



MM OR, ON BLONDNESS—DO BLONDES HAVE MORE FUN?

his day uncoiling the rainbow of women's modesty, lightly floating heads of hair, wisps-of-steam hair, these charming bed-curtains. His life will pass in this thick haze of love, his fingers intertwined with the very emblem of woman's wantonness, with that most subtle device for caresses that she sports so nonchalantly. There must surely be hairdressers who, like miners down a pit, have dreamed of serving only brunettes, or of launching out into blondes. Have they thought of deciphering those networks which just a while ago gave a hint of sleep's disorder? I have often stopped at the threshold of these establishments from which men are barred, and I have seen the heads of hair uncoiling in their grottoes. Serpents, serpents, you never cease to fascinate me. So one day, in the Passage de l'Opéra, I found myself contemplating the pure, lazy coils of a python of blondness. And suddenly, for the first time in my life, the idea struck me that men have discovered only one term of comparison for what is blond: *flaxen*, and have left it at that. Flax, poor wretches, but have you never looked at ferns? I have spent months on end nibbling fern hair. I have known hair that was pure resin, topaz hair, hair pulsing with hysteria. Blond as hysteria, blond as the sky, blond as tiredness, blond as a kiss. My palette of blondnesses would include the elegance of motorcars, the odour of sainfoin, the silence of mornings, the perplexities of waiting, the ravages of glancing touches. How blond is the sound of the rain, how blond the song of mirrors! From the perfume of gloves to the cry of the owl, from the beating of the murderer's heart to the flower-flames of the laburnum, from the first nibble to the last song, how many blondnesses, how many eyelids: blondness of roofs, blondness of winds, blondness of tables or palm trees, there are whole days of blondness, Blond's department stores, arcades for desire, arsenals of orangeade powder. [Blond everywhere: I surrender myself to

{ this pitch pine of the senses, to this concept of a blondness which is not so much a colour as a sort of spirit of colour blended with the accents of love. From white to red through yellow, blond keeps its mystery intact. Blond resembles the stammerings of ecstasy, the piracies of lips, the tremors of limpid waters. Blond takes flight from definitions down a wayward path where flowers and seashells greet my eyes. It is woman glinting upon stones, a paradoxical shadow of caresses in space, a breath of dishevelment of reason. Blond as the reign of passionate embraces, these tresses were dissolving, then, in the shop in the passage, and as for me, I had been slowly dying there for the past fifteen minutes or so. It seemed to me that I could willingly have spent my whole life near this swarm of wasps, near this river of glimmers. In this underwater world, the imagination is haunted by those film heroines who, in search of a lost ring, encase all their American pearliness in a diving suit. This unfurled hair had the electric pallor of storms, the cloudiness of breath upon metal. A drowsy animal of some kind, lolling in a car. One felt surprised that it made no more noise than unshod feet upon a carpet. What is blonder than the froth of moss? I have often thought I saw champagne on the floors of forests. And chanterelles! And agaric! Darting hares! The moons of fingernails! The colour pink! The blood of plants! The eyes of bitches! Memory: memory is truly blond. At its very limits, where memory blends with falsehood, the pretty clusters of clarity! The dead hair suddenly took on a port-wine glint: the hairdresser was beginning the Marcel waving.

At freedom in the shop, huge and thoroughly modern wild animals lay in wait for *homo's* female, already the prey of small iron tongs: the mechanical dryer with its serpentine neck, the ultraviolet ray tube with its gentle eyes, the summer-breathed fumigator, all the crafty instruments ready to snap their jaws,

THE KISS

Blonde

A NOVEL BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

This movie I've been seeing all my life, yet never to its completion.

Almost she might say *This movie is my life!*

Her mother first took her when she was two or three years old. Her earliest memory, so exciting! Grauman's Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. This was years before she'd been able to comprehend even the rudiments of the movie story, yet she was enthralled by the movement, the ceaseless rippling fluid movement, on the great screen above her. Not yet capable of thinking *This was the very universe upon which are projected uncountable unnameable forms of life.* How many times in her lost childhood and girlhood she would return with yearning to this movie, recognizing it at once despite the variety of its titles, its many actors. For always there was the Fair Princess. And always the Dark Prince. A complication of events brought them together and tore them apart and brought them together again and again tore them apart until, as the movie neared its end and the movie music soared, they were about to be brought together in a fierce embrace.

Yet not always happily. You couldn't predict. For sometimes one knelt beside the deathbed of the other and heralded death with a kiss. Even if he (or she) survived the death of the beloved, you knew the meaning of life was over.

