

INTRODUCTION

I'm often tempted to engage in fisticuffs with those who label unique and challenging works of fiction, such as *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*, "opaque" or "difficult" or "for the egghead set," and suspect them of being the same folks who dismiss jazz as an art form because it doesn't especially care whether you sing along, or were ever able to phone it in as a long-distance dedication to be read by Casey Kasem on the radio. Then I think to myself, "No, don't be one of those intellectual elites that they rant about on the floor of the Senate or in the muddy trenches of the hand-fishing invitational." Then I think about my writing students, many of whom would show up at office hours with flaming torches if I assigned them this book, despite the fact they've asked me to read a cavalcade of stories they've written about witches, mages, animal/human hybrids, misshapen creatures, and shape-shifting whatnots that inhabit dystopian fantasy worlds so complex Tolkien might have suggested they get out of the house once in a while.

But perhaps I'm the problem. Almost never do I purse my lips disapprovingly over the complete negation of the hero, or sweat the fact that he/she forgets to change intrinsically before the final showdown in the Whole Foods parking lot. I regularly forget to change myself, and thus might not be a character that could scale Freytag's pyramid or meet the expectations of capital-F fiction. But to be welcomed by a book is not simply about recognizing what one expects to find there. *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* is incredibly cordial and inviting, and not only for its acknowledgement of the Monk family's biography or legend. It calls to the reader in love with language and possibility, with the exquisite unknowable, with the contentious and the ephemeral past.

Obsession with fame (and infamy) is never very far from literary consciousness, especially when it comes to the quixotic lifestyles of the rich, talented, bipolar and/or chemically dependent. Jazz icon Thelonious Monk's relationship with his major patron, the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, has long been one of those stories that speaks ideation as truth. He the legendary musician, the mad genius, star of a jazz scene that was hard, glorious, and bittersweet in its moment and is uniformly canonized today. She the black sheep of the Rothschild family, the capricious patron/den mother of the same jazz scene but a ghost to her own family (according to the legend advanced by her biographer niece and many others, Nica left her marriage and five children upon hearing Monk's "Round Midnight" for the first time, years before she ever met him). More subtly acknowledged in the telling of either story is Nellie — Monk's wife, Nica's other, a working woman and mother who often managed her husband's career without claiming the job, and inspired the jazz standard

which serves as the title of this book. This is the trifecta, some say triangle, that sits snug atop Monk's legacy like a paper crown, fragile and oft disturbed or disputed (by facts and egos alike), but largely accepted as the arrangement.

With music, however, it's all about the version — how a piece translates and is translated in the particular moment of inception, of recording, of the gig. So while there are as many versions of Monk's story as there are covers of his compositions, the central risk in imagining the lives of Monk, Nica, and Nellie today is that those who would celebrate him as the elite trophy mold for troubled brilliance, and peg Nellie and Nica as simply the women behind the great man, have largely succeeded in making stock characters out of them already. In this respect, *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* attempts to enter a conversation that has been skewed and reframed for as long as journalists, biographers, academics, and fans have been trying to figure Monk out, or claiming to have a handle on his life and career.

A certain cognitive dissonance of detail emerges as myth when one looks at the history of this discourse, and at times it seems we expect authors to address it whole cloth in order to broach the subject of Monk at all. Some of the racially tinged criticism and reporting (oft delivered in the guise of the good old music snob) has characterized Monk as an untrained musician who excelled in jazz because he was intimidated by other advanced forms of composition, which has been countered by confidantes and biographers who've spoken about his love and talent for classical music and explained him as a man whose early gift was cultivated by a series of learning experiences and mentors. Some consider Nellie and Nica the only women of influence in Monk's life, while others point to piano teacher Alberta Simmons and pianist/composer Mary Lou Williams as having key roles in his development and career. It has been assumed of Monk that he was the stereotypical absent musician father who chose to make a family of Nica and his peers instead, yet his son regularly characterizes him as an amiable and loving parent who ultimately integrated his two worlds successfully and to the benefit of his children. Most controversially, perhaps, many fans and critics view Monk as a lost soul whose gift was tragically muted by and lashed to mental illness and addiction, while others contend his true disability was an era and a system that failed to understand or treat his bipolar disorder properly, and a music business that denied many of our essential jazz artists the professional access and compensation they were due.

