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EDWARD SOREL

zon.com, a Seattle outfit that sells books over the Internet, to contribute the beginning of a story that would be taken forward over the Internet in daily installments, for six weeks, by visitors to the Amazon.com Web site. Each day's winner would get a thousand dollars. I was to provide the ending on the last day. Well, any writer has some aborted beginnings in his files, so I offered them three, of which they took the opening paragraph of a would-be murder mystery entitled 'Murder Makes the Magazine,' featuring a forty-three-year-old editor, Miss Tasso Polk. I wrote it, as I recall, around 1960."

When asked what magazine he had in mind, Updike uneasily admitted, "*The New Yorker* was the only magazine I knew at all from the inside, so you might say there was a tenuous connection. But the novel stalled at thirteen pages, in part because I had a heavy conscience. The magazine in those old days was immensely publicity-averse, and even the most whimsical report from its interior would have seemed a betrayal. Also, I have never had any luck writing a mystery novel, though I devoured them by the dozen as a kid. So I was interested to see what others might make of my beginning."

And what did they make of it? "Well," the silver-haired, sixty-five-year-old author hesitantly declared, "they served up lots of red herrings. And a lot of male characters, so that my spinster heroine finds herself with this suddenly jammed dance card. And there are the mysterious keys and messages, and a murder that has to take place twice, since one installment revived the victim. The strangest twist, I thought, was when Miss Polk gets into a taxi and is driven, in short order, to an estate with a cobble driveway and a grove of boxwoods and elms. Elms! In Manhattan! And of course there were inconsistencies, which occur even with a single writer. But," Updike went on, unstoppably, "I thought they did pretty well, as a crowd. The real narrative artists, I dare say, were the judges out there at Amazon.com, since they were selecting from as many as eighteen thousand eight hundred entries a day. Imagine, eighteen thousand eight hundred plot alternatives a day! People thought I was among the selectors, but it would have driven me mad. When the last entry was in place, I just tried to tie



A SEMI-PRIVATE PERSON

up some of the bundle of loose ends and to reward Tasso Polk for her patience. I came to love her—she was the one who leaped into cyberspace, not me."

And what did his adventure tell him about the state of culture in a hyper-electronic age? "I was struck," he said, "by how literary the episodes were. Euripides, 'Treasure Island,' Shakespeare's sonnets, the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll—these are all alluded to. A lot of the mystery takes place, classically, in a library full of old books—the story kept trying to become an old-fashioned English country-house puzzle. Maybe it shouldn't surprise us that Internet buffs have done some reading, since what is the Internet but a form of reading? Also, cats. There are three cat characters, and the main one, Mauser, keeps sneaking back into the tale. I suppose a computer and a cat are somewhat alike—they both purr, and like to be stroked, and spend a lot of the day motionless. A cat and a computer are both on the quiet side, with secrets they don't necessarily share. As it happened, I was in New York the day my finale came due, and I had to write it on a strange laptop, with a program I didn't know. The screen kept disappearing, or jumping sideways. When I came to print it out, the printer ignored the punctuation. Still, I got it done—a hairbreadth escape from cyberspace."

—JOHN UPDIKE

ON STAGE

It's hard to hate a man who plays the blues and dies young.



IN the what-if world of Presidential political history, the brain tumor that, in 1991, took the life of Lee Atwater, the divertingly diabolical campaign tactician, went on to root itself in the realm of myth. Atwater's premature demise, many Republicans have ruefully speculated, like the proverbial missing nail from the horse's shoe, delivered George Bush to retirement four years earlier than he'd planned. An Atwater resurrection of sorts was effected by the playwright Robert Myers, in the form of "Fixin' to Die," a one-man show first staged in Los Angeles in 1992—but it was, oh well, only a play, so Bush still lost the election. After sporadic productions in the intervening years, "Fixin' to Die" has just opened for a six-week run Off Broadway. Bruce McIntosh portrays Atwater and a few minor characters in a brisk tour through the life and mind of the man who, having convinced a significant portion of the electorate that Michael Dukakis's running mate in 1988 was a rapist named Willie Horton, was rewarded with the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee.

Has verisimilitude been sacrificed along the way? Not at all, according to a narrowly

targeted audience survey conducted the night before previews officially began. George Stephanopoulos, the erstwhile Clinton adviser, worked his way up the aisle to greet Susan Thomases, the former Hillary Clinton aide who memorably fell on her sword during the Whitewater investigation.

"I thought it was perfect," Thomases said of McIntosh's performance. "Almost eerily perfect."

"He's really got Lee's gestures and speech rhythms down," Stephanopoulos agreed. "You know, young Republican operatives still talk like him and move their hands like he did."

