

Rue Matthiessen

Real Life

I have thought that when my children are grown I would like to enter a monastery. P thinks too of such things. Unlike Count Axel and Sara, who killed themselves saying, "Let our servants do our living for us," we will let who will live Real Life while we submit to strange disciplines behind monastic walls.

It is the illusion of choice that has baffled me. When I truly remember there is none, I will again be cheerful.

By day three at the Four Winds, I found myself surprisingly attached to the mediocre breakfast: scrambled eggs, white and black sausage, under-ripe fried tomatoes, sautéed mushrooms, orange juice that Emmett wouldn't drink, grapefruit juice, pallid, under-salted oatmeal, a selection of cold cereals, weak coffee that Steve wouldn't drink, and tea that was a travesty—a tea bag floating in a metal canister pot like a dead body in the Hudson. If the O'Connors once cared about return business, they certainly didn't anymore.

Our plan was to partake of the breakfast every morning and scrape through the rest of the day on snacks from the grocery, mainly because the dollar was so low against the euro. Kathleen told us that we should try the South Pole Inn in Anascual, which was opened by the town's most notable son, Tom Crean, an explorer who was on the first British expeditions to the Antarctic. Yesterday we went in and looked at the menu. It was completely out of our league.

We chewed silently, the new day coming upon us all at the same time. The two peaks behind the Four Winds lightened in the sun, and the bay slowly glossed over with tinsel. Despite the overall lack of quality, it had been lovely to have breakfast together without cell phones, newspapers, multiple computers, BlackBerrys, someone having to go somewhere or get up for something. Steve and Emmett liked the sausages and bacon, Emmett clamoring for the crispiest ones at the buffet. I liked the grapefruit slices and the toast. The butter, fresh from its little pack with a clover on it, was the most delicious I'd ever tasted.

I thought of my mother Deborah Love's longing, frequently expressed in *Annaghkeen*, to live in hotels. As a child her family had a nanny, a cook, a housekeeper, and a gardener. On Thursdays, the cook's night off, her mother made macaroni and cheese, the only dish she knew. By the time Deborah reached her marriage to Peter

Matthiessen, she could cook two dishes: beef bourguignon and borscht. Like her mother, she would never clean.

There weren't many domestics for hire on the eastern end of Long Island, so we had one live-in person from the Caribbean to cook, clean, and babysit—they were always stretched to the limit. There was sweet, religious Celia; stern, religious Agnes; unhappy Amelia; and mild, melancholic Frances, who took care of baby Alex at home in New York while we were in Ireland. I drove them all crazy, they said, except for Celia. They occupied a small room up a spiral staircase behind the kitchen, none for very long. Celia later told me that it was a lonely life all the way out on the end of Long Island in the freezing winters with no car of their own. Deborah wouldn't have known how to make them comfortable had she thought of it. She saw them mainly as independent entities from an agency whose needs should be met by a weekly check. So they came and went, came and went. To Deborah they were interchangeable, summoned to the dining room by a quaint holdover from my parents' era: the dinner bell. Even by sixties standards this ritual was absurd. I remember the tinkling sounds of it in the quiet, the maid tending to us awkwardly; the strain between Deborah and Peter, the echoes of a void, of *absolutely nothing* in the house besides that dinner bell, which made me tense too and want desperately to fill the space. So I overflowed, heightening the tension with my childish prattle, which was considered the worst of all possible things: phony. Soon I found myself getting served a solitary, separate dinner in the kitchen by one of the maids well before my parents ate. These dinners—cold noodles, warmed-over burgers, tepid milk—tasted of everyone's disapproval.

The problem might well have been reality, the life that they were living and, consequently, I was living through them. Throughout *Annaghkeen* Deborah refers to what she calls "Real Life." There is prosaic, ugly Real Life that is the opposite of an earlier held ideal of elegance and a light and sweet enjoyment. Real Life is routine, obligations, and maddeningly silent dinners. Real Life is *right now*, at home, far away from the "fantasy" life of a hotel, where everything is silently done for you. Real Life is modern, brutish, and funny, driving so fast into the future it can barely keep up with itself. Certainly almost no one in the house could keep up with it except for my father, who mainly ignored it.

