

## *Under the Condor—Part Two*

“The only criterion we’ll be using in the selection of material for the magazine is that it be interesting. Think pieces, short stories containing description, feature articles, a table of contents—all will be used so long as they meet that standard. We’d even run a horoscope or a stock listing should it be interestingly done. My job will be to edit the magazine in a fascinating way and contribute an occasional editorial on subjects of interest.”

That was the editorial credo of COTTON MATHER’S *Magazine for the Arts at Harvard* as explained by Ben Pasquali, its founding editor, to Jane Repton in the same small Quincy House living room that would have been a death chamber had she gone through with the suicide she had attempted, or at least seriously contemplated, two days before. Jane was staring blankly out the chamber window.

Autumn had begun in late September that year. It was now the second Monday in October, or Columbus Day Observance, a holiday marked by an absence of classes and the Cambridge City Council’s restyling Harvard Square as “Christopher Columbus Plaza.”

Autumn is also the season when everything begins to die inside, and Jane thought there was something comforting in that—at least for someone who’s been to the depths of depression and come only part way back. She remembered the story of the young French poet who made a lobster his companion, explaining “he’s seen the depths.” From what Jane had seen, the depths were not so memorable a place. In fact, all she—and probably all the lobster—could have said was, simply, that it was cold and dark down there.

Watching Jane as she gazed out the window, Ben sensed that she was not giving him her full attention. “I had better be moving on,” he said. “I know that I am not very interesting—nor do I intend to be. All the impulses which might make me interesting as an individual I am saving for my magazine work instead.”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” Jane said. “My mind was wandering. A story I’d heard a long time ago just came back to me—about a young French poet who hanged himself at the age of only 25.”

“When a young creative person ends his life prematurely,” Ben said, “it is always sad. But, unfortunately, this happens often. Behind all creativity, as a kind of driving force, is a tremendous feeling of unease. When this sense of uneasiness is not channeled into artistic endeavors, or is left uncontrolled, it can have an enormously destructive effect on a person’s life, leading finally to alcoholism or madness. However, when this sense of uneasiness doesn’t just run loose but turns inward, the result is an overwhelming feeling of despair, with suicide often the final outcome.

“What I personally worry about is not that my own uneasiness will get out of control, but that it is not great enough for me to be sure of coming up with the unending stream of interesting notions needed to successfully edit and write for a magazine like COTTON MATHER’S.”

After Ben had gone, Jane was left alone with herself. For some minutes she considered his theory of uneasiness and suicide. Ben’s perspective, she decided, was logical and analytical—and,

in those terms, correct. Her own perspective was intuitive and impressionistic, and so—according to those terms—also valid. On Saturday night, less than two days before, under the influence of the highly personal, deeply emotional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Jane herself had nearly committed suicide. Until then she too had thought of herself as a poet and a creative person. But there was, she now realized, something dangerous in that. It had made her feel too “special,” too far removed from ordinary life, as if she were operating on the very edge of existence, with an abyss below. Like the legendary wings of Icarus, artistic perception could carry the creative person so high, so close to the sun, that a corresponding and perhaps fatal plunge seemed almost inevitable.

Now Jane preferred to see herself simply as a survivor. On Saturday night and, even more, on Sunday morning, Jane had resolved that life was the most important thing to her. She would have to give up poetry, at least until she knew better how to control it. For the present what she must do was survive—to get through one day, and then the next, and then the one after that, and so on. Already Sunday and more than half of Columbus Day Observance were behind her. It was nearly five, and before the stores closed she wanted to buy a calendar on which to mark off each day as she got through it—a kind of survival diary.

From Quincy House she walked up to Massachusetts Avenue—or “Mass. Ave.”—across Christopher Columbus Plaza to Brattle Street. The Cambridge sidewalks were clogged with shoppers from the outlying Bay area towns. Jane could not help wondering how these people could tolerate their drab, meaningless lives. She did not really even like streets—perhaps because she always associated them with pedestrians—but that was not what was important: What mattered was that she simply get through them.

It was difficult to find current calendars in October. She finally came across some in a shop opposite the Brattle Theater. They were priced at 30 cents, or ten cents for each month remaining. But she felt that the expense was justified if the calendar helped her maintain her emotional stability.

As she walked back towards her room, Jane regretted the critical thoughts she had had earlier about pedestrians. Walking, she suspected, stimulated these kinds of thoughts, or at least freed her mind to rush off in every direction, invariably ending in some negative thought. For the sake of her own emotional balance Jane had given up poetry, but the imagination was still there.

