

Richard Yates on the Edge of Success

Joseph Heller made the point that “success and failure are both difficult to endure,” and by 1961 Richard Yates had enjoyed a fair portion of each. Indeed, he existed in some limbo in between. As his publisher Seymour Lawrence reminded him, he was now established as “an important new writer”: the literary world was keeping an eye on him, and many thought that his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, was very like a classic. On the other hand he was broke again, still living in a basement, and hardly able to write a word without crossing it out. His drinking continued apace. One gloomy night he “reread Fitzgerald’s ‘Crack Up’ for the 400th time” and found that he’d “drawn emphatic pencil lines around these words: ‘I only wanted absolute quiet to think out why I had developed a sad attitude toward sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy and a tragic attitude toward tragedy—why I had become identified with the objects of my horror or compassion.’” It occurred to Yates that he’d first highlighted this passage early in the writing of his novel, when he found himself identifying with the feckless Wheelers to an uncomfortable degree. And now he felt worse than ever. “Old Fitz really does have an uncanny way of laying my problems on the line,” Yates reflected. “In any case the point is that I just plain can’t afford to be as doomed as the people I wrote about.”

And yet, like his character Jack Fields in “Saying Goodbye to Sally,” Yates took “a certain literary satisfaction” in seeing himself as a “tragic figure.” He couldn’t help being aware of—and sometimes exploiting—the fact that it was more seemly to be a maudlin drunk if one also happened to be the young(ish) author of a brilliant first novel. It was a role he found hard to resist, and yet its implications troubled him: If he couldn’t afford to be as doomed as his own characters, then surely he couldn’t afford to be as doomed as F. Scott Fitzgerald either; but then too, he’d arguably earned the privilege of putting a romantic face on his misery, if only for a while. The role was congenial because it was true . . . or was it? He could never quite resolve the question. “The idea of the writer haunted Dick,” said his friend David Milch, who described Yates’s literary persona as a fifties-style “refinement of F. Scott Fitzgerald”:

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"The ordeal of inauthenticity—what was real versus feigned—was a drama enacted in every gesture of his. Dick had this punitive self-consciousness: had he integrated the *idea* of being a writer with being a writer?" Or, as another friend generalized it, "Dick was both melancholy and played the role of a melancholic."

But there was more to being Fitzgeraldian than acting melancholy; there was also the impulse to pick drunken fights, to throw one's writerly weight around—the revenge of the weakling who'd spent his youth being picked on by boys bigger and richer than he. "There was a bit of the high school pug in Dick," said John Williams. "He'd become bellicose when he drank, though when sober he was settled and attentive." Seymour Epstein agreed: "Dick always wanted to settle things with his fists," he said, "though I got the impression he always hoped someone would intervene." Epstein performed this function at least once, in a Village restaurant. "Dick was drunk and talking too loud, and a customer seated nearby asked him to keep it down. Dick said, 'How'd you like to go outside?' I got between them and mollified the other guy, who would've torn Dick's head off." More than ever Yates also had a tendency, when drunk, to vent his contempt for people with manqué literary ambitions: "How's the *schoolteaching* going, Hal?" he'd say, whacking the back of a man who considered teaching a degrading and temporary avocation at best. Or, to Bob Riche: "How's the PR dodge going, Bob?"—but with nastiness instead of their old conspiratorial glee.

As an acclaimed writer Yates was disinclined to suffer the insolence of waiters, cabbies, and cops who treated him like a common drunk, and this too was a very Fitzgeraldian animus. One day a figure out of the distant past, Doris Bialek, spotted Yates on Fifty-seventh Street; she'd seen neither him nor his ex-wife Sheila in almost ten years, since the couple left for Europe. "He was having an altercation with a policeman," said Bialek. "He was drunk and cursing the man out. He was with some girl—at first I thought it was his daughter, but it wasn't." When Yates heard his name called ("Rich! What are you doing here?"), he dropped the quarrel with the cop and became solicitous toward his old friend. Bialek recalled, "By then I'd read *Revolutionary Road* and identified Sheila with April Wheeler. I read how April commits suicide and I thought, 'My God, she must be dead!'" She explained all this to Yates, who hastened to reassure her and even wrote down Sheila's address and phone number for Bialek before saying goodbye.

Yates's friends rarely saw him sober, even during morning strolls in the Village; he'd always greet Warren Owens's wife, Marjorie, with a "big juicy kiss on the lips" that left her dazed with mortification. And then there was the time she ran into Yates in the subway: He'd just been to the dentist, he told her, and found out he had leukoplakia (white precancerous patches in the mouth); the dentist had advised him to stop smoking. "Like hell I will!" said Yates, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands. Many thought he wasn't long for the world, certainly not as a writer, but (oddly enough) they were wrong.

One day Yates got a call from Grace Schulman, a twenty-six-year-old writer for *Glamour* who'd been "enthralled" by *Revolutionary Road* and wanted to include the author in a group of cultural luminaries being featured in the magazine (e.g., Brando,

Philippe Entremont, tenor Franco Corelli). Yates had no proper publicity shots to give her—he thought his portrait on the book jacket made him look effeminate—so Schulman arranged a session with the photographer Duane Michals. Afterward Yates and Schulman ducked out of a snowstorm into the Cedar Tavern, and talked for hours. She told him his novel had made the biggest impact on her since Flaubert, and Yates responded with an animated homage to *Madame Bovary*. “When Emma dies, I die,” he said. “We realized there was an enormous connection between us,” said Schulman, “that we’d be lifelong friends. But there was also this sexual undercurrent.” Before things went any further, then, and despite the late hour, she took Yates home to meet her husband Jerry. It was love at first sight all over again.

Yates came to dinner every night that week, and the three became inseparable. “We couldn’t get enough of each other,” Schulman recalled. “It was that great moment in life when exciting things are *so* exciting. We told each other everything that had ever happened to us, and talked about the books we loved.” In certain essential respects the Schulmans were ideal companions for Yates. Grace would later become a distinguished poet, but at the time she was strictly an admiring apprentice, and hence no threat to Yates’s ego. Jerry was a medical scientist who was well-read enough to appreciate Yates’s work without being inclined to judge it; he was also a kind and decent man, patient with the vagaries of an artistic temperament.

For Yates it was almost like having a family again, or anyway congenial siblings. At night they’d share a pot of boeuf bourguignon, then sit around drinking and talking while Grace strummed the guitar. The Schulmans thought the author of *Revolutionary Road* was a wise and compassionate arbiter of human relations, and Yates worked hard to live up to their expectations. Together and separately the young couple confided their marital problems to Yates, and sometimes he’d suddenly excuse himself to take a walk and think things over; “I’ve emerged with a fresh insight into your problem,” he’d announce on his return. “We never had a friend like that,” said Grace, “before or after.”

Yates was less temperate on the subject of writing. “Write with balls, Grace!” he once exclaimed, and when she protested the impertinent anatomical reference, he said: “Well, write with ovaries, then. It’s the same thing.” At first she was having trouble writing at all, what with her duties at *Glamour*, and Yates was adamant that she quit: “Any girl in town would give her left breast to have that job,” he said, “but you want to write and you should do it.” Clearly Yates didn’t want his beloved friend to become one of the phony strivers of the world, and he rarely missed a chance to play literary Pygmalion. Indeed, the main points of his ex cathedra advice amounted to a nice summary of the Yatesian aesthetic. He suggested she read Jane Austen, who had balls, and avoid Katherine Mansfield, who didn’t; Gina Berriault had balls to spare, and one of her stories in *Short Story 1* was “better than any of ours.” Cheever was a “dirty old man” who wrote about farts and so forth, and his slick prose didn’t compensate for the sprawl of his work (“Don’t be seduced by prose, Grace; the point is structure”); the same went for John O’Hara. *Billy Budd* was better than *Moby-Dick* because the latter sprawled. *Ulysses* (“I stretched my brain for it”) was far, far better than *Finnegans Wake*. *A High Wind in Jamaica* and *Invisible Man* were wonderful,

classically *structured* books. Characters shouldn't be too "knowy" about themselves; rather they should reveal themselves obliquely, like the narrators in Ford's *A Good Soldier* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Avoid "privacy" and "preciousness"—neither fiction nor poetry is "a letter home"; one writes with an audience in mind. Nor is "honesty" per se a virtue ("Remember what Anatole France said about the dog masturbating on your leg—'Sure it's honest, but who needs it?'"). And finally, a writer needs to know the difference between sentiment and sentimentality: when Humbert sees the hair on grown-up Lolita's arms and loves her anyway, that's sentiment, that's what love *is*—being able to see the hair on somebody's arms.

At the time Schulman wasn't sure whether she wanted to devote herself to poetry or fiction, and Yates insisted on helping her with both. "Bad poems get by me," he said, "but good ones never do." Soon this became "Good poems get by me, but bad ones never do," and Schulman noted the contradiction. Yates waved it away: The same basic rules applied to both fiction and poetry, and to produce first-rate work in either genre required patience, talent, and balls. When Schulman gave up her *Glamour* job to concentrate on creative work, Yates wrote her, "*Don't worry* if it comes slowly at first and fails to give you pleasure, or if your brains feel scrambled, or if you spend whole days staring at the wall. . . . You must expect to produce a certain amount of bad stuff before it starts getting good. *Stay loose*: don't let your high critical standards choke you up and constrict you before you start."

