

Henderson

the   

Rain King



Saul Bellow

PENGUIN BOOKS

HENDERSON THE RAIN KING

Saul Bellow was born in Lachine, Quebec, in 1915 and raised in Chicago. He attended the University of Chicago, received his bachelor's degree from Northwestern University in 1937 with honors in sociology and anthropology, did graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, and served in the Merchant Marine during World War II. His first novel, *Dangling Man*, appeared in 1944, and his second, *The Victim*, was published in 1947. In 1948 he was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship and spent two years in Europe, where he began *The Adventures of Augie March*. That book, as well as two later novels, *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), won the National Book Award for fiction. Another novel, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Mr. Bellow is also the author of the play *The Last Analysis* and of three one-act plays, and he has contributed both fiction and criticism to many leading general and literary magazines, including *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *Esquire*. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict he served as a war correspondent for *Newsday*. He has taught at Princeton University, Bard College, and the University of Minnesota and is a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

In 1965 Mr. Bellow won the International Literary Prize for *Herzog*, becoming the prize's first American recipient. In January 1968 the Republic of France awarded him the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres, the highest literary distinction given by that nation to noncitizens. In October 1976 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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I What made me take this trip to Africa?

There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated.

When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins—my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos.

However, the world which I thought so mighty an oppressor has removed its wrath from me. But if I am to make sense to you people and explain why I went to Africa I must face up to the facts. I might as well start with the money. I am rich. From my old man I inherited three million dollars after taxes, but I thought myself a bum and had my reasons, the main reason being that I behaved like a bum. But privately when things got very bad I often looked into books to see whether I could find some helpful words, and one day I read, "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required." This impressed me so deeply that I went around saying it to myself. But then I forgot which book it was. It was one of thousands left by my father, who had also written a number of them. And I searched through dozens of volumes but all that turned up was money, for my father had used currency for bookmarks—whatever he happened to

have in his pockets—fives, tens, or twenties. Some of the discontinued bills of thirty years ago turned up, the big yellowbacks. For old times' sake I was glad to see them and locking the library door to keep out the children I spent the afternoon on a ladder shaking out books and the money spun to the floor. But I never found that statement about forgiveness.

Next order of business: I am a graduate of an Ivy League university—I see no reason to embarrass my alma mater by naming her. If I hadn't been a Henderson and my father's son, they would have thrown me out. At birth I weighed fourteen pounds, and it was a tough delivery. Then I grew up. Six feet four inches tall. Two hundred and thirty pounds. An enormous head, rugged, with hair like Persian lambs' fur. Suspicious eyes, usually narrowed. Blustering ways. A great nose. I was one of three children and the only survivor. It took all my father's charity to forgive me and I don't think he ever made it altogether. When it came time to marry I tried to please him and chose a girl of our own social class. A remarkable person, handsome, tall, elegant, sinewy, with long arms and golden hair, private, fertile, and quiet. None of her family can quarrel with me if I add that she is a schizophrenic, for she certainly is that. I, too, am considered crazy, and with good reason—moody, rough, tyrannical, and probably mad. To go by the ages of the kids, we were married for about twenty years. There are Edward, Ricey, Alice, and two more—Christ, I've got plenty of children. God bless the whole bunch of them.

In my own way I worked very hard. Violent suffering is labor, and often I was drunk before lunch. Soon after I came back from the war (I was too old for combat duty but nothing could keep me from it; I went down to Washington and pressured people until I was allowed to join the fight), Frances and I were divorced. This happened after V-E Day. Or was it so soon? No, it must have been in 1948. Anyway, she's now in Switzerland and has one of our kids with her. What she wants with a child I can't tell you, but she has one, and that's all right. I wish her well.

I was delighted with the divorce. It offered me a new start in

life. I had a new wife already picked out and we were soon married. My second wife is called Lily (maiden name, Simmons). We have twin boys.