*For there is no meaning to life apart from the movie story.
And there is no movie story apart from the darkened movie theater.
But how vexing, never to see the end of the movie!*

For always something went wrong: there was a commotion in the theater and the lights came up; a fire alarm (but no fire? or was there a fire? once, she was sure she smelled smoke) sounded loudly and everyone was asked to leave, or she was herself late for an appointment and had to leave, or maybe she fell asleep in her seat and missed the ending and woke dazed as the lights came up and strangers around her rose to leave.

Over, it's over? But how can it be over?

Yet as an adult woman she continued to seek out the movie. Slipping into theaters in obscure districts of the city or in cities unknown to her. Insomniac, she might buy a ticket for a midnight show. She might buy a ticket for the first show of the day, in the late morning. She wasn't fleeing her own life (though her life had grown baffling to her, as adult life does to those who live it) but instead easing into a parenthesis within that life, stopping time as a child might arrest the movement of a clock's hands: by force. Entering the darkened theater (which sometimes smelled of stale popcorn, the hair lotion of strangers, disinfectant), excited as a young girl looking up eagerly to see on the screen yet again *Oh, another time! one more time!* the beautiful blond woman who seems never to age, encased in flesh like any woman and yet graceful as no ordinary woman could be, a powerful radiance shining not only in her luminous eyes but in her very skin. *For my skin is my soul. There is no soul otherwise. You see in me the promise of human joy.* She who slips into the theater, choosing a seat in a row near the screen, gives herself unquestioningly up to the movie that's both familiar and unfamiliar as a recurring dream imperfectly recalled. The costumes of the actors, the hairstyles, even the faces and voices of the movie people change with the years, and she can remember, not clearly but in fragments, her own lost emotions, the loneliness of her childhood only partly assuaged by the looming screen. *Another world to live in. Where?* There was a day, an hour, when she realized that the Fair Princess, who is so beautiful because she is so beautiful and because she is the Fair Princess, is doomed to seek, in others' eyes, confirmation of her own being. *For we are not who we are told we are, if we are not told. Are we?*

Adult unease and gathering terror.

The movie story is complicated and confusing, though familiar or almost familiar. Perhaps it's carelessly spliced together. Perhaps it's meant to tease. Perhaps there are flashbacks amid present time. Or flash-forwards! Close-ups of the Fair Princess seem too intimate. We want to stay on the outsides of others, not be drawn inside. *If I could say, There! that's me! That woman,*

that thing on the screen, that's who I am. But she can't see ahead to the ending. Never has she seen the final scene, never the concluding credits rolling past. In these, beyond the final movie kiss, is the key to the movie's mystery, she knows. As the body's organs, removed in an autopsy, are the key to the life's mystery.

But there will be a time maybe this very evening when, slightly out of breath, she settles into a worn, soiled plush seat in the second row of an old theater in a derelict district of the city, the floor curving beneath her feet like the earth's curve and sticky against the soles of her expensive shoes; and the audience is scattered, mostly solitary individuals; and she's relieved that, in her disguise (dark glasses, an attractive wig, a raincoat) no one will recognize her and no one from her life knows she's here, or could guess where she might be. *This time I will see it through to the end. This time!* Why? She has no idea. And in fact she's expected elsewhere, she's hours late, possibly a car was scheduled to take her to the airport, unless she's days late, weeks late; for she's become, as an adult, defiant of time. *For what is time but others' expectations of us? That game we can refuse to play.* So too, she's noticed, the Fair Princess is confused by time. Confused by the movie story. You take your cues from other people. What if other people don't provide cues? In this movie the Fair Princess is no longer in the first bloom of her youthful beauty, yet of course she's still beautiful, white-skinned and radiant on the screen as she climbs out of a taxi on a windswept street; she's in disguise in dark glasses, a sleek brown wig, and a tightly belted raincoat, closely tracked by the camera as she slips into a movie theater and purchases a single ticket, enters the darkened theater, and takes a seat in the second row. Because she's the Fair Princess, other patrons glance at her but don't recognize her; perhaps she's an ordinary woman, though beautiful, no one they know. The movie has begun. She gives herself up to it within seconds, removing her dark glasses. Her head is forced back by the angle of the screen looming over her, and her eyes are cast upward in an expression of childlike, slightly apprehensive awe. Like reflections in water, the movie light ripples across her face. Lost in wonderment she's unaware of the Dark Prince having followed her into the theater; the camera broods upon him as, for several tense minutes, he stands behind frayed velvet drapes at a side aisle. His handsome face is veiled in shadow. His expression is urgent. He is wearing a dark suit, no necktie, a fedora hat slanted over his forehead. At a music cue he comes quickly forward to lean over her, the solitary woman in the second row. He whispers to her and she turns, startled. Her surprise seems genuine though she must know the script: the script to this point, at least, and a little beyond.

