

John Cheever
from The Journals (London House 1991)

1971

THE FIRST DAY OF THE NEW YEAR. NO TOOTHACHE, AND I WAKE FEELING VERY HAPPILY
horror. I trust the year will end this way.

We walk to the F's, where we are shown home movies of the Cairo bazaar and where
much that is said seems to have been said before. My little camera is my memory, etc. Later,
just before dark, I go to see S., a pleasant woman, with an open fire, who gives me whiskey.

A drunken scene, for which I am heartily sorry.

I claim again that the Sunday Times derails me. Shovel snow, walk the dogs over the hill.
Mary's sister calls and when I say she's in Chappaqua she says, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Did
they let her come home for Christmas?" Chappaqua, "I say, 'is the next village.'" "Oh," says
she, "I thought it was a rest home."

♦ ♦ ♦

Drinking with R. and S. and M., I seem to glimpse—no more—the fact that I can be diffi-
cult, ungainly, prone to flare up at trifling misunderstandings. I think of my brother, exam-
ine what I remember of his conduct and misconduct, since the end of his marriage re-
sembled in some ways mine. He drank too much, and so do I, although I will not end up in
a hospital. He seemed morbidly sensitive to any sort of discrimination. I remember his
stamping off the playing field. When I asked him what was wrong he said that P. was cheat-
ing. We were playing touch football, bluff was half the game. Sorehead I trust I don't do this.
He would punish his wife by refusing to speak to her for a week or two. He merely punished
himself, of course. We have the same blood, the same memories, and make, I suppose, the
same mistakes. Who, after all, is that man who puts a dime in the lock of the public toilet
and in this privacy drinks from a flask of vodka? It is I. When? Last month, last year, six years
ago, I seem to have changed more than the airport. The imitation orange drink still geysters
in a sort of glass showcase. The coffee is weak. The cock drawn on the toilet door seems a
size smaller than it did last time. My hair is gray.

Are these the accents of contempt or is this my morbid sensibility? For example, I mix drinks and ask her to join me: "I have to wash the spinach," she says. The voice strikes me as unnatural, unwarm. I do not, of course, check on the truth of this. Once I said, "Let's fuck," and she said, "I have to find the baking potatoes." I'll find the potatoes," I said, and I did, but when I returned to the bedroom she had dressed. Saturday night, I suggested again that she join me. I want someone to talk with, but I also feel that the sound of conversation might relax my son. Hours pass when the only voices one hears are electronic. To this invitation she says, "I have to go to the bathroom." "Well, won't you join me after you've been to the bathroom?" I say. She does, but she holds a book in front of her face. I talk about Lorca, whose poetry she is reading. "I will not be lectured about a book you have not read," says she, leaving the room. I did not intend to lecture her, but perhaps I mistook my tone of voice. Later—and I may now be as my brother was, moved in the stumbling and ungainly way of gin, half deaf, half blind, responding to some blow that was dealt so far in the past it can't be remembered—"I won't listen to your shit." The raised voice will be heard by my son, and my good intentions have come to nothing. I climb another flight of stairs and watch something asinine on TV.

She is, to say the least, laconic this afternoon. At dusk, she takes the dog for a walk, the first in months. She returns at dark. She is excited. "I saw Josephine, I saw Josephine for the first time since Christmas, and I didn't have an apple or some sugar for her." Josephine is a lonely and unriden horse, owned by the superintendent in the next place. Now it is dark and cold, and Josephine's corral is perhaps a mile away. Mary takes an apple and some sugar and goes off into the winter night. Can I, having dived into the pond in October to pick some water lilies, claim that she is eccentric? I am pleased to see that she is moved and excited, but there is an unpleasant trace of skepticism in my thinking. Later, on TV, a polar bear is murdered. "They've shot the mother polar bear!" she cries, and she cries, she sobs. "They've shot the mother polar bear!" And I think that perhaps I should go on TV, that if I approached her through the tube on the shelf above the sink I might win her interest and her affection, but I would have to be disguised as a mother polar bear, or some other wild, innocent, and wronged animal.

I think of my father, but nothing is accomplished. The image of him is an invention, not a memory, and an overly gentle invention. There was his full lower lip, wet with spit; his spit-wet cigarette; his hacking cough; the ash on his vest; and the shabby clothes he wore, left to him by dead friends. "Let's give Fred's suits to poor Mr. Cheever." I find in some old notes that my mother reported that he had, just before his death, written a long indictment of her—as a wife, a mother, a housekeeper, and a woman. I never saw the indictment. I suppose, uncharitably, that the effect on her would have been to fortify her self-righteousness. She had worked so hard to support a helpless old man, and her only reward was castigation. Sigh—how deep were her sighs. I have no idea of what their marriage was like, although I suspect that he worshipped her as my brother worshipped his choice and as perhaps I have worshipped mine. In my brother's case there was, I think, that rich blend of uxoriousness in which praise has a distinct aftertaste of bitterness, not to say loathing. I think that Mary was wounded years before I entered her life, and who is this ghost whose clothes I wear, whose voice I speak with, what were the cruelties of which I am accused? She may look for another lover; I certainly do. Are we, lying in our separate beds and our separate rooms, only two of

millions or billions who wake a little before dawn each morning thinking hopefully that surely there is some man or woman who would be happy to lie at our sides? Happy for cheerful kissing, fucking, jokes, the day to come. I suppose we outnumber the felicitous by millions, and I must say that had I been given a loving and uncomplicated woman I might very well have run.

The terrifying insularity of a married man and woman, standing figuratively toe to toe, throwing verbal blows at each other's eyes and genitals. Their environment is decorous, a part of their culture. The clothes they wear are suitable for this part of the world, this time of year, this income bracket. There are flowers (hothouse) on the table (inherited). Children sleep or lie awake in upstairs bedrooms. They seem as well rooted and native to this environment as the trees on the lawn, but at the height of their quarrel they seem to stand on some crater of the moon, some arid wilderness, some Sahara. Their insularity is incompressible. This is an abandoned place.

