



Among the Paths to Eden, Truman Capote

Among the Paths to Eden

One Saturday in March, an occasion of pleasant winds and sailing clouds, Mr. Ivor Belli bought from a Brooklyn florist a fine mass of jonquils and conveyed them, first by subway, then foot, to an immense cemetery in Queens, a site unvisited by him since he had seen his wife buried there the previous autumn. Sentiment could not be credited with returning him today, for Mrs. Belli, to whom he had been married twenty-seven years, during which time she had produced two now-grown and matrimonially-settled daughters, had been a woman of many natures, most of them trying: he had no desire to renew so unsoothing an acquaintance, even in spirit.

No; but a hard winter had just passed, and he felt in need of exercise, air, a heart-lifting stroll through the handsome, spring-propheying weather; of course, rather as an extra dividend, it was nice that he would be able to tell his daughters of a journey to their mother's grave, especially so since it might a little appease the elder girl, who seemed resentful of Mr. Belli's too comfortable acceptance of life as lived alone.

The cemetery was not a reposeful, pretty place; was, in fact, a damned frightening one: acres of fog-colored stone spilled across a sparsely grassed and shadeless plateau. An unhindered view of Manhattan's skyline provided the location with beauty of a stage-prop sort—it loomed beyond the graves like a steep headstone honoring these quiet folk, its used-up and very former citizens: the juxtaposed spectacle made Mr. Belli, who was by profession a tax accountant and therefore equipped to enjoy irony however sadistic, smile, actually chuckle—yet, oh God in heaven, its inferences chilled him, too, deflated the buoyant stride carrying him along the cemetery's rigid, pebbled paths.

He slowed until he stopped, thinking: "I ought to have taken Morty to the zoo"; Morty being his grandson, aged three. But it would be churlish not to continue, vengeful: and why waste a bouquet? The combination of thrift and virtue reactivated him; he was breathing hard from hurry when, at last, he stooped to jam the jonquils into a rock urn perched on a rough gray slab engraved with Gothic calligraphy declaring that

SARAH BELLI

1901–1959

had been the

DEVOTED WIFE OF IVOR

BELOVED MOTHER OF IVY AND REBECCA.

Lord, what a relief to know the woman's tongue was finally stilled. But the thought, pacifying as it was, and though supported by visions of his new and silent bachelor's apartment, did not relight the suddenly snuffed-out sense of immortality, of glad-to-be-aliveness, which the day had earlier kindled. He had set forth expecting such good from the air, the walk, the aroma of another spring about to be. Now he wished he had worn a scarf; the sunshine was false, without real warmth, and the wind, it seemed to him, had grown rather wild. As he gave the jonquils a decorative pruning, he regretted he could not delay their doom by supplying them with water; relinquishing the flowers, he turned to leave.

A woman stood in his way. Though there were few other visitors to the cemetery, he had not noticed her before, or heard her approach. She

did not step aside. She glanced at the jonquils; presently her eyes, situated behind steel-rimmed glasses, swerved back to Mr. Belli.

“Uh. Relative?”

“My wife,” he said, and sighed as though some such noise was obligatory.

She sighed, too; a curious sigh that implied gratification. “Gee, I’m sorry.”

Mr. Belli’s face lengthened. “Well.”

“It’s a shame.”

“Yes.”

“I hope it wasn’t a long illness. Anything painful.”

“No-o-o,” he said, shifting from one foot to the other. “In her sleep.” Sensing an unsatisfied silence, he added, “Heart condition.”

“Gee. That’s how I lost my father. Just recently. Kind of gives us something in common. Something,” she said, in a tone alarmingly plaintive, “something to talk about.”

“—know how you must feel.”

“At least they didn’t suffer. That’s a comfort.”

The fuse attached to Mr. Belli’s patience shortened. Until now he had kept his gaze appropriately lowered, observing, after his initial glimpse of her, merely the woman’s shoes, which were of the sturdy, so-called sensible type often worn by aged women and nurses. “A great comfort,” he said, as he executed three tasks: raised his eyes, tipped his hat, took a step forward.

