

 A PENGUIN BOOK

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood*

Other Voices

Other Rooms

Penguin Book 2135
Other Voices, Other Rooms

Truman Capote says of himself: 'I was born in New Orleans in 1925 and raised in various parts of the South – winters in New Orleans, summers in Alabama and New Georgia. I learned to read at a pre-school age. I have always lived the life I liked. I have never skipped a pulse beat over what others thought. My education has been rather do-it-yourself. To this day I cannot recite the alphabet or the multiplication tables. I had already started writing short stories when I was 14 and some of them were published. I left school when I was 15. My first – and last – regular job was with the *New Yorker* when I was 17. Later, I "retired" to a Louisiana farm for two years and wrote *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. I have lived, at one time or another, in Greece, Italy, Spain, Africa, and the West Indies and travelled in Russia and the Orient.'

Other Voices, Other Rooms, Breakfast at Tiffany's, The Grass Harp and *A Tree of Night* are available as Penguins and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was made into a very successful film. Truman Capote's latest book, which was the subject of controversy immediately it was published, is *In Cold Blood*.



Truman Capote

Other Voices, Other Rooms

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For Newton Arvin

**The heart is deceitful above
all things, and desperately
wicked. Who can know it?
*Jeremiah, 17:9***

Part One

Chapter 1

Now a traveller must make his way to Noon City by the best means he can, for there are no buses or trains heading in that direction, though six days a week a truck from the Chuberry Turpentine Company collects mail and supplies in the next-door town of Paradise Chapel: occasionally a person bound for Noon City can catch a ride with the driver of the truck, Sam Radclif. It's a rough trip no matter how you come, for these washboard roads will loosen up even brandnew cars pretty fast; and hitch-hikers always find the going bad. Also, this is lonesome country; and here in the swamplike hollows where tiger lilies bloom the size of a man's head, there are luminous green logs that shine under the dark marsh water like drowned corpses; often the only movement on the landscape is winter smoke winding out the chimney of some sorry-looking farmhouse, or a wing-stiffened bird, silent and arrow-eyed, circling over the black deserted pinewoods.

Two roads pass over the hinterlands into Noon City; one from the north, another from the south; the latter, known as the Paradise Chapel Highway, is the better of the pair, though both are much the same: desolate miles of swamp and field and forest stretch along either route, unbroken except for scattered signs advertising Red Dot 5 cent Cigars, Dr Pepper, NEHI, Grove's Chill Tonic, and 666. Wooden bridges spanning brackish creeks named for long-gone Indian tribes rumble like far-off thunder under a passing wheel; herds of hogs and cows roam the roads at will; now and then a

farm-family pauses from work to wave as an auto whizzes by, and watch sadly till it disappears in red dust.

One sizzling day in early June the Turpentine Company's driver, Sam Radclif, a big balding six-footer with a rough, manly face, was gulping a beer at the Morning Star Café in Paradise Chapel when the proprietor came over with his arm around this stranger-boy.

'Hiya, Sam,' said the proprietor, a fellow called Sydney Katz. 'Got a kid here that'd be obliged if you could give him a ride to Noon City. Been trying to get there since yesterday. Think you can help?'

Radclif eyed the boy over the rim of his beer glass, not caring much for the looks of him. He had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes, which were brown and very large. His brown hair, cut short, was streaked with pure yellow strands. A kind of tired, imploring expression masked his thin face, and there was an unyouthful sag about his shoulders. He wore long, wrinkled white linen breeches, a limp blue shirt, the collar of which was open at the throat, and rather scuffed tan shoes.

Wiping a moustache of foam off his upper lips, Radclif said: 'What's you name, son?'

'Joel. Jo-el Har-ri-son Knox.' He separated the syllables explicitly, as though he thought the driver deaf, but his voice was uncommonly soft.

'That so?' drawled Radclif, placing his dry beer glass on the counter. 'A mighty fancy name, Mister Knox.'

The boy blushed and turned to the proprietor, who promptly intervened: 'This is a fine boy, Sam. Smart as a whip. Knows words you and me never heard of.'

Radclif was annoyed. 'Here, Katz,' he ordered, 'fillerup.' After the proprietor trundled away to fetch a second beer,

Sam said kindly, 'Didn't mean to tease you, son. Where bouts you from?'

'New Orleans,' he said. 'I left there Thursday and got here Friday . . . and that was as far as I could go; no one come to meet me.'

'Oh, yeah,' said Radclif. 'Visiting folks in Noon City?'

