

BLAKE BAILEY

EXCERPT FROM:
 A TRAGIC HONESTY

A NEW YORKER DISCOVERS THE MIDDLE WEST: 1964 – 66

BEFORE THE POET PAUL ENGLE and others began to teach creative writing there in the mid-Thirties, the University of Iowa was a minor member of the Big Ten with nothing much to recommend it other than a picturesque locale (Victorian architecture, the Iowa River winding through campus). Thirty years later, the “Workshop” was by far the most famous writing program in the country, rivaled only by its counterpart at Stanford established by Wallace Stegner, an Iowa graduate. The Workshop was composed of a hundred or so carefully selected graduate students who prided themselves on being part of a bohemian community of writers coexisting with, but remaining aloof from, the conservative bumpkins of both town and campus. “Greenwich Village West” they called it, and tried to live up to the name by smoking pot, getting drunk, and enjoying a certain amount of “free love” long before such a lifestyle was assimilated into the national counterculture. Just beneath the surface of this self-styled Arcadia, however, was a snake pit of internecine strife between poets and fiction writers, traditionalists and experimentalists, the talented and not-so-talented, the drunk and not-so-drunk, the faculty and administrators.

Yates would have preferred to stand apart from all that, or most of it anyway. He’d come to Iowa for one reason — as he liked to say (echoing Vonnegut), “The business of teaching creative writing offers solace

to writers who are down on their luck." He was down on his luck, and grateful for the chance to make a living, but continued to think the whole idea of "teaching" writing was ridiculous. He felt no particular solidarity with the whole noble experiment—a Community of Writers—much less its affected bohemian nonsense, though he was glad enough to know that liquor by the drink was now legal in Iowa City. And certainly he could use whatever comforts were afforded by an emancipated sexual ethos, whether he quite subscribed to it or not. As he'd written his friend R.V. Cassill, "I must admit I'm a little leery about the idea of living in Iowa as a bachelor—what if anything does a fella do for laughs on those long winter nights out there?" Cassill replied that the night life of the town was fairly dull—"few places interesting to eat out in, even fewer to drink in"—but assured him that he'd be invited to a lot of parties, and that "a great deal of flexibility" was possible in one's private life: "That is, everyone will know what you are up to, but no one will interfere."

Yates's arrival in Iowa was far from auspicious. His car overheated and caught fire on the way, and what few worldly possessions weren't in storage (and hence lost forever) were scorched in the mishap. Somehow he managed to be only a few minutes late to his inaugural guest lectureship, but was ill-prepared and utterly cowed: "I found myself talking about Bellow," he said later, "about whom I knew nothing. And they were writing it down!" When that ordeal was over he was conducted to his lodgings, which Cassill had found within the specified price-range of eighty dollars a month or less: a drafty ramshackle Victorian mansion divided into four apartments at 317 South Capitol Street ("Turn at the sign that says 'Save Two Cents,'" Yates would instruct visitors in a despondent drawl), where he would dwell for the next nine months with a table, bed, typewriter, and little else. One of the first things he did was write a letter to his seven-year-old daughter Monica, at the bottom of which he drew his signature cartoon of a Sad Daddy with a thought-balloon above his head filled with the face of a pretty girl: "Thinking of you."

YATES WAS A CELEBRITY AT THE WORKSHOP as soon as he arrived—many regarded *Revolutionary Road* as the most important novel written by a faculty member—and before long he became something of a legend. "I think we all wanted to be Richard Yates," his student Robert Lacy remembered. "I know for a fact that I did. He was tall, lanky, and movie-star handsome back then, and he moved in an aura of sad, doom-haunted, F. Scott Fitzgeraldian grace. He was Gatsby and Nick Carraway and Dick Diver all rolled into one." Gaunt and dapper and courtly, coughing mortally as he lit one ciga-

rette after another with palsied hands, he was “everybody’s idea of a writer” as David Milch put it. And for many Iowa students, learning how to look like a writer was at least as important as learning how to write—of course, one had to cultivate a fair amount of misery to look as “doom-haunted” as Yates, though perhaps that was a price worth paying.

Yates wasn’t much comforted by the admiring eyes that followed him around. Not only was he losing faith in himself as a writer—a little worse than dying—but he’d never had any faith in himself as a teacher, and now he was being scrutinized by people, intellectuals, who took the whole business very seriously indeed. It was one thing to “teach” nice-biddy hobbyists and car-painting dreamers at the New School, another to be exposed as a fraud in the eyes of some of the brightest, most talented young writers in the country, many of whom hailed from the dreaded Ivy League. And the earliest signs seemed to indicate that Yates and the Workshop wouldn’t mix. At one of his first parties he was approached by an admiring new student named Robin Metz; Yates

“The business of teaching creative writing offers solace to writers who are down on their luck.” --Yates

was tipsily cordial until the young man happened to mention that he’d gone to Princeton. Yates squinted at his necktie. “What’s this,” he said, flipping it into Metz’s startled face, “—a fucking club tie?” Then, to make matters worse, the two found themselves having brunch together the next day, in a group that included Richard Barron and E. L. Doctorow (both with the Dial Press at the time), who were in town for a publishers’ conference. At one point it came to light that Metz had been a student of Philip Roth at Princeton, and Yates’s face darkened as Barron went on about what a prodigy Roth was as a teacher and a writer—the National Book Award at age twenty-six! Verlin

Cassill and Vance Bourjaily heartily concurred. Then Metz (“still irked”) mentioned the tie-flipping incident of the night before, and the mortified Yates explained to the table that he didn’t remember that at all. By the end of the brunch both men were miserable: Metz, because he’d alienated the writer he most admired on the faculty; Yates, because some Princeton snottose had just made him look like a fool in front of his new colleagues, and for that matter he was stuck in a place where people made a *big fucking deal* out of Philip Roth, whose lack of basic human sympathy was evident on every page of his books (and who’d won the NBA at age twenty-six).

