

*Helpless*

*And in my mind  
I still need a place to go,  
All my changes were there.  
- Neil Young*

“Don’t mourn me.”

It wasn’t said with arrogance; no one would have accepted it as arrogance anyway, not from Duke.

J. Andrew “Duke” Caraway was a renowned novelist and columnist, and had been for the last three decades, though the narrow description never appealed to him. He preferred to be known as an historian who utilizes the art of fiction to create an approachable body of work. “Write history as it develops,” he would say, “or else risk it later being told as a tale unrecognizable by those who experienced it.” He had received countless awards for his contributions across media, and had been nominated for countless others. Upon receiving his third Peabody he had only to say, “To think, I could have stayed in bed this morning.” When visitors to his home implored him to produce his Nobel Prize for inspection, he directed their attention to a custom ashtray placed as the centerpiece on the coffee table in his sitting room.

Duke had recently been diagnosed with an incurable disease of the blood. He called it cancer because he was certain that was what anyone who could avoid bombs, bullets, or moving vehicles long enough would die from eventually. But he refused to distinguish himself in his final hours. He believed the cancer consuming the world had finally been kind enough to catch up to him.

“Don’t mourn me,” he repeated. His companions all gathered to hear what they feared would be Duke’s last words. Words were the commodity on which Duke had built his empire. Friends, admirers, and critics alike had known for years that this day would eventually come, but no one seemed prepared. They couldn’t begin to imagine what he might have to say, but there was conviction among them all that being present at this very moment to witness the last ounce of gold to depart from his lips was a story worth savoring.

Save for a few personalized requests for appearance, Duke was rather loose with the guest list. He had issued an open invitation to all published writers, so long as their medium was respectable. The invite read:

You are cordially invited to celebrate  
the life and death of J. Andrew Caraway,  
as told by J. Andrew Caraway,  
with a eulogy delivered by J. Andrew Caraway.

Aspiring writers need not attend.

Those who have not challenged themselves to rise above tabloid  
and newsprint may gaze with wide wonder from the front gate.

I look forward to seeing those of you who know you are welcome.

I look forward to surprising those of you who think you are welcome.

Hors d’oeuvres at 8 p.m.

“Don’t leave here and tell those clowns at the gate what good friends we were or give them sorry excuses for anecdotes to peddle to their dogs. You know damn well you’re no friends of mine.”

Of course this drew laughter.

“You might wonder why I’ve asked you here. I presume it’s at least partly the reason you made the journey.”

Duke lived with his wife of 27 years on a large plot of land that happened to occupy the point where Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon meet. He liked to joke that he bought it for the sake of giving state tax collectors hell, but there was something fitting about not being able to settle him within arbitrary boundaries if not of his own creation.

“The fact is, I’ve got a lot of booze stashed away, and apparently I haven’t the time left to drink it.”

The event was taking place deep out on his land, far from the main house. He’d hired caterers and bartenders, had a banquet room constructed from what appeared to be no more than stilts and a heavy plastic draping, and propped up a stage complete with a podium flanked by banquet tables filled with hired hands in penguin suits meant to laugh and clap on cue. The podium appeared to prop Duke up. His tired eyes sat deeply within a withered face, seemingly competing with an exhausted body to mime the frivolity of youth.

“And I’ve never known a finer group to drink from the flowing rivers of poison that spiderweb across our once-great nation,” he went on, “so it’s only fitting I share with you what remaining poison I possess.”

Duke shifted his weight from his left to his right, then continued.

“With so many flailing about in the ocean, taking on each wave as though one had not just passed and another would not soon follow, it is a pleasure to be among company that seeks out the mouth of the river. Greater still are those of you that

fight the current in search of the tributaries, and the idealists among you who still believe you can find the mythological spring.”

Stillness consumed the attendees and staff alike. All eyes were on Duke. The small lump that had occupied his throat for the last several days was now a barrier between his words and his audience. He barked viciously at the servers.

“Keep their glasses full, god dammit! I’m not paying you to ogle my tired ass.”

A soft clamoring resumed among the banquet staff that offered Duke the strength to continue.

“So what do you do when the current gets too strong or the waters get too deep? What do you do with what you’ve found once you climb ashore? How do you reconcile the fact that your discovery can’t stop the river from feeding the waves?”

Duke paused long enough to raise his glass of scotch to his lips. He was trembling now. The thought of the podium failing and crumbling beneath him was more conceivable to his faceless audience than the idea of Duke collapsing beneath his own weight. One of the tuxedos to his right made an attempt to steady him, but Duke would have none of it. The commanding thud of his glass on the podium caused piercing feedback through the PA. He erected himself, took another drink from his glass, and continued.

“Honestly, I don’t know what you do. And I don’t know why you think I would. You’ve come here to watch me die, yet you pray to whatever god you love that I won’t go just yet. I want to tell you to keep swimming, but we all eventually get tired and none of us can keep from drowning.”

Duke's face collapsed into his hands. He laughed, then stopped suddenly. His laughter filled the open space again. He closed his eyes, drew air quickly into his lungs, held it briefly, then let his shoulders fall. *Blue, blue windows behind the stars, yellow moon is on the rise.* He hummed a few bars before raising his eyes and peering through his audience.

He gave two sudden shakes of his head, so awkward they appeared as twitches, gripped the edges of the podium, and screamed into the microphone: "I WANT ALL OF YOU FUCKERS OUT OF MY HOUSE." Then, as almost a whimper, "But I've never wanted you closer."

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The night replayed again in his head, this time more briefly than the last. Now he thought less about his words and focused more on their faces. With his eyes closed tightly, he squinted to make out the guests within the recent but fading memory. They were only a blurry mass now, yet the hired help appeared crisp and clear. In this recount of the evening, it felt as though the exhaustion had left him, as though his spirit was not imprisoned within a dying old man. He sat on the same spot the podium had stood a week before - - deep out on his land, far from the main house.

The big birds flew across the sky throwing shadows as he nestled the barrel of the shotgun beneath his chin. *Babe, can you hear me now? Baby sing with me somehow.* Duke closed his eyes and firmly squeezed the trigger.