

Birthday Guy on Azalea Path

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I was nine when my father died. I observed the commotion caused by his death -- three days of wake, many visitors, looks of pity, High Mass, cortege -- more than I felt any sadness about it. His being gone seemed insignificant perhaps because I'd never really sensed that he was there. Gertrude Stein's "There was no there there,"¹ is not apt -- I knew, for instance, that he was my father, but perhaps I hadn't really figured out what the significance of a father was. I did not think of him as a good man; I did not think of him as a bad man. I simply had not judged him because I had not learned to judge. Smothered in meekness, fear, backwardness, and a lack of awareness, I did not feel close to him. I had not bonded with him. I had not even bonded with myself.

Sylvia Plath, with whom I've long been obsessed, was, on the other hand, a brilliantly aware child. She was eight when her father died, but she did not fall into silence, as I had, but became angry. "I'll never speak to God again!" she declared.²

Later, as a young woman, and as a poet with some moderate successes, she visited her father's grave in Winthrop, a suburb northeast of Boston, with her husband. This visit prompted her 1959 poem "Electra on Azalea Path."

When I first read "Electra on Azalea Path," sometime back in the late sixties or early seventies, I longed to see Otto Plath's grave. I longed to stand where Sylvia had stood. I longed to look upon the marker she had looked upon.

That's just the way I am.

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¹ Everybody's Autobiography, pg. 289.

² Letters Home, pg. 25.



At about ten in the morning on New Year's Day, a dear friend, Ellen Farnum, and I leave a motel in Dorchester where we'd spent the night. It is raining cats and dogs. Ellen reads from a MapQuest printout while I try to see the road ahead. With just one easily corrected mistake we wind ourselves this way and that way, around the northern end of Logan Airport, and then along the streets of Winthrop. We turn left on Kennedy Drive. There's a cemetery just ahead. We park. A blustery wind has risen. The rain is slashing every which way. This can't be the right cemetery, I think – it's too new; it's very regimented: two orderly rectangles of markers, one to the left of the center road, one on the right. Room for expansion at the left end, the right end, and far end. My heart is shrinking. I've spent too much fruitless time in too many cemeteries, and I'm having a damp sinking feeling that this will be another failed adventure. "You take that side and I'll take this one," I say to Ellen. Within a minute, slogging through mud, we're soaked through and through. The rain is of the cold sort that seeps completely through you, even into your soul. We have every right to be miserable. A pickup truck pulls into the cemetery. It and its driver pass us, continuing up the lane. How pitiful we must look!

Plus I feel like an intruder; he, the driver, probably knows the dead here. I don't.

He parks a distance up the lane. I don't stare so I don't see whether he gets out of his truck or not. Shortly, though, the pickup is coming back down the lane.

I flag it down. "Is this the Winthrop Cemetery?" "It's part of it," he says. He wonders whose grave we're looking for. "Otto Plath's ... he was probably buried in the early forties. His daughter, Sylvia, was a famous poet."

None of this rings a bell. The driver is nice looking, a construction-worker kind of guy maybe, thirty-five or forty. Dark hair. Nice black eyebrows. Smooth swarthy complexion. His truck is red and shiny and just-right butch; its size indicates that there's no problem with the guy's sense of masculinity. He wears a Rex Sox cap. He's surely a good, decent American. Certainly not the poetry-reading type. Probably likes to fish and hunt. He's not wearing a wedding ring. We talk back and forth a bit. "You probably

wanna be looking in the cemetery down on Cross Street” he says. “Could you tell us how to get there?” “Well ...” He lifts his cap and scratches the right side of his forehead. He puts his hat back down and announces that it’s not that easy. “Get in your car and follow me ... I’ll lead you there.”

We follow him back toward the center of town, taking a couple of weirdly angled in-the-know turns; before long we are pulling along the side of whatever street we’re on. Opposite the side we’re on is a cemetery; it looks to be more of Otto Plath’s era.

I get out of the car and walk up to thank him. “I really appreciate it,” I say. “I’m so thankful you showed up. Did you just happen to be driving around up there?”

The wind is blowing rain into his lowered window.

“No ... my mom and dad are buried up there and I always try to visit them on holidays.”

