

ME AND ORSON WELLES

By Robert Kaplow

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ONE

This is the story of one week in my life. I was seventeen. It was the week I slept in Orson Welles' pajamas. It was the week I fell in love. It was the week I fell out of love. And it was also the week I changed my middle name—twice.

My memory of that period is of things *happening*—almost without cease. There must be a period in every life when the phone doesn't stop ringing—when the mailman brings you nothing but success—when you walk down the street, the sunlight pouring around you, scarcely able to believe your own good luck.

That Saturday morning the phone was ringing again. My grandfather's Model A was pulling up in front of the house. The living-room radio was blaring news about the Japanese invading China.

On the second floor, my sister was playing her record of "The Moon Got in My Eyes" for the eight-millionth time. It was the latest in a series of moony, sentimental ballads that served as emotional chapter-titles to what I thought was her over-dreamed and under-lived life.

"Change the needle!" I said as I headed towards the bathroom. "You're wrecking it."

"Twerp."

"Another county heard from." This was my mother. She was knocking spider webs from the ceiling with a broom. "Your father works every day till nine o'clock at night, and now on Saturday he has to rake leaves yet? You *enjoy* giving him more work?"

I went into my Paul Muni impersonation from *The Life of Emile Zola*: "The day will come when France will *thank* me... for having helped to save her honor!"

"It's no use."

"What's he shouting for, Nutsy Fagen?" This from my grandmother downstairs.

I checked my reflection in the hall mirror. Not bad, I thought. Sometimes I really did look like *somebody*—a writer, an actor—the earnestness of Gary Cooper—the playfulness of Cary Grant—with maybe just a whisper of Astaire. I struck an Astaire-like pose, straightened an imaginary tie, and sang into the camera:

*I've been a roaming Romeo,
My Juliets have been many,
But now my roaming days are through...*

Oh, I was crazy for songs that year! Knew all the verses; knew the years they were written; knew the names of all the composers and the lyricists; knew the shows and the movies they were from. I'd picked a lot of it up from my grandmother's sheet music collection, but even more I'd learned from my near-obsessive listening to the radio. (The radio and the public library were my two connections to something bigger than Westfield, New Jersey.) My parents' old Atwater Kent sat next to my bed, the hot dust of the tubes sweetening the air till two in the morning as the room filled with Benny Goodman's "Avalon," Mildred Bailey's "There's a Lull in My Life," Glen Gray and Ruth Etting and Isham Jones. And Saturday nights there was "Theatre News" with John Gassner—and suddenly voices in my own bedroom were talking about the new George S. Kaufman play, and Richard Rodgers himself was playing the piano, and Lorenz Hart was speaking: "Here's our first song hit 'Manhattan' from the *Garrick Gaieties*." And the Lunts were laughing about *Amphitryon 38*, and Harold Clurman was directing the new Clifford Odets.

I lay there at night, and I felt *close* to it all. New York City and the CBS Radio Workshop—close enough to touch, if I could just get through the right door. Forty minutes from where I lived Irving Berlin was writing a new song that two months from now every person in the world would be singing. All of it *vibrating* out there!

And some mornings when the light was good, and when the coffee and the Fig Newtons were scalding through me, I'd think—at least for a few intoxicated seconds: "You know, Richard, you can do all that, too." I

wasn't sure whether I wanted to write songs or direct plays or write novels or maybe do everything—like the Jewish Noel Coward.

So I pored through the magazines in the public library searching for the answer. I read the biographies of every actor and writer I admired for the secret. How did it happen? When did they know? What was the breakthrough?

I'd just finished Noel Coward's autobiography *Present Indicative*. I thought it was the best book I'd ever read, and I kept comparing myself to Coward: O.K., Coward was twenty-five when he wrote, directed, and starred in *The Vortex*. That still gave me eight years. He wrote "A Room with a View" when he was twenty eight, so I still had a little time there, too. But Berlin was only twenty two when he wrote "When I Lost You."

God, it was going to be hard to keep up.

The phone was still ringing downstairs. It was nearly always for me; mostly the guys at school—the 40-Ounce Crew we called ourselves—the seven of us—in celebration of our drinking exploits. But it wasn't the drinking that had pulled me to the 40-Ounce Crew. It was the *energy* of Stefan and Skelly and the rest of them—this vanguard of good-looking male power in Westfield High School! They had this kind of celebrity that just about defined the entire school. That I was permitted to be tight with them seemed nothing short of a miracle. Last year, Stefan had been standing outside of study hall eyeing up this amazing tenth-grader, Kristina Stakuna—and we noticed each other both staring at her ass, and we cracked up laughing. We ended up sitting next to each other in study hall for half a year—and so became friends. It was strange, because we seemed almost opposites. Stefan was five feet tall, tough, physically intense—about once a week he got thrown out of school for beating the crap out of somebody. I was taller and significantly less imposing; the Honors-English type. Sometimes, with Stefan, I felt I was the pilot fish hovering just behind the shark. I think I gave him some sort of (dubious) intellectual credentials—and in return I fell under his protection. Nobody could mess with me, or they'd have to deal with Stefan and Da Boys. I rewrote his entire research paper on Walt Whitman. *A+ Phil, it's good to see you finally living up to your potential.* And in return he set fire to Kimberley Kagan's car when she refused to go to the prom with me. It was definitely a fair trade. And, of course, Skelly, Stefan, Carter, Silver,

and the rest of them knew every beautiful girl in the school—I mean, these girls were *lining up* for the privilege of dating these guys—or even being near them—sitting in the same diner as they did on a late Saturday night. And while those particular romantic spoils hadn't fallen my way, just the *proximity* of beautiful women was exciting. And I was sort of the approachable liaison to the 40-Ounce Crew. Gorgeous girls would stop and ask me if I knew whether Stefan had plans for the weekend. They were so close I could smell their perfume—could stare with perfect innocence at their well-toned arms and the sculpted perfection of their stockinged legs. And, all right, I may have been invisible to them—but they weren't invisible to me. I remember Kate Rouilliard looking directly at me with the lamps of her blue eyes, and I couldn't sleep an entire week.

