

Richard Elman

1934-

MY LIFE SO FAR

Both my parents were born in Polish-Russia (sometimes known as Russo-Poland), into Yiddish-speaking families, shortly after the turn of the century. By the age of five, both had arrived on these shores, via steerage. They were patriots from the first, proud of having shed their "greenhorn" accents by the second fall of their arrivals. All his life my father called Newark "Nerk" just like any other "Nerk" Newarker, and my mother, raised in Memphis, spoke a Southern which she could adjust to her audience, like the slats on her venetian blinds. She told me once she'd dreamed of singing on the riverboats, songs like "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

During the Great War the only Berlin my mother knew was from Irving. She worked in a relative's shop and schemed to go north to the Great White Way. My father, meanwhile, studied engineering (which proved a bad career choice for a Jew), then the law, and ended up marrying his pretty first cousin shortly after he was sent to meet her train from Memphis.

They proved true to type: she was his "Southern belle" and he was her "college boy," who knew all about speakeasies and had scrimmaged with the great Joe Alexander at Syracuse. A nice-looking couple, a Jewish Zelda and Scott, and when they married his mother wouldn't speak to him for a year because she was expecting him to pay room and board at home. My father hated certain stereotypes and loved others. He would tell you all Hassidim "smelled" as though they hadn't bathed in a decade, and when he settled down in Brooklyn with his pretty wife he joined a synagogue more Methodist than Jewish, including the fact that the rabbi wore a Roman collar. (I have the feeling that even when they Charlestoned together, with seeming abandon, during the twenties, they spent a lot of time correcting the Americanisms in each other's steps.)

They were always trying so hard to make the grade that thorough abandon, by one or both, must have been as hard for them to accomplish as it was for me to imagine of them. They were also very protective of us, with us. If we were not allowed to know certain "kikey" relatives, and never encouraged to learn Yiddish, we were also not permitted to celebrate the dreaded Christmas or Easter of the goyim, or even to glance at a picture of Christ without some comment



Pearl (right) and some of her friends, "just up from Memphis."

being made about how he may have been well-meaning but he was also a big fake. The holidays we celebrated were uniformly joyless, a pudding of breadcrumbs from which the fruits of life had been removed. All that we knew, all that they told us, about their old world they'd fled so young, was a total horror. My grandfather served as a conscript with the Russian conscript army at Port Arthur simply because his father had fought at Sebastopol for which he'd received a lifetime pension that could be revoked by filial disloyalty to the Tsar. There were usurers in the family and revolutionists cranky with disappointment, thieves, pimps, artisans, and peasants, but not one honest whore among the women. There were relatives in Edinburgh on the Portobello Road and in Chicago and Warsaw



Eddie (back row center) and some friends, "carousing"

and Los Angeles, but nobody was doing that well. My mother's half brothers were racetrack touts and scam artists; they became Hollywood producers and jewelry tycoons. The big noises were expected from my father, with his expensive education, who did what he could for others in the family, but always grudgingly.

My father had a temper so terrible and scary he could break you into jagged wounds, just by staring at you quite suddenly. There were beatings and beratings, beratings and beatings, a quite unoriginal method of behavior modification. I once thought of him as Dmitri in *The Brothers K*—only to realize he was a craftier person than that who had intimidated only little me, not the world; he'd also had the ability to scam and cajole. Many years ago, when I was still a young man, he confessed to me how he'd read some of Dostoevsky and also I. J. Singer and Chekhov, when they were regularly serialized in the *Vivants*, a Yiddish, nominally-socialist newspaper the family sometimes took, but when I was growing up even the reading of Dostoevsky would have probably been labelled "kikey." My father was a jock, a handball player, a former football lineman. His library was rich with leatherette, heavy on Carl Sandburg, Abe Lincoln, the Lives of Supreme Court Justices, and Train and Tarkington. There were tracts that argued St. Paul had never wished to be a Christian, and celebrations of the New Deal by Robert Sherwood. There was every one of John Gunther's "Inside" books and elegant works of mild pornography on the higher shelves. The general effect, though, was moralistic, expensive, and very short on poetry.

He became a quite successful real estate attorney; she was a general flop as a housewife. She cooked

poorly and couldn't keep maids. People said my father was the Spencer Tracy type, but his wife was nothing like Katharine Hepburn, or Ida Lupino, or Sylvia Sydney; she was pretty enough, but sad. They just weren't getting along but stayed together out of persistence, and, perhaps, lack of imagination. There was a brother, nearly four years my senior. They always claimed they'd been very happy with him until I came along, in 1934, to upset everybody. It was now the Depression and my father was doing a little less well than he had. I'd been planned as the patch to their domestic situation that kept coming unstuck. Everybody blamed faulty materials, bad cement, or both.

When your father plays self-achiever and your mother is a self-deceiver, it can make a child's head spin. He preached Horatio Alger at us while she played Cinderella. My brother was supposed to be Jason, I suppose, and I was all the rest: Benjy, Pinocchio, Rose Red and Dopey Benny. My mother said I had a "warped mind." For the sake of nostalgia and mistaken identity, she sometimes dressed me as a girl, sprayed perfume on me. "Sissy stuff," my father said. He always believed in the use of force as persuasion. Naturally I referred to him often as "Mr. Hitler."

"I'll kill him," was his repartee. "I'll kill him. I'll kill him. I'll kill him." World without end. Amen.

I've written about much of this in my autobiographical novel *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids*, (the autobiography in fables of Richard M. Elman, a novel by Richard Elman). And that caused a little pain to some and a lot of release for me. I really don't want to go into all of it again. The real names were Eddie & Pearl & Leonard & Richard, and yes there was an Uncle

Joe, who was an unschooled six-day bike-racer, and I admired him to the point of adoration.

For a Depression child, I was born with some fairly optimistic notions. If someone was friendly, I tried to be a friend. I was not overly impressed with class or color distinctions; better to have someone to talk to than be alone in the house with Eddie & Pearl.

My childhood seemed endless. In school I was one of those students who were always falling short of their abilities; at home I was deemed the "troublemaker." The problem, as I say, was faulty materials and workmanship. The remedy was to be "knocked from pillar to post."

