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## PROFILES

# FIFTEEN YEARS OF THE SALTO MORTALE

BY KENNETH TYNAN

FEBRUARY 20, 1978

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July 14, 1977: There is a dinner party tonight at the Beverly Hills home of Irving Lazar, doyen of agents and agent of doyens. The host is a diminutive potentate, as bald as a doorknob, who was likened by the late screenwriter Harry Kurnitz to “a very expensive rubber

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beach toy.” He has represented many of the top-grossing movie directors and best-selling novelists of the past four decades, not always with their prior knowledge, since speed is of the essence in such transactions; and Lazar’s flair for fleet-footed deal-clinching—sometimes on behalf of people who had never met him—has earned him the nickname of Swifty. On this occasion, at his behest and that of his wife, Mary (a sleek and catlike sorceress, deceptively demure, who could pass for her husband’s ward), some fifty friends have gathered to mourn the departure of Fred de Cordova, who has been the producer of NBC’s “Tonight Show” since 1970; he is about to leave for Europe on two weeks’ vacation. A flimsy pretext, you may think, for a wingding; but, according to Beverly Hills protocol, anyone who quits the state of California for more than a long weekend qualifies for a farewell party, unless he is going to Las Vegas or New York, each of which counts as a colonial suburb of Los Angeles. Most of the Lazars’ guests tonight are theatre and/or movie people; e.g., Elizabeth Ashley, Tony Curtis, Gregory Peck, Sammy Cahn, Ray Stark, Richard Brooks. And even Fred de Cordova spent twenty years working for the Shuberts, Warner Brothers, and Universal before he moved into television. The senior media still take social precedence in the upper and elder reaches of these costly hills.

One of the rare exceptions to this rule is the male latecomer who now enters, lean and dapper in an indigo blazer, white slacks, and a pale-blue open-necked shirt. Apart from two months in the late nineteen-fifties (when he replaced Tom Ewell in a Broadway comedy called “The Tunnel of Love”), Johnny Carson has never been seen on the legitimate stage; and, despite a multitude of offers, he has yet to appear in his first film. He does not, in fact, much like appearing *anywhere* except (a) in the audience at the Wimbledon tennis championships, which he and his wife recently attended, (b) at his home in Bel Air, and (c) before the NBC cameras in Burbank, which act on him like an addictive and galvanic drug. Just how the drug works is not known to science, but its effect is witnessed—ninety minutes per night, four nights per week, thirty-seven weeks per year—by upward of fourteen million viewers; and it provoked the actor Robert Blake, while he was being interviewed by Carson on the “Tonight Show” in 1976, to describe him with honest adulation as “the ace comedian top-dog talk artist of the universe.” I once asked a bright young Manhattan journalist whether he could define in a single word what made television different from theatre or cinema. “For good or ill,” he said, “Carson.”





"He's energizing his base."

This pure and archetypal product of the box shuns large parties. Invitations from the Lazars are among the few he accepts. Tonight, he arrives alone (his wife, Joanna, has stopped off in New York for a few days' shopping), greets his host with the familiar smile, cordially wry, and scans the assembly, his eyes twinkling like icicles. Hard to believe, despite the pewter-colored hair, that he is fifty-one: he holds himself like the midshipman he once was, chin well tucked in, back as straight as a poker. (Carson claims to be five feet ten and a half inches in height. His pedantic insistence on that extra half inch betokens a man who suspects he looks small.) In repose, he resembles a king-sized

ventriloquist's dummy. After winking impassively at de Cordova, he threads his way across the crowded living room and out through the ceiling-high sliding windows to the deserted swimming pool. Heads discreetly turn. Even in this posh peer group, Carson has cynosure status. Arms folded, he surveys Los Angeles by night—"glittering jewel of the Southland, gossamer web of loveliness," as Abe Burrows ironically called it. A waiter brings him a soft drink. "He looks like Gatsby," a young actress whispers to me. On the face of it, this is nonsense. Fitzgerald's hero suffers from star-crossed love, his wealth has criminal origins, and he loves to give flamboyant parties. But the simile is not without elements of truth. Gatsby, like Carson, is a Midwesterner, a self-made millionaire, and a habitual loner, armored against all attempts to invade his emotional privacy. "He had come a long way to this blue lawn," Fitzgerald wrote of Gatsby—as far as Carson has come to these blue pools, from which steam rises on even the warmest nights.

"He doesn't drink now." I turn to find Lazar beside me, also peeking at the man outside. He continues, "But I remember Johnny when he was a *blackout* drunk." That was before the "Tonight Show" moved from New York to Los Angeles, in 1972. "A couple of drinks was all it took. He could get very hostile."

I point out to Lazar that Carson's family tree has deep Irish roots on the maternal side. Was there something atavistic in his drinking? Or am I glibly casting him as an ethnic ("black Irish") stereotype? At all events, I now begin to see in him—still immobile by the pool—the lineaments of a magnified leprechaun.

"Like a lot of people in our business," Lazar goes on, "he's a mixture of extreme ego and extreme cowardice." In Lazar's lexicon, a coward is one who turns down starring roles suggested to him by Lazar.

Since Carson already does what nobody has ever done better, I reply, why should he risk his

reputation by plunging into movies or TV specials?

Lazar concedes that I may be right. “But I’ll tell you something else about him,” he says, with italicized wonder. “*He’s celibate.*” He means “chaste.” “In his position, he could have all the girls he wants. It wouldn’t be difficult. But he never cheats.”

It is thirty minutes later. Carson is sitting at a table by the pool, where four or five people have joined him. He chats with impersonal affability, making no effort to dominate, charm, or amuse. I recall something that George Axelrod, the dramatist and screenwriter, once said to me about him: “Socially, he doesn’t exist. The reason is that there are no television cameras in living rooms. If human beings had little-red lights in the middle of their foreheads, Carson would be the greatest conversationalist on earth.”

One of the guests is a girl whose hobby is numerology. Taking Carson as her subject, she works out a series of arcane sums and then offers her interpretation of his character. “You are an enormously mercurial person,” she says, “who swings between very high highs and very low lows.”

His eyebrows rise, the corners of his lips turn down: this is the mock-affronted expression he presents to the camera when a baby armadillo from some local zoo declines to respond to his caresses. “This girl is great,” he says to de Cordova. “She makes me sound like a cross between Spring Byington and Adolf Hitler.”

Before long, he parts as unobtrusively as he came.

Meeting him a few days afterward, I inquire what he thought of the party. He half grins, half winces. “Torturous?” he says.

Within a month, however, I note that he is back in the same torture chamber. Characteristically, although he is surrounded by the likes of Jack Lemmon, Roger Vadim, Michael Caine, James Stewart, and Gene Kelly, he spends most of the evening locked in NBC shoptalk with Fred de Cordova. De Cordova has just returned from his European safari, which has taken him through four countries in half as many weeks. The high point of the trip, de Cordova tells me, was a visit to Munich, where his old friend Billy Wilder was making a film. This brings to mind a recent conversation I had with Wilder in this very living room. He is a master of acerbic put-downs who has little time for TV pseudostars, and when I mentioned the name of Carson I expected Wilder to dismiss him with a mordant one-liner. What he actually said surprised me. It evolved in the form of a speech. “By the simple law of survival, Carson is the best,” he said. “He enchants the invalids and the insomniacs as well as the people who have to get up at dawn. He is the Valium and the Nembutal of a nation. No matter what kind of dead-asses are on the show, he has to make them funny and exciting. He has to be their nurse and their surgeon. He has no conceit. He does his work and he comes prepared. If he’s talking to an author, he has read the book. Even his rehearsed routines sound improvised. He’s the cream of middle-class elegance, yet he’s not a mannequin. He has captivated the American bourgeoisie without ever offending the highbrows, and he has never said anything that wasn’t liberal or progressive. Every

night, in front of millions of people, he has to do the *salto mortale*—circus parlance for an aerial somersault performed on the tightrope. “What’s more”—and here Wilder leaned forward, tapping my knee for emphasis—”he does it without a net. No rewrites. No retakes. The jokes must work tonight.”

Since a good deal of what follows consists of excerpts from the journal of a Carson-watcher, I feel bound to declare a financial interest, and to admit that I have derived pecuniary benefit from his activities. During the nineteen-sixties, I was twice interviewed on the “Tonight Show.” For each appearance I received three hundred and twenty dollars, which was then the minimum payment authorized by aftra, the TV and radio performers’ union. (The figure has since risen to four hundred and twenty-seven dollars.) No guest on the show, even if he or she does a solo spot in addition to just chatting, is paid more than the basement-level fee. On two vertiginous occasions, therefore, my earning power has equalled that of Frank Sinatra, who in November, 1976, occupied the hot seat on Carson’s right for the first time. (A strange and revealing encounter, to which we’ll return.) Actually, “hot” is a misnomer. To judge from my own experience, “glacial” would be nearer the mark. The other talk shows in which I have taken part were all saunas by comparison with Carson’s. Merv Griffin is the most disarming of ego strokers; Mike Douglas runs him a close second in the ingratiating stakes; and Dick Cavett creates the illusion that *he* is *your* guest, enjoying a slightly subversive private chat. Carson, on the other hand, operates on a level of high, freewheeling, centrifugal banter that is well above the snow line. Which is not to say that he is hostile. Carson treats you with deference and genuine curiosity. But the air is chill; you are definitely on probation.

Mort Sahl, who was last seen on the “Tonight Show” in 1968, described to me not long ago what happens when a guest fails to deliver the goods. “The producer is crouching just off camera,” he said, “and he holds up a card that says, ‘Go to commercial.’ So Carson goes to a commercial, and the whole team rushes up to his desk to discuss what went wrong. It’s like a pit stop at Le Mans. Then the next guest comes in, and—I promise you this is true—she’s a girl who says straight out that she’s a practicing lesbian. The card goes up again, only this time it means, ‘Come in at once, your right rear wheel is on fire.’ So we go to another commercial. . . .” Sahl is one of the few performers who are willing to be quoted in dispraise of Carson. Except for a handful of really big names, people in show business need Carson more than he needs them; they hate to jeopardize their chance of appearing on the program that pays greater dividends in publicity than any other. “Carson’s assumption is that the audience is dumb, so you mustn’t do difficult things,” Sahl continued. “He never takes serious risks. His staff will only book people who’ll make him look artistically potent. They won’t give him anyone who’ll take him for fifteen rounds. The whole operation has got lazy.”

When an interviewer from *Playboy* asked Robert Blake whether he enjoyed doing the “Tonight Show,” he gave a vivid account of how it feels to face Carson. He began by confessing that “there’s a certain enjoyment in facing death, periodically.” He went on:

There's no experience I can describe to you that would compare with doing the "Tonight Show" when *he's* on it. It is so wired, and so hyped, and so up. It's like Broadway on opening night. There's nothing casual about it. And it's not a talk show. It's some other kind of show. I mean, he has such energy, you got like six minutes to do your thing. . . . And you better be good. Or they'll go to the commercial after two minutes. . . . They are highly professional, highly successful, highly dedicated people. . . . The producer, all the *federales* are sittin' like six feet away from that couch. And they're right on top of you, man, just watchin' ya. And when they go to a break, they get on the phone. They talk upstairs, they talk to—Christ, who knows? They talk all over the place about how this person's going over, how that person's going over. They whisper in John's ear. John gets on the phone and he talks. And you're sittin' there watchin', thinkin', What, are they gonna hang somebody? . . . And then the camera comes back again. And John will ask you somethin' else or he'll say, "Our next guest is. . ."

Carson's office Suite at Burbank is above the studio in which, between 5:30 and 7 p.m., the show is taped. Except for his secretary, the rest of the production team occupies a crowded bungalow more than two hundred yards away, outside the main building. "In the past couple of months," a receptionist in the bungalow said to me not long ago, "I've seen Mr. Carson in here just once." Thus the king keeps his distance—not merely from his colleagues but from his guests, with whom he never fraternizes either before or after the taping. Or hardly ever: he may decide, if a major celebrity is on hand, to bend the rule and grant him or her the supreme privilege of prior contact. But such occasions are rare. As Orson Welles said to me, "he's the only invisible talk host." A Carson guest of long standing, Welles continued, "Once, before the show, he put his head into my dressing room and said hello. The effect was cataclysmic. The production staff behaved the way the stagehands did at the St. James's Theatre in London twenty-five years ago when Princess Margaret came backstage to visit me. They were in awe! One of Carson's people stared at me and said, 'He actually came to *see* you!' " (Gust of Wellesian laughter.) Newcomers like me are interviewed several days in advance by one of Carson's "talent coördinators," who makes a list of the subjects on which you are likely to be eloquent or funny. This list is in Carson's head as you plunge through the rainbow-hued curtains, take a sharp right turn, and just avoid tripping over the cunningly placed step that leads up to the desk where you meet, for the first time, your host, interrogator, and judge. The studio is his native habitat. Like a character in a Harold Pinter play, or any living creature in a Robert Ardrey book, you have invaded his territory. Once you are on Carson's turf, the onus is on you to demonstrate your right to stay there; if you fail, you will decorously get the boot. You feel like the tourist who on entering the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, was greeted by a guide with the minatory remark "Remember, Signore, that here it is not the pictures that are on trial." Other talk hosts flatter their visitors with artificial guffaws; Carson laughs only when he is amused. All I recall of my first exposure to the Carson ordeal is that (a) I had come to discuss a controversial play about Winston Churchill, (b) the act I had to follow was the TV début of Tiny Tim, who sang "Tip Toe Through the Tulips," (c) Carson froze my marrow by suddenly asking my opinion not of Churchill but of General de Gaulle, and (d) from that moment on, fear robbed me of saliva, so that my lips clove to my gums, rendering coherent speech impossible. The fault was mine, for not being the sort of person who can rise to Carson's challenge—i.e., a professional performer. There is abundant evidence that comedians, when they are spurred by Carson, take off and fly as they cannot in any other company. David Brenner, who has been a regular Carson guest since 1971, speaks for many

young entertainers when he says, “Nowhere is where I’d be without the ‘Tonight Show.’ It’s a necessary ingredient. . . . TV excels in two areas—sports and Carson. The show made my career.”

