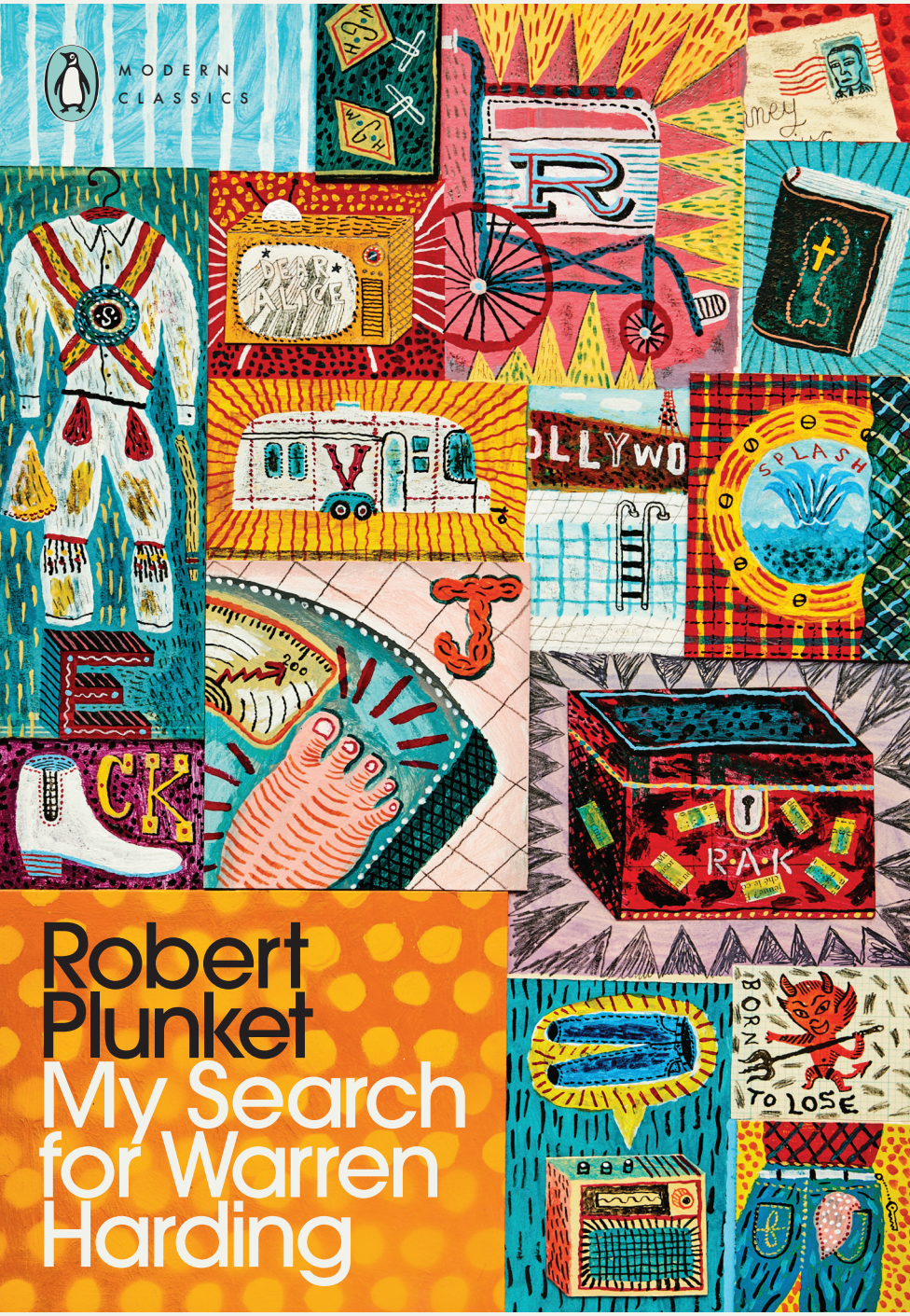


Robert Plunket

My Search for Warren Harding

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

My Search for Warren Harding

Robert Plunket was born in Greenville, Texas, in 1945 but raised in Havana and Mexico City. After college he moved to New York and became Mr. Chatterbox, the gossip columnist for *Sarasota Magazine*. His has published two novels, *My Search for Warren Harding* (1983) and *Love Junkie* (1992). He is currently retired and lives in a trailer park in Englewood, Florida, where he enjoys collecting old quilts and raising succulents from scratch.

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ROBERT PLUNKET

My Search for Warren Harding

Foreword by Danzy Senna



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Foreword

I might not have read a single truly funny novel that year if my friend hadn't stopped by my Los Angeles porch one afternoon carrying an out-of-print copy of Robert Plunket's comic masterpiece, *My Search for Warren Harding*.

