Interviews

Gay Talese, The Art of Nonfiction No. 2

Interviewed by Katie Roiphe

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In order to get to Gay Talese's study you have to leave his Upper East Side town house and go down the elegantly curling stairs, into another entrance, with another set of keys, and down another flight of steps. The bunker, as he calls it, is a long, narrow room that is bigger than many Manhattan apartments, with a bathroom, shower, kitchen, several couches, two desks, a table and chairs. One does not, however, lose the feeling of being underground. One also has the unmistakable sense of being inside his mind.

There are shelves running up to the ceiling filled with boxes and boxes of files. Each box is elaborately festooned with a collage: photographs from newspapers and magazines, excised words, drawings, cartoons. The files contain notes for all of Talese's books and articles, clippings, outlines, letters. The collages make the cardboard boxes look whimsical, childlike, flamboyant; there is a joy here that most of us can't muster for file keeping.

Strewn across one of the desks are Ziploc sandwich baggies filled with photographs and meticulously typewritten labels with names and dates. Spilled across the floor are more photographs of his glamorous wife, Nan, and their friends, throughout the five decades of their marriage. Talese is beginning to classify his photographs for his new book, a history of his marriage, and the mess is part of the vast organizational project that marks the beginning of his research. Few writers research as thoroughly or ardently as Talese, who gives nine or ten years of his life to a book. He has records of every day—where he was, who he saw, and how he felt. The photographs will be correlated with those records and placed into files, organized by year. As one can tell by the collages decorating the file boxes, the record keeping is more than just boxes of notes; it's the creative act itself.

Each time we meet, in the early afternoon after he has come up from the bunker, Talese is always beautifully dressed. He is so beautifully dressed that strangers will talk to him in the street, that waiters and hostesses in restaurants will want to do things for him, like find a special place to put his hat. Talese's father was a tailor, his mother ran a successful dress shop, and he says his first idea of how to be special was through clothing. His suits are made by a tailor in Paris, whose father trained his father. When Talese tells me that he sometimes goes to the gym in the afternoon I am tempted for a moment to ask what he wears, but I don't want to blur or complicate the image of him—bespoke suit, vest, pocket square, colored shirt with a white collar, cuff links—that I have in my head.

The care and formality of his appearance carries through into his writing. Talese works at a desk with an enormous computer on it, but the machine looks decades old; it is the computer of someone who views the computer as a more convenient form of typewriter, and

even that with reluctance. Talese does not use the Internet. Talese does not have e-mail. In situations where other people would send an e-mail, he will send a typewritten postcard. On the wall above his desk is a white Styrofoam board where he pins up the pages he has written, notes to himself, and ideas in progress.

Now seventy-seven years old, Talese occupies the strange position of being both legendary and misunderstood. His innovation was to apply techniques from the craft of fiction to his newspaper and magazine stories, giving them the shape and life of short stories—a style, later referred to as New Journalism, which he originated in his days as a *New York Times* reporter in the fifties. He gained attention with his artful magazine pieces for *Esquire* in the sixties, including "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," which the editors later selected as their best piece in seventy years. Since then, he has written many books, including *The Kingdom and the Power* (1969), about the *Times*; *Honor Thy Father* (1971), about the mafia; and *Unto the Sons* (1992), about his Italian family's history, all of which have the richness of novels. His method is to go as deeply as possible into character, to burrow into a single psyche, as a way of capturing the spirit of the times. Despite Talese's success and his vast influence on several generations of nonfiction writers, book reviewers have tended to attack his work with an unusual ferocity. A whiff of scandal still lingers from *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1980), his best-selling study of the sexual revolution in the seventies. Attacked by critics and feminists out of a belief that there was something illicit, or even perverse, in his methods—managing a massage parlor, joining a swingers' retreat—the book is recognized today as a masterpiece of cultural observation. Talese lives his books in a way most writers don't; he uproots himself and inhabits the world of his subjects in a way most writers can't. His books are so thorough, and so passionately researched, that they seem to reproach ordinary journalists for a certain tepidness and restraint in their approach.

Over the course of many afternoons we sat together in his beige living room, on tufted leather couches, and drank glass after glass of Coke. I saw right away how difficult it must have been for his subjects to resist his combination of charm and intensity. The journalist in him appeared eager to take over: he often corrected or steered my questions, which were not always rigorous enough for him. At times it almost seemed that he would have preferred interviewing himself. With company, of course.

INTERVIEWER

How does your writing day begin?

GAY TALESE

Usually I wake up in bed with my wife. I don't want to have breakfast with anyone. So I go from the third floor, which is our bedroom, to the fourth floor, where I keep my clothes. I get dressed as if I'm going to an office. I wear a tie.

INTERVIEWER

Cuff links?

TALESE

Yes. I dress as if I'm going to an office in midtown or on Wall Street or at a law firm, even

though what I am really doing is going downstairs to my bunker. In the bunker there's a little refrigerator, and I have orange juice and muffins and coffee. Then I change my clothes.

INTERVIEWER

Again?

TALESE

That's right. I have an ascot and sweaters. I have a scarf.

INTERVIEWER

Do you like that the bunker doesn't have windows?

TALESE

Yes. There are no doors, no time. It used to be a wine cellar.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write?

TALESE

Longhand at first. Then I use the typewriter.

INTERVIEWER

You never write directly onto the computer?

TALESE

Oh no, I couldn't do that. I want to be forced to work slowly because I don't want to get too much on paper. By the end of the morning I might have a page, which I will pin up above my desk. After lunch, around five o'clock, I'll go back to work for another hour or so.

INTERVIEWER

Surely there must be some days in the middle of a project, when you're really going, that you write more than a single page.

TALESE

No, there aren't.

INTERVIEWER

But your books are so long.

TALESE

I take a long time. I have published relatively little given how long I have been working. Over fifty-five years I've only written five long books, two short ones, and four collections. It's not that many.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because you spend a lot of time editing?

TALESE

Not really. I type and I retype. When I think I'm getting close, that's when I put it on the computer. Once it's on the screen I make very few changes. It's the reporting that takes so much time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you use notebooks when you are reporting?

TALESE

I don't use notebooks. I use shirt boards.

INTERVIEWER

You mean the cardboard from dry-cleaned shirts?

TALESE

Exactly. I cut the shirt board into four parts and I cut the corners into round edges, so that they can fit in my pocket. I also use full shirt boards when I'm writing my outlines. I've been doing this since the fifties.

INTERVIEWER

So all day long you're writing your observations on shirt boards?

TALESE

Yes, and at night I type out my notes. It is a kind of journal. But not only my notes—also my observations.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by observations?