Perhaps needless to say, Yates tended to be more generous when holding forth in the abstract, or rather when sober. "Oh, that *tree* thing—" he sneered tipsily, when one of Schulman's poetic motifs came under discussion. It was Yates who unwittingly canceled her future as a fiction writer—destroying with a vehement black pencil the last story she ever ventured to write. "[I] still feel like a turd," he wrote her afterward, "for . . . having scrawled those inept and booze-soaked half-assed 'comments' all over [your manuscript]." Despite such inevitable remorse, though, the balance between candor and kindness was all but impossible for Yates to maintain in the heat of the moment, much less with a dear friend. "PAY NO ATTENTION to what ANYBODY says about your ideas," he finally insisted, when yet another of his boozy critiques had gone awry. He added that if she'd known him back in 1955—and if she were "as big a bastard as [he]"—she might have said, "'Ahh, nobody's interested in that Sloan Wilson crap any more'" when he told her about an idea he had for a novel.

The aesthetic perfectionist who spent hours slaving over a sentence, and who couldn't resist berating a friend to write better, had a corresponding sense of ethical perfection as well. There was the drunk Yates and the sober Yates, and sometimes one or the other coincided with what Schulman called the "Platonic" Yates—the man who was "always trying to define what was true, what was right," and who sometimes even managed to live up to his ideals. "I always thought Dick was incorruptible," Schulman said:

For example, he believed it detracted from one's own self-esteem to be harshly critical of others, however tempting it was to criticize. Visiting us one evening, he brought us a little bank and insisted we feed it coins (dimes in those days) whenever any of us said unkind words about absent people. The practice took hold, and the bank stayed in our living room. Dick tried to

be careful. One day, though, the name of a writer came up—a bad writer, Dick thought—who had won a prize. Dick sprang to his feet, emptied his pockets of change, and only then let loose a stream of invective.

The little bank was called the Physicians and Authors Benefit Fund (PABF), the proceeds of which would send a writer to medical school or a physician to a creative writing program. “I think that remark is fineable,” one of them would say when the level of discourse sagged—as it often, wittily, did. Yates aspired to a Platonic self, but he was also a man who tilted at cops and told women to write with balls (and worse, much worse), while at the same time deploring ribaldry-for-its-own-sake and hence taking Cheever to task for being a “dirty old man.” And yet amid such contradictions one could divine certain steadfast moral coordinates, indeed almost a puritanical streak. Yates’s daughters, for example, were sacrosanct; he’d never violate their innocence by exposing them to a girlfriend, period, and he was appalled when a woman quipped, “Don’t you want your daughters to know you have a penis?” Also, he hated pretense even in such harmless, pathetic forms as name-dropping. In college Grace Schulman had been a *Mademoiselle* guest editor, as had Joan Didion and Sylvia Plath, and her mentor at the magazine (and theirs) was one Cyrilly Abels; when Yates met the latter, she lost no time alluding to “Truman” et al., until Yates put his head on the Schulmans’ coffee table and went to sleep. “Best regards to Cyrilly,” he subsequently wrote his friends, “[and] C. P., Truman, Carson, Alfred, Guvvie, Frank, Ken, and the gang, and do thank them all for being so patient with Jerome (dime enclosed).”

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When *Newsweek* calls your first novel “the find of the year,” your stock is apt to go up among the opposite sex, and so with Yates. It was a further reminder to the likes of Bob Riche that he and his old friend were no longer on equal terms; Yates would repeatedly leave parties with the best-looking woman there, often the very woman Riche had spent the better part of the evening trying to impress. “After you write *Revolutionary Road* you can screw anybody,” Yates remarked with equal parts arrogance and boyish awe, as he’d just managed to bed a gorgeous Ivy Leaguer and was surprised that such “nice girls” could be so easily seduced.

On good days he was no longer the jumpy, drunken swain who scared women off with his needy desperation. He was a witty tippling genius novelist, who also happened to be a gentleman. One night at the Blue Mill the writer Dan Wakefield sat with his friend Sarel Eimerl, who was bemoaning the fact that he didn’t seem able to talk to women, and one beauty in particular. “Before the meal was over,” Wakefield recalled, “[Sarel] turned pale and said ‘Look over there, in that booth, that’s her! And damn, she’s with that fellow Dick Yates, and just look, he’s having no trouble talking to her at all! What the hell do you suppose the fellow is saying to her?’” Yates could even afford to be highly selective about the women he chose to charm. A very young and definitively nice girl such as Barbara Beury (his “Sweet Briar Sweetie”) was near the

ideal, worth courting at whatever distance, but a small-time Canadian actress coming out of the past to throw herself at him was not. "You make things most uncomfortable for me by becoming famous just as I am about to take you up on that drink," wrote the star of a mediocre adaptation of "The Best of Everything" produced by the CBC two years before. She'd seen the *Newsweek* puff and was coming to New York for ten days; could they meet? "You'd be bored to death with me," Yates replied. "I drink too much."

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After a tedious summer visit to Cape Cod with the Schulmans and Natalie Bowen (an occasional girlfriend), it was probably a relief for Yates to get back to New York, where he now knew any number of famous writers. As ever, the more he admired a person's work, the more he was apt to find that person congenial as a human being. He'd recently read *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* on the recommendation of Seymour Lawrence, the book's American publisher, and eagerly approached its author at a subsequent party: "This confident, good-looking young man came up to me and told me how much he had liked my first novel," Brian Moore remembered. "I was pleased and gratified. I thanked him. He then said: 'Do you ever worry about having written a second novel which mightn't be as good as the first?'" For a moment Moore thought he was being mocked, but Yates's earnest, worried face convinced him otherwise.

The Irish-Canadian Moore had a lot in common with Yates: both were realistic writers whose characters tended to be lonely, self-deluding failures, and Moore, too, was a witty, voluble man who often became dour and withdrawn. For a while Yates was something of a tipsy fixture at Moore's apartment in the East Seventies, along with the Australian writer Franklin Russell (with whom Moore would eventually exchange wives), who regarded Yates as a "soulmate drinker": "Dick had a steely dedication to destroying himself," said Russell admiringly. "He realized that if you're gonna drink, it's gotta be *serious*." In fact Yates was rather more serious than either man in that respect, and often needed assistance getting home at night. Once Moore asked a young woman to see him off, and Yates became galvanized with indignation: "Outrageous!" he shouted. "A girl take me home? I'll take her home!" "Are you sure you're competent?" Moore inquired. "Of course I'm 'competent,'" snapped Yates, spinning around and walking full speed into a wall. Another night the men staggered back from a party, and Yates insisted on trudging through the gutter; when he came to cars he'd climb ponderously over the back, jump onto the hood, and proceed as before. "After watching this episode," Moore remarked, "I realize I'm just a country boy."

Yates liked few things better than being admired by writers he admired, but in one case he suspected ulterior motives. He thought it ominous when he got a person-to-person call from "Beverly" ("Beverly who?" "Beverly Hills calling, sir") and it turned out to be Tennessee Williams, who wondered if his favorite new writer would like to

meet for dinner in New York. Yates felt certain that his “effeminate” jacket photo had something to do with this, but how could he say no to Tennessee Williams? They met at the Forty-seventh Street YMCA, where Williams liked to swim; Yates stood in the lobby when suddenly the playwright appeared, dressed for dinner and still wearing a bathing cap. “How did it go?” Natalie Bowen asked when Yates returned late that night. “We talked books and drank,” he reported. “I wasn’t his cup of tea.” Still, Yates remained convinced that a fair percentage of the reading public regarded him as “queer,” and later insisted that Grace Schulman make him look “ballsy” when she photographed him for the jacket of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*.

By the summer of 1961, however, such a book had yet to materialize. Seymour Lawrence was eager to consolidate Yates’s reputation with a story collection, but Yates made him wait while he slowly progressed with his eleventh study of loneliness, “Builders.” It was his first sustained fiction in almost a year, and his first short story since the abortive “End of the Great Depression.” Work on his war novel had come to a dead end, and at one point he became so desperate that he blamed it on his table: “It’s too high,” he told Grace Schulman. “I need to get *over* my writing. . . .” So he sawed the legs down, to no avail. He wondered if perhaps it was the material itself that was the problem: he’d never been wholly satisfied with previous attempts at explicit autobiography, which seemed to go against the grain of his favorite Flaubertian principle—“The writer’s relation to his work must be like that of God to the Universe: omnipresent and invisible”; and then, too, there was the uneasy sense of exposure inherent in writing (much less publishing) confessional fiction, all the more so while his mother was still alive. “Builders,” then, began as an “experimental warm-up” to see if he could make “decent fiction” out of a “direct autobiographical blow-out,” and he was tentatively pleased with the result. Indeed, he was sure enough of its basic soundness to be undaunted when *Esquire* editor Rust Hills rejected an early draft as a “formula story” (“[about] a ‘colorful’ character encountered by a writer”); Yates went back to work, and told Lawrence that his new book would have to wait a bit longer until he brought “Builders” to its final, perfected form.

