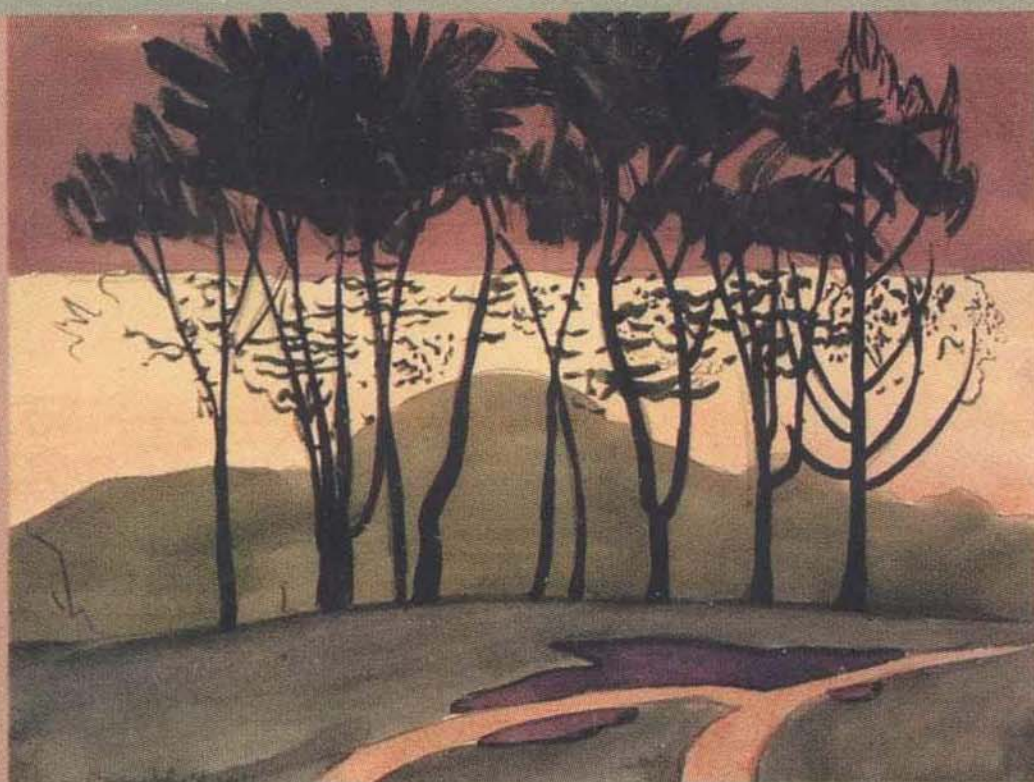


# WALKER PERCY

Author of **THE THANATOS SYNDROME**

# LOVE IN THE RUINS



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# **LOVE IN THE RUINS**

**The Adventures of a Bad Catholic  
at a Time Near the End of the  
World**

**Walker Percy**

**IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK**



**Ivy Books**

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*For Shelby Foote*



**JULY FOURTH**







## IN A PINE GROVE ON THE SOUTHWEST CUSP OF THE INTERSTATE CLOVERLEAF



5 P.M. / JULY 4

**N**OW IN THESE DREAD LATTER DAYS OF THE OLD VIOLENT beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?

Two more hours should tell the story. One way or the other. Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur, or it won't and I'm crazy. In either case the outlook is not so good.

Here I sit, in any case, against a young pine, broken out in hives and waiting for the end of the world. Safe here for the moment though, flanks protected by a rise of ground on the left and an approach ramp on the right. The carbine lies across my lap.

Just below the cloverleaf, in the ruined motel, the three girls are waiting for me.

Undoubtedly something is about to happen.

Or is it that something has stopped happening?

Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the roller-coaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes, carries us out and up toward the brink from that felicitous and privileged siding where even unbelievers admitted that if it was not God who blessed the U.S.A., then at least some great good luck had befallen us, and that now the blessing or the luck is over, the machinery clanks, the chain catches hold, and the cars jerk forward?

\* \* \*

It is still hot as midafternoon. The sky is a clear rinsed cobalt after the rain. Wet pine growth reflects the sunlight like steel knitting needles. The grove steams and smells of turpentine. Far away the thunderhead, traveling fast, humps over on the horizon like a troll. Directly above, a hawk balances on a column of air rising from the concrete geometry of the clover-leaf. Not a breath stirs.

The young pine I am sitting against has a tumor and is bowed to fit my back. I am sweating and broken out in hives from drinking gin fizzes but otherwise quite comfortable. This spot, on the lower reaches of the southwest cusp, was chosen carefully. From it I command three directions of the interstates and by leaning over the lip of the culvert can look through to the fourth, eastern approach.

Traffic is light, an occasional milk tanker and produce trailer.

