



Way Back In The Day

Remembrance of things Present

TO BE RATHER THAN NOT TO BE!

By Ron Kenner



Some eighty-five years ago when it was fashionable to call a scoop a scoop, reporters occasionally traded off those press stickers in their hats for more perilous undercover assignments.

It was for just such an intrepid occasion that one young cub reporter—Eugene Francis Coughlin, his pencil and pad nowhere handy—was pulled out of an all night poker game and asked—not without an editor’s skeptical trepidation—to do his stuff.

Armed with one of those exclusive “hot leads,” one that eventually would bring him face to face with the famed attorney Clarence Darrow, and motivated by an urgent need to keep his editor happy, Coughlin went out into the cold dark night to take his chances sneaking around a prison.

Even then Coughlin's life was like something out of a *Perils of Pauline* silent movie. Supposedly this story was worth the trouble—it could have been! The particulars can wait except to mention here that the editor must have had his doubts. Not about the story, but about the reporter; for once again, as Coughlin later explained, he was to bungle the assignment.

There seemed little doubt that Coughlin's "career," as he called it, wasn't exactly rising fast. More likely it was sinking and at a respectably good clip. But Coughlin held on. Fortunately, not much was really expected of him, his being a kind of Cinderella/ Ugly Duckling story; the early chapters, anyway, maybe with a little *Studs Lonigan* boyhood tough stuff thrown in for bruises.

So there it was. A starkly poor Irish family. The father a bit of a drinker, of course, holding down some romantic-sounding but miserable job: on the railroad, in the mines, on the bottom somewhere. The younger children in school, naturally, and then Gene, the eldest, working himself through school from some early age. Not only was Gene not the youngest but his workload differed from that of the fabled Cinderella, there being not that much percentage even those days in scrubbing floors at home. Gene didn't have the slipper girl's perpetually sweet disposition, either, but still he had to help out to keep things going around the house and life surely had its trying moments.

Thus from an early age Coughlin was out on his own and trying to hold his own, usually, but he had little education, less money for openers, and little solid "fund-raising" experience beyond knowing the three P's: poker, pool, and a prayer. That is—like so many who started that way in those days before personnel directors and editors looking for college credentials—a prayer that he could bluff his way through in the newspaper game until he could figure out what he was doing. But it was no game for Coughlin and so he managed. The Ugly Duckling even became a White Swan, though not without a few spots. Coughlin's *career* had its fair share of "defugalties," as he liked to all them, yet he was to become a note staff writer for a nationally distributed weekly supplement, was later to write a fast-selling book, *Assistant Hero* (about how, as a middle-aged journalist), he reached down for bedroom slippers and picked up an Army draft notice), **and even, among a thousand other things, how he was nearly to make a President out of—yes—Gracie Allen.**

"I tell you, there were people everywhere we stopped who actually took her candidacy seriously," he told me one day, incredulously, while I sat in my chair, which Gene had dubbed "little chair," and he sat in his chair, "big chair," in a funny Los Angeles apartment we shared once with lots of big things and little things.

"And I mean plenty of 'em," Coughlin said, referring now not to the "big things" and "little things"—which were part of his wit, intended to keep things in proportion—but to the Gracie supporters, who were no joke and who seemed to have gotten things out of proportion.

"I tell you there were plenty who really believed it. Some even had tears in their eyes," he'd remind me, periodically, shaking his head in one of his rare serious moments.

That episode was when Coughlin was brought in temporarily as a pro to help boost the radio ratings of Gracie Allen and George Burns. It was an election year. As usual, all front runners were hesitating to announce their candidates so early. So Gene suggested, modestly, "Why not run Gracie for President?"

Soon afterward, they left cross-country in a special Gracie-for-President train. Gracie announced her candidacy—neither for the Republican nor Democratic party but, as Gene suggested, for the *Surprise Party*.



They had a fifty-foot kangaroo fronting the train and emblazoned with Gene's slogan, "It's in the bag."

Gracie didn't get elected but she did all right. The ratings pushed way up and Gracie and George brought in Hormel Ham as a sponsor.

Some months, or years, later, when Coughlin had that distinction of being one of the oldest sad sacks ever drafted into the United States Army, the Classification and Assignments Officer was most impressed by the Gracie story, as Coughlin explained to me one day. Looking at the report on Gracie and George, a notation Coughlin had put in hoping to get a nice cushy writing job, the officer observed.

"Mr. Coughlin, I see here you've had experience in Radio...."

"That's right," said Gene, proudly, wagging his head some.

"Yes sir!"

So Coughlin was assigned to the Signal Corps where he was then to draw on his radio background in order to efficiently splice Radio wires. As Coughlin well observed, later, that special response of his—"It fits!"

Some time later while college students began absorbing several thousand years of the history of Western Civilization during short semester courses, Coughlin decided to specialize. He wrote in his book, *Assistant Hero*, several thousands of words describing how, despite his impressive "radio experience," he still was unable to splice a wire so that the spliced part came out not much smaller than, say, a small-sized fist.

So things didn't always work out. When Coughlin was pulled out of that poker game in 1924 to go sneaking around the Illinois State Prison, he missed—sort of missed—the scoop then on a big story: the sensational Leopold-Loeb murder case.

An aunt of mine in Chicago, Idell Resnick, who used to be secretary to Leopold, Loeb and Strauss, wealthy financiers on Michigan Avenue, remembered the two Leopold and Loeb boys from when they were in school. Their parents, active in considerable charity work, were “the nicest people” but the boys were dreaded, Idell recalled only two well. Even then few workers complained to the prestigious parents but the youths were regarded as spoiled, obnoxious, wild, coming in sometimes on a late afternoon to race around or splatter ink about the office. But none had any idea, Idell said, just how wild the two were.

The Leopold-Loeb case, not many years later, was the story of the seemingly pointless murder of a young friend. It was as impossible for most of to understand then as would be the Charles Manson story that I would co-author a book on almost fifty years later.