My grandfather was standing in front of the phonograph in the living room listening to my father's Jolson records. He was still dressed in his hat, scarf, and black Chesterfield coat with the velvet collar.

*So till we meet again,
Heaven only knows where or when,
Think of me now and then,
Little pal!*

My mother handed me the phone.

"Hi, it's Caroline."

My heart leapt a little. All right, she was short; she looked a little "librarian", but, Jesus, it was a start. And I thought she was pretty. My affiliation with the mighty 40-Ounce Crew was finally beginning to pay off—although my relationship with Caroline Tice had become a sort of joke among Da Boys. I'd been seeing her for two months now and hadn't even kissed her. "Pounce!" Stefan and Skelly kept yelling at me. "*Pounce* that broad. That's what she's *waiting* for you to do. Don't *ask* her, for Christ's sake."

"I'm getting there."

"He's *getting* there."

"Slowly."

"Listen," said Stefan. "Broads aren't interested in slowly. Their *parents* are interested in slowly."

Skelly was jabbing his finger in my face. He wore a white beer jacket signed with names and obscenities.

"They want you to be aggressive," he said. "They *want* you to fight for 'em."

I looked at the ground and shook my head. "I don't know if that's who I am."

Stefan nailed me. "And is who you *are* who you *want* to be?"

"How they hell do I know?"

At this point they usually slapped their heads in disbelief.

Even *I* sometimes slapped my head in disbelief, but this was my eternal problem with girls. I was always the "friend" and never the "boyfriend." I shared all their romantic troubles during lunch; they showed me their diaries; I got the jubilant shriek: "The big idiot finally *asked* me!" I got: "Richard, you're the only guy I can really *talk* to. I mean, I can talk to you like a girl." But I never got the dream, the cream, the Unhooked Capacious Brassiere. I never got the "you-can-take-off-my-stockings-before-my-parents-come-home." Which is exactly what Skelly got, and Stefan got. In abundance. Overflowing.

But I had a chance with Caroline Tice. At least a slight chance. She was guileless and intelligent. She had green Lutheran eyes. I liked her shortness; I liked her handwriting; I liked her ring size. She wore her hair as short as a guy's, and I liked that, too. She liked her hair short, and nobody was going to make her change it.

And I was polite. Oh, God, I was polite. I bought her flowers. I wrote her parents elaborate thank you notes whenever they'd had me over for dinner—sixty-hour suppers where they smiled with courteous Lutheran horror at the Fast Talking Jew Boy their green-eyed jewel had dragged home from the dump.

"The show is eight," Caroline was saying, "but I have to be there by at *least* six thirty. And, Richard, please, no more rowdiness from your drunken friends."

"It wasn't us."

"It wasn't *we*."

Caroline had the lead in *Growing Pains* which was being presented that night for the second and final time. I'd gone the previous evening. It was a terrible play, a "comedy of youth" filled with characters named

"Dutch" and "Slim" and "Spats" shrieking about roller skates and lost baseball gloves.

Anyway, the only really enjoyable moment of the play was when Kristina Stakuna (the Amazon Queen of the Swollen Softballs) came onstage and the whole 40-Ounce Crew started giving her wolf whistles and stomping.

"That amazing uplift!" called out Stefan.

Then Skelly got all seven of us singing to the tune of "That Old Feeling:"

*I saw you last night,
And got that old boner.*

At the intermission Dr. Mewling invited us to leave.

We goofed around on the front steps of the school, smoking my Wings cigarettes and indulging in wildly obscene fantasies about Kristina Stakuna and the college goon she was dating. "I heard when she visited him at Rutgers," said Stefan, "that he screwed her for *nine* hours. When he was done he had to go to the hospital. I'm not shittin' ya."

I'd met up with Caroline after the show. "That was really raw," she'd said. "You embarrassed Kristina. You embarrassed me. You guys are *really* raw." But even as she said the words, it struck me that she had actually enjoyed it—that she, too, had been briefly defined by the celebrity of the 40-Ounce Crew.

"Am I going to see you this afternoon?" she said now on the phone. "Or are you going to drag me into New York again to look at old, boarded-up old theatres and say, 'Did you know Eva Le Gallienne starred in *Peter Pan* here in 1925?'"

"It was 1926."

"Look, I'll see you tonight. And do me a favor: tell the 40-Ounce Crew they're officially *not* invited to the performance. Tell them they can come to the party afterwards at Kristina's house; I'm *sure* they'll enjoy that."

"I'm sure *you'd* enjoy that."

"I am not interested in Phil Stefan, Richard."

"Then you're the only girl in the school who isn't."

When I replaced the phone, Jolson was still wailing: *Dirty hands!*
Dirty face!

"Ma!" I yelled to no one in particular. "I'm heading out."

"*Gai gezint,*" said my grandfather.

I stood by the front door wearing my father's old black double-breasted coat (too big for me, but I liked that it felt like a costume in a Russian play) and my battered black fedora—a five-dollar bill folded into my sock.

"The leaves!" called my mother.

"Tomorrow! Ma, I've got nothing on my schedule tomorrow but raking! I'm going to do seventeen, maybe eighteen hours straight."

The front door was already shutting behind me.

"It's no use," she said.