I read the three stories and don't much like them. Phony modesty, perhaps. I've never much liked my work. The point is not to count my losses but to exploit what remains. I pick up "Crime and Punishment" and exclaim with pleasure over the opening sentence. Halfway down page 3 I close the book and watch TV. So the great books drop from our hands. Skating, I swing my arms, swing back happily into my youth, my childhood. The black ice on Brainiere Dam, through which you could see the grasses. The instant the sun went down, the ice made a sound like cannon. And I think of the green valley of the Nory and the hum of wild bees in the hall of the ruined castle. The sound was so loud you could hear it from the banks of the stream. I was thankful that I had heard nothing so romantic earlier in life. Mary swam in the stream, and the water seemed to magnify the size of her backside. My knees buckled.

Palm Sunday. Federico and I go to church. During the years that I've said my prayers here the priest's hair has turned white and his eyeglass prescription has been strengthened. I. L. smells of hair oil and toothpaste; a clash of scents. S seems not beautiful, not at all, but she seems this morning to remind one powerfully of how beautiful she must have been thirty years ago. I remember, years ago, that she cried during the service. Why? The priest, a pleasant fellow, embraces me. I put the palm frond behind the clock, and my house seems truly blessed. I think of the swan, the gorilla, and other monogamous species. It does seem possible on this splendid afternoon that a man and a woman can love each other passionately until death do them part. A lovely hour in bed. Thank God, thank God, thank God, is what I say on waking. Thank God.

That voice in the dark that gives me so much advice says, "You will not be as great as Picasso, because you are an alcoholic."

I have a homosexual dream, which deals much with the spirit. I do not know in whose arms I lie; I know only that he will take care of me. He will pay the bills, the taxes, balance

midnight train. The Kremlin in the morning. The disinfected atmosphere of most offices, except for the shoeshine machine. Our guide seems thrown into life with a more desirable velocity than I enjoy. He is definitely very engaging, definitely engaged. There is a cast in his right eye that makes him seem irresistible. I think that I may faint. The table seems to swim.

The Winter Palace at six. A dark night on the Neva. Snow. Will I have vertigo on the grand staircase as I once did in Washington? I want a drink, a cigarette, a friend, a more intimate source of light and heat. I think of myself sitting on the B's sofa with a second or third drink, chatting merrily with Mrs. X in French. Now I experience a terrifying sense of nothingness. Would such a life be tolerable? Would I not cut my throat? Is this what my friends in the prison experience? So we drive back through the snow to the hotel, where I drink half a glass of vodka and dress for the opera.

Why is it so difficult for me to bring into focus the image of a young man with thick eyelashes on the plane from Tolissi? Is this a temperamental infirmity, a national trait, a sort of neurosis? Why, watching some killed pipers crossing a bridge in Ireland, did I feel that my life was passing by? What is this unhappy mystery?

The flight back from Moscow is painful. A gray day. If I feel well enough tomorrow I must do the eight stories.



In town with D. His 65th birthday. The face is strong, his gray hair is long. We do not mention his remarkable wife, who choked to death during lunch a month ago. His mistress has called him in Australia and asked him to marry her, and I suppose he will. The barber shop at the Biltmore has been cut in half, and there are only three barbers on the job. Do people get their hair cut elsewhere or don't they get it cut at all? One used to have to wait, reading copies of *The Zinder*. What is the significance of a dying barber shop? The barbers are all old friends, and we talk in Italian. I spend a dollar in tips for being whisk-broomed and drink a Martini at the bar, where there is a new, and more attractive, painting of a nude. The face seems unusually sensitive. But as I walk up Madison Avenue the city escapes me. What has happened to this place where I used to happily to pound the sidewalk? Where has my city gone, where shall I look for it? In the Playboy Club, the Century Club, the Princeton Club, or the Links? In the steam room at the Biltmore, in L's panelled apartment, in the skating rink, in the Park, in the Plaza, on the walks where someone behind me makes tonguing noises with his or her mouth? I don't look. I know the city well, why does it not know me? A pair of well-filled boots, pretty legs, a tossed head. A restaurant where all the lights are pink, and so my hands are pink, and pink is the face of my friend. Everybody is pink. Fifteen or twenty men stand at the urinal in Grand Central. Their looks are solicitous, alert, sometimes wistful. They use the polished marble as a glass for pickups, and most of them are fondling or pulling their various-sized and -colored cocks. Why does the sight of fifteen or twenty men jerking off seem more significant than the string music in the Palm Court? One young and attractive man, the point of contact concealed by a raincoat, is making an accelerated jerking, as if he was approaching juice time. These are the darkest days of the year, and when the 3:40 pulls out of the tunnel into the Bronx it is nearly dark, although very few lights burn in the new housing developments. Perhaps everyone is still at work. By the time we reach the river, it is dark, and the only water traffic is barges and tugs. When I was younger I would wonder about the tug crews, wonder about what they would have for supper. I no longer much care. In the early dark the barges seem like mangrove islands—shoal water—you could wreck your boat. Three men behind me are talking loudly about the col-

lapse of the government, the railroad, the U.N. Is this really the end of a world, as they seem to think it is? The men beside me seem so goled and enlacinated by time that I look away. One has no gray in his hair, so I suppose he is rather young. His face is finely lined, rather like a woman's. He opens his briefcase busily, but it contains nothing but a printed brochure. Will such a weary face be welcomed anywhere? The face seems incapable of any sensual provocation or response. But when it is time for him to leave he jauntily slaps on a seakskin hat with a bright feather cockade and braces his shoulders in his raincoat. He's ready for the next round. I wanna go home, I wanna go home. I've lunched and had my hair cut, and now I am exhausted and I wanna go home.



