

JOE CURRIE

I was pulled back into the world in an unexpected way. During my first summer on the island I had met a man named Joe Currie there. In the spring of my second year I received a letter from him saying that he had thought about me through the winter and he wondered how I was doing. I wrote back inviting him to come and spend the summer. He agreed, providing I could pay for his airfare.

Joe Currie was an extraordinary man. He was of Italian descent, good-looking, with dark brown eyes and olive skin. He was a fabulous cook. He could sing like a true Italian tenor. He was a marvelous mimic and storyteller. But with all his talent, he seemed curiously damaged somehow. So far as I could figure out, he had never had a steady job, but had always lived off other people. He had little or no education, and he felt this had prevented him from getting ahead. "What could I do - sew silver buckles on dolls's shoes?" he would ask plaintively.

The first summer he stayed with me was not a success. From the start he made it clear that he had no interest in me physically. Also, he was subject to mysterious rages and sulks that would go on for days. At the end of the summer he moved out to stay at another friend's house. I remember one rainy afternoon in early September when I watched him in the street below from an upper window of Nantucket Looms. I wondered what I had done to drive him away.

When he returned to New York, he wrote me a curt thank-you note. When I replied, he wrote back that my letter had so enraged him that he had torn it up and flushed it down the toilet. The whole experience reinforced my belief that I was not a very lovable person.

As luck would have it, I bumped into him by accident one autumn night on a visit to New York. He acted as though nothing had happened. We went into a bar to have a drink, and there he told me that he had a key to an empty apartment. A friend of his had gone south for the winter and left him in charge. He said that if I wanted to stay there I could. I accepted his offer just to be near him.

After that we saw each other every day. What we lived on I don't know. Things finally got so bad that I decided I would have to get a job again in order to support the two of us. We were sitting on a park bench. I picked up a newspaper that was lying nearby, turned to the want-ads section, and circled a high-paying job. When I went to the employment agency, I found that the position was as an associate editor in the Condensed Book section of Reader's Digest in Pleasantville, New York.

Thus began an endless series of interviews. The editors of Reader's Digest seemed to be amused by the fact that the only real experience I had to offer was as a failed off-Broadway producer and playwright and as a weaver at Nantucket Looms. The magazine reflected the nature of its founder, DeWitt Wallace, in placing a premium on eccentricity. When I finally worked my way up to a final interview with him, he got it into his head that I was some sort of intellectual. I remember hearing the sound of a gunshot on the lawn outside Mr. Wallace's office. He went to the window to investigate, and when he turned back to me, he woefully asked, "Why don't intellectuals like us?" I later found out

that his father, the head of Macalester College and a distinguished professor of Greek and Latin, never cared much for Reader's Digest.

Nevertheless I was hired, and to my surprise, I was quite happy there. My fellow employees were warm-hearted, bright, and intelligent. The work I did was about as trifling as the work I had done for This Week. I had to figure out a way to condense about twelve pages of an ordinary book into four triple-spaced pages of copy, but once I got the hang of it, it wasn't hard. The main thing was that for the first time in a long while I had enough money to live on. I started out commuting by car from New York. After that got too wearying, I rented a small house whose owner was a Reader's Digest editor on sabbatical. When she returned I rented a small room on the third floor of a house in Pleasantville. I finished my book there. A first-rate agent took it on, but she was never able to sell it. After that I returned to painting as a sure means of additional income. I rented a nearby barn to work in, and eventually I also rented the farm in Briarcliff Manor that went with it. By now I have moved on from watercolors and was working in acrylic paints. My first painting in the new medium was the same tree I had first painted in Nantucket.

I began what was, up to then, the most creative period of my life. I would see Joe Currie every Saturday, but other than that, all my time was devoted entirely to painting. I turned out one painting after another, and all of them found a ready market among the staff of Reader's Digest.

