

Theron Montgomery

Driving Truman Capote: A Memoir

On a calm, cool April afternoon in 1975, I received an unexpected call from my father on the residence First Floor pay phone in New Men's Dorm at Birmingham-Southern College. My father's voice came over the line, loud and enthused. "Hi," he said, enjoying his surprise. He asked me how I was doing, how school was. "Now, are you listening?" he said. "I've got some news."

Truman Capote, the famous writer of *In Cold Blood*, would be in our hometown of Jacksonville, Alabama, the next day to speak and read and visit on the Jacksonville State University campus, where my father was Vice-President for Academic Affairs. It was a sudden arrangement Capote's agent had negotiated a few days before with the school, primarily at my father's insistence, to follow the author's reading performance at the Von Braun Center, the newly dedicated arts center, in Huntsville. Jacksonville State University had agreed to Capote's price and terms. He and a traveling companion would be driven from Huntsville to the campus by the SGA President early the next morning and they would be given rooms and breakfast at the university's International House. Afterwards, Capote would hold a luncheon reception with faculty at the library, and in the afternoon, he would give a reading performance at the coliseum.

My father and I loved literature, especially southern literature, and my father knew I had aspirations of becoming a writer, too. "You must come and hear him," he said over the phone, matter-of-fact and encouraging. I caught the edge of authority in his voice and the sense of pride in him that he

often portrayed as a school administrator when something exceptional or new was happening on his watch. Jacksonville State University had just trumped every school in the state, getting a famous writer and a celebrity, and one from Alabama, to boot.

My parents and I knew Capote's work. Over the years, we had read *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, *The Grass Harp* and *In Cold Blood*, and we had seen the special TV movies based off of his stories, such as "A Christmas Memory" and "Among the Paths to Eden." We had seen re-runs of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. And, as many people at that time, we had watched the small man with his large hats and quiet histrionics on *The Dick Cavett Show*.

My father's voice could not contain his eagerness. "Having Truman Capote on campus will be an event," he said. "I'll see that you get to meet him and I'll tell him you want to write."

"Truman Capote?" I echoed over the phone. "Really?"

I felt myself grin and go suddenly shy. I paused and then said all right, I'd be there. "Thanks, Dad."

"Coliseum at two-thirty. And come around the back," Dad said. "Admission is free. Tell someone who you are and they'll show you where your mother and your sister and I will be. We'll see you afterwards at home, okay?"

He paused. "President Stone is going to let us hold dinner for Truman Capote at our house. Oh, and--" Dad added before we hung up, "don't forget to take notes." He said it with a knowing laugh.

I laughed at the insinuation, too, remembering some statement attributed to Truman Capote that he took notes virtually every day, and with a ninety-something percent total recall.

That night, instead of going to the fraternity house, I sat at my dorm room wall desk and rewrote a short story I was

working on, “The Boy and the Horse,” which had been inspired by the John Steinbeck story, “Flight,” and the quote of the mother when she told Pepe, “A boy becomes a man when a man is needed.” My story was about a boy alone with his horse during a jumping workout in a ring while his parents were absent. After some detailed development, a jumping accident, some emotional travail, and the encouragement of a maternal vet who arrived on the scene (and who could not act because the parents were not there), the boy did what had to be done: “He slowly placed the point of the gun’s blue steel barrel on the middle blaze on the horse’s forehead, between the large, calm brown eyes, clamped his own eyes shut and squeezed the trigger.” The next, last, and closing paragraph read: “The blast seemed to be far, far away.”

I stayed up into the night, revising lines so they read better, changing infinitives, struggling over accurate description, and before going to bed, I retyped the entire story on my small, blue, portable Smith-Corona. I was a graduating senior English major, taking the school’s only course in creative writing with a visiting, white-haired and aging gentleman professor from Vanderbilt, whose specialty was Dryden. In his classes, he gave us eloquent lectures about writing from behind a desk while he chain-smoked cigarettes in a suit and then guided the class in reading and critiquing each other’s short story efforts, discussing such concepts as the recognition of “pastoral elegy” or the short story’s “mimetic implications”. Once a week, there was a one-on-one conference with the professor in his office where he would tell each student whether his or her work was too didactic (“preachy”) or whether the work was realistic (believable) enough, being sure to mark off points for punctuation and fragments. He would then cite passages or give examples from writers who were dead or had written at least fifty years ago, and each of us would be sent off to revise again. “The real writer,” the

professor would say with a wink and a slanted, tobacco-stained grin, “always comes back.”

The next morning, after classes and lunch in the cafeteria, I went back to my dorm room, packed my typewriter in its case, placed my short story into a folder and packed a change of clothes and a toilet kit. I remembered to put on a brown knit suit with a wide belt and a wide, brown tie with something like silver fox hunting patterns on it, brown socks and a pair of brown and white oxfords to please my mother. Before carrying everything to my cranberry red Camaro in a parking space behind the dorm, I placed a call from the hall phone to my new girlfriend, Darla.

“Oh, yeah? Truman Capote?” she said over the phone from New Women’s dorm. “Oh, hey. *Far Out!*” she declared.

I was taken aback by her sudden excitement and the volume in her voice. “Wild,” Darla went on. “Truman Capote. Another Alabama writer. I *loved* that rain scene with the cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

“So, you’re going, huh?” Darla said. “Come around the back of New Women’s’ and I’ll see you off.

I carried my suitcase, typewriter and folder outside and into the black interior of my Camaro, loading everything into the back seat. I got in behind the wheel and drove around the campus circle to an open parking place along the curb behind New Women’s dorm. Darla was already there; smiling and waiting for me on the landing above the concrete steps to the glassed West Door: her long, frosted blonde bangs hanging down her shoulders and in something like a midi, blue paisley, drop dress, with a cream string belt and heavy-heeled, medium blue shoes. She gave me a small, girlish wave and did a little hop; her clean, white smile and clear, baby blue eyes the largest things on her face. I grinned up at her, got out of the car and ran up the steps.

“Hey,” she whispered, suddenly shy, as I came up. She

held her closed smile on me.

“Hey,” I said.

“So...you’re going, huh?”

“Yeah. Sorry I can’t take you with me.”

“Oh...that’s okay,” she sighed. “We’re not there yet,” she hinted at the level of our relationship.

I nodded in surprise at her directness.

“Hope you have fun,” she drawled. She watched me with a shy grin. “Maybe you can learn how to write, too.”

I shrugged and tried a small laugh, feeling the blood rise to my face, suddenly embarrassed. It was as if Darla had clued into my inner thoughts. She smiled and nodded, like she knew something.

The drive from Birmingham was a little over an hour on I-20 to Oxford, north on Highway 21 through Anniston, past Fort McClellan and into Jacksonville. I drove with the driver’s window down; my large, brown, knotted tie loosened, smoking an occasional Winston Red, and the car radio blaring rock on FM WERC. I listened to songs by Elton John, Sly and the Family Stone and Joni Mitchell. I was twenty-two years old with sideburns and thick hair that dropped over my ears to my collar, and which I constantly swept out of my eyes. The sun was bright. The air was mild. The sky was blue. Wild white dogwoods were blooming in the flush spring greening of the Appalachian foothills. I listened to songs and thought random thoughts. I thought about Darla and then of my ATO fraternity brothers who would be lounging around the fraternity house TV about now, watching “Andy Griffith” re-runs or driving together to The Tide and Tiger Bar and Grill on Graymont Avenue, across from Legion Field, for beer.

