

Harry Crews

*We Are All of Us Passing Through**

I came through Monarch Pass in Colorado, fifteen thousand feet high and fourteen miles out of the nearest town—I came through on a 650cc Triumph motorcycle about dusk dark in late September of 1958. It was snowing lightly. I was freezing. I had been on the road for a little over a year, driven there by what you call your higher educational system.

I have never cared what horse a man was riding, only how he rode him. Because that is the pretty and human thing. I got out of the Marine Corps in 1956, and went to the University of Florida and found it full of granite men riding granite horses. Deliver me from men who are without doubt. Doubt makes a man decent. My most steadfast conviction is that every man ought to doubt everything he holds dearest. Not all the time, but now and then. *Sometime*. With rare exceptions, though, professors treat their disciplines as closed subjects, as though nothing had been written or discovered or reevaluated about their disciplines since the day they were awarded their PhDs. Consequently, universities have become communities of men with answers instead of—as they should be—communities of men with questions.

Anyway, I couldn't bear it after my sophomore year. There didn't seem to me to be any difference at all between, say, a professor of history and a sergeant in the Marine Corps. Both men's worlds were carefully proscribed; both men knew exactly what you ought to do and say, and where you ought to squeeze your juice. So one fine spring day I got on a Triumph motorcycle and left.

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Eighteen months later I limped back into the University of Florida purified and holy, ready to continue with what society expected of me.

But that evening coming through Monarch Pass, freezing, I was still being tried and purged. I was not pure, and even though I was hurt bad, I had not yet developed the limp by which every saint is known. About every two miles I had been getting off the bike, going around behind the machine and holding on to the twin exhausts with my gloved hands. My fingers were numb, had been numb for the last twenty miles. Coming from Georgia, I knew something about frostbite, and I thought that was what was in my fingers. It scared me. I kept thinking of myself handless. So I stopped the Triumph every two miles until it got so cold that when I stopped I couldn't get off. I literally could not swing my leg over the seat. A freezing, driving wind was roaring right into my face and eventually it simply benumbed me to the point that when I tried to talk to myself (you know the kind of thing: "Come on now! Not much further. Don't be such a pussy, suck it up and go!") I couldn't say the words. I couldn't feel my lips. I could make sounds, but not words.

There was no place to stop. It was straight down off the mountain toward the little town whose lights I could already see. But like everything else it did end, and when I got down into the town, it was much warmer, though it must have been snowing for days because snow was banked on the trees and against buildings and over the curbs. I cruised through that warm place feeling good.

You have to be on the road seventeen hours with no place to stop to know what it means to drive between neon-lit storefronts and see houses, side by side and permanent as taxes, to realize how warm *images* can make you. Never mind what the weather was; this was where people lived—you see their windows, see their cars parked in carports and driveways. I tooled around for probably an hour, feeling good just knowing I wasn't going to die, frozen in some Midwest wilderness.

I didn't know exactly where I was going. I had a sleeping bag and a coffee-pot rolled behind me on the bike. But I wasn't about to risk myself in that snow again. I was in an alien land, and I was scared. I wanted to go where it was safe. I could go to a hotel, but that cost money, and I was headed for Mexico with the little score I'd made working for Hunt's Foods Inc. in Hayward, California, which is right down the road from Oakland, which is right down the road from San Francisco. I didn't want to spend any more than I had to. There were

missions, but I had unpleasant memories of all the missions I had stayed in, because they made you pray for your breakfast. I mean you didn't *have* to pray, but you did unless you wanted to hurt some religious freak's feelings. And since I have never been a basically cruel person, I've always shown whatever respect I could muster when the old lady (sometimes an ancient gentleman, but for some unknowable reason usually an old, old lady in some sort of uniform you did not recognize) would get you together in the morning—whiskey drunks, winos, pill heads, runaways, syphilitic wanderers, retards, and whatever else had wandered in during the night—and make you go through obsequious, cowardly, belly-crawling rituals where you told Jesus that you hated yourself and would gladly kill yourself, stamp out the vermin of your life with knife, gas, long fall (anything above the tenth floor) if only it was not a sin against His Holy Person.