"Little Mr. Richard," my father called me. The most affectionate way I had of referring to him was, "Big Shot Eddie the Bully."

We lived in a neighborhood where every boy and girl was planning to go to college, an Ivy League college, the poor on scholarships. It was an optimistic time: Jews were dying in Europe, but here Bess Meyerson was Miss America, and Hank Greenberg was almost as big a slugger as Joe DiMaggio. The sons of my neighbors went to MIT and worked on atom bombs; the daughters went to Holyoke and married doctors, or became them. My own grades were so



Richard (in carriage) and brother Leonard with their mother



"Eddie & Pearl & The Kids"

below-the-average of excellence in the neighborhood that my college advisor recommended I consider a career in military service, or the post office, and my father said, "I'm not surprised; why should I be? My kid's not only stupid but disturbed."

A lot of the time I was disturbed by him and mother: they were getting along even worse than before. She was menopausal; he was randy with ambition. I was neglected. Eddie stayed away from home a lot, "in the office," "at a meeting," and since my brother was already away in college, I had to entertain my mother a lot of the time.

That was the longest date I ever had that did not result in climax before I met my first wife. We ate out together a lot, went to movies, shopped at Loehmann's for fetching outfits to entice Eddie, and were miserable together. Pearl told me how unhappy she was. When I spoke about my complaints, she said, "You're young." We were start-crossed lovers. I tried to get her to see a therapist, but she believed all psychiatrists were crazy, and tried to get me to see our upstairs neighbor, a prominent physician who worked only with hardened criminals.



"My favorite uncle, Joe Elman, the bike-racer, and his wife, June, as they looked then. . . ."

I was never unhappy away from home, and never homesick. I cruised the streets of the city when not attending to mother like a medieval troubadour, happy with my freedom beneath the linden trees.

I was six foot, five inches tall at thirteen, and it was only natural for some people to suppose I could play basketball. I really couldn't, but I spent a lot of hours at it on the hard streets and in the schoolyard, dribbling, and learning about sex, marijuana, underage drinking, and communism. I joined the youth league as a protest against my self-enforced basketballing, and found Communist girls pretty and their dogmas hard to follow. I chalked up many a street to save Willie McGee, a black man from Mississippi who was electrocuted in a trumped-up rape case, saw "friendly" Henry Wallace address the thinning multitudes outside the Garfield Cafeteria, and was, for a while, a Communist party Zionist, or *Hashomer Hatzairnik*, of which my parents disapproved equally. Our temple was so "reformed" that the rabbi who wore his collar reversed regularly called Zionists "hooligans."

When it came time to go to college in 1951 I had no calling, no aptitude, and no grade point average. I'd developed an interest in poetry in my senior year at high school through the kindly attentions of Rose Ribicoff, who also invited me and another student to the theatre with her to see the musical of *Cry the Beloved*

Country. The poems I wrote did not scan or rhyme and were regularly rejected by the academic squareheads of the student literary magazine, *Patterns*. I went to the library to look for precedents, and found I was in good company: Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and Hart Crane (whom I admired above all because he'd lived in Brooklyn and wrote his major work about its bridge) didn't always scan regularly. I wrote and wrote, copied and postured, got worse, and better by my standards. Mrs. Ribicoff said, "You have some talent . . . but you're such an unhappy person . . . so unruly . . ."

I determined I would go to college anyway. But where?

My grade point average was somewhere a bit under a D, and I had been cited for foul language toward the dean, and various other delinquencies. I was on one of the state's subversive lists. It was the Korean War and I didn't care to be drafted. Making do, I chose to spend my time at the beach in Riss Park rather than frequent the fancier synagogue health club to which my parents belonged. The summer I graduated high school I met a girl. She showed me a lot of things I'd only thought of before. She was older than me and scheduled to be married shortly, so she claimed she wished to remain intact. So what we engaged in was like the finger exercises two duet pianists put themselves through before their big concert.

And such interludes were hardly lasting distractions from the reproaches I received at home.

One of the anomalies of being unloved at home was the amount of guilt I could provoke in those who did not love me. My father was ashamed of me and did not like being so. He resolved I must not shame him forever, and so he made financial arrangements for me to enter his alma mater, Syracuse, on probation. As I recall I was not to be trusted with the liberal arts initially, but was to do a course of study in something like business administration.

I was so pleased to be away from home it did not matter what I was doing. My father was paying for my liberation from him, I thought, and he had probably even given a special latchkey donation to get me admitted. I took all the required courses except for math: English, logic, science, a language. I was determined to show my parents I was not as hopeless as I seemed to them. "Don't make us any more ashamed of you than we already are," were my mother's parting words to me. I lived in a barracks, miles from the life of the campus, but I felt happy with myself—as though I were sitting in a cafe on the Boul' Mich'. No more candlelight suppers with mother. No more steaks served at knife point by my irate father. I was on my own, and lonely. I read a lot my freshman year and



Richard (back row center) at his Bar Mitzvah. "Most of the boys were my friends. There were 100 adults there, all clients or potential clients of "Eddie's."

none of it was schoolwork, and fell in love seriously at least three times, and experienced a good deal of sex, at first hand, though once removed.

I also discovered I really could write, partly through the help of my Freshman English teacher, Daniel Curley, a professional writer of short stories. He allowed me to write imaginative prose pieces in his class, in lieu of expository close readings, and it turned out I had a knack for this sort of thing, could be vivid, even gruesome, especially if writing about life at home with my family. Here's a very early poem called "Oedipus":

In youth I goosed my parents' nerves,
burnt fardles that I stacked and stoked,
took my firewood pike and poked
dear mother's corset stays
were open-eyed by what I saw . . .

My very earliest poems were full of "nipping waves," "plumed glaucomas," and "Dasein nightmares," but some people I respected honestly deemed them promising.

In very short order I was made an editor of the literary magazine *Dilemma* and was palling around with Syracuse's tiny elite. I became a protégé of Donald Dike, a great teacher, with infinite patience, who taught me much. I was sought after, and had respect.

