

Introduction

"As Time Flies By"

Where were we? Has it been eight years since last we met on those smooth white pages that served as an introduction to the first seven plays created by that schizophrenic half man-half monster? It was March 10, 1971, as I recall. How have you been? . . . Really? . . . Well, I've had my ups and downs. Not that you would notice too much from my outward appearance. The hair thinned just a bit, a little grayer around the temples, some lines around the eyes that seem to suggest character more than decay, no more than three pounds added to a still lithesome frame and an agility around the tennis courts that bring "oohs" and "ahs" from the aging members of the club who usually match up the "Bypasses" against the "Pacemakers" in the semiweekly doubles matches. All in all, life has, in the words of Barney Cashman in *Red Hot Lovers*, "not only been very kind, but has gone out of its way to ignore me."

Alas, like Dorian Gray, the true picture is hidden in the attic of the mind, locked and kept from view to all except wife, family, a few close friends and a plethora of medical men who daily struggle to keep the deadly radiation of neurosis from melting down and destroying this Prolificity Plant and all who live in a radius of its emotional and co-working environs. On a day like all others, I awoke to the first sign of danger. A duodenal ulcer appeared and panic spread through the central nervous system. The plant was immediately shut down and six hundred and twelve spicy foods and alcoholic beverages were laid off. Cottage cheese and Carnation non-fat milk had to show identifying badges before they were allowed to enter the lower digestive tract . . . Meetings were held in the brain, and college-type white cells marched out defiantly carrying placards that proclaimed, "We don't want Neurotic Energy," "No More Neuks," "Right to Live, Not

Live to Write" . . . Paranoia set in. "What if suddenly all the Creative Plants broke down at once? What if ulcers spread across the writing community like the plague? Would there be enough help? Would there suddenly be odd and even days for Antacid Tablets?" The overworked, overwrought, overloaded machinery came to a halt. All ideas were given a six-month paid vacation and were told either to relocate or to wait until the plant was rehailed and inspected and found safe enough to go back into production. Some ideas, already half typed and ready to be born, lay unloved and unnurtured on the yellow bond paper, withered and died. Others huddled together for protection in a top right-hand drawer, hoping against hope they would not be forgotten. Now came the difficult and arduous task of looking for causes, of dismantling an enormously productive piece of creative equipment which suddenly seemed to break down and malfunction at the peak of its thought-to-be-limitless potential.

On a quiet, cool and perfect spring night in New York a few weeks later, the first clue appeared. It was to be a week of quiet relaxation for me. Dinner dates with friends, two plays, a ballet and a drink with Woody Allen at the Russian Tea Room comparing notes where life had taken us since the days we worked on the old Garry Moore Show (*Annie Hall* and *The Goodbye Girl* were easier to write than a funny lead-in to Jo Stafford's next song). The days were spent idly walking up the west side of Madison Avenue to see the galleries, the boutiques, the antique shops, and down the east side to ogle the deep-dark chocolate cakes in Greenberg's window and the girls bouncing out of Yves St. Laurent's, both of whom got equal attention from my salivary glands. The ulcer in my stomach, which demanded to be fed every fifty-three minutes, was assuaged by saltine crackers bulging from every conceivable coat pocket, and seemed incompatible with the pleasantness of my surroundings and that I had two hit shows running on Broadway. In addition to this, the film of *Chapter Two* was about to be shot in New York, a new play, *I Oughta Be*

in Pictures, was written and ready to go into rehearsal in December, and another film, *Seems Like Old Times*, set to shoot in California the following February. If ever a man wanted more out of life, he was not only a glutton but a fool.

On the night I speak of, this gluttonous fool decided to look in on his two current attractions. I saw the first act of *Chapter Two*, now in its second year with a superb and dedicated new cast, then jaunted down four blocks to see the second act of *They're Playing Our Song*, which not only was playing to a Standing Room Only audience of the most vociferous, enthusiastic and appreciative group of theatergoers I've encountered in a long time, but had, in addition, just paid off and was now in profit. Even the ulcer decided to skip a meal to see Lucie Arnaz and Robert Klein. After all, how often does an affliction get a free ticket to a Broadway show?