October 1, 1977, marked Carson’s fifteenth anniversary as the star of a program he recently called “NBC’s answer to foreplay.” For purposes of comparison, it may be noted that Steve Allen, who was the show’s host when it was launched, in September, 1954, lasted only two years and four months. The mercurial and thin-skinned Jack (Slugger) Paar took over from Allen in the summer of 1957, after a six-month interregnum during which doomed attempts were made to turn the “Tonight Show” into a nocturnal TV magazine held together by live contributions from journalists in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Paar’s tenure of office seems in retrospect longer than it was, perhaps because of the emotional outbursts that kept his name constantly in the headlines; it actually ended after four years and eight months. On March 29, 1962, having resigned for positively the last time, he took his final bow on the program, his face a cascade of tears. “*Après le déluge, moi*” is the thought that should have passed through Carson’s mind, though there is no evidence that it did. He was then in his fifth year as m.c. of “Who Do You Trust?,” an ABC quiz show that had become, largely because of his verbal dexterity, the hottest item on daytime television. A few months before Paar’s farewell, Carson had turned down a firm offer from NBC to replace its top banana. The gulf between chatting with unknown contestants for half an hour every afternoon and matching wits with celebrities for what was then an hour and forty-five minutes every night seemed unnervingly wide, and he doubted his ability to bridge it. However, when the job had been rejected by a number of possible candidates—among them Bob Newhart, Jackie Gleason, Joey Bishop, and Groucho Marx—either because they wanted too much money or because they were chary of following Paar, NBC came back in desperation to Carson. This time, he asked for two weeks to consider the proposition. Coolly, he weighed the size of his talent against the size of his ambition, decided that the scales approximately balanced, and told NBC that his answer was yes. The only snag was that his contract with ABC did not run out until September. Undismayed, NBC agreed to keep the “Tonight Show” supplied with guest hosts (they included Merv Griffin, Mort Sahl, and Groucho) throughout the summer. On October 1, 1962, Carson took command. His announcer and second banana, transplanted from “Who Do You Trust?,” was Ed McMahon, who was already in great demand as the owner of the most robust and contagious laugh in television. The guests were Rudy Vallée, Tony Bennett, Mel Brooks (then a mere comedy writer, though he nowadays insists that he gave a dazzling impersonation of Fred Astaire on that October evening), and Joan Crawford.

Any qualms that NBC may have had about its new acquisition were soon allayed. Star performers lined up to appear with Carson. Even his fellow comedians, a notoriously paranoid species, found that working with him was a stimulus rather than a threat. “He loves it when you score,” Woody Allen said, “and he’s witty enough to score himself.” Mel Brooks has explained to me, “From the word go, Carson could tell when you’d hit comic gold, and he’d help you to mine it. He always knew pay dirt when he

saw it. The guys on other talk shows didn't. There were one or two dissenters. Jackie Mason enjoyed his first session with Carson but reported that during his second appearance he was treated with "undisguised alienation and contempt," and went on to say, "I'd never go back again, even if he asked me." The press reaction to Carson was enthusiastic, except for a blast of puritanism from John Horn of the *Herald Tribune*, who wrote of Carson, "He exhibits all the charm of a snickering small boy scribbling graffiti on a public wall." He added, in one of those phrases that return to haunt critics in their declining years, that Carson had "no apparent gift for the performing arts."

With the public, Carson's triumph was immediate and nonpareil. Under the Paar regime, the show had very seldom been seen by more than seven and a half million viewers. (One such occasion was March 7, 1960, when the unruly star came back to his post after walking out in a fit of pique, brought on by the network's decision to delete a mildly scatological joke and protracted for several well-publicized weeks.) Under Carson, the program *averaged* seven million four hundred and fifty-eight thousand viewers per night during its first six months. The comparable figure for the same period in 1971-72 was eleven million four hundred and forty-one thousand, and it is currently being seen by seventeen million three hundred thousand. Over fifteen years, therefore, Carson has more than doubled his audience—a feat that, in its blend of staying power and mounting popularity, is without precedent in the history of television. (Between April and September, the numbers dip, but this reflects a seasonal pattern by which all TV shows are affected. A top NBC executive explained to me, with heartless candor, "People who can afford vacations go away in the summer. It's only the poor people who watch us all the year round.") By network standards, the ultimate test is not so much the size of the audience as the share it represents of the total viewing public in the show's time slot. Here, after some early ups and downs, the Carson trend has been consistently upward; for example, from twenty-eight per cent in the third quarter of 1976 to thirty per cent in the second quarter of 1977. Moreover, his percentage seems to rise with the temperature; for example, in the four weeks that ended on July 15, 1977—a period during which guest hosts frequently stood in for Carson, whose absence from the show normally cuts the audience by about one-sixth—NBC chalked up thirty-two per cent of the late-night viewers, against twenty-four per cent registered by CBS and twenty-three per cent by ABC. These, of course, are national figures. The happiness of Fred de Cordova, as producer, is incomplete unless Carson not only leads the field nationwide but beats the combined opposition (ABC plus CBS) in the big cities, especially New York and Los Angeles. He is seldom unhappy for long. On peak nights, when Carson rakes in a percentage of fifty or more from the key urban centers, de Cordova is said to emit an unearthly glow, visible clear across the Burbank parking lot.

For his first year on the show, making five appearances per week, Carson was paid just over a hundred thousand dollars. His present contract (the latest of many), which comes into force this spring, guarantees him an annual salary of two and a half million dollars. For twenty-five weeks of the year, his performances, which were long since reduced from five to four, will further dwindle, to three; and



his vacation period will stay at fifteen weeks—its duration under several previous contracts. These details, which were announced by NBC last December, leave no doubt that Carson qualifies for admission to what the late Lucius Beebe called “the mink-dustcloth set.” Whether they tell the whole story is less certain. Carson’s earlier agreements with NBC contained clauses that both parties were forbidden to disclose, reportedly relating to such additional rewards as large holdings in RCA stock and a million-dollar life-insurance policy at the network’s expense. Concerning Carson’s total earnings, I cannot do better than quote from one of his employers, who told me, months before the new contract was signed, “If someone were to say in print that Johnny takes home around four million a year, I doubt whether anyone at NBC would feel an overpowering urge to issue a statement denying it.” And even this figure excludes the vast amounts he makes from appearances at resort centers—preëminently Las Vegas—and from Johnny Carson Apparel, Inc., a thriving menswear business, founded in 1970, whose products he models on the show. David Tebet, the senior vice-president of NBC, who is revered in the trade as a finder, keeper, and cosseter of talent, and is described in his publicity handout as being “solely in charge of the Johnny Carson show,” said to me recently, “For the past four or five years, Johnny has made more money per annum than any other television performer ever has. And he has also made more money per *week* than anyone else—except, maybe, for a very rare case like Sinatra, where you can’t be sure, because Sinatra will sell you a special through his own company and you don’t know how much he’s personally taking out of the deal.” Despite the high cost of Carson, he remains a bargain. The network’s yearly income from the show is at present between fifty and sixty million dollars. “As a money-maker,” de Cordova says, “there’s nothing in television close to it.” In 1975, a sixty-second commercial on the program cost twenty-six thousand dollars. In 1977, that sum had risen by half.

I dwell on these statistics because they are unique in show business. Yet there is a weird disproportion between the facts and figures of Carson’s success and the kind of fame he enjoys. To illustrate what I mean, let me cite a few analogies. Star tennis players are renowned in every country on earth outside China, and the same is true of top heavyweight boxers. (A probable exception in the latter category is Muhammad Ali, who must surely be known inside China as well.) At least fifty living cricketers are household names throughout the United Kingdom, the West Indies, Australia, South Africa, India, and Pakistan. Movie stars and pop singers command international celebrity; and *Kojak*, *Starsky, Hutch*, *Columbo*, and dozens more are acclaimed (or, at any rate, recognized) wherever the TV programs that bear their names are bought and transmitted. Outside North America, by contrast, Johnny Carson is a nonentity: the general public has never heard of him. The reason for his obscurity is that the job at which he excels is virtually unexportable. (O. J. Simpson is a parallel case, illustrious at home and *nada* abroad; and if the empire of baseball had not reached out and annexed Japan, Reggie Jackson would be in the same plight.) The TV talk show as it is practiced by Carson is topical in subject matter and local in appeal. To watch it is like dropping in on a nightly family party, a

conversational serial, full of private jokes, in which a relatively small and regularly rotated cast of characters, drawn mainly from show business, turn up to air their egos, but which has absolutely no plot. Sometimes the visitors sing. Sometimes, though less often nowadays than in the past, they are people of such worldwide distinction that their slightest hiccup is riveting. But otherwise most of what happens on the show would be incomprehensible or irrelevant to foreign audiences, even if they were English-speaking. This drives yet another nail into the coffin lid, already well hammered down, of Marshall McLuhan's theory that TV has transformed the world into a global village. (Radio is, as it has long been, the only medium that gives us immediate access to what the rest of the planet is doing and thinking, simply because every country of any size operates a foreign-language service.) Only for such events as moon landings and Olympiads does TV provide live coverage that spans the globe. The rest of the time, it is obstinately provincial, addressing itself to a village no bigger than a nation. Carson, in his own way, is what Gertrude Stein called Ezra Pound—a village explainer.

He has spent almost all his life confined, like his fame, to his country of origin. He served in the Navy for three years, beginning in 1943, and was shipped as far west as Guam. Thereafter, his travels abroad indicate no overwhelming curiosity about the world outside his homeland. Apart from brief vacations in Mexico, and a flying visit to London in 1961, when he appeared in a TV special starring Paul Anka, he has left the United States only on three trips: in 1975, to the ultrasmart Hôtel du Cap in Antibes (at the instigation of his wife, Joanna, who had been there before); in 1976, to see the tennis at Wimbledon; and in 1977, when he threw caution to the winds and went to both Wimbledon *and* the Hôtel du Cap. He was recognized in neither place, except by a handful of fellow-Americans. This, of course, was the purpose of the exercise. Carson goes to foreign parts for the solace of anonymity. But enough is enough: he is soon impatient to return to the cavernous Burbank Studio, where his personality burgeons in high definition and where he publicly discloses as much of his private self as he has ever revealed to anyone, except (I assume, though even here I would not care to bet) his parents, siblings, sons, and wives.

“Johnny Carson on TV,” one of his colleagues confided to me, “is the visible eighth of an iceberg called Johnny Carson.” The remark took me back to something that Carson said of himself ten years ago, when, in the course of a question-and-answer session with viewers, he was asked, “What made you a star?” He replied, “I started out in a gaseous state, and then I cooled.” Meeting him tête-à-tête is, as we shall see later, a curious experience. In 1966, writing for *Look*, Betty Rollin described Carson off camera as “testy, defensive, preoccupied, withdrawn, and wondrously inept and uncomfortable with people.” Nowadays, his off-camera manner is friendly and impeccably diplomatic. Even so, you get the impression that you are addressing an elaborately wired security system. If the conversation edges toward areas in which he feels ill at ease or unwilling to commit himself, burglar alarms are triggered off, defensive reflexes rise around him like an invisible stockade, and you hear the distant baying of guard dogs. In addition to his childhood, his private life, and his income, these no-trespassing zones

include all subjects of political controversy, any form of sexual behavior uncountenanced by the law, and such matters of social concern as abortion and the legalization of marijuana. His smile as he steers you away from forbidden territory is genial and unfading. It is only fair to remember that he does not pretend to be a pundit, employed to express his own opinions; rather, he is a professional explorer of other people's egos. In a magazine article that was published with annotations by Carson, Fred de Cordova wrote, "He's reluctant to talk much about himself because he is essentially a private person." To this Carson added a marginal gloss, intended as a gag, that had an eerie ring of truth: "I will not even talk to myself without an appointment." He has asked all the questions and knows all the evasive, equivocal answers. When he first signed to appear on the "Tonight Show," he was quizzed by the press so relentlessly that he refused after a while to submit to further interrogation. Instead, he issued a list of replies that journalists could append to any questions of their choice:

1. Yes, I did.
2. Not a bit of truth in that rumor.
3. Only twice in my life, both times on Saturday.
4. I can do either, but I prefer the first.
5. No. Kumquats.
6. I can't answer that question.
7. Toads and tarantulas.
8. Turkestan, Denmark, Chile, and the Komandorskie Islands.
9. As often as possible, but I'm not very good at it yet. I need much more practice.
10. It happened to some old friends of mine, and it's a story I'll never forget.

**E**xtract from Carson-watching journal, January, 1976:

There is such a thing as the pleasure of the expected. Opening routine of "Tonight Show" provides it; millions would feel cheated if the ceremony were changed. The close shot of Big Ed McMahon as his unctuous baritone takes off on its steeply ascending glissando "Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!" Stagehands create gap in curtain. Carson enters in his ritual Apparel, style of which is Casual Square. Typical outfit: checked sports coat with two vents, tan trousers, pale-blue shirt with neat but ungaudy tie. Not for him the bluejeaned, open-necked, safari-jacketed Hollywood ensemble: that would be too Casual, too Californian. On the other hand, no dark suits with vests: that would be too Square, too Eastern Seaboard. Carson must reflect what de Cordova possessively calls "our bread-basket belt"—the Midwest, which bore him (on October 23, 1925, in Corning, Iowa), and which he must never bore.

On his lips as he walks toward applauding audience is the only unassuming smirk in show business. He halts and swivels to the right (upper part of body turning as rigid vertical unit, like that of man in plaster cast) to acknowledge Big Ed's traditional act of obeisance, a quasi-Hindu bow with fingertips reverently joined. Then the leftward rotation, to accept homage from Doc Severinsen—lead trumpet and musical director, hieratically clad in something skintight and ragingly vulgar—which takes more bizarrely Oriental form: the head humbly bowed while the hands orbit each other. Music stops; applause persists. In no hurry, Carson lets it ride, facially responding to every nuance of

audience behavior; e.g., shouts of greeting, cries of “Hi-yo!” When the ecstasy subsides, the exordium is over, and Carson begins the monologue, or address to the faithful, which must contain (according to one of his writers) between sixteen and twenty-two surefire jokes.

