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Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife

Sam Savage

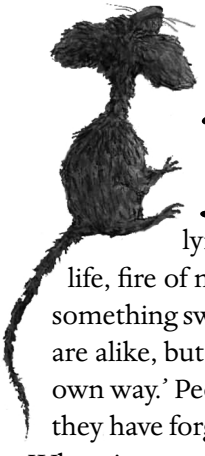
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Extract

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Chapter 1



I had always imagined that my life story, if and when I wrote it, would have a great first line: something lyric like Nabokov's 'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins'; or if I could not do lyric, then something sweeping like Tolstoy's 'All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' People remember those words even when they have forgotten everything else about the books. When it comes to openers, though, the best in my view has to be the beginning of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*: 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard.' I've read that one dozens of times and it still knocks my socks off. Ford Madox Ford was a Big One.

In all my life struggling to write I have struggled with nothing so manfully – yes, that's the word, *manfully* – as with openers. It has always seemed to me that if I could just get that bit right all the rest would follow automatically. I thought of that first sentence as a kind of semantic womb stuffed with the busy embryos of unwritten pages, brilliant little nuggets of genius practically panting to be born. From that grand vessel the entire story would, so to speak, ooze forth. What a delusion! Exactly the opposite was true. And it is not as if there weren't any good ones. Savor this, for example:

'When the phone rang at 3:00 a.m. Morris Monk knew even before picking up the receiver that the call was from a dame, and he knew something else too: dames meant trouble.' Or this: 'Just before being hacked to pieces by Gamel's sadistic soldiers, Colonel Benchley had a vision of the little whitewashed cottage in Shropshire, and Mrs Benchley in the doorway, and the children.' Or this: 'Paris, London, Djibouti, all seemed unreal to him now as he sat amid the ruins of yet another Thanksgiving dinner with his mother and father and that idiot Charles.' Who can remain unimpressed by sentences like these? They are so pregnant with meaning, so, I dare say, poignant with it that they positively bulge with whole unwritten chapters – unwritten, but there, already there!

Alas, in reality they were nothing but bubbles, illusions every one. Each of the wonderful phrases, so full of promise, was like a gift-wrapped box clutched in a small child's eager hand, a box that holds nothing but gravel and bits of trash, though it rattles oh so enticingly. He thinks it is candy! I thought it was literature. All those sentences – and many, many others as well – proved to be not springboards to the great unwritten novel but insurmountable barriers to it. You see, they were too *good*. I could never live up to them. Some writers can never equal their first novel. I could never equal my first sentence. And look at me now. Look how I have begun this, my final work, my opus: 'I had always imagined that my life story, if and when . . .' Good God, 'if and when'! You see the problem. Hopeless. Scratch it.

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This is the saddest story I have ever heard. It begins, like all true stories, who knows where. Looking for the beginning is like trying to discover the source of a river. You paddle upstream for months under a burning sun, between towering green walls of dripping jungle, soggy maps disintegrating in your hands. You are driven half mad by false hopes, malicious swarms of biting insects, and the tricks of memory, and all you reach at the end – the ultima Thule of the whole ridiculous quest – is a damp spot in the jungle or, in the case of a story, some perfectly meaningless word or gesture. And yet, at some more or less arbitrary place along the way between the damp spot and the sea the cartographer inserts the point of his compass, and there the Amazon begins.

It is the same with me, cartographer of the soul, when I look for the beginning of my life story. I close my eyes and stab. I open them and discover a fluttering instant impaled on my compass point: 3:17 p.m. on the thirtieth of April, 1961. I scrunch up my eyes and bring it into focus. Moment, moment on a pin, where's the fellow with no chin? And there I am – or, rather, there I was – peering cautiously out over the edge of a balcony, just the tip of my nose and one eye. That balcony was a good spot for a looker, a sly peerer like me. From it I could survey the whole shop floor and yet not be seen by any of the people below. That day the store was crowded, more customers than usual for a weekday, and their murmurs floated pleasantly up. It was a beautiful spring



afternoon, and some of these people had probably been out for a stroll, thinking about this and that, when their inattention was diverted by a large hand-painted sign in the store window: 30% OFF ALL PURCHASES OVER $20. But I wouldn't really know about that, I mean about what might have attracted them into the store, since I have had no actual experience with the exchange value of money. And indeed the balcony, the store, the customers, even the spring, require explanations, digressions that, however necessary, would wreck the pace of my narrative, which I like to think of as headlong. I have obviously gone too far – in my enthusiasm to get the whole thing going I have overshot the mark. We may never know where a story begins, but we sometimes can tell where it *cannot* begin, where the stream is already in full flood.

