

A F T E R W O R D

Appalachian Trail, Maine
August 17, 2004

Kimberly,

I am writing this beside a lovely, quiet brook to the south of Monson. I have just pitched my tent. The sky is teeming with beautiful stars, though I can make out only a few of them through the treetops. I feel as if I were in the middle of an impressionist painting. Utterly at peace.

It took me two and a half hours to travel the always-enjoyable road from Stonington to Monson. I stopped only once, at Orland, for a Coke, which I drank as I drove along. Just outside of Bangor I was enchanted by the sight of a house flying the flags of the United States, Acadia, and Quebec. Farther north, in Dover-Foxcroft, the sight of hunchback child moved me nearly to tears. He was with his crew, a lively bunch of fifteen-year-old boys who, fortunately, treated him with great consideration, it seemed to me. They carried fishing poles, as they do in Walt Disney movies.

After a stop at the general store in Monson I went into the woods at dusk. I quickly turned on my flashlight. Whenever you walk in the forest at night you are to some extent walking toward yourself. By the way, some oddball is said to have covered the whole length of this trail at night. Walking at night, sleeping by day! There are all sorts of crazy stories about the Appalachian Trail. Recently, a hiker, exhausted and apparently out of his mind, is said to have erected a gate and demanded a five-dollar toll from his fellow backpackers.

This is the first time since 1978, the year I did the whole thing, that I've set foot in the Monson area. So I guess it's what you might call a pilgrimage. Monson is not at all one of those towns that have been prettified for the

tourist trade. You almost expect to see a moose loom up behind every house, every vine-tangled shed, every thicket. And you step back in time when you step onto the creaky floor of the general store where the backpackers get their supplies for the first or last time, depending on whether they've left from Maine or Georgia.

That said, times are hard in Monson. A word about Keith, by way of explanation. Keith's place is where backpackers lay over when they come through Monson. His gargantuan breakfasts and Maine-style chicken have made him famous from one end of the trail to the other. No sooner has a resident of Monson spied a hiker emerging from the woods than he automatically points him in Keith's direction, on Pleasant Street.

That was how things stood, in any case, until a woman on the neighboring street hung a sign over her door: The Pie-Lady's Inn. Since then, life has become intolerable in Monson. The good citizens of the village, who all wish to remain neutral, no longer mix with the backpackers nor even so much as speak to them. Or they pretend to be deaf-mutes, or claim to be on a fishing trip from Portland or Tierra del Fuego. This has obviously had an effect on the hikers themselves. Until the Pie-Lady came on the scene they were all bosom buddies singing the praises of Good Ol' Keith. Now, Kimberly, it's come to strife and even blows. There are the hikers for Keith and the hikers for the Pie-Lady. You'd think it was the Great Pacific Grove Croquet War. Walking sticks are used as truncheons. I counted at least three bodies scattered along the side of the road going out of town. Most hikers want nothing better than to leave that miserable place and plunge back into the brush.

I'm afraid you'll think I'm exaggerating, so let me change the subject. I headed south for a couple of hours. To the shore of a large, dark lake, Hebron Lake, and then on to this pleasant brook. Certain places were alive with echoes. Would you believe me if I told you I knew a man who went through psychotherapy with the echo as his interlocutor? Now he's riding high, and it didn't cost him a cent.

Walking along, I thought of you, as I had done since leaving Stonington, reliving our encounter and shaking my head in disbelief. Not surprisingly, my thoughts occasionally turned to my dad, who passed away last summer at the age of ninety-three. God, how glad he would have been to learn I had finally met you! He was a kind and good man, who cherished the Earth and loved to sing. I miss him terribly. He was pretty sad at the end of his life. I think he was worn out. But there in his casket, as though recalling the divine promise, something in his handsome face, freed from that sadness and tiredness, put me in mind of a sky turning blue again. I'll send you his picture.

