

PODHORETZ REVISITED

HE HAD GONE UNDERGROUND the day after he failed the bar exam. He hadn't thought about it for 30 years, but now, sitting on the flight from Paris to Chicago with the young man beside him studying bar review notes, he closed his eyes and he remembered the pain and how he had immediately gone into hiding.

When the stewardess came around with the wine he nodded pleasantly to the young man. Greenfield held the wine glass up in the beam of his reading light. "À votre sante," he said.

"Santé," the young man answered. "The 'e' is accented."

"I'm sorry, my French is rusty."

The young man didn't smile and returned to his notes.

The kid is really a little shit, Greenfield thought as he looked out the window at the black layers of moonlit clouds. Most of them are insufferable little bastards. They take everything so literally. Had he once been that insufferable? No, he hadn't been that insufferable. He took another sip of the wine.

"Where did you go to law school?" he asked his seatmate with his eyes closed. "I'm a lawyer."

The student, annoyed, put down his yellow marker.

"Stanford."

"My name's Joel Greenfield. I'm a corporate lawyer from Chicago."

"I'm Allan."

"OK—you seem to speak French very well."

"No, I don't speak it well. I hear it well."

"You're studying bar review notes."

The young man began underlining again with his yellow marker and suddenly he stood up, took his knapsack down from the rack, and moved to another seat down the aisle. He turned to Greenfield for a moment. "It's like I don't want to talk," he said, and then slouched down in his new seat.

Greenfield didn't answer him. They were all so god-damned earnest and intense. Had he been that earnest and intense? He'd been loose, casual, graceful, and civilized. He sipped his wine again. He'd known the name of Holden Caulfield's brother, (Allie). No one else in the class knew Allie. No one had even known the name of The Catcher. He also knew that Wallace Stevens, a lawyer, had written "The Idea of Order at Key West," which, gentlemen, more or less explained the universe. It also explained why he hadn't finished two of the questions the first time he'd taken the bar exam and had immediately gone underground for four months.

He looked around the plane and rang the bell for the stewardess. Why not a bottle of Hungarian Tokay and some caviar on those good

little crackers Air France served? What was a kid like that doing in First Class anyway? Probably spending more of his parents' money.

He spread the caviar on the cracker and felt the wine beginning to fuzz his mind. It took only about 30 seconds. Everything was absolutely black now out the window. He couldn't tell if he was looking at black clouds or black water.

He wore a black cowboy hat in 1954. He bought it in Amarillo because he knew he hadn't finished the two questions, hadn't even begun the two questions, so he bought a black cowboy hat and wore it home from Amarillo on the trip his parents had given him. Stephen Schwartz's father had bought him a new car and, after the bar, he and Steve had headed west. First, though, they hit St. Paul because Steve knew a girl there. He hadn't told Steve about the two unanswered questions. So he was alone with his shame in St. Paul and with the girl whose face he couldn't remember now. She was still faceless in his memory but he remembered her shoes. Purple suede shoes with brown saddles. Steve was with the laughing, heavy blonde. He remembered the ornate recreation room. Trying to make it with his date on the narrow floral pillowed rattan couch.

And then Omaha, Denver, and across the mountains into New Mexico. Mexican girls in a tavern in the mountains of New Mexico. The sad high-planed serious face of a beautiful Mexican girl. He hadn't bought the hat yet. He bought the hat in Amarillo. Walking the streets of Amarillo in his gray Brooks pinstripe and wearing the new black cowboy hat. It had a red satin lining and the salesman got up on a rolling ladder to bring down the hat box. It was a shiny black box and when he opened it the red lining flashed up at Greenfield like an open wound. All because of two unanswered questions.

Then over the Ozarks slowly heading back to Chicago, wearing the black hat, lighting candles in tiny mountain churches. Kansas City and the hat. St. Louis and the hat and the pale face of his one true law school love who met him in her driveway wearing an engagement ring. She solemnly asked Greenfield into the house. He could see Steve shooting baskets from the window (she'd turned her face away) and he walked back out to the car without looking back at her and roared out of the driveway, jamming into reverse, leaving a rut in her father's expensive pebbles and never once looking back.

He still hadn't told anyone, not Steve, not the Mexican girl, not his lost love in St. Louis, not anyone.

Then Chicago, his anxious parents waiting at the door with the envelope from the board of examiners. Thick, you passed. Thin, you failed. Alone in the backyard with the thin envelope, still wearing the

black hat. Had he cried? He couldn't remember now. It had been so long ago.

He poured another glass of wine and looked out again at the black patterns of clouds. Had he cried? What difference did it make? He tried not to look out the window at God's black patterned handiwork. (What if you fell into one of the crevices, where would you wind up? What if the plane burst apart and all of us were cast out like motes adrift in moonlight?) He smiled. He was good at this. Almost as good as Wallace Stevens. He, Joel Greenfield, who flew in and out of Paris now like a weary minister. He, Joel Greenfield, had the same poetic turn as Stevens, even though his tongue was slightly blurred by the wine, just a tad blurred. He, Joel Greenfield, who maintained a farm he'd named Braemor in Barrington with two gun-metal gray Mercedes with "Braemor" incised in tiny white enameled letters on their front doors.

