

Life Isn't a Short Story

BY CONRAD AIKEN

A Story

THE short story writer had run out of ideas; he had used them all; he was feeling as empty as a bathtub and as blue as an oyster. He stirred his coffee without gusto and looked at his newspaper without reading it, only noting (but with a lacklustre eye) that Prohibition was finally dead. He was having his breakfast at one of those white-tiled restaurants which are so symbolic of America—with an air of carbolec purity at the entrance, but steamy purlicues at the rear which imagination trembles to investigate. His breakfast was always the same: two two-minute eggs, a little glass of chilled tomato juice, dry toast and coffee. The only change, this morning, lay in the fact that he was having these simple things in a new place—it was a somewhat humbler restaurant than the one he usually entered at eight-thirty. He had looked in through the window appraisingly, and had a little hesitantly entered. But the ritual turned out to be exactly the same as at the others—a ticket at the entrance, where the cashier sat behind a glass case which was filled with cigarettes, chewing-gum and silver-papered cakes of chocolate; a tray at the counter; the precise intonation of “two twos, with.” The only difference, in fact, was that the china was of a pale

smoke-blue, a soft and dim blue which, had it been green, would have been pistachio. This gave his coffee a new appearance.

He sat at the marble-topped table near the window, and looked out at the crowded square. A light soft drizzle was falling on the morning rush of cars, wagons, pedestrians, newsboys; before the window bobbed a continuous procession of men and women; and he watched them over the half-seen headlines of his newspaper. A middle-aged woman, walking quickly, her umbrella pulled low over her head, so that the whiteness of her profile was sharp and immediate against the purple shadow. She vanished past the range of his vision before he had had time to see her properly—and for a moment after she had gone he went on thinking about her. She might do for the physical model of his story: but she wasn't fat enough, nor was she blonde, and for some obscure reason he had decided that the heroine must be fat and blonde. Just the same, she was real, she had come from somewhere and was going somewhere, and she was doing it with obvious concentration and energy. The rhythm of her gait was unusually pronounced, each shoulder swayed slightly but emphatically sideways, as if in a

series of quick and aggressive but cheerful greetings—the effect, if not quite graceful, was individual and charming. He stopped thinking about her, and recovered his powers of observation, just in time to see a gray Irish face, middle-aged, hook-nosed, under a dirty felt hat, a hand quickly removing the pipe from the mouth, and the lips pouting to eject a long bright arc of spit, which fell heavily out of sight, the pipe then replaced. Such a quantity of spit he could not have imagined—his mouth felt dry at the mere thought of it. Where had it been stored and for how long? and with increasing pleasure, or increasing annoyance? The act itself had been unmistakably a pleasure, and had probably had its origins in pride: one could imagine him having competed, as a boy, in spitting through a knot-hole in a fence. He had trained himself, all his life, in the power of retention: his mouth had become a kind of reservoir.

II

But the “story” came back to him. It had waked him up as a feeling of obscure weight at the back of his head or on the back of his tongue; it had seemed also to be in one corner of the shadowy ceiling above the bookcase, like a cobweb to be removed with a long brush. He had lain in bed looking at it, now and then turning his head to right or left on the pillow as if precisely to turn it away from the idea. It might be Elmira, it might be Akron, it might be Fitchburg—it was a small provincial city, at any rate, the sort of small town that looks its most characteristic in a brick-red post-card of hard straight streets and ugly red houses. But she wouldn’t be living in one of these—she would be living in an apartment house

of shabby stucco, and the entrance would be through a door of grained varnish and plate glass. It would have an air of jaded superiority. And as for her apartment itself, on the second floor, with a little curly brass number on the door—

The idea had first occurred to him in the lobby of the Orpheum. He had paused to light a cigarette in the passage that led past the lounge, where parrots squawked in cages, and canaries trilled, and goldfish swam in an ornate aquarium, at the bottom of which, dimly seen through the heavy green water, was a kind of crumbling Gothic castle. He was standing there, looking at this, when the two groups of people had suddenly encountered each other with such hearty and heavy surprise. He had caught merely the phrases “*as I live and breathe!*” and “*in the flesh!*” The two men and the two women he had scarcely looked at—the phrases themselves had so immediately assumed an extraordinary importance. They would both, he at once saw, make good titles—it was only later that he had seen that they both had the same meaning. They both simply meant—*alive*.

