U.S. JOURNAL: SAN FRANCISCO

NOV 27, 1978
New Yorker

TINK

NOT long ago, while reading a Sunday edition of the Washington *Post*, I came across a book review written by a college friend of mine—a philosophy professor who signed the review Josiah Thompson but is known to just about everyone who has ever met him as Tink. Although Tink's nickname makes him sound playful, his specialty has been the cheerless Sören Kierkegaard. The last time I had noticed Tink's name in a book section was in 1973, when he was an associate professor of philosophy at Haverford: Knopf had published a biography by him that a lengthy review in *The New York Review of Books* said deserved to be read by all students of Kierkegaard. After reading the review that Tink had written in the *Post*, I glanced at the note on the reviewer to see if he was still teaching at Haverford. The note said that Josiah Thompson was "a private detective in San Francisco."

I read the author's note again. Now that twenty years have passed since Tink and I left college, I have started to become accustomed to hearing about classmates who suddenly change their style of dress or their jobs or their wives. We seem to have reached the time of life when reflections on beginnings and endings and aspirations and accomplishments can provoke some drastic decisions. The sort of career changes I usually hear about, though, turn an investment banker into a cattle rancher or an advertising executive into an innkeeper—changes almost as predictable now as the original choice was twenty years ago. For a moment, it occurred to me that the note about Tink in the *Post* was one of those notes that are meant to carry on some joke started by the book being reviewed—a joke I had clearly missed. But the book—"Lying," by Sissela Bok—was patently serious. A private detective? I realized I was not even certain what that means these days. A private detective like Sam Spade or Lew Archer? A private detective like the lumpy ex-cop who is hired to burst through the hotel-room door with a camera? I telephoned San Francisco information and asked if there was a listing for Josiah Thompson.

"We have one Josiah Thompson," the operator said. "With a telephone number but no address."

"That's him. That must be him," I said. A number but no address. How else would a private eye be listed?

IN the unlikely event that I had ever been asked if I knew any professors who could possibly become private eyes, I suppose Tink's name might have eventually come to mind. He did always have a taste for adventure. In college, Tink had played football despite being so much smaller than most of the other players that a friend of ours on the team, a kindly giant from the Midwest, always reacted to coming across him in a scrimmage by setting him aside gently on the way to a person of proper size. Tink's military service included commanding the Navy frogman detachment assigned to do beach reconnaissance before the Marines landed in Lebanon. At Haverford, he drove the sort of old Volvo that a lot of professors drive, but he also drove a motorcycle. In the late sixties, the last time I had the opportunity to talk with him at some length, he became known outside the scholarly journals as an amateur investigator of the John F. Kennedy assassination. He went to Dallas to search out witnesses; he become conversant with specialties like bullet trajectory and forensic pathology. He served for a time as a consultant to *Life* on the assassination, and he eventually published a book of his own, "Six Seconds in Dallas," which sought to prove the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory physically impossible. Tink had liked investigating the assassination. As someone suspicious of the government in general and bitterly opposed to its Vietnam War policy in particular, he saw his efforts as an opportunity to demonstrate that the government was capable of systematically lying to the public about the assassination and, therefore, about anything else. As someone who often seemed uncomfortable in the sort of academic hierarchy that made some other professors feel secure, he liked doing research in a field that recognized no credentials. ("There's no Ph.D. in the assassination.") As someone who, even in college, had always analyzed himself and his motives and his surroundings unsparingly, he felt, as he told me at the time, that "somehow one hopes to clarify one's own situation and one's own society by clarifying this." I may have been surprised to hear that Tink had become a private detective, but I was not surprised to hear that he had been questioning his life closely enough to consider a dramatic change.

"Do you mean a private detective like in the movies?" I said when I finally reached him on the telephone.