We were in the worst of days—the depths of the prevaccine pandemic—and our world was on fire, both literally and figuratively. The copy of the novel that my friend, the writer Victoria Patterson, handed over to me looked the way we all felt in those days: yellowing, battered, dusty from too long in storage. Tory bellowed through the muffled fabric of her N95 mask that it was one of her favorite novels—and really fucking funny.

I needed funny. I opened the book a few weeks later—and despite my allergic reaction to the mold in the edition, kept reading for the next 256 pages. When I was done, I sat in a kind of silent, focused delight. I held in my hands one of the best and most invigorating books I'd read in years, and certainly the funniest—and yet, how was it out of print? Why had I never heard of this novel before now? (Later I learned Tory had actually written an excellent piece about it for *Tin House* magazine in 2015.) Why had it disappeared so fully from the literary landscape? And what did that say about this literary landscape if it could bury a book like this? Most intriguingly: Who was Robert Plunket?

The jacket bio for Plunket's second (and, so far, last) novel, *Love Junkie*, published in 1992 and also out of print, reads:

> Robert Plunket's first novel, *My Search for Warren Harding*, immediately established him as one of America's most promising novelists.

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> Unfortunately, the promise soon faded, and he now lives in a trailer in Sarasota, Florida, where he ekes out an existence as a gossip columnist, covering everything from gala charity balls to KKK meetings. He has also served on the boards of Sarasota AIDS Support and the Humane Society of Sarasota County, and is currently running for election to the Mosquito Control Board, District 6.

So much for literary fame. There are few interviews with Plunket online. In one of the only I could find—from a 2015 issue of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*—he explains the inspiration for the novel to writer Michael Leone.

"Obviously, it's based on *The Aspern Papers*," Plunket explains.

The Aspern Papers, the celebrated novella published by Henry James in 1888, is set in nineteenth-century Venice, where an unnamed narrator seduces a young woman in order to gain access to her spinster aunt's trove of letters by her dead poet-lover.

Plunket goes on to say, "It was always one of my favorites, but most important, it spoke to me in a special way. I couldn't figure out why until one day it hit me. The guy's gay! Of course! Now the book made perfect sense. His relationships with all the women characters were those of a gay man. Now, not an openly gay man or even a consciously gay man. But a man who was just not heterosexual at his core. I don't think Henry James realized what he had done, or how well he had done it, which made my discovery even more exciting."

In Plunket's retelling of *The Aspern Papers*, he sets his novel in late-1970s Los Angeles. The author himself was just emerging from that era when he wrote the book. It came out in 1983: the same year the national craze for Cabbage Patch dolls reached its pinnacle. The same year Vanessa Williams was crowned, then promptly de-crowned, the first Black Miss America. The same year Ronald Reagan decreed Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday and Michael Jackson moonwalked for the first time on national television. The same year Reverend Jerry Falwell described AIDS as "the gay plague."

Plunket's book, in other words, emerged out of a culture of contradictions—a world of both hedging progress and conservative

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backlash, an America of trash and spectacle. Which is maybe why the novel, forty years later, feels so startlingly contemporary.

Sensitivity readers, be warned: the protagonist of this novel, Elliot Weiner, is cruel, racist, fat-phobic, homophobic, and deeply, deeply petty. In the novel's opening, we find Weiner standing on a scenic lookout in Los Angeles with his friend Eve Biersdorf staring through binoculars at a large dilapidated home in the distance. Whatever mischief he's up to, he says, "it was Mrs. Biersdorf's—Eve's—idea." Weiner, we soon learn, is an East Coast snob and middling historian who has come from New York to Los Angeles on a fellowship. He holds himself in high regard, but the more he brags about his academic career—"Suffice it to say that I teach at both Mercy College and the New School, and I feel that speaks for itself"—the more we sense desperation: "Some unfortunate comments have gotten back to me about my 'qualifications.'" Elliot Weiner is hoping to retrieve some lost love letters between President Harding, traditionally ranked as the worst of presidents, and his secret mistress, Rebekah Kinney, the owner of the house in the view of their binoculars. Wiener soon learns that Kinney is alive, but now a cranky octogenarian who wears rhinestone sunglasses and spends her days in her crumbling mansion shouting at her Mexican servant from a squeaky wheelchair. Weiner believes the old woman still possesses the love letters and other Harding-related papers, and is hiding her treasure somewhere in her crumbling mansion. And he will do anything to get his mitts on those letters, even "rape and pillage," as he's hoping a discovery like this can propel him to academic stardom.

As the novel unfolds, Weiner's madcap effort to obtain these papers propels the absurd, picaresque plot. He rents out Kinney's dilapidated pool house and cozies up to her granddaughter, a naive young woman named Jonica whose ample flesh disgusts him. But he's willing to grit his teeth and seduce her if it means getting to her grandmother's historical smut.

