

FOREWORD

Perhaps the best way to introduce this novel—which on my third reading of it astounds me even more than the first—is to tell of my first encounter with it. While I was teaching at Loyola in 1976 I began to get telephone calls from a lady unknown to me. What she proposed was preposterous. It was not that she had written a couple of chapters of a novel and wanted to get into my class. It was that her son, who was dead, had written an entire novel during the early sixties, a big novel, and she wanted me to read it. Why would I want to do that? I asked her. Because it is a great novel, she said.

Over the years I have become very good at getting out of things I don't want to do. And if ever there was something I didn't want to do, this was surely it: to deal with the mother of a dead novelist and, worst of all, to have to read a manuscript that she said was *great*, and that, as it turned out, was a badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon.

But the lady was persistent, and it somehow came to pass that she stood in my office handing me the hefty manuscript. There was no getting out of it; only one hope remained—that I could read a few pages and that they would be bad enough for me, in good conscience, to read no farther. Usually I can do just that. Indeed the first paragraph often suffices. My only fear was that this one might not be bad enough, or might be just good enough, so that I would have to keep reading.

In this case I read on. And on. First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a

prickle of interest, then a growing excitement, and finally an incredulity: surely it was not possible that it was so good. I shall resist the temptation to say what first made me gape, grin, laugh out loud, shake my head in wonderment. Better let the reader make the discovery on his own.

Here at any rate is Ignatius Reilly, without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one—who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age, lying in his flannel nightshirt, in a back bedroom on Constantinople Street in New Orleans, who between gigantic seizures of flatulence and eructations is filling dozens of Big Chief tablets with invective.

His mother thinks he needs to go to work. He does, in a succession of jobs. Each job rapidly escalates into a lunatic adventure, a full-blown disaster; yet each has, like Don Quixote's, its own eerie logic.

His girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff of the Bronx, thinks he needs sex. What happens between Myrna and Ignatius is like no other boy-meets-girl story in my experience.

By no means a lesser virtue of Toole's novel is his rendering of the particularities of New Orleans, its back streets, its out-of-the-way neighborhoods, its odd speech, its ethnic whites—and one black in whom Toole has achieved the near-impossible, a superb comic character of immense wit and resourcefulness without the least trace of Rastus minstrelsy.

But Toole's greatest achievement is Ignatius Reilly himself, intellectual, ideologue, deadbeat, goof-off, glutton, who should repel the reader with his gargantuan bloats, his thunderous contempt and one-man war against everybody—Freud, homosexuals, heterosexuals, Protestants, and the assorted excesses of modern times. Imagine an Aquinas gone to pot, transported to New Orleans from whence he makes a wild foray through the swamps to LSU at Baton Rouge, where his lumber jacket is stolen in the faculty men's room where he is

seated, overcome by mammoth gastrointestinal problems. His pyloric valve periodically closes in response to the lack of a "proper geometry and theology" in the modern world.

I hesitate to use the word *comedy*—though comedy it is—because that implies simply a funny book, and this novel is a great deal more than that. A great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions would better describe it; *commedia* would be closer to it.

It is also sad. One never quite knows where the sadness comes from—from the tragedy at the heart of Ignatius's great gaseous rages and lunatic adventures or the tragedy attending the book itself.

The tragedy of the book is the tragedy of the author—his suicide in 1969 at the age of thirty-two. Another tragedy is the body of work we have been denied.

It is a great pity that John Kennedy Toole is not alive and well and writing. But he is not, and there is nothing we can do about it but make sure that this gargantuan tumultuous human tragicomedy is at least made available to a world of readers.

WALKER PERCY

There is a New Orleans city accent . . . associated with downtown New Orleans, particularly with the German and Irish Third Ward, that is hard to distinguish from the accent of Hoboken, Jersey City, and Astoria, Long Island, where the Al Smith inflection, extinct in Manhattan, has taken refuge. The reason, as you might expect, is that the same stocks that brought the accent to Manhattan imposed it on New Orleans.

“You’re right on that. We’re Mediterranean. I’ve never been to Greece or Italy, but I’m sure I’d be at home there as soon as I landed.”