My parents wondered if Syracuse was the right place for me after all.

I fell in love seriously right about then with a very beautiful and talented young woman who had the additional qualification of generally disliking me, and very shortly after the affair, or misalliance, commenced, I proposed marriage to Emily, and meant it. That she came close to despising me did not disqualify her in my eyes: I'd lived more than eighteen years with my family and that had more or less worked out, without love. Emily, though, held herself back. She'd led a protected childhood. She had no real need for me, she thought. We agreed to keep company from then on, on a pay-as-you-go basis.

I worshipped her from afar, was uncomfortable up close, and she regarded me with a contempt that made love unnecessary.

How I worshipped this enemy. I wrote poems to her, sent her records and books; she claimed she didn't like to read. She was determined to remain a virgin, but enjoyed petting. In my junior year of college I wrote a novel about a youth that should have been called "The Blue Balls of Young Werther" which I called "The Pippick Papers." after Dickens, about two such lovers.

If one has inappropriate parents, choosing inappropriate lovers is a matter of course. How I should



Eddie's country house, Deal, New Jersey

have longed to be an orphan. I was only Little Mr. Richard Martin Elman, a poet, and my lawyer father was disturbed that I was showing little interest in business and a great deal of interest in literature. He didn't wish me to join the family law firm, as he did my brother, because even he was not that self-destructive, but he had no wish to create a family remittance man; and he was not so certain that he would not end up being my most telling and convincing subject.

Eventually I went off to Stanford University in 1956 with scholarship money to do graduate work in creative writing, and that freed me from the worst of the tyranny. The girl I loved also married me which seemed to her to be the path of least resistance, and she was going to be a painter and thought she needed to buy time. We lived in Palo Alto and I came under the influence of Yvor Winters, which was like taking chemotherapy for a bad cough. My hair started falling out; I enlisted in the army where I published my first journalistic works, exposes of army life, in the *Nation* under the pseudonym Eric Pearl. Later I returned to New York and pursued a career as a publicist and journalist. Somewhere in there I wrote my first short novel which was published with great elegance by the University of Texas Press under the title *A Coat for the Tsar*. I often pay graduate students to burn copies, should they come across them.

Emily and I always got along well, under the circumstances. Our family photos from that period are like still lifes, carefully contrived, of beautiful stems of

flowers which have not yet opened up. We sheltered each other from each other's families, gave each other a little more time than we might have had otherwise to write and paint. In all other respects we expected so little from each other. It felt to me like I was living in this flat for which the landlord had never promised to provide steam heat. In reality I hacked out reviews for reviews and occasionally took straight jobs in P.R. I became expert at huddling over my desk; Emily visited with her mother and dreamed of inheriting money. Eventually we had a daughter, Margaret, and I fell in love with her from first sight. On more than one occasion after we split up I was privileged to be her full-time parent and "primary validator," as some shrinks put it.

I could say Emily and I used each other to grow up; it was probably also a shame we weren't grown-ups before getting married. During the time we were together I began to accomplish things: first radio documentaries for the Pacifica network, then stories and books which are still important to me: *The Poorhouse State*, *The 28th Day of Elul*, *Lilo's Diary*. Her lack of interest in me certainly helped in that respect, if not in others.

I made a sort of living in those days through odd jobs in journalism. Once I was the entire news department of a small twenty-four hour radio station in Newark. We were supposed to have a "New York sound" so I was enjoined to conduct interviews with important people in the news, and, if that proved logistically impossible, to fake them. With the help of a filter mike I was at various times Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, Konrad Adenauer, and Yuri Gagarin. I also worked for CBS in a junior capacity, and for *Look* magazine, *Newsweek*, and the Public Broadcasting network, but the bulk of my income, even then, came from writing free-lance pieces for magazines ranging from *Cavalier* (a junior *Playboy*) to *Commonweal*, the *Nation*, and the *New Republic*. I estimated I wrote and published about three hundred book reviews alone between 1963 and 1966.

I split up with Emily in 1968, after teaching two years at Bennington College when it was still a girls' school. One of the first people I met at Bennington was Nick Delbanco; we were supposed to be rivals and ended up close friends. He taught me much of what I know of graciousness, and conviviality. He was my friend and support when I needed one. I was astonished by the beauty of his prose. I couldn't write that way. Nick invited me to parties where I finally learned how to dance. I felt as though I was the student being expensively schooled in life's necessities and I was truly humbled by my experience, despite the fact that I was going through the difficulties of separation and im-



Elman with his daughter Margaret, 1971

pending divorce.

The Bennington girls also taught me a lot, and I was infatuated with a number of them, and eventually fell in love with one who, like Emily, was a painter. When I left the place and my wife in one gesture, I was as hungry for female company as an infant at the dug.

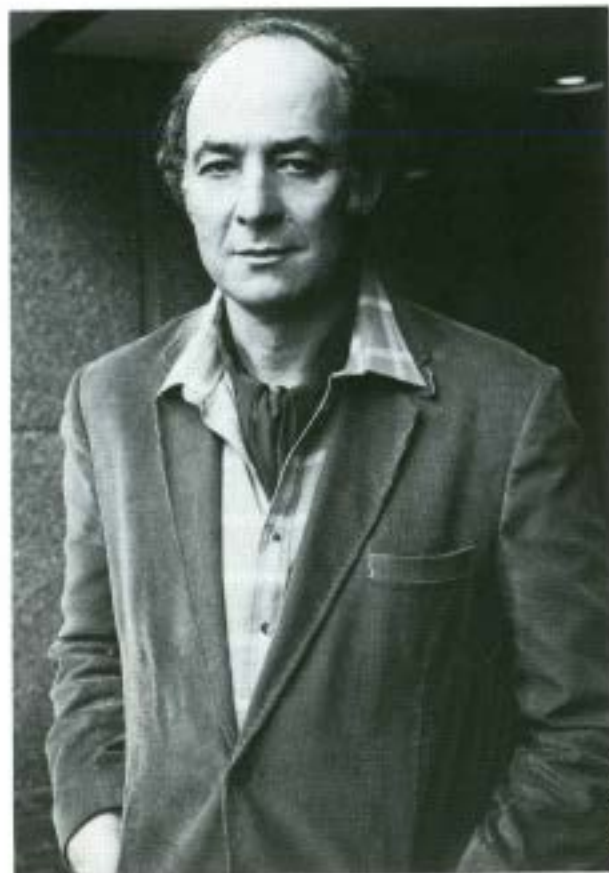
I thought for a while to try my luck as a Don Juan, a sexual jackal. As a matter of fact, my luck was surprisingly good in those overheated days of the late sixties and early seventies, and I rarely had an empty bed, or a balance in my checking account. Around that time I began work on a new novel, *An Education in Blood*, which was an exploration of male rage and numbness and amnesia, and my editor, Burroughs Mitchell of Scribner's, who was a close friend, told me to slow down, as it was coming very well, and would simply take time. In those days I wrote as I womanized, at white heat. When the novel was completed in three drafts (and some places many more) I really couldn't tell if it was any good or a total disaster. I tore up my only copy and asked Burroughs' forgiveness. He gave it because, he assured me, he had two more xeroxes in his desk.