At one point in "Fixin' to Die," Atwater says, "Lemme tell you something about my attitude towards lying," then launches into a hilariously bombastic non sequitur that winds up with the declamation "Because if you ever corrupt yourself on lying or stealing, then Katie bar the door!" Reliving 1988, Atwater reveals: "I became the prince of sleaze, the master of gutter politics, the architect of attack ads, a shameless practitioner of negative campaigning, whatever that is!"

Was that the sum of the Atwater legacy? "My hunch is that one of his long-term gifts to politics is that he clarified what was politically incorrect," Stephanopoulos said. "He got away with certain tactics but made it impossible for anyone to get away with those tactics afterward. If you tried to do Willie Horton now, it would backfire."

One other Atwater gift to the culture also bears mentioning: his race-baiting notwithstanding, he recorded a blues album with B. B. King that was nominated for a Grammy Award.

STEPHANOPOULOS: "Lee Atwater was the last cool Republican."

THOMASES: "He loved music and he had a good sense of humor. How could you not like him?"

STEPHANOPOULOS: "Once you got past what he was doing." —MARK SINGER

GLASS CEILING DEPT.

Women can open a lot of doors, except the one to the lobby.



DEMI MOORE can do many things. She can do one-armed push-ups. She can deck a man and survive off the land. But there is one thing she cannot do—at least, not here in

the great City of New York. She cannot be a doorman.

That movie—"Jane of the Beresford"—will never be made. The public may accept a woman's becoming a Navy Seal, but we all know what we see with our own eyes. From East End Avenue to West End Avenue, no one has ever come across a female doorman. Like baby pigeons, female doormen exist only in theory.

Once, not that long ago, there was a female doorperson, Anna Kushetsky by name. She was seventy years old in 1994, when National Public Radio's Margot Adler found her, and she reported that as far as she knew she was *sui generis* (although she didn't put it quite that way). The doormen's union, the Service Employees International, insists that many of its members are women—just don't ask where they work.

So what could explain the paucity of females in the lobbies of Manhattan? Could



it be a presumed lack of upper-cornea strength that keeps women from spotting cabs as they come over the crest of Carnegie Hill in a blur of yellow which, for deep-seated Darwinian reasons, can be mistaken for the still feared saber-toothed tiger?

Oddly, neither the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission nor the city's Human Rights Commission reports any pending litigation about doormen's jobs. And why not? It hardly seems possible that not a single Gloria or Bella (names I use generically) has ever wondered why a woman cannot don a pair of white gloves, dress like a noncom in the Ruritania Army, and push an elevator button. Yet, next month, Steinem and four other women are scheduled to discuss at the 92nd Street Y "Female Genital Mutilation: A Ritual in Question." In my building, at least, this issue has been settled.

Can it be that the same people who avow that women are the equal of men in all things nevertheless prefer to have a male at the door of their own abode?

The Citadel has fallen and Demi is a commando, but in the lobbies of grand New York apartment houses the women's movement is still waiting to be announced. —RICHARD COHEN

THE NOSTALGIC GOURMET

A remembrance of tomatoes past for New York diners.



IF, in the years immediately following Proust's childhood, the French pâtisserie industry had been overhauled for mass production, one consequence might have been that by the time the grownup Proust ate his madeleine its flavor would have been so altered that he would have carried on drinking his tea, remembering nothing. This notion is worth bearing in mind next time (and there will be a next time) you see heirloom tomatoes on a menu. Heirlooms—your waiter draws out the second syllable, a nuance that can be translated as "There is a good reason that this apparently simple salad is extremely expensive"—are grown from non-hybridized seeds that existed before the produce police decided that what really matters is stackability rather than taste. Aficionados claim that they are rich in flavor and texture and have Proustian powers of evocation. Restaurant Daniel's chef de cuisine, Alex Lee, who makes a twenty-tomato salad, says that "a tomato, when it is in its perfect state, brings memories, food memories."

This season (which ends in a few weeks), Le Cirque has heirlooms, as do Gramercy Tavern, La Grenouille, the Four Seasons, and almost every other restaurant you'd like to name. Some are bluish-black or greenish-white, as irregular and intricate in shape as a New York City congressional district. And while heirlooms, at two-fifty a pound, are appearing mainly on upscale menus, John Weintraub, a restaurant supplier, is already seeing the degeneration that seems inevitably to accompany popularity. Some chefs are cutting their supplies with the cheaper stuff, *tranches* of New Jerseys smuggled under a decorative sprinkling of yellow, purple, and green slices. When asked to name names, Weintraub only mutters something about corporate dining rooms and private parties. Forgettability has its uses, too. —REBECCA MEAD