

# The Vertical Smile

A NOVEL BY

Richard  
Condon



2712.45 / C746

# THE VERTICAL SMILE

RICHARD  
CONDON



THE DIAL PRESS NEW YORK

Copyright © 1971 by Richard Condon

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in connection with reviews written specifically for inclusion in a magazine or newspaper.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For Jemma and Nito, this book  
and—*Aieee!*—this world

On a lovely late-March evening she strolled along Park Avenue wearing a palomino mink car coat and a beaded bag which a beautiful man (who turned out to have acne on his back) had given her in Paris when her husband had been alive. The beautiful man's wife had bought forty-three beaded bags before he could stop her.

She was thinking about Dunc Mulligan, her son-in-law, who would be nominated to the United States Senate at the state convention in April; a shoo-in because he was the Attorney General's candidate. All she had ever been able to say in favor of her son-in-law was that he had a beautiful set of caps on his teeth. If they could run him on a combined Republican-Conservative-Democrat ticket, the Panthers would sweep the elections.

She was a small-boned woman with good posture to make her chest look nice. She wore dainty white gloves and virgins' tear pearls. Her hair was blacker than the ravens' wings in Victorian poems; not dyed. It had been the hair of a healthy young vegetarian who had cleaned fish for a living in the heart of the low-rent district in downtown Fuchow. It would have cost six hundred and seventy dollars plus tax if she had not bought it through a doorman whose brother-in-law was a shoplifter.

As she reached the corner of Fifty-fourth Street she glanced to her left and saw the red, double-decker bus which Jemma's had imported from London to take diners across town to the theatres. She loved double-decker buses. She had kept in touch with one friend who lived on Washington Heights because in those days she could take a green double-decker to visit him while her husband Arthur was downtown winning the money. She would sit in the last row on top of the bus, reading the Gulden's Mustard signs which were screwed into the backs of the seats, sailing right through Harlem with her hair flying while no-

body, but nobody, fired a gun or threw a rock at her. Then after a marvelous afternoon under Al, who worked nights as a heat maintenance engineer at Hearn's, she would ride downtown on a Number 5, bowling along Riverside Drive opposite the Spry sign on the crowded Jersey shore.

For old time's sake she turned into Fifty-fourth Street, smiling at the red bus because double-deckers still made her feel sexy, entered the revolving door of Jemma's, kept pushing it, made a complete circle without entering the restaurant, debouched upon the pavement and entered the bus. A young man with sensual teeth said something to her but she smiled at him, gestured over her shoulder, and kept going. She climbed the narrow steps to the upper deck slowly. There was nothing to rush about and she had a trick knee.

There were dozens of empty seats on the upper deck but four feet away, all alone, she saw a hauntingly familiar face hovering wistfully above an ectomorphic body which took expensive tweed like paint. Always favor the ectomorphs had been one of the most successful rules of her life. They could go all night, standing up if necessary. She approached him intently, trying to place him before she sat down, thinking how pitiable it was that they didn't nominate a magnificent-looking man like this for the Senate instead of Duncan Mulligan. She sat down with supreme control, reminding herself of another of her successful rules: if you don't ask you don't get. He was pretending he did not know she had sat beside him: hilarious. He seemed to be counting bricks in a building wall. With the confidence she had every right to have in her forty-three-dollar-an-ounce perfume, she slipped her right hand out of its glove and let it rest on her knee to show the six-carat penolouque emerald which Arthur had finally been able to buy from the estate of the woman who had been intensely interested in *chemin-de-fer* but who, no matter how much she lost or how rough things got, no matter how often Arthur approached her with cash, would never, until did death part, give up the ring. If the perfume didn't break him down the emerald would. If they didn't work then she would have to remember his name. She knew she had met him. He was not just one of those people making a fortune on television commercials who drive the public crazy trying to figure out who they are when

they go walking around. Maybe she didn't always remember a man's name instantly because maybe she didn't always get fussy and formal and ask their names. Because you have a wonderful meal in some place like Lorand-Barre you don't necessarily go rushing out across Brittany stopping people to demand that they tell you the name of the chef.