The boy nodded. 'My father. I'm going to live with him.'

Radclif raised his eyes ceilingward, mumbled 'Knox' several times, then shook his head in a baffled manner. 'Nope, don't think I know anybody by that name. Sure you're in the right place?'

'Oh, yes,' said the boy without alarm. 'Ask Mister Katz, he's heard about my father, and I showed him the letters and . . . wait.' He hurried back among the tables of the gloomy café, and returned toting a huge tin suitcase that, judging by his grimace, was extremely heavy. The suitcase was colourful with faded souvenir stickers from remote parts of the globe: Paris, Cairo, Venice, Vienna, Naples, Hamburg, Bombay, and so forth. It was an odd thing to see on a hot day in a town the size of Paradise Chapel.

'You been all them places?' asked Radclif.

'No-o-o,' said the boy, struggling to undo a worn-out leather strap which held the suitcase together. 'It belonged to my grandfather; that was Major Knox: you've read about him in history books, I guess. He was a prominent figure in the Civil War. Anyway, this is the valise he used on his wedding trip around the world.'

'Round the world, eh?' said Radclif, impressed. 'Musta been a mighty rich man.'

'Well, that was a long time ago.' He rummaged through his neatly packed possessions till he found a slim package of letters. 'Here it is,' he said, selecting one in a watergreen envelope.

Radclif fingered the letter a moment before opening it; but

presently, with clumsy care, he extracted a green sheet of tissue-like paper and, moving his lips, read:

Edw. R. Sansom, Esq.
Skully's Landing
May 18, 19—

My dear Ellen Kendall,

I am in your debt for answering my letter so quickly; indeed, by return post. Yes, hearing from me after twelve years must have seemed strange, but I can assure you sufficient reason prompted this long silence. However, reading in the *Times-Picayune*, to the Sunday issue of which we subscribe, of my late wife's passing, may God the Almighty rest her gentle soul, I at once reasoned the honourable thing could only be to again assume my paternal duties, forsaken, lo, these many years. Both the present Mrs Sansom and myself are happy (nay, overjoyed!) to learn you are willing to concede our desire, though, as you remark, your heart will break in doing so. Ah, how well I sympathize with the sorrow such a sacrifice may bring, having experienced similar emotions when, after that final dreadful affair, I was forced to take leave of my only child, whom I treasured, while he was still no more than an infant. But that is all of the lost past. Rest assured, good lady, we here at the Landing have a beautiful home, healthful food, and a cultured atmosphere with which to provide my son.

As to the journey: we are anxious Joel reach here no later than June First. Now when he leaves New Orleans he should travel via train to Biloxi, at which point he must disembark and purchase a bus ticket for Paradise Chapel, a town some twenty miles south of Noon City. We have at present no mechanical vehicle; therefore, I suggest he remain overnight in P.C. where rooms are let above the Morning Star Café, until appropriate arrangements can be made. Enclosed please find a cheque covering such expenses as all this may incur.

Yrs. Respect.

Edw. R. Sansom

The proprietor arrived with the beer just as Radclif, frowning puzzledly, sighed and tucked the paper back in its envelope. There were two things about this letter that

bothered him; first of all, the handwriting: penned in ink the rusty colour of dried blood, it was a maze of curlicues and dainty i's dotted with daintier o's. What the hell kind of a man would write like that? And secondly: 'If your pa's named Sansom, how come you call yourself Knox?'

The boy stared at the floor embarrassedly. 'Well,' he said, and shot Radclif a swift, accusing look, as if the driver was robbing him of something, 'they were divorced, and mother always called me Joel Knox.'

'Aw, say, son,' said Radclif, 'you oughtn't to have let her done that! Remember, your pa's your pa no matter what.'

The proprietor avoided a yearning glance for help which the boy now cast in his direction by having wandered off to attend another customer. 'But I've never seen him,' said Joel, dropping the letters into his suitcase and buckling up the strap. 'Do you know where this place is? Skully's Landing?'

'The Landing?' Radclif said. 'Sure, sure I know all about it.' He took a deep swallow of beer, let forth a mighty belch, and grinned. 'Yessir, if I was your pa I'd take down your britches and muss you up a bit.' Then, draining the glass, he slapped a half-dollar on the counter, and stood meditatively scratching his hairy chin till a wall clock sounded the hour four: 'O.K., son, let's shove,' he said, starting briskly towards the door.

After a moment's hesitation the boy lifted his suitcase and followed.

'Come see us again,' called the proprietor automatically.