Tone of monologue is skeptical, tongue-in-cheek, ironic. Manner: totally relaxed, hitting bull’s-eyes without seeming to take aim, TV’s embodiment of “Zen in the Art of Archery.” In words uttered to me by the late screenwriter Nunnally Johnson, “Carson has a delivery like a Winchester rifle.” Theme: implicitly liberal, but careful to avoid the stigma of leftism. The unexpected impromptus with which he rescues himself from gags that bomb, thereby plucking triumph from disaster, are also part of the expected pleasure. “When it comes to saving a bad line, he is the master”—to quote a tribute paid in my presence by George Burns. Carson registers a gag’s impact with instant, seismographical finesse. If the laugh is five per cent less than he counted on, he notes the failure and reacts to it (“Did they clear the hall? Did they have a drill?”) before any critic could, usually garnering a double-strength guffaw as reward. Whatever spoils a line—ambiguous phrasing, botched timing, faulty enunciation—he is the first to expose it. Nobody spots flaws in his own work more swiftly than Carson, or capitalizes on them more effectively. Query: Is this becoming a dangerous expertise? In other words, out from under how many collapsed jokes can you successfully climb?

This evening’s main attraction is Don (The Enforcer) Rickles, not so much the court jester of TV as the court hit man. Carson can cope superbly with garrulous guests who tell interminable stories (whether ponderously, owing to drink or downers, or manically, owing to uppers or illicit inhalations). Instead of quickly changing the subject, as many hosts would, he slaughters the offenders with pure politesse. Often, he will give them enough rope to hang themselves, allowing them to ramble on while he affects attentive interest. Now and then, however, he will let the camera catch him in the act of half-stifling a yawn, or raising a baffled eyebrow, or aiming straight at the lens a stare of frozen, I-think-I-am-going-mad incredulity. He prevents us from being bored by making his own boredom funny—a daring feat of comic one-upmanship. The way in which he uses the camera as a silent conspirator is probably Carson’s most original contribution to TV technique. There is a lens permanently trained on him alone—a private pipeline through which he transmits visual asides directly to the viewer, who thus becomes his flattered accomplice. Once, talking to me on a somewhat tattered theme, the difference between stage and screen acting, Paul Newman made a remark that seemed obvious at the time but grows in wisdom the more I ponder it. “On the stage, you have to seek the focus of the audience,” he said. “In movies, it’s given to you by the camera.” Among the marks of a star on television, as in the cinema, is his or her ability to grasp this truth and act on it. Seek, and you shall not find; grab, and it shall not be given unto you. Carson learned these rules early and is now their master practitioner.

Even the best-planned talk shows, however, run into doldrums; e.g., the guest who suffers from incontinent sycophancy, or whose third marriage has brought into his life a new sense of wonder plus three gratingly cute anecdotes about the joys of paternity, or who is a British comedian on his first,

tongue-tied trip to the States, or whose conversational range is confined to plugging an upcoming appearance at Lake Tahoe. On such occasions, the ideal solution is: Bring on Rickles, king of icebreakers, whose chosen weapon is the verbal hand grenade. Rickles is an unrivalled catalyst (though I can already hear him roaring, “What do you mean, I’m a catalyst? I’m a Jew!”). Squatly built, rather less bald than Mussolini, his bulbous face running the gamut from jovial contempt to outright nausea, he looks like an extra in a crowd scene by Hieronymus Bosch. No one is immune from his misanthropy; he exudes his venom at host and guests alike. In a medium ruled by the censorious Superego, Rickles is the unchained Id. At his best, he breaks through the bad-taste barrier into a world of sheer outrage where no forbidden thought goes unspoken and where everything spoken is anarchically liberating. More deftly than anyone else, Carson knows how to play matador to Rickles’ bull, inciting him to charge, and sometimes getting gored himself. At one point during this program, Rickles interrupts a question from Carson with an authentic conversation-stopper. “Your left eye is dancing!” he bellows, leaning forward and pointing a stubby finger. “That means you’re self-conscious. Ever since you stopped drinking, your left eye dances.” Even Carson is momentarily silenced. (I did not fully understand why until, at a subsequent meeting, Carson told me that there was one symptom by which he could infallibly recognize a guest who was on the brink of collapse, whether from fear, stimulants, or physical exhaustion. He called it “the dancing-eyeball syndrome.” A famous example from the early nineteen-sixties: Peter O’Toole appeared on the show after forty-eight sleepless hours, spent filming and flying, and could not utter a coherent sentence. Carson ushered him offstage during the first commercial. “The moment he sat down, I could see his eyeballs were twitching,” Carson said to me. “I recognized the syndrome at once. He was going to bomb.”)

**T**estimony of a Carson colleague:

My witness is Pat McCormick, who has been supplying Carson with material on and off for eighteen years and was a staff writer on the show from 1972 to 1977. Regarded as one of the most inventive gagmen in the business, he has also worked for Red Skelton, Danny Kaye, and others of note. McCormick, at forty-seven, is a burly, diffident man with hair of many colors: a reddish thatch on top, a gray mustache, and patches of various intermediate tints sprouting elsewhere on his head and face. Suitably resprayed, he might resemble a cross between Teddy Roosevelt and Zero Mostel. I have it on Ed McMahon’s authority that McCormick takes the occasional drink, and that he once turned up at a script conference declaring, “I have lost my car, but I have tire marks on my hands.” He gives me his account of a typical day on the “Tonight Show.” “The writers—there are usually five of us—arrive at the studio around 9:30 a.m.,” he says. “We’ve read the morning papers and the latest magazines. Once a week, we all get together for an ideas meeting, but most days we work separately, starting out with the monologue. I tend to specialize in fairly weird, uninhibited stuff. Johnny enjoys that kind of thing, and I just let it pour out. Like a line I came up with not long ago: ‘If you want to clear your system out, sit on a piece of cheese and swallow a mouse.’ Johnny finds his own ways of handling bum

gags. When he's in a bad situation, I always wonder how the hell he'll get out of it, and he always surprises me."

Always? I remind McCormick of an occasion two days earlier, when a series of jokes had died like flies, and Carson had got a situation-saving laugh by remarking, "I now believe in reincarnation. Tonight's monologue is going to come back as a dog." That sounded to me like *echt* McCormick.

With a blush matching some of his hair, he admits to authorship of the line. He continues, "All the monologue material has to be on Johnny's desk by three o'clock. He makes the final selection himself. One of his rules is: Never tell three jokes running on the same subject. And, of course, he adds ideas of his own. He's a darned good comedy writer, you know."

One sometimes detects a vindictive glint in Carson's eye when a number of gags sink without risible trace, but McCormick assures me that this is all part of the act and causes no outbreaks of cold sweat among the writing team. "After the monologue," he goes on, "we work on the desk spot with Ed McMahon, which comes next in the show, or on sketches that need polishing, or on material for one of Johnny's characters."

Accustomed to thinking of Carson the host, we forget the range of Carson the actor-comedian. His current incarnations include the talkative crone Aunt Blabby (Whistler's mother on speed); the bungling turbaned clairvoyant named Carnac the Magnificent; Art Fern, described by McCormick as "the matinee-movie m.c. with patent-leather hair who'll sell *anything*;" and—a newer acquisition—Floyd Turbo, the man in the red shirt who speaks for the silent majority, rebutting liberal editorials with a vehemence perceptibly impaired by his inability to read from a TelePrompTer at more than dictation speed. Fans will recall Turbo's halting diatribe against the anti-gun lobby: "If God didn't want man to hunt, he wouldn't have given us plaid shirts. . . . I only kill in self-defense. What would *you* do if a rabbit pulled a knife on you? . . . Always remember: you can get more with a smile and a gun than you can with just a smile."

Everything for the evening's show must be rehearsed and ready for taping by five-thirty, apart from the central, imponderable element, on which all else depends: Carson's handling of the guests. Briefed by his aides, he knows the visitors' backgrounds, recent achievements, and immediate plans, and during the commercials he will listen to tactical suggestions from confreres like Fred de Cordova; but when the tape is running, he is the field commander, and his intuitions dictate the course of events. As he awaits his entrance cue, he is entitled to reflect, like Henry V on a more earthshaking occasion, "The day, my friends, and all things stay for me." McCormick, who now and then appears as a guest on the show, has this to say of Carson the interviewer: "He leans right in and goes with you, instead of leaning back and worrying about what the viewers are thinking. He never patronizes you or shows off at your expense. If you're getting a few pockets of laughter from the studio audience, he'll encourage you and feed you. He's an ideal straight man as well as a first-rate comedian, and that's a unique combination. Above all, there's a strand of his personality that is quite wild. He can do good bread-

and-butter comedy any day of the week—like his Vegas routines or his banquet speeches—but he has this crazy streak that keeps coming through on the show, and when it does it’s infectious. You feel anything could happen.”

Example of Carson when the spirit of pure, eccentric play descends upon him and he obeys its bidding, wherever it may lead: During the monologue on May 11, 1977, he finds, as sometimes happens, that certain words are emerging from his mouth in slightly garbled form. He wrinkles his brow in mock alarm, shrugs, and presses on to the next sentence: “*Yetserday*, U.S. Steel announced. . .” He pauses, realizing what he has said, turns quizzically to McMahon, and observes, “ ‘Yesterday’ is not a hard word to say.” Facing the camera again, he goes on, “Yesterday—all my troubles seemed so far away . . .” Only now he is *singing*—singing, unaccompanied, the celebrated standard by John Lennon and Paul McCartney: “Now it looks as though they’re here to stay. Oh, I believe in yesterday.” By this time, the band, which was clearly taken by surprise, has begun to join in, at first raggedly but soon improvising a respectable accompaniment. Warming to his berserk task, Carson does not stop until he has reached the end of the chorus. He resumes the monologue: “Now, what was I talking about? Oh, yes. Yesterday . . .” But no sooner has the word passed his lips than Doc’s combo, determined not to let him off the hook, strikes up the melody again. Undaunted, Carson plunges into the second chorus. Having completed it, he silences the musicians with a karate chop. There is loud applause, followed by an extended pause. Where can he go from here? Cautiously feeling his way, he continues, “*about twelve hours ago*, U.S. Steel announced . . .” And successfully finishes the gag. Everyone in the studio is laughing, not so much at the joke as at the sight of Carson on the wing. Grinning, he addresses McMahon.

Carson: That’s what makes this job what it is.

McMahon: What is it?

Carson: (*frowning, genuinely puzzled*): I don’t know.

McCormick on Carson the private man: “Don’t believe those iceberg stories. Once, when I was going through a bad divorce and feeling pretty low, I was eating alone in a restaurant and Johnny came in with a bunch of people. I’m not one of his intimate friends, but as soon as he saw me he left his guests and sat with me for more than half an hour, giving me all kinds of comfort and advice.”

**F**urther notes of a Carson watcher (random samplings from October and November, 1976):

Where other performers go home to relax after the show, Carson goes to the show to relax. The studio is his den, his living space—the equivalent in the show-business world of an exclusive salon in the world of literature. He instantly reacts to any untoward off-camera occurrence—a script inadvertently dropped, a guitar string accidentally plucked, a sneeze from a far corner of the room—as most of us would react to comparably abnormal events in the privacy of our homes. *Mutatis* very much *mutandis*, the show could be seen as a TV version of “The Conning Tower,” Franklin P. Adams’ famous column in the *Tribune*, which was launched in 1914 and consisted mainly of anecdotes,

aphorisms, and verses contributed by F.P.A.'s friends and correspondents. "The Conning Tower," like the "Tonight Show," was a testing ground for new talents, and many of the people it introduced to the public went on to become celebrities.

October 1st: Traditional two-hour retrospective to mark the fourteenth anniversary of Carson's enthronement as NBC's emperor of causerie. Choice of material is limited to the period since 1970, for, with self-destructive improvidence, the company erased all the earlier Carson tapes, including Barbra Streisand's first appearance as his guest and Judy Garland's last. Host's debonair entry is hailed with fifty-second ovation, which sounds unforced. I note the digital mannerisms (befitting one who began his career as a conjurer) that he uses to hold our attention during his patter. The right index finger is particularly active, now stabbing downward as if pressing computer buttons, now rising to flick at his ear, to tickle or scratch one side of his nose: constantly in motion, never letting our eyes wander. Thus he stresses and punctuates the gags, backed always by Big Ed's antiphonal laughter.

Well-loved bits are rerun. The portly comic Dom DeLuise attempts a feat of legerdemain in which three eggs are at risk, and carries it off without breakage. But the sight of unbroken eggs—and others on standby—provokes Carson to a spell of riot. He tosses the original trio at DeLuise, who adroitly juggles with them and throws them back; Carson retaliates with more eggs, aiming a few at McMahon for good measure. Before long, in classic slapstick style, he has expressionlessly cracked an egg over DeLuise's head and dropped another inside the front of his trousers, smashing it as it falls with a kindly pat on the belly. "You're insane!" the victim cries. "You guys are bananas!" He gives Carson the same treatment; McMahon joins in; and by the end the floor and the three combatants are awash with what Falstaff would have called "pullet-sperm." Looking back on the clip, Carson puckishly observes, "There's something about eggs. I went ape." The whole impromptu outburst would not have been funny if it had been initiated by someone like Buddy Hackett; it worked because of its incongruity with Carson's persona—that of a well-nurtured Midwestern lad, playful but not vulgar. ("Even though he's over fifty," Fred de Cordova once said to me, "there's a Peck's Bad Boy quality that works for Johnny, never against him.")