In the last decade, some previously unpopcorned kernels in the tale of Monk, Nellie and Nica have been pried open and served up for our consideration, a number of them in biographies written by or in cooperation with family members who dispute long-held beliefs about their loved ones and reveal new aspects of their stories. But

to borrow a line from the book you are about to read, the cumulative effect of over a half-century of mythmaking has nonetheless "bred in us a taste for hogwash" (204) that may never be fully satisfied when it comes to their lives as imagined and lived. So now comes *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*, which slips in through the trap door of this cacophonous discussion, approaching three now-departed souls and their contested, conjoined histories with a phenomenological story and a carefully fractured narrative which denies us the ability to play Concentration with the details.

As a version, this is the hidden track found in the parallel groove of the record, not the chord chart from the fake book by which we might learn to reconstruct Monk ourselves. This book is not a residency with the facts, or an attempt to put anything to bed when it comes to the symbiosis and duality of the world Monk existed in with Nellie and Nica. Nor is this jazz history run through the Ken Burns Photoshop filter for value-added grace or floaty, sepia-toned homage. This is an entirely different kind of being there, imagining there. *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* is Monk's basketball in the gutter and his fingertips arching up, up and the flip, flap, and tuck of his thumb. It's Nica as Nica and as the Baroness. It's Nellie standing beside the piano, "in the little roominess of its bend." (170) A Weehauken, NJ, ballroom and the express coach to Carnegie Hall. Those shirts that won't press themselves, and the chorus of motley items a laundress must handle. Ice cream, a feast of pancakes and roast beef, and harmonic conventions weak as communion wine. Love that's both a camera lucida and a tongue in the ear. Dedicated tuggers on the same rope, encumbrances laced between purplish fingers, and rings made from colorfast orange yarn. Economists who have better arches than journalists, and women whose words carry a stench of wildness. The phantom mechanics of music, and eloquent limousine drivers entrusted with the lives of players and other dignitaries, but carrying no more cash than a roll of dimes for the pay phone.

This is a book by which you will be charmed and confronted and ultimately tempted, and the abundance of your inquiry and the breadcrumbs dropped by your search party cannot be cataloged or encompassed in a modest introduction such as this. It's a story, not the story. It is made from diary entries, telephone calls, scenes, conversations, film negatives, recording masters, cartoons, folders, handbills, all of which will enrobe you and strand you in the moment, and leave you not where you may expect. Yet *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* is not an improvisation. It's as precise as it is surprising, capable of suspending time and holding it faithfully for the length of a perfect solo or one devastating note.

- Robin Myrick, 2014

— Ice cream.

What? Strike what? Struck?

— Ice cream.

Is it a bump? Pug-nosed? It's a fact.

— Ice cream!

May I have the next one? That fact. Dropped lollipop. What I mean, Nellie, what do you mean? That it's nothing but a cold wind licking away at the hair and specks of skin, fly fingerprints, spots and specks and curls of dry filth, and to get at my warm glass? Go rattle somebody else's windows. Treats this hour, no how.

— Ice cream! Time!

It is. It's nothing. A little bit of mice. A meant name; I mean, a name you meant. Nellie? Sure as you are born. I sit up, and if I do, I will surely, surely be sick.

— Ice cream!

There it is again. Like new lipstick on an old, old, begetting and begat night. Nellie, don't you do anything? Won't you get the cups? Run the scoop under the hot tap? Of course, of course, in the minute you give me, a minute. I'll sit up, right into this heartburn, if I could do more than pull my bones together and make myself see what it is. Oh, but I need my pan. Again. It's only nothing, Nellie, only a step, some steps, going from some easy gallop, a shuffle-me-off-someplace-else-on-this-earth, without fail. That's a fact. Nothing but a post ringing itself off the knob, a light sucking its innards out, Christmas chains, a train, a truck, a should-know-better well-before-dawn. Two minutes past a few minutes past one, can't be. You know it is.