The hawk slants off in a long flat glide toward the swamp. From the angle of its wings one can tell it is a marsh hawk.

One of the roof tiles of the motel falls and breaks on the concrete.

The orange roof of the Howard Johnson motel reminds me of the three girls in rooms 203, 204, and 205. Thoughts of the girls and the coming catastrophe cause my scalp to tingle with a peculiar emotion. If the catastrophe occurs, I stand a good chance, knowing what I know about it, of surviving it. So do the girls. Surviving with one girl who likes you is not such a bad prospect. But surviving with three girls, all of whom like you and each of whom detests the other two, is both horrible and pleasant, certainly enough to make one's scalp tingle with a peculiar emotion.

Another reason for the prickling sensation is that the hives are worse. Fiery wheals bloom on my neck. My scalp feels airy and quilted and now and then pops a hair root like a dirigible popping its hawsers one by one.

These are bad times.

Principalities and powers are everywhere victorious. Wick-edness flourishes in high places.

There is a clearer and more present danger, however. For I have reason to believe that within the next two hours an unprecedented fallout of noxious particles will settle hereabouts and perhaps in other places as well. It is a catastrophe whose

cause and effects—and prevention—are known only to me. The effects of the evil particles are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself. If a man is already prone to anger, he'll go mad with rage. If he lives affrighted, he will quake with terror. If he's already abstracted from himself, he'll be sundered from himself and roam the world like Ishmael.

Here in my pocket is the very means of inoculating persons against such an eventuality or of curing them should it overtake them.

Yet so far only four persons have been inoculated: myself and the three girls yonder in the motel.

Just below me, abutting the deserted shopping plaza, rises the yellow brick barn-and-silo of Saint Michael's. A surprisingly large parish it was, big enough to rate a monsignor. But the church is empty now, abandoned five years ago. The stained glass is broken out. Cliffs swallows nest in the fenestrae of its concrete screen.

Our Catholic church here split into three pieces: (1) the American Catholic Church whose new Rome is Cicero, Illinois; (2) the Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance but not God; (3) the Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny scattered flock with no place to go.

The American Catholic Church, which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of neighborhoods, retained the Latin mass and plays *The Star-spangled Banner* at the elevation.

The Dutch schismatics in this area comprise several priests and nuns who left Rome to get married. They threw in with the Dutch schismatic Catholics. Now several divorced priests and nuns are importuning the Dutch cardinal to allow them to remarry.

The Roman Catholics hereabouts are scattered and demoralized. The one priest, an obscure curate, who remained faithful to Rome, could not support himself and had to hire out as a fire-watcher. It is his job to climb the fire tower by night and watch for brushfires below and for signs and portents in the skies.

I, for example, am a Roman Catholic, albeit a bad one. I believe in the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church, in God the Father, in the election of the Jews, in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord, who founded the Church on Peter his first

vicar, which will last until the end of the world. Some years ago, however, I stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally I do as I please. A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar. Nevertheless, I still believe.

A couple of buzzards circle the interchange a mile high. Do I imagine it, or does one cock his head and eye me for meat? Don't count on it, old fellow!

Thoughts about the coming catastrophe and the three girls cause my scalp to tingle with a peculiar emotion. Or perhaps it is the hives from drinking gin fizzes. A catastrophe, however, has both pleasant and unpleasant aspects familiar to everyone—though no one likes to admit the pleasantness. Just now the prospect is unpleasant, but not for the reasons you might imagine.

Let me confess that what worries me most is that the catastrophe will overtake us before my scientific article is published and so before my discovery can create a sensation in the scientific world.

The vanity of scientists! My article, it is true, is an extremely important one, perhaps even epochal in its significance. With it, my little invention, in hand, any doctor can probe the very secrets of the soul, diagnose the maladies that poison the wellsprings of man's hope. It could save the world or destroy it—and in the next two hours will very likely do one or the other—for as any doctor knows, the more effective a treatment, the more dangerous it is in the wrong hands.

But the question remains: which prospect is more unpleasant, the destruction of the world, or that the destruction may come before my achievement is made known? The latter I must confess, because I keep imagining the scene in the Director's office the day the Nobel Prize is awarded. I enter. The secretaries blush. My colleagues horse around. The Director breaks out the champagne and paper cups (like Houston Control after the moon landing.) "Hats off, gentlemen!" cries the Director in his best derisive style (from him the highest accolade). "A toast to our local Pasteur! No, rather the new Copernicus! The latter-day

Archimedes who found the place to insert his lever and turn the world not upside down but right side up!"

If the truth be known, scientists are neither more nor less vain than other people. It is rather that their vanity is the more striking as it appears side by side with their well-known objectivity. The layman is scandalized, but the scandal is not so much the fault of the scientist as it is the layman's canonization of scientists, which the latter never asked for.