The truck was a Ford of the pick-up type. Its interior smelled strongly of sun-warmed leather and gasoline fumes. The broken speedometer registered a petrified twenty. Rain-streaks and crushed insects blurred the windshield, of which one section was shattered in a bursting-star pattern. A toy skull ornamented the gear shift. The wheels bump-bumped over the rising, dipping, curving Paradise Chapel Highway.

Joel sat scrunched in a corner of the seat, elbow propped on windowframe, chin cupped in hand, trying hard to keep awake. He hadn't had a proper hour's rest since leaving New Orleans, for when he closed his eyes, as now, certain sickening memories slid through his mind. Of these, one in particular stood out: he was at a grocery counter, his mother waiting next him, and outside in the street January rain was making icicles on the naked tree limbs. Together they left the store and walked silently along the wet pavement, he holding a calico umbrella above his mother, who carried a sack of tangerines. They passed a house where a piano was playing, and the music sounded sad in the grey afternoon, but his mother remarked what a pretty song. And when they reached home she was humming it, but she felt cold and went to bed, and the doctor came, and for over a month he came every day, but she was always cold, and Aunt Ellen was there, always smiling, and the doctor, always smiling, and the uneaten tangerines shrivelled up in the icebox; and when it was over he went with Ellen to live in a dingy two-family house near Pontchartrain.

Ellen was a kind, rather gentle woman, and she did the best she knew how. She had five school-aged children, and her husband clerked in a shoe store, so there was not a great deal of money; but Joel wasn't dependent, his mother having left a small legacy. Ellen and her family were good to him, still he resented them, and often felt compelled to do hateful things, such as tease the older cousin, a dumb-looking girl named Louise, because she was a little deaf: he'd cup his ear and cry 'Aye? Aye?' and couldn't stop till she broke into tears. He would not joke or join in the rousing after-supper games his uncle inaugurated nightly, and he took odd pleasure in bringing to attention a slip of grammar on anyone's part, but why this was true puzzled him as much as the Kendalls. It was as if he lived those months wearing a pair of spectacles with green, cracked lenses, and had wax-plugging in his ears, for everything seemed to be something it wasn't, and the days melted

in a constant dream. Now Ellen liked to read Sir Walter Scott and Dickens and Hans Andersen to the children before sending them upstairs, and one chilly March evening she read *The Snow Queen*. Listening to it, it came to Joel that he had a lot in common with Little Kay, whose outlook was twisted when a splinter from the Sprite's evil mirror infected his eye, changing his heart into a lump of bitter ice: suppose, he thought, hearing Ellen's gentle voice and watching the fire-light warm his cousins' faces, suppose, like Little Kay, he also were spirited off to the Snow Queen's frozen palace? What living soul would then brave robber barons for his rescue? And there was no one, really no one.

During the last weeks before the letter came he skipped school three days out of five to loaf around the Canal Street docks. He got into a habit of sharing the box-lunch Ellen fixed for him with a giant Negro stevedore who, as they talked together, spun exotic sea-life legends that Joel knew to be lies even as he listened; but this man was a grown-up, and grown-ups were suddenly the only friends he wanted. And he spent solitary hours watching the loading and unloading of banana boats that shipped to Central America, plotting of course a stowaway voyage, for he was certain in some foreign city he could land a good-paying job. However, on his thirteenth birthday, as it happened, the first letter from Skully's Landing arrived.

Ellen had not shown him this letter for several days. It was peculiar, the way she'd behaved, and whenever her eyes had met his there was a look in them he'd never seen before: a frightened, guilty expression. In answering the letter she'd asked assurance that, should Joel find himself discontented, he would be at once allowed to return; a guarantee his education would be cared for; a promise he could spend Christmas holidays with her. But Joel could sense how relieved she was when, following a long correspondence, Major Knox's old honeymoon suitcase was dragged down from the attic.

He was glad to go. He could not think why, nor did he bother wondering, but his father's more or less incredible appearance on a scene strangely deserted twelve years before didn't strike him as in the least extraordinary, inasmuch as he'd counted on some such happening all along. The miracle he'd planned, however, was in the nature of a kind old rich lady who, having glimpsed him on a street corner, immediately dispatched an envelope stuffed with thousand-dollar bills; or a similar god-like action on the part of some good-hearted stranger. And this stranger, as it turned out, was his father, which to his mind was simply a wonderful piece of luck.