— Ice cream! Hey!

A cat or rat or dog that's jumped his fence and snapped at the moon. It's nothing but you witching yourself, Nellie. You hearing, your hearing. And not a word for the heard. If it's nothing, and it is, it's far away or down below. I'll sit up. I'll find my dressing gown. With about 27 families who, do I have to remind you, do I, I suppose I do, 27 name-brassed and -plated families who are allowed to lay exactly where they lay, perfectly asleep, 27 families blessed with broken buzzers who anyway and besides don't know

what hours like these look or sound like laying between you and whatever is going on down in that street. It's a drunken taxi whistle, a hum, somebody skidding or taking a stab, it's nothing like what you won't ever see around here, Nellie, nothing but a beggar dropping his squeezebox and his dented old tin cup.

— Hey! Hey! Pistachio!

I know, I know, I know this one. It's a song. Perplexed as polka dots. Often cross-eyed-up for a ghost, a winding sheet hung on three holes, two A's and a B. Easy to admit they're often mistook, but, no, they aren't even cousins. One hayseed, one George Peorgie.

— Frozen! Icy novelties!

See, Nellie, it's only just a dumb old melody after all, pawing around, a sad circus bear who loves his Pepsi Cola and 7-Up too much. It's "Happy Birthday" for days I'd rather send to the dump. Played twice is overplayed, so why won't you just let me turn over and find some kinder lumps to cuddle in this mattress? Old bear, ride your ball on to the next door. I've got that nausea. It's sitting up in my lap. My ribs.

— Icy cream, creamy! Icy!

Here comes the caravan. Should I make this face? Or this one? Here it comes, gypsying all the whole way, my caravan.

— Scream!

To think you'd imagine I'd left you somewhere Monk. I haven't been possuming in my sleep, so yes sir, right away sir, ice cream it is. Sir, you'd think I have been ticktock, ticktock hypnotized. Just waiting for your word. No dreams for Nellie unless the spell is split apart.

— Ice cream!

Ice cream, see? Not if you had the stomach I've got now, Monk. And it a quarter of. What if the landlady was watching. What if that telescope across the way was swung to stare over here. I can't imagine. A pox on that good-for-nothing super and the landlady and her cadaver's opera glasses. Her filing cabinet—two whole drawers dedicated to "MONK, Thelonious; Nellie (spouse)"—must be fit to burst, like a Rockefeller's shirtfront. Nellie, Nellie, Nellie. "Nellie," Monk, "Nellie," that's what you're about to want to whoop.

As the back of the white linen shirt Monk has been pressing begins to smolder—inexplicably, if seen from the vantage of the ceiling fans; that is, not through the center on which Monk would normally have settled his weight, but from the edges outward, so that the flatiron's impression soon boils over its outline, the locomotive-thick steam rather than the scorching wing of the metal itself not casting so much as ejecting an accelerating shadow that threatens to desolate even the sleeves and the square cut of the tail—"Mr. Lee" drops the badminton racket he has been brandishing, sending up a tiny eruption of faintly green soap powder, and loudly shoves his way past Frank, who by now is poking into a bin of ladies' undergarments with the eraser end of his pencil. His balance unaffected by this alteration in emergencies, Frank glances up. The lids of his eyes can hardly be bothered to lift, but, as if without needing to try, they do. Although only momentary, Frank's look is nevertheless of a duration sufficient to ensure that all present may see how unperturbed he has remained: how indifferent to, how beyond bored with his own culpability he is and will be.