TALESE

I mean my personal observations, what I myself was thinking and feeling during the day when I was meeting people and seeing things and making notes on shirt boards. When I'm typing at night, on ordinary pieces of typing paper, I'm not only dealing with my daily research, but also with what I've seen and felt that day. What I'm doing as a researching writer is always mixed up with what I'm feeling while doing it, and I keep a record of this. I'm always part of the assignment. This will be evident to anyone who reads my typed notes.

I uncovered a good example of this recently when I was looking through some old files from the sixties. I had just gotten to the Beverly Wilshire in Los Angeles to begin researching my piece on Frank Sinatra. I hear a knock on the door. It's the night chambermaid. She comes in to turn down the bed and to place a piece of chocolate on the pillow. And this chambermaid is gorgeous. She's a strong, lean woman from Guatemala, about twenty-two years old, who speaks English with a heavy accent and wears a wonderful striped skirt. I have a conversation with her. Then I find myself writing about these women who work for the Beverly Wilshire, many of them quite beautiful, and most of them from faraway places, who each day are immersed in the luxurious and privileged lifestyles of the hotel's guests. So here I'm supposed to be working on Frank Sinatra, but this whole drama about hotel rooms and chambermaids, that's in there too.

INTERVIEWER

Are you equally interested in everyone you meet?

TALESE

One of the key facts of my life is that I was raised not in the home, but in a store. My father had been an apprentice to his cousin, a famous tailor in Paris who had movie stars and leading politicians as clients. My father left Paris in 1920 on a ship to Philadelphia. He hated Philadelphia and developed a respiratory problem, and someone suggested he move to the seashore.

In Ocean City, New Jersey, he bought an old store on Asbury Avenue, the main business

street, and he opened the Talese Town Shop. On one side of the store he set up a tailor shop. On the other side my mother, who had grown up in an Italian American neighborhood in Park Slope, Brooklyn, opened a dress shop. Above the store my parents had an apartment.

The tailor business never really worked out. The craftsmen were fine, but there weren't quite enough people in Ocean City who wanted to pay for handmade suits. So my mother became the wage earner. All the money we made was because of my mother selling dresses. She was successful because she had a way of getting women to talk about themselves. Her customers were, for the most part, large women, women who did not go to the beach in the summertime. My mother would give them clothes to try on that made them look better than they thought they had any right to look. She wasn't a hustler. She made her sales because they trusted her and liked her, and she liked them back. I was there a lot—folding the dress boxes, dusting the counters, doing chores—and I learned a lot about the town by eavesdropping. These women, telling my mother their private stories, gave me an idea of a larger world.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write as a child?

TALESE

There was a weekly newspaper in Ocean City, the *Sentinel-Ledger*, and its editor, Lorin Angevine, occasionally visited my father's store. As a freshman in high school I decided I wanted to write stories, and my father suggested that I go see him. Mr. Angevine said that I could write a column called "High School Highlights," so long as I could find enough news about school activities to fill it out.

I didn't fit in at high school. I didn't look like the other students and I certainly didn't dress like them, in their mackinaw jackets. My father made my clothes, and I was overly well dressed. But the column gave me an excuse to talk to others. It was not unlike my mother talking with the wealthy women in her dress shop. Doing journalism made me feel that, even if I wasn't part of their group, I had a right to be there.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read much as a child?

TALESE

I read what my parish priest would call trashy fiction. The wonderful and risqué Frank Yerby—a black writer from Georgia who lived in Spain. I was reading some New Yorker writers when I was in college. That's when I came across William Faulkner, Irwin Shaw, John O'Hara, and John Cheever.

INTERVIEWER

How did you end up going to college in Alabama?

TALESE

It was a school that I could get into. I had bad grades in high school. I was turned down by every college in the region, and before I knew it, it was late summer. One of my father's customers was a physician, Aldrich Crowe, who had been born in Birmingham and graduated from the University of Alabama medical school. He made a call on my behalf, and a few weeks later I received an acceptance letter.

I enjoyed my time there and I passed. I was worried about keeping my grades up. If I flunked I would have lost my student deferment. I would've been sent to Korea.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose journalism as a major?

TALESE

The main reason was that it seemed like the easiest thing to do. But my big journalistic break happened when I befriended a guy named Jimmy Pinkston. Close to graduation, Jimmy said to me, If you ever go to New York you ought to look up my cousin, Turner Catledge, he's the managing editor of The New York Times. So when I graduated in the summer of 1953, the first thing I did was take a bus to New York. I walked into the New York Times building. The receptionist there said, What can I do for you, young man? I said, I'd like to say hello to Mr. Turner Catledge. Do you have an appointment? No. He said, Well, Mr. Catledge is very busy. Why are you here? I said, I know his cousin.

The receptionist looked at me like I was some kind of lunatic, but I was dressed very well—in clothes made by my father—so at least I was a well-dressed lunatic. After six hours, I got in to see Mr. Catledge. He asked, What brings you to New York? I said, Well, I'm a friend of your cousin. He said, And who might that be, if you don't mind my asking? I said, James Pinkston. Catledge looked at me and there was no expression on his face. I thought, That Jimmy Pinkston was so distantly related that Catledge never even knew he was his cousin. But he hired me anyway, as a copy boy. So that's how I began: getting people coffee and sandwiches, running errands. And after a week and a half my first piece was published in the paper.

INTERVIEWER

What was the piece?

TALESE

The copy boys had to go at night to Times Square to wait for the arrival of the late-evening tabloids, which we'd deliver to the editors so that they could see what the other newspapers were reporting. While I was waiting in Times Square one night I became transfixed by that electronic news ticker scrolling around three of the sides of the old New York Times building. Fifteen thousand lightbulbs spelling out that day's headlines, in five-foot-high letters. I wondered, How do they do that?

After I delivered the papers I had some free time, so I went back to the old Times building and I climbed the stairs until I found a door open on the fourth floor. Behind it was a man standing on a ladder, holding what looked like an accordion. I said, Excuse me, I'm a copy boy, and I was just wondering, what are you doing? He said, I'm doing the headlines. I asked him how he did it. He said, They call me and read me the headlines, and I type them into this device here, and it makes the bulbs light up in the right way. He said he'd been working there for twenty-five years. I asked him what his first big headline was, and he said, Oh, election night, 1928. HERBERT HOOVER BEATS AL SMITH. I asked him if I could come back with a notepad and interview him about his career and some of the famous headlines he'd written, and he agreed.