Again the woman held her ground; it was as though she had been employed to detain him. “Could you give me the time? My old clock,” she announced, self-consciously tapping some dainty machinery strapped to her wrist, “I got it for graduating high school. That’s why it doesn’t run so good any more. I mean, it’s pretty old. But it makes a nice appearance.”

Mr. Belli was obliged to unbutton his topcoat and plow around for a gold watch embedded in a vest pocket. Meanwhile, he scrutinized the lady, really took her apart. She must have been blond as a child, her general coloring suggested so: the clean shine of her Scandinavian skin, her chunky cheeks, flushed with peasant health, and the blueness of her genial eyes—such honest eyes, attractive despite the thin silver spectacles surrounding them; but the hair itself, what could be discerned of it under a drab felt hat, was poorly permanented frizzle of no particular tint. She was a bit taller than Mr. Belli, who was five-foot-eight with the aid of shoe lifts, and she may have weighed more; at any rate he couldn’t imagine that she mounted scales too cheerfully. Her hands: kitchen hands; and the nails: not only nibbled ragged, but painted with a pearly lacquer queerly phosphorescent.

She wore a plain brown coat and carried a plain black purse. When the student of these components recomposed them he found they assembled themselves into a very decent-looking person whose looks he liked; the nail polish was discouraging; still he felt that here was someone you could trust.

As he trusted Esther Jackson, Miss Jackson, his secretary. Indeed, that was who she reminded him of, Miss Jackson; not that the comparison was fair—to Miss Jackson, who possessed, as he had once in the course of a quarrel informed Mrs. Belli, “intellectual elegance and elegance otherwise.” Nevertheless, the woman confronting him seemed imbued

with that quality of good-will he appreciated in his secretary, Miss Jackson, Esther (as he'd lately, absent-mindedly, called her). Moreover, he guessed them to be about the same age: rather on the right side of forty.

"Noon. Exactly."

"Think of that! Why, you must be famished," she said, and unclasped her purse, peered into it as though it were a picnic hamper crammed with sufficient treats to furnish a smörgåsbord. She scooped out a fistful of peanuts. "I practically live on peanuts since Pop—since I haven't anyone to cook for. I must say, even if I do say so, I miss my own cooking; Pop always said I was better than any restaurant he ever went to. But it's no pleasure cooking just for yourself, even when you can make pastries light as a leaf.

Go on. Have some. They're fresh-roasted."

Mr. Belli accepted; he'd always been childish about peanuts and, as he sat down on his wife's grave to eat them, only hoped his friend had more. A gesture of his hand suggested that she sit beside him; he was surprised to see that the invitation seemed to embarrass her; sudden additions of pink saturated her cheeks, as though he'd asked her to transform Mrs. Belli's bier into a love bed.

"It's okay for you. A relative. But me. Would she like a stranger sitting on her—resting place?"

"Please. Be a guest. Sarah won't mind," he told her, grateful the dead cannot hear, for it both awed and amused him to consider what Sarah, that vivacious scene-maker, that energetic searcher for lipstick traces and stray blond strands, would say if she could see him shelling peanuts on her tomb with a woman not entirely unattractive.

And then, as she assumed a prim perch on the rim of the grave, he noticed her leg. Her left leg; it stuck straight out like a stiff piece of mischief with which she planned to trip passers-by. Aware of his interest, she smiled, lifted the leg up and down. "An accident. You know. When I was a kid. I fell off a roller coaster at Coney. Honest. It was in the paper. Nobody knows why I'm alive. The only thing is I can't bend my knee. Otherwise it doesn't make any difference. Except to go dancing. Are you much of a dancer?"

Mr. Belli shook his head; his mouth was full of peanuts.

"So that's something else we have in common. Dancing. I might like it. But I don't. I like music, though."

Mr. Belli nodded his agreement.

"And flowers," she added, touching the bouquet of jonquils; then her fingers traveled on and, as though she were reading Braille, brushed across the marble lettering on his name. "Ivor," she said, mispronouncing it. "Ivor Belli. My name is Mary O'Meaghan. But I wish I were Italian. My sister is; well, she married one. And oh, he's full of fun; happy-natured and outgoing, like all Italians. He says my spaghetti's the best he's ever had. Especially the kind I make with sea-food sauce. You ought to taste it."