Monk peels free the lavender silk cravat he has been using as a headband and tosses its sopping onto the expectant surface of a pressing machine, which lets slip a long string of H's and barely suppressed R's. The Baroness begins to suck, then to chew, on a tress seduced by the purifying infusions of the laundry's back room into lank errancy. The air, she cannot waft it away. It is massy, sickly. She cannot help but think of it as a stalled sirocco. Or a church veil. It smells here like ether, or kerosene, but laced with some sweet compound. The pants and vests overflowing their bins lose their whiteness to the more and more occasional vapors; seamed with yellow, they grow arms and groins. The Baroness feels the burn in her throat become a tickle as "Mr. Lee" pulls up on the lever-like handle of the iron with rapid, careful touches. He tosses the iron from one hand to another, cursing.

Monk dodges the obstacle of his insufficient hours by ducking under the ironing table. He has balled his hands. He veers away from Frank, who now appears to have been distracted by the quality of light entering the window shoved high up the wall, the wall against which he has lined up the cardboard drums of step-ins, girdles, brassieres, petticoats and hose no one is preventing him from browsing. "Mr. Lee" has one hand at his head, raking the hair into sharp tufts pomaded with sweat, and the other, clawing, telescopes towards Monk. "Mr. Lee"'s pointing is not accusatory,

but the motion of his arm is. Frank fishes up a pair of elastic bloomers and unfurls them with exaggerated delicacy until the expanse of dull silk makes a silhouette of him.

The Baroness has pulled on her gloves and is ready to bump out of the FIRE EXIT door. She sees T. S. emerge towards her from around the pressing machine. He is now wearing a different pair of socks (light blue) and he is carrying a basketball the mottled, worn brown of a dried bean. He tucks the ball between his arm and his hip. His fingers dangle just off the curve of the rubber as if lifelessly. The sudden flab of T. S.'s hand—it is a jolt, if not a jolt indeed. It is then that The Baroness must acknowledge that her emotions, the ones that entered with such conviction and with such pointed expressions worked out, as sorted through as the official contents of her handbag, are now diffuse. Her needles have been tossed into the ocean.

Who has followed whom? Frank recognizes the intimate heap through which he's oozing about the time his employer and her associate are rounding the street-side corner and are approaching the front of the laundry. Leaving both his pencil and the gray slickness of his feigned obsession to the finishing room, Frank is forced to stop short. He is impeded by a newspaper statistic come to life. Columns of men's two- and three-button suits—the racks of navy blue and charcoal and ivory and olive shoulders swaying almost imperceptibly, yet enough to make Frank experience a coolness across his cheeks—obstruct his egress: the path past the flip-top counter and straight to the front door with its broken bell. Frank composes himself in a side step and guesses that his hesitant maneuver must be forward. An object thin yet blunt hooks into the base of his neck, between skin and collar. "Mr. Lee" twists the wire hanger so that he can get a more ineludible grip, centered along the hypotenuse, and then he begins to drag Frank through the worsted breasts of the employed and those seeking employment; the executives and junior executives; the immigrants, emigrants, residents and citizens; the enlisted officers; the fathers, sons and suburban heads of household.

— No, no, fella, now wait a minute, wait one minute!

Frank surrenders. If he could reach for a handful of detergent or some scalding device that would permit him to defend himself, he would resist such a base instinct. Besides, there is no time to rifle the pockets of the ranks of these deceased. Accidental deaths, deaths attributable to the most natural

of causes. All this fashion actuarial. Why else would these garments leave a sheen of dust on his fingers, the tip of his nose? Either the vacated clothes have been stuffed with their former owner's ashes, or their tickets are fugitive, and, though they are never to be soiled again, they will die clean. Frank will not bury his own hands. (It does not occur to him, but Frank's own jacket lies discarded somewhere underneath the bold calligraphy of the finishing room's heat, wilted and mingled like any other unmentionable.)

— Where did you think you were going, huh, where, where, where, Mr. Famous Stagedoor Laundry on Seventh and Broadway?

"Mr. Lee" spits his words, each one like an imprecation, each one dribbling down Frank's back.