Once we had moved into the Sagaponack house, Deborah would sometimes float in a queenly way around the bedroom in her nightie, miming a particular architectural feature she had coveted: arched "Lady Godiva" windows she had seen in the movies, windows that could open out with a flick of her wrist, while flinging her arms wide to embrace another glorious, perfect day. I would giggle at the

silliness of her, flouncing around the room, a false smile affixed to her face, opening these imaginary windows and beaming out over a lawn browning in the cold. It was the opening scene from a thirties movie, the point at which the fascinating tale began. Or it could have been the closing scene, where the heroine, having struggled through great trials, has finally met her prince and set up house with him, beginning their fairy-tale life together.

Then, stooping and mock-grumpy, she'd labor over what she actually had: a husband who was gone a lot of the time, children she found unmanageable, and eleven casement windows that wound around two sides of the bedroom. Leaning down to grasp the spindle handles, she'd open each one by one with a grimace, saying, "Crank, crank, crank . . ."—a task that took between three and seven minutes, depending on how ambitious she was feeling. This was the abhorred, hysterically funny Real Life, where the strip of film in the projector has gotten tangled up, and the movie has stopped dead.

Sometimes the different sides of things weren't so funny. (And there were *always* different sides.) By marriage number three she was too sophisticated to admit to anyone that she had hoped for the proverbial happy ending, but *I* knew that she had at least wanted to feel as though she had landed, that *we* had landed, in the right place. This was going to be mostly impossible. My father had affairs while he was gone and sometimes right under her nose, because that's what his father did and what he felt he had a right to. Once, when getting ready to go out for a dinner party, a ritual that always took at least one hour, she looked at me, frosted pink lipstick in hand, and said, "It's all cocks and cunts." I was about ten years old and felt gutted by these words. One entire area of life that I had some hopes for, *romantic love*, was portrayed as some sort of ugly joke.

That was well after Ireland; we were all older, we were all somewhat weary. Angered by him and bored with the game, she was bitter as she took the usual care over her appearance, buying fashionable clothes, going to the beauty parlor to have the gray taken out. "I do it all," she'd say, surrounded by the detritus of her efforts: the heat-roller case, the makeup, the garters, the stockings, bottles of nail polish, scent (*Joy* and *4711*), the lingerie, shopping bags from Paraphernalia and Bonwit Teller, the rows of high heels, the close-fitting winter shifts, and the cotton summer dresses rustling in the closet, waiting to be enlivened. I loved watching her get ready for the evening, admiring how she could turn herself out. But no matter how fabulous the result, there was no joy in it for her. It was a job she felt tied to. She had her own work, but it was Peter who had the freedom and power and, most of all, the satisfaction of following his inclinations. Though his were mainly hidden, it's safe for me to say that her

needs were not as simply dispatched. He was focused on his work, and he was a master at compartmentalization. She was different. To begin with, she was female. Her affairs were few, retaliatory, and half-hearted.

Looking back, I can't help but admire her unique approach to what were garden-variety problems. Primping and shopping seemed to be part of her role as wife, which matured later into a belief that her *authentic self* was completely separate from afternoons spent at Elizabeth Arden covered with goop. It began as a feminist idea and went on from there. For it was around this time that her inquiry into the nature of life and consciousness got more serious. It centered around the question: What was embellishment and what was truth? What of *herself* was true and, by extension, anyone else? Was she "the beauty," an object, a muse? Was she then "the betrayed"? (She would have hated that, not for the hurt of it so much as the reduced standing, the ridiculousness.) What of *him* was true and could be depended on? Did he love her? Did he need her? In the era of easy divorce, what of their marriage was not temporary? Did they really need each other, after all?

When he was home, his first love was whatever book he was working on, and he was remote and irritable a lot of the time. When he was gone, she was alone and angry. Her dissatisfaction strung us out between two poles: a romantic fantasy from girlhood and its counterpoint—Real Life. The fairy tale and the commonplace. The coveted, closely held vision and the reality. The former were full of lightness, air, and promise, and the latter were harsh, hard, and ridiculous. The humor helped to get through the days but was unable to fix the underlying disappointment.

