

like that. If Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders had been poets, they would have written poems like that. If Genghis Khan and Napoleon had been poets, they would have written poems like that. They were masculine poems. They were political and personal, public and private. They were full of both passion and enmity, they were youthful and elderly, they were green and wise. But they were not beautiful and they were not dull, the way a well-used, faintly gnarled, but superbly controlled muscle is neither beautiful nor dull.

They were, in fact, very much like Margaret's vision of Edmund Gate himself. The poet and the poems were indistinguishable.

She sent her vision to Yugoslavia, she sent it to Egypt, she sent it to Japan. In Warsaw girls ran after him in the street to pick his pockets for souvenirs — they came near to picking his teeth. In Copenhagen they founded an orgiastic club named 'The Forbidden Gate' and gathered around a gatepost to read him. In Hong Kong they tore off his underwear and stared giggling at his nakedness. He was now twenty-five; it began to wear him out.

When he returned from Brazil he came to see me. He seemed more morose than ever. He slammed up the stairs, kicked heavily over the floors, and slammed down again. He had brought down with him his old cigar box.

'My aunt's dead,' he said.

As usual he took my father's chair. His burly baby's-head lolled.

'The one in Liverpool?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Though she must have gotten to be a pretty old lady by now.'

'She was seventy-four.'

He appeared to be talking it hard. An unmistakable misery creased his giant neck.

'Still,' I said, 'you must have been providing for her nicely these last few years. At least before she went she had her little comforts.'

'No, I never did a thing. I never sent her a penny.'

I looked at him. He seemed to be nearly sick. His lips were black. You always meant to, I suppose. You just never got around to it. I ventured; I thought it was remorse that had darkened him.

'No,' he said. 'I couldn't. I didn't have it then. I couldn't afford to. Besides, she was always very self-reliant.'

He was a worse scoundrel than I had imagined. 'Damn you, Elia,' I

said. 'She took you in, if not for her you'd be murdered with your whole family back there—'

'Well, I never had as much as you used to think. That police station job wasn't much.'

'Police station!' I yelled.

He gave me an eye full of hurt. 'You don't follow, Edmund. My aunt died before all this fuss. She died three years ago.'

'Three years ago?'

'Three and a half maybe.'

I tried to adjust. 'You just got the news, you mean? You just heard?'

'Oh, no. I found out about it right after it happened.'

Confusion roiled in me. 'You never mentioned it.'

'There wasn't any point. It's not as though you knew her. Nobody knew her. I hardly knew her myself. She wasn't anybody. She was just this old woman.'

'Ah,' I said meanly, 'so the grief is only just catching up with you, is that it? You've been too busy to find the time to mourn?'

'I never liked her,' he admitted. 'She was an old nuisance. She talked and talked at me. Then when I got away from her and came here she wrote me and wrote me. After a while I just stopped opening her letters. I figured she must have written me two hundred letters. I saved them. I save everything, even junk. When you start out poor, you always save everything. You never know when you might need it. I never waste anything.' He said portentously, 'Waste Not, Want Not.'

'If you never answered her how is it she kept on writing?'

'She didn't have anybody else to write to. I guess she had to write and she didn't have anybody. All I've got left are the ones in here. This is the last bunch of letters of hers I've got.' He showed me his big scratched cigar box.

'But you say you saved them—'

'Sure, but I used them up. Listen,' he said. 'I've got to go now, Edmund, I've got to meet Margaret. It's going to be one hell of a fight, I tell you.'

'What?' I said.

'I'm not going anywhere else, I don't care how much she squawks. I've had my last trip. I've got to stay home from now on and do poems. I'm going to get a room somewhere, maybe my old room across town, you remember — where you came to see me that time?'

'Where I knocked you down. You can stay here,' I said.

'Nah,' he said. 'Nowhere your sister can get at me. I've got to work.' 'But you've *been* working,' I said. 'You've been turning out new poems all along! That's been the amazing thing.'

He hefted all his flesh and stood up, clutching the cigar box to his dinosaurish ribs.

'I haven't,' he said.

'You've done those five collections—'

'All I've done are those two babies, Edmund and Gate. And they're not even my real names. That's all I've done. The reviews did the rest. Margaret did the rest.'