— What I want to know... hey, you listening to me? You! Who's going to finish out my man's shift! We've got over 200 shirts to press and fold between now and opening time tomorrow! Two-oh-oh. 200! 200!

With each repetition "Mr. Lee" jerks Frank back towards full awareness of his torment. The hook itself has no real point, yet the wire digs, has pressed itself deep enough to raise a little mound of flesh from Frank's clavicle and burrow into it with its pinch. Frank's yoke protests, but Frank himself maintains a hard—a granite—silence. His only tell is to struggle for an instant in shifting his weight from his toes. In fighting the slouch imposed upon him, Frank is turned so that he can see the two of them, Pannonica and then the man who would be her man, passing the lucky dragon painted to stand guard in the storefront window.

— What, are you gonna be my new helper? The Queen Mother out there? 200!

— Mr. Lee.

— Huh, who?

— For the last time, am I not addressing Mr. Lee?

— Sure, yeah, fine, I'm Mr. Lee. Sure thing. Now

— Mr. Lee, will you be requiring letters of reference? Not to presume, but it would be more conducive to our arrangements if you did not.

Outside, Pannonica signals no farewell. Does it occur to her unfaithful servant that she has made no adequate plans for one? Does it occur to anyone? She looks for the nearest corner; either end of this awful row will do. T. S. pivots and pretends a two-handed push of the large ochre ball from his chest, through the garish glass of “Mr. Lee’s” No. 1 Chinese Laundry Service, to Frank’s own. Instead, he slams the ball against the pavement, reaching high and to his left, but never leaving the flat of his feet, to arrest its rebound as the rude ping of its bounce bounces in turn off the laundry’s awning, the surrounding buildings.

— See you. Your so long. Thursday next. Right? I’ll bring them. Spares. Super sneakers.

Nica has not yet turned back to face Monk. She is undecided.

— What? You want to— you care to discuss this now?

— Say. Your man. Need a valet to have him. Your valet valet-ed up?

— Is this how you wish to part, T. S.?

Nica abandons the idea that any corner will allow an easier escape. And does T. S. think she can hope to look at him, to be looked at in her looking, when he thinks she looks at him that way?

— Like you said.

— I would n

— You said. You picked. Hired him. His hand. Underlined him. Crossed out. My line. What is it?

— I am not the author of this scenario, T. S. It is beneath my imagination. And yours. And so I thought. I did.

The Baroness never hears Monk’s reply; by then, T. S. has made it across the street, to where the few pedestrians are raising editorials and yesterday’s scores to shield themselves from the thickening rain. The drops, though not many in number, are fat, and they make hard splats on the city’s surfaces like diffident hailstones. Nica jogs a little more quickly to the car at the far meter. It is pinned now between a produce truck and an off-duty taxi. And before she can handle all the business of getting in (opening the driver’s door, lifting her hem, slipping off her heel and slipping into her driving moccasin), she

has to remove the parking citation—Pannonica frowns; more gaily colored paper—from beneath the grooved rubber fin of her windshield wiper. T. S., somehow, is there, his expression almost inquisitive, the open door with its one-way window fogging underneath his grasp. His would-be chivalry. His assertion.

— Stop. You’ll stop. Why? Do you? You want to crash.

The basketball sneaks from underneath Monk’s sneakered foot and rolls toward the gutter. It will catch at the storm drain; Nica is absolved from calling his attention to any loss. Monk positions himself so that she may back into his assistance. Never before has he offered to take her coat or lay it on the backseat. The Baroness snugs her wrap and snaps it behind her knees before T. S. might note what she notes, now that the full consequences of having dashed out without pulling any nylons on is splashing damp patterns across her legs: that her shins are rough, her ankles frail bulges, her calves a cleft dividing tendon from fat. She falls into her cushions.

— T. S., how can I stop? How can I stop if you won’t stop?