That left the YMCA. The worst thing that could happen to you at the YMCA was that you'd get sucked off. I wonder how many people who contribute to the Young Men's Christian Association (of course the people who contribute to the YMCA never stay there) know that if you are a young man, you dare not go to the Young Men's Christian Association unless you are willing to take it in the ass or give it in the mouth?

I am not easily provoked to outrage, but I say categorically now, once-and-for-all, that my *general* experience with YMCAs around the country is that if you drop your soap in the shower, don't pick it up. You do, and at least three guys will be injured in the rush that will result from them storming to violate your asshole.

None of which kept me from staying in them. The YMCAs' great attraction was that they were incredibly cheap and you didn't have to pray for your breakfast. So I was cruising through those warm streets of that little town, looking for a YMCA. And found one. They advertise well. The one I found was on a busy corner downtown housed in what looked like it had once been a private home that was a kind of mansion, a huge pile of marble with columns. And in the back of the thing two wings had been added—low ugly modern brick structures built onto the original house.

I went up on the sidewalk under a tree—I remember it as a kind of oak, but I don't know if they have oaks in that part of the world—and there I shut the Triumph down, the first time it had been shut down that long day of riding, and covered it with a poncho. With some difficulty I got off, untied my bedroll,

and went inside. A tall, thin, pale young man stood behind a desk and watched me come across the lobby.

When I got to him he said: "You can't bring fresh meat in here."

"What?" I said, truly not hearing him.

My ears were ringing from the wind, and would ring on into the next day. If you rode every day your ears always had the sound of the wind in them, because that was before the day when every motorcycle rider by law had to wear a crash helmet. I wore a knitted black navy watch cap and it did nothing against the wind, so I had a lot of trouble hearing what was being said to me.

"What?"

"You can't bring fresh meat in here."

Now I thought the guy was talking about a woman. I thought he was telling me that I couldn't bring a woman to my room. I was trembling and exhausted, and taking a woman to my room was the last thing I had on my mind. After seventeen hard hours on a bike you can't even jerk off, much less confront a woman.

So I told him: "Oh, I'm not thinking about that. Honestly, that's the last thing I'd do. I'm new here, I don't even know anybody."

"What?" he said.

"I'm not from this part of the world," I told him. "I don't know anybody. Where would I get a woman?"

"Where would you get a what?" he said.

We went on about ten minutes like that there at the desk, and I won't inflict all of what we said on you. Enough to say that he thought I was a hunter. Apparently there are a lot of people that time of the year who shoot—I don't know, deer, bear, and other such—and he thought I was one of them. He meant by fresh meat exactly that: freshly killed animals from the woods, and if I had any or was going to have any, I couldn't bring'm into the YMCA.

I guess he had every right to think that. Here is what I looked like coming across the lobby of the YMCA toward him:

At that time I'd been on the road about ten months, working at whatever jobs I could find, washing dishes in Cody, Wyoming, mining salt just outside of Redwood City, California, things like that. My hair was down to my shoulders, and I had not shaved since I left the university. Under the knitted black watch cap I had a pair of World War Two goggles to keep the wind out of my eyes. These, when I walked into the YMCA that night, were pulled down and strung from around my neck. I was wearing a sheepskin-lined flight jacket that I'd

bought out of a surplus store, a great jacket that I got cheap because the zipper didn't work. I had it held together with four enormous safety pins, the kind used in laundries, about three inches long. The leather of the jacket was peeling and had a tear in the shoulder that let the sheepskin show through. My Levi's hadn't been washed in weeks and were stiff with motorcycle grease and dirt from the road. The inside of the right leg of the Levi's had been pretty much eaten away—ragged holes from knee to ankle—by battery acid from the bike. The engineering boots I had on made me walk even stranger than I ordinarily walk—and I walk pretty strange anyway—because the left boot had a sole made out of a quarter of inch of lead from the time when I raced the Triumph in Northern California—just outside Sacramento—on a dirt track anytime I could pay the entry fee to it. On a track you always run counterclockwise, and the lead sole on the left boot is so you can put that foot down and keep it down while turning the track without getting it maimed, and while it helps you in a race, it had no function at all once you left the track but I had kept it on for no other reason than all the other misplaced macho bullshit that was coursing through my blood in those days.

