

Woody  
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# Apropos of Nothing

Woody Allen



ARCADE PUBLISHING,  
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

Cover design by Albert Tang and Brian Peterson

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-951627-34-8

Large Print Edition ISBN: 978-1-951627-35-5

Audio Book ISBN: 978-1-951627-36-2

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-951627-37-9

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*For Soon-Yi, the best.*

*I had her eating out of*

*my hand and then I noticed my arm was missing.*

Like Holden, I don't feel like going into all that David

Copperfield kind of crap, although in my case, a little about my parents you may find more interesting than reading about me. Like my father, born in Brooklyn when it was all farms, ball boy for the early Brooklyn Dodgers, a pool hustler, a bookmaker, a small man but a tough Jew in fancy shirts with slicked-back patent leather hair a la George Raft. No high school, the Navy

at sixteen, on a firing squad in France when they killed an American sailor for raping a local girl. A medal-winning marksman, always loved pulling a trigger and carried a pistol till the day he died with a full head of silver hair and twenty-twenty eyesight at a hundred. One night during World War I his boat got hit by a shell somewhere off the coast in the icy waters of Europe. It sank. Everyone drowned except for three guys who made the miles-long swim to shore. He was one of the three that could handle the Atlantic. But that's how close I came to never being born. The war ends. His father who's made some dough always spoiled him, favoring him shamelessly over his two dim-witted siblings. And I mean dim-witted. As a kid, I always thought his sister reminded me of a circus pinhead. His brother, weak, wan, and degenerate looking, drifted around the Flatbush streets peddling newspapers till he dissolved like a pale wafer. White, whiter, gone. So Dad's dad buys his favorite sailor boy a real fancy car in which my father tools around post-World War I Europe. When he comes home, the old man, my grandfather, has added a few zeroes to his bank account and smokes Corona Coronas. He's the only Jew working as the traveling rep for a big coffee company. My father runs errands for him, and one day lugging some coffee sacks around he passes a courthouse, and down the steps strolls Kid Dropper, a thug of the times. The Kid gets into a car and some nonentity



named Louie Cohen jumps on the car and puts four slugs through the window while my dad stands there staring. The old man told me this tale many times as a bedtime story, which was a lot more exciting than Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter.

Meanwhile, my father's father, looking to become an industry, buys a string of taxicabs and a number of movie houses including the Midwood Theater, where I would spend so much of my childhood in flight from reality, but that came later. I first had to be born. Unfortunately, prior to that little cosmic long shot, Dad's dad, in a burst of manic euphoria, bet more and more on Wall Street, and you can see where this is going. On a certain Thursday the stock market did a big Brodie, and my grandfather, high roller that he was, was reduced to instant abject poverty. The cabs go, the movie houses go, the coffee company bosses jump out windows. My father, suddenly responsible for his own caloric intake, is forced to go on the hustle; he drives a cab, runs a poolroom, strikes out with assorted scams and makes book. Summers he is paid to go to Saratoga to attend to questionable horse-racing business for Albert Anastasia. Summers upstate were another series of bedtime stories. How he loved that life. Fancy clothes, a big per diem, sexy women, and then somehow he meets my mother. Tilt. How he wound up with Nettie is a mystery on a par with dark matter. Two

characters as mismatched as Hannah Arendt and Nathan Detroit, they disagreed on every single issue except Hitler and my report cards. And yet with all the verbal carnage, they stayed married for seventy years—out of spite, I suspect. Still, I’m sure they loved each other in their own way, a way known perhaps only to a few headhunting tribes in Borneo.

In Mom’s defense I have to say Nettie Cherry was a wonderful woman; bright, hardworking, sacrificing. She was faithful and loving and decent but not, let us say, physically prepossessing. When I said years later my mother looked like Groucho Marx, people thought I was kidding. In her last years, she suffered from dementia and died at ninety-six. Delusional as she was, at the end she never lost her ability to kvetch, which she had raised to an art form. Dad, spry into his midnineties, never a worry nor a care ever disturbed his sleep. Nor a single thought his waking hours. His philosophy amounted to “If you don’t have your health you got nothing,” wisdom deeper than all the complexity of Western thought, succinct as a fortune cookie. And he kept his health. “Nothing bothers me,” he would brag. “You’re too stupid for anything to bother you,” Mom would patiently try to explain. Mom had five sisters, one homelier than the next, with Mom arguably the homeliest of the swarm. Let me put it this way: Freud’s Oedipal theory that all us men unconsciously want to kill our fathers and

marry our mothers hits a brick wall when it comes to my mother.

Sadly, even though my mother was a much better parent, much more responsible, more honest, and more mature than my not-so-moral, philandering father, I loved him more. Everybody did. I guess because he was a sweet guy, warmer, more demonstrably affectionate, while she took no prisoners. She was the one who kept the family from going under. She worked as a bookkeeper in a flower shop. She ran the household, cooked the meals, paid the bills, made sure there was fresh cheese in the traps while my father peeled off twenties he couldn't afford and stuffed them into my pocket while I slept.

