

RE:AL,

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A Member of



CELJ

Wherrre's Johnny . . . ?

by Walter B. Levis

Out of cigarettes, J.C. sat alone in the dark kitchen and poked at two cold scrambled eggs. A spilled jar of Coffee-Mate lay on its side, the white powder spread like fresh snow across the morning newspaper's black print.

CITY HIRES CLOUT-HEAVY FIRM WITH TIES TO DALEY

This headline meant little to J.C., who cared nothing for the local politics in this place. He picked up his cup of weak coffee and took a sip.

He couldn't stop thinking about a girl he knew when he was sixteen.

2

A man or woman with a taste for abstraction might write: J.C. went to Chicago in a fit of anxiety and existential despair. This would be fine.

If you like this sort of thing, this is the sort of thing you'll like.

An influential critic.

3

It has been said that writing is a form of meditation, a way of structuring consciousness, of uniting the tensions inherent in consciousness. From this point of view, Idea seeks Image, and Image seeks Idea, which is an expression of the notion that Spirit seeks Matter and Matter seeks Spirit.

4

J.C.'s seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Tripcock, a large full-breasted woman who wore a flower-pattern dress to school almost every day, loved to tell her friends how quiet J.C. was as a boy.

You wouldn't believe it, she said. Quiet as a mouse. A mouse.

Telling this to her friends made Mrs. Tripcock feel somehow special.

5

We all have this enormous desire perhaps it's even a need to say things that will make us feel special. Maybe it's our fear of the banal. We all have to overcome the depressing thought that our lives are banal. Many people, including J.C.'s seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Tripcock, try to overcome banality by achieving some sort of status or fame, or being somehow associated with someone who has achieved status or fame.

Once having taught J.C., the J.C., made Mrs. Tripcock feel unique and that her life had been involved with something of consequence. The picture of J.C.'s class hung alongside Mrs. Tripcock's family photos in the den/T.V. room. The reporter who noticed this juxtaposition found it strange. Mrs. Tripcock's teenage granddaughter, who happened to bounce in during the interview, said she always showed the picture to her friends and asked them if they could pick out J.C. The reporter imagined how this granddaughter, dressed in tight nylon running shorts and a snug tank-top shirt, might have lost her virginity in this very room to a boy in the neighborhood who delivered pizzas.

Later, when questioned, Mrs. Tripcock modestly smiled and said she had spent a lot of extra time with little Johnny helping him overcome his fear of speaking in class.

6

A celebrity is someone who is known more for who he or she is than for what he or she has done.

7

J.C. was calling every area code in the Illinois-Wisconsin-Michigan-Indiana area, pressing the phone to his ear so hard it hurt.

Tuttle, Julie.

Hoping for the impossible, he used her maiden name.

Meanwhile, a gelatinous glaze had formed over his cold eggs.

8

Someone with a knack for plot might frame it this way: Big TV celebrity gives up his show and falls into a depression. Drinking, maybe even suicidal. Desperate, he tries to track down his first love, who now teaches high school somewhere in the Midwest. Basic values vs. the empty glitz of the rich and famous. It's lonely at the top, that type of thing.

A Triumph of the Spirit! A story for anyone who's ever wondered if love is enough . . .

Newspaper advertisement, quoting an influential critic.

9

You have to be sort of cynical not to be at least a little bit moved--genuinely moved--by a movie like Rocky. The first Rocky anyway.

10

J.C.'s secretary swore that she never, never, never saw him lose his temper.

Not once, she said. Not once.

And her body language, the relaxed slump of her shoulders, the easy smile on her round face together with the unstained tone of her

voice, this made what she said seem convincing.

11

J.C.'s chiropractor--what a find! This surprisingly overweight man with severe dark hair explained that he could almost have predicted J.C. would do something drastic like go to Chicago on a wild goose chase.

A most unusual pain pattern hypertrophy of the ligamentum flavum and facet joint proliferative changes at L4-5, L3-4, and L2-3, narrowing the posterior lateral aspect of the thecal sac at these levels.

Thecal sac?

A little pouch the nerves sit in.

12

He got her on the phone. It was a miracle.

The burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea and my actually getting your number. I feel blessed. Really I do.

She laughed, and he felt that special ease come over him that he always felt come over him when he had made someone laugh. It made him feel like himself again.

13

They couldn't possibly see each other, though. If they saw each other the "special ease"

would surely be crowded out by the whole range of emotions that are unavoidable in a real relationship.

Just hearing her laugh, hearing about her kids in college, her husband's successful bypass surgery, their vacation home in the Wisconsin Dells, and geometry, that she taught geometry it was all so right.

14

Some observers believe the unplanned appearance of talk shows as a form is the secret to their popularity. The conversation looks spontaneous, whether it is or not. Watching people make an entrance, say hello, then sit down and communicate in a relaxed and playful and subtly affectionate sort of way affirms some of humanity's deepest yearnings. J.C. made it seem so easy. Just ask a few questions, listen, and react.

15

Love thy Neighbor.

16

J.C.'s family refused to be interviewed. This greatly disappointed the editor, who was going to kill the story until the weird angle appeared about the high school sweetheart.

17

After he hung up, J.C. poured himself four ounces of Jack Daniels, his favorite whiskey. He told the reporter that he does not have any favorite color or favorite foods and isn't really sure who had a significant influence on his life except for his mother and father, who were just decent people.

I feel lucky, extremely lucky. I've been so blessed.

In spite of himself, the reporter was moved by this. Maybe it was just acting, but J.C. seemed to really mean what he said.

18

Sincerity and spontaneity are closely linked. What impressed the reporter is that when J.C. said I feel lucky, extremely lucky. I've been so blessed it seemed—seemed—to occur to J.C. at exactly that moment.

Even though I'm the narrator of all this, I can't say whether or not J.C. was, in fact, being sincere. Because you could just as easily question my sincerity.

19

None of us know what it's like to be J.C. or even to be anywhere near as famous as J.C. C but we all know what it's like to yearn for an old lover. That's all J.C. was really doing. Although, yes, he'd had a weird backache for several weeks.

20

The reporter's question about his favorites annoyed J.C. because it broke the spell of joy he'd felt hearing Julie Tuttle's calm, deep voice, which reminded him of a big Nebraska sky at sunset.

21

An art historian x-rayed one of Matisse's paintings and found beneath the oil paint a carefully drawn outline done in pencil.

22

J.C. explained that his father had once told him the key to being successful is to plan your work and work your plan. The reporter countered with: but aren't you right now following your whim? Coming here like this to Chicago? That's not part of any plan, is it?

J.C. smiled. A calm glow came over him, which might have been from the Jack Daniels.

23

One of the rules of realistic drama is that desire creates action which reveals character. J.C. wanted to talk to Julie, which led him to

travel to Chicago and look her up.

24

The bittersweet bite of the Jack Daniels soothed J.C., and he looked the reporter directly in the eyes and said, I guess it was a pretty romantic thing to do. I could've just called her from L.A. That would have been a lot simpler.

But it's not just a publicity stunt, is it?

No, no. I don't need the publicity.

What do you need, Johnny?

Me? I don't know. Nothing much, really, I guess. I've just been so blessed.

25

The reporter sat down to write his article wondering if J.C. was simply a man who tried always to trust his desires. Was that the key to J.C.'s success? That he could talk so easily to such a wide variety of people because he genuinely liked a wide variety of people . . . ?

26

"God is love."

27

"God is . . ."

28

"God . . ."

29

" . . ."

THE END