Alive. And that was the difference between life, as one conceived it in a story, and life as it was, for example, in the restaurant in which he was sitting, or in the noisy square at which he was looking. As I live and breathe—I am standing here living and breathing, you are standing there living and breathing, and it’s a surprise and a delight to both of us. In the flesh, too—death hasn’t yet stripped our bones, or the crematory tried out our fats. We haven’t seen each other for a long while, we didn’t know whether we were dead or not, but here we are.

At the same time, there was the awful commonplaceness of the two phrases, the cheapness of them, the vulgarity—they were as old as the hills, and as worn; æons of weather and æons of handshake lay upon them; one witnessed, in the mere hearing of them, innumerable surprised greetings, innumerable mutual congratulations on the mere fact of being still alive. The human race seemed to extend itself backwards through them, in time, as along a road—if one pursued the thought one came eventually to a vision of two small apes peering at each other round the cheeks of a cocoanut and making a startled noise that sounded like “yoicks!” Or else, one simply saw, in the void, one star passing another, with no vocal interchange at all, nothing but a mutual exacerbation of heat. . . . It was very puzzling.

He stirred his coffee, wondered if he had sweetened it, reassured himself by tasting it. Yes. But in this very commonplaceness lay perhaps the idea: he had begun to see, as he lay in bed in the morning, watching the rain; and as he wondered about the large blonde lady in Fitchburg; he had begun to see that Gladys (for that was her name) was just the sort of hopelessly vulgar and commonplace person who would pride herself on her superiority in such matters. She would dislike such phrases, they would disgust her. After the first two or three years of her marriage to Sidney, when the romance had worn off and the glamor had fallen like a mask from his lean Yankee-trader's face, when the sense of time had begun to be obtrusive, and the deadly round of the merely quotidian had replaced the era of faint orchids and bright bracelets and expensive theatre-tickets, it was then that she became conscious of cer-

tain tedious phrases he was in the habit of using. There was no concealing the fact any longer that they really came of separate and different worlds: Sidney had had little more than a high school education, he had no “culture,” he had never read a book in his life. He had walked straight from school into his father's hardware shop. What there was to know about cutlery, tools, grass-seed, lawn-mowers, washing-machines, wire nails, white lead paint and sand-paper, he knew. He was a loyal Elk, a shrewd and honest business man, a man of no vices (unless one counted as a vice a kind of Hoosier aridity) and few pleasures. Occasionally he went to the bowling-alleys, a pastime which she had always considered a little vulgar; he enjoyed a good hockey match; he liked a good thriller in the talkies (one of the few tastes they actually shared); and now and then he wanted to sit in the front row at a musical comedy. On these occasions, there was a definite sparkle or gleam about him, a lighting up of his sharp gray eyes, which reminded her of the Sidney to whom she had become engaged. This both puzzled and annoyed her: she felt, as she looked at him, a vague wave of jealousy and hatred. It must have been this gleam which, when focused intently on herself, had misled her into thinking him something that he wasn't and never would be.

III

As I live and breathe.

The story might even be called that.

A horse and wagon drew up at the curbstone outside the window. On the side of the wagon was inscribed, “Acme Towel Supply Company.” Of course; it was one of those companies which supply towels and napkins and dishcloths

to hotels and restaurants. The driver had jumped down, dropping his reins, and was opening the little pair of shabby wooden doors at the back of the wagon. The brown horse, his head down, his eyes invisible behind blinkers, stood perfectly still, as if deep in thought. His back and sides were shiny with rain, the worn harness dripped, now and then he twitched his shoulder muscles, as if in a slight shiver. Why did towel-supply companies always deliver towels in horse-drawn wagons? It was one of the minor mysteries; a queer sort of survival, for which one saw no possible reason. Beyond the wagon and the horse, the traffic was beginning to move forward again in response to a shrill bird-call from the policeman's whistle. A man in a black slicker had come close to the window and was reading the "specials" which were placarded in cinnamon-colored paper on the glass. When this had been done, he peered into the restaurant between two squares of paper; the quick sharp eyes looked straight at him and then past him and were as quickly gone. This meeting of his eyes had very likely prevented him from coming in: it was precisely such unexpected encounters with one's own image, as seen in the returned glance of another, that changed the course of one's life. And the restaurant had perhaps lost the sale of a couple of doughnuts and a "cup of coffee, half cream."