One of the good things about being a copy boy was that you got to know a lot of people on the staff. Especially if you were polite. I had good manners, thanks to growing up in the store—a reverential attitude toward the customer. So I approached Meyer Berger, one of the famous reporters on the paper at the time and a wonderful, generous man. He said I could write up the piece on his typewriter and show it to him. I did, and he liked it. He showed it to his editor, and soon it was published, without a byline, on the editorial page.

INTERVIEWER

That took a lot of confidence.

TALESE

Well I didn't have great confidence in myself because I had nobody, really, who had confidence in me. I always think of John Updike, who had tremendous confidence in himself because his mother said, You're the greatest little shit in the world. You're so

wonderful, wonderful, wonderful—and he believed it. David Halberstam too—his mother told him he was the greatest shit in the world and he believed it. He had a tremendous sense of self. In his mind he was Charles de Gaulle. My mother never told me I was the greatest, my father never did either. They were very critical. I felt that I had to prove something to them. Neither they nor anyone else gave me the sense that I was gifted.

INTERVIEWER

When did you realize that you had talent?

TALESE

Never. All I have is intense curiosity. I have a great deal of interest in other people and, just as importantly, I have the patience to be around them.

INTERVIEWER

What happened after you were promoted to become a regular reporter at the Times?

TALESE

My first job was on the sports desk, but I didn't want to write about sporting events. I wanted to write about people. I wrote about a losing boxer, a horse trainer, and the guy in the boxing ring who rang the bell between rounds. I was interested in fiction. I wanted to write like Fitzgerald. I collected his work—his short stories and journals. "Winter Dreams" is my favorite story of all time. The good nonfiction writers were writing about famous people, or topical people, or public people. No one was writing about unknown people. I knew I did not want to be on the front page. On the front page you're stuck with the news. The news dominates you. I wanted to dominate the story. I wanted to pick subjects that were not the ordinary assignment editor's idea of a story. My idea was to use some of the techniques of a fiction writer: scene setting, dialogue, and even interior monologue, if you knew your people well enough. I was writing short stories, and there were not many people on the Times who were doing that. Once, at an NYU baseball game, I overheard a conversation between a young couple who were having a lovers' quarrel. I wrote the dialogue and I told the story of the game through what they were watching and what they were saying. At the St. Patrick's Day parade, I wrote about the last person in the procession, a little guy who was carrying a tuba, and behind him came the sanitation trucks. I followed the parade from the vantage point of this tuba player.

INTERVIEWER

What was the reaction to your work from the editors or the other writers? These were obviously uncommon stories in *The New York Times* of that period.

TALESE

First of all they thought I was faking. They'd say I was writing fiction. I'd say, I'm not writing fiction. I was very careful to be accurate. In the ten years that I worked as a newspaper reporter I never made a mistake that warranted a correction. Sometimes I'd get in the paper, sometimes my pieces got killed. But I wanted to write, not report.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write as slowly and carefully then as you do now?

TALESE

All the other reporters of my generation would come back from an assignment and be done with their piece in a half hour. For the rest of the afternoon they'd be reading books or playing cards or drinking coffee in the cafeteria, and I was always very much alone. I didn't carry on conversations during those hours. I just wanted to make my article perfect, or as good as I could get it. So I rewrote and rewrote, feeling that I needed every minute of the working day to improve my work. I did this because I didn't believe that it was just

journalism, thrown away the next day with the trash. I always had a sense of tomorrow. I never turned in anything more than two minutes before deadline. It was never easy, I felt I had only one chance. I was working for the paper of record, and I believed that what I was doing was going to be part of a permanent history.

It had better be good too, because my name was on it. I've always thought that. I think this came from watching my father work on suits. I was impressed by how carefully he would sew, and he never made much money, but I thought he was the real thing. His name was on those suits—the buttons couldn't fall off tomorrow. They had to look great, had to fit well, and had to last. His business wasn't profitable, but from him I learned that I wanted to be a craftsman.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you leave the *Times* to write for *Esquire*?

TALESE

I could not contain myself within the twelve-hundred-word limit of daily journalism. Wherever I was, I thought that there were stories that other people weren't telling. When I was going into professional athletes' locker rooms, for instance, I would just listen to the chatter and look at the bodies of these men who had been in locker rooms with other men since they were little boys. There'd be other sports writers there, and they'd be asking the athletes questions about their performance in that night's game, but I thought, No, there's a different story here. These men are fascinating not as performers but in the way in which they mingle together. They're freer with each other than homosexual men in a bathhouse. These other reporters didn't even see the story, they just saw their job. Yet because it was a daily newspaper I was always being pulled away from these stories. I couldn't do them at any real depth. That was really why I couldn't do the job anymore.

At the same time, in the mid-sixties, Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin were having fun at the *Herald Tribune*. They were able to write what they wanted to write and I wished I had that kind of freedom. I was getting a lot of freedom by the standards of the *Times*, but not compared to them. I wanted more room and I wanted to go anywhere I wanted.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think of those other writers?

TALESE

The man I greatly admire is Tom Wolfe. I knew him pretty early on, when he was at the *Herald Tribune* and I was at the Times. We were friends and he often came to dinner. Stylistically, Wolfe is incomparable. He's a unique person, a great reporter, and a wonderful writer.

I don't put Breslin or Hunter S. Thompson at that level. I never felt competitive with Breslin. I thought he was unnecessarily rude. He's turned that rudeness into a kind of marketable manifestation of his mentality. Thompson was out there. He was playing music that a lot of people understood, but I didn't get it. I liked some of his work and I read some of his books. I met him maybe twice and I have no ill feeling toward him. I was watching a recent documentary about Thompson and a friend pointed out to me that he had a copy of *The Kingdom and the Power* on his bookshelf. So I decided that I should have thought more highly of Hunter S. Thompson.

INTERVIEWER

Did you think of yourself as part of the movement commonly called New Journalism?

TALESE

Wolfe in his book on New Journalism honors me by calling me one of the founders. But I

never gave any thought to New Journalism. I never felt that I was part of a category of new people doing new things. I wanted to write like Fitzgerald.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel competitive with novelists?

TALESE

Yes, I do. Journalism is not given much respect. Journalists themselves, particularly in my generation, didn't take their jobs very seriously. I take it very seriously. This is a craft. This is an art form. I'm writing stories, just like fiction writers, only I use real names. If you chopped my books into single chapters, each one could be a stand-alone short story. You could take the chapter about McCandlish Phillips in *The Kingdom and the Power*, Garibaldi in *Unto the Sons*, and Harold Rubin in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, and they would work together as a short-story collection.