Mr. Belli, having finished the peanuts, swept the hulls off his lap.

"You've got a customer. But he's not Italian. Belli sounds like that. Only I'm Jewish."

She frowned, not with disapproval, but as if he had mysteriously daunted her.

"My family came from Russia; I was born there."

This last information restored her enthusiasm, accelerated it. “I don’t care what they say in the papers. I’m sure Russians are the same as everybody else. Human. Did you see the Bolshoi Ballet on TV? Now didn’t that make you proud to be a Russian?”

He thought: she means well; and was silent.

“Red cabbage soup—hot or cold—with sour cream. Hmnn. See,” she said, producing a second helping of peanuts, “you were hungry. Poor fellow.” She sighed. “How you must miss your wife’s cooking.”

It was true, he did; and the conversational pressure being applied to his appetite made him realize it. Sarah had set an excellent table: varied, on time, and well flavored. He recalled certain cinnamon-scented feast-days. Afternoons of gravy and wine, starchy linen, the “good” silver; followed by a nap. Moreover, Sarah had never asked him to dry a dish (he could hear her calmly humming in the kitchen), had never complained of housework; and she had contrived to make the raising of two girls a smooth series of thought-out, affectionate events; Mr. Belli’s contribution to their upbringing had been to be an admiring witness; if his daughters were a credit to him (Ivy living in Bronxville, and married to a dental surgeon; her sister the wife of A. J. Krakower, junior partner in the law firm of Finnegan, Loeb and Krakower), he had Sarah to thank; they were her accomplishment.

There was much to be said for Sarah, and he was glad to discover himself thinking so, to find himself remembering not the long hell of hours she had spent honing her tongue on his habits, supposed poker-playing, woman-chasing vices, but gentler episodes: Sarah showing off her self-made hats, Sarah scattering crumbs on snowy window sills for

winter pigeons: a tide of visions that towed to sea the junk of harsher recollections.

He felt, was all at once happy to feel, mournful, sorry he had not been sorry sooner; but, though he did genuinely value Sarah suddenly, he could not pretend regret that their life together had terminated, for the current arrangement was, on the whole, preferable by far. However, he wished that, instead of jonquils, he had brought her an orchid, the gala sort she'd always salvaged from her daughters' dates and stored in the icebox until they shriveled.

"—aren't they?" he heard, and wondered who had spoken until, blinking, he recognized Mary O'Meaghan, whose voice had been playing along unlistened to: a shy and lulling voice, a sound strangely small and young to come from so robust a figure.

"I said they must be cute, aren't they?"

"Well," was Mr. Belli's safe reply.

"Be modest. But I'm sure they are. If they favor their father; ha ha, don't take me serious, I'm joking. But, seriously, kids just slay me. I'll trade any kid for any grownup that ever lived. My sister has five, four boys and a girl. Dot, that's my sister, she's always after me to baby-sit now that I've got the time and don't have to look after Pop every minute. She and Frank, he's my brother-in-law, the one I mentioned, they say Mary, nobody can handle kids like you. At the same time have fun. But it's so easy; there's nothing like hot cocoa and a mean pillow fight to make kids sleepy. Ivy," she said, reading aloud the tombstone's dour script. "Ivy and Rebecca. Sweet names. And I'm sure you do your best. But two little girls without a mother."

“No, no,” said Mr. Belli, at last caught up. “Ivy’s a mother herself. And Becky’s expecting.”

Her face restyled momentary chagrin into an expression of disbelief. “A grandfather? You?”

Mr. Belli had several vanities: for example, he thought he was saner than other people; also, he believed himself to be a walking compass; his digestion, and an ability to read upside down, were other ego-enlarging items. But his reflection in a mirror aroused little inner applause; not that he disliked his appearance; he just knew that it was very so-what. The harvesting of his hair had begun decades ago; now his head was an almost barren field. While his nose had character, his chin, though it made a double effort, had none. His shoulders were broad; but so was the rest of him. Of course he was neat: kept his shoes shined, his laundry laundered, twice a day scraped and talcumed his bluish jowls; but such measures failed to camouflage, actually they emphasized, his middle-class, middle-aged ordinariness. Nonetheless, he did not dismiss Mary O’Meaghan’s flattery; after all, an undeserved compliment is often the most potent.

