

STRAIGHT UP MIDNIGHT

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Well, look at this - we're all here. We made it back again. I hope you're half as happy to be here as I am just saying that reminds me of a story, and since telling stories is what I do for a living (and to keep myself sane), I'll pass this one along.

Earlier this year - I'm writing this in late July of 1989 - I was crashed out in front of the TV, watching the Boston Red Sox play the Milwaukee Brewers. Robin Yount of the Brewers stepped to the plate, and the Boston commentators began marvelling at the fact that Yount was still in his early thirties. 'Sometimes it seems that Robin helped Abner Doubleday lay down the first set of foul lines,' Ned Martin said as Yount stepped into the box to face Roger Clemens.

'Yep,' Joe Castiglione agreed. 'He came to the Brewers right out of high school, I think - he's been playing for them since 1974.'

I sat up so fast I nearly spilled a can of Pepsi-Cola all over myself. Wait a minute! I was thinking. Wait just a goddam minute! I published my first book in 1974! That wasn't so long ago! What's this shit about helping Abner Doubleday Put down the first set of foul lines?

Then it occurred to me that the perception of how time passes - a subject which comes up again and again in the stories which follow - is a highly individual thing. It's true that the publication of *Carrie* in the spring of 1974 (it was published, in fact, just two days before the baseball season began and a teenager named Robin Yount played his first game for the Milwaukee Brewers) doesn't seem like a long time ago to me subjectively - just a quick glance back over the shoulder, in fact - but there are other ways to count the years, and some of them suggest that fifteen years can be a long time, indeed.

In 1974 Gerald Ford was President and the Shah was still running the show in Iran. John Lennon was alive, and so was Elvis Presley. Donny Osmond was singing with his brothers and sisters in a high, piping voice. Home video cassette recorders had been invented but could be purchased in only a few test markets. Insiders predicted

that when they became widely available, Sony's Beta-format machines would quickly stomp the rival format, known as VHS, into the ground. The idea that people might soon be renting popular movies as they had once rented popular novels at lending libraries was still over the horizon. Gasoline prices had risen to unthinkable highs: forty-eight cents a gallon for regular, fifty-five cents for unleaded.

The first white hairs had yet to make their appearance on my head and in my beard. My daughter, now a college sophomore, was four. My oldest son, who is now taller than I am, plays the blues harp, and sports luxuriant shoulder-length Sammy Hagar locks, had just been promoted to training pants. And my youngest son, who now pitches and plays first base for a championship Little League team, would not be born for another three years.

Time has this funny, plastic quality, and everything that goes around comes around. When you get on the bus, you think it won't be taking you far - across town, maybe, no further than that - and all at once, holy shit! You're

halfway across the next continent. Do you find the metaphor a trifle naive? So do I, and the hell of it is just this: it doesn't matter. The essential conundrum of time is so perfect that even such jejune observations as the one I have just made retain an odd, plangent resonance.

One thing hasn't changed during those years - the major reason, I suppose, why it sometimes seems to me (and probably to Robin Yount as well) that no time has passed at all. I'm still doing the same thing: writing stories.

And it is still a great deal more than what I know; it is still what I love. Oh, don't get me wrong - I love my wife and I love my children, but it's still a pleasure to find these peculiar side roads, to go down them, to see who lives there, to see what they're doing and who they're doing it to and maybe even why. I still love the strangeness of it, and those gorgeous moments when the pictures come clear and the

events begin to make a pattern. There is always a tail to the tale. The beast is quick and I sometimes miss my grip, but when I do get it, I hang on tight ...

and it feels fine.

When this book is published, in 1990, I will have been sixteen years in the business of make-believe. Halfway through those years, long after I had become, by some process I still do not fully understand, America's literary boogeyman, I published a book called *Different Seasons*. It was a collection of four previously unpublished novellas, three of which were not horror stories. The publisher accepted this book in good heart but, I think, with some mental reservations as well. I know I had some. As it turned out, neither of us had to worry. Sometimes a writer will publish a book which is just naturally lucky, and *Different Seasons* was that way for me.

One of the stories, 'The Body,' became a movie (*Stand By Me*) which enjoyed a successful run ... the first really successful film to be made from a work of mine since *Carrie* (a movie which came out back when Abner Doubleday and you-know-who were laying down those foul lines). Rob Reiner, who made *Stand By Me*, is one of the bravest, smartest filmmakers I have ever met, and I'm proud of my association with him. I am also amused to note that the company Mr Reiner formed following the success of *Stand By Me* is Castle Rock Productions ... a name with which many of my long-time readers will be familiar.