It made me feel good, invincible, to limp down a sidewalk with that left boot shooting a few sparks and making a loud and unseemly noise. Too, in the back of my mind, I think I had the notion that I might stomp some son-of-a-bitch's face in with it, somebody who really deserved stomping. To this day I've never stomped anybody and, I'm pleased to say, no longer want to. But for years I was always on the lookout for the possibility. I was nothing if not a violence freak. But then you've got to understand this was before Peace and Pacifism had become respectable. I mean you didn't kill or mutilate indiscriminately, but for those who deserved it (and I don't remember how one determined who deserved it in those days and who did not, I only remember it was an issue)—for those who deserved it, you always finished off with a good stomping.

"What is the difference in the room and the dormitory?" I asked.

"Difference," said the pale young man.

"Price," I said.

"The room is four dollars. The dormitory is a dollar and a quarter."

"The dormitory," I said.

I got the key and the directions to one of the ugly wings behind the house I mentioned earlier. The dormitory turned out not to be a true dormitory at all. It was a moderately large room, maybe twenty feet by twenty feet, with double-decker beds lined cheek to jowl down both sides so that only a

small aisle was left. At the end of the aisle was a cheapo chest of drawers with a small mirror on top. The light in the ceiling was uncovered. A film of musty odor—not entirely unpleasant—hung over the room. None of the beds were occupied.

The clerk in the lobby had given me towels and directions to the showers, but I was hurt too bad from the day's ride to care about a shower. I dropped my stuff on the floor, stripped down to some sour drawers that had really seen a lot of action, hit the light by the door and was asleep almost before my head touched the pillow, which, incidentally, was covered with a white case with a green legend stenciled across one end that read: STOLEN FROM THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION.

Even exhausted, I'm a light sleeper. Anything brings me instantly awake. The room I was in was utterly dark, and I must have opened my eyes simultaneously with the wedge of yellow light splitting the room, followed for the briefest instant by the silhouette of a man. He didn't turn on the light, which I took for a courtesy, and half asleep again already, I heard him drop a shoe, another one. A belt buckle hit the floor. He was directly across the narrow aisle from me, but the room was so dark not even an outline of him was evident as I heard the springs give under his weight.

I was just about to slip under and be asleep again when I heard a sound like a tire had been punctured by an ice pick: SSSSSSSSSSSSSSS! My eyes popped open. My heartbeat jacked up a notch. I wasn't sure if I had heard what I thought I heard or not. Maybe I'd been dreaming. I tentatively closed my eyes and was beginning to relax when I heard a sound a child might make imitating a train whistle: OOOOOOooooooooOOOOOOooooOOOOOOO!

Now there was no mistake. I *had* heard something, and it clearly came from the guy across the aisle. I turned slowly and strained to see him but the room was hermetically sealed in darkness. My whole body drew tight. I became aware of sounds I had not heard before: pipes banging somewhere through the walls, a creak now and again as though the building was settling, a car horn.

Nothing else came from across the aisle though. I was beginning to convince myself that there was a reason for the guy doing whatever he had done, and that I ought to ignore it and go on to sleep because he was through now and it wouldn't happen again, when a series of grunts rocked the air around my head. UUnnt! UUnnt! TURCH! KaGUNK! Then silence. I was half-sitting in my bunk by the time the grunts stopped.

"Something wrong over there?" My voice had a little trembling croak in it, and it was only when I heard it that I realized I was scared. There was no answer to my question. Instead, I heard deep regular breathing. I eased down on the pillow and waited. When it came, it was the imitation of a machine gun. Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh!