A week later Metz got a message to meet Yates at Donnelly's Bar. Warily, the young man arrived at the appointed time and found Yates sitting in a booth with a coterie of three or four older students he'd already picked out as drinking buddies. "There he is now," one of them hissed. Yates sprung to his feet and shook Metz's hand: "I read your story 'Doughboy,'" he said. "That's one fucking good story! I've wanted to meet you ever since." Metz, a little puzzled, pointed out that they'd already met—the necktie and Philip Roth and so forth. Yates waved his hand: "Oh, well, I don't care about that . . ."

And (beyond the heat of the moment) he didn't, and that was one of the things that proved a bit of a revelation to Yates's more smitten students: he cared about the writing—whether Hemingway's or Metz's or whosoever's—more passionately than any jargon-spouting literature professor, such that life itself was somewhat less than secondary. In the World War II-era Quonset huts where Workshop classes were held, Yates would sit on the edge of a desk with his long legs dangling, as he lovingly flipped through and finger-thumped the ragged paperbacks he taught from. His student Luke Wallin called him a "sublime, rugged presence," and particularly looked forward to his seminar on contemporary fiction:

His lectures were like his narrative voice: gentle and careful, honest and clean and surprising. He was something to watch, with his aging good looks, his shyness (he was extremely polite to his students, almost afraid of them), and best of all his personal, thought-out views of each novel we read. He, too, had an incredible voice, expressing such pain and such love for American writing. . . . His views were presented in quiet, open challenge to the class, and it always amazed me how little his otherwise boisterous students would take exception and argue. His criticism reminds me most of Kazin's, about as non academic as one could find, and full of power. His lasting example was of a writer who had taken his tradition deeply to heart.

As his listeners at Breadloaf had also learned, Yates had a gift for imparting his very subjective enthusiasms; he rarely if ever approached a text in any kind of systematic way, but rather pointed to a line, a detail, a bit of dialogue, and said in effect, *See?* His fixed ideas remained the same—revealing dialogue, objectification, structural integrity, precision—but he digressed more than ever in discussing them. The "controlled sentiment" of *Lolita* might remind him of "Guests of the Nation" or "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," and (legs softly kicking, head wagging in awe) he'd enumerate certain pertinent aspects of those

stories, and perhaps others, until it was time to go. And then the following week he'd discuss an entirely different novel, as dictated by the syllabus, and *Lolita* would be forgotten unless it happened to cross his mind again for whatever reason. Such an approach would explain the rather inchoate notes that student Loree Wilson took as she tried to follow the thread of Yates's "lectures":

The Sun Also Rises: Pathos of the book — it's almost as if . . .
 Story of a nymphomaniac, a romantic, and an emasculated . . .
 Book is pernicious if read the wrong way. Hemingway is not speaking — Jake Barnes is speaking.

All the King's Men: Road company Faulkner. Melodrama is pejorative term.

Babbitt: Can't look for grace and tightness in Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt* is an accidental work of art. Worked in the 19th c. tradition. Ear for American speech. Scene — education between father and son, p. 66, hilarious. *Babbitt* man going to pieces before our very eyes — contradictions.

Lolita: Beautiful book — funny and tragic. N. takes such pains setting up this complicated voice of Humbert. Very first pages brilliant. A story about love — but not how Humbert loved *Lolita* — but the generative writer's love of Nabokov for Humbert Humbert. . . .

"Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut": Eloise a type — a neurotic — standardized suburban wife (surroundings and furniture of mind). . . .

Big action doesn't amount to much, but the little bits of dialogue — delicacy — finally make the shape of things. "Down at the Dinghy" a flimsy story . . . because we're told to love Boo Boo. Mistake of kite and kike is sweet and icky and sentimental. . . . "Teddy": annoying damn story. Dick suspects Salinger's Zen kick.

The few lines quoted above represent the whole gist, more or less, of what Yates had to say about each book; ellipses indicate either where he left a thought unfinished, or the omission of a line or two (but no more) from Wilson's original notes. What she didn't write down, of course, were all the points where he quoted from the text, as well as his various conversational glosses and digressions ("By the way, for a good example of that kind of rhetorical style you might want to read Katherine Anne Porter's 'Flowering Judas' . . ."), in the course of which he'd come up with the best of those "clean and surprising" aperçus (of which Luke Wallin and others were so enamored). Finally, while students waited for him to return to the subject at hand — be it *Lolita* or *Babbitt* or whatever — Yates would abruptly stand up and announce:

"I'm going to the Airliner [bar] for a martini. Would anyone care to join me?" There were no exams.

Yates's approach didn't appeal to everyone. It was true that "other-wise boisterous students" tended to defer to him, but not always because they agreed with his opinions; rather the man's extreme politeness—so anxious and unsettling at times—could turn into something else when he was put on the defensive. "Now that is fucking good writing!" Yates would exclaim after reading dialogue from *Gatsby*, say, then thrum a few pages to the next example—perhaps the part where Daisy sobs over Jay's "beautiful shirts": "Now, if that's Daisy talking, and not Fitzgerald, we've got a great novel!" *Thrum . . .* If a hand went up, and a puzzled (or cocky) student asked *why* it was so great, Yates would often get irritated, and suddenly the soft-voiced monk of literature

His lectures were like his narrative voice: gentle and careful, honest and clean and surprising. He was something to watch with his aging good looks, his shyness, and best of all his personal, thought-out views of each novel we read.

would vanish, replaced by a hung-over curmudgeon who hated show-offs. "There's Murray, squirming in his chair to tell us the news again," Yates said of one student who (until that moment) had a tendency to talk too much, and who happened to be an Ivy Leaguer. And while Yates was compellingly reverential toward the books he loved, he became downright antic on the subject of books he loathed, and dissent was hardly encouraged. Southern students—or those such as David Milch who'd been protégés of Robert Penn Warren at Yale—would blanch at Yates's (literal) trashing of *All the King's Men* as fake, derivative, melodramatic *shit*.