On those rare occasions over the years when he hit his number, we all got cut in big-time. Dad played the numbers every single day rain or shine. It was the closest thing in his life to religious observance. And whether he left the house with one dollar or one hundred dollars, he spent it all before returning home. On what? Well, clothes and other essential items, like tricky golf balls that rolled funny and he could use to cheat his pals. And he spent it on me and my sister, Letty. He spoiled us with the same generous freedom with which his father had spoiled him. Example: at one point, Dad was a waiter on the Bowery working nights for no salary, only tips. Yet every morning I woke up—I was going to high school at the time—there on

my night table was five bucks. The other kids I knew were getting fifty cents or maybe one dollar allowance a week. I was getting five bucks a day! What did I do with it? Ate out, bought magic tricks, used it to bankroll my card or crap games.

See, I had become this amateur magician because I loved everything about magic. I always took to anything that required solitude, like practicing sleight of hand or playing a horn or writing, as it kept me from having to deal with other humans who, for no explainable reason, I didn't like nor trust. I say "no reason" because I came from a large, loving, extended family who were all nice to me. It's like I was a genetically born louse. Meanwhile, I'd sit all alone and practice card moves and coin moves, manipulating the deck, false shuffles, false cuts, bottom dealing, palming. Anyhow, it was a short jump for a born louse, from pulling a rabbit from a hat to realizing I could cheat at cards. Having inherited my father's DNA for dishonesty, I was soon hustling at poker, cleaning out the unsuspecting, dealing seconds, hopping the cut, and pocketing everyone's allowance. But enough about me and what a lowlife I started out as. I was filling you in on my parents and still haven't come to the part where Mom gives birth to her little miscreant. My father led a charmed life and my mother—who by necessity had to handle all the serious problems of daily survival—

was all business and not fun or interesting. She was intelligent but not book smart, which she'd be the first to tell you, proud of her "common sense." I frankly found her too strict and pushy, but it was because she wanted me to "amount to something." She glimpsed the results of an IQ test I took at five or six, and while I won't tell you the figure, it impressed my mother. It was recommended that I be sent off to Hunter College special school for sharp kids, but the long train ride every day from Brooklyn into Manhattan was too grueling for my mother or my aunt, who alternated taking me on the subway. So they plopped me back into P.S. 99, a school for backward teachers. I hated all schools and probably would've gotten little or nothing out of Hunter had I stayed. My mother was forever browbeating me, telling me I had such a high IQ, how could I be so complete an idiot in school?

Example of my scholastic idiocy: In high school I had two years of Spanish. Upon entering New York University, I hustled my way into being allowed to take freshman Spanish—like it was totally new to me. Can you believe I failed it?

Anyhow, my mother's smarts did not extend to culture, and so neither she nor my father, who never rose academically above baseball, pinochle, or Hopalong Cassidy movies, never once, not one single time, ever took me to a show or a museum. I first saw a Broadway show when I was seventeen,

and I discovered paintings on my own playing hooky and needing a warm place to hang out, and the museums were free or cheap. I can safely say my father and mother never saw a play or visited a gallery or read a book. My father owned one book, *The Gangs of New York*. It was the only book I browsed growing up, and it imbued in me a fascination with gangsters, criminals, and crime. I knew gangsters like most boys knew ball players. I knew baseball players, too, but not like I knew Gyp the Blood, Greasy Thumb Jake Guzik, and Tick-Tock Tannenbaum. Oh, I also knew movie stars, thanks to my cousin Rita, who papered her walls with color portraits from *Modern Screen*. I'm saving writing about her as she was one of the true bright spots of my growing up and deserves some special space. But in addition to Bogart and Betty Grable and how many wins Cy Young had and how many RBIs Hack Wilson hit in one season and who pitched two consecutive no-hitters for Cincinnati, I knew Abe Reles could sing but not fly—plus where Owney Madden wound up and why an icepick was the weapon of choice for Pittsburgh Phil Strauss.

In addition to *The Gangs of New York*, my entire library consisted of comic books. I read only comic books until I was in my later teens. My literary heroes were not Julien Sorel, Raskolnikov, or the local yokels of Yoknapatawpha County; they were Batman, Superman, the Flash, the Sub-

Mariner, Hawkman. Yes, and Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny and Archie Andrews. Folks, you are reading the autobiography of a misanthropic gangster-loving illiterate; an uncultivated loner who sat in front of a three-way mirror practicing with a deck of cards so he could palm off an ace of spades, render it invisible from any angle, and hustle some pots. Yes, I eventually got blown away by Cezanne's heavy apples and Pissarro's rainy Parisian boulevards, but as I said, only because I would cut school and needed succor on those snowy winter mornings. There I was at fifteen, on the hook, confronted by Matisse and Chagall, by Nolde, Kirchner, and Schmidt-Rotluff, by *Guernica* and the frantic wall-sized Jackson Pollock, by the Beckmann triptych and Louise Nevelson's dark black sculpture. Then lunch in the MOMA cafeteria, followed by a vintage movie downstairs in the screening room. Carole Lombard, William Powell, Spencer Tracy. Doesn't it sound like more fun than Miss Schwab's obnoxious picklepuss demanding the date of the Stamp Act or the capital of Wyoming? Then the lies at home, the excuses next day at school, the hustling, the tap dancing, the forged notes, caught again, parental exasperation. "But you have such a high IQ." And by the way, reader, it's not so high, but you'd think from my mother's *cri de cœur* I could explain string theory. You can tell from my movies; while some are entertaining, no

idea I ever had is going to start any new religion.