The Leopold-Loeb murder rocked the nation, and some yet recall it as one of the biggest crime stories of the century. Many later recalled the shock, as if the future, new times, something frightening and unknown, had arrived uninvited.

Some just didn't want to figure it out. As with the Manson story, it was too uncomfortable. “In-depth” coverage, hardly a household word, was not in great demand. A reporter could say the culprit was “no good” and he got caught. “A bad one. Forget it!” Even by the '60s, the newspaper coverage was still generally limited to the gory details. By the '70s the “in-depth” report had become a favored term but coverage of the war in Southeast Asia, for example, was limited mostly to the body counts and the score. So what might Coughlin have been able to write in the twenties, I wondered. Maybe that had something to do with his cynicism—his sometimes making a game of things—and with how, or maybe even why, he blew that particular scoop on one of the biggest crime stories of the century.

Coughlin had been working then as a reporter for the Joliet Herald News, a small newspaper nearby the state penitentiary in Illinois where Leopold and Loeb were being held while awaiting trial. And shortly before the trial, while scores of reporters from all over the country swarmed the prison gates, there was to be a secret meeting in the warden's office at the prison. It had been arranged that the two wealthy families would meet with their sons, and Clarence Darrow, the famous criminal attorney, was to be

present. It was here, in this little room, in the quiet of early morning that they were to reach a decision. The small group gathered was presumably to decide on a plea and on other matters of life and death.

What else went on in this little room is not known and may never be known, though Coughlin had a chance to find out, and, as it turned out, he found out too much. It could have been the biggest “scoop” of the day. Thus, as Gene told me when first contacted by the prison he had been only vaguely hesitant to leave the poker game.



Apparently, since he constantly covered stories for the Joliet prison on his beat while other reporters from throughout the country were present for only that one particular trial, Coughlin has the “in.” This was more literal an *in* than he’d expected, for he was briefed and then hidden inside the warden’s office where the crucial meeting was to take place.

The setting: he was stretched out on the floor behind some drapes which hung from the window overlooking the prison grounds. For sometime he remained there behind the folds, stiff and uncomfortable, tired from being up all night at the poker game and beginning to feel the heat from the radiator nearby. But he continued, waiting for the meeting.

As Coughlin later explained, he waited until, eventually, he felt the weight of somebody who was gently kicking him and talking.

**“Pardon me,” that man said, “but you’re snoring, and I would appreciate it if you would remove yourself from this room.”
That man, of course, was Clarence Darrow.**

Considering such “defugalities,” and then that knot Coughlin had gotten himself spliced into in the Signal Corps, admittedly he didn’t always come up to par. Yet soon enough Coughlin was to earn himself a tall reputation; amongst his friends as much for his behavior as for his writing.

“Nobody,” everybody would say—since Gene himself had been the first to say so—“could press the down button” on his elevator shoes: and William Randolph Hearst, before he passed on his newspaper empire, supposedly called Gene “one of the five greatest newsmen in the world.”

That much is hard to measure. But for sure, Gene—a premonition of the age of anti-hero, of more genuine heroes to burp—was one of the last of the great misfit newsmen who ever wore a tie. Who else but Coughlin could tell you with such a straight face, not to mention his big frame and slightly jutting and indelicate pot belly, the story of how he was *discovered* passed

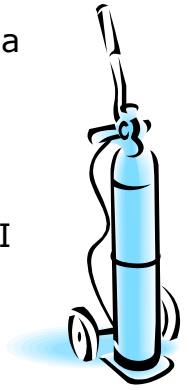
out one day after he'd had a "few belts" too many and managed a pirouette into a snow bank.

"Can I have a cigarette" he asked a nurse on becoming conscious in the hospital.

"Well," she said, as Gene explained to me from *big chair*, "I wouldn't advise it."

"Why not?"

"Because," she said, "You're in an oxygen tent."



Ron, attempting the Dipsy Doodle, as taught by Coughlin

Who else, in the middle of the newsroom could, or rather, would, make ready to pitch his famous *dipsy doodle* ball of crushed up copy paper, looking suspiciously behind him and then, after the appropriate pauses and shifty-eyed glances to fake out the imagine runner, turning quickly to the left or right. "I'm not fast, but I'm shifty," he'd say.

But Gene, sometimes prone to disappearing acts and sometimes disappearing into prone acts, as in his *snow bank ballet*, as he labeled it, was not always loved by editors.

One time I was sent out to find Coughlin when I was a copy boy during those early '50s at the old *Los Angeles Evening Herald & Express*, just off what was known to many then as Pico Gulch, that long row of ten cent beer bars, though now it's the Los Angeles Convention Center. As with many other old war-horse reporters, Coughlin was more comfortable in the Gulch

than he ever could be in a shiny convention center with all its new gadgets for sale.

Though it was years earlier, sometimes you'd think all those reporters were making the most of the old Gulch atmosphere as if they saw the Convention Center and all its publicity releases and shiny products coming.

In those days, I myself was invaluable to the Herald, though not so much for my extra hours of unpaid cub reporting or rewrites as for knowing who'd usually be drinking at what bar and at what times and for having mastered, with considerable expertise, how to coax those old timers (especially the ones who had *lost* their licenses and needed me to chauffeur them around), and particularly Coughlin, from the Gulch back to the city room.

As it happened, on the way out of the *Herald* and heading straight for the second closest bar around the corner to find Gene, I noticed that a car had crashed into a telephone pole, the squad car already on the scene. Checking, I learned the driver had died, presumably of a heart attack, and that his vehicle had run out of control.

Somewhat out of breath, I ran to a nearby telephone booth and called upstairs to the City Room, asking if they wanted to send down a "photog."

Aggie Underwood, the only woman city editor in the country then, was off that day, and the editor on duty, Bill Pigue, may not have been as enterprising.