The mind was a river. She floated inland from Brittany to Angers. She was drifting back to a long time ago, to the time of Arthur's induction into his fourth wine society.

Arthur had refused to be inducted into wine societies in New York because he said it was snobbish. "In my wine societies in France, Australia, Italy, Chile, Germany and Yugoslavia," he would say, "you are at the headquarters where the wine brains are. Where the region is right under the fingernails of the top wine people." Arthur had given the impression that if he could have carried all of his huge, nine-color wine certificates with him into restaurants that head waiters would begin to show some respect. (Arthur hated to tip.)

She became surer and surer that the man sitting next to her must be one of Arthur's fellow Chevaliers. Angers, the *Confrérie des Chevaliers du Sacavin*, the oldest wine society in France? The town with the tapestries; not easy to get to—but what was?

They had been invited to stay at a château which had long, high, freezing corridors like a girl's school in an old German movie. There had been no loo in the room. She had lain awake on that bed at about two o'clock in the morning, absorbing water from the air around her. Arthur was snoring D7 chords. She had to pee. She kept putting it off and putting it off until the suffering of getting up got to be less than the suffering of staying in bed. She had finally thrown back the two feather quilts, put on Arthur's robe over her robe and had waddled rapidly out of the room, down the long, gelid hall, as full as a pelican. Nothing could awaken Arthur (who never peed) except sunshine.

As she started back through the darkness of the eighty-meter course, as she passed a doorway, she heard a man's voice whisper to her. She went closer to it to hear what it was selling and the man grabbed her and kissed her in an ingenious way, causing her vagina to whirl like a pinwheel. She pushed him back into the room, that is, well back, onto the bed. He was like the Masked

Marvel of Sex with the stamina of a Dominican diplomat and the technical virtuosity of a certain employee at a certain Italian ski resort. But when it was over she had forgotten to ask who he was and it had been too dark inside that room to see his face.

To keep her place at the château at Angers, she folded over a corner of time on the right-hand page of her memory just to spend a little time re-savoring the Dominican diplomat from the summer she and Arthur had attended an *arroz con pollo* tasting in Havana. Arthur knew a man named Klarnet who was always setting up junkets to have something tasted and they always had to travel at least a thousand miles to taste whatever it was. The Dominican diplomat had a secret which any one of Arthur's pharmaceutical companies would have bottled and sold if it had been anything a woman could have told her husband about.

She had met the Dominican diplomat at the craps table at Sans Souci. He had been very diplomatic and they had arranged to meet at his place the next afternoon while Arthur was off being made an *Amigo de Arroz con Pollo de los Antilles*. What a spectacular certificate those Cubans could turn out!

All over the Dominican diplomat's four-story house, which had a regulation-sized boxing ring on its top floor, were round crystal pitchers carefully covered with cheesecloth to keep the flies out. Each pitcher held a supply of Japanese Mushroom Tea: a jar of Instant Erections infinitely marinated and sustained. But when she and Arthur got back to New York she must have bought the wrong mushrooms—or maybe it was the local water—because the stuff had no effect on Arthur.

She turned back the dog-eared page of time and returned hurriedly to the château and the identity of the man seated beside her.

All right: after a fantastic night in the sack it was the following morning. They all met downstairs for brunch. Out of the six men assembled she had not one clue as to which man it had been, except she knew it hadn't been Arthur. It could have been this man. She undressed him mentally and stretched out under him. The size was right. He was tall, not too heavy. Her mother had always mourned very tall girls because she was convinced they couldn't have orgasms which certainly didn't apply to tall men. To produce his name she closed her eyes lightly and squeezed



down hard with her legs as though she had him, perhaps as before, in the grand, old nutcracker position. Nothing identifying recurred. She flashed instantaneously to the Angers town hall and the wine investiture but it had all been in French and his name had been lost in the torrent. But it had to come back to her. If she got lucky and came up with the right name he would be permitted to proceed as required but if she got the wrong name she would need only to pretend to be flustered and try to move to another seat. If he were the gentleman she knew him to be, the man who had run across that freezing room just to get her a towel, he would stop her before she could get away and introduce himself. More and more she felt herself evaluating that he was a tremendously attractive man with a very warm left thigh and calf.