In something like a slow surprise, I would now and then realize where I was going and why, hearing my father’s ebullient voice, seeing his smile and expectant face; seeing

Truman Capote in his large, white hat with a dark band on *The Dick Cavett Show*, a quiet, wheedling voice from the tiny man seated in a raised chair, with a fair and plump face, tinted glasses and a prominent nose. I thought about writing. I recalled the black and white TV dramas based on Truman Capote's stories, "A Christmas Memory" and "Among the Paths to Eden," and then I thought of Truman Capote as the small, lonely neighborhood boy, "Dill," in Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I thought of the character in the movie, too.

Take notes, I heard my father say, as if there was a significant point to all of this—Take notes--like Truman Capote always claimed to take prolific notes, with a prolific memory. I thought about writing. Was that how one became a writer? We're not there yet, Darla had said.

In Jacksonville, I drove around the small, circular square with the Confederate statue of my hometown, listening to Bread on WERC as I went past the filling stations, the stores, the bank, the drug store where the old men of my childhood used to sit on the front steps and tell tales, and onto the main Pelham Road, past the post office, the Dairy Queen, where I hung out as a teenager; past the high school and the Jacksonville State University campus. At the university's International House, I turned West onto Highway 421, driving past dormitories and the funeral home and then to the coliseum, its large, surrounding, black asphalt parking lot crammed with parked vehicles, their chrome and windshields shining in the sunlight.

I parked behind the coliseum, before a cracked curb and the high, green-slatted cyclone fence of the tennis courts. I got out of my car, straightened my tie, straightened my coat and joined a slow progression of people going through the parking lot, up the concrete steps and into the coliseum, through its tinted glass and steel doors and onto the long

concrete and ceramic-tiled balustrade that served as an upper deck with offices to one side and as an upper side deck overlooking the hard rubber basketball court on the other.

Inside was dim, cool and crowded with people. On the deck side, I stopped at the railing, looking down on talking, milling students, local citizens and faculty gathering in sections of folding chairs in rows below—maybe four or five hundred people in all—standing in small groups or as couples on the court floor. Most of the upper court bleacher seats were empty. People stood beside or sat in the lower or floor seats under the ceiling lights, and some were already seated around a raised, wooden platform at mid-court. On the raised platform was a steel microphone on a low stand to the right side of a plush, blue study chair, facing the rows of seats. Beside the chair was a small, glass-topped table with a wrought iron center leg in the form of a musical Treble Cleft. On the glass table top was a clear glass of water and a closed, dark, hardcover book.

I recognized some familiar faces but I did not locate my parents or my sister. The lights began to go off and on. Everyone who was standing began to sit down and I decided to stay where I was, looking on with my hands on the railing as the lights dimmed down and off and the people talking below grew quiet. In a few moments, a spotlight beamed on from the upper court seats above me to my right, piercing the dark with a direct, strong white light onto the blue study chair on the center platform. Without any introduction, Truman Capote, the small man from *The Dick Cavett Show*, came into the light, bareheaded, without a tie, in a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, and in gray slacks and small, dark dress shoes. He made a slight bow before the chair in the fierce beam of the light, to rising applause from the dark and sporadic flickers of flashbulbs: a small, short, plump man with thinning hair, almost bald; a fair and bland face with clear-framed, gray-tinted glasses, and a long, low,

prominent nose. He turned and plopped himself down into the study chair. In the fierce stream of light, he looked pale and tired; a small, doll-like man slumped into what seemed like an oversized seat. In the fierce light, his hair was white and thin, his small face was pallid and his glasses glinted in a lambent glow. He turned the level microphone toward his mouth and reached for the dark book on the side table, looking to it and opening it as if pretending this was to be a quiet, ponderous moment. He paused and looked up from his book.

“Hello. I’m Truman Capote,” he said into the microphone in a soft whine. A loud round of applause rose from the darkness. He went back to the book, pausing between the pages.

“Since I’m back in *Alabama*,” Mr. Capote stressed, in an emphasized slow and high drawl while he turned the pages, “I thought I’d give you an *Alabama* story.” He paused. “I spent my early childhood in Monroeville,” he informed everyone. “And that’s where this story takes place.”

He turned, picked up the shiny glass of water from the side table, took a swallow, set the glass back on the table and studied a page in the book for a long moment before he began to read into the microphone in a quiet and steady voice and with a slow tone, like a soft and sullen child. As I listened to him read and settled into the pacing of the story in a “we” point of view, I recognized “A Christmas Memory,” the story of a seven-year old boy child and the sixty-something year old woman “friend” who was also a child; the story of their being together, partners, their making of fruitcakes in November, pushing an old, ratty baby buggy through fields for pecans, bootleg whiskey and a Christmas tree; the last Christmas day when the boy is loved and flying kites with his older “friend” before he is sent off to military school, never to return “home” again.

“Home is where my friend is,” Capote read even slower

towards the end, his voice sad, “and there I never go.”

At the end of the story, when the child, now older and on a military school campus, learns of his older friend’s death, but instead of looking down, is searching the sky, Capote’s voice broke and he wiped each of his eyes under his glasses on an index finger before he managed to finish.

“As if I expected to see, rather like hearts,” he read on with a deep sigh, “a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.”

He went silent in the bright stream of light upon him in the study chair. The audience in the dark gave him a pause and then loud and steady applause. Capote nodded, closed the book, dropped it onto the side table and wiped both eyes under his tinted glasses with the fingers of either hand. He dropped his hands, pushed the glasses back up on his nose and nodded his thanks. The ceiling lights came on and the spotlight went off. As the applause died, the little man slumped in the study chair laid his hands on the armrests, crossed his short legs at their ankles and he gazed off and around at the audience.

“Well,” he whined at the audience through the microphone, “does anyone have a *question*?”

A pause. Capote waited with a thin, closed and bemused smile. A female student stood up, in a pink and white dress, raised her hand and asked a question I couldn’t hear.

“Oh, no, dearie,” Capote said, after a moment. His face relaxed as he considered her question. “Truth is a relative thing,” he announced in his still quiet voice. “In order to tell a story, we have to first know that the story will be believed-or there wouldn’t be one, would there?” He paused, looked to the girl. “I mean, who knows what real truth is?” he added in a plaintive whine. “The only truth we have is in the word.”

The girl nodded her thanks and sat down. Several people rose then throughout the audience with a show of hands.

Capote pointed to a male student in a dark blazer a few rows away from him.

“Mr. Capote... sir,” the young man said, loud and eager, “I was wondering, how much revision do you do?”

Capote looked at the ceiling and tugged an ear lobe with one hand. “Oh, I used to revise,” he said slowly in a soft whine. “I don’t revise anymore,” he stated.

There was brief, polite silence, then applause from the audience.

“You see,” Capote went on. He looked down at the young man and then upwards again, tugging his ear. “If one writes long and hard enough... and if one *plans* in his head, well...you can eventually learn to avoid a lot of revision.”

He paused. There was more scattered applause. Capote searched the audience and pointed to a middle-aged woman with thick glasses, in a long, flowing brown dress, who was standing roughly in the middle of the seats with her hand raised.

“Mr. Capote,” the lady said, her voice ingratiating and shrill as she lowered her hand, smiling. “Do please tell us how Nelle is doing,” she said. She waited, smiling expectantly. She was referring to Harper Lee, another Alabama writer, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and a longtime friend of Capote’s.

“I do not,” Capote dead-panned in his soft voice, “care to talk about my friends in public.”

He dismissed the woman with a turn of his head and pointed to a student standing below him near the platform in flared jeans and a yellow shirt. The woman remained standing for a few moments and holding something left of her smile before she sat down.

“Mr. Capote,” said the male student Capote had pointed to, “I was wondering...what advice you have for anyone wishing to become a writer?”