Turning into the courtyard of Quincy House she saw a tall young man in starched white cotton jacket and trousers sitting on the stoop to her entryway—either a medical doctor or a restaurant employee. Jane hesitated to make a distinction of this kind. It came too close to the snobbishness of her earlier thoughts about the out-of-towners. She instead chose to tolerate the ambiguity. A writer—Fitzgerald, she thought—once said that the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in the mind at the same time was the mark of a fine intellect. Jane held the two possibilities—doctor or restaurant employee—in her consciousness, and let them dangle there. This potentially negative line of reasoning came to a stop when she realized that the tall young man reclining informally on her entryway steps and the handsome skipper who had courted her during the Regatta in Edgartown were one in the same.

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*Whit Stillman graduated from Harvard in 1973.*

Jim Van Blanck had taken a break from his summer medical work that July to compete in the Vineyard races. He was on the eve of the third year of a long medical program which, if successfully completed, would make him a psychiatrist, and one with a particularly strong background in neurology and biochemistry. Jim was one of the new kind of therapists who did not limit their methods to one doctrine or even one discipline, but sought instead to use what was most valuable in each—in short, whatever worked.

He had confided his plans to Jane as they walked back from the Regatta Ball, his overlong arm wrapped around her. The emotion Jane had felt then resembled infatuation, but was really a kind of idealistic love. Now, as Jim got up from the steps and walked towards her, she felt a brief shiver of fear. A thin gloss of perspiration, or dew, formed on her skin.

"It's been eight weeks, Janie. That's nearly two months."

"Yes, it's been quite a while. Time's a strange thing, Jim. It can't be seen, yet it's there. But once it's passed there's no way to bring it back again."

Hearing this Jim looked at her closely, but saw only a friendly, open expression on Jane's pretty, shaped face.

"I haven't called you in the past weeks because I didn't want to do anything which might jeopardize our relationship. I can understand how you might have felt we'd been out of touch, but actually I don't think I've ever felt as close to anyone as to you during this time."

"When I was young I developed a habit of directing all my thinking towards one person, and of conducting with them a sort of conversation inside my head, with me doing all the talking. At first it was Mom with whom I'd talk this way, and then mostly God. Afterwards came a whole series of home-room teachers, favorite authors, imaginary interviewers, and professional models like Freud and Erikson. But for the past two months it's been you."

"Maybe I'm way off base and you don't care for me at all, but I still don't regret these weeks, because they will always be there, whatever you feel. My memories are something which no one can take away from me."

Jim paused a moment. "I'm sorry," he said. "I feel that I've both said too much and yet not really expressed what I meant at all."

"I think I know what you are saying," said Jane, "and I feel the same way myself. I've always had a tremendous difficulty in expressing myself. In fact, I think it was because of my inability in prose conversation that I originally turned to poetry."

At this point Jim interrupted. "I want to hear what you have to say about poetry, but let's go someplace where we can sit down."

By way of a shady, countrified path between Lowell House and a small parking area for motorcycles, Jim led Jane to the garden of the Cat Club, which in local slang was also called the "Cat Frat" or the "Cathouse." The Cat was one of Harvard's undergraduate fraternities, or "Final Clubs"—a term, Jim told Jane, derived from the late nineteenth century to distinguish them from "Waiting Clubs," whose members were said to be "waiting" to be invited to join a Final Club. The Cathouse had severed its connections with its national fraternity and "gone final" in the 1890s. "To me," Jim said, "the Cat is the most beautiful place in Cambridge—except for the stacks at Widener, but that's different." Jim's feeling was, Jane thought, another aspect of his idealism—in this case a love of the past as represented by the Final Clubs.

When Jane entered the Cat Club garden she was struck by its deeply green quality—all lawn, trees, and ivy. Jim went inside the clubhouse to get Jane a gingerale and himself a beer. An inexhaustible supply of ice, alcohol, and soda always seemed to be

flowing from the Cathouse, and to Jane there was something especially masculine in that.

She and Jim finally settled with their drinks at a round, white iron table in the middle of the deserted garden. For a moment Jane watched the tiny bubbles which formed at the bottom of her glass and then quickly floated to the top. They seemed to come out of nowhere, like the sudden insights creative artists get while working on a project.

"I'm not sure," she said, "if I'll be able to explain exactly what I mean, because the poetic form, which I used to rely on, is no longer open to me, but I'll have to try. While you are listening, though, please keep in mind that the narrative form of expression is not the one I'm used to."