The way to get at Gladys's character, perhaps, was through her environment, the kind of place she lived in, her street, her apartment, her rooms. First of all, the stucco apartment house, the glass door, on which the name "Saguenay" was written obliquely in large gilt script, with a flourish of broad gilt underneath. Inside the door, a flight of shallow stairs, made of imitation marble, super-

ficially clean, but deeply ingrained with dirt. Her apartment, now that she lived alone, was small, of course—it consisted of a bedroom, a sitting-room, a bathroom and a kitchenette. One's immediate feeling, on entering the sitting-room from the varnished hallway, was that the occupant must be a silly woman. It was plushy, it was perfumed, there was a bead curtain trembling between the sitting-room and the kitchenette, at either side of the lace-curtained window hung a golden-wired birdcage, in which rustled a canary, and on the windowsill was a large bowl of goldfish. The ornaments were very ornamental and very numerous; the mantel groaned with souvenirs and photographs; the pictures were uniformly sentimental—several were religious. It was clear that she doted, simply doted, on birds and flowers—talked baby-talk to the canaries and the goldfish, even to the azalea, and always of course in that offensive, little, high-pitched fat-woman's coo. She would come in to them in the morning, wearing a pink flannel wrapper, brushing her hair, and would talk to them or wag a coy finger at them. And how's my sweet little dicky bird this morning? and have they slept well and been good in the night? and have they kept their little eyes shut tight to keep out the naughty bogey-man? And then at once she would forget them entirely, begin singing softly, walk with her head tilted on one side to the bathroom to turn on the bath, return to the kitchen to filch a cookie from the bread-box, and then go languidly to the front door for the milk and the newspaper.

The newspaper was the *Christian Science Monitor*: she took it, not because she was a Scientist, though she had an open mind, but because it was so "cultured." She liked to read about

books and music and foreign affairs, and it frequently gave her ideas for little talks to the Women's Club. She had talked about the dole in England, and its distressing effect on the morals of the young men, and she had made a sensation by saying that she thought one should not too hastily condemn the nudist cult in Germany. Every one knew that the human body craved sunlight, that the ultra-violet rays, or was it the infra-red, were most beneficial, so the idea was at least a healthy one, wasn't it? And the beautiful purity of Greek life was surely an answer to those who thought the human body in itself impure. It raised the whole question of what was purity, anyway! Every one knew that purity was in the heart, in the attitude, and not really in the body. She thought the idea of playing croquet in the nude, queer as it might seem to us in Fitchburg, most interesting. One ought to think less about the body and more about the mind.

IV

The towel-supply man seemed to have disappeared: perhaps he was getting a cup of coffee at the Waldorf next door. Or making a round of several of the adjacent restaurants all at once. The horse waited patiently, was absolutely still, didn't even stamp a foot. He looked as if he were thinking about the rain. Or perhaps, dismayed by the senseless noise of all the traffic about him, he was simply thinking about his stall, wherever it was. Or more likely, not thinking anything at all. He just stood.

To her friends, of course, and to her sister Emma (who was her chief reason for living in Fitchburg) she posed as a woman with a broken heart, a woman

tragically disillusioned, a beautiful romantic who had found that love was dust and ashes and that men were—well, creatures of a lower order. It was all very sad, very pitiful. One ought to have foreseen it, perhaps, or one ought not to have been born so sensitive, but there it was. If you had a soul, if you had perceptions, and loved beautiful things, and if you fell in love while you were still inexperienced and trusting, while you still looked at a world of violets through violet eyes, this was what happened. You gave your heart to some one who didn't deserve it. But what man ever *did* deserve it? Only the poets, perhaps, or the composers, Chopin for instance, those rare creatures, half angel and half man (or was it half bird?) who had great and deep and tender souls. And how many such men could one find in Massachusetts? It was all so impossible, it was all so dreadful. Every one knew that in America the women were infinitely more refined and sensitive than the men, you had only to look about you. What man ever wanted to talk about poetry with you, or listen to an evening of the Preludes, or to a lecture about the love affair of George Sand and Alfred de Musset? They wouldn't know what you meant: they wanted to go to the bowling alley or talk about the stock market; or else to sit in the front row of the Follies and look at the legs. They were vulgar, they had no imaginations. And she remembered that time at Emma's when Sidney had got so angry and gone on so in that common and vulgar way and made such a scene—whenever she thought of it she got hot all over. Absolutely, it was the most vulgar scene! And done deliberately, too, just because he was so jealous about their having a refined