An Education in Blood was inspired by, but did not slavishly imitate, the David Lamson murder case in

Palo Alto, California, in 1933 which I'd read about through the writings of Yvor Winters, one of Lamson's only staunch defenders. I did not wish to sit in judgment of Lamson, and whether he killed or did not kill his wife. I was interested in the combination of literary interests and murderous rage. When I told Winters, who was dying of cancer of the tongue, that I wished to make a book out of the Lamson material, he threatened me, said he would haunt me. In the end I fictionalized almost everything, aside from the initial situation, but Winters is represented in this fiction through the character of Jim Hill. And if I managed to write *An Education in Blood*, despite Winters' dying efforts to intimidate me, it was because it was as much about people like myself, I felt, as Lamson.

An Education in Blood—though largely unread by others and out-of-print—remains my most serious work of that period.

An Education is an unpleasant book; its characters do not always elicit our sympathies. In that respect, the well-known savant Ted Solotaroff once remarked about some people in another of my other books that he would hate to spend a weekend in their company. I would agree with him. Our characters would never get along, like mixing vinegar and oil.



Jerry Bauer

Richard Elman

When I looked around at the world, at first, and thought of writing about it, it seemed, alas, a place of pain. But I never settled for easy *weltschmerz*. *The 28th Day of Elul*, was revised from front to back so many times that, when it was finished and published, I felt as if I had been briefly in the "camps": I developed a bad pleurisy, and Elie Wiesel who reviewed the book most favorably in the *New York Times* told me later in person: "You were only a little boy in America but you were with us then, I know."

"In our time," Saint Orwell tells us, "political speech and writing are 'a defense of the indefensible.'" For reasons very like that I chose to write fiction. But, in laboring late at night over *28th Day*, it sometimes seemed I could dramatize the process by which atrocious behavior is rationalized by memory. I found myself writing the final draft of *28th Day* very much in a dream state. Things were always shifting on me as I wrote, changing. There was a small Hungarian cafe where I took coffee in the mornings, and I sat there with my morning paper, like the others, a denizen, dislocated by history.

The same sort of displacement happened to me a few years later when I was teaching at Columbia. The department chairman was an American with an English accent. He was so Catholic he might have been Protestant, a very scrupulous man about marriage and adultery, the sort Ford Madox Ford devoted whole novels to. He was, of course, a very grand philanderer, but I knew him mostly as moneyed. One day he called me in from the corridor to speak personally. He came right out with it: he was thinking of divorcing his wife, a wretched hostess. Did I have any opinions? "If you're not happy you should," I said. "Things will take care of themselves. You can afford it." "You really think so?" "Honestly," I said, "in all candor, if that's what you want, I'll help you." "I'll remember that," he said. "Thanks." He never spoke to me again, and shortly thereafter, I later learned, started making plans for my replacement. How was I to know he was that scrupulous about breaking women's hearts. The rest of my time at Columbia my conscience was easy for the good advice I had offered to a man who preferred freezing to struggling day to day like the rest of us; and when I was given my notice from Columbia without reason, I suddenly knew my *métier* was not to be a marriage counselor.

Sometimes we dream ourselves awake. The long somnolence of my first marriage was made jagged by all my earliest efforts at writing. I worked constantly, but as though surrounded by a brittle lucite shell, encapsulated. Hermetic, though not quite a hermit. The more I wrote and published the more others became aware of me and lauded me, but I was not always happy with such fame. I felt there was something forced and synthetic to my writing; it seemed to glance off speech without *being* speech. And when I was free of the obligation to live out all the old fantasies of Emily and Dick, I adapted an entirely new style that was terse and colloquial, as unliterary as I could make it. *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids* was one result, a comic strip, as one critic put it. There were also a number of early stories which took their inspiration from the human voice, from the learned experience I acquired working with human voices as a documentary producer and tape editor for the Pacifica Radio network. In these stories, the gesture with which a voice said this or that was as important as the words. Such stories were about the wobble in the human voice between coherence and lunacy. This was something I also played with and extended in a much more somber way through *An Education in Blood*.

I also became interested in poetry once more. It had been pretty much beaten out of me by Yvor Winters' denunciations of my Brooklyn ear at Stanford,

though I had never given up on the genre entirely. Even on journalistic assignment I sometimes found myself scribbling short evocative poems of place. And, as I felt freer to use the range and pitch of the language, it came to me that I really didn't have to sound like my beloved Sir Thomas Wyatt to make a poem. I seemed to be writing them all the time, mostly with song movements. It was the Beatles era. For a while I hung out with poet Marge Piercy and her husband Robert. I very much liked the spirit of her first book, *Breaking Camp*, and reviewed it, positively; but I did not write like her, with so much seasoned disgruntlement. Recently separated, I wrote poems that seemed to converge on some sort of metaphysics of seduction and loss: "When I turn again to the wild wallpaper of my heart / in the room you rented me without a ceiling / it's the cost of leasing I find sad . . ."