“Yes, well,” Capote drawled and nodded. “You need to

read,” he said. “Read any and everything and pay attention to those writers you like.” He paused, dropping and crossing his hands in his lap. “Then you need to decide whether you really want to write,” he insisted. “After all, writers have to work alone and they have to work hard. I decided long ago,” he elaborated, looking away to the audience and expanding with his slow, soft voice, “that college wasn’t for me. I wanted to be a writer and I knew where I wanted to go.” He paused. “So, I began as a young man to read and study words and write ... for hours every day.

“That’s not to say you can’t or that you shouldn’t go to college,” he added. “It’s just that the big decision comes down to what you want to do,” he whined, “and then, well, do it. Right?”

Capote paused, looking away with his tinted lenses. The audience applauded. The young man applauded, too, and sat down.

“Mr. Capote?” another male student called, standing far back in the seats in a red plaid shirt and dark slacks, after getting the author’s nod. “I was just wondering. With all that you’ve read and written,” he asked, “who would you say is the greatest writer today?”

“The greatest *living* writer?” Capote drawled. “Oh, my,” he paused. “There are so many,” his voice trailed. He adjusted his glasses with one hand. “I couldn’t say. “William Styron?” he offered. “Malamud? Or, maybe Norman Mailer...” his voice trailed off. He paused. “Well, who do you think?” he turned the question on the student.

“You?” the student said. The audience applauded.

Capote took a long moment, adjusted his glasses with both hands on the frames and let his hands drop.

“That’s acceptable,” he said quietly.

He sat rock still while the audience applauded.

I watched from the railing, sweeping my hair out of my

eyes and shifting my weight from one foot to the other, fighting the fatigue of standing, while the questioning went on: raised hands to be acknowledged from eager or solemn, and mostly young faces--though an occasional academic with a serious face, a serious question. Each slow, thoughtful answer from Truman Capote, in a calm nonchalance and a soft, whiny voice while he sat with his legs crossed and his short arms and hands resting on the armrests, brought applause. Truman Capote could do no wrong, the small, virtually bald, man-doll with tinted lenses and thinning hair, in an over-sized and plush study chair, enjoyed himself as he fielded questions at his time and will, each one with random and interpolated pauses. The questions were various, some banal.

Someone asked what his favorite color was. Truman Capote paused and grinned with a pencil thin leer. "Does that *matter*?" he whined. "Story gray, sometimes sky blue," he said. A professor asked about discipline and how many words he wrote a day. That brought a long pause, a doff of a hand. "Some days, only one word," Capote finally stated. Then someone asked what the hardest thing about being a writer was. Capote pondered. "I'm not sure," he said, after a moment, tugging on an ear. "Being alone, I imagine...and finding that exact and right word," he said slowly. That brought hesitant, scattered applause.

After about half an hour of such questioning, Truman Capote slid off the front of the chair, stood up and with a slight bow, waved everyone off. "Thank you, thank you," the little man in tinted lenses said in his high, quiet voice, without the microphone beside him, "but I think I'm due somewhere else." He peered up toward the ceiling. His lenses glinted. He gave a small, concave smile.

The audience rose and applauded. He bowed two or three times, turned and went slowly down the steps of the platform, as a few flashbulbs flickered in the audience. A

man in a dark suit appeared to be waiting for him. The audience began to break up, murmuring, and filing out, while others rushed to the front of the platform to try to meet the famous author. I followed Capote from my perch on the deck railing and watched two dozen or so students and faculty swarm around the little man. He patiently stopped and answered their questions and autographed books or scraps of paper as they were offered to him.

I searched the rest of the crowd and found my parents then, waving to me behind the platform; my father, his dark, thinning hair and big-toothed grin, in a steel gray suit and wide, silver tie with some kind of white pattern on it; my mother smiling in a white, russet-lined suit dress and a gold balled necklace, her short dark hair in a wave perm, her lips ginger-colored; my fourteen year-old sister, a thin, young teen; not waving but close-smiling, in a green and white T-shirt dress, her lighter brown hair in something like a wedge haircut. My parents stopped waving but kept smiling at me. *Home*, my father mouthed, pointing away from the platform. *See you home*. I nodded that I understood. I smiled and waved and turned away.

“Where you going, boy?” someone uttered behind me at the exit doors. I turned and it was Gus Edwards, my father’s best friend, my sister’s godfather, and the Dean of Men at Jacksonville State University. Short, square-shouldered, in a black-tailored suit, white shirt and black tie, with rapid, squinting dark eyes behind thick, black framed glasses, Gus was a perpetual Citadel graduate with his ever close-cropped, black crew cut. He could be gruff and laconic, but beneath the façade, he was, in truth, amusing and kind.

“Funny fella,” Gus said, bemused, with a slight and knowing grin, a rapid blinking of his eyes.

“Yeah,” I grinned back. “How are you?”

He nodded. “Humph,” Gus said, holding a slight and

mischievous grin. "If he's from here," Gus observed, "I don't know that many families that would take him in."

I laughed. "He's very popular," I said. "He's on TV."

"Um-hmm, popular," Gus echoed. "Our greatest writer?" Gus did his rapid eye squints. "I'd take Pat Conroy, myself."

"He might be the best one from Alabama," I said.

"Though I don't think he's any better than William March."

"Um-hmm," Gus said with a nod. He averted his eyes, and then peered over his glasses at me with a wry smile.

"And who," he asked, "remembers William March?"

On the street before my parents' pink bricked, colonial style, I was surprised to discover our family's yellow Oldsmobile 88 and our maid's brown Buick Electra with its black vinyl top, parked off the shoulder of the drive, as though to allow visitors entrance. I parked my Camaro at the curb, walked up the drive, past the vehicles to the back door and rang the doorbell. My mother came to the door, smiling in her ginger lipstick, her dark perm, in the same suit dress from the coliseum.

"Oh, Tem-bo," she greeted me. "Tem-bo, you made it!"

She hugged me and led the way inside. "We're so glad you came," she whispered, giving me a knowing wink. "Your father is so excited," she smiled

She led the way through the foyer, the hallway and into the cherry paneled family room, where the author himself, Truman Capote, was seated at the far end of the white couch, near the dead, brick fireplace, on the opposite end from my sister, Kam; the same small man with the same tinted lenses, dressed as he had been in the coliseum but with a light gray suit coat on now and cradling a large, white Panama hat with a black band in his lap. His apparent companion sat in the immediate brown club chair, diagonally across from the small wooden coffee table from him, facing my sister. My

father was seated in the further orange club chair across from the coffee table, facing Truman Capote.

“Mr. Capote,” my mother declared, leading the way into the family room. She stopped and raised her hand, palm up and toward me, as though I was the presentation. “This is our son,” she announced, smiling.

Feeling a rising blush on my cheeks and my sister’s lingering grin, I stopped and nodded to Mr. Capote and the other man.

“Hello,” I said.

“There he is,” Dad declared. He rose from his chair with a broad smile, his dark gray suit coat unbuttoned. Truman Capote and his companion rose after him. Everyone nodded toward me. I tried to force a smile. My sister remained seated, her steeled look and grin on me.

“Tem,” my father said, with a slow, dignified emphasis, “this is Truman Capote...and,” he turned to the other man, “this is his good friend, and a good writer in his own right, Mr. Jack Dunphy.”

My father nodded to Jack Dunphy. Jack Dunphy nodded to my father with a quick, curt smile. He was a trim man in a dark suit. He had a small face with a pointed nose and his blue eyes were bloodshot. His hair was short and white, his temples a sheen of gray. Mr. Capote stood, polite, quiet, dangling his panama hat by the fingers of one hand. One had to look down at him. The gray tinted glasses seemed to cover most of his face. He was about five feet, two inches; short and plump in his small suit, fair skinned, balding and with thin, wispy hair.

