

Life in Our Time

Recently we read a definition of “Camp” (Susan Sontag’s?). Something is “Campy” when it’s so “far out” that it’s “in,” so “bad” that it’s “good”—or to put it another way, so lacking in culture that it is culture. (Norman Mailer has defined Camp as “the art of the cannibal, the art which evolved out of the bankruptcy of the novel of manners.”)

But is Camp, or even Campiness, truly the most representative symbol of our Twentieth Century civilization? We don’t believe it; perhaps more accurately, we don’t want to believe it . . .

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When Harry’s time capsule arrived, Jill made him put it in the guest-house.

All it was, it turned out, was a big metal box with a cover that could be sealed tight and soldered so that the air couldn’t get at what was inside. Jill was really quite disappointed with it.

But then she was quite disappointed with Harry, too—Professor Harrison Cramer, B.A., B.S., M.A., Ph.D. Half the alphabet wasted on a big nothing. At those flaky faculty cocktail parties, people were always telling her, “It must be wonderful to be married to a brilliant man like your husband.” Brother, if they only knew!

It wasn’t just that Harry was 15 years older than she was. After all, look at Rex Harrison and Richard Burton and Cary Grant and Laurence Olivier. But Harry wasn’t the movie-star type—definitely not! Not even the mad-scientist type, like Vincent Price in those crazy “campy” pictures. He was nothing—just a big nothing.

Of course, Jill got the message long before she married him. But he did have that imposing house and all that loot he’d inherited from his mother. Jill figured on making a few changes, and she actually did manage to redo the house so that it looked halfway presentable, with the help of that *fagilleh* interior decorator. But she couldn’t redo Harry. Maybe *he* needed an interior decorator to work on him, too; *she* certainly couldn’t change him.

And outside of what she managed to squeeze out of him for the redecorating, Jill hadn’t been able to get her hands on any of the loot, either. Harry wasn’t interested in entertaining or going out or taking cruises, and whenever she mentioned a sable jacket he mumbled something under his breath about “conspicuous

consumption”—whatever that was! He didn’t like modern art or the theater, he didn’t drink or smoke— why, he didn’t even watch TV. And he wore flannel pajamas in bed. *All* the time.

After a couple of months Jill was ready to climb the walls. Then she began thinking about Reno, and that’s where Rick came in. Rick was her attorney—at least, that’s the way it started out to be, but Rick had other ideas. Particularly for those long afternoons when Harry was lecturing at seminars or whatever he did over there at the University.

Pretty soon Jill forgot about Reno; Rick was all for one of those quickie divorces you can get down in Mexico. He was sure he could make it stick and still see to it that she got her fifty-fifty share under the community property laws, and without any waiting. It could all be done in 24 hours, with no hassle; they’d take off together, just like eloping. Bang, you’re divorced; bang, you’re remarried; and then, bang, bang, bang—

So all Jill had to worry about was finding the right time. And even that was no problem, after Harry told her about the time capsule.

“I’m to be in full charge of the project,” he said. “Com-plete authority to choose what will be representative of our present culture. Quite a responsibility, my dear—but I wel-come the challenge.”

“So what’s a time capsule?” Jill wanted to know.

Harry went into a long routine and she didn’t really listen, just enough to get the general idea. The thing was, Harry had to pick out all kinds of junk to be sealed up in this gizmo so that sometime—10,000 years from now, maybe—somebody would come along and dig it up and open it and be able to tell what kind of civilization we had. Big deal! But from the way Harry went on, you’d think he’d just won the Grand Prix or something.

“We’re going to put the capsule in the foundation of the new Humanities Building,” he told her.

“What are humanities?” Jill asked, but Harry just gave her one of those *Good-lord-how-can-you-be-so-stupid?* looks that always seemed to start their quarrels; and they would have had a fight then and there, too, only he added something about how the dedication ceremonies for the new building would take place on May 1st, and he’d have to hurry to get everything arranged for the big day. Including writing his de-dicatory address.

May 1st was all Jill needed to hear. That was on a Friday, and if Harry was going to be tied up making a speech at the dedication, it would be an A-OK time to make that little flight across the border. So she managed to call Rick and tell him and

he said yeah, sure, perfect.

“It’s only ten days from now,” Jill reminded Rick. “We’ve got a lot to do.”

She didn’t know it, but it turned out she wasn’t kidding. She had more to do than she thought, because all at once Harry was *interested* in her. *Really* interested.

“You’ve got to help me,” he said that night at dinner. “I want to rely on your taste. Of course, I’ve got some choices of my own in mind, but I want *you* to suggest items to go into the capsule.”

At first Jill thought he was putting her on, but he really meant it. “This project is going to be honest. The usual ploy is pure exhibitionism—samples of the ‘best’ of everything, plus descriptive data which is really just a pat on the back for the *status quo ante*. Well, that’s not for me. I’d like to include material that’s self-explanatory, not self-congratulatory. Not art and facts—but artifacts.”