Plus—I'm not ashamed to admit it—I didn't like reading. Unlike my sister, who enjoyed it, I was a lazy boy who found no joy in cracking a book. And why would I have? The radio and movies were so much more exciting.

They were less demanding and more vivid. In school, they never knew how to introduce you to reading so you'd learn to enjoy it. The books and stories they chose were dull, witless, antiseptic. No one in those carefully chosen stories for young boys and girls compared to Plastic Man or Captain Marvel. You think a hot-to-trot kid (again, defying Freud, I never had a latency period) who likes gangster movies with Bogart and Cagney and cheap, sexy blondes is going to go a hundred over "The Gift of the Magi"? So she sells her hair to buy him a watch fob and he sells his watch to buy combs for her hair. The moral I drew was you're always safer giving cash. I liked comic books, sparse as the prose might have been, and when school later introduced me to Shakespeare they managed to force-feed it in such a way that when it was over you never wanted to hear another *hark, prithee*, or *but soft* as long as you lived.

Anyhow, I didn't read until I was at the tail end of high school and my hormones had really kicked in and I first noticed those young women with the long, straight hair, who wore no lipstick, little makeup, dressed in black



turtlenecks and skirts with black tights, and carried big leather bags holding copies of *The Metamorphosis*, which they had annotated themselves in the margins with things like “Yes, very true,” or “See Kierkegaard.” For whatever irrational carnal singularity, those were the ones who captured my heart, and when I called for a date and asked if they’d like to go to a movie or a baseball game and they wanted rather to hear Segovia or catch the Ionesco play off Broadway, there’d be a long awkward pause before I said, “Let me get back to you,” then scrambled to look up who Segovia and Ionesco were. It’s fair to say these women were not eagerly awaiting the next issue of *Captain America* or even the next Mickey Spillane, the sole poet I could quote.

When I did finally date one of these delectable bohemian little kumquats, it was brutal for both of us. For her, because early on in the evening she would realize she was stuck with an illiterate imbecile who didn’t seem to know what position Stephen Daedalus played, and brutal for me because I became aware that I was indeed a submental and if I ever hoped to kiss those unlipsticked lips or see her a second time I was going to have to actually delve into literature deeper than *Kiss Me Deadly*. I couldn’t get by just on anecdotes about Lucky Luciano or Rube Waddell. I was going to have to grab a look at Balzac, and Tolstoy, and Eliot so I could hold up my

end of the conversation and not have to take the young lady home, as she claimed suddenly to be stricken with a case of Bronze John. Meanwhile, I would wind up at Dubrow's Cafeteria to commiserate with the other strikeout victims of Saturday night.

But those fiascos lay in the future. Now that you have some idea of my parents I'll mention my only sibling, my sister. Then I'll double back and get born so the tale can really take flight.

Letty is eight years younger than me. Naturally, when she was about to come into the world my parents prepared me in the consummately wrong way: "When your sister is born you will no longer be the center of attention. You won't be getting the presents anymore, she will. We'll all have to shift our attention to her and her needs, so don't expect to be the main attraction ever again." Another boy of eight might have been a bit shaken by the prospect of suddenly being cast aside in favor of the new arrival. But while I loved my parents dearly, I was aware they were a couple of rank amateurs who had no flair for child rearing and their dire predictions were dopey and empty, which they proved to be. I guess it's a tribute to them that they loved me in such an unequivocal way that I knew while they came on like Cassandra, they would never abandon me and their devotion to my happiness and well-being, and they did not.

The second I set eyes on my sister in the crib I was totally taken with her, loved her, and helped raise her, shielding her from the friction between my parents, which could escalate exponentially over trivial concerns. I mean, who could believe a disagreement over gefilte fish could morph into a battle worthy of Homer? I played with Letty, took her with me many times when I went out with friends. They all found her cute and smart, and she and I always got along swimmingly. It reminded me of an exchange of letters I had with Groucho, whom I had gotten friendly with over the years thanks to Dick Cavett, whom I'll tell you about later. I wrote Groucho when Harpo died, and he wrote me and said he and Harpo never had exchanged a serious argument or bad words, and that's how it's been with my sister, who today produces my movies.

