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Tropic of Capricorn

HENRY MILLER

author of the sensational bestseller

Tropic of Cancer

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**Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*:
The great companion volume to *Tropic of Cancer*.**

This is an astonishing account of what it means to grow to manhood in modern America. Nothing like it, nothing even remotely approaching it, has ever been published in this country. Long banned because of its unprecedented frankness about sex, it gives complete expression to its author's determination to face everything in life without evasion, and to accept everything without reservation.

First published in Paris in 1939, five years after *Tropic of Cancer*, *Capricorn* takes the fictional autobiography of one of America's greatest writers back to earlier days, before the Paris vagabondage that produced *Cancer*. Here Henry Miller writes about the youthful years in Brooklyn, the job as employment manager for the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company," the first loves and the riotous sex episodes of the twenties. He gives us the New York he knew before he went to Paris to become a writer, and peoples it with those fabulous Miller characters, riotously funny, shockingly coarse, totally different from all the characters of polite literature and thus amazingly true and real.

But most of all he writes about himself. No other book by Henry Miller tells us so much about what went on within him that turned him into one of the most remarkable people and writers of this or any age.

HENRY MILLER

**Tropic
of
Capricorn**

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TO HER

FOREWORD

to

HISTORIA CALAMITATUM

(the story of my misfortunes)

Often the hearts of men and women are stirred, as likewise they are soothed in their sorrows, more by example than by words. And therefore, because I too have known some consolation from speech had with one who was a witness thereof, am I now minded to write of the sufferings which have sprung out of my misfortunes, for the eyes of one who, though absent, is of himself ever a consoler. This I do so that, in comparing your sorrows with mine, you may discover that yours are in truth nought, or at the most but of small account, and so shall you come to bear them more easily.

PETER ABELARD

ON THE OVARIAN TROLLEY

Once you have given up the ghost, everything follows with dead certainty, even in the midst of chaos. From the beginning it was never anything but chaos: it was a fluid which enveloped me, which I breathed in through the gills. In the substrata, where the moon shone steady and opaque, it was smooth and fecundating; above it was a jangle and a discord. In everything I quickly saw the opposite, the contradiction, and between the real and the unreal the irony, the paradox. I was my own worst enemy. There was nothing I wished to do which I could just as well not do. Even as a child, when I lacked for nothing, I wanted to die: I wanted to surrender because I saw no sense in struggling. I felt that nothing would be proved, substantiated, added or subtracted by continuing an existence which I had not asked for. Everybody around me was a failure, or if not a failure, ridiculous. Especially the successful ones. The successful ones bored me to tears. I was sympathetic to a fault, but it was not sympathy that made me so. It was a purely negative quality, a weakness which blossomed at the mere sight of human misery. I never helped any one expecting that it would do any good; I helped because I was helpless to do otherwise. To want to change the condition of affairs seemed futile to me; nothing would be altered, I was convinced, except by a change of heart, and who could change the hearts of men? Now and then a friend was converted: it was something to make me puke. I had no more need of God than He had of me, and if there were one, I often said to myself, I would meet Him calmly and spit in His face.

What was most annoying was that at first blush people

usually took me to be good, to be kind, generous, loyal, faithful. Perhaps I did possess these virtues but if so it was because I was indifferent: I could afford to be good, kind, generous, loyal, and so forth, since I was free of envy. Envy was the one thing I was never a victim of. I have never envied anybody or anything. On the contrary, I have only felt pity for everybody and everything.

From the very beginning I must have trained myself not to want anything too badly. From the very beginning I was independent, in a false way. I had need of nobody because I wanted to be free, free to do and to give only as my whims dictated. The moment anything was expected or demanded of me I balked. That was the form my independence took. I was corrupt, in other words, corrupt from the start. It's as though my mother fed me a poison, and though I was weaned young the poison never left my system. Even when she weaned me it seemed that I was completely indifferent; most children rebel, or make a pretense of rebelling, but I didn't give a damn. I was a philosopher when still in swaddling clothes. I was against life, on principle. What principle? The principle of futility. Everybody around me was struggling. I myself never made an effort. If I appeared to be making an effort it was only to please someone else; at bottom I didn't give a rap. And if you can tell me why this should have been so I will deny it, because I was born with a cursed streak in me and nothing can eliminate it. I heard later, when I had grown up, that they had a hell of a time bringing me out of the womb. I can understand that perfectly. Why budge? Why come out of a nice warm place, a cosy retreat in which everything is offered you gratis? The earliest remembrance I have is of the cold, the snow and ice in the gutter, the frost on the window panes, the chill of the sweaty green walls in the kitchen. Why do people live in outlandish climates in the *temperate* zones, as they are miscalled? Because people are naturally idiots, naturally sluggards, naturally cowards. Until I was about ten years old I never realized that