He would, too, I thought. New Orleans resembles Genoa or Marseilles, or Beirut or the Egyptian Alexandria more than it does New York, although all seaports resemble one another more than they can resemble any place in the interior. Like Havana and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico form a homogeneous, though interrupted, sea.

A. J. Liebling,

THE EARL OF LOUISIANA

"Shut up," Liz said to her.

"Can it, sweets," Betty said.

"Get me outta here," Lana screamed through the bars. "I just been through one fucking hell of a night with these three creeps. I got my rights. You can't stick me in here."

The matron smiled at her and walked away.

"Hey!" Lana screamed down the corridor. "Come back here."

"Take it easy, dearie," Frieda advised. "Quit rocking the boat. Now come on and show us those pictures of yourself you got hidden in your bra."

"Yeah," Liz said.

"Get out the snapshots, doll," Betty ordered. "We're tired of looking at these frigging walls."

The three girls lunged for Lana at the same time.

X

Dorian Greene turned one of his severe calling cards over and printed on the reverse side: "Stunning apartment for rent. Apply at 1A." He stepped out onto the flagstone sidewalk and tacked the card to the bottom of one of the black patent leather shutters. The girls would be gone for quite a while this time. Police were always so adamant about second offenses. It was unfortunate that the girls had never been very sociable with their fellow residents in the Quarter; someone would certainly have pointed out that marvelous patrolman to them, and they would not have made the fatal mistake of attacking a member of the police force.

But the girls were so impulsive and aggressive. Without them, Dorian felt that he and his building were completely unprotected. He took special care to lock his wrought-iron gate securely. Then he returned to his apartment to finish the job of cleaning up the litter left from the kickoff rally. It had been the most fabulous party of his career: at the height of it Timmy had fallen from a chandelier and sprained his ankle.

Dorian picked up a cowboy boot from which a heel had been broken and dropped it into a wastebasket, wondering whether that impossible Ignatius J. Reilly was all right. Some people were simply too much to bear. Gypsy Queen's sweet mother must have been heart-broken over the dreadful newspaper publicity.

XI

Darlene cut her picture out of the paper and put it on the kitchen table. What an opening night. At least she had received a little publicity from it.

She picked up her Harlett O'Hara gown from the sofa and hung it in the closet while the cockatoo watched her and squawked a bit from its perch. Jones had certainly taken over when he found out that man was a cop, leading him right over to the cabinet under the bar. Now she and Jones were both out of a job. The Night of Joy was out of business. Lana Lee was out of circulation. That Lana. Posing for French pictures. Anything for a buck.

Darlene looked at the golden earring that the cockatoo had brought home. Lana had been right all along. That big crazy man was really the kiss of death. He sure treated his poor momma cruel. That poor lady.

Darlene sat down to ponder job possibilities. The cockatoo flapped and squawked until she stuck the novelty earring, its favorite toy, in its beak. Then the phone rang, and when she answered it, a man said, "Listen, you got some great publicity. Now I run a club in the five-hundred block of Bourbon, and . . ."

XII

Jones spread the newspaper on the bar of Mattie's Ramble Inn and blew some smoke at it.

"Whoa!" he said to Mr. Watson. "You sure gimme a good idea with all this sabotage crap. Now I sabotage myself right back to bein a vagran. Hey!"

"It look like this sabotage go off like a nuclear bum."

"That fat freak a guarantee one hummer percen nuclear bum. Shit. Drop him on somebody, everybody gettin caught in the fallout, gettin their ass blowed up. Ooo-wee. Night of Joy really turn into a zoo las night. Firs we get a bird, then the fat mother come draggin along, then three cats look like they jus escape from gym. Shit. Everbody fightin and scratchin and screamin and that big fat freak layin in the gutter like he daid, peoples fightin and cussin and rollin all aroun that big cat pass out in the street. Look like a barroom fight in a western movie, look like a gang rumble. We got us a big crowd on Bourbon Street look like we could have us a football game. Po-lice drivin up draggin off that Lee bastar. Hey! It turn out she don have no pal at the precinc anyways. Maybe they be haulin in some of them orphan she been sponsorin. Whoa! That paper sure sending out plenny mothers takin pictures and axin me all about wha happen. Who say a color cat cain get his picture on the front page? Ooo-wee! Whoa! I gonna be the mos famous vagran in the city. I tell that Patrolman Mancusa, I say, 'Hey, now this cathouse shut down, how's about tellin your frien on the force I help you out so maybe they don star draggin my ass off for vagran?' Who wanna get stuck in Angola with Lana Lee? She was bad enough on the outside. Shit."