But now, I'm ready to be born. Finally, I enter the world. A world I will never feel comfortable in, never understand, and never approve of or forgive. Allan Stewart Konigsberg, born on December 1, 1935. Actually, I was born on the thirtieth of November very close to midnight, and my parents pushed the date so I could start off on a day one. This has given me zero advantage in life, and I would have much preferred they left me an enormous trust fund. I mention it only because in a meaningless bit of irony, my sister was born eight years later on the exact same day. This remarkable

coincidence and fifteen cents will get you on the subway. I was delivered in a Bronx hospital though the folks lived in Brooklyn. Don't ask me why my mother schlepped all the way up to the Bronx to produce me. Maybe that hospital was giving away free dishes. Anyhow, my mother didn't schlep back from the Bronx hospital. Instead, she nearly died up there. In fact, it was touch and go for a few weeks, but as she tells it, constant hydrating pulled her through. That's all I would've needed, to be raised only by my father. I would probably have a rap sheet by now the length of the Torah. As it is, having two loving parents I grew up surprisingly neurotic. Why, I don't know.

I was the cynosure of my mother's five sisters, the only male child, the darling of these sweet yentas who fussed over me. I never missed a meal, nor wanted for clothing or shelter, never fell prey to any serious illness like polio, which was rampant. I didn't have Down syndrome like one kid in my class, nor was I hunchback like little Jenny or afflicted with alopecia like the Schwartz kid. I was healthy, popular, very athletic, always chosen first for teams, a ball player, a runner, and yet somehow I managed to turn out nervous, fearful, an emotional wreck, hanging on by a thread to my composure, misanthropic, claustrophobic, isolated, embittered, impeccably pessimistic. Some people see the glass half empty, some see it half full. I

always saw the coffin half full. Of the thousand natural shocks the flesh was heir to, I managed to avoid most except number six eighty-two—no denial mechanism. My mother said she couldn't figure it out. She always claimed I was a nice, sweet, cheerful boy till around five, and then I changed into a sour, nasty, disgruntled, rotten kid.

And yet there was no trauma in my life, no awful thing that occurred and turned me from a smiling, freckle-faced lad with a fishing pole and pantaloons into a chronically dissatisfied lout. My own speculation centers around the fact that at five or so, I became aware of mortality and figured, uh-oh, this is not what I signed on for. I had never agreed to be finite. If you don't mind, I'd like my money back. As I got older, not just extinction but the meaninglessness of existence became clearer to me. I ran into the same question that bugged the former prince of Denmark: Why suffer the slings and arrows when I can just wet my nose, insert it into the light socket, and never have to deal with anxiety, heartache, or my mother's boiled chicken ever again? Hamlet chose not to because he feared what might happen in an afterlife, but I didn't believe in an afterlife, so given my utterly dismal appraisal of the human condition and its painful absurdity, why go on with it? In the end, I couldn't come up with a logical reason why and finally came to the conclusion that as humans, we are simply hardwired to resist

death. The blood trumps the brain. No logical reason to cling to life, but who cares what the head says—the heart says: Have you seen Lola in a miniskirt? As much as we whine and moan and insist, often quite persuasively, that life is a pointless nightmare of suffering and tears, if a man suddenly entered the room with a knife to kill us, we instantly react. We grab him and fight with every ounce of our energy to disarm him and survive. (Personally, I run.) This, I submit, is a property strictly of our molecules. By now you’ve probably figured out not only I’m no intellectual but also no fun at parties.

Incidentally, it is amazing how often I am described as “an intellectual.” This is a notion as phony as the Loch Ness Monster as I don’t have an intellectual neuron in my head. Illiterate and uninterested in things scholarly, I grew up the prototype of the slug who sits in front of the TV, beer in hand, football game going full blast, *Playboy* centerfold Scotch-taped to the wall, a barbarian sporting the tweeds and elbow patches of the Oxford don. I have no insights, no lofty thoughts, no understanding of most poems that do not begin, “Roses are red, violets are blue.” What I do have, however, is a pair of black-rimmed glasses, and I propose that it is these specs, combined with a flair for appropriating snippets from erudite sources too deep for me to grasp but which can be utilized in my work to give the

deceptive impression of knowing more than I do that keeps this fairy tale afloat.

Okay, so I'm raised in a bubble by many doting women, mom, my aunts, and four loving grandparents. Try and keep track: Dad's dad, once rich, a man who sailed to London merely to go to the horse races, who owned a box at the opera, now impoverished, earning a pittance God knows how. His wife, also an immigrant he married so they could both enter the country. She was fleeing Russian pogroms and he compulsory military service. She was a raisin of an old woman, diabetic, living with her spouse and brood in a cheesy hovel with an upright piano that no one played. But she loved me, slipping me dough on the QT, sugar cubes from the yellow Domino box, asking for nothing in return except occasional visits, and forever generous despite their poverty.

My maternal grandparents also loved me. Mom's mom, fat and deaf, just sitting by the window all day, every day (from her looks, she'd have been more at home on a lily pad). Grandpa, active, virile, always in shul, and here's the way a louse like me repaid his kindness. Me and my friends came into possession of a counterfeit nickel. Pure lead. We were scared to try and pass it at the candy store lest we wind up on Riker's, so I volunteered to slip it past my grandfather who was old and would never catch wise, and he

didn't, and I exchanged it with him for five pennies from his snap-open purse, and it wasn't like in the movies where the old guy chuckles and knows what I'm up to but humors me with a sly twinkle in his eye. Nope. He was conned, and I took him to the cleaners for his five pennies and stuck him with the lead nickel and went off to buy Goobers.