"What's remarkable is how much like the movies it is," Tink said. He told me that he had done a lot of investigation for defense lawyers in political cases—one of the Huey Newton trials, for instance, and the trial of Bill and Emily Harris—but that he had also worked on conventional murders and even divorce cases. He was in fact a private detective, at hire for twenty-five dollars an hour plus expenses.

"I'll be there Monday," I said. "Meet me for breakfast."

TINK was wearing old corduroys, scuffed motorcycle boots, a work shirt, and a down hiking vest. He looked younger than most of the classmates I've run across lately. His hair was tousled, and he still spoke with the sort of informal friendliness that leads people to call him Tink within five or ten minutes of meeting him even if he has just quoted Heidegger. After a while, he pulled out a name badge identifying him as a poll-taker for a survey firm. The badge was for a job he was not looking forward to doing. At the request of a detective in another city, Tink was trying to find out whether a client's ex-wife could be shown to be living with and taking support from another man—a situation that would constitute an argument for reducing the client's alimony payments. The plan—or the scam, as Tink put it—was to get into the apartment as a survey-taker. The survey included, among the usual questions on Proposition 13 and the legalization of marijuana, some questions that could lead to revelations Tink's client would be interested in—questions about the number and relationship of the people in the household, for instance, and about the advantages of a law "granting full spousal rights to people living together

for over one year." Tink, as it turned out, carried an array of business cards and credentials, including one that identifies him as the rector of St. Mary's in the Hollow. The most impressive cover he has ever used, he acknowledged, is provided by a card that introduces him as Josiah Thompson, professor of philosophy, Haverford College.

When Tink first began working part-time as a private detective, in the fall of 1976, the Haverford card described him accurately. He had arrived in California late that summer with the intention of using a sabbatical to write a biography of Nietzsche. His future at Haverford seemed assured. He had been given early tenure. Once he completed the Kierkegaard biography—which he had done research for in Denmark during his previous sabbatical—he was under no pressure to continue publishing books and articles. After his return from Denmark, in 1970, though, he found himself with increasing doubts about both scholarship and teaching. "In the academic world, the way one goes about proving things is too soft," he told me. "There's the well-crafted lecture. Was it true? Well, sure, but all sorts of other interpretations were also true." The students he was teaching seemed blander than those he had taught in the sixties—heightening his concern that what he was doing was "adding two per cent on top" of the education that upper-middle-class children were going to get whether he was involved or not. He seemed to have a professional life without risk. His antiwar activities became riskier—moving from civil disobedience to the sort of operations that were then grouped under the category of "bringing the war home." When he and his wife, Nancy, and their two children left for California in 1976—settling in Bolinas, a sort of Walden Pond for the comfortably laid-back, in western Marin County, north of San Francisco—it was with the intention of returning to Haverford after the sabbatical year. But, Tink told me, "there were intimations that it was an ending."

A few months later, while Tink was out riding his motorcycle, he stopped at a café and happened to meet someone who had hired Hal Lipset, the best-known private investigator in San Francisco, to find two children who had been snatched away during an argument about custody. The Nietzsche book was not going well. Tink was facing the sort of strains in his marriage that seem to have become endemic among our classmates in the last few years. He was restless. His assured future at Haverford seemed a burden rather than a comfort. "I looked down the road, and I couldn't see any highs," he told me. He missed the excitement of working on real rather than academic puzzles—what he calls "that very unusual *frisson* when you figure out something on paper and then go out in the real world and find it true." He arranged to have dinner with Lipset, and asked for a part-time job. Two days later, Tink went into San Francisco to have what he understood was to be a more formal job interview with David Fechheimer, then Lipset's junior partner. He was immediately sent out on surveillance—assigned to watch one participant in a violent strike at a company in Oakland. "I thought, Well, they're doing a real trip on the professor," Tink told me. A lot of detectives consider surveillance one of the most boring aspects of their work. Tink, as it turned out, loved surveillance, even though he seemed to lose his man continually that first day. "Surveillance is the paradigmatic activity," he told me. "You are literally the private eye—the eye that sees but is not seen. There's a power to it."