"Is the guy dead?" he asked me.

I'm sure he is," I answered, "but I'll get right back to you." I raced over, then raced back and reassured Pigue, impressed by the finality of it all and not nearly as cool and calm as a seasoned reporter might have been, I thought.

"Fine," Pigue replied. "If it's Coughlin, call me back." Then he hung up.

I never mentioned that to Gene. If I had, probably he would have shrugged and said, as he often used to say, "I don't have to take that, you know. My folks are wealthy." And then, after a brief pause, he'd add, especially if it was the first time you'd heard this one—"Only problem is, I can't find my folks."

There were, of course, editors who loved Gene too, as demonstrated, Gene himself would point out, just by keeping him on the payroll despite some of his antics. One such editor was the noted Walter Howy, the

skeptical editor of the national *American Weekly*, who'd spent the remaining years of his life editing copy with one eye after he'd lost the other one shooting himself in the head.

It was Howy who came to Gene's rescue one time while Gene was really sweating out trying to justify drinking expenses, claiming that got him relaxed enough to cover a nudist colony story but without being able to cover himself. To help account for the remaining expense account balance after legitimate expenditures, editor Howy grabbed a pencil and scribbled down on the paper, next to the considerable dollar sum—"cleaning and pressing."

So some editors loved him. And except for a jealous writer or editor or two and an occasionally angry wife during this married days, Gene was welcomed most everywhere as a touch of splash and splendor.

After I'd left the old *Herald* still in the early fifties it was some years before I shared my place with Gene, first in New York, when he came from California and stayed until he could find an apartment, and then later in Los Angeles when he was kind of "in between," though that was when he sold a first-person article to *The Reader's Digest* on his "most unforgettable character," about how sometime in the early 1930s he wrote the first commercial radio message from airplane to ground, with Charles A. Lindbergh as his operator. As the story goes, Gene had been roused by his editor, maybe after another late-night poker game, and was asked to join the plane junket and report on the historic event.



Those were the days when you'd fly by day and travel on land by night. But Gene, whom you might say was as likely to fly by night, hadn't thought about all that. Bleary eyed, lacking the expected preparedness of a reporter or maybe even a good boy scout, he found himself with neither paper nor portable to record the historic event, with or without purple prose. Nor had he given much thought about a note to be added in with those of the other newsmen, though one of those notes was to become the first commercial radio message from airplane to ground.

At the time, far more important, Coughlin thought, he had neither money for a hotel nor train nor bus fare to get himself home—he'd only just discovered the plane wasn't returning that evening. With some enterprise, though, Gene managed to come up with a pencil and an old envelope or a scrap of paper and, as he told me and as I took it all in from "little chair," it took him only moments and little or no speculation about what to write.

Addressed to his city editor, the note said:

**"DPS (day press rate)
PLEASE WIRE ME FIFTY STOP WILL EXPLAIN LATER."**

While some reporters probably were still opening up typewriters, Gene quickly handed his note to John Farley Granger, the United States Postmaster General who then immediately questioned the historic value of such a message as this, hardly something for future archives, for an aviation history that would one day even include messages from the moon and even beeps from way beyond that; not to mention greetings—the first sent beyond the bounds of the universe, in a space capsule—signed by one time Nazi officer Kurt Waldheim, later a chief of the United Nations. In a way Waldheim would travel far, literally out of this world, but after being caught lying about his Nazi past he still wasn't allowed in the US.

All that, of course, was for the future. The big thing, at the moment, was sending that commercial message from plane to ground.

Looking at Coughlin's note, Postmaster General Granger suggested, "That's not a commercial message." But Lindbergh said then, "Send it—that's as commercial message as you're ever going to see."

The message was sent, and Coughlin got the fifty dollars. Twenty-five years later, he got another twenty-five hundred dollars when he sold the first person article to *The Reader's Digest*. It's now another half century or so since the *Digest* article, but the story still holds. History doesn't change, after all, but sometimes there's more history than makes it into print.

That much of the story behind the story, or behind the first commercial radio message, is perhaps still remembered by many *Digest* readers. Less known, though equally amusing to some—I wasn't too thrilled tagging along at the time as his chauffeur and Jiminy Cricket—was the way Coughlin would report to fans, friends and collectors, particularly in the bars and down that cosmopolitan stretch of Alvarado Street in Los Angeles—one of those rare streets, aside from downtown then that had people walking on it—just across from the lake and park.

Every day and every other day, as the telegrams would come, Gene would be flashing his latest missive as editors would inquire about this or that detail to round out and confirm the story. Obviously everyone wished Gene success, and particularly so where he'd borrowed a few or had a good tab going.

As the notes and telegrams arrived, first with an expression of interest, then with a more solid decision, and so on up to receipt of the big check, it was a merry adventure. News of the pre-celebration, if not of Coughlin's reputation, had spread to the *Digest* itself. A note accompanying the check kindly advised, "Dear Mr. Coughlin: Hope this doesn't contribute too much to your liver problem."

It didn't. Sometimes Gene would go for weeks or months when he would, as he used to say to me, even though I was invariably sober, a kind of nice Jewish boy—"straighten up and fly right."

He might not cover so much territory sober as when, for example, he could be seen traipsing out of the men's room somewhere with half a roll of toilet paper dangling conspicuously out of his pocket. Or asking that cashier in a crowded shop, "Are you open?" Or making funny faces at Trudy, a waitress, through the picture frame window of that coffee shop on Alvarado, just down from Seventh Street and near that subway stop for which someone would later remark—"They spent a billion dollars just so you could get a corned beef sandwich at Langer's."

Or, if you got distracted, Gene might say, when he'd be asking, capturing your attention again: "Do you want to hear this?—I've heard this story before, you know."

