



Self-Portrait, Truman Capote

SELF-PORTRAIT

Q: If you had to live in just one place—without ever leaving—where would it be?

A: Oh, dear. What a devastating notion. To be grounded in just one place. After all, for thirty years I've lived everywhere and had houses all over the world. But curiously, no matter where I lived, Spain or Italy or Switzerland, Hong Kong or California, Kansas or London, I always kept an apartment in New York. That must signify something. So, if really forced to choose, I'd say New York.

Q: But why? It's dirty. Dangerous. In every way difficult.

A: Hmmm. Yes. But though I can live for long stretches in mountainous or seaside solitude, primarily I am a city fellow. I like pavement. The sound of my shoes on pavement; stuffed windows; all-night restaurants; sirens in the night—sinister but alive; book and record shops that, on impulse, you can visit at midnight.

And in that sense, New York is the world's only city city. Rome is noisy and provincial. Paris is sullen, insular, and, odd to say, extraordinarily puritanical. London? All my American friends who have gone to live there bore me so by saying, "But it's so civilized." I don't know. To be totally dead, utterly dull—is that civilized? And to top it all, London is also highly provincial. The same people see the same people.

Everybody knows your business. At most, it is only possible to lead two separate lives there.

And that is the great advantage of New York, why it is the city. One can be a multiple person there: ten different people with ten different sets of friends, none overlapping.

Q: Do you prefer animals to people?

A: I like them about equally. Still, I've usually found there is something secretively cruel about people who really feel more warmly toward dogs and cats and horses than people.

Q: Are you cruel?

A: Occasionally. In conversation. Let's put it this way: I'd rather be a friend of mine than an enemy.

Q: Do you have many friends?

A: About seven or so whom I can entirely rely upon. And about twenty more I more or less trust.

Q: What qualities do you look for in friends?

A: Firstly, they mustn't be stupid. I've once or twice been in love with persons who were stupid, indeed very much so; but that is another matter—one can be in love with someone without feeling the least in communication with that person. God, that's how most people get married and why most marriages are unhappy.

Usually, I can tell quite early on whether it is possible for someone and myself to be friends. Because one doesn't have to finish sentences. I mean, you start to say something, then realize, midway, that he or she

has already understood. It is a form of mental-emotional conversational shorthand.

Intelligence apart, attention is important: I pay attention to my friends, am concerned about them, and expect the same in return.

Q: Are you often disappointed by a friend?

A: Not really. I've sometimes formed dubious attachments (don't we all?); I've always done it with my eyes open. The only hurt that hurts is one that takes you by surprise. I am seldom surprised. Though I have a few times been outraged.

Q: Are you a truthful person?

A: As a writer—yes, I think so. Privately—well, that is a matter of opinion; some of my friends think that when relating an event or piece of news, I am inclined to alter and overelaborate. Myself, I just call it making something “come alive.” In other words, a form of art. Art and truth are not necessarily compatible bedfellows.

Q: How do you like best to occupy your spare time?

A: Not sexually, though I have had my enthusiastic periods. But, as more than a casual pastime, it is too heart-scalding and costly, however you interpret the latter adjective.

Really, I like to read. Always have. There are not many contemporary writers I like too well. Though I have admired, among our own Americans, the late Flannery O'Connor, and Norman Mailer, William Styron, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, the early Salinger.

And oh, really, a number of others. I've never liked Gore Vidal's fiction, but I think his nonfiction is first-class. James Baldwin, ditto. But for the last decade or so I prefer to read writers I've already read. Proven wine. Proust. Flaubert. Jane Austen. Raymond Chandler (one of the great American artists). Dickens (I had read all of Dickens before I was sixteen, and have just now completed the full cycle again).

I am partial to films, too—though I leave in the middle quite a lot. But I only like to go to films alone, and only in the daytime when the theater is mostly empty. That way I can concentrate on what I'm seeing, and depart when I feel like it without having to discuss the merits of the project with someone else: with me, such discussions always lead to argument and irritation.

