

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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**“The successful man sometimes makes his money by ability and experience;
but he generally makes it by mistake.”**

G. K. Chesterton

LAREDO, JULY 21, 1965

“. . . so just what in the God damned Hell do you think you’re doing, Joyce? Are you stark, staring insane?”

“I - I - I don’t know what you mean, I just . . .”

“You know damned well what I mean. Why didn’t you finish the job? Why didn’t you just run up and kick him in the balls?”

“Arthur, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If you’re that God damned stupid, then you . . .”

“Will you tell me what you’re talking about?”

“Joyce, what did you promise me about Bill Binnings?”

“I don’t know what I’ve done, I’ve been as nice to the man as I know how.”

“Oh, you’ve been that, all right. You’ve been real buddy buddy. In less than two hours, you’ve convinced him that you’re a cheap, dirty mouthed, bitchy little whore; and he’s probably right, for the first time in his life.”

“Arthur, I won’t take that kind of talk off of anybody, I’ll . . .”

“You’ll what? Just what will you do, Joyce? Right now there’s really not much more you can do to me. You’re always talking about trying to destroy people, Joyce, is that what you’re trying to do to me? It damned sure looks like it.”

“Arthur, I was as friendly towards Bill as I could be.”

“You sure were, just barely short of throwing him down and raping him, and you didn’t leave much doubt in his mind about how much trouble he’d have getting in your pants.”

“Arthur, I’m going home to Mama. Where’s the phone? I’ll call her right now. Mama’s right about you, you are some kind of a monster. Your father knew it too; he wanted to get the kids taken away from you, for their sake, but he was afraid of you. He should have done it; you’re ruining those kids, and they’re good kids, but they won’t be if they stay around you much longer.”

“You’ve said all I care to hear, Joyce, there’s the phone, call your mother.”

“Will you - you - oh - oh God - Arthur, I’m sick, I can’t breathe - Help me. Oh, God - I’m real sick . . .”

LATER THAT SAME DAY

“What happened to Joyce? Ya Ya said you took her to the hospital.”

“Apparently she’s got ulcers. We had an argument in her room, and she said she was going back to Arkansas, so I told her to go, and started to walk out; then, about two seconds later, she had a violent attack of stomach pains. So I took her to the hospital and they put her under sedation. They’ve probably been coming on for quite a while and the argument was enough to trigger the first attack. I thought she was faking at first, and I almost walked off and left her standing there.

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“She’s been complaining about stomach pains for the last two weeks, but never anything like this before.”

“What were you arguing about?”

“Liza, I’ve been warning her about Bill ever since she left Arkansas, and she told me she understood; then, this afternoon, on the airport, she acted like she was trying to start trouble with him. So, when I jumped on her about it, she threw a big fit and said she was leaving and I started to walk out, and that’s when she had the attack.”

“What did she say to Bill?”

“It wasn’t just what she said, although that was bad enough, it was the way she acted, and the way she said things; in less than half an hour, she managed to insult him, ridicule him in front of other people, convince him that she’s a cheap little bitch, and damn near proposition him.”

“Arthur, what did she actually say to Bill?”

“Well, he was telling some people that he planned to fly the gyrocopter in the film, and she walked up and said, ‘Now, Bill, you know Arthur won’t let you fly that thing, not until the picture’s finished at least.’

“I was standing about ten feet away, and I felt like Chicken Little, I thought the sky was falling. But that was just for openers, after she got warmed up she really let him have it; she told him all about the jaguar sequence, all of this in front of other people, of course, and what a clever film editor I am, and how lucky he is to be connected with someone that can make him look like a hero when he isn’t even involved.

“Then, about five minutes later, she had him off in a corner telling him dirty jokes, and all about her battles with her husband, down to and including the size of his penis.

“Arthur, the girl’s emotionally disturbed.”

“Liza, that’s why I took her away from Arkansas; she damned sure wasn’t getting any better living with her mother. When I first saw her, on the trip when I picked her up, I hardly recognized her; if I’d seen her on the street, I don’t think I would have recognized her. She looked like a trapped animal; she was caught, and she didn’t know which way to turn. If I hadn’t taken her away from there when I did, I think she’d have had a complete nervous breakdown within a matter of days.”

“Arthur, she’s not getting any better with you, either; the girl needs professional help. Why don’t you take her to a psychiatrist?”

“She won’t go, and it would probably be a mistake to force her, even if I could. Legally, she’s in a peculiar position; her husband’s about the only one with any legal control over her, and all he wants is out. He damned sure wouldn’t take the responsibility for getting her committed; if he did, he might be stuck with her for life, and that’s probably the last thing in the world he wants right now.”

“I thought you told me he tried to get here to come back to him?”

“Liza, I’ve never met the boy, I haven’t even talked to him on the phone, so all I have to go on is what Joyce tells me, and what her mother tells me; according to both of them, he did, at first, but then the last time I talked to Gladys on the phone, she said he’d changed his tune about that now.”

“When will she get out of the hospital?”

“Oh, any time tomorrow. I talked to the doctor after she went to sleep, and he said he’d release her as soon as she sleeps off the effects of the drug they gave her to kill the pain. He gave me a prescription for some medicine, and he told me to avoid any emotional disturbances, but he couldn’t give me a prescription for that.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER . . .

“. . . you dumb son of a bitch, I used to think Arthur was too hard on you, but I’m surprised he hasn’t killed you.”

“...And God Laughs”

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“I just thought it would be all right to leave him for a few minutes.”

“Shut up, Herbert, go out in the hall and wait, and don’t leave; if you do, you’ll damned sure wish you hadn’t. Bill, would it make you feel any better of I cut Herbert up in small pieces and let you feed him to the cat?”

