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PARADISE LOST, PARADISE REGAINED, AND THE HOTEL PARADISO

Though eclectic in my reading, biography as a genre doesn't really attract me. However, several lives of show business celebrities have recently appeared and I decided to see what I could learn about them. Do we read about famous people to see whether they're just like us only lucky? Do we want confirmation that they're really different from us? Do we take vicarious pleasure in seeing them corrupted by the money and fame? There but for the grace of God and Michael Eisner go I? Would celebrity convert me thus?

Rhinestone Cowboy, Glen Campbell's autobiography, qualifies as a conversion narrative. In it Campbell recounts his rise from impoverished Arkansas roots to magnificent Los Angeles fruition. In his rise was his fall, but never fear, Campbell tells us at the outset, God "never left me, even though I might have left him for a time" (xiv). That "for a time" encompasses some serious womanizing and prolonged drug use and drinking. The country boy with his feet in L.A. finally remembers that he knew Jesus (before he was a star) and becomes a one woman man. "God has been merciful to me even when I've been mean to myself," Campbell says. "But of all He's given me, there is nothing for which I'm more thankful than Kim."

Campbell's beginnings were in Billstown, Arkansas, a town so small that nobody knew where it was. Residents would tell people they came from De­light, a larger (pop. 290) town some four miles away. Though Campbell tries to tell us that as a star he never forgot his roots, he describes a childhood so impoverished no one would ever seek to return. "I'm like a lot of entertainers," Campbell notes, "especially the ones who sing country music or the blues: I grew up poor... The kind of poverty I knew as a boy wasn't really any kind of living. It was merely existing... On the survival scale, my family was just a step above the animals that we ate to stay alive" (5). The reader needs no further explanation of Campbell's ambition to leave Delight and never return. With the help of a sympathetic uncle, he teaches himself guitar. "Today, they would say I was a child prodigy. That word was never used in Billstown in 1940. They just said things like, 'That boy can sure play a guitar.'"

Campbell expresses some obligatory nostalgia for his upbringing, saying things like "my dad and his country wisdom comprise my fondest childhood memories." Such fondness perhaps softens his recollection of the frequent beatings he endured from the paternal font of country wisdom. Punishment in Delight was physical, prolonged, and painful. Campbell only ceased fistfighting when he realized damage to his hands could end his musical career.

At age fifteen Campbell leaves school and departs for Wyoming with his Uncle Eugene Campbell where they will play roadhouses and honky-tongs until forced to retire because the younger Campbell's age bars his presence in such establishments. Campbell perseveres and gradually makes his way to Los Angeles where his talent and versatility gain him access to session musician work and ultimately to television. He fills in with the Beach Boys and other noted acts of the 1950s and '60s. Monetary success attends his efforts; he sets out to live the Hollywood style to its fullest. He garnishes his narrative with anecdotes about life in Hollywood, adventures on the road, marital troubles, and personal indulgences that threaten to overwhelm him. "I'm not making excuses for what I did," he tells us, "but my judgment and values were distorted because of the alcohol and cocaine" (143).

Campbell finishes his autobiography as, in his words, "the new Glen Campbell." He appears regularly on the Christian Broadcast Network and Pat Robertson's 700 Club. He claims to possess a ministry in his music which he
performs for God. Given his origins, and the beginning chapters are the most powerful in Campbell’s story, who would deny him the right to stand before audiences in Branson, Missouri’s “Glen Campbell Goodtime Theatre” and end his show as he says he always does singing ‘Amazing Grace.’

“Someday Kristi,” Mia Farrow tells her college student nanny, “you can write your own book about all this” (11). A graceful offer not to be resisted, Kristi Groteke tells what her book’s dust jacket hypes as the first true insider’s story of Ms. Farrow’s legal battle with filmmaker Woody Allen, her lover for thirteen years, for the custody of their biological and adopted children. The facts of all this concern Mr. Allen’s liaison with Soon-yi, Ms. Farrow’s adopted daughter, and Ms. Farrow’s subsequent allegation that Mr. Allen had molested another daughter, Dylan, in August 1992. On June 7, 1993 a court did in fact award Ms. Farrow custody, much to Mr. Allen’s bitter and continuing dismay. (He has just recently announced that should he not receive legal vindication, he will produce a film offering his side of the story.)