I prefer to work in the mornings, usually for about four or five hours, and then, if I'm alone in a city, any city, I meet a friend for lunch at some favorite restaurant (in New York: Lafayette, La Côte Basque, Orsini's, the Oak Room at The Plaza, and, until its unhappy demise, the Colony). Many people say they hate to lunch; it fattens them, fatigues them, altogether spoils their day. It makes mine. There are some men I enjoy lunching with, but by and large I prefer beautiful, or at least extremely attractive, alert, and au courant women. I count in this category several very young ladies (Lally Weymouth, Amanda Burden, Penelope Tree, Louise Melhado—the latter, alas, married to a very square stockbroker).

But I don't consider that any woman deserves full marks until she attains and maintains qualities of style and appearance and amusing good sense beyond the point of easy youthful beguilement: this, a partial list, and a prejudicial one, would have to include Barbara Paley, Gloria Guinness, Lee Radziwill, Oona Chaplin, Gloria Cooper, Slim Keith, Phyllis Cerf, Kay Meehan, Viola Loewy, D. D. Ryan, Evelyn Avedon,

Pamela Harriman, Kay Graham—well, one could go on for quite a while, though certainly the names would not top fifty.

Notice, the persons I mention are private citizens, not public; after all, for certain public characters—Garbo (an ultimately selfish and tiresome woman) or Elizabeth Taylor (a sensitive, self-educated lady with a tough but essentially innocent attitude—if you sleep with a guy, gosh, that means you have to marry him!)—allure is their trade.

Though I know I'm supposed to be very sociable, and though some of the above statements would seem to testify to that, I like to be alone. I like fast, finely made cars, I like lonely motels with their ice machines and eerie anonymity; so sometimes I get behind the wheel and, without warning, without particular destination, drive all alone as far as a thousand miles. I've only once consulted a psychiatrist; instead, I should have gone for a drive with the top down and a wind blowing and a sun shining.

Q: Of what are you most afraid?

A: Not death. Well, I don't want to suffer. But if one night I went to sleep and failed to wake, that thought doesn't trouble me much. At least it would be something different. In 1966 I was nearly killed in an auto accident—was flung through the windshield head-on, and though seriously wounded and certain that what Henry James called The Distinguished Thing (death) was nearby, lay fully conscious in pools of blood reciting to myself the telephone numbers of various friends. Since then, I've had a cancer operation, and the only altogether upsetting part was that I had to loiter around an aimless week between the day of diagnosis and the morning of the knives.

Anyway, it strikes me as absurd and rather obscene, this whole cosmetic and medical industry based on lust for youth, age-fear, death-terror. Who the hell wants to live forever? Most of us, apparently; but it's idiotic. After all, there is such a thing as life-saturation: the point when everything is pure effort and total repetition.

Poverty? Fanny Brice said, "I've been rich and I've been poor. Believe me, rich is better." Well, I disagree; at least I don't think money makes any ultimate difference to anyone's personal adjustment or (moronic word) "happiness." I know very well a considerable number of very rich people (I don't count anyone rich who can't quite quickly summon up fifty million dollars in hard currency); and there are some who say, when feeling in a bitchy mood, that I don't know anybody else (to which one can best reply, at least they sometimes pick up the check, and never ask for a loan).

But the point is: I can't think of a single rich person who, in terms of contentment, or a lessening of the general human anxiety, has it easier than the rest of us. As for me, I can accept it either way: a furnished room on some side street in Detroit or Cole Porter's old apartment in the Waldorf Towers, which the decorator Billy Baldwin transformed into such an island of sublime and subtle luxury. What I couldn't survive is the middle ground: the sound of lawn mowers and water sprinklers outside a two-car-garage ranch split-level in Scarsdale or Shaker Heights. Well, I never said I wasn't a snob. I only said I wasn't afraid of being poor.

Failure? Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor. No, I've drunk that special hemlock, bit that bullet (especially working in the theater) enough to now scorn it. Honestly, I don't give a damn what anybody says about me, either privately or in print. Of course, that was not true when I was young and first began to publish. And it is not true

now on one count—a betrayal of affection can still traumatically disturb me. Otherwise, defeat and criticism are matters of indifference, remote as the mountains of the moon.

Q: Then what does frighten you?

A: The thought that I might lose my sense of humor. Become a mind without a soul, start down the path to madness, and thereby, as the Zen riddle runs, spend the rest of a ruined life listening to the sound of one hand clapping.

Q: What shocks you? If anything?