“Arthur, I just don’t know about Herbert, I feel like killing him myself. He knew the bow was here, I was showing it to him less than an hour ago, and he knew the jaguar was interested in it; yet he went off and left him alone, and now look, just look. I don’t really care about the clothes, and the shoes, and the other stuff, I expected them to get torn up sooner or later, but this, I had this made especially, this was the only one like it in the world, I designed it myself, and now just look at it.

“You’re right about Herbert, Arthur, he’s not safe running around loose; I just don’t know how you ever put up with him for so long. Arthur, this just makes me sick; I know my stuff doesn’t mean anything to anybody else, and maybe it’s not very important, but it means a lot to me. That’s why I take such good care of my things, and why I won’t even let him touch them, but I strung it for him, just to show him how, and I spent half an hour just answering his questions, simply because he was interested. I went to all that trouble in an effort to be nice to the stupid son of a bitch, and now look, this is the thanks I get.

“Arthur, I just feel like packing what little stuff I’ve got left and catching a plane for home, and saying to Hell with the whole damned thing. You just don’t know how this makes me feel. Herbert knows what I think about that damned cat in the first place, and then he lets this happen. I felt bad enough after the way Joyce acted, but I realize she’s your daughter, and I know you haven’t been around her much, so I can overlook a certain amount of that, but this is just too much. I feel so weak my legs are shaking, let me sit down before I fall down.”

“Bill, I’m just as sorry about this as you are, maybe more so, and you have my personal guarantee that Herbert won’t hear the end of it for the rest of his life, short as that appears to be at the moment. In the morning, as soon as the factory’s open, get on the phone and order another one just like it, and Herbert’s going to pay for it, and I don’t give a damn how much it costs. If you can think of something to add to it, something that’ll make it more expensive, then be my guest, or be Herbert’s guest. He needs a good lesson along those lines anyway; I’ve been protecting him from his own mistakes too long now.”

“Arthur, they didn’t even want to make this one for me, and it’s not just a matter of expense; that’s a big factory, they make thousands of bows, and they don’t like to make special order items. It took me all day to talk them into making this one, and they only made it because I promised them some free publicity in the films. I doubt if they’d make another one for any price.”

“Do they still make bows out of bone?”

“Oh, some of the Indians used to, I think. Why?”

“We could string Herbert’s vertebra on a piece of spring steel and use his skull for a handgrip, it’s about the right size. I think he wears a size two hat, and that comes down to his shoulders.”

“Oh, Hell, Arthur, go to bed, I’ll be all right. I’ll call the factory in the morning, maybe I can think of something to tell them. Anyway, it wasn’t your fault, so I can’t cause you trouble over Herbert’s stupidity. But I’m beginning to understand what you’ve been putting up with all these years. Don’t kill him yet, though, wait ‘till we finish the picture, then maybe I’ll do it for you.”

LAREDO, JULY 23, 1965 . . .

“. . . you fly it for a while, Arthur, let me relax and smoke a cigarette.”

“O. K., I’ve got it, but you won’t learn anything with me flying it.”

“What did you do to Herbert? Gary said you beat the Hell out of him.”

“Nothing of any importance, Joyce, just stay completely out of it. There’s enough bad blood between you and Herbert now, and if you mention it, it’ll just make it worse.

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“I won’t say anything, I just want to know what happened.”

“You’ve got to know everything, don’t you? And I’ve heard that line about not saying anything before, you said that about Bill, remember?”

“Arthur, you promised you’d drop that.”

“Joyce it gives me no pleasure to have to throw things up to you, and I’d be perfectly happy to tell you anything I can, if I thought I could do so without causing problems.”

“All right, tell me about Herbert. Gary said . . .”

“Joyce, I don’t want you discussing things like that with anybody, not even the kids, Herbert let the cat get Bill’s bow, and . . .”

“I know all about that part of it; I want to know what you did to Herbert afterwards.”

“I gave him standard lecture number five, that’s the one where I hit him in the head with my fist until I can’t stand it any more, and that’s usually not very long, since his head is a lot harder than my fist, and then I kick him in the shins until I get too tired to stand up. Properly administered, that usually gets some slight results for about two days, and it doesn’t mark him up so that it shows on film.”

“Arthur, are you kidding? You really did that to Herbert?”

“Well, that’s part of it, you didn’t ask me what I told him.”

“I can imagine what you told him.”

“Joyce, in spite of what the psychiatrists think, there are a lot of cases where force is the only thing that’ll work, and with some people you’re wasting your time if you try anything else. Herbert, at times, requires the use of force, so I just give him the minimum amount necessary.”

“You call hitting him in the head and kicking him in the shins the minimum amount necessary? What’s the maximum amount?”

“Joyce, the minimum amount, or the maximum amount, depends entirely upon the circumstances. A guy tried to kill me with an ax one time, but he made the mistake of doing it while I was holding a saw, a common, ordinary, cross-cut saw, and that’s a simply terrible weapon, So I got downright violent with that guy, but he didn’t kill me with the ax, either, and he would have, otherwise.”

“Did you kill him?”

“No. It wasn’t necessary to kill him, but I cut him all to pieces with the saw.”

“Why didn’t you kill him? He tried to kill you.”

“Joyce, if I’d killed everybody that ever tried to kill me, or that threatened to, I wouldn’t have had time for much of anything else. I don’t like violence, and I never did, but I have been placed in a lot of situations where violence was the only possible solution, and so far, I’ve been able to come out of it alive. So a lot of people think I’m mean, which is fine with me, as long as it gets them to leave me alone.