Other oddities from the program's past: Carson diving onto a mattress from a height of twenty feet; splitting a block of wood with his head on instructions from a karate champion; tangling with a sumo wrestler; cuddling a cheetah cub; permitting a tarantula to crawl up his sleeve. We also see Carson confronted by guests with peculiar skills—the bird mimic whose big items are the mallard in distress and the cry of the loon, for instance, and the obsessive specialist whose act (one of the most memorable stunts ever recorded in a single take) consists of seven thousand dominoes arranged on end in a convoluted, interwoven pattern, involving ramps and tunnels, so that the first, when it is pushed, sets off a chain reaction that fells the remaining six thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine, which spell out—among other things—the DNA symbol and Carson's name. In addition, we get the parody of "Dragnet," that triumph of alliterative tongue-twisting in which Jack Webb, investigating the theft of a



school bell, somberly elicits from Carson the information that kleptomaniac Claude Cooper copped the clean copper clappers kept in the clothes closet. Best of all are the snippets from Carson's interviews with people aged ninety and upward, whom he addresses as exact equals, with care and without condescension, never patronizing them, and never afraid to laugh when they get a sentence back to front or forget the punch line of a joke; one such encounter is with a woman of a hundred and three years, who is still a licensed driver. (Paul Morrissey, the movie director, who is watching the program with me, remarks, "Nobody else on TV treats old people with the perfect tact and affection of Carson. He must have a very loving relationship with his parents.") An NBC spokesman chips in with a resounding but meretricious statistic. The Carson show, he says, has already been seen by more than four times the population of our planet. This presumably means that one person who has watched the program a hundred times counts as a hundred people. Either that or NBC is laying claim to extraterrestrial viewers. The ratings war being what it is, anything is possible.

November 12th: After days of spot announcements and years of coaxing by the network, Frank Sinatra makes his debut on the show. Received like visiting royalty, he gives the impression of swaggering even when seated. For once, the host seems uneasy, overawed, too ready to laugh. Don Rickles is hurried on unannounced to dissipate the atmosphere of obsequiousness, which he does by talking to the singer like Mafia subaltern reporting to Godfather; at least this is better than treating him as God. (I get memory flash of cable sent to me by Gore Vidal when he agreed to accept my younger daughter as godchild: "Always a godfather, never a god." For many people in entertainment business, Sinatra is both.) When conversation again falters, Rickles declares to world at large, "I'm a Jew, and he's an Italian, and *here*"—he thrusts at Carson a face contorted with distaste, like diner finding insect in soup—"here we have . . . *what?*" Rickles wraps up interview by saying that he truly admires Sinatra, because "he stimulates excitement, he stimulates our industry, and"—fixing Carson with glare of malign relish—"he . . . *makes . . . you . . . nervous.*"

Not long afterward, Carson had his revenge. While acting as guest host on the show, Rickles broke the cigarette box on Carson's desk by striking it with his clenched fist when a gag fell flat. The next night, Carson returned. As soon as he sat down, he noticed the damage. "That's an heirloom," he said. "I've had it for nine years." Informed that Rickles was the culprit, he picked up the debris and rose, telling one of the cameras to follow him. (None of this was rehearsed.) He then left the "Tonight Show" studio, crossed the corridor outside, and, ignoring the red warning lights, marched into the studio opposite, where Rickles was at that moment halfway through taping the next episode of his comedy series "CPO Sharkey." Walking straight into the middle of a shot, Carson held out his splintered treasure to Rickles and sternly demanded both restitution and an apology. The Enforcer was flabbergasted, as were his supporting cast, his producer, and his director. Carson was impenitent. "I really shook him," he said to me later, with quiet satisfaction. "He was speechless."

Testimony from the two NBC associates who are closest to Carson:

These are Fred de Cordova and Ed McMahon De Cordova, who has been Carson's producer for the past seven years, talks to me in the "Tonight Show" bungalow at Burbank. He is a large, looming, beaming man with horn-rimmed glasses, an Acapulcan tan, and an engulfing handshake that is a contract in itself, complete with small print and an option for renewal on both sides. Now in his mid-sixties, he looks like a cartoon of a West Coast producer in his early fifties. His professional record, dating back to 1933, is exceptional: Ten years in theatre with the Shubert organization, followed by a decade making movies in Hollywood. Thence into TV, where he worked (directing and/or producing) with Burns and Allen, George Gobel, Jack Benny, and the Smothers Brothers. In the magazine piece he wrote which appeared with notations by Carson, he said he now had "the last great job in show business," because the Carson program was "spontaneous" and "instantaneous." He explained that it wasn't technically live, in that taping preceded transmission; nevertheless, "practically speaking, we are the only continuing live show left." (For accuracy's sake, this phrase should be amended to read, "the only continuing nationwide nighttime quasi-live talk show left, apart from Merv Griffin's.") He went on to compare the program to a ballgame, played "in front of a jammed grandstand night after night." "To me," Carson noted in the margin, "it's like a salmon going up the Columbia River." Trying to define Carson's appeal, de Cordova wrote, "He's somebody's son, somebody's husband, somebody's father. He combines them all." Which sounds very impressive until you reflect that it applies to most of the adult male population. Carson circled this passage and made it slightly narrower in scope by adding to the first sentence, "and several people's ex-husband." De Cordova's most telling point, at which no one could cavil, came later in the article. "We have no laugh track," he said. "We're naked." In an age when canned hilarity has all but usurped the viewer's right to an autonomous sense of humor, it is reassuring to read a statement like that.

On the wall behind de Cordova's desk hangs a chart showing the lineup of guests for weeks, and even months, ahead. Perennial absentees, long sought, never snared, include Elton John and Robert Redford. When de Cordova is asked why the list is so sparsely dotted with people of much intellectual firepower, he reacts with bewilderment: "That just isn't true. We've had some of the finest minds I know—Carl Sagan, Paul Ehrlich, Margaret Mead, Gore Vidal, Shana Alexander, Madalyn Murray O'Hair." This odd aggregation of names sprang from the lips of many other "Tonight Show" employees to whom I put that question, almost as if they were contractually bound to commit it to memory. Nobody, however, denied that there have been few latter-day guests with the political weight of Nelson Rockefeller, Hubert Humphrey, and John and Robert Kennedy, all of whom appeared with Carson in his earlier years. De Cordova continues, "I've heard it said that Johnny is intimidated by witty, intellectual women. Well, just who are these women? Apart from people like Shana, who've had a lot of TV experience, they tend to freeze on camera. We've so often been fooled by witty cocktail talkers who simply didn't transfer to television." Carson, he points out, is no numbskull; he reads

extensively, with special emphasis on politics, and has more than an amateur knowledge of astronomy. Also of sports: “Ike Nastase, Chris Evert, and Dwight Stones have all been very effective guests.” But there are, he admits, certain categories of people who are unlikely to receive the summons to Burbank: “We don’t have an official blacklist, but Johnny wouldn’t have Linda Lovelace on the show, for example. Or anyone mixed up in a sexual scandal, like Elizabeth Ray. And no criminals, except reformed criminals—we turned down Clifford Irving, the guy who forged the Howard Hughes memoirs. Johnny prefers to look for non-celebrities who’ll make human-interest stories. We subscribe to fifty-seven newspapers from small towns and cities all over the country, and that’s where we find some of our best material.” He goes on to say, “In the monologue, Johnny will attack malfeasance, illiberal behavior, Constitutional abuses. But then compassion sets in. He was the first person to *stop* doing anti-Nixon jokes.” (Ten years ago, Henry Morgan said of Carson, “He believes that justice is some kind of entity that is palpable. He talks about it as if he were talking about a chair.”) Does the monologue suffer from network censorship? “The problem doesn’t come up, because Johnny has an in-built sense of what his audience will take,” de Cordova says. “He’s the best self-editor I’ve ever known.” This, as we shall see, was a somewhat disingenuous reply.

Lunch with the bulky, eternally clubbable McMahon in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Born in Detroit, Big Ed is now in his mid-fifties, and has worked with Carson for two decades, including five years as his announcer on “Who Do You Trust?” NBC gives him eight weeks’ annual vacation with full pay, and he makes a great deal of money on the side from night-club appearances, real-estate investments, and commercials for a variety of products, chief among them beer and dog food. Even so, he is well aware that, as he says to me, “the ‘Tonight Show’ is my staple diet, my meat and potatoes—I’m realistic enough to know that everything else stems from that.” In 1972, when the show moved from New York to Los Angeles, McMahon left his wife and four children, after twenty-seven years of marriage, to go with it. (Divorce followed soon afterward; McMahon remarried in 1976.) He has known his place, and kept to it without visible resentment, since 1965, when the notorious Incident of the Insect Repellent showed him exactly where he stood. “Johnny was demonstrating an anti-mosquito spray,” he says, “and just before using it he said he’d heard that mosquitoes only went for really passionate people. Acting on instinct, I stuck out my arm and slapped it. It wrecked Johnny’s gag, and I had to apologize to him during the next break. That taught me never to go where he’s going. I have to get my comedy in other areas. Before the show, I do the audience warmup, and even there I have to avoid any topical material he might be using in the monologue.”

This being a show day, McMahon eats and drinks frugally (cold cuts and beer). Both he and Carson have drastically reduced their alcoholic intake over the past few years. On camera, Carson sips coffee and cream (no sugar), and McMahon makes do with iced tea. McMahon denies the rumor that Carson has become anti-social because of his abstinence: “If it’s a big affair, you’ll maybe find him in a corner, talking one to one, but in a small group he can be the life of the party, doing tricks, killing

everybody.” One of the unauthorized biographies of Carson contains a story about a surprise birthday party to which his second wife, Joanne, invited all his close friends. “There were about eight people there,” an unnamed guest is quoted as saying, “and I think it was a shock to all of us.” Pooh-poohing this yarn, McMahon counters by telling me about a surprise party he gave for Carson in 1962: “I built it up by pretending it was being held in his honor by *TV Guide* and he really had to go. He finally gave in. I said I’d drive him down there, and he began bitching as soon as he got in the car. So I suggested stopping off at my place for a preliminary drink, and he agreed. I’d arranged for the other cars to be parked out of sight, in case he recognized them. What happened was that he walked straight into the arms of about fifty friends and relatives who’d come from all over to see him. He had tears in his eyes. That was the first time I saw him touched.”

Professionally, McMahon most enjoys the tête-à-tête at Carson’s desk which follows the monologue: “Sometimes he develops a real resistance to bringing out the first guest. I see something goofy in his eyes. It means that he wants us to go on rapping together, so we play back and forth, getting wilder and wilder, until maybe the guest has gone home and it’s time for the first commercial.”

I read to him some remarks made by the columnist Rex Reed, who described Carson as “the most over-rated amateur since Evelyn and her magic violin” and continued, “The most annoying thing about Carson is his unwillingness to swing, to trust himself or his guests. . . . He never looks at you; he’s too busy (1) watching the audience to see if they are responding, and (2) searching the face of his producer for reassurance.”

McMahon finds these comments inexplicable. “Johnny can get absolutely spellbound by his guests,” he says. “You’ll see him lean his chin on his hand and really drink them in. And as for that stuff about not swinging—did the guy ever watch him with Tony Randall or Buck Henry or Orson Bean? He’s always going off into unplanned areas and uncharted places. Other people have clipboards full of questions and use them like crutches. Johnny never uses any. And he loves meeting new comics and feeding them lines, the way he did with Steve Martin and Rodney Dangerfield when hardly anyone had heard of them. Naturally, he likes to get laughs himself. That’s part of the job. A few nights ago, Tony Bennett was on the show, talking about his childhood and how his family hoped he’d achieve fabulous things when he grew up. Johnny listened for a long while and then said, quite deadpan, ‘My parents wanted me to be a sniper.’ Another time, he asked Fernando Lamas why he’d gone into movies, and Lamas said, ‘Because it was a great way to meet broads.’ I loved Johnny’s comeback. He just nodded and said, ‘Nietzsche couldn’t have put it more succinctly.’ And, of course, there are the famous ad-libs that everyone remembers, like when Mr. Universe was telling him how important it was to keep fit—‘Don’t forget, Mr. Carson, your body is the only home you’ll ever have’—and Johnny said, ‘Yes, my home *is* pretty messy. But I have a woman who comes in once a week.’” McMahon confirms my impression that Carson was daunted by Sinatra. He adds, ‘And he’s always a little bit overawed by Orson Welles. But there was one time when we were both nervous. I came on as a guest

to plug a film I'd just made, and we had a rather edgy conversation. When the interview was over, Johnny came out from behind his desk to shake hands and revealed to the world that he had no pants on. I was so anxious to get off that I didn't even notice." How long, I ask, will Carson stay with the show? "He'll still be there in 1980," says McMahon confidently.

The year 1977, for Carson-watchers, was one in which the "Tonight Show," while retaining all its sparkle and caprice, gained not an inch in intellectual stature. It is one thing to say as Carson often does, that he is not a professional controversialist. It is quite another to avoid controversy altogether.

February 2nd: Appearance of Alex Haley to talk about "Roots." (During the previous night's monologue, Carson used a curiously barbed phrase to account for the success of ABC's televised adaptation of Haley's best-seller. "Give the people what they want," he said. "Hatred, violence, and sex." It was difficult to tell whether the gibe was aimed at the rival network or at the book itself. One wondered, too, why he thought it amusing to add, "My great-great-great-great-grandfather was a runaway comedian from Bangladesh.") In 1967, when Haley was working for *Playboy*, he conducted a lengthy interview with Carson. In the course of it, Carson attacked the C.I.A. for hiring students to compile secret reports on campus subversives, condemned "the kind of corporate espionage and financial hanky-panky that goes on in business," supported the newly insurgent blacks in demanding "equality for all," and said, "It's ludicrous to declare that it's wrong to have sex with anyone you're not married to." Moreover, he summed up the war in Vietnam as "stupid and pointless." He seldom voiced these opinions with much vehemence on the show. Ten years later, with the war safely over, he welcomed Jane Fonda as his guest and congratulated her on having lived to see her views on Vietnam fully justified by history. With considerable tact, Ms. Fonda not only resisted the temptation to address her host as Johnny-come-lately but refrained from reminding him that when she most needed a television outlet for her ideas the doors of the "Tonight Show" studio were closed to her.