“Hell, I’m fifty-one,” he said, subtracting four years. “Can’t say I feel it.” And he didn’t; perhaps it was because the wind had subsided, the warmth of the sun grown more authentic. Whatever the reason, his expectations had reignited, he was again immortal, a man planning ahead.

“Fifty-one. That’s nothing. The prime. Is if you take care of yourself. A man your age needs tending so. Watching after.”

Surely in a cemetery one was safe from husband stalkers? The question, crossing his mind, paused midway while he examined her cozy and gullible face, tested her gaze for guile. Though reassured, he

thought it best to remind her of their surroundings. “Your father. Is he”—Mr. Belli gestured awkwardly—“near by?”

“Pop? Oh, no. He was very firm; absolutely refused to be buried. So he’s at home.” A disquieting image gathered in Mr. Belli’s head, one that her next words, “His ashes are,” did not fully dispel. “Well,” she shrugged, “that’s how he wanted it. Or—I see—you wondered why I’m here? I don’t live too far away. It’s somewhere to walk, and the view ...” They both turned to stare at the skyline where the steeples of certain buildings flew pennants of cloud, and sun-dazzled windows glittered like a million bits of mica. Mary O’Meaghan said, “What a perfect day for a parade!”

Mr. Belli thought, You’re a very nice girl; then he said it, too, and wished he hadn’t, for naturally she asked him why. “Because. Well, that was nice what you said. About parades.”

“See? So many things in common! I never miss a parade,” she told him triumphantly. “The bugles. I play the bugle myself; used to, when I was at Sacred Heart. You said before—” She lowered her voice, as though approaching a subject that required grave tones. “You indicated you were a music lover. Because I have thousands of old records. Hundreds. Pop was in the business and that was his job. Till he retired. Shellacking records in a record factory. Remember Helen Morgan? She slays me, she really knocks me out.”

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered. Ruby Keeler, Jean Harlow: those had been keen but curable infatuations; but Helen Morgan, albino-pale, a sequinned wraith shimmering beyond Ziegfeld footlights—truly, truly he had loved her.

“Do you believe it? That she drank herself to death? On account of a gangster?”

“It doesn’t matter. She was lovely.”

“Sometimes, like when I’m alone and sort of fed up, I pretend I’m her. Pretend I’m singing in a night club. It’s fun; you know?”

“Yes, I know,” said Mr. Belli, whose own favorite fantasy was to imagine the adventures he might have if he were invisible.

“May I ask: would you do me a favor?”

“If I can. Certainly.”

She inhaled, held her breath as if she were swimming under a wave of shyness; surfacing, she said: “Would you listen to my imitation? And tell me your honest opinion?” Then she removed her glasses: the silver rims had bitten so deeply their shape was permanently printed on her face. Her eyes, nude and moist and helpless, seemed stunned by freedom; the skimpily lashed lids fluttered like long-captive birds abruptly let loose. “There: everything’s soft and smoky. Now you’ve got to use your imagination. So pretend I’m sitting on a piano—gosh, forgive me, Mr. Belli.”

“Forget it. Okay. You’re sitting on a piano.”

“I’m sitting on a piano,” she said, dreamily drooping her head backward until it assumed a romantic posture. She sucked in her cheeks, parted her lips; at the same moment Mr. Belli bit into his. For it was a tactless visit that glamour made on Mary O’Meaghan’s filled-out and rosy face; a visit that should not have been paid at all; it was the wrong address.

She waited, as though listening for music to cue her; then, “Don’t ever leave me, now that you’re here! Here is where you belong. Everything seems so right when you’re near, When you’re away it’s all wrong.”