Tink assumed that Lipset had hired him because of his work on the Kennedy assassination—there was some talk at the time that Lipset might be hired by the assassination committee then being organized in Congress—but both Lipset and Fechheimer say that they merely thought it good business to hire an obviously competent Ph.D. who was willing to sit outside someone's house all night for five dollars an hour. At the time, Tink was not the only person of rather impressive education who had been attracted to the Lipset Service. Hal Lipset, who served in the Second World War as a Military Police investigating officer, had opened an office in San Francisco in the nineteen-forties which specialized in providing investigative services for lawyers, and had become widely credited with raising the standards of private investigation in the city. By the nineteen-seventies, of course, the matching of people's education with their employment was no longer the rather simple matter it had been when Tink and I and the investment bankers and the advertising executives left college. Jack Palladino, who was in charge of the Lipset Service's operation in the Oakland strike, had graduated from Cornell, done graduate work in political science, and got a law degree from Boalt Hall, the University of California's law school at Berkeley. Another of the Lipset Service regulars, a young Australian woman named Sandra Sutherland, who originally joined a San Francisco detective agency with the idea that private investigating might be good training for investigative reporting, had done graduate work in developmental psychology and, with two other women, published a book of poems, "Almost Like Dancing," in 1975. The story of how David Fechheimer became a detective is one of the staples of the overeducated-private-eye world of San Francisco. According to the story, Fech-

heimer, then a graduate student at San Francisco State, read "The Maltese Falcon," by Dashiell Hammett, the former Pinkerton man, for a course in American realism, and reacted to the experience by phoning the Pinkerton agency to say, "I don't suppose you hire people with beards and no experience."

"A beard! We need a guy with a beard," the Pinkerton man said. "Come right on over."

When Fechheimer left the Lipset Service, in 1977, only a few months after Tink had been hired, Tink went with him as a sort of apprentice. Within a month or so, Tink found himself working on a murder case in Los Angeles, where two members of the American Indian Movement had been accused of killing a taxi-driver. Fastening on one piece of physical evidence—a taximeter—Tink spent days compiling a report that his colleagues still refer to as a model of research and analysis. He travelled to the Midwest to find a witness named Roland Knox and bring him back to Los Angeles. "It was a political case, filled with intrigue," Tink told me. "Most important, it was a murder case." It was the sort of opportunity Tink had in mind when he talked about "figuring something out that's not just a scholarly game."

When it came time to return to Haverford or give up his position on the faculty—and give up with it an assured salary and tuition assistance for his children's education and the other perquisites of what he had always thought of as "a soft life"—Tink and Nancy did some serious thinking. Not all his cases had been as satisfying as the Los Angeles murder. Once, he spent all night in a tree outside a house trying to get compromising pictures for a divorce case, only to find out that he was in a tree outside the wrong house. (He found out when the local police picked him up that morning lurking in some bushes with a camera.) Working for Lipset or for Fechheimer, he had not made enough money to support his family without the sabbatical pay from Haverford. Tink had always found Haverford remarkably free of the backbiting and petty jealousies that are supposed to be staples of faculty life, but the same could not be said for the world of the educated private eye in San Francisco. Still, he decided to resign from the faculty. Part of his decision, he thinks, had to do with preferring life in California to life in Pennsylvania. Part of it had to do with not being able to see any highs in his future at Haverford. Part of it, he knows, had to do with being hooked on detective work. "If I had gone back," he told me, "I knew in five years I'd look back and see myself walking into that courtroom in Los Angeles with Roland Knox, functioning at the top level, and I'd say, 'No guts, baby.'" This fall, when Fechheimer more or less decided to give up detective work for a while, Tink joined Jack Palladino and Sandra Sutherland—who are now husband and wife as well as colleagues—to form a new partnership. The business card that describes Tink accurately these days—or will as soon as the printer delivers it—says Palladino, Sutherland & Thompson, Investigations.

