

Hello, Stranger, Truman Capote

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TIME: DECEMBER 1977.

Place: A New York restaurant, The Four Seasons.

The man who had invited me to lunch, George Claxton, had suggested we meet at noon, and made no excuse for setting such an early hour. I soon discovered the reason, however; in the year or more since I had last seen him, George Claxton, heretofore a man moderately abstemious, had become a two-fisted drinker. As soon as we were seated he ordered a double Wild Turkey ("Just straight, please; no ice"), and within fifteen minutes requested an encore.

I was surprised, and not just by the urgency of his thirst. He had gained at least thirty pounds; the buttons of his pinstripe vest seemed on the verge of popping loose, and his skin color, usually ruddy from jogging or tennis, had an alien pallor, as though he had just emerged from a penitentiary.

Also, he was sporting dark glasses, and I thought: How theatrical! Imagine good old plain George Claxton, solidly entrenched Wall Street fellow living in Greenwich or Westport or wherever it was with a wife named Gertrude or Alice or whatever it was, with three or four or five children, imagine this guy chugging double Wild Turkeys and wearing dark glasses!

It was all I could do not to ask straight out: Well, what the hell happened to you? But I said: "How are you, George?"

GEORGE: Fine. Fine. Christmas. Jesus. Just can't keep up with it. Don't expect a card from me this year. I'm not sending any.

TC: Really? Your cards seemed such a tradition. Those family things, with dogs. And how is your family?

GEORGE: Growing. My oldest daughter just had her second baby. A girl.

TC: Congratulations.

GEORGE: Well, we wanted a boy. If it had been a boy, she would have named him after me.

TC (thinking: Why am I here? Why am I having lunch with this jerk? He bores me, he's always bored me): And Alice? How is Alice?

GEORGE: Alice?

TC: I mean Gertrude.

GEORGE (frowning, peevish): She's painting. You know our house is right there on the Sound. Have our own little beach. She stays locked in her room all day painting what she sees from the window. Boats.

TC: That's nice.

GEORGE: I'm not so sure. She was a Smith girl; majored in art. She did a little painting before we were married. Then she forgot about it. Seemed to. Now she paints all the time. All the time. Stays locked in her room. Waiter, could you send the maître d' over with a menu? And bring me another of these things. No ice.

TC: That's very British, isn't it? Neat whiskey without ice.

GEORGE: I'm having root-canal. Anything cold hurts my teeth. You know who I got a Christmas card from? Mickey Manolo. The rich kid from Caracas? He was in our class.

(Of course, I didn't remember Mickey Manolo, but I nodded and pretended yes, yes. Nor would I have remembered George Claxton if he hadn't kept careful track of me for forty-odd years, ever since we had been students together at an especially abysmal prep school. He was a straight-arrow athletic kid from an upper-middle-class Pennsylvania family; we had nothing in common, but we stumbled into an alliance because in exchange for my writing all his book reports and English compositions, he did my algebra homework and during examinations slipped me the answers. As a result, I had been stuck for four decades with a "friendship" that demanded a duty lunch every year or two.)

TC: You very seldom see women in this restaurant.

GEORGE: That's what I like about it. Not a lot of gibbering broads. It has a nice masculine look. You know, I don't think I'll have anything to eat. My teeth. It hurts too much to chew.

TC: Poached eggs?

GEORGE: There's something I'd like to tell you. Maybe you could give me a little advice.

TC: People who take my advice usually regret it. However ...

GEORGE: This started last June. Just after Jeffrey's graduation—he's my youngest boy. It was a Saturday and Jeff and I were down on our little beach painting a boat. Jeff went up to the house to get us some beer and sandwiches, and while he was gone I suddenly stripped down and went for a swim. The water was still too cold. You can't really swim in the Sound much before July. But I just felt like it.

I swam out quite a ways and was lying there floating on my back and looking at my house. It's really a great house—six-car garage, swimming pool, tennis courts; too bad we've never been able to get you out there. Anyway, I was floating on my back feeling pretty good about life when I noticed this bottle bobbing in the water.