A: Deliberate cruelty. Cruelty for its own sake, verbal or physical. Murder. Capital punishment. Child-beaters. Animal-baiters.

Once, long ago, I discovered that my best friend, aged eighteen, was having a fully realized love affair with his stepmother. At the time I was shocked; needless to add, I'm not now, and thinking back, can see that it was probably a positive benefit to them both. Since then, I've never been surprised, not to say shocked, by any sexual-moral arrangement. If so, I'd have to lead the parade of our nation's million-upon-million hypocrites.

Q: It is now six years since you published *In Cold Blood*. What have you been working on since then?

A: Published as a book a long short story, "The Thanksgiving Visitor." Collaborated on a film, *Trilogy*, based on three of my short stories ("A Christmas Memory," "Miriam," "Among the Paths to Eden"); made a documentary film about capital punishment, *Death Row U.S.A.*, which was commissioned by ABC but never shown in this country (others, yes; Canada, for one) for reasons still mysterious and unexplained. Have also recently completed a screenplay of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—

a nearly perfect short novel (or, really, long short story), but hell to dramatize because it consists almost entirely of long-ago exposition and, as it were, offstage scenes. Personally, I like my adaptation, but the producers, Paramount Pictures, are of a different opinion; my pity to whoever attempts a rewrite.

It took five years to write *In Cold Blood*, and a year to recover—if recovery is the word; not a day passes that some aspect of that experience doesn't shadow my mind.

However, prior to beginning *In Cold Blood*, in fact soon after finishing *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1957, I began to prepare the notes and structure for an ambitious novel then entitled, and entitled now, *Answered Prayers*, which derives from a remark of St. Theresa's: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." I think that's true: no matter what desires are requited, they are always replaced by another.

It's like those racing greyhounds and the mechanical rabbit—one can never catch it. It makes for the worst and best in life. I remember a friend at Robert Kennedy's funeral, someone very close to him, and she said: "It was such a hot day. Sweltering. And there was the grave waiting in the grass under this great cool green tree. And suddenly I envied him. Envied him all that green peacefulness. I thought, Bless you, Bobby, you don't have to fight anymore. You're safe."

Answered Prayers is complicated technically and much the longest work I've done—indeed, triple the length of all my other books combined. During the past year or so I've been under great pressure to finish it; but literature has its own life, and insists on dancing to its own measure. *Answered Prayers* is like a wheel with a dozen spokes; the fuel that spins the wheel is an extraordinary young woman who has had

fifty affairs, could have married virtually anyone, but for twelve years has loved an “older” man who can’t marry because he is married, and won’t divorce because he expects, with reasonable cause, to be the next President of the United States.

Q: If you hadn’t decided on writing, a creative life, what would you have done?

A: Become a lawyer. I often considered it, and many lawyers, including one attorney general and a Supreme Court justice, have told me I would have made a first-class trial lawyer, though my voice, often described as “high and childish” (among other things), might have been a detriment.

Also, I wouldn’t have minded being kept, but no one has ever wanted to keep me—not more than a week or so.

Q: Do you take any form of exercise?

A: Yes. Massage.

Q: Can you cook?

A: Not for company. For myself, I always dish up the same cuisine. Crackers and cream of tomato soup. Or a baked potato stuffed with fresh caviar.

Q: If Reader’s Digest ever commissioned from you an “Unforgettable Character” article, whom would you write about?

A: God forbid that such a degrading assignment should ever come my way. But if it did—ahem, let’s see. Robert Frost, America’s Poet Laureate, was fairly memorable. An old bastard, if ever there was one. I met him when I was eighteen; apparently he didn’t consider me a

sufficiently humble worshiper at the altar of his ego. Anyway, by writing a scurrilous letter to Harold Ross, the late editor of *The New Yorker*, where I was then employed, he got me fired from my first and last time-clock job. Perhaps he did me a favor; because then I sat down and wrote my first book, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

As a child, I lived until I was ten or so with an elderly spinster relative in a rural, remote part of Alabama. Miss Sook Faulk. She herself was not more than twelve years old mentally, which is what accounted for her purity, timidity, her strange, unexpected wisdom. I have written two stories about her, “A Christmas Memory” and “The Thanksgiving Visitor”—both of which were filmed for television with Geraldine Page portraying Miss Faulk with an uncanny beauty and accuracy.