He might not be so comical then but still strange things happened to him even when he wasn't happening to them. Perhaps because he could recognize a laugh others would pass up. I clearly remember his chortling, for example, after two of his ex-wives, both charming ladies, came calling one morning at our hotel apartment on Lake, near Olympic. One ex-wife came strolling in right after the other, and with each introducing herself to the manager at the switchboard downstairs as: "Mrs. Coughlin."

I always like the story about how the dog "snitched" on Gene, too. As he confided to me once, apparently one of his wives had hated for him to drink so much but often found him boring when he was sober. So he solved the problem, supposedly—keeping his wife happy and amused without worrying her—by walking the dog each morning and having a good snort by the incinerator outside where he always kept a bottle. He'd solved the problem. That is, until the dog snitched one day when Gene and his wife and some company were out in the backyard.



It was as if the morning ritual hadn't been completed, Gene explained. The dog kept moving over toward the incinerator. Waiting, nodding to Gene. Coming to get him and then back over toward the incinerator. Finally, Gene's wife

got suspicious and looked for the bottle. That was the dog Gene called Mr. Dog.

Having known Gene's last lady friend and perhaps his best fan, Mary, and both wives, I can sympathize with all three for much of the time they spent with him, the moments of near-cringing embarrassment of being along when he was flying, the toilet-paper dragging from his pocket, or some such; and then, perhaps, one ought to sympathize for that loss of special effervescence when he was grounded. Yet Coughlin had sharp and subtle wit, a genuine character and some standard lines that always stayed with him to add to the continuity despite the flying record.

Too often Gene had to buoy himself up. Not only by opening up and rereading, several times over, when he thought he was alone, for example, that *Digest* note complimenting his story and assuring a successful sale, and not only with "a belt" here and there to keep himself afloat, but, far more importantly, it seemed, with the sociability. Gene thought the editorial policies of most of the publications he'd worked for—the *Herald* included, not least for their great support of Joe McCarthy—a joke.

And he didn't always have a spectacular faith in the public, either—such as when he looked with a flinching eye at citizens for *Gracie for President*. That was indeed the time of the "front page" Later, at the *Herald*, and with Gene himself, I caught what must have been the tail end of it. In that context, you might call it—more suitable than "the sleepy fifties" perhaps—the era of *The back page*.

Sometimes Gene would get the laugh on someone—an editor, perhaps—not so much to "even a score" but as though, like a comic philosopher, to make a joke about an absurdity—to get even with the absurdity itself—because he could see through it, or beyond it, and would refuse to take it too seriously.

"Sirius [the dog star, brightest in the heavens]," he would say, "is eight and a half light years away."

Looking around, Coughlin would laugh at himself, at others, at life itself. And though not always in that order, to be sure he saw plenty to laugh at. In my early twenties then, I didn't quite sense the full impact of it, though of course now we've lived through Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-gate, the HUD scandals, the Iran-Contra scandals, the S&L scandals, "conservative" Orange County's speculative financial bankruptcy scandal, Monicagate—even *Enron-gate*.

The desire to make a "quick buck" seemed common enough, and even these common frailties, perhaps mostly frailties, added to the human partnership, Gene thought. But of course, as he would easily recognize, with

a good reporter's eye, looking to make a few quick bucks was a different kind of frailty than that demonstrated in earlier years by the Robber Barons and in later years by Eronesque styled executive who could happily pocket millions while, apparently with small concern, wreaking havoc on the lives of workers and shareholders. With Coughlin, one saw the difference between critical skepticism and uncritical cynicism. With a little less uncritical cynicism and little more Coughlinesque skepticism among the accountants and overseers, there never would have been an Enron carried to such absurd lengths.

Perhaps, with or without the money, the Presidential or Congressional or Senatorial legislative committees or the blue ribbon panels or the multi-million or multi billion dollar "oversight" accounting firms or the "oversight" regulatory agencies, might find it difficult—for all their worldly cynicism—to see a problem with an *Enron* or a *Global Crossing*. Yet my guess is that, for all its complexities, Coughlin, or some of the other old time first rate reporters, for all their made up stories and shenanigans—and I can think of a few good ones—would have seen through, despite the fancy and respectable high rise offices, an '*Enron*' or a '*Global Crossing*' sales or stock pitch in a flash.

"Jeez!" Coughlin would guffaw, "Talk about tall tales."

So the world, for all its anguish, has been good for a few dark laughs along the way and I can appreciate even better now Coughlin looking down on such episodes, chortling some, shaking his head sadly, and saying for each, "It fits!"

Though some thought Gene a clown he was actually a true comedian, one who saw the connection between tragedy and comedy. He could laugh—and help others to laugh—at tragedy. Not as a clown's game but as a way of accepting and coming to terms with it. So Coughlin had his doubts about man—and hung onto his critical eye—because he could see himself, clearly enough, at least, to be able to laugh at himself, too. Not really singling himself out, he could observe himself, at least, as an honest measure of the human dynamic.

He had his insecurities but it was just because of that sometimes tenuous faith, and that sympathy for both himself and the public, that he recognized connections, certain universal human qualities.

Of course the transference worked both ways. On occasion, maybe responding to some undercurrent self-defense mechanism as well as to his friendly outgoing nature, he'd write some waitress a poem on the back of a napkin and almost lament he didn't have a carbon, viewing the poem and

the waitress inimitably matched as the two finest creations since perhaps the last waitress and poem.

Coughlin would not hardly buy into an Enronesque tall tale; yet, admittedly, at least when it seemed safe enough and with not too much riding on it, he had that special optimism that usually comes from one beer too many.... Thus, I can still recall the occasion more than forty years back when Gene called forth from that huge reserve of faith of his to immortalize—for the moment, anyway—a musician we met in a piano bar.



On Alvarado—where else? Gene had “discovered” an old-time jelly roll blues piano player, a black man with a raspy voice whom I was made to understand once played that way in a *House of Pleasure* “thirty or forty years earlier” somewhere on Chicago’s Rush Street of the twenties or thirties.