It was a clear-glass bottle that had contained some kind of soda pop. Someone had stoppered it with a cork and sealed it with adhesive tape. But I could see there was a piece of paper inside, a note. It made me laugh; I used to do that when I was a kid—stuff messages in bottles and throw them in the water: Help! Man Lost at Sea!

So I grabbed the bottle and swam ashore. I was curious to see what was inside it. Well, it was a note dated a month earlier, and it was written by a girl who lived in Larchmont. It said: Hello, stranger. My name is Linda Reilly and I am twelve years old. If you find this letter please write and let me know when and where you found it. If you do I will send you a box of homemade fudge.

The thing is, when Jeff came back with our sandwiches I didn't mention the bottle. I don't know why, but I didn't. Now I wish I had. Maybe then nothing would have happened. But it was like a little secret I wanted to keep to myself. A joke.

TC: Are you sure you aren't hungry? I'm only having an omelette.

GEORGE: Okay. An omelette, very soft.

TC: And so you wrote this young lady, Miss Reilly?

GEORGE (hesitantly): Yes. Yes, I did.

TC: What did you say?

GEORGE: On Monday, when I was back in my office, I was checking through my briefcase and I found the note. I say "found" because I don't remember putting it there. It had vaguely crossed my mind I'd drop the kid a card—

just a nice gesture, you know. But that day I had lunch with a client who likes martinis. Now, I never used to drink at lunch—nor much any other time, either. But I had two martinis, and I went back to the office feeling swivel-headed. So I wrote this little girl quite a long letter; I didn't dictate it, I wrote it in longhand and told her where I lived and how I'd found her bottle and wished her luck and said some dumb thing like that though I was a stranger, I sent her the affectionate wishes of a friend.

TC: A two-martini missive. Still, where's the harm?

GEORGE: Silver Bullets. That's what they call martinis. Silver Bullets.

TC: How about that omelette? Aren't you even going to touch it?

GEORGE: Jesus Christ! My teeth hurt.

TC: It's really quite good. For a restaurant omelette.

GEORGE: About a week later a big box of fudge arrived. Sent to my office. Chocolate fudge with pecans. I passed it around the office and told everybody my daughter had made it. One of the guys said: "Oh, yeah! I'll bet old George has a secret girl friend."

TC: And did she send a letter with the fudge?

GEORGE: No. But I wrote a thank-you note. Very brief. Have you got a cigarette?

TC: I stopped smoking years ago.

GEORGE: Well, I just started. I still don't buy them, though. Just bum one now and then. Waiter, could you bring me a pack of cigarettes?

Doesn't matter what brand, as long as it isn't menthol. And another Wild Turkey, please?

TC: I'd like some coffee.

GEORGE: But I got an answer to my thank-you note. A long letter. It really threw me. She enclosed a picture of herself. A color Polaroid. She was wearing a bathing suit and standing on a beach. She may have been twelve, but she looked sixteen. A lovely kid with short curly black hair and the bluest eyes.

TC: Shades of Humbert Humbert.

GEORGE: Who?

TC: Nothing. A character in a novel.

GEORGE: I never read novels. I hate to read.

TC: Yes, I know. After all, I used to do all your book reports. So what did Miss Linda Reilly have to say?

GEORGE (after pausing a full five seconds): It was very sad. Touching. She said she hadn't been living in Larchmont very long, and that she had no friends, and that she had tossed dozens of bottles into the water, but that I was the only person who had found one and answered. She said she was from Wisconsin, but that her father had died and her mother had married a man who had three daughters of his own and that none of them liked her. It was a ten-page letter, no misspellings. She said a lot of intelligent things. But she sounded really miserable. She said she hoped I'd write again, and maybe I could drive over to Larchmont and we could meet someplace. Do you mind listening to all this? If you do ...

TC: Please. Go ahead.

GEORGE: I kept the picture. In fact, I put it in my wallet. Along with snaps of my other kids. See, because of the letter, I started to think of her as one of my own children. I couldn't get the letter out of my mind. And that night, when I took the train home, I did something I'd done only a very few times. I went into the club car and ordered myself a couple of

stiff drinks and read the letter over and over. Memorized it, practically. Then when I got home I told my wife I had some office work to do. I shut myself in my den and started a letter to Linda. I wrote until midnight.