To return to February 2nd: Haley takes the initiative by asking Carson how far back he can trace his own roots. He replies that he knows who his grandparents were, and was personally very close to his father's parents, both of whom survived into their nineties. Of his pedigree before that, he confesses total ignorance. Haley thereupon shakes him by producing a heavy, leatherbound volume with a golden inscription on the cover: "Roots of Johnny Carson—A Tribute to a Great American Entertainer." Haley has signed the fly-leaf, "With warm best wishes to you and your family from the family of Kunta Kinte." Carson is obviously stirred. "I was tremendously moved that Alex had found time to do all this research in the middle of his success," he said to me afterward, and I learned from McMahon that this was only the second occasion on which he had seen the boss tearful. Although Haley was the instigator, the work was in fact carried out by the Institute of Family Research, in Salt Lake City. The people there first heard of the project on the evening of Saturday, January 29th, when Haley called them up and told them that the finished book had to be ready for presentation to Carson in Los Angeles the following Wednesday. "That gave us two working days to do a job that would normally take us two

months,” a spokesman for the Institute told me. “What’s more, we had to do it in absolute secrecy, without any access to the person involved.” A task force of fifteen investigators toiling round the clock for forty-eight hours just managed to beat the deadline. The result of their labors—consisting of genealogical charts going back to the sixteenth century, biographical sketches of Carson’s more prominent forebears, and anecdotes from the family’s history—ran to more than four hundred pages. The gesture cost Haley (or his publishers) approximately five thousand dollars. Carson lent me the book, a massive quarry of data, from which I offer a few chippings:

(1) Earliest known Carson ancestor: Thomas Kellogg, on the paternal side of the family, born c. 1521 in the English village of Debdon, Essex. The first Kelloggs to cross the Atlantic were Daniel (born 1630) and his wife, Bridget, who settled in Connecticut. By the early nineteenth century, we find offshoots of the clan widely dispersed in Indiana and Nebraska, and it was Emiline, of the Nebraska Kelloggs, who married Marshall Carson, great-grandfather of Johnny. Marshall (born c. 1833) was allured by gold, and staked a profitless claim in the western part of Nebraska. Along with Emiline, he moved to Iowa, where by dying in 1922 he narrowly failed to become a nonagenarian. That was the year in which his grandson Homer Loyd Carson married a girl named Ruth Hook. John William Carson (born 1925) was the second child of this union, flanked by an elder sister, Catherine, and a younger brother, Dick.

(2) On his mother’s side, Carson’s first authenticated forebear is Thomas Hooke, a seventh great-grandfather, who sailed from London to Maryland in 1668. Most of his maternal roots, however, lead back to Ireland, whence two of his fifth great-grandfathers embarked for the States in the middle years of the eighteenth century.

(3) His family tree is laden with hardworking farmers. Decennial census sheets from 1840 to 1900 show Carson progenitors tilling the land in Maine, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska, and Iowa.

(4) As far as anyone knows, Johnny and Kit Carson are no more closely related than Edward and Bonwit Teller. Johnny’s background nonetheless contains two figures of some regional celebrity. One is Captain James Hook (maternal branch), who is reputed, but not proved, to have served with Washington at Valley Forge. In a private quarrel, Captain Hook lost a sliver of his ear to a man who pulled a knife on him. Being unarmed, Hook riposted by tearing off a much larger piece of his assailant’s ear with his teeth. The other Carson ancestor of note is Judge James Hardy (paternal branch), a whimsical but beloved dispenser of justice in mid-nineteenth-century Iowa.

(5) Judge Hardy’s son Samuel, who died in 1933, at the age of eighty-five, was a skilled amateur violinist. Otherwise, in all the four previous centuries of the Carson family saga there is no sign of anyone with an interest in the arts or a talent for entertainment.

February 10th: Significant how many of the failed gags in Carson’s monologues miss their target because they are based on the naïve assumption that the studio audience has read the morning papers. One often gets the feeling that Carson is doubly insulated against reality. Events in the world outside

Burbank and Bel Air impinge on him only when they have been filtered through magazines and newspapers and then subjected to a second screening by his writers and researchers. Hence his uncanny detachment, as of a man sequestered from the everyday problems with which most of us grapple. In fifteen years, barely a ripple of emotional commitment has disturbed the fishpond smoothness of his professional style. We are watching an immaculate machine. Some find the spectacle inhuman. "He looks plastic," said Dorothy Parker in 1966. On the other hand, Shana Alexander told me with genuine admiration, "He's like an astronaut, a Venusian, a visitor from another planet, someone out of 'Star Trek.' "

Two reflections on tonight's monologue. First, drawing on the latest Nielsen report, Carson informs us that during the icebound month of January the average American family watched television for seven hours and sixteen minutes per day A fearsome statistic. No wonder they have so little time for newspapers. Second, he knocks the Senate for allowing its members' salaries to be raised to fifty-seven thousand five hundred dollars a year. The joke gives off a whiff of bad taste, coming, as it does, from a man who earns more than that every week. Whatever Carson's failings may be, they do not include a lack of chutzpah.

April 1st: Nice to hear Ethel Merman on the show, blasting out "Ridin' High" as if calling the cattle home across the sands of D flat major. But I wonder whether Carson would (or could) have done what Merv Griffin, of all people, did earlier in the evening; namely, devoted most of a ninety-minute program to a conversation with Orson Welles, which was conducted on what by talk-show standards was a respectably serious level. In 1962, when Carson took over the stewardship of the "Tonight Show," America was about to enter one of the grimmest and most divisive periods in its history, marked by the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, the ghetto insurrections, the campus riots, the Vietnam war. Is it arguable that during this bad time Carson became the nation's chosen joker because, in Madison Avenue terms, he was guaranteed to relieve nervous strain and anxiety more swiftly and safely (ask your doctor) than any competing brand of wag? Now that the country's headaches have ceased to throb so painfully, its viewers may be ready for a more substantial diet than any that Carson, at the moment, cares to provide.

April 7th: Characteristic but in no way exceptional duologue between Carson and Buck Henry, the screenwriter and occasional actor. Whenever they meet on the show, their exchanges are vagrant, ethereal, unhurried, as if they were conversing in a limbo borrowed from a play by Samuel Beckett.

Carson: Do you believe in plastic surgery?

Henry: Absolutely. It's important, I think, to move things about judiciously.

Carson: They're talking about freezing people and then reviving them in hundreds of years' time.

Henry: (*nods for a while, until a thought strikes him*): But suppose you died of freezing to death? (*Pause.*) I think it would be frightening to come back.

Carson: If you could come back as somebody else, who would it be?

Henry: (*unhesitatingly*): Miss Teen-Age America.

Carson: Where do you get ideas for your work?

Henry: Oh, everyday places. Looking through keyholes.

Carson: Eugene O'Neill got his ideas from his family.

Henry: I expect to get a short monograph out of mine. (*Pause.*)

Carson: You have a strange turn of mind.

Carson brings up a newspaper story about a California woman who was recently interred, in accordance with a clause in her will, at the wheel of her Ferrari.

Henry: Yes. It's reasonable to be married—or I may mean buried—in a Ferrari.

Carson: How do you want to go?

Henry: (*very slowly*): Very slowly. With a jazz band playing in the background. I want to be extremely old. I want to be withered beyond recall.

Carson: But if you lived to be a hundred and fifty, how would you kill time for the last seventy years?

Henry: (*contemplatively*): You'd read a lot. I don't know what the real fun things to do would be after a hundred and twenty. I think the normal activities that come to mind would probably cripple you.

There was also some adagio talk about quarks and their relationship to other subatomic particles, but Henry declined to expand on the subject, perhaps feeling that it might be over our heads.

May 11th: Advice from Carson on longevity: "If you must smoke, don't do it orally." And, more cryptically: "You can add years to your life by wearing your pants backwards."

June 15th: He chats with someone who has attained longevity. Clare Ritter, an impoverished widow from Florida in her late seventies, discloses that her life's ambition is to make a trip to Egypt. In order to achieve it, she sells waste aluminum, which she collects by ransacking garbage cans.

Carson: How much is this trip going to cost?

Mrs. Ritter: Three thousand dollars.

Carson: And how much have you saved so far?

Mrs. Ritter: About half of it.

Carson volunteers to give her the rest himself. A graceful (and, I am assured, unpremeditated) gesture.

July 19th: Seated at the desk with McMahon, Carson says, "If you decide to ban your kids from watching TV here's what they can do instead." He picks up a sheaf of humorous suggestions submitted by his writers, scans the first page, shows by his reaction that he finds it unfunny, and drops it on the floor. (This, like what ensues, is unplanned and impromptu.) He inspects page 2, raises his eyebrows, shows it to McMahon, drops *that* on the floor; goes on to page 3, gives McMahon a glimpse of it, whereupon both men shake their heads, and it, too, ends up on the floor. At this point, Carson starts to chuckle to himself. "How about *this*?" he says, and page 4 is tossed away, to be joined in rapid



succession by a dozen, by *two* dozen more pages, falling faster and faster (the chuckle is by now uncontrollable), in a blizzard of rejection that does not stop until he has discarded every sheet of what was obviously planned as a solid five-minute comedy routine. On network TV, this is just not done. You do not throw away an expensive script in full view of a national audience unless you can ad-lib something funnier to take its place. Carson offers us nothing in exchange except what he alone can supply: the spectacle of Carson being Carson, acting on impulse, surrendering to whim, and, as ever, getting away with it. (No claim is made for the above escapade as archive material, or as anything more than a specimen of Carson in average form on an average night. I record it to illustrate how, in the right hands, pure behavior becomes pure television. Like Shakespeare's Parolles, Carson can say, "Simply the thing I am shall make me live.")

Later in this show, Albert Finney, an actor who has temporarily turned his hand to lyric-writing and his voice to singing, plugs his first L.P., declaring with brooding self-satisfaction that his songs derive from "the spring well" of personal experience. The number with which he favors us constitutes more of a threat to English grammar ("What has become of you and I?") than to Charles Aznavour, who seems to be Finney's model. The last guest is Madeline Kahn, who discusses the psychological ups and downs of her career as an actress. Carson responds with a rare flash of self-revelation. "I've had a little therapy myself," he says, "to cut down the hills and get out of the valleys."

August 4th: President Carter has recommended that it should not be a criminal offense to be found in possession of an ounce or less of marijuana.

Carson: The trouble is that nobody in our band knows what an ounce or less means.

Doc Severinsen: It means you're about out.

**J**anuary 18, 1977: My first solo encounter with Carson. We are to meet at the Beverly Hills Hotel for an early luncheon in the Polo Lounge. I prepare for my date by looking back on Carson's pre-"Tonight Show" career. It is not a story of overnight success. At the time of his birth in Corning, Iowa, his father was a lineman for an electricity company. It was a peripatetic job, and the family moved with him through several other Iowa hamlets. When Johnny was eight, they settled in Norfolk, Nebraska, a town of some ten thousand, where Carson senior got a managerial post with the local light-and-power company. "When one meets Johnny's parents, one understands him," Al Capp has said. "They're almost the definitive Nebraska mother and father. Radiantly decent, well-spoken. The kind that raised their kids to have manners. Of all the television hosts I've faced, Carson has the most old-fashioned manners." By contemporary standards, he had a strict—even rigorous upbringing, not calculated to encourage extrovert behavior. His brother Dick (now director of the "Merv Griffin Show") was once quoted as saying, "Put it this way—we're not Italian. Nobody in our family ever says what they really think or feel to anyone else." Except, I would add, in moments of professional crisis, when Johnny Carson can express himself with brusque and unequivocal directness. In 1966, for instance, the first three nights of a cabaret engagement he played in Miami were spoiled by a backstage

staff too inexperienced to handle the elaborate sound effects that his act required. Carson accused his manager, Al Bruno, who had looked after his business affairs for almost ten years, of responsibility for the fiasco, and fired him on the spot. Again, there was the case of Art Stark, who described himself to an interviewer in 1966 as “Johnny’s best friend.” He had every reason to think so: for nearly a decade he had been Carson’s producer, first on “Who Do You Trust?” and then on the “Tonight Show.” He was the star’s closest confidant, and when, in 1967, Carson embarked on a legal struggle with NBC for control of the show, including the right to hire and fire, he repeatedly assured Stark that, whatever the outcome, Stark’s job would be safe. Having won the battle, however, Carson summoned Stark to his apartment and announced without preamble that he wanted another producer, unconnected with NBC. Dumbfounded, Stark asked when he would have to quit. “Right now,” said Carson.

When Carson was twelve, he picked up, at a friend’s house, a conjuring manual for beginners called “Hoffman’s Book of Magic.” Its effect on him has been compared to the impact on the youthful Keats of Chapman’s Homer. (“Chapman hit it in the bottom of the ninth to tie the game against Milwaukee,” said the man who made the comparison, a former Carson writer. “Little Johnny Keats was standing behind the center-field fence and the ball landed smack on his head.”) Carson immediately wrote off for a junior magician’s kit. He worked hard to master the basic skills of the trade, and, having tried out his tricks on his mother’s bridge club, he made his professional début, billed as The Great Carsoni, before a gathering of Norfolk Rotarians. For this he received three dollars—the first of many such fees, for the kid illusionist was soon in demand at a variety of local functions, from firemen’s picnics to county fairs. As a student at Norfolk High, he branched out into acting and also wrote a comic column for the school newspaper.