The Baroness fumbles for the door handle. She has no idea where the spare key is. Monk bends closer, the door hitches in, his face melts in a leaden reflection of her own, unsoftened by drink or tobacco, her face as it always is, that exceptional brow, the places along her cheeks and below her hairline charmingly splotched, the freckles parched, and the aspect facing her there, budging closer, as if confining them both (Nica, Pannonica) in a kiss, that woman’s confidence is so incongruous, and yet it is not amusing at all. The door is nearly secure; T. S.’s hands like a great doleful Kilroy doll, they flop off their ledge, finger after finger. The Baroness is fastened in her cockpit. Even the glove box is locked. T. S.’s mouth isn’t anywhere, but he can still be heard.

— Don’t. Only if you. Don’t.

Nellie and I, ze Baroness, oh it's oh so awfully nefarious of her to volley my handsome nefariousness back at me, but what's a girl to do? we've only just hung up. oh dear diary, scourge me; why do I cling to this chronology? my days are gauzy, nicht wahr? I reminisce futurities. if only T. S. would light my last bedtime cigarette and remark how every Local 802 dwarf is grumpy, I might think I am to think perhaps he has the right kind of nerve, and to say to myself that I do in that his clutches would be nothing less than a caution to me. bear with me dear diary. Nellie and I, ze Baroness, we have managed (ha ha, you McCarthy me, don't you, dear diary) a first conversation, and I am coming around to it.

dear diary, the numbers were an operator's numbers. it took some time for us to connect. buzzing buzzes, clicks clicking, these waiting noises are all as much the grist of the telephone artist's medium as the sleepy wariness of a salutation, the chipper efficiency of an interviewer's standardized interest. a taken interest, I might remind you, dear diary. revocable at last.

"Hello?"

"Why, hello. Hello and good evening. This is the Monk residence, is it not?"

"Yes. Yes ma'am. Good morning."

"Please. No need for that ma'am business, as you have it. Primus inter pares: we're all on equal pedestals here."

a pause to stump the best of our-yours and mine-kind, dear diary. a dark audacity matched to a light audacity doesn't quite provide the expected sparks. do you know what it does? it makes a quite discomfiting "thud."

"May I ask who it i- who's calling?"

"Nellie"—but before you can deliver your past-its-bedtime edict of "Nellie!", Monk, you're going to have to let me say it and say it right to myself.

— Nellie!

"Nellie," now there it goes. Hurrying the "ell" and sharpening the "lie," all icepick jab and jab. Well, have at it. You know where the ice cream cartons. "Nellie," I should remind you, say after me, Nellie and not Nica, nor Neenah. Not Ruby, Ruthie, Zenobia, Lenore, Robin, Sissy, Effie, Ethel, Alberta, Spence, did I hear you right, Pistachio?, but no, not Wilbur, Ray, Wife-of-Ray—numbers 1, 2, or 3—not LaVerne, not Captain Cook, not Inah, not Kim, not Mater. Nothing but "Nellie!" "Nellie," she's me, not what's on so much as is the tip of your tongue. For a fact, you better bet I'm there, just swelling your tongue and making it ripple all chili pepper or fizz like a spoon's full of colic-y pink might Pop! out, Pop! Pop! right out of your mouth. Pop. I'm fit to pop.

— Nellie! Hey Nellie! Frozen frosty treats!

So here comes the caravan. Trash stacked up as it is, and the caravan is just coming and coming and coming. My father would declare, and have I ever told you, dear heart, even your mumbles can come out like whoops. Monk. No, cottonmouthed you're exactly not. A good ten minutes of roughhousing in the hall, denying me the luxury of being frightened. No, no, not Nellie, she's sharp as a right regular hound, she can tell your fumbling around for a grand entrance from any old noise in the middle of the night. Indeed. I'm up, I'm sitting. Disregard, that's what it is. All it is. I imagine I'll just turn myself back down, back over and be sick and forget all about what time it is now. Now! There's no now in it for me, not at this hour. My arms are so heavy. I'm no farmer's gal but I know my way round a knife. Waggle that tongue at me again tomorrow. Squeak. See how far that gets you under my quilts.