It was an event. Here was a musician who was really appreciated. He really believed in himself then because someone else—Coughlin—believed in him. And, it seemed to me, though I was no more an authority on piano players than on waitresses or poetry, that piano player played to expectation. Though hardly “a winner” and perhaps even a “loser” by many modern standards, apparently—neither a recording star nor known to millions—he had become, for the moment, anyway, like in the old days in Chicago, a success. He brought pleasure. He justified himself.

It was a rare key Coughlin had struck for that man. But of course Coughlin wanted more.

After considerable approbation’s and coaxing by Gene then, and though it was nearing midnight of a weekday, I finally agreed to call an independent film producer I knew, hoping against hope that she wouldn’t answer. As it turned out, she did. The idea was that she would come down from her haunt in Beverly Hills and really “discover,” though for what I wasn’t the least clear, the piano player. What could she do—put him in a movie like Oscar Levant?

On reflection, that player might have fit right in with something like *Lady Sings the Blues*, though the film was some years off yet. Anyway, Gene and I sat around the piano waiting for the producer who said she’d “try to make it,” and mostly Gene softly belted out some of his favorites such as the perennial: *The Ol’ Ace in the Hole*—

“. . . This town is full of guys/who think they’re mighty wise/just because they know a thing or two/you can see `em every day, strolling up and down Broadway...”

We continued that way with Gene making old requests and the piano player filling then, Gene borrowing another dollar from me to out in the

piano man's glass. Some of the songs, though the titles were familiar, I'd never even heard sung before. Great lyrics. Great music. It was a truly fine evening, even if that original *House of Pleasure* player wasn't likely to make the top ten.

I never expected the young gorgeous blonde producer to show up. Though she did finally, bringing with her into those questionable parts some slender Italian count as a sort of bodyguard. I remember he had a dapper kerchief around his neck.

I'm not sure what that producer could have done if the piano man *had* bowled her over, but mostly she just snuggled up into a corner for a few fast drinks somewhere with her count, while the piano man played on. I don't know if, as Coughlin had insisted at that late hour, the old man was great or not. He was good enough for me but I don't think either the producer or her count were too impressed. Maybe things would have gone better if the bartender had served Pernod, as the count had requested. After that, when Gene finally "straightened up" and I didn't have to play chaperone in the bars, I never saw that piano man again. Nor the producer nor her count. As it turned out, despite Gene's confidence, she ended up doing about as much good for the piano man as she did for me. Though I missed him more.

Anyway it was clear that Gene loved people. Not just the "successful" people, the winners, but the man on the street, the friend of the moment. It showed. And that was one reason so many people loved Gene.

"How tall are you?" he'd say sometimes. "I'm not sure I like your altitude."

Yet fly though he might, Coughlin, a great reporter from that Back Page era, himself seemed never quite up in the clouds. Not like Enron. Not ever.

Even flashing his *Digest* telegrams, Coughlin's thing was not to impress but to amuse, often at his own expense, and to listen. He was one of the most non-phony persons I've ever known. His successes were obvious enough, yet he was among the last to be enamored of himself. He often had



his doubts, though once he'd get into full swing, such as up or down Alvarado or around Pico Gulch, in any of dozens of places where he was known, or even in the newsroom showing off his *dipsy doodle* pitch, he'd be in good shape. "Let's get operatin'", he'd say.

He did tell me once he thought his father hated him and used to knock him around some because he looked just like the old man, a big Irishman with a funny face and a double chin.

There never seemed any trace of bitterness in Coughlin's writing, though it did carry with it something deeply personal.

In his latter years Coughlin had worked up a good-sized double chin himself. Sometimes, his chest out, he'd strut, making fun of himself with the chin tucked in and clearing the throat in a comic way to capture attention. Yet from the copy, anyway, you never noticed the chin—at least not the way a pundit often seems to tuck his in while speaking in a low deep voice to students, not the way the medium is the message nor even, in much written copy, the way all you notice sometimes is the chin. The kind of mumbling you get in quarters where the spokesman is obviously a little too respectable for one's own good.

Gene was so formal that sometimes he'd put both the editor and the public on, the way Jack Smith of the *Los Angeles Times* admitted, for example, how he used to write the weather report—he'd simply push aside all the weather data from the wire machines and look out the window.

Smith joked that he wouldn't write—or wasn't allowed to write—the weather anymore. But, on reflection, he insisted, his record wasn't really worse than most and sometimes it was better.

Coughlin never mentioned it but I'm reasonably sure that whenever the task came to him, he, too, wrote the weather by looking out the window.

Coughlin's copy always had more of an off-the-record than an officialese on-the-record tone. But there was more than just the tone or even the feeling that he was talking to you. Beyond merely talking to *you*, it was as if he had to go on the record *himself*. You sometimes had the feeling that Gene, with that bright splash here and there, actually was letting defenses down, admitting his own needs in a world turning ever more impersonal.

To the extent he could get away with it he wanted all to know that each story of his was written by a person and not merely by a trained or programmed machine that could tell a dangling participle from a parenthetical clause. Coughlin reminded one, perhaps, of a little boy, though one fighting for human recognition. Like many writers, Coughlin was highly literate and well read, yet people were always more important to him than things, situations or ideas. His was a real people-to-people program, which include himself.

In an important way, Coughlin dealt uniquely with some major existential concerns—how to hang onto oneself despite increasing specialization and reliance upon authorities, if not on the computer itself.

Authors Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian touch on similar concerns in their book, *The Existential Imagination*, focusing on the assertion by Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, that “man has lost his subjectivity, his own concrete life, and, consequently, has virtually ceased to exist.” According to Kierkegaard, the authors note, the chief philosophical problems were not really about knowledge or metaphysics or even God—“but human: specifically, how was the individual to come to terms with existence in a technological civilization?”

