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## Am I Laughing?

By CURTIS MARTIN

SOMEHOW, sitting here, you always think of the same things. You sit and you think: I have to write this story. What can I write? I have written, but can I write again? Is there anything left that I can write about? You feel that there is nothing more to write. You have finished everything. You have written your insides out. You have poured everything over the keys.

Then you think: You have to be young to write, really write. But how can you be young and know enough things to write. You have lived twenty-five years. You have seen just so many things, and you have written those things already. You have already written them, but so badly that they will never be published. But they are out of you, and once they are out of you, you don't write them again, whether they were good or rotten the first time they came out. They come but once. There is no come-back for a story that once tried and flopped. At least not for years.

Then you think: Remember the first story you wanted to write. You started it when you were a Freshman at the University. It was like this: "Gliding over the floor they danced like feathers, floating together . . . Glen and Adele." You wrote that, you think, then you sat before the shaky table, holding the stub of pencil, and stared at it. Your head began to ache. The room was stuffy. You stood up suddenly and pushed the table over, flung your chair back and raised the window to its full height, although it was early spring and the north wind, coming directly in, was very cold. Then you set the table up, wadded the paper into a tight ball and tossed it in the wastebasket, and stood up before the wide mirror of the dressing table.

Your room was small. Three feet at the end of the bed, six feet at the side, and in that space the dressing table,

your study table, and in the tight closet your clothes; two suits, a sweater and an extra pair of pants, and your trunk. There was a tiny rag rug on the floor and you remember that night when Stuhl knocked on your door at one o'clock in the morning and sneaking in asked you if he might sleep on that rag rug. You said: "For Christ's sake get in the bed." And he did get in the bed and go to snoring, and you pushed in the single bed beside him and tried to contract your flesh until it did not touch him, thinking that you had known times when he was not exactly clean, wondering about the number of diseases you might catch from him, wanting to ask him what had happened. Why he had left his own room? Why he was wandering about at night? But you were silent. And in the morning he was gone. Gone from your room and gone from the University. Gone from everyone you knew, and you heard once that he had a store in the Indian village of Tierra Amarillo, where no white man would live for more than a week.

But then, you think, there is no story there. You can't write that. You can't do it right. But you go on thinking: You don't want to write, but you've got to write. Not like William Saroyan; firstly, because you can't, maybe, and secondly, because, who the hell wants to? But you've got to write. Why? Why have you got to write? No one forces you. You might write to make money. But God knows you would starve if you wrote for your bread. You think: In four years you made a measly twenty dollars writing. Although there are three or four other stories accepted, there was only the one you received the twenty dollars for. No, it isn't money. Is it fame? Could it be that? Could it be an inner-urge to see your name in print? Could it be that you want to see Robert Stevens, ROBERT STEVENS printed, published? Thousands seeing Robert Stevens, saying Robert Stevens? Could it be that? You think: Writing is a mighty slow and uncertain way, if it is merely that you want to see your name in print. Why, you say to yourself, sitting there, if I wanted only that, isn't there a quicker way? And

immediately you say: Yes, there is. For you have been thinking about it for a long while. Yes, you say, there is a more certain and speedier method. You could take your gun, it is there on the shelf, my rifle; there are thirteen shells on top of the cupboard. You could take your rifle and those thirteen shells, and walk in the darkness, down the center of the streets of this town. You think like this: Few people draw their shades at night in this town. They sit reading beneath the lights, reading and smoking and talking. Now you take your gun and the thirteen shells, it is odd that there are thirteen, but it is an absolute fact. You have counted them twice. You take them and load the gun carefully. It will hold seven shells in the magazine and one in the barrel, making eight shots you could fire within eight seconds if necessary. Put the other five shells carefully in your right-hand pocket, being certain that you take your knife and matches out first, so that you won't grab them by mistake in your haste. Prepare the gun carefully, then walk down the moonlit street, on the white, crunching snow. Go at eleven at night, because at that time people will be off the streets. They will be drugged toward sleep, and sitting sleepily under the lights reading and dozing.

On the street, going up, you will first pass Willard's house. And you know that certainly old man Willard and his son will be in the front room, sitting on opposite sides of a table, both reading, both rocking slowly in their chairs, and with the front shade rolled high. You know they will be like that, because they have been like that every night for twelve years. How many times have you seen them thus in those twelve years, as you passed along the street late at night? They will be there. In the street you kneel, slowly, coldly in the snow, glancing about you, up the road, down the road for cars, for persons on the sidewalk. There will be no one.

You rest the rifle in your hand across your knee, the sight glinting from the light at the corner. You can't miss at that range, even at night. Twenty yards, and you have

killed deer running at four hundred yards, not once, accidentally, but many times, in half-light too. You will not miss. You aim for the old man first because he is more active, quicker thinking than the son. He would be up at the crash as his son crumpled beside him. You aim carefully, at the full chest of the father. There is not a chance that he will live, no need to aim for his head. Too often you have seen the side torn from a buck with one of these so-called mushroom bullets, which explodes and spreads as it strikes. Carefully at the wide middle you aim and fire, feeling the gun on your shoulder. A second after the first crash, the second follows and beyond the broken window glass both father and son slump in their easy chairs. The snow is white around you. The stars are high and cold, blinking silver.