Finally, there was the true rainbow of my childhood, my cousin Rita.

Five years older than me, blond, zaftig, her companionship had perhaps the most significant influence on my life. Rita Wishnick, her father yet another fleeing Russian Jew named Vishnetski, anglicized to Wishnick. She was an attractive girl, a polio victim who had a slight limp, who took a liking to me and took me everywhere—to the movies, the beach, Chinese restaurants, miniature golf, pizza joints—who played cards with me, who played checkers with me, who played Monopoly with me. She introduced me to all her friends, boys and girls who were older than me, and whatever precociousness I had seemed to delight them, so I ran with them and became very sophisticated for a little boy, and my childhood took a big step forward.

I had friends my own age, too, but I spent a lot of time with Rita and the boys and girls of her set. They were bright, middle-class Jewish kids getting educated to teach, to become journalists, professors, doctors, and lawyers.



But let me get back to the movies, Rita's passion. Now remember, I'm five, she's ten. Apart from papering her walls with color photos of every star in Hollywood, she went to the movies regularly, which meant every Saturday at noon to the double feature, usually at the Midwood, and while she went with friends, she always took me. I saw everything Hollywood put out. Every feature, every B picture. I knew who was in the pictures, recognized them, got to know the smaller players, the character actors, recognized the music as I knew all of popular music because Rita and I sat and listened to the radio together endlessly. The *Make Believe Ballroom*, *Your Hit Parade*. In those days, the radio was on from the minute you woke up till you went to sleep. Music, news, and what music.

The pop music of the day was Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey. So here I am inundated with such beautiful music and movies. First, a double feature every week, then as the years pass, I go more and more. Such excitement to enter the Midwood Saturday morning while the house lights were still on and a small crowd bought their candy and filed in as some pop record played to keep the seat takers from mutinying till the lights dimmed. Harry James—"I'll Get By." The sconce shades were red, the fixtures gold brass, the carpets red. At last the lights go

down and the curtains part and the silver screen lights up with a logo that makes the heart salivate, if I may mix my metaphors, with Pavlovian anticipation. I saw them all, every comedy, any cowboy movie, love story, pirate picture, war film. Many decades later when I stood with Dick Cavett on a street where a once-grand theater had been and was now an empty lot, we both stared at the blank real estate plot and remembered how in the middle of that lot we once sat, transported to foreign cities full of intrigue, to deserts surrounded by romantic Bedouins, on ships, in trenches, to palaces and Indian reservations. Soon a condo would be there with Rick's Café long demolished.

As a young boy my favorite films were what I've dubbed champagne comedies. I loved stories that took place in penthouses where the elevator opened into the apartment and corks popped, where suave men who spoke witty dialogue romanced beautiful women who lounged around the house in what someone now might wear to a wedding at Buckingham Palace.

These apartments were big, usually duplexes, with much white space.

Upon entering, one or one's guest almost always headed directly to a small, accessible bar to pour decantered drinks. Everybody drank all the time and nobody vomited. And nobody had cancer and the penthouse didn't leak and when the phone rang in the middle of the night, the people high above Park

or Fifth Avenue didn't have to, like my mother, drag ass out of bed and bang her knees in the dark groping for the one black instrument and hear maybe a relative just dropped dead. No. Hepburn or Tracy or Cary Grant or Myrna Loy would just reach for a phone on their night table inches from where they slept, and the phone was usually white and the news did not revolve around the metastasizing of cells or a coronary thrombosis from years of deadly brisket, but more likely solvable conundrums like "What? What do you mean we're not legally married!?"

Just imagine a scorching summer day in Flatbush. The mercury hits ninety-five and the humidity is suffocating. There was no air-conditioning, that is, unless you went inside a movie house. You eat your morning soft-boiled eggs in a coffee cup in a tiny kitchen on a linoleum-covered floor and a table draped with oilcloth. The radio is playing "Milkman Keep Those Bottles Quiet" or "Tess's Torch Song." Your parents are in yet another stupid "discussion," as my mother called them, which stopped just short of exchanging gunfire. Either she spilled sour cream on his new shirt or he embarrassed her by parking his taxicab in front of the house. God forbid the neighbors should discover she married a cabdriver instead of a Supreme Court justice. My father never tired of telling me that he once picked up Babe Ruth. "Gave me a lousy tip," was all he could remember

about the Sultan of Swat. I thought of it years later when I was a comic working at the Blue Angel and Sonny, the doorman, gave me his character rundown of Billy Rose, the wealthy Broadway sport who loved playing big shot. “A quarter man,” Sonny sneered, having learned to categorize all humans by the square footage of their gratuities. I tease my parents in this account of my life, but each imparted knowledge to me that has served me well over the decades. From my father: When buying a newspaper from a newsstand, never take the top one. From Mom: The label always goes in the back.