conversation. And when she tried to stop him talking about it, he just went on, getting stubborn and stubborn, and all simply to make her feel ashamed. As if any of them had wanted to hear about those cheap drinking-parties of his in Ohio. And that dreadful word, *burgoo*, that was it, which they had all laughed at, and tried to shame him out of, why what do you mean, *burgoo*, why Sidney what are you talking about, who ever heard such a word as *burgoo*, *burgoo*! And even that hadn't been enough, he got red and angry and went on saying it, *burgoo*, what's wrong with *burgoo*, of course there is such a word, and damned fine parties they were, too, and if they only had *burgoo* in Massachusetts life here would be a damned sight better. The idea! It served him right that she got mad and jumped up and said what she did. If you can't talk politely like a gentleman, or let others talk, then I think you had better leave those who will. Why don't you go back to your hardware shop, or back to Ohio, it doesn't seem this is the right environment for you. Or *anywhere* where you can have your precious *burgoo*.

But of course that was only one incident among so many, it was happening all the time; anybody could see that Sidney was not the man to ever appreciate her. What she always said was that nobody outside a marriage could ever possibly have any *real* idea of the things that went on there, could they. It was just impossible for them even to conceive of it. All those little things that you wouldn't think of—like Sidney's always leaving the dirty lather and little black hairs in the wash-basin after he shaved. Or the way he never noticed when she had on a new hat or ever said anything nice about the meals

she got for him, just simply not noticing anything at all. That was a part of it, but much more was his simply not ever being able to talk to her, or to take any interest in intellectual things. And his vulgarity, the commonness of his speech, his manners! Every time she introduced him to somebody he would put his head down and take that ridiculous little confidential step toward them and say, "What was the name? I didn't get the name?" The idea! And if you told him about it he got mad. And as for the number of times every day that he said "as I live and breathe"—!

v

It had begun to rain harder. The sound of it rushed through the opening door as a small man, very dark, a Syrian perhaps, came in shaking his sodden hat so that the drops fell in a curve on the floor. A bright spray was dancing on the roof of the towel wagon, and a heavy stream fell splattering from one corner of an awning. People had begun to run, to scurry, in one's and two's and three's, exactly like one of those movies of the Russian Revolution, when invisible machine-guns were turned on the crowds. One would not be surprised to see them fall down, or crawl away on their bellies.

Or to see the whole square emptied of human beings in the twinkling of an eye. Nor would one be surprised to see a lightning-flash, either, for it had suddenly become astonishingly dark—the whole dismal scene had that ominous look which seems to wait, in a melodrama, for a peal of thunder. The light was sulphur-colored; it was terrifying; and he watched with fascination all the little windshield-wipers wagging agitatedly on the fronts of cars—it gave

one the feeling that the poor things were actually frightened, and were breathing faster. As for the horse, he stood unmoving, unmoved. His head was down, and he seemed to be studying with an extraordinary concentration the torrent of muddy water which rushed past his feet. Perhaps he was enjoying it: perhaps he even liked to feel all that tropic weight of rain on his back, experiencing in it a renewal of contact with the real, the elemental. Or perhaps he merely enjoyed standing still. Or perhaps he simply *was*.

But the question arose, ought one now to switch the point of view in the story, and do something more about Sidney? What about Sidney? Where on earth was Sidney all this while? and doing what? Presumably, running his hardware shop—and presumably again in Boston—but this was a little meagre, one wanted to know something more than that. One ought to give him a special sort of appearance—a pencil behind his ear, a tuft of white hair over his sallow forehead, sharply pointed brown shoes. Perhaps he was something of a dandy, with a vivid corner of striped handkerchief pointing from his breast pocket: and perhaps he was by no means such a dull fellow as Gladys thought. But this would involve a shift in point of view, which was a mistake: it was no doubt better to stick to Gladys, in Fitchburg, and to see Sidney wholly as *she* saw him, to think of him only as *she* thought of him. She would almost certainly, from time (self-absorbed as she was, and vain, and vulgar, and with her silly small-town pretensions to culture), she would almost certainly, nevertheless, give him credit for a few virtues. He was generous: he had offered her a divorce, as soon as he knew how she felt about it;

and he had behaved like a lamb, really, if she did say so, like a lamb, about the separation. He had done everything he could think of to make it easier for her.

In fact, one thing you *could* say for Sidney was, that he was generous—generous to a fault. She often thought of that. She always thought of it especially on the first of the month, when the cheque for the separation allowance turned up, as punctually as the calendar—sometimes he even sent her something extra. On these days, when she bustled to the bank with the cheque tucked into her glove to deposit it and pay the rent, she always felt so secure and happy that she had a very special state of mind about Sidney, something that was almost affection. Of course, it couldn't *be* affection, but it was *like* it—and it was just that feeling, with perhaps the loneliness which had upset her to begin with, which had misled her at last into writing him. It was easy enough now, as she had so often said to Emma, to see what had made her do it; she was sorry for him; but it only went to show how right she had been in the whole idea.