"We all adored him," said Cassill, and by *We* he meant all the people at Iowa who "got" Yates. "We found him stubborn and foolish sometimes, but he was constantly turning up with his heart in the right place." While Yates would sometimes overexcitedly praise or damn a book, or put certain students in their place, usually he was the essence of modesty and tact. Though he didn't much like to have his convictions challenged (especially since such a response tended to have faintly mocking overtones), he often wanted to know what students thought, and would listen with an almost disconcerting intensity to any well-meant comment or question. And when a student would say something that

seemed (inoffensively) “callow and absurd,” as Geoffrey Clark recalled, Yates was at his best: “He’d take special pains to be gentle with you; it hurt him to inadvertently discomfit a student . . . About the only things that really aroused his contempt or derision were pretension or condescension of any kind.”

Accordingly Yates preferred underdogs: students who were socially inept, who were talented but hadn’t found their voices yet, and who tended to be the target of mean-spirited sallies from the smart-ass contingent. “Oh c’mon, you don’t really mean that!” Yates would admonish the latter, if they unfairly attacked a person’s work or observation. When one of his more awkward students went on to become a well-known critic and novelist, Yates fondly reminisced how “smelly and shy” the man had been at Iowa, how others had mocked him as a crack-



Grace Schulman

From the photo shoot for *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, 1961.

pot. Yates lavished attention on such students, and protected them both in and out of the classroom. John Casey remembers how “furious” Yates became with him and David Plimpton for bullying their roommate (and Yates’s student) Robert Lehrman: the three young men had rented a farmhouse together, but the suburban Lehrman was ill-suited to country life; he’d tag along in his loafers while the older, bigger men shot birds and turtles, ridiculing Lehrman the while. Both Casey and Plimpton were from genteel backgrounds—Casey had prepped in Switzerland and attended Harvard Law, Plimpton (like his cousin George) was the product of an illustrious New England family—and Yates considered their treatment of Lehrman a typical instance of the rich picking on the (relatively) poor. Yates let Casey know that he wouldn’t stand for it.

But, as Lehrman himself remembers, it was always a student’s work that mattered most: “Yates had no doubt that writing was important. Unlike some of the other writers on the faculty—Nelson Algren, for example, who was shocked that he had to actually read student work—

Dick threw himself into helping us." Yates put himself at the disposal of those who wanted to discuss writing – whether their own or others', at the Airliner or in his office – and he'd not only read their work, but cover it with scribbled commentary in his own recognizable voice. Once Lehrman wrote a demurring essay on Yates's pet concept of literary "condescension," as it applied (or rather didn't apply in Lehrman's view) to Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*; Yates's marginal notes (given below in italics) were typically prickly but amused. "'Condescension' is not a part of the official language of criticism," Lehrman began, " – certainly Northrop Frye would disapprove of it [*big deal*] – for good reason. . . . The word doesn't apply to literature [*Why not?*] . . . Sinclair Lewis, for example, feels superior to *Babbitt* [*says who?*], Flaubert had great difficulty convincing himself [*But he did, which is the point*] that *Emma Bovary* wasn't too petty to write about, and so on." Lehrman went on to claim that writers of farce (e.g., Roth) necessarily "condescend" to their characters, and noted: "It is not that Roth satirizes the Patimkins but that at the same time he takes Neil Klugman seriously [*Right! And there goes your argument about 'Farce'.*]" And so on. Yates's good-natured sniping continued to the last page, at the bottom of which he wrote: *Okay. You finally convinced me – but it was touch and go for a while there, buddy. R. Y.* He gave the paper an "A."

Actual "workshop" sessions – in which student fiction was read aloud and discussed, often viciously – were held once a week in the afternoon. Each writer on the faculty had a section of fifteen workshop students, assigned somewhat on the basis of mutual affinity: that is, if a student wrote in a purely realistic mode then he or she might be apt to sign-up for Yates, and if Yates liked his or her work then he might be apt to accept the student into his section. Sometimes he'd give the person a call first. DeWitt Henry had been so "galvanized" by Revolutionary Road that when he left his Harvard Ph.D. program to transfer to Iowa for a continued draft deferment and time to write, he was thrilled to discover Yates among the staff and left a writing sample for him. At a dingy table in one of the Workshop Quonset huts, Yates praised 'The Lord of Autumn' --then told Henry to scrap it: Too influenced by Faulkner, he said, but a talented piece of work nonetheless. Henry handed him the tentative pages of a new story, and a few days later was even more thrilled by an excited call from Yates. announcing that these pages were "the real thing" and had to be a novel. "The sword fell on my shoulder," said Henry.