So it's a hot summer day and you kill the morning returning deposit bottles to the market to earn two cents per bottle so you can ante up at the Midwood or the Vogue or the Elm, our nearest local three movie houses. Three thousand miles away in Europe, Jews are being shot and gassed for no good reason by ordinary Germans who do it with great relish and have no trouble finding coat holders all over the continent. You sweat your way down Coney Island Avenue, an ugly avenue replete with used car lots, funeral homes, hardware stores, till the exciting marquee comes into view. The sun is now high and brutal. The trolley makes noise, cars are honking, two men are locked in the moronic choreography of road rage and are screaming and starting to swing at each other. The shorter, weaker one is

running to secure his tire iron. You buy your ticket, walk in, and suddenly the harsh heat and sunlight vanished and you are in a cool, dark, alternate reality. OK, so they're only images—but what images! The matron, an elderly lady in white, guides you to your seat with her flashlight. You've spent your last nickel on some blissful confection fancifully christened Jujubes or Chuckles. And now you look up at the screen and to the music of Cole Porter or Irving Berlin's unspeakably beautiful melodies, there appears the Manhattan skyline. I'm in good hands. I'm not going to see a story about guys in overalls on a farm who rise early to milk cows and whose goal in life is to win a ribbon at the state fair or train their horse to transcend a series of equine tribulations and place first in the local harness race. And mercifully, no dog will save anyone and no character with a twang will hook his finger into a jug's ear to suck out the contents, and no string will be attached to any boy's toe as he dozes at the old fishing hole.

To this day, if the opening shot of a movie is a close-up of a flag being thrown and the flag is on the meter of a yellow cab, I stay. If it's on a mailbox, I'm out of there. No, my characters will awaken and the curtains to their bedroom will part, revealing New York City with its tall buildings and every bit of its thrilling possibilities out there, and my cast will either dine in bed with a bed tray complete with a holder for the morning paper—

or at a table with linen and silver and this guy's egg will come to the table in an egg cup so he just has to tap the shell to get to the yolk and there will be no news of extermination camps, only maybe a front page showing some beautiful babe with another guy that sets Fred Astaire off since he loves her. Or, if it's breakfast for a married couple, they actually care about each other after years of being together and she doesn't dwell on his failures, and he doesn't call her a douchebag. And when the movie ends, the second feature is a detective thriller where some hard-boiled private eye solves all life's problems with a sock in the jaw and goes off with a stacked tomato the likes of which did not exist in any of my classes or any of the weddings, funerals, or bar mitzvahs I attended. And by the way, I never attended a funeral: I was always spared reality. The first and only dead body I ever saw was that of Thelonious Monk, when I stopped off en route for dinner at Elaine's to view him out of respect as he lay in state in a funeral home on Third Avenue. I took Mia Farrow with me; it was very early in our dating, and she was polite but dismayed and should have known then she was beginning a relationship with the wrong dreamer, but that whole mishigas comes later. So now the double feature is over and I leave the comfortable, dark magic of the movie house and reenter Coney Island Avenue, the sun, the traffic, back to the wretched apartment on Avenue K. Back into the clutches

of my archenemy, reality. In my movie *Sleeper*, as part of one comic sequence, by some kind of mind-bending process I imagine I'm Blanche Du Bois from *Streetcar Named Desire*. I speak in a feminine, southern accent trying to make the sequence funny while Diane Keaton does a perfect Brando. Keaton's the type who complains, "Oh I can't do this, I can't imitate Marlon Brando." Like the girls in class who tell you how lousy they did on the test and the results come back and they're straight As. Naturally, her Brando is better than my Blanche, but my point is, in real life I am Blanche. Blanche says, "I don't want reality, I want magic." And I have always despised reality and lusted after magic. I tried to be a magician, but found I could only manipulate cards and coins and not the universe.

And so, because of cousin Rita, I was introduced to movies, movie stars, Hollywood with its patriotic morality and miraculous endings; and while I brushed off everything everyone tried to teach me, from my parents to my Spanish teachers when I'd already had the two years of Spanish, Hollywood took. *Modern Screen*. *Photoplay*. Bogart, Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Rita Hayworth—their celluloid world was what I learned. The larger-than-life, the superficial, the falsely glamorous, but I do not regret a frame of it.

When asked which character in my films is most like me on the screen, you only have to look at Cecilia in *Purple Rose of Cairo*.

So where was I? Oh, I was born. I was definitely born, and I put it that way because there were three close calls for me not having a life. The first was when my father was one of only three swimmers who made the long swim to shore when his boat sank. The second also involved him, but not so heroically. He was at a family party of some sort with my mother, his fiancée. It was all my mother's side of the family. They were a bunch of decent, noisy Jews with their makeshift lifestyles. Example of their style: we had a relative named Phil Wasserman, whom I will return to soon, as he was a major contributor to my career in later years. But there was also another relative named Phil Wasserman, equally as important a member of the family and he was always referred to as "the other Phil Wasserman." So in conversations about either Phil Wasserman, one always had to specify and one did by saying, "I was walking in Manhattan and I ran into the other Phil Wasserman." Or "I have to buy a gift for the other Phil Wasserman." As a child I wondered if when he phoned he opened with, "Hi, it's the other Phil Wasserman." Or did his wife say, "This is my husband, the other Phil Wasserman"? Or, on his tombstone, does it say, "Here lies the other Phil Wasserman"? Jerry-built as the system was, it worked.

