WALKER PERCY

THE THANATOS SYNDROME

THE LAST GENTLEMAN

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The New York Times Book Review

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Walker Percy

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If a man cannot forget, he will never amount to much.

Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or

. . . We know now that the modern world is coming to an end . . . at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies . . . Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another . . . the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.

Romano Guardini, The End of the Modern World

The characters in this novel are fictional. No real persons are portrayed. The places do not necessarily correspond to geography. That is to say, New York is New York, but localities in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have been deliberately scrambled. For example, the Southern city herein set forth bears certain resemblances to Birmingham. But the nearby university is more like the state institution in Mississippi. The town of Shut Off, Louisiana, is not across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg. These liberties are taken as a consequence of my impression that this region as a whole, comprising parts of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, shares certain traits which set it apart from much of the United States and even from the rest of the South.

1

1. ONE FINE DAY IN EARLY SUMMER A YOUNG MAN LAY thinking in Central Park.

His head was propped on his jacket, which had been folded twice so that the lining was outermost, and wedged into a seam of rock. The rock jutted out of the ground in a section of the park known as the Great Meadow. Beside him and canted up at mortar angle squatted a telescope of an unusual design.

In the course of the next five minutes the young man was to witness by chance an insignificant, though rather curious happening. It was the telescope which became the instrument of a bit of accidental eavesdropping. As a consequence of a chance event the rest of his life was to be changed.

He was an unusual young man. But perhaps nowadays it is not so unusual. What distinguished him anyhow was this: he had to know everything before he could do anything. For example, he had to know what other people's infirmities were before he could get on a footing with them.

Most people would have forgotten the incident in question in a week's time. But he did not. His life had come to such a pass that he attached significance to it. For until this moment he had lived in a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of a man he was or what he must do, and supposing therefore that he must be all men and do everything. But after this morning's incident his life took a turn in a particular direction. Thereafter he came to see that he was not destined to do everything but only one or two things. Lucky is the man who does not secretly believe that every possibility is open to him.

It was a beautiful day but only after the fashion of beautiful days in New York. The sky was no more than an ordinary Eastern sky, mild and blue and hazed over, whitened under the blue and of not much account. It was a standard sky by which all other skies are measured. As for the park, green leaves or not, it belonged to the animal kingdom rather than the vegetable. It had a zoo smell. Last summer's grass was as coarse and yellow as lion's hair and worn bare in spots, exposing the tough old hide of the earth. The tree trunks were polished. Bits of hair clung to the bark as if a large animal had been rubbing against them. Nevertheless, thought he, it is a good thing to see a park put to good hard use by millions of people, used and handled in its every square inch like a bear garden.

A 35-millimeter camera had been fitted to the telescope in place of the in-line ocular, but a lateral eyepiece allowed him to lean over from time to time and take a squint. There sprang into view a section of the cornice of a building, no doubt one of the hotels along Central Park South. But so powerful was the instrument that it was hard to say which building was being looked at. It was as if the telescope created its own world in the brilliant theater of its lenses.

He was waiting for the peregrine.

The day before, he had seen it but not photographed it. The falcon had abandoned its natural home in the northern wilderness and taken up residence on top of the hotel. From this eyrie it preyed on the fat pigeons of the park. Along the cornice it would strut, cock a yellow eye down at the great misty rectangle (the eye sunk and fierce in its socket and half eclipsed by the orbit of bone), and down it would come smoking, at two hundred miles an hour, big feet stuck out in front like a Stuka, strike the pigeons in mid-air with a thump and a blue flak-burst of feathers.

The peregrine did not return to his perch. As the young man made ready to unlimber his telescope, he loosened the thumbscrew and the barrel dropped to the horizontal. He took another look. Being of both a scientific and a superstitious turn of mind and therefore always on the lookout for chance happenings which lead to great discoveries, he had to have a last look—much as a man will open a telephone book and read the name at his thumbnail.

There in the telescope sat a woman, on a park bench, a white woman dark as a gypsy. She held a tabloid. Over her shoulder he read: ". . . parley fails."

But when he looked up he couldn't find her. The telescope was pointed toward the southeast, where a thicket of maples bordered the Great Meadow. She could only be there. Yes, now he saw: the telescope looked toward a leafy notch and through it to the summit of one of the little alps which overlook the Pond.

There she was, not twenty feet away and shimmering slightly in the pressed optic air as if she sat at the bottom of a sunlit ocean. Her coarse hair gave off rainbows. One arm was flung along the back of the bench, the hand smudged with newspaper ink. She was a neat stocky woman with a shock of hair and a handsome if somewhat meager face, like the face of an athlete, as if all strength and beauty had gone first to her body.