Miss Page is rather unforgettable, come to consider: a Jekyll and Hyde; Dr. Jekyll on stage, Mr. Hyde off. It is purely a matter of appearance; she has better legs than Dietrich and as an actress can project an illusion of infinite allure—but in private she insists, Lord knows why, in disguising herself under witchlike wigs and costumes of consummate eccentricity.

Of course, I don't care much for actresses or actors. A friend, I can't remember just now who, said, “All actresses are more than women, and all actors are less than men.” A half-true observation; still, true enough to be, in my opinion, the root cause of the prevailing theatrical neurosis. But the trouble with most actors (and actresses) is that they are dumb. And, in many instances, the dumbest are the most gifted. Sir John Gielgud, the kindest man alive, an incomparable technician, brilliant voice; but, alas, all his brains are in his voice. Marlon Brando. No actor of my generation possesses greater natural gifts; but none other has transported intellectual falsity to higher levels of hilarious pretension. Except, perhaps, Bob Dylan: a sophisticated musical (?) con

man pretending to be a simple-hearted (?) revolutionary but sentimental hillbilly.

But enough of this question. It was stupid to start with.

Q: What is the most hopeful word in any language?

A: Love.

Q: And the most dangerous?

A: Love.

Q: Have you ever wanted to kill anybody?

A: Haven't you? No? Cross your heart? Well, I still don't believe you. Everybody at one time or another has wanted to kill someone. The true reason why many people commit suicide is because they are cowards who prefer to murder themselves rather than murder their tormentor. As for me, if desire had ever been transferred into action, I'd be right up there with Jack the Ripper. Anyway, it's amusing to think about: the plotting, the planning, the surprise and regret imprinting the face of the villain-turned-victim. Very relaxing. Better than counting sheep.

Not long ago my doctor suggested that I adopt some healthier hobby other than wine-tasting and fornication. He asked if I could think of anything. I said, "Yes, murder." He laughed, we both did, except I wasn't laughing. Poor man, little did he know what a painful and perfect demise I'd planned for him when, after eight days abed with something closely resembling black cholera, he still refused to pay me a house call.

Q: What are your political interests?

A: I've known a few politicians whom I liked, and a more surrealist montage could not be imagined. Adlai Stevenson was a friend, and always a generous one; we were staying as guests in the same house when he died, and I remember watching a manservant pack his belongings, and then, when the suitcases were so pathetically filled, but still unclosed, I walked in and helped myself to one of his ties—a sort of sentimental theft, because the night before I'd complimented him on the tie and he'd promised to give it to me. On the other hand, I like Ronald Reagan, too. Many of my friends think I'm teasing them when I say that. I'm not. Though Governor Stevenson and Governor Reagan are quite different spirits, the latter shares with the former a modesty, an "I'm looking you in the eye and I mean what I say" directness that is rare enough among us folk, not to mention politicians.

I suppose New York's Senator Jacob Javits and Governor Reagan, for purely reflex reasons, feel antipathetical toward each other. Actually, I think they would get along fine, and would make an interesting political combination. (Of course, the real reason I always speak well of Governor Reagan and Senator Javits is that I like both their wives, though they are even less alike than their husbands, Mrs. Javits being a lacquered but still untamed city urchin, a smoochy-voiced and sexy-eyed child-woman with a vocabulary as fresh and salty and Brooklyn-bred as the waves that spank the beaches at Coney Island. As for Mrs. Reagan—I don't know, there is about her something so small-town American and nostalgia-making: the homecoming queen riding past on a throne of roses.)

The two politicians I've known best were President Kennedy and his brother Robert. They, too, were quite unlike, and not as close as generally believed; at any rate, the younger brother was very much afraid of the elder—

Q: Do we really have to hear any more about any Kennedy? Moreover, you're sidestepping the question, which wasn't about politicians but your own interest in politics.

A: I have none. I've never voted. Though, if invited, I suppose I might join almost anyone's protest parade: Antiwar, Free Angela, Gay Liberation, Ladies' Lib, etc.

Q: If you could be anything, what would you most like to be?

A: Invisible. To be visible or invisible at will. I mean, think of the possibilities: the power, the riches, the constant erotic amusement.