“Sometimes, though, it works the other way around, We used to have a lot of trouble with truck drivers, and it was always their fault, but it finally got so bad that I had to get real violent to stop it. Then, for a while, instead of stopping it, it just made it worse. So then I really had to get violent.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, they used to park their trucks in front of the exhibit in Slidell, completely blocking off our driveway, and then they’d go in the cafe next door and stay there anywhere from an hour to all day, and in the meantime, we were out of business.”

“...And God Laughs”

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“So why didn’t you ask them to park someplace else?”

“Joyce, we did, for all the good that did. They’d just say, ‘Screw you,’ or words to that effect, and keep walking. So, when they did, I’d have to drag them back to their trucks and run them off; some of them went easy, and some not so easy, but they all went, and none of them ever came back for seconds. Then word started spreading across the country, from truck stop to truck stop, and a lot of guys started stopping just for the purpose of trying me out. Sometimes two or three of them at a time, so then I had to get real violent.”

“Did you kill any of them?”

“Joyce, I wish you’d quit talking about killing people all the time; after you’ve killed a few, then we’ll discuss it, but in the meantime, just drop it.”

“You didn’t answer my question. I asked you . . .”

“I heard what you asked me. Did you hear what I just told you?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Joyce, for Christ’s sake, do you understand the English language?”

“Arthur, all I asked you . . .”

“Joyce, I heard your question. No, I didn’t kill any of them.. What the Hell would I want to kill them for? I told you earlier, I use the minimum force necessary, whatever that happens to be. But you can’t go around killing everybody that deserves it, just because they deserve it; if everybody did that, there’d only be two of us left, and I’m not sure who the other one would be.”

“You’ve got a mighty damned high opinion of yourself.”

“I told you before, Joyce, I’ve got to, everybody else hates me.”

“I don’t hate you, I love you. Make love to me, Arthur, right here and right now, put the plane on auto-pilot and make love to me.”

“Joyce, I’m not going to make love to you here or anyplace else, not now and not later. Joyce, stop that, I’ll . . .”

“You’ll what? I’m just following your own rules: the minimum force necessary. I can’t get you to do it any other way, so I’ll use force, although, like you say, I’d rather not have to. Arthur, if you don’t make love to me, right here and right now, then I’ll go back to the airport just like this. Then let me see you talk your way out of that. I won’t say a word, either; I’ll just get out of the airplane, start putting on my clothes, right there in front of whoever happens to be there, pucker up my face like I’m about to cry, and walk off. That’ll be a lot worse than anything I could say, a lot worse.”

“O. K., Joyce, in that case . . .”

“You mean you’ll do it? Oh, Arthur, you won’t be . . .”

“No, I don’t mean I’ll do it. I started to say . . .”

“Arthur, I’m not kidding. You told me to say what I meant, and I damned sure mean this, and I’ll do it, too. I don’t want to, but you’re forcing it on yourself. I gave you an easy way out, but I’ll do it if . . .”

“Go right ahead, be my guest. Right there in front of whoever happens to be there, I think you said; well, for your information, that’ll be ‘nobody’ and ‘there’ will be Slidell. By the time we get there, it’ll be bone dark, so you’ll have three or four owls and a few bats for witnesses, and then you’ll have a ten mile walk to the house, through the woods in the dark, and that’s assuming you can keep up with me, and I walk damned fast, as you’ve noticed. So hand me the charts out of that side compartment.”

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“I won’t give you a damned thing, and you can’t get ‘em unless I let you, and I won’t so you’ll have to take me back to Laredo.”

“Joyce, I won’t start a fist fight with you in this airplane, so we’ll just go to Slidell without charts.”

“Arthur, what are you doing? Arthur, you . . .”

“Shut up, Joyce. Laredo radio, this is November eight six eight nine whiskey, on one two one point nine, how do you read?”

“Read you loud and clear, eight nine whiskey, this is Laredo radio, go ahead.”

“Eight nine whiskey, Laredo, I’ve got a bit of a problem, and maybe you can . . .”

“Arthur, you get off that . . .”

“Shut up, Joyce. Stand by one, Laredo. Joyce, I’ve taken all I intend to off of you, now shut up.”

“I’ll put my clothes back on, Arthur. You won’t have to . . .”

“O. K., shut up. Laredo, eight nine whiskey.”

“Go ahead, eight nine whiskey.”

“I think I’ve solved my problem, Laredo. Thanks anyway. Eight nine whiskey out.”

“Arthur, that was dirty pool; I wouldn’t do anything like that to you.”

“What would you call that little stunt you just pulled? You didn’t get that out of any rule book I ever read.”

“Arthur, I love you . . .”

ON TOP OF A MESA ON THE RIM OF DEVIL’S RIVER CANYON, DEL RIO, JULY 28, 1965 . . .

“. . . do you hear somebody talking, Arthur? It sounds like it’s coming from right over there, but I can’t see anybody.”

“Herbert’s the only one not here; I better go check, he might be talking to a rancher, and we don’t have permission to use this place.”

“I’ll go with you, I’m getting tired of sitting down anyway, and, my God, Arthur, it is Herbert, he’s sick, look at his face . . .”

“Go get Eliza and Bill, and get some water.”

“My God, Arthur, he’s dying, look at his mouth . . .”

“Joyce, go get Eliza and Bill, I’ll take care of him. Don’t just stand there, move.”

“O. K., but . . .”

“Move, Joyce. Herbert, can you hear me? Herbert? Herbert?”

“What happened to Herbert? Joyce said, oh my God, look at his mouth.”

