times*, which celebrated her clothes, her cooking, and her benefit galas for libraries and diseases. She had brought her own fortune to her marriage and was as schooled in noblesse oblige as the Great Man. Fate had granted her only one child instead of the ten customary to moneyed Catholics, so her good works amounted to a career. She also found time to decorate their city and country domiciles, execute salmon soufflés for their dinner parties, and supervise a staff of maids and gardeners.

Together Gladys and Molly tended the Great Man's reputation as an authority on nearly everything. Molly plodded through books on the Cuban missile crisis

and third-world agriculture to find the facts for his novels and columns, and every morning she read the *Times* and other journals, marking the articles he should read. Gladys edited the column and kept a sharp eye on the correspondence. The Great Man's way with words failed him sometimes, and it would never do to release a column referring to "Ninety Days Around the World" or a letter to the president's son closing with regards to Gloria rather than Doria.

Molly diligently checked the column for missing names and numbers and strained her eyes over maps of Mexico City, plotting geographically plausible routes for the Great Man's spy-novel protagonist to follow in his narrow escapes. "It's so frustrating," she said. "There are all these different streets that have the same names, and nobody I've called in Mexico knows anything and they're so tired of me, they don't even return my calls anymore. The fans are the best—if I can find someone who reads the novels then they're delighted to help." Occasionally she admitted to boredom. She had worked for the Great Man for eight years, almost since leaving college, and despite her wide reading seemed not to have visited many corners of the world, or known any other life than serving him.

Both women seemed to view my marriage with incomprehension. I usually left work on the dot of five, to get back at Gladys for giving me dirty looks when I arrived just thirty seconds after nine, but they both said things like, "Of course you have to leave at five, you're married," as though I risked a black eye if dinner weren't on the table by six thirty. In fact my husband tended to say, "Don't spend all Saturday housecleaning—write something!" But they didn't know that.

Gladys lived a few blocks from the office and often came in early to stay abreast of the work that threatened to overwhelm her. "That man will drive me to drink!" she would declare, but I thought she was at least half in love with him. One day I came into her office and found him sitting beside her with his feet up on her desk. They were laughing, and her eyes were wide with "that look." Sometimes I overheard her talking to his wife on the phone, her voice brittle with false cheer and exaggerated concern, as though she were addressing a slightly deaf child.

Gladys and Molly reminded me of nuns, celibate and obedient, wedded in spirit to a man whose instructions came to them disembodied through memos and phone calls. ("Once he called me on a Sunday morning from Fiji," Molly told me, "but I asked him not to do that again.") Though Gladys's conversation showed her to be a woman with a past, and she often went to movies and concerts with friends, she had no evident boyfriend. She didn't believe in growing old gracefully—"I love to see some old lady with her hair dyed red, that's how I'd like to be," she said once—but she seemed resigned to living alone. "It's too late for

me to get married,” she told me on another occasion. “I’m too old and set in my ways.”

“Don’t say that, anything might happen,” I said, to be polite, but I thought she was probably right.

Molly spent weekends with her parents in New Jersey, though she had her own apartment on the Upper East Side (I imagined it as a tiny studio in a high-rise with a doorman); her social life seemed to consist of going to parties attended by doctors and lawyers. She confessed to being a devout Catholic, and she radiated inviolability. Though I thought I saw a passionate heart in her, and could imagine her happily wiping oatmeal from babies’ cheeks and greeting Mr. Right with a kiss at the door, what I could not see was the man who would dare put his arm around her for the first time. She reminded me of a character in a novel I’d read, a girl whose frustrated boyfriend told her the man she was waiting for was “the sort that could but didn’t—not with the girl he was going to marry, anyway. The snag about him is that he’s dead. He died in 1914 or thereabouts. Or he’s going to turn out to have a wife in Birmingham or a boy friend in Chelsea or a psychiatrist in—wherever psychiatrists live.”

One day Molly announced that she had been asked out. The young man was a lawyer she’d met at a party—single, cute, and straight. “He’s taking me out to dinner Thursday night,” she said. “I’m supposed to call him in the afternoon, because he doesn’t know what time his deposition will end.” But on Thursday he called to postpone the date until Friday, and on Friday he again had to work late. This time we all knew the rain check would not be redeemed.

Sometimes I suspected that Molly and Gladys didn’t really want to have much to do with men. Molly was obviously scared of them, and Gladys was unlikely to meet many to compare with the Great Man. There was one editor who worked on our floor (the rest of editorial was downstairs from us), and I rarely saw either woman speak to him, save to exchange pleasantries. To me, however, he was a ray of masculinity in our cloistered existence. A protégé of the Great Man, Princeton ’76, he was first published in the magazine while still in high school. I thought of myself as young, but he was several years younger than I and seemed to have it made—he even had a contract for a book. He was tall, handsome, and given to wearing cream-colored suits, which also impressed me, since the men I knew tended to spill their coffee. Since he was married, to all appearances happily, I found it strange Gladys and Molly didn’t like him—I would have thought they preferred their men unavailable.