Some of the women I lived with in those days, for days or weeks at a time, are still as intimate to me as memory. They were often literary and usually beautiful, but what I looked for and what I got was a dependency to replace what I had walked away from in Emily. I told myself I was having a very good time, but a lot of the time I felt like the towel man in a large whorehouse. One of my girlfriends was an actress; another a courier for the PLO. I was on the lookout for psychotherapists with large incomes, or comptrollers of major American corporations, and when I encountered one it was like taking a cold shower inside an iceberg. "The schmuck doesn't lie," they used to tell me in Brooklyn. The more needy women were the women I always chose to love.

It was fortunate in those days I wasn't yet divorced, or I might have gotten married four or five times, badly. For a little while I lived in a psychiatric free-love commune, a sort of Marxist-Leninist psychiatric never-never land. The head honcho was always fixing me up with the homeliest women. I had a yen for his girlfriend. He put pressure on me to marry this one woman who looked very much like my own star child, she also didn't like me very much. But, if I married her, she said, I could sleep with anybody else I liked afterwards. She just wanted to make a baby, or rather her shrink thought she should. I made a pass at the head's girl and was kicked out of the group. Just as well. The only reason why I joined the group in the first place was I was having such a good time with women I thought I must be going crazy.

My divorce from Emily finally happened in the early seventies; it was acrimonious, though by consent. My relations with others were equally bitter. When I published *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids* in 1972 I broke with my family. It was now my daughter Margaret and me against the world. In 1973 I was called in to the Scrib-



On assignment in Mexico, 1979, "a few years after I wrote the novelization of *Taxi Driver*, a popular book in Mexico."

ner library by Master Charles and told he personally was ashamed to have published *Fredi & Shirl*. My editor looked as if he'd swallowed a turd. The book had been widely reviewed and all praise. Mr. Scribner said he probably should be given back the advance. I left the house, without regrets, and shortly thereafter so did my editor, Burroughs Mitchell.

I was now an entire orphan, and my depredations against women were increasingly widespread. I had large responsibilities and no way of paying for them except by my pen. I began to do a certain amount of for-hire writing, largely for friends, on books to which they alone signed their names, and by 1976 I also wrote the novelization of the movie, *Taxi Driver*, which was printed in many editions, and which remains the single most lucrative book I ever published. It also received a certain amount of notoriety in 1981 when it was found on the shelf of the would be presidential assassin, John Hinckley.

They say in Central America: "*Con estes buyes hay que arar* (With these oxen one must plough)." And it is certainly true one does what one must do, but sometimes one does even more: at the same time as I was turning myself into a novelization factory I also rediscovered my poetry, and began to write in earnest—thanks to the encouragement of William Bronk, Mark Weiss, Herbert Krohn, my fellow poets—and to give readings at cafes and bistros, all the things I should have done as a younger man. My income suffered a precipitate decline, but I was happy. It still means more to me to publish a good poem than to have my novel reviewed in the *New York Times*.

Novels only work for me when I find myself understanding my subject better through writing about it. I enjoy the experience of changing my mind in the act of writing. This was preeminently the case with *Fredi & Shiril*. It was initially a long lugubrious work of angst and ambivalence about family life. During the process of revision I became so clear about what I was saying that I dropped all the ambivalence as essentially affectation. Some people have subsequently complained that I was too harsh on my family. If anything I underwrote, but my understatements about them were very clear. The most terrible irony of *Fredi & Shiril* is that the book's narrator, the author, is also its most grievously injured victim. As with Butler's Ernest in *The Way of All Flesh*, one can't help wondering what an artist Little Mr. Richard Elman might have been if he had not had his head handed to him time and again in childhood.

After writing *Fredi & Shiril* I felt utterly naked and also empty. I tried a lot of different writing projects and most of them failed, aside from some short poems. Around then I spent one whole year of my life painting. I was inspired by one of those temporary friends one sometimes runs across in social situations, the painter Jules Olitski. We were both seeing the same woman and she was doing us both dirt, so we tried each other's company, even went up to Yaddo together, briefly.

He was a very large success, and he claimed to want to write novels but he seemed to be having so much fun spritzing and smearing paint with squeegees and other odd devices, I grew envious of him, for more than one reason. On several occasions his friend Larry Poons had me in to slop paint, and all the painters in that circle were egging me on to try. "You have something special. Can't describe it. Got anything to lose?"

Such painters truly lived by their wits: a shtick here or there, or a touch of magic marker at the edges, and they had a kind of million-dollar logo. I enjoyed painting because I could write poems in my head while I was doing it. I never had to think, I thought. I

cleared the floor in my small Upper West Side apartment, and bought all the materials I could afford from Pearl Paints: gels and dry pigments and glazes. I made a real mess of the place, too, and became quite haughty and competitive about my messes. I was not the only one I knew staring into the horse's mouth: a psychiatrist friend actually used to hold therapy sessions with his patients while he painted, until he got a reading-out from his supervisor.

Why did I try so hard to do what I was not really prepared to do? I was once again testing the original much-maligned materials of my being, and what I did was not that reassuring to me: my large paintings were vulgar, grandiose, and craven, and it was my pastels and watercolors that sometimes seemed delicate to me, gentle, and finely conceived.

Maybe it also had to do with my marriage to Emily. She was a very tidy person who never let me play with her paints and brushes when we were married. In the end, I renounced that sort of huge gestural painting, too, as a snare and a delusion, though I still draw with colors occasionally. What was the point of becoming as competitive about painting as I was about writing?

Between 1968 and 1975 I published seven books of fiction and nonfiction, drove myself mad to the point of incarceration at least three times, helped to raise and support a child, was a member of the graduate creative writing faculty at Columbia University, and went so deeply into debt that one morning early I was forced to announce to the dunning voice of a credit-card clerk that Richard Elman was dead, I was just looking after his effects. And I was never bothered by them again.