“Help me get him up, Bill, he’s had a heat stroke; let’s get him back to the truck and get him into the shade. Wait a minute, just hold him like that, let me get his mouth cleaned out.”

“Arthur, what happened?”

“Get me some water, Liza, and give me a rag.”

“...And God Laughs”

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“We haven’t got any water, all we’ve got left is part of a Coke, and that’s practically boiling.”

“Well, get that, he’s got to have liquid of some kind. Come on, Bill, give me a hand, we’ll have to carry him...”

THE HOSPITAL IN DEL RIO, THE NEXT DAY . . .

“. . . so, if it wasn’t for Joyce, you’d be dead as Hell right now, Herbert. Nobody else heard anything, and about two more minutes would have done it.”

“But what’s a heat stroke, anyway?”

“Well, if you don’t know now, then I don’t know how to explain it to you, but I’ll tell you this much: the next one will kill you, and you’ll be a long time getting over this one. It’s your own damn fault, too, if you hadn’t sneaked off, it wouldn’t have happened; your ‘manly image’ almost got you killed this time, next time you may not be so lucky. If the plane hadn’t been right there, or if Joyce hadn’t heard you, there wouldn’t be any next time to it. You can thank Eliza too, she took off her blouse and used it to clean out your mouth and nose, and she picked a couple of hundred cactus spines out of your face.

“After you vomited, apparently you started biting the ground and a cactus plant; I got a whole handful of rocks and dirt out of your mouth, and Eliza got a lot more out . . .”

SLIDELL, JULY 30, 1965 . . .

“Who was that on the phone?”

“Leonard McGee, he’ll be here in about an hour.”

“Arthur, do you mean ‘the’ Leonard McGee?”

“I don’t know what you mean by the emphasis, but he’s the only Leonard McGee I know. He was with me when you were a baby, when your mother and I were living in Laredo.”

“That’s the one I mean. Do you mean to tell me, Arthur, that you’ll let that son of a bitch come into your house? I’m surprised you didn’t kill him.”

“Over the phone?”

“No, silly, when he caused you and Mama to break up.”

“Joyce, I’ve seldom accused McGee of having good intentions, and he damned sure didn’t have them in 1947, but he wasn’t responsible for your mother and me breaking up, either.”

“Arthur, if he comes here, I’ll try to kill the son of a bitch.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Joyce, nobody’s going to kill McGee, least of all you.”

“Arthur, I’ll do it, I swear I will.”

“What’ll you do, Joyce, talk him to death?”

“Arthur, I’m serious, sometimes you make me so mad I feel like killing you.”

“Joyce, you’ve been calm for several days now; let’s not get another big battle going. I’m twelve years ahead of schedule on that score right now, and you’ve only been here a month.”

“Arthur, if Leonard McGee comes in this house, then I’m leaving and I won’t be back. I mean it, too.”

“There’s the door. I didn’t realize it would be that easy, or maybe I’d have called him.”

“Do you mean that, Arthur?”

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“I told you a long time ago, Joyce, I mean everything I say. If I don’t mean it, then I don’t say it, and I expect the same thing from you.”

“I’m leaving.”

“I say again, there’s the door.”

“You really mean it, don’t you?”

“Joyce, how many times do I have to tell you something?”

“Mother was right; you’re a fucking monster of some kind.”

“Oh, my, here we go again.”

“Arthur, I don’t want to leave. You know I’ve got no place to go.”

“Then stop making threats to leave. If you intend to leave, then do it.”

“Arthur, I just can’t stay in the same house with somebody like McGee, and I don’t see how you can.”

“You don’t even know the man; you haven’t even seen him since you were a few months old.”

“I don’t have to know him; I know what he did to you and Mama.”

“Joyce, he had nothing to do with that.”

“Mama said he did.”

“She’s wrong.”

“Well, she should know, she’s the one that left; she ought to know why, if anybody does.”

“Yeah, you’d think so; but she doesn’t, apparently.”

“I don’t see how you can even stand to be around him.”

“Joyce, it just so happens that McGee’s coming here at this exact moment is important to me. I need him. He’s useful to me. He can cause me to make some money. It’s to my advantage for him to come here. Can you get a simple thought like that through your thick head?”

“Why?”

“Because, Joyce, I need another pilot to do the flying in the canyon, while I do the filming this time. Can you understand that?”

“Get another pilot. There are lots of other pilots looking for a job, you told me so yourself.”

“Joyce, will it be asking too much of you to permit me to run my own God damned business? Carnival people have a term for girls like you, Joyce, they’d call you a ‘take over broad’, and they’d be right.”

“Oh, so now you’re calling me names.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“No, and I don’t care.”

“Then how do you know it’s a name?”

“All right, I’ll bite; what does it mean?”

“It means a girl just like you, Joyce; in fact, if I didn’t know better, I’d think the term was invented just to describe you.”

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“You still haven’t said what it means.”

“Joyce, it’s an extremely apt expression referring to a woman that steps into any situation and automatically tries to take charge, regardless of the fact that they don’t have the slightest idea about what they’re trying to do; a woman that thinks she knows more about everything than anybody else.”

“So, it is a name. I was right.”

“Call it what you like, Joyce, it describes you perfectly.”

“So what’s all this got to do with McGee, anyway?”

“You, Joyce, were trying to tell me how to run my business; you were being a ‘take over broad.’ So just keep your nose out of my business. I was doing a Hell of a lot better before you came along; in fact, since you’ve been here, I haven’t gotten a damned thing done.”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault that Herbert ruined the film in Texas?”

“Partially.”

“And just how do you figure that?”