To the outward eye our household looked prosperous and happy. His reviews were good, his books were selling, and there was an air of recently gained, substantial success. Deborah and Peter became very well connected in the New York literary and art scene. Editors, agents, publishers, art world luminaries, and literary stars came through for dinners and cocktail parties, almost always with that peculiar calling card that was *de rigueur* in the sixties and early seventies literary scene—the outrageous story of inebriation and/or domestic failure. The sympathetic, bumbling protagonist was always male, always funny, and mirthfully forgiven for losing control of himself and/or the location of his family. Everyone understood that the onus and weight of making art or writing books far outweighed such concerns. The wives went along with the hilarity, having not yet begun to understand the implications. Those who did understand were tempered by the surprisingly warm glow of early celebrity and believed in the sacrifices necessary to great art. Everyone was very young. Deborah put a smile on her face and laughed along because they *were*

funny stories, surprisingly touching, hilarious stories of bungling buffoons at the mercy of their talent and their love of and need for women. Softened as she was by the joke, on them and on herself, the laughter didn't fix it. In fact the laughter excused it, which made it worse to laugh along, to genuinely find it funny. There was still the morning ahead, cranking open those windows, alone. The living room studded with half-empty highball glasses and crumpled napkins. A grumpy maid hiding in the room over the kitchen. Real Life at home was not a happy place. The job of maintaining a false exterior fell mainly to her, which created an ever sharper divide between her and my father.

Conversely an *idealized* version of Real Life was threaded throughout our lives. It was in my father's books and in objects from his travels—an actual shrunken head, American Indian baskets and pots, a collection of axes from New Guinea, woven baskets and earthen pots from Africa that decorated the house. *This* Real Life was had and enjoyed by the indigenous, the poor, even the middle class, who were by necessity taken up with practical concerns. These Real Lives were defined by the simplicity of having few choices or none, which ordained them, in my parents' view, with a kind of mystical grace. The modern world might learn from them. *We* might learn from them. Once, in Africa, Deborah pointed out to me the exquisite form of a Masai warrior's wife that Peter had spotted. The woman was tall and slender against a hot, orange sun, her baby slung to her front as she tended a herd of cattle. Deborah studied her, sure of the woman's semi-holy state of being, her life pared to the slimmest essentials, framed by the dramatic splendor of an African sunset.

Ireland afforded many more opportunities to see the beauty of simple living. Though Deborah rarely did laundry, and not by hand, the sight of a farm woman's laundry was an opportunity for poetry. In this lovely passage she has seen a wife taking wet clothes across the road to the shrubbery to dry:

Clean clothes spread on bushes are pleasant, yet less thrilling than laundry hung out on a line: touching symbols of human shapes strung side by side, jumping, snapping in a breeze, or—more eloquent—quiet on a windless day. I love a whole white line of children's cotton underpants, especially when an orderly wife has hung them in expanding sizes. Rows of diapers are strangely not monotonous; one following another, a simple statement of the succession of time. Shirts, neckless, held by the shoulders; pants swung by the cuffs; a union suit hung upside down, empty, flexible; brassieres bold next to blue jeans, mothers and sons in startling intimacy, pristine. Slips are sad, vulnerable, trifling. Overalls are cheerful; they speak of men coming hungry to the table.

Each clean diaper marks the slow passing days of babyhood, a man's suit (without the man) is flexible, mothers and sons can be guiltlessly close, though the things of the woman are sad and trifling. The overalls are cheerful because hunger is sharp, the meal is deserved. The meal seems to be deserved mostly by the men; the woman is invisible but for the food she provides and the order she creates on the line. She doesn't seem to have much fun, though the result is beautiful and poetic: Real Life has been done for another day and will continue. It must; the family depends upon it and each other. The thing that holds Real Life together is need. There are few choices, they must stay together.

Real Life in Ireland often happened on farms.

Beautiful farms, a house under trees, the straight line of shed shapes becomes a village across the yard strewn with machines and white chickens I don't want to be a farmer, I just want to be around farms.

And one time our VW got caught in the outflow from a church in Headford:

. . . we watched while they flowed around us in the narrow street. They were stylishly dressed and many of the women and girls were beautiful These women, dressed so well, had a seductive sense of themselves. So too have the countrymen of Ireland, perhaps from a sense of themselves so close to the beasts and the soil. House-work does not make vivid the female, though if she go to the field or the farm yard, she is enhanced.