I close my eyes and stab again. I unfold the fluttering instant and pin its wings to the desk: 1:42 a.m., November 9, 1960. It was cold and damp in Boston's Scollay Square, and poor ignorant Flo – whom I would know shortly as Mama – had taken refuge in the basement of a shop on Cornhill. In her great fright she had somehow contrived to squeeze herself into the far end of a very narrow slot between a large metal cylinder and the concrete wall of the cellar, and she crouched there shaking with fear and cold. She could hear from up on the street level the shouts and laughter drifting away across the Square. They had almost had her that time – five men in sailor suits, stamping and kicking and shouting like crazy people. She had been zigzagging this way and that – fool them as to your

intention, hope they crash into each other – when a polished black shoe caught her a blow to the ribs that sent her flying across the sidewalk.

So how did she escape?

The way we always escape. By a miracle: the darkness, the rain, a crack in a doorway, a misstep by a pursuer. *Pursuit and Escape in America's Oldest Cities*. In the scramble of her panic she had managed to get all the way around behind the curved metal thing, so that only a faint glow reached her from the lighted basement, and there she crouched a long time without moving. She closed her eyes against the pain in her side and focused her mind instead on the delicious warmth of the cellar that was rising slowly through her body like a tide. The metal thing was deliciously warm. Its enameled smoothness felt soft, and she pressed her trembling body up against it. Perhaps she slept. Yes, I am sure of it, she slept, and she woke refreshed.

And then, timid and uncertain, she must have crept from her cave out into the room. A faintly humming fluorescent lamp hanging by a pair of twisted wires from the ceiling cast a flickering bluish light on her surroundings. On *her* surroundings? What a laugh! On my surroundings! For all around her, everywhere she looked, were books. Floor to ceiling against every wall as well as against both sides of a counter-high partition that ran down the center of the room stood unpainted wooden shelves into which rows of books had been jammed to bursting. Other books, mostly taller volumes, had been wedged in flat on top of these, while

still others rose in towering ziggurats from the floor or lay in precarious stacks and sloping piles on top of the partition. This warm musty place where she had found refuge was a mausoleum of books, a museum of forgotten treasures, a cemetery of the unread and unreadable. Old leatherbound tomes, cracked and mildewed, rubbed shoulders with cheap newer books whose yellowing pages had gone brown and brittle at the edges. There were Zane Grey westerns by the saddleload, books of lugubrious sermons by the casketful, old encyclopedias, memoirs of the Great War, diatribes against the New Deal, instruction manuals for the New Woman. But of course Flo did not know that these things were books. *Adventures on the Planet Earth*. *I* enjoy picturing her as she peers about at this strange landscape – her kind, worn face, her stout body, no, her rotund body, the glittering, hunted eyes, and the cute way she has of wrinkling her nose. Sometimes, just for fun, I put a little blue kerchief on her and knot it at the chin, and then *adorable* says it all. Mama!

High in one wall were two small windows. The panes were grimed black with soot and hard to see through, but she could make out that it was still night. She could also hear the quickening pace of the traffic in the street and knew from long habit that another workday was set to begin. The shop above would be opening, perhaps people would be coming down the steep wooden steps into the basement. People down the steps, maybe man-people, big feet, big shoes. *Thump*. She had to hurry, and – let's



have this out now – not just because she was not keen on being caught by the sailors and kicked again or worse. She had to hurry especially because of the huge thing that was going on inside of her. Well, not a thing exactly, though there were indeed things inside of her (thirteen of them), more like a process, the sort of happening that people, with their enormous sense of humor, call a Blessed Event. A Blessed Event was about to occur, there was no question about it. The only question is, whose blessed event was it? Hers? Or mine? For most of my life I was convinced it had to have been anybody's but mine. But leaving me aside – oh, if only I could! – and returning to the situation in the basement: there was the Blessed Event on the verge of happening, and the question was what Flo (Mama) was going to do about it.

Well, I'll tell you what she did about it.

She went over to the shelf nearest the little cave in back of the warm metal thing and pulled down the biggest book she could get her paws on. She pulled it out and opened it, and holding a page down with her feet she tore it into confetti with her teeth. She did this with a second page, and a third. But here I detect a doubt. How, I hear you asking, do I know that she chose the *biggest* book? Well, as Jeeves likes to say, it is a question of the psychology of the individual, who in this case is Flo, my impending mother. 'Rotund' was, I fear, too kind. She was disgustingly overweight, and just the daily grind of stoking all that fat had made her horribly edgy. Edgy and piggy. Urged on by the voracious clamor of millions of starving cells, she was

always sure to grab the biggest slice of anything, even if she was already stuffed to the gills and could only nibble at the edges. Spoiled it for everyone else, of course. So rest assured, the biggest volume around is the one she went for.