“Because I know Herbert; his whole attitude changes when he’s around you, he’s getting almost as bad as Bill Binnings, he’s acting all the time. You caused me to bruise his ego the other night, so now he’s got to prove to you that he’s Superman, which he really isn’t, and any problems that causes are your fault. Partially, at least, although Herbert’s at fault, too.

“That’s why he had the heat stroke, he sneaked off when he started feeling sick, because he didn’t want you to know about it, and . . . ”

“Well, anyway, I . . . ”

“Joyce, McGee’ll be here in less than an hour, and you can just put up with him, and that means be pleasant to him, or you can get home to Mama. Take your pick, girl.”

“All right, Arthur, I’ll put up with him, if I have to, but I won’t like it.”

“Joyce, I don’t give a damn whether you like it or not, but you damn sure better not let it show, and McGee may be a lot of things, but he’s not a complete idiot; so, if you try to get cute, he’ll know it in three seconds.”

“What’s he like?”

“Oh, in some ways he’s like you; most of his problems stem from the fact that he can’t control his emotions, and . . . ”

“Thanks.”

“In another way, he’s like Herbert; he’s always trying to impress somebody, he’s constantly worried about his image.

“You blame McGee for breaking up your Mama and me, which he didn’t do, but he has caused me a lot of trouble in other ways, and sometimes, he’s been very useful.

“Did you ever screw a nigger, Arthur? I’ll bet you have.”

“Joyce, for Christ’s sake, can’t we stay off the subject of sex for five seconds?”

“Well, did you? You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Every night, Joyce, as soon as you go to sleep, I slip over to niggertown and screw everybody there.”

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“Arthur, I’m serious.”

“Joyce, it’s none of your damned business, now forget it.”

“All right, but I think you have. I’ll find out, too.”

“Stop changing the subject. McGee may be some kind of a nut, I rather think so myself, but the son of a bitch can fly an airplane.

“McGee was with me in Laredo, in 1947, when I went back into the snake business after the war; he knew less than nothing about snakes, but lack of knowledge never held him back any, and he never was afraid of much. Shortly after we arrived in Laredo, we got a telegram from a Mexican in a little town called Grulla, Texas; the telegram said, ‘Tengo viboras in Grulla, Texas.’ ‘I have snakes in Grulla, Texas.’ The son of a bitch ‘tengoed’ snakes, too; he had the damndest bunch of big rattlers I ever saw, and one of them almost killed McGee. That was funny as Hell, too, although McGee didn’t think so.

“There are several dozen different kinds of rattlesnakes, and all the books list the Florida Diamondback as being the largest, but the books are wrong, as usual. The books list the Florida rattlers as reaching a length of eight or nine feet, which they don’t, and never did, and a Florida rattler that’s a full six feet is a big one. Ross Allen has been handling Florida snakes for over thirty years, and he’ll tell you the largest Florida rattler he ever saw was seven feet, two inches long, but he’s a damned liar.”

“Why would he lie about the size of a snake?”

“Joyce, people will lie about any damned thing. Why did you lie to me about the size of your husband’s penis?”

“That wasn’t a lie, and I can prove it.”

“I doubt it. I doubt if he’d even speak to you, let alone let you measure him in public.”

“Well, it was that big, whether you believe it or not.”

“Joyce, I knew a sailor named ‘Foots’ Woods, and I saw him measured, and he had a quarter of an inch less than you claim your husband has, and he was bigger than a Coca Cola bottle. He’d have trouble screwing a horse.”

“Now who’s changing the subject to sex?”

“I was just trying to make a point, Joyce; that people don’t have to have a logical reason for telling lies. But in Ross Allen’s case, he had a reason; he was selling Florida rattlers in competition with Texas rattlers, so he wanted people to think they’re bigger, which they aren’t. Ross told me that the heaviest Florida rattler he ever saw weighed twelve pounds, so I shipped him a Texas rattler that weighed nineteen pounds, and I know of another one that weighed twenty-six pounds.

“A friend of mine in Tampa, a guy named Ray Singleton, has handled more Florida rattlers than Ross Allen ever heard about, and he says the biggest one he ever saw was six feet, two inches. Ray’s a thief and he admits it, but he’s not a liar, or at least he doesn’t lie to his friends, and I’m a friend of his. In any case, if he did lie, he’d stretch it, not understate it.

“Anyway, my point is this; all of that Mexican’s snakes were huge, he just didn’t have any small snakes, not even any medium sized ones, they were all big, they were the biggest rattlers I ever saw. The one that nearly killed McGee was six feet, eight inches long and weighed nearly fifteen pounds, and it was a damned dangerous individual, as far as Texas rattlers go, and they’re all dangerous. Poisonous snakes don’t attack people, Joyce, but Texas rattlers show a great deal of enthusiasm when it comes to defending themselves. A Texas rattler will bite you ten times while a Florida rattler is trying to decide what to do.

“If you give any poisonous snake a chance to escape, he’ll take it; first he’ll try to hide, then he’ll try to run, then, finally, if you push him, he’ll fight, but he’ll always make you come to him, he won’t chase you. But a Texas rattler can run through the whole bit, hiding, running, and fighting, all in about two seconds. They’re by far the most dangerous

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poisonous snakes in the world; by comparison to a Texas rattler, a cobra is about as dangerous as an equal sized piece of rope.

“In some parts of this country they still handle snakes in religious services, and they use rattlesnakes, too, but they use so-called Timber rattlers, not Texas Diamondbacks. If you wanted to bring a religion to a screeching halt in about ten minutes, and there would be some screeching, too, I’ll guarantee you, all you’d have to do would be to take a box of big Texas rattlers to one of those meetings where they handle snakes. That would be the end of a religion. They might not all die, but most of ‘em would, and any survivors would lose their interest in religion, and in handling snakes, too.