Their seductive power comes from their involvement with each other and their collective interest—farming. Their roles are simple and proscribed, limited by what is available to them. Restricted by convention, they are made beautiful. The warrior's wife, the laundress, and the farmers were examples of the other, romantic side of Real Life. In a natural state of immersion, at one with their surroundings, they have purpose. They belong. They have a specific contentment that she believed was smothered, in *her* life, under layers of frustrating obfuscation as well as her inability to be "simple enough." Her problem, she says, is an abundance of choice. Her problem was also the abundance of choices of everyone around her, especially my father.

She did love the idea of doing useful, practical things, and God knows she tried. Once, inspired by Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, she spent weeks planting a garden in a plot near our barn that was surrounded by twelve-foot-high privet because it looked just like the garden in the book. Everything died for lack of sun, an outcome that made her laugh at herself for years but not without a certain sadness, because she had really made an effort. The idea of Burnett's dormant roses and smothered snowdrops finding new life was

magical to her, but the simple alchemy of sun, water, and nutrition proved impossible. She just didn't have the knack. Then there was a cooking phase, where she took time out from her reading and writing to attempt a few experiments in the kitchen.

One afternoon she had a beef bourguignon simmering on the stove for a dinner party. Because there wasn't very much food in the house, I was often very hungry as a child, resorting to eating, at times, dog food. I distinctly remember the brand: Alpo Meatballs. I wouldn't go for the other, mushy stuff. But if Alpo Meatballs was left on top of the breakfront, I'd sometimes grab a few bites because there was hardly any food in the refrigerator, and I was not allowed to snack because of my weight. Another of my options was to get into the jars of Baba Rum in the pantry when the maid wasn't in the kitchen. Though the rum in them wasn't tasty, I overlooked it for the sake of the round, yellow cakes soaked in sugar. The Baba Rum left me with a strange, buzzing feeling and slightly sick from the alcohol.

On the day of the dinner party, the beef bourguignon, a significant step up from Alpo, was irresistible. I spent the entire afternoon running back and forth from my room at the other end of the house with a grapefruit spoon, taking a bite at a time, not realizing how many trips I had made. When she came down from her study and saw the depleted dish, she broke down and cried because she had four people coming for dinner, an enterprise that already intimidated her. She was furious at me for days, which was a long time for her to be angry. I remember feeling terribly sorry. I knew she was angry because the day she had spent cooking felt pointless to her. For me to eat the stew piled stupidity on top of wasted time, more than doubling the loss. To her, cooking felt like running in place, a redundant exercise where material for consumption was provided, used, and expelled. Her frustration was not *getting anywhere* with it. Like coal shoveled into a furnace, food was just fuel that came out of the other end—the whole of human experience not any less perplexing for it and certainly more frustrating.

Her rejection of domestic enterprise wasn't absolute. There was wistfulness, a way that she looked at "homemaking" out of the corner of her eye. At bottom, when she wasn't immersed in study or Zen, she felt herself a failure for having been married three times by the age of thirty-one. After all, she hadn't turned out to be the ideal woman that it had been drummed into her mind she should be. She wasn't presiding over stacks of folded laundry or standing at the front door to greet her family with a freshly baked pie. So now and then she'd get a wild idea and try her own version of homemaking. She tried bread making but could not get the loaf to rise. She made yogurt (then called yoghurt) in four little glass cups kept lukewarm in a device

on the kitchen counter (impossible to screw up). She tried knitting, I still have the scarf, a red, bumpy little scrap with a blue anchor sewn on haphazardly—one of my dearest possessions. She did needlepoint (half a canvas in purple and yellow, a Zen proverb) and Japanese Sumi painting; she blew out Easter eggs with her friend Murette Galesi and painted brown branches with blue flowers on them. Drawn to the power of minimalism, she wanted to be the woman who lovingly gardened, who farmed and made things, someone who was content with simplicity.