TC: Were you drinking all this time?

GEORGE (surprised): Why?

TC: It might have some bearing on what you wrote.

GEORGE: Yes, I was drinking, and I guess maybe it was a pretty emotional letter. But I felt so upset about this kid. I really wanted to help her. I wrote her about some of the troubles my own kids had had. About Harriet's acne and how she never had a single boyfriend. Not till she had her skin-peel. I told her about the hard times I'd had when I was growing up.

TC: Oh? I thought you'd enjoyed the ideal life of an ideal American youth.

GEORGE: I let people see what I wanted them to see. Inside was a different story.

TC: Had me fooled.

GEORGE: Around midnight my wife knocked on the door. She wanted to know if anything was wrong, and I told her to go back to bed, I had an urgent business letter to finish, and when it was finished I was going to drive down to the post office. She said why couldn't it wait until morning, it's after twelve. I lost my temper. Married thirty years, and I could count on ten fingers the times I've lost my temper with her. Gertrude is a wonderful, wonderful woman. I love her heart and soul. I do, goddamnit! But I shouted at her: No, it can't wait. It has to go tonight. It's very important.

(A waiter handed George a pack of cigarettes already opened. He stuck one in his mouth, and the waiter lit it for him, which was just as well, for his fingers were too agitated to hold a match without endangering himself.)

And Jesus Christ, it was important. Because I felt if I didn't mail the letter that night, I never would. Maybe, sober, I'd think it was too personal or something. And here was this lonely unhappy kid who'd shown me her heart: how would she feel if she never heard one word from me? No. I got in my car and drove down to the post office and as soon as I'd mailed the letter, dropped it into the slot, I felt too tired to drive home. I fell asleep in the car. It was dawn when I woke up, but my wife was asleep and she didn't notice when I came in.

I just about had time to shave and change my clothes before rushing off to catch the train. While I was shaving, Gertrude came into the bathroom. She was smiling; she hadn't mentioned my little temper tantrum. But she had my wallet in her hand, and she said, "George, I'm going to have Jeff's graduation picture enlarged for your mother," and with that she started shuffling through all the pictures in my wallet. I didn't think anything about it until suddenly she said: "Who is this girl?"

TC: And it was the young lady from Larchmont.

GEORGE: I should have told her the whole story right then. But I ... Anyway, I said it was the daughter of one of my commuter friends. I said he'd been showing it to some of the guys on the train, and he'd forgot and left it on the bar. So I'd put it in my wallet to return the next time I saw him.

Garçon, un autre de Wild Turkey, s'il vous pla't.

TC (to the waiter): Make that a single.

GEORGE (in a tone unpleasantly pleasant): Are you telling me I've had too much to drink?

TC: If you have to go back to the office, yes.

GEORGE: But I'm not going back to my office. I haven't been there since early November. I'm supposed to have had a nervous breakdown. Overwork. Exhaustion. I'm supposed to be resting quietly at home, tenderly cared for by my adoring wife. Who is locked in her room painting pictures of boats. A boat. The same damn boat over and over.

TC: George, I've got to take a leak.

GEORGE: Not running out on me? Not running out on your old school buddy that sneaked you all the algebra answers?

TC: And even so, I flunked! Be back in a jiffy.

(I didn't need to take a leak; I needed to collect my thoughts. I didn't have the nerve to steal out of there and hide in a quiet movie somewhere, but I sure as hell didn't want to go back to that table. I washed my hands and combed my hair. Two men came in and stationed themselves at urinals. One said: "That guy that's so loaded. For a moment I thought it was somebody I know." His friend said: "Well, he's not a complete stranger. That's George Claxton." "You're kidding!" "I ought to know. He used to be my boss." "But my God! What happened?" "There are different stories." Then both men fell silent, perhaps out of deference to my presence. I returned to the dining room.)

GEORGE: So you didn't cut out?

(Actually, he seemed more subdued, less intoxicated. He was able to strike a match and light a cigarette with reasonable competence.)

Are you ready to hear the rest of this?

TC: (Silent, but with an encouraging nod.)