Now I feel the disorderly rush—I gave Lily a terrible time, worse than Frances. Frances was withdrawn, which protected her, but Lily caught it. Maybe a change for the better threw me; I was adjusted to a bad life. Whenever Frances didn't like what I was doing, and that was often, she turned away from me. She was like Shelley's moon, wandering companionless. Not so Lily; and I raved at her in public and swore at her in private. I got into brawls in the country saloons near my farm and the troopers locked me up. I offered to take them all on, and they would have worked me over if I hadn't been so prominent in the county. Lily came and bailed me out. Then I had a fight with the vet over one of my pigs, and another with the driver of a snowplow on US 7 when he tried to force me off the road. Then about two years ago I fell off a tractor while drunk and ran myself over and broke my leg. For months I was on crutches, hitting everyone who crossed my path, man or beast, and giving Lily hell. With the bulk of a football player and the color of a gipsy, swearing and crying out and showing my teeth and shaking my head—no wonder people got out of my way. But this wasn't all.

Lily is, for instance, entertaining ladies and I come in with my filthy plaster cast, in sweat socks; I am wearing a red velvet dressing gown which I bought at Sulka's in Paris in a mood of celebration when Frances said she wanted a divorce. In addition I have on a red wool hunting cap. And I wipe my nose and mustache on my fingers and then shake hands with the guests, saying, "I'm Mr. Henderson, how do you do?" And I go to Lily and shake her hand, too, as if she were merely another lady guest, a stranger like the rest. And I say, "How do you do?" I imagine the ladies are telling themselves, "He doesn't know her. In his mind he's still married to the first. Isn't that awful?" This imaginary fidelity thrills them.

But they are all wrong. As Lily knows, it was done on purpose,

and when we're alone she cries out to me, "Gene, what's the big idea? What are you trying to do?"

All belted up with the red braid cord, I stand up to her in my velvet bathrobe, sticking out behind, and the foot-shaped cast scraping hard on the floor, and I wag my head and say, "Tchu-tchu-tchu!"

Because when I was brought home from the hospital in this same bloody heavy cast, I heard her saying on the telephone, "It was just another one of his accidents. He has them all the time but oh, he's so strong. He's unkillable." Unkillable! How do you like that! It made me very bitter.

Now maybe Lily said this jokingly. She loves to joke on the telephone. She is a large, lively woman. Her face is sweet, and her character mostly is consistent with it. We've had some pretty good times, too. And, come to think of it, some of the very best occurred during her pregnancy, when it was far advanced. Before we went to sleep, I would rub her belly with baby oil to counteract the stretch marks. Her nipples had turned from pink to glowing brown, and the children moved inside her belly and changed the round shape.

I rubbed lightly and with greatest care lest my big thick fingers do the slightest harm. And then before I put out the light I wiped my fingers on my hair and Lily and I kissed good night, and in the scent of the baby oil we went to sleep.

But later we were at war again, and when I heard her say I was unkillable I put an antagonistic interpretation on it, even though I knew better. No, I treated her like a stranger before the guests because I didn't like to see her behave and carry on like the lady of the house; because I, the sole heir of this famous name and estate, am a bum, and she is not a lady but merely my wife—merely my wife.

As the winters seemed to make me worse, she decided that we should go to a resort hotel on the Gulf, where I could do some fishing. A thoughtful friend had given each of the little twins a slingshot made of plywood, and one of these slingshots I found

The Rain King

7

in my suitcase as I was unpacking, and I took to shooting with it. I gave up fishing and sat on the beach shooting stones at bottles. So that people might say, "Do you see that great big fellow with the enormous nose and the mustache? Well, his great-grandfather was Secretary of State, his great-uncles were ambassadors to England and France, and his father was the famous scholar Willard Henderson who wrote that book on the Albigensians, a friend of William James and Henry Adams." Didn't they say this? You bet they did. There I was at that resort with my sweet-faced anxious second wife who was only a little under six feet herself, and our twin boys. In the dining room I was putting bourbon in my morning coffee from a big flask and on the beach I was smashing bottles. The guests complained to the manager about the broken glass and the manager took it up with Lily; me they weren't willing to confront. An elegant establishment, they accept no Jews, and then they get me, E. H. Henderson. The other kids stopped playing with our twins, while the wives avoided Lily.

