

Derring-do, Truman Capote

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TIME: NOVEMBER, 1970.

Place: Los Angeles International Airport.

I am sitting inside a telephone booth. It is a little after eleven in the morning, and I've been sitting here half an hour, pretending to make a call. From the booth I have a good view of Gate 38, from which TWA's nonstop noon flight to New York is scheduled to depart. I have a seat booked on that flight, a ticket bought under an assumed name, but there is every reason to doubt that I will ever board the plane. For one thing, there are two tall men standing at the gate, tough guys with snap-brim hats, and I know both of them. They're detectives from the San Diego Sheriff's Office, and they have a warrant for my arrest. That's why I'm hiding in the phone booth. The fact is, I'm in a real predicament.

The cause of my predicament had its roots in a series of conversations I'd conducted a year earlier with Robert M., a slender, slight, harmless-looking young man who was then a prisoner on Death Row at San Quentin, where he was awaiting execution, having been convicted of three slayings: his mother, a sister, both of whom he had beaten to death, and a fellow prisoner, a man he had strangled while he was in jail awaiting trial for the two original homicides.

Robert M. was an intelligent psychopath; I got to know him fairly well, and he discussed his life and crimes with me freely—with the understanding that I would not write about or repeat anything that he told me. I was doing research on the subject of multiple murderers, and Robert M. became another case history that went into my files. As far as I was concerned, that was the end of it.

Then, two months prior to my incarceration in a sweltering telephone booth at Los Angeles airport, I received a call from a detective in the San Diego Sheriff's Office. He had called me in Palm Springs, where I had a house. He was courteous and pleasant-voiced; he said he knew about the many interviews I'd conducted with convicted murderers, and that he'd like to ask me a few questions. So I invited him to drive down to the Springs and have lunch with me the following day.

The gentleman did not arrive alone, but with three other San Diego detectives. And though Palm Springs lies deep in the desert, there was a strong smell of fish in the air. However, I pretended there was nothing odd about suddenly having four guests instead of one. But they were not interested in my hospitality; indeed, they declined lunch. All they wanted to talk about was Robert M. How well did I know him? Had he ever admitted to me any of his killings? Did I have any records of our conversations? I let them ask their questions, and avoided answering them until I asked my own question: Why were they so interested in my acquaintance with Robert M.?

The reason was this: due to a legal technicality, a federal court had overruled Robert M.'s conviction and ordered the state of California to grant him a new trial. The starting date for the retrial had been set for late November—in other words, approximately two months hence. Then, having delivered these facts, one of the detectives handed me a slim but exceedingly legal-looking document. It was a subpoena ordering me to appear at Robert M.'s trial, presumably as a witness for the prosecution.

Okay, they'd tricked me, and I was mad as hell, but I smiled and nodded, and they smiled and said what a good guy I was and how grateful they were that my testimony would help send Robert M. straight to the gas chamber. That homicidal lunatic! They laughed, and said goodbye: "See ya in court."

I had no intention of honoring the subpoena, though I was aware of the consequences of not doing so: I would be arrested for contempt of court, fined, and sent to jail. I had no high opinion of Robert M., or any desire to protect him; I knew he was guilty of the three murders with which he was charged, and that he was a dangerous psychotic who ought never to be allowed his freedom. But I also knew that the state had more than enough hard evidence to reconvict him without my testimony.

But the main point was that Robert M. had confided in me on my sworn word that I would not use or repeat what he told me. To betray him under these circumstances would have been morally despicable, and would have proven to Robert M., and the many men like him whom I'd interviewed, that they had placed their trust in a police informer, a stool pigeon plain and simple.

I consulted several lawyers. They all gave the same advice: honor the subpoena or expect the worst. Everyone sympathized with my quandary, but no one could see any solution—unless I left California. Contempt of court was not an extraditable offense, and once I was out of the state, there was nothing the authorities could do to punish me. Yes, there was one thing: I could never return to California. That didn't strike me as a severe hardship, although, because of various property matters and professional commitments, it was difficult to depart on such short notice.

I lost track of time, and was still tarrying in Palm Springs the day the trial began. That morning my housekeeper, a devoted friend named Myrtle Bennett, rushed into the house hollering: "Hurry up! It's all on the radio. They've got a warrant out for your arrest. They'll be here any minute."

