

A FRIEND

I went down to get the Sunday paper and he was there when I got back, the tutor of children, the world-traveler, the writer.

Linda called out, "guess who's here?"

and I walked out on the porch and there he was, pacing, he'd just been by the night before: Bernard Rifko.

"hello, Rifko," I said, and he said, "I came by to bring you that poem you once wrote, it's a great poem, I was going to mail it to you."

"only," said Linda, "he couldn't find a stamp."

so he had driven from his place to mine, a good 15 miles. I read the poem. I didn't like it.

"it ought to be in one of your books," said Rifko.

he walked into the house and began pacing up and down.

he said, "I've been writing poems, I get very tense when I've been writing poems, I almost go crazy."

I followed Rifko into the room, then he spun, walked toward me, stopped:

"I told you to read Berryman and you're never going to read Berryman, are you?"

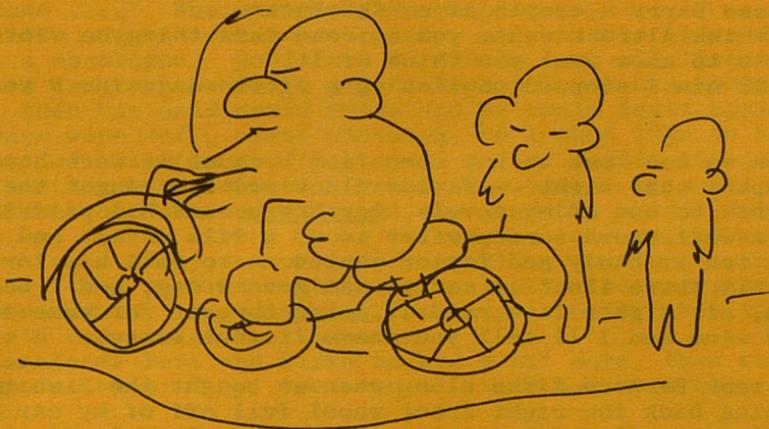
"no."

"I saw Kenneth Rexroth and he said if he ever saw you he was going to get you from behind with a telephone pole. he claims you killed Kenneth Patchen."

he lit a cigarette. "don't you have any coffee? I've got to have coffee."

"we've got some herb tea," said Linda.

"no, I have to have coffee. Balzac drank 50 cups of coffee



a day and look at the novels he wrote. you ought to get me a can of coffee and put my name on it."

Rifko stepped out on the porch. "this sunshine is dangerous, it can destroy one, drive one mad, it's an Algerian sunshine. it's the angle of the rays this time of the year ..."

he came back into the house. "god, I've been in bed most of the day!"

I told Rifko that a man needed his rest.

"no," he said, "it wasn't that. I was in bed with a woman!"

"oh"

"I can still smell her perfume, her perfume is all over me!"

"does your wife wear perfume?" I asked.

"I've got a letter from my girlfriend in France. I'll read it to you."

"no," I said, "it's all right."

it was on blue paper. he stared at it, folded it and put it back in his pocket.

"someone told me I looked like a Viking," he said.

"oh?"

"you know who else looks like a Viking? Kenny Stabler, the quarterback for the Oakland Raiders."

"maybe so."

"Thurman Altrock wrote a long thing on how Kelly Barry tried to murder you."

"he did?"

"yes, he mailed it to me, it was written on red paper. Kelly Barry comes by to see you and for some reason you won't let him in. when he leaves you find a gun on the front porch that had dropped out of his coat."

"I saw Barry a couple of months back"

"I think Altrock wants you to read this thing he wrote, he wants to know what you think of it."

"tell him I stopped publishing a little magazine 8 years ago"

then we went out to buy some fish because we were having company that night -- Taylor Blackford had bought the film rights to one of my novels, Dry Sperm, and had paid \$15,000 to a well-known screenwriter to do a film script and he had written it badly and Taylor wanted me to tell him for gratis where the film script had gone wrong, and I had told him, all right, I've read it, come on over for some fish and wine and I'll tell you where it went wrong.

we took Bernard Rifko along when we bought the fish but coming back the right front wheel fell off of my car and while we called for a tow-truck Rifko walked 11 blocks to get his car and to pick us up, which was damned useful, so that night I suggested that he stay for dinner and meet Taylor Blackford and his wife and his son and Rifko said all right but he wouldn't say anything, he'd just sit there.

and he was all right until his second wine and then he started talking, and with each succeeding wine he talked more and more. it was mostly about people in the media and about the left wing and he told Blackford's wife what a great woman she was and he kept insisting that Taylor's 7 year old son drink more wine: "here! drink up, my boy!" well, it was good wine, it cost me \$4.75 a bottle.

whenever Taylor began to question me about the movie script Rifko would raise his voice and that was all we could hear. he was well-read, he told us who had written the first novel, as the novel form is known, and then he kept repeating four or five opening lines of one of his poems, it was something about taking a leg out of a refrigerator, and the lines evidently contained some hidden meaning, and then he told us he was a member of the Wobblies, and somebody said "Eugene Debbs" and the flames of the candles wavered. Rifko then told us that he was going to Russia next year and he poured more wine for everybody.