Weiner is cruel about Jonica from the beginning, describing her as "a fat girl … wearing baggy green paratrooper pants … and a lot

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of plastic bracelets that added to the general din … She talked like a real California girl, no inflection, lots of *r*'s." Yes, Elliot is unabashedly cruel about innocent Jonica. He despises all she represents—fatness, the West Coast, gullibility—and yet he begins to court the poor woman, to prey on her neediness. Soon they are romantically and sexually involved—and he's that much closer to his prize and becoming a renowned historian.

The bare bones of a plot is so often just a skeleton for a novelist to hang up their observations. The more streamlined and beautifully elegant a plot—and in the case of *My Search for Warren Harding*, the plot simply boils down to a single character pursuing a single, tantalizing object—the more tangents the author can take. And the tangents in this book are everything. They let us see Plunket—with his lacerating wit—send up the entire culture of Los Angeles at the turn of the 1980s.

But with every parody of the culture around him, Weiner is the biggest joke of all. One of Elliot and Jonica's early dates is to an avant-garde feminist performance—an audience-participation play called *All My Sisters Slept in Dirt—A Choral Poem*, performed at the LA Women's Theatre. "Then, all of a sudden, people started streaming in like they'd just got off a bus. Women mostly, with severe haircuts and aviator glasses. It hit me what an important moment in feminist fashion it was when Gloria Steinem dropped by her optician's and said, 'I'll take *those*.'" The satire in this scene is perfect, and we are aware, too, that Elliot, who has a sweating problem and is wearing a silk shirt, has strapped cut-up Pampers diapers to his underarms to absorb the sweat. Whenever the author is vicious about the people around him, he humiliates Elliot a little more. After the date, Weiner expresses his repulsion toward Jonica:

> When I got back, she was still lying on the rug, looking up at me.
>
> What can I say? You can guess what happened next.
>
> As for her body, I won't go into details but will say this: she had a lot of dimples. Everywhere.

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And yet the reader knows Weiner is the one with the soggy Pampers taped under his arms.

In fact, Elliot Weiner is depicted as the most deliciously awful of New York City neurotic bachelors. For one, he puts his garbage in the refrigerator so it won't stink and attract roaches, while the girlfriend he's left back in New York, Pam, is the consummate beard. "When we first met, we discovered we had a lot in common, including the fact that our brothers had attended the same basketball camp although at different times." They were clearly meant to be. Pam even indulges his true passion—which is for "Morris dancing . . . a type of old English folk dancing, always performed by men. It can get pretty wild, since it involves a lot of swinging of clubs."

What's wonderful about Plunket's first-person narrator is how far beneath the surface his dishonesty lies. His attraction to men is hinted at beautifully, hilariously, but always cagily, never consummated. He has lied so much—so profoundly—and for so long that his attraction leaks out in twisted bromances with straight, working-class men. He leers at them, ingratiates himself toward them, describes their biceps and the length of their shorts, but his desire reveals itself sideways. His defenses have been shored behind this original lie, as he looks down on everyone and on Los Angeles itself. In the gaps between his observations, the silences, the truth about Weiner's true self emerges. Behind the bluster and arrogance he's a closeted gay misanthrope, blind to his own desires. While Weiner is not a likable character, the story doesn't ask you to admire or sympathize with him. Yes, he's a superficial, arrogant, closeted homophobe who refers to the one gay man he encounters as "the faggot." He goes into long tirades, including an elaborate racist theory about the difference between Puerto Ricans in New York and Mexicans in LA. (He prefers the Mexicans.) Fat jokes abound. But it's not empathy we are here for.

In his essay "Gay Sincerity Is Scary," Paul McAdory calls out the fiction of "gay sincerity"—that contemporary, humanistic, and above all, earnest gay novel that revels in its own poignancy and

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tenderness. McAdory cringes in the face of such mawkish, heartfelt quasitransgressive sentimentality, and asks: "Do we not grow tired, after so many rounds of this sentimental journey to the weepy, fantastical core of human experience? Might we not celebrate instead a more horizontal outlay of sincerity, mania, irony, horror, meanness, humor, etc. . . . In lieu of crying, a writer might try laughing, cackling, madly monologuing to the pool of cum on one's tummy, coolly observing it, overanalyzing it for effect, playing in it, rejoicing in it . . ."

My Search for Warren Harding might be the insincere gay novel McAdory has been hoping for. Wiener is a low-key monster. He projects his self-loathing outward onto fat women and openly gay men. His views are problematic. His whole way of judging other people is reductive and snobby and scathing and unkind. Of course all books and works of art are in some ways a symptom of their times, and this one has the blind spots and cringeworthy moments that remind us of its 1983 pub date. But for those of us who are greedy for models of literary fiction that are actually funny, hungry for satire that stings, craving work that pricks and prods us awake—fiction that doesn't bore us—the risk of not reading these rare works outweighs the risk of being offended.