Coughlin’s answer would be clear and simple: When you can, look out the window.

Not only to double-check the weather against the statistics but to assert *yourself*.

Looking out the window sounds easy. But it’s not. One can imagine such a weather writer from several perspectives. Not so a specialist but one of those general assignment reporters who doesn’t always know how to look busy when he’s not and who happens to be around when someone remembers that someone else forgot the weather box. It may be that the novice weatherman turns to the window more-so from ineptitude than from courage. The small mounds of weather data off the teletype machines, often contradicting, commonly confusing and simply too much information for too little space, presumably could well send one off, if not to jump out the window from the bottom floor, to search the skies from there. This way, forced to act more-so by ineptitude than by courage, looking out the window would come not so much by choice as by final alternative, as if peeking through the blinds and hoping against hope to find some scattered clouds (what can you write about clear skies) in order to legitimately get the words *scattered* or *variable* into the report.

One could, of course, go to the window as a first choice. Or be both inept *and* courageous. What was impressive about Coughlin, though, was that he would call the weather as he saw it even if he couldn’t see straight. Coughlin was often “out of joint” and not ashamed to admit it. At times, in fact, he would brag about it. While most of us were getting more and more efficient, Coughlin was holding onto his ineptitude, his courage to be, rather than not to be, though seemingly hardly a match against that know-it-all world of skyscrapers, concrete bridges, jet airplanes, teletype machines or even that barrage of household contraptions that were sometimes too complicated for Coughlin to manipulate. But then, looking out the window, or with one’s own personal vision as distinct from the group vision, you sometimes see things that others don’t see. And at other times, if you’re a good old jaundiced reporter with that skeptical eye, or if you’re not getting a donation or extra consulting fee in the process, you might not see things, or

buy into things, that a big named committee or panel or accountant might readily buy into.

Coughlin recognized that things are not always so simple as you can tell at a glance. But he tried, within bounds, to simplify matters—or as with “big chair” and “little chair” in our apartment, to bring things into focus. And then he’d try to understand.

He once told me that what he thought it takes to be a good writer were too things—“sympathy and understanding.”

Many who knew Coughlin thought he had both, though some may remember him as fondly for his madness. One time—this was when Coughlin was writing poems on napkins in one of those lounges where he’d dragged me again as a combination straight man and slowly sipping chaperone and chauffeur—when I came out of the men’s room I thought I saw people looking curiously at me, treating me with a special respect. It wasn’t until some time later I learned that he’d spread the word then about how I was a top Mafia man from the east.

More often, though, the joke would be on Gene. He’d make a near fool of himself sometimes just to make others look or feel good. And once, I recall, someone who’d never met Gene came up to shake his hand, not because Coughlin was a popular writer but because that person had come into a restaurant in a severe depression and, after listening in a while, had left practically laughing in tears. I can think of stories I can’t even tell that had me laughing in tears, too, and falling out of “little chair.”

It’s clear enough he had a way with people. It’s hard to forget that story of how he once responded to a suicide threat, a common enough call coming into newspaper city rooms.

At a PEN awards dinner, the former newsman Paul Weeks told me how he’d once taken a suicide call. You’d be surprised how many old time reporters have taken such calls. Not me. I did take a bomb threat over the phone once—but no suicide call had ever come in to me. However, for the sake of friendly conversation, I was glad to pass on a somewhat remarkable suicide call story that I once heard about direct from Coughlin, along with a few chortles.

I forget the exact words but in essence, as Gene recalled, the caller announced simply:

“I’m going to kill myself.”

“Oh yeah,” said Gene. “And how might you plan to do that?”

“Whaddya mean, how do I plan to do it—I’m gonna kill myself, that’s all. . .”

“But how?” Gene insisted.



"What difference does it make?" the caller responded. "If you must know, I'm going to shoot myself. That's how."

"Oh yeah?"

But how do you plan to do it?"

"I'm going to shoot myself with a gun, for Chrissake."

"What kind of gun?"

"Oh God, whaddya mean, what *kind* of gun. If you must know, it's a .38."

"That makes a pretty big hole, doesn't it?" Gene continued.

"So what? I'm gonna shoot myself in the head."

"Well, that'd be pretty messy, then, wouldn't it?"

"So who cares?"

"I do—would you promise to do me a favor first?"

"Whaddya mean, would I do you a favor?"

"You know, would you do me a favor? Just one?" Gene asked, keeping the caller on the phone while authorities tried to locate him.

"Okay, shady want?"

"Well, could you tell me first—what are you wearing?"

"What am I wearing? Oh, God, what am I wearing?"

"You know, what are you wearing?"

"As a matter of fact," the caller responded, "I'm wearing a brand new sport coat."

"Fine. Now would you do me that favor?"

"Oh, Jesus, what?"

"Would you take the coat off, first, before you shoot yourself?"

"Why?"

"You know, so you won't mess it up."

Before Gene was through he probably told that caller he'd better "straighten up and fly right" or expect to have Coughlin come over and press the down button on his elevator shoes because he didn't like his altitude. . .

The caller finally changed his plans and later sent the coat to Gene.

There was something about Gene that was very much in support of life, however lightly he sometimes seemed to treat it. The story of Leopold and Loeb may offer an example by contrast.

In this case the question of "nurture or nature" would arise as rarely before. Both boys had had every advantage and were regarded as exceedingly bright. Dr. Karl Menninger would refer to the case as "a milestone," noting that for the first time in the American courtroom a psychiatrist (William Alanson White) "tried to explain the behavior of . . .

murderers as the product of . . . strange unconscious striving that, for reasons not clear, overwhelmed their control.”

Coughlin later, discussing the story privately, told me once it may not have been so much a matter of ordinary thrill-seeking, but a case of necrophilia. This crime—taking as its basis a love of the dead—was perhaps a kind of landmark for events outside the courtroom, too, and Coughlin was there to observe.