— Ice cream, that's what. Say, Nellie!

"Nuh-helly." Mispronouncing is no game. I'd thank you to know a challenge when you propose one. "Nalllllliee." "Null." Just what is it you are trying to say? Never mind, leave me alone, let me have some leaving. I'm not well Monk.

— Nellie! The scoop!

Well, Monk, if you want me to show the wide world how shamefully frayed the cut of my nightgown is... This tsk tsk is grown old, Monk. Old and humped-up all scrawny like a grandma's back. Grandmas: just spinsters, fully furnished. What have you done with my slippers? Nellie, Nellie night and day and all day long. I didn't order this midnight snack, it is just not agreeing with me Monk. Too much Nellie. She runs me down, Monk, you haven't a care, you let her stomp around to beat the band, not like you've ever given her run of the house, but you've never had the whatever-it-takes to admit to her you haven't. You won't. And when you can yelp up such big noises, syllables and all as painted-lady as swearing. Or as spooking as bricks. Or as vain as barbells. Wouldn't that be a sight? Monk hupping to. And you'd hold on, wouldn't you, onto those hernias even if their strange invitations pulled you crashing right through the floorboards and into the downstairs neighbors' snoring.

— Nellie? Ice! Cream!

— Monk, man, enough with the mating calls. Aren't we ever gonna finish that match?

And little Johnny too, Super Chief Johnny Henry. Momma's little helper. Johnny, teach that man—Melodious, he thunk—to be gentle.

— Shhh now! Are you here? Are you shaking? Shook the clams out of your horn. Until now? Not. Not as I think!

Anteing up at this hour. Why don't they just go to the 8th Street Chess Club, or commandeer a bench in Mount Morris Park. Caravaning, pitching tents right in the middle of my tired. It's not me taking my time, isn't it, ahem, *ain't it*, it's you, Monk, robbing me of my time. Burglarizing me. Just let me get to the bathroom before my supper gets any bigger than my eyes. How I hate the chowder taste of busting out. So never mind that I'm rushing, Monk, just you sit still and do your counting. You and your crookless sheep.

— Nell

— Oh, uh, say hey there Nelli

— Nellie! Where? Kitchen's way. Keep left. Dash it left.

Cold. Why does this floor have to be so cold? And not a dry towel to be found.

— Nellie? Monk, man, was that your old lady, man?

— Lady of the house. Plain lady. It goes. Go on. I finish this ice cream. Gnash it. Go to bed. Bed-ee-bye. Ulcers, you dig. Nellie! Table!

All hours I know. Chess, dominoes, canasta, pinochle, coon-can, vanilla, lemon chiffon, chocolate when I crunch in his Ovaltine, strawberry if the bananas aren't green. I don't want to be sick, I'm going to be sick. On account of ice cream. If he hankers for pouring a liqueur over the whole bean kind he can bring a jigger back from that Baroness'. If he wants one variety with walnuts in it or something in a cone he'll phone Wilbur, make him drop whatever devil's work he's doing.

— Nellie?

Ooh, my feet. This cold and colder floor. Makes me gimpy. My arches. My edema. My fits. My back. My Nellie, Nellie.

— Look, man, you hear that? She's not in a good way, Monk. Somebody ought to check on her, man.

Yak yak yak, Johnny Monk. My watch is stopped, and just short of a dime. That man, he has a stomach for this. His junior's, Jay Are's sweet tooth for a supper of nothing but root beer and Mr. Goodbar. The old scavenger. Got his paws deep in the honey crock. Blink, blinkety-blink. No, he's still manifested. The genius of my kitchen. I'm not about to give in. I can't give in. There's no giving in, Nellie, where's your head? I won't let it happen to me. I will be staying in, all the way in. Besides, there's nothing happening, something roused me is all, and I need to pat my face with a little warm water. Take two washrags and call me next year. Nothing, a screaming nothing, only it's that something crawling from my hips up my back. The cock's crow, the rooster's cussing, that's what it is. Breaking all yonder through the keyhole.