Actually, it was twenty minutes before the Palm Springs police arrived full-force and with handcuffs at the ready (an overkill scene, but believe me, California law enforcement is not an institution one toys with lightly).

However, though they dismantled the garden and searched the house stem to stern, all they found was my car in the garage and the loyal Mrs. Bennett in the living room. She told them I'd left for New York the previous day. They didn't believe her, but Mrs. Bennett was a formidable figure in Palm Springs, a black woman who had been a distinguished and politically influential member of the community for forty years, so they didn't question her further. They simply sent out an all-points alarm for my arrest.

And where was I? Well, I was tooling along the highway in Mrs. Bennett's old powder-blue Chevrolet, a car that couldn't do fifty miles an hour the day she bought it. But we figured I'd be safer in her car than my own. Not that I was safe anywhere; I was jumpy as a catfish with a hook in its mouth. When I got to Palm Desert, which is about thirty minutes out of Palm Springs, I turned off the highway and onto the lonely curving careening little road that leads away from the desert and up into the San Jacinto mountains.

It had been hot in the desert, over a hundred, but as I climbed higher in the desolate mountains the air became cool, then cold, then colder. Which was okay, except that the old Chevy's heater wouldn't work, and all I had to wear were the clothes I had on when Mrs. Bennett had rushed into the house with her panic-stricken warnings: sandals, white linen slacks, and a light polo sweater. I'd left with just that and my wallet, which contained credit cards and about three hundred dollars.

Still, I had a destination in mind, and a plan. High in the San Jacinto mountains, midway between Palm Springs and San Diego, there's a grim little village named Idylwyld. In the summer, people from the desert travel there to escape the heat; in the winter it's a ski resort, though the quality of both the snow and the runs is threadbare. But now, out of season, this grim collection of mediocre motels and fake chalets would be a good place to lie low, at least until I could catch my breath.

It was snowing when the old car grunted up the last hill into Idylwyld: one of those young snows that suffuses the air but dissolves as it falls. The village was deserted, and most of the motels closed. The one I finally stopped at was called Eskimo Cabins. God knows, the accommodations were icy as igloos. It had one advantage: the proprietor, and apparently the only human on the premises, was a semi-deaf octogenarian far more interested in the game of solitaire he was playing than he was in me.

I called Mrs. Bennett, who was very excited: "Oh, honey, they're looking for you everywhere! It's all on the TV!" I decided it was better not to let her know where I was, but assured her I was all right and would call again tomorrow. Then I telephoned a close friend in Los Angeles; he was excited, too: "Your picture is in the Examiner!" After calming him down, I gave specific instructions: buy a ticket for a "George Thomas" on a nonstop flight to New York, and expect me at his house by ten o'clock the next morning.

I was too cold and hungry to sleep; I left at daybreak, and reached Los Angeles around nine. My friend was waiting for me. We left the Chevrolet at his house, and after wolfing down some sandwiches and as much brandy as I could safely contain, we drove in his car to the airport, where we said goodbye and he gave me the ticket for the noon flight he had booked for me on TWA.

So that's how I happen now to be huddled in this forsaken telephone booth, sitting here contemplating my predicament. A clock above the departure gate announces the hour: 11:35. The passenger area is crowded; soon the plane will be ready for boarding. And there, standing on either side of the gate through which I must pass, are two of the gentlemen who had visited me in Palm Springs, two tall watchful detectives from San Diego.

I considered calling my friend, asking him to return to the airport and pick me up somewhere in the parking lot. But he'd already done enough, and if we were caught, he could be accused of harboring a fugitive. That held true for all the many friends who might be willing to assist me. Perhaps it would be wisest to surrender myself to the guardians at the gate. Otherwise, what? Only a miracle, to coin a phrase, was going to save me. And we don't believe in miracles, do we?

Suddenly a miracle occurs.

There, striding past my tiny glass-doored prison, is a haughty, beautiful black Amazon wearing a zillion dollars' worth of diamonds and golden

sable, a star surrounded by a giddy, chattering entourage of gaudily dressed chorus boys. And who is this dazzling apparition whose plumage and presence are creating such a commotion among the passers-by? A friend! An old, old friend!