Anyhow, here's this party and one cousin shows off her new diamond ring. Many ooohs and ahhs over its size and beauty, although I'm sure it



didn't approximate the Hope Diamond. Meanwhile, an hour later it's missing and panic ensues. No one can find the precious jewel. I don't know how the mystery got solved, but it was discovered my father had stolen it. Well, you can imagine the stunned disbelief. Eyes widened, hands were clapped to heads in the manner of the Yiddish theater, there was a collective "Oy vey" as glasses of sweet wine were put down and chicken legs were abandoned in mid-mastication. Naturally, my mother keeled over and that night the wedding was called off. My birth is now in peril yet again. It was only the charm and smooth talking of my father's father having a sit-down with my mother's father that eventually ameliorated this crisis. My father's father made the promise that his dopey gonif son would never do such a thing again and that he would also get out of the rackets, stop booking bets for the mob, and go straight. With that, he somehow helped my father buy a failing grocery store on Flatbush Avenue, and with some careful planning and hard work, my father managed to double its losses in record time. By now, you realize Dad had no flair for supporting a family, a topic of much stimulating conversation over the years, causing my father many times to angrily pack all his clothes in a valise before unpacking the valise and going back to bed.

My third brush with nonexistence came shortly after birth. At least I was

up and running. My mother, who I told you was always forced to work to supplement my father's many unprofitable enterprises, had to leave me with maids. These were unknown young women, often different from day to day depending on who the agency would send over. My mother would instruct them where the cod liver oil was, that I only drank chocolate milk, and that no matter how cute I looked, not to trust the little momza. I was in a high chair, usually upset when she left although to this day, I don't know why because she was such a pill, not a fun mother like Billie Burke or Spring Byington. Anyhow, being alone with a stranger every day could prove fatal, and one maid closed me up inside a blanket explaining how simple it would be for her to smother me and then she would put the blanket with me dead in it, in the trash can. Things got pretty warm and airless, bundled up in that blanket. Luckily for me the maid belonged to the variety of crazies who do not act out, rather than the kind who wind up on Page Six in an orange jumpsuit having skipped their clozapine.

As I say, I was lucky, and this good luck has followed me all the days of my life, so far. Its potency cannot be overestimated. People will point to my career and say it can't be all luck, but they don't realize how much of it has been the roll of the dice and nothing more.

So while my entrance into the world was threatened and my early

existence precarious, I made it alive to Fourteenth Street right off Avenue J in Brooklyn. And while I don't have many memories of those early years except for drinking a glass of milk directly squeezed from a cow's udder (which was supposed to thrill me, but I found it warm and disgusting), and breaking away from my mother at some Disney film to try and run down the aisle to touch the screen, there are no other dull anecdotes worth mentioning. Oh yes, I seemed to have been a born paranoid. I can recall my first dwelling, an apartment which my parents shared with Uncle Abe and Aunt Ceil, my mother's sister. I remember thinking that all the other people in the world, including my mother and father and aunt and uncle, were aliens from another planet who would at some moment remove their masks, revealing the monster faces they really owned, and hack me to pieces. Why such a terrible fantasy, I don't know. My parents and aunts and uncle, as I said, were good and loving to me.

We first lived in a wonderful neighborhood I came to really appreciate only after it was gone. This was Avenue J, a commercial street, which was no big deal then but now seems to me like a paradise. It had wonderful candy stores, delicatessens with succulent meats, toy stores, a hardware store, delicious Chinese restaurants, a poolroom, a library. There were myriad small stores selling clothing and freshly baked cakes and bread and,

of course, the lady who sold pickles, a fearful creature who just sat like the minotaur next to a big barrel of pickles. She was a lump dressed in many sweaters, the layered look in spades. And for five cents, she would dip her hand into the barrel and find a nickel-sized pickle and give it to you, and after decades of dipping that hand into the brine all day, every day, her hand had become pickled. I wondered as a kid, how many gallons of Jergens lotion it would take to get it back to normal. Then there was the Midwood, the movie house I practically lived in. How nice, in those days, in my dinky little neighborhood, there were countless movie houses within walking distance, all showing double features. The poorer ones showed two films, five cartoons, a weekly serial like Batman, and a funny short if it was Robert Benchley and not Joe McDoakes.