And in the end, I don't think you can read Plunket's work straight-faced. Too often we still insist on reading the fiction of so-called "marginalized" authors as thinly veiled autobiography, or worse yet, a tool of self-help. We somehow still believe the queer novelist or the writer of color must share the moral underpinnings and opinions of the characters they create on the page—and when the character says or does wrong, we convict the author. But so much of the real pleasure of fiction lies in the nonliteral, meaning told slant—in double-talk and mischief and irony, all imbedded in the elaborate lie.

First-person narrators are often best as liars. They are most interesting when they lie to the world and they lie to us and they especially lie to themselves. Weiner is no exception. And there is a particular pleasure in this novel of witnessing the cracks where Weiner's self-delusion runs up against the reality of his true self.

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Weiner learns nothing from his journey. He keeps judging, keeps lying, keeps grasping, keeps being petty. Part of what's liberating about writing awful characters, grotesque characters who do grotesque things and learn nothing from their journey, particularly for those of us who are writing from the margins, is that dark satirical comedy resists the autobiographical gaze. In writing a perceptive satire—writing monstrous characters on downward spirals that never reverse course—we resist the pressure to remediate and uplift. We reclaim our right as artists to simply fuck shit up and walk away, laughing.

The first rule of improv is "Say Yes." And indeed part of the perfection of *My Search for Warren Harding* is in how committed it remains to its premise and the persona of Elliot Weiner. Plunket says "Yes" to the problematic character and he continually says "Yes" to the absurd circumstances he puts him in. The story keeps saying "Yes" to its own twisted logic and doesn't ever shy away from the ugliness or limitations of Weiner's vantage point.

In the real world we're told we should empathize and see things from other people's points of view. In a novel, the opposite is often true: the point of view is by necessity chauvinistic. It works most powerfully when limited by its own body and times and perspective.

My Search for Warren Harding feels like freedom because of its limitations. In reading a character so blind and blindsided, so prejudiced and self-absorbed, we are freed from our own sanctity, our own arrogance. The main character is a closeted white gay man with a narcissist's insecure vapid center. In reading Plunket, we are freed from our own delusion that we are not all Weiner. That we are not all—somehow, someway—in the closet.

His novel anticipated and influenced much of what the culture would begin to find funny (and maybe what some of us are still waiting for the world to find funny). In our contemporary humble-bragging world of filtered selfies, virtue signaling and good optics, we find increasing release, and comic relief, in fictional characters we

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are not asked to admire or envy—in characters so awful or amoral or vapid that the joke is on them.

The novel was critical success upon its publication in the Eighties. Ann Beattie and Frank Conroy wrote glowing reviews. Plunket, however, didn't publish again for many years and instead dabbled in acting. His IMDB page says he is "best remembered as the timid gay guy" in Martin Scorsese's dark comedy thriller *After Hours*. He went on to get bit parts in other movies, then published a second novel, *Love Junkie*, in 1992; the rights were optioned by Madonna. Plunket moved to Florida and did not publish another book. Even still, *My Search for Warren Harding* continued to quietly leave its mark—passed around through some kind of comedic-literary whisper network, where it was adored by a small, select group of readers that included Amy Sedaris and Larry David.

Rumor has it that Larry David was such a fan of the novel he kept copies of it available in the *Seinfeld* writing room and told his writers to imitate the tone. It's clear reading this novel that he even lifted details from the book, such as the absurd way that *Seinfeld*'s Elaine dances—clearly based on the novel's depiction of how Weiner's girlfriend Pam dances:

> She is one of those people who "abandon" themselves to the beat, clapping their hands over their head and emitting little yelps. To make matters worse, she studied modern dance in college and thus considers herself a Movement Expert. The thing she does—I can only describe them as Martha Graham routines. Her arms fly out into space, she makes sudden turns, then she half-squats, her head flung back in ecstasy.

After its publication, this novel did what so many great novels do: it shone briefly on the new fiction scene, long enough to be pilfered and imitated, long enough to be absorbed into the culture it would influence. And then, like so much source material, it disappeared, like the author himself, who retreated to Sarasota, Florida, and involved himself in gossip and real estate writing, rhinestone and quilt collecting, and raising succulents.

"The literary marketplace is fickle, unforgiving, and often unfair, likely to reward the second-rate," writes Victoria Patterson in her

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essay on Plunket. "In counteraction to this depressing reality, there's also a beautiful and hopeful phenomenon, whereby a deserving book survives."