And Mr. Belli was shocked, for what he was hearing was exactly Helen Morgan’s voice, and the voice, with its vulnerable sweetness, refinement, its tender quaver toppling high notes, seemed not to be borrowed, but Mary O’Meaghan’s own, a natural expression of some secluded identity. Gradually she abandoned theatrical poses, sat upright singing with her eyes squeezed shut: “—I’m so dependent, When I need comfort, I always run to you.

Don’t ever leave me! ’Cause if you do, I’ll have no one to run to.” Until too late, neither she nor Mr. Belli noticed the coffin-laden entourage invading their privacy: a black caterpillar composed of sedate Negroes who stared at the white couple as though they had stumbled upon a pair of drunken grave robbers—except one mourner, a dry-eyed little girl who started laughing and couldn’t stop; her hiccup-like hilarity resounded long after the procession had disappeared around a distant corner.

“If that kid was mine,” said Mr. Belli.

“I feel so ashamed.”

“Say, listen. What for? That was beautiful. I mean it; you can sing.”

“Thanks,” she said; and, as though setting up a barricade against impending tears, clamped on her spectacles.

“Believe me, I was touched. What I’d like is, I’d like an encore.”

It was as if she were a child to whom he'd handed a balloon, a unique balloon that kept swelling until it swept her upward, danced her along with just her toes now and then touching ground. She descended to say: "Only not here. Maybe," she began, and once more seemed to be lifted, lilted through the air, "maybe sometime you'll let me cook you dinner. I'll plan it really Russian. And we can play records."

The thought, the apparitional suspicion that had previously passed on tiptoe, returned with a heavier tread, a creature fat and foursquare that Mr. Belli could not evict. "Thank you, Miss O'Meaghan. That's something to look forward to," he said. Rising, he reset his hat, adjusted his coat. "Sitting on cold stone too long, you can catch something."

"When?"

"Why, never. You should never sit on cold stone." "When will you come to dinner?"

Mr. Belli's livelihood rather depended upon his being a skilled inventor of excuses. "Any time," he answered smoothly. "Except any time soon. I'm a tax man; you know what happens to us fellows in March. Yes sir," he said, again hoisting out his watch, "back to the grind for me." Still he couldn't—could he?—simply saunter off, leave her sitting on Sarah's grave? He owed her courtesy; for the peanuts, if nothing more, though there was more—perhaps it was due to her that he had remembered Sarah's orchids withering in the icebox. And anyway, she was nice, as likeable a woman, stranger, as he'd ever met. He thought to take advantage of the weather, but the weather offered none: clouds were fewer, the sun exceedingly visible. "Turned chilly," he observed, rubbing his hands together. "Could be going to rain."

“Mr. Belli. Now I’m going to ask you a very personal question,” she said, enunciating each word decisively. “Because I wouldn’t want you to think I go about inviting just anybody to dinner. My intentions are—” her eyes wandered, her voice wavered, as though the forthright manner had been a masquerade she could not sustain. “So I’m going to ask you a very personal question. Have you considered marrying again?”

He hummed, like a radio warming up before it speaks; when he did, it amounted to static: “Oh, at my age. Don’t even want a dog. Just give me TV. Some beer. Poker once a week. Hell. Who the hell would want me?” he said; and, with a twinge, remembered Rebecca’s mother-in-law, Mrs. A. J. Krakower, Sr., Dr. Pauline Krakower, a female dentist (retired) who had been an audacious participant in a certain family plot. Or what about Sarah’s best friend, the persistent “Brownie” Pollock? Odd, but as long as Sarah lived he had enjoyed, upon occasion taken advantage of, “Brownie’s” admiration; afterwards—finally he had told her not to telephone him any more (and she had shouted: “Everything Sarah ever said, she was right.

You fat little hairy little bastard”). Then; and then there was Miss Jackson. Despite Sarah’s suspicions, her in fact devout conviction, nothing untoward, very untoward, had transpired between him and the pleasant Esther, whose hobby was bowling. But he had always surmised, and in recent months known, that if one day he suggested drinks, dinner, a workout in some bowling alley ... He said: “I was married. For twenty-seven years. That’s enough for any lifetime”; but as he said it, he realized that, in just this moment, he had come to a decision, which was: he would ask Esther to dinner, he would take her bowling and buy her an orchid, a gala purple one with a lavender-ribbon bow. And where, he wondered, do couples honeymoon in April? At the latest May. Miami? Bermuda? Bermuda! “No, I’ve never considered it. Marrying again.”