GEORGE: My wife didn't say anything, just tucked the picture back in my wallet. I went on shaving, but cut myself twice. It had been so long since I'd had a real hangover, I'd forgotten what it was like. The sweat; my stomach—it felt like I was trying to shit razor blades. I stuffed a bottle of bourbon in my briefcase, and as soon as I got on the train I headed straight for the john. The first thing I did was to tear up the picture and drop it in the toilet. Then I sat down on the toilet and opened up that bottle. At first it made me gag. And it was hot as hell in there. Like Hades. But after a while I began to calm down, and to wonder: Well, what am I in such a stew about? I haven't done anything wrong. But when I stood up I saw that the torn-up Polaroid was still floating in the toilet bowl. I flushed it, and the pieces of the picture, her head and legs and arms, started churning around, and it made me dizzy: I felt like a killer who had taken a knife and cut her up.

By the time we got to Grand Central, I knew I was in no state to handle the office, so I walked over to the Yale Club and took a room. I called my secretary and said I had to go to Washington and wouldn't be in till the next day. Then I called home and told my wife that something had come up, a business thing, and I'd be staying overnight at the club. Then I got into bed, and thought: I'll sleep all day; I'll have one good long drink to relax me, stop the jitters, and go to sleep. But I couldn't—not until I'd downed the whole bottle. Boy, did I sleep then! Until around ten the next morning.

TC: About twenty hours.

GEORGE: About that. But I was feeling fairly okay when I woke up. They have a great masseur at the Yale Club, a German, hands strong as a gorilla's. That guy can really fix you up. So I had some sauna, a real storm-trooper massage, and fifteen minutes under a freezing shower. I stayed on and ate lunch at the club. No drinks, but boy, did I wolf it down. Four lamb chops, two baked potatoes, creamed spinach, corn-on-the-cob, a quart of milk, two deep-dish blueberry pies ...

TC: I wish you'd eat something now.

GEORGE (a sharp bark, startingly rude): Shut up!

TC: (Silence)

GEORGE: I'm sorry. I mean, it was like I was talking to myself. Like I'd forgotten you were here. And your voice ...

TC: I understand. Anyway, you had a hearty lunch and you were feeling good.

GEORGE: Indeed. Indeed. The condemned man had a hearty lunch. Cigarette?

TC: I don't smoke.

GEORGE: That's right. Don't smoke. Haven't smoked for years.

TC: Here, I'll light that for you.

GEORGE: I'm perfectly capable of coping with a match without blowing up the place, thank you.

Well now, where were we? Oh yes, the condemned man was on his way to his office, subdued and shining.

It was Wednesday, the second week in July, a scorcher. I was alone in my office when my secretary rang through and said a Miss Reilly was on the phone. I didn't make the connection right off, and said: Who? What does she want? And my secretary said she says it's personal. The penny dropped. I said: Oh yes, put her on.

And I heard: "Mr. Claxton, this is Linda Reilly. I got your letter. It's the nicest letter I've ever had. I feel you really are a friend, and that's why I decided to take a chance on calling you. I was hoping you could help me. Because something has happened, and I don't know what I'll do if you can't help me." She had a sweet young-girl's voice, but was so breathless, so excited, that I had to ask her to speak more slowly. "I don't have much time, Mr. Claxton. I'm calling from upstairs and my mother might pick up the phone downstairs any minute.

The thing is, I have a dog. Jimmy. He's six years old but frisky as can be. I've had him since I was a little girl, and he's the only thing I have. He's a real gent, just the cutest little dog you ever saw. But my mother is going to have him put to sleep. I'll die! I'll just die. Mr. Claxton, please, can you come to Larchmont and meet me in front of the Safeway? I'll have Jimmy with me, and you can take him away with you. Hide him until we can figure out what to do. I can't talk any more. My mother's coming up the stairs. I'll call you first chance I get tomorrow and we can make a date--"

TC: What did you say?

GEORGE: Nothing. She'd hung up.

TC: But what would you have said?

GEORGE: Well, as soon as she hung up, I decided that when she called back I'd say yes. Yes, I'd help the poor kid save her dog. That didn't mean I had to take it home with me. I could have put it in a kennel, or something. And if matters had turned out differently, that's what I would have done.

TC: I see. But she never called back.

