

HEMINGWAY'S BOAT

We have a wonderful current in the Gulf still in spite of the changes in weather and we have 29 good fish so far. Now they are all very big and each one is wonderful and different. I think you would like it very much; the leaving of the water and the entering into it of the huge fish moves me as much as the first time I ever saw it. I always told Mary that on the day I did not feel happy when I saw a flying fish leave the water I would quit fishing.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY, in a letter, September 13, 1952

Then, astern of the boat and off to starboard, the calm of the ocean broke open and the great fish rose out of it, rising, shining dark blue and silver, seeming to come endlessly out of the water, unbelievable as his length and bulk rose out of the sea into the air and seemed to hang there until he fell with a splash that drove the water up high and white.

“Oh God,” David said. “Did you see him?”

“His sword’s as long as I am,” Andrew said in awe.

“He’s so beautiful,” Tom said. “He’s much better than the one I had in the dream.”

—*Islands in the Stream*

The dark is different in Havana. It's lit in a kind of amber glow, as if everything's on low generator, weak wattage. If you come into Cuba for the first time at nighttime, this feeling of strange darkness is intensified. Even the plane must sense this—or at least the pilot—for it seems to hang forever in a low, back-powered glide, as if working through a tunnel, before hitting the runway with a smack at Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí La Habana. You emerge from the Jetway into a terminal with the complexion of tea water. In the customs and immigration area, soldiers in the olive drab of the Revolution are walking large dogs. If your papers are in order, a latch on a door clicks open. Like that, you're on the other side of a lost world that's always been so seductively near and simultaneously so far.

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AMID SO MUCH RUIN, STILL THE BEAUTY



On *Pilar*, off Cuba, midsummer 1934

MAY 2005. I went to Havana partly for the reason that I suspect almost any American without a loved one there would wish to go: to drink in a place that's been forbidden to American eyes (at least mostly forbidden) for half a century. So I wanted to smoke a Cohiba cigar, an authentic one—and I did. I wanted to flag down one of those chromeless Studebaker taxis (or Edsels or Chevy Bel Airs, it didn't matter) that roll down the Prado at their comic off-kilter angles, amid plumes of choking smoke—and I did. I got in and told the cabbie: "*Nacional, por favor.*" I was headed to the faded and altogether wonderful Spanish Colonial monstrosity of a hotel where you're certain Nat King Cole and Durante are

in the bar at the far end of the lobby (having just come in on Pan Am from Idlewild), and Meyer Lansky is plotting something malevolent in a poolside cabana while the trollop beside him rubies her nails. I also wanted to stand at dusk at the giant seawall called the Malecón that rings much of the city so I could watch the surf beat against it in phosphorescent hues while the sun went down like some enormous burning wafer. I wanted to walk those sewer-fetid and narrow cobbled streets in Habana Vieja and gaze up at those stunning colonial mansions, properties of the state, carved up now into multiple-family dwellings, with their cracked marble entryways and falling ceiling plaster and filigree balconies flying laundry on crisscrosses of clothesline.

Mostly, though, I went to Cuba to behold—in the flesh, so to speak—Ernest Hemingway's boat.

She was sitting up on concrete blocks, like some old and gasping browned-out whale, maybe a hundred yards from Hemingway's house, under a kind of gigantic carport with a corrugated-plastic roof, on what was once his tennis court, just down from the now-drained pool where Ava Gardner had reputedly swum nude. Even in her diminished, dry-docked, parts-plundered state, I knew *Pilar* would be beautiful, and she was. I knew she'd be threatened by the elements and the bell-tolls of time, in the same way much else at the hilltop farm on the outskirts of Havana—Finca Vigía was its name when Hemingway lived there—was seriously threatened, and she was. But I didn't expect to be so moved.

I walked round and round her. I took rolls and rolls of pictures of her long, low hull, of her slightly raked mahogany stern, of her nearly vertical bow. When the guards weren't looking, I reached over and touched her surface. The wood, marbled with hairline fissures, was dusty, porous, dry. It seemed almost scaly. It felt febrile. It was as if *Pilar* were dying

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from thirst. It was as if all she wanted was to get into water. But even if it were possible to hoist her with a crane off these blocks and to ease her onto a flatbed truck and to take her away from this steaming hillside and to set her gently into Havana Harbor, would Hemingway's boat go down like a stone, boiling and bubbling to the bottom, her insides having long ago been eaten out by termites and other barely visible critters?