Unfortunately, sometimes a travelogue would pop on, where Mister Fitzgerald would take us to places like Ceylon and Java, the land that time forgot, whether we wanted to go or not. And sometimes you'd get a door prize, perhaps a paper gun that made a loud noise when you snapped it forward, but here's the killer—for all that, the price of admission was twelve cents. That was when I was little. Though not so little I couldn't go to a movie. The price in the classy cinemas was twenty cents, then a quarter, then thirty-five cents. When it hit fifty-five cents, the neighborhood rose up

like the crew of the *Potemkin*. Someone told me a ticket now can be twenty dollars. You know how many deposit bottles I would have had to return to get twenty dollars?

There were movie houses around every corner and not a day passed when there wasn't something worth going to—if you're okay with *Crime Doctor* or *The Whistler*. I loved them all. And one day my life changed when my father took me to Manhattan for what today would be called some quality time, although he was probably going into the city to pay off some bookies. I was about seven years old and till then had only seen Brooklyn. We rode the subway, got off at Times Square, and walked upstairs, emerging at Broadway and Forty-Second Street. I was flabbergasted. Here's the kid's view: a million people, many soldiers and sailors, marines. Endless movie houses all up Broadway and lining both sides of Forty-Second Street. Dance halls. Stylish women, or so I thought. Guys playing instruments for money. The Bond clothing sign, the Camel cigarette sign with the guy blowing the large smoke rings. Desiccated types screaming to a gathered group about the end of the world coming Thursday. (Does this guy know something?) And just how did those paper dolls dance in the air with no strings? On Forty-Second Street was the Laugh Movie, with its distorting mirrors outside (which I must say failed to amuse me even at

seven) and then Hubert's Flea Museum boasting a hermaphrodite, whatever the hell that was. We paused there only so my father could shoot the .22-caliber rifles and put out the candles, and he went for about five bucks on bullets.

My dad never saw a gun he didn't like. He could never resist a shooting gallery, which then had rifles and live ammunition. In later life he got a pistol permit, rationalizing that he needed to pack heat because he carried around jewelry. In those years he hustled jewelry and came home late because he also waited on tables nights. He didn't need a gun and pulled the pistol only twice: once, he marched a troublemaker off a city bus; once, alone in the subway at three a.m. and confronted by four young men, he took it out and fired a shot into the black of the tunnel. They turned on their heels and ran. Not that they attacked him, but he sensed they were going to, although for all he knew they were a barbershop quartet—in which case he was right in scaring them off.

And so we walked up Broadway past one movie house after another and the restaurants; McGinnis's, Roth's, Jack Dempsey's, the Turf, and finally Lindy's. We hit the various penny arcades, ate frankfurters, and drank pina coladas, maybe saw a movie. I was so young I can't recall, except that I experienced instant passion for Manhattan, and over the years I returned

every chance I got. There are no more blissful memories for me than playing hooky, getting on the train at Avenue J in Brooklyn, riding into the city, buying a paper, ducking into the Automat, scarfing up some cherry pie and coffee, and reading Jimmy Cannon. By then, the Paramount would open and I'd catch the movie and the stage show, always loving the comic. I recall going to the Roxy when the Duke Ellington band was there, and when the film ended and the orchestra rose out of the pit playing "Take the A Train," the top of my head blew off. From then on, any movie that was set in New York had me. How many times did I sit enthralled watching some leggy tootsie come home from a nightclub montage in Manhattan, toting an extortionate pelt over her shoulder as she entered a Fifth Avenue lobby, pressed the elevator button and rode up to her apartment, not turning in till dawn was coming up to the slow strains of "Out of Nowhere"? Every time I returned to Brooklyn it was the city across the river that I wanted to live in. I longed for the day I could go into a Manhattan bar and say, "The usual." Years later Mort Sahl had a brilliant idea about starting a class action suit against the movies for ruining all our lives. But I digress. In our story I'm still on Avenue J in Brooklyn, sunsuit toggled by day and finally going from my crib to a single bed. I do recall that little rite of passage. So fearful a kid was I, that from night one in my new bed, I formed

what I called my “sleeping position,” a position on my right side that enabled me to push myself up in a flash and react should a werewolf emerge from the closet. I slept prepared to vault out of bed, but to do what? Good question. Jiu-jitsu was rather popular in those war years, but you had to get the werewolf to shake hands with you before you threw him over your shoulder. Anyhow, I will say with age has come maturity and I can see now how silly it all was and how much wiser it is to simply sleep with a Louisville Slugger at arm’s reach.

Commensurate with the escapist fantasies of a chic Manhattan life—and I say *chic* because while other boys saw movies and came out wanting to be John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, I identified more with Reginald Gardiner, Clifton Webb, and the more effete characters. Oh, and Bob Hope to a fault; I never missed him in the movies or on the radio. I loved the radio. It was another version of bliss, being sick or feigning illness so I could stay home from school. Pretending to be sick was hard. If I had no temperature I had to go to school, and since my mother always sat there after she stuck the thermometer in my mouth, it was almost impossible to find a radiator or light bulb to jack up the mercury without getting coldcocked. But to be home sick: my spot in bed, the radio next to me. The *Breakfast Club*, *Helen Trent*, *Luncheon at Sardi’s*, *Queen for a Day*,