I shook Mr. Capote’s hand and Mr. Dunphy’s hand. I shook my father’s hand, went and hugged my sister as she rose from the couch, still grinning at me, and sat back down.

Pearl, our maid, came out from the kitchen, her mahogany face and black eyes behind black-topped and wire-rimmed cat eye lenses; her heavy frame in soft, leather

shoes, a white dress and beige apron; her salt and pepper hair pulled back into a bun. She hugged me quick, hard and shy before the others and I smelled the steam from cooking on her skin.

“Pearl,” I said and grinned.

Pearl smiled her white and gold teeth, nodded to me, everyone, turned back into the kitchen. I turned to our guests.

“I enjoyed your reading, sir,” I said to Mr. Capote.

“Thank you,” he said in a soft voice.

“And how are you, sir?” I said to Mr. Dunphy.

He nodded.

“Please, please. Let’s sit down,” my father said. “We shall all eat soon.”

Mr. Capote sat down in his corner of the couch, holding the hat in his lap. Mr. Dunphy and my father sat down in the same Family Room club chairs. My father motioned for me to sit between Truman Capote and my sister; which I did, remembering to unbutton my coat and to sweep the hair out of my eyes.

What I did not know until much later was that my father was putting up a pleasant and persistent conversation in an attempt to soothe tensions that had been building all day between him and our distinguished guests. Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy had arrived that morning from Huntsville hung over, apparently having not considered that they were now in the Deep Dry South, at a public university, and that not all of their needs would be accommodated. I would learn later from various witnesses that both men were sullen and lethargic throughout the morning and the faculty luncheon, though Capote did make a greater effort to be polite. At the faculty luncheon, Jack Dunphy unknowingly pulled on his suit coat inside out, and his head fell onto his salad plate of cottage cheese. Capote had stifled a giggle and looked

away, while Dunphy tried to dab his face with a napkin and the audience looked on speechless.

From mid morning of that day, Capote and Dunphy began prodding people for vodka, beginning with the SGA President who was their student escort, the cafeteria waiters at the faculty luncheon, the English department chair, resorting to even the cleaning crew, and finally, my father, who was the university administrator in charge of the event. What began as friendly, colluding inquiries with winks, grew to plaintive whines and then outright demands by the afternoon. To each request for a drink, my father had answered, “No.”

As I seated myself on the couch between my sister and Mr. Capote, Mr. Capote remained quiet, holding the panama hat in his lap, while my mother went into the kitchen, apparently to assist Pearl with dinner, and then she came back into the family room, walking into the middle of everyone, between the couch and chairs and beside the coffee table, in her soft, polite and servile manner; a smile on her ginger lips.

“Gentlemen,” she said in her southern drawl, “You’ve had a long day.” She clasped her hands together at her waist and looked to our guests. “Wouldn’t you like a drink before dinner?” She paused and smiled.

My father stared at her and his eyes widened in alarm. But my mother ignored him and continued to smile. She had already spoken. The men were guests in our house and there was nothing Dad could do.

Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy looked up at her in disbelief and they nodded like chagrined children.

“We have bourbon,” my mother suggested, her voice bright and friendly. “We also have...vodka,” she added and held her smile. My father, sister and I all stared at her. I wondered how she had located a bottle of anything in Jacksonville. But that was another thing I didn’t know.

“Oh, er...vodka,” Mr. Dunphy managed in a weak voice and he blinked his bloodshot eyes.

“Vodka...*please*,” Mr. Capote said in a slow, soft whine. He cleared his throat.

My mother kept smiling and she turned to my father. “And what would you like, dear?” Her tone remained bright.

My father looked at her, swallowed, and slowly shook his head no. She turned to me with the same smile. I quickly shook my head no.

“No thank you,” I said, in disbelief.

My sister said nothing, shy and staring at my mother with wide and surprised eyes while she nodded, smiled at all of us, turned and went into the kitchen.

“Well...er, well...and another distinctive tale of ours,” my father finally broke the silence, apparently returning to a sociable discussion before I had entered the room, “is we have only Virginia bridal wreath growing all over Jacksonville. It seems during the Civil War,” dad warmed up to his topic with an engaging smile, “when our local hero, the Gallant Pelham, was killed in action in Virginia, the women up there placed cuttings of bridal wreath on his casket before it was sent back here by train and wagon for burial.”

My father paused as Capote and Dunphy nodded and dutifully looked on. “At his funeral in the old Baptist church off the town square, as legend has it,” Dad continued, “four grieving, young ladies showed up dressed in black, each one clasping a Bible in her hand signed from him, and each one claiming to be engaged to him as well—that’s another story,” my father interjected with a laugh “—anyway,” he went on, “as reliable, local sources have it, the women of Jacksonville took the cuttings of bridal wreath off the casket before he was laid to rest in our town cemetery...and to this day, descendants of that particular bridal wreath bloom every

spring, all over town, in the hills, our yards, gardens, everywhere.

“So, you don’t say?” Mr. Dunphy said. He nodded with a small smile and blinked at my father with his bloodshot eyes. “Tell me,” he asked, “what is bridal wreath?” He gave my father a blank look.

“Oh, *Jack*,” Truman Capote muttered, giving him an incredulous look. “You know what *bridal* wreath is.”

Mr. Dunphy looked at him and shook his head no.

“Small, stick-like stem,” my father offered. “Clustered with small, white flowers.” He looked to my sister and then to me. For a brief moment, I thought he was going to tell us to go out and find some, but dad let it drop. Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy gave him tired smiles.

Mr. Capote turned to me. “Your father says you like to write?” he said, quiet and kind.

“Oh. Yes, sir,” I said. I nodded. My sister watched us in silence.

“Oh, *pleeeze*,” he rolled his eyes with a quick look upward. “Call me Truman,” he said softly. “We are in your house.”

“Yes, sir. Er, Truman, sir.”

He laughed at that, a soft, slow laugh; his face amused behind the tinted lenses.

“What do you write?” he asked.

My father and Mr. Dunphy began to talk about something. My mother came in from the kitchen, smiling, and carrying two large glass tumblers on a silver tray, each glass filled to the brim with clear liquid and ice cubes. My father stopped talking to Mr. Dunphy. He watched as mother served our guests.

“There you are, Mr. Capote,” mother almost sang, her voice ever bright and cheerful. Her ginger lips.

“Oh...*thank* you, dear,” Truman whispered with gratitude. He set his hat down on the coffee table and made a

long, dry swallow as he took the drink from the tray, holding it with care. He took a slow, deep sip, closed his eyes and sighed with relief. Mr. Dunphy nodded his thanks as mother turned with the tray to him. He took his glass and took a long, careful swallow. Mother paused with the tray, smiled, turned and left for the kitchen.

“You were saying?” Truman turned to me while my father and Mr. Dunphy resumed talking. “Oh, yes. You want to be a writer?” He took another slow sip of his drink. “Well,” he said, “you only *write* as well as you *read*,” he stated. “What do you read?”

“The English,” I said, sweeping my hair out of my face. My sister said nothing, only watched us.

“The *English*?” Truman looked at me in disbelief. He looked away with a playful, subtle sneer, looked back at me. Why the *English*?” he repined. “I don’t know *that* many English writers.”

“They’ve had more great writers,” I said.

Truman scoffed, his eyes rolled behind his tinted lenses. He took a fast sip of his drink, clutching the glass tumbler in both of his hands.

“Oh, but...that’s not *fair*,” he answered in his high, soft voice. They’ve had more time,” he stressed. “Who do you know living now that’s so great?” he wanted to know. “I mean,” he frowned, “name one.”

“Er ...Waugh? Golding?” I searched.