I telephoned my mother, from Monson. She sends you her fond regards. Don't hesitate to get in touch with her and to ask for her soup recipes. She had loved my dad since she was sixteen, and with him gone she's been left all alone in her big house in Bord-de-l'Eau. I go to see her every day. Do the maintenance. It's her grandfather's house, all white, made of freestone, girded by a veranda with ornate columns, like in *Gone With The Wind*. I'm a good carpenter, like Joseph, the Virgin Mary's husband. My specialty is repairing things that are beyond repair. I owe that to my father and to his background on the farm, in Saint-Tite. The other day, for instance, instead of replacing the handrail on the second-floor balustrade I scraped away the rot and inserted a butt with screws and glue. Not only is it unnoticeable but it's good for another thirty years. Let me know, dear, if you ever have any problems with your handrail.

Are you aware of the statistics according to which believers are healthier and happier than non-believers? Of course, belief in the afterlife is a source of comfort. But what makes some people believe and others not? In other words, how is it that there are those who *see* the invisible, while others cannot? Doesn't the ability to see the invisible stem, at least in part, from the child's ability to see its parents even when they are not there? The hypothetical link between these two variables is worth investigating. I also believe the austere lifestyle adopted by many believers enhances their ability to gain access to the invisible. The real and sometimes frightening voyage to

the unknown that detachment from worldly pleasures amounts to, not only cures neuroses and many physical ailments by fostering self-esteem and independent thought; it also leads one to new windows, which themselves open onto previously *invisible* landscapes. I should write a paper on the subject. I have to talk about eternity, like Saint Augustine.

By the way, what's become of your writing projects? (Our far too brief meeting allowed me to raise only a millionth of the items on my agenda, if I'd had an agenda.) According to a *Playboy* article on former Playmates, you enriched your life by going to writing workshops, which only confirms what I had already gathered from your beautiful gaze. One thing is certain, however: Your village overlooking the sea must be a source of inspiration for you. Did you know — you, who read so widely — that John Steinbeck stopped in Stonington in the fall of 1960? He mentions this in *Travels with Charley*. After describing the bridge that arcs like a rainbow over the Eggmoggin Canal and takes you across to Deer Isle, he says he can't find the words to portray your village. The place is so fragile, so magical, so atypical of America, he writes in sum, one suspects it might disappear the moment one leaves it.

I believe I understand what you are doing in a village so much at odds with the awful torpor of the American night: You are watching the sea, Kimberly, just as it says on the license plate of your car. You identify with the sea in its role as the sentinel and mirror of humanity. Like the sea, you confound the impostors and strive against the forces of evil. I'm willing to bet you have made enemies by choosing to take the unraveled roads.

Let me review the series of events that led me to Stonington and, through some munificent intervention of Heaven, to your side. I left home yesterday morning after going over to my mother's to give her a kiss and let her know I would be spending a few days wearing out my shoe leather in Maine. In light of all the unanswered letters that I had sent you after finally finding out where you made your nest, there was no question of my knocking at your door nor of contriving to cross your path. My sole desire

was to see that village, with at most the hope of catching a glimpse of you from afar tending your lilies or readying your lobster pots. Never in the world would I have worn my ragged woodsman's gear had I imagined I might actually meet you. Next time I'll put on my blue suit, like Bob Dylan in Rome. And I'll have my black guitar. These days, dear girl, the herd mentality that paves the way for fashion is raging even in the woods. They don't make tough guys like me anymore. There's more to the post-modern backpackers than merely being elegant and counting steps: they use walking sticks the most costly of which are telescopic, and drink from a gourd installed in their backpacks, full of pouches and zippers just like Michael Jackson's jacket. The other day I had to explain to two young hikers fascinated by my old-fashioned knapsack that it dated from 1966. They could not believe it. They thought the world had begun in 1980. But these kids were so sincere I could not hold it against them.