Just the same, it had been natural enough to write to him in that affectionate and grateful way; and when he had answered by so pathetically asking her to let him come to see her she had certainly thought it might be worth trying; even Emma had thought so; perhaps they would find after all that the differences between them were superficial; they could patch things up, maybe she would go back to Boston to live with him. The idea actually excited her—she remembered how she had found herself looking forward to having him come. Emma had offered to put him up for the night, so as to prevent embarrassment. And the thought of

having him see her new apartment for the first time, with the canaries and the goldfish and the oriental rugs, and the Encyclopædia Britannica, had given her a very funny feeling, almost like being unfaithful. The day before he came she could hardly sit still. She kept walking to and fro round the apartment, moving the rugs and the chairs, and patting the cushions—and all the time wondering if two years would have changed him much, and what they would say. Naturally, she hadn't held out any real hope to him in her letter, she had only told him she would be willing to talk with him, that was all. He had no right to expect anything else, she had made that clear. However, there was no sense in not being friendly about these things, was there? Even if you were separated you could behave like a civilized human being: Emma agreed with her about that. It was the only decent thing to do. But when the day came, and when finally that afternoon she heard him breeze into Emma's front hall, stamping his feet, and went out to meet him, and saw him wearing the wing collar and the stringy little white tie, and the rubbers, and his little gray eyes shining behind the glasses with the cord, and when the very first thing he said was, just as if nothing at all had ever happened, "Well, as I live and breathe, if it isn't Gladys!"—and then stood there, not knowing whether to kiss her or shake hands—it was just a misdeal, that was all, just another misdeal.

The whole thing went down, smack, like a house of cards. She could hardly bring herself to shake hands with him, or look at him—she suddenly wanted to cry. She rushed into Emma's room and stayed there on the bed for an hour, crying—Emma kept running in and saying for God's sake pull yourself to-

gether, at least go out and talk to him for a while, he's hurt, you can't treat him like this; the poor man doesn't know whether he's going or coming; come on now, Gladys, and be a good sport. He's sitting on the sofa in there with his head down like a horse, not knowing what to say; you simply can't treat him like that. The least you can do is go out and tell him you're sorry and that it was a mistake, and that he'd better not stay, or take him round to your apartment and talk it over with him quietly and then send him back to Boston. Come on now.

But of course she couldn't do it—she couldn't even go with him to the station. Emma went with him, and told him on the platform while they were waiting for the train that it was no use, it had all been a terrible mistake, and she was sorry, they were both sorry, Gladys sent word that she was very sorry. And afterwards, she had said it was so pathetic seeing him with his brand-new suitcase there beside him on the platform, his suitcase which he hadn't even opened, just taking it back to Boston where he came from. . . . When the train finally came, he almost forgot his suitcase; she thought he would have liked to leave it behind.

The towel-supply man came running back with a basket, flung it into the wagon, banged the dripping doors shut, and then jumped nimbly up to his seat, unhooking the reins. Automatically, but as if still deep in thought, the horse leaned slowly forward, lowered his head a little, and began to move. A long day was still ahead of him, a day of crowded and noisy streets, streets full of surprises and terrors and rain, muddy uneven cobbles and greasy smooth asphalt. The wagon and the man would be always there behind him; an incal-

culable sequence of accidents and adventures was before him. What did he think about, as he plodded from one dirty restaurant to another, one hotel to another, carrying towels? Probably nothing at all: certainly no such senti-

mental thing as a green meadow, nor anything so ridiculous as a story about living and breathing. It was enough, even if one was a slave, to live and breathe. For life, after all, isn't a short story.

Gulf Storm

BY SONIA RUTHÈLE NOVÁK

BLACK galleons fare in smoking gray that curls
Up from the very edge of earth. But spread
Like sheeted, slowly heaving, molten lead,
The water stills their race till lightning hurls
A gleaming javelin where a dark bird whirls
To scream a signal. Then they turn to head
Into each other, by some phantom sped
With all the knouting force it can unfurl!

They crash! They splinter rainily, and screech
Across the Gulf! Their endless debris falls
For miles around! The farthest eye can reach,
The farthest ear can hear, their wreckage mauls
The smitten air! And morning on the beach
Will stumble over stripped and broken yawls.