

Hemingway told me things

by Lillian Ross, *New Yorker*, 16 May, 1999

I FIRST met Ernest Hemingway on Christmas Eve, 1947, in Ketchum, Idaho. He liked vacationing there, away from his home, in San Francisco de Paula, Cuba, and eventually built his own house there. I had gone to talk to Hemingway about Sidney Franklin, the bullfighter from Brooklyn, whom I was writing about. Hemingway was extraordinarily patient and generous in giving me marvellous material on Franklin and bullfighting. Then he and his wife, Mary, invited me to join them and his three sons for an elaborate Christmas dinner cooked by Mary in the tourist cabin where they were staying. After that, we kept in touch, and a couple of years later, when the Hemingways came to New York, I was able to spend enough time with him to write a long Profile of him for this magazine. He was, as he liked to put it, 'half a century old' at the time. Throughout the succeeding eleven years, until his death, he wrote scores of letters to me. Mary also wrote from time to time. Our correspondence established an unshakable friendship. I last heard from Hemingway in 1961, when he was in St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, where he had gone to seek medical help. It was about five months before he killed himself, in Ketchum.

In his letters to me, Hemingway often used the joke 'Indian' talk he had invented, dropping his articles and being intentionally ungrammatical. He kidded around in other ways, too. For example, while writing a letter he would switch from typewriter to handwriting: 'Had to quit typing due to my self pity + cramps. There are a lot of compensations in life. Anyhow, I don't have to re-marry Dorothy Parker. Please write. Huck Hemingstein.' Or: 'Wrote you a funny letter last night when yours came. But had to tear it up because it was too rough. I shouldn't have said that about the sin house, etc. anyway. But I got used to telling the truth to you and it's a hell of a habit to stop. Probably am just as much of a jerk as those bastards that rush to their analysts. My analyst's name is Royal Portable (noiseless) the 3rd.' He also liked to refer to his typewriter as the Royal Deportable Machine.

Hemingway signed a few of his letters 'Papa,' but mostly he signed them 'Ernest' or 'Honest Ernie' or 'Huck von Hemingstein' or 'Ernest Buck Hemingstein' or 'Mountain Boy Huck' or 'Huckmanship von Hemingstein' or 'Love and good luck, Ernest.' Or, after signing, he would draw three mountain peaks, which I assumed was his own idea of an Indian sign.

Occasionally, he would apologize for his 'sloppy writing.' And he would ask, 'But you don't want me to write all the time with a hard, gem-like flame do you?' Then he would throw in a Hemingway sentence as only Hemingway could write it. In talking about the 'haunted, nocturnal life' he led in Cuba, he once wrote that he had been up since '0230' and it was now '0530': 'It is getting light now before the sun rises and the hills are grey from the dew of last night.'

From Cuba, he often wrote once or twice a week. When he went to Spain or to Africa, the letters would come less frequently. Each time I opened one of them, on

onionskin stationery with 'finca vigia, san francisco de paula, cuba' printed across the top, I felt the thrill of knowing that it was from Hemingway. Every letter contained electric echoes of the writer I had discovered at the age of eleven, when I found 'The Sun Also Rises,' a forbidden book, under my brother Simeon's pillow. We planned a couple of times to meet in Paris, but we didn't connect, so we met during the Hemingways' few visits to New York. Despite many invitations from Hemingway and his wife to come and stay with them in Cuba, I never visited them there. I've never felt comfortable 'visiting' most people. Besides, I didn't want to spoil our particular equation.

In my Profile, I wanted to give a picture of this special man as he was, how he looked and sounded, with his vitality, his unique and fun-loaded conversation, and his enormous spirit of truthfulness intact. He had the nerve to be like nobody else on earth, stripping himself — like his writing — of all camouflage and ornament. To my surprise, the piece was extremely controversial. Some readers objected strongly to Hemingway's personality, and admired the piece for the wrong reasons. The Profile was called 'devastating' by some reviewers. But Hemingway wrote to me afterward, 'Actually good old profile made me about as many enemies as we have in North Korea. But who gives a shit? A man should be known by the enemies he keeps.' Several years later, he told me that people continued to talk to him about it: 'All are very astonished because I don't hold anything against you who made an effort to destroy me and nearly did, they say. I always tell them how can I be destroyed by a woman when she is a friend of mine and we have never even been to bed and no money has changed hands?'

He had some succinct advice for me as a writer: 'Just call them the way you see them and the hell with it.' In his letters to me, he ridiculed people he didn't respect; he gossiped about people he knew; he sympathized with people who were in trouble. He told of his impatience with the wife of one of his friends. 'There was always, with her, a lot of stuff about being Jewish and not being Jewish,' he said. 'This always bores the hell out of me because I would just as soon observe Yom Kippur as Easter, and I am really an Indian I guess anyway, and we probably were as badly bitched as the Jews. I like Jews very much, but I always get bored with people making a career of their race, religion, or their noble families. Why can't we take the whole damned thing for granted?'

In another letter he said, 'I usually introduce myself as Hemingstein when meeting known anti-Semites and their friends. But actually the name is Hemingway, and there is nothing I can do about it.'

Hemingway liked to make lists, and when he listed the people he loved he usually started with the names of his sons: John (nicknamed Bumby), Patrick (nicknamed Mousie), and Gregory (nicknamed Gigi). Next, he would affectionately list all his wives: Hadley, Pauline, Martha, and Mary. (He described Pauline as a fine woman after she had visited Mary and him at Finca Vigia.) When John became a captain of infantry in Germany, Hemingway proudly told me, 'He is a nice boy and I love him very much and he loves me. Since have never been on a couch don't know whether there is anything wrong with that.'

In addition to being marvellously eclectic, the letters were full of facts. Hemingway told me things. I found skiing difficult, for example, and the proliferation of broken legs among skiers scared me. 'Nobody has any real strength in their legs any more, because they don't climb,' he said. 'Skiing is all on a ski-lift basis. . . . They don't know the mountains.'