Harry lost her there, until he said, “Everything preserved will be a clue to our contemporary social attitudes. Not what we *pretend* to admire, but what the majority actually *believes in* and *enjoys*. And that’s where you come in, my dear. You represent the majority.”

Jill began to dig it, then. “You mean like TV and pop re-cords?”

“Exactly. What’s that album you like so much? The one with the four hermaphrodites on the liner?”

“Who?”

“Excuse me—it’s purportedly a singing group, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you’re talking about the Poodles!” Jill went and got the album, which was called “The Poodles Bark Again.” The sound really turned her on, but she had always thought Harry hated it. And now he was coming on all smiles.

“Great!” he said. “This definitely goes in.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy you another.” He took the album and put it on his desk. “Now you mentioned something about television. What’s your favorite program?”

When she saw that he was really serious, she began telling him about “Anywhere, U.S.A.” What it was, it was about life in a small town, just an ordinary suburb like, but the people were great. There was this couple with the two kids, one

boy and one girl, sort of an average family, you might say, only he was kind of playing around with a divorcee who ran a *discothetique* or whatever they call them, and she had a yen for her psychiatrist—he wasn't really *her* psychiatrist, he was analyzing one of the kids, the one who had set fire to the high school gymnasium, not the girl—she was afraid her par-ents would find out about her affair with the vice-principal who was really an enemy agent only she didn't know it yet, and her real boy friend, the one who had the brain operation, had a “thing” about his mother, so—

It got kind of complicated, but Harry kept asking her to tell him more, and pretty soon he was smiling and nodding. “Wonderful! We'll have to see if we can get films of a typical week's episodes.”

“You mean you really want something like that?”

“Of course. Wouldn't you say this show faithfully captured the lives of American citizens today?”

She had to agree he was right. Also about some of the things he was going to put into the capsule to show the way people lived nowadays—like tranquilizers and pep pills and income tax forms and a map of the freeway-expressway-turn-pike system. He had a lot of numbers, too, for Zip Code and digit dialing, and Social Security, and the ones the computers punched out on insurance and charge-account and utility bills.

But what he really wanted was ideas for more stuff, and in the next couple of days he kept leaning on her. He got hold of her souvenir from Shady Lawn Cemetery—it was a plastic walnut that opened up, called “Shady Lawn in a Nutshell.” Inside were twelve tiny color prints showing all the tourist at-tractions of the place, and you could mail the whole thing to your friends back home. Harry put this in the time capsule, wrapping it up in something he told her was an actuarial table on the incidence of coronary occlusion among middle-aged, middle-class males. Like heart attacks, that is.

“What's that you're reading?” he asked. And the next thing she knew, he had her copy of the latest Steve Slash paperback—the one where Steve is sent on this top-secret mission to keep peace in Port Said, and right after he kills these five guys with the portable flame thrower concealed in his judo belt, he's getting ready to play beddy-bye with Yasmina, who's really another secret agent with radioactive finger-nails—

And that's as far as she'd got when he grabbed the book. It was getting so she couldn't keep anything out of his eager lit-tle hands.

“What's that you're cooking?” he wanted to know. And there went the TV dinner—frozen *crepes suzettes* and all. To say nothing of the Plain Jane Instant

Borscht.

“Where’s that photo you had of your brother?” It was a real nothing picture of Stud, just him wearing that beatnik beard of his and standing by his motorcycle on the day he passed his initiation into Hell’s Angels. But Harry put *that* in, too. Jill didn’t think it was very nice of Harry, seeing as how he clipped it to another photo of some guys taking the Ku Klux Klan oath.

But right now the main thing was to keep Harry happy. That’s what Rick said when she clued him in on what was going on.

“Cooperate, baby,” he told her. “It’s a real kinky kick, but it keeps him out of our hair. We got plans to make, tickets to buy, packing and like that there.”

The trouble was, Jill ran out of ideas. She explained this to Rick but he just laughed.

“I’ll give you some,” he said, “and you can feed ‘em to him. He’s a real way-out kid, that husband of yours—I know just what he wants.”

The funny part of it was that Rick did know. He was really kind of a brain himself, but not in a kooky way like Harry. So she listened to what he suggested and told Harry when she got home.

“How about a sample of the Theater of the Absurd?” she asked. Harry looked at her over the top of his glasses, and for a minute she thought she’d really thrown him, but then he grinned and got excited.

“Perfect!” he said. “Any suggestions?”

“Well, I was reading a review about this new play every-body’s talking about—it’s about this guy who thinks he’s hav-ing a baby so he goes to an abortionist, only I guess the abor-tionist is supposed to be somebody mystical or something, and it all takes place in a greenhouse—”

“Delightful!” Harry was off and running. “I’ll pick up a copy of the book. Anything else?”

Thank God that Rick had coached her. So she said what about a recording of one of those concerts where they use a “prepared” piano that makes noises like screeching brakes, or sometimes no sound at all. And Harry liked that. He also liked the idea about a sample of Pop Art—maybe a big blowup of a newspaper ad about “That Tired Feeling” or maybe “Psoriasis.”