"You got any plan for gettin you a job, Jones?"

Jones blew a dark cloud, a storm warning, and said, "After the kinda job I jus had workin below the minimal wage, I really deserve a pay vacation. Ooo-wee. Where I gonna fin me another job? Too many color mothers draggin they ass aroun the street already. Whoa! Gettin your ass gainfully employ ain exactly the easies thing in the worl. I ain the only cat got him a problem. That Darlene gal ain gonna have no easy time gettin herself and that ball eagle gainfully employ. Peoples see wha happen the firs time she stick her ass on a stage, they be throwin water in her face if she be comin aroun lookin for work. See wha I mean? You drop somebody

like that fat mother for sabotage, plenny innocen peoples like Darlene gettin theyselves screwed. Like Miss Lee all the time sayin, that fat freak ruin *everbody* inves'men. Darlene and her ball eagle probly starin at one another right now sayin, 'Whoa! We really boffo smash for openin night. Hey! We real openin *big*.' I plenny sorry that sabotage goin off in Darlene face, but when I see that big mother, I couldn resis. I knowed he make some kinda esplosion in that Night of Joy. Ooo-wee. He really go off. Hey!"

"You pretty lucky them po-lice didn't take you in, too, workin in that bar."

"That Patrolman Mancusa say he appreciate showin him that cabinet. He say, 'Us mothers on the force need peoples like you, help us out.' He say, 'Peoples like you be helpin me get ahead.' I say, 'Whoa! Be sure and tell that to your frien at the precinc, they don star snatchin my ass for vagran.' He say, 'I sure will. Everbody at the precinc be appreciatin wha you done, man.' Now them po-lice mothers *appreciate* me. Hey! Maybe I be gettin some kinda awar. Whoa!" Jones aimed some smoke over Mr. Watson's tan head. "That Lee bastar really got her some snapshot of herself in the cabinet. Patrolman Mancusa starin at them pictures, his eyeballs about to fall out on the floor. He sayin, 'Whoa! Hey! Wow!' He sayin, 'Boy, I really be gettin ahead now.' I say to myself, 'Maybe some peoples be gettin ahead. Some other peoples be turnin vagran again. Some peoples ain gonna be gainfully employ below the minimal wage after to-night. Some peoples be draggin they ass all aroun town somewheres, be buyin me air-condition, color TV.' Shit. Firs I'm a glorify broom expert, now I'm vagran."

"Things can always be worse off."

"Yeah. You can say that, man. You got you a little business, got you a son teachin school probly got him a bobby-cue set, Buick, air-condition, TV. Whoa! I ain even got me a transmitter radio. Night of Joy salary keepin peoples below the air-condition level." Jones formed a philosophical cloud. "But you right in a way

there, Watson. Things maybe be worse off. Maybe I be that fat mother. Whoa! Whatever gonna happen to somebody like that? Hey!"

XIII

Mr. Levy settled into the yellow nylon couch and unfolded his paper, which was delivered to the coast every morning at a higher subscription rate. Having the couch all to himself was wonderful, but the disappearance of Miss Trixie was not enough to brighten his spirits. He had spent a sleepless night. Mrs. Levy was on her exercising board treating her plumpness to some early morning bouncing. She was silent, occupied with some plans for the foundation which she was writing on a sheet of paper held against the undulating front section of the board. Putting her pencil down for a moment, she reached down to select a cookie from the box on the floor. And the cookies were why Mr. Levy had spent a wakeful night. He and Mrs. Levy had driven out through the pines to see Mr. Reilly at Mandeville and had not only found he was not there but had also been treated very rudely by an authority of the place who had taken them for pranksters. Mrs. Levy had looked something like a prankster with her golden-white hair, her sunglasses with the blue lenses, the aquamarine mascara that made a ring around the blue lenses like a halo. Sitting there in the sports car before the main building at Mandeville with the huge box of Dutch cookies on her lap, she must have made the authority a little suspicious, Mr. Levy thought. But she had taken it all very calmly. Finding Mr. Reilly did not seem to bother Mrs. Levy particularly, it seemed. Her husband was beginning to sense that she did not especially want him to find Reilly, that somewhere in some corner of her mind she was hoping that Abelman would win the libel suit so that she could flaunt their resulting poverty in the face of Susan and Sandra as their father's ultimate failure. That woman had a devious mind that was only predictable