“Waugh’s all right. Nothing to crow about, really. Golding can be good.” Truman nodded, took a deep sip of his drink and stared me in through his lenses.

“The best writers today are American, young man,” he said, his voice quiet and sure. “That’s where the writing is today, where the great energy is.” He paused, pushed his glasses back up his nose with one free finger. “And who do you think is the best American writer?” he wanted to know.

“Faulkner,” I stated.

“*Faulkner?*” Truman sputtered as he took a swallow of his drink. He sneered, looked away and up at the ceiling. “Oh, but he’s dead,” Truman whined, bringing his eyes down on me.

“He was an original,” I said, with sophomoric defensiveness. “A genius.”

“Oh...” Truman pouted, doffing a hand at me from his glass. “Genius is *cheap*,” he stressed with a high pitch. “Besides, he was before television,” Truman said. “How a book sells is what gets it noticed. You can’t have impact if people don’t *notice* it,” he insisted.

I looked at him and nodded, but I didn’t get it.

Truman smiled a small, smug smile. He looked at me, paused before a sip of his drink and looked to Jack. Jack turned from my father, nodded and laughed. My father and I smiled to be polite. My silent sister said nothing and looked on, either listening or pretending to.

Truman took a sip of his drink and turned back to me with a sigh and a look of patient tolerance. He started to speak, thought better of it, finished his drink in a gulp and set the glass down on a coaster on the coffee table.

“So, what do you like, my boy? Why do you write?” Truman Capote waited.

“I don’t know,” I said. I swept my hair out of my eyes. I saw his cheeks were turning red.

Truman smiled and nodded. “That may be a good reason,” he said in his soft voice. “But it’s not the best one,” he added, placing his hands on his knees and sliding them to his lap. He made a slow, closed smile and glanced toward the kitchen.

“Me?” he said. “I wanted to say something great. I wanted be rich and famous.” He smiled and chuckled.

“I think Faulkner said he had ghosts chasing him.”

Truman frowned. “Will you get off *Faulkner?*” he

whined. He grimaced. “God, Faulkner,” he said. He ran a finger up and down his cheek. “The only people who could read him were academics.”

Truman let his hand drop and studied me with a closed smile. “All right, Faulkner was great in his *time*,” he conceded. He became thoughtful, rubbing his ear between a thumb and forefinger. “But this is a new *time*,” Truman Capote said, serious. “The news is becoming our literature. People relate more to what they see than what they live in now.”

I looked at him and nodded, but I didn’t get it.

Truman looked to Jack and smiled. Jack turned from my father and laughed, blinking his bloodshot eyes. My father and I smiled. My sister looked on, still patient, silent.

“Me? I’m just a fly on the wall,” Truman raised his voice and grinned at everyone. “I just enter the storm and report on what I see,” he said. “And what I remember,” he laughed. “That’s all it is, really.” He turned to me and smiled a closed smile. Jack laughed, too. They were both feeling better after the drinks.

My father asked Jack a question. Truman watched and sighed as they began to talk.

“You have a girlfriend, Timmy?” Truman turned to me and asked. He gave me a calm, level gaze through his tinted glasses. He smiled a thin, closed smile. He slowly pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his thumb.

“Well, er, yes,” I said.

My father and Jack continued to talk to one another and my quiet sister continued to look on like a deaf mute. Truman’s smile grew wane. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple with a forefinger.

“What a waste,” he whispered, under his breath.

I smiled and nodded. But I didn’t get it.

The doorbell rang. My mother came out of the kitchen and smiled for everyone as she went down the hallway to the

door.

“That may be Dr. Stone,” my father said. His tone signaled everyone.

Jack smiled and beckoned to Truman with his empty glass. He set the glass down on another coaster on the coffee table and my mother came into the family room, leading in Dr. Stone, the university president. Dr. Stone’s presence immediately dominated the room: a big man with a large, eager face; thick, dark eyebrows and dark, penetrating eyes; fleshy cheeks, a long nose, and a shock of thick, white hair. He wore a dark blue suit with a blue tie. My father and I rose. Truman and Jack rose, too. My sister remained sitting, silent, and watching. Dr. Stone nodded with a broad smile for everyone as my mother introduced him. They had already met during the day. He shook hands with Truman and then Jack. He shook hands with dad and then me.

“Good to have you with us in Jacksonville!” he declared for our guests.

He nodded to my sister and me. “Hey, kids! Kam,” he nodded. “Tem.”

“Dr Stone,” we said in unison and smiled. We had known him all of our lives.

Everyone except my sister remained standing while my father brought a study chair from the living room for Dr. Stone.

He placed it to the outside of Jack Dunphy’s chair. Dr. Stone smiled, calmly moved the chair to the near end of the coffee table as we men sat down and my mother smiled and turned towards the kitchen. Dr. Stone took his seat with a broad grin on everyone and unbuttoned his suit coat. He leaned forward from the edge of his seat, resting his elbows on his knees, taking everyone in, and paused as though to include everyone in his confidence.

“We had a good talk this morning, gentlemen,” he nodded to Jack and Truman, rubbing his large hands together. “I

enjoyed talking to you,” he said. “And we had a good read this afternoon.”

Jack nodded with his bloodshot eyes. He suddenly looked tired.

“Why, thank you,” Truman said, his tone meek and quiet from his corner of the couch. He averted his look from Dr. Stone’s steady, scanning gaze, picked up the white Panama hat from the coffee table and clutched it in his lap with both hands.

“Thank you,” Truman said. It came like a slow sigh.

“Oh, I thought the reading and the questioning went well,” my father offered.

“What we wanted to do--” Dr. Stone stated with slow solemnity, interrupting my father, leaning even more toward everyone, looking to be sure that everyone was looking at him, and rubbing his hands together, as though he was at a fireplace—“we wanted to bring this great mind,” he paused, parting his large hands and holding them up as if to beseech us—“*home*,” Dr. Stone looked at Truman, relishing the word.

“Bring him back home,” he repeated, like a biblical chant.

Truman and Jack sat staring, unmoved. Dr. Stone paused and waited, letting his hands drop, his eyes surveying our guests. My father and my sister and I nodded.

“*You* are Alabama’s greatest writer,” Dr. Stone said with a slow and profound nod to Truman. “And we are the ones who brought you *home*.”

Truman managed a pencil thin smile under his tinted glasses. “Thank you,” he whispered. He nodded. Jack Dunphy looked at Truman. He and Truman seemed to have grown quiet and small in Dr. Stone’s presence.

There was a moment of silence.

“Well,” Truman finally said, clearing his throat from his corner of the couch, in his high, soft voice. “Thank you ... for bringing me...*home*.”

My father and Dr. Stone smiled and nodded. Jack Dunphy looked to Dr. Stone, then to Truman. My mother came smiling into the room from the kitchen.

“Dinner is served!” she announced, almost singing. “Mr. Capote?” mother asked, her voice bright, kind, “Would you do us the honor of leading us to table?”

“Oh...oh, yes,” Truman said slowly. He nodded. “Thank you, dear.”

He rose from the couch and set his Panama hat down on the coffee table. The little man stood as everyone else rose, looking down at him and waiting for him to lead the way.

Three decades will tinge a cluster of loose legal pages from white to Indian yellow, held together on a rusted paperclip and kept in a fake leather, cardboard briefcase, after being stored under various beds, in desks, on bookshelves, in closets; and eventually, winding up forgotten in the attic of the very house in which the notes originated.