WHERE HIS STUDENTS' FICTION WAS CONCERNED, Yates was polite if he could help it, but also emotional, blunt and uncompromising: either a story (a scene, a line, a word) came alive or it didn't, and he was eager to explain *why* it didn't and

how (if possible) to fix it. Intellectual exercises, ideas, abstractions, didacticism, pretension or implausibility of any kind were fatal errors. Mark Dintenfass was startled when Yates called to discuss his first three stories, and dismissed two of them as “crap”: Dintenfass was trying to write like Nabokov, Yates explained, and only Nabokov could do that; Dintenfass’s *other* story, however, was about *real life*, the life he knew, and *that’s* what he should be writing about. “It’s the most important thing anyone ever told me as a writer,” said Dintenfass, who turned away from “fruitless experimentation” and started a novel about Jewish life in Brooklyn. Yates encouraged him to send opening chapters to Yates’s agent Monica McCall, who eventually sold the book.

Yates could get away with calling a piece of fiction “crap” (though he’d rarely say as much unless he had some kind of compliment in store) because his goodwill was never in doubt. Flattery was bullshit; what was good for the work? “Would it really happen that way?” he’d expostulate. “I don’t think so.” He wanted students to see the “Platonic form” of the work—its latent state of finished perfection—and this involved examining every nuance in terms of precision and truth. “Dick demonstrated the keenest eye I’ve ever seen for the flaw, great or small, in fiction,” said Geoffrey Clark; “and for the small telling detail that transfigures or transfixes; and for cant, cheap tricks, and especially *unfelt* fiction.” A student’s ego never stood in the way of Yates’s insistence that something could be improved, even if the story or novel in question had already been accepted for publication (or published). “They’re rushing you,” Yates told James Alan McPherson, whose first collection *Hue and Cry* was in press at the time. “Slow down.” And he proceeded to tease through McPherson’s paragraphs, pointing out all the little things that needed to be “fixed” prior to publication. “I hope this won’t make you sore,” he wrote DeWitt Henry, “but I’m not too crazy about your story”—a typical preamble to an epistolary critique, both in terms of candor and modest reluctance.

If a story was a total loss, was “crap” in short, Yates would summarize the reason(s) as briefly as possible and elaborate only if challenged. And he much preferred to say he *liked* a given story, then list his various quibbles at length—e.g., “I simply can’t imagine a man polishing-off a whole fifth of whisky in a single drive between Philadelphia and New York. Better make it a pint”; “You have her kick off her shoes, flop on the couch, throw back her head, eyes closed, and rub her throat (hardly the gestures of a frightened girl, or even a wary one).”

Yates was more diffident during the formal workshop sessions. At the New School he’d never felt comfortable criticizing students’ work in front of their peers, and amid the ruthless crucifixions of Iowa the best

he could do, at times, was serve as a gentle referee. “Hmm, did you really have to say that?” he’d intercede, and try to silence the more rabid critics by pointing out the better qualities of a given story, while (in accordance with workshop protocol) its reeling author would have to weather the onslaught in red-faced silence. Occasionally Yates was so startled by the carnage he’d simply withdraw into chain-smoking bemusement. His student Bill Kittredge described a session in Yates’s workshop as “the most savage thing [he’d] ever witnessed”: “This guy from Spokane just got *shelled*. People were reading lines aloud from his story and everybody would laugh. Dick let it get out of hand. There were a lot of strong personalities in the class — Ivy Leaguers, New Yorkers. The guy from Spokane left town after that, and nobody ever saw him again.”

More often than not, Yates was less tolerant of such excesses. Sometimes he’d check a student with a look of baleful disapproval, slowly shaking his head (“Bill, Bill, Bill”), or else he’d let others express views which decorum forbade to himself.

[Yates] wanted students to see the “Platonic form” of the work—its latent state of finished perfection—and this involved examining every nuance in terms of precision and truth.

“You motherfuckers wouldn’t know literature if it ran you down in a car!” shouted his student Jane Delynn in defense of a story under attack. There was a silence. “As the lady in the rear suggested —” Yates sighed approvingly. Above all he became fed-up with the condescending sarcasm of certain students, perhaps most notably David Milch. As one student recalled, “Milch was a slasher in workshops. He was part of a new wave of Ivy League students at Iowa, and some of these students were contemptuous about Iowa’s casual non-academic milieu. Milch thought Yates was a joke — too non-professorial,

stumbling, and shy. Too conversational.” Robert Penn Warren had helped Milch get a teaching fellowship at Iowa, where he was touted as a writer of tremendous promise. At age twenty-one he was brilliant, learned and witty, and apt to make light of other students’ writing. “Oh, for Christ’s sake, Milch!” Yates would erupt. “Who’s interested in your jokes? What do you think it feels like to be at the other end of a barb like that?” Not only did Yates object to Milch’s wisecracks, but he wasn’t much inclined to praise the young man’s work either: sometimes he’d begrudge Milch’s (vaunted) facility for writing dialogue, but was often exhaustive in taking him to task for other lapses.

The enmity between the two doesn't call for a lot of subtle analysis. Milch was a catalogue of Yates's foremost bogeys: an unapologetically intellectual graduate of Yale who'd arrived at Iowa under the aegis of the world-famous author of *All the King's Men*, no less; a condescending young man who sneered at both students and Yates alike. Milch, for his part, deplors the arrogance of the young man he was, but points out that all the Workshop people, teachers as well as students, were "unfinished spirits" in one way or another: "Self-taught writers like Yates and Vonnegut who'd developed their talents outside the citadels of culture — the 'apostolic succession' of Harvard, say: William James teaching Gertrude Stein and so on — had this rage against the Tradition even as it attracted them. They had an adolescent relationship with the authority of culture." Certainly Yates's apprenticeship at *Food Field Reporter* and Remington Rand were about as removed from the citadels as one could get; in any case Yates let himself go one night at Kenny's Bar. "Who wouldn't want to be David Milch?" he announced to an audience of Workshop people, on the periphery of which was Milch. "He went to Yale! He graduated first in his class! Warren said he has an ear for dialogue that rivals Hemingway! And here he is twenty-one years old . . ." It went on and on. The whole spiel, said Milch, "was a devastating encapsulization of everything pretentious and self-important." Many years later, though, Milch would be in a nice position to get his own back.