I can't tell you the number of times over the years I asked myself who you were. "What does this woman want? Where is she going? Does she like herself?" There are not many people who like themselves, which is good for the economy, of course, but not for the advancement of the human spirit. I carried your ghost with me into the very depths of the forest, with my soul, wounded in a previous life, feeling for you what Chateaubriand, spilling bitter tears from high atop the clouds, feels for his magician lady in his *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*.

I read that you had been devastated by your brother's death in a road accident. I read that you had the voice of an angel, nourished no doubt by the enduring child in you, and that your favorite singer was Gordon Lightfoot. As promised, I will send you the DVD of the show where we launched *Que la lumière soit, et la musique fut* (*Let There Be Light, And There Was Music*). Wait till you see me as Roy Orbison!

My musician friends and I have lots of fun together. We practice in my brother Jean-François' garage, Buddy Holly style. My brother's children and all the kids in the neighborhood come to our rehearsals. Our motto is "Better

to take yourself for Elvis than to take yourself too seriously." I'm about to tackle two new songs: Don McLean's *American Pie* and the Everly Brothers' *Cryin' in the Rain*, with its opening that simmers like a poisonous brew. I suppose you're aware that Don McLean lives near Bangor, just like Stephen King.

I saw you in that film about Elvis Presley where you play the wife of Joe Esposito. I missed your TV commercials for Kleenex, Merrill Lynch and AT&T, but not *Slumber Party Massacre II* by Jean-Luc Godard. (You yourself have joked about that movie!) I read that you got the leading female role in the television series *Santa Barbara*, and I had a good laugh when I learned that after three months of pure boredom you walked out for good. What goes through your mind in that fishing village of yours propped up against the rocks? Are you searching for God? This brings me back to the sea. For Rousseau, the sea spawns an idea of redemptive power and a sense of rapture akin to mystical ecstasy. For Chateaubriand, its immensity induces a vague desire to quit the world of the living.

After looking for you all over the USA, I found out four years ago that you had gone away from California, where you had lived since leaving Fort Worth, to hole up in Stonington. I thumbed my way to California for the first time in 1963. I was twenty-two, and the notion that life in the late fifties and early sixties was a bowl of cherries is little more than a fairy-tale. Those times were as troubled as any other. Just as pretentious and unpoetical. The heads of state were cooking up an omelet with atomic mushrooms. It was, frankly, a very peculiar period, considering that every left-wing college was also a breeding ground for Palefaces and careerists. I was so angry that I was constantly in tears. And I was burdened by a shyness that made it impossible for me to utter two words in public, which ultimately drove me out of school. My ideas were unfashionable. I felt God's presence in nature, so I was completely unable to fathom the rise of atheism and the taste for materialism, except that they went hand in hand. I crossed Texas two months before Kennedy's assassination on the very day, by some strange twist of fate, none

other than you were born in Fort Worth. That's something we should talk about one of these days.

To come back to what I was saying earlier, I set out from Bord-de-l'Eau yesterday morning. I drove in the rain to the Maine border, and then, under a cheerful sky, all the way to Pittsfield on Interstate 95. That's where I spent the night — in Pittsfield.

It was a moment at once magical and uncertain when, a little after twelve noon, I landed in Stonington. The difficulty of parking my cumbersome old Oldsmobile on that narrow Main Street forced me to backtrack to the top of the hill, on the edge of town, near the Catholic church all in white wood siding, St. Mary Star of the Sea. Virgin Mary is among those watching over God's properties.

There was no question, even without ever mentioning your name, of my enquiring from anyone as to the location of your street. I might have done so had I been in the company of a woman or, better yet, a youngster. "Two men chatting are less suspicious than only one walking along," writes Beaumarchais. All the more so in the United States, land of the Horsepower. The friendly faces of the good people of Stonington in no way changed the fact that I was walking on eggshells. How, without being pegged as a nutcase, do you explain to your peers and ultimately to the police that you are looking for the most beautiful women in all the Milky Way? That said, my kind friend, I quickly found your street. This was so amazing I hardly knew whether or not I was dreaming. There were only three houses on the street, which made the lack of house numbers in Stonington less of a problem.