Charlie and I became friendly, and to my surprise he seemed almost envious of my checkered background. I had been at Columbia University in the late sixties and had worked at a pacifist radio station in the seventies. In Charlie, I encountered for the first time that nostalgia for the passionate, dialectical decade that my juniors had been too young to appreciate. He thought I had a knack for being where the action was.

Naturally, we gossiped about our colleagues. I told him some of Molly's stories about the Great Man's ignorance of the details of daily life—how he had once tried to dry his wet shoes in a frying pan, how he had once asked her if she could find him a book about women's clothes, because he was tired of making his spy novels' heroines wear flowered dresses with strings of pearls. Charlie told me that in one of the novels, the Great Man had depicted the hero bringing a woman to climax in an implausibly short time. "After it was published people pointed it out, and in the next book he made the act go on a little longer."

"He probably asked Molly to go research it," I said, and we both laughed maliciously.

It may have been coincidence, but as I got to know Charlie and some of the others in editorial, my relations with Gladys became more strained. Though she might express surprise at how quickly I finished an assignment, at those moments I thought I saw her put a black mark beside my name in some mental ledger. And if no one criticized her openly, I gathered from my new friends that she was not altogether popular, though her competence was universally acknowledged.

One thing I did like about Gladys was her interest in language and literary style. She was always eager to settle a question by looking it up in the dictionary or the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and she cared passionately about the placement of commas. One day when the Great Man used the noun *toxics* in a column and I asserted that this was a misprint for *toxins*, Gladys pursued the matter through Fowler and several dictionaries before she finally located a citation upholding its correctness. I objected that nonetheless people would think it a misprint—the Great Man himself was fond of saying, "Newspapers are low-definitional media." I thought she enjoyed such discussions, thinking she had hired me for my literacy. She gave in on *toxics*, but in retrospect I think that was when I lost the war.

The arrival of this year's novel had been foreshadowed by the Great Man's correspondence with his editor, who wrote, "I think this one is the best yet—it's warmer, somehow, more human than the previous ones." I had tried to read some of them—there were plenty in the bathroom—but while I admired the

Great Man's political writing, the novels were populated by cardboard characters reciting inhuman dialogue. I could not get interested in the plots, which were the part the reviewers usually praised. Still, I knew myself to be impervious to the espionage genre and hoped for the best.

It was the Great Man's custom to write the first draft of a novel during his February skiing vacation in Montreux. He then sent it to his editor and didn't look at it again until June, when he did the second draft on his yacht. By the beginning of July, Gladys was nervously awaiting his corrected second draft, so that I could prepare a final version. The Great Man kept promising the manuscript, but it didn't arrive. Gladys, it turned out, was not planning to try to get the publisher's deadline extended—it was to be our job to catch up.

Finally he sent it, some three hundred pages of typescript thickly annotated in a cramped, illegible hand in his signature red ink. He also sent diskettes for the computer, from which I called up each chapter on my screen to type in his revisions. Some of the chapters on the diskettes proved not to be the same versions as the typescript he had sent. Gladys told me to do the best I could.

In his column the Great Man had an instantly recognizable voice. In graceful cadences he could slice an argument into its several strands and braid them back together, all in the space of 750 words. But in the novel he resorted to some rather clunky tricks. Early on, the hero receives a letter from his girlfriend in which she obligingly provides her dossier: "I'm staying with a very kind old couple here in Mexico City while teaching English literature at the university. It's exactly seven months and six days since we were last together in that little hotel in Paris—you see, I've kept track, darling . . ." To indicate that the characters were speaking Spanish, the Great Man would eliminate contractions from their speech: "For the moment, my friend, you are worth more to us alive than dead." Since the chapters were coming to us out of order, I couldn't grasp the plot.

I applied myself to the revisions, but they started coming faster, and I could not keep up. "Maybe you should take the computer home with you," Gladys suggested. "That's what Betsy used to do." I thought she was joking. In any case, at midsummer my apartment was much too hot for the machine, which liked air-conditioning.

Having the wrong versions on disk slowed the work, as did a printer malfunction that took me days to correct. The computer's printer was the old-fashioned sort that typed mechanically without benefit of laser jets. It made such a clatter that whenever I printed a whole chapter, I had to wait in the library for it to finish.

Early in the summer, I asked Gladys for a day off to go upstate for my father's

sixtieth-birthday celebration. A week before the date, Gladys inquired shyly whether I'd consider foregoing the trip, but she was so roundabout that again I failed to interpret her wish as a command.

In fact I was feeling rather put upon. The loyalty the Great Man enjoyed from his entourage was famous and genuine—people often did work for him until they retired or died. He corresponded frequently with Gladys's eighty-two-year-old predecessor; the maids at his country house even drove to church with their employers, according to one of his books. I had stayed late a few evenings, but Gladys evidently wanted me to work around the clock because the Great Man was a month late finishing the novel. Although in previous incarnations I had often worked all night and was not scared of it, I resisted making sacrifices for a man who had not yet apprised himself of my existence. After all, wasn't I a critical, if replaceable, cog in the machinery that let the world know *he* existed? Before I offered my devotion, I wanted to compel him to look me in the eye.