Money, as usual, was a problem. Yates halfheartedly cast about for work while hoping that Hollywood’s interest in his novel would soon amount to more than occasional teasing. The director John Frankenheimer, who would soon begin work on *The Manchurian Candidate* and was considered the industry’s foremost wunderkind, had been trying to get financing for *Revolutionary Road* without success. Yates thought any number of big-name actors would be thrilled to play Frank Wheeler—if they could only be persuaded to read the book—in which case the financing would follow. He particularly wanted Jack Lemmon for the part, and one day he spotted the man in a coffee shop. But the moment passed: Yates didn’t have a copy of his novel handy, and was loath to seem just another hustling fan. “But I knew he’d buy it!” he told the Schulmans. “I came so close!” By midsummer he was so broke he accepted a book-reviewing assignment from the *Saturday Review*—Jerome Weidman’s *My Father Sits in the Dark and Other Selected Stories*. “Jerome Weidman writes three kinds of short stories,” Yates wrote: “little sharp ones that are sometimes good, nostalgic ones

that are often corny, and long flabby ones that are nearly always very bad. The trouble with *My Father Sits in the Dark* is that the good ones are badly outnumbered."

Yates's poverty was enough to make him long for the fall, when at least he'd have some income from teaching—but such anticipation was rueful at best. Reading students' work was a hateful distraction, and once his double duty at Columbia began he'd have more of it than ever. The previous spring he'd taught a second, nonfiction class at the New School, for which he'd written a course description that read like the jeremiad of a man bracing himself for the worst: "No culture has placed greater stress on the value of 'communication' than ours, and none has produced greater quantities of inept and muddled writing." Yates therefore solicited the "literate non-professional" interested in everything from "the personal essay to the business report," and promised to emphasize "lucid phrasing" and "[how to avoid] dullness." As it happened, mere dullness would have been a blessing. As he'd written Barbara Beury in late April:

Had a dreary class tonight after which an enormous fifty-year-old matron who can neither spell, punctuate nor write coherent English cornered me to demand, frankly, whether I thought she Had Talent. Tried to evade the question for twenty minutes and ended up saying sure. Depressing experience. . . . [I've] pretty well decided that teaching does sap the old creative energy after all. Why do so many sad clowns want to be writers? It's hard, no fun, scrambles your brains and leaves you unfit for practically all other kinds of human activity. Apart from which there's no dough in it except for Leon Uris and Allen Drury.

And sometimes, in a small way, for Richard Yates. That summer Rust Hills offered him "a considerable amount of dough" to serve as editor of an anthology featuring winners of a fiction contest for unpublished writers sponsored by *Esquire* and Bantam Books. All Yates had to do was read some five thousand stories (with an assistant) and select fifteen or so winners—this in addition to whatever his students at Columbia and the New School saw fit to produce. And meanwhile, too, he was still ghosting the odd speech for an agency in Princeton.

At seventy, Dookie, Yates's mother, seemed tough and talkative as ever, despite a long half century of drinking, smoking, and fiscal emergency. For eight years she'd divided her time between Manhattan and St. James, Long Island, where she rested each weekend amid her considerable efforts to keep the City Center art gallery afloat. The long commute was brutal in the summer and the hot little garage apartment at High Hedges (her son-in-law's family "estate") was hardly an oasis, such that one might have wondered why she bothered to make the trip at all. The fact was, for all her illustrious contacts in the art world, the old woman was socially alone in the city except for an incompatible sister and a beloved son whom she rarely saw. High Hedges couldn't have been much better—her relationship with daughter Ruth was an uneasy truce, her son-in-law hardly spoke to her, and all but one of her grandchildren had grown up and moved out—but her belongings were there, her sculpture, and anyway it was a change.

Yates later told friends that his mother's cerebral hemorrhage (and much of its aftermath) happened exactly the way he described it in *The Easter Parade*, though the only surviving witness—Ruth's daughter and namesake—remembers a few details differently. Unlike the far more dissolute Pookie Grimes, Yates's mother was fully clothed when her fifteen-year-old granddaughter found her comatose in the garage apartment, and Ruth Rodgers Ward recalls no sign of emptied bowels or bottles of whiskey ("Bellows Partners' Choice") strewn about the place. The rest happened pretty much as written: Dookie had failed to emerge after a few sweltering days in mid-July, and Yates's sister had sent little Ruth to investigate.

Yates took it hard. He was with the Schulmans when he got the news that his mother had suffered an "insult to the brain" (Yates was appalled by the term) and that her chance of survival was less than 50 percent. Over the four or five months he'd known the Schulmans he'd always spoken kindly of his mother, and from the depths of his remorse he did so then: She was an elegant, talented woman who'd married beneath her, he said; an artist reduced at one point to sculpting mannequins. He wished he'd taken better care of her, and now she was likely to die or go on living as a vegetable. "I heard she was crazy *before* the stroke," said Natalie Bowen, after Yates caught a train for Long Island.

Dookie had revived somewhat when Yates got to the hospital, but she didn't seem to recognize him or anybody else, and was unable to speak more than a few random words. The doctors said that she could die within days or go on living for years, with or without some significant degree of brain damage. "[They] are talking in terms of 'wait and see' for weeks or months to come—it's amazing how little they really know about things like this," Yates wrote Barbara Beury;

Meanwhile I've been living with my sister and her family out here in Ass Hole, Long Island, and my time has been wholly given over to the round of hospital visits, conversational banality, drunken slobberings, quarrels and all the other Thomas Wolfean goodies that accompany emergencies like this. My sister is in a constant state of near-hysteria, which doesn't help things much, and she and I have hardly anything in common, which makes it even less jolly. Worst week I've had in years, buddy.

But such was Yates's guilty desire to be a dutiful son that he was prepared to spend most of the summer, if necessary, amid the stormy boredom of High Hedges (or at least until Dookie's condition was established one way or the other). Lonely and miserable, he called Sheila, one of the few people who could somewhat fathom his conflicted feelings: he wanted to do something about his mother, he said, but felt helpless.

A month later Dookie was still holding her own—"physically stronger but mentally off her trolley [sic]" as Yates put it—and she was moved to St. Johnland, an Episcopalian "home for the aged" in King's Park, Long Island. Her total monthly expenses came to a relatively exorbitant \$260, and the Suffolk County Welfare Department demanded that Yates and Ruth contribute to their mother's care. Both were strapped and the extra burden was unwelcome, to put it mildly; when Ruth reminded her brother that Dookie's doctor at St. Johnland needed a one-time fee of \$150 in addition to regular

expenses, Yates exploded. Further discussion was impossible, and Ruth wrote him a weary letter instead: "I am not, as you so neatly put it, trying to 'cozy up to this shit-head.' I feel, and Fred agrees, that Dookie needs Dr. Alexander and Dr. Alexander needs \$150. It's cut and dried. . . . Don't let's fight anymore." There was one other practical matter: since welfare benefits still paid the better part of Dookie's care, the State of New York would claim her assets when she died. Therefore Ruth suggested they persuade Dookie to "give" them her sculpture, as it was "just possible that twenty years from now somebody will want to collect 'Ruth Yates.'"

Dookie tuned in and out of lucidity, but even at her best she lived in a delusional fog. "It was Bob Jones [?] who arranged to have me hit by that car," she belligerently insisted, and wondered what would be done about it. At first she thought she'd "served two years as President of the United States"—it's possible she was confusing the nation with the National Association of Women Artists—and then demoted herself to first mother. She thought Yates was John F. Kennedy, that she lived in an annex of the White House, and that the nurses were pretty insolent under the circumstances. Her place among the "aristocracy" seemed assured at last, but soon she became depressed and withdrawn. She stopped speaking of her role in Camelot, and during one of Yates's rare visits she sat ignoring him while she studied her haggard face in a hand mirror; finally, carefully, she painted lipstick on her reflection. The primacy of image over reality was complete.

"The deaths of parents, dreadful and sad as they are, do I think to an extent free writers," said Alice Adams, and this was certainly true of Yates. But it was a long and difficult process, and it exacted a psychic toll. He once told interviewers that the prologue of *A Special Providence*—in which Private Prentice visits his mother and listens to her drunken boasting about her artistic career—was the hardest scene he ever wrote ("I sweated blood over that"), and still more years would pass before he thought he was finally, truly able to "see things in the round" where his childhood was concerned. And the more he saw, the more obsessive and bitter he became, until finally he was as haunted as Stephen Dedalus by the memory of a spurned, beloved, and deeply hated mother.

By mid-August Yates needed a break, and with Dookie bound for St. Johnland he decided to accept John Ciardi's invitation to return to Bread Loaf as a teaching fellow. His friend Ed Kessler was driving to Vermont in rather illustrious company—Julia Child and her husband, Paul; Bernard DeVoto's widow, Avis—and invited Yates to join them. The five had breakfast together at DeVoto's apartment the morning of their departure, and Yates was on his best behavior. Paul Child had been the art teacher at Avon Old Farms when Yates was a bedraggled fourth former, and both seemed pleased by the subsequent turn of events, though perhaps the happily married Child was a bit more so than his old pupil.