While there was a sudden diversion in the street below—someone's viciously trained guard dog was savaging a passing woman's throat—his name flashed into her mind. She would have to wait until the screams and shouting subsided below because he was fascinated with the activity, but it was as though his name had arisen from an automatic-tickler file. That made her think of the gift-wrapped ticklers, eight for four dollars, which she had bought one Christmas Eve on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg while Arthur was being made a *meister* of the prestigious German potato pancake society. One of the ticklers had been tufted gaily in the shape of Little Bo Beep. Another was a mass of circular, miniature tires as a promotion for the Michelin company's little tire man. The men's room attendant who had sold them to her had carried the crazing smell of Vicks VapoRub with him. It was her personal opinion that Vicks VapoRub had done more for sex than it had done even for the common cold.

"Mr. Noon?" her small, cultivated voice asked. "I think you are just too shy to say hello after all these years so I'm going to be bold and say hello to you."

He turned toward her, away from the blood in the street, to stare at her the way the emu at the Lone Pine Sanctuary outside Brisbane had stared at Arthur just before it had attacked.

"You are Osgood Noon, Chevalier du Sacavin?"

He nodded, bemused. If a cobra nods to a mongoose, that was how he was nodding to her.

"It's Ada Clarke?" she said, lilting the end of the sentence like a Texan, as though there were some question about her name as well. "That is—I am Ada Clarke?" she used her eyelids like hummingbirds' wings worrying a little if she could be spattering him with mascara. She was shy-seeming, perhaps a little wary. Not wary for her own sake but for his. The way a bacteriological-warfare scientist well back in a laboratory under the Rocky Mountains might feel wary about what people might think of him if they survived.

"We met a long time ago at the Château de Montvictoire?" she said/asked tentatively. "That time you were being—uh—*intronisé* in that—uh—*association bachique* in the Anjou?"

He went colorless. It was as though a silent picture comedian had emptied a sack of flour over his head. From the deep, carbon-monoxide cherry which had suffused his face when she first addressed him, he went to middle-pink then to an iguana-belly shade. She wasn't alarmed by it but she was curious. She leaned across him to open the window slightly to help him to breathe.

"I was with my husband? Arthur Harris?" she said smoothly. "And you were with the Emmets and their teensy-tiny dogs and your wife?" Here was a man who had investigated the lower part of her torso like a mining engineer but who now had become almost faint with embarrassment because she had remembered his name.

Osgood Noon was indeed immobilized, but not from embarrassment. It was as though he were being boarded by a swarm with cutlasses in their teeth led by the most piratically forward woman he had ever met. He was dizzied by yet another impact even though it was happening years later. It would be like trying to waltz with a sex-maddened rhinoceros who saw him as its temporary mate. She offended and terrified him still as she had always been able to do but she had that damnable ability to squirt extraordinary excitement ahead of her, as though the sex act were just about to be invented for human history as she leaped in, tearing open his English trousers and his expensive cambric underwear.

The last time he had seen her (from afar, and she had not known he had seen her) had been seven years ago, aboard the *Reina Gertrudis* of the old Radin Line where he had avoided

her with mounting inner hysteria. But now she had found him again in the middle of a trading area of forty-eight million people. He was pinned. He was virtually locked against the wall of the bus and she blocked the only egress. And she was still strong enough to be able to lift that goddam emerald which had gotten caught under him at Montvictoire, costing him a consistent three strokes off his game for the rest of the season. Fate wasn't playing fair. Christ, Computer, Himself, would not be able to figure the odds against their ever meeting again. But here she was, threatening him with her merciless lust. He had set out that evening innocently, on the blandest of bland excursions only in the hope of the most conventional diversion and now this. No!