The critics, by and large, also liked *Different Seasons*. Almost all of them would napalm one particular novella, but since each of them picked a different story to scorch, I felt I could disregard them all with impunity ... and I did. Such behavior is not always possible; when most of the reviews of *Christine* suggested it was a really dreadful piece of work, I came to the reluctant decision that it probably wasn't as good as I had hoped (that, however, did not stop me from cashing the royalty checks). I know writers who claim not to read their notices, or not to be hurt by the bad ones if they do, and I actually believe two of these individuals. I'm one of the other kind

- I obsess over the possibility of bad reviews and brood over them when they come. But they don't get me down for long; I just kill a few children and old ladies, and then I'm right as a trivet again.

Most important, the readers liked *Different Seasons*. I don't remember a single correspondent from that time who scolded me for writing something that wasn't horror. Most readers, in fact, wanted to tell me that one of the stories roused their emotions in some way, made them think, made them feel, and those letters are the real payback for the days (and there are a lot of them) when the words come hard and inspiration seems thin or even nonexistent. God bless and keep Constant Reader; the mouth can speak, but there is no tale unless there is a sympathetic ear to listen.

1982, that was. The year the Milwaukee Brewers won their only American League pennant, led by - yes, you got it - Robin Yount. Yount hit .331 that year, bashed twenty-nine home runs, and was named the American

League's Most Valuable Player.

It was a good year for both of us old geezers.

Different Seasons was not a planned book; it just happened. The four long stories in it came out at odd intervals over a period of five years, stories which were too long to be published as short stories and just a little too short to be books on their own. Like pitching a no-hitter or batting for the cycle (getting a single, double, triple, and home run all in the same ball game), it was not so much a feat as a kind of statistical oddity. I took great pleasure in its success and acceptance, but I also felt a clear sense of regret when the manuscript was finally turned in to The Viking Press. I knew it was good; I also knew that I'd probably never publish another book exactly like it in my life.

If you're expecting me to say Well, I was wrong, I must disappoint you.

The book you are holding is quite different from the earlier book. Different Seasons consisted of three

'mainstream' stories and one tale of the supernatural; all four of the tales in this book are tales of horror. They are, by and large, a little longer than the stories in Different Seasons, and they were written for the most part during the two years when I was supposedly retired. Perhaps they are different because they came from a mind which found itself turning, at least temporarily, to darker subjects.

Time, for instance, and the corrosive effects it can have on the human heart. The past, and the shadows it throws upon the present - shadows where unpleasant things sometimes grow and even more unpleasant things hide ...

and grow fat.

Yet not all of my concerns have changed, and most of my convictions have only grown stronger. I still believe in the resilience of the human heart and the essential validity of love; I still believe that connections between people can be made and that the spirits which inhabit us sometimes touch. I still believe that the cost of those connections is horribly, outrageously high ... and I still believe that the value received far outweighs the price which must be paid. I still believe, I suppose, in the coming of the White and in finding a place to make a stand ...

and defending that place to the death. They are old-fashioned concerns and beliefs, but I would be a liar if I did not admit I still own them. And that they still own me.

I still love a good story, too. I love hearing one, and I love telling one. You may or may not know (or care) that I was paid a great deal of money to publish this book and the two which will follow it, but if you do know or care, you should also know that I wasn't paid a cent for writing the stories in the book. Like anything else that happens on its own, the act of writing is beyond currency. Money is great stuff to

have, but when it comes to the act of creation, the best thing is not to think of money too much. It constipates the whole process.

The way I tell my stories has also changed a little, I suppose (I hope I've gotten better at it, but of course that is something each reader should and will judge for himself), but that is only to be expected. When the Brewers won the pennant in 1982, Robin Yount was playing shortstop. Now he's in center field. I suppose that means he's slowed down a little ... but he still catches almost everything that's hit in his direction.

That will do for me. That will do just fine.

Because a great many readers seem curious about where stories come from, or wonder if they fit into a wider scheme the writer may be pursuing, I have prefaced each of these with a little note about how it came to be written. You may be amused by these notes, but you needn't read them if you don't want to; this is not a school assignment, thank God, and there will be no pop quiz later.

Let me close by saying again how good it is to be here, alive and well and talking to you once more ... and how good it is to know that you are still there, alive and well and waiting to go to some other place - a place where, perhaps, the walls have eyes and the trees have ears and something really unpleasant is trying to find its way out of the attic and downstairs, to where the people are. That thing still interests me ... but I think these days that the people who may or may not be listening for it interest me more.

Before I go, I ought to tell you how that baseball game turned out. The Brewers ended up beating the Red Sox.

Clemens struck Robin Yount out on Yount's first at-bat ... but the second time up, Yount (who helped Abner Doubleday lay out the first foul lines, according to Ned Martin) banged a double high off the Green Monster in left field and drove home two runs.

Robin isn't done playing the game just yet, I guess.

Me, either.

Bangor, Maine July, 1989