FOR THE MOST PART, YATES CHOSE not to socialize with his fellow faculty members except for Cassill. "That many writers were never meant to be together in the same place," he said of Bread Loaf, and so with Iowa. He never felt particularly at ease with rival authors unless they were the sort who wore their eminence lightly — "good guys" as Yates would have it. His colleague Vance Bourjaily was a good guy, modest and affable, though perhaps a bit too much of an outdoorsman for Yates's taste. The two were cordial but not close. Yates would make a point of attending the frequent parties at Bourjaily's farm (or any party to which he was asked), but if the guests were mostly faculty Yates would recede into a quiet corner where he could soak in peace.

He preferred the company of graduate students, the more down-to-earth the better. The first to accept his invitation to the Airliner was a burly Texan named Jim Crumley, and soon they were joined by others who, like Crumley, tended to be married ex-servicemen in their late-twenties: Bob Lacy, Jim Whitehead, and Andre Dubus; Ted Weesner and Robin Metz also became part of the circle. After a few hours of noisy drunken argument, one of the young men would call his wife to say they were coming over (while the others would call theirs to say

they weren't), and the evening would continue until three or four in the morning.

Dubus belonged in another category — perhaps the closest thing to a soul mate Yates ever had (though both men would have cringed at the term). Dubus was a shy, plainspoken ex-Marine who became raucous and swaggering when he drank. As his third wife Peggy Rambach observed, “Andre wanted to be a tough guy. He was picked on a lot as a kid, and both he and Dick grew up in a time when men couldn't be sensitive.” The two friends would sit drinking on Dubus's porch for hours — sometimes bellowing at each other amid skirls of laughter, sometimes hushed — and Dubus got to where he could mimic Yates so perfectly that others couldn't tell them apart. Along with their temperamental affinities, both had unqualified admiration for the other's work. Within three weeks of his arrival Yates decided Dubus was by far the most talented student at Iowa: “Most of the clowns here will never be writers,” he wrote Miller Williams, “and it's depressing to think of their getting degrees called ‘Master of Fine Arts’ — Good God! — but [Dubus] is one of the very few exceptions to the rule. I haven't read much of his work — he's Verlin Cassill's student here, not mine — but I read a story he published in the *Sewanee Review* a while back that really knocked me out. He's also a fine guy, which supports my rather shaky theory that good writers tend to be good men.” Almost seven years later, when Yates left Iowa for good, he still considered Dubus the most talented student he'd ever encountered there, while in turn Dubus revered Yates as a master comparable to Chekhov. As he wrote in a 1989 tribute, “Richard Yates is one of our great writers with too few readers, and no matter how many readers he finally ends up with, they will still be too few, unless there are hundreds of thousands in most nations of the world.”

Dubus and the other married students were almost ideal companions for Yates: most were hard-drinking men's men who loved to stay up late and talk about books, and they admired Yates both as a writer and a personality. When he wasn't shouting them down on some literary point or lost in the throes of another hilarious coughing fit, he'd teach them his vast repertoire of show tunes, ribald ditties, and patriotic anthems. He loved the clever rhymes of Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart (particularly the latter's “Mountain Greenery”: “While you love your lover, let/ Blue skies be your coverlet . . .”), which he'd linger over with leering relish as he sang verse after verse in their Quonset-hut duplexes. Along with his occasional cartoons, the nearest thing Yates ever had to a hobby was learning old songs and working out routines for performing them, and his memory for lyrics was flawless. Sometimes he'd prefer obscurity for its own sake, whether a parody version

(e.g., “Honey Suck My Nose” for “Honeysuckle Rose”) or an old Wobbly variation (“You’ll Get Pie in the Sky When You Die [That’s a Lie]”)—but the climax of almost any night’s recital was an old WWII hillbilly anthem called “There’s a Star-Spangled Banner Flying Somewhere.” The sentimental old vet Yates would become when singing this song was an affecting sight, and fellow servicemen such as Bob Lacy couldn’t resist joining him in joyous harmony. One verse in particular elevated them into a kind of ecstasy:

Though I realize I’m crippled that is true, sir,
Please don’t judge my courage by my twisted leg,
Let me show my Uncle Sam what I can do, sir,
Let me take the Axis down a peg.

“God, how we loved that song!” Lacy remembered. “And, God, how Yates used to love to lead us in it! No doubt there were happier moments in his life. But those were the happiest I ever saw. We’d be gathered in someone’s kitchen, our heads, including Yates’s, all leaned in close together in a drunken bouquet, and the look on his face as he put us through our musical paces would be positively beatific. Occasionally a spouse or girlfriend might stick a head in the door to see what was going on, see what all the racket was. But after one look they’d shake their heads and go away.”

Yates’s high spirits were a necessary outlet, because he was miserable in almost every other department of his life. “Dick walked around with the weight of the world on his shoulders,” said Kittredge. “On the one hand you had the poet Marvin Bell, who’d just written a poem that day and would write another tomorrow, whistling on the way to his 11:00 class. Then 3:00 would roll around and here comes Yates shambling down the hallway, depressed as hell because he’s got a 600-page novel and doesn’t know if it’s any good.” Somehow he needed to make his second novel, *A Special Providence* cohere by Christmas, but teaching proved too much of a drain on his time and energy. “If that goddamned movie thing had panned out I wouldn’t be fucking around here!” he’d grumble, faced with at least two hundred pages of student writing a week—with lectures and conferences and chaotic workshop sessions—all in exchange for a gross income of \$666 a month, almost \$400 of which went to alimony and child-support.