when she scented an opportunity to vanquish her husband. Now he was beginning to wonder which side she was on, his or Abelman's.

He had asked Gonzalez to cancel his spring practice reservations. This Abelman case had to be cleared up. Mr. Levy straightened his newspaper and realized again that, were his digestive system able to take it, he should have given his time to supervising Levy Pants. Things like this would not happen; life could be peaceful. But just the name, just the three syllables of "Levy Pants," caused acid complications in his chest. Perhaps he should have changed the name. Perhaps he should have changed Gonzalez. The office manager was so loyal, though. He loved his thankless, low-salaried job. You couldn't just kick him out. Where would he find another job? Even more important, who would want to replace him? One good reason for keeping Levy Pants open was keeping Gonzalez employed. Mr. Levy tried, but he could think of no other reason for keeping the place open. Gonzalez might commit suicide if the factory were shut down. There was a human life to consider. Too, no one apparently wanted to buy the place.

Leon Levy could have named his monument "Levy Trousers." That wasn't too bad. Throughout his life, but especially when he was a child, Gus Levy had said, "Levy Pants," and had always received a standard reply, "He does?" When he was about twenty, he had mentioned to his father that a change of title might help their business, and his father had moaned, "'Levy Pants' all of a sudden isn't good enough for you? The food you're eating is 'Levy Pants.' The car you're driving is 'Levy Pants.' I am 'Levy Pants.' This is gratitude? This is a child's devotion? Next I should change *my* name. Shut up, bum. Go play with the autos and the flappers. Already I got a Depression on my hands, I don't need smart advice from you. Better you should give with the advice to Hoover. You should go tell him to change his name to *Schlemiel*. Out of my office! Shut up!"

XI

Darlene recortó su fotografía del periódico y la puso en la mesa de la cocina. Vaya noche de estreno. En fin, por lo menos había conseguido publicidad.

Recogió su vestido de Harlett O'Hara del sofá y lo colgó en el armario, mientras la cacatúa la observaba y chillaba un poco desde su aro. Jones se había precipitado, sin duda, cuando descubrió que aquel hombre era un policía, llevándole directamente a aquel armario que había debajo de la barra. Ahora, los dos estaban sin trabajo. El Noche de Alegría estaba clausurado. Lana Lee estaba retirada de la circulación. Aquella Lana. Posando para fotos francesas. Por dinero era capaz de cualquier cosa.

Darlene contempló el aro dorado que había traído a casa la cacatúa. Lana había acertado en lo que había dicho. Aquel loco gordo era realmente el beso de la muerte. Qué mal trataba a su pobre mamá. Pobre señora.

Darlene se sentó a pensar en las posibilidades de trabajo que tenía. La cacatúa aleteó y chilló hasta que le puso el aro, su juguete favorito, en el pico. Luego, sonó el teléfono, y cuando lo descolgó, una voz de hombre dijo:

—Oiga, consiguió usted muchísima publicidad con lo de ayer. Mire, yo llevo un club en el 500 de Bourbon y...

XII

Jones extendió el periódico sobre la barra del Mattie's Ramble Inn y echó una bocanada de humo sobre él.

—¡Juáaa! —le dijo al señor Watson—. Me dio usted una buena idea con esa mierda del sabotaje. Ahora el sabotaje me lo hice a mí, que me veo otra vez vagabundo. ¡Sí, señor!

—Parece que este sabotaje estalló como una bomba nuclear.

—Ese gordo chiflao es una bomba nuclear garantizó al cien por cien. Mierda. Se lo echas encima a alguien y resulta que tó el mundo queda cogido en la lluvia radiactiva, le vuela el culo a tó el mundo. Sí, señor. El Noche de Alegría anoche era un verdadero zoo.