When Patterson handed me Plunket's half-forgotten novel that day on my porch, California burning and the world in decay, the out-of-print book had already been handed to her years before, pressed upon her by another writer. And I read it and pressed it upon a brilliant friend at New Directions and so here we have it, a redemption song.

In that one rare interview in the *LARB*, Plunket comes off like I'd expect: unpretentious, unfiltered, quick-witted, honest, and completely bullshit-free. He is deeply literary, loves literature perhaps too much to sully it with careerism. He talks trash about the books that are supposed to be funny but aren't: "PG Wodehouse means nothing to me. I can't get past the first page." He throws shade at Jonathan Franzen: "I find the characters so stuck in middle-class angst that we are supposed to take seriously …" He is also transparent about the rules he tries to follow in order to write a truly funny novel. As he says, the funny novel must include a "slightly manic, deeply flawed first-person narrator"; it must "pay attention to rhythm—make the words dance," and should include a "punch line every other paragraph."

Plunket bemoans in the interview that "people don't think anything 'delightful' can be serious. Yet the delightful works of art are exactly the ones that last, while the 'profundity' of any age dates quickly."

This turns out to be true. The cosmic joke of Plunket's delightful novel is still as fresh today as it was forty years ago. It is a gift to us—devoted readers of Los Angeles literature, of comedy, of queer literature, and of the literature of self-loathing—that it is finally being reissued now. You hold in your hands the paramount example of a comic novel. To all the greedy readers and writers, enjoy the ride.

—DANZY SENNA, LOS ANGELES, 2022

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Author's preface

Dear Reader,

It's hard to believe that forty years have gone by since *My Search for Warren Harding* was first published. Who would have thought that it would end up, as my mother put it shortly before her death from dementia, "a true literary classic?" Certainly not those critics who so completely misunderstood my work. The insults they hurled—"limp," "flaccid," "dysfunctional." The words still sting. And certainly not the snobbish glitterati who run the literary establishment. Everyone agrees—there seems to be a conspiracy of silence surrounding my beloved book.

So this brand new edition is for the only "critics" who really matter—my wonderful fans. The people who discover me, tattered and dusty, in the Goodwill, who track me down in the most remote corners of the Internet. People like the lonely recluse from Queens, N.Y., who sends me pictures he draws of the characters. Or the guy from Oklahoma who drove all the way to have dinner with me. Or the nice middle-aged woman in London who reads it as a special treat on her birthday, all alone in her bedsitter. Or Karen, the hospice nurse. She's my favorite. She often reads passages to her patients so they can get a comforting last laugh.

Well, I want my fans to know that I have found peace and contentment at a lovely trailer park in Florida. My career as Mr. Chatterbox, the gossip columnist at *Sarasota Magazine* is over. True, my time there was marked by scandal and litigation but that's all in the past now. Just as Warren Harding and his era are quickly receding into the past, so are me and mine.

The Pee-wee Herman affair was my first baptism by fire. By an incredible stroke of luck I was a regular customer at the adult theater

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where he was arrested (indeed, the staff even invited me to the annual Christmas party), so when Pee-wee was hauled in for indecent exposure, I had the inside scoop and was prepared to "tell all" if the price was right. The results caused quite a stir and have even been reprinted in college journalism textbooks in the chapter on ethics.

I stumbled onto a much larger stage in 2000 with the contested presidential election of Bush vs. Gore. Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris—whose duty it was to certify the election—was a dear friend, and still is. She even appeared with me in a night club act I was trying out in an effort to enlarge my fan base. During the act we led the audience in a "chicken dance." At the height of the recount crisis it was somehow leaked that I had a tape of this performance and, while a real hoot, everyone who saw it agreed that it would destroy any claim Katherine might have to being a serious person. The *National Enquirer* offered me $50,000. I said no. Loyalty to those dear to me always comes first. I am proud to say, "I cannot be bought!"

I'm sure it was to thank me for paving his way to the White House that President Bush invited me to accompany him on his education tour of Florida in 2001. I even got to ride on the White House press plane! The first day in Jacksonville there were all sorts of speeches and seminars, during which I could see the President survey the crowd, undoubtedly thinking, "Is that Robert Plunket? Is *that* Robert Plunket?" Finally, late in the afternoon, his eyes met mine and I gave him a thumbs up. He grinned and gave me a big wink just as he was promising to increase spending for the nation's public schools.

The next day in Sarasota, while he was listening to the children read that book about the goat, Andrew Card ran in and whispered in his ear that another plane had hit the second tower. The blood drained from his face and his glance darted around the room. People wondered, what on earth was he looking for? Well, he was looking for me. Our eyes locked and in that moment I like to think it was my reassuring smile that gave him the courage to hold on when, to channel Celine Dion, there was nothing left except the will which says to him hold on.