A man who let his own insides get eaten out by the diseases of fame had dreamed new books on this boat. He'd taught his sons to reel in something that feels like *Moby Dick* on this boat. He'd accidentally shot himself in both legs on this boat. He'd fallen drunk from the flying bridge on this boat. He'd written achy, generous, uplifting, poetic letters on this boat. He'd propositioned women on this boat. He'd hunted German subs on this boat. He'd saved guests and family members from shark attack on this boat. He'd acted like a boor and a bully and an overly competitive jerk on this boat.

She'd been intimately his, and he hers, for twenty-seven years—which were his final twenty-seven years. She'd lasted through three wives, the Nobel Prize, and all his ruin. He'd owned her, fished her, worked her, rode her, from the waters of Key West to the Bahamas to the Dry Tortugas to the north coast and archipelagoes of Cuba. She wasn't a figment or a dream or a literary theory or somebody's psychosexual interpretation—she was actual. Onto her varnished decks, hauled in over her low-cut stern on a large wooden roller, had come uncounted marlin and broadbill swordfish, tuna, sailfish, kingfish, snook, wahoos, tarpon, horse-eye jacks, pompano, dolphinfish, barracuda, bonito, and mako sharks, which, as Hemingway once remarked, are the ones that smell oddly sweet and have those curved-in teeth that give them their Cuban name, *dentuso*.

He could make her do sixteen knots at full-out, and he could make her cut a corner like a midshipman at Annapolis. When she was up and moving, her prow smartly cutting the waves, it was as if she had a foaming white bone in her teeth—which is an expression old seamen sometimes use. When he had her loaded for a long cruise, she'd hold twenty-four hundred pounds of ice, for keeping cool the Hatuey beer and the daiquiris, the avocados and the Filipino mangoes, and, not least, the freshly landed monsters of the Gulf Stream, which Hemingway always thought of as "the great blue river." Who knew what was down there lurking in those fathomless bottoms—the skeletons of slave ships? Who'd ever caught what was possible to catch in those mile-deep waters of his imagination? "In hunting you know what you are after and the top you can get is an elephant," Hemingway once wrote in *Esquire* magazine. "But who can say what you will hook sometime when drifting in a hundred and fifty fathoms in the Gulf Stream? There are probably marlin and swordfish to which the fish we have seen caught are pygmies."

Pilar's master used to play Fats Waller records and "You're the Top" on a scratchy phonograph while his boat rocked in the Stream and he waited in his ladder-back fighting chair, which had leather-cushioned armrests and was bolted to the afterdeck and could swivel in a 360-degree circle. He said the tunes were good for bringing up the monsters. When the mood was upon him, he'd sing along in his lusty baritone.

In another piece for *Esquire*, also written in the mid-thirties, when he was still trying to decipher the mysteries of the Stream and escaping to it every chance he got, this most riddlesome of men wrote about the hooking of a marlin, always the blue river's greatest prize.

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He can see the slicing wake of a fin, if he cuts toward the bait, or the rising and lowering sickle of a tail if he is traveling, or if he comes from behind he can see the bulk of him under water, great blue pectorals wide-spread like the wings of some huge, underwater bird, and the stripes around him like purple bands around a brown barrel, and then the sudden upthrust waggle of a bill. . . . To see that happen, to feel that fish in his rod, to feel that power and that great rush, to be a connected part of it and then to dominate it and master it and bring that fish to gaff, alone and with no one else touching rod, reel or leader, is something worth waiting many days for, sun and all.

And in a different mood, a few years later, no less in thrall:

Once you are out of sight of land and of the other boats you are more alone than you can ever be hunting and the sea is the same as it has been since men ever went on it in boats. In a season fishing you will see it oily flat as the becalmed galleons saw it while they drifted to the westward; white-capped with a fresh breeze as they saw it running with the trades; and in high, rolling blue hills, the tops blowing off them like snow. . . .

He had named her after a shrine and *feria* in Spain that commemorates Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Our Lady of the Pillar. It's in Saragossa, and he'd been to the bullfights there in 1926. But his boat's name was also meant to commemorate the secret nickname adopted by his second wife, Pauline, before she was his wife, when the two were still in adultery. It was the name he would have given his daughter, he once said, if he'd ever been blessed enough to have a daughter. *Pilar*

could fit six in her sleeping compartments, two more in her open-air cockpit with its roll-down canvas sides and copper screens for warding off the nighttime bugs. In her prime, she'd been known among Gulf Stream anglers for her shiny black hull, for her snappy seafoam-green canvas roof and topside. A boat with a black hull, riding long and low in the water, can be extremely difficult to sight against a glaring tropical horizon—so, yes, something ghostly.