He was suddenly weeping.

'I can't tell it to Margaret—'

'Tell what?'

'There's only one bundle left. No more. After this no more. It's finished.'

'Elia, what in God's name is this?'

'I'm afraid to tell. I don't know what else to do. I've *tried* to write new stuff. I've tried. It's terrible. It's not the same. It's not the same, Edmund. I can't do it. I've told Margaret that. I've told her I can't write any more. She says it's a block, it happens to all writers. She says don't worry, it'll come back. It always comes back to genius.'

He was sobbing wildly; I could scarcely seize his words. He had thrown himself back into my father's chair, and the tears were making brooks of its old leather cracks.

'I'm afraid to tell,' he said.

'Elia, for God's sake. Straighten up like a man. Afraid of what?'

'Well, I told you once. I told you because I knew you wouldn't believe me, but I *did* tell you, you can't deny it. You could've stopped me. It's your fault too.' He kept his face hidden.

He had made me impatient. 'What's my fault?'

'I'm a plagiarist.'

'If you mean Margaret again—'

He answered with a whimper: 'No, no, don't be a fool, I'm through with Margaret.'

'Aren't those collections yours? They're not yours?'

'They're mine,' he said. 'They came in the mail, so if you mean are they mine *this way*—'

I caught his agitation. 'Elia, you're out of your mind—'

'She wrote every last one,' he said. 'In Liverpool. Every last line of every last one. Tante Rivka. There's only enough left for one more book. Margaret's going to call it *Virility VI*,' he bawled.

'Your aunt?' I said. 'She wrote them all?' He moaned.

'Even the one — not the one about the—'

'All,' he broke in; his voice was nearly gone.

He stayed with me for three weeks. To fend her off I telephoned Margaret and said that Edmund had come down with the mumps. 'But I've just had a cable from Southern Rhodesia!' she wailed. 'They need him like mad down there!'

'You'd better keep away, Margaret,' I warned. 'You don't want to carry the fever back to the nursery. All those babies in there—'

'Why should he get an infant's disease?' she wondered; I heard her fidget.

'It's just the sort of disease that corresponds to his mentality.'

'Now stop that. You know that's a terrible sickness for a grown man to get. You know what it does. It's awful.'

I had no idea what she could be thinking of; I had chosen this fabrication for its innocence. 'Why?' I said. 'Children recover beautifully—'

'Don't be an imbecile, Edmund,' she rebuked me in my father's familiar tone — my father had often called me a scientific idiot. 'He might come out of it as sterile as a stone. Stop it, Edmund, it's nothing to laugh at, you're a brute.'

'Then you'll have to call his next book *Sterility*,' I said.

He hid out with me, as I have already noted, for nearly a month, and much of the time he cried.

'It's all up with me.'

I said coldly. 'You knew it was coming.'

'I've dreaded it and dreaded it. After this last batch I'm finished. I don't know what to do. I don't know what's going to happen.'

'You ought to confess,' I advised finally.

'To Margaret?'

'To everyone. To the world.'

He gave me a teary smirk. 'Sure. The Collected Works of Edmund Gate, by Tante Rivka.'

'Vice versa's the case,' I said, struck again by a shadow of my first shock. 'And since it's true, you ought to make it up to her.'

'You can't make anything up to the dead.' He was wiping the river that

fell from his nose. 'My reputation. My poor about-to-be-mutilated reputation. No, I'll just go ahead and get myself a little place to live in and produce new things. What comes now will be *really* mine. Integrity,' he whined. 'I'll save myself that way.'

'You'll ruin yourself. You'll be the man of the century who fizzled before he made it to thirty. There's nothing more foolish-looking than a poet who loses his gift. Pitiful. They'll laugh at you. Look how people laugh at the Later Wordsworth. The Later Gate will be a fiasco at twenty-six. You'd better confess, Elja.'

Moodyly he considered it. 'What would it get me?'

'Wonder and awe. Admiration. You'll be a great sacrificial figure. You can say your aunt was reticent but a tyrant, she made you stand in her place. Gate the Lamb. You can say anything.'