“But there’s a great deal of variation in the disposition of individual snakes, just like in people; some individuals are a lot worse than average. In 1951, I got another big rattler from that same part of Texas, and he was a mean son of a bitch; he was the most dangerous thing I ever saw, until I met you, I mean, and . . .”

“Thanks.”

“Anyway, he was exactly seven feet long and weighed eleven pounds, not skinny, but just long and rock hard lean. When I opened the box he was in, against the strong advice of the Mexican that caught him, he flowed out of there like water coming out of a high pressure hose, biting everything in sight. He bit the box, he bit my snake stick, the tires on my truck, several trees and everything else in sight except me, by that time the Mexican was no longer anywhere in sight, he never stopped biting and he never seemed to get tired. Just how that poor Mexican ever managed to catch him in the first place was more than I could ever figure out.

“I chased him around and around the truck, under the truck, over the truck, through several small trees, and don’t tell me rattlesnakes don’t climb trees, that one did, I chased him through bushes, around the box; I chased that son of a bitch for a solid hour, and most of the time I wasn’t really sure whether I was chasing him or he was chasing me. It took me over an hour to get him back in the box, and I had to rest for half an hour after that.

“I usually handle snakes, even Texas rattlers, with my bare hands, I normally don’t even use a snake stick, but I wouldn’t have laid hands on that snake for a thousand dollars; to touch that snake was to die.

“A man’s actually faster in his movements than a normal snake, but that was far from being a normal snake; for the first time in my life, I was actually afraid of a snake, he was just too dangerous to even keep in a cage. I was on my way to Mexico, and I couldn’t take him with me, but I couldn’t think of anybody I dared ship a snake like that to; there wasn’t anybody that I wanted to kill at the moment, nobody that wanted a rattlesnake, anyway, so I just didn’t know what to do with him.

“Finally, after a lot of thought, I decided to ship him to a friend of mine named Bo Miller, and I did. But I sent him a long telegram, and I mean a ‘long’ telegram, telling him how to handle, or rather, ‘not’ to handle that snake. Then I wrote instructions and warning signs all over the box and enclosed a note in an envelope tacked on the outside of the box.

“All of which effort was wasted, naturally; Bo was just like everybody else in that respect, and he ignored all the warnings, and he damned near got killed for his trouble. He made the mistake of opening the box inside a big snake pit, while standing in the pit, and he did so in spite of very firm warnings not to. He managed to get out of the pit alive, but just barely, and no human went back inside that pit until the snake died. The pit didn’t get cleaned out, the snakes didn’t get milked, nothing at all happened in the pit until that snake died, but nobody got killed, either, and they would have if they’d gone in the pit with that snake.

“I’ve got no real idea just how many snakes I’ve handled, Joyce, but it’s a bunch; on three different occasions we had over twenty thousand snakes on hand at one particular moment, and we had ten thousand lots of times. But out of all those snakes, I’ve only seen two real bad ones, really dangerous snakes; the one I shipped Bo Miller and the one that nearly killed McGee. I don’t like to talk about snakes like that, because it gives a completely wrong impression of snakes in general; most snakes are perfectly harmless, even the poisonous ones, those two were just extremely rare exceptions to the rule.

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“Anyway, when McGee and I got back to Laredo with the big snakes we got from the Mexican, we dumped the boxes in the front room of a house we’d rented and started sorting them out. On that occasion, one of the very few times we did, we were working in the daytime, and it was a mistake; we were tired and our reactions were slow, it was almost a fatal mistake.

“The front door of the house was opened clear back against the inside of the wall, and was wedged in that position so it wouldn’t blow closed; only the locked screen door prevented the snakes from crawling out on the front porch. It was hot as Hell, and McGee had on a pair of thin cotton pants and low-cut shoes, no shirt and no socks, not even shorts. His pants were rolled up and his legs were completely bare from the tops of his shoes to above the knees.

“A big rattler crawled behind the wedged-back front door, between the door and the wall, and about two feet of its tail was sticking out in sight. McGee reached down, caught hold of the tail and pulled, and all Hell broke loose; McGee pulled, the door came loose from the wedge, and the snake struck, all at the same time. The result of all those forces made the snake fly through the air, literally, aimed at McGee’s stomach.

“McGee back-pedaled across the room, staying just ahead of the snake, still holding it by the tail. But we’d piled a bunch of boxes in the middle of the room, and McGee backed into them, and he couldn’t get back any farther. At that exact moment, he let go of the tail, raised up on his toes, leaned his head forward and pulled in his stomach as far as he could; the fangs actually rubbed his skin for several inches, but didn’t break the surface. The snake landed in a coil between his feet, instantly turned and struck him on the bare leg, but didn’t bite him.”

“Why? Why didn’t it bite him?”

“I’ll never know for sure, Joyce. It meant to, and it tried to; it struck, it opened its mouth, and it hit his leg, but it never unfolded its fangs for the second strike. I guess the snake was just as excited as McGee was.

“When I realized he wasn’t hurt, I started laughing, but McGee wasn’t amused; the snake was still coiled between his legs, and it was cocked to go off again like a bomb with a lit fuse, and McGee was scared stiff. He didn’t dare move, and he didn’t have any place to move to anyway. So he looked at me and said, ‘Don’t stand there like a laughing hyena, get this thing away from me before it kills me.’

