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INTRODUCTION

Coming of Age in Memory

by

Burt Kimmelman

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*... dost thou think that thou wilt always
kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within?*

CHARLES DICKENS

Thomas Gradgrind's instrument of utilitarian training in *Hard Times*, Mr. M'Choakumchild, intends to exterminate the last vestiges of hope his young students secretly nurture. "Facts alone are wanted in life," Gradgrind has decreed. "Plant nothing else and root out everything else." The ethereal memories of Sandy McIntosh recover his younger years in which, too often, he's learned to finesse the implacable forces trying to keep him in a box. In his early adulthood, he'll come to learn how peculiar people, some like him escapees, can be. His memories are subtly painful, raucously hilarious

At 10, he's sent to the New York Military Academy. Donald Trump began his stint there the year before. (The fathers of these boys were Long Island real estate sharks—Donald and Sandy knew one another from the Nassau County beach club their families patronized.) The older boy, once Sandy gets squared away in upstate New York, shows his charge the ropes. The adult Sandy, in recall, warns us of the Donald he'd come to know then: "the most distinctive quality of his personality was his sudden fury." Decades since the six long years McIntosh spent with him in the school, he likens Trump to Zelig (the Woody Allen character): he's a "a nondescript enigma who, apparently out of his desire to be liked, unwittingly takes on the characteristics of strong personalities around him."

Once sprung from NYMA, McIntosh becomes a spiritual itinerant. He'd also find himself putting down stakes in the Hamptons (a very different part of the Island from where he'd been raised). His youthful peregrinations—they comprise most of this book that especially memorializes the 1960s—confirm Auden's admission that "poetry makes nothing happen." Well, that's not true. It's quite the other way around.

In late adolescence, he falls in with some of our now famous writers, poets, painters, and sculptors, who mentored him more with kindness and panache. For all their fascinating quirks, these people are capable of more than artistic brilliance. They're kind. And they're honest about the important stuff, eventually. (Truman Capote did have a hissy fit, though, once he'd spotted the young man's just-released poetry collection thoughtlessly displayed in the Southampton bookshop's window, where it was hindering view of *In Cold Blood*. "Why is there a nothing book blocking mine?" Capote demands to know. Yet he could be affectionate.) Each writer's vanities, in *Escape from the Fat Farm*, are front and center.

Some people in these brief memoirs are fictional. In "A Curious Case: Dr. Irvin D. Yalom Treats Bartleby the Scrivener," Yalom really exists—he's "an American existential psychiatrist who is an emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford University" (according to Wikipedia). McIntosh has constructed a hall of mirrors appropriate to Melville's own propensity for reflectivity. The mirroring serves as a permeable membrane holding everything in place. "I had not wanted to treat Bartleby," Yalom confides in us, "but a fan of these accounts of my therapeutic experiences with patients writes to urge me on. He questions my use of literary techniques to shape the stories I tell in my books [thereby suggesting] I am unfairly inflating the power of my curative insights." Yalom is "disconcerted by" his fan's categorization of him as "a 'non-fictional literary character'" whom the fan merely knows "only on the printed page." The real Bartleby pays him a visit, and he looks "exactly as

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becomes a spiritual itinerant, stakes in the Hamptons where he'd been raised). I'm surprised most of this book doesn't confirm Auden's admission: "Well, that's not true. It's

some of our now famous mentors who mentored him more for his fascinating quirks, these quirks of brilliance. They're kind of stuff, eventually. (Truman Capote he'd spotted the young writer effortlessly displayed in the way he was hindering view of *In* the blocking mine?" Capote's name.) Each writer's vantage point and center.

are fictional. In "A Curious Case by the Scrivener," Yalom describes a fictional psychiatrist who is an "ardent University" (according to a hall of mirrors approach to reflectivity. The mirroring of everything in place. "I'm confident in us, 'but a series of experiences with patients use of literary techniques [hereby suggesting] I am able insights.'" Yalom is "dismissive" as "a 'non-fictional lit-erary' shows 'only on the printed page' and he looks 'exactly as

I'd imagined him," Yalom says, which is "not surprising since I was, in fact, just then imagining him."