I discover those notes that I took for two nights in April of 1975, under a string-corded stack of *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly* magazines, beside a broken Hercules tricycle, a toy Daisy musket and a wooden baby rocker in my parents' dusty, heat-desiccated attic, while searching for a boyhood Blue and Gray Battle Set to show my young sons on a Thanksgiving Day. Bemused at the discovery and remembering, I slowly pull out the collapsed briefcase and unzip it, as one who wonders if time might still be preserved in a tomb. Opening it and lifting the pages out, I am struck at how juvenile and abstract the writing is, compared to my memory of it; how the pages and paperclip have aged; how the sloppy and slanted cursive in blue Scripto fountain ink has faded into thin purple, and how, except for some tedious recollection of dialogue, the language does not revive all of the expected images.

Beneath the clumped, brittle pages of notes that my

father urged me to take long ago, so that I could one day write a story, is my original and typed short story, “The Boy and the Horse,” which Truman Capote read and afterwards said to me, “That’s very good.” The pages are high in cotton fiber. They are still white and the keyed impressions from another era, Smith-Corona typewriter are still clear.

Only, the story is not good. Reading it again, in my now elderly parents’ dim and silent attic, a middle-aged man with glasses and thinning hair, kneeling under a lone, dangling light bulb, I see that the writing is naïve and indulgent; the development is long and slow. Too much passive voice. Too many ‘ly’ modifiers. Twenty-two pages should have been cut down to twelve and one can see the ending, where the boy will shoot the horse, coming from a mile away. The dialogue is overdone and melodramatic.

Kneeling in an attic, decades later, looking at a novice’s attempt at writing, I wonder again, why did Truman Capote lie? I recall the sincerity of his tone and face; how he lifted his tinted glasses and tears ran down his cheeks. I see Frederick Barthleme, later, in the early ‘80s, in graduate workshop: his large face and Roman nose, his balding head and reddish-brown beard. He makes a bitter, exasperated sneer when I tell him about Truman Capote and the story I have submitted for class.

“Truman Capote?” he makes a pained grimace. “Oh, give me a break!”

And I see Jane Anne Phillips, too, in an early 80s workshop, nodding patiently while I tell her the same—her imperious calm face and eyes and her long, honey-blonde hair. Then she tells me flat-out the story is bad. “The fact that one can write sentences ... entertain,” she says, “especially to bring attention to oneself, doesn’t make one a good *teacher*.”

And I see my friend, Anthony Grooms, in Atlanta, later in the mid 90s: his close-cropped, kinky hair, full cheeks and

his dark, attentive eyes. He nods and considers the point. He shrugs. “Sentimental people often disguise themselves—like in their writing,” he says.

I look over the faded, inked words of the notes, words that cannot recall or evoke all the mind’s pictures of the time; but I, unlike the writing, know more now than I did then. “I felt detached,” my sister told me years later. “I was young and present but not informed. I didn’t understand what the big deal was—until later.” And my father and mother have insisted that Mrs. Stone was also there, though my sister and I have no memory of it, and Mrs. Stone is not in my notes. If she was there, I am certain she did not join the immediate group around the coffee table. I now know that everything on the platform at the coliseum, including the lighting and the schedule throughout the day, was at Truman Capote’s specific instructions, that Jack Dunphy was more than just a traveling companion; that my mother, in typical Southern fashion, dashed to a neighbor’s house for the bottle of vodka, because it was what a guest wanted; and other than Dr. Stone and some late arriving English teachers and local artistic types, I now realize few of the invited people came for dinner in our combined dining and living rooms that evening.

There were more vacant chairs and tables than not as we in the queue followed Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy into the dining room, served ourselves at the white cloth-covered dining table with a “Spring” flower arrangement in a glass vase (“Is that bridal wreath?” Jack Dunphy wanted to know) and seated ourselves around two of the center folding tables covered in white table cloths, except in Truman’s Capote’s case. He chose to sit apart from us in a living room arm-chair by the bay window.

I see now how set-off and odd Truman Capote was, how alone he was in our small, southern setting. It had to do with

his being peculiar and eccentric: his being an outsider; his small, pug-like physique and high voice, his being a literary figure and a converted New Yorker; but, ultimately, it had to do with the unspoken knowledge that he was homosexual. In the 70s, homosexuality was not something that was assumed or discussed in the open, certainly not in a small and polite southern town. I learned later that Dr. Stone and the school administration were warned beforehand by their public relations staff that the visiting author named Truman Capote was “queer as a three dollar bill”. It made people at the school uneasy and nervous, and while Dr. Stone respected my father’s wishes that Truman Capote come as a literary figure, he was also a long-time state politician. I now see why the dinner was held at my parents’ house, why Dr. Stone left early, few people showed, and no photographs were taken.

But if Truman Capote was aware of any of this, he didn’t let on. As everyone else ate seated or standing in my parents’ living room with their china plates, silverware and cloth napkins and crystal glasses of iced, sweet tea, he sat apart in the armchair and ate from his lap, strangely meek and quiet, his cheeks red from vodka, responding to comments and questions in a soft and whining voice while Jack looked on him, now and then, with his bloodshot eyes from wherever he was standing in the room.

My father’s brave voice continued to include everyone. Dad nodded and smiled. “Truman,” he asked, “didn’t you say an excerpt of your next book is coming out in *Esquire*?” “Doctor Stone,” my father informed him, “did you know the Dosters of Anniston are related to Truman?” “Jack?” my father turned. “What’s been showing on Broadway?”

Not until Dr. Stone and the few late-comers rose and excused themselves, thanking Truman Capote and saying they had to leave, for whatever reasons--each one shaking

the author's hand while Truman remained seated and my father led them out—not until then, did Truman begin to become loud and merry again, grinning and cracking a joke about his “Daddy” now leaving them, calling my mother and Pearl to the kitchen doorway and leading us, Jack, my father, my sister and me, in high praise of the roast beef, the twice-baked potatoes, and what Truman and Jack insisted as being “fresh” Sand Mountain tomatoes.

Later, after Pearl said goodbye and left, the rest of us retired to the family room, where Truman and Jack took the two club chairs across from the coffee table and my mother poured Truman and Jack each another full glass of vodka with a smile. My family and I huddled together on the couch and watched and listened as Truman and Jack began to talk and laugh, their faces growing redder. Dad tried to join the conversation. He asked Truman about Monroeville, his scattered kin and his childhood in Alabama. “Can you tell us...?” he said. “Can you tell us...?”

But Truman Capote wouldn't go there. He talked about writers and actors he knew and his next great, and upcoming book, *Answered Prayers* that he had been working on for years. With Jack's ever-patient, bloodshot looks, short laughs and servile manner pushing Truman on, Truman doffed his glass, took deep breaths, rolled his eyes and exclaimed in his whiny voice as he told stories about Andy Warhol, Diana Ross and Neil Simon, looking up, now and then, with what seemed to be a posed look through his tinted lenses at the ceiling before he would speak again.

My family and I sat smiling, eyes glued on Truman Capote. We laughed after he and Jack did. In the middle of a story about Gloria Vanderbilt losing a shoe at a party, Truman abruptly stopped and said, “Anyone who is someone in New York is going to be in my next book,” he boasted. “Whether they know it or not; whether they like it or not.” Truman giggled with a pencil-thin grin. Jack laughed and

winked at us for tolerance. My family and I smiled. We didn't know anything about anyone in New York.

Truman abruptly paused in a rambling story about running into Peter Sellers holding a box of Kleenex on Fifth Avenue the other week. "Could we *possibly* catch a plane in Birmingham in the morning?" he asked. "I *need* to get out of here.

"We have to fly down to the Keys to recuperate," Truman said with sly smile, a laugh. Jack looked at us and laughed, too.

"I'm returning to Birmingham in the morning," I offered, sweeping my hair out of my eyes.

"Oh, wonderful," Truman said. "If you don't mind?" he whined. He gave me a thin smile. "If you drive, I'll talk about writing," he told me with a quiet, smug tone and toasted me with his glass.