“I reached over with a snake hook and jerked it away from him, and he collapsed in his tracks; but that snake coiled between his legs would have impressed a marble statue, and I don’t blame him for being scared, I would have been, too. Shortly after that, he lost his enthusiasm for the snake business, and a few weeks later he left.

“That wasn’t the only bad time we had with a snake, though, and the next time I was the victim. We went to a Mexican snake dealer to pick up several hundred pounds of boa constrictors, in exchange for rattlers on a pound for pound basis, or at least it was supposed to be on that basis; but we were screwing him on the weight of the rattlers, and he was trying to screw us on the weight of the boas. I never did know who was ahead at any given time, but I think we came out ahead in the long run.

“He kept his boas in deep concrete pits filled with straw. The straw was supposed to keep the snakes warm, or so he said; but snakes are cold-blooded, so the straw didn’t do anything except make it damned near impossible to find ‘em in the pit, but it did that all right. I was standing in the pit, it was about seven feet deep, and I was fishing around in the straw with my hands, feeling for the snakes. When I felt one, I’d grab him, hopefully by the tail, jerk him out of the straw and hand him up to McGee, all in one fast movement, before the snake had a chance to bite me.

“Boas aren’t poisonous, but they have a Hell of a mouth full of teeth, big teeth and a lot of ‘em. Well, things went fine for a while, but then a big boa grabbed me by the arm just as I handed it to McGee, and that damned fool jerked on its tail just after it bit me. I came right up out of the pit with the snake, with it still holding on to my arm. Then McGee made the mistake of laughing. I was always very quick to laugh at other people’s problems in those days, but I was a bit slower when it came to seeing the humor involved when I was the victim. I jerked the snake loose, tearing several chunks of flesh out of my arm, and leaving about a dozen teeth still sticking in me, grabbed it by the head and tail and started beating McGee over the head with it. I chased him clear around the block, twice, beating him over the head with that snake every step of the way. It completely ruined the snake.

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“The old Mexican was running right behind us, running surprisingly fast for a fat man, and was screaming at us in Spanish and broken English at the top of his lungs. I never did understand what he was saying, but I knew what he meant. Finally, after two complete laps around the block, McGee and I both collapsed from exhaustion. Then we both started laughing, and that really made the Mexican mad, but it probably didn’t matter, he was convinced that we were both crazy anyway.”

“What really happened between you and Mama? Over McGee, I mean.”

“Not a Hell of a lot, he just told her I’d been married before, which was true, and she left. It was as simple as that. I wasn’t any too happy about it at the time, and I damned near killed McGee over it, but it wasn’t really important; we would have split up sooner or later anyway. McGee speeded it up a bit, but not much.”

“Did you visit the whorehouses in Mexico while you were married to Mama?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“From Mama.”

“It wasn’t a very strong endorsement of her own charms, was it?”

“I hadn’t thought about that; but you’re right, it wasn’t. Will you take me to a whorehouse in Mexico?”

“It wouldn’t do you any good, you couldn’t get a job; you haven’t got a license.”

“I don’t want a job in a whorehouse; I’d just like to see what they’re like.”

“Well, I took your mother and your grandmother to visit one; so I don’t guess it’ll hurt the third generation any more than it did them.”

“Mama never told me about that.”

“I imagine not. Tell me, though, why are all American women so strongly attracted to Mexican whorehouses?”

“I don’t know. Are they?”

“Well, maybe not ‘all’ American women, but most of them I’ve known seemed to be, and you always see a bunch of American women every time you visit one.”

“You’re avoiding the question, Arthur.”

“No. You asked me if I visited the whorehouses in Mexico while I was married to your mother.”

“Well, did you?”

“Yes and no; I did while I was married to her, but not while I was living with her.”

“How was your sexual relationship with Mama?”

“Damn poor.”

“Who’s fault was it? Yours or hers?”

“Joyce, that’s an impossible question to answer properly. That was twenty years ago, and both of us were young, too damned young, and, besides, a question like that involves the emotions far too much to permit an academic evaluation, especially by one of the people involved.

“When I was your age, Joyce, and for a long time before that, I used to get involved in extremely long-winded conversations on the subject of sex, and on other subjects. Most kids do the same thing today, and I’m sure you have too, probably lots of times.

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“Unlike most other people, however, I still remember those conversations now, years later. I remember not only the fact that such conversations were held, but I remember the things that I said, the things that I believed at the time.

“Very few people, within my experience, really remember the things they believed that many years earlier, and even fewer people, out of the very few that do remember accurately, are willing to admit what they believed then.

“In that respect at least, I’m different from most people; I do remember accurately, and I’ll admit the truth of the matter, in spite of the fact that almost all of those beliefs have been changed by time and later experiences, sometimes altered clear out of any similarity to my earlier beliefs.

“But, although I remember my beliefs, I can’t be sure that I can give you a totally unbiased account of my emotions at that time. It’s very likely, Joyce, that I married your mother simply because I thought she was a virgin, which she was at the time we were married. To me, at that time, that was a very important consideration, it was, in fact, practically the only consideration.

“It still causes me a real hodge-podge of mixed emotions to remember our honeymoon, even now.”

“Tell me about it, I’ve already heard Mama’s version.”

“I’ll bet you have.”

“No, really.”

“I think you’re lying, Joyce, but I’ll tell you about it anyway. We were married in the spring of 1945, just before the war was over; I was on leave from the port of embarkation in New Orleans. Gladys’ father was out of town working on a construction project, and her mother wanted us to delay the wedding until he got back. There was no objection to the marriage, your grandmother just wanted him to be there, or, at least, that’s what she said at the time.

“We waited several days, but we had no way to contact your grandfather and nobody knew when to expect him back so, finally, we went ahead without him being there.