This seemed to attract him. 'It *was* a sacrifice,' he said. 'Believe me it was hell going through all of that. I kept getting diarrhoea from the water in all those different places. I never could stand the screaming anywhere. Half the time my life was in danger. In Hong Kong when they stole my shorts I practically got pneumonia.' He popped his cigarette out of his mouth and began to cough. 'You really think I ought to do that, Edmund? Margaret wouldn't like it. She's always hated sterile men. It'll be an admission of my own poetic sterility, that's how she'll look at it.'

'I thought you're through with her anyhow.'

Courage suddenly puffed him out. 'You bet I am. I don't think much of people who exploit other people. She built that business up right out of my flesh and blood. Right out of my marrow.'

He sat at the typewriter in the attic, at which I had hammered out my futile proposal to Regina, and wrote a letter to his publisher. It was a complete confession. I went with him to the drugstore to get it notarized. I felt the ease of the perfect confidant, the perfect counsel, the perfect avenger. He had spilled me the cup of humiliation, he had lost me Regina; I would lose him the world.

Meanwhile I assured him he would regain it. 'You'll go down,' I said, 'as the impresario of the nearly-lost. You'll go down as the man who bestowed a hidden genius. You'll go down as the saviour who restored to perpetual light what might have wandered a mute inglorious ghost in the eternal dark.'

On my paper they had fired better men than I for that sort of prose. 'I'd rather have been the real thing myself,' he said. The remark seemed to leap from his heart; it almost touched me.

'Caesar is born, not made,' I said. 'But who notices Caesar's nephew? Unless he performs a vast deep act. To be Edmund Gate was nothing. But to shed the power of Edmund Gate before the whole watching world, to become little in oneself in order to give away one's potency to another — *that* is an act of profound reverberation.'

He said wistfully, 'I guess you've got a point there,' and emerged to tell Margaret.

She was wrathful. She was furious. She was vicious. 'A lady wrote "em?" she cried. 'An old Jewish immigrant lady who never even made it to America?'

'My Tante Rivka,' he said bravely.

'Now Margaret,' I said. 'Don't be obtuse. The next book will be every bit as good as the ones that preceded it. The quality is exactly the same. He picked those poems at random out of a box and one's as good as another. They're all good. They're brilliant, you know that. The book won't be different so its reception won't be different. The profits will be the same.'

She screwed up a doubtful scowl. 'It'll be the last one. He says *he* can't write. There won't be any more after this.'

'The canon closes,' I agreed, 'when the poet dies.'

'This poet's dead all right,' she said, and threw him a spiteful laugh. Edmund Gate rubbed his glasses, sucked his cigarette, rented a room, and disappeared.

Margaret grappled in vain with the publisher. 'Why not *Virility* again? It was good enough for the other five. It's a selling title.'

'This one's by a woman,' he said. 'Call it *Muthebitiy*, no one'll understand you.' The publisher was a wit who was proud of his Latin, but he had an abstract and wholesome belief in the stupidity of his readers.

The book appeared under the name *Flowers from Liverpool*. It had a pretty cover, the colour of a daisy's petal, with a picture of Tante Rivka on it. The picture was a daguerro-type that Edmund had kept flat at the bottom of the cigar box. It showed his aunt as a young woman in Russia, not very handsome, with large lips, a circular nose, and minuscule light eyes — the handle of what looked strangely like a pistol stuck out of her undistinguished bosom.

The collection itself was sublime. By some accident of the unplanned gesture the last poems left in Edmund Gate's cracked cigar box had turned out to be the crest of the poet's vitality. They were as clear and hard as all the others, but somehow rougher and thicker, perhaps more

intellectual. I read and marvelled myself into shame -- if I had believed I would dash his career by inducing him to drop his connection with it, I had been worse than misled. I had been criminal. Nothing could damage the career of these poems. They would soar and soar beyond petty revenges. If Shakespeare was really Bacon, what difference? If Edmund Gate was really Tante Rivka of Liverpool, what difference? Since nothing can betray a good poem, it is pointless to betray a bad poet.

With a pre-publication copy in my hand I knocked at his door. He opened it in his underwear: a stink came out of him. One lens was gone from his glasses.

'Well, here it is,' I said. 'The last one.'

He hiccuped with a mournful drunken spasm.

'The last shall be first,' I said with a grin of disgust; the smell of his room made me want to run.