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But that's all in the past now. He's in happy retirement in Texas, as I am in Florida. The big Eight Oh is rapidly approaching for both of us. He has his beloved ranch, I have my treasured trailer. He has his Laura, I have my Kyle, a young man I met while he was participating in a Wet Jockey Shorts contest in a bar out on the key.

Kyle, who placed a respectable fifth, was between "gigs" so I invited him to stay with me for a couple of days. Those days have turned into years and Kyle has become a more and more important part of my life. His help has been crucial during my recent health crises—two strokes, a heart attack, quadruple bypass surgery, prostate cancer, an anal fissure, and type 3 diabetes—and now I depend on him for a myriad of things: cleaning, grocery shopping, banking, chauffeuring me to doctors' appointments and the Senior Friendship Center for a game of canasta. He has proven so helpful that I have even given him a durable power of attorney. He often jokes that he's amazed I have lasted as long as I have.

So if he sometimes seems a little cranky and impatient with me—as he has lately—I am quick to forgive him. He can still come up with wonderful surprises. This afternoon, for instance, he has a special outing planned. We're going kayaking! Yes, I recently bought him a brand new Itiwit inflatable kayak and we're going to try it out at the Moccasin Wallow Nature Preserve down by Everglades City. What a special place. Old Florida at its best—total seclusion, just the palms and mangroves, the hidden coves and impenetrable waterways—and best of all, the gators, hundreds of them.

There's the horn. And so I bid you adieu. My race is almost run, my days are nearly done. Life is an adventure, I always say. I've had mine. And now, dear reader, it's time for yours. Just take a deep breath and turn the page …

—R.P.,
ENGLEWOOD, FLORIDA,
SEPTEMBER 27, 2022

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Reed Foundation, which institution, in March of 1980, awarded me a grant of $7,500 in order that I might carry forward the research effort that culminates in this book. Modest as the sum was, it nevertheless proved invaluable, and I am accordingly appreciative and wish to say so. Yet it is in the light of its initial support and encouragement that I am now baffled to learn that the Reed Foundation has elected to dissociate itself from this project and the text that represents its completion, a matter I would comment on further were it not that certain events pertinent to my researches have subsequently given rise to an array of sordid litigations—and until the courts have spoken, I, regrettably, must keep silent.

Let me also hasten to thank my attorney and literary agent, Mr. Bruce Pinsky, of Beverly Hills, California. Thank you, Bruce.

Finally, a special statement of thanks goes out to my father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. D. Ballard Weiner, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—thanks, Mom, thanks, Dad—not to mention Amy Robinson, Doris Baizley, and Paul Corrigan, who stored some boxes for me in the course of the time I was obliged to spend in California.

It is to all these good persons, and to my benefactors at the Reed Foundation, that this book is respectfully and earnestly dedicated.

—E.W., NEW YORK, 1983

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I have to admit it was Mrs. Biersdorf's—Eve's—idea. Without her input, who knows how long I could have taken it? I might have wandered around Los Angeles all summer, till all my fellowship money was gone, winding up with nothing more than a good tan.

We must have looked like an odd pair, standing there at the scenic lookout about fifty yards down the street from the Kinney house. It was a sweltering Southern California morning, with the temperature past 90° and still climbing. "Dry heat" they call it, but I could still feel my heavy cotton shirt stick to my back. I loosened my tie. Eve was a little better off. She at least was used to the climate and was dressed in a smart tennis outfit.

We were fiddling around with the "spy kit" we had assembled from whatever gadgets lay around Pete's den. Eve peered through the binoculars while I tried to figure out how to load the Polaroid. Exactly what I was going to take a picture of I had no idea, but Eve had insisted that I bring it along.

For the truth is that in the past three days I had driven by the house so many times I had committed the whole thing to memory. Not that there was much to see: just a long peeling stucco wall with a rusty wrought-iron gate. Next to the gate was a little building—a guest house, I imagined—but the main house was invisible through the overgrown vegetation except for an occasional glimpse of red-tiled roof.

Eve had her attention—and the binoculars—focused on the guest house.

"All the curtains are down," she reported.

I had noticed that the very first day, of course. In fact, they had been up in the morning and then when I returned after lunch for

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more surveillance they were gone. I didn't think much about it at the time.

"I see some cartons piled up," she continued. "And there's something in the middle of the room. A ladder, it looks like."

A car down the hill attracted my attention. It was heading up our way. God knows I had reason enough to feel paranoid after the way I had been lurking around the neighborhood. I had read somewhere that this area, which certainly looked expensive ("very hip but not very chic," Eve had told me), was patrolled by private police cars, some of which carried vicious attack dogs.

"You know what it looks like," Eve said, removing the binoculars and frowning. "It looks like someone's moving."