Nonfiction writers are second-class citizens, the Ellis Island of literature. We just can't quite get in. And yes, it pisses me off.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever try to write fiction?

TALESE

I wrote one short story and it was published in 1967 by *Mademoiselle*. I have a nice letter from the fiction editor about it. But I never wrote another piece of fiction. I thought nonfiction was one area where I could do things that others were not doing. There are so many great short-story writers and playwrights and novelists, but there were not many really wonderful nonfiction writers. I thought I'd rather be one of those.

INTERVIEWER

Your piece "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" is often singled out as the classic work of New Journalism. How did that assignment come about?

TALESE

Harold Hayes, my editor at *Esquire*, said, I have your next piece: Sinatra. I told him I didn't want to do it. Sinatra had been done to death. I mean, Christ, another piece on Sinatra? But Hayes is a strong person with a polite manner who got his way. So I go to the Beverly Wilshire in Los Angeles and I call Sinatra's press agent, Jim Mahoney. He says Frank's not feeling well. He has a cold. Mahoney is also not happy about other things. He's unhappy about this rumor that Sinatra is friends with organized crime figures. Mahoney says, We may want you to sign an agreement saying we can see the piece first. I say, I can't do that. He says, Then we might not have a deal. At the end of the week, I'm still in the hotel room, and Mahoney calls to ask me what I'm doing. I say, I'm waiting for you to call me. How's Frank feeling? Well, he's not very good. I say, He still has a cold? He says, Yes, he still has a cold. He brings up the agreement issue again, and again I say that's a problem. He says, I understand you've been seeing people. Yes, I've been seeing people. You've been seeing some of Frank's friends? I say, I don't know if they're Frank's friends, but I've been seeing people. He asks me, How long are you going to be doing this? I don't know, I say, and then he hangs up.

That night I'm sitting at a bar around ten o'clock, watching people, and sure enough I notice Frank Sinatra sitting down the corner of the bar with two blondes. Sinatra goes to play pool and I witness a scene between Sinatra and a guy named Harlan Ellison, and I write it down on a shirt board. But I don't get it all, so I go up to Ellison and ask him if I can talk to him the next day. He gives me his phone number and address. When we speak in person I ask him not just what everyone said, but what he was thinking. I always ask people what was on their mind. Were you surprised by Sinatra? Had you met him before? Did you think he

was going to hit you, or did you want to pop him?

Then someone I knew had a secretary who had gone to school with Sinatra's daughter Nancy. She told me this great story about how she went to this party at the Sinatras' house. At the party she accidentally knocks off from the mantle an alabaster bird. And little Nancy says, Oh no, that's my mother's favorite. Then Frank Sinatra knocks the other one off.

I called Floyd Patterson, whom I'd written a piece about in *Esquire*, because I knew Sinatra was going to see him in a fight in Las Vegas. He got me tickets to the fight and I just followed Sinatra around. I was in touch with Floyd because when I finish a story, I don't finish a story. I keep in touch with the people I write about. I did that even as a young sports writer just starting out, twenty-five years old. I keep in touch because I always think that there might be more. The stories go on.

So I was getting little things like that. I called Harold Hayes, my editor, almost every day. He asked me how it was going. I said, I'm out here getting things. Harold never asked me if I wanted to come home and I never thought of asking him if I could leave.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever make eye contact with Sinatra?

TALESE

Yes, I'm sure he knew who I was, but he didn't talk to me. I wasn't asking him for any favors but I was interviewing a lot of so-called minor characters. I specialize in minor characters. When I finally got back to New York I looked up Jilly Rizzo, a saloon owner who was close to Sinatra. He took me to see Sinatra's parents in New Jersey. That was a great opportunity for me, because Sinatra's mother was friendly and she told me about his relationship with Ava Gardner. I have to believe that Sinatra gave her permission to speak with me, because otherwise I doubt she would have seen me. Both Sinatra and I were cooperating with each other without acknowledging it. In other words, I was not asking for an interview, and he wasn't saying, Don't write about me. It was a funny little dance.

I turned in the piece at roughly a hundred pages. They didn't change a word. When it came out it wasn't like, Oh, this is one of the great pieces of all time. It was just another piece.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think of it?

TALESE

I thought it was OK. I still don't think it was my greatest piece. I thought "Mr. Bad News," about the obituary writer at *The New York Times*, was better. I think I did a better piece on Muhammad Ali as well. I didn't talk to him at all. As with Sinatra, I relied on minor characters. And I love the piece on Peter O'Toole. He was the smartest interview I ever had. It was the only time I felt like I could really talk to a person I was writing about. O'Toole was one of the first magazine pieces I wrote where I didn't have minor characters who carried the story.

It's funny, half of what I was writing, which sometimes gets into anthologies, like "Sinatra," or "The Loser," about Floyd Patterson, I don't think anyone would publish today. I remember getting a call a few months ago from a friend telling me that I was going to receive the George Polk Award for lifetime achievement. My friend said that he wanted to tell the news to the folks at *Esquire*. I said, *Esquire*? I don't write for *Esquire* anymore. He said, But you did "Sinatra." I said, That was forty years ago. I'm not putting myself down, but the truth is that the kind of magazine pieces I used to do are not published in magazines anymore.

INTERVIEWER

Really? Why not?

TALESE

Last year *Esquire* had an anniversary issue. I thought I might have the chance to do some piece for it—even though I don't think the magazine is that good any more. So I proposed a new piece on O'Toole. They didn't want it. In fact, I never even received a response from the editor.

I knew things had changed in the magazine world around 1996. After many years of not writing a magazine piece, I was given an assignment by *The Nation* to write about the first meeting between Muhammad Ali and Fidel Castro in Havana. I turned it in, and they said it wasn't right for them. It was too long. So I offered it to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *Commentary*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*—all rejections. I said to myself, What the hell? This is a good piece. It would've been published in a second in 1967. Finally the articles editor of *Esquire* asked to see it again. They wanted it cut, and I refused. They held it for a while, but finally they published it.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think the magazine industry worked so differently forty years ago?

TALESE

When I came of age, in the post–World War II era, a lot of the young men who wanted to become journalists dreamed of being foreign correspondents. I never did, because I thought, This is a foreign country right here. The civil-rights movement, the antiwar movement, the cultural revolution, gay rights, feminism—the newness of it all made our own nation seem alien, especially to older generations. *Thy Neighbor's Wife* is very much about the whole change in morality that had just occurred. In the sixties, the story wasn't France, not even Russia—it was America.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you give up writing magazine pieces?