The woman was doing something. The soiled left hand dropped behind the bench, where by any calculation of hers it could not be seen, for the bench sat on the slope of an alp and there was nothing behind it but treetops. The blue hand felt its way down along a partition. It was an old-style bench, the sort built many years ago of a porous tufalike concrete in which pebbles had been set like raisins in a cake. A sad yellow 1901 concrete it was, enough to strike a pang to the heart. The seat was divided into thrones by scroll-shaped partitions which arched up and over to the rear, where they fastened the back into the bench. At the bottom the scroll was mortised into the bench by an ornamental tenon. Down crept the hand along the scroll. As he watched, the hand shattered into rainbows and disappeared. In another second the woman herself was gone, vanishing into the blue nimbus which rimmed the circle of light.

It did not take him long to act. Often nowadays people do not know what to do and so live out their lives as if they were waiting for some sign or other. This young man was such a person. If a total stranger had stopped him this morning on Columbus Circle and thrust into his palm a note which read: *Meet me on the NE corner of Lindell Blvd and Kings Highway in St. Louis 9 A.M. next Thursday—have news of utmost importance*, he'd have struck out for St. Louis (the question is, how many people nowadays would not?).

The hillock was easy to find. The bench overlooked the Pond and, beyond, the Grand Army Plaza. To the north the slope fell away abruptly into a screen of privet and poplar. Below, workmen were setting out folding chairs in the plaza

and draping bunting over scaffolding in preparation for a patriotic ceremony.

Setting down his case, he explored the rear of the bench. The tenon which fastened the scroll between the third and fourth thrones, counting from Fifth Avenue, was loose. It could be slid back a way in its mortise, opening a recess into the blind bottom of the scroll. The cul-de-sac so formed was the sort of place which only neighborhood boys know of (and here there were no neighborhood boys), a time-niche where one leaves a note addressed to oneself: to be opened May 20, 1995. But today there was only a scrap of tin, a disc cut from the top of an orange-juice can, folded to a semi-circle, and sealed with chewing gum. He pried it open with a fingernail. It contained a slip of paper like a supermarket receipt upon which was written in violet script:

Some say thy fault is youth,
some wantonness;
Some say thy grace is youth
and gentle sport;
Both grace and faults are lov'd
of more and less
Thou makest faults graces
that to thee resort.

It was eleven thirty. He replaced note in tin, tin in cul-de-sac, and returned to his rock in the Great Meadow where he set up his telescope, and waited.

At fifteen minutes after twelve a girl came to the bench, set down a brown paper bag, and, making no secret of it, slid back the tenon and got her note. She read the note without expression as she ate her sandwich.

His heart gave a leap. He fell in love, at first sight and at a distance of two thousand feet. It was not so much her good looks, her smooth brushed brow and firm round neck bowed so that two or three vertebrae surfaced in the soft flesh, as a certain bemused and dry-eyed expression in which he seemed to recognize—himself! She was a beautiful girl but she also slouched and was watchful and dry-eyed and musing like a thirteen-year-old boy. She was his better half. It would be possible to sit on a bench and eat a peanut butter sandwich with her and say not a word.

But before he could think what to do, his love had finished

her sandwich, wiped her mouth with Kleenex, and vanished. By the time he reached the alp, there was no sign of her.

Taking the gravel path which skirts the pond, he crossed Central Park West, entered the Y.M.C.A., and went straight up to his room, which was furnished with a single bed and a steel desk varnished to resemble wood grain. Carefully stowing away his telescope under the Val-Pak which hung in the closet, he undressed to his shorts and lay on the bed. After gazing at the ceiling for some minutes, he fell asleep and slept soundly for five hours.

2.

HE WAS A YOUNG MAN OF A PLEASANT APPEARANCE. Of medium height and exceedingly pale, he was nevertheless strongly built and quick and easy in his ways. Save for a deafness in one ear, his physical health was perfect. Handsome as he was, he was given to long silences. So girls didn't know what to make of him. But men liked him. After a while they saw that he was easy and meant no harm. He was the sort whom classmates remember fondly; they liked to grab him around the neck with an elbow and cuff him around. Good-looking and amiable as he was, however, he did not strike one as remarkable. People usually told him the same joke two or three times.

But he looked better than he was. Though he was as engaging as could be, something was missing. He had not turned out well. There is a sort who does well in school and of whom much is heard and expected and who thereafter does less and less well and of whom finally is heard nothing at all. The high tide of life comes maybe in the last year of high school or the first year of college. Then life seems as elegant as algebra. Afterwards people ask, what happened to so and so? And the answer is a shrug. He was the sort who goes away.