The car was getting closer, rounding the hairpin turns in clouds of yellow dust. I was about to suggest we move on for a spell when Eve let out a shriek and grabbed my arm with such force I was afraid it might leave a bruise. I jumped about some, fearing she had seen a rattlesnake.

"I've got it, I've got it!" she cried.

"Got what?"

She held still and looked at me, her face the picture of excitement.

"Just ask to rent the guest house. Someone's obviously moving. And you'll be the first person there!"

It was one of those brilliant ideas that seem immediately right. The perfect solution, simple and clear. It solved a million problems. Holy Christ, when I thought of some of the plans I had been considering—the long-lost relative, the tax assessor . . .

We piled into my rented Mustang and drove off, hyperventilating from excitement. We rode around aimlessly, rehashing the idea and looking for flaws. Of course it might not work—there were so many variables—*but if it did* . . .

Hooking up with Eve was turning out to be a wonderful omen. Not only was she full of ideas, but she had actually met the old lady! It seems that before her most recent marriage she had served as an executive assistant to some creative bigwig at Paramount. This was when they were shooting *Chinatown*. Eve spent most of her

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time breaking down budgets, but she kept nagging until they let her scout locations too. The biggest problem was Faye Dunaway's mansion—everything they looked at seemed too modern, too remodeled. Then someone remembered this big old Spanish house way up just underneath the Hollywood sign. Screen great Norma Talmadge built it in 1929 just before her debut in talkies (*Madame du Barry*) revealed a Brooklyn accent so beyond the aid of speech therapy that she was forced into early retirement, followed by a troubled marriage to Toastmaster General George Jessel.

Eve found some pictures of the house in an old architecture magazine and it looked perfect—"Classic Hollywood Spanish," she said. After a little legwork she found out that it belonged to an old lady named Rebekah Kinney. Eve described her thus: "Real old, real mean, and dumb—dumb like a fox." But Mrs. Kinney wanted too much money, and after several unsatisfactory meetings they found another place, out in Pasadena, that was almost as good and snapped it up.

Eve herself had been in California almost fifteen years. She was my mother's oldest and dearest friend; my mother adored her and kept up the friendship through all of Eve's marriages, jobs, face-lifts (as Eve would be the first to admit), etc. My mother thought Eve was the most glamorous person she had ever known, and she was probably right.

And now Eve had reached the summit—marriage to a movie producer, a house in Beverly Hills, a glittering life-style involving lunch dates with the stars, and so on. My mother felt vindicated now that Eve had made it and collected press clippings about all of her husband's movies. After all, she had stood by Eve through thick and thin and it had paid off.

And it did get thin. There was the time when Eve went off to Guatemala for the winter to study archaeology with a divorce settlement and became involved with a native accountant who embezzled his firm in order to buy her a Lincoln. My father, who never could stand Eve, had to wire her plane fare back to Pittsburgh, and she showed up at our house in the middle of the night, hysterical and

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one step ahead of Interpol. The whole incident was swept under the carpet, and after some R & R Eve went off to New York to break into publishing.

Since the only other person I knew in "the Southland" was a tedious chemistry major I had run track with at Harvard, I gave Eve a call upon my arrival and she invited me over for dinner. It was just the two of us—husband number four, the famous Pete, was "down at the Springs"—and even though we hadn't seen each other in twenty years we hit it off immediately. Over a second bottle of wine I took her into my confidence.

Any lingering disappointment I was harboring that there were no stars around the dinner table completely vanished when I found out that Eve had actually met my reason for coming to Southern California. And she for her part was astonished to learn that old Mrs. Kinney, with the rhinestone sunglasses and the squeaky wheelchair, not only had been the mistress of a president but had borne him an illegitimate child and then, to top it off, had written a best-seller about the whole thing.

Eve was quick to point out that Warren Harding was "way, way" before her time. I wasn't so sure. He died, in office, in 1923. And as for Mrs. Kinney—"My God, she must be over one hundred years old!"

"She's barely eighty," I corrected. She was, in fact, several years younger than my own grandfather, thriving happily, from all reports, in a nursing home outside of Worcester, Mass.

"But how could I not have known?" Eve moaned. It dawned on me that it was this tantalizing piece of gossip she hadn't been privy to that was the real cause of her upset. "I know where all the bodies are buried," she had pointed out more than once that evening.

Eve's ignorance about the old lady was an encouraging sign. "At least nobody else knows," she told me, and this consoled both of us. The bigger the secret, the bigger the scoop.

For the discovery that the old lady was still alive threatened to make a mess out of the book I was planning. She was the last Harding intimate left. She alone could refute all my meticulously

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thought-out theories. She alone knew the truth. She alone had all the answers.

And they were answers to some very important questions. What had happened to her daughter by Harding, Blanche Marie, whose financial security was the supposed motive for writing *The Price of Love*, the under-the-counter bestseller that shocked the last half of the 1920s? Was she still alive? What did she have to say about all this? After all, she was the daughter of a US president. That is, if the old lady was to be believed.