My daughter says that our dinner table is like a shark tank. I go into a spin. I am not a shark; I am a dolphin. Mary is the shark. Etc. But what we stumble into is the banality of family situations. As for Susie, she makes the error of daring not to have been invented by me, of laughing at the wrong times and of speaking lines I have not written. Does this prove I am incapable of love, or can love only myself?



I read "Bullet Park," which is an extract of my most intimate feelings, and wonder why it should have antagonized Broyard. Is there some discernible falling off, some trace of my struggle with alcohol and age? It is a struggle, but I have come through before, and pray that I will bring it off again.



In the middle of Sunday afternoon I think that perhaps my dishevelled and unpunctual muse will return. I seem to stand above the characters at hand as if they were pawns on a chessboard. Chess, however, is a game I never learned to play. My mind approaches some unsavory matters, and I put Serkin on the record player and seem to enter into some community of accomplished men, who are passionately concerned with their deepest intuitions about love and death. The music, especially the Schubert, sounds like a powerful narrative. I see the stream, the Roman bridge, the leaves on the trees, the hazen-haired woman leaning from her casement window. The dialogues are much more forceful and moving than any dialogue in any of the books on my table. I would like the story to be called "Glad Tidings," but I'm not sure where I go from there.



It seems today that all I can write is letters. I am too shaken to take the car to the garage. I think of P. inviting me drunkenly to take a nap in his room. What was intended, and are these fleeting hints at erotic tenderness between men natural? What men have I desired? A stranger in a shower in Guam twenty-five years ago, who seemed so comely and so natural that I felt disenfranchised. What did I desire? Is this some force of self-love?

JEAN GENET : A THIEF'S

JOURNAL

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia

Journal du voleur published in France 1949
This translation first published in Great Britain by
Anthony Blond 1965
Published in Penguin Books 1967
Reprinted 1971
Copyright © Jean Genet, 1949, 1965
Translation copyright © Anthony Blond Ltd, 1965

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks
Set in Monotype Baskerville

This book is sold subject to the condition that
it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser

The convict's outfit is pink-and-white striped. Though it was at my heart's bidding that I chose the universe wherein I delight, I have at least the power of finding in it the many meanings I wish to find: *there is a close relationship between flowers and convicts*. The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter.* Should I have to portray a convict – or a criminal – I shall so bedeck him with flowers that, as he disappears beneath them, he will himself become a flower, a gigantic and new one. Toward what is known as evil, I lovingly pursued an adventure which led me to prison. Though they may not always be handsome, men doomed to evil possess the manly virtues. Of their own volition, or owing to an accident which has been chosen for them, they plunge lucidly and without complaint into a reproachful, ignominious element, like that into which love, if it is profound, hurls human beings. Erotic play discloses a nameless world which is revealed by the nocturnal language of lovers. Such language is not written down. It is whispered into the ear at night in a hoarse voice. At dawn it is forgotten. Repudiating the virtues of your world, criminals hopelessly agree to organize a forbidden universe. They agree to live in it. The air there is nauseating: they can breathe it. But – criminals are remote from you – as in love, they turn away and turn me away from the world and its laws. Theirs smells of sweat, sperm and blood. In short, to my body and my thirsty soul it offers devotion. It was because the world contains these erotic conditions that I was bent on evil. My adventure, never governed by rebellion or a feeling of injustice, will be merely one long mating, burdened and complicated by a

* My excitement is the oscillation from one to the other.

heavy and strange erotic ceremonial (figurative ceremonies leading to jail and anticipating it). Though it be the sanction, in my eyes the justification too, of the foulest crime, it will be the sign of the most utter degradation. That ultimate point to which the censure of men leads was to appear to me the ideal place for the purest, that is, the most turbid anatomy harmony, where illustrious ash-weddings are celebrated. Desiring to hymn them, I use what is offered me by the form of the most exquisite natural sensibility, which is already aroused by the garb of convicts. The material evokes, and not only by its colours and roughness, certain flowers whose petals are slightly fuzzy, which detail is sufficient for me to associate the idea of strength and shame with what is most naturally precious and fragile. This association, which tells me things about myself, would not suggest itself to another mind; mine cannot avoid it. Thus, I offered my tenderness to the convicts; I wanted to call them by charming names, to designate their crimes with, for modesty's sake, the subtlest metaphor (beneath which veil I would not have been unaware of the murderer's rich muscularity, of the violence of his sexual organ). Is it not by the following image that I prefer to imagine them in Guiana: the strongest, with a horn, the 'hardest', veiled by mosquito netting? And each flower within me leaves behind so solemn a sadness that all of them must signify sorrow, death. Thus, I sought love as it pertained to the penal colony. Each of my passions led me to hope for it, gave me a glimpse of it, offers me criminals, offers me to them or impels me to crime. As I write this book, the last convicts are returning to France. The newspapers have been reporting the matter. The heir of kings feels a like emptiness if the republic deprives him of his anointment. The end of the penal colony prevents us from attaining with our living minds the mythical underground regions. Our most dramatic movement has been clipped away: our exodus, the embarkation, the procession on the sea, which was performed with bowed head. The return, this same procession in reverse, is without meaning. Within me, the destruction of the colony corresponds to a kind of punishment of punishment: I am castrated, I am shorn of my infamy. Un-