Even now he made the highest possible scores on psychological aptitude tests, especially in the area of problem-solving and goal-seeking. The trouble was he couldn't think what to do between tests.

New York is full of people from small towns who are quite content to live obscure lives in some out-of-the-way corner of

the city. Here there is no one to keep track. Though such a person might have come from a long line of old settlers and a neighborhood rich in memories, now he chooses to live in a flat on 231st Street, pick up the paper and milk on the doorstep every morning, and speak to the elevator man. In Southern genealogies there is always mention of a cousin who went to live in New York in 1922 and not another word. One hears that people go to New York to seek their fortunes, but many go to seek just the opposite.

In his case, though, it was part of a family pattern. Over the years his family had turned ironical and lost its gift for action. It was an honorable and violent family, but gradually the violence had been deflected and turned inward. The great grandfather knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought. He even wore a pistol in a holster like a Western hero and once met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barbershop and invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street. The next generation, the grandfather, seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. He was brave but he gave much thought to the business of being brave. He too would have shot it out with the Grand Wizard if only he could have made certain it was the thing to do. The father was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other men. So living for him was a strain. He became ironical. For him it was not a small thing to walk down the street on an ordinary September morning. In the end he was killed by his own irony and sadness and by the strain of living out an ordinary day in a perfect dance of honor.

As for the present young man, the last of the line, he did not know what to think. So he became a watcher and a listener and a wanderer. He could not get enough of watching. Once when he was a boy, a man next door had gone crazy and had sat out in his backyard pitching gravel around and hollering out to his enemies in a loud angry voice. The boy watched him all day, squatted down and watched him, his mouth open and drying. It seemed to him that if he could figure out what was wrong with the man he would learn the great secret of life.

Like many young men in the South, he became overly subtle and had trouble ruling out the possible. They are not like an immigrant's son in Passaic who decides to become a dentist

and that is that. Southerners have trouble ruling out the possible. What happens to a man to whom all things seem possible and every course of action open? Nothing of course. Except war. If a man lives in the sphere of the possible and waits for something to happen, what he is waiting for is war—or the end of the world. That is why Southerners like to fight and make good soldiers. In war the possible becomes actual through no doing of one's own.

But it was worse than this in his case. It was more than being a Southerner. For some years he had had a nervous condition and as a consequence he did not know how to live his life. As a child he had had "spells," occurrences which were nameless and not to be thought of, let alone mentioned, and which he therefore thought of as lying at the secret and somehow shameful heart of childhood itself. There was a name for it, he discovered later, which gave it form and habitation. It was *déjà vu*, at least he reckoned it was. What happened anyhow was that even when he was a child and was sitting in the kitchen watching D'lo snap beans or make beaten biscuits, there came over him as it might come over a sorrowful old man the strongest sense that it had all happened before and that something else was going to happen and when it did he would know the secret of his own life. Things seemed to turn white and dense and time itself became freighted with an unspeakable emotion. Sometimes he "fell out" and would wake up hours later, in his bed, refreshed but still haunted.

When he was a youth he had lived his life in a state of the liveliest expectation, thinking to himself: what a fine thing it will be to become a man and to know what to do—like an Apache youth who at the right time goes out into the plains alone, dreams dreams, sees visions, returns and knows he is a man. But no such time had come and he still didn't know how to live.

To be specific, he had now a nervous condition and suffered spells of amnesia and even between times did not quite know what was what. Much of the time he was like a man who has just crawled out of a bombed building. Everything looked strange. Such a predicament, however, is not altogether a bad thing. Like the sole survivor of a bombed building, he had no secondhand opinions and he could see things afresh.

There were times when he was as normal as anyone. He could be as objective-minded and cool-headed as a scientist. He read well-known books on mental hygiene and for a few minutes after each reading felt very clear about things. He

knew how to seek emotional gratifications in a mature way, as they say in such books. In the arts, for example. It was his custom to visit museums regularly and to attend the Philharmonic concerts at least once a week. He understood, moreover, that it is people who count, one's relations with people, one's warmth toward and understanding of people. At these times he set himself the goal and often achieved it of "cultivating rewarding interpersonal relationships with a variety of people"—to use a phrase he had come across and not forgotten. Nor should the impression be given that he turned up his nose at religion, as old-style scientists used to do, for he had read widely among modern psychologists and he knew that we have much to learn from the psychological insights of the World's Great Religions.