Ms. Groteke enters Ms. Farrow’s Bridgewater, Connecticut household as a player in Summer Vacation and finds herself Alice in Wonderland chronicling the Brady Bunch. The penumbra of these facts as Ms. Groteke relates them casts two self-absorbed celebrities, personally and professionally united, who attempt to ruin one another.

In January 1992, while waiting for Mr. Allen in his Manhattan apartment, Ms. Farrow discovers compromising photographs of Mr. Allen and Soon-yi, her 21-year-old adopted daughter. She later tells Ms. Groteke that the photos had been left in a conspicuous place on the fireplace mantel, that Mr. Allen must have intended she find them. One is not inclined to disbelieve her. Though Ms. Groteke wasn’t told until June 1992 about Mr. Allen’s affair with his ‘daughter,’ Ms. Farrow had told her in January that something was sufficiently wrong to require changing the houselocks and phone number. “Whatever secret dramas were being played out that winter, Woody still came by to see Mia and the kids regularly, so I figured they were trying to work their problems through” (76). But with Ms. Farrow’s accusation, made on August 4, 1992, that Mr. Allen had molested another daughter, the eight year old Dylan, any further attempts to work through the problems ceased. In fact, since the molestation occurred on a day when Ms. Groteke had charge of the younger children, she, to her dismay, found herself a player in the drama. Ms. Farrow’s children, Dylan and Satchel, unwilling performers, decide sometime in 1993 to change their names. Dylan chooses Eliza “because she was so charmed by Audrey Hepburn’s performance as Eliza Doolittle in the movie My Fair Lady” (216). Satchel, Allen and Farrow’s only biological son, selects Harmon, a name he found in his mother’s Filofax list of names for new adoptions. Ms. Groteke tells us that Mr. Allen was furious about the name changes, though the childrens’ therapists “felt that these changes might help them put the bad times behind them” (216). Tellingly, Dylan hits upon the name of our modern Pygmalion, the woman molded and trained by an older man whom she loves but who can not and will not marry her. Small wonder Mr. Allen was furious at her choice. Satchel, whom Allen had named after Satchel Paige, selects a name which suggests his yearning for the harmony no longer evident in his parents’ increasingly discordant relationship.

During her court testimony, Ms. Farrow reveals how she thought of her role in the drama. She had likened herself to Hecuba, Queen of Troy, in Euripides’ The Trojan Women, a comparison she had apparently first suggested in conversation with a Dr. Schultz, Dylan’s therapist. The doctor had, Ms. Farrow told the court, misunderstood her, believing that she had referred to the violence done the women in the tragedy. Quite otherwise, Ms. Farrow explained; she had been thinking of Hecuba’s ‘struggle to maintain her moral roots and I felt during this period of time that that was an issue for me... I explained to Dr. Schultz what the moral dilemma was, and that Hecuba had been unsuccessful” (205). Ms. Farrow casts herself as the desolated Queen crying “O children hear me; it is your mother who calls.”

Mr. Allen can hardly be cast as a tragic figure. Ms. Groteke presents Mr. Allen as a case of life imitating art, and the art standing as a record of his life. She yields Mr. Allen no sympathy, and truth to tell, he probably deserves none. For Mr. Allen, at Frog Hollow with Ms. Farrow and the children, everything’s coming up neuroses. He tries to depict himself as wrongly and spitefully accused of molesting Dylan. But Mr. Allen’s affair with Soon-yi is fact and places him in a role quite other than the nerdy, neurotic persona so familiar to us from his films. Mr. Allen’s liaison with Soon-yi, rather than recalling any of his film characters, brings to mind his short story, “The Klugelmass Episode,” where the narrator is invited by Klugelmass to enter a futuristic contraption that can place him in the scene of any book he chooses. The narrator chooses Madame Bovary, has an affair with Emma, brings her to Manhattan, takes her back to Youville, and promises to return and liberate her from the boring, provincial town forever. Unfortunately, the machine malfunctions on the return trip and imbeds the narrator in a remedial Spanish text. Perhaps he came across Cervantes’ epigram “Es un entrevero loco, lleno de lucidos intervalos” [He’s a muddled fool, full of lucid intervals]. As it happens, this pretty much captures Ms. Groteke’s sense of him.