He’s so sweet! Such a decent guy! I could cry. I could be falling in love. “That’s really nice that you do that.” I’m sorry his parents are gone. “And we are really lucky that you came by when you did. I just can’t thank you enough!”

He reaches out his right hand and we shake hands. “Good luck!” he says. “The cemetery office is right over there if you have any questions.” He’s pointing to a building off to the right, up an incline. “It’ll be open tomorrow.”

The decent man is pulling away. The potentially most important love of my life is pulling away. I’m never going to see him again. We might have had such a wonderful few days or few months or few years together, but he’s gone.

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The cemetery looks to be two-to-three city blocks long and close to a block deep. It’s



surrounded by a handsome iron fence. We enter a gate and immediately see an embedded granite sign that indicates we are on “Lilac Path.” This is a small thrill because I figure we’re at least in a cemetery whose paths are named after flowers; if there’s a marker for a Lilac Path, there may just as well be a marker for an “Azalea Path.” All we have to do is find it. We head to the left, walking along different rows, reading as many names as we can. It’s amazingly congested. It’s also very beautiful and would, in a warm sunshine, be extraordinarily beautiful. Ellen and I are soaked. The sheer number of gravestones is dismaying. I’ve started to think it’s just not worth it, especially when some day it’s going to be spring and, inasmuch as I’m only about a hundred miles from my home, I can drive up on some nice warm sunny day and won’t care if I have to walk up and down every row.



As we near the left end we turn back and head toward the opposite far end. About a quarter of the way there, I’m ready to give up. I’m colder. I’m soaked even more. It’s unlikely that we are going to find it. I’m meandering now, looking

around, hardly hoping to come across any certain name on any certain stone. When we’re close to the end I look for Ellen. She’s across several rows of stones. Suddenly she says, “I found it!” I head toward her. She’s standing not at an upright stone. “It’s a flat nondescript little thing,” she remarks. It was this flatness, an oddity among the rows of upright markers, which drew Ellen’s eye. It is but a few steps from one of the cemetery’s gates, a gate we might have entered had we by chance parked further along Cross Street. Ellen snaps the picture above; we leave.

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Sylvia Plath was already a brilliant American poet when, at Cambridge University, on a Fulbright, she met the brilliant British poet, Ted Hughes. Plath’s poems up to this point were formal, perfect, and impersonal; they were more accomplished than felt -- the work of an emotionally costive person who got straight A’s and would not have worn the same

panties two days in a row. Hughes was different in almost every way imaginable; he was rough, didn't brush regularly, and he wore clothes that might have been handed down from an earlier generation. He had no pretensions, and was self-assured.

What they did have in common was an immense love of poetry. They fell in love; they married.

Hughes was fond of fishing, hunting, and hiking. He loved the outdoors, loved nature. His poems, vastly different from Plath's, were earthy, unstilted by academics. They were, with their entirely different tone, as perfect as Plath's. Envious publishing success would come for him before it would come for her.

And it would be he who would influence her. He urged her to take nature as inspiration, as he did, and he urged her to mine, for subject matter, her own feelings. His influence was for the best; he wisely recognized that if she joined her marvelous skills in imagery with profound subject matter, she could become a powerful poetic force.

Even Plath, in a BBC interview shortly before her 1963 suicide, said of her first book of poems, most of them written before the Ted Hughes influence: "They, in fact, quite privately bore me."³

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"Electra on Azalea Path" is one of the early poems written in her transition phase; it is also one of the earliest of the dozen-or-so in which she grappled with the tremendous effect her father's early death had had on her.

Sylvia Plath's taking upon herself, in the poem, the persona of Electra is both obvious and marvelous. The mythological goddess is commonly depicted as standing at the tomb of her father, Agamemnon, accompanied by her brother, Orestes. The two are plotting a revenge of their murdered father's death -- murdered perhaps by their mother's

³ The Poet Speaks, pg. 170.



lover, perhaps by their mother herself, or -- the myth's story doesn't make it clear -- perhaps by the mother and her lover.