Digressive flash forward: In 1976, Carson was invited back to Norfolk to give the commencement address. Immensely gratified, he accepted at once. He took great pains over his speech, and when he delivered it, on May 23rd, the school auditorium was packed to the roof. In the front row, alongside his wife, brother, and sister, sat his parents, to whom he paid tribute for having “backed me up and let me go in my own direction.” He also thanked one of his teachers, Miss Jenny Walker, who had prophetically said of him in 1943, “You have a fine sense of humor and I think you will go far in the entertainment world.” In case anyone wondered why he had returned to Norfolk, he explained, “I’ve come to find out what’s on the seniors’ minds and, more important, to see if they’ve changed the movie at the Granada Theatre” (where, I have since discovered, Carson was working as a part-time usher when the manager interrupted the double feature to announce that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor). He went on to recall that he had been chosen to lead the school’s scrap-metal drive: “Unfortunately, in our zeal to help the war effort, we sometimes appropriated metal and brass from people who did not know they were parting with it.” He continued, “I was also a member of the Thespians. I joined because I thought it meant something else. Then I found out it had to do with acting.” In the manner expected of commencement speakers, he offered a little advice on coping with

life in the adult world. Though his precepts were homespun to the point of platitude, they were transparently sincere and devoid of conventional pomposity. The main tenets of the Carson credo were these: (1) Learn to laugh at yourself. (2) Never lose the curiosity of childhood: “Go on asking questions about the nature of things and how they work, and don’t stop until you get the answers.” (3) Study the art of compromise, which implies a willingness to be convinced by other people’s arguments: “Stay loose. In marriage, above all, compromise is the name of the game. Although”—and here he cast a glance at his third wife—“you may think that my giving advice on marriage is like the captain of the Titanic giving lessons on navigation.” (4) Having picked a profession, feel no compulsion to stick to it: “If you don’t like it, stop doing it. Never continue in a job you don’t enjoy.” (On the evidence, it would be hard to fault Carson for failing to practice what he preached.) A question-and-answer session then took place, from which I append a few excerpts:

Q: How do you feel about Norfolk nowadays?

Carson: I’m very glad I grew up in a small community. Big cities are where alienation sets in.

Q: Has success made you happy?

Carson: I have very high ups and very low downs. I can all of a sudden be depressed, sometimes without knowing why. But on the whole I think I’m relatively happy.

Q: Who do you admire most, of all the guests you’ve interviewed?

Carson: People like Carl Sagan, Paul Ehrlich, Margaret Mead . . . (He recites the official list, already quoted, of Most Valued Performers.)

Q: In all your life, what are you proudest of?

Carson: Giving a commencement address like this has made me as proud as anything I’ve ever done.

The applause at the end was so clamorous that Carson felt compelled to improvise a postscript. “If you’re happy in what you’re doing, you’ll like yourself,” he said. “And if you like yourself, you’ll have inner peace. And if you have that, along with physical health, you will have had more success than you could possibly have imagined. I thank you all very much.” He left the stage to a further outburst of cheers, having established what may be a record for speakers on such occasions: throughout the evening, he had made no reference to the deity, the flag, or the permissive society; nor had he used the phrase “this great country of ours.”

After graduating from Norfolk, in 1943, Carson enrolled in the Navy’s V-12 program, but training did not start until the fall, so he filled in time by hitchhiking to California. There, in order to gain access to the many entertainments that were offered free of charge to servicemen, he stopped off at an Army-Navy store and prematurely bought himself a naval cadet’s uniform. Thus attired, he danced with Marlene Dietrich at the Hollywood Stage Door Canteen. Later, he travelled south to see Orson Welles give a display of magic in San Diego, where he responded to the maestro’s request for a volunteer from the audience and ecstatically permitted himself to be sawed in half. That night, he was

arrested by two M.P.s and charged with impersonating a member of the armed forces—an offense that cost him fifty dollars in bail. After induction, he attended the midshipmen's school at Columbia University and served in the Pacific aboard the battleship Pennsylvania. Never exposed to combat, he had plenty of time to polish his conjuring skills. In 1946, discharged from the Navy, he entered the University of Nebraska, where he majored in English and moonlighted as a magician, by now earning twenty-five dollars per appearance. In need of an assistant, he hired a girl student named Jody Wolcott; he married her in 1948. (To dispose, as briefly as possible, of Carson's marital history: The liaison with Jody produced three sons—Chris, Ricky, and Cory—and was finally dissolved, after four years of separation, in 1963. "My greatest personal failure," Carson has said, "was when I was divorced from my first wife." In August, 1963, he married Joanne Copeland, aged thirty, a diminutive, dark-haired model and occasional actress. They parted company in 1970 but were not legally sundered until two years later, when the second Mrs. Carson was awarded a settlement of nearly half a million dollars, in addition to an annual hundred thousand in alimony. She had by then moved from New York to Los Angeles. Shortly afterward, Carson migrated to the West Coast, bringing the show with him. Between these two events she discerns a causal connection. She has also declared that when, at a Hollywood party, Carson first met his next wife-to-be, "she was standing with her back to him, and he went right up to her, thinking it was me." On matters such as this, Carson's lips are meticulously sealed. All we know—or need to know—is that on September 30, 1972, during a gaudy celebration at the Beverly Hills Hotel in honor of his tenth anniversary on the "Tonight Show," he stepped up to the microphone and announced that at one-thirty that afternoon he had married Joanna Holland. Of Italian lineage, and a model by profession, she was thirty-two years old. They are still together. It is difficult to see how Carson could have mistaken her, even from behind, for her predecessor. She could not be sanely described as diminutive. Dark-haired, yes; but of medium height and voluptuous build. The third Mrs. Carson is the kind of woman, bright and *molto simpatica*, whom you would expect to meet not in Bel Air but at a cultural soiree in Rome, where—as like as not—she would be more than holding her own against the earnest platonic advances of Michelangelo Antonioni.)

Carson's post-college career follows the route to success traditionally laid down for a television—What? Personality-cum-comedian-cum-interviewer? No single word yet exists to epitomize his function, though it has had many practitioners, from Steve Allen, the archetypal pioneer, to the hosts of the latest and grisliest giveaway shows. In Carson's case, there are ten steps to stardom. (1) A multi-purpose job (at forty-seven dollars and fifty cents a week) as disc jockey, weather reporter, and reader of commercials on an Omaha radio station, where he breaks a precedent or two; e.g., when he is required to conduct pseudo-interviews, consisting of answers prerecorded by minor celebrities and distributed to small-town d.j.s with a list of matching questions, he flouts custom by ignoring the script. Instead of asking Patti Page how she began performing, he says, "I understand you're hitting the bottle pretty good, Patti—when did you start?" which elicits the taped reply "When I was six, I used to

get up at church socials and do it.” (2) A work-hunting foray, in 1951, to San Francisco and Los Angeles, which gets him nowhere except back to Omaha. (3) A sudden summons, later in the same year, from a Los Angeles television station, KNXT, offering him a post as staff announcer, which he accepts, at a hundred and thirty-five dollars a week. (4) A Sunday-afternoon show of his own (“KNXT *cautiously* presents ‘Carson’s Cellar’ “), produced on a weekly budget of twenty-five dollars, plus fifty for Carson. It becomes what is known as a cult success (a golden phrase, which unlocks many high-level doors), numbering among its fans—and subsequently its guests—such people as Fred Allen, Jack Benny, and Red Skelton. (5) Employment, after thirty weeks of “Carson’s Cellar,” as a writer and supporting player on Skelton’s CBS-TV show. (6) The Breakthrough, which occurs in 1954 and is brought about, in strict adherence to the “Forty-second Street” formula, by an injury to the star: Skelton literally knocks himself out while rehearsing a slapstick routine, and Carson, at roughly an hour’s notice, triumphantly replaces him. (7) The Breakdown: CBS launches “The Johnny Carson Show,” a half-hour program that goes through seven directors, eight writers, and thirty-nine weeks of worsening health before expiring, in the spring of 1956. (8) Carson picks self up, dusts self off, starts all over again. On money borrowed from his father, he moves from the West Coast to New York, where he joins the Friars Club, impresses its show-business membership with his cobra-swift one-liners, makes guest appearances on TV and generally repairs his damaged reputation until (9) he is hired by ABC, in 1957, to run its quiz program “Who Do You Trust?,” on which he spends the five increasingly prosperous years that lead him to (10) the “Tonight Show,” and thence to the best table in the Polo Lounge, where he has been waiting for several minutes when I arrive, precisely on time.

He is making copious notes on a pad. I ask what he is writing. He says he has had an idea for tonight’s monologue. In Utah, yesterday, the convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, who had aroused national interest by his refusal to appeal against the death sentence passed upon him, got his wish by facing a firing squad—Utah being a state where the law allows condemned criminals to select the method by which society will rid itself of them. Thus, the keepers of the peace have shot a man to death at his own urgent request. Carson’s comment on this macabre situation takes the form of black comedy. Since justice must be seen to be done, why not let the viewing public in on the process of choice? Carson proposes a new TV show, to be called “The Execution Game.” It would work something like this: Curtains part to reveal the death chamber, in the middle of which is an enormous wheel, equipped with glittering lights and a large golden arrow, to be spun by the condemned man to decide the nature of his fate. For mouth-watering prizes—ranging from a holiday for two in the lovely Munich suburb of Dachau to a pair of front-row seats at the victim’s terminal throes—members of the audience vie with one another to guess whether the arrow will come to rest on the electric chair, the gas chamber, the firing squad, the garrote, or the noose.

This routine seems to me apt and mordant, and I tell Carson that I look forward to seeing it developed this evening. (Footnote: I looked in vain. The January 18th edition of the “Tonight Show”

contained no mention of Gary Gilmore's execution apart from a terse and oddly sour sentence—"Capital punishment is a great deterrent to monologues"—inserted without buildup or comic payoff in Carson's opening spiel. A couple of nights later, one of his guests was Shelley Winters, who burst into an attack on the death penalty, using the Gilmore case as her springboard. Carson showed a distinctly nervous reluctance to commit himself; indeed, he shied away from the subject, and cut the discussion short by saying, "There are no absolutes." Yet I had seen him writing a piece that implied fairly bitter opposition to the process of judicial killing. What had happened? I called up Fred de Cordova, who admitted, after some hesitation, that he had disliked the "Execution Game" idea and that the network had backed him up. There had been a convulsive row with Carson, but in the end "Johnny saw reason" and the item was dropped. Hence his remark, meaningless except to insiders, about capital punishment's being "a great deterrent to monologues"; and so much for de Cordova's description of Carson as a supreme "self-editor" who never needed censorship.)

A believer in eating only when one is hungry, Carson orders nothing more than a salad and some mineral water. "I gave up drinking a couple of years ago," he says. "I couldn't handle it." He adds that we can chat until two o'clock, when he must be off to Burbank. He doesn't know who is lined up to appear tonight. This prompts an obligatory question: Which guests has he coveted and failed to corral? "Cary Grant, of course. But straight actors often get embarrassed on the show. They say they feel naked. Their business is to play other people, and it bugs them to have to speak as themselves. Naturally, I'd be glad to have Henry Kissinger. And it was a great sorrow to me when Charles Laughton, whom we'd been after for ages, died a few days before he was scheduled to appear. But on the whole I'm pretty content to have had a list of guests like Paul Ehrlich, Gore Vidal, Carl Sagan, Madalyn Murray O'Hair . . ." He flips through the familiar roster. "And it gives me a special kick to go straight from talking to that kind of person into an all-out slapstick routine." He runs over his rules for coping with fellow-comedians on the program: "You have to lay back and help them. Never compete with them. I learned that from Jack Benny. The better they are, the better the show is." (In more immature days, Carson's technique was less self-effacing. The late Jack E. Leonard told a reporter in 1967, "You say a funny line on Griffin, and he laughs and says, 'That's brilliant.' Carson repeats it, scavenging, hunting all over for the last vestiges of the joke, trying desperately to pull a laugh of his own out of it.") Carson continues, "When people get outrageous, you have to capitalize on their outrageousness and go along with it. The only absolute rule is: Never lose control of the show."

To stay in control is the hardest trick of all, especially when the talk veers toward obscenity; you have to head it off, preferably with a laugh, before it crashes through the barrier of public acceptance. At times, you have to launch a preemptive strike of salaciousness in order to get an interview started. "Not long ago, a movie starlet came on the show with gigantic breasts bulging out of a low-cut dress," Carson says. "The audience couldn't look at anything else. If I'd ignored them, nobody would have listened to a word we said. There was only one thing to do. As soon as she sat down, I stared straight at

her cleavage and said, ‘That’s the biggest set of jugs I ever saw.’ It got a tremendous laugh. ‘Now that we’ve got that out of the way,’ I said, ‘let’s talk.’ ”

High on his list of favorite guests is Don Rickles, though he feels that Rickles has sadly mishandled his own TV career: “He went in for situation comedy and tried to be lovable. And he failed every time. What he needed—and I’ve told him this over and over again—was a game show called something like ‘Meet Don Rickles,’ where he could be himself and insult the audience, the way Groucho did on ‘You Bet Your Life.’ “ Although Carson himself is less acid than he used to be, he is still capable of slapping down visitors who get uppish with him. “There was one time,” he recalls, “when we had Tuesday Weld on the program, and she started behaving rather snottily. I finally asked her something innocuous about her future plans, and she said she’d let me know ‘when I’m back on the show next year.’ I was very polite. I just said that I hadn’t scheduled her again quite that soon.” Beyond doubt, Carson’s least beloved subjects are British comedians, of whom he says, “I find them unfunny, infantile, and obsessed with toilet jokes. They’re lavatory-minded.” (It is true that British comics sometimes indulge, on TV, in scatological—and sexual—humor that would not be permitted on any American network; but this kind of liberty, however it may be abused, seems to me infinitely preferable to the restrictiveness that prevented Buddy Hackett, Carson’s principal guest on February 1, 1977, from completing a single punch line without being bleeped.) I throw into the conversation my own opinion, which is that to shrink from referring to basic physical functions is to be truly infantile; to make good jokes about them, as about anything else, is evidence of maturity. It is depressing to reflect that if Rabelais were alive today he would not be advised to appear on the “Tonight Show.”