concerned about beheading our dreams of their glories, they awaken us prematurely. The home prisons have their power: it is not the same. It is minor. It has none of that elegant and slightly bowed grace. The atmosphere there is so heavy that you have to drag yourself about. You creep along. The home prisons are more stiffly erect, more darkly and severely; the slow and solemn agony of the penal colony was a more perfect blossoming of abjection. So that now the home jails, bloated with evil males, are black with them, as with blood that has been shot through with carbonic gas. (I have written 'black'. The outfit of the convicts – captives, captivity, even prisoners, words too noble to name us – forces the world upon me: the outfit is made of brown homespun.) It is toward them that my desire will turn. I am aware that there is often a semblance of the burlesque in the colony or in prison. On the bulky and resonant base of their wooden shoes, the frame of the condemned men is always somewhat shaky. In front of a wheel-barrow, it suddenly breaks up rather stupidly. In the presence of a guard they lower their heads and hold in their hands the big straw sun-bonnet – which the younger ones decorate (I should prefer it so) with a stolen rose granted by the guard – or a brown homespun beret. They strike poses of wretched humility. If they are beaten, something within them must nevertheless stiffen: the coward, the sneak, cowardice, sneakiness are – when kept in a state of the hardest, purest cowardice and sneakiness – hardened by a 'dousing', as soft iron is hardened by dousing. They persist in servility, despite everything. Though I do not neglect the deformed and misshapen, it is the handsomest criminals whom my tenderness adorns.

Crime, I said to myself, had a long wait before producing such perfect successes as Piltorge and Angel Sun. In order to finish them off (the term is a cruel one!) it was necessary that a host of coincidences concur: to the handsomeness of their faces, to the strength and elegance of their bodies there had to be added their taste for crime, the circumstances which make the criminal, the moral vigour capable of accepting such a destiny, and, finally, punishment, its cruelty, the intrinsic quality which enables a criminal to glory in it, and,

with adventures. Every part of his body, which is nocturnal, has been involved: his hands, his arms, his legs, the back of his neck. But he, unaware of these marvels, tells me about them in forthright language. He takes from his pockets rings, wedding bands, watches, the evening's loot. He puts them in a big glass which will soon be full. He is not surprised by queers or their ways, which merely facilitate his jobs. When he sits on my bed, my ear snatches at scraps of adventure: An officer in underwear whose wallet* he steals and who, pointing with his forefinger, orders: 'Get out!' René-the-wise-guy's answer: 'You think you're in the army?' Too hard a punch on an old man's skull. The one who fainted when René, who was all excited, opened a drawer in which there was a supply of phials of morphine. The queer who was broke and whom he made get down on his knees before him. I am attentive to these accounts. My Antwerp life grows stronger, carrying on in a firmer body, in accordance with manly methods. I encourage René, I give him advice, he listens to me. I tell him never to talk first. 'Let the guy come up to you, keep him dangling. Act a little surprised when he suggests that you do it. Figure out who to act dumb with.'

Every night I get a few scraps of information. My imagination does not get lost in them. My excitement seems to be due to my assuming within me the role of both victim and criminal. Indeed, as a matter of fact, I emit, I project at night the victim and criminal born of me; I bring them together somewhere, and toward morning I am thrilled to learn that the victim came very close to getting the death penalty and the criminal to being sent to the colony or guillotined. Thus, my excitement extends as far as that region of myself, which is Guiana.

Without their wishing it, the gestures and destinies of these men are stormy. Their soul endures a violence which it had not desired and which it has domesticated. Those whose usual climate is violence are simple in relation to themselves. Each of the movements which make up this swift and devastating life is simple and straight, as clean as the stroke of a great draughtsman – but when these strokes are

* He says: 'I did his wallet.'

encountered in movement, then the storm breaks, the lightning that kills them or me. Yet, what is their violence compared to mine, which was to accept theirs, to make it mine, to wish it for myself, to intercept it, to utilize it, to force it upon myself, to know it, to premeditate it, to discern and assume its perils? But what was mine, willed and necessary for my defence, my toughness, my rigour, compared to the violence they underwent like a malediction, risen from an inner fire simultaneously with an outer light which sets them ablaze and illuminates us? We know that their adventures are childish. They themselves are fools. They are ready to kill or be killed over a card-game in which an opponent – or they themselves – was cheating. Yet, thanks to such fellows, tragedies are possible. This kind of definition – by so many opposing examples – of violence shows you that I shall not make use of words the better to depict an event or its hero, but so that they may tell you something about myself. In order to understand me, the reader's complicity will be necessary. Nevertheless, I shall warn him whenever my lyricism makes me lose my footing.

Stilitano was big and strong. His gait was both supple and heavy, brisk and slow, sinuous; he was nimble. A large part of his power over me – and over the whores of the Barrio Chino – lay in the spittle he passed from one cheek to the other and which he would sometimes draw out in front of his mouth like a veil. 'But where does he get that spit, I would ask myself, 'where does he bring it up from? Mine will never have the unctuousness or colour of his. It will merely be spun glassware, transparent and fragile.' It was therefore natural for me to imagine what his penis would be if he smeared it for my benefit with so fine a substance, with that precious cobweb, a tissue which I secretly called the veil of the palace. He wore an old grey cap with a broken peak. When he tossed it on the floor of our room, it suddenly became the carcass of a poor partridge with a clipped wing, but when he put it on, pulling it down a bit over the ear, the opposite edge of the peak rose up to reveal the most glorious of blond locks. Shall I speak of his lovely bright eyes, modestly lowered – yet it could be said of Stilitano: 'His bearing is

immodest' - over which there closed eyelids and lashes so blond, so luminous and thick, that they brought in not the shade of evening but the shade of evil? After all, what meaning would there be in the sight that staggers me when, in a harbour, I see a sail, little by little, by fits and starts, spreading out and with difficulty rising on the mast of a ship, hesitantly at first, then resolutely, if these movements were not the very symbol of the movements of my love for Stilitano? I met him in Barcelona. He was living among beggars, thieves, fairies and whores. He was handsome, but it remains to be seen whether he owed all that beauty to my fallen state. My clothes were dirty and shabby. I was hungry and cold. This was the most miserable period of my life.