there were "warm" countries, places where you didn't have to sweat for a living, nor shiver and pretend that it was tonic and exhilarating. Wherever there is cold there are people who work themselves to the bone and when they produce young they preach to the young the gospel of work—which is nothing, at bottom, but the doctrine of inertia. My people were entirely Nordic, which is to say *idiots*. Every wrong idea which has ever been expounded was theirs. Among them was the doctrine of cleanliness, to say nothing of righteousness. They were painfully clean. But inwardly they stank. Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul; never once did they dream of taking a blind leap into the dark. After dinner the dishes were promptly washed and put in the closet; after the paper was read it was neatly folded and laid away on a shelf; after the clothes were washed they were ironed and folded and then tucked away in the drawers. Everything was for tomorrow, but tomorrow never came. The present was only a bridge and on this bridge they are still groaning, as the world groans, and not one idiot ever thinks of blowing up the bridge.

In my bitterness I often search for reasons to condemn them, the better to condemn myself. For I am like them too, in many ways. For a long while I thought I had escaped, but as time goes on I see that I am no better, that I am even a little worse, because I saw more clearly than they ever did and yet remained powerless to alter my life. As I look back on my life it seems to me that I never did anything of my own volition but always through the pressure of others. People often think of me as an adventurous fellow; nothing could be farther from the truth. My adventures were always adventitious, always thrust on me, always endured rather than undertaken. I am of the very essence of that proud, boastful Nordic people who have never had the least sense of adventure but who nevertheless have scoured the earth, turned it upside down, scattering relics and ruins everywhere. Restless spirits, but not adventurous ones. Agonizing spirits,

incapable of living in the present. Disgraceful cowards, all of them, myself included. For there is only one great adventure and that is inward toward the self, and for that, time nor space nor even deeds matter.

Once every few years I was on the verge of making this discovery, but in characteristic fashion I always managed to dodge the issue. If I try to think of a good excuse I can think only of the environment, of the streets I knew and the people who inhabited them. I can think of no street in America, or of people inhabiting such a street, capable of leading one on toward the discovery of the self. I have walked the streets in many countries of the world but nowhere have I felt so degraded and humiliated as in America. I think of all the streets in America combined as forming a huge cesspool, a cesspool of the spirit in which everything is sucked down and drained away to everlasting shit. Over this cesspool the spirit of work weaves a magic wand; palaces and factories spring up side by side, and munition plants and chemical works and steel mills and sanatoriums and prisons and insane asylums. The whole continent is a nightmare producing the greatest misery of the greatest number. I was one, a single entity in the midst of the greatest jamboree of wealth and happiness (statistical wealth, statistical happiness) but I never met a man who was truly wealthy or truly happy. At least I knew that I was unhappy, unwealthy, out of whack and out of step. That was my only solace, my only joy. But it was hardly enough. It would have been better for my peace of mind, for my soul, if I had expressed my rebellion openly, if I had gone to jail for it, if I had rotted there and died. It would have been better if, like the mad Czolgosz, I had shot some good President McKinley, some gentle, insignificant soul like that who had never done anyone the least harm. Because in the bottom of my heart there was murder: I wanted to see America destroyed, razed from top to bottom. I wanted to see this happen purely out of vengeance, as atonement for the crimes that were committed against me and

against others like me who have never been able to lift their voices and express their hatred, their rebellion, their legitimate blood lust.

I was the evil product of an evil soil. If the self were not imperishable, the "I" I write about would have been destroyed long ago. To some this may seem like an invention, but whatever I imagine to have happened did actually happen, *at least to me*. History may deny it, since I have played no part in the history of my people, but even if everything I say is wrong, is prejudiced, spiteful, malevolent, even if I am a liar and a poisoner, it is nevertheless the truth and it will have to be swallowed.

As to what happened . . .

Everything that happens, when it has significance, is in the nature of a contradiction. Until the one for whom this is written came along I imagined that somewhere outside, in life, as they say, lay the solution to all things. I thought, when I came upon her, that I was seizing hold of life, seizing hold of something which I could bite into. Instead I lost hold of life completely. I reached out for something to attach myself to—and I found nothing. But in reaching out, in the effort to grasp, to attach myself, left high and dry as I was, I nevertheless found something I had not looked for—*myself*. I found that what I had desired all my life was not to live—if what others are doing is called living—but to express myself. I realized that I had never the least interest in living, but only in this which I am doing now, something which is parallel to life, of it at the same time, and beyond it. What is true interests me scarcely at all, nor even what is real; only that interests me which I imagine to be, that which I had stifled every day in order to live. Whether I die today or tomorrow is of no importance to me, never has been, but that today even, after years of effort, I cannot say what I think and feel—that bothers me, that rankles. From childhood on I can see myself on the track of this specter, en-

joying nothing, desiring nothing but this power, this ability. Everything else is a lie—everything I ever did or said which did not bear upon this. And that is pretty much the greater part of my life.