At Reader's Digest I encountered a world of wealth and power such as I could scarcely have imagined. What had started as a two person publication put out by Mr. and Mrs. Wallace from a basement in Greenwich Village had grown into one of the most successful magazines in history. The Wallaces had no children, so with the profits they earned they chose to devote themselves to good works. They supported the Martha Graham Dance Company. They moved the temples at Abu Simbel. They restored Monet's gardens at Giverny. They renovated the Great Hall of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art and modernized its Egyptian collection. They paid for the production of Boris Godunov at the Metropolitan Opera. Although the magazine was considered to be right wing, the Wallaces's munificence seemed to follow no party lines. If a presidential candidate lost an election, he would wind up on the payroll of Reader's Digest.

A strange air of unreality hung over my life. I lived for the weekends when I would see Joe, but that was a part of my life no one knew anything about. If I felt duplicitous, it was a duplicity shared by my coworkers. We were all paid fairly large salaries to turn out a magazine that in no way represented our interests, values, or beliefs. I doubt that any of us would have bought it or read it on our own. We worked in offices designed by Syrie Maugham. The walls were hung with paintings by Picasso, Cezanne, and Van Gogh. But in spite of the beauty of our surroundings, in spite of an air of geniality that pervaded the premises, in spite of the magazine's liberal employment practices, there was something very wrong, something I would come to think of as a peculiarly American disconnect. For all of its bright outlook on life, Reader's Digest also had a dark underside. Some editors would be drunk by noon. When they passed out on the floors of their offices, their secretaries would politely close their doors until they slept it off. I was aware that the men's room of the Chappaqua railroad station had to be closed off to prevent furtive assignations among the male commuters. The irony that I was working at Reader's Digest to support another man was not lost on me.

Joe Currie did not share my point of view. For him Reader's Digest was a grand American success story. He eagerly bought into all the pretensions of the magazine. He felt the magazine guaranteed him security. It conferred respectability upon him.

By this time my father was quite sick. He had suffered a heart attack ten years before and was now dying of congestive heart failure. I tried to be a good son to him. I went home every weekend to comfort him in his final illness. I would lie next to him on his bed and hold him in my arms.

One evening we were all watching television together. For some reason my mother got up to

leave the room. "Oh God, how I hate that woman," my father said to me after she had left. I protested that he did not realize what he was saying. He was sick. "No, I hate her," he insisted. "She has never done anything for anybody unless there was something in it for her." With that he turned to me and said, "And you know that better than anyone."

He died soon after. At his funeral one of our neighbors came up to me to inform me that my father had been able to die more easily knowing that I had finally gotten over all this nonsense about the theatre and taken a real job at Reader's Digest.

After his death my father's words haunted me. One afternoon I decided to question my mother about their relationship. When she was ten years old, my mother's father died. She adored him and after he was gone, she would ride a streetcar out in the dead of winter to the cemetery where he was buried. She used to lie in the snow on his grave to be close to him. She once told me that she had made a vow to her dead father that she would never love any other man, or marry. She had married, but I asked if she had kept the rest of her vow. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Yes."

My mother's life had not been an easy one. Her own mother ran a delicatessen in Hell's Kitchen, so they were very poor. After her father's death, her mother had been badly burned in a gas explosion and had to be hospitalized for a long period of time. There was talk that my mother and her sister might have to be put up for adoption. My mother told me that she had learned then to conceal all her emotions.

She looked to marriage to provide her with the money and security she had always craved. I sometimes wonder how my mother and father ever found each other. He was as emotionally withdrawn as she was. He had been engaged to two other girls who had died before he met my mother. After his marriage he kept a framed picture of one of them on his dresser. One day my mother could stand it no longer. She took the picture and hid it.

"What did he say when he found out?" I asked.

"He never mentioned it," my mother replied.

The hurts of childhood. The wounds that we carry with us all our lives.

Things went along fairly well at Reader's Digest for a few years. I had a second show of paintings in Nantucket, and it completely sold out. I bought the house there. Then, through the kind offices of Mary Turlay Robinson, an elderly amateur artist who lived in a greenhouse in Siasconset during the summer months, I was introduced to John Clancy, the director of the Frank Rehn Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York. He agreed to take me on. The Frank Rehn Gallery was one of the more distinguished galleries in American art history. It represented artists such as Edward Hopper, Reginald Marsh, Charles Burchfield, and George Tooker, and I was pleased to be considered in such company. Mr. Clancy gave me my first New York show in 1967.