At his best, he was everything a psychologist could have desired him to be. Most of the time, however, it was a different story. He would lapse into an unproductive and solitary life. He took to wandering. He had a way of turning up at unlikely places such as a bakery in Cincinnati or a greenhouse in Memphis, where he might work for several weeks assaulted by the *déjà vus* of hot growing green plants.

A German physician once remarked that in the lives of people who suffer emotional illness he had noticed the presence of *Lücken* or gaps. As he studied the history of a particular patient he found whole sections missing, like a book with blank pages.

Most of this young man's life was a gap. The summer before, he had fallen into a fugue state and wandered around northern Virginia for three weeks, where he sat sunk in thought on old battlegrounds, hardly aware of his own name.

3.

A FEW INCIDENTS, MORE OR LESS AS HE RELATED THEM to his doctor, will illustrate the general nature of his nervous condition.

His trouble came from groups. Though he was as pleasant and engaging as could be, he had trouble doing what the group expected him to do. Though he did well at first, he did not for long fit in with the group. This was a serious business.

His doctor spoke a great deal about the group: what is your role in the group? And sure enough that was his trouble. He either disappeared into the group or turned his back on it.

Once when he was a boy his father and stepmother put him in a summer camp and went to Europe. Now here was one group, the campers, he had no use for at all. The games and the group activities were a pure sadness. One night as the tribe gathered around the council fire to sing songs and listen to the director tell stories and later ask everyone to stand up then and there and make a personal decision for Christ, he crept out of the circle of firelight and lit out down the road to Asheville, where he bought a bus ticket which carried him as far as his money, to Cedartown, Georgia, and hitchhiked the rest of the way home. There he lived with his aunts for several weeks and with the help of a Negro friend built a tree house in a tall sycamore. They spent the summer aloft, reading comics while the tree house tossed like a raft in a sea of dappled leaves.

Later there was trouble with another group. Like his father and grandfather and all other male forebears, save only those who came of age during the Civil War, he was sent up to Princeton University. But unlike them he funked it. He did very well in his studies, joined a good club, made the boxing team, but funked it nevertheless. It happened this way. One beautiful fall afternoon of his junior year, as he sat in his dormitory room, he was assaulted by stupefying *déjà vus*. An immense melancholy overtook him. It was, he knew, the very time of life one is supposed to treasure most, a time of questing and roistering, the prime and pride of youth. But what a sad business it was for him, this business of being a youth at college, one of many generations inhabiting the same old buildings, joshing with the same janitors who had joshed with the class of '37. He envied the janitors. How much better it would be to be a janitor and go home at night to a cozy cottage by the railroad tracks, have a wee drop with one's old woman, rather than sit here solemn-and-joyous, *feierlich*, in these honorable digs. On this afternoon, some of his classmates were standing just outside in the hall, a half dozen young Republicans from Bronxville and Plainfield and Shaker Heights. They too knew it was the best years of their lives and they were enjoying themselves accordingly. They had a certain Princeton way of talking, even the ones from Chicago and California, and a certain way of sticking their hands in their pockets and settling their chins in their throats. They were fine fellows, though, once you got used to their muted Yankee

friendliness. Certainly this was the best of times, he told himself with a groan. Yet, as he sat at his desk in Lower Pyne, by coincidence in the very room occupied by his grandfather in 1910, he said to himself: what is the matter with me? Here I am surrounded by good fellows and the spirit of Old Nassau and wishing instead I was lying in a ditch in Wyoming or sitting in a downtown park in Toledo. He thought about his father and grandfather. They had been very fond of their classmates, forming relationships which lasted through the years. One had only to mention the names, Wild Bill (each had a Wild Bill in his class), the Dutchman, Froggie Auchincloss the true frog the blue frog the unspeakably parvenu frog, and his father would smile and shake his head fondly and stick his hands in his pockets in a certain way and rock back on his heels in the style of the class of '37.

His classmates used words in a distinctive way. That year they called each other "old buddy" long before this expression was heard at Tulane or Utah State, and they used the words "hack" and "go" in an obscure but precise way: if you made a good run in touch football, somebody might say to you, "What a hack." At other times and out of a clear sky, even in the middle of a sentence, somebody might say to you, "Go!", a command not to be confused with the argot of disc jockeys but intended rather as an ironic summons to the speaker to go forth. It was a signal to him that he was straying ever so slightly from the accepted way of talking or acting, perhaps showing unseemly enthusiasm or conviction. "Go!" he would be told in the obscure but exact sense of being sent on a mission.