'The first shall be last,' he contradicted, flagging me down with an old newspaper. 'You want to come in here, Edmund? Come in, sure.'

But there was no chair. I sat on the bed. The floor was splintered and his toenails scraped on it. They were long filthy crescents. I put the book down. 'I brought this for you to have first thing.'

He looked at the cover. 'What a mug on her.'

'What a mind,' I said. 'You were lucky to have known her.'

'An old nuisance. If not for her I'd still be what I was. If she didn't run out on me.'

'Eh,' I began; I had come to tell him a horror. The publisher did a little biographical investigation. They found where your aunt was living when she died. It seems, I said, 'she was just what you've always described. Self-sufficient.'

'Always blah blah at me. Old nuisance. I ran out on her, couldn't stand it.'

'She got too feeble to work and never let on to a soul. They found her body, all washed clean for burial, in her bed. She'd put on clean linens herself and she'd washed herself. Then she climbed into the bed and starved to death. She just waited it out that way. There wasn't a crumb in the place.'

'She never asked me for anything,' he said.

'How about the one called "Hunger"? The one everybody thought was a battle poem?'

'It was only a poem. Besides, she was already dead when I got to it.'

'If you'd sent her something,' I said, 'you might have kept Edmund

Gate going a few years more. A hardy old bird like that could live to be a hundred. All she needed was bread.'

'Who cares? The stuff would've petered out sooner or later anyhow, wouldn't it? The death of Edmund Gate was unavoidable. I wish you'd go away, Edmund. I'm not used to feeling this drunk. I'm trying to get proficient at it. It's killing my stomach. My bladder's giving out. Go away.'

'All right.'

'Take that damn book with you.'

'It's yours.'

'Take it away. It's your fault they've turned me into a woman. I'm a man,' he said; he gripped himself between the legs; he was really very drunk.

All the same I left it there, tangled in his dirty quilt.

Margaret was in Mexico with a young client of hers, a baritone. She was arranging bookings for him in hotels. She sent back a photograph of him in a swimming pool. I sat in the clamorous nursery with the stockbroker and together we rattled through the journals, looking for reviews.

'Here's one. "Thin feminine art," it says.'

'Here's another. "A lovely girlish voice reflecting a fragile girlish soul: a lace valentine."'

'Limited, as all domestic verse must be. A spinster's one-dimensional vision.''

'Choked with female-inwardness. Flat. The typical unimaginativeness of her sex.''

'Distaff talent, secondary by nature. Lacks masculine energy.''

'The fine womanly intuition of a competent poetess.''

The two youngest children began to yowl. 'Now, now Gatey boy,' said the stockbroker, 'now, now, Edmund. Why can't you be good? Your brothers and sisters are good, *they* don't cry.' He turned to me with a shy beam. 'Do you know we're having another?'

'No,' I said. 'I didn't know that. Congratulations.'

'She's the New Woman,' the stockbroker said. 'Runs a business all by herself, just like a man.'

'Has babies like a woman.'

He laughed proudly. 'Well, she doesn't do that one by herself, I'll tell you that.'

'Read some more.'

'Not much use to it. They all say the same thing, don't they? By the

way, Edmund, did you happen to notice they've already got a new man in *The Centennial*? Poor Fielding, but the funeral was worthy of him. Your father would have wept if he'd been there.'

'Read the one in *The Centennial*,' I said.

'There is something in the feminine mind which resists largeness and depth. Perhaps it is that a woman does not get the chance to sleep under bridges. Even if she got the chance, she would start polishing the piles. Experience is the stuff of art, but experience is not something God made woman for . . . ' It's just the same as the others,' he said.

'So is the book.'

'The title's different,' he said wisely. 'This one's by a woman, they all point that out. All the rest of 'em were called *Vrility*. What happened to that fellow, by the way? He doesn't come around.'

The babies howled down the ghost of my reply.

I explained at the outset that only last week I visited the grave of Edmund Gate, but I neglected to describe a curious incident that occurred on that spot.

I also explained the kind of camaraderie elderly people in our modern society feel for one another. We know we are declining together, but we also recognize that our memories are a kind of national treasury, being living repositories for such long-extinct customs as burial and intra-uterine embryo-development.