The next day she suggested a tape of a “Happening” which was the real thing, because it took place in some private san-atorium for disturbed patients, and Harry

got really enthused about this idea.

And the next day she came up with that new foreign movie with the long title she couldn't pronounce. Rick gave her the dope on it—some far-out thing by a Yugoslavian director she never heard of, about a man making a movie about a man making a movie, only you never could be quite sure, in the movie, whether the scene was supposed to be a part of the movie or the movie was a part of what was really happening, *if* it did happen.

Harry went for this, too. In a big way.

“You're wonderful,” he said. “Truthfully, I never expected this of you.”

Jill just gave her extra-special smile and went on her merry way. It wasn't hard, because he had to go running around town trying to dig up books and films and recordings of all the stuff he had on his list. Which was just how Rick said it would be, leaving everything clear for them to shop and set up their last-minute plans.

“I won't get our tickets until the day before we leave,” Rick told her. “We don't want to tip off anything. The way I figure it, Harry'll be moving the capsule over to where they're holding the ceremonies the next morning, so you'll get a chance to pack while he's out of the way.” Rick was really something, the way he had it all worked out.

And that's the way it went. The day before the ceremony, Harry was busy in the guest-house all afternoon, packing his goodies in the time capsule. Just like a dopey squirrel burying nuts. Only even dopey squirrels don't put stuff away for another squirrel to dig up 10,000 years from now.

Harry hadn't even had time to look at her the past two days, but this didn't bother Jill any. Along about suppertime she went out to call him, but he said he wasn't hungry and besides he had to run over and arrange for the trucking company to come and haul the capsule over to the foundation site. They'd dug a big hole there for tomorrow morning, and he was going to take the capsule to it and stand guard over it until it was time for the dedication ceremonies.

That was even better news than Jill had hoped for, so as soon as Harry left for the trucking company she phoned Rick and gave him the word. He said he'd be right over with the tickets.

So of course Jill had to get dressed. She put on her girdle and the fancy bra and her high heels; then she went in the bathroom and used her depilatory and touched up her hair where the rinse was fading, and put on her eyelashes and brushed her teeth, and attached those new fingernails after she got her makeup on and the perfume.

When she looked at the results in the mirror she was really proud of herself; for the first time in months she felt like her real self again. And from now on it would always be this way—with Rick.

There was a good moment with Rick there in the bedroom after he came in, but of course Harry *would* drive up right then—she heard the car out front and broke the clinch just in time, telling Rick to sneak out the back way. Harry would be busy with the truckers for at least a couple of minutes.

Jill forced herself to wait in the bedroom until she was sure the coast was clear. She kept looking out the window but it was too dark now to see anything. Since there wasn't any noise, she figured Harry must have taken the truckers into the guest-house.

And that's where she finally went.

Only the truckers weren't there. Just Harry.

"I told them to wait until first thing in the morning," he said. "Changed my mind when I realized how damp it was—no sense my spending the night shivering outside in the cold. Besides, I haven't sealed the capsule yet—remembered a couple of things I wanted to add."

He took a little bottle out of his pocket and carried it over to the time capsule. "This goes in too. Carefully labeled, of course, so they can analyze it."

"The bottle's empty," Jill said.

Harry shook his head. "Not at all. It contains smog. That's right—smog, from the freeway. I want posterity to know ev-erything about us, right down to the poisonous air in which our contemporary culture breathed its last."

He dropped the bottle into the capsule, then picked up something else from the table next to it. Jill noticed he had a soldering outfit there to seal the lid, ready to plug in after he'd used a pump to suck all the air out. He'd explained about the capsule being airtight, sound-proof, duralumin-sheathed, but that didn't interest her now. She kept looking at what he held in his hand.

It was one of those electric carving knives, complete with battery.

"Another Twentieth Century artifact," he said. "Another gadget symbol of our decadence. An electric knife—just the thing for Mom when she carves the fast-frozen, precooked Thanksgiving turkey while she and Dad count all their shiny, synthetic, plastic blessings."

He waved the knife.

“They’ll understand,” he told her. “Those people in the future will understand it all. They’ll know what life was like in our time—how we drained Walden Pond and refilled it with blood, sweat, and tears.”

Jill moved a little closer, staring at the knife. “The blade’s rusty.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not rust,” he said.

Jill kept it cool. She kept it right up until the moment she looked over the edge of the big metal box, looked down into it, and saw Rick lying there. Rick was stretched out, and the red was oozing down over the books and records and photos and tapes.

“I was waiting for him when he sneaked out the back of the house,” Harry said.

“Then you knew—all along—”

“For quite a while,” Harry said. “Long enough to figure things out and make my plans.”

“What plans?”

Harry just shrugged. And raised the knife.

A moment later the time capsule received the final specimen of life in the Twentieth Century.