I was a contradiction in essence, as they say. People took me to be serious and high-minded, or to be gay and reckless, or to be sincere and earnest, or to be negligent and carefree. I was all these things at once—and beyond that I was something else, something which no one suspected, least of all myself. As a boy of six or seven I used to sit at my grandfather's workbench and read to him while he sewed. I remember him vividly in those moments when, pressing the hot iron against the seam of a coat, he would stand with one hand over the other and look out of the window dreamily. I remember the expression on his face, as he stood there dreaming, better than the contents of the books I read, better than the conversations we had or the games which I played in the street. I used to wonder what he was dreaming of, what it was that drew him out of himself. I hadn't learned yet how to dream wide-awake. I was always lucid, in the moment, and all of a piece. His daydreaming fascinated me. I knew that he had no connection with what he was doing, not the least thought for any of us, that he was alone and being alone he was free. I was never alone, least of all when I was by myself. Always, it seems to me, I was accompanied: I was like a little crumb of a big cheese, which was the world, I suppose, though I never stopped to think about it. But I know I never existed separately, never thought myself the big cheese, as it were. So that even when I had reason to be miserable, to complain, to weep, I had the illusion of participating in a common, a universal misery. When I wept the whole world was weeping—so I imagined. I wept very seldom. Mostly I was happy, I was laughing, I was having a good time. I had a good time because, as I said before, I really didn't give a fuck about anything. If things were wrong

with me they were wrong everywhere, I was convinced of it. And things were wrong usually only when one cared too much. That impressed itself on me very early in life. For example, I remember the case of my young friend Jack Lawson. For a whole year he lay in bed, suffering the worst agonies. He was my best friend, so people said at any rate. Well, at first I was probably sorry for him and perhaps now and then I called at his house to inquire about him; but after a month or two had elapsed I grew quite callous about his suffering. I said to myself he ought to die and the sooner he dies the better it will be, and having thought thus I acted accordingly: that is to say, I promptly forgot about him, abandoned him to his fate. I was only about twelve years old at the time and I remember being proud of my decision. I remember the funeral too—what a disgraceful affair it was. There they were, friends and relatives all congregated about the bier and all of them bawling like sick monkeys. The mother especially gave me a pain in the ass. She was such a rare, spiritual creature, a Christian Scientist, I believe, and though she didn't believe in disease and didn't believe in death either, she raised such a stink that Christ himself would have risen from the grave. But not her beloved Jack! No, Jack lay there cold as ice and rigid and unbeckonable. He was dead and there were no two ways about it. I knew it and I was glad of it. I didn't waste any tears over it. I couldn't say that he was better off because after all the "he" had vanished. *He* was gone and with him the sufferings he had endured and the suffering he had unwittingly inflicted on others. Amen!, I said to myself, and with that, being slightly hysterical, I let a loud fart—right beside the coffin.

This caring too much—I remember that it only developed with me about the time I first fell in love. And even then I didn't care enough. If I had really cared I wouldn't be here now writing about it: I'd have died of a broken heart, or I'd have swung for it. It was a bad experience because it taught me how to live a lie. It

taught me to smile when I didn't want to smile, to work when I didn't believe in work, to live when I had no reason to go on living. Even when I had forgotten her I still retained the trick of doing what I didn't believe in.

It was all chaos from the beginning, as I have said. But sometimes I got so close to the center, to the very heart of the confusion, that it's a wonder things didn't explode around me.

It is customary to blame everything on the war. I say the war had nothing to do with me, with my life. At a time when others were getting themselves comfortable berths I was taking one miserable job after another, and never enough in it to keep body and soul together. Almost as quickly as I was hired I was fired. I had plenty of intelligence but I inspired distrust. Wherever I went I fomented discord—not because I was idealistic but because I was like a searchlight exposing the stupidity and ~~futility of everything~~. Besides, I wasn't a good ass licker. That marked me, no doubt. People could tell at once when I asked for a job that I really didn't give a damn whether I got it or not. And of course I generally didn't get it. But after a time the mere looking for a job became an activity, a pastime, so to speak. I would go in and ask for most anything. It was a way of killing time—no worse, as far as I could see, than work itself. I was my own boss and I had my own hours, but unlike other bosses I entrained only my own ruin, my own bankruptcy. I was not a corporation or a trust or a state or a federation or a polity of nations—I was more like God, if anything.

This went on from about the middle of the war until . . . well, until one day I was trapped. Finally the day came when I did desperately want a job. I needed it. Not having another minute to lose, I decided that I would take the last job on earth, that of messenger boy. I walked into the employment bureau of the telegraph company—the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America—toward the close of the day, prepared to go through with it. I had just come from the public library and I had