"Two days ago, on Saturday night, I nearly committed suicide. What specifically brought me to that point I couldn't say, perhaps because there was no specific factor but a combination of them. However, the major factor was almost certainly my poetry work which always seemed to be going either well or badly. When it was going badly I would sometimes sit for hours without being able to write a line—an awful blankness faced me from the notebook lying open on my lap. I would become desperate to write anything at all, even something of less than the highest quality. Then the feeling would be even worse—the sickening realization that I had com-

promised my artistic standards, which were the only things which made writing worthwhile in the first place. I could, of course, cross out the offending lines, but then an awful blotted area would confront me from the notebook lying open on my lap.

"When the writing was going well the effect was even worse again, because it gave me the sense of being 'special'—the feeling that I was different from other people, and maybe even better. In America there is a cult of genius which says that just because a person shows brilliance in a part of her work, then she herself is somehow godlike. This will sound crazy now, but two weeks ago when I was on a productive streak and had a poetry 'high,' I felt tremendously hurt when my roommate Lisa did not save the telephone messages I had been taking

for her. I had put a lot of thought into those messages and was upset that she did not take them more seriously."

"When the writing was going well I would also get a terrible feeling of guilt, which was completely irrational. Perhaps deep down I just didn't feel I deserved the enormous success I was having—that without the usual agony of creation and unsuccessful first drafts I somehow hadn't 'paid the price.' According to one theory—I think Freud's—the real source of my guilt feelings would go deeper than that: My writing poetry would be an attempt to attract my father's attention and in some way 'replace' my mother in his affections."

"The Electra Complex."

"Yes. So long as I was unable to write a word this was no problem, but when my writing was going well I must have unconsciously feared that I was going to succeed in that other thing, too."

"Of course, what finally prompted me to consider an irrational act could have been something much less profound. I can't stop thinking that the whole thing might have had something to do with the fact that my hair was dirty. For some reason I hadn't felt my hair needed washing Saturday morning, and by that night it felt awful. Nothing depresses me more than that feeling of uncleanness. I wonder if my not washing my hair Saturday wasn't an unconscious way for me to punish myself for trying to write well, and all that that implies psychologically."

For a few moments after Jane said this Jim looked at her without saying a word. "I had no idea you'd been through all this," he said at last, obviously moved.





Jane had turned her head away and, while trying to collect her emotions, watched through the garden hedge the shadowy forms of several cars as they rushed down Mt. Auburn Street. What Jim had said was true.

"When we were talking in Quincy House," she began, "you said you hadn't gotten in touch with me before because you did not want to do anything which might jeopardize our relationship. Something serious must have happened to make you feel that you should see me again so soon."

"You're right," Jim said, but seemed to hesitate before continuing. "Something serious and very sad did happen. A beautiful girl whom I met while working at a clinic a year ago just died without any warning. She—" For a moment Jim broke off and looked toward the motorcycle parking area. Then he continued. "That she's now dead says something horrible about beauty—that maybe the beautiful really are the damned. Look around at this garden; to me it seems extraordinarily beautiful—"

"It is beautiful," Jane said.

"—yet it stinks with death. Sometimes late at night when I sit here alone with a cocktail the ghostly faces come back to me. Three years ago they were all here in the daytime sun. One was a slim girl with blonde streaks in her hair who regularly vacationed in the Mediterranean and was writing for national magazines even before she graduated. Last Easter her lifeless body was found in a Galápagos Islands hotel room after an apparently accidental mixing of a small quantity of barbituates with alcohol. She and the others are all dead now—their lives smashed against existence like glasses at a fraternity party. Living well seems to carry with it its own revenge—as if at the core of beauty were something fatal to those who have it. When I think of all the beautiful and talented people who have risked their lives and lost, I have a tremendous urge to shout out, 'Thank God I have a big nose!'"

For a quarter of a minute there was a silence in the Cat Club garden, and then Jane said, "I don't think your nose is big. Rather, it's distinguished. You have a Roman, or aristocratic, nose."

"Thank you. I know that in minimizing the size of my nose you intend a compliment but please remember that, in this case, it comes across as a kind of death warrant to me."

"Somehow talking about all this has made me feel hungry. We usually have some ham and cheese in the kitchen inside—could I get you a sandwich?"

"Thanks. I'd love one."

"How would you like it?"

"Cheese on top, if that's okay."

Jim disappeared into the clubhouse and came back shortly with two sandwiches and another round of beverages. Before passing Jane her plate Jim checked her sandwich again. "Oh, sorry," he said, and, taking two napkins, gingerly flipped over the halves of her sandwich. "There. All set."

