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Chapter 33.

Television not only brought McCarthy into microscopic perspective for all to see, it gave the world a home in every house and America did not know how to cope with the guest who came for dinner and stayed. (There used to be another world, a world before Janie was born, a world in which my father and I listened to the baseball games on the radio. There were no crowd noises, no sound as the bat hit the ball, no yelling from the infield. Only the sound of a ticker-tape machine and a man's voice reading the action from the tape. It's two-and-two on Bauer in the top of the eighth." He would try to liven it up -- "Here comes the pitch. Low and outside. Ball three!" But I knew that he'd made up the description of the action. It didn't matter. We sat at the kitchen table and listened to that ticker-tape machine and that voice and saw the game oh so vividly and it was real! World War II had been the voices of H' V' Kaltenborn and Edward R' Murrow. The next war would be grubby supertime pictures of bombs dropping, huts burning and people dying in living color.) Out went the lights in the living room and the family sat for hours, watching, watching,--24--watching. Their shadows were flung against the wall by the light from the set like shadows of Cro-Magnon Man sitting around a fire in his cave sometime after the Snake had done its deed. In Toledo, Ohio, the Water Commissioner discovered that water consumption rose fantastically during certain three minute periods. After many days of trying to find what had gone wrong in the city's water system, the answer finally came to him. The bladders and bowels of Toledo, Ohio, were now being suppressed until the commercials came on.

The American form of greeting became, "Did you see the Such-and-Such show last night?" A mass culture was created and if one answered the new form of greeting with "I don't have a TV set," he slowly found himself with little to say in which others were interested. Milton Berle, "I Love Lucy," Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, Arthur Godfrey and others became the common referents and common experiences. American culture became synonymous with the fantasies of individuals whose profession is based upon fantasies, which are then sold to a sponsor who creates fantasies to make people think that the soap in the blue box gets clothes whiter than white while the soap in the orange box only gets them white. Add all the fantasies together and you get MONEY, the ultimate fantasy.

While the young girls of Hi-ro-shi-ma came to womanhood to find their wombs covered with the dust of 6 August 1945, Americans were exploring the joys of precooked, frozen foods. All that could not be frozen had been dehydrated, put into boxes and labeled INSTANT. Entire meals were cooked and frozen, put into aluminum containers that--25--needed only to be placed in the oven and dinner was ready. They were called TV dinners.

While the young women of Hi-ro-shi-ma writhed and screamed in labor and gave birth to deformed children, American men discovered the breast. Jayne Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe, Sherry North and countless other platinum-covered (did they dye the pubic hair, too?) women found themselves famous for being a bigger piece of meat than some other women. *Playboy* magazine brought the middle-class male fantasy of Woman to national attention with its color fold-out of the Playmate of the Month, because that's what women are for -- playing with. Other magazines followed with bigger breasts and bigger asses, with women lying on rugs, couches, beds, and rocks by the ocean, with their legs cocked at assorted, allegedly sexy, angles. Page after page and at lunchtime at magazine racks across the country, well-dressed, respectable-looking men stand solemnly in front of the racks, leafing slowly through the magazines, page after page, one magazine after another. They stand so no one can see if the well-pressed pants are beginning to bulge, but no one would look, because no one wants to know and no one ever looks anybody in the eye. They stand there, dreaming their dreams and at night, how many of them close their eyes, thrust themselves into their wives and in the ensuing minutes transform wives into the big-breasted, willing-hipped girls of the magazines? How many wives know

that their husbands have never slept with them but merely used the availability of their bodies as the raw material for fantasies induced by a pose a photographer ordered a girl to take if she--26--wanted to get paid. The sexual fantasies of men became big business, while any woman who admitted having sexual fantasies was a whore. A man named Kinsey came out with a study that said women like it. The book was a best seller (to men or women?). Never having been able to acknowledge that men and women were made of flesh, America began to broadcast the fact as if it were news.

The instant entertainment flowing simultaneously into millions of homes, the instant meals being heated at 350°ree; (F) for twenty minutes (and serve), the purloined sex and guilty erections and the highest level of living in the world did not create a happier people. The adults, however, played their roles and smiled for 250th of a second at f 11.

The young didn't. They were called "The Silent Generation," but that was because no one was listening to their heartbeats. They were in the street dousing old men with kerosene and setting them afire, fighting each other with zip guns and Leonard Bernstein saw it all as a romantic *West Side Story* with pretty songs sung in beautifully rounded tenor and soprano tones. The more intellectual of the young (and it was always the quiet, bright student) practiced with their rifles until they were expert marksmen and then sent their parents into the Great Void. They knew that something was not right, as they were being served instantly. They knew, as they sat at the feet of their gray flanneled fathers, listening eagerly to the day's exciting tales of how two hundred extra cases of white thread were sold to a client who didn't need them. They knew, the teen-age girl on Mockingbird Lane in a suburb of a Texas city whose father did nothing--27--but work, come home, watch TV and drink beer before going to bed to do it all again the next day. She knew and one day she stayed home from school to kill her family, because she was "tired of seeing them suffer." They knew. The young always do and they protested, but no one understood. The fathers and the mothers offered many answers, the old answers, and the sociologists filled the magazines with articles on juvenile delinquency and Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale and Fulton Sheen gave the old answers a new twist and preached that a return to God meant higher profits. (Of course God is dead. The pistol still smokes in our hands.)