TC (opening the booth's door; shouting): Pearl! Pearl Bailey! (A miracle! She hears me. All of them do, her whole entourage) Pearl! Please come here ...

PEARL (squinting at me, then erupting into a radiant grin): Why, baby! What you doing hiding in there?

TC (beckoning her to come closer; whispering): Pearl, listen. I'm in a terrific jam.

PEARL (immediately serious, for she is a very intelligent woman, and at once understood that whatever this was, it wasn't funny): Tell it to me.

TC: Are you on that plane to New York?

PEARL: Yeah, we all are.

TC: I've got to get on it, Pearl. I have a ticket. But there're two guys waiting at the gate to stop me.

PEARL: Which guys? (I pointed them out) How can they stop you?

TC: They're detectives. Pearl, I haven't got time to explain all this ...

PEARL: You don't have to explain nothing.

(She surveyed her troupe of handsome young black chorus boys; she had a half-dozen—Pearl, I remembered, always liked to travel with a lot of company. She motioned to one of them to join us; he was a sleek number sporting a yellow cowboy hat, a sweatshirt that said SUCK DAMMIT, DONT BLOW, a white leather windbreaker with an ermine lining, yellow jitterbug pants [circa 1940], and yellow wedgies.)

This is Jimmy. He's a little bigger than you, but I think it'll all fit. Jimmy, take my friend here to the men's room and change clothes with him. Jimmy, don't flap your yap, just do like Pearlie-Mae say. We'll wait right here for you. Now hurry up! Ten more minutes and we'll miss that plane.

(The distance between the telephone booth and the men's room was a ten-yard dash. We locked ourselves into a pay toilet and started our wardrobe exchange. Jimmy thought it was a riot: he was giggling like a schoolgirl who's just puffed her first joint. I said: "Pearl! That really was a miracle. I've never been so happy to see someone. Never." Jimmy said: "Oh, Miss Bailey's got spirit. She's all heart, know what I mean? All heart."

There was a time when I would have disagreed with him, a time when I would have described Pearl Bailey as a heartless bitch. That was when she was playing the part of Madame Fleur, the principal role in House of Flowers, a musical play for which I had written the book and, with Harold Arlen, co-authored the lyrics. There were many gifted men attached to that endeavor: the director was Peter Brook; the choreographer, George Balanchine; Oliver Messel was responsible for the legendarily enchanting décor and costumes.

But Pearl Bailey was so strong, so determined to have her way, that she dominated the entire production, much to its ultimate detriment. However, live and learn, forgive and forget, and by the time the play ended its Broadway run, Pearl and I were friends again. Aside from her skill as a performer, I'd come to respect her character; it might occasionally be unpleasant to deal with, but certainly she had it: she was a woman of character—one knew who she was and where she stood.

As Jimmy was squeezing into my trousers, which were embarrassingly too tight for him, and as I was slipping on his white leather ermine-lined windbreaker, there was an agitated knock at the door.)

MAN'S VOICE: Hey! What's goin' on in there?

JIMMY: And just who are you, pray tell?

MAN'S VOICE: I'm the attendant. And don't sass me. What's goin' on in there is against the law.

JIMMY: No shit?

ATTENDANT: I see four feet in there. I see clothes comin' off. You think I'm too stupid I don't know what's goin' on? It's against the law. It's against the law for two men to lock themselves in the same toilet at the same time.

JIMMY: Aw, shove it up your ass.

ATTENDANT: I'll get the cops. They'll hand you an L and L.

JIMMY: What the hell's an L and L?

ATTENDANT: Lewd and lascivious conduct. Yessir. I'll get the cops.

TC: Jesus, Joseph, and Mary—

ATTENDANT: Open that door!

TC: You've got it all wrong.

ATTENDANT: I know what I see. I see four feet.

TC: We're changing our costumes for the next scene.

ATTENDANT: Next scene what?

TC: The movie. We're getting ready to shoot the next scene.

ATTENDANT (curious and impressed): They're making a movie out there?

JIMMY (catching on): With Pearl Bailey. She's the star. Marlon Brando, he's in it, too.

TC: Kirk Douglas.

JIMMY (biting his knuckles to keep from laughing): And Shirley Temple. She's making her comeback.

ATTENDANT (believing, yet not believing): Yeah, well, who are you?

TC: We're just extras. That's why we don't have a dressing room.