The two weeks passed without major mishap, though the good impression Yates made on the Childs and Avis DeVoto didn't last. DeVoto presided over Treman Cottage, where privileged staff members gathered to eat, drink, joke, argue, and plot sexual assignations, rather in spite of their domineering hostess. DeVoto insisted her

guests provide their own liquor and mark the bottles, and if anyone was so much as a minute late moving from veranda or lounge or lawn to the dining room, that person found the door shut. A student who wrote Yates a postconference note, inviting him to visit her, promised, "[W]e don't mark our bottles here and there isn't anyone named Avis within fifty miles, except maybe a car rental agency." Yates seems to have kept his temper in the face of such fussiness, but not without a certain amount of extravagant sulking. "He had the manner of a spoiled child," said Julia Child, who remembered him as a "romantic figure" but a "difficult drunk": "He seemed conspicuously unstable—Byronic, adrift."

Yates was at his best among the unthreatening young, whose work he critiqued with candor and a sense of tact that came naturally in moods of sober detachment. The poet Miller Williams was a student that year, a friend thereafter, and he found much to emulate in Yates's approach: "Dick never praised simply to make you feel good, but he never wounded with criticism either." Yates also made his mark in the lecture hall, as a lovingly modest enthusiast vis-à-vis his pet subjects—Flaubert and Fitzgerald, dialogue and the objective correlative.

And finally Yates managed to finish "Builders" and tune up the other stories for his collection, which he sent off to Seymour Lawrence as soon as Bread Loaf was over. "I can't tell you how impressed I was with *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*," Lawrence replied; he'd read and reread each story with "renewed pleasure" (even the ones he'd rejected over the years) and liked "Builders" the best of all: "It is the most poignant and profoundly moving and it has a kind of prayer at the end which I could not forget."

Back in New York, Yates's life was in flux. His philandering friend Anatole Broyard, at the age of forty-one, had decided to marry—to retire at the top of his form, so to speak. Yates was among the fifty or so guests who attended the Village wedding, where he presented the couple with a crystal decanter. After that he and Broyard saw little of each other: the latter, thus domesticated, avoided Yates as an unpredictable drunk, and in 1963 he and his wife settled in Connecticut; later, when Broyard became a full-time reviewer for the *New York Times*, he'd often be in a position to remind Yates, after a peculiar fashion, of their old friendship.

Yates's romantic life was "lively if somewhat confused," as he put it; two long-term affairs became moribund that fall, while others came and went. Barbara Beury decided to turn down the *Glamour* job and stay in West Virginia, though she continued to write Yates and even spoke of visiting now and then. Yates's response was irascible but gracious on the whole: he was tired of their "endless sophomoric discussions about 'fate' and 'bridge-burning,'" he wrote, just as he supposed she was tired of his "instabilities and uncertainties"; but he agreed it might be nice to maintain "an undemanding, friendly-correspondence type thing that would enable us to keep in touch without driving each other crazy." But they didn't keep in touch. A few weeks later Yates decorously confessed to "a new involvement," and though Beury tried to assure him that she wanted to remain friends anyway ("Christ, Dick, you're no cad

or whatever, in fact to be honest I've been regarding our relationship as a 'buddy system' since May of last year"), she never heard from him again.

Yates's "new involvement" also superseded his old one with Natalie Bowen. He never did adjust to the combination of her sharp tongue and Fall River pedigree, nor did she grow any more used to the noise. One night the couple met Seymour Lawrence for dinner and all got more or less equally drunk, after which they went back to Bowen's apartment for a nightcap. Before long Yates was raving at both of them, muddling his grievances as he addressed one or the other, until Bowen locked herself in the bathroom and Lawrence tried lugubriously to reason with him. For Bowen such scenes had become all too familiar, with or without a third party, ditto Yates's tendency to come banging on her door in the middle of the night to apologize. Toward the end ("as a last resort") he went so far as to tell Bowen he loved her—and then suddenly it was over: He had a new involvement. Unlike Barbara Beury, though, Bowen would continue to hear from him over the years, however sporadically. A few months after their breakup Yates called while she was in the process of moving; he insisted on coming over and helping her unpack boxes. "I remember Dick busily carrying books from one room to another," said Bowen, "one of my friends commenting that she could always tell where Dick had been from the little pile of ashes he left behind." Eventually, more than ten years later, she'd find herself in a position to return this curious favor.

Yates's first involvement after Bowen came to a bad end. The woman's name was Lynn and she was also a writer (not a good sign), a recent divorcee who needed a job. Grace Schulman, obliging as ever, introduced her to the editors of *Glamour*, and the pretty, well-spoken young woman was hired on the spot as a copywriter. She was still working there when she came in one day "looking as though someone had been beating her over the head," Schulman recalled, "moaning, wordless." Yates had just broken up with her, and no wonder: He'd never thought much of her mind—she had "brains of submoronic intellect," he said—plus he'd always been suspicious of the fact that she'd married a wealthy man. At any rate he wasn't alone for long. At a publishing party Bob Riche was glad to introduce his old friend to Sandra Walcott, a "rich, classy girl" who was "too intimidating" for Riche's own taste. Walcott, a reader at Holt, was a great admirer of *Revolutionary Road*, and she seems to have brought out the best in Yates. Indeed she remembers him as "a perfect gentleman," and never experienced the slightest hint of tumult in his presence: "He'd drink wine or beer," she said, "but that was it. He was very sensitive, tender, and courtly. No big ego. He alluded to past problems with drinking, and was thoughtful and honest about it." This of course is a recognizable side of Yates, but when Walcott also recalls his "cute little apartment," the brow begins to furrow a bit: if he managed to tidy the place to such a miraculous extent that someone like Walcott would find it "cute," then that winter must truly have been a halcyon period.

Even Sheila was having second thoughts about her ex-husband. Their relations had gradually thawed since Yates's mental collapse the year before, until Yates had taken

to spending the night (chastely) when visiting his children in Danbury, where Sheila had moved to be near the teachers' college where she was taking classes for her degree. At one point she proudly brought Yates to the home of her English teacher, a young writer named Lee Jacobus, for whom Sheila was a favorite pupil. Yates finished off the man's small store of liquor, a little of everything, but remained in control and at one point asked Jacobus to submit a story to the Bantam contest.

For her part Sheila continued to be troubled by Yates's drinking, but her doubts were somewhat offset by his growing stature as a writer, to say nothing of his exemplary conduct as a father. Then over Christmas 1961, Sheila was so touched by Yates's gift of fine Danish crystal that their rapprochement became heated. A few days later she and the girls drove to Tarrytown to meet Yates for dinner; afterward Sharon woke up in the back of the car and observed her mother canoodling her father's neck: "You know what I want, dear," she was saying. When Sharon inquired about this, Sheila was briskly matter-of-fact: Your father and I might get together again, she said, but don't get your hopes up and don't tell your sister.

Otherwise they kept it secret from the children, a situation Sheila disliked as a "hole-in-corner deal." She was sneaking weekend visits to New York as well as trysting with Yates in and around Danbury, but she wasn't willing to commit to anything more permanent. In some ways the past two years had been the most rewarding (certainly the most peaceful) of Sheila's life: After her abysmal academic performance as a girl, she was gratified to learn that she had it in her to be an excellent student, and she liked keeping an orderly home for her children without interference or mess. But she was lonely. "I have learned what it is to need," she wrote Yates, "to want to go to bed with you and not be able to . . . I've missed you so awfully much." Not so much, however, that she'd altogether forgotten that she and Yates were "a hell of a lot of trouble to each other." And Yates, too, was a little skeptical—he told Sheila he'd gotten his self-esteem back after the divorce—but the prospect of living with his daughters again, of having a reliable body in bed at night, far outweighed his doubts. Early that spring he parted company with Sandra Walcott: "He was very kind about it," she recalled. "He said he was seeing his ex-wife again, and that he could only see one woman at a time. I never heard from Dick or saw him again."

As the new year dawned, Yates was less inclined to view himself as a tragic figure. The modest abstemious fellow who sipped only wine and beer, who impressed the well-bred Walcott with his "cute" bachelor digs, was at the moment so awash in good news that even he had to concede that the "tragic" label was a trifle inexact. For one thing he'd digested the worst of his "rather exaggerated emptiness and despair that followed *Revolutionary Road*," and in the meantime "Builders" had reassured him not only that he could still write, but that he could also use problematic personal material and avoid what he called "the two terrible traps that lie in the path of autobiographical fiction—self-pity and self-aggrandizement." Moreover, Hollywood was coming around at last: though Frankenheimer had shelved plans to make *Revolutionary Road*, he'd optioned an equally depressing novel by a more famous author who, like the director,

happened to be a fan of Richard Yates. Frankenheimer realized he needed a “special type of writer” to adapt *Lie Down in Darkness* for the screen, and while William Styron himself wasn’t available for such work, he knew somebody who was. “The Movie Deal that seemed so certain for my book all summer and fall came to a dreary end about a month ago,” Yates had written in late-November,

but I’m now almost equally excited and nervous about another deal which is said to be 90 percent of a sure thing—a job to write the screenplay for Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*, in exchange for such a colossal amount of money that it would buy my freedom for the next two years. If this does happen I will go to Hollywood the first week in January and earn all the dough before summer; if it doesn’t I’ll stay here in the old mousetrap and continue with other freelance droppings.