Far into the evening they sat in the garden talking about all kinds of things. They talked about how sometimes late at night instead of sleeping they just lay in their beds thinking about the past; about how they loved sitting before warm fires on cold winter nights—talking with friends or just reading novels written long ago; they talked, above all, about how they wanted to be able to dedicate themselves passionately to their careers, although for the moment Jane didn't know what hers would be.

While Jane spoke Jim let himself gaze deeply into her face: It was lovely, and for a moment that made him shudder inside—to Jim loveliness spoke of death. He preferred to close his eyes and just listen to her voice. It had the vibrancy of Park Avenue in the upper 70s, but also the soft undertones of the language her

mother had learned under the shady porches of her native Mobile.

Later, Jim escorted Jane back to Quincy House. Alone in her room, Jane continued where she had left off that afternoon, slipping the flat calendar out of its bag and hanging it, open to October, on an ancient painted-over nail protruding from the wall over her desk. Taking a pen, she carefully drew a diagonal line through the box with the words "Columbus Day Observance" printed in small capitals. "Another day," she thought, "survived."

Turning away Jane suddenly trembled as a stab of fear passed through her body. When one person feels affection for another person, that person is playing with fire.

Shortly after Jane woke up on Tuesday morning her roommate Lisa stepped into the bedroom.

"Before going to class I wanted to mention how much I appreciate the telephone messages you have been taking for me. I've never seen any messages prepared with such care and sensitivity before."

As the week went on many impressions struck Jane, often while she was walking: the reddish hues of the sun's rays towards the end of the day; the sound of cars rushing along wet pavement; the memories old songs evoke; the smell of burning autumn leaves, and the sense of this smell's absence in Massachusetts cities; the dark tracks of rushing cars on the shiny surface of wet pavement; the bittersweet mood evoked by old songs playing on the radio; droplets of rain on a window glass—the little streams forming from them; the song, "Gotta Hold On To This Feeling," by Jr. Walker & The All Stars; the reddish hues of wet pavement towards the end of the day.

Across the river at Commonwealth Union Hospital, Jim Van Blanck, unable to take any time off from his demanding hospital and medical school regimen, kept a steady stream of calls and correspondence flowing in Jane's direction. There were hurried calls on pay telephones and notes scribbled on the backs of postcards or

written on odd scraps of paper and stuffed into the window-box hospital envelopes. In one he had inserted a paper napkin with these descriptive lines scratched on it: "Through the windows on the south side of Neurology I can see the hospital's small garden below. In the morning the rooms in this ward are brightened by slanting rays of sunlight, which, early in the day, seem to have a yellowish hue. The corridors here have a hospital smell."

On the back of a postcard picturing sprawling Com Union in color with its parking area filled with 1950s cars, he wrote: "Regatta weekend when I wrapped my arms around you and said that I felt you were wonderful, I can't recall whether you replied that you felt 'the same way,' or whether from your silence I just assumed that you did. Again and again I have played the scene over in my mind but, while my memory of the emotion I felt then is still overwhelming, I can't exactly remember every detail of what happened, and I feel that it's tremendously important that I try to. *Qu'est qui c'est passe à la neige de printemps perdu?!*"

Jim would only begin his cards and notes to Jane when he had a few free minutes. But sometimes it wasn't possible to wrap them up in such a brief amount of time, and so he would allow himself a few extra minutes off. Obviously, his work sometimes suffered. As if to compensate he dedicated himself even more passionately to his career.

Finally, at the end of the week, Jim learned his schedule for the rest of the month, and from a pay phone off the hospital cafeteria he called Jane to ask whether she might have dinner with him on his evening off. After the call Jane walked over to the calendar,



and in the box for the following Tuesday, she wrote, "Jim—Dinner."

Tuesday fell on the second day of that week. Late in the afternoon the sun put on a gaudy show—its reddish-hued light illuminating the old colonial college buildings. But Jim arrived too late to see it.

In the darkness he and Jane walked to Frederico's. There they had the full meal—cocktails, four courses, two wines—all capped off with cups of caffeinated coffee.

"Last week," Jane said while they lingered over their coffee, "you started telling me about a former patient of yours who died, but then you stopped."