Primero el pájaro, luego aquel gordo desgraciao y luego tres tipas que parecían recién escapás del gimnasio. Mierda. Tós allí peleando y arañando y chillando y aquel gordo chiflao grandote tirao en la calle como si estuviera muerto, la gente peleando y maldiciendo y dando vuelta alrededor de aquel tipo gordo desmayao allí en la calle. Parecía una pelea de una película del Oeste, una pelea de una banda. Se juntó un gentío tremendo allí en la Calle Bourbon. Parecía que teníamos un partido de fútbol. Y al final apareció la policía y agarró a aquella desgraciá de la Lee. ¡Sí, señor! Resulta que ella no tenía ningún amigo en la comisaría. Puede que detengan también a alguno de aquellos huérfanos a los que ella ayudaba. ¡Juáaa! Y aquel periódico envió un montón de tipos allí a tomá fotos y me preguntaron lo que había pasao. ¿Quién dice que un tipo de coló no pué conseguí que pongan su foto en primera página? Sí, señor. Juá. Voy a sé el vagabundo más famoso de la ciudad. Ya se lo dije yo al patrullero Mancuso. Fui y le dije: «Bueno, ahora este burdel se va a quedá cerrado, ¿qué tal si le dice usted a su amigo de la comisaría que le ayudé para que no ande fastidiándome y diciendo que soy un vagabundo?» ¿Quién quiere verse metío en la cárcel con Lana Lee? Ya era bastante mala fuera. Mierda.

—¿Tienes algún plan de trabajo, Jones?

Jones soltó una nube oscura, aviso de tormenta, y luego dijo:

—Después del trabajo que he hecho por menos del salario mínimo, me merezco unas vacaciones pagás. Sí, señor. ¿Dónde voy a encontrá otro trabajo? Ya hay demasiaos tipos de coló arrastrando el culo por la calle. Sí, señor. ¡Juá! Es muy difícil conseguí un trabajo remunerao. Yo no soy el único tipo que tiene ese problema. Esa Darlene lo va a tené muy difícil, le va a costá mucho encontrá trabajo para ella y para esa águila bailarina. La gente no olvidará lo que pasó la primera vez que metió el culo en un escenario y le echarán agua a la cara si va a pedí trabajo. ¿Comprendes? Usas a un tipo como ese gordo desgraciao pa hacé sabotaje y resulta que luego hay mucha gente inocente como Darlene que acaba jodía. Como decía siempre la señorita Lee, aquel gordo chiflao es capaz de arruiná la inversión de tós. Darlene y su águila voladora probablemente deben está mirándose ahora y diciendo: «¡Juá! Qué fracaso de noche de estreno!» ¡Sí, señor! ¡Vaya noche de estreno! Siento muchísimo que el sabotaje perjudicara a Darlene, pero cuando vi a aquel gordo desgraciao, no pude remedialo. Sabía que organizaría una explosión en el Noche de Alegría. Sí, señor. Y explotó de verdá. ¡Sí, señor!

—Suerte tuviste de que los policías no te detuvieran también a ti por trabajar en aquel bar.

—Aquel patrullero Mancuso dijo que agradecía que le hubiese enseñado el armarito. Dijo: «Nosotros los policías necesitamos gente como usted, que nos ayude.» Me dice: «Gente como usted es la que me ayuda a mí a hacer mi trabajo.» Y yo voy y le digo: «¡Juáaa! No se olvide de decirle a su amigo de la comisaría que no empiecen a perseguirme por vagabundo.» Y va él y me dice: «Pues sí, claro que sí que lo haré. En comisaría sabrán tós lo que has hecho, sí, hombre». Ahora ellos los policías me *aprecian*. ¡Sí, señor! A lo mejor hasta me dan una especie de premio. ¿Por qué no?

Jones dirigió una bocanada de humo hasta la cabeza tostada del señor Watson.