Looking back, I see the illogic of what I did next, but perhaps I was half doubting my own existence. I had been a secretary for years and didn't imagine that it was a direct route to fame and fortune. The lawyer I had previously worked for had shown me the little courtesies that made my job easier—giving clear instructions, saying *please* and *thank you*. But he was a struggling entrepreneur, not a national figure with an impossible schedule.

Thus, on one of the rare occasions when the Great Man came into my office on some business to do with the novel, I took a deep breath and said, "I'd like to ask you a favor. Would it be possible to include me in the acknowledgements for typing?"

His normally distant gaze clouded further. I went on, "You mentioned Betsy in the acknowledgements to your last book."

"That wasn't quite the same thing," he said.

"Well, I'd be grateful if you'd consider it," I finished lamely.

"I'll think about it," he mumbled, and went out.

I went to my parents' for the weekend. My flight back to the city Monday morning should have gotten me to work on time, but it came in late, so it was nearing ten o'clock when I finally arrived at the office. Gladys looked ready to explode. I tried to explain, but I could see it was doing no good.

All Monday and Tuesday the office hummed with bad vibrations. When Gladys spoke to me, her voice snapped with anger. In addition to the novel, there were other urgent projects. The Great Man was writing a confidential memo to a

colleague about his scheme to have the magazine's thirtieth anniversary the following year be celebrated at the White House. I wondered whether a lowly undersecretary would be invited and how much longer I could stand life with the Great Man.

On Wednesday morning Gladys asked me to type revisions on a speech he was preparing for his forthcoming holiday at Bohemian Grove. The Bohemian Club, an association of "men of achievement" (her term), every summer spent a week at this resort, swimming, sunbathing, dining, and hearing lectures by distinguished guests. The Great Man was excited about this jaunt; he was bringing along a famous professor and had written many letters of introduction praising his friend's erudition, wit, and good humor.

The Great Man had sent us an annotated typescript of the speech along with a diskette, but once again it turned out they didn't match. I began trying to revise the diskette version in accordance with the typescript, but when Gladys came to check up on me, she disapproved. "You'd better just type it over from the beginning," she advised. The speech was some twenty pages long, and I thought my way would be faster, so I said, "I'd rather do it this way." Gladys caught her breath suddenly and wheeled out.

A few minutes later she summoned me to her office. "We'd better have a talk," she said. "I'm afraid this just isn't working out."

"I quite agree," I said.

"Your presumption is absolutely amazing. To demand to be in the acknowledgements of the book! I heard about that. You're very talented, and perhaps you should be in an editorial position somewhere, but this isn't the place for you. I'll have them draw you a check right now. You can finish out the day if you'd like."

I went back to my office and began erasing my files from the computer's hard disk, zapping to zeros the correspondence, the form letters I'd prepared, the telephone lists, my directions to various office procedures, and finally the play I was writing after hours. I considered destroying the novel, but that was surely imprudent—what if I ever needed the magazine as a reference? I could in conscience destroy only what I'd created.

Shaking with rage, I packed up my manuscripts, the framed photograph of my stepdaughter, the Chinese bowl I'd bought to hold paper clips, the review copies of books given to me. The bookkeeper came in a few minutes later with my check, which included two weeks' severance pay.

I left the office and walked to the corner. As I passed the storefronts that had so recently become familiar, I began to feel sorry for my deflected future, sorry that I

would not be around to see how everything turned out. Soon the bus came. Before I'd traveled twenty blocks, the prospect of not greeting Gladys every morning shone as brightly as the afternoon sun. Now I would sit on my roof with the marigolds and tomatoes, reading and soaking up the rest of the summer. I had been in the Great Man's office exactly three months.

A few weeks later I was telling a friend, "I guess what I resented most was everyone's attitude that *his* time was worth so much more than anyone else's—you couldn't bother him with something just because it might save *you* time."

"Really," said my friend, who was rebuilding a piano for the fun of it. "How do you ever know what your time is worth, if you don't know how much you've got? You could be hit by a truck tomorrow! Who's to say?"

Eventually another magazine hired me as an editor. From time to time I heard news of the Great Man. The magazine gave the novel a good review; the *Times* complained that the characters were cardboard but said the plot was good. The magazine's thirtieth anniversary was celebrated at the Plaza, not the White House, but the president showed up for it anyway.

A few years later it happened that our office was invited to a book party for one of the magazine's editors. I elected to attend it, though I was nervous enough to walk around the block before I went in. The lobby, the stairs, the front hallway smelled of the same dust I remembered. Someone directed me to the library, where the sherry and hors d'oeuvres were spread.

When I entered, the Great Man caught sight of me. "How *are* you?" he cried, shaking my hand. "So glad you could make it!" He knew he'd seen my face before but couldn't place me.