Rifko mentioned again that somebody had said he looked like a Viking and then he told Taylor: "I really like you! I really do! and your wife is a marvelous woman!"

I excused myself and went into the other room. Rifko followed, he caught me and said, "I'm really good tonight! I'm coming on sharp! seriously, I'm fantastic!"

Linda had started on the dishes. Rifko went back to the table and continued talking. I opened the newspaper and checked the race results at Los Alamitos. Linda walked in with a tape machine: "they'll be in here in a moment. I can't believe how sickening he is. I want to get some of

this down" she switched the machine on. soon Rifko and the others came out. he was into it good, it was a monologue. he talked on and on. we all listened. now and then he would pause, look down at his shoes, smile, then his head would raise and he would begin again. he always wore soft, clean clothing, he looked like he had come out of a little doll's house. no, he didn't get into Ibsen, although he touched a great many bases, it mostly became what he felt and what his mind and his spirit felt, and he was really a very funny fellow, he told us, he was really a very funny fellow in his bumbling sort of way, you know. and then he went into the leg-in-the-refrigerator poem again, in medias res, smiling, knowing that this time we'd understand the innuendo.

the Blackfords left and Rifko talked a bit more, then saw the tape machine: "hey! you mean all this has been recorded?"

we told him it had been and he asked to listen to it and we let him listen to it and afterwards he said: "I can't believe how good it is! can I have this tape?"

we told him sure he could have the tape.

"listen," he went on, "I need something hot to drink. I need to shower. I've got to leave. I told my wife I'd be in early. she can make things very uncomfortable."

Linda fixed him some tea, herb tea, he drank that and walked into the bathroom. he was in there quite some time. we waited. then he walked out. "don't let me forget that tape."

we put Rifko and the tape into his automobile. he backed out the drive, spun left, stalled, his head looking so round in the moonlight as he pumped at the throttle. we waved him away over the top of the hill.

we went back in for the nightcap. Linda went into the bathroom, came out, "you know, it's dry in there. he didn't shower. he just sat in there."

"maybe that's what Vikings do," I said.

the next day the phone rang at 9:30 a.m. I was taking a crap. Linda answered the phone: "well, I don't know," she said, "you'll have to ask Hank what he thinks of your tape but he's on the toilet right now"

later she told me: "it was Rifko. he couldn't make work today but he remembered some of last night. he listened to the tape again and he said he thought the tape was great, that it was astonishing"

for the remainder of the day I forgot about Rifko. about 6 p.m. the phone rang again. I answered it. it was Rifko: "listen, do you have Altrock's phone number? I've lost it and I'm sure he wants to know what I think of that thing

he wrote about Kelly Barry murdering you."

I told him just a moment, and I looked for the phone number but I couldn't find it.

"that's all right," he said. "by the way, Hank, what did you think of me last night? I was really great, wasn't I?"

"I didn't hear all of it"

"well, I did ... I heard the tape and somewhere on it you said that I appeared to be an asshole ... are you mad at me, Hank?"

"no, everything is all right"

"it's a great tape. I'm going to send it to Germany. I'm going to send it to Carl Weissner in Germany"

"all right, Bernard"

I hung up.

"you should have told him the tape was horrible," said Linda.

"it's strange that he couldn't tell, couldn't he tell?"

"no, all he heard was his own voice"

"well, he helped us when the wheel fell off"

"how long are we going to owe him for that one?"

"literary types are a special breed: they save the best of themselves for the creative act and then sometimes they don't do that very good."

"have you ever come across a writer who wasn't an ass?"

"have you ever come across a left-handed shortstop?"

"what are you going to do about Rifko?"

"I'll have to step on his toes."

"you've done it before but he only withdraws for a little while"

"I'll have to stomp his ankles then"

"how you going to do that?"

"I'll write a poem about him"

"oh, how dreary ...!"

yes, it's dreary. I've got to stop.

HAVE A NICE DAY

there's no mercy,
said the truckdriver.

there's mercy,
said the nun.

there's no chance,
said the hangman.

it's war,
said the service station operator.