My love! It's you.

Never has it been anyone except you.

In the reflected shimmering light from the gigantic screen the faces of the lovers are charged with meaning, heralds from a lost age of grandeur. As if, though diminished and mortal, they must play out the scene. *They will play out the scene.* Boldly he grips her by the nape of her neck to steady her. To claim her. To possess her. How strong his fingers, and icy; how strange, the glassy glisten of his eyes, closer than she's ever seen them before.

Yet another time, she sighs and lifts her perfect face to the Dark Prince's kiss.

THE BATH

It is in early childhood that the born actor emerges, for it is in early childhood that the world is first perceived as Mystery. The origin of all acting is improvisation in the face of Mystery.

—T. Navarro,
The Paradox of Acting

I

"See? That man is your father."

There was a day, it was Norma Jeane's sixth birthday, the first day of June 1932, and a magical morning it was, blinding breathless whitely dazzling, in Venice Beach, California. The wind off the Pacific Ocean fresh and cool and astringent, smelling only faintly of the usual briny rot and beach debris. And borne, it seemed, by that very wind came Mother. Gaunt-faced Mother with her luscious red lips and plucked and penciled brows who came for Norma Jeane where she was living with her grandparents in a pockmarked old ruin of a beige stucco building on Venice Boulevard—"Norma Jeane, come!" And Norma Jeane ran, ran to Mother! Her pudgy little hand caught in Mother's slender hand, that feel of the black-net glove strange to her and wonderful. For Grandma's hands were chafed old-woman's hands, as Grandma's smell was an old-woman smell, but Mother's smell was so sweet it made you dizzy, like a taste of hot sugary lemon. "Norma Jeane, my love—come." For Mother was "Gladys," and "Gladys" was the child's *true mother*. When she chose to be. When she was strong enough. When the demands of The Studio allowed. For Gladys's life was "three dimensions

Marilyn

a biography by

I. A NOVEL BIOGRAPHY

Norman

Mailer (1973)

So we think of Marilyn who was every man's love affair with America, Marilyn Monroe who was blonde and beautiful and had a sweet little rinky-dink of a voice and all the cleanliness of all the clean American backyards. She was our angel, the sweet angel of sex, and the sugar of sex came up from her like a resonance of sound in the clearest grain of a violin. Across five continents the men who knew the most about love would covet her, and the classical pimples of the adolescent working his first gas pump would also pump for her, since Marilyn was deliverance, a very Stradivarius of sex, so gorgous, forgiving, humorous, compliant and tender that even the most mediocre musician would relax his lack of art in the dissolving magic of her violin. "Divine love always has met and always will meet every human need," was the sentiment she offered from the works of Mary Baker Eddy as "my prayer for you always" (to the man who may have been her first illicit lover), and if we change *love* to *sex*, we have the subtext in the promise. "Marilyn Monroe's sex," said the smile of the young star, "will meet every human need." She gave the feeling that if you made love to her, why then how could you not move more easily into sweets and the purchase of the full promise of future sweets, move into tender heavens where your flesh would be restored. She would ask no price. She was not the dark contract of those passionate brunette depths that speak of blood, vows taken for life, and the furies of vengeance if you are untrue to the depth of passion, no, Marilyn suggested sex might be difficult and dangerous with others, but ice cream with her. If your taste combined with her taste, how nice, how sweet would be that tender dream of flesh there to share.

In her early career, in the time of *Asphalt Jun-*

gle when the sexual immanence of her face came up on the screen like a sweet peach bursting before one's eyes, she looked then like a new love ready and waiting between the sheets in the unexpected clean breath of a rare sexy morning, looked like she'd stepped fully clothed out of a chocolate box for Valentine's Day, so desirable as to fulfill each of the letters in that favorite word of the publicity flack, *curvaceous*, so curvaceous and yet without menace as to turn one's fingertips into ten happy prowlers. Sex was, yes, ice cream to her. "Take me," said her smile. "I'm easy. I'm happy. I'm an angel of sex, you bet."

What a jolt to the dream life of the nation that the angel died of an overdose. Whether calculated suicide by barbiturates or accidental suicide by losing count of how many barbiturates she had already taken, or an end even more sinister, no one was able to say. Her death was covered over with ambiguity even as Hemingway's was exploded into horror, and as the deaths and spiritual disasters of the decade of the Sixties came one by one to American Kings and Queens, as Jack Kennedy was killed, and Bobby, and Martin Luther King, as Jackie Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis and Teddy Kennedy went off the bridge at Chappaquiddick, so the decade that began with Hemingway as the monarch of American arts ended with Andy Warhol as its regent, and the ghost of Marilyn's death gave a lavender edge to that dramatic American design of the Sixties which seemed in retrospect to have done nothing so much as to bring Richard Nixon to the threshold of imperial power. "Romance is a nonsense bet," said the jolt in the electric shock, and so began that long decade of the Sixties which ended with television living like an inchworm on the aesthetic gut of the drug-deadened American belly.