At any rate, the poet remarks that the burial occurred twenty years ago. She'd managed for all that time to not deal with Otto Plath's death, but it cannot, she now realizes, be put off any longer. (Hadh't Hughes encouraged her to dig deep within herself for source material?) Of those twenty years, she says that it was as if he -- her father -- had never existed; she posits -- and it seems almost a joke as well as a blasphemy -- that her birth "wore the stain of divinity." She says that she felt no guilt in having outwardly forgotten him; but now she's ready to acknowledge him. She apologizes; she's sorry she had to put him out of mind while she struggled for perfection, struggled for scholarships, struggled for straight A's.

Of course she couldn't have really forgotten him: "Small as a doll in my dress of innocence I lay dreaming your epic ..." She had, in fact, deep within, felt consumed by the huge early loss of the father she had idolized. No longer will she shuttle aside those thoughts of him. She's "found [his] bones ... in a cramped necropolis." (Subsequent to my and Ellen's visit to Otto Plath's tomb, I called the Superintendent of Winthrop's cemeteries and he "guess-timated" that there are eighteen- to nineteen-thousand people buried in the cemetery.)

In a new stanza Plath relates impressions of the dense graveyard. It puts her in mind of a "charity ward ... where the dead crowd foot to foot, head to head." "No flower breaks the soil." At the tomb next to her father's she sees that someone has placed an artificial bouquet and notes that it is incapable of stirring in a breeze and it will not rot. The rain, however, can cause the dye used in the artificiality to become "bloody."

Yet, continues the speaker in the penultimate stanza, "Another kind of redness bothers me," and Plath goes on to relate the apparently real-life fact that her mother, Aurelia Plath, had told her that on the day she had given birth to Sylvia she had dreamed of her husband "face down in the sea." Good lord! Sylvia's birth then, at least in her

fervid imagination, had foretold her father's death! "A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing"

Plath acknowledges further feelings of guilt in the poem's final stanza: "I brought my love to bear, and then you died," she says. Her mother, in the words of the poem, had told Sylvia that Otto "died like any man," that "gangrene ate [him] ..." Aurelia had also told Sylvia that Otto, who suffered from diabetes, did not have to die at the young age of fifty-five, but, afraid of a diagnosis of cancer, had refused to see a doctor. Had he seen a doctor, the boil on his leg would most likely have been recognized as a symptom of early-stage diabetes, entirely treatable; not a death sentence at all.

Otto Plath's poetic daughter sees this as tantamount to suicide; the man she adored was, in her mind, the stubborn instrument of his own death.

Sylvia had already once tried to commit suicide (in the summer before her senior year at Smith College, after apparently suffering a nervous breakdown brought on probably the the years of striving for perfection). In closing "Electra on Azalea Path" she references that suicide attempt, declaring herself to be the "ghost of an infamous suicide ..." She seems, too, and hauntingly so, to foretell her successful suicide four years later in London, asking her father for his pardon, claiming that "It was my love that did us both to death."

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During what would be Sylvia Plath's last summer and fall, alone now with two children, having thrown the womanizing Ted out of the house, feeling overwhelmed, she wrote a volume's worth of urgently chiseled words, which were published posthumously as Ariel. These words, penned as if in her own blood, are astonishingly personal, amazingly original, exquisite expressions of white-hot emotions. One could wish, in reading Ariel, to have one's sensitivity clad in asbestos; the poems hurt terribly. The last was finished not long before the day that the poet's life ended when she put her head in a gas-fed but



unlit oven in a cold London flat; it -- the last poem -- may have been "Edge" with the eerily prescient opening words: "The woman is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment."

When, years earlier, Hughes had urged her to search within herself and in nature for subject matter, he couldn't have had any idea of the maelstrom he released.