Lily tried to reason with me. We were in our suite, and I was in swimming trunks, and she opened the discussion on the sling-shot and the broken glass and my attitude toward the other guests. Now Lily is a very intelligent woman. She doesn't scold, but she does moralize; she is very much given to this, and when it happens she turns white and starts to speak under her breath. The reason is not that she is afraid of me, but that it starts some crisis in her own mind.

But as it got her nowhere to discuss it with me she started to cry, and when I saw tears I lost my head and yelled, "I'm going to blow my brains out! I'm shooting myself. I didn't forget to pack the pistol. I've got it on me now."

"Oh, Gene!" she cried, and covered up her face and ran away. I'll tell you why.

II Because her father had committed suicide in that same way, with a pistol.

One of the bonds between Lily and me is that we both suffer with our teeth. She is twenty years my junior but we wear bridges, each of us. Mine are at the sides, hers are in front. She has lost the four upper incisors. It happened while she was still in high school, out playing golf with her father, whom she adored. The poor old guy was a lush and far too drunk to be out on a golf course that day. Without looking or giving warning, he drove from the first tee and on the backswing struck his daughter. It always kills me to think of that cursed hot July golf course, and this drunk from the plumbing supply business, and the girl of fifteen bleeding. Damn these weak drunks! Damn these unsteady men! I can't stand these clowns who go out in public as soon as they get swacked to show how broken-hearted they are. But Lily would never hear a single word against him and wept for him sooner than for herself. She carries his photo in her wallet.

Personally I never knew the old guy. When we met he had already been dead for ten or twelve years. Soon after he died she married a man from Baltimore, of pretty good standing, I have been told—though come to think of it it was Lily herself who told me. However, they could not become adjusted and during the war she got her divorce (I was then fighting in Italy). Anyway, when we met she was at home again, living with her mother. The family is from Danbury, the hatters' capital. It happened that Frances and I went to a party in Danbury one winter night, and Frances was only half willing because she was in correspondence

with some intellectual or other over in Europe. Frances is a very deep reader and an intense letter-writer and a heavy smoker, and when she got on one of her kicks of philosophy or something I would see very little of her. I'd know she was up in her room smoking Sobranie cigarettes and coughing and making notes, working things out. Well, she was in one of these mental crises when we went to that party, and in the middle of it she recalled something she had to do at once and so she took the car and left, forgetting all about me. That night I had gotten mixed up too, and was the only man there in black tie. Midnight blue. I must have been the first fellow in that part of the state with a blue tuxedo. It felt as though I were wearing a whole acre of this blue cloth, while Lily, to whom I had been introduced about ten minutes before, had on a red and green Christmas-striped dress and we were talking.

When she saw what had happened, Lily offered me a ride, and I said, "Okay." We trod the snow out to her car.

It was a sparkling night and the snow was ringing. She was parked on a hill about three hundred yards long and smooth as iron. As soon as she drove away from the curb the car went into a skid and she lost her head and screamed, "Eugene!" She threw her arms about me. There was no other soul on that hill or on the shoveled walks, nor, so far as I could see, in the entire neighborhood. The car turned completely around. Her bare arms came out of the short fur sleeves and held my head while her large eyes watched through the windshield and the car went over the ice and hoarfrost. It was not even in gear and I reached the key and switched off the ignition. We slid into a snowdrift, but not far, and I took the wheel from her. The moonlight was very keen.

"How did you know my name?" I said, and she said, "Why, everybody knows you are Eugene Henderson."

After we had spoken some more she said to me, "You ought to divorce your wife."

I said to her, "What are you talking about? Is that a thing to say? Besides, I'm old enough to be your father."

We didn't meet again until the summer. This time she was shopping and was wearing a hat and a white piqué dress, with white shoes. It looked like rain and she didn't want to be caught in those clothes (which I noticed were soiled already) and she asked me for a lift. I had been in Danbury buying some lumber for the barn and the station wagon was loaded with it. Lily started to direct me to her house and lost the way in her nervousness; she was very beautiful, but wildly nervous. It was sultry and then it began to rain. She told me to take a right turn and that brought us to a gray cyclone fence around the quarry filled with water—a dead-end street. The air had grown so dark that the mesh of the fence looked white. Lily began to cry out, "Oh, turn around, please! Oh, quick, turn around! I can't remember the streets and I have to go home."