—Y aquella cabrona de la Lee que tenía una foto suya metía en aquel armarito. El patrullero Mancuso se quedó mirando las fotos y casi se le caen los ojos al suelo. Decía: «¡Juáaa! ¡Eh! ¡Ahí va!», decía: «Muchacho, ahora sí que lo he conseguido, ahora sí que me ascenderán» Y yo me dije entonces: «Bueno, pué que algunos asciendan. Y que otros vuelvan otra vez de vagabundos. Después de esta noche, algunos no van a tener ya su empleo remunerado por debajo del salario mínimo. Algunos van a tener que arrastrar el culo otra vez por ahí por la ciudad. Y otros se pondrán aire acondicionado y televisión en coló.» Mierda. Primero soy barredor especializado y ahora soy vagabundo.

—Las cosas siempre pueden ponerse todavía peor.

—Sí. Dices bien, amigo. Tú tienes tu negocio, tienes tu hijo que está enseñando en la escuela y que tiene su aire acondicionado y su Buick y su televisión en coló. ¡Juá! Yo ni siquiera tengo un transistor. El salario del Noche de Alegría mantenía a la gente por debajo del nivel del acondicionador de aire —Jones formó una nube filosófica—. Pero tú tienes razón en parte, Watson. Las cosas pueden empeorar todavía más. Yo podría ser, por ejemplo, aquel gordo desgraciado. ¡Puaf! A un tipo así, pué pasarle cualquier cosa. ¡Sí, señor!

XIII

El señor Levy se instaló en el sofá de nylon amarillo y desplegó el periódico, que se entregaba todas las mañanas en la costa

pagando una suscripción algo más alta. Era maravilloso poder tener el sofá para él solo, pero la desaparición de la señorita Trixie no bastaba para levantarle el ánimo. No había dormido en toda la noche. La señora Levy estaba en su tabla de ejercicios aplicando unos cuantos masajes matutinos a su obesidad. Guardaba silencio, ocupada en ciertos planes para la Fundación que estaba anotando en un papel que mantenía apoyado en la ondulante sección frontal de la tabla. Posando el lápiz un momento, estiró la mano para elegir una pasta de la caja que tenía en el suelo. Y las pastas eran precisamente el motivo de que el señor Levy no hubiera dormido en toda la noche. La señora Levy y él habían atravesado bosques para ir a ver al señor Reilly a Mandeville y se habían encontrado no sólo con que no estaba allí sino que, además, una autoridad del lugar, que les había tomado por bromistas, les había tratado muy groseramente. La señora Levy tenía cierto aire de bromista con su pelo de un color blanco dorado, las gafas de sol de cristales azules, la máscara de maquillaje aguamarina que formaba un círculo alrededor de los cristales azules, como un halo. Allí sentada en el coche deportivo, ante el edificio principal de Mandeville, con la caja inmensa de pastas holandesas en el regazo, debió resultarle un tanto sospechosa a aquella autoridad, pensaba el señor Levy. Pero ella se lo había tomado con mucha calma. Al encontrar al señor Reilly no parecía importarle demasiado a la señora Levy. Su marido estaba empezando a tener la sensación de que no tenía grandes deseos de que lo encontrara, de que, en algún rincón de su cabeza, tenía la esperanza de que Abelman ganase el pleito para poder esgrimir la ruina consiguiente ante Susan y Sandra, como el último y definitivo fracaso de su padre. Aquella mujer tenía una mentalidad tortuosa que sólo era predecible cuando olfateaba una oportunidad de derrotar a su marido. Ahora, el señor Levy empezaba a preguntarse de qué lado estaba ella, en realidad: del suyo o del de Abelman.

El señor Levy había pedido a González que cancelara sus reservas para las prácticas de primavera. Había que resolver el asunto de Abelman. El señor Levy estiró el periódico y comprendió de nuevo que, si su sistema digestivo hubiera sido capaz de soportarlo, debería haber dedicado más tiempo a supervisar Levy Pants. No habrían pasado cosas como aquella. La vida podía ser más tranquila. Pero sólo el nombre, sólo las tres sílabas de «Levy Pants», provocaban en su pecho complicaciones ácidas. Quizá debería haberle cambiado el nombre. Quizá debería haber cambiado a González. Pero el jefe administrativo era tan leal. Amaba su ingrato trabajo mal pagado. No podías darle la patada así por las buenas. ¿Dónde iba a encontrar