I did a painting in acrylics of the same tree I had first painted in water color. I did a painting of Nantucket in fog. I did a portrait of Julia Miles and her three daughters. I did a portrait of Cornelius van Vorst, a young man who had lived in my attic one summer and assisted me with chores. I painted forsythia. I painted Queen Anne's Lace. I did a portrait of Joe Currie. I did a portrait of two lady friends of mine, having Sunday coffee in my living room. I did a portrait of my next door neighbor, Mrs. Amey. The reviews in obscure publications were generally good, and I sold fairly well. The best part was that museums throughout the country began to exhibit my work.

John Gruen, whom I had always thought of as a somewhat friend, reviewed the show for New York Magazine. He said he could not make up his mind whether or not I was a "cornball" painter. After that, I was wary of ever again having a show in New York.

The painting of Joe Currie was eventually bought by a rich lady in Connecticut. She called me several years later in tears to say that it had been destroyed in a fire.

Mr. Clancy bought the painting of Mrs. Amey. After his death, I was afraid that I had lost track

of it forever, until some man from Florida called to say that he had purchased the painting at auction. "I bought your painting of Golda Mier," he said.

I also managed to keep my hand in the theatre. I designed an evening of ballet for James Waring at the Judson Memorial. I also designed Endecott and the Red Cross, the first play in Robert Lowell's trilogy The Old Glory, for the American Place Theatre.

But all was not really well. Joe Currie had said at the outset that if I wanted to have a sexual relationship I should look elsewhere. At first I just accepted this condition, out of the low regard I had for myself. Because of my experience with James Price, I felt that love would never again come easily for me. It was something I would have to earn. Nevertheless, I was confident that in time I could gain Joe's love by my steadfastness and devotion. But after nearly seven years there was little real change in our relationship. I had to pay for his apartment, his clothes, his living expenses, and in return for this, I saw him for a few hours every Saturday. "I let you buy sox for me," as Joe so succinctly put it. It seemed an unfair bargain. One day, when we were talking on the telephone, he flew into one of his rages. I simply hung up on him. I knew at that moment that the relationship was over.

In Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War was escalating. Reader's Digest was firmly in support of this war, although most of the staff was not. One day the copy for an editorial signed by the editors came across my desk. The copy urged ever greater military efforts to win the war. I wrote a letter to Hobe Lewis, the managing editor of the magazine, saying that I would have to resign. I said, so far as I knew, I was one of the

editors of Reader's Digest, and I did not support the war.

I wanted to put an end to the dichotomies in my life. As Americans with memories of World War II, we had always asked why the German people did nothing to oppose the policies of the Nazi government. I felt I could no longer accept a salary from an organization that I believed was doing something morally wrong. My coworkers applauded me for my act of bravado. Given my situation with Joe Currie, I felt unworthy of their praise: If I had only myself to support, I no longer needed the sort of salary I had been earning.

No one questioned my true motives except my mother. For everyone else I was a hero, even Mr. Wallace seemed to admire what I had done. He thought I had acted entirely out of principle. For years afterward, whenever I needed money for one nonprofit project or another, he would send it to me. But my mother suspected something else. Many years after the event she and I were sitting in the living room of the house in Nantucket. She was smoking, and she stared at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Tell me, there's something I've always wanted to know," she said. You were fired from the Reader's Digest, weren't you?" Her words felt like a body blow to me. She was wrong in her conclusions, but she was right about my duplicity.

My departure from Reader's Digest was hard. I was genuinely fond of most of the people I worked with. I had saved no money, so once again I was totally broke. As I drove away one day in early spring, I noticed that the carefully tended flower beds that led up to the main building were just beginning to bloom with daffodils and jonquils. I felt as though I were leaving Shangri-La.