TALESE

I was putting too much work into them. I loved the form. But I started writing about *New York Times* people for *Esquire* and I had the idea to write a book on the subject, *The Kingdom and the Power*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you worry about how your friends and former colleagues at the paper would react to such a revealing book?

TALESE

No, I didn't. It's not that I didn't care. I cared very much. But I believe this: every day, *The New York Times* hurts people and ruins careers—playwrights, business people, people who are accused of crimes they didn't commit. They are assassins. In their reviewing and their criticism and their domestic and foreign reporting, sometimes it's accurate and sometimes it's half right and sometimes it's slander.

It wasn't that I was on some crusade to even the score against these people in the media. I just thought, I'm going to be fair. In my mind I was quoting the great Adolph Ochs, who said the Times should be "more than fair and courteous to those who may sincerely differ with its views." I thought that was the paper's credo. It was much more important than "All the News That's Fit to Print." So I was more than fair to those with whom I sincerely differed. It wasn't a polemical book, it was just a reportorial book. I was reporting on reporting. But it's storytelling, too. There are some good stories in there.

INTERVIEWER

What's it like to be married to an editor? Does Nan ever edit for you?

TALESE

Not exactly, but she reads aloud to me every page I write. One time I asked her to read a piece that would later become part of *The Kingdom and the Power*. She said, This is good. Then I worked on it some more and made it, I thought, much better. I showed her the new draft and she said, This is good. I said, That's what you said to me last week about the previous draft. She said, Well, I thought that draft was good too. I complained that she wasn't being hard enough on me, that I wanted her to read my work as an editor, not as a wife.

Sometimes, however, I will talk over what I am about to do. In *A Writer's Life* I wanted to write about her mother and father and how we never got along, and she asked me not to do it.

INTERVIEWER

You spend an incredible amount of time doing research for your pieces. Do you ever think it becomes obsessive, or excessive?

TALESE

Original research is difficult and time-consuming. I'm not doing a history of the French Revolution where I can go to the library to consult a thousand books. When I started researching pornography laws, for instance, it took a lot of work just to understand those legal briefs. Read those cases—they're boring! Or when I wanted to research a restaurant, the Napa Valley Grill, that closed fourteen years ago, I had to look up people, travel all over the country, just in order to find some sous-chef that once worked there. You can't use Google for that.

Most of what I gather for my work doesn't wind up in a book, but I don't think one can do too much research. All my research is important because it gives me a foundation and a sense of proportion for my subject. And I discover things that might lead me to other stories. I was doing research on a man whose penis was chopped off, John Wayne Bobbitt, for a piece that ended up being adapted for *A Writer's Life*. Bobbitt's story is about a man who loses his power to have an erection. So I became extremely interested in urology, and began to attend urology conventions. I learned that a lot of young men become impotent after common injuries—car accidents, war wounds, sports injuries. An entire section of University of Miami's medical school is devoted to trying to restore erections to men injured in this way, men who are young and married and want to have children.

I found one woman at the medical school whose job it is to give men erections. She's one of the most interesting women I've ever met. She's not beautiful, but she is the greatest masturbator in all of the United States of America. I watched her work. The man sits in bed, and there's a male doctor there, but she starts fondling the patient. She has the most magical fingers. Then the doctor takes the sperm and injects it into the wife, who is standing by. I always thought I would write a piece about this woman, but I never did, nor did I figure out how to include her in *A Writer's Life*. Maybe one day I'll find a place for her.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when to turn an article into a book?

TALESE

A good example is my book on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. In 1959, Robert Moses proposed the eviction of thousands of people who lived in Bay Ridge, right near the Narrows, so that the bridge could be built. I was assigned to go out to Brooklyn and cover a protest against Moses in the neighborhood. I thought, For these people, it's a catastrophe on

the scale of an earthquake. Or a war—Dresden, Poland, Hiroshima—where whole areas of cities are leveled by bombs and the survivors have to relocate. Moses wasn't just going to break up buildings, he was going to break up lives. I started to think about all the types of people who would be affected. Children would have to go to new schools with new classmates. A man having an affair with a woman on his block—now they have to move to different neighborhoods. A dentist loses his patients, a church loses its parishioners, morticians lose their dead. I wrote a piece for the Times about the protest but I thought there was so much I wasn't able to include in a short piece.

The second thing I thought was, How in the hell do you build a bridge? I never could understand how one builds a road across the water. So I started to read about it. I learned that people used to shoot an arrow with a rope tied on it across the banks of a river. I thought, That's interesting. Now, how do you do that with steel?

INTERVIEWER

You've also written books about the newspaper industry, the Mafia, sex, and your family. Does any single theme unite all of these subjects?

TALESE

A sense of history. In all of my books, I try to tell the reader where my characters come from, and how they got to the point where I've found them. It never is just present tense. It's always also about past tense. Origins. This is even true of the magazine pieces. The instinct comes from my mother in her store. She was the newcomer from Brooklyn and she wanted to know about the women who were her regular customers.

INTERVIEWER

You've said you never pay people for interviews. But you did set up a fund for the Bonanno crime family. How do you explain that?

TALESE

When I was in Bill Bonanno's home, doing research for *Honor Thy Father*, I'd often overhear his wife, Rosalie, complain to him about money. They needed money, their kids needed money. I thought, I am witnessing something that is never reported by newspaper crime writers, who always portray the Mafia as rich, living in mansions. Bonanno himself had an affectation of affluence. But there on the inside, I observed that it was a struggle.

The only thing I paid for at the time of publication was the photographs, which were used in *Esquire* and then in the book. I bought about fifty photographs, for nine thousand dollars. I disclosed that in the book. When I finished the manuscript, my agent, Candida Donadio, sold the paperback rights immediately, for $451,000. The extra one thousand was to top her paperback sale of *The Godfather*. This was 1971, and for the first time in my life I had money. I bought this house we are in now. And I felt as if I had to do something for the Bonanno family. The only thing I could think of was to start a college fund, which I set up for my own daughters at the same time. *Honor Thy Father* paid for college for all four of the Bonanno children and my daughters. I'm glad I did it because I have the evidence now that it was the right decision. The four Bonanno children are straight, and one of them is even an important doctor. None of them have had to do what their father chose to do.

INTERVIEWER

How did the sprawling, ambitious project that became *Thy Neighbor's Wife* begin?

TALESE

After dinner one night Nan and I were walking up Lexington Avenue around Fifty-eighth Street, and I saw this sign that said live nude models. This was 1972. I said to Nan, let's go up and check this out. She said, You go—I'll meet you at home. I went back the next morning, and it turned out it was a massage parlor. There was a man at the front desk and

he gave me a photo album. He said, You have your choice of the four girls pictured inside. I picked one, and I was led back into a small room.