Two months later Yates still had “no whiff of a contract yet,” but his “endlessly optimistic agent” assured him it was only a matter of time that he’d be bound for Hollywood and the big money.

In general he was too busy to worry about life with his old morbidity. Apart from his teaching duties, some three thousand stories had already been submitted for the Bantam contest, and Yates—never much of a skimmer—was “temporarily out of the writing game” as he made his slow, conscientious way through the vast pile. The work was a bit depressing at times, as Yates was made more aware than ever that, where writing fiction is concerned, many are called but very few are chosen. One submission came from a New Jersey State Prison inmate, who wrote Yates a long letter admitting, gratuitously, that he wasn’t much of a writer, though he did have a number of salable ideas for a novel, all of which revolved around the same basic premise of a prisoner unjustly accused. No story was enclosed; what the man really wanted was advice: “Mr. Yates, how can I make sure that know one [sic] can use this story concerning me and this whole case? There are a few lawyers thinking about taking this story using it for motion picture.”

When the drudgery and waiting got him down, Yates could indulge in the “serene and majestic daydreams” that had sustained him as a hopeful apprentice and now seemed on the verge of realization. In January *Revolutionary Road* was named one of the eleven finalists for the National Book Award, along with such strong contenders as Heller’s *Catch-22*, Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker*, and an obscure first novel called *The Moviegoer* by a forty-five-year-old physician named Walker Percy. Seymour Lawrence was guardedly hopeful—he knew for a fact that at least one of the three judges that year, Herbert Gold, was a big fan of *Revolutionary Road* (“the book was a shattering experience for him”), and meanwhile there was a growing consensus that such bestsellers as *Catch-22* and *Franny and Zooey* were, after all, ludicrously overrated. Yates emphatically agreed.

After the award ceremony on March 13, Yates and his fellow nominee Ed Wallant went away to commiserate. They were disappointed but philosophical: *The Moviegoer* was a good book and Percy seemed a nice guy, but both had come to believe they had a real chance. Then, two days later, Gay Talese reported in the *New York Times*

that writer Jean Stafford had, in effect, waylaid her fellow NBA judges in favor of the underdog Percy. It was a story that, in bitter moments, struck Yates as all too plausible. Though he later told interviewers that Stafford was “a beautiful writer,” for private consumption he called her “a pathetic lush” and would often recount the story of how she’d derailed his career. According to his friend Dan Wakefield, the 1962 National Book Award was “a ‘Rosebud’ moment for Dick: If he’d won, his whole life would have been different.” To be sure, for a writer who often seemed almost self-destructively modest about his own work, Yates could be surprisingly vehement on the subject of the NBA. When a student later asked whether he’d “really wanted” it, Yates was incredulous: “Want it? Want it? Of course I wanted it, I wanted it so fucking bad I could taste it!”

At the time, though, Yates could afford to be stoical. A month before the ceremony he’d been summoned to the Plaza Hotel by John Frankenheimer. “Just to save you anxiety in the elevator,” the director told Yates on the house phone, “you have the job.” Faced with the staggering prospect of fifteen thousand dollars for a few months’ work—to adapt a novel he admired, no less—the impoverished freelancer comported himself with admirable poise in the great director’s presence. Amid a suiteful of name-dropping Hollywood types (“Who’s going to wet-nurse Warren [Beatty] on the set? I did last time,” etc.), Yates sat apart with Frankenheimer and explained his thoughts on Styron’s work. The director was “very favorably impressed”: “Dick was without subterfuge. Very direct and intelligent, no pretense at all. It was clear he loved *Lie Down in Darkness* and came well prepared to discuss it.”

Yates flew to Los Angeles in mid-March and spent a week or so as Frankenheimer’s guest in Malibu. On the plane he felt a bad cold coming on—always ominous for the consumptive Yates—and the milieu chez Frankenheimer was hardly conducive to a quick recovery. As he wrote the Schulmans, “I spent the first week in Frankenheimer’s palace by the sea, mostly in a state of continual drunken, shouting story conference with the man himself, while [actress] Evans Evans tiptoed discreetly around in her Mou-Mou [sic].” The whole episode is treated at length in “Saying Goodbye to Sally,” in which Frankenheimer appears as “Carl Oppenheimer”—“a dramatic, explosive, determinedly tough-talking man of thirty-two.” The portrait is not altogether flattering: Oppenheimer is an intellectually pretentious egomaniac who bullies his adoring girlfriend (“Ellie, can you check the kitchen and find out what the fuck’s happened to all the bouillon?”), and indeed Yates thought Frankenheimer overdid his flamboyant young genius persona. For the most part, though, Yates was struck by how well they got along: “Believe it or not, we made a happy household,” he reported to the Schulmans. Frankenheimer was also a divorced father of two daughters, and he obviously respected Yates’s accomplishment as a writer. Yates in turn rather envied the man’s relationship with Evans Evans—who, though a good sport and attractive enough, was hardly the kind of glamorous starlet Yates would have expected. It occurred to him that he, too, needed such a helpmeet.

Mainly Yates felt intimidated. Apart from the immediate domestic rapport, it was the Hollywood scene writ large: the great pad in Malibu, famous actors calling at

all hours for bizarre reasons, power brokers of all sorts coming and going. Yates had never written a screenplay before, and suspected that Frankenheimer—who could have hired anyone in Hollywood—might at any moment realize his mistake. But in fact the two men collaborated well together: The bombastic Frankenheimer found Yates “quite shy” in a pleasant, receptive way, and deferred to his views on literary matters, while Yates was “eager to absorb the whole screenwriting process” from Frankenheimer. Nor did Yates make himself conspicuous as a drinker: “We all drank,” said Frankenheimer. “We all behaved erratically. We weren’t prototypes for a brokerage firm. Besides, the Styron piece was really horrid, depressing—we’d both be depressed, and one of us would say ‘God, let’s have a drink.’ We had to boost each other up.” Best of all, there was no question of Yates’s having to compromise his artistic integrity in exchange for Hollywood lucre; both he and Frankenheimer agreed on a rigorously faithful adaptation of Styron’s novel, with due emphasis on its incest theme, and damn the censors. All this came as a great relief to the folks at home, some of whom wondered if success would spoil Dick Yates: soon after he left for Tinseltown, Sheila reported that she’d been accosted at a party by an almost total stranger, who demanded, “Do you think Hollywood is changing Dick’s values?” “Nobody, honest to God,” Yates assured the Schulmans, “has tried to corrupt me yet, which in a way is faintly disappointing—there’s nobody to hate, and nobody to blame if the picture turns out to be a mess. They all keep insisting that I have Absolute Freedom.” If anything the whole business seemed too good to be true, right down to the nature of the work itself, which Yates found “a remarkably easy and interesting kind of writing to do.”

Once he and Frankenheimer agreed on the “thrust” of the screenplay, Yates rented the ground floor of a tiny dilapidated beach house in a far more raffish section of Malibu. Like Jack Fields in “Saying Goodbye to Sally,” he almost immediately regretted his choice: “He didn’t realize until after moving in—and after paying the required three months’ rent in advance—that the place was very nearly as dismal and damp as his cellar in New York.” As if to convince himself that the glamour of his adventure hadn’t faded yet, Yates rented a sporty white convertible and stressed his shack’s better features in letters to friends. “Baby, this is Crazyville,” he wrote Ed Kessler. “Wobbling around here in a sleek little sunlit beach house while the Pacific thunders beyond my terrace.” To the Schulmans he admitted his lodgings were “about as big as 27 Seventh Ave.,” but at least the beach was private and it was “picturesque as all get-out, and reasonably cheap, too.” But the damp mildewy hovel didn’t agree with Yates’s lungs, and within a week his cold had developed into pneumonia. The doctor warned him about the possibility of a TB recurrence, and Jerry Schulman mailed a three-month supply of Isoniazid (“the drug I’ve been needling you about for three months”). Yates may or may not have bothered to take his medicine as prescribed, but anyway his health continued to be poor for at least a month or so.

Eleven Kinds of Loneliness was published a few days after Yates arrived in California, and geographical isolation seems to have enhanced his sense of detachment toward a

rather disappointing reception. "[The book] is Not Selling at All and being ignored by most New York critics," he wrote Kessler, "but getting excellent reviews in all the places that don't count—Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, etc." Yates told the Schulmans he was especially pleased by a Southern critic who'd compared the collection favorably to Hemingway and Fitzgerald: "He's probably some semiliterate cracker with tobacco-juice running down his chin, but it makes delightful reading all the same." Above all he was gratified by the fact that reviewers tended to single out "Builders" as the best story, an advance on the author's earlier work that indicated growth and the brilliant career to come. But very few seemed to think brilliance had already been established, and amply so, on the strength of his first two books.