Carson once said, “I’ve never seen it chiselled in stone tablets that TV must be uplifting.” I ask him how he feels about his talk-show competitor Dick Cavett. His answer is brisk: “The trouble with Dick is that he’s never decided what he wants to be—whether he’s going for the sophisticated, intellectual viewer or for the wider audience. He falls between two stools. It gets so that you feel he’s apologizing if he makes a joke.” In reply to the accusation that his own show is intellectually jejune, Carson has this to say: “I don’t want to get into big debates about abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, and so forth. Not because I’m afraid of them but because we all know the arguments on both sides, and they’re circular. The fact is that TV is probably not the ideal place to discuss serious issues. It’s much better to read about them.” With this thought—self-serving but not easily refutable—he takes his leave.

**F**ebruary 10, 1977: The Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard has elected Carson its Man of the Year. There have been ten previous holders of the title, among them Bob Hope, Paul Newman, Robert Redford, James Stewart, Dustin Hoffman, and Warren Beatty. Delighted by the honor, because it is untainted by either lobbying or commercialism, Carson will fly to Harvard in two weeks’ time to receive his trophy. While he is there, he will attend the opening night of “Cardinal Knowledge,” the hundred-and-twenty-ninth in the series of all-male musicals presented by Hasty Pudding Theatricals, which claims to be the oldest dramatic society in the United States. I am to travel with Carson on what

will be his first trip to Harvard. To give me details of the program of events that the Pudding people have prepared for him, he asks me to his home in Bel Air, where I present myself at 11 a.m. It is roughly five minutes by car from the Beverly Hills Hotel, and was built in 1950 for the director Mervyn LeRoy. Carson bought it five years ago, and, like many places where West Coast nabobs dwell, it is about as grand as a house can be that has no staircase. When you turn in at the driveway, a voice issuing from the wall sternly inquires your name and business; if your reply pacifies it, iron gates swing open to admit you.

I am welcomed by Joanna Carson's secretary, a lively young woman named Sherry Fleiner, part of whose job consists of working with Mrs. C. for a charitable organization known as share—Share Happily And Reap Endlessly—which raises funds for the mentally retarded. (Other than a married couple who act as housekeepers, the Carsons have no live-in servants.) Proffering Carson's apologies, Miss Fleiner says that he is out on the tennis court behind the house, halfway through a closely fought third set. While awaiting match point, I discreetly case the joint, which has (I learn from Miss Fleiner) six bedrooms. Except where privacy is essential, the walls are mainly of glass, and there is window-to-window carpeting with a zebra-stripe motif. Doors are infrequent. In accordance with local architectural custom, you do not leave one room to enter another, you move from one living area to the next. In the reading area (or "library") I spot a photograph of four generations of Carsons, the eldest being my host's grandfather Christopher Carson, who died two years ago at the age of ninety-eight, and I recall Carson's saying to me, in that steely, survivor's voice of his, "One thing about my family—we have good genes." On a wall nearby hangs a portrait of Carson by Norman Rockwell, the perfect artist for this model product of Middle American upbringing. Other works of art, scattered through the relaxing, ingesting, and greeting areas, reveal an eclectic, opulent, but not barbarously spendthrift taste; e.g., a well-chosen group of paintings by minor Impressionists; a camel made out of automobile bumpers by John Kearney and (an authentic rarity) a piece of sculpture by Rube Goldberg; together with statues and graphic art from the Orient and Africa. Over the fireplace in the relaxing area, a facile portrait of Mrs. Carson, who deserves more eloquent brushwork, smilingly surveys the swimming pool.

Having won his match, Carson joins me, his white sporting gear undarkened by sweat, and leads me out of the house to a spacious octagonal office he has built alongside the tennis court. This is his command module. It contains machinery for large-screen TV projection, and a desk of Presidential dimensions, bristling with gadgets. On a built-in sofa lies a cushion that bears the embroidered inscription "it's all in the timing." Coffee is served, and Carson offers me one of his cigarettes, which I refuse. He says that most people, even hardened smokers, do the same, and I do not find this surprising, since the brand he favors is more virulent and ferociously unfiltered than any other on the market. He briefs me on the impending Harvard visit—a day and a half of sightseeing, speechmaking, banquets, conferences, seminars, and receptions that would tax the combined energies of Mencken,



Mailer, and Milton Berle—and then throws himself open to me for further questioning.

Q: When you're at home, whom do you entertain?

Carson: My lawyer, Henry Bushkin, who's probably my best friend. A few doctors. One or two poker players. Some people I've met through tennis, which is my biggest hobby right now—though I'm still interested in astronomy and scuba diving. And, of course, a couple of people who work on the show. But the point is that not many of my friends are exclusively show-business.

Q: Why do you dislike going to parties?

Carson: Because I get embarrassed by attention and adulation. I don't know how to react to them in private. Swifty Lazar, for instance, sometimes embarrasses me when he praises me in front of his friends. I feel much more comfortable with a studio audience. On the show, I'm in control. Socially, I'm not in control.

Q: On the show, one of the things you control most strictly is the expression of your own opinions. Why do you keep them a secret from the viewers?

Carson: I hate to be pinned down. Take the case of Larry Flynt, for example. [Flynt, the publisher of the sex magazine *Hustler*, had recently been convicted on obscenity charges.] Now, I think *Hustler* is tawdry, but I also think that if the First Amendment means what it says, then it protects Flynt as much as anyone else, and that includes the American Nazi movement. As far as I'm concerned, people should be allowed to read and see whatever they like, provided it doesn't injure others. If they want to read pornography until it comes out of their ears, then let them. But if I go on the "Tonight Show" and defend *Hustler*, the viewers are going to tag me as that guy who's into pornography. And that's going to hurt me as an entertainer, which is what I am.

Q: In private life, who's the wittiest man you've ever known?

Carson: The wittiest would have to be Fred Allen. He appeared on a show I had in the fifties, called "Carson's Cellar," and I knew him for a while after that—until he died, in 1956. But there's an old vaudeville proverb—"A comic is a man who says funny things, and a comedian is a man who says things funny." If that's a valid distinction, then Fred was a comic, whereas Jonathan Winters and Mel Brooks are comedians. But they make me laugh just as much.

Before I go, Carson takes me down to a small gymnasium beneath the module. It is filled with gleaming steel devices, pulleys and springs and counterweights, which, together with tennis, keep the star's body trim. In one corner stands a drum kit at which Buddy Rich might cast an envious eye. "That's where I work off my hostilities," Carson explains. He escorts me to my car, and notices that it is fitted with a citizens-band radio. "I had one of those damned things, but I ripped it out after a couple of weeks," he says. "I just couldn't bear it—all those sick anonymous maniacs shooting off their mouths."

I understand what he means. Most of what you hear on CB radio is either tedious (truck drivers warning one another about speed traps) or banal (schoolgirls exchanging notes on homework), but at

its occasional—and illegal—worst it sinks a pipeline to the depths of the American unconscious. Your ears are assaulted by the sound of racism at its most rampant, and by masturbation fantasies that are the aural equivalent of rape. The sleep of reason, to quote Goya's phrase, brings forth monsters, and the anonymity of CB encourages the monsters to emerge. Not often, of course; but when they do, CB radio becomes the dark underside of a TV talk show. No wonder Carson loathes it.

**F**ebruary 24, 1977: Morning departure from Los Angeles Airport of flight bearing Boston-bound Carson party, which consists of Mr. and Mrs. C., Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bushkin, and me. Boyish-looking, with an easy smile, a soft voice, and a modest manner, Bushkin, to whom I talked a few days earlier, is a key figure in Carson's private and professional life. "Other stars have an agent, a personal manager, a business manager, a P.R. man, and a lawyer," he told me. "I serve all those functions for Johnny." Bushkin was born in the Bronx in 1942. He moved to the West Coast five years ago and swiftly absorbed the ground rules of life in Beverly Hills; e.g., he is likely to turn up at his desk in a cardigan and an open-necked shirt, thus obeying the precept that casualness of office attire increases in direct ratio to grandeur of status. He first met Carson through a common friend in 1970, when he was working for a small Manhattan law firm that specialized in show-business clients. At that time, Carson lived at the United Nations Plaza, where one of his neighbors was David (Sonny) Werblin, formerly the driving force behind the Music Corporation of America and (until 1968) the president of the New York Jets. In 1969, Werblin had drawn up a plan whereby he and Carson would form a corporation, called Raritan Enterprises, to take over the entire production of the "Tonight Show," which would then be rented out to NBC for a vast weekly fee. Rather than risk losing Carson, the network caved in and agreed to Raritan's terms. "As the tax laws were in the late sixties, when you could pay up to ninety per cent on earned income, the Raritan scheme had certain advantages," Bushkin explained to me. "But there were handicaps that Johnny hadn't foreseen. Werblin had too many outside interests—for one thing, he owned a good-sized racing stable—and Johnny found himself managing the company as well as starring in the show, because his partner wasn't always there. When a major problem came up, he'd suddenly discover that Werblin had taken off for a month in Europe and couldn't be reached. Around 1972, Johnny decided that the plan wasn't working, and that's when he asked me to represent him. Not to go into details, let's just say that Werblin was painlessly eliminated from the setup. By that time, the maximum tax on earned income was down to fifty per cent, and that removed the basic motive for the corporate arrangement. So the show reverted to being an NBC operation. But Johnny went back with a much better financial deal than he had in 1969." When Bushkin came to Beverly Hills, in 1973, his life already revolved around Carson's. "It took about three years for our relationship to get comfortable, because Johnny isn't easy to know," he went on. "But now we're the best of friends, and so are our wives. The unwritten rule for lawyers is: Don't get too friendly with clients. But this is an unusual situation. This is Carson, and Carson's my priority."

Ed McMahon, I remarked, had predicted that Carson would stay with the "Tonight Show" until

1980. "I'll bet you that he's still there in 1984," Bushkin said.

If Carson can hold on as long as that, it would be churlish of NBC to unseat him before he reaches retiring age, in 1990.

5:30 p.m.: We land at Boston. Frost underfoot. Carson, following his new President's example, totes his suit (presumably the tuxedo required for tomorrow's festivities) off the plane. He murmurs to me, "If someone could get Billy Carter to sponsor a carry-off suitcase, they'd make a fortune." He walks through popping flashbulbs and a fair amount of hand-held-camera work to be greeted by Richard Palmer and Barry Sloane, undergraduate co-producers of the Hasty Pudding show, who look bland, businesslike, and utterly untheatrical; i.e., like co-producers. Waiting limos take Carsons and Bushkins to the Master's Residence at Eliot House, where they are to spend the night. I repair to my hotel.

8:30 p.m.: Pudding people give dinner for Carson and his entourage at waterfront restaurant called Anthony's Pier 4. When I announce destination, my cabdriver says, "That's the big Republican place. Gold tablecloths. Democrats like checked tablecloths. They go to Jimmy's Harbor Side." Décor at Anthony's features rustic beamery and period prints. Tablecloths definitely straw-colored, though cannot confirm that this has political resonance. Carson (in blue sports jacket, white shirt, and discreetly striped tie) sits beside wife (in brown woollen two-piece, with ring like searchlight on left hand) at round table with Bushkins, Pudding officials, and short, heavily tanned man with vestigial hair, dark silk suit, smoke-tinted glasses, and general aspect of semi-simian elegance. This, I learn, is David Tebet, the senior vice-president of NBC, whose suzerainty covers the Carson show, and who in May, 1977, will celebrate his twenty-first anniversary with the network. Of the three men who wield influence over Carson (the others being Bushkin and Fred de Cordova), Tebet is ultimately the most powerful. "It's a terrible thing to wish on him," Frank Sinatra once said of Tebet, "but it's too bad he's not in government today." In 1975, Robert D. Wood, then president of CBS-TV, described Tebet as "the ambassador of all NBC's good will—he sprinkles it around like ruby dust." With characteristic effusiveness, de Cordova has declared that the dust-sprinkler's real title should be "vice-president in charge of caring." In 1965, Carson came to the conclusion that he had to quit the "Tonight Show," because the daily strain was too great, but Tebet persuaded him to stay; what tipped the scale was the offer of an annual paid vacation of six weeks. Ten years later, Carson said he had a feeling that when he died a color TV set would be delivered to his graveside and "on it will be a ribbon and a note that says, 'Have a nice trip. Love, David.'" "

During dinner, although wine is served, Carson drinks only coffee. He talks about "Seeds," a Wasp parody of "Roots," dealing with history of orthodox Midwestern family, which was recently broadcast on the "Tonight Show." Concept was his, and he is pleased with how it came out, though he regrets loss of one idea that was cut; viz., scene depicting primitive tribal ceremony at which the hyphen is ritually removed from Farrah Fawcett-Majors.

"He looks so mechanical," mutters a Pudding person on my right. "Like a talking propelling

pencil.” Same fellow explains to me that the club is divided into social and theatrical compartments. Former was founded in 1795; latter did not develop until 1844, when first show was presented, establishing an annual tradition that has persisted—apart from two inactive years in each of the World Wars—ever since. Pudding performers have included Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Randolph Hearst, Robert Benchley (star of “Below Zero,” 1912), and Jack Lemmon. Tomorrow’s production, which is to play a month at Pudding theatre, followed by quick tour to New York, Washington, and Bermuda, will cost a hundred thousand dollars. Revenue from box office and from program advertising, plus aid from wealthy patrons, will insure that it breaks even. (Undergraduates provide words, music, and cast; direction, choreography, and design are by professionals.) Publicity accruing from Carson’s presence will boost ticket sales; thus, his visit amounts to unpaid commercial for show.

Another Pudding functionary tells me that club also bestows award on Woman of the Year—has, in fact, been doing so since 1951. First recipient was Gertrude Lawrence, Bette Midler got the nod in 1976, and last week Elizabeth Taylor turned up to collect the trophy for 1977. “She is genuinely humble,” my informant gravely whispers. After dinner, Carson and wife are interviewed in banqueting salon of restaurant by local TV station. Mrs. C. is asked, “Did you fall in love with the private or the public Johnny Carson?” She replies, “I fell in love with both.” Before further secrets of the confessional can be extracted, camera runs out of tape, to her evident relief.

