

decision." The decision was for the plaintiff. Things have come so far in America that the editors of a magazine were content to be publicly disgraced for an appearance fee.

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## Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

### *Beginnings Past All Remembering*

The Knights of Columbus Club is just beginning to buzz as we pull up at 7:45, 15 minutes fashionably late. Our cars hold two families of three people each; the two small boys—cousins, one in each car, for sanity's sake—love each other madly and can't bear the five-minute drive from our dinner at Bonanza. My husband's aunt and uncle have been married for 48 years, and their children are throwing them a party.

The club manager directs us into the room. To the left as we enter is the guest book, presided over by my husband's cousin's wife and their infant son. To the right is a long table with old and new family pictures. Wearing a corsage and boutonniere, Milly and Joe greet their guests.

My husband and I, and his sister and her husband, sit next to my mother-in-law at a table full of family. The little boys and their three younger cousins whiz off, playing tag as far from us as possible. They use the punchbowl as home base, and I worry. (I worry about it all, actually, and if I had my way our seven-year-old son would sit politely next to me and converse intelligently with his elders.) My husband tells me to relax: This is all *de rigueur* at dances, has been since Adam. I did it, too, in different ways, when I was a child, but wanting my son to be better than I am, I remain unconvinced. "Look how well I turned out," my husband adds. I force a smile. My sister-in-law grows soft-eyed reminiscing about going to dances as a little girl and then the long car ride home, sleepy in the backseat. "I could still hear the music as if it was in

the car with us," she says. Eyeing the accordions on the stage, I fear it might be true.

About 8:30 the band comes in: Reiny and Burt on guitar and accordion, their names embroidered on their caps, and a third man on the drums. One of the children of the honored couple gets on the mike and says that the party is for them because they've been such wonderful parents. They're going to cut the cake now, he adds, and would everyone please stand up for a moment and gather around it? We hear him, but no one wants to be the first to walk across the empty dance floor, and after a second request they cut the cake attended only by five boys under eight years old, all in their Sunday best, greed in their eyes.

The first dance belongs to Milly and Joe, and now I know how they looked at each other at their wedding. Then there's a two-step, three waltzes, another two-step, then a couple of polkas and a schottische to which we polka. The only real deviation in rhythm during the evening is "Blue Spanish Eyes," performed without conviction. There's something comforting about participating in a dance whose beginnings lie past all remembering. I look around and guess that the percentage of divorces in this room must be nearly as low as in a pondful of Canada geese. These ranch and small-town couples of all shapes and sizes dance together as if they were breathing or pulling a calf or rolling over together in their sleep. I'd like to dance like that some day. "One flesh" takes on new meaning when one watches plain long-married folks doing a plain immemorial dance (which can, hours later, cramp up the legs of the immoderate).

The five small cousins, in groups of two and three according to age, discover Paradise. They sit on the dance-waxed floor and spin around. They swing each other by the hands as hard as they can and then let go, fall, and slide; drink waitresses dodge them deftly, used to it. My son is wearing a pair of white pants his grandmother gave him, and our table decides I'll need a whole bottle of Shout to get them clean. I tell my mother-in-law no, I'm just going to send them to her.

There are three extraordinarily pretty girls, cousins and friends, all quivering on the brink of teendom. They

have asked the band to play what in my youth was called a bunny hop, and the band obliges gallantly. The girls form a line, each with her hands lightly, self-consciously on the hips of the girl before her, and they start their sedate, charming circle of little kicks and hops. A hitch: They have the floor to themselves. They tough it out, smiling bravely and trying to make nonchalant small talk among themselves as they move under the lights, although it's obvious they'd like the earth to swallow them up. The adults are not the only ones watching: I see my young son and his six-year-old cousin lying at the dark end of the dance floor, heads propped up on elbows, mouths wide open but motionless for once, entranced at the pretty sight. I grow firmer in my resolve to lock him in the basement during his teens.

At 9:30 the food is brought in, much of it prepared by Milly herself: anniversary cake, nuts, mints, dips and crackers and cold cuts, hot meatballs and chicken wings and french fried cauliflower in chafing dishes, relish trays, tropical fruit punch, and coffee. The boys are dancing on their toes now, too wound up to eat. My husband makes our son drink a Sprite, suspicious that the boys are innocently commandeering whatever beverage is handy when they get thirsty. I start to ask him if he did that, too, when he was a kid, but someone we haven't seen for a while bends over us and the thought gets lost. I know the answer, anyway.



There are more than a hundred people in the room, more family than I'll ever be able to meet or remember. Some are not family but friends, which amounts to almost the same thing. By 10:00—11:00 in the time zone we came from, just 90 miles east—we've all danced with each other if we're so inclined, caught up on the gossip, our son is rubbing his eyes as he hops up and down to the music, and I'm beginning to feel that way myself. My husband drives us to his sister's house, where we'll spend the night. I look at him and out at the clear sky, listen to the boys chattering tiredly, and it comes into my mind that a family is like a galaxy, whirling

its giant arms and growing larger all the time, so large that where it stops nobody knows—and a marriage, thank God, is more than the sum of its partners. Time and patience effect a grace that mere *intent* never could. I close my eyes and can still hear the music.