Her cabin sides and decks were crafted from Canadian fir and high-grade Honduras mahogany, with tight tolerances between the seams. But she wasn't a luxury craft—she was ever and always, her owner liked to say, a functional fishing machine, sturdy, reliant, built to take the heaviest weather, "sweet in any kind of sea." There's a term old boatmen sometimes use to describe a reassuring boat in a heaving ocean: "sea-kindly." That was *Pilar*, who'd come humbly out of a factory, and a shipbuilder's catalog, a "stock boat" of the 1930s, albeit with her owner's list of modifications and alterations for her. Over the decades Hemingway would add other modifications and innovations and alterations, further improving the well-built fishing machine that had already proved astonishingly durable and dependable.

After Hemingway's suicide, the pundits at *Time* wrote that conduct

is a question of how the good professional behaves within the rules of a game or the limits of a craft. All the how-to passages—how to land a fish, how to handle guns, how to work with a bull—have behind them the professional's pride of skill. But the code is never anchored to anything except itself; life becomes a game of doing things in a certain style, a narcissistic ritual—which led Hemingway himself not only

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to some mechanical, self-consciously “Hemingway” writing, but to a self-conscious “Hemingway” style of life.

Yes, that was a piece of the truth about him.

He used to love standing up on his beauty’s flying bridge and guiding her out of the harbor in the morning light. Sometimes, he’d be bare-chested. The flying bridge was his name for a top deck, and it wasn’t added until 1937, just before he left for Spain to report on the Spanish Civil War (and—unconsciously—to find a hugely successful novel about it). The sportfisherman, in his raggedy and beltless shorts—or, if he was wearing a belt, putting it not inside the loops but over top of them—would have his tanned, muscular legs planted several feet apart, like a heavyweight braced for a roundhouse or a golfer ready to slam his tee shot. He’d have his white visor pulled low over his blistering nose that was coated with zinc oxide or glazed with coconut oil. (One of the reasons Hemingway grew his iconic white Papa beard of the 1950s was because his fair midwestern facial skin could no longer take the harsh Cuban sun.) He’d be waving to people he recognized on the shore. The flying bridge had its own set of duplicate engine controls, throttles and levers, coming up via several pipes through the overhead of the cockpit. The steering wheel on the bridge—flat as a plate in front of him, the way steering wheels are on the back of hook-and-ladder fire trucks—was out of an old luxury car from a Key West junkyard, polished wood set into a steel casing.

From up there, when he wasn’t manning the wheel, he could fight a decent-size fish—not a 450-pound marlin nor an Atlantic sailfish, but maybe a tarpon or a recalcitrant barracuda. On the way to the fishing grounds, he’d already have a line in the water, with a Japanese feather

squid and a strip of pork rind on the hook, which in turn would be attached to a No. 10 piano-wire leader, which in turn would be knotted to a fifteen-thread line. This was for the smaller catches—good eating, good selling. Tarpon and kingfish liked to lie in close to shore and feed around the commercial fishing smacks. Hemingway was after almost any kind of fishing he could get, but he wouldn't get all four rods going on the boat until *Pilar* had reached the Stream. On going out—"running out" is how he sometimes said it, just as coming home was "running in"—he loved watching the motion of the Japanese squid bait skipping on the whitecaps. In 1949, in *Holiday* magazine, when he'd owned *Pilar* for fifteen years and had been living in Cuba for a decade, and was married to his fourth and last wife, who liked going out on the boat almost as much as he did, Hemingway described this feeling in a discursive, lore-filled reminiscence-cum-piece-of-fishing-reportage:

Coming out of the harbor I will be on the flying bridge steering and watching the traffic and the line that is fishing the feather astern. As you go out, seeing friends along the water front . . . your feather jig is fishing all the time. Behind the boulevards are the parks and buildings of old Havana and on the other side you are passing the steep slopes and walls of the fortress of Cabanas, the stone weathered pink and yellow, where most of your friends have been political prisoners at one time or another. . . .