That I was saved from myself, and eventually found my way again, was due to the influence of good friends: the poet William Bronk (whom I met after reviewing an early book many years before) took me in innumerable times and offered me succor. The historian Al Fried, a former collaborator, was always available for a touch, or advice, or an earned reproach. And my sometimes girlfriend, Rosalyn Baxandall, also a writer, and a biographer, was loving and stern with me, generous but outraged by my nonsense. She kept tabs on me, taught me how to live in the adult world, and be happy again.

I learned from my friends I was not always alone and misunderstood. Sometimes I was too well understood. In a poem called "Taking Out the Garbage" I wrote at that time, "Nothing and nobody has a hold on me." I was to discover, after about ten years of despairing of things, that this was not always going to be true. Once having defied auguries, I now seemed to await



Ethan A. Russell

Elman with Mick Jagger.

(From Upright with the Stones by Richard Elman. Copyright © 1972, 1973 Richard Elman.)

them, eagerly enough, for I wrote,

The clay of our hearts
has ripened when we can feel
the intense longing glance
the cauliflower offer us
its adorations . . .

It is an adventure to be alive with the knowledge that we are arriving somewhere we do not yet know to be a place.

On election day 1976 I took the old Adirondack Limited from Grand Central Station to my temporary home near Bill Bronk in Hudson Falls, New York. They were still using the old trains then, and there was a club car and diner added on beyond Albany for the winding shlep along Lake Champlain to Montreal. Hudson Falls is built around a rapids in the river; it's Fenimore Cooper country, the glen in nearby Glens Falls being the one Cooper referred to in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Thanks to Bronk, I now knew all those things. He taught me his history and told me it was mine as well. So I was an excellent tour guide on my trips back and forth from the city along the river. I could point to where the Mohawk and the Hudson joined at Cohoes, and the mansions of the rich around Rhinebeck, Bannerman's Island and Melville's birthplace in Gansevoort. And it was a fine day for touring, a day like

glass, squeaky clean and brilliant; and the broad and lordly Hudson sinewing beside me, like a trail of lapis lazuli or darkest green onyx.

A very beautiful young woman sat behind me with a book on her lap and I caught her glance, at first, unintentionally. She was very appealing, a friendly face framed by dark hair, and I was feeling quite lonely. I asked what she was reading, and she answered. Pretty soon we were seatmates and I was showing off the wonders of the Hudson Valley, the robber baron castles along this American Rhine. She listened rapt, attentive, and accepted my invitation to have a drink in the club car.

Only when we stood together in the weaving car amid shy glances, I knew I would not escape this counter quite so easily as I had others. My new friend, Alice Goode, was a very serious person, but also quite tolerant of my most lunatic adventures, and I was very strongly attracted to her. I asked her to get off the train with me at Fort Edward, but she said she couldn't then: she was going to meet another man. We exchanged addresses, though, and after a while I heard from her. We got together, and it was every bit as wonderful as I had anticipated. So we moved in together. We lived together nearly two years in Stony Brook before we decided to marry, and try to have a child.

Getting to know Alice and share my life with her was surely a turning point for me. I was forty-two, and



Richard and his wife, Alice, at "Fishtown," Lake Leelanau, Michigan

she was twenty-eight. She'd been married once before and hurt. She was a teacher and she had writing talent. I had a home for the first time in many years. I started to write fiction in earnest again.

We lived together in a conservative old-line university town quite far out on the shores of the Long Island Sound. My neighbors were the flotsam of the ruling Protestant majority in this country. Oddly the work I chose to finish, initially, under the pseudonym of John Howland Spyker, its narrator and principal character, was a series of "Little Lives" set in and around Hudson Falls, New York, and modelled in a mild way on John Aubrey's seventeenth-century classic, *Brief Lives*.

My John Howland Spyker was irascible, amused, tender, even horny; to some he was, of course, the epitome of my friend, William Bronk, who was very cross with me for such a portrait. He claimed his neighbors all thought he wrote my book. Indeed, the mysterious

authorship of *Little Lives* remained mysterious until my friend John Leonard revealed my identity in a rave review in the *New York Times*. But, earlier, in another favorable review, Anatole Broyard, during a newspaper strike, declared for the out-of-town papers that carried the *Times* syndicate. Spyker was in the company of Grandma Moses, and the maker of glass flowers in the Peabody Museum, a natural miniaturist.

For awhile, I enjoyed being John Howland Spyker. It's one of those lateral motions authors use to free themselves of old, unnecessary inhibitions. You step sideways into another world, another character. By the time the book was being published, to much notoriety, I was on my way to Nicaragua to witness the Sandinists' revolution.

It came about that the elegant new magazine, *GEO*, with Germanic sententiousness, was looking for a Brooklyn-born writer to write about that borough for a special issue on New York. I was recommended by a friend of the editor. The papers that August were full of the insurgency in Nicaragua. I'd never seen a war, and didn't consider myself very brave. I didn't want to write about Brooklyn; it had taken me eighteen years to get away from the place, and now that I was on my own I didn't feel like returning. I also needed the bucks. I made a deal with the editors: if they would send me to Nicaragua, I'd write the piece about Brooklyn later.

What convinced them to go along with me were the simply miraculous photos by Susan Meiselas. She had already been down in Nicaragua three months alone, and unaided, and had a beat on everybody in journalism, aside from the *Times'* Alan Riding, with whom she sometimes collaborated. Susan's photos were tacit, implicit explosions inside the eye of consciousness. She showed a popular and bloody revolution and a smug, corrupt, unpopular government, but the magazine felt there should be—that the people might want—some sort of text and I was instructed to write a diary of the ongoing revolt.

I don't believe I ever experienced so much in such a short span as I did in Nicaragua. It was as though the whole of a cotton wool-wrapped childhood and adulthood came unraveled in that first month of bloodshed, death, courage, and unbelievable stoicism. I came away a believer in the Revolution, and I am still, though I am not always sure the Sandinistas are the only and inevitable agents of history inside Nicaragua.

I saw things there that still haunt my dreams; I came fairly close to getting hurt on two occasions; and I made lifelong friends. It's odd that Nicaragua is much more like my own personal Zion than the State of Israel which sold arms to the Somocista forces to murder Nicaraguans. I came to despise what North



Elman's press identification, Nicaragua, 1978

Americans were about in Central America, and the more I went back, the more I saw that North Americans were not the only enemies of liberty in Central America; many were within the ranks of the Revolution itself. But because a body is infected does not mean it should be destroyed; hope demands it be cured.