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Shortly before his 1998 death, Ted Hughes, who'd been named England's Poet Laureate in 1984 (by the Queen, of course, but ... it figures ... after the latter's consultation with the mean-spirited Margaret Thatcher, who wouldn't have liked Sylvia Plath for one minute, and who would have sympathized with the good Brit who'd unfortunately gotten himself mixed up with a weak woman) ... yes, Hughes published Birthday Letters, a stunning collection of eighty-eight searingly sad poems. They are not particularly well-crafted -- they seem like prose; a poet as masterful as Hughes could have brushed off three or four of these poems in a day. They do, however, contain one powerful image after another, and present a narrative of his and Sylvia Plath's relationship, something he had not spoken about publicly in the 35 years since her suicide. In my obsession, for instance, having read some twenty or twenty five books about Sylvia Plath, it was sensational to now have the perspective of the man who had actually lived through what has been so tenaciously mined by biographers and critics and scholars who did not have the husband's side of the story. The poems initially struck me as being shamelessly self-forgiving while at the same time it was easy to feel an amount of pity for the man who'd been caught up in the storm of emotions that was Sylvia Plath.

(Birthday Letters was a publishing sensation. It had, for a book of poetry, an unprecedented first printing of 25,000 copies in the U.S.; and -- a rarity for a book of poems -- it profited on the New York Times bestseller list).

Hughes, who dabbled in odd spiritualities, seems to have believed, from some unspecified point in their marriage, that Plath's suicide was inevitable, a predetermined

matter of fate, and he viewed himself as having been innocently caught up in it. In one poem, "The Table," he practically flat-out places Sylvia's obsession with her father as the impetus to her own suicide (while conveniently leaving unmentioned that his marital infidelities had, just months before her death, broken her heart).

I suggest that her father's death gave Sylvia Plath permission to kill herself; Ted Hughes gave her the reason to do so -- even if, in fairness, it should be pointed out that not every woman or man who is betrayed commits suicide. It must also be said -- and it is fair to say this as well -- that Hughes had to have been keenly aware that he was dealing with an extremely vulnerable human being.

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In another poem from Birthday Letters -- "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" -- addressed to his and Sylvia's son and daughter, in their thirties at the time of publication, Hughes takes a swipe at Plath-obsessives like myself, likening us to an occasion when he and the children saw "a lean hound coming up the lane holding high the dangling raw windpipe and lungs of a fox." Further, in the same poem, scholars and biographers of Plath are depicted as warped people who "batten on the cornucopia of her body."

Most of us have reached the point where we can look with sympathy upon both Plath and Hughes, entangled as they were in what surely will be the most written-about marriage of the 20th century (the Windsor's, for instance, are boring in comparison!). The Irish poet Eavan Boland put it well in an essay published in *The New York Times Book Review*: "But much as I admired Plath ... I never once went to Hughes's early definite, splendid lyrics with anything but a sense of his gift and presence. My gratitude for those poems has been entirely separate from my attitude to any of his other roles."

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Ephemera #1: The kind man in the red truck, for whom the names of Otto Plath and Sylvia Plath rang no bell, would be likely (if I may typecast him) to consider not Sylvia Plath but a certain Mark Bavaro to be Winthrop's most noteworthy native. Bavaro, born in 1963, some two months after Plath's death, was an All-American tight end at Notre



Dame, and then played professionally on the New York Giants teams that won Super Bowls XXI and XXV.

Bavaro's practice of genuflecting and making the sign of the cross in the end zone after a touchdown must have endeared him to some while leaving others, such as myself, stupefied.