Perhaps the most representative notice was Peter Buitenhuis's in the March 25, 1962 *New York Times Book Review*. Buitenhuis recognized many of Yates's virtues—pitch-perfect dialogue, "exact and memorable" details, the "unexpected rightness [of his endings] that is the peculiar reward of reading a first-rate story"—but like many critics then and after, he ultimately and rather perversely held Yates's craftsmanship against him. In an irony that might have struck the author as droll, Buitenhuis (and others) implied that Bernie Silver's hackneyed "Builders" metaphor constituted Yates's actual method for writing a well-made story: "Mr. Yates has submitted his considerable talent to the formula," Buitenhuis wrote, "and has been ground by the mill into mediocrity." Happily he thought that "Builders" was a hopeful sign Yates was moving away from "formulaic" O. Henry-like stories toward a more Chekhovian mode, whereby "the situation grows naturally out of the characters" rather than vice versa.

Other reviews offered a thumbnail sketch of the conventional arguments that tend to be marshaled for and against Yates's work. Richard Sullivan in the *Chicago Tribune* could no more resist the "Builders" metaphor than Buitenhuis, but at least he used it to express a kind of stolid approval: "Each story stands on its own. Each is written with its own care and its own craft. Each is a sturdy structure in revealing prose." Some took Yates to task for his "limited" range—a charge leveled at everything from the artful economy of his plots to the mediocre character types to a repetitive bleakness of theme. Hollis Alpert of the *Saturday Review* wondered "why, over the span of ten years in which [the stories] were written, Mr. Yates didn't explore farther," and J. C. Pine of *Library Journal* suggested that Yates needed "a larger canvas" lest "his vaunted 'compassion'" come across as mere "snobbery."

Perhaps the first indication that *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* would stand the test of time came almost two years later, when the critic Jacques Cabau wrote a long appreciation for the influential French weekly *L'Express*. "A Flaubert formed in the rough school of the magazine," the review was titled. Cabau called Yates "one of the hopes of his generation," and suggested that the perfection of his prose (even in translation) was the work of a slow, meticulous writer who "searches for hours for the exact word, and often finds it." Not surprisingly the Frenchman was especially pleased by Yates's insights into the hollowness of American life: "*Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*—a courageous theme in America, where loneliness is a sin, where success is obligatory and happiness is the first duty of every citizen." Such considered

praise, aimed at posterity, was long in coming on this side of the Atlantic, though an awareness of the book's excellence was—to repeat Richard Ford's phrase on the subject of *Revolutionary Road*—"a sort of cultural-literary secret handshake among its devotees." In 1978 Jonathan Penner noted in the *New Republic* that the collection "stands at the pinnacle of its genre," and three years later Robert Towers made an even more definitive claim in the *New York Times Book Review*: "the mere mention of its title is enough to produce quick, affirmative nods from a whole generation of readers . . . [it is] almost the New York equivalent of *Dubliners*."

The comparison to Joyce's masterpiece is not an idle one, and for that matter the two books have more in common than merit. Each evokes the ethos of a time and place in a peculiarly memorable way, and each reveals aspects of human weakness which are universal and abiding, but flourish better under certain conditions. It's no coincidence that the paralysis of Joyce's Dublin produced characters that might well be called Yatesian. In Joyce's "Counterparts," for example, the frustrated lout Farrington—whose humiliations as a bullied clerk can only be dispelled by violence ("The barometer of his emotional nature was set for a spell of riot")—is the spitting image of Yates's "B.A.R. Man," John Fallon, who returns from the war to find himself in a dismal world of underpaid office labor and a loveless marriage. At a slightly higher social level we find Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead," a kind of Irish Frank Wheeler who affects Continental sophistication in order to distance himself from his petty-bourgeois background—his arty aunts and "country cute" wife—but is finally revealed as "the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror." Postwar America and turn-of-the-century Dublin have niches in store for people like Fallon and Farrington, Conroy and Wheeler, and these tend to be commensurate with their limitations; enticed to act on their longings for something more, be it fame or fulfillment or simple human acceptance, they're exposed like the boy in "Araby"—as creatures "driven and derided by vanity."

The charge that Yates's range is "limited" is particularly unfair in regard to *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. Never again would Yates depict such a broad cross-section of society, from the welfare child Vincent Sabella to the expatriate Yalies Carson Wyler and Ken Platt, and all the lonely people in between. That he was constrained by the "formulaic" demands of magazine fiction is true, though one might as well say that a poet is constrained by the sonnet or a composer by the sonata. Yates's talent, like Salinger's, was honed by the necessary discipline of concision, sharply delineated characters, and a clear trajectory of beginning, middle, and end. Both authors would later allow themselves the luxury of "a larger canvas" in their not-so-short fiction—looser dialogue and plots, more ambiguity—and in one case the result was not especially fortunate.

But given only four or five thousand words to tell a story, Yates learned to be ruthless in restricting himself only to the most resonant details. The bleakness of Vincent Sabella's life, for example, is imparted by a single image: "Clearly, he was from the part of New York that you had to pass through on the train to Grand Central—the part where people hung bedding over their windowsills and leaned

out on it all day in a trance of boredom, and where you got vistas of straight, deep streets . . . all swarming with gray boys at play in some desperate kind of ball game." As for the characters themselves, Yates sketched them with a few deft strokes; rather like the more contradictory, lingered-over Wheelers, they are both stylized types and nobody but themselves. Thus Leon Sobel, the former sheet-metal worker with writerly pretensions in "A Wrestler with Sharks," is aptly described as "a very small, tense man with black hair that seemed to explode from his skull and a humorless thin-lipped face . . . His eyebrows were always in motion when he talked, and his eyes, not so much piercing as anxious to pierce, never left the eyes of the listener."

When critics call Yates "limited" what they often mean is not that he worries too much about "building" his stories according to some formulaic blueprint, but rather that (*pace* Bernie Silver's instructions) he doesn't put enough windows in. Readers want more light, more hope and moral uplift, not such an unremittingly "limited" view of frustration and failure. Few if any writers can make the reader wince the way Yates can: On the tenth reading it's still uncomfortable to read the passage in "A Really Good Jazz Piano" where Carson humiliates Sid; or when Leon Sobel produces his pitifully pretentious newspaper column (with "a small portrait of himself in his cloth hat" clipped to the top); or when Vincent adds "a triangle of fiercely scribbled pubic hair" to his otherwise loving graffito of Miss Price; or when John Fallon's better-paid wife makes him come back to the table and drink his milk ("you're the one that makes me *buy* milk"), and a page later he avenges himself by scornfully waving a padded bra "in her startled face." Readers who deplore this kind of thing believe Yates is more cruel than compassionate, but this is rather beside the point. As Richard Russo noted in his introduction to the *Collected Stories*, Yates leaves out the "windows" because "he believes this light to be a lie." In real life the light seeps in, if at all, "through whatever chinks and cracks have been left in the builder's faulty craftsmanship"—and certainly Yates, *qua* builder, makes allowance for such occasional rays: hence the grace that allows Ken Platt to recognize a kindred loneliness in his friend's eyes; or Leon Sobel's loving wife who believes in him no matter what; or the memory of being "a damn good B.A.R. man" that will have to suffice for the rest of Fallon's mediocre, loutish life.

"The truth is a funny thing," as Leon Sobel says. "People wanna read it, but they only wanna read it when it comes from somebody they already know their name." Perhaps, but not necessarily in the case of Richard Yates: readers who already knew his name as the author of the depressing *Revolutionary Road*—that is to say, readers who were keen for diversion amid the grim uncertainties of the cold war—might have decided to give *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* a miss, while those who didn't know Yates at all plumped in favor of Updike's *Pigeon Feathers*. In any case the stories didn't sell despite a number of excellent reviews in the provincial press. When Yates's agent fired off an angry letter to Seymour Lawrence demanding a full-page ad—the kind of treatment Updike was getting—the hapless man demurred: the "economics of publishing" wouldn't permit it, he explained, and the Updike situation was "by no means comparable" since the latter had received front-page reviews all over the

country; for Yates they'd already spent almost a dollar a copy on advertising, and distributed 543 gift copies to reviewers, critics, authors, and booksellers. But the total sale had petered out at around two thousand, and there it was.

Yates took the news remarkably well, though he did venture to inquire why he couldn't find the book anywhere in Greater Los Angeles. Lawrence replied that at least seven area bookstores had ordered copies, and added a bit of heavy humor to ease the strain: "They're there, and now all you have to do is persuade those starlets and tycoons to buy them. But do they read out there?"

The last week in March, while laid up with pneumonia, Yates set aside work on his screenplay to make a final selection for the Bantam anthology. By then he was thoroughly sick of the whole business—in his introduction he wrote that he'd begun to develop "a kind of literary snow-blindness" amid the "blizzard of manuscripts"—but fairly satisfied with the result: He'd managed to cull fifteen good stories out of the five thousand submitted, and also sent thirty-five runners-up just in case. Rust Hills was "quite impressed" by Yates's selection, though he did decide to rearrange the top two prizewinners so that a quirky, formless story called "Two Semesters at Wagner Inn" got first place instead of George Cuomo's more conventional "A Part of the Bargain." The anthology was titled *Stories for the Sixties* ("Here are some of the writers you'll watch for in the Sixties," trumpets the cover blurb), and Yates's introduction was a precise summary of his own principles, whatever the decade:

There are, I believe, no sentimental stories in this collection. None of them betrays the uncomfortable sound of an author trying to speak in a voice that is not his own, nor is there any in which the voice is not worth listening to. . . . It might be tempting to look for literary trends in these fifteen stories, or to draw conclusions from them about contemporary ways of seeing Man and Society, but that's a risky business better left to scholars and critics. For an editor, it's enough to know that they encompass a healthy variety of style and content, that each writer has accomplished what he set out to do, and that what he set out to do was neither false nor trivial.