1932. Spain at the time was covered with vermin, its beggars. They went from village to village, to Andalusia because it is warm, to Catalonia because it is rich, but the whole country was favourable to us. I was thus a louse, and conscious of being one. In Barcelona we hung around the Calle Mediodia and the Calle Carmen. We sometimes slept six in a bed without sheets, and at dawn we would go begging in the markets. We would leave the Barrio Chino in a group and scatter over the Paralelo, carrying shopping baskets, for the housewives would give us a leek or turnip rather than a coin. At noon we would return, and with the gleanings we would make our soup. It is the life of vermin that I am going to describe. In Barcelona I saw male couples in which the more loving of the two would say to the other: 'I'll take the basket this morning.'

He would take it and leave. One day Salvador gently pulled the basket from my hands and said, 'I'm going to beg for you.'

It was snowing. He went out into the freezing street, wearing a torn and tattered jacket - the pockets were ripped and hung down - and a shirt stiff with dirt. His face was poor and unhappy, shifty, pale, and filthy, for we dared not wash since it was so cold. Around noon, he returned with the vegetables and a bit of fat. Here I draw attention to one of those lacerations - horrible, for I shall provoke them despite the

danger - by which beauty was revealed to me. An immense - and brotherly - love swelled my body and bore me towards Salvador. Leaving the hotel shortly after him, I would see him a way off beseeching the women. I knew the formula, as I had already begged for others and myself: it mixes Christian religion with charity; it merges the poor person with God; it is so humble an emanation from the heart that I think it scents with violet the straight and light breath of the beggar who utters it. All over Spain at the time they were saying: 'Por Dios.'

Without hearing him, I would imagine Salvador murmuring it at all the stalls, to all the housewives. I would keep an eye on him as the pimp keeps an eye on his whore, but with such tenderness in my heart! Thus, Spain and my life as a beggar familiarized me with the statelessness of abjection, for it took a great deal of pride (that is, of love) to embellish those filthy and despised creatures. It took a great deal of talent, which came to me little by little. Though I may be unable to describe its mechanism to you, at least I can say that I slowly forced myself to consider that wretched life as a deliberate necessity. Never did I try to make of it something other than what it was, I did not try to adorn it, to mask it, but, on the contrary, I wanted to affirm it in its exact sordidness, and the most sordid signs became for me signs of grandeur.

I was dismayed when, one evening, while searching me after a raid - I am speaking of a scene which preceded the one with which this book begins - the astonished detective took from my pocket, among other things, a tube of vaseline. We dared joke about it since it contained mentholated vaseline. The whole record-office, and I too, though painfully, writhed with laughter at the following:

'You take it in the nose?'

'Watch out you don't catch cold. You'd give your guy whooping-cough.'

I translate but lamely, in the language of a Paris hustler, the malicious irony of the vivid and venomous Spanish phrases. It concerns a tube of vaseline, one of whose ends was partially rolled up. Which amounts to saying that it had

VIRGINIA WOOLF DIARIES

1941

Miss Gardner instead of Elizabeth Bowen. Small beer. But space, silence; and time.

Wednesday 15 January

Parsimony may be the end of this book. Also shame at my own verbosity, which comes over me when I see the twenty is it – books shuffled together in my room. Who am I ashamed of? Myself reading them.

Then Joyce is dead – Joyce about a fortnight younger than I am. I remember Miss Weaver, in wool gloves, bringing *Ulysses* in typescript to our tea table at Hogarth House. Roger I think sent her. Would we devote our lives to printing it? The indecent pages looked so incongruous: she was spinstery, buttoned up. And the pages reeled with indecency. I put it in the drawer of the inlaid cabinet. One day Katherine Mansfield came, and I had it out. She began to read, ridiculing: then suddenly said, But there's something in this: a scene that should figure I suppose in the history of literature. He was about the place, but I never saw him. I bought the blue paper book, and read it here one summer I think with spasms of wonder, of discovery, and then again with long lapses of intense boredom. This goes back to a pre-historic world. And now all the genies are furbishing up opinions, and the books, I suppose, take their place in the long procession. We were in London on Monday. I went to London Bridge. I looked at the river; very misty; some tufts of smoke, perhaps from burning houses. There was another fire on Saturday. Then I saw a cliff of wall, eaten out, at one corner; a great corner all smashed; a Bank; the Monument erect; tried to get a Bus; but such a block I dismounted. A complete jam of traffic; for streets were being blown up. So by tube to the Temple; and there wandered in the desolate ruins of my old squares: gashed; dismantled; the old red bricks all white powder. Grey dirt and broken windows; sightseers; all that completeness ravished and demolished.

Monday 20 January

I will be curt, compressed. A mood like another. Back from a damp, perhaps rather strained, visit to Charleston. Nessa and Quentin; Adrian has almost died of pneumonia. Visit from Oliver Strachey. All stocky gloom. Civilisation over for 500 years. I say to Nessa, Do you find painting gets slower? Yes. And money? Never think of it. And Helen? She does nothing. How can one do nothing? All the same Monks House is somehow cheerful. I am reading – oh all lit. for my book.

Sunday 26 January

A battle against depression, routed today (I hope) by clearing out kitchen; and by breaking into *Pointz Hall* two days, I think, of memoir writing. This

1941

MONKS HOUSE, RODMELL

Wednesday 1 January

On Sunday night, as I was reading about the Great Fire in a very accurate detailed book, London was burning. Eight of my city churches destroyed, and the Guildhall. This belongs to last year. This first day of the new year has a slice of a wind – like a circular saw. Leslie H[umphrey]. came to lunch; said um-um so often I nearly goggled; he was discussing the foundations of communism, having come chiefly to pick L.'s brain. Then old Octavia [Wilberforce] came, with her market woman's basket. Great white bottles of milk and cream. L. looking at the comet. Rather a strong moon, and so can't identify the constellation. And now its close on cooking time. A psychologist would see that the above was written with someone, and a dog, in the room. To add in private: I think I will be less verbose here perhaps – but what does it matter, writing too many pages. No printer to consider, no public.