It was the third floor, and I could hear the buses going down Lexington Avenue, the grinding of the gears, and the chatter of the street. And here I am behind a curtain with this young woman. I ask her where she's from. She says Alabama. I say, Oh really? I went to the University of Alabama. Of course she couldn't care less. But while she's performing her services, part of me is enjoying it, and part of me is interested in the whole thing—Who is this woman? What was her childhood like? Who are the men that come here?

I started going to these parlors every day. Each time I had a conversation with these women, during the massage.

INTERVIEWER

Did you take notes?

TALESE

No. I was looking for a really articulate woman. I was casting. I was looking for a character. For much of 1972, into 1973, I was looking for characters. I wanted to write about the seventies, and a new generation of people with new attitudes about sexuality. I thought the massage parlor would be a perfect laboratory for me. I had lots of women whom I thought would be great to write about, many of them college educated, from NYU and Hunter, but after I had spent some time with them, taken a lot of notes, and had taken them to dinner and met their boyfriends, they'd tell me that I couldn't use their real names. That was the biggest problem I had. And then after a lot of failures, I finally found this one woman who said she would let me use her name.

INTERVIEWER

Why is it so important to you to use real names?

TALESE

When I use a person's real name, I'm saying to the reader, You can check me out. I wanted to show that you can write about real people, and about their private lives—which has always been the domain of a fiction writer. I never wanted to take the easy way: the anonymous character, the composite character. So many journalists and writers are liars. You know who they are. I wanted to distinguish myself from them. It's not easy. In *Thy Neighbor's Wife* it took me three months to determine how I could write a transition between two characters, Harold Rubin and John Bullaro. I thought, God, if I were doing fiction I could make them the same character, because they're both Jewish and from Chicago. But I wanted the truth.

INTERVIEWER

What happened when you finally found the masseuse who would let you use her name?

TALESE

I invited her and her boyfriend, who was a doctor, one night for dinner. Nan's cooking dinner and the doctor gets up and says, I'll join Nan. So he goes into the kitchen while the masseuse and I are sitting outside in the living room, just talking. They're very quiet in there and I can see that the masseuse is getting a little irritated. It turns out that the doctor is quite taken with Nan. Finally Nan comes out and says that dinner is ready. After dinner, I say that I'll help do the dishes. The doctor says, No, no, I'll help. So Nan and the doctor go back there again and I hear Nan say, Don't.

He was making a pass at her. I could see my story getting in trouble because of this. Then Nan and the doctor come out of the kitchen, and he and the masseuse start drinking. The doctor got drunk, and passed out on the floor. He had to spend the whole night here,

and his girlfriend stayed with him. The next morning, Nan told me, You pushed me and pushed me to meet them and finally I did it. But I'm not going to be involved in your research for this book anymore.

INTERVIEWER

Did the masseuse still talk to you for the book?

TALESE

No, a couple of days later she said she was quitting. She said she was going to get married to the doctor. They got married and moved to Miami. I lost her as a character. It really upset me because she was a good character.

INTERVIEWER

Did Nan mind that you were doing this book? That you were going to massage parlors, then managing one, then going to sex colonies?

TALESE

No. Sometimes I'd call her up from the pay phone in the ballroom at Sandstone, the swingers' retreat in California. I'd be nude and I'd had to go up and get some change. I'd call Nan at six or seven o'clock her time when she would be back from the office. And I'd say, Oh, I'm over here watching Dr. Alex Comfort perform cunnilingus on some ballet dancer, or something like that. When I started managing a massage parlor, one block away from the Random House office where she worked, I invited her to come by and see it, because I like having her opinion on what I'm doing. But she didn't want to.

INTERVIEWER

Was it really necessary to do that level of research? It's one thing to go to a massage parlor or two. But for two years, and then to manage one?

TALESE

In order to get to know these people, and to get in their heads, I felt that I had to be there. More than that, I had to be there in such a way that I didn't seem different from them. I couldn't be seen as a journalist. When you go to Sandstone, for instance, you have to take your clothes off. The first time it was very awkward for me, unnatural, especially given my age and background. But the fourth or fifth time, it wasn't awkward. Then I was living at Sandstone. Naked morning, noon, and night. The point is that they had to trust me and I had to trust them. I couldn't have done it any other way.

INTERVIEWER

But does that mean that *Honor Thy Father*, for instance, is an inferior book because you didn't become a Mafioso, or commit a murder?

TALESE

No. I don't think there was a difference. I participated in *Honor Thy Father*. I was in cars with Bill Bonanno and his bodyguards and other members of his gang. I could have been shot at. In 1966 I started going out to northern California to visit the Bonannos. I saw them regularly for the next eight years, including a period where I actually lived in their home for a while. I was taking risks all the time, even if I wasn't actually committing crimes.

Same with *The Bridge*. I never changed out of my three-piece suit, but I did wear a hard hat and I did hang out with the bridge people. I went on the highest point of the bridge, I walked the catwalk, wobbling around up there, even before the bridge was completed. And on weekends I went to Indian reservations, so I could write about the Indians. A young man who worked on the bridge often took me to his home on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. He was married with young children. His father, who lived next door, was a bridge builder

and there was also a grandfather who'd been a bridge builder—everyone in this little tribe had been a bridge builder. One time, this young bridge builder proposed that I stay in his house, and he further suggested that I could bunk with his sister. She was twenty-seven and unattached, and she was amenable to the idea. Now that episode wasn't part of the experience of building the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. But it was part of the experience of being in the midst of this tribe, along the Saint Lawrence River, in a settlement of construction-working, mixed-breed Mohawks. I was not an outsider. I was not an insider. I certainly wasn't an ironworker or bridge builder, but I felt I was able to experience their world.

INTERVIEWER

You employ an unusual technique at the end of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*: you use the third person to refer to yourself. Why did you want to have a character named Gay Talese?

TALESE

I thought it would destroy the tone to have an I. It would have been jarring. I also wanted to emphasize my distance from the events surrounding me, even when I was within them. I might be in a sauna, but I'm also apart from that sauna. I'm always thinking what it looks like from across the street, or I'm eavesdropping on other conversations. As a reporter I disassociate. It seemed the most obvious way to put myself into the book. I am an observer at all times.

I'm detached always, with everyone. Now that I'm trying to write about my life with Nan, I realize the extent to which I've been an observer in a fifty-year marriage. I am always interested in the story that I could be writing if I were writing about what I'm doing. I could be swatting tennis balls, and I'm thinking of a scene on the tennis court. A case could be made that this is my main failing as a person. I am never there. Fully.

