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Tom Wolfe

THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES



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THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES

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who walked among the flames,
pointing at the lurid lights.
And he wishes to express
his deep appreciation to
BURT ROBERTS
who first showed the way*

About the Author

TOM WOLFE grew up in Richmond, Virginia, received a doctorate in American Studies from Yale University, and now lives in New York City. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is his eleventh book.

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THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES

Prologue

Mutt on Fire

“And then say what? Say, ‘Forget you’re hungry, forget you got shot inna back by some racist cop—Chuck was here? Chuck come up to Harlem—’ ”

“No, I’ll *tell* you what—”

“ ‘Chuck come up to Harlem and—’ ”

“I’ll *tell* you what—”

“Say, ‘Chuck come up to Harlem and gonna take care a business for the black community’?”

That does it.

Heh-heggggggggggggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

It’s one of those ungodly contralto cackles somewhere out there in the audience. It’s a sound from down so deep, from under so many lavish layers, he knows exactly what she must look like. Two hundred pounds, if she’s an ounce! Built like an oil burner! The cackle sets off the men. They erupt with those belly sounds he hates so much.

They go, “*Hehhehheh . . . unnnnhhhh-hunhhh . . . That’s right . . . Tell ’im, bro . . . Yo . . .*”

Chuck! The insolent—he’s right there, right there in the front—he just called him a Charlie! Chuck is short for Charlie,

and Charlie is the old code name for a down-home white bigot. The insolence of it! The impudence! The heat and glare are terrific. It makes the Mayor squint. It's the TV lights. He's inside a blinding haze. He can barely make out the heckler's face. He sees a tall silhouette and the fantastic bony angles the man's elbows make when he throws his hands up in the air. And an earring. The man has a big gold earring in one ear.

The Mayor leans into the microphone and says, "No, I'll *tell* you what. Okay? I'll give you the actual figures. Okay?"

"We don't want your figures, man!"

Man, he says! The insolence! "You brought it up, my friend. So you're gonna get the actual figures. *Okay?*"

"Don't you shine us up with no more your figures!"

Another eruption in the crowd, louder this time: "*Unnnnnh-unnnnnh-unnnh . . . Tell'im, bro . . . Y'on the case . . . Yo, Gober!*"

"In this administration—and it's a matter of public record—the percentage of the total annual budget for New York City—"

"Aw, maaaaan," yells the heckler, "don't you stand there and shine us up with no more your figures and your bureaucratic rhetoric!"

They love it. The insolence! The insolence sets off another eruption. He peers through the scalding glare of the television lights. He keeps squinting. He's aware of a great mass of silhouettes out in front of him. The crowd swells up. The ceiling presses down. It's covered in beige tiles. The tiles have curly incisions all over them. They're crumbling around the edges. Asbestos! He knows it when he sees it! The faces—they're waiting for the beano, for the rock fight. Bloody noses!—that's the idea. The next instant means everything. He can handle it! He can handle hecklers! Only five-seven, but he's even better at it than Koch used to be! He's the mayor of the greatest city on earth—New York! Him!

"*All right!* You've had your fun, and now you're gonna *shut up* for a minute!"

That startles the heckler. He freezes. That's all the Mayor needs. He knows how to do it.

"*Youuuuu asked meeeee a question, didn't you, and you got a bigggg laugh from your claue. And so now youuuuuu're gonna keep quiiiiiit and lisssten to the answer. Okay?*"

"Say, claque?" The man has had his wind knocked out, but he's still standing up.

"Okay? Now here are the statistics for yourrr community, right here, Harlem."

"Say, claque?" The bastard has hold of this word *claque* like a bone. "Ain' nobody can eat statistics, man!"

"Tell'im, bro . . . Yo . . . Yo, Gober!"

"Let me finish. Do youuuuuu think—"

"Don't percentage no annual budget with us, man! We want jobs!"

The crowd erupts again. It's worse than before. Much of it he can't make out—interjections from deep in the bread basket. But there's this *Yo* business. There's some loudmouth way in back with a voice that cuts through everything.

"Yo, Gober! Yo, Gober! Yo, Gober!"

But he isn't saying *Gober*. He's saying *Goldberg*.

"Yo, Goldberg! Yo, Goldberg! Yo, Goldberg!"

It stuns him. In this place, in Harlem! Goldberg is the Harlem cognomen for Jew. It's insolent!—outrageous!—that anyone throws this vileness in the face of the Mayor of New York City!

Boos, hisses, grunts, belly laughs, shouts. They want to see some loose teeth. It's out of control.

"Do you—"

It's no use. He can't make himself heard even with the microphone. The hate in their faces! Pure poison! It's mesmerizing.

"Yo, Goldberg! Yo, Goldberg! Yo, Hymie!"

Hymie! That business! There's one of them yelling Goldberg and another one yelling Hymie. Then it dawns on him. Reverend Bacon! They're Bacon's people. He's sure of it. The civic-minded people who come to public meetings in Harlem—the people Sheldon was supposed to make sure filled up this hall—they wouldn't be out there yelling these outrageous things. Bacon did this! Sheldon fucked up! Bacon got his people in here!

A wave of the purest self-pity rolls over the Mayor. Out of the corner of his eye he can see the television crews squirming around in the haze of light. Their cameras are coming out of their heads like horns. They're swiveling around this way and that. They're eating it up! They're here for the brawl! They wouldn't lift a finger. They're cowards! Parasites! The lice of public life!