Finally we got there, a small house filled with the odor of closed rooms in hot weather, just as the storm was beginning.

"My mother is playing bridge," said Lily. "I have to phone her and tell her not to come home. There is a phone in my bedroom." So we went up. There was nothing loose or promiscuous about Lily, I assure you. When she took off her clothes she started to speak out in a trembling voice, "I love you! I love you!" And I said to myself as we embraced, "Oh, how can she love you—you—*you!*" There was a huge knot of thunder, and then a burst of rain on the streets, trees, roofs, screens, and lightning as well. Everything got filled and blinded. But a warm odor like fresh baking arose from her as we lay in her sheets which were darkened by the warm darkness of the storm. From start to finish she had not stopped saying "I love you!" Thus we lay quietly, and the early hours of the evening began without the sun's returning.

Her mother was waiting in the living room. I didn't care too much for that. Lily had phoned her and said, "Don't come home for a while," and therefore her mother had immediately left the bridge party through one of the worst summer storms in many years. No, I didn't like it. Not that the old lady scared me, but I read the signs. Lily had made sure she would be found out. I was

the first down the stairs and saw a light beside the chesterfield. And when I got to the foot of the stairs, face to face with her, I said, "Henderson's the name." Her mother was a stout pretty woman, made up for the bridge party in a china-doll face. She wore a hat, and had a patent-leather pocketbook on her stout knees when she sat down. I realized that she was mentally listing accounts against Lily. "In my own house. With a married man." And so on. Indifferent, I sat in the living room, unshaved, my lumber in the station wagon outside. Lily's odor, that baking odor, must have been noticeable about me. And Lily, extremely beautiful, came down the stairs to show her mama what she had accomplished. Acting oblivious, I kept my big boots apart on the carpet and frisked my mustache once in a while. Between them I sensed the important presence of Simmons, Lily's papa, the plumbing supply wholesaler who had committed suicide. In fact he had killed himself in the bedroom adjoining Lily's, the master bedroom. Lily blamed her mother for her father's death. And what was I, the instrument of her anger? "Oh no, pal," I said to myself, "this is not for you. Be no party to this."

It looked as though the mother had decided to behave well. She was going to be big about it and beat Lily at this game. Perhaps it was natural. Anyway, she was highly ladylike to me, but there came a moment when she couldn't check herself, and she said, "I have met your son."

"Oh yes, a slender fellow? Edward? He drives a red M G. You see him around Danbury sometimes."

Presently I left, saying to Lily, "You're a fine-looking big girl, but you oughtn't to have done that to your mother."

The stout old lady was sitting there on the sofa with her hands clasped and her eyes making a continuous line under her brows from tears or vexation.

"Good-by, Eugene," said Lily.

"So long, Miss Simmons," I said.

We didn't part friends exactly.

Nevertheless we soon met again, but in New York City, for

Lily had separated from her mother, quitted Danbury, and had a cold-water flat on Hudson Street where the drunks hid from the weather on the staircase. I came, a great weight, a huge shadow on those stairs, with my face full of country color and booze, and yellow pigskin gloves on my hands, and a ceaseless voice in my heart that said, *I want, I want, I want, oh, I want—yes, go on*, I said to myself, *Strike, strike, strike, strike!* And I kept going on the staircase in my thick padded coat, in pigskin gloves and pigskin shoes, a pigskin wallet in my pocket, seething with lust and seething with trouble, and realizing how my gaze glittered up to the top banister where Lily had opened the door and was waiting. Her face was round, white, and full, her eyes clear and narrowed.

"Hell! How can you live in this stinking joint? It stinks here," I said. The building had hall toilets; the chain pulls had turned green and there were panes of plum-colored glass in the doors.