Did I sit back and revel in my good fortune? Did I relax and watch boyhood ambitions being fulfilled before my eyes? Not if you were born in the Bronx, in the Depression and Jewish, you don't. In each case, at each show, I reacted in the same manner. It was like going to simultaneous opening nights with all the accompanying fears and traumas. I found myself annoyed and irritated when latecomers arrived, causing an entire row to rise one after the other like ducks in a shooting gallery and distracting everyone who sat behind them, so that my favorite line in the play was barely audible, let alone laughed at. I gunned down insensitive coughers with the high-powered rifle I carry in the back of my brain for such emergencies; I put body language on every syllable uttered by the actors, wishing they wouldn't turn their heads at that moment or drop their voices at another, and mostly I wished I had rewritten the whole bloody thing while I reached back in my arsenal, got out two hand grenades and blew up the air-conditioning system and six elderly usherettes who were chatting pension-talk near the exit sign.

My inner rage was so intense that my ulcer threatened to attack my teeth if I didn't keep quiet. It hardly

mattered to me that these were both successful shows, enjoying long runs and having long since passed the acid test of critics (not without its usual slings and arrows, causing considerable personal pain but no significant damage to life and longevity), or that the present audience, by their vocal approval, were having the time of their lives . . . give three or four rows. What mattered was that I left the theater with my stomach tied not only in knots—it was braided. Instead of the even, relaxed breathing I was taught in meditation, mine was coming in quick, short gasps, not unlike the kind you experience if you are in bed at three o'clock in the morning and suddenly hear your window being opened from the outside.

I got home that night, undressed, brushed my teeth, looked in the mirror and saw a man holding a glass of water in one hand and a Valium, an ulcer pill, two extra-strength Tylenol and an Inderal, which helps lower blood pressure, in the other. I prayed that that man wasn't me. The pajamas and the slippers fit, and the face matched the one in the photograph on my wife's side of the bed. The man in the mirror was definitely me and neither one of us was very happy about it.

The ulcer knocked three times on the duodenum and yelled up, "Let's move it, Buster. We need some milk and cottage cheese down here." The blood pressure yelled back at the ulcer, "Be quiet, will you? We're trying to get some rest. Otherwise we come upstairs and bang on this guy's head." Then someone in the digestive tract got really angry and said, "You guys have been asking for this all night," whereupon he opened Flood Gates 2, 4 and 7, sending cascades of acidity over intestinal walls, wiping out lunch, dinner and what felt like a small town in southern Mississippi.

I know that I personally writhed and anguished in pain, but the face in the mirror smiled tauntingly as if it had a life of its own and smirked, "Well, big shot, how does it feel to be a success?"

I glanced to the side and the cut-glass mirror in the shower reflected my pained expression dozens of

times over, straight out of an early Orson Welles movie. And the myriad of images of this suffering soul nodded and said in unison, "Someone's trying to tell you something, fella!" I have never before heard the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in my bathroom offering me sage symphonic advice. "... telling you something, fella fella fella fella fella," it echoed and bounced against the tiles until it faded away in silence. The message got through. I had been given a gift. A reprieve. Another chance to re-examine and re-evaluate my life; to redirect my energies so that I would no longer stand in front of a bathroom mirror every night with a glass of water in one hand and a mini-pharmaceutical outlet in the other. My joy was enormous. I wanted to raise my eyes up to heaven and whisper my love and gratitude to the Almighty, but I was already on the thirty-fifth floor, and looking up struck me as being redundant.

Success, I grant you, is relative. From an outsider's point of view, it is measured by the degree of his admiration, respect, envy or disdain. From inside looking out, it is no greater nor less than you perceive yourself. I have dozens upon dozens of awards, nominations and tributes, most of which hang in my bathroom on a wall facing the commode. I am too vain to store them in the basement and humble enough to know they seem to be in the right perspective from the low vantage point I view them from. I rejoice in the flattering letters I receive from my peers and thoughtful admirers who rank my plays anywhere from "a delightful evening" to "worthy of Molière." They do not, however, counterbalance the humiliation endured on the opening night of *God's Favorite*, when a kindly semi-invalided woman in her mid-seventies beckoned to me at the final curtain as I made my way backstage, took me by the arm, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mr. Simon . . . shame on you!" It's moments like this that take the lustre out of an opening-night party.