INTERVIEWER

Was your hope that *Thy Neighbor's Wife* would provoke outrage?

TALESE

Certainly not. My hope was that I would take nonfiction into an area where no one had taken it before. I wanted to break into the little private club that only the fiction writers had the keys for. Philip Roth is my age, John Updike is my age. They could write about sex in fiction. I wanted to do it with nonfiction. That's what motivated me.

INTERVIEWER

Were you surprised by the personal nature of the attacks on *Thy Neighbor's Wife* when it came out?

TALESE

I was very upset and surprised. Maybe I was stupid to be surprised, but I was. The real review ran seven years before the book came out. In 1973 a profile published in *New York* tainted me, trivialized me. It was called "An Evening in the Nude with Gay Talese," by Aaron Latham. I'm pictured in a massage parlor on West Fifty-seventh Street, frolicking around in the nude. I didn't have that much dignity after that was published. Whatever pride I might have had in the way I worked was open to question because it looked as if I were having an erotic experience on an expense account, calling it research. Nan was dragged into this. To say nothing of my daughters, who were in grade school at the time.

I was made to feel like I was an essentially wicked, perverted person. But I didn't think I was. I was just interested, endlessly interested, foolishly, unadulteratedly, with unparalleled vigor, interested in all I could do to extend my range, to extend the boundaries of my own particular experience.

INTERVIEWER

Were you parents still alive when *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was published?

TALESE

Yes, but they never read it. In fact, they were even quoted as saying as much in the newspapers. They never said anything to me about it. There was a bad review in *The Ocean City Sentinel-Ledger*, which I knew they had read. The book was a source of embarrassment for them. I said to them, I can sell my house in Ocean City, and they said, No, no, you should stay. That was all.

INTERVIEWER

How did your writer friends react?

TALESE

The PEN people were unkind to me. The feminists were particularly vocal in those days. I was up for president of PEN and I was told I better take my name off the list, even though the nominating committee had put me up for it. I thought that was pretty rich since these people in PEN are not exactly members of the Catholic Bowling League. They're supposed to be First Amendment absolutists, defending the freedom to write. It was my version of a scarlet letter. I was branded a sinful person.

INTERVIEWER

How did you respond?

TALESE

I wanted to hide. I wanted to take on a completely different subject, something that was close to the heart of America: the automobile. I wanted to write about an Italian who wasn't me. There is always a little bit of me in those I am writing about, particularly in the Italians, the DiMaggios, and the Sinatras, so I thought I would write about Lee Iacocca, the newly appointed president of Chrysler, who had become a prominent national figure. For the better part of a year and a half I worked on a book about Chrysler, spending a lot of time with Iacocca at his house in Bloomfield Hills. But it didn't work. I was trying to restore my reputation by writing about cars, and not really wanting to do it. Sometimes you find your characters fit into your life and sometimes they don't. It's like a relationship. It's like you are dating someone and it didn't work out.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that one of the mysteries of your career is that so many people love and revere your work and yet you've gotten an inordinate number of bad reviews. Why do you think that is, and do you let the bad reviews bother you?

TALESE

Often a negative review is a put-down of my technique. They don't believe me. They think I'm faking. Talese writes so-and-so was thinking this. How do we know this person was thinking that? The reason I knew is that I interviewed them over and over again. I asked, What were you thinking? So that I get it right. You have to lay the groundwork so that you can ask them, What did you feel? And you have to have enough history with them.

Critics have often seemed troubled that I don't pass moral judgments on my subjects. This happened not only in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, but also with *Honor Thy Father*. They said I was being soft on organized crime. I try to see people as they see themselves. Bill Bonanno was a murderer, as was his father, as were those bodyguards I used to hang out with in restaurants along First Avenue in lower Manhattan. But I didn't think they were so different from soldiers who are praised by their government as patriotic for committing murder. Protecting your buddies, that's all it's about.

My books and articles have never received any prizes either. I heard I was up for the Pulitzer a few times, but I was never chosen. I never won the National Book Award. But with one or two exceptions, I haven't felt regret about anything I've published. The only reward I have is the feeling that I have done the best I can.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that the period after *Thy Neighbor's Wife* came out was a dark period. What happened after that?

TALESE

I was stuck and just spinning my wheels when Nan went on a business trip to London, and I didn't really have anybody I could talk to. I found myself all alone. So I went to Rome. I ended up staying there for three years. During that period I was away from the whole publishing scene. I was sick of book people. I was sick of editors. I was sick of agents. I decided to research my family's history in Italy and that was the beginning of *Unto the Sons*.

Something else had happened that made me want to leave. My best friend was David Halberstam. Shortly after I met him he joined *The New York Times*. He lived across the street from here in 1964. I was the best man at his wedding. We were like brothers. Then in 1982, after I'd known him twenty years, he called me up and said, Gay, I want to write about automobiles, and I might want to talk to your friend Iacocca. I said, David, I've been working on this for about a year. He said, Yes, well this is the third part of a series I'm doing on America in the latter part of the twentieth century. He had some larger scheme—I don't know what it was. I said, Let's sit down and talk about it, because we can't both write on the same subject. I was very upset. I didn't want to tell him that I wasn't sure I wanted to do the book. I was just astonished that my best friend would go into the territory where I had put my little flag, such as it was. Two weeks later, he came back to New York and we had a little meeting at my house. Nan was here, we had dinner, and he talked about how he really wanted to do this. And I said, It's going to affect our friendship. We have to stop seeing one another and talking every day about our work. I had never had a situation like that. I thought he'd change his mind. But he didn't. He was determined. Much stronger than I am, I realized. David did his book and it was called *The Reckoning*. I didn't read it. It ended our friendship for eleven years.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever run into him during that time?

TALESE

Sometimes Nan and I would see him at parties. I would stay away from him. If it was crowded I could do it. But sometimes I would bump into him. I'd say hello, he'd say hi, and that was it. Inwardly I was broken up by it. It was like a divorce.

INTERVIEWER

How did it end?

TALESE

In 1993 he called me and said that he wanted to send me something he had written about me. It was the introduction of a book he was putting together about the best sports writing, and it was very appreciative, it was about his respect for me. I realized that he was trying to make up. Then we decided we'd go to a baseball game, and after the game we had dinner. Little by little, we became as close as we had been, and then more so. He and his wife, Jean, flew to Wales for my daughter Pamela's wedding, and we spent a week together in London, and the next Thanksgiving we went to Paris, the four of us. I'd see him at least twice a week. Then he went to northern California to make a speech and I was teaching in Los Angeles for a week, so I proposed that he come down there and we'd spend a few days

together. But he couldn't come and I went back to New York. Two days later, I heard that he was killed in a car accident out West. Jean telephoned, and I went right over. We spent the night talking. It was a bad year for me. I never had a male friend that I loved as much as David.