The prayer of the scientist if he prayed, which is not likely: Lord, grant that my discovery may increase knowledge and help other men. Failing that, Lord, grant that it will not lead to man's destruction. Failing that, Lord, grant that my article in *Brain* be published before the destruction takes place.

Room 202 in the motel is my room. Room 206 is stacked to the roof with canned food, mostly Vienna sausage and Campbell's soup, fifteen cases of Early Times bourbon whiskey, and the World's Great Books. In the rooms intervening, 203, 204, and 205, are to be found Ellen, Moira, and Lola respectively.

My spirits rise. My quilted scalp pops another hair root. The silky albumen from the gin fizz coats my brain membranes. Even if worst comes to worst, is there any reason why the four of us cannot live happily together, sip toddies, eat Campbell's chicken-and-rice, and spend the long summer evenings listening to Lola play the cello and reading aloud from the World's Great Books stacked right alongside the cases of Early Times, beginning with Homer's first words: "Sing, O Goddess, the anger of Achilles," and ending with Freud's last words: "—but we cannot help them and cannot change our own way of thinking on their account"? Then we can read the Great Ideas, beginning with the first volume, *Angel to Love*. Then we can start over—until the Campbell's soup and Early Times run out.

The sun makes bursts and halos through the screen of pine needles. The marsh hawk ends his long glide into the line of cypresses, which are green as paint against the purple thunderhead.

At first glance all seems normal hereabouts. But a sharp eye might notice one or two things amiss. For one thing, the inner lanes of the interstate, the ones ordinarily used for passing, are in disrepair. The tar strips are broken. A lichen grows in the oil stain. Young mimosas sprout on the shoulders.

For another thing, there is something wrong with the motel.

The roof tiles are broken. The swimming pool is an opaque jade green, a bad color for pools. A large turtle suns himself on the diving board, which is broken and slanted into the water. Two cars are parked in the near lot, a rusty Cadillac and an Impala convertible with vines sprouting through its rotting top.

The cars and the shopping center were burnt out during the Christmas riot five years ago. The motel, though not burned, was abandoned and its rooms inhabited first by lovers, then by bums, and finally by the native denizens of the swamp, dirt daubers, moccasins, screech owls, and raccoons.

In recent months the vines have begun to sprout in earnest. Possum grape festoons Rexall Drugs yonder in the plaza. Scuppernong all but conceals the A & P supermarket. Poison ivy has captured the speaker posts in the drive-in movie, making a perfect geometrical forest of short cylindrical trees.

Beyond the glass wall of the motel dining room still hangs the Rotary banner:

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and better friendship?

But the banner is rent, top to bottom, like the temple veil.

The vines began to sprout in earnest a couple of months ago. People do not like to talk about it. For some reason they'd much rather talk about the atrocities that have been occurring ever more often: entire families murdered in their beds for no good reason. "The work of a madman!" people exclaim.

Last Sunday as I was walking past the house of a neighbor, Barry Bocock, a Boeing engineer transplanted from Seattle, I spied him riding his tiny tractor-mower like a big gringo astride a burro. The next moment my eye was caught by many tiny vines sprouting through cracks in the concrete slab and beginning to cover the antique bricks that Barry had salvaged from an old sugar mill.

Barry got off his tractor simply by standing up and walking.

"It looks as though your slab is cracked, Barry," I told him.

Barry frowned and, seeming not to hear, began to show me how the tractor could cut grass right up to the bark of a tree without injuring the tree.

Barry Bocock is the sort of fellow who gives the most careful attention to details, especially to those smaller problems

caused by germs. A very clean man, he walks around his yard in his shorts and if he should find a pustule or hickey on his clean hairy muscular legs, he takes infinite pains examining it, squeezing it, noting the character of the pus. One has the feeling that to Barry there is nothing wrong with the world that couldn't be set right by controlling germs and human wastes. One Sunday he invited me into his back yard and showed me the effluence from his new septic tank, letting it run into a drinking glass, where in fact it did look as clear as water.

But when I called his attention to the vines cracking his slab, he seemed not to hear and instead showed me his new mower.

"But, Barry, the vines are cracking your slab."

"That'll be the day," said Barry, flushing angrily. Then, drawing me close to his clean perfect West-Coast body, he asked me if I'd heard of the latest atrocity.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"The work of a madman!" he exclaimed and mounted his burro-size tractor.

Barry is a widower, his wife having died of alcoholism before he left Seattle. "Firing the sunset gun" he called her drinking. "Every day she'd be at it as early as one o'clock." "At what?" "Firing the sunset gun."

The buzzards are lower and more hopeful, rocking their wings this way and that and craning down for a look.