Q: What are your chief vices? And virtues?

A: I have no vices. The concept doesn't exist in my vocabulary. My chief virtue is gratitude. So far as I know, I've never betrayed anyone who was kind to me. But as art is life's compensation for the flawed delights of living, I reserve my greatest gratitude for those poets, painters, composers who have compensated me most. A work of art is the one mystery, the one extreme magic; everything else is either arithmetic or biology. I think I understand a considerable lot about writing; nevertheless, when I read something good, in fact, a work of art, my senses sail away into a universe of wonder: How did he do it? How is it possible?

Q: Looking back, it would seem as though some of your answers are rather inconsistent. Deliberate cruelty, you say, is the one unforgivable sin. Then you confess to occasional verbal cruelty, and later on admit that you have contemplated prepared murder.

A: Anyone consistently consistent has a head made of biscuit. My head, the interior, may be made of something odd, but it isn't biscuit.

Q: Suppose you were drowning. What images, in the classic tradition, do you envision rolling across your mind?

A: A hot Alabama day in, oh, 1932, so I must be eight, and I am in a vegetable garden humming with bees and heat waves, and I am picking and putting into a basket turnips and slushy scarlet tomatoes. Then I am running through a pine and honeysuckle woods toward a deep cool creek, where I bathe and wash the turnips, the tomatoes. Birds, bird-music, leaf-light, the stringent taste of raw turnip on my tongue: pleasures everlasting, hallelujah. Not far away a snake, a cottonmouth moccasin, writhes, ripples across the water; I'm not afraid of it.

Ten years later. New York. A wartime jazz joint on West 52nd Street: The Famous Door. Featuring my most beloved American singer—then, now, forever: Miss Billie Holiday. Lady Day. Billie, an orchid in her hair, her drug-dimmed eyes shifting in the cheap lavender light, her mouth twisting out the words: Good mornin,' Heartache—You're here again to stay—

June, 1947. Paris. Having a fine l'eau at a sidewalk café with Albert Camus, who tells me I must learn to be less sensitive to criticism. (Ah! If he could have lived to see me now.)

Standing at the window of a pension on a Mediterranean island watching the afternoon passenger boat arrive from the mainland. Suddenly, there on the wharf carrying a suitcase is someone I know. Very well. Someone who had said good-bye to me, in what I took to be final tones, not many days prior. Someone who had apparently had a change of mind. So: is it the real turtle soup?—or only the mock? Or is it at long last love? (It was.)

A young man with black cowlicked hair. He is wearing a leather harness that keeps his arms strapped to his sides. He is trembling; but he is

speaking to me, smiling. All I can hear is the roar of blood in my ears. Twenty minutes later he is dead, hanging from the end of a rope.

Two years later. Driving down from the April snows of the Alps into the valleys of an Italian spring.

Visiting, at Père-Lachaise in Paris, the grave of Oscar Wilde—overshadowed by Epstein's rather awkward rendition of an angel; I don't think Oscar would have cared for it much.

Paris. January, 1966. The Ritz. An unusual friend comes to call, bringing as gifts masses of white lilac and a baby owl in a cage. The owl, it seems, must be fed live mice. A waiter at the Ritz very kindly sent it to live with his farm-family in Provence.

Oh, but now the mental slides are moving very fast. The waves are closing over. Picking apples on an autumn afternoon. Nursing to life a bulldog puppy ill-to-death with distemper. And she lives. A garden in the California desert. The surf-sound of wind in the palm trees. A face, close by. Is it the Taj Mahal I see? Or merely Asbury Park? Or is it at long last love? (It wasn't—God no, was it ever not.)

Suddenly, everything is again spinning backward; my friend Miss Faulk is making a scrap-quilt, the design is of roses and grapes, and now she is drawing the quilt up to my chin. There is a kerosene lamp by the bed; she wishes me happy birthday, and blows out the light.

And at midnight when the church-bell chimes I'm eight.

Once more, the creek. The taste of raw turnip on my tongue, the flow of summer water embracing my nakedness. And there, just there, swiveling, tangoing on the sun-dappled surface, the exquisitely limber and lethal cottonmouth moccasin. But I'm not afraid; am I?

1972

The End