Sometimes as you leave the gray-green harbor water and *Pilar's* bows dip into the dark blue water a covey of flying fish will rise from under her bows and you will hear the slithering, silk-tearing noise they make when they leave the water.

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The “slithering, silk-tearing noise” was always a good sign—that the monsters might come that day.

And now Hemingway’s boat sat beached and grime-coated and time-stunned in the Cuban sun. There were rips in her canvas topside; little hair-like pieces of fabric stuck up from the roof. Her brass and copper fastenings had gone green with corrosion, her bottom a hideous pink. Someone had reconfigured her power plant: instead of two propellers, there was just the big one, coming down the center of the boat. Where was the other screw? Anyone who’s ever paid close attention to Hemingway’s boat knows she ran two engines in her day—the big Chrysler seventy-five-horse Crown reduction gear engine for cruising; the little four-cylinder, forty-horse Lycoming motor for trolling. Many other things were discernibly, puzzlingly off about *Pilar* as well. But she was here, intact, beneath this awning, on this hill, sliced with midday heat and shadow.

When he got this boat—or, more precisely, when he placed the order for her and put down \$3,000 toward the full purchase price, courtesy of a hastily arranged loan/advance from the editor of *Esquire* against future articles—on a spring day in 1934, at a shipyard in Brooklyn, just back from safari in east Africa, Ernest Miller Hemingway was not quite thirty-five years old. He was still living and writing in Key West, a sand-bitten and Depression-sagging outpost at the bottom of America. He was rugged, handsome, youthful, trim-waisted, owner of a killer grin and an even more killer ego, the reigning monarch of American literature, a sportsman and sensualist glorying in his life, in the external physical world. And when he lost *Pilar*? It was in that moment when he lost everything, on a summer Sunday in 1961, in a place where the mountains outside his three picture windows in the living room were as jagged as the teeth of a shredding saw. He was nineteen days shy of his sixty-second birthday:

prematurely old, multidiseased, mentally bewildered, delusional, slurred of speech, in exile from Cuba, from the Stream, unable to compose so much as one true sentence a day, or so he'd wept on a sofa in his living room. Is it any wonder the most imitated writer of the twentieth century rose sometime after seven o'clock that morning, slipped a red silk dressing robe over blue pajamas, put on slippers, moved past the master bedroom where his wife was sleeping, padded down the red-carpeted stairs, crossed the length of the living room to the kitchen, retrieved the key to the locked storeroom where the weapons were (inexplicably, Mary Hemingway had left the ring of keys on the windowsill above the sink), went down to the basement, took shells from an ammo box, closed and relocked the door, came back upstairs, walked ten steps to the front-entry foyer (one sees him in this grainy mind-movie moving very fast but also methodically, teeth clenched and bared in that sickly smile that he often exhibited toward the end of his life), opened the foyer door, stepped inside, placed the butt of the gun on the linoleum tile, tore open the breech, slammed in the cartridges, snapped it shut, bent over, as you might bend over a water fountain, rested his forehead against the blue steel, and blew away his entire cranial vault with the double-barreled, 12-gauge Boss shotgun with which he'd once shot pigeons?

In Havana, a thirty-eight-foot motorized fishing vessel, framed so long ago with steam-bent white oak and planked with white cedar, bobbed at anchor, ready to be gassed up, waiting.

This book is largely the story of the twenty-seven years and three months between the first week of April 1934 and the first week of July 1961. It's about the strange, sad distance from

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Wheeler Shipyard, Inc., at the foot of Cropsey Avenue in Brooklyn to a tight, oak-paneled entryway in a bunker-like house in Ketchum, Idaho, when the world went away from a suffering man in fractions of a second. But it isn't meant to be a Hemingway biography, not in any conventional sense, and much less is it meant to be the nautical history of a piece of floating wood. We've had far too many Hemingway biographies in the past fifty years, not to say daffy critical studies and even daffier psychological "explanations" of the man.

My aim, rather, is to try to lock together the words "Hemingway" and "boat" in the same way that the locked-together and equally American words "DiMaggio" and "bat," or "Satchmo" and "horn," will quickly mean something in the minds of most people, at least of a certain age.

So it's about such ideas as fishing, friendship, and fatherhood, and love of water, and what it means to be masculine in our culture (as that culture is now rapidly changing), and the notion of being "boatstruck" (a malady that seems to affect men more than women), and how the deep good in us is often matched only by the perverse bad in us, and—not least—about the damnable way our demons seem to end up always following us, even or especially when we think we've escaped them and are out cruising on the Stream.