The psychotherapist Dr. Rollo May suggested that a relatively small number of people with severe mental disturbances “provide a very revealing and significant barometer of the conflicts and tensions under the psychological surface of the society.”

Within a dozen years of the Leopold and Loeb crime, the Spanish Civil War was beginning, and the favorite motto of General Millan Astray, *Viva la muerte!*(long live death), was to find increasing popularity. And not so many years later, Adolph Hitler—who was fascinated by death and destruction—was to rise to power.

In *The Heart of Man*, Eric Fromm described the person with a necrophilious orientation as “one who is attracted to and fascinated by all that is not alive, all that is dead.” With Fromm’s commentary, we move from the thirties of Leopold and Loeb to the sixties of the western world. “The bureaucratic-industrial civilization which has been victorious in Europe and North America,” he says, “has created a new type of man; he can be described as the *organization man*, as the *automaton man*, and as *homo consumens*. He is, in addition, *homo mechanicus*, by this I mean a gadget man, deeply attracted by all that is mechanical, and inclined against that which is alive. . . .

“There is no more fundamental distinction between men, psychologically and morally,” Fromm adds, “Than the one between those who love death and those who love life, between the necrophilias and the biophilious.”

So the Leopold and Loeb case, seen in Coughlin’s terms as “a love of death,” may have symbolized much that was yet to come. And Coughlin may have seen much that was coming that made him a kind of forerunner of the theater of the absurd.

Gene was into and could tell an endless number of stories and original jokes. Most all would grab you unless maybe you’d heard them seven or eight times before. But even that was part of his charm. It wasn’t as if he’d

forgotten who'd heard "that one" before—it's just that "that one" was part of his trademark.

"I don't have to take that," he'd remind. "My folks are wealthy." And if you'd heard it before, he'd leave you to fill in the last line yourself.

Despite the standard ones, there was the never-ending supply of new stories—though we all knew if he didn't take care of himself he couldn't go on that way.

As a youth he'd been an athlete, with a cast iron constitution, he recalled, and once he held a city or state pole vaulting record somewhere. Though that was a long time ago.

Finally, and for a good while, Gene did "shape up" and "straighten up" again, though then, as had happened before, he'd lose touch with many of his friends. Sometimes it seemed as if everybody who'd shot himself in the head or was about to shoot himself in the head loved Gene and wanted to buy him a drink. I'd be reminded of a Richard Conte movie where Conte, as the reporter, was fawned over in an Italian restaurant whose small business the reporter had just saved with some sparkling feature story. So traveling with Gene would be like sliding into some scene right out of the movies until you suddenly realized Gene wasn't even Italian.

Coughlin, who died of Parkinson's Disease in the early 1960s, was among the last of a special breed of writers and journalists, it seemed to me. Great personalities, though misfits, whose lives, in a way, were intricately involved in the stories they wrote, or, as in Coughlin's case, sometimes—as in the Leopold-Loeb case with its supposed necrophilia—didn't write.

Associated Press correspondent Lawrence A. Gobright, concluding his report of the assassination of President Lincoln in 1865, wrote: "We can give in these, its first moments, no thought of the future. God, in his inscrutable providence, has thus visited the nation; the future we must leave to Him."

Even in our highly subjectivized postmodern times, with everyone supposedly allowed one's own perspective, it's safe to presume such a comment as Gobright's would never get past today's presumably more objective news desk. Similarly, Damon Runyon, reporting in New York on the "Dumbbell Murder," in 1927, would probably never get past today's more objective blue pencil:

"A chilly-looking blonde with frosty eyes and one of those marble, you-bet-your-will chins, and an inert, scare-drunk fellow that you couldn't miss among any hundred men as a dead setup for a blonde, or the shell game, or maybe a gold brick. . . ."

The earlier style had its limitations, but consider much of the “objective” reporting of the sixties and seventies that placed emphasis on the Vietnam body counts but for years ignored much of what the reporters really had to tell us.

Only brief reflection reveals the change in times. Since today’s reporter is not commonly allowed in a news report a subjective opinion—that would be too “value-laden”—but objectively reports the subjective opinions of everyone but himself, Damon Runyon, with all his talent and adjectives, would find it difficult getting published today.

Coughlin had a plethora of colorful adjectives but he also had a solid personal objectivity with which he could meet the growing call for more technological objective, cooler, and cooling times.

Reporters, amongst each other, are always trying to look non-busy, as Hemingway himself perceptively observed. And then, too, the faster you could bat the story out after returning to your desk the smarter you’d look, and if you wouldn’t appear to spend too much time and get too wrapped up in it all then the more objective you’d seem, too.

The observation about looking non-busy may suggest not so much that there is nothing to write of import but that the reporter is not that much involved in the work, that in fact there’s no commitment, no bias, no concern, no opinion and perhaps even no thought. He’s professional. He’s objective. He’s no true believer. And to prove it, he doesn’t care. So whatever the issue, the motto is: don’t be serious.

Surely that must apply to plenty of objective or supposedly objective, writers today. Yet though Coughlin himself used to joke about “Sirius,” the canine star, in unforgettable ways he was a serious man, particularly for those who could read between the lines and those who knew him in-between the stories. Some may have failed to see the connections but those who really knew him, even those who’d laughed over some of the stories he’d made up, knew a man of unusual integrity and talent.

Particularly where work is without fun, and play without meaning—as it so often is—such individuals as Hemingway’s vacationing writers in *The Sun Also Rises* appear to focus on the meaningless or irrelevant, for example, as the two writers spy on a stranger, riding across from them on a train, with a stained shirt and sleeping:

“He must drink a lot of wine.”

“Or wear purple undershirts.”

“Let’s ask him.”

“No. He’s too tired.”