Why should a kid's remark set him off?

It wasn't the remark. It was the attitude. "It's like I don't want to talk." That supercilious attitude.

He moved into the Y. on Chicago Avenue and for four months practiced his timing with an alarm clock. Hour after hour, working on his timing against the clock like a boxer. Seeing no one, avoiding his classmates. He disappeared and became a non-person. When he surfaced for the next examination he was a machine. He finished each question with at least four minutes to spare. As he left the room on the second day, he knew he'd passed. Six weeks later the thick envelope came and he became a lawyer. He went to Springfield with his parents for the investiture and in their album there was still a photograph of him at the base of the statue of the young Lincoln. Soon after the snapshot, he entered his law firm, now four floors of the Bank of America Building, and had simply neglected to mention the failed examination. He said he'd been in Europe at the time of the summer bar and had returned that February. No one had ever inquired further.

Greenfield didn't speak to the young man again until they landed in Chicago. The law student was cleared to San Francisco and remained seated with his notes on his lap as Greenfield stood in the aisle waiting to exit.

"Allan," he said. "Have you ever heard of Salinger?"

"Who?"

"Salinger. Jerome Salinger?"

"No."

"Do you know Holden Caulfield?"

"Does Caulfield teach at Berkeley?"

"Right."

"I don't know him, but my roommate once went to a conflicts lecture Caulfield gave at Berkeley."

"Good," Greenfield said. "By the way," he touched the young man's yellow-lined notes, "good luck."

In the cab on the way to the office Greenfield thought about why they had called him back again. Jack Podhoretz, the chief tax partner, had died, and he'd been called back from Paris to deal with Jack's widow. They had sealed off Jack Podhoretz's office until Greenfield's arrival. He was the only man in the firm who officially dealt with death. He, Joel Greenfield, was the firm's shredder, the one who went in the office and cleaned it up before the family was admitted. He looked for letters, photographs. Anything the family shouldn't see, he destroyed. He was the only man in the firm who specialized in the cosmetics of death. No matter where Greenfield was—Addis Ababa, Hong Kong, Brussels—whenever a man died the door remained locked until he could fly back and go through the office. He knew where to look for the openings, the cracks, the fissures in a man's character. He could find the hidden stack of ancient love letters, the pornographic photographs, the addresses and phone numbers. He was the firm's Catcher in the Rye. As each of them tumbled over the cliff it was he, Greenfield, who stood waiting to catch them and set them back up again. He arranged their last deceit, healed their last wound, covered their one open fissure. After he had finished, the widow could enter the office and lovingly spend days packing her husband's letters and mementos in cardboard boxes.

He dumped his bags and went down to Jack Podhoretz's office and opened the door. He could smell Jack's pipe tobacco. He sat down at Jack's desk. He had the shredder wheeled in by a gray-jacketed clerk. The man left. *À votre santé. À votre santé.* He still didn't like to be told how to pronounce his French by a punk kid. If the kid was so smart, let him sit in Jack Podhoretz's chair and figure it all out.

He opened Jack's cabinets. Full of unfiled CCH reports. The letters would be close at hand. Probably shoved under the pile of CCH reports. And there they were. He removed a packet of blue envelopes in a delicate handwriting. They were all from the same woman in Albany, postmarked more than 20 years ago. He read one and then ran them all through. He turned them into blue confetti, blue paper ribbons in a plastic bag. They looked like blue entrails in an oxygen tent. The sound of the shredding was barely audible.

Now a photograph. There would be a photograph of her somewhere. Usually in the right-hand drawer, shoved way in back. If the man was right-handed the photograph would be in the right-hand drawer. He

found it immediately. Hidden in an old theater program. She was rather pleasant looking, a bright, expectant, round-faced woman. He looked at her and then ran the photograph through the shredder. There was a slight whirring sound. The kid from Stanford with the yellow marker would some day learn about all this and perhaps be not quite so certain. There would be porno too from the last ten years of Jack's life. You can't be an old tax man without turning into a voyeur. Greenfield sat in Jack's chair and looked around. The letter opener. Of course, the handle of the letter opener. If you stood it on point it cast a shadow on the desk of the figure of a young, pubescent girl, perfectly formed. And the boy? Now where was the boy? The scissors, of course. If you stood the scissors on point, the handle cast a shadow of a tumescent boy. He stood the letter opener and scissors side by side on end and smiled. Oh, Jack Podhoretz, you were a foolish man. Where are you, Jack, a mote somewhere in the universe? Alas, poor Yankele. I saved your ass. He would have to take these playthings away. He put them in his pocket. You see, Allan, the fissures a man falls into, the darkness, the hidden crevices.