OVER lunch, in North Beach, Tink discussed the survey scam with his partners, acknowledging that he was somewhat troubled by the deception involved. Palladino had come up with the idea of a survey as naturally as Tink thought of posing as a philosophy professor, since the name of the company on Tink's name badge was in fact the name of a survey firm that Palladino ran while he was in graduate school. Palladino, who looks more like a trial lawyer than a detective, is particularly interested in the technology of detective work and of weaponry, although not to the extent of carrying a gun. ("I have a bullet-proof vest, but it ruins my fitted suits.") He and Sandra Sutherland agreed that any of the conventional methods private investigators would use in the alimony case Tink was working on—bribing a building superintendent, spying, buying copies of both parties' bank records—would involve what Tink calls "the fundamental ambivalence" of trying to find out the truth through deceit. "This is a community of liars," Tink said. "But there's a sort of honor here. There's so much deceit, so much lying, so much manipulation, that the trust and honor with your partners and your client has to be strong."

"In another context," Sandra Sutherland said, smiling, "it's been called honor among thieves."

Tink smiled, too, and, after complaining a bit about the amateurish quality of the printing on his name badge, he left to take his survey. Despite having responded to Tink's talk about ambivalence with a joke, Sandra Sutherland acknowledged that the tension involved in what Lipset calls "the honest con" is one of the attractions of the detective business for her as well. In introducing her section of "Almost Like Dancing," she wrote, "I work as a private investigator, an occupation which exemplifies that 'genius for lying and adoration for the truth' that Denise Levertov has attributed to the poet." Having been deeply involved in the antiwar movement herself, she was particularly engaged at first by political cases—she was an investigator for the defense in the Angela Davis trial—but the fascination carries over to "the three-hundred-dollar murder" in Oakland, the casual drug or liquor stabbing for which the court might grant the public defender a few hundred dollars for defense investigation. "I think there are fascinations in this business for people who have led protected lives and think there are things about the world they ought to know and don't," she told me. "I always felt vulnerable, like a potential victim. I wanted to know how the cards are dealt."

But how, I asked, do people like Palladino, Sutherland & Thompson learn how the cards are dealt? How did Tink know how to record a conversation surreptitiously with a Nagra tape recorder or how an ignition might have been primed to explode an Atlas blasting cap wired to the coil? How did Palladino know about computer crime or the techniques of neutron-activation analysis on nails? How did they know which tests could be run on a piece of cloth or how to get somebody's Veterans Administration records?

They learned a lot through working with experienced people like Lipset, she said, and through trial and error, and, of course, through books. "We simply read a book on the subject," she said. "It helps to be an ex-intellectual."

Tink returned, wearing his name badge, and said that there had been nobody home.

THE sort of question that occurred to me when I heard that Tink had become a private detective—

"A private detective like Sam Spade or Lew Archer?"—continues to occur to him and his colleagues. Fechheimer, after two years with the Pinkertons and eight years with Lipset and two years on his own, remains a Hammett buff—a collector of Hammett memorabilia, an adviser on Hammett films, a patron of John's Grill, a San Francisco restaurant that was mentioned in Hammett's fiction and now features Sam Spade Chops on the menu. Sandra Sutherland, who has both worked as a free-lance journalist and pretended to work as a free-lance journalist as a way of prying information from the prosecution, still refers to one of her former bosses as "a character out of a John le Carré novel." Jack Palladino talks of the investigator's life as having to do with "working backstage," and Tink says that he thinks of each job more as a story than a case. "You get involved in the story, almost always in a pivotal moment in people's lives," he told me. "Then you begin to play a role with the other actors."

"I SIMPLY don't believe he did it," a young woman I'll call Grace was saying to Tink. "I grew up with him. His mom raised us. It's just not in his character." Tink nodded, and took notes on a yellow legal pad. The person Grace was talking about—he can be called Vernon—was being held in the Marin County jail on a capital murder charge, accused of having stabbed a nineteen-year-old girl more than a hundred times. Vernon's mother, a black woman from a town nearby, had worked as a housekeeper for Grace's parents for years. "I'll be blown out if he did it," Grace went on.