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### *The Judgment of History*

Satire is a difficult form these days. Reality keeps calling, and raising. Let me tell a story that illustrates the difficulty.

Last November, when President Reagan's Teflon began to wear thin, pundits began to write about how his "place in history" was being jeopardized. My buddy Tim, a historian, casually suggested that a President really needs professional historians on call to warn him about how history will judge his actions. I thought that was a funny idea. Tim and I started goofing on it, and we wound up writing a proposal to establish a "Council of Historical Advisors."

We pointed out that such a body would answer a real need. After all, every politician above the state-legislator level wants to be regarded with favor by history, and Presidents in their final years in office, especially, seem to worry about it a lot. They're not running for anything, and posterity doesn't even have a PAC, but they just can't kick the habit: They start to suck up to the electorate of Yet-to-be.

But history takes time (as Gertrude Stein remarked), and that makes them nervous. Since we can't poll the Great Unborn, obviously, we have to rely on speculation. But Tim and I argued that the judgment of history is too important to be left to well-meaning amateurs. We suggested that a panel of historians could be engaged to deliver official preliminary verdicts of history. If nothing else, that would free Presidents to worry about the things they're hired to worry about, and it might even save us in the future from embarrassments like high schools named

after Warren G. Harding.

As we saw it, a Council of Historical Advisors would be like the Council of Economic Advisors—a body of experts to make the close calls and hard decisions and assess for the President how he'll stand in the past of the future. We suggested a set-up like that of the Supreme Court: a fixed number of members, nominated by the President and approved by the Senate, serving for life, contingent on good behavior. (Sure, the criteria for good behavior might be hard to establish, but those for life aren't self-evident either.) We wanted these provisions to guard against "council-packing" by Presidents tempted to believe that adverse judgments were the work of small-minded pedants trying to deny them their historical due.

Day to day, we suggested, the council could make itself useful by, for example, finding historical precedents for administration proposals, or making sure that policies said to be unprecedented really were. It could also remind busy Presidents and other top-level administration figures of the historical events commemorated by holidays like Thanksgiving, Columbus Day, the Fourth of July, and Christmas. Speechwriters could call the council with questions about the current state of historiography: "What's the latest on Squanto?" "William Bradford in Plymouth—still an important player?" "Remind me: What happened at Munich?" With answers in hand, speechwriters could use phrases like "history tells us" or "the lessons of history" in full confidence that, in a pinch, they could buck responsibility to the council.

But, we argued, it would be in times of crisis that the historical advisors would really earn their keep. A President could call in the council's chairman: "I want to invade," he might say, or "I want to cut a deal." Then: "What will be the judgment of history? Will it threaten my place in history?" The chairman would summon the advisors. (Robes of office—perhaps tweed—might be appropriate.) The council would solemnly deliberate and by formal vote determine history's verdict. Like economic forecasts, of course, it could be subsequently adjusted.

Proposals of this sort had come up before but had never gotten anywhere.

When Fritz Hollings was running for President in 1984, he promised that he would shoot all the economists in government and replace them with historians, but this shameless pitch for historians' votes wasn't enough to get him the nomination. Eight years earlier, in 1976, we learned, a group of historians had actually, seriously urged President-elect Carter to set up a formal body like the one we were proposing, but historians were one special-interest group to which Carter did not respond.

We concluded that this could be a bold initiative, one that President Reagan could use to put his mark on the closing years of his administration. We predicted confidently that history would applaud. We wrote our proposal as an op-ed piece and fired it off to a number of your high-class dailies.

All of them turned us down. Every last one of them.

Now, I can understand the conservative ones doing that. Everything but the stock market seemed to be falling apart at the time, and they weren't in the mood for satire. But I must say that it was a bit of a puzzle when the *New York Times* didn't want it. I've never seen the *Times* pass up the chance to kick a conservative when he was down, and I thought anything that poked even mild fun at the Reagan administration would be a shoo-in. Tim and I began to think maybe the idea wasn't as amusing as we thought it was.

Then, lo and behold, nearly two months after we'd sent our piece to the *Times*, on last January 14, that paper's op-ed page carried a piece by Stuart E. Eizenstat. Eizenstat (whom some may recall as a figure from the forlorn Carter White House) called for the creation of a "White House secretariat . . . charged with providing the political appointees on the National Security Council and domestic policy staff with historical analogues, thereby helping keep Presidents out of trouble." Such an "institutionalized memory," he argued, would "reduce the likelihood that past mistakes would be repeated." Sound familiar?

Now, I certainly don't mean to suggest that the *Times* pilfered our idea and farmed it out. Great ideas often occur to many people more or less simultaneously; anyway, as I said, the idea was not a new one. But I do