Fair enough, though readers who watched for these particular writers in the sixties or any other decade were bound to be somewhat disappointed. Of the fifteen, only one would become at all well-known: Judith Rossner, author of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. George Cuomo and Helen Hudson (a former New School student of Yates) would go on to have productive if rather obscure careers, while another, Silvia Tennenbaum, wrote a commercial novel titled *Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife*.

After Yates's first hectic month in California, he was perhaps too exhausted to feel proper elation at the news that he'd won a Guggenheim in the amount of \$4,500. He was deflated further by the fact that his friend and fellow NBA-nominee Ed Wallant had just gotten a Guggenheim for \$6,000, and had kited off to Rome after submitting his third and fourth novels simultaneously. Yates was gleeful when he got word that both manuscripts had been rejected pending further revision ("Maybe the little bastard will now begin to learn that it's difficult to write good novels"), but shocked

into taking a kinder view a few months later, when Wallant died suddenly of a brain aneurysm at thirty-six. "It was almost as if he knew he didn't *have* much time," Yates remarked in a later interview, having noted his friend's hasty working methods.

Yates himself, of course, couldn't help but work with agonizing care, which was hardly the sort of thing his present employers had in mind. "At the rate Yates is going he will complete [the screenplay] about the time we land the first Astronaut on the moon," Malcolm Stuart, his Hollywood agent, reported in May. Meanwhile Yates was "discovering endless problems" in adapting the novel he admired so much: "How can you expect an audience to sit through two hours of unrelieved heartbreak without breaking up into peals of derisive laughter?" he wrote the Schulmans. "The really ludicrous part is that I'm going to damn sure have to figure it out before July first or my economic ass will be dragging again—I don't get another paycheck until I've turned in the first draft, and July first is when my dough runs out."

By then Yates was already disenchanted with the whole "diseased" Hollywood milieu, even more so than he'd pessimistically anticipated. It had taken all of two months for his stock as a screenwriter to drop—for his agent to mock his dilatory progress, for his phone to quit ringing while Frankenheimer et al. got on with their high-powered lives—but no matter how bored, lonely, and disgusted he felt, Yates hardly thought he'd find much comfort in whatever "friendships" he managed to make in Hollywood. "Don't think I'm neglecting you, sweetheart," he wrote a friend, the artist Bob Parker:

Matter of fact I happened to mention your name to Jerry Wald just the other day—we were grabbing a bite in the Commissary with Frank and Dean and Shirley and some of the group—and I said Jerry, you know why your last four pictures bombed? . . . I said Jerry, you're weak artwise—costumes, set design, the whole schmier. I said Jerry, it so happens I'm personally acquainted with the all-time greatest little art talent of our generation. I said You know the way Judy puts over a song? I said You know the way Marlon puts over a scene? I said Well that's the way this kid puts over a painting . . . Kid out in Carmel, New York, name of Bobby Andy Parker.

Jerry just looked at me. He said Dick baby you know what I love about you? He said if there's one thing I love about you it's your loyalty to your friends; right, Frank? Frank said That's right, Jerry, that's Dick's whole action: loyalty. Dean said That's right, Frank. Shirley kind of cuddled up and she said You can say that again, Dean. She said That's why we all love you, Dick; that's your whole action: loyalty. Very wonderful; very human; very warm.

Yates went on to write that Wald had rejected his overture in Parker's behalf ("he said Dick baby . . . in this industry you've got to be a businessman"), but begged Parker not to lose heart: he knew of an opening in the "Animation Department (Black & White)" at Disney, where the salary was \$67.50 a week, union scale, and in the meantime Yates would find him lodgings at a "very reasonable trailer park out in East L.A." And finally—lest Parker think the target of all this was something other than Hollywood phoniness—Yates added a conciliatory postscript: "This struck me as side-splittingly funny when I wrote it; now it seems much less so, and I'm haunted by visions of Dot saying 'Oh, that's mean.' But I'll mail it anyway because it represents hours of work. If it doesn't make you laugh you have my permission to roll it into a

tight cylinder and stick it up the nearest horse's ass." That Yates was willing to spend "hours" composing a clever letter to distant out-of-touch friends speaks volumes about his frame of mind.

Loneliness is perhaps the best way to explain Yates's affair with his agent's thirty-seven-year-old secretary, Catherine Downing, who later turned up as the title character in "Saying Goodbye to Sally." Sally Baldwin (née Munk) was born of working-class parents in an industrial California town, and the same may be assumed of Catherine Downing (née Meng) of Lomita, California. Downing was a well-spoken divorcée who did most of Malcolm Stuart's reading for him, and as such had read and admired *Revolutionary Road*. This was the basis of a flirtation that resulted in her "shacking-up" with Yates (as he later put it) for the rest of his stay in California. Yates was surprised to learn that Downing lived in a lavish replica of an old Southern mansion on Coldwater Canyon Drive in Beverly Hills, then a bit repelled as he began to see the whole picture: the owner of the place was a promiscuous single mother who'd enticed Downing to live there not only as a friend but as "protective coloration" for the woman's sordid behavior despite the presence of a young son. For a while Yates was too relieved at having Downing's company to remonstrate much over this arrangement. Like Jack Fields in the story, he romanticized her struggle to rise above the poverty of her early life, and saw their affair as parallel to that of Fitzgerald and gossip columnist Sheilah Graham: "He knew she would never be Zelda; that was one of the ways he knew he loved her. Holding himself together every day for her, dying for a drink but staying away from it, putting what little energy he had into those sketchy opening chapters of *The Last Tycoon*, he must have been humbly grateful just to have her there."

Yates may have been humbly grateful, but he was hardly staying away from liquor for Downing's sake; indeed, he was rather hard pressed to keep up with her. Every night was pretty much the same for Downing and her drunken vulgarian friends, and she became ever more willing to linger among them as a way of putting off her return to Yates's mildewy Malibu hovel. After a few drinks Downing's charming facade would fade and she'd become like a parody of the trite Hollywood types Yates had come to despise: She'd use "fudgy little showbusiness" endearments such as "a very dear person" or "a very gutsy lady," and express amusement by laughing "as stridently as an unpopular schoolgirl over things he didn't think were funny at all." Despite such shortcomings, Yates considered Downing a worthwhile if limited person, a pathetic victim of her environment, and the two stayed in occasional contact for years to come. But he had no illusions about her (and perhaps vice versa) after that first stay in California: three years later, back in Hollywood, Yates alluded to Downing as a cautionary figure while advising another young woman, "You need to get out of here *now*."

After a busy and somewhat chaotic five months, Yates finally submitted a finished screenplay in August. All agreed that it had been worth the wait. "You didn't leave anything for *me* to do," Frankenheimer laughed, noting that Yates had specified almost

every conceivable nuance, visual and otherwise, in written form; but then, too, the director had to concede that Yates's choices were inspired. Most gratifying was the reaction of Styron, who thought the adaptation a work of considerable brilliance in itself; for years he advocated its production as a film, and when the screenplay was published by Ploughshares in 1985, Styron helped promote the event with a public reading. Back in 1962, though, such praise was so much gravy for Yates: United Artists had tentatively scheduled production for the following year—starring Henry Fonda and Natalie Wood in the roles of Milton and Peyton Loftis—whereupon Yates would receive “a whole new avalanche of money.”

The money was his foremost concern, of course, since Yates had no particular ambition to become a famous screenwriter; and years later, typically, he'd see fit to deprecate his work on *Lie Down in Darkness*. “Good novels—let's say great novels—have almost never been adapted into good movies,” he observed, explaining that in the case of Styron's work there were a number of “subtleties that would inevitably have been lost in the translation.” That said, he did single out a favorite moment in his screenplay—when Helen Loftis admits to the minister Carey Carr that she doesn't know what God is, and he replies “God is love.” “Then, *wham*,” said Yates,

instantly there's a cut to the blinding hot sunshine of the Daddy Faith parade . . . and you see these two white-robed blacks carrying a big satin banner that reads GOD IS LOVE. I think that might've been pretty effective. Here's Carey delivering himself of what he thinks is a profound philosophical statement, and then you see these crazy, ignorant Daddy Faith people carrying the same message, and it undercuts it and makes it meaningless for you as well as for Helen.

In fact Yates's adaptation is full of such apposite effects; as George Bluestone noted in his introduction to the published screenplay, Yates skirted such typical pitfalls as voice-over narration (“delivering great globs of Styron's prose”) in favor of finding, always, some exact visual or aural equivalent.