The fall afternoon glittered outside, a beautiful bitter *feierlich* Yankee afternoon. It was the day of the Harvard–Princeton game. He felt as if he had seen them all. The ghost of his grandfather howled around 203 Lower Pyne. He knew his grandfather occupied room 203 because he had seen the number written in the flyleaf of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, a dusty yellow book whose pages smelled like bread. After a moment the young Southerner, who still sat at his desk, tried to get up, but his limbs were weighed down by a strange inertia and he moved like a sloth. It was all he could do to keep from sinking to the floor. Walking around in old New Jersey was like walking on Saturn, where the force of gravity is eight times that of earth. At last, and despite himself, he uttered a loud groan, which startled him and momentarily silenced his classmates. "Hm," he muttered and peered at his eyeballs in the mirror.

"This is no place for me for another half hour, let alone two years."

Forty minutes later he sat on a bus, happy as a lark, bound for New York, where he lived quite contentedly at the Y.M.C.A.

The following summer, in deference to the wishes of his father, who hoped to arouse in him a desire to complete his education and particularly to awaken a fondness for the law, he worked as a clerk in the family law firm. There was no place to sit but the library, a dusty room with a large oval table of golden oak which also served as a conference room and a place to read wills and pass acts of sale. The fragrant summer air thrust in at the window and the calfskin of the law books crumbled and flew up his nostrils. Beyond the glittering street, the oaks of the residential section turned yellow with pollen, then a dark lustrous green, then whitened with dust. He contracted dreadful hay fever and sat all summer, elbows propped on the conference table, tears running down his cheeks. His nose swelled up like a big white grape and turned violet inside. Through the doorway, opened at such an angle that he might overhear without being seen, he heard his father speak with his clients, a murmurous sound compounded of grievance and redress. As the summer wore on, it became more and more difficult to distinguish the words from the sound, until finally they merged with the quarrels of the sparrows under the window sill and the towering sound of the cicadas that swelled up from the vacant lots and filled the white sky. The other members of the firm were cordial enough, but he could not get on any other footing with them save that of the terrific cordiality of their first greetings, to which he responded as best he could while holding his great baboon's nose in a handkerchief.

At the end of summer his father died. Though his death was sudden, people were less surprised than they might have been, since it was well known that in this particular family the men died young, after short tense honorable lives, and the women lived another fifty years, lived a brand new life complete with a second girlhood, outings with other girls, 35,000 hearty meals, and a long quarrelsome senescence.

For another month or so the young man, whose name was Williston Bibb Barrett or Will Barrett or Billy Barrett, sat rocking on the gallery with six women: one, his stepmother,

who was a good deal older than his father, was nice enough but somewhat abstracted, having a way of standing in the pantry for minutes at a time and whistling the tunes of the Hit Parade; three aunts; a cousin; and a lady who was called aunt but was not really kin—all but one over seventy and each as hale as a Turk. He alone ailed, suffering not only from hay fever but having fallen also into a long fit of melancholy and vacancy amounting almost to amnesia. It was at that time that he came near joining the ranks of the town recluses who sit dreaming behind their shutters thirty or forty years while the yard goes to jungle and the bugs drone away the long summer days.

Managing to revive himself, however, he concluded his father's affairs, sold the law library to the surviving members of the firm, reapportioned the rooms of the house in the fashion best calculated to minimize quarrels, had drawn in his favor a letter of credit in the amount of $17,500, his inheritance—and, again losing the initiative, sat rocking on the gallery with his aunts. He considered farming. But all that remained of Hampton, the family plantation, was two hundred acres of buckshot mud long since reclaimed by canebrakes.

As it turned out, his mind was made up for him, for he was drafted shortly thereafter. He put Hampton in the soil bank and served two years in the United States Army, where he took a large number of courses in electronics and from which he was honorably and medically discharged when he was discovered totally amnesic and wandering about the Shenandoah Valley between Cross Keys and Port Republic, sites of notable victories of General Stonewall Jackson.

Once again he found himself sitting in the television room of the Y.M.C.A. in Manhattan, a room done in Spanish colonial motif with exposed yellow beams and furniture of oxidized metal.

As he surveyed his resources and made allowance for his shortcomings—for he was, in some respects, a cool-headed and objective-minded young man—it seemed to him that two courses of action were called for. There was something the matter with him and it should be attended to. Treatment would take money and therefore he needed a job. Transferring his inheritance to a savings account at the Chemical Bank New York Trust Company, Columbus Circle branch, he engaged a psychiatrist, whom he consulted for fifty-five minutes a day, five days a week, for the following five years, at an approxi-