"Oh, no problem," I said, feeling a rising exhilaration at being the one to drive him to the airport. Truman nodded his thanks, then asked if we could leave early, say by seven in the morning? I said no problem to that, too. I nodded and smiled. Jack nodded and my mother and father smiled. Then my father said it was time for him to take them back to the university's International House and check them in for the night.

"Oh, of course," Truman said.

Truman and Jack placed their empty glasses on the coasters of the coffee table and everyone got up. Truman turned quiet, politely thanked my father and my mother for having him and shook their hands. He shook my sister's hand and he reached up and drummed his fingers along my shoulder. "And thank you for becoming our chauffeur," Truman quipped with a thin smile.

He picked up his Panama hat on the coffee table. He put it on his head, took the proffered pen from my mother's hand and autographed her First Edition of *In Cold Blood* before he

and Jack turned to leave. “Thank you again,” he said.

“Yes. Yes, thank you,” Jack said, standing with him.

“The pleasure was ours,” my mother emphasized. She smiled and clutched her closed copy of *In Cold Blood* to her waist.

“Thank you for coming to Jacksonville,” my father said.

“Maybe next year?” Truman quipped. He and Jack laughed.

“Goodbye!” Truman sang. “Thank you.”

My father smiled and fished the car keys out of his pant pocket and led them down the hall, the foyer, and outside to the family car.

“There he goes,” my mother sighed when they were gone. “The greatest writer to ever enter this house.”

“Well, gee. Take notes,” my thin sister mimicked my father and looked at me. She gave me a quick, squeaky smile and left for her room.

I walked outside to the street in the cool, April night, under the clear stars, after my father had come home and everyone had gone to bed. I got my suitcase, my typewriter and my short story from the back seat of my Camaro and carried them into the kitchen, where I set everything down, turned on the lights, took off my coat and loosened my tie. I made a cup of coffee and rolled up my sleeves, sat down at the kitchen table and began to proof “The Boy and the Horse,” with a pencil, retyping select pages on my small, blue, portable Smith-Corona. Now and then, I swept my hair out of my eyes.

When I re-typed the last page and paper-clipped my story together, it was late but I was too excited to sleep. In the kitchen drawers, I found a white legal pad and a Scripto fountain pen and I sat down at the kitchen table again with my father’s voice from the telephone echoing in my mind as I began to take notes, intending and thinking in that moment,

that I was recording something factual and real and important, and believing I had total and fresh recall from the immediacy of the day and that I always would. I made an outline of everything I could remember; sure I would own the memory of specific details later: the school, Darla, the drive, Truman Capote's reading at the coliseum, my meeting Truman and Jack and Dr. Stone at my parents' house; the places, the conversations, the faces, the tones—I thought I had it down.

When I was through, gray light lined the silhouettes of the foothills outside the kitchen windows and the kitchen lights were the only lights on in the house. I had seventeen single-spaced, handwritten notes in long legal pages. I paper-clipped the pages together, got up from the kitchen table and walked around the empty kitchen and dark family room, still seeing sentences and scenes in my mind, still too excited and too full of anticipation to sleep.

But fall asleep I did, if only for some minutes. I awoke, fully clothed on the family room couch, with my father, in his morning face and mussed hair standing over me in his deep red, paisley bathrobe, shaking my shoulder.

“Get up, writer,” he said, mock-serious. “You have a mission.” He grinned and I grinned back.

My mother, in a white hairnet, white bathrobe, and her makeup stripped off, made me sit down and eat poached eggs and toast in the kitchen, before I showered, shaved and dressed in a clean green shirt and checkered slacks I had brought along, wearing the same belt, socks and shoes. Still in their bathrobes, my sister sleeping, my parents saw me out the back door into a foggy morning with the coo-ing of mourning doves and the clatter of squirrels in the spring green of the trees. I carried my suitcase with my suit and notes in it, my typewriter under the same arm, and clutching my paper-clipped short story in the other. I turned and

waved and grinned at my parents standing in the doorway with my story in my hand, like a boy leaving for something like choir practice, believing he could always come home.

I drove down the main road to the university's International House and parked in the front lot before the magnolia trees and the white, Doric columns of the two storey, bricked building. I got out of my Camaro and went inside through the front double doors and into the empty lobby, not knowing exactly where Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy were, but assuming they were in one of the Guest Suites upstairs, to the left of the long, curving stairwell. At the first door, as I mounted the stairs and swept the hair out of my eyes, I recognized voices rising from inside the room, loud and boisterous, now and then squealing with laughter.

"*Gawd*," I heard Truman play-mimick a Southern drawl, "we brought you home to Alabama." Laughter. "Call the sheriff! Call the sheriff!" Truman howled. More laughter.

I heard someone gasp for breath. "Our most famous writer," Jack said.

"*Gawd*," Truman answered.

"Our most famous," Jack insisted.

I knocked on the door. The voices hushed. There was a long pause.

"Who is it?" Truman said.

"Good morning," I said. "It's me, Tem. Are you ready for Birmingham?"

"Oh, yes...Tem! We'll be right with you," Truman said.

The door opened and Truman came out, looking up at me and smiling in his tinted glasses. He was in a shinier gray suit than yesterday's, dark brown oxfords and a yellow tie. He wore the same white Panama hat with the black band.

"Good morning," Truman sang out. "Tem is here." He pulled a black Pullman case on wheels by its handle behind him. Jack followed, in black shoes, a black suit and tie, and

a stuffed brown garment bag. He smiled, too, his blue eyes clear now.

“Good morning,” he said, loud and too cheerful.

“Good morning,” I said.

They followed me to the stairway. Truman seemed to have trouble pulling his Pullman case. I offered to take it and he nodded. I picked it up by the carrying handle and we went down the stairs and out of the International House to my Camaro in the parking lot. Outside was quiet before the magnolias. There was little traffic on the main road and the morning fog was beginning to lift above the surrounding foothills. I loaded Truman’s case and Jack’s garment bag into the trunk with my suitcase and typewriter case. I opened the passenger door.

“You get in the back,” Truman said to Jack. “I’ll sit up with Tem.”

I pressed the seat lever, pushed the back of the bucket seat down and pushed the bucket seat forward so Jack could climb in. I stepped back and Jack complied, settled into the small seating space and stretched his legs across the adjoining back seat floorboard as well as he could. I swept the hair out of my eyes, pushed the bucket seat back into its normal position and lifted the back of the seat up for Truman to get in. But Truman hesitated.

“Too far back,” Truman said, his voice soft and matter-of-fact. “I’m just a little fella.” He looked at me and sighed.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. I pressed the passenger seat lever and pushed the seat as far forward as it would go toward the dash. I stepped back and Truman got in. His short legs, small feet and hat had plenty of room.

“Thank you,” Truman smiled.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

I shut the passenger door, went around the back of the car to the driver’s side and got in behind the wheel and shut my door. While Jack and Truman fumbled with their seatbelts, I

paused a moment and thought of defending those Truman and Jack had been making fun of in the suite.

But I was too timid. I put on my seatbelt, started the car and drove away from the International House parking lot, going down the main, Pelham Road, to the town square, around the median with the Confederate statue, and then out of Jacksonville, South, onto Highway 21, toward Fort McClellan. Jack was quiet. Truman gazed out of his passenger window in silence. I searched for something say.

“Have you had breakfast?” I asked.

“Oh,” Truman drawled, not turning from the window, “we don’t do breakfast.”

“Tell me,” Jack said, in a curious tone from the back. “Why does every damn southern town have a Confederate statue in it? Don’t they know the war is over?”