This vignette, not really a memoir, obviously partakes of the same design to be found in actually evident memories, which McIntosh can bend to his will. Here's "Death Chair":

Mother died at home in her favorite chair.
Later, we moved her chair to our house,
setting it in the living room, hoping
it would find anonymity among other furniture,
no longer entrapping our morbid attention
when a hapless visitor sat in it by mistake,
squirming under our gaze, as though, perhaps,
he's done something to distress us.

McIntosh has an uncanny feel for when to leave off—his propensity for the well timed, reticent moment suggests something essential that's especially salient in his portraits. His work is transformative while it's as much, or more, imagined as transcriptive. Something of great value has to do with language and, by extension, how a nascent writer emerges over time, whose literary propensity renders the past as necessity.

He grew up in the heyday of the Five Towns just over the Queens border. (Donald was chauffeured to that Nassau County beach club from the city each day.) Especially western Long Island had been transformed after the war—so many GIs suddenly civilians again, changed forever—the GI Bill and other assistance enabling their flight from New York City for what then was something city kids called the country; in any case, it was something resembling a bucolic ideal.

I have memories of visiting cousins on the Island back then—one family having settled in the original Levittown, the first housing tract ever built. Queens and Brooklyn are part of the same land

mass; yet what we think of as Long Island, especially the South Shore, was once farms with ocean all around. Its beaches were magical—but to get there one had to drive. (Robert Moses made sure the highway overpasses were low enough to prevent buses filled with the urban unwashed from enjoying them.)

McIntosh will discover himself amongst the Hamptons' artists and writers (de Kooning, Bolotowsky; Ignatow, Schwerner, Hays; many others—all of them glad to trade the city for the immense ocean and sky of Suffolk County). Aside from the supple textures and rhythms of McIntosh's prose and verse, the aesthetic delight of his writing fosters our contemplation of persons who stalk his memory. A stark contrast to the Five Towns, the Hamptons were part of the Island's singular weirdness that has something to do with its proximity to the city. (Yet, even today, some of Long Island's residents have never ventured into it.)

Several poets took an interest in the young man. David Ignatow's deathbed conversation with him benefits from the elder's loving, sardonic attention (although this may seem odd to anyone just coming to McIntosh for the first time, it's meant to elevate his life in our eyes):

Ignatow was dying, laid out in a rented hospital bed in the writing room of his house in The Springs, East Hampton. He turned to me and said, "I'm here to die."

I didn't know what to say.

I changed the subject. "Remember," I said, "how you paid so much attention to me when I was a kid—more attention than you paid your own children. Why?"

"You had the energy," he said. "You were like an animal in a trap. I enjoyed myself, waiting for you to gnaw off your leg, make your escape."

We rejoined the silence which all day had felt like something cloaked, about to unveil its secret.

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"When we bought this house," Ignatow resumed, "I said to myself: 'Here I am. I've come to join the exiles.'"

He had grown up in Manhattan, on the Lower East Side. At first, out here in the country, the surrounding trees made him uneasy. "The branches," he said. "They're like prison bars."

[. . .]

Finally, when the room darkened, I asked if there was anything I could do for him, any final act between us.

He thought for a bit. "Yes," he answered with his sly smile. "Trade places with me."

McIntosh is very good at trading places. This element in his writing may make it difficult to know what's been fabricated and what's truly remembered. It's a concern of no consequence. The younger McIntosh, from the inside out, was drawn to questions of, beyond verbatim transcription, what makes for art. Robert Bly and Carlos Castaneda were two figures he was especially drawn to years ago. Inherently interested in dreaming, McIntosh consciously has "[u]sed [his] dreams as literal text for poems." It would not be an overstatement to say that his memoirs pay less attention to assiduous fact than to what an occasion, any occasion, *was*, and how it affected everyone involved.

Kenneth Koch, who summered in the Hamptons, provided a useful model of how to play gently with retrieved fact or simply with fiction. "The results," McIntosh writes, "which could come from such a [experiment] will certainly verge on the 'poetic,' and the marvelous, staggering products these techniques often produce can be labeled confidently as *real* poetry. The raw material—the wishes, lies, and dreams—are, in the end, the stuff of poetry itself."