And what of Ms. Groteke? When the trial has ended and Ms. Farrow has been awarded custody of the children, Ms. Groteke knows she has to move on. For all her admiration of Ms. Farrow, deep down Ms. Groteke understands that her
employer has perhaps not been much changed by her experience. "As extraordinary as Mia is," observes Ms. Groteke, "she seemed to have a need to be less intelligent, less moral, less powerful than Woody and Woody had a need to make her feel that way. In the end these two extraordinary people were not immune to the same power plays that are common to so many ordinary couples." Like Alice emerging from Wonderland, Ms. Groteke finds her experience "curiouser and curiouser."

In the midst of her custody battle, Ms. Farrow flies to Hollywood to audition for the female lead in Wolf which was to star Jack Nicholson, himself the subject of a recent biography by Patrick McGilligan. Nicholson's celebrity dates from 1969's Easy Rider where Nicholson as George Hanson looks at Billy and says "You know—this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's going wrong with it." Nicholson travels a long road between Easy Rider's George Hanson and A Few Good Men's Colonel Jessup whose take on America may not be so different but whose tone covers the distance. Along the way, Nicholson has played more than his share of memorable roles: Bobby Dupea, Buddinsky, J. J. Gittes, Randle P. McMurphy, Jack Torrance, Garrett Breedlove, Daryl van Horne, Francis Phelan, the Joker, Jimmy Hoffa, and my personal favorite, Charlie Partanna. He has shared the screen with extraordinary people were not immune to the same power plays that are common to so many ordinary couples" (256). Like Alice emerging from Wonderland, Ms. Groteke finds her experience "curiouser and curiouser."

McGilligan hinges his biography on a revelation that Nicholson's parents were not John J. and Ethel May Nicholson as the actor himself supposed at least until 1974. His mother was in fact June Nicholson, John J's and Ethel's daughter, who had had an affair with either a dancing instructor named Eddie King or a dancer named Don Furlillo-Rose. These doubtful antecedents allow McGilligan to present Nicholson's films as attempts by the actor to develop an identity for himself through his character parts. We're told that when Nicholson learned from his sister Lorraine the facts of his paternity, he was so stunned by the news that he became disoriented, telling Mike Nichols — then directing him in The Fortune — "that he had been thrown by a personal revelation." McGilligan's readers must remind themselves to be wary of this tendency to regard Nicholson's film roles as the actor's attempts to fill some psychological void. Thirty-seven years old in 1974, Nicholson was well along in his career when he learned the void existed.

Like Glen Campbell, Nicholson is driven by a desire to escape where he knew he was from. The New Jersey shore. "You have no idea what it's like living in New Jersey," Nicholson told a reporter, "until you move out of it, really. In many ways it is the most futile state in the nation" (71). McGilligan writes that Nicholson "embraced Los Angeles from the start" and quotes the actor as having said "people comically impugn the L. A. sensibility. They think it's kookie. But it's based on breadth. We have an open view of things that comes out of the topography" (75). Los Angeles released Nicholson from restraint and constraint, a release his womanizing and drug use have made notorious. Yet the release worked side by side with discipline, for Nicholson is nothing if not a disciplined performer, meticulously crafting the details of his roles. So when McGilligan comments on Nicholson's remarks about L. A., saying "it was a city of opportunity, the place where movies were dreamed up, and where people acted out their dreams," he reduces the play between person and setting, what D. H. Lawrence called the "spirit of place," to a cliche. Too bad really, for the facts of Nicholson's life show someone fleeing the futility of cliches. Rather than spend time with the 400 plus pages of this 'blockbuster' biography, I recommend a trip to Blockbuster Video for a copy of your favorite Nicholson film.

What do these lives teach us about celebrity? The latest Donald Westlake, Baby, Would I Lie?, set in—of all places—Branson, Missouri maybe speaks for all of us when the narrator says "country-music fans don't envy or begrudge the material success of the performers, and that's because they don't see the country stars as being brilliant or innovative or otherwise exceptional people (which they are), but firmly believe the Willie Nelsos and Roy Clarks are shirkickers just like themselves, who happened to hit it lucky, and more power to them. It meant anybody could hit it lucky, including their own poor sorry selves, so these people...took sweet vicarious pleasure in the overt manifestations of their heroes' lush rewards." But if 90% of life consists, as Woody Allen says, in just showing up, don't you bet right now he's yearning for that lost 10%?

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