The Honduran poet Roberto Sosa, observing the Central American poor, writes of "their dignity of offended Gods." In Nicaragua I saw a people suddenly courageous who once were passive, cowed. I watched human beings achieve miracles of cooperation and sacrifice and I was struck by so many personal contradictions that I went back six or seven times over the years before I understood: I was a gringo and my friends were not my enemies. But first trips, like first impressions, make impressions that are lasting. No subsequent visit to Nicaragua has touched me as much as when I worked with a first-class artist, Susan, and felt outraged and inspired by the human animal in every encounter.

I wrote two of my finest books about Nicaragua: *Cocktails at Somoza's* (journalism) and *In Chontales*, a book of poems; Nicaragua is also the scene of my comic novel, *The Menu Cypher*. In fact, the U.S. intelligence spookery of the Caribbean basin figures not only in *The Menu Cypher*, but in its earlier counterpart, *The Breadfruit Lotteries*. The fact is, Nicaragua has colored much of my imagination over the last decade, though I live

placidly enough by the Long Island Sound; and it required a real struggle to detach myself from the allegory long enough to begin to think about my most recent novel, *Loving Strangers*, which I began in the early seventies and let stand for nearly ten years.

If Nicaragua was the grisly fun of reporting on a smashed mirror, getting back to work and focus with *Loving Strangers* made me anxious, tested my patience. The time I was putting in produced no immediate emotional or monetary rewards. I felt under considerable stress. In the end I consoled myself with the knowledge that my real work had always brought me little wealth and considerable anxiety. I was never going to be a "success" like my father. Nevertheless, I considered myself a very lucky person. Since age thirty I'd done little else except write, and occasionally teach; and I rarely even had to attend a faculty meeting. I'd travelled less than I wanted to but that's because I wanted even more to be at my desk. And I'd made dear friends and colleagues in writing: Bronk, Delbanco, the poet Mark Weiss, others.

I've known many people who've been influences on me, though I really knew them hardly at all. There was Henry Miller who told me in his early seventies that, with the time he had left on earth, he didn't want to pose for my biography of him. I really couldn't blame him and dropped the project.

There was Tillie Olsen who was my colleague at Stanford twenty-eight years ago. We've corresponded regularly ever since, and often her letters are full of reproaches, which are her chief form of encouragement, I suspect.

There was Isaac Bashevis Singer for whom, once, briefly, I performed the duties of an amanuensis. He disapproved of my divorcing Emily and consorting with "schwartzas" who, he insisted, were not friends of the Jews.

There's another person I should like to mention, and by name. He was my closest literary colleague, a distinguished writer, and a friend. He lavished praise on my books. We followed each others' lives. Then we quarreled, I don't believe I know over what, and afterwards we no longer spoke. It's been a few years. I miss his presence in my life enormously and his influences as dearly as anything. If I thought that we could be friends again, I would mention his name, but I don't wish to embarrass him by placing him in my company without his permission.

We lose friends along the way in writing. We lose as many as we make. There are those we grow away from, and those we offend by seeking to be honest in our words.

When my mother was an old woman she pretended to be of a forgiving nature. She insisted on making me the object of her forgiveness. I'd never meant to do her and my father harm, she insisted. I saw the matter differently. My seeing her again was an act of compassion. I did not wish her to, but she would never forgive me for *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids*. She always called it that "bad book you once wrote." One reason why I still honor that book is because I know how much it discomforted my parents.

I continue to tell myself that the situation I described in my household was hardly different from that of other households, though only I had been prepared to write about it.

My wife Alice has never reproached me for writing *Fredi & Shirl*. She grew up in a "close, good" family, but there were amazing similarities. Perhaps the only major difference between her family and mine is nobody ever got out of hers alive.

About five years ago a producer friend asked me to record some radio talks for "All Things Considered," a very popular program over National Public Radio. I enjoyed doing the talks and they were very popular. But, as my audience grew, so did the envy of the NPR staff; they became frightened when I referred to President Carter as "one of Johnson's patriotic scoundrels" during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980 and they took me off the air. I was not that upset: I'd been invited to the sort of party I never usually attended and I'd had a

pretty good time there. If people were asking me to leave, it was really time to go anyway.

But, after a while, I was invited back on again, in response to listener mail. They said no more commentaries on politics; you'll be a book reviewer. The trouble with reviewing books is everybody thinks they know what a good book is. It's their friend's book. I was sacked a second time for being uncooperative.

So it was that I came to feel with NPR a little like a man who keeps marrying the same woman over and over again. After she throws him out of the house for not wiping his feet on the front mat, he is allowed to enter in the rear, as it were, to be scolded again for leaving the toilet seat up.

A case of bashful dogs mating. Everytime I was reproached for some new infraction I'd ask for a raise. I never got a raise but I was always asked back just so I could be dismissed again.

I still meet people who listened to me with pleasure and ask, "What happened?"

My usual reply is, "'All things considered,' comes from Washington. People in Washington are very family-minded. I was not a member of their immediate family. Relatives have a lot of common enemies and it turned out I was one of their most common enemies."

Alice and I lived together four years before we had a daughter, Lila, a happy wonder to me; we spend a lot of time together. They say she looks like me; I say she's even better looking.

In 1980 I made some sort of reconciliation with my mother Pearl and Leonard at their invitation. It wasn't easy, being as bitter as I was, but I also knew some of it was just antique rage, which froze in my throat without immediate cause. I became one of Pearl's guardians, and found that painful but necessary, and, now that the parents are no longer with us to divide and conquer, my older brother and I and his children and mine are able to be on friendly, supportive, though really not very close, terms.

A lot of my life has involved changing my mind about situations that irked me once. I grew up believing intimacy was another word for rape, and have gotten to know intimacy even so. I was not lucky in my initial circumstances, but I was luckier than some: the orphans of Calcutta, or Ho Chi Minh City. I survived. I was always able to reach out to supportive strangers and some of them became my good, dear friends.