ATTENDANT: I don't care. Two men, four feet. It's against the law.

JIMMY: Look outside. You'll see Pearl Bailey in person. Marlon Brando. Kirk Douglas. Shirley Temple. Mahatma Gandhi—she's in it, too. Just a cameo.

ATTENDANT: Who?

JIMMY: Mamie Eisenhower.

TC (opening the door, having completed the transference of clothing; my stuff doesn't look too bad on Jimmy, but I suspect that his outfit, as worn by me, will produce a galvanizing effect, and the expression on the attendant's face, a bristling short black man, confirms this expectation): Sorry. We didn't realize we were doing anything against the rules.

JIMMY (regally sweeping past the attendant, who seems too befuddled to budge): Follow us, sweetheart. We'll introduce you to the gang. You can get some autographs.

(At last we were in the corridor, and an unsmiling Pearl wrapped her sable-soft arms around me; her companions closed about us in a concealing circle. There were no jokes or jesting. My nerves sizzled like a cat just hit by lightning, and as for Pearl, the qualities about her that had once alarmed me—that strength, that self-will—were flowing through her like power from a waterfall.)

PEARL: From now on keep quiet. Whatever I say, don't you say anything. Tuck the hat more over your face. Lean on me like you're weak and sick. Lean your face against my shoulder. Close your eyes. Let me lead you.

All right. We're moving now toward the counter. Jimmy has all the tickets. They've already announced the last boarding call, so there aren't too many people around. Those gumshoes haven't moved an inch, but they seem tired and kind of disgusted. They're looking at us now. Both of them. When we pass between them the boys will distract them and start jabbering. Here comes somebody. Lean closer, groan a little—it's one of those VIP guys from TWA. Watch Mama go into her act ... (Changing voice, impersonating her theatrical self, simultaneously droll and drawling and slightly flaky) Mr. Calloway? Like in Cab? Well, aren't you just an angel to help us out.

And we surely could use some help. We need to get on that plane just as fast as possible. My friend here—he's one of my musicians—he's feeling something terrible. Can't hardly walk. We've been playing Vegas, and maybe he got too much sun. Sun can addle your brain and your stomach both. Or maybe it's his diet. Musicians eat funny. Piano players in particular. He won't eat hardly anything but hot dogs. Last night he ate ten hot dogs. Now, that's just not healthy. I'm not surprised he feels poisoned.

Are you surprised, Mr. Calloway? Well, I don't suppose very much surprises you, being in the airplane business. All this hijacking that's going on. Criminals afoot all over the place. Soon as we get to New York, I'm taking my friend straight to the doctor. I'm going to tell the doctor to tell him to stay out of the sun and stop eating hot dogs. Oh, thank you, Mr. Calloway. No, I'll take the aisle. We'll put my friend in the window seat. He'll be better off by the window. All that fresh air.

Okay, Buster. You can open your eyes now.

TC: I think I'll keep them closed. It makes it seem more like a dream.

PEARL (relaxed, chuckling): Anyway, we made it. Your friends never even saw you. As we went by, Jimmy goosed one, and Billy stomped on the other guy's toes.

TC: Where is Jimmy?

PEARL: All the kids go economy. Jimmy's duds do something for you. Pep you up. I like the wedgies especially—just love 'em.

STEWARDESS: Good morning, Miss Bailey. Would you care for a glass of champagne?

PEARL: No, honey. But maybe my friend could use something.

TC: Brandy.

STEWARDESS: I'm sorry, sir, but we only serve champagne until after takeoff.

PEARL: The man wants brandy.

STEWARDESS: I'm sorry, Miss Bailey. It's not permitted.

PEARL (in a smooth yet metallic tone familiar to me from House of Flowers rehearsals): Bring the man his brandy. The whole bottle. Now.

(The stewardess brought the brandy, and I poured myself a hefty dose with an unsteady hand: hunger, fatigue, anxiety, the dizzying events of the last twenty-four hours were presenting their bill. I treated myself to another drink and began to feel a bit lighter.)

TC: I suppose I ought to tell you what this is all about.

PEARL: Not necessarily.

TC: Then I won't. That way you'll have a free conscience. I'll just say that I haven't done anything a sensible person would classify as criminal.