Those who were not in the streets, on the corners, back in the alleys, at the drive-ins, were in their rooms, watching, waiting, looking, knowing that when they could see a way out of the homes where the sounds from the TV smashed all possibility of thought and feeling, when they could get the slightest intimation vibration adumbration of an alternative to following in Dad's footsteps out the back door and into the garage every morning at 7:30, they would take it. All roads lead to a time clock, the teachers, preachers, parents said, with know-it-all smiles. The children said nothing, but late at night, in the quiet of their rooms, when the television sets were silent, they prepared themselves. For what, they didn't know. But when it came, they would recognize it, as a Mississippi farmer recognizes which rain of spring is the last one, and the cotton seeds can be planted without fear of their being washed away. (There was a day, a hot Nashville summer day. I was seventeen, riding on the--28--bus, the back of the bus. In my hand was the second issue of *Evergreen Review*. How it had gotten there, down to me, black me, in Nashville, I don't remember. But I had it in my hand, turning the pages slowly, understanding nothing of what passed before my eyes. And then: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, /starving hysterical naked, /dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn look-/ing for an angry fix." I closed the book, not knowing what it said, what it meant or where it had come from, but the long nights of waiting were over. There was another day, an afternoon, a September afternoon of the same year when I walked in Otey's Grocery at 18th and Jefferson and picked up a copy of *Esquire* magazine and started browsing through it. The first article was by somebody named John Clellon Holmes called "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation." My eyes focused on those words, "Beat Generation," and I saw myself. Hastily I scanned the article until I read, "Everyone who has lived through a war, any sort of war, knows that beat means, not so much weariness, as rawness of the nerves; not so much being 'filled up to here,' as being emptied out. It describes a state of mind from which all unessentials have been stripped, leaving it receptive to everything around it, but impatient with trivial obstructions." I closed the magazine, bought it and

smiled. Everyone could see the copy of the magazine in my hand. What they could not see was the self growing inside me.)

Those who came to be known as the Beat Generation had barely entered their twenties when the world changed at Hiroshima. They had been at that--29--most exciting of ages, the early twenties, when you feel life stretching before you, waiting for you to impress your image upon its fictile face. But the world had no face after Hiroshima. It bled from every pore and those in their neonatal womanhood and manhood set themselves the task of stanching the rivulets of blood pouring from the soul of Man. The pain of Hiroshima, the grim winters of Korea and the shadow of the hanging tree stretched across America. That was what their lives were supposed to affirm and they refused. Like those who killed their parents while they slept, the Beat Generation saw no reason to accept the values America presented them on the commuter trains leaving Grand Central Station, filled with the men in the gray flannel suits and V I P cases, passing through Harlem with their eyes on the closing stock market quotations. (One day the train won't make it out of Harlem and the stock market will not reopen when the sun rises the next day.) So they dropped out and Jack Kerouac described them On The Road hitchhiking back and forth from San Francisco to Denver to New Orleans to New York and back "angel-headed hipster high," smoking pot, listening to jazz, reading Zen, "Plotinus Poe St John of the Cross" and writing haiku on bus station walls in Pittsburgh. They dropped out and grew beards, let their hair hang low and the women dressed in black sweaters, skirts, leotards. They created their own society, where they lived, worked, talked, loved and presented a visible alternative to those still in the loneliness of adolescent rooms. There was a way out for those imprisoned in states of mind called Nashville, Dayton, Palmyra, Salt Lake City, Topeka,--30--Worcester. Catatonia was not the only alternative to psychosis. While Fidel liberated the Sierra Maestras, the Beat Generation created a liberated zone on North Beach in San Francisco. In their liberation, they thought of themselves as "white Negroes," rejects from society, outsiders, and they listened to jazz and got high and romanticized what they thought were the lives of black people.

(June 13, 1959)

7 P M

Talk about tired! I've been hunting for a place all day and one possibility. The most disgusting thing is that most people seem to read the sign that flashes over my head. It flashes so bright that soon it'll be inside of me and this'll make me bitter, which I don't want. Went in one place and got the proverbial, "Somebody just took it. Just hadn't had time to take the sign down." The lie was too obvious. If I'd been thinking, I would've gone to the window and politely removed the sign. The amazement on his face when I entered said quite loudly, "What th' hell is this nigger doing in here?"

Well, I'm sitting in one of the North Beach places now. When I first hit this part of town I wanted to laugh. The people are so ludicrous. The first thing that occurred to me was, what is their motivation? And all the Negroes! But it's no wonder. Here at least you're accepted, but it's more because you're a Negro and not so much as an individual. I want to be accepted as plain ol' me and rejected on the same basis. But it's a little better to be accepted because you are a Negro rather than rejected for the same reason.--31--

I would like to get an apartment over here, but price will probably eliminate me. But North Beach is nice with its narrow streets and hidden alleys. Also it's near the Bay and you know my passion for water.