When I think of Barry, I can't help but wonder whether he, not I, should be the doctor, what with his keen interest in germs, boils, hickies, bo-bos, pustules, scabs, and such. Moreover, I could tell from Barry's veiled expression when I mentioned the vines sprouting that he knew of my own troubles and that he was accordingly discounting my alarm. Physician, heal thyself. . . .

The truth is that, though I am a physician, my health, especially my mental health, has been very poor lately. I am subject to attacks of elation and depression, as well as occasional seizures of morning terror. A few years ago my wife left me, running off with an Englishman, and I've led an irregular life ever since.

But to admit my infirmities is not necessarily to discredit my discoveries, which stand or fall on scientific evidence. After all, van Gogh was depressed and Beethoven had a poor time of it. The prophet Hosea, if you will recall, had a bad home life.



Some of the best psychiatrists, it is hardly necessary to add, have a few problems of their own, little rancors and terrors and such.

Who am I? you well might wonder. Let me give a little dossier.

I am a physician, a not very successful psychiatrist; an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors, but a genius nevertheless who sees into the hidden causes of things and erects simple hypotheses to account for the glut of everyday events; a bad Catholic; a widower and cuckold whose wife ran off with a heathen Englishman and died on the island of Cozumel, where she hoped to begin a new life and see things afresh.

My afflictions attract some patients, repel others. People are generally tolerant. Some patients, knowing my frailties, calculate I'll understand theirs. I am something like old Doc in Western movies: if you catch old Doc sober, he's all right, etcetera. In fact, he's some kind of genius, I heard he went to Harvard, etcetera etcetera.

Not that I make much money. Sensible folk, after all, don't have much use for a doctor who sips toddies during office hours. So I'm obliged to take all kinds of patients, not merely terrified and depressed people, but people suffering with bowel complaints, drugheads with beriberi and hepatitis, Bantus shot up by the cops, cops shot up by Bantus.

Lately, however, I've discouraged patients in order to work on my invention. I don't need the money. Fortunately for me, my wife, who left me and later died, either didn't or wouldn't change her will and so bequeathed me forty thousand shares of R. J. Reynolds stock she inherited from her father.

Loose bark from the pine is beginning to work through my shirt. My scalp is still quilted, my throat is whistling with hives—albumen molecules from the gin fizzes hum like bees in the ventricles of my brain—yet I feel quite well.

Where is the sniper? Shading my eyes, I examine every inch of the terrain.

A flag stirs fitfully on its pole beside the green rectangle dug into the slope of the near ridge like a step. It is the football field of the Valley Forge Academy, our private school, which was founded on religious and patriotic principles and to keep Negroes out. Earlier today—could it have been today?—the Christian Kaydettes, our champion baton twirlers, practiced

their twirling, little suspecting what dread misadventure would befall them.

Beyond the empty shopping plaza at my foot rise the low green hills of Paradise Estates. The fairways of the golf links make notches in the tree line. Pretty cubes and loaves of new houses are strewn among the pines like sugar lumps. It is even possible to pick out my own house, a spot of hot pink and a wink of glass under the old TV transmitter. By a trick of perspective the transmitter tower seems to rise from the dumpy silo of old Saint Michael's Church in the plaza.

Here in the old days I used to go to mass with my daughter, Samantha. My wife, an ex-Episcopal girl from Virginia, named our daughter Samantha in the expectation that this dark gracile pagan name would somehow inform the child, but alas for Doris, Samantha turned out to be chubby, fair, acned, and pious, the sort who likes to hang around after school and beat Sister's erasers.

The best of times were after mass on summer evenings when Samantha and I would walk home in the violet dusk, we having received Communion and I rejoicing afterwards, caring nought for my fellow Catholics but only for myself and Samantha and Christ swallowed, remembering what he promised me for eating him, that I would have life in me, and I did, feeling so good that I'd sing and cut the fool all the way home like King David before the Ark. Once home, light up the charcoal briquets out under the TV transmitter, which lofted its red light next to Venus like a ruby and a diamond in the plum velvet sky. Snug down Samantha with the *Wonderful World of Color* in the den (the picture better than life, having traveled only one hundred feet straight down), back to the briquets, take four, five, six long pulls from the quart of Early Times, shout with joy for the beauty of the world, sing "Finch 'han dal vino" from *Don Giovanni* and "Holy God We Praise Thy Name," conceive a great heart-leaping desire for Doris, go fetch Doris, whose lip would curl at my proposal but who was nonetheless willing, who in fact now that she thought of it was as lusty as could be, her old self once again, a lusty Shenandoah Valley girl, Apple Queen of the Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester. Lead her by the hand beyond the azaleas where we'd fling ourselves upon each other and fall down on the zoysia grass, thick-napped here as a Kerman rug.

\* \* \*