I am in a no man's land of self-evaluation. On a Tuesday I see myself as so gifted that I think the cornflakes I left over for breakfast should immediately

be wrapped and sent to some Literary Museum for bronzing and held for posterity. (Walter Matthau's mother once said, "Walter, you don't have to act anymore. You're too big a star.") Come around on a Thursday and I will grovel at your feet to take me on as a shipping clerk in a dockside factory that manufactures "I Love New York" ashtrays. My confidence not only blows with the wind but is susceptible to the currents caused by a butterfly at rest.

Espying Woody Allen one night at a corner table in Elaine's shortly after his delightful *Manhattan* had opened to reviews which bestowed upon him such accolades as "genius" and "the most mature comic mind in America," I toyed despondently with my fettucini, rationalizing my own achievements by throwing myself such bitter crumbs as "Oh, well, I'm taller than he is," or, "I'm glad they didn't call *me* a genius. How can you ever top yourself?" But it was merely a cosmetic job that didn't cover up my true feelings for Woody. I was naturally envious of the critical acclaim showered upon him. Showered, hell. It was a down-pour. Not only did it bother me that he was being extolled to the pantheon of greats, it bothered me that it bothered me. I am not without my supporters, but I often feel it will go no further than Clive Barnes's succinct evaluation: "Neil Simon is destined to remain rich, successful and underrated." Thank you, Clive. If you're my gift horse, it's not your mouth I'm looking at. I have no wish to be poor, unsuccessful and over-rated. My admiration for Woody is enormous. Not just for the body of his work, but for the uncompromising dignity he maintains in striving for excellence. Jealousy fades away under the unadulterated rays of admiration.

However, what struck me about Woody as he sat there with his face all over *Time* magazine's cover was that he was toying with his linguini just as despondently as I was. His face was so long that he didn't need a napkin to cover up the faded army shirt that has been his uniform long before our military forces thought of it. When I walked over to congratulate him and ask how he was feeling about it all, he replied, "Oh, all

right." It was such a mournful response that I suspected he had just learned he had contracted a disease so dreadful that it doesn't end in death but causes one to live in pain for three hundred years. When I saw his dour expression, I saw my own reflected agony. I was not exactly along skid row career-wise myself, and yet the acidity in my stomach was as sour as the look on his face. After Woody won the Academy Award for *Annie Hall*, someone remarked to him, "You must be very happy." His reported reply was, "I have no time for happiness." He didn't seem to be dealing with good fortune any better than I was, and if misery loves company, we should have taken out a wedding license that night. But the next afternoon at the Tea Room the common bond was found. "The fun is getting there," we both agreed. "The work is the joy. The results are just something you have to deal with. You resent the catcalls and don't trust the ones who overpraise."

I don't know Woody well enough to accuse him of terminal *misanthropy*. He makes too many people happy to be joyless himself. Nor do I myself wish to appear ungrateful for the rewards that can't find wall space in my john, or unduly bitter for the times I'm dismissed by academia. But these recent observations have crystallized and finally made themselves clear to me. To wit: "I must take my work seriously, but not the results. I can control only what I write and not what others write about my writing. To agree with the ayes and negate the nays is a foolish pastime." To get gastric lesions because four people walked out of your play, or euphoria because someone asks for your autograph, will eventually misdirect your intentions and you will work to please rather than be pleased with your work. If success brings no more happiness than failure, what *does* give me joy? (We are, for the moment, leaving aside the main sources of contentment: wife, family, friends, good health, *The Maltese Falcon* and Chinese food. We are dealing solely with the creative spirit here and that won't take much longer, I promise.)

I am most alive and most fulfilled sitting alone in a room, hoping that those words forming on the paper

in the Smith-Corona will be the first perfect play ever written in a single draft. My pleasure is enhanced by a favorable reception by those I trust and respect: my wife, director, producer and the girl who types the manuscript. Rehearsals, production, reviews, box-office grosses, losses, triumphs and disasters are merely the scavengers that help keep the balance of nature in order. My job has been fulfilled. I have either fed and nurtured those who are hungry for whatever it is I have to offer, or I am simply a carcass to be clawed open and ripped apart. The point of view is yours.

I suspect I shall keep on writing in a vain search for that perfect play. I hope I will keep my equilibrium and sense of humor when I'm told I haven't achieved it. At any rate, the trip has been wonderful. As George and Ira Gershwin said, "They Can't Take That Away from Me."

NEIL SIMON

June 2, 1979

Los Angeles, Calif.