INTERVIEWER

You've announced that your next book will be about your marriage. How did you decide on this as a subject?

TALESE

No one has been nutty enough to do it or to try to do it. Also, it's the only story that I'm in a position to tell that I haven't yet told. What else can I do? I've run out of stories. I am going to report the story of my marriage, the intimacy and complexity and discord of this relationship, as if I were another person. Which I am, I think. I want to write about how difficult it was for Nan to be married to me. Why would this intelligent, accomplished, financially independent woman stay with me for fifty years? She has all of these people in the publishing game, she goes to the Frankfurt Book Fair and attends all those sales conferences, she has minglings and associations and friendships. Why would she want to stay married, especially when she is, in the case of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, humiliated in print, embarrassed like Hillary Clinton was embarrassed? Who stays married to a person she, in her right mind, shouldn't be married to? There's no reason why it should have worked. I think of all these people who got divorced for minor matters. If we didn't get divorced, I don't know why anyone would get divorced. I have to come to some understanding for myself before I am in a casket somewhere.

INTERVIEWER

How will you research this one?

TALESE

I have employed a couple of research assistants who have tape-recorded many hours of interviews with her.

INTERVIEWER

Why don't you conduct the interviews yourself?

TALESE

I want to have, on the record, in her own words, verifiable on tape, her version of things. Quotations, verifiable on tape, that she cannot refute. Transcripts. Because I think in many relationships there are two different versions. On the surface Nan is unflappable, she's very calm, nothing is wrong. She says she has a happy marriage. I hear her talk about me and I think, Who is she talking about? That's not me! She's usually making a sweeter presentation in public of my personality, or my very being, than I would myself.

I have also been going through my calendars and photographs in order to reconstruct our years together. I save every letter that is sent to me, and often I make notes about the circumstances I'm going through at the time I receive the letter. I have letters from Nan beginning in 1959, when we were just married.

INTERVIEWER

Could you ever see yourself in a more conventional marriage?

TALESE

No. I don't see how I could live ten years that way. I don't think Nan could either. She has this mysterious life too. There are men that I think she should be with instead of me. Like some of her writers, for instance, whom she is very close with. Those relationships, as

well as her whole professional life, have helped this marriage.

The only other marriage that I really know is the one that my parents lived. That lasted more than sixty years and it was suffocating. My idea of conventional marriage was shaped by the home in which I lived. It was very tight. They worked together in the store all day long and at night they went out together. They never fought. They were completely compatible. My mother adored my father and he adored her.

INTERVIEWER

I think most people would see that as a good thing.

TALESE

I didn't. I just felt there was no escape. If you get into a relationship like that you don't have any chance of living.

INTERVIEWER

How does Nan feel about this book?

TALESE

One day she's fine with it, the next day she's not. When I first got the contract to do this book, my editor called her to ask whether she was all right with the idea. She said she was. She said, Whatever he wants to do is his decision, but I don't think he knows the first thing about marriage.

I remember some very romantic things about Nan. I have a TR3 sports car, which I bought back in 1958. It's a little convertible with a canvas roof. Once we drove it down to Key West. It was a long ride. On the way back, I wanted to see the home of Thomas Wolfe in Asheville, North Carolina. I didn't know this ahead of time, but the route requires you to drive over a mountain. I wasn't speeding, but at the top of the mountain, on a patch of ice, I lost control of the car. We started to slide. I thought the car was going to go right over the side of the road, where there was a drop of more than a hundred feet. I thought it was all over. I looked at Nan and she looked at me. And there was no panic on her face. She had been doing a crossword puzzle, and she looked as calm as if she were trying to think of the answer to some clue.

We ran over the shoulder and into a trench of mud. The car stopped and tilted over the edge of the cliff, but it didn't go over. For a minute we just sat there. Then, still very calm, Nan said, Why don't you get out and I'll come after you? I opened the door and we took our time. Then we stood on the road, freezing, and waited an hour and a half until a car came by and led us back down. Right then I knew that this woman had character. She isn't going to panic and jump. This happened in 1962. We'd only been married for three years.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plan to write about other women in the book?

TALESE

Perhaps, but here is what people don't get: sex is not that important. It isn't the most important thing in any relationship. Marriage is never about sex, and yet in American fiction so many stories and novels present a sexual dalliance as a unpardonable sin. I never thought that should be true.

Marriage is the main event. These other relationships bring me into worlds that I would otherwise not know. Other people's lives—that's what is sexy. They are firsthand fiction. That's what these friendships are about.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any conception of privacy? Do you feel bad at all about revealing every detail about your marriage?

TALESE

I gave up my privacy. One has to. In this book about my marriage, I want to go further than I did in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. And I can go anywhere because I don't feel any constraints. That said, I don't think I'm irresponsible, or insensitive, or driven and reckless. I don't think I am, at least, but then people say, Yes you are. So I don't really know. I do feel that I have a right to tell a story and I know what I'm writing about—I have the credentials to do it. My perspective might be challenged by another person. My wife could write the same story and it would be a whole different thing. But at the end of the day it's my perspective. Yes, I have a detachment about it. But detachment doesn't mean a lack of compassion. It just means you have one eye, at all times, on the story.

INTERVIEWER

To a certain extent, isn't this the book that you've been preparing to do for all these years?

TALESE

I've been researching the subject for fifty years. And why else would I be saving all this paper? I have saved and dated every piece of paper: photographs, letters I've written, and letters I've received, together with notes I've made about each of them. I keep notes from every interview I've ever conducted and every book I've written.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think you want to keep these records—all the shirt boards, the notes, and the files? Do you imagine other people reading them or are they just for you?

TALESE

I haven't given it much thought. I just don't want to throw them away. It's become an obsession with me now. I don't want to give the impression that I have an inflated sense of myself because I do not. But I do think that I am a chronicler. I want to report on what I have seen and heard and people I've known, and what I've done, because I think it's connected to history. I'm interested in leaving my mark. I keep records to testify to the fact that I'm alive.

INTERVIEWER

Like the T. S. Eliot line, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins"?

TALESE

You bring intellectual bearing upon my banality.

INTERVIEWER

Are you worried about how people will react to this new book? It might bring back memories of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.

TALESE

I don't care anymore. That's the great thing about being old. I mean, what can they do to me? Who are they? Who are they?

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