"Hey fella," I said. No answer. "Hey, fella, what's your trouble?" To that, I got as a reply the original sound, that of a tire being punctured.

"Hey," I called. And then in a kind of scream: "Hey!"

"What is it?" The voice came out of the dark not more than three feet from where I lay. "What's the matter with you?"

I don't know what I expected, but whatever it was, it was a long way from what I got. The voice was not much more than a whisper and almost without inflection. But it was more than antagonistic. It was venomous. Evil. I felt cautiously over the side of the bed for my boot with the lead sole. But I couldn't find it. I couldn't even find the boot that didn't have the lead sole. And from across the aisle there now came a kind of air raid, full of diving planes and sirens and whistling bombs.

I figured I had to be firm with him, but even thinking that firmness was what was needed, it was with tremendous misgivings that I said, rather loudly: "All right, *you*, knock off the goddam bullshit!"

I knew I'd made a mistake the moment it was out of my mouth, because the silence following my voice was filled with a great in-suck of breath, ending in a strangled gasp. And I knew I was locked in the dark with madness.

"What did you say?" the voice asked, so filled with passion it could hardly speak.

I had eased to a sitting position, getting ready to bolt for the door, when I heard the springs on the top bunk stretch and recoil as if they were being used like a trampoline. Then I heard two naked feet hit the floor half a room away by the door.

"I asked you what it was you said?"

"Look," I said, "I'm just passing through, and . . ."

"We are all, *all* of us passing through," the voice said, "but . . ."—the voice had taken on a malicious smile—" . . . I just happen to be between you and the door. You ain't passing nowhere."

I probably would have been afraid anyway, but the darkness made it much worse. I only had the voice to go on. I wished I knew what he looked like,

something about him. But all I had was the voice and the certain conviction that he was crazy.

"What do you want?" I said. "What the hell *do* you want?"

I was still being firm, or trying to.

"Ah, my friend," said the voice, "it is you who want. I do not want. I have never wanted."

"Then why are you between me and the door?" I said. "Why did you say I wasn't passing *anywhere*?"

"Your problem is questions," the voice said.

He was coming toward me. I retreated along the aisle, toward the rear of the room. He was a big mother. Although *actually*, I could see nothing; nonetheless I was being stifled and overwhelmed by what I could feel in the aisle in front of me. I thought I could smell him too. I *could* smell him: something hairy, full of wood-musk, the sweet suffocating smell that only wild things have.

"You just keep on asking them questions, don't you," the voice said.

My back touched the wall. There was no place to go.

"Look," I said, trembling. "What do you want?"

"What I want, you can't give."

This is not easy to say, even this long time after the fact, but I was nearly weeping from terror. It all seemed so silly that I had come this long way to be summarily butchered in a dark room by a man I did not know, had never seen, against whom I had no grievance, and who could not possibly have a grievance against me.

"I've never done anything to you," I said.

"Oh, but you have. You have."

"You don't know my name," I said.

"I did not say I knew your name."

"*My name is Harry Crews! My name is Harry Crews!*" I screamed my name out of a hysterical compulsion, because I suddenly knew that he must think I was someone else.

"Is that really your name?" the voice asked.

"Yes," I cried, "yes. You've got the wrong man. You've come for the wrong man."

"No," the voice came back, "it is for you I've come. You and all your kind."

My kind? My *kind*? I thought wildly. What can that mean? What *can* it mean?

"I don't know what you mean," I said, pressing into the wall, my sweat making it slick. "I don't understand."

"I don't expect you to understand." The voice was patient now, quieter. "I only expect you to believe."

And I believed. I believed it was dark and I was going to die. I believed I'd never know the face of the thing that killed me, its name, or why. *They'd* know who it was. *They* would catch it, name it, discover its secret. But I, alone and ignominiously weeping, would have death fall from its hand onto my blind head, knowing nothing.

