

ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL
FEDERATION OF ASSOCIATIONS
CONVENTION, MINNEAPOLIS,
JUNE 12, 1993

MADAME CHAIR, MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY AND JUDICIARY,
DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE,
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SKILLED TRADES, MY FRIENDS IN
THE PRESS, FELLOW ARTISTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, CHIL-
DREN OF ALL AGES:



A few years ago in a poker game I won a membership in a club called The Sons of Bernie and last January, late one night, I drove my truck deep into the woods near River Falls to attend the annual Bernie campfire and drunken orgy of song and self-pity, standing arm in arm with other S.O.B.s around a bonfire under the birches, in a raw wind at twenty below zero, the snowbanks up to our waists, and there, under the Milky

Way and a nearly full moon, we ate chili out of cans and drank bourbon whiskey and sang mournful songs like "Long Black Veil" and "Old Man River," and complained about women until six o'clock in the morning, when we retired to our homes to recuperate.

There were about thirty of us, and when I arrived and saw them, I said to myself, "Let's get out of here. You were *bad* in that poker game. This membership isn't worth *half* the five hundred dollars you gave him for it, the big cheater." It was not my crowd. They were the sort of desperate low-lives who will tell you a long story for a five-dollar loan, guys who everything unfortunate has happened to, cruel fathers, treacherous friends, abject poverty, rejection by women, dust storms, prison, tuberculosis, car wrecks, the boll weevil, and poor career choices, all the disasters familiar to fans of the great Johnny Cash. Men peak at age nineteen and go downhill, we know that, but, I tell you, they looked so much older and sadder than you want people your own age to look. One glance at those beat-up faces and you could not imagine women loving them at all and I was by far the soberest and handsomest one in the bunch. "Well, perhaps I will stay for a while," I thought, "and gather impressions of them so that I can someday write about these poor guys so that they will not be completely forgot." As the night wore on, however, I came to feel more brotherly.

You had to stand close to this fire to get any warmth from it. The smoke got in our eyes, hot coals flew into our hair, but we didn't mind. We stood, left arm over

Introduction

the shoulder of the man to our left, right arm free to pass the bottle, and we sang and sang.

We sang "Hard Times Come Again No More," "Abilene," "It Ain't Me, Babe," "Take This Hammer," "Streets of Laredo," and recited poems, such as "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes I all alone beweep my outcast state," and then someone recited, "There was an old sailor named Tex who avoided women and sex by thinking of Jesus and terrible diseases and spending the night below decks."

It was not a tasteful or reverent occasion, and yet it was satisfying in some respects. A person can drink quite a snootful of whiskey in subzero temperatures and still keep floating, and while it isn't an experience that you want to base a lifetime on, nevertheless you would hate to come to the end of your life and think, "I never ever once got drunk in the woods on a winter night with a bunch of guys who all knew the words to 'I Ride an Old Paint.'"

We sang about Old Paint and Frankie and Johnny and somebody recited:

*Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
The women on the streetcar looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean shaven, and he used expensive aftershave.
And he looked very elegant in a suit.
And he was always friendly when he talked;
He certainly made the heads turn en route
To his office at the First National Bank.*

THE BOOK OF GUYS

*And he was rich, a man of style and grace,
And married to a beautiful woman named June.
And yet none of us wished that we were in his place.
We knew June and she was a bitch.
And one calm summer night, under a beautiful moon,
Richard Cory put a bullet through his head.
No big surprise, not if you knew June.*

We got to feeling awfully close, hooked together, the fire blazing away, the whiskey doing its work. After the poem, a guy said, “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I’m glad there aren’t any damn women here.” (LAUGHTER) Sorry, but that’s what he said.

Another guy stepped forward and said: “I have worshipped women all my life, especially pregnant women, and then the other day, a woman I know, she looked like she had a basketball under her dress, she told me that she felt *great* when she was pregnant, that she *enjoyed* it, had more energy, felt sort of high, and it just makes me wonder if maybe women have gotten more mileage out of motherhood than they should’ve and if maybe we could stop bowing whenever one comes in the room.”

A ripple of excitement passed through the circle: Guys were Speaking Out! Us! Saying things we wouldn’t dare say in polite society (i.e. women).