

Private Lives

John Leonard

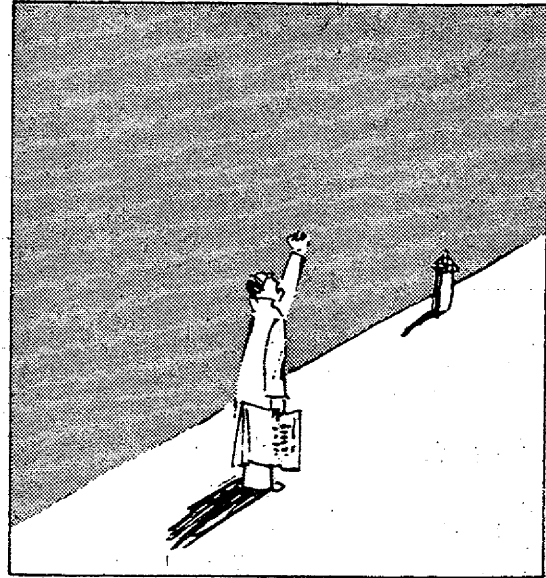
TWO memorial services in one week are too many. It is as if someone had decided that we will devote every Tuesday to thinking about death and listening to Schubert and Peter, Paul and Mary and apologizing. Survivors apologize. The last time I saw Allard Lowenstein, he was leaving early. He was always leaving early, with his briefcase, getting up from the table before dessert. I tend to leave early, too, but not because I have a plane to catch or a cause to promote. I am merely tired and want to go home. He was a man with a mission; most of us have hobbies.

The next to the last time I saw Allard Lowenstein, he was asleep. We were at a Christmas party, listening to some harpsichord music that had not been composed by Schubert or Peter, Paul and Mary. He sat on a couch and nodded off. I was astonished. I remember looking around the room and wondering whether we were in New York at all. With the exceptions of Murray Kempton and my wife, Allard Lowenstein and I might have been the only people in the room ever to have voted Democratic. What a dangerous place to fall asleep. And how could he spare the minutes, when there were voters to be registered, Presidents to be turned out of office, Congressional seats to run for? Later in the evening it occurred to me to say hello, but he had left early.

The night he died, a friend who had known him from the old days of the National Student Association called from Little Rock, Ark., to ask if I had heard the news. Of course. Certain kinds of news one can't avoid hearing; there is a tribal drum; we are transistorized. The following morning another friend called. She had examined the photograph in the newspaper of the man who is accused of having murdered Allard Lowenstein, and she recognized his face from the early 1960's. She had known Dennis Sweeney. We had nothing else to say; the fact just sat there and nodded off.

Many sermons will now be written about the apocalyptic politics of the 1960's, and the refugees of those years, the great expectations and the exaggerated disappointments, the social myth (community) and the fact that just sits there (we die alone), energy and craziness. I am tired of sermons and want to leave early and go home, where it isn't necessary to apologize.

In Berkeley in the 1960's — every life has two or three controlling clichés, like "Berkeley in the 1960's" or "love gone wrong" — one of my favorite professors was shot. He was a tall man, acquainted with Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg, practiced in disdain, secretly kind. He read my novel, a sickly thing in which too many words were wasted on how to mix a martini without bruising the vermouth, and he



Guy Billout

got me a job, knowing even then that I would never be able to support a family by writing novels about bruised vermouth. He was sitting in his office at the English department, talking to one of his graduate students. A former student came in and started firing. The graduate student was killed; half of my professor's face was shot off.

When he came home from the hospital to the Berkeley hills, I paid a visit. He was humble, as if apologizing for himself. I missed his disdain; I had come to count on it as a corrective to the promiscuous enthusiasms of a world on a tear of whim. We sat there, in the presence of his wife's paintings. I wanted him to be sardonic; he lacked the energy; I am lousy at commiseration; the paintings seemed to blot up the words; I left early. Years later, we found ourselves on a committee. My professor had grown a beard to knit together his shattered face, and he talked to me as though I were an idiot nephew, and I was pleased. He had survived and transcended the failure of having been a victim.

They were crazy times, all right. Someone painted a bull's-eye on the concrete at the foot of the campaign tower on the Berkeley campus, between suicides.

Between memorial services, one thinks about the accused murderer who has been described in the newspapers as Allard Lowenstein's "protégé," and about the former student who was so murderously dejected that he shot my professor. On the street in

front of my house, every morning at approximately 20 minutes before noon, a small man in a black raincoat strides by, screaming. He wears horn-rimmed glasses. He waves his arms. There is a cigarette screwed into his mouth, and still he raves. It is a monologue of obscenities. Everybody is out to get him. Everybody, in nodding fact, crosses the street to avoid him. Once, by accident, I boarded a subway right on his heels. On the train, he was silent. He required the street. I got off one stop early to follow him. Above ground, he began to scream again, at the sky. I am beginning to understand his paranoia.

We go to a meeting to decide who should be invited to serve as chairman of the board of directors of an artists' colony. We go to another meeting to decide who should win a medal from the Mayor of New York for contributions to literary culture. We go to a third meeting to decide which books by Americans ought to be sent to China. We drink with editors and publicists; we dine with friends; we subvert our children. We are surrounded by friends, dependents, protégés, former students, colleagues, gurus. The gun, if there is a gun, will not belong to Palestinian terrorists or maniacs in black raincoats. We are likely to know the name of the person who shoots our face off.

Between Tuesdays, I went to a birthday party. A friend was 40 and the party was a surprise. We congratulated him for being 40 and we congratulated ourselves for surprising him. We knew he was genuinely surprised because he had neglected to shave. Between kisses, he apologized for stubble. I was standing in the middle of the society that admires him while he is still alive, and I was diverted by a conversation between two women I care a lot about.

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One woman had been married most of her life, to two different men; the other had not been married, to anyone as yet. But the unmarried woman had arrived at the surprise birthday party with a man and without a purse. The married woman reminded the unmarried woman that when the married woman was between marriages the unmarried woman had reminded *her* — are you following this? Thank you — to carry "mad money." Mad money is a dime for a telephone call, a token for the subway, and a \$5 bill for a taxicab if the situation is desperate. In the experience of the unmarried woman, married women forgot about mad money.

Then why, the married woman wanted to know, had the unmarried woman come to the party without a purse? The unmarried woman blushed. The man she was with reached into his pocket, extracted a subway token, fell to his knees and put the token into her left shoe. She limped for the rest of an evening during which I, because I needed a token of love in a season of death, left early.