But the narrative won't always stay between the bracketing and polar-opposite moments I identified above. No human history ever proceeds in a straight line, perhaps least of all Hemingway's. His prose was wonderfully rooted in geography and linear movement. And yet his life, like his boat, beat against so many crosscurrents. So there are more than a few purposeful zigzags and loop-arounds and time-bends and flashbacks and flash-forwards and other sorts of departures from the main frame here, but generally the story is on a trajectory from early spring 1934 to early summer 1961.

Ernest Hemingway has been examined by so many scholars and memoirists and respected biographers and hangers-on and pretenders and doctoral students desperate for a dissertation topic that I feel sometimes we have lost all sense of who the man really was. It's as if each new Hemingway book by each new Hemingway "expert" wishes to contradict the last, which is one reason why I have been determined to try to anchor a Hemingway narrative, to ground it, in something that had existed in his world—that still exists, in its way—just as he had once existed in the world. I felt that if I could somehow learn whatever was possible to learn about a possession that meant so much to its owner—if I could actually *touch* it, too—then I might be able to begin to understand things about Hemingway, and not only Hemingway, in ways that I had not previously been able to understand. Indeed, I hoped to find people who were once on that boat, who had had their own deep relationship with her, and tell their stories, too. And I have found them, both the living and the dead.

Actually, as far back as the summer of 1987, as a *Washington Post* reporter, I searched out and interviewed Hemingway's three sons. The series of articles that resulted was called "Papa's Boys." Their father had been dead for twenty-six years and the sons themselves were late-middle-aged men. What I recall so vividly about Jack and Patrick and Gregory Hemingway, in their deep psychic sibling pain, was their attempt to say how fine it had been to spend time with their father outdoors—in Idaho meadows, flushing quail; in the Stream, going for the monsters; in high Wyoming creeks, fighting rainbows. No one could ever take those feelings and experiences away. Past all their father's posing and public brawling, past all his posthumous critical whittling down, past all the intentional and unintentional psychic hurt he had inflicted on them, what each Hemingway son still possessed was the memory of the

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man when he was good. Patrick Hemingway, who is in Montana, the only one alive now (he is in his early eighties), the one whom his father had nicknamed Mouse, told me that it was as if some immense and wise Plains Indian, the head of a whole nation, was taking time out from warfare and buffalo hunts to instruct in the codes of manhood—of life itself. The chief taught his braves how to pee high and wide off rickety wooden bridges in the Florida Keys, how to crouch low and *whish-whish* through the back of their teeth for shore birds, how to enter pebble-clean rivers without spooking the cut-throat trout around their shoes. He taught them these things and a lot more besides, but in the end, which came sooner than later, everything changed. I recall each Hemingway son talking longingly about their father's boat, even amid stories about their retchings in the toilet down below when the seasickness overcame them; even amid stories about their inability to land the trophy fish that their dad—holding them by the waist and dousing them with pails of sea water to try to cool their bare bodies as they sat in the fighting chair at the stern of the boat, with their small arms giving out—so badly wished them to land, not for his sake as much as theirs. It wasn't that the sons loved going out on *Pilar* for a day or several days; it was that their father loved being out there so much on his boat with them. It was enough.

Gregory Hemingway—the most deeply scarred of the three, the most gifted athlete in the family, the one with the truest writing gift, the son who'd been given the nickname Gigi by his father—had grown up to be a doctor, like his paternal grandfather. Gigi (with a hard G sound, pronounced like “Wiggy”) had also spent most of his adult life struggling—heroically seems not too strong a word—against the compulsion to adorn his squat, bulky body in hosiery, brassieres, wigs, girdles, makeup, spiked heels, fingernail polish, and then go