Truman and I laughed. “I’m not sure,” I said, eyeing him in the rearview. “Because we are all defiant, I guess.”

Truman turned to me with a thin grin under the Panama hat and tinted lenses. “Are you defiant?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Umph,” Jack said. “If you’re so defiant down here, then why is the fort named Fort McClellan? Wasn’t he Union?”

“Yes, but the South beat him every time,” I said.

Truman laughed.

“I can tell you want to write,” Truman said in his high baby voice. He took me in with the tinted lenses and his thin grin. “I can tell from your voice,” he said. “You love story, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes sir. I love story.”

“Sure you do,” Truman insisted. He looked ahead at the road. “Why do you think *I* ever wrote anything?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You can stop calling me, sir,” Truman said. “We think we want everyone to wake up and take notice of us,” he con-

tinued. “We think we have something to say. But even that’s not it,” he said with a sigh, turning and looking out his passenger side window. “It’s the voice—always a voice we hear—telling a story,” he said.

“I wouldn’t know, sir,” I said.

“Oh, *sure* you do,” Truman whined, turning to me.

“Why do you want to *write*?”

“I—well, it moves me,” I said, glancing at him and keeping my attention on the road.

“Well,” Truman nodded. He looked off toward the road, too, nodding. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose that’s not bad. It moves you,” he echoed.

Jack said nothing. I glanced at him in my rearview. He was stretched out in an arched angle across the two small back seats of the Camaro, his chin propped up on his palm, his elbow on the side armrest; his eyes staring in our direction.

Truman chuckled, rubbed his temple with a finger. “I remember at LaGuardia once,” he said out of nowhere, “a man came up to me and for fifteen minutes thanked me for my books

and called me the greatest mover of American literature, so on and so on.” Truman paused. “Problem was,” he said, smiling at the road, “he thought I was William Stryon.”

Truman laughed, then Jack did. I smiled and paid attention to the driving. We came up the rise in the highway to the scrub pines behind the high cyclone fence of Fort McClellan on our left, the Galloway Gate entrance with its bricked and glassed MP station. Across the street was a cinderblock warehouse, the yellow-bricked building with dark windows of Bob’s Barbeque and its high yellow letters on a large, sky blue sign in the side parking lot. Beyond that were white frame houses and a filling station before a right turnoff to Cave Road.

I reached under my seat, pulled out my paper-clipped

manuscript and held it up.

“Mr. Capote, sir,” I said, not taking my eyes off the road and keeping the other hand on the wheel, “I was wondering if you would look at something for me?”

“Oh,” Truman said, his voice slow and soft. I glimpsed a nod from him. He took the manuscript from my hand.

“Of course,” Truman said.

I let my freed hand drop to the wheel and kept my eyes glued to the road, expecting at any moment a rebuke or sarcastic derision from either Truman or Jack, as I had heard from the suite. But we rode in silence all the way into Anniston and through the stoplights, past the businesses on either side, and along the old trees and monuments of the center meridian. When I glanced at Truman, he was reading my story slowly, sighing now and then as he turned a page in his lap. I forced my eyes to stay on the road.

We went over the hill, past the car dealerships and the commercial businesses, and into the city of Oxford, past the mall, the high school stadium and the nursing home. As I signaled and turned right onto the turnoff to I-20 West toward Birmingham, there was a sound like a loud gasp. I looked and Truman had dropped my loose manuscript pages in his lap, brought his hands to his face and begun to cry.

“Why are you crying?” Jack said, alarmed from the back.

“The boy pulled the trigger,” Truman said. He sniffed, pulled off his tinted glasses. Tears ran down his cheeks. Without the glasses, Truman’s eyes looked small and feeble.

“He what?” Jack said.

But Truman didn’t answer him. He looked at me.

“That’s...that’s *very* good,” Truman said to me in a whisper.

I nodded, swept my hair out of my eyes and tried to keep my eyes on the interstate as we picked up speed. Truman wiped away tears with his fingers. He sniffed, slowly set his

glasses back on, turned and looked out the passenger side window.

And that's where something of the memoir ends and another story begins. There are no more notes. I either thought there was nothing more to write, or I meant to write more that night back in my dorm room and I didn't, or I wrote more and I lost it. My memory is that Truman Capote, after a few minutes, turned back from the window, gathered up the loose manuscript in his lap, slid the paperclip back on it, turned with it toward the back seat and asked Jack in a quiet whine if he would like to read it.

"Jack? You want to read it?"

A moment of silence ensued.

"Er, no," Jack deadpanned.

"Oh, that's...that's a terrible thing to say," Truman said. He sighed and turned back into seat and frowned. Truman handed me the manuscript with a shrug and turned to gaze out his passenger window at the passing countryside along the interstate, in what seemed like a self-absorbed silence for much of the remaining forty-five minute drive to Birmingham Airport.

Jack's refusal to read my story didn't affront me in the least. In my sudden, rising and exuberant emotion, I slid the paper-clipped manuscript under my bucket seat, and while Jack closed his eyes and stretched out in the back and Truman held his silent vigil at the window, I managed to drive to Birmingham in something that now seems like a blur of giddy exhilaration, remembering I had to signal before changing lanes, gripping the wheel so hard that my palms hurt, and catching glimpses of a face like mine grinning back at me in the rearview mirror while I managed to watch the road, afraid to look at Truman or Jack, for fear they would say something to take away the incredulous belief that I had arrived as a writer—after all, I had Truman

Capote's judgment, he *liked* it—not knowing then, and for some time to come, what a naïve and ignorant young man I was; and that what was coming was years of rejection slips and manuscripts stacked in dusty, cardboard boxes, and a long time and a long way--decades--before I could realize, after college, after working as a newspaper reporter, and after reading and writing and being crucified for years in graduate school workshops; pounding away at typewriters and eventually computers, to finally reach a place as one who sits down alone at a table with paper and a pen and struggles in the quiet with oneself for hours, days and years.

Every writer must learn to take his or her own journey to what, as John Keats tells us, becomes a routine and form of constant prayer toward an end one never really gets to—and a long time and a long way for me to finally realize, now decades later, that Truman Capote did not lie.

As I remember it now, over thirty years later, he didn't say the *story* was good. The story is poor. The writer is overly indulgent, superfluous and embarrassingly juvenile--there is no question about that. But what Truman said was, "The boy pulled the trigger." "That's *very* good," Truman said.

I think I now know what Truman meant. Every writer wants to be in the place to pull the trigger. That's not to be taken as some Freudian or a sexual pun. What I mean is that all writers try to push the language to where the writer and the reader can recognize what it is to be on the brink of fate: between living and dying, between loving and hating, between belonging and loneliness; between what is known and unknown; between consciousness and nothing. Whether it's a man standing on a railroad bridge with his hands tied behind his back and a noose around his neck, looking down into the swift water below in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," or the moment Helen's eyes seized upon the knife in her father's hand before he

slammed it into her chest in Joyce Carol Oates' "By the River," or the micro-second Anders is shot in the head by a bank robber for laughing out loud in Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," or if it's Perry Smith thrusting the shotgun into each of the Clutters' faces before blasting them away in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*--the list and the ways go on and on and on.

At the end of "The Boy and the Horse," after twenty-two pages of trial and tribulation, the boy did what had to be done: "He slowly placed the point of the gun's blue steel barrel on the middle blaze of the horse's forehead, between the large, calm and brown eyes, clamped his own eyes shut and squeezed the trigger." The next and closing paragraph reads: "The blast seemed to be far, far away."

And that was all that was shared between a young, naïve writer and an aging, veteran one when I handed over a short story at a moment in North Alabama, on Highway 21, between Galloway Gate at Fort McClellan and the turnoff to Cave Road.