PEARL (consulting a diamond wristwatch): We should be over Palm Springs by now. I heard the door close ages ago. Stewardess!

STEWARDESS: Yes, Miss Bailey?

PEARL: What's going on?

STEWARDESS: Oh, there's the captain now—

CAPTAIN'S VOICE (over loudspeaker): Ladies and gentlemen, we regret the delay. We should be departing shortly. Thank you for your patience.

TC: Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.

PEARL: Have another slug. You're shaking. You'd think it was a first night. I mean, it can't be that bad.

TC: It's worse. And I can't stop shaking—not till we're in the air. Maybe not till we land in New York.

PEARL: You still living in New York?

TC: Thank God.

PEARL: You remember Louis? My husband?

TC: Louis Bellson. Sure. The greatest drummer in the world. Better than Gene Krupa.

PEARL: We both work Vegas so much, it made sense to buy a house there. I've become a real homebody. I do a lot of cooking. I'm writing a cookbook. Living in Vegas is just like living anywhere else, as long as you stay away from the undesirables. Gamblers. Unemployed. Any time a man says to me he'd work if he could find a job, I always tell him to look in the phone book under G. G for gigolo. He'll find work. In Vegas, anyways. That's a town of desperate women. I'm lucky; I found the right man and had the sense to know it.

TC: Are you going to work in New York?

PEARL: Persian Room.

CAPTAIN'S VOICE: I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but we'll be delayed a few minutes longer. Please remain seated. Those who care to smoke may do so.

PEARL (suddenly stiffening): I don't like this. They're opening the door.

TC: What?

PEARL: They're opening the door.

TC: Jesus, Joseph—

PEARL: I don't like this.

TC: Jesus, Joseph—

PEARL: Slump down in the seat. Pull the hat over your face.

TC: I'm scared.

PEARL (gripping my hand, squeezing it): Snore.

TC: Snore? PEARL: Snore!

TC: I'm strangling. I can't snore.

PEARL: You'd better start trying, 'cause our friends are coming through that door. Looks like they're gonna roust the joint. Clean-tooth it.

TC: Jesus, Joseph—

PEARL: Snore, you rascal, snore.

(I snored, and she increased the pressure of her hold on my hand; at the same time she began to hum a low sweet lullaby, like a mother soothing a fretful child. All the while another kind of humming surrounded us: human voices concerned with what was happening on the plane, the purpose of the

two mysterious men who were pacing up and down the aisles, pausing now and again to scrutinize a passenger. Minutes elapsed. I counted them off: six, seven. Tickticktick. Eventually Pearl stopped crooning her maternal melody, and withdrew her hand from mine. Then I heard the plane's big round door slam shut.)

TC: Have they gone?

PEARL: Uh-huh. But whoever it is they're looking for, they sure must want him bad.

THEY DID INDEED. EVEN THOUGH Robert M.'s retrial ended exactly as I had predicted, and the jury brought in a verdict of guilty on three counts of first-degree murder, the California courts continued to take a harsh view of my refusal to cooperate with them. I was not aware of this; I thought that in due time the matter would be forgotten. So I did not hesitate to return to California when a year later something came up that required at least a brief visit there.

Well, sir, I had no sooner registered at the Bel Air Hotel than I was arrested, summoned before a hard-nosed judge who fined me five thousand dollars and gave me an indefinite sentence in the Orange County jail, which meant they could keep me locked up for weeks or months or years. However, I was soon released because the summons for my arrest contained a small but significant error: it listed me as a legal resident of California, when in fact I was a resident of New York, a fact which made my conviction and confinement invalid.

But all that was still far off, unthought of, undreamed of when the silver vessel containing Pearl and her outlaw friend swept off into an ethereal November heaven. I watched the plane's shadow ripple over the desert and drift across the Grand Canyon. We talked and laughed and ate and sang. Stars and the lilac of twilight filled the air, and the Rocky Mountains, shrouded in blue snow, loomed ahead, a lemony slice of new moon hovering above them.

TC: Look, Pearl. A new moon. Let's make a wish.

PEARL: What are you going to wish?

TC: I wish I could always be as happy as I am at this very moment.

PEARL: Oh, honey, that's like asking miracles. Wish for something real.

TC: But I believe in miracles.

PEARL: Then all I can say is: don't ever take up gambling.

The End