It was too much to bear, and in a spasm of cowardice, I charged away from the wall, my eyes squeezed shut, straight down the aisle toward the door. I expected to hit something—someone—but didn't. To this day, I do not know why I didn't, because the aisle was too narrow to pass anyone without touching him. I jerked open the door and raced down the hall without ever looking back. I had some thought that he might be behind me, and if he was, I sure as hell didn't want to know if he was gaining on me.

The lobby was empty. I saw no clock but I could *feel* that it had to be three or four in the morning. The desk clerk was dozing in a metal chair behind the desk. And I scared him every bit as bad as I'd been scared by vaulting the desk and landing more or less straddle of his lap. His eyes popped open and he started yelping and slobbering and struggling to get up but he was too thin to be able to move me. And I, dressed only in my moldy shorts, hair and beard tangled, twisted across my face, had him half by the shirt-front and half by the throat, yelping and slobbering too, nose to nose with him.

He finally did in desperation unseat me from his lap but couldn't get loose of my hands, so that we hopped, skipped, and grotesquely danced from behind the desk and out into the lobby and around the lobby, screaming and talking at once, both of us trying to find out what was happening here in the middle of an otherwise quiet night at the YMCA. Ultimately, we calmed enough to talk.

"Who?" he said.

"In my room," I said again.

"It's you," he said in disgust.

"Damn right it's me—what's left of me after what you put in my room."

"How dare you come out here like that," he said. "You can't behave like this at the YMCA."

"You put a crazy man in there with me?" I said.

"You didn't bathe," he said, a little sour anger settling on his mouth.

"I'm going to kill you if you don't listen," I screamed.

He had been bouncing around on the balls of his feet, full of nervous gestures, his thin arms and legs jerking about, but then he got very quiet and said in an even voice: "What did you say to me?"

I had the awful sense of a distorted funhouse mirror where you see the same image retreating into the glass, perfectly reproduced and growing smaller and smaller into infinity.

"I'm trying to get you to go out there and take that person out of my room."

"You threatened me," he said.

"I've *been* threatened," I said. "This whole place is a threat."

"The YMCA is not a threat," he said. "And I'll have to ask you to get out of the lobby dressed like that."

"Do you know who's in my room?"

He thought about that and then said: "No."

"I don't either," I said.

He pinched his chin with his pale, rather blue fingers. "I believe you're in the dormitory," he said.

"That's right," I said. "That's where I am."

He spoke with numbing rationality: "A dormitory by its very nature will have *many* people. They may not live up to your expectation. I never said they would."

"But will they try to kill me?"

"Did someone try to kill you?"

"Yes."

"How did he try to accomplish this deed?"

"Well," I said, "he didn't actually *try* to kill me."

"I see," he said. "Did someone at the YMCA threaten to kill you?"

"No," I said, sensing already I was defeated.

"I thought not," he said.

"But there was a guy in there making strange noises and when I tried to ask him what was wrong, he started shouting and hemmed me up." I sounded like such a weak stick, it shamed me.

"Hemmed you up?" he said.

"Got between me and the door," I said.

"And you came to *me* for help?"

I could see his point, had already *seen* his point. I outweighed the clerk by about forty pounds. I was also hairy and had a dangerous sole on my left boot.

I waved my hand off vaguely toward the wing where the madman was. "Are you going to see about it or not?"

"Of course I'll have a look if you like." He was enjoying himself immensely. "Besides," he said, "it seems the only way I'll get you out of the lobby." He added as an afterthought as we were going down the hall, "You really ought not to come out here dressed like that."

When we got to the room the light was on. The clerk turned to me and said: "Is that the man who had you cornered and threatened?"

A man about the size of a jockey sat on the bed opposite mine. His legs, skinny as a child's and marked with blue veins, were hardly long enough to let his toes brush the floor.

"I don't know," I said. "But I don't think so."

"You don't know?" said the clerk.

I could feel myself blushing. "The light was turned out," I said. "I never saw him."

The little man sat watching us. A sharp pale tongue kept darting over his lips. And the light seemed to hurt his eyes, which he had shaded now with a paper-thin hand.