What might this say for the real yet ghostly people in his past—now, decades later, who have lodged in his memory? And what might this question have to do with reconciling the lurid, yet palpable, other-worldly childhood McIntosh attests? To be sure,

how does one find the normal after his child's experience of a military regimen that incorporated hazing? What happens when play becomes formalized?

He'd have to unlearn the contorted pose of the pornographic. Here he parts ways with Trump, his ersatz big brother. McIntosh, in all seriousness, offers insight into what military-school upbringing was and wasn't (especially in a piece titled "Sex and the Lonely Boys"). "The evidence from several years after Donald Trump's graduation," he concludes, "suggests that Donald had always enjoyed *Playboy* and styled himself as a *Playboy* man: rich, handsome, dashing. Not only did he drive back and forth from his Queens, New York home in an appropriate *Playboy*-type sports car from the Wharton undergraduate school in Pennsylvania, but he dressed the part."

At the heart of McIntosh's self-made genre are his forays into anecdote or disquisition (such as the commentaries on Bly and Castenada, the two figures who were looking for a reality beyond art). McIntosh will err on the side of graceful expression. It's clear that *states of being* is the truly important question—but how to get at it directly? The personality, as a construct in early psychoanalysis, was a natural borrowing from the nineteenth-century novel. (Freud, a powerful writer and devoted reader, often employed fiction in the service of explanation). The self, on the crest of Modernism, sets the individual apart from the masses. The idiosyncratic hero of modernity typifies industrial society's alienation. McIntosh reads *Catch-22* "six times straight through" during his period of what was, in effect, enforced incarceration.

His real-life fictions, in *Escape from the Fat Farm*, are droll, poignant, painfully funny satires. They find their groove in self-parody. In "Teen Angel: A Love Story" McIntosh has fallen in love with the head of a girl, which is one of the specimens in his biology lab (along with the usual "specimen jars with mummified frogs, birds, squirrels, and assorted dead animals"). Her head had been

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bisected from the top of the scalp down to the base of the neck.
From one angle you could see the cross-section of the brain,
the empty nasal passages, the nose, and the mouth. But the
real shock was what you could see when you turned the jar
around.

It was a girl's head, with wisps of blond hair down to her
ear. She had pert nose and pretty lips. Her single eye was
closed as if in gentle sleep.

The instructor never said a word about this relic, not
where it had come from, nor what we were supposed to think
about it.

In my case, I fell in love.

I couldn't stop looking at her. I'd sneak a peek into the cab-
inet between classes when the classroom was empty. At first,
I looked at both sides of her head. The dissected side was, so
brutally ugly, so anonymous, while the other side was soft—a
soft girl, perhaps about my age.

As I studied her, I forced myself to concentrate only on her
human half. I could not keep myself from fantasizing about
her.

Perverse or not, I built her a life history. I imagined she'd
died young from some incurable disease or foolish accident.
There had been a song on the radio some years before: "Teen
Angel", about a girl whose car stalls on a railroad track. Her
boyfriend pulls her out to safety, but she runs back to find his
high school ring, and the train mows her down. The boyfriend
is heartbroken. He wants to know:

Teen angel, can you hear me?

Teen angel, can you see me?

Are you somewhere up above?

And am I still your own true love?

At some point, I decided that her name was Jennifer. She was my girlfriend. We went on dates to movies in the village and learned to dance at a soda fountain with a jukebox.

At this point, my roommate interrupted me. "Oh, come on," he said, disgusted. "You didn't really believe all that made-up stuff, did you?"

"Well, I didn't know other girls," I said. "Maybe I should have talked to the school chaplain or doctor or someone. But," I told him, "things between Jennifer and me were going along just fine!"

Right then, Anthony looked suspicious. Perhaps he was waiting for the punchline. "Go on, he said slowly."

I made a full confession: "I really loved Jennifer," I said. "The trick was to look at her only on the good side of the jar. If you turned the jar around to look at her on the other side. . . .

"Well," I said, "she'd just break your heart."

McIntosh's waggish, fracturus moments adumbrate primal scenes in which one or another "harmless impersonator" steps forth from a menagerie of unreliable narrators. "He feels the danger, dithering with history," McIntosh says of Goethe, "but he has an honest end to achieve." Finally, it's the honesty of this book that gets me; it appears as fiction sometimes, yet it is true.

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