out into public places talking to people in his deep-chested voice. He was fifty-five and in the Miami area when we met. Coarse gray hair fell in clumps over his face. His teeth were wrecked. Gigi was spending his days in public parks and libraries. He had no fixed address. He had been married and divorced several times. He was estranged from most of his children. The medical career had drained away. Sometimes, he said, he'd go out onto Biscayne Bay in a small rowboat to hand-fish over the side with a night crawler, to fall asleep in the sun until something below jerked him awake. Gigi said, and it was easy to believe, he'd undergone ninety-eight electroshock treatments. "I've taken every fucking pill there is," he said. "These horrible mixed-up feelings you have, the love and the hate," he said. We talked of yet another Hemingway biography that had recently come out, whose author, Jeffrey Meyers, had seemed to wish to put on view every nasty thing Hemingway had ever said or done in his life—so he had boatloads of material. Meyers described letters that a father had written about his troubled youngest son. These unpublished Hemingway letters of the 1950s, not well-known, had described Gigi, in the biographer's paraphrasing words, as "an exploded firecracker, worthless, no good, ruined by money, a macabre and mercenary mix of Charles Addams and the National City Bank, an absolute pathological shit, a son he would like to see hanged."

And in a way, it was as if none of it mattered, not finally. I can still hear the exact tone of fantasizing voice with which Gregory Hemingway—a very nice man, despite everything, with a doctorly sense of wanting to ease the pain of others—said: "I think I want to go over to Cuba and find a way to get that fucking boat off the hillside at the *finca* and bring her back over here to Florida. It's where she belongs, you know. It would be a way of honoring him. This is where my father

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first learned to take her out on the water and to sit in a chair and wait for a fish—when we were still living as a family in Key West. You know, there were periods when he didn't like to talk much on the boat. He'd just sit there and stare out over the water."

I have come to believe deeply that Ernest Hemingway, however unpostmodern it may sound, was on a lifelong quest for sainthood, and not just literary sainthood, and that at nearly every turn, he defeated himself. How? "By betrayals of himself, and what he believed in," as the dying writer, with the gangrene going up his leg, says so bitterly in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," one of Hemingway's greatest short stories. Why the self-defeating betrayal of high humanistic aspirations? The seductions of celebrity and the sin of pridefulness and the curses of megalomania and the wastings of booze and, not least, the onslaughts of bipolarism must amount to a large part of the answer. Hemingway once said in a letter to his closest friend in the last two decades of his life, General Buck Lanham, whom he had come to know on the battlefield as a correspondent in World War II: "I have always had the illusion it was more important, or as important, to be a good man as to be a great writer. May turn out to be neither. But would like to be both."

I also believe there was so much more fear inside Hemingway than he ever let on, that it was almost always present, by day and more so by night, and that his living with it for so long was ennobling. The thought of self-destruction trailed Hemingway for nearly his entire life, like the tiny wakes a child's hand will make when it is trailed behind a rowboat in calm water—say, up in Michigan.

Many years ago, Norman Mailer wrote a sentence about

Hemingway that has always struck me as profound: “It may even be that the final judgment on his work may come to the notion that what he failed to do was tragic, but what he accomplished was heroic, for it is possible he carried a weight of anxiety within him from day to day which would have suffocated any man smaller than himself.” The great twentieth-century critic Edmund Wilson, a contemporary of Hemingway’s, who admired him early and had contempt for him late, wrote in his journals of the 1960s: “He had a high sense of honor, which he was always violating; he evidently had a permanent bad conscience.” A writer named Ella Winter, one of the Lost Generation exiles of Paris in the twenties, said in a letter, seven months after the suicide:

I of course knew Hem as the big-broad-shouldered, dark-haired, most handsome “boy” who walked in that peculiar way not exactly limping but lurching, and who talked writing and ate and drank and dreamed and thought writing—only the boxing bouts and bicycle races and maybe skiing mattered besides—but you felt in him such a clean, clear strength. I know his legend caught up with him and all the beard and “Papas” and posing and drinking and publicity became part of the legend and the later man—I don’t know how much he himself became the persona the legend created. But I’ve always felt there was the real human being, unphoney, unpublicized, caring like hell.

I think there’s another truth here, too, and in a sense it doesn’t even have to do with Hemingway; it has to do with *us*: namely, that his life, which is to say, the way he lived it, or our perception of the way he lived it, has always had the capacity to stir up complex things, to make us uneasy, defensive,

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secretly troubled about our own far less glamorous and more sedentary selves. Hemingway's fellow Chicagoan, the novelist Nelson Algren, to whom Hemingway was a hero, and who came along a literary generation behind him, once said of all the desk-bound critics who couldn't seem to bear the man in his own lifetime:

It wasn't Hemingway's prose, but his life, which demanded "total and considered rejection." It wasn't his economy of language which made them feel small—it was his free-handedness. To men whose self-doubt put them in need of formal respect from others, the ease with which Hemingway earned the informal respect of workaday men and women felt like an accusation. . . . He flaunted a personality as poetic as Byron's and as challenging as Teddy Roosevelt's before timorous men whose lives were prosaic. It was necessary, no, absolutely essential to get his number.