GEORGE: Waiter, I'll have another one of these dark things. And a glass of Perrier, please. Yes, she called. And what she had to say was very brief. "Mr. Claxton, I'm sorry; I sneaked into a neighbor's house to phone, and I've got to hurry. My mother found your letters last night, the letters you wrote me. She's crazy, and her husband's crazy, too. They think all kinds of terrible things, and she took Jimmy away first thing this morning, but I can't talk any more; I'll try to call later."

But I didn't hear from her again—at least, not personally. My wife phoned a few hours later; I'd say it was about three in the afternoon. She said: "Darling, please come home as soon as you can," and her voice was so calm that I knew she was in extreme distress; I even half-knew why, although I acted surprised when she told me: "There are two policemen here. One from Larchmont and one from the village. They want to talk to you. They won't tell me why."

I didn't bother with the train. I hired a limousine. One of those limousines with a bar installed. It's not much of a drive, just over an hour, but I managed to knock down quite a few Silver Bullets. It didn't help much; I was really scared.

TC: Why, for Christ's sake? What had you done? Play Mr. Good Guy, Mr. Pen Pal.

GEORGE: If only it were that neat. That tidy. Anyway, when I got home the cops were sitting in the living room watching television. My wife was serving them coffee. When she offered to leave the room, I said no, I want you to stay and hear this, whatever it is. Both the cops were very young and embarrassed. After all, I was a rich man, a prominent citizen, a churchgoer, the father of five children. I wasn't frightened of them. It was Gertrude.

The Larchmont cop outlined the situation. His office had received a complaint from a Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wilson that their twelve-year-old daughter, Linda Reilly, had been receiving letters of a "suspicious nature" from a fifty-two-year-old man, namely, me, and the Wilsons intended to bring charges if I couldn't explain myself satisfactorily.

I laughed. Oh, I was just as jovial as Santa Claus. I told the whole story. About finding the bottle. Said I'd only answered it because I liked chocolate fudge. I had them grinning, apologizing, shuffling their big feet, and saying well, you know how parents get nutty ideas nowadays. The only one not taking it all as a dumb joke was Gertrude. In fact, without my realizing it, she'd left the room before I'd finished talking.

After the cops left, I knew where I'd find her. In that room, the one where she does her painting. It was dark and she was sitting there in a straight-back chair staring out at the darkness. She said: "The picture in your wallet. That was the girl." I denied it, and she said: "Please, George. You don't have to lie. You'll never have to lie again." And she slept in that room that night, and every night ever since. Keeps herself locked in there painting boats. A boat.

TC: Perhaps you did behave a bit recklessly. But I can't see why she should be so unforgiving.

GEORGE: I'll tell you why. That wasn't our first visit from the police.

Seven years ago we had a sudden heavy snowstorm. I was driving my car, and even though I wasn't far from home, I lost my way several times. I asked directions from a number of people. One was a child, a young girl. A few days later the police came to the house. I wasn't there, but they

talked to Gertrude. They told her that during the recent snowstorm a man answering my description and driving a Buick with my license plate had got out of his car and exposed himself to a young girl. Spoken lewdly to her. The girl said she had copied down the license number in the snow under a tree, and when the storm had stopped, it was still decipherable. There was no denying that it was my license number, but the story was untrue. I convinced Gertrude, and I convinced the police, that the girl was either lying or that she had made a mistake concerning the number. But now the police have come a second time. About another young girl.

And so my wife stays in her room. Painting. Because she doesn't believe me. She believes that the girl who wrote the number in the snow told the truth. I'm innocent. Before God, on the heads of my children, I am innocent. But my wife locks her door and looks out the window. She doesn't believe me. Do you?

(George removed his dark glasses and polished them with a napkin. Now I understood why he wore them. It wasn't because of the yellowed whites engraved with swollen red veins. It was because his eyes were like a pair of shattered prisms. I have never seen pain, a suffering, so permanently implanted, as if the slip of a surgeon's knife had left him forever disfigured. It was unbearable, and as he stared at me my own eyes flinched away.)

Do you believe me?

TC (reaching across the table and taking his hand, holding it for dear life): Of course, George. Of course I believe you.

The End