In what a light does that leave the last angel of the cinema! She was never for TV. She preferred a theatre and those hundreds of bodies in the dark, those wandering lights on the screen when the luminous life of her face grew ten feet tall. It was possible she knew better than anyone that she was the last of the myths to thrive in the long evening of the American dream—she had been born, after all, in the year Valentino died, and his footprints in the forecourt at Grauman's Chinese Theatre were the only ones that fit her feet. She was one of the last of cinema's aristocrats and may not have wanted to be examined, then *ingested*, in the neighborly reductive dimensions of America's living room. No, she belonged to the occult church of the film, and the last covens of Hollywood. She might be as modest in her voice and as soft in her flesh as the girl next door, but she was nonetheless larger than life up on the screen. Even down in the Eisenhower shank of the early Fifties she was already promising that a time was coming when sex would be easy and sweet, democratic provender for all. Her stomach, untrammelled by girdles or sheaths, popped forward in a full woman's belly, inelegant as hell, an avowal of a womb fairly salivating in seed—that belly which was never to have a child—and her breasts popped buds and burgeons of flesh over many a queesting sweating moviegoer's face. She was a cornucopia. She excited dreams of honey for the horn.

Yet she was more. She was a presence. She was ambiguous. She was the angel of sex, and the angel was in her detachment. For she was separated from what she offered. "None but Marilyn Monroe," wrote Diana Trilling,

could suggest such a purity of sexual delight. The boldness with which she could parade herself and yet never be gross, her sexual flamboyance and bravado

which yet breathed an air of mystery and even reticence, her voice which carried such ripe overtones of erotic excitement and yet was the voice of a shy child—these complications were integral to her gift. And they described a young woman trapped in some never-never land of unawareness.

Or is it that behind the gift is the tender wistful hint of another mood? For she also seems to say, "When an absurd presence is perfect, some little god must have made it." At its best, the echo of her small and perfect creation reached to the horizon of our mind. We heard her speak in that tiny tinkly voice so much like a little dinner bell, and it tolled when she was dead across all that decade of the Sixties she had helped to create, across its promise, its excitement, its ghosts and its center of tragedy.

Since she was also a movie star of the most stubborn secretiveness and flamboyant candor, most conflicting arrogance and on-rushing inferiority; great populist of philosophers—she loved the working man—and most tyrannical of mates, a queen of a castrator who was ready to weep for a dying minnow; a lover of books who did not read, and a proud, inviolate artist who could haunch over to publicity when the heat was upon her faster than a whore could lust over a hot buck; a female spurt of wit and sensitive energy who could hang like a sloth for days in a muddymooded coma; a child-girl, yet an actress to loose a riot by dropping her glove at a premiere; a fountain of charm and a dreary bore; an ambulating cyclone of beauty when dressed to show, a dank hunched-up drab at her worst—with a bad smell!—a giant and an emotional pygmy; a lover of life and a cowardly hyena of death who drenched herself in chemical stupors; a sexual oven whose fire may rarely have been lit—she would go to bed with her brassiere on—she was

certainly more and less than the silver witch of us all. In her ambition, so Faustian, and in her ignorance of culture's dimensions, in her liberation and her tyrannical desires, her noble democratic longings intimately contradicted by the widening pool of her narcissism (where every friend and slave must bathe), we can see the magnified mirror of ourselves, our exaggerated and now all but defeated generation, yes, she ran a reconnaissance through the Fifties, and left a message for us in her death, "Baby go boom." Now she is the ghost of the Sixties. The sorrow of her loss is in this passage her friend Norman Rosten would write in *Marilyn—An Untold Story*:

She was proud of her dishwashing and held up the glasses for inspection. She played badminton with a real flair, occasionally banging someone on the head (no damage). She was just herself, and herself was gay, noisy, giggling, tender. Seven summers before her death. . . . She liked her guest room; she'd say, "Make it dark, and give me air." She slept late, got her own breakfast and went off for a walk in the woods with only the cat for company.

Marilyn loved animals; she was drawn to all living things. She would spend hundreds of dollars to try to save a storm-damaged tree and would mourn its death. She welcomed birds, providing tree houses and food for the many species that visited her lawn, she worried about them in bad weather. She worried about dogs and cats. She once had a dog that was by nature contemplative, but she was convinced he was depressed. She did her best to make him play, and that depressed him even more; on the rare occasions when he did an antic pirouette, Marilyn would hug and kiss him, delirious with joy.