Thursday 9 January

A blank. All frost. Still frost. Burning white. Burning blue. The elms red. I did not mean to describe, once more, the downs in snow; but it came. And I can't help even now turning to look at Ashham down, red, purple, dove blue grey, with the cross so melodramatically against it. What is the phrase I always remember – or forget. Look your last on all things lovely.

Yesterday Mrs Dedman was buried upside down. A mishap. Such a heavy woman, as Louie put it, feasting spontaneously upon the grave. And today she buries the aunt whose husband saw the vision at Seaford. Their house was bombed by the bomb we heard early one morning last week. And L. is lecturing and arranging the room. Are these the things that are interesting? that recall; that say Stop you are so fair? Well, all life is so fair, at my age. I mean, without much more of it I suppose to follow. And t'other side of the hill there'll be no rosy blue red snow. I am copying *Pointz Hall*. I am economising. I am to spend nothing. Is it difficult now to string tight? The great change isn't that but the change to the country.

trough of despair shall not, I swear, engulf me. The solitude is great. Rodmell life is very small beer. The house is damp. The house is untidy. But there is no alternative. What I need is the old spurt. "Your true life, like mine, is in ideas." Desmond said to me once. But one must remember one can't pump ideas. I begin to dislike introspection.

We are going to Cambridge for two days. There's a lull in the war. Six nights without raids. But Garvin says [in *The Observer*] the greatest struggle is about to come – say in three weeks – and every man, woman dog cat even weevil must girt their arms, their faith – and so on. Yes, I was thinking; we live without a future. That's what's queer, with our noses pressed to a closed door.

Friday 7 February

Why was I depressed? I cannot remember. A week of broken water impends. Cambridge; then Elizabeth Bowen; then Vita and Enid [Bagnold]. The snow came back. Marshes in the thaw a swamp. We were in London, and had to come home, owing to a bomb, by Dorking. London streets are very empty – Oxford Street a wide grey ribbon. At Charleston Clive was stockish, like a Bell. I said "What a risk Nessa ran in marrying him!" The third week in March is fixed for invasion. Now black out.

Sunday 16 February

In the wild grey water after last week's turmoil. I liked the dinner with Dadie best. All very lit up and confidential. Then Letchworth – the slaves chained to their typewriters, and their drawn set faces and the machines – the incessant more and more competent machines, folding, pressing, glueing and issuing perfect books. They can stamp cloth to imitate leather. Our Press is up in a glass case. Very long train journeys. Food skimpy. No butter. No jam. Elizabeth Bowen arrived two hours after we got back, and went yesterday; and tomorrow Vita.

Wednesday 26 February

Finished *Pointz Hall, The Pageant: The Play* – finally *Between the Acts* this morning.

Yesterday in the ladies lavatory at the Sussex Grill at Brighton I heard: She's a little simpering thing. I don't like her. But then he never did care for big women. He has wonderful white teeth. He always had. Its fun having the boys . . . If he don't look out he'll be court married. They were powdering and painting, these common little tarts, while I sat, behind a thin door, p—ing as quietly as I could. Then at Fuller's. A fat, smart woman, in red hunting cap, pearls, check skirt, consuming rich cakes. Her shabby dependant also stuffing. They ate and ate. Something scented,

shoddy, parasitic about them. Where does the money come to feed these fat white slugs? Brighton a love corner for slugs. The powdered, the pampered, the mildly improper. We cycled. Irritated as usual by the blasphemy of Peacehaven. No walks for ever so long. People daily. And rather a churn in my mind. And some blank spaces. Food becomes an obsession. I grudge giving away a spice bun. Curious – age, or the war? Never mind. Adventure. Make solid. But shall I ever write again one of those sentences that gives me intense pleasure? There is no echo in Rodmell – only waste air. No life; and so they cling to us. This is my conclusion. We pay the penalty for our rung in society by infernal boredom.

Saturday 8 March

No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James's sentence: Observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope. I insist upon spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying. This I see verges on introspection; but doesn't quite fall in. Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that its seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down.

Oh dear yes, I shall conquer this mood. Its a question of letting things come one after another. Now to cook the haddock.

Monday 24 March

When we came in she was sitting perched on a three cornered chair with knitting in her hands. An arrow fastened her collar. And before five minutes had passed she had told us that two of her sons had been killed in the war. This, one felt, was to her credit. Sitting there I tried to coin a few compliments. But they perished in the icy sea between us. And then there was nothing.

A curious seaside feeling in the air today. It reminds me of lodgings on a parade at Easter. Everyone leaning against the wind, nipped and silenced. All pulp removed.

This windy corner. And Nessa is at Brighton, and I am imagining how it would be if we could infuse souls.

Octavia's story. Could I englobe it somehow? English youth in 1900. L. is doing the rhododendrons . . .

he, 'if this will not do, I will say, as Sir J. Falstaff did to the Prince, "Tell your father that if he do not like this, let him kill the next Percy himself."'

31st. Much pleased today with thoughts of gliding the backs of all my books alike, in all my new presses.

September 1st. My wife and I to Polichinello, but were there horribly frightened to see young Killigrew come in with a great many more young sparks: but we hid ourselves, so as we think they did not see us.