“We got the license, and for some reason we had to go to Little Rock; then, finally, we started looking for a preacher to marry us. Anyhow, it took us all day, what with one thing and then another, we started in the early morning, and we finally got married in the late afternoon. I didn’t have a car at the time, so we got somebody to take us up on Petit Jean Mountain, to a big lodge where we planned to spend a week, we thought.

“Looking back on it now, over twenty years later, I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry; but, at the time, it was damned serious, it was anything but funny. The whole honeymoon was a comedy of errors, I guess it was funny, but we damned sure weren’t laughing at the time.

“I’d known your mother for over two years, since she was thirteen, and, in all that time, I’d never so much as put my hand on her breast, not even through her clothes. So, on the way up to the mountain, the first thing I did was put my hand down inside her dress. Somebody in the front seat turned around and looked right at us. Then they laughed. That embarrassed your mother, naturally, and it embarrassed the Hell out of me, too. Then, from that point on, things went from bad to worse.

“When we got to our room, your mother went into the bathroom to take a bath, and closed the door behind her; I took off my clothes and went to bed, in the dark. When she finished in the bathroom, she turned out the bathroom light and opened the door into the room. She climbed into bed and thirty seconds later I had her nightgown off and was on top of her; then the door to the hall opened, a brightly lighted hall and a big door, and the whole bed was directly in the path of the light.

“Some idiot was bringing us some extra linen, or so he said, and he stood there in the door while he said so. I was so surprised I didn’t say anything until after he closed the door, and by that time it was too late. The worst part was that we didn’t know who it was, except that it was a man, since his back was to the light and we were looking directly into the light. So, from then on, whenever we saw somebody from the hotel staff, we always assumed they were the guilty party, which didn’t really add to the enjoyment of our stay, to say the least.”

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“You’re pulling my leg.”

“No, Joyce, I’m not. But I wish I was. It’s funny now, but it damned sure wasn’t funny at the time. Practically all humor, of course, is based on tragedy, but it’s a Hell of a lot easier to laugh if it’s somebody else’s tragedy, and believe me, the whole honeymoon was a tragedy, in every sense of the word.

“Anyway, when we finally got over the shock, your mother, as you can well imagine, was in anything but a receptive mood; although, to give her credit, she was really trying. I didn’t realize it at the time, and it probably wouldn’t have changed things if I had realized it, but I imagine she was scared to death.

“It was completely impossible to get any penetration at all, no matter how hard I tried, and believe me, I really tried. I finally succeeded in breaking her hymen, but I did that with my thumb. By that stage, of course, she was practically on the point of panic.

“In the end, after frightening her half to death, I added insult to injury by reaching a climax on her stomach, which didn’t help matters very much either. At that time, Gladys probably had no real idea about anything connected with sex. She knew, quite vaguely I imagine, that ‘something’ was discharged from the male at the climax of the sex act; but it was quite obvious from her reaction that she had no idea of what to expect. And, I must admit, it was a bit much.”

“Mama’s version is a bit different.”

“I imagine it is, Joyce, I just imagine it is. Anyway, so much for the first night, not that I stopped after that one attempt, far from it, but it was just more of the same. The next day we tried to get something in the way of a lubricant; we tried butter, we tried lard, we tried soap, we tried any damned thing we could think of, but nothing worked. Finally, in the end, we cut our stay short by several days and went back into town, and I went to see a doctor.”

“What did he suggest?”

“Vaseline and more effort, and it worked. I finally managed a full penetration, or a penetration of any sort, for that matter, about four days after we were married, back on your grandfather’s farm in Byrd Town. By that time, however, as they say in the dime thrillers, ‘the die was cast’, your mother never really got over the experience of those first few days on the mountain. During the entire time we were married, over two years, I don’t think she ever reached a climax; although once, in a whorehouse in New Orleans, of all places, I think she came close.”

“What in the Hell were you and Mama doing in a whorehouse in New Orleans?”

“Sleeping there, that was during the war, remember, and it was damned near impossible to get a room of any kind; you had to take what you could get, and that was all we could get, and damned lucky to get that.

“Most of these things, Joyce, are things that I’ve never discussed with anyone, certainly never with your mother. I’m mentioning them now only in an effort to try to reach a complete understanding with you, mainly because you seem to have a fixation on sex, and especially since a lot of it’s directed towards me.”

“Why did you say that?”

“What was the first thing that happened when we reached Slidell?”

“We went to bed, went to sleep.”

“Before that. What happened before that?”

“I tried to get you to throw those damned stinking snakes out of the bathroom, and you didn’t.”

“Forget the snakes for a minute.”

“How can I forget ‘em, they were stinking up the whole damn house. It smelled like you had a couple of dead people in there.”

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“Forget the snakes, Joyce, you’re avoiding my question.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t ‘want’ you to say anything, Joyce, I just want you to remember what you did the night we arrived in Slidell.”

“I’ve already said, we went to bed.”

“O. K., Joyce, I’ll spell it out. You took off your clothes, except for your panties, and then crawled into bed with me. You don’t see anything strange about that?”

“No, I don’t. You’re my father.”

“Yes, I’m your father, but I’m also a man. Little girls, after they reach a certain size, aren’t supposed to parade around nude in front of men, even their fathers.”

“Now look who’s being a prude, and you think Mama’s a religious nut.”

“I never said that, Joyce, that was your statement, remember? I’ve never had a word to say to you on the subject of your mother’s religion, or damned little, at least, and nothing like that statement. And, in so far as me being a prude; well, I’ve been accused of damned near everything, but that’s the first time I’ve ever been called prudish.”