Then in October, to make matters worse, he was hospitalized with pneumonia. The Iowa weather was ill-suited for a consumptive chain-smoking alcoholic: scores of pigs were slaughtered each year by hailstones, and it was all but suicidal to run out of gas on a country road in winter. But whatever the season, the creaky old wind-moaning mansion on

South Capitol Street was meager shelter at best, and Yates was felled by the first bitter drafts. For two weeks he lay abed in the hospital, deathly ill, alone in a cold alien land, thinking he could scarcely afford to be there. He said as much to Wendy Sears, and sounded so weak and depressed she wanted to “hug [him] to pieces,” while the stolid Sheila was moved to write a kindly note advising him to get well and stop worrying about money (for now). He was somewhat cheered by the concern of his students—one of whom, Jonathan Penner, recalled their hospital visit as an unexpected lesson in Yatesian style: “Steve Salinger sneaked in whiskey. Immediately, Dick poured a shot for his roommate, an elderly farmer. We studied that. That was style.” But such admiration went only so far to alleviate loneliness, to say nothing of paying the bills. “I don’t think I’m at all cut out for this teaching scene,” the convalescent Yates wrote Monica McCall. “It becomes increasingly clear that screenwriting is the only way I can ever hope to achieve minimal solvency and still have the freedom to write fiction.” McCall replied with maternal reassurance: she’d look into getting him that Hollywood job, and meanwhile a further advance on his novel was forthcoming.

EVEN BEFORE HIS HEALTH TOOK A TURN for the worse, Yates was an object of tender regard among female students and wives. “He really listened to women when they talked,” said Pat Dubus, “and that was a new experience for us.” Lyn Lacy agreed: “Dick saw more in me than I did myself at the time, and I adored him for it. He was sort of an uncle or brother figure—so friendly, open and interested.” Such intense solicitude on Yates’s part was touched with desperation: more than anything he missed the intimate company of women—a wife, a girlfriend, his daughters. And while the young women at Iowa, married or not, were used to predatory advances (particularly from distinguished authors), there was little of that from Yates: soft-spoken and handsome, the picture of a gentleman in his coat and tie, he’d prolong the sweetness of their company with fervent curiosity, the only selfish aspect of which was a naked fear of being left alone. “Dick attracted women as a victim,” said Robin Metz, “a kind of Keatsian figure who needed to be cared for.” At least in that respect he’d come to the right place.

In the Workshop there was no particular stigma attached to the rather common phenomenon of love affairs between teachers and students; in principle they were all writers together, and “human moments” were to be expected. Cassill—who looked after Yates in a fraternal way, and was distressed by how sickly and morose he was becoming—urged their friend and mutual student Loree Wilson to help care for him. A single mother who got by on a graduate assistantship, Wilson was

strong, voluptuous and warm-hearted, and she adored Yates. “Dick appealed to one’s deepest sympathies,” she said. “He was so clearly unwell, and seemed to be reaching out with those big, soulful eyes, but he could be insatiably needy. He was the loneliest man I ever knew.” As Wilson soon discovered, Yates required at least as much care as that soulful aspect of his seemed to suggest. Mornings she’d find him sitting alone in a booth at the Airliner, forlornly eating a boiled egg with his beer as he listened to Barbra Streisand singing *Funny Girl* on the jukebox. Other times he’d call from his apartment — “I’m sick, I’m cold, I’m sitting here in a sweater” — and, if possible, Wilson would

Dubus and the other married students were almost ideal companions for Yates: most were hard-drinking men’s men who loved to stay up late and talk about books, and they admired Yates both as a writer and a personality.

drop everything and go make him warm. One day Cassill called and told her something was wrong with Yates, that he’d “lost it” and needed to be calmed down. She rushed over, but by the time she arrived Yates had already taken his “emergency kit” of pills prescribed by his psychiatrist, Nathan S. Kline. “You’re a good kid,” he murmured as he fell asleep.

Perhaps the best part of the arrangement were Wilson’s children, a boy and girl aged seven and eight. It was widely known how much Yates suffered from the absence of his daughters: he blamed himself for being a bad father, and fretted incessantly over whether he’d be able to provide for them. A necessary solace for Yates

was lavishing affection on whatever children were available, whether Wilson’s or the Dubuses’ or the Lacys’. He’d give them his undivided attention, and refuse to discuss adult matters in their presence. He was particularly attached to Wilson’s daughter, who sometimes joined her mother in bringing soup and other comforts to Yates’s dismal apartment. Both children were disturbed by his gaunt appearance, his wheezing, and for Christmas they gave him a muffler to keep warm. Yates had nothing to give them in return, and later became so enraged at himself that he began weeping and beating his fist on the car.

YATES’S POOR HEALTH, POVERTY, and general malaise made for a strained Christmas. In New York he stayed with his old friends, Grace and Jerry Schulman, who were shocked by his deterioration over the past three months. That first evening, as he dined with Grace at the Blue Mill (Jerry was out of town), he told her

he was badly in need of medication and had an emergency appointment with Kline in the morning. But any further mention of his mental state became redundant when they returned to the Schulmans' apartment, where Yates began shouting and kicking furniture. For the first time Grace felt a little afraid of him; they were alone together, and he seemed capable of anything. More than fear, though, she felt a kind of weary exasperation: "Insanity is no excuse for bad behavior," she told him, then turned around and went to bed. Yates was demonstratively calm the next day, though further outbursts followed and it was a long visit all around.