2d. (Lord's day.) Some of our maids sitting up late last night to get things ready against our feast today, Jane called us up about three in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the City. So I rose, and slipped on my night-gown and went to her window, and thought it to be on the back side of Mark Lane at the farthest; but, being unused to such fires as followed, I thought it far enough off, and so went to bed again, and to sleep. About seven rose again to dress myself, and there looked out at the window, and saw the fire not so much as it was, and further off. So to my closet to set things to rights after yesterday's cleaning. By and by Jane comes and tells me that she hears that above 300 houses have been burned down tonight by the fire we saw, and that it is now burning down all Fish Street, by London Bridge. So I made myself ready presently, and walked to the Tower; and there got up upon one of the high places, Sir J. Robinson's little son going up with me; and there I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side the end of the bridge; which, among other people, did trouble me for poor little Michell and our Sarah on the bridge. So down, with my heart full of trouble, to the Lieutenant of the Tower, who tells me that it begun this morning in the King's baker's house in Pudding Lane, and that it hath burned St. Magnus's Church and most part of Fish Street already. So I down to the water-side, and there got a boat, and through bridge, and there saw a lamentable fire. Poor Michell's house, as far as the Old Swan, already burned that way, and the fire running further, that, in a very little time, it got as far as the Steelyard, while I was there. Everybody endeavouring to remove their goods, and flinging into the river or bringing them into lighters that lay off; poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats, or clambering from one pair of stairs by the waterside

¹ His name was Faryner.

to another. And, among other things, the poor pigeons, I perceive, were loth to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconies, till they, some of them, burned their wings, and fell down. Having stayed, and in an hour's time seen the fire rage every way, and nobody, to my sight, endeavouring to quench it, but to remove their goods, and leave all to the fire; and, having seen it get as far as the Steelyard, and the wind mighty high, and driving it into the City; and everything, after so long a drought, proving combustible, even the very stones of churches; and, among other things, the poor steeple ¹ by which pretty Mrs. — lives, and whereof my old schoolfellow Elborough is parson, taken fire in the very top, and there burned till it fell down; I to White Hall (with a gentleman with me, who desired to go off from the Tower, to see the fire, in my boat); and there up to the King's closet in the Chapel, where people came about me, and I did give them an account dismayed them all, and word was carried, in to the King. So I was called for, and did tell the King and Duke of York what I saw; and that, unless His Majesty did command houses to be pulled down, nothing could stop the fire. They seemed much troubled, and the King commanded me to go to my Lord Mayor from him, and command him to spare no houses, but to pull down before the fire every way. The Duke of York bid me tell him that if he would have any more soldiers, he shall; and so did my Lord Arlington afterwards, as a great secret. Here meeting with Captain Cocke, I in his coach, which he lent me, and Creed with me to Paul's; and there walked along Watling Street, as well as I could, every creature coming away laden with goods, to save, and, here and there, sick people carried away in beds. Extraordinary good goods carried in carts and on backs. At last met my Lord Mayor in Cannon Street, like a man spent, with a handkercher about his neck. To the King's message, he cried, like a fainting woman, 'Lord! what can I do? I am spent: people will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses, but the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it.' That he needed no more soldiers; and that, for himself, he must go and refresh himself, having been up all night. So he left me, and I him, and walked home; seeing people all almost distracted, and no manner of means used to quench the fire. The houses, too, so very thick thereabouts, and full of matter for burning, as pitch and tar, in Thames Street; and warehouses of oil and wines and brandy and other

¹ St. Lawrence Poultry.

things. Here I saw Mr. Isaac Houlton, the handsome man, prettily dressed and dirty, at his door at Dowgate, receiving some of his brothers' things, whose houses were on fire; and, as he says, have been removed twice already; and he doubts, as it soon proved, that they must be in a little time removed from his house also, which was a sad consideration. And to see the churches all filling with goods by people who themselves should have been quietly there at this time. By this time, it was about twelve o'clock; and so home, and there find my guests, who were Mr. Wood and his wife Barbary Shelden, and also Mr. Moone: she mighty fine, and her husband, for aught I see, a likely man. But Mr. Moone's design and mine, which was to look over my closet and please him with the sight thereof, which he hath long desired, was wholly disappointed; for we were in great trouble and disturbance at this fire, not knowing what to think of it. However, we had an extraordinary good dinner, and as merry as at this time we could be. While at dinner, Mrs. Barellet came to enquire after Mr. Woolfe and Stanes, who, it seems, are related to them, whose houses in Fish Street are all burned, and they in a sad condition. She would not stay in the fright. Soon as dined, I and Moone away, and walked through the City, the streets full of nothing but people; and horses and carts laden with goods, ready to run over one another, and removing goods from one burned house to another. They now removing out of Cannon Street, which received goods in the morning, into Lombard Street, and further: and, among others, I now saw my little goldsmith Stocks,¹ receiving some friend's goods, whose house itself was burned the day after. We parted at Paul's; he home, and I to Paul's Wharf, where I had appointed a boat to attend me, and took in Mr. Carcasse² and his brother, whom I met in the street, and carried them below and above bridge to and again to see the fire, which was now got further, both below and above, and no likelihood of stopping it. Met with the King and Duke of York in their barge, and with them to Queenhithe, and there called Sir Richard Browne to them. Their order was only to pull down houses apace, and so below bridge at the water-side; but little was or could be done, the fire coming upon them so fast. Good hopes there was of stopping it at the Three Cranes above, and at Botolph's Wharf below, bridge, if care be used; but

¹ Humphrey Stocks, at the Black Horse in Lombard Street.