The romanticized version of Real Life held up—there in the Irish farmers moving around the car like a school of fish (in which Deborah and Peter sit isolated). It is there in the graceful form of the Masai woman on the African plain. Later the curios from my father's expeditions accumulated: a set of elegant spears used by New Guineans to defend territories, hand-beaded American Indian vests, intricately painted Inca pots. During the *Annaghkeen* summer and beyond, simplicity as a solution began to metamorphose into a fantasy of monastic life. On a visit to Mount Melleray Abbey, a monastery in the Knockmealdown Mountains, Deborah and Peter stayed overnight, participating in a program where guests were allowed to observe the rituals along with the monks. In regard to what would be her eventual devotion, she wrote:

I would like to enter a monastery . . . though of what kind I cannot know; but were I able to take vows to Christian realities, I could not live solely among women, an aesthetic imbalance.

So Deborah would take Peter along. They would find that place where, limited by the conventions of religion, they would themselves be made simple enough for the idealized Real Life, or for the grittiness of the other, "real" Real Life, or some amalgam of the two. Would children have a place there? Children might but only if they left their childish nature behind. Children are loud and needy, and they change all the time—as soon as you've adjusted to one phase, there's a complete transformation. My parents found them lovable and interesting but didn't really believe they had much *effect* on children past the age of twelve or so, while harboring deep and hopeless regrets about them. Better to have the children at least a half mile from the monastery, in a field, playing prettily under a large, sheltering tree. Real Life but not too real.

For me Real Life is just where I am. It is oftentimes more real to me on the road, traveling, than at any point when I'm home immersed in "real" Real Life—which can have the quality of a tape loop. That is why I love to travel. The colors and sounds and sights are a film I watch closely for the detail that tells, the fragment that falls into place. I pull the surroundings in, a taste of this, a bit of that. I won-

Kestrel

der at every person who walks by, about how they feel, about where they live, and yet by the time the sun has begun its descent from the sky's apex, I already know. A new self is created. I am Italian in Italy and black in Philadelphia. In New York on the day of the Puerto Rican parade, I'm Puerto Rican. In Amsterdam I'm one of those folks on a bike, zipping down a canal after work, blonde tresses aloft in the wind. To be a chameleon trying on cultures is my favorite part.

Ireland, especially, is a place of vivid re-imagining for me. Having walked every day for miles around our adopted bungalow, I felt Irish again, as though I hadn't really ever left this island. We picked wildflowers into small bouquets for the room, we heard the cows lowing when we awoke, we roamed unchecked into the worn, green hills. It seemed as though not all that much had changed. How much of Deborah was still here—the closely held fairy tale, Real Life gritty and difficult, Real Life beautiful and perfect, all as true as if she were right beside me, funny and warm, and laughing, as she often did, at her own situation. Then she is thinking—it isn't that funny, things are not right, not at all, and tears quickly come, dropping from the ends of her long, dark lashes. Through a thin, cashmere sweater, she radiates the heat of a young person. She's combing my hair and hasn't gotten the tangles out. She's reading the last chapter of Alan Watts' *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, plucking gently at her eyebrow in concentration. She's writing a poem and hasn't finished all of her meticulous, painstaking edits. She's making borscht and has forgotten the sour cream (or has dropped her spoon and left the kitchen, sick of making borscht).

There is no older Deborah, no calmed-down Deborah, no grounded Deborah, no Deborah who finally found home. No Deborah who found a Real Life of any variety to which she could meaningfully adhere. There's no effervescent Deborah, gone for a walk on a sharp winter day after having finished her latest book. There's no mellowed Deborah, her fashion sense gone happily astray, watching the news mid-afternoon with a cat on her lap. She's mid-sentence, as flattened as a paper doll under the weight of everything that had to move forward. Now there are no more irritating alternatives to bother her, no Real Life problems, no real life either. No life at all. After a period of re-flection under this huge pile of stuff, she's not happy. She's not happy and she hasn't been for years and years, though having had to put a good face on it (along with my father, and me, and all the Zen people, and all her friends and relatives), though putting on a pretty good show, gazing out from her memorial pamphlet with its portrait of her beautiful face, its pallor telling of her recent diagnosis, her eyes soulful and deep, the picture ringed with a slash of black ink from a Sumi painter's brush, deep and absolute.