You get up quickly, but not rushed, swinging the gun down beside your leg, moving it with your leg as you walk, and move off up the street. You are in no hurry, because you know this: When Mrs. Willard finds them she can do nothing but call the telephone office. There is no man there, only an old woman. At the office the old woman will begin desperately searching the town for the one marshal. He may be at home in bed, where there is no phone, within a mile. He may be prowling the streets in Old Town, but he will not be found in less than an hour. You are not worried about him. But there is another thing: Next door to Willard's lives William Gaspard. Mrs. Willard after calling the telephone office will rush to his door and beat there fearfully. But Gaspard does not wake easily. You remember well the night you tried to wake him to tell him that his garage was on fire. You beat at the window and shouted at him for fifteen minutes before he understood what you were saying. And now in fifteen minutes . . .

You are down the street to the next house where there is someone still up this late at night. It is Carloewe's, the old shoemaker. He is sitting before the wide front-window, staring over thick spectacles at the latest *Saturday Evening Post*. You will get very near him. At the yard fence you

will stop and see the white hair below his leather cap, which he wears even in the house.

You will shoot him in the head, and his wife, rushing out from the kitchen, you will shoot in the full-breasted chest. Now it is four. Enough certainly. But not enough to reach the very top, to reach the very ends of the earth. Not to make the headlines of every paper. So you go on. And on. On. Up.

When they catch you an hour and a half later you are sitting quietly near a street light, in front of the school house. The school you once attended, where you loved two girls. Where once, you even taught for a short time. You have one shell in your gun when they take you, the thirteenth. But you do not raise it against them, because you have done enough already to reach the heights of notoriety. You have missed with three shots, but nine people lie dead or dying along the streets you have passed. That is certainly enough, you think. You remember reading about the Slav who went wild in Washington, running amok. He killed four, and you read of him for weeks. Headlines. Your nine must be higher than any other has ever attained in these United States. This civilized country. Yes. Nine must be enough. Surely. Day after today it will be there. On pink sheets, on yellow, on white, all with black letters . . . ROBERT STEVENS. INSANE. NINE. NINE. NINE. Yes nine were enough.

You read what you have written, and the only thing you can think is: Why don't you make a story of that, and not merely sit and write that you are thinking about it? Have someone do that and there you have your story. I could do it. I could do that, but I won't.

Or you could tell them about Helen. Damn Helen. You have been thinking of Helen all night. You will always think of Helen and Aline. Those two you will be thinking of always. In the day a little, but mostly at night. You will think of them until the night you die. You could tell them of Helen that night in the old blacksmith shop, or that

night on the steps behind the church, talking, talking, into the darkness to Helen, sitting on the cold cement beside you. Talking until your voice was hoarse . . . telling her what? Telling her things partly true, honestly partly true, and totally true to you then, a kid of fifteen, talking to the girl you had loved first, and would always love, but who had scared you by asking you to marry her. Why did that scare you? It didn't. It only revolted you and you can never say how or why, only that it did. On the cold cement, sitting, you told her why you could not marry her; and your greatest argument was that too many other girls loved you. Loved you so much that you could not break five hearts or six by giving yourself to her. And you believed that, you damned fool, talking without taking a full breath for two hours. Telling her she could have you always, have your heart, spiritually, mentally, but not your body, not to be hers alone, because in the world there were things coming to you too great for you to be sacrificed on the altar. Crying you kissed one of her long, rolled curls, smelling the peculiar scent, which you believed to be spice-wood, and stumbled down the six steps, away in the night, and in the corner, Helen sat silently. Was that the last time I touched you?

But Helen, no more, than Aline. Aline at night in moonlight. On horseback. Alone in black mountains. Alone on the plains with moonlight for miles, rabbits leaping away from beneath clumps of bushes. Aline. Aline, let me go now. Can't you let your hold slip an instant and let me away? They tell me you live in Kansas now. I haven't seen you for five years. I saw you in Pocatello, Idaho, this summer five years ago. I had a full beard. You did not know me. I saw the man with you. Wasn't it your husband? What were you doing in Pocatello? God knows what I was doing there. Passing through, probably. What else?

Now you think: Why don't you tell them about Rohoveck? That would be something. You could tell them how you loved him. How he loved you. How you two lay

in bed talking at nights. You telling him about deer hunts, nights in cold tents in the mountains, beds made in snow banks and deer brought down, and he telling you about bobsleds in Wisconsin. About the times he and the other kids rode the runners of the horse-drawn sleds, up and down the streets of Fennimore, Wisconsin. That would be a story.

Or you could tell them about that cold day in Colmor, New Mexico, when you sat all day on the cold ground holding with your hands one rear leg of a calf, while with your feet you pushed wide the other rear leg, and Fred castrated, branded, de-horned and vaccinated one hundred and twenty-one of those poor devils. On four counts they received the works, and stumbled away in the coming snow storm. You might add that that many calves, for two men, is a record in these parts. Afterwards in the adobe house the Mexican's wife set a meal for you. The only garment she had on was a single-piece outfit, made of pieces of blue denim taken from the legs of her husband's trousers. Her husband heaped all the food in the house on your plate and sat blinking, telling you how he had been refused a job on the FERA, or relief of any kind, because he had a weak heart and could not work hard. You ate that food and wished to God you could get out. You had no money to hide under your plate. But you did have two bottles of beer in the saddle pockets on your horse and you gave them, unwillingly, wishing you had a ten dollar bill to give instead, because it was thirty miles to Springer and another bottle of beer, and the blizzard was howling then, as you whipped your horse into the wind.

But you don't write about those things. You sit here and you think there is nothing to write about. You curse and suck your broken tooth, and listen to the radio, and listen to the night, and hear the snow falling.