He led a life of action in the physical world, all right. But underneath that was a bookish man in glasses trying to get his work done, and finding it harder with each passing year.

So what we have of this man are the irresolvable contradictions of the life and the glories of the work—some of it. The Hemingway myth, however much oversold and devalued, can still powerfully stand in a new century for a great many tensions unresolved in American males, or so I believe—and not only males. I also believe that all of Hemingway's writing, every bit of it, even at its most self-parodistic and Papa-cult worst, is seeking to be about the *living* of this life. The being of this life. The doing of this life. The engaging of this life. And in that sense, the work—and even, I am willing to say, so much of the coarsened personal history—can be thought of as something spiritual and indeed almost holy. In late April

1934, waiting in Key West with a schoolboy's excitement for his new boat to be shipped to him in Florida, Hemingway wrote to his beloved friend Sara Murphy: "Am working fine now—But I would rather had a good life than be a bloody great writer—(who says he's a b.g.w. Nobody) Have written *plenty* and will write *plenty* more. And I will be as good as I know and I'll know better all the time. But every day is a day and its *my* lousy life—not posterities. Oh well." That's such a characteristic Hemingway letter—the streams of loose syntax, the blunt emotion.

Loop backward seventeen days from his death—to June 15, 1961, at Rochester, Minnesota. A man in the psychiatric ward of Saint Marys Hospital at Mayo Clinic is writing a different kind of letter to a nine-year-old boy. The man writes it on two small sheets of notepaper, in his big, round, legible hand, with his trademark downhill slant. An irreversibly damaged Ernest Hemingway, his inner landscape now a paranoid's nightmare, has found within himself at the end of his life the kindness and courage and momentary lucidity—to not say literary grace—to write 210 beautiful words to a kid he likes very much. Whenever I begin to feel revulsion at Hemingway's ego and boorish behavior toward other human beings, I like to take out a copy of this letter. Two hundred and ten words, with so much emotion tucked below the surface of the prose, the sentences pile-driven by contained feeling and acute observation of the natural world, would have been a half-decent output for a workday, even in a master's prime.

The boy—his name is Frederick G. Saviers, although everyone, including Hemingway, calls him Fritz—has a congenital heart condition. He is the son of George Saviers, Hemingway's small-town doctor in Ketchum, who was also one of

PROLOGUE

Hemingway's favorite duck-hunting companions. In these last weeks, Hemingway has been brought once more for treatment to Mayo. Not long after this note to Fritz, Hemingway will fool his foolish doctors at the world-famous clinic into believing he is well enough to go home to Idaho. And almost immediately the Boss shotgun will go off in the Sunday quiet of the house that sits a couple of hundred yards up the steep slope from the west bank of the Big Wood River.

The patient on the locked ward at Saint Marys on June 15, 1961, has just learned that Dr. Saviers's son is in a Denver hospital. In Idaho, Hemingway and Fritz and Fritz's father liked talking about the Yankees and rainbow trout. But none of that will ever be the same again.

St. Mary's Hospital
Rochester, Minn.
June 15 1961

Dear Fritz

I was terribly sorry to hear this morning in a note from your father that you were laid up in Denver for a few days more and speed off this note to tell you how much I hope you'll be feeling better.

It has been very hot and muggy here in Rochester but the last two days it has turned cool and lovely with the nights wonderful for sleeping. The country is beautiful around here and I've had a chance to see some wonderful country along the Mississippi where they used to drive the logs in the old lumbering days and the trails where the pioneers came north. Saw some good bass jumping in the river. I never knew anything about the upper Mississippi before and it is really a very beautiful country and there are plenty of pheasants and ducks in the fall.

AMID SO MUCH RUIN, STILL THE BEAUTY

But not as many as in Idaho and I hope we'll both be back there shortly and can joke about our hospital experiences together.

Best always to you, old Timer from your good friend who misses you very much

Mister) Papa.

Best to all the family. am feeling fine and very cheerful about things in general and hope to see you all soon.

Papa

No one knows for sure, but these seem to be the last real sentences Ernest Hemingway set down on paper. Amid so much ruin, still the beauty.