Time tumbled in upon him like a weakened brick wall in an earthquake. He had been sipping a Clover Club aboard the *Reina Gertrudis* two hundred miles at sea, feeling safer than he had ever been allowed to feel on land, when Skutch, the crooked smoking-room steward who sold the ship's run in advance for twenty-five per cent of the pools (requiring an advanced mathematical mind, extraordinary seamanship and certain inside information), had passed out the printed passenger list for the run. Noon sat there within the ineffable languor which had been brought about by an hour in the ship's baroque Turkish bath, so striking in its authentic Moorish decorations of the seventeenth century with portholes concealed by an elaborately carved Cairo curtain through which the fitful light had seemed to reveal something of the mysterious East. From dado to cornice the room had been completely tiled: warm teak illuminated by suspended bronze Arab lamps. It had relaxed him sublimely. He looked forward with such tremendous zest to the voyage while he waited for his wife to finish abluting and anointing in their state-room below when, as he read the passenger list, this woman's name(s) had struck his eyes like a fist(s).

*Harris, Mrs. Arthur Bainbridge*

He had nearly panicked. In retrograde hopelessness he had sent his palsying finger back to the C's to have his dread confirmed:

*Clarke, Ada*

The abominable *cuteness* of her affectation of two names wherever she went made him smoke with acrid disapproval. He

gulped the Clover Club (something he detested doing) for he knew, as Valjean knew Javert, that if she ever discovered that he was aboard she was capable of breaking into his stateroom at night (as she had done on that awful night at Montvictoire) and begin to chew on his parts. It would offend his wife to say the least. Cerce might not have been overly possessive about him—in fact there was an accurate record which showed that she was even somewhat indifferent to him and what might happen to him, but no wife could be expected to behave amiably if this woman were to be allowed to have her aberrant way.

He had spent the days of that voyage running before her like a hunted thing. He would huddle in the ship's library, as safe from her as if he were an Arab in Mecca. But he would lose his nerve and sink from the first-class library to the second-class reading room to the third-class comic-book rack, ever fearful that she would spot him. He bribed the chief steward beyond that man's right to accept such an amount for such a tiny service, to rearrange their dining table far across the salon from the purser's table where she sat kneading and ogling. He could not stand to watch her so he had had them shifted to the first sitting, appalling Cerce who was a figure in the film industry (or had been). He told his wife that the sea air had given him a prodigious appetite, that he could not wait for the second sitting, and then to prove it he had had to gain twelve pounds on the crossing and utterly disgust his fitter in Cork Street a week later.

He would sit on the edge of his bunk with his toes intertwined anxiously, staring at the cabin door, pressing his palms into the sides of his head, acid with self-pity, fearful yet hopeful that she would find him: in a condition of the helplessness of classical masculine sexual timidity.

"How are the Emmets?" the woman asked brightly.

"Why—uh—just fine, I think. He's still with the bank. In charge of the Reykjavik office."

"Does she still have those tiny little dogs?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you still see them?"

"Oh, yes. At least whenever I'm in Iceland. Which isn't really often. They send me the traditional barrel of herring every Christmas."

"How sweet. And how is your wife?"

He did not answer but that could have been, she thought, because as the bus had started to move away from Jemma's, someone had shot at the guard dog and had missed, winging a child at the elbow. She winced herself remembering how the funny bone could hurt but she persisted with Osgood Noon. "Your wife was *such* a beauty. And I always remember her as being so wondrously amiable."

He did not answer.

"I was transformed when I actually met her—in person. When I was a girl my mother always kept up our subscription to *Film Fun*. Why, even Arthur was thrilled with her and he never read anything but *Drug Age*. He actually asked her for her autograph."