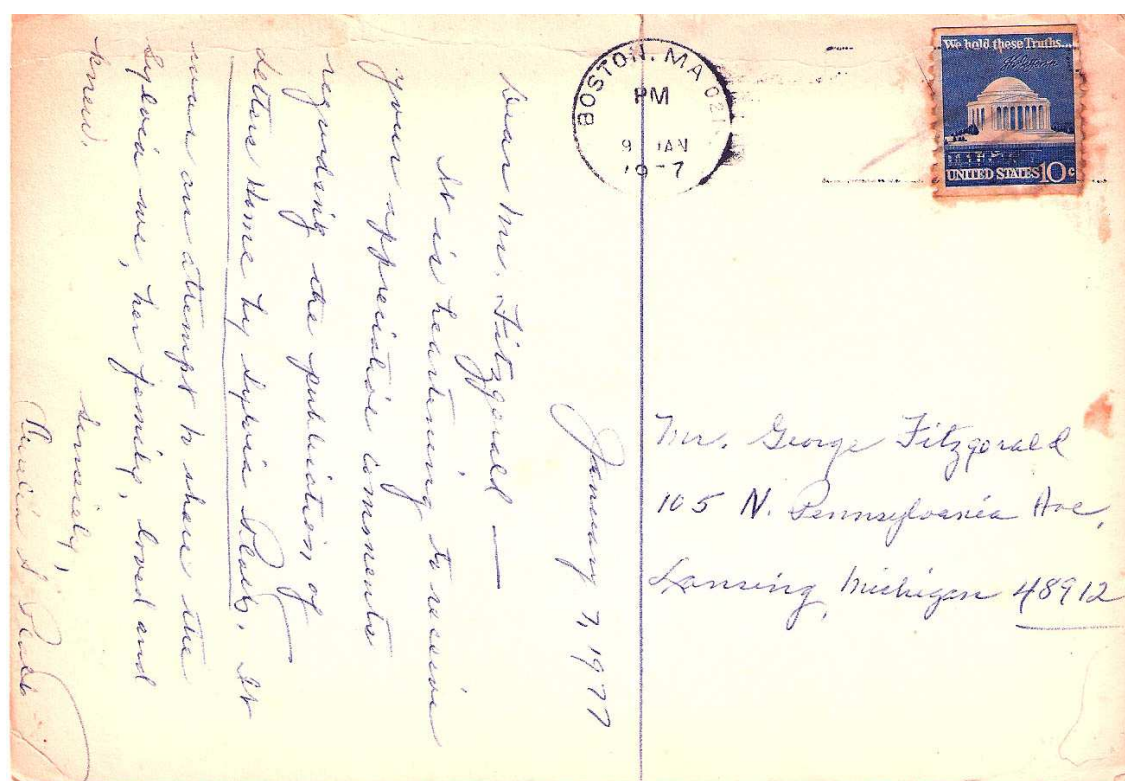
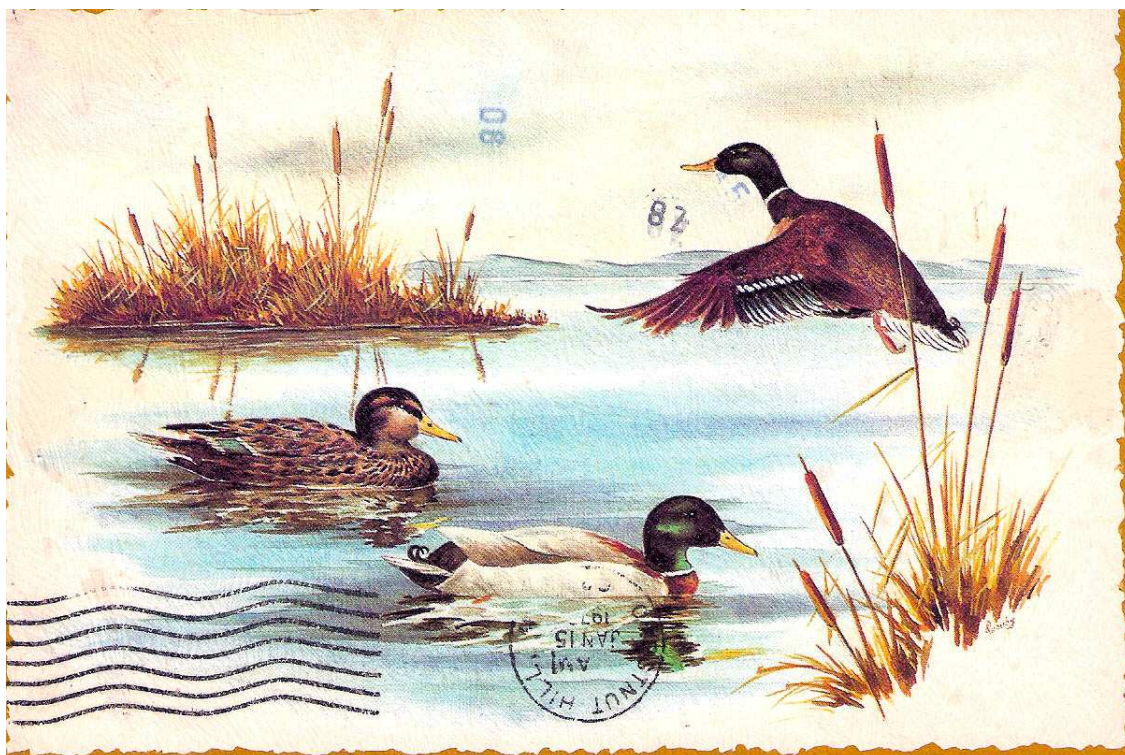
At the time of this writing, one can buy a football jersey autographed by Mark Bavaro on eBay for \$279.99; one can buy a copy of Otto Plath's Bumblebees and Their Ways from various antiquarian bookshops for anywhere from \$153.93 to \$1003.00.⁴