She was a friend of the slum people, the old and the mothers in particular. She said she understood why they had television sets though on relief, and she let them keep their milk and butter in her refrigerator and filled out their social-security forms for them. I think she felt she did them good and showed these immigrants and Italians how nice an American could be. However, she genuinely tried to help them and ran around with her impulsive looks and said a lot of disconnected things.

The odors of this building clutched at your face, and I was coming up the stairs and said, "Whew, I am out of condition!"

We went into her apartment on the top floor. It was dirty, too, but there was light in it at least. We sat down to talk and Lily said to me, "Are you going to waste the rest of your life?"

With Frances the case was hopeless. Only once after I came back from the Army did anything of a personal nature take place between us, and after that it was no soap, so I let her be, more or less. Except that one morning in the kitchen we had a conversation that set us apart for good and all. Just a few words. They went like this:

"And what would you like to do now?"

(I was then losing interest in the farm.)

"I wonder," I said, "if it's too late for me to become a doctor— if I could enter medical school."

Frances opened her mouth, usually so sober, not to say dismal and straight, and laughed at me; and as she laughed I saw nothing but her dark open mouth, and not even teeth, which is certainly strange, for she has teeth, white ones. What had happened to them?

"Okay, okay, okay," I said.

Thus I realized that Lily was perfectly right about Frances. Nevertheless the rest did not follow.

"I need to have a child. I can't wait much longer," said Lily. "In a few years I'll be thirty."

"Am I responsible?" I said. "What's the matter with you?"

"You and I have got to be together," she said.

"Who says so?"

"We'll die if we're not," she said.

A year or so went by, and she failed to convince me. I didn't believe the thing could be so simple. So she suddenly married a man from New Jersey, a fellow named Hazard, a broker. Come to think of it she had spoken of him a few times, but I thought it was only more of her blackmail. Because she was a blackmailer. Anyway, she married him. This was her second marriage. Then I took Frances and the two girls and went to Europe, to France, for a year.

Several years of my boyhood were spent in the south of the country, near the town of Albi, where my old man was busy with his research. Fifty years ago I used to taunt a kid across the way, "François, oh François, ta soeur est constipée." My father was a big man, solid and clean. His long underwear was made of Irish linen and his hatboxes were lined with red velvet and he ordered his shoes from England and his gloves from Vitale Milano, Rome. He played pretty well on the violin. My mother used to write poems in the brick cathedral of Albi. She had a favorite story

about a lady from Paris who was very affected. They met in a narrow doorway of the church and the lady said, "Voulez-vous que je passe?" So my mother said, "Passassassez, Madame." She told everyone this joke and for many years would sometimes laugh and say in a whisper, "Passassassez." Gone, those times. Closed, sealed, and gone.

But Frances and I didn't go to Albi with the children. She was attending the Collège de France, where all the philosophers were. Apartments were hard to get but I rented a good one from a Russian prince. De Vogüé mentions his grandfather, who was minister under Nicolas I. He was a tall, gentle creature; his wife was Spanish and his Spanish mother-in-law, Señora Guirlandes, rode him continually. The guy was suffering from her. His wife and kids lived with the old woman while he moved into the maid's room in the attic. About three million bucks, I have. I suppose I might have done something to help him. But at this time my heart was consumed with the demand I have mentioned—I want, I want! Poor prince, upstairs! His children were sick, and he said to me that if his condition didn't improve he would throw himself out of the window.

I said, "Don't be nuts, Prince."

Guiltily, I lived in his apartment, slept in his bed, and bathed in his bath twice a day. Instead of helping, those two hot baths only aggravated my melancholy. After Frances laughed at my dream of a medical career I never discussed another thing with her. Around and around the city of Paris I walked every day; all the way to the Gobelins factories and the Père Lachaise Cemetery and St. Cloud I went on foot. The only person who considered what my life was like was Lily, now Lily Hazard. At the American Express I received a note from her written on one of the wedding announcements long after the date of the marriage. I was bursting with trouble, and as there are a lot of whores who cruise that neighborhood near the Madeleine, I looked some of them over, but this terrible repetition within—I want, I want!—was not stopped by any face I saw. I saw quite some faces.