Sometimes I like to think that the first moments of my struggle toward existence were accompanied, as by a triumphal march, by the shredding of *Moby-Dick*. That would account for the extreme adventurousness of my nature. At other times, when I am feeling particularly outcast and freakish, I am convinced that *Don Quixote* is the culprit. Just listen to this: 'In short, he so immersed himself in those romances that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason. Having lost his wits completely, he stumbled upon the oddest fancy that had ever entered a madman's brain. He believed that it was necessary, both for his own honor and the service of the state, that he should become a knight-errant.' Behold the Knight of Rueful Figure: fatuous, pigheaded, clownish, naive to the point of blindness, idealistic to the point of grotesqueness – and who is that if not me in a nutshell? The truth is, I have never been right in the head. Only I don't charge windmills. I do worse: I *dream* of charging windmills, I *long* to charge windmills, and sometimes even I *imagine* I have charged windmills. Windmills or the mills of culture or – let's say it – those most delectable of all unconquerable objects, those erotic grinders, lascivious little mills of lust, carnal factories of kinky joys,





fantasylands of frustrated fornicators, my Lovelies' own bodies. And what difference does it make in the end? A hopeless cause is a hopeless cause. But I won't obsess about that now. I'll obsess about it later.

Mama had made a huge pile of paper and with great effort was dragging and shoving it back into that little dark cavern she had found. And here we must not allow ourselves to become so distracted by the doleful cacophony of her portly grunts and wheezes as to lose sight of the fundamental question: where did all that paper come from? Whose broken words and shattered sentences did Mama churn into the indecipherable mélange that, moments later, would cushion my fall into existence? I am straining my eyes to see. It is very dark in that place where she has pushed the pile and where now she is busy stamping it down in the middle and humping it up at the edges, and I can see it clearly only by leaning over the precipice that is the moment I was born. I am looking down at it from a great height, screwing up my imagination into a kind of telescope. I think I see it. Yes, I recognize it now. Dear Flo has made confetti of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce was a Big One, maybe the Biggest One. I was birthed, bedded, and suckled on the defoliated carcass of the world's most unread masterpiece.

Mine was a large family, and soon thirteen of us were cruddled in its struins, to speak like itself, 'chippy young cuppinjars cluttering round, clottering for their creams.' (And after all these years, here I am hard at it still – clottering, dottering, for my creams, my crumbs. O dreams!) All of us were soon fighting it out over

twelve tits: Sweeny, Chucky, Luweena, Feenie, Mutt, Peewee, Shunt, Pudding, Elvis, Elvina, Humphrey, Honeychild, and Firmin (that's me, the thirteenth child). I remember them all so well. They were monsters. Even blind and naked, especially naked, their limbs bulged with sinew and muscle, or so it seemed to me at the time. I alone was born with my eyes wide open and clothed in a modest coat of soft gray fur. I was also puny. And take it from me, being puny is a terrible thing when you are little.

It had an especially damaging effect on my ability to participate fully in the feeding routine, which usually went something like this: Mama tumbles home to the basement from wherever it is she has been, in her customary foul mood. Grunting and complaining as if she were about to do something so heroic that no other mother in the history of the world had ever even thought of doing it, she flops down on the bed – *kerplop* – and falls instantly asleep, gape-mouthed and snoring and totally deaf to the chaos breaking out around her. Clawing, shoving, biting, squealing, all thirteen of us simultaneously dive for the twelve nipples. *Milk and Madness*. In this game of musical tits, I was almost always the one left standing. Sometimes I think of myself as He Who Was Left Standing. I have found that putting it that way helps. And even when I did occasionally manage to be first man on, I was soon muscled off by one of my more sinewy siblings. It's a miracle that I made it out of my family alive. As it was, I survived pretty much on leftovers. Even today, just by remembering, I can feel





again that awful sliding sensation as the nipple slips from my mouth, as I am dragged backward by my hind feet. People talk about despair as a hollow feeling in the gut or a coldness or a nausea, but to me it will always be that slipping-away feeling in my mouth and across my gums.

But what do I hear now? Is it silence, an *embarrassed* silence? You are pulling at your chin and thinking, 'Well, *that* explains everything. This character has spent his whole useless life just searching for the thirteenth tit.' And what can I say? Should I grovel and admit it? Or should I protest and cry out, 'Is that *all*? Is that really *all*?'