They are loving lines. Rosten's book must offer the tenderest portrait available of Monroe, but those who suspect such tender beauty can find other anecdotes in Maurice Zolotow's biography:

One evening, some of the cast—though not Monroe—were watching the rushes of the yacht sequence.

. . . [Tony Curtis] is posing as a rich man's son who suffers from a frigid libido. Girls cannot excite him. Monroe decides to cure him of his ailment by kissing him and making love to him. On the fifth kiss, the treatment succeeds admirably.

In the darkness, someone said to Curtis, "You seemed to enjoy kissing Marilyn." And he said loudly, "It's like kissing Hitler."

When the lights came on, Paula Strasberg was crying. "How could you say a terrible thing like that, Tony?" she said. "You try acting with her, Paula," he snapped, "and see how you feel."

During much of the shooting, Monroe was reading Paine's *Rights of Man*. One day, the second assistant director, Hal Polaire, went to her dressing room. He knocked on the door. He called out, "We're ready for you, Miss Monroe."

She replied with a simple obliterative. "Go fuck yourself," she said. Did she anticipate how a future generation of women would evaluate the rights of men? Even so consummate a wit as Billy Wilder would yet describe her as the meanest woman in Hollywood, a remark of no spectacular humor that was offered nonetheless in an interview four years after her death, as though to suggest that even remembering Marilyn across the void was still sufficiently irritating to strip his wit. Yet during the filming of *Let's Make Love* she was to write in her dressing room notebook, "What am I afraid of? Why am I so afraid? Do I think I can't act? I know I can act but I am afraid. I am afraid and I should not be and I must not be." It is in fear and trembling that she writes. In dread. Nothing less than some intimation of the death of her soul may be in her fear. But then is it not hopeless to comprehend her without some concept of a soul? One might literally have to invent the idea of a soul in order to approach her. "What am I afraid of?"

It may be fair to quote another woman whose

life ended in suicide: "A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as one thousand." The words are by Virginia Woolf. In its wake, the materials of any biographer come begging with his credentials.

But why not assume Marilyn Monroe opens the entire problem of biography? The question is whether a person can be comprehended by the facts of the life, and this does not even begin to take into account that abominable magnetism of facts. They always attract polar facts. Rare is the piece of special evidence in any life that is not quickly contradicted by other witnesses. In a career like Monroe's, where no one can be certain whether she was playing an old role, experimenting with a new one, or even being nothing less than the *true* self (which she had spent her life trying to discover), the establishing of facts dissolves into the deeper enigma of how reality may appear to a truly talented actor. Since the psychological heft of a role has more existential presence than daily life (and in fact the role creates *real* reactions in everyone who sees it), so the twilight between reality and fantasy is obliged to become more predominant for a great actor than for others. Even if a few of the *facts* of Monroe's life can be verified, therefore, or, equally, if we learn the sad fact that Monroe reminiscing about her past at a given moment is not being accurate—to say the least!—how little is established. For an actor lives with the lie as if it were truth. A false truth can offer more reality than the truth that was altered.

Since this is a poor way to establish history, the next question is whether a life like hers is not antipathetic to biographical tools. Certainly the two histories already published show the limitations of a conventional approach. The first, by Maurice Zolotow, *Marilyn Monroe*, written while she was still alive, is filled with interesting psychoanalytical insights of the sort one can hear at a New York coffee table when two intelligent people are analyzing a third, but his material is reamed with overstressed and hollow anecdotes untrustworthy by the very style of their prose, a feature writer heating up the old dishes of other feature writers, and so a book which has fewer facts than factoids (to join the hungry ranks of those who coin a word), that is, facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority. (It is possible, for example, that Richard Nixon has spoken in nothing but factoids during his public life.)

So Zolotow's book is able to make another biographer wistful—for if a few of his best stories were true, how nice they might be for one's own use; it is just that one cannot depend on them—they have in the main been written by Marilyn, which is to say, by Marilyn as told to Ben Hecht, a prodigiously factoidal enterprise printed as Sunday supplement pieces in 1954. Hecht was never a writer to tell the truth when a concoction could put life in his prose, and Marilyn had been polishing her fables for years. No team of authors contributes more to the literary smog that hangs over legend than Marilyn ben Hecht.

The other book, *Norma Jean*, by Fred Lawrence Guiles, seems more accurate, and is certainly more scrupulous, as close to the facts of its subject as Carlos Baker's book may have been