"I know apologies are a bore," he wrote afterward, "but I *am* sorry as hell about those several loud-mouth evenings, and am filled with admiration for your patience in putting up with me." The Schulmans replied graciously as ever ("people don't stop caring for one another because of some silly thing like that"), though they were slowly but surely coming to the end of their tether. After a ruckus Yates was sometimes sorry, but seemed incapable of conceding actual insanity and often blamed others for his behavior. If the Schulmans asked him to leave when he lost control, or offered to take him to the hospital, he'd only wax more belligerent — and later, in moments of seeming lucidity, he'd still look back on the incident with a sense of injustice ("Why'd you ask me to leave? Obviously there was nothing wrong with me!"). Though he often complained about his awful childhood — indeed more so all the time — any suggestion that he augment

That spring, as his health and spirits continued to flag, his friend Andre Dubus offered Yates the greatest conceivable form of succor—his wife Pat.

drug-treatment with some form of psychotherapy was met with table-pounding scorn: "Why go to a two-man to tell me what a ten-man has discovered?" By "two-man" he meant an ordinary shrink, and by "ten-man" he meant Freud — or rather (since he didn't like Freud) some personage of ideal wisdom and tact, which pretty much ended the discussion.

Back in Iowa Yates was "lonesome as hell." If nothing else, New York had been a blessed respite from his novel, during which he'd almost managed to convince himself it wasn't as bad as he thought; on his return he resolved to undertake "a crash program to get the bleeding book finished by March One." But within days he was gloomier than ever — the novel simply wasn't working, and he didn't know what to

do about it. Also Iowa was cold, he felt sick all the time, and other people weren't much of a comfort; as for his job, it was a daily torment. "[T]he 'teaching' routine grows increasingly dreary," he wrote the Schulmans. "It's easy work, but so basically lacking in substance — and even fraudulent — that I'm damned if I can understand how full-grown men can find it rewarding in its own right, year after year. I've now firmly decided not to come back here next fall, even if they ask me real pretty. . . . I'd rather rot in Hollywood than go on performing the ponderous bullshit-artist role I'm expected to play in this place."

But the privilege of rotting in Hollywood remained purely speculative, and his only immediate chance for escaping the Middle West lay in finishing his novel. So far the only part he'd dared show around was that unimpeachable prologue; meanwhile he'd "tinkered and brooded and fussed" so much with the rest he could scarcely see it anymore — though he sensed something was terribly, organically wrong — and in February he finally accepted the fact that he'd have to get an outside opinion before he went any further. His friend Cassill was the inevitable choice: the author of *Writing Fiction* and one of the leading practitioner-teachers of same, Cassill was an astute if somewhat captious critic, who for months had bullied Yates to quit "digging himself into a trap" and move on. Yates could count on the man's probity, but that was rather the problem — if Cassill said the book was bad, the book was bad. And Yates had once told him it might turn out to be better than *Revolutionary Road*!

"Verlin Cassill's verdict on my book could not have been more negative," he informed the Schulmans. "He talked for a long time, some of it incomprehensible but most of it all too painfully clear — he said at one particularly unkind point that it 'reads like a book written by a man on tranquilizers' (Jesus!) — and I was pretty shattered for a few desperate and boozy days." Cassill himself doesn't remember it that way, and particularly disowns the "tranquilizer" remark. What he recalls telling Yates, in effect, was that the book probably *wasn't* as good as *Revolutionary Road*, but it did have a "Hardyesque compassion" to it and a number of fine incidental things. But at that stage of composition the story of Prentice's mother wasn't developed much beyond the prologue, which after all was the strongest section of the book. Hence Cassill suggested he either balance the war sections with more stuff about Alice Prentice, or just finish the damn book as it was and write an entirely different one about his "crazy sainted mother." Yates would eventually take most of this advice to heart, but for a while his almost total despair was akin to "a kind of peace": "I can remember the same kind of thing happening fifteen years ago, when the first X-ray showed that I really did have TB, and could therefore stop worrying."

AFTER AN ALL-NIGHT CELEBRATION of his thirty-ninth birthday, Yates became increasingly withdrawn from the communal world of the Workshop. Partly this was a matter of depression and ill health, but a number of other factors conspired to make the whole atmosphere distasteful to Yates. For one thing, Cassill was engaged in an ugly feud with the head of the English department, John Gerber, who wanted to absorb the Workshop into the regular academic program. Cassill thought that writers (a la Hemingway's "wolves" who ought to stick together) should be immune from the bureaucratic, bourgeois rigmarole of conventional academia, and that the MFA should be regarded as a legitimate terminal degree. Yates agreed with his friend, more or less, but lacked the man's crusading fervor. "I think my loyalty has been called into question at least once," he wrote in a later tribute to Cassill, "but then, calling people's loyalty into question is as much a part of Verlin as his endless conspiracy theories, or his wrong-headed rages, . . . or his ominous way of saying 'Ah.'" Reluctantly Yates attended a dramatic meeting at Cassill's house, where the charismatic host conducted himself like the leader of some revolutionary fringe group. "What will *you* do?" he hectoring each person in turn. "And *you*?" He thought they should all resign from the Workshop if their demands weren't met, and insisted on an overt pledge of loyalty from everyone in the room. Yates looked miserable: "Oh Christ, Verlin, do we have to go through all this? Can't we just talk it out?" Cassill shushed him like a callow little brother: "Dick, you just don't understand." At one point Yates looked ill and left the room ("It just seems so *concocted*—"), and when he finally returned Cassill was pacing and shouting as before. "Is this shit *still* going on?" Yates sighed. "C'mon, let's all go have a drink."