But the scene, seemingly without meaning, suggests a camaraderie and relaxation, and a relief from stuffiness. So, too, Coughlin's antics weren't all that irrelevant. They were mostly intended to make people happy, to make people forget their big or little problems. Sometimes they were so he could forget things himself. Or so he could escape an absurdity by recognizing it for what it was and treating it accordingly. If something struck him as absurd, he might remind himself it was part of an absurd framework.

"That fits," he'd say. And you could interpret it either way. Years later, when I was a hundred-dollar-a-week "World News Editor" with more title than money on a small daily, I'd think about Coughlin's term as I used to play Atlas and squeeze the world daily into 160 column inches, the size of a full newspaper page. "That fits," I'd think sometimes, when the page was in.

If you got too important Gene had a way of bringing you down to size, politely, by threatening to press that "down button" on your "elevator shoes." But the intent was not to "put someone down" so much as to get a laugh. Usually. Sometimes it was a defensive move. But Coughlin wasn't even really "cute"—and he wasn't just giving an impression. He just was.

When he was the first one to finish a story it was usually because, he admitted to me once, he'd simply thought things out on the way back to the typewriter. It seemed to me his copy almost always sparkled, and sometimes sizzled. Sometimes it was heavy, such as when he'd hand over a page stooping low, as if it weighed 73 pounds. And if he did bat out a story or rewrite with surprising speed it may have been just because he wasn't cute or too clever, but straightforward.

He once told me not to think too much about a story when you write it—you can always publish it later—and the important thing is to get the story out the way it comes out, spontaneously, honestly.

He hated to face blank page as if mindlessly with nothing to say. You have to think the story out in advance, treat it with respect, he'd say. And I'd recall how sometimes he'd stay up reading for hours, to double-check something or to come up with a supporting paragraph.

"But when you're at the typewriter just write it like you're telling it to your mother, or your best friend," he'd say. "You can't do much better than that." It never occurred to him to worry about whether that sounded corny or not.

When the story was down, Gene'd polish it. Then he might gurgle with pleasure over a line or phrase. Even beforehand, unlike many an editor, Gene could get really excited about a story idea—particularly if he wanted to

get out of the office on a slow Saturday afternoon when he'd have to be sitting around twiddling thumbs and pitching dippy doodles.

Then to the contrary, if Gene seemed "objective" in the sense of sometimes appearing too aloof about some story someone thought important, maybe it was because he had the eye of an old-timer who knows today's scoop is usually tomorrow's forgotten headache. If he was sometimes disinterested in a story of the moment to the point of not showing up to cover it—and maybe making up a better one—perhaps this, too, was not only understandable but preferable. Gene had long ago "proved himself" as a journalist, and even as a novice copyboy and cub reporter I could guess that it must have been hard to take, for example, that time he was assigned to cover the marble tournament. Who could blame him for maybe elaborating here and there on a few tales from a stool somewhere in Pico Gulch to account for the time spent away from a marble tournament or the like. What was less obvious though, was that even then Coughlin cared. He had sympathy and understanding, and so he cared. Or he cared, and so he had sympathy and understanding.

Maybe he cared too much. Frequent or heavy drinking seemed to me then a dangerous waste of time, health and money, and so it mostly seems so. But for Gene, down on the Gulch was one place where people really talked. Often he might just sit and nurse a beer, but it was like finding honest graffiti on a wall instead of a puffed-up job application or a prepared speech or the happy music in a supermarket.

The Los Angeles Convention Center with its new products and proud press releases was a long way off, not yet built on that very Pico Gulch site, but it was as if Coughlin saw it coming. Pico Gulch was a slum, and Coughlin saw that, too, though still it seemed to have more honesty, perhaps, than some of the shiny new world that would replace it, for a few square blocks amid the slums. And so it was from a ten-cent beer bar that Coughlin came up with his *True Tales of the City* that captured the hearts of thousands and later won an award for the best feature story, or series of stories, in all Hearst papers that year. Remarkably the award arrived about the same time that Coughlin picked up a "pink slip" from the *Herald* in a staff reduction.

When working he'd write his stories—after thinking about them for who knows how long—with that flair, then he'd hand them in ever so casually, hoping there wouldn't be many questions and that the expense account would pass.

Coughlin was part of a school that may have cared not so much about the story sometimes as about the reader, who the stories were for. Though those who knew him knew he wrote not to put on, really; not to impress, not to pander, but to entertain—to reach the reader in some indescribable way.

Often enough, though never knowing quite what to expect from him, he had things to say. And though not so caught up in the present perhaps as the present was always catching up with him, still he *was* involved. As in the Leopold-Loeb case, when he proved himself a real sleeper among journalists, *he* was a part of the story. And far from hyping it, he held back what was probably one of the bigger scoops of the century.

"Do you want to hear this?" he'd say, if the attention might dip in the middle of a story he was telling, "I've heard it before."

Besides those personal Coughlin stories, there were also those rib-tickling one-liners and jokes of his, some of which may still be making the rounds.

Such as the time an editor, insisting on "tight" copy, unwittingly nodded satisfaction when Coughlin promised him "half a paragraph."

I was there for that one. And poor Bill Pigue—a really nice guy and probably not a bad assistant city editor, either—responded, "Yeah, that's fine. Give me half a paragraph."

Or there were Gene's old standards, such as when he'd call you on the telephone. "Hi. This is Coughlin. Are you near a phone?"

Coughlin once told me one of the best compliments he ever received was when a joke he'd started finally came back to him, some months later, as if he hadn't "heard that one" before.

Who really knows who started that funny story that "really grabbed" you? Well, maybe it was Coughlin. A visionary of the *first* kind, who saw the obvious, and then some.

Everyone, one can guess, knows of Clarence Darrow. But those who haven't known Coughlin, that man in the gulch, have missed a moment of joy in the passage of time. But then again, maybe you do know him. Some of his one liners are probably still going around.

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