But afterwards, as he lay in a scaling iron bed above the Morning Star Café, dizzy with heat and loss and despair, a different picture of his father and of his situation asserted itself: he did not know what to expect, and he was afraid, for already there were so many disappointments. A panama hat, newly bought in New Orleans and worn with dashing pride, had been stolen in the train depot in Biloxi; then the Paradise Chapel bus had run three hot, sweaty hours behind schedule; and finally, topping everything, there had been no word from Skully's Landing waiting at the café. All Thursday night he'd left the electric light burning in the strange room, and read a movie magazine till he knew the latest doings of the Hollywood stars by heart, for if he let his attention turn inward even a second he would begin to tremble, and the mean tears would not stay back. Towards dawn he'd taken the magazine and torn it to shreds and burned the pieces in an ashtray one by one till it was time to go downstairs.

'Reach behind and hand me a match, will you, boy?' said Radclif. 'Back there on the shelf, see?'

Joel opened his eyes and looked about him dazedly. A perfect tear of sweat was balanced on the tip of his nose. 'You certainly have a lot of junk,' he said, probing around the shelf,

which was littered with a collection of yellowed newspapers, a slashed inner tube, greasy tools, an air pump, a flashlight, and . . . a pistol. Alongside the pistol was an open carton of ammunition; bullets the bright copper of fresh pennies. He was tempted to take a whole handful, but ended by artfully dropping just one into his breast pocket. 'Here they are.'

Radclif popped a cigarette between his lips, and Joel, without being asked, struck a match for him.

'Thanks,' said Radclif, a huge drag of smoke creeping out his nostrils. 'Say, ever been in this part of the country before?'

'Not exactly, but my mother took me to Gulfport once, and that was nice because of the sea. We passed through there yesterday on the train.'

'Like it round here?'

Joel imagined a queerness in the driver's tone. He studied Radclif's blunt profile, wondering if perhaps the theft had been noticed. If so, Radclif gave no sign. 'Well, it's . . . you know, different.'

'Course I don't see any difference. Lived hereabouts all my life, and it looks like everywhere else to me, ha ha!'

The truck hit suddenly a stretch of wide, hard road, unbordered by tree-shade, though a black skirt of distant pines darkened the rim of a great field that lay to the left. A far-off figure, whether man or woman you could not tell, rested from hoeing to wave, and Joel waved back. Farther on, two little white-haired boys astride a scrawny mule shouted their delight when the truck passed, burying them in a screen of dust. Radclif honked and honked the horn at a tribe of hogs that took their time in getting off the road. He could swear like nobody Joel had ever heard, except maybe the Negro dock-hand.

A while later, scowling thoughtfully, Joel said: 'I'd like to ask you something, O.K.?' He waited till Radclif nodded consent. 'Well, what I wanted to ask was, do you know my . . . Mister Sansom?'

‘Yeah, I know who he is, sure,’ said Radclif, and swabbed his forehead with a filthy handkerchief. ‘You threw me off the track with those two names, Sansom and Knox. Oh sure, he’s the guy that married Amy Skully.’ There was an instant’s pause before he added: ‘But the real fact is, I never laid eyes on him.’

Joel chewed his lip, and was silent a moment. He was crazy with questions he wanted answered, but the idea of asking them embarrassed him, for to be so ignorant of one’s own blood-kin seemed shameful. Therefore he said what he had to in a very bold voice: ‘What about this Skully’s Landing? I mean, who all lives there?’

Radclif squinted his eyes while he considered. ‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘they’ve got a coupla niggers out there, and I know them. Then your daddy’s wife, know her: my old lady does dressmaking for her now and again; used to, anyway.’ He sucked in cigarette smoke, and flipped the butt out the window. ‘And the cousin . . . yes, by God, the cousin!’

‘Oh?’ said Joel casually, though never once in all the letters had such a person been mentioned, and his eyes begged the driver to amplify. But Radclif merely smiled a curious smile, as if amused by a private joke too secret for sharing.

And that was as far as the matter went.

‘Look sharp now,’ said Radclif presently, ‘we’re coming into town.’

A house. A grey clump of Negro cabins. An unpainted clapboard church with a rain-rod steeple, and three Holy panes of ruby glass. A sign: *The Lord Jesus Is Coming! Are You Ready?* A little black child wearing a big straw hat and clutching tight a pail of blackberries. Over all the sun’s stinging glaze. Soon there was a short, unpaved and nameless street, lined with similar one-floored houses, some nicer-looking than others; each had a front porch and a yard, and in some yards grew scraggly rose bushes and crêpe myrtle and China trees, from a branch of which very likely dangled a