One would have assumed from her attentive posture that Mary O’Meaghan was raptly listening to Mr. Belli—except that her eyes played hookey, roamed as though she were hunting at a party for a different, more promising face. The color had drained from her own face; and with it had gone most of her healthy charm. She coughed.

He coughed. Raising his hat, he said: “It’s been very pleasant meeting you, Miss O’Meaghan.”

“Same here,” she said, and stood up. “Mind if I walk with you to the gate?”

He did, yes; for he wanted to mosey along alone, devouring the tart nourishment of this spring-shiny, parade-weather, be alone with his many thoughts of Esther, his hopeful, zestful, live-forever mood. “A pleasure,” he said, adjusting his stride to her slower pace and the slight lurch her stiff leg caused.

“But it did seem like a sensible idea,” she said argumentatively. “And there was old Annie Austin: the living proof. Well, nobody had a better idea. I mean, everybody was at me: Get married. From the day Pop died, my sister and everybody was saying: Poor Mary, what’s to become of her? A girl that can’t type. Take shorthand. With her leg and all; can’t even wait on table. What happens to a girl—a grown woman—that doesn’t know anything, never done anything? Except cook and look after her father. All I heard was: Mary, you’ve got to get married.”

“So. Why fight that? A fine person like you, you ought to be married. You’d make some fellow very happy.”

“Sure I would. But who?” She flung out her arms, extended a hand toward Manhattan, the country, the continents beyond. “So I’ve looked; I’m not lazy by nature. But honestly, frankly, how does anybody ever find a husband? If they’re not very, very pretty; a terrific dancer. If they’re just—oh ordinary. Like me.”

“No, no, not at all,” Mr. Belli mumbled. “Not ordinary, no. Couldn’t you make something of your talent? Your voice?”

She stopped, stood clasping and unclasping her purse. “Don’t poke fun. Please. My life is at stake.” And she insisted: “I am ordinary. So is old Annie Austin. And she says the place for me to find a husband—a decent, comfortable man—is in the obituary column.”

For a man who believed himself a human compass, Mr. Belli had the anxious experience of feeling he had lost his way; with relief he saw the gates of the cemetery a hundred yards ahead. “She does? She says that? Old Annie Austin?”

“Yes. And she’s a very practical woman. She feeds six people on \$58.75 a week: food, clothes, everything. And the way she explained it, it certainly sounded logical. Because the obituaries are full of unmarried men. Widowers. You just go to the funeral and sort of introduce yourself: sympathize. Or the cemetery: come here on a nice day, or go to Woodlawn, there are always widowers walking around. Fellows thinking how much they miss home life and maybe wishing they were married again.”

When Mr. Belli understood that she was in earnest, he was appalled; but he was also entertained: and he laughed, jammed his hands in his pockets and threw back his head. She joined him, spilled a laughter that restored her color, that, in skylarking style, made her rock against him.

“Even I—” she said, clutching at his arm, “even I can see the humor.” But it was not a lengthy vision; suddenly solemn, she said: “But that is how Annie met her husbands. Both of them: Mr. Cruikshank, and then Mr. Austin. So it must be a practical idea. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, I do think.”

She shrugged. “But it hasn’t worked out too well. Us, for instance. We seemed to have such a lot in common.”

“One day,” he said, quickening his steps. “With a livelier fellow.”

“I don’t know. I’ve met some grand people. But it always ends like this. Like us ...” she said, and left unsaid something more, for a new pilgrim, just entering through the gates of the cemetery, had attached her interest: an alive little man spouting cheery whistlings and with plenty of snap to his walk. Mr. Belli noticed him, too, observed the black band sewn round the sleeve of the visitor’s bright green tweed coat, and commented: “Good luck, Miss O’Meaghan. Thanks for the peanuts.”

1960

The End