² James Carcasse, who is again frequently mentioned, was a clerk in the office for issuing tickets to the seamen.

the wind carries it into the City, so as we know not, by the water-side, what it do there. River full of lighters and boats taking in goods, and good goods swimming in the water; and only, I observed that hardly one lighter or boat in three that had the goods of a house in, but there was a pair of virginals in it. Having seen as much as I could now, I away to White Hall by appointment, and there walked to St. James's Park; and there met my wife and Creed, and Wood and his wife, and walked to my boat; and there upon the water again, and to the fire up and down, it still increasing, and the wind great. So near the fire as we could for smoke; and all over the Thames, with one's face in the wind, you were almost burned with a shower of fire-drops. This is very true: so as houses were burned by these drops and flakes of fire, three or four, nay, five or six houses, one from another. When we could endure no more upon the water, we to a little alehouse on the Bankside, over against the Three Cranes, and there stayed till it was dark almost, and saw the fire grow; and, as it grew darker, appeared more and more; and in corners and upon steeples, and between churches and houses, as far as we could see up the hill of the City, in a most horrid, malicious, bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire. Barbary and her husband away before us. We stayed till, it being darkish, we saw the fire as only one entire arch of fire from this to the other side the bridge, and in a bow up the hill for an arch of above a mile long: it made me weep to see it. The churches, houses, and all on fire, and flaming at once; and a horrid noise the flames made, and the cracking of houses at their ruin. So home with a sad heart, and there find everybody discouraging and lamenting the fire; and poor Tom Harter came with some few of his goods saved out of his house, which was burned upon Fish Street Hill. I invited him to lie at my house, and did receive his goods; but was deceived in his lying there, the news coming every moment of the growth of the fire; so as we were forced to begin to pack up our own goods, and prepare for their removal; and did by moonshine (it being brave, dry, and moon-shine and warm weather) carry much of my goods into the garden; and Mr. Harter and I did remove my money and iron chests into my cellar, as thinking that the safest place. And got my bags of gold into my office, ready to carry away, and my chief papers of accounts also there, and my tallies into a box by themselves. So great was our fear, as Sir W. Batten hath carts come out of the country to fetch away his goods this night. We did put Mr.

September 1666

Harer, poor man, to bed a little; but he got but very little rest, so much noise being in my house, taking down of goods.

3d. About four o'clock in the morning my Lady Batten sent me a cart to carry away all my money and plate and best things to Sir W. Rider's, at Bethnal Green, which I did, riding myself in my night-gown, in the cart. And, Lord! to see how the streets and the highways are crowded with people running and riding, and getting of carts at any rate to fetch away things. I find Sir W. Rider tired with being called up all night, and receiving things from several friends. His house full of goods, and much of Sir W. Batten's and Sir W. Pen's. I am eased at my heart to have my treasure so well secured. Then home, with much ado to find a way, nor any sleep all this night to me nor my poor wife. But then and all this day she and I and all my people labouring to get away the rest of our things, and did get Mr. Tooker to get me a lighter to take them in, and we did carry them, myself some, over Tower Hill, which was by this time full of people's goods, bringing their goods thither; and down to the lighter, which lay at the next quay, above the Tower Dock. And here was my neighbour's wife, Mrs. —, with her pretty child and some few of her things, which I did willingly give way to be saved with mine; but there was no passing with anything through the postern, the crowd was so great. The Duke of York came this day by the office, and spoke to us, and did ride with his guard up and down the City to keep all quiet, he being now General and having the care of all. This day, Mercer being not at home, but against her mistress's order gone to her mother's, and my wife, going thither to speak with W. Hewer, met her there and was angry; and her mother saying that she was not a 'prentice girl, to ask leave every time she goes abroad, my wife with good reason was angry; and, when she came home, did bid her be gone again. And so she went away, which troubled me, but yet less than it would, because of the condition we are in, in fear of coming in a little time to being less able to keep one in her quality. At night, lay down a little upon a quilt of W. Hewer's in the office, all my own things being packed up or gone; and, after me, my poor wife did the like, we having fed upon the remains of yesterday's dinner, having no fire nor dishes, nor any opportunity of dressing anything.

4th. Up by break of day, to get away the remainder of my things; which I did by a lighter at the Iron gate:¹ and my hands

¹ Irongate Stairs, Lower Thames Street.

September 1666

so few, that it was the afternoon before we could get them all away. Sir W. Pen and I to the Tower Street, and there met the fire burning, three or four doors beyond Mr. Howell's, whose goods, poor man, his trays and dishes, shovels, &c., were flung all along Tower Street in the kennels, and people working there-with from one end to the other; the fire coming on in that narrow street, on both sides, with infinite fury. Sir W. Batten not knowing how to remove his wine, did dig a pit in the garden, and laid it in there; and I took the opportunity of laying all the papers of my office that I could not otherwise dispose of. And in the evening Sir W. Pen and I did dig another, and put our wine in it; and I my Parmesan cheese, as well as my wine and some other things. The Duke of York was at the office this day, at Sir W. Pen's; but I happened not to be within. This afternoon, sitting melancholy with Sir W. Pen in our garden, and thinking of the certain burning of this office, without extraordinary means, I did propose for the sending up of all our workmen from the Woolwich and Deptford yards, none whereof yet appeared, and to write to Sir W. Coventry to have the Duke of York's permission to pull down houses, rather than lose this office, which would much hinder the King's business. So Sir W. Pen went down this night, in order to the sending them up tomorrow morning; and I wrote to Sir W. Coventry about the business,¹ but received no answer. This night Mrs. Turner (who, poor woman, was removing her goods all this day, good goods, into the garden, and knows not how to dispose of them) and her husband supped with my wife and me at night, in the office, upon a shoulder of mutton from the cook's without any napkin.

¹ The letter, among the Pepys MSS., was as follows:

Sir,—The fire is now very near us, as well on Tower Street, as Fenchurch Street side, and we little hope of our escape but by that remedy, to the want whereof we do certainly owe the loss of the City, namely, the pulling down of houses in the way of the fire. This way Sir W. Pen and myself have so far concluded upon the practising, that he is gone to Woolwich and Deptford to supply himself with men and necessities in order to the doing thereof; in case, at his return, our condition be not bettered, and that he meets with his R. His approbation, which I have thus undertaken to learn of you. Pray please to let me have this night, at whatever hour it is, what his R. His directions are in this particular. Sir J. Mines and Sir W. Batten having left us, we cannot add, though we are well assured of their, as well as all the neighbourhood's concurrence.

Yr obedient Servant,

S. P.

Sir W. Coventry,
Sept. 4, 1666.