The characters that stroll in and out. Long hair, beards -- do you take them seriously? They seem to me to be bums masquerading under the banner of the avant-garde. This is all like watching something on the stage.

The "beatnik" attitude toward the Negro is interesting, because it creates a new Negro. America's born Outsider can now belong. He who accepted before his position of unacceptance in society, now is made to know consciously that he is oppressed. "But we accept you. We, the beatniks are white Negroes. We are emulating your reaction to society." So now the Negro is a paragon of sorts, and

what develops is a new Uncle Tom. Not the obsequious old man down South, but a "balling fool" who can ball and be praised for it.

In the South you accept segregation as a granite fact, but here it's more subtle, more cruel. In Nashville, white people looked at me, called me a nigger and frowned. Here they look at me, call me a nigger and want to hug me. Either way / end up being nonexistent.)

The new selves the Beat Generation created appeared insincere only because they did not yet fit comfortably. But with their thirst to live, with their intensity to feel everything (FEEL) as if no one had ever ever ever ever felt before, they were real. Henry Miller and Rimbaud became minor saints—32—because they had the same hungry intensity, the desire to rearrange derange the senses, so they might know more, feel more and above all, be more. Being was all. Don't be good; don't be evil. They were religious fanatics seeking union with God. Not the God of Our Father who art in Heaven (and what're YOU doing up there when the mess is down here), but the God that walked the streets and lay in the sun and all manner of good emanated from His BEING.

Being. To Be. In America one was taught TO DO. (The kitchen. That's where I always had the most serious talks with my mother. While she was cooking. "I think I want to be a monk," I told her one afternoon. "A monk?" she exclaimed with horror. "Why?" "Well, that's the only way I could devote all my time to God." "But, Julius. Monks don't do anything.") But what one did affected one's Be-ing and to correct that, Western society evolved Freud, and countless other systems of psychiatry that adjust one's Being so that you can continue the Doing. The society depended upon people Doing and if they suddenly wanted TO BE, the society would disintegrate. If people cared more about the man who wore the clothes than the clothes on the man, fortunes would disappear in a matter of minutes.

The Beat Generation cared enough to kill within themselves a lifetime of being educated to do. They cared enough to hold a small protest demonstration in downtown San Francisco on 6 August 1959. (It had never occurred to me to protest the bombing of Hiroshima. I would observe the day in my introverted way, but I didn't know one could do anything else. Only a few of them protested, but it—33—was a small reminder that radioactive matter was still falling from the explosion of that August morning and that it would continue to fall until something, something happened. But none of us knew what.) They cared enough to sit for hours and talk about other ways. Most of them believed in nonviolence, even when the police beat and arrested the black poet Bob Kaufman. ("Well, I see where a white jury down South sentenced a white guy to the electric chair for the rape of a Negro girl," someone said to me one day sarcastically. "Oh yeah!" I exclaimed. "Yeah. I guess that's real equality. Instead of abolishing capital punishment, spread it around." I didn't respond, because there was nothing to say. Maybe he was right, but retribution was retribution and it was long overdue. To take a life was wrong, but I couldn't help being happy thinking about that cracker sitting in the electric chair.)

They were real and America regarded them as freaks. The photographers came to North Beach with their Nikons; the reporters with their built-in-answer questions ("What do you think your parents would think if they could see you now?"). On weekends, the tourist buses drove slowly up North Beach's Grant Street; the soldiers and sailors on weekend passes came, got drunk and lined the sidewalk, yelling, "You need a bath!" "The Army barber should get his hands on you!" And Allen Ginsberg left for India; Gary Snyder went to Japan; Kerouac took to the road once more and ended up at his mother's on Long Island; John Clellon Holmes bought a house in Connecticut; Pierre de Lattre, the priest of the Bread and Wine Mission (whose—34—wife always looked so unhappy), disappeared and others vanished into the wilds of Big Sur, the sewage waste of Venice West and to various other asylums in the outer circles of respectability, while Bill Margolis jumped off the roof and was paralyzed forever and Bob Kaufman's wife Eileen, who must be close to forty now, can be seen walking through Washington Square Park in New York on spring afternoons, smiling to herself, pushing their child in a stroller, a creature from another world, another time, and all those around her think she's only a housewife out with her kid for the day.

The stream did not die. It made its way underground and the black dress of the women (the faces pale with no make-up) became a uniform for a generation of college students. Beards and sandals became the language of new states of mind.

America quickly assimilated the first post-Hiroshima rebellion. It absorbed what the Beat Generation offered culturally -- the influx of Japanese and Eastern culture, a new dynamism in poetry and prose, and fashions -- and rang it up on the cash register. Others, however, internalized the truths the Beat Generation had brought and resolved to continue the journey.