Noon stared out of the bus window at a mugging which was taking place on the far side of Park Avenue. The mugger held the elderly woman's head locked in his arm while he slammed a metal garbage can lid into her face repeatedly with his free hand. People hurried around them or reversed their directions casually.

"Did you divorce?" Ada asked.

"No."

"Is she—?"

"I don't know."

"Arthur died. My husband. Do you remember him?"

Os remembered Arthur as the biggest wine boob he had ever known. The man had carried a pocket wine thermometer and if the stuff in the bottle with the label he could pronounce only by pointing to it were over fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit he would go berserk. For all the years Os had known Arthur, only on the various tasting junkets which Klarnet had organized, Os had never felt he really understood the man because Arthur would be in shock from having memorized a wine and food dictionary and seemed to be able to speak only in the jargon of a *sous-chef*.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Indeed I do. A positive peach."

"Are you surprised that I remembered you?" She laughed with three low musical tones, deliciously, like a dying sailor's memory of a whorehouse doorbell.

"Well, it has been some time since our—our little nocturnal escapade," Os smirked.

A slight malaise passed through her vanity, no more than if it had taken a dozen or so heated spears. "But—you did remember?"

"Oh, I remember."

"You won't mind if I ask? It has bothered me for so long. Where was your wife that night?"

"My wife?"

"You went upstairs together when we all did. I mean later on—when I relived the experience—it seemed so—well, so *kinky*. Your wife wasn't somewhere in that pitch-dark room all that time?"

"I don't know where she was," Os answered grimly.

"You don't *know*? Oh, you poor man!"

## 2

One of the Attorney General's brilliant deputies drove F.M. Heller to the Air Force base where the big jet was waiting to take him into New York. They had meant to put him down at La Guardia but the tower sent them to Teterboro to land. The Everest Bank's helicopter was waiting for him. It flew him to the Wall Street landing pad. A long black Chrysler with an Isotta-Franchini body took him to Wall Street's tallest building. The private chute lofted him to the law offices of Lantz, Lantz, Tolliver & Farr, the great American law firm of which the Attorney General had been a senior partner until his nation had called him up to serve its destiny. A very thin but luciously pretty receptionist who wore a reinforced, tensile-steel wired C-cup combination dropped everything to lead him directly to the Tanzanian law library of the firm, on the basis of whose codes the firm someday soon hoped to gain the Tanzanian government's legal work in the United States, even as they had been slowly gaining the legal representation for most of the countries

of the world, where she left him behind locked doors with Duncan Mulligan who was a sort-of member of the firm for the reason that his wife Celeste Mulligan-Harris was the daughter of the late Arthur Bainbridge Harris and the many Harris foundations.

F.M. Heller was the quaggy board chairman of the Everest National Bank (and its chief executive officer). He was a significant second-generation power in the Eastern establishment. His father, F. Marx Heller, the feisty, fearsome, grand old man of tax-free municipal bonds, had been one of the three all-time puissant Wall Street lawyers.

F.M. Heller *filed* was an exaggeratedly sigmoid man in his late fifties who wore a white beard which had been designed by Alexandre "for optimum allure" and, during the three weeks before Christmas, always wore a bright red beret for its shock effect upon the American financial community. He was precisely all-American America. He personally raised his nation's flag outside his Rockrimmon House on Fifth Avenue ("so marvelously near the zoo") on Flag Day (only). Each Arbor Day he planted one tree on his late father's estate at Dover, New Jersey. When he had been much younger he had tried to create one new American mother each Mother's Day. Entering the library he interrupted Duncan Mulligan's study of J. Fagin-Ryan's *The United States Senate*, a background study themed along the lines that the Senate was the last of the great gentlemen's clubs.