For the next few hours there I was, looking for all the world like a schizophrenic, walking back and forth along that unchangingly silent and deserted street. From time to time, so as not to raise suspicions, I paused innocently to look out in the distance, toward the ocean and the Isle au Haut, using my hand as a visor, Indian-style. Otherwise, when I wasn't pacing up and down Main Street I was either at the ice cream parlor, like a sixteen-year-old, or sitting in front of the post office. Stonington was my dream.

I was somewhat heavy-hearted when, after four hours of leisurely rambling, I finally made my way back to the car. But I had seen your very blue sea, your village, and your house, so something had been gained. Sooner or later, albeit in a life to come, I would end up holding you in my arms. I wanted to go into the church, to whisper something in the Virgin Mary's ear, but it was closed. I climbed into my car, turned on the ignition and, rather than bearing right, I instinctively went left for one last look around.

How did it happen? How did the apparition come about? As I told you in person, darling, our cars crossed paths just as you turned right off of Main Street. I glimpsed you in profile, like a portrait by Raphael. It took me an instant to realize it might be you, and another instant to veer left and fall in behind you. Oh, my, my!

It was when you emerged from the drive-in teller at the bank — I had quietly pulled up just opposite — that things took a turn worthy of a great novel. You smiled at me, Kimberly. Do you smile at everyone like that? I thought it might be on account of the chrome on my Oldsmobile. In any case, everything told me it was you. You made things simple not just by smiling at me but by heading toward the harbor rather than toward Main Street and then stopping sixty yards down the road.

No matter how much I told myself there was nothing to be afraid of — at worst, getting my skull rapped with a lobster pot buoy — my heart was pounding like a drum when, having walked up to the open door of the shed where you were busy with something, I said hello. Hearing you reply in a friendly voice calmed me down, along with the sight of the '47 Ford and the '53 Chevrolet pick-up inside those walls: What fantastic conversation pieces! And so, McArthur, we talked cars. There was a fashionable theory in the late sixties according to which, when two people meet for the first time the first four minutes of conversation are decisive. Your knowledge of mechanics impressed me just as much as your flawless diction and your uninhibited smile. I could not get over seeing you in front of me: titian hair, eyes alive

with curiosity, dazzling white teeth, and, well, a silhouette that had lost none of the grace of the centerfold days. I'll never forget that you even went to the trouble of opening the hood of the Ford just for my benefit.

I can see us again, facing each other like a couple of cedar waxwings: it was when I told you the Chevrolet pick-up reminded me of an old love of mine, a '54 Pontiac Chieftain that I had driven for twenty years, that you, being your curious little self, wondered out loud whether I might not hail from other parts. To which I replied that I was from Quebec, prompting you to utter a thoughtful "hmmm," as might be expected under the circumstances. The ensuing exchange, strung together like something out of Shakespeare, will go on resonating in my ears until the end of time: "Are you Kimberly?" "Yes!" "Please don't be angry with me. Guess who I am." "You're André."

To hold to my breast my sagacious sister and my muse, my star and my prophet — surely one of the most stupendous experiences of my life! And that I acted spontaneously and that you responded with joyous laughter only added to the historic scene.

This strange fantasy that I have nurtured about you for two decades might have plunged me into darkness and ultimately destroyed me if I had not sublimated it. I had in mind at first to write a kind of elegy, as in the time of Ronsard. Later, the idea came to me of a novel whose protagonist would be a mad monk. He was to be depicted with a breviary containing the images of the two most beautiful women in all creation, the Holy Virgin and you; a novel with psychoanalytical undertones, laying out side by side the physical, affective, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality. Raging battles and slabs of sky crashing down. The writer André Maurois says of the saint and the artist that both, through struggle and temptation, are lifted to a higher spirituality. Jack Kerouac says the same thing with different words in *Desolation Angels*.