— Nellie. Come out. No time. Not for that time.

— Leave this door alone, for heaven's sake! Monk, don't you try this door!

Is it more than a voice there on the other side? Whispering like this, it's sword swallowing, Monk. Glass eating. You and your three rings, Monk. Forget the genius. Here comes my caravan. I'm pulling my thumb back in, though. I'm not taking anymore rides outside. Wild, glib. Here comes my rendezvous. The genie is in the woods, not my kitchen, I've summoned him

home with an accidental wink. Oops, the biggest oops of all; grace, Nellie. I'll suck my thumb if it comes to that. See, Nellie, who's this old circus bear plodding along, bringing up the exhibition's rear? Stay where you are, Melodious Thunk.

— You hear me!

— Nellie, we got it? Ice and cream.

— Monk, do you hear me! Monk!

— That could do. John?

— Say, Monk, Nellie, I'm telling you, you don't get out of bed like that if you're right. All right.

Until I echo so. Oh Melodious Thunk, this must've been what it was like for you. It must have been like this when those smog-mouthed detectives asked you who in the hell—see where you make me go, Monk, by myself right down into the gutter—just who you thought you were that night. Did you accost their suits, Monk, look hard into the crystal balls they had hidden inside their suits? Did you yell and rail at the frame-up you saw in your future, did you yell at those detectives, Monk, just like you're about to holler it towards me here again soon, shaking and rattling at my shoulder—“Nellie!” Why can't you leave me alone? Can't you see I'm sick. And tired. And sick, why I don't know why. That's a fact. I don't want to imagine how. Why should I. Why can't I pretend like I tolerate your pretending, Monk, why can't I just pretend I've picked myself up off the floor and that I'm still sleeping, a dream-sleep in midair, beauty-resting right through you in all your crashing and demanding and dad-gumming?

— Monk, I'm fine, Monk. Never mind. I'm perfectly fine.

Sure it was like this. I can pretend it was. I'd rather have been there that night than here now, that's a fact. Factually that. So what was it, Monk, did those bogeymen from the 14th precinct aim a jujitsu chop between your legs and force your feet way apart? Did they make a boil gorge out on your neck with the way they just kind of chuckled at whatever it was you were yelling? Protesting? Heh-heh-heh. A whole squadron of Great Gildersleeves, one Birdy. Or did you keep it quiet, Monk? So that no one had to know that you were so deep down inside yourself you might as well have been standing

right next to them, looking down at your folded-up body? Looking out and looking down. How else were you going to testify to how it happened, Monk? My bones know, I'm capsizing into my bones, but you make wonder, Monk, if that's how it felt. Would you ever confess to me just how your cheek stubble was smacking, your forehead greasing the roof of that hot-trotting jalopy with panic? Would you ever confess that you did, come to think of it, do something rash, Monk, like begin explaining with your hands? Oh no, oh yes, and Mr. Carpenter, yes he can vouch for where I was at one and forty-five in the morning. Did they wrestle your arm behind your back? Did a big flashbulb go off, white as a cowboy's hat? Did your funny bone jangle? Jangling like my telephone does at some profane hour when you've taken a notion to get a message to your Nellie? That's where I was, Monk, that's where I was. Assuming so much I was sleeping the sleep of the faucet. Overflowing, Monk, John, I can't shut off its drowning.

— Wrong? I guess you're forfeiting. Not screaming for. Ice! Cream!

— Now wait a minute, man. Take five. I don't blow over any quitting, no sir.

— Change the changes. Quitting. That's knowing, as I know. What you. Time! On Nellie. For ice cream.

— A challenge is a challenge. I don't need any ice cream, man, I was only fooling. It's just I can't split, not just yet.

— From the churn!

— Look, Monk, Nellie, she's been in there awhile, right? She's not right. Not right. Unright. And, look, man, I'm trying to tell you something's about to be wrong with me, man. You dig me, man?