"You saw how upset I was," Jim said. "I've thought a lot about it since then. Her name was Ceci—I first got to know her the summer before last when I was a counselor at the Com Union anorexia clinic. She then looked like a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of dungarees hanging on a skeleton. But her recovery was rapid and amazingly complete—last year everything seemed to be going wonderfully for her. Personally she was pretty, bright, kind, and seemed to have everything—money, looks, married parents, a small stature. This fall she was starting her senior year at Dana Hall." Jim paused. "Are you familiar with the phrase '*ennui écrasant*'?"

"Yes, from advance placement French—Baudelaire and the Symbolists."

"That was something else about Ceci—she was brilliant at languages. Even at the clinic it was always '*merci*' for thank you, '*bon soir*' in the evening, and '*garçon*' or '*cheri*' when addressing me. Naturally, she was put in advance placement French. It was there she was assigned to read Baudelaire and taught about '*ennui écrasant*'."

"That Ceci is not alive today I hold the designers of the advance placement program in French directly responsible. What are they thinking of—assigning high school seniors to study the concept of 'overwhelming boredom'? Graham Greene has written about how as an adolescent he would stick a revolver in his ear and pull the trigger—anything to relieve the tedium. Several times he played

Russian roulette and won, but after a while even that got boring. Greene survived and later wrote a series of novels and 'entertainments.' For Ceci, though, there was no second chance—60 Second capsules don't miss...When I look back upon my own life I can't help thinking, 'Thank God I got a C in French fifth form year!'"

It was past eleven when the couple stepped out of the restaurant and started walking back to Quincy House by the long route—along the river. There is something not entirely realistic in love. It has instead a quality reminiscent of July nights by the ocean or old songs playing on the radio.

The Charles River is in some ways like the ocean, only much calmer. A little way past the Weld Boathouse they sat down together on a bench facing the water. Feeling the night air, Jane pulled her cardigan sweater more tightly around herself and under her on the bench tucked her pale, slender legs, which were five years younger than his own.

Gently Jim took Jane in his arms. "You are very beautiful," he told her, "and that scares me."

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Later, alone in her room, Jane walked over to the wall calendar, and under the words "Jim—Dinner" wrote in a print so small it was legible only to herself: "Frederico's, later walk by river. The moon's light has a bluish hue."

Then Jane turned to look out the window. The words her upper level expository writing teacher had said at the end of the semester came back to her: "How is one a writer? Just by writing." Without really thinking about it Jane had all along been writing words—on her messages to Lisa, in the boxes of her calendar, in other places. Poetry she had given up, at least for the time being, but prose, with its rigorous discipline of sentence and paragraph, was an avenue for self-exploration and self-expression still open to her.

Before preparing for the night Jane returned to the calendar and carefully drew a diagonal line through the box for Tuesday. "Eight days," she thought, "survived." Then, she trembled. □

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Joseph P. McGrath

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## The Cain Scrutiny

None dare call it reaction, but many otherwise sensible people have allowed themselves to be stampeded into an unreasoned acceptance of the Warren Report in response to the wild and paranoid charges of the professional conspiracy-mongers.

But are there realistic grounds for viewing the findings of the Warren Commission with suspicion? Probably, yes. Though no one will claim that the investigation was cursory, we tend to forget the massive pressure exerted on the commissioners by the circumstance of a shocked and bewildered nation, in deep mourning, awaiting some "official finding" with which to punctuate its grief. Although such pressure may now seem an abstraction, it was then a palpable presence. It was this factor, moreover, which prompted LBJ to pressure the Chief Justice into releasing the Oswald-as-lone-madman verdict before the final report; and this despite Johnson's own suspicion that Castroite Cubans were involved in the assassination. Under such conditions, to accept the Warren Report at face value is like endorsing the Bayeux Tapestry as a

flawless documentary record of the year 1066. The current reevaluation of the evidence now being conducted by the House Special Committee on Assassinations will, it is hoped, illuminate the case afresh and, finally, provide a clear, unbiased judgment which will attract a consensus. No such consensus exists regarding the Warren Report today. And since the events in Dallas are considered by many a watershed in American political history, to ignore sincere pleas to reopen the investigation may prove highly corrosive to the social fabric.

The importance of thoroughly investigating assassinations central to our cultural self-image could hardly be better illustrated than it is in a forthcoming book. *Did Cain Act Alone?*, by Mark Cooper, drives the point home with jarring clarity, and while the book's message is widely resonant, it has immediate significance for the House Special Committee on Assassinations. Mr. Cooper, currently Laing Professor of Alternative Reality at Bowdoin College, has done a rare thing: He has pivoted all the mirrors so perfectly that we are confronted with ourselves. *Did Cain Act Alone?*—a chilling question, a haunting book.

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