February 25, 1977: Dining hall of Eliot House is crowded at 8:45 a.m. University band, with brass section predominant, lines up and plays “Ten Thousand Men of Harvard” as Carson (black-and-white checked sports jacket) leads his party in to breakfast. His every move is followed, as it will be all day, by television units, undergraduate film crew, and assorted press photographers. Asked by TV director whether sound system is to his liking, Carson says he has no complaints, “except I thought the microphone under the bed was pushing it a bit.” Member of Harvard band achieves minor triumph of one-upmanship by conning Carson into inscribing and autographing autobiography of Dick Cavett.

Fast duly broken, party embarks on walking tour of Harvard Yard and university museums. Hundreds of undergraduates join media people in the crush around Carson, and police cars prowl in their wake to protect the star from terrorist assaults or kidnap attempts. Weather is slate-clouded and icy; Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Bushkin both wear mink coats. Climax of tour is meeting with John Finley, internationally eminent classical scholar and treasure of Harvard campus, Eliot Professor of Greek Literature Emeritus and Master of Eliot House Emeritus, whose study is in the Widener Library. (During previous week, I called Professor Finley to find out how he felt about forthcoming encounter with Carson. “At first, I thought it was an asinine idea,” he said. “I’ve never seen the man on television—as a matter of fact, I’ve spent most of my life with my nose plunged into classical texts. But, after all, how important is one’s time anyway?”) Carson is properly deferential in the presence of this agile septuagenarian. Eavesdropping on their conversation, I hear Professor Finley say, “Writing is like an artesian well that we sink to find the truth.” He talks about Aristotle, getting little response, and then

tries to clarify for Carson the distinction drawn by Lionel Trilling between sincerity and authenticity, in literature and in life. “President Carter is an example of sincerity,” he explains. “But whether he has authenticity—well, that’s another matter. I’m not sure that Trilling would have been much impressed.” Cannot imagine what Carson is making of all this.

12:30 p.m.: Luncheon in Carson’s honor at the A.D. Club, described to me by reliable source as “the second-stuffiest in Harvard.” (First prize goes, by general consent, if not by acclamation, to the Porcellian Club. Choice of venue today is dictated by fact that co-producers of Pudding show are members of A.D. and not of Porcellian.) Atmosphere is robustly patrician enough to warm heart of late Evelyn Waugh: sprigs of Back Bay dynasties sprawl in leather armchairs beneath group photographs of their forebears. Club clearly deserves title of No. 2; it could not conceivably try harder. Members cheer as Carson enters, flanked by Bushkin and Tebet. (This is a strictly stag sodality.) About twenty guests present, among them Professor Finley and Robert Peabody, son of former governor of Massachusetts and vice-president of Pudding Theatricals—a bouncing two-hundred-and-fifty-pound lad much cherished by Pudding enthusiasts for his comic talent in drag. Carson, still rejecting grape in favor of bean, wears blue sweater, dark slacks, and burgundy patent-leather shoes. When meal is consumed, he makes charming speech of thanks, in which he regrets that life denied him the opportunity of studying under Prof. Finley. (Later, rather less lovably, he is to tell drama students at Pudding Club that from his lunchtime chat with Finley “I learned a hell of a lot more about Aristotle than I wanted to know.”)

2 p.m.: Carson is driven to Pudding H.Q. on Holyoke Street—narrow thoroughfare jammed with fans, through whom club officials have to force a way to the entrance. Upstairs, in red-curtained reception room, Carson is to hold seminar with thirty handpicked undergraduates who are studying the performing arts. This select bunch of initiates sits in circle of red armchairs. Carson takes his place among them and awaits interrogation. Standard of questions, dismal for allegedly high-powered assembly, seldom rises above gossip level; e.g.:

Q: As a regular viewer, may I ask why you have switched from wearing a Windsor knot to a four-in-hand?

Carson: Well, I guess that’s about all we have time for. [Questioner presses for reply.] Just between ourselves, it’s a defense mechanism.

Q: Did Jack Paar have someone like Ed McMahon to work with?

Carson: No. A psychiatrist worked with Jack Paar. The last time I saw Paar was in Philadelphia. He was sitting on a curb and he had a swizzle stick embedded in his hand. I removed it.

Q: I’ve noticed that people don’t always laugh at your monologue. Why is that?

Carson: Well, we don’t actually *structure* it to go down the toilet. But we work from the morning papers and sometimes the audience isn’t yet aware of what’s happened in the news.

Q: How do you really feel about Jimmy Carter?

Carson: The Carter Administration is perfect comedy material. And I think he rented the family. I don't believe Lillian is his mother. I don't believe Billy is his brother. They're all from Central Casting.

Q: Do you normally watch the show when you get home?

Carson: No. I'd get worn out from seeing it all over again. If we're breaking in a new character, I'll watch.

Q [first of any substance]: Has the "Tonight Show" done anything more important than just brighten up the end of the day?

Carson: I'd say it was quite important to let people hear the opinions of people like Paul Ehrlich, Carl Sagan, Gore Vidal, Margaret Mead. . . [Vide supra, passim.] We've also taken an interest in local politics. One year, there were eleven candidates for Mayor of Burbank, and we had to give them all equal time. That was pretty public-spirited. But what's important? I think it's important to show ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Like we once had a Japanese guy from Cleveland who wanted to be a cop but he was too short, so his wife had been hanging him up every night by his heels. And it's important to help people live out their fantasies, like when I pitched to Mickey Mantle on the show, or when I played quarterback for the New York Jets. But a lot of the time TV is judged by the wrong standards. If Broadway comes up with two first-rate new plays in a season, the critics are delighted. That's a good season. But on TV they expect that every week. It's a very visible medium to jump on. And there's another thing that isn't generally realized. If you're selling hard goods—like soap or dog food—you simply can't afford to put on culture. Exxon, the Bank of America—organizations like that can afford to do it. But they aren't selling hard goods, and that's what the "Tonight Show" has to do. [Applause for candor. This is the nearest approach to hard eloquence I have heard from Carson, and he sells it to great effect.]

Q: What is Charo really like?

This reduces Carson to silence, bringing the seminar to a close.

4:30 p.m.: Cocktail party for Carson at Club Casablanca, local haunt crowded to point just short of asphyxiation. Star and companions have changed into evening dress. Carson tells me how Prof. Finley sought to explain to him eternal simplicities of Aristotle's view of life, and adds, "He's out of touch with the real world." Subject for debate: By what criteria can Carson's world be said to be closer to reality than Aristotle's? Or, for that matter, than Professor Finley's? Carson group and non-acting Pudding dignitaries then proceed on foot to nearby bistro called Ferdinand's for early dinner. Eating quite exceptional soft-shell crabs, I sit next to Joanna C., who has flashing eyes and a quill-shaped Renaissance nose. Her mother's parents came from northern Italy; her father's family background is Sicilian. She introduced Carson to what is now his favorite Manhattan restaurant, an Italian place named Patsy's, and her immediate ambition is to coax him to visit Italy. Eying her husband (who must be well into his second gallon of coffee since breakfast), she tells me that the only time she has seen

him cry was at the funeral of Jack Benny, who befriended and helped him from his earliest days in TV. She doesn't think he will still be on the "Tonight Show" when he's sixty (i.e., in 1985). "Of course, everybody wants him to act," she continues. "He was offered the Steve McQueen part in 'The Thomas Crown Affair,' and Mel Brooks begged him to play the Gene Wilder part in 'Blazing Saddles.' He read the script twice. Then he called Mel from Acapulco and said, 'I read it in L.A. and it wasn't funny, and it's even less funny in Mexico.' "

David Tebet, seated opposite, leans across table and tells me what he does. His voice is a serrated baritone growl. From what I gather, he is a combination of talent detector, ego masseur (of NBC stars), and thief (of other networks' stars). Has been quoted as saying that he judges performers by "a thing called gut reaction," and that he understands "their soft underbellies." To a thing called my surprise, he adds that these qualities of intestinal intuition help to keep stars reassured. According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, a two-thousand-year-old samurai sword hangs over the door of his New York office. Am not certain that this would have reassuring effect on me. It may, however, explain enigmatic remark of Bob Hope, who once referred to Tebet as "my Band-Aid." Razor-edged weapon is part of huge Tebet art collection (mainly Oriental but also including numerous prints and lithographs by Mucha, Klimt, Schiele, Munch, et al.), much of which adorns his NBC suite. Tebet claims this makes actors feel at home. But at whose home?

7 p.m.: Back to Pudding Club for pre-performance press conference. I count five movie and/or TV cameras, eight microphones, about thirty photographers, and several dozen reporters, all being jostled by roughly a hundred and fifty guests, gate-crashers, and ticket-holders diverted from route to auditorium by irresistible surge of Carson-watchers. Bar serves body-temperature champagne in plastic glasses; Carson requests slug of water.

Reporter asks what he thinks of Barbara Walters' million-dollar contract with ABC News.

He replies, "I think Harry Reasoner has a contract out for Barbara Walters."

Press grilling is routine stuff, except for:

Q: What would you like your epitaph to be?

CARSON [after pause for thought]: I'll be right back.

Laughter and applause for this line, the traditional cliché with which talk-show hosts segue into commercial break. Subsequent research reveals that Carson has used it before in answer to same question. Fact increases my respect for his acting ability. That pause for thought would have fooled Lee Strasberg.

8 p.m.: Join expectant crowd in Pudding theatre, attractive little blue auditorium with three hundred and sixty-three seats. Standees line walls. In fat program I read tribute to "that performer who has made the most outstanding contribution to the entertainment profession during the past years—Johnny Carson." Article also states that in the fifties he wrote for "The Red Skeleton Show"—ideal title, I reflect, for Vincent Price Special—and concludes by summing up Carson's gifts in a burst of baroque

alliteration: “Outspoken yet disciplined, he is a pool of profanity, a pit of profundity.” Audience by now buzzing with impatience to hear from pool (or pit) in person.

Co-producer Palmer takes the stage and, reading from notes, pays brief homage to “a performer whose wit, humor, and showmanship rank him among America’s greatest—ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Johnny Carson!” Band plays “Tonight Show” theme as Carson walks down the aisle and clambers up to shake Palmer’s hand. Standing ovation greets him. Co-producer Sloane emerges from wings and solemnly presents him with small golden pudding pot. Ovation persists—three hundred and sixty-three seats are empty. When it and the spectators have subsided, Carson holds up his hands for silence and then makes speech precisely right for occasion. (Without notes, of course, as befits man who, if program is to be believed, has “liberated the airwaves from scripted domination.”) He begins by saying that it is gratifying to hear so much applause without anyone’s brandishing a sign marked “Applause.” He thanks the club for the honor bestowed on him, even though (he adds) “I understand that this year the short list for the award was me, Idi Amin, and Larry Flynt.” He expresses special gratitude for the hospitality extended to his wife and to him by Eliot House: “It’s the first time I’ve scored with a chick on campus since 1949.” He has never visited the university before. However, it has played a small but significant role in his family history: “My Great-Uncle Orville was here at Harvard. Unfortunately, he was in a jar in the biology lab.” Widening his focus, he throws in a couple of comments on the state of the nation. Apropos of the recent and groundless panic over immunizing the population against a rumored epidemic of swine flu: “Our government has finally come up with a cure for which there is no known disease.” And a nostalgic shot at a familiar target: “I hear that whenever anyone in the White House tells a lie, Nixon gets a royalty.” End of address. Sustained cheers, through which Carson returns, blinking in a manner not wholly explicable by the glare of the spotlights, to his seat.

“Cardinal Knowledge,” the Pudding musical, at last gets under way. It’s a farrago of melodramatic intrigue, with seventeenth-century setting and plethora of puns; e.g., characters called Barry de Hatchet and Viscount Hugh Behave. (How far can a farrago go?) Am pleased by high standard of performance, slightly dismayed by lack of obscenity in text. No need to dwell on show except to praise Robert Peabody, mountainously flirtatious as Lady Della Tory, and Mark Szpak, president of Pudding Theatricals, who plays the heroine, Juana deBoise, with a raven-haired Latin vivacity that puts me in mind of the youthful Lea Padovani. Or the present Mrs. Carson.

10:15 p.m.: Intermission not yet over. Carson at bar, still on caffeine, besieged by mass of undergraduates, all of whom receive bright and civil answers to their questions. He has now been talking to strangers for thirteen hours (interrupted only by Act I of show) with no loss of buoyancy. “For the first time in my life,” he remarks to me, “I know what it’s like to be a politician.”

Midnight has passed before the curtain falls and he makes his exit, to renewed acclamation. One gets the impression that the audience is applauding not just an admired performer but—why shun simplicities?—a decent and magnanimous man.



Two thoughts in conclusion:

(1) If the most we ask of live television is entertainment within the limits set by commercial sponsorship, then Carson, week in, week out, is the very best we shall get. If, on the other hand, we ask to be challenged, disturbed, or provoked at the same time that we are entertained, Carson must inevitably disappoint us. But to blame him for that would be to accuse him of breaking a promise he never made.

(2) Though the written and rehearsed portions of what Carson does can be edited together into an extremely effective cabaret act, the skill that makes him unique—the ability to run a talk show as he does—is intrinsically, exclusively televisual. Singers, actors, and dancers all have multiple choices: they can exercise their talents in the theatre, on TV, or in the movies. But a talk-show host can only become a more successful talk-show host. There is no place in the other media for the gifts that distinguish him—most specifically, for the gift of re-inventing himself, night after night, without rehearsal or repetition. Carson, in other words, is a grand master of the one show-business art that leads nowhere. He has painted himself not into a corner but onto the top of a mountain.

Long—or, at least, as long as the air at the summit continues to nourish and elate him—may he stay there. ♦

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