At Edmund Gate's grave stood an extraordinary person — a frazzled old woman, I thought at first. Then I saw it was a very aged man. His teeth had not been trans-rooted and his vision seemed faint. I was amazed that he did not salute me — like myself, he certainly appeared to be a centagenarian — but I attributed this to the incompetence of his eyes, which wore their lids like hunched capes.

'Not many folks around here nowadays,' I said. 'People keep away from the old Preserved Cemeteries. My view is these youngsters are morbid. Afraid of the waste. They have to use everything. We weren't morbid in our time, hah?'

He did not answer. I suspected it was deliberate.

'Take this one,' I said, in my most cordial manner, inviting his friendship. 'This thing right here. I gave the little stone a good knock, taking the risk of arrest by the Outdoor Museum Force. Apparently no one saw. I knocked it again with the side of my knuckle. I actually knew this fellow. He was famous in his day. A big celebrity. That young

Chinese fellow, the one who just came back from flying around the edge of the Milky Way, well, the fuss they made over him, that's how it was with this fellow. This one was literary, though.'

He did not answer; he spat on the part of the stone I had touched, as if to wash it.

'You knew him too?' I said.

He gave me his back — it was shaking horribly — and minced away. He looked shrivelled but of a good size still; he was uncommonly ragged. His clothing dragged behind him as though the covering over the legs hobbled him; yet there was a hint of threadbare flare at his ankle. It almost gave me the sense that he was wearing an ancient woman's garment, of the kind in fashion seventy years ago. He had on queer old-fashioned woman's shoes with long thin heels like poles. I took off after him — I am not slow, considering my years — and slid my gaze all over his face. It was a kettle of decay. He was carrying a red stick — it seemed to be a denuded lady's umbrella (an apparatus no longer known among us) — and he held it up to strike.

'Listen here,' I said hotly, 'what's the matter with you? Can't you pass a companionable word? I'll just yell for the Museum Force, you and that stick, if you don't watch it—'

'I watch it,' he said. His voice burst up and broke like boiling water — it sounded vaguely foreign. 'I watch it all the time. That's my monument, and believe you me I watch it. I won't have anyone else watch it either. See what it says there? "I am a man." You keep away from it.'

'I'll watch what I please. You're no more qualified than I am,' I said. 'To be a man? I'll show you,' he retorted, full of malice, his stick still high. 'Name's Gate, same as on that stone. That's my stone. They don't make 'em any more. You'll do without.'

Now this was a sight: madness has not appeared in our society for over two generations. All forms of such illness have vanished these days, and if any pops up through some genetic mishap it is soon eliminated by Electromed Procedure. I had not met a madman since I was sixty years old.

'Who do you say you are?' I asked him.

'Gate, born Gatoff, Edmund, born Elia.'

This startled me: it was a refinement of information not on the monument.

'Edmund Gate's dead,' I said. 'You must be a literary historian to know

a point like that. I knew him personally myself. Nobody's heard of him now, but he was a celebrated man in my day. A poet.'

'Don't tell *me*,' the madman said.

'He jumped off a bridge dead drunk'

'That's what you think. That so, where's the body? I ask you.'

'Under that stone. Pile of bones by now.'

'I thought it was in the river. Did anybody ever pull it out of the river, ha? You've got a rotten memory, and you look roughly my age, boy. My memory is perfect: I can remember perfectly and I can forget perfectly. That's my stone, boy. I survived to see it. That stone's all there's left of Edmund Gate.' He peered at me as though it pained him. 'He's dead, y'know.'

'Then you can't be him,' I told the madman; genuine madmen always contradict themselves.

'Oh yes I can! I'm no dead poet, believe you me. I'm what survived him. He was succeeded by a woman, y'know. Crazy old woman. Don't tell *me*.'

He raised his bright stick and cracked it down on my shoulder. Then he slipped off, trembling and wobbling in his funny shoes, among the other monuments of the Preserved Cemetery.

He had never once recognized me. If it had really been Elia, he would certainly have known my face. That is why I am sure I have actually met a genuine madman for the first time in over forty years. The Museum Force at my request has made an indefatigable search of the Cemetery area, but up to this writing not so much as his pointed heel-print has been discovered. They do not doubt my word, however, despite my heavy age; senility has been eliminated from our modern society.