Perhaps the main challenge that Yates's work poses for any ego-driven auteur is how to bring something other than technical facility to the making of a movie that, as Frankenheimer put it, “is all there on the page.” Yates took pains to describe facial expressions, sound effects, and camera angles, all of which work to convey in cinematic terms the maximum possible meaning and mood of a given scene. For example, when the jealous Helen scolds her daughter Peyton before Christmas dinner, the stage-directions indicate that Milton's “light, tinny, inexperienced” xylophone music (which he plays for the feeble-minded Maudie in order to appear a doting father) be heard throughout the scene. The “music” suggests not only the dissonance between the actual and feigned causes of Helen's rage, but also the gruesome awkwardness of the whole family gathering, the childishness of Milton's not-so-furtive infatuation with Peyton—and so on, level on level. Likewise, Yates managed to find subtle solutions for the novel's alternating points of view, as when the drunken Milton attends the UVA football game in hope of finding Peyton; for the establishing shots, Yates specified “intentional newsreel clichés” (a roisterous crowd, players trotting out

on the field, and so on), to provide contrast with the same scene as Milton sees it: "narrow concrete steps leading straight down, in dizzying perspective . . . a cheering man's wide-open mouth full of chewed hot dog." Such images suggest a drunkard's viewpoint and more—a sense of foreboding, the grotesquerie of a world bereft of hope or moral center.

Yates was faithful to the novel's episodic, nonlinear structure, which he tightened as much as possible with cuts, dissolves, and motifs linking discrete episodes into a symphonic whole. Perhaps the most structurally crucial sequence in the screenplay is the one leading up to its first climactic plot point, when Milton and the prepubescent Peyton climb the bell tower together. Here as elsewhere Yates evoked character and theme with precise visual economy: after Milton persuades Peyton to apologize for tormenting her sister, the screenplay indicates an immediate cut to father and daughter singing a silly song in the car, like two gleeful children involved in a successful conspiracy; then, as they climb the bell tower, they pause near the top to exchange a look that lingers, ominously, until the clappers fall with a denunciatory clamor to the tune of "Jesus Calls Us"—which we will hear again when Milton passionately kisses Peyton at her wedding, and still again when Peyton climbs the stairs (a *visual* parallel) to commit suicide. Thus Yates suggested the main thematic conflict between illicit love and convention (religious or social) without heavy-handed explication one way or the other, and used the best of Styron's material in doing so. Birds recur in the novel as symbols of flight and freedom, and so too at key points in Yates's version: pigeons fill the screen when the bell tower clock begins to whirl, and later, finally, a flock is disturbed by the fatal impact of Peyton's fall.

Add the sheer perfection of Yates's prose, and the result is a finished work of art that (contrary to his later disclaimer) may well have amounted to a great movie adapted from a great novel. "God, it's good," Frankenheimer said forty years later of Yates's screenplay. "I'd *still* like to make that movie."

Sheila and Yates exchanged characteristic letters, at once fond and bickering, throughout his stay in California. "At a distance in time and space of four months and 3000 miles," she wrote, "perhaps we can lay it on the line to each other in a way that will either break the tie . . . or suggest a way to preserve it." For Sheila it was a question of giving up "old, reliable tranquility" for the possibility of a greater happiness, though she realized that disaster and disillusionment were far more probable. She pointed out that he'd be better off with a "literary-type girl," and made it clear that, if they did reunite, things would be different: "I will never—and I mean never—stay home again. Housewifery was my Remington Rand." Also she was "appalled" at the memory of having to clean up after Yates, but knew all too well what to expect: "Judging from your little flat, and your visit out here, [you] are less likely to keep the trash down than you were in the old days." Yates responded with a harsh letter to the effect that Sheila was "less wife than anybody [he could] think of," but later apologized and continued to press for a reconciliation on his return. By July Sheila seemed almost won over: she asked whether he'd like to settle in Danbury or the city—possibly go

back to Europe, even—and as late as mid-August she signed off with, “I love you (and miss you).” Then something happened to remind her, permanently this time, that all such prospects were hopeless.

California had been a draining experience for Yates, and two weeks at Bread Loaf seemed a perfect way to relax and savor his triumph before returning to New York and his novel. Indeed, the first week of the conference went remarkably well, though it was far from relaxing. Yates found himself the most celebrated writer on the faculty, a figure of considerable romantic appeal: tall and handsome, still tan from his stint in Hollywood, the embodiment of literary glamour—looks, talent, money. Copies of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* were snapped up by the conferencees (particularly female), many of whom also regarded Yates as the most scintillating lecturer. He discussed, variously, his experience adapting *Lie Down in Darkness*, the matter of tragic design, the influence of Conrad on Fitzgerald (the peripheral narrator, the “dying fall”), and certain postwar American novels he’d take on a “tight boat”—*The Naked and the Dead*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Catcher in the Rye*. After his lectures Yates would return trembling to Treman Cottage, the applause ringing in his ears, and try to calm himself with massive amounts of alcohol. “I should, damn it, have known how much you were giving,” a rueful John Ciardi wrote to him afterward; “you were being so damned great, I guess I forgot everything but my directorial gloat over the way you were rocking the Great Hall.”

Yates’s breakdown at the 1962 Bread Loaf conference became part of the permanent lore of the place, but details are sketchy at best—a lot of stale, contradictory impressions heard second and third hand from the principal witnesses, most of whom are dead. All agree that Yates was drinking too much, perhaps in an effort to mitigate the rampant pangs of mania—the exhilaration and paranoia, the sense of being stared at and discussed. Yates finally erupted into full-blown, roaring-drunk psychosis at Treman Cottage, where he seems insistently to have helped himself to other people’s liquor. When challenged about it (or not), Yates went berserk and began shouting. He apparently called an older woman on the faculty, whom he liked and who liked him, an “ugly fucking battle-ax.” Ultimately he thought he was becoming the Messiah (a common delusion of mania), and legend has it he clambered onto the roof of Treman and held out his arms as though crucified. He told Grace Schulman he remembered swinging from tree branches and naming his gawking students after Christ’s disciples, though it’s hard to imagine someone with Yates’s stamina exerting himself to that extent.

Ciardi and Dr. Irving Klompus, a guest at the conference, somehow managed to coax Yates down from the roof (or tree) and conduct him back to his room, where he was forcibly restrained and sedated. Yates was later under the impression that he’d abused Ciardi as a bad poet and dirty old man, but he appears to have made that much sense only to himself. “You can take my word for one thing,” Ciardi wrote him: “you did say some fairly hairy things to me in your room, but you weren’t sore at me. There was a lot of stuff you somehow had to get out but I’ll swear you were throwing it by me, not at me.” Typically at the height of his mania, Yates’s speech would become a kind of rapid-fire regurgitation of (seemingly) random verbiage—hence

Ciardi's impression that it "had to get out" and that it was mostly impersonal, that is, indecipherable; Yates was drunk as well as psychotic, after all. In any case he remained "convulsively distraught" (as one witness put it) until the ambulance arrived; a few students stood in the doorway and watched in horror. Seymour Lawrence's associate at Atlantic Monthly Press, Peter Davison, was backing out of the parking lot when he was startled by the sight of his firm's most promising author being led away in a straitjacket. It was a brilliantly sunny day.

As always, the worst came later. "After it's over I wince and wither," the poet Robert Lowell wrote apologetically to T. S. Eliot, whom he'd berated on the phone during a "feverish" episode of mania: "The whole business has been very bruising, and it is fierce facing the pain I have caused and humiliating [to] think that it has all happened before and that control and self-knowledge come so slowly, if at all." And so with Yates. After Bread Loaf he found himself at Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington, where he became so despondent with shame that a doctor predicted he'd kill himself within two years. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Wilder's response to the information that he is not the Messiah—rather just a man behaving oddly at Marlowe College in Vermont—may serve to evoke Yates's own devastation at such times: "That was when he started to cry, because what she said did have the ring of reality; and if this was real and all the rest was a dream, then he'd made a colossal fool of himself and everyone at Marlowe College knew it, or would know it soon." A number of prominent writers—including the ancient Robert Frost, no less—knew that Yates had behaved like a lunatic, perhaps *was* a lunatic, to say nothing of all the students who'd admired him. John Ciardi was a generous friend, and Yates had said awful things to him; ditto the woman he'd called "an ugly fucking battle-ax." And still that wasn't the worst of it. When Grace Schulman visited him at the hospital, she made the mistake of sharing a "recognition poem" she'd written based on Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, wherein the protagonist wakes from a spell of madness to learn he's murdered his wife and children. Yates became stricken: as would often be the case, his mania had left him with a terrible lingering delusion that he'd harmed his daughters, or would someday, and he felt helpless to do anything about it.

Sheila sympathized with her ex-husband's distress, but at the time she thought his problems were almost entirely alcohol-related, and mostly she was exasperated. "Any hope that we can work things out as husband and wife has gone," she wrote a few months after the breakdown, when Yates persisted in his visits to Danbury. "I have a sense that I have lost so many, many years, because I was unsure and lonely and confused. . . . If there's anything more you want to know, ask me, but please, by letter. When you put a thing on paper, sometimes you discover you already know the answer. Or maybe that there is no answer, which is the same thing."