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Ephemera #2: When, in 1975, Aurelia Plath edited and published the letters Sylvia had written to her and to other family members in a book entitled Letters Home, it almost seemed like she was trying to rebut the bitternesses expressed about her by her daughter in the latter's journals, which had been published earlier. I felt such pity toward Mrs. Plath that I was moved to write a commiserating letter to her. My aim -- however feeble -- was to console her. I wrote that surely Sylvia did love her, just as her letters home said she did, and I likened Sylvia to a good many children, including myself, who are often duplicitous when dealing with a parent, plotting with words and deeds in hopes of assuring the parent that he or she reared a good person, and even this duplicity can be, in a weird way perhaps, an indication of love -- you want to make a good impression on someone you love, not on someone you hate. (So, while there certainly are expressions of hatred toward her mother in Sylvia's journals, and while people who were acquainted with her did, in fact, say she had verbally expressed hatred toward her mother, I believed in 1975, and believe still in 2009, that Sylvia must have, from time to time, also felt love and an appreciation for the hard-working and well-meaning woman who was her mother.)

Aurelia Plath responded with a postcard:

⁴ Prices from <http://www.bookfinder.com>. Last checked on May 27, 2009.





Ephemera #3: Only after I'd returned from visiting Otto Plath's grave did it occur to me to wonder where Aurelia Plath is buried. It doesn't say in the obituary published in *The Boston Globe* of March 18, 1994 (an obituary which I cut out and saved; I asked *The Globe* for permission to reproduce it herewith but their "permissions" department didn't bother to respond to my request). Surely there wasn't room in the "cramped necropolis" for her to be buried with her husband, who was twenty-two years older than she (what a sly fox, that Otto!) and whom she had outlived by some fifty-four years. I've learned since that she is buried in Wellesley in the same plot as her parents, Frank and Aurelia Schober; so she is a good distance away from Otto's Winthrop grave. Perhaps somewhere in so many years of widowhood Aurelia had ceased to feel any love for Otto; he does seem to have been somewhat of a tyrant.

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Ellen and I, our Winthrop mission accomplished, drive back to the motel, park the car, and take the subway into Boston. Ellen wants to visit the headquarters of the Christian Scientist Church to check on a quote she can't precisely recall from her days as a foster child in the home of a sadistic Christian Scientist, and I want her to see the famous Maparium at the Mother Church. Unfortunately the entire Mary Baker Eddy complex is closed for the holiday.

We walk up Huntington Avenue in the cold rain to Legal Seafood at Park Square. It is wonderful to sit mid-afternoon in the warmth and dryness, eating, in my case, a delicious scallop and mushroom ravioli in a cream sauce, and, in Ellen's case, a heaped plate of fried clams. Ellen picks up the tab. Then we walk around the corner to an outrageously priced dessert place called Finale's. I have a sampler plate -- roasted pear wedge with a peach sauce; a lemon bundt cake with a blood orange sauce; and a tower of milk chocolate filled with whole almonds -- "paired" (per the menu) with a butterscotch sauce; the dessert accompanied by an elegant presentation of a pot of tea. Again, Ellen picks up the tab. It's still my birthday!

We go to Harvard Square and browse in one of the world's great bookstores, The

Harvard Co-op. When we've had enough of this -- a couple of hours -- the night is still young but we are too fat and full to do anything but go back to the motel, flop onto the beds, and watch stupid TV.

It was one of the best birthdays I've ever had.

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