Our culture is massively visual and massively pornographic. There is little that encourages the interior vision, the mystical quest. No civilization has sought visual pleasure as much as ours. When it comes to the unadorned spectacle of nature, human beings have grown jaded. The condemnation of

pornography is an issue not just for the Church and our grandmothers. The Ancients considered the eye a suspicious organ, one that distracts people.

There is nothing we do not do to demean sexuality, to desecrate it, to divest it of its non-physical dimensions. We swagger over it. We talk about it as though it were an incident one night at the fair. We define it based on the testimony of Joe Blow. The hedonists enjoy great popularity. They can be seen on TV, coolly spouting their unspeakable stories. We know everything about these phony rebels, everything about these individuals who are bored to death, but nothing about what Kerouac referred to as the “Redskin” thinkers, Kimberly. It’s not sexual repression that’s at the root of neurosis, but the repression of the need to surpass oneself.

I would have liked to discuss these matters with Sigmund Freud, who completely dismisses spiritual intuition. Or with the king of shallow thinking, your former boss Hugh Hefner, when I was introduced to him in a Los Angeles hotel in 2001. But he was among his courtiers, and it was not the right time. I mentioned your name as I presented him with a signed copy of *Kimberly* in English, explaining that it was the first novel ever published with a Playboy Playmate as its premise. For a guy who has seen everything he appeared to be taken aback. His way of holding the book and of looking at it was akin to that of a country dweller examining a sample of Martian soil.

The years have not been kind to old King Hefner. In my view he was never possessed of the sort of intelligence nor of the self-esteem needed to understand the myth that he himself had created. As a result, the myth has turned against him. One thing is certain: the man has something to do with the Playmate’s looking less and less like Marilyn Monroe and more and more like a porn star. Let it be said in passing that some of the Playmates I’ve had the opportunity to meet through this whole adventure gave me the impression of being quite unhappy.

Like Hefner with *Playboy*, I have made enemies in both camps with my novel: the religious right and the intellectual left, always uncomfortable with the theme of the mother. The publisher who held first reading rights on the

manuscript of *Kimberly, Mother of God* refused to publish it and sputtered arguments obviously rooted in political correctness. The head of another publishing house accepted the manuscript. However, the feminist with the water bottle who replaced him two months later not only refused to honor the contract, but wanted on top of that to charge me five dollars for sending back the manuscript! The courts, which saw things differently, sentenced her to compensate me to the tune of several thousand dollars, a rather inauspicious start to the little lady's career. Aren't the Quebec literati something else!

I went to Los Angeles twice in the space of a few weeks. Dianne Chandler, a Playmate from the sixties whom I had met in Atlanta through my efforts to approach Playboy, had opened a couple of doors. Victoria Valentino, who was born in Hollywood, later took up the baton. Inside me, naiveté and the certainty that *Kimberly* was a worthwhile thing were intertwined. You surely know that nobody shows up in Los Angeles without at least believing that he can reach out his hand and pluck the stars from the sky.

John Irving read the book. He sent it to Mark Steven Johnson of Horseshoe Bay Productions. That's in Burbank. It's a subsidiary of Walt Disney. In 1998 Johnson wrote and directed *Simon Birch*, based on Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Until now, there have been no other developments.

To come back to Victoria, have you heard about her series of TV interviews with women, out of Van Nuys, California? I was able one night to sit in on the recording of the interview with Dolores Del Monte, the third Playmate after Marilyn Monroe. She told how her youngest son, while flipping through *Playboy's* 25th anniversary edition with his merry band of university buddies, discovered she had been a Playmate. She is a gentle, discreet woman who speaks kindly of other people. Two years ago, the astronaut Rick Linnehan carried aboard the space shuttle Columbia a small reproduction of the Playmate of the Month photo of his old friend Dolores.