But she was believed. Better historians than I accepted her story. There were letters (not many) and a few grudging, off-the-record acknowledgments of the affair from long-dead Harding cronies. But if she once had been so vocal in demanding her daughter's birthright, why had she now turned her back on the whole thing? And what did she know of the scandals that plagued the Harding regime? Or of his bizarre last days and mysterious death?

And most of all, did she have any material, any letters, any papers? So much had been destroyed by "the Duchess," Harding's imperious wife, that his signature was by far the most valuable of any president since Lincoln.

It was my chief rival, Paterson Decker from Yale, who had tracked her down (or rather bumped into her through blind luck and no fault of his own). Harding has never been a fashionable specialization for historians; consequently Decker and I pretty much have the field to ourselves. Our relationship is cordial but competitive. He resents, I feel, my youth and my ambition. Some unfortunate comments have gotten back to me about my "qualifications." I don't wish to bore the reader with some petty argument between a couple of fusty scholars, or dwell on my educational background. Suffice it to say that I teach at both Mercy College and the New School, and I feel that speaks for itself. And I will be the first to admit that Decker's contributions to Hardingania have been tremendous, and that the charges of speciousness that are occasionally leveled against his work are largely unmerited.

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Decker has written an interesting yet (I feel) poorly thought-out monograph (*Journal of Historical Research*, June 1970), in which he classifies Rebekah Kinney as a "historical intruder [who] shouted and shoved [her] way into the history books," demanding room from the "historical personages" who really belong there. His theory, if I am reading it right, is that these "intruders" obfuscate and confuse history, and that while some are important enough to merit limited study, they are at heart easy-to-dismiss nuisances. Some other historical troublemakers he identifies are Whittaker Chambers, Pope Urban III, John Wilkes Booth, and Lord Birchall, Queen Elizabeth's personal physician and confidant, whose arrest in 1601 for procuring led to the first legal definition of the term.

So I don't find it strange that it would take a freak accident for Decker to uncover Mrs. Kinney once again. To make it more embarrassing for him, she was even in the phone book! He had previously traced her to Dover, Delaware, in 1937, where she operated a small dry-cleaning establishment called Tact Cleaners. But for the next forty-odd years, nothing.

Until last year, when he was attending a conference at USC. He happened to glance through the Los Angeles phone book, searching for a colleague's number (a certain Professor Kinsey had offered him a lift to the airport), and he came across the unmistakable name of Rebekah Kinney. A hurried and, from what I hear, very expensive investigation by a "private eye" confirmed that the Rebekah Kinney residing at 6701 Casino Drive was indeed a lady well into her eighties.

I pumped Eve for more information, but she wasn't much help. She had never even gotten inside the main house. Her negotiations with the old woman had taken place on a heavily screened verandah, and all she could remember was "lots of broken porch furniture and a fan that sounded like a DC-3."

"Did Paterson Decker ever meet her?" Eve asked.

I explained the story I had heard through the grapevine: two letters unanswered and finally, after the third, a two-sentence reply saying she had no idea what he was talking about and would he please stop bothering her as she was a widow living alone.

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Eve thought about this. "Maybe it's another Rebekah Kinney," she said. "I suppose that *could* be possible."

"No, it was her, all right. We have proof."

"Proof?"

I paused for dramatic effect. "Right after the last letter she got an unlisted phone number."

"Ooooh," said Eve, her face lighting up. Here was a tactic she could relate to. "But why did Decker give up?"

"What else should he do? She refused to have anything to do with him. And he's not the sort of person who could go in there and lie."

"And you are?"

"Lie? Listen, I'd rape and pillage to get my hands on those papers."

"Jesus," she said, and for a moment I thought she had taken me seriously.

My first job out of college was with a well-known zoo in the metropolitan area. Theoretically I was "Assistant to the Director," but in reality what I performed were mostly clerical tasks, plus some weekend babysitting for expensive animals who were pregnant and had to be watched constantly. Luckily my superiors took a shine to me, and soon I was the zoo's fair-haired boy. After several years of steady promotions I found myself Director of Development, with a hefty expense account and ready access to the zoo's cars. It was a pleasant enough job. Five people worked under me: another young man who ran the direct-mail campaign, an older woman who was in charge of government and foundation grants, and three secretaries. We really needed only two, but the third was the daughter of a local politico who was hired for obvious reasons even though her skills were not the best.

I oversaw the operations of the entire department, of course, but my specialty was talking to rich people, particularly heirs to large fortunes. Once I got a substantial sum from an orchestra leader, but most of the money that came in was so old it had to be dusted off before it was delivered. My biggest coup was when I was just

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