But a tiresome, divisive political situation wasn't the main reason for his low profile. That spring, as his health and spirits continued to flag, his friend Andre Dubus offered Yates the greatest conceivable form of succor—his wife Pat. At the time he thought it the least he could do where both parties were concerned: Dubus ("a cherry when I got married," as he put it) had spent the first years of his manhood raising a family, and now amid the swinging milieu of the Workshop he openly made up for lost time with various students and wives; it seemed only fair, then, that Pat be allowed to follow her heart and comfort a talented man who needed all the comfort he could get, and who happened to be one of her husband's dearest friends.

A nice gesture, perhaps, but hardly one that enhanced the friendship. As Dubus later wrote Yates, "I wasn't so Goddam happy because, as you know, Pat loved you then and still does, and I reckon I got jealous,

not about the boudoir, but the heart." The tension between them became so sticky that Yates almost gave up going to parties altogether, particularly since a lot of them took place at Dubus's house down the street from a certain sign on South Capitol that said "Save Two Cents." Yates felt terrible about the whole thing—he was "a moralist at heart" as Milch pointed out—but not so terrible that he was willing to go without female company. It was certainly a trade-off, though; Yates sometimes had to be seen in public, after all, and Iowa City suddenly seemed a very small place. One day, after Pat had spent the night with Yates, the two men bumped into each other on the street. Dubus's first novel had just been rejected by Viking, and Yates tried to console his friend over Bloody Marys at the Airliner. "[But] all the time you were feeling bad," Dubus wrote, "and I knew you were, so I was uncomfortable, and I kept thinking what an ass I was, how I was ruining all those fine moments in all of our lives." They would not reconcile while at Iowa. Dubus knew that Yates had no intention of returning in the fall, and decided to bide his time until the affair necessarily ended in May. But the last months were sad for both men: They adored each other, and the constrained civility between them was perhaps more painful than outright hostility. For Yates, the year was shaping up as an all but total loss.

YATES'S LATEST ANNUS HORRIBILIS—the academic year 1964-65—came to a kind of logical end in early April, when he went to New York and was told by both his editor Robert Gottlieb, and McCall that his novel was unpublishable. "I'm afraid we really are in trouble this time, dear," says Bill Grove's agent "Erica Briggs" in *Uncertain Times*. "It doesn't work as a book. It's not a war novel because there's not enough war in it, and it isn't a coming-of-age novel because the boy doesn't really come of age." All was not lost, however: Briggs-McCall suggested (not unfamiliarly) that Grove-Yates expand the narrative to tell more of the mother's story:

"She's one of the world's lost people, isn't she? And you always do that kind of thing so well."

"Jesus, I don't know [Grove replied]. That would be opening a whole new can of worms."

"I suppose it would, yes. But I know you can work it out. . . . The point is I can't handle the manuscript as it stands. I don't want to represent you with this."

"So there went the ball game," Yates wrote friends. If Cassill's verdict had been the moral equivalent of TB, this was advanced cancer. It was awful on so many levels that it might have inspired a kind of vertigo.

The very idea of “expanding” the novel to write in detail about his mother (and hence the ghastly childhood of a character “clearly and nakedly” himself) was “a whole new can of worms” to put it mildly, and never mind that Dookie wasn’t even dead yet—indeed, still enjoyed the odd moment of fleeting lucidity. Moreover he was sick to death of “that crummy novel” one way or the other, his credibility as a promising writer was waning fast, and he didn’t know what to do next or even if there were any more books in him. And finally he was broke and had no definite source of income that summer, and if it came down to living in Iowa another year he’d pretty much rather die.

“If calling me when you get into your worse moments of panic helps you at all,” McCall wrote him in early May, “then I want you to know that I don’t really mind, except that you create a sense of frustration and failure and pressure, pressure which you know realistically is not necessary! . . . I know these are *hideous* days for you, but urge you to try not to panic.” She was pursuing every possible lead in Hollywood: the producer Albert Ruddy presently held the option on *Revolutionary Road*, and might be persuaded to hire its author to write a screenplay; Ross Hunter or Elliott Kastner might have work, or a man named Richard Lewis who produced TV dramas, or even Johnny Johnson at Walt Disney (though McCall had to admit she could hardly picture Yates as a Disney writer — “however if you can write speeches and articles for Remington Rand . . . ”); and finally Yates’s old Hollywood agent, Malcolm Stuart, handled a young B-movie director named Roger Corman, who’d just signed a big contract with Columbia and was shopping around for a screenwriter. McCall doubted, however, that anyone would hire Yates sight-unseen; he’d simply have to Go West and hope for the best. “Train yourself to go into appointments where for the moment it is talk and not necessarily a firm offer of a job,” she advised, “[and] get in the mood where you don’t care if there is a job or not.” Sensing, perhaps, that this was a tall order for such a desperate man, she added two lines from “Chaucer’s translation of the Boethius Cancellations [sic] of Philosophy. . . . ‘Ne hope for nothing/ Ne drede not.’” Yates was well on his way to mastering the first part of that formula.

At the end of May he stopped in New York to see his daughters, but little Monica was upset over the brevity of his visit, and acted moody and unresponsive. More depressed than ever, Yates confided his fears about Hollywood to Nathan S. Kline, who made a referral Yates scribbled on his bill: “Dr. Robert T. Rubin, Neuropsych Inst UCLA.”

Excerpt from: *A Tragic Honesty* by Blake Bailey
To be published in July 2003 by Picador: St. Martin’s Press