Victoria comes from a family of highly talented artists. After her stint as a Playmate she tried her hand at folk singing. Her sister played bass for Lindsey Buckingham when he went on tour after leaving Fleetwood Mac. All this goes some way to explaining why she came from Los Angeles to sing with us at the Club Soda. She had never rehearsed with us, except over the telephone! And she had hardly stepped off the airplane when she learned that her mother had been rushed to Intensive Care back home. It seemed to confirm that when it rains it pours, just as in Bord-de-l'Eau. Fortunately, her mother's condition stabilized. We were all half dead when we arrived at the Soda. Then, in an incident much like what happened to Fats Domino when he crashed through the floorboards of the stage some years ago, our bass-player went for a spill just before the start of the show and had to play sitting down with his foot in an ice-pack. We're still laughing about it.

Victoria is at one and the same time very funny and very British aristocrat. She loves books and history. She says her Playmate status has thwarted her career plan to become the first female president of the United States. At the Club Soda she followed Roberta Flack's *Killing Me Softly with His Song* with Arlo Guthrie's *City of New Orleans*. Her resonant voice is comparable to Marianne Faithfull's on *Broken English*. Her staging is in the Hollywood style: arms swinging and hands trembling. It's like watching a preacher from North Carolina or Alabama.

Victoria does not know you. Nor Dianne Chandler. But Debi Nicolle Johnson, whom I also met in Los Angeles, and who was a Playmate in 1984, lights up when she talks about you. At one point, a few of your fellow Playmates and I came up with the idea of creating a *Playmate Forum* in response to the magazine's *Playboy Forum*. Because the Devil is on the loose, Kimberly. The unbelievable regression that goes hand in hand with materialism and the pathological quest for physical pleasure does more than rob us of any deep feelings of safety; it does more than leave our children perplexed: it jeopardizes our planet Earth.

I can't wait to tell Susie Scott Krabacher that I have met you. I am sure she will want to call you and rekindle the friendship she had for you back then. She has been working in Haiti for ten years now. Her foundation, which employs a hundred and forty Haitians, provides over two thousand children with a daily meal and drinking water. It houses, feeds, and cares for a hundred and sixty newborns, orphans, and physically or mentally handicapped children. It supplies eight elementary schools with textbooks and library books. This Susie has shown courage: of late, bullets fired by the Chimères have on several occasions whistled past her ears.

I try to support her work, as well as my brother Alain's among the children in the slums of Manila in the Philippines. A friend of mine, one of the very few individuals I know who are at peace with the idea of death, such is the strength of her faith, once told me, "When you feel bad, André, go out for a walk or a bicycle ride, and give to charity."

I am having trouble staying awake, Kimberly. The murmur of the brook is lulling me like a cradlesong. My fire is burning down. Lord, what a day!

I return to John Steinbeck. In *Sweet Thursday* there is a passage reminiscent of the thoughts I've exchanged over the years with some friends who are psychiatrists and who have wondered about the underlying reasons for my attachment to you. The scene is set in the California so dear to Steinbeck. Doc, the hero of the novel, is talking to a character with "the lively, innocent eyes of a healthy baby", a tattered pair of overalls and a straw hat containing two large holes, "proof that it had once been the property of a horse".

He is a seer, writes Steinbeck, and he says in a soft voice:

"I saw a mermaid last night. You remember, there was a half moon and a thin drifting mist. There was color in the night, not like the black and gray and white of an ordinary night. Down at the end of the beach a shelf of rock reaches out, and the tide was low so that there was a smooth bed of kelp. She swam to the edge and then churned her tail, like a salmon leaping a rapid.

And then she lay on the kelp bed and made dancing figures with her white arms and hands. She didn't go away until the rising tide covered the kelp bed."

"Was she a dream? Did you imagine her?"

"I don't know. But if I did I'm proud that I could imagine anything so beautiful."

Good night, Kimberly.

André