Tink had spent part of the previous day talking to Vernon's lawyer. Another part had been spent making another attempt to work his survey scam. Tink had again failed to get into the apartment, although he succeeded in speaking to the woman on the intercom and had so interested the building superintendent in the survey that the super wanted to fill one out himself. Vernon's defense lawyer had asked Tink to spend some time with Grace, who had come back to her parents' home from Oregon to help with the case. The lawyer also wanted Tink to run a time check on an automobile trip from Vernon's house to a hospital where he had gone on the night of the murder to have a cut hand attended to. The cut hand, which Vernon claimed to have suffered in a fight with a motorcyclist, was not the only sticky point in the defense. Vernon had gone to a hospital miles away from his apartment. He had registered under a false name. His fingerprints had been found at the murder scene. His story explaining his presence in the victim's apartment was complicated.

Grace's parents' house was one of those Marin County houses which are built partway down a cliff—with a couple of levels of gardens, and lush shrubbery, and a view of Tamalpais. Some heavy leather furniture and a lot of bookcases and some wooden ceiling beams and a few turn-of-the-century photographs gave the inside of the house an Old California feeling—an odd place to be talking about whether the victim had been involved in cocaine dealings or how many times the weapon had penetrated her skull. It occurred to me that Lew Archer had conducted similarly discordant interviews in a number of similar houses.

Tink had been called in by Vernon's lawyer at the last minute—the prosecution had already begun to present its case in court—and Grace brought him up to date with the help of a huge loose-leaf notebook filled with carefully organized police reports. She was calm and articulate—obviously a person of considerable intelligence as well as loyalty. I was taken by surprise when she said that, having consulted a psychic, she knew the real murderer was a man named Charles who worked in Reno. Tink didn't look surprised. "Well, the problem with that is that locating this Charles would take a lot of time," Tink said when Grace asked what could be done about following up the lead the psychic had provided. "Also, you're locked into a different story."

Tink continued to take careful notes. After a while, he looked up and said, "The main problem, then, is that we've got his prints and blood at the scene."

"And that he wrote an anonymous letter implying he did it, and sent it to the police," Grace said, in the same calm voice. "They found his fingerprints on it." She flipped to the proper section of the notebook and showed Tink a copy of the letter.

I thought Tink was going to sigh, but he didn't. "I'd like to take a look at his apartment and her apartment," he said.

Tink and Grace and I spent the day in Marin County, driving around in Tink's battered Volvo. We went to both apartments. We went to the county jail, where Tink spent some time interviewing Vernon. We followed Vernon's route to the hospital, where Tink interviewed the emergency-room receptionist to find out how many minutes had been taken up that night with paperwork before Vernon was clocked in. What the lawyer had asked of Tink was rather narrow, but Tink had a number of ideas of his own—more sophisticated laboratory tests that could be done on some of the evidence, for instance, and a new method of finding the motorcyclist Vernon claimed he met.

Between stops, Tink lamented the limited time and resources that were available for the investigation. There were obviously other reasons to be discouraged: when I tried to think of a weak point in the district attorney's case, all I could think of was that he did not have a film of Vernon committing the murder. Tink, though, seemed exhilarated rather than discouraged. "You know," he said as we drove toward Grace's house late in the afternoon, "this is just the kind of case I really love. So much of it depends on logical analysis of the evidence. Really paying attention." Whatever the problems, Tink was obviously enjoying himself. "When all those heavy philosophical things are said and done," he had told me the day before, "it's just so much more fun than anything else."

Grace looked at Tink. "You know," she said, "you have some character aspects like Lieutenant Columbo."

Tink smiled and shrugged, and ran his hand through his hair—which was, of course, already tousled.

—CALVIN TRILLIN