"Billy," said the clerk, "do you know this man?" He pointed at me.

The little man said: "He turned on the light. And he went away. So I prayed for him."

"See?" I demanded. "That's crazy."

"That's Billy," said the clerk with a kind of sighing patience which seemed to imply it was something I should have known all along. He took me by the elbow and led me out in the hall. "We don't even register Billy," he said. "He just comes and goes as he will. I can assure you he's harmless."

"How is it you're able to tell me that?" I wanted to know.

"He thinks he's Jesus Christ," said the clerk.

"Christ," I said.

"Right," he said.

"I was swearing," I said.

"Don't swear," he said, "this is the YMCA."

"Right," I said.

I didn't want to tell him, inasmuch as this *was* the YMCA, that the fact that the little man thought he was Jesus Christ was no assurance to me at all. When I think of Jesus Christ, I think of the Byzantine Christ, He of the hooked nose and burning eyes. Let others think of Him as a gentle God-Man with a palm leaf and a donkey, if they can. For my part, I can't.

Obviously I couldn't tell all of that to the clerk. It would not have applied. Most of what I think usually doesn't. I don't know what the point is, but whatever it is, I'm usually not on it, but beside it.

"Now go on back in there and have a good night's sleep," said the clerk, "and don't ever come into another lobby of a YMCA unless you're properly dressed." This last was delivered harshly, sternly. Quite clearly, he was no longer intimidated by me, if he had ever been.

I went back into the room where the little man still sat on the side of the bed. I looked at him, he at me. We said nothing. I was embarrassed, and furious with myself because of it. I had been properly shat upon by everybody concerned, and here I was embarrassed.

"I'm turning out the light," I said.

The little man didn't answer me. Instead he lay down in his bed and stretched out flat on the covers, his hands folded funeral-like on his skinny chest. I watched to see if his eyes were going to close. They didn't. They didn't seem to be blinking either. He was lying unnaturally still and straight. I turned out the light anyway and went to my bunk.

No sooner had I lain down than The Voice said: "They think I think I'm Jesus, but I don't think I think I'm Jesus."

"Shit," I said, and jumped for the light. I never took my eye off him as I jerked into my clothes and grabbed up my bedroll.

"I let'm think it," he said as I was going out the door. "But I haven't said who I am yet."

As I was going by the desk, the clerk, who was dozing again in the metal chair, looked up.

"You leaving *now*?" he asked.

"He doesn't think he's Christ," I said, "and you're a goddamn fool."

It was still dark, but it had quit snowing. I dug the Triumph out from under the snow-covered tarp, and spent thirty minutes kicking the engine before it caught. I was bone tired. My head hurt. My eyeballs felt pitted, and there was a skin of fuzz on my tongue and teeth. I had had no shower and my armpits under the sheepskin jacket were sticky and lined with a dirty rash.

There was no place to go to rest. I went to an all-night diner and ate two bennies with a cup of black coffee, and sat there thinking how the night had been wasted.

As soon as the bennies got my heart cranked up and my eyeballs rushing, I'd go south through Raton Pass into New Mexico and on into El Paso and from there straight through the desert a little over a hundred miles to the town of Chihuahua, in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Sitting in the diner, I could see it clearly, the bennies burning the road clean in my head, lying straight between sand and cactus after you left Ciudad Juarez, but I was angry and would remain angry for weeks because I thought that everything had been wasted and undone and that I had given up a night's rest and no inconsiderable part of my manhood for nothing there in the YMCA.

But of course nothing is ever wasted. Ten years later, when I would start the first novel I was able to publish, *The Gospel Singer*, the little man in the YMCA sat up in his bed and up in my head as alive and immediate as he had ever been, and out of his skinny legs and maniacal voice I made the character of Didymus, and it was in the person of Didymus that I first felt the miracle that keeps fiction writers writing fiction, the miracle of the alphabet turning into blood.

If not better than wine, it's at least as good.