At forty-two, any one of Duncan Mulligan's facial features would have made signals of strength of character but all of them were overemphasized so that the impression he conveyed to the world was that he had bought them from a fence or had stolen them during a fire sale at a plastic surgeon's or was merely minding them for six friends who had lost face in one way or another. Held (almost) together under his pale ivory skin, linked (somehow) with the lower-face mask of his blue-black underbeard, a perpetual and luminescent, seemingly painted shadow upon his face which would forever prevent him from selling a used car to anyone; his features were all wrong. Instead of conveying the resolution of a leader of men with that chin, he seemed merely glum. His overpronounced black eyebrows jutting out beyond his ever-darting dark eyes accented their shiftiness and

opportunism. Overall, at high tide, such as when all his features were assembled by a television camera, his most immediately startling characteristic, irradicable from any memory, was shallowness.

Throughout his life Duncan had retained a weird preparatory-school accent which made him sound as though he were strangling on false teeth. He spoke slowly, evenly and monotonously; a mechanically deliberate man who had used gray hair dye on his temples and the backs of his hands from the age of fourteen. He had the flair of Stanley Baldwin years after the Prime Minister's death and the attack policy of Montgomery of Alamein who would not budge his troops until eleven and a quarter times the required men and matériel had been assembled and if another strong force was attacking the enemy from the rear.

F.M. Heller shucked off his topcoat and pulled out a chair at the far end of the long highly polished table, facing Duncan, and spoke across the intervening twenty-two feet.

"I come here after twenty-two minutes with the Attorney General in Washington," he boomed, "and I bring news to you beyond all dreams of glory." Words from F.M. Heller were not just thrown together into carelessly enunciated groupings called sentences. Each word was individually waxed and polished then lined up as one more shining bottle of elixir on the shelf of his syntax.

Duncan looked up slowly from the volume of Fagin-Ryan. More slowly his right hand began its measured ascent to grasp the template of his black horn-rimmed glasses to lift them from the bridge of his nose at a deliberate millimeter at a time then to lower them slowly and carefully to the table before he took the risk of responding.

"Good morning, F.M.," he said. "Have you been keeping well?"

"Very well, Duncan. And you?"

"Never fitter, F.M."

"Duncan—listen carefully. The Attorney General has authorized me to tell you that even before you get the nomination to the Senate he has every reason to believe there will be a place for you on the national ticket in seventy-two."



"On what ticket, F.M.?" Few politicians champing to leap into the national arena would have asked that question but Duncan was not a quick mind; however, by the merit of his shallow grasp, Duncan profited because F.M. Heller was exasperated to reveal more than he would have revealed if Duncan had rejoiced, or merely cringed, at his news.

"Duncan. Please listen to me. The Attorney General told me directly that he was going to put you on the national ticket. Do you understand?"

"Do you mean—?" The realization now possessed Duncan. He had not evaluated it but the essence of the attention such a fantastic vaulting could bring to him was forming and growing within his imagination.

"We are going to talk about what I mean and what the Attorney General meant for the rest of the day," F.M. Heller told him, staring at him with heavy significance.

"If called I will respond," Duncan said. "If nominated I will accept. If drafted, I shall run. If elected, I shall serve. And from the ramparts of a just democracy, defending law and order, I will fight Mao, I will fight Castro, I will fight the memory of Ho Chi Minh and I will fight the uppityness of the American Negro."

"First we have to get you elected to the Senate. Even the Attorney General can't help if you aren't elected to the Senate."

"I'm in your hands. But further, it is the Attorney General's will. It seems to me that it's only a matter now of assembling the seven million dollars for the television spots and I will have entered American history."

"Your wife can't be allowed to put up all the money and so far your mother-in-law has shown very little enthusiasm for the campaign."

"Money is no object here, F.M. When the word goes out that the Attorney General has chosen me—F.M.?—if I am assigned to the Appropriations Committee or to Military Affairs does that mean I can order a military jet to take me anywhere I want to go?"

"Appropriations and Military Affairs are House committees, Duncan. You promised to bone up on that."

"God, I'd love to bring back a Civil War regimental-style like the Zouaves. What magnificent uniforms they wore."