Loving Strangers is my twenty-first book written under my own name (there are a number of ghosted works). I do not feel depleted. There's a novel called *Uganda* I've been working on since 1969, and there's another Harmon spy novel set in Honduras. There are books about love (a subject I know little about that



Alice and daughter Lila, 1982

never ceases to fascinate me), and there's a book of memoirs of other people I've bumped into: Singer, Miller, Faye Dunaway, Malcom X, Hubert Humphrey, John Gardner, Truman Capote, Grace Paley, Elie Wiesel, Erica Jong, Dylan Thomas, etc., etc.

I also want to spend a major portion of the time I have left writing poetry. This is increasingly hard to justify since my finances are precarious, but it is the source of all my hopes.

The great Hungarian poet Attila József once wrote: "An adult is one who has no father or mother in his heart." Recognizing that in himself, the desolated poet chose suicide. I chose hope. It's the feeling of being lost and anchorless that leads us into life, into love.

"My gift horse looked me in the mouth," wrote the poet Louis MacNeice, in summing up his life, just a few months before he died. I have no such intentions, though it has often seemed as such when I was writing this. My aim was to explain how a lad of indifferent talents and discouraged airs, contracted early on from a household of psychopaths, managed to fare none too badly by following two main rules: trust strangers; and try to enjoy yourself.

Scholars may also benefit from my evaluation of what I believe to be my best work. I believe I am a better poet than a novelist, and that my best poems are scattered in magazines and newspapers and the drawers of my desk, as well as in the two principal "cannibalized" collections: *Homage to Fats Navarro* and *In Chronotales*. There is also the unpublished memorial elegy of over sixty pages which I wrote for my college friend, the artist Keith Sanzenbach, suicide at thirty-five, "Cathedral Tree Train."

Of my fiction I prefer *The 28th Day of Elul*, *Fredi & Shirl*, and *An Education in Blood* along with the two spy novels and the *Spyker*. I like my collection of stories, *Crossing Over*, and have enough to fill three more; and I still admire my book (nonfiction) on the Welfare System, *The Poorhouse State*, and my published account of the Rolling Stone tour of 1973; and if anybody thinks *Taxi Driver* is just another novelization, they ought to take a look at it.

I cannot even begin to say how much or why I admire *Loving Strangers*. My wife says, "I don't know how to feel about such people." Maybe that's why I like them so much. They are full of contradictions and all the more human to me.

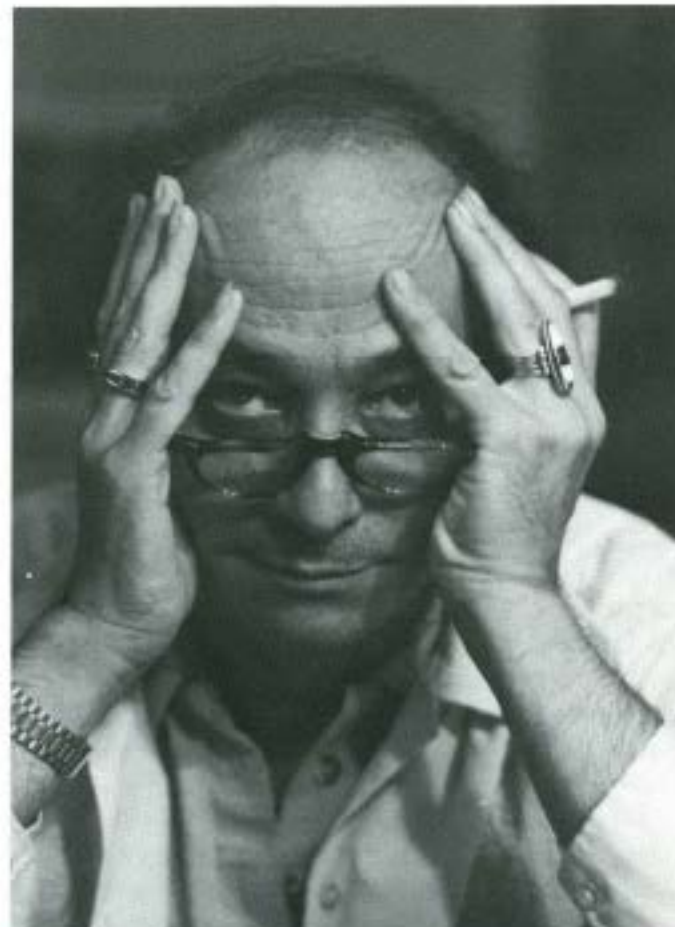
When I was still a young man I wrote: "Some fotos / in the summer heart garden / are quiet as memories / their edges uncurled: one hardly thinks such sepia was blood." A writer's work can be like that, too: "permanently fixed by tears."

In my poem "Curriculum Vitae," which is on the subject of what people do and don't put in their résumés, I lamented: "We never indent the chronology of yens, crushes, fantasies, affairs / never present under experience: Five years of heavy longing for Inez / or two great nights with Margot Meringue of Crowell. . ." I've tried hard to violate the ruling order of things in this brief new autobiography without somehow revealing my current crush "for Phyllis of the Women's Movement" taking her coffee breaks next to the water-cooler; and I also believe that I have shown life has meant more to me than a flirtation at the annual student faculty gathering above a trivet holding "a shiney brass casserole of Swedish meatballs." If I've quoted

from myself, it's because that's the subject you asked me to address myself to—myself and my work. As I once wrote, there was a point in my life when I wanted to go down in history, and then I realized what fun writing really was and it all got easier and more fun for me.

My only regret so far is not to have been born an orphan, or, failing that piece of luck, to have been raised by wolves in a forest in the Auvergne. If some members of my family probably felt the same way about me, that doesn't invalidate my feeling that my childhood was a crime, and my life and career since then has been an effort to transform a bum rap into good time.

"Whoever loves himself," the poet Richard Elman once wrote, "loves an antagonist worthy of others."



Richard Elman, Mexico City, 1982: "The poet who lost his glasses."

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