If some ultimate simplicity saved him, some writer's instinct to know that no account of an unpleasant event could survive its evasions—few authors have the courage to work with that!—it is just as well to recognize that Miller was not necessarily born with such simplicity but achieved it out of his own literary struggles and was forever losing it and regaining it and finally forged his escape from his life by daring to live at the deepest level of honesty he could endure in his life. This is not to say that he was always more honest than anyone else—his evasions also stand out—but it is not how absolutely honest we are, so much as the torture we are willing to bear in the attempt to be honest which works as the lever of such literary deliverance. It is possible a coward attempting to be brave can light more iridescence in the cosmos than a brave man fulfilling a routine demand on his courage. The point is that Miller came out of a background which gave no medals for honesty, the parents from whom he emerged were at odds with each other, and his Brooklyn milieu, first Williamsburg then Bushwick at the turn of the century, was closed to the idea of literature itself.

Genius may depend on the ability to find a route between irreconcilables in oneself, and Miller's parents, by his description, were fundamentally apart. His father was a gentleman, a boss tailor, just so much of a gentleman as a custom tailor for gentlemen, a finely dressed German tradesman, progressively more devoted with each decade of his life to those sentiments of twilight which drinking with business cronies will arouse through elongated lunch hours that do not end until evening. A restaurant with a nice drinking clientele is Valhalla on long afternoons to middle-class men not getting along with their wives. Miller's mother was also German, junker in comparison to his father whose spirit next to hers might seem Viennese. A strong dour intolerant German woman, the mother was impeccably thrifty and irretrievably hostile to any idea she had not heard every day for the last forty years. The only notion she and her husband share is their absolute anti-Semitism. There is not a single suggestion in all of Miller's writing that even one sexual vibration came from her ever into the family circle.

My people were entirely Nordic, which is to say idiots. Every wrong idea which has ever been expounded was theirs. Among them was the doctrine of cleanliness, to say nothing of righteousness. They were painfully clean. But inwardly they stank. Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul; never once did they dream of taking a blind leap into the dark. After dinner the dishes were promptly washed and put in the closet; after the paper was read it was neatly folded and laid away on a shelf; after the clothes were washed they were ironed and folded and then tucked away in the drawers. Everything was for tomorrow, but tomorrow never came. The present was only a bridge and on this bridge they are still groaning, as the world groans, and not one idiot ever thinks of blowing up the bridge.

Tropic of Capricorn

At one point when Miller was already thirty-five, twice-married and so penniless he and his second wife had to separate in order to live rent-free with their own parents, Miller trying to write would have to hear his mother say, "If anyone comes, a neighbor of one of our friends, put that typewriter away and hide in the closet. Don't let them know you're here." A mother's shame! "I stood in that closet sometimes for over an hour, the camphor balls choking me. . . . All my life she hated the idea of me being a writer."

His sister was mentally retarded. When they were children, the kids used to call her "Crazy Loretta." Miller at eighty reminisces about his mother and sister:

. . . my sister couldn't attend school because she was so backward. So my mother decided to teach her herself.
My mother was never meant to be a teacher. She was terrible. She used to scold her, crack her, fly into a rage. She’d say, “How much is two times two?” and my sister, who hadn’t the faintest idea of the answer, would say, “Five, no—seven, no—three.” Just wild. BANG. Another slap or crack. Then my mother would turn to me and say, “Why do I have to bear this cross? What did I do to be punished so?” asked me, a little boy, “Why is God punishing me?” You can see what kind of woman she was. Stupid? Worse than that . . . I never felt any warmth from her. She never kissed me, never hugged me. I don’t ever remember going to her and putting my arms around her. I didn’t know mothers did that till one day I visited a friend at his home. We were twelve years old. I went home from school with him and I heard his mother’s greeting. “Jackie, oh Jackie,” she says, “Oh darling, how are you, how have you been?” She puts her arms around him and kisses him. I never heard that kind of language—even that tone of voice. It was new to me. Of course, in that stupid German neighborhood, they were great disciplinarians, really brutal people.

*My Life and Times*

How, in such a pass, does one arrive at a first love? He spends his adolescence “madly, passionately in love with my high school sweetheart.” She is blonde with blue eyes. “I never went steady with her,” he states at eighty. In his novels she reappears over and over. She is never aware of his existence. “That lasted three years! And it was a tremendous thing. Every evening after dinner I walked to her home and back again. It took almost an hour to reach her home, and all I did was walk past her house to see if by chance she might be at the window.” At nineteen he meets an “attractive widow” old enough to be his mother and has his first affair, even lives

CRAZY COCK

with the widow and her child for a period. He is in and out of City College—quits after the first two months of his Freshman year, goes in rigorously, Germanically, at keeping himself in top physical condition over the next seven years and one can believe it when his sexual exploits begin, for later he will stay up all night drinking, have three or four orgasms with one woman, come home and make love to his wife, pick up an hour of sleep and be off to work at his job—he is employment manager of messengers at Western Union. It is then 1920, and he is close to thirty. This Side of Paradise is being published. Whereas Miller has spent his twenties in traveling through the west, working as a ranch hand, working in his father’s shop, getting married in 1917, having a daughter, going through a dozen jobs, then another dozen, dreaming of writing, never daring to, carousing instead with friends and developing a powerful ability to cheat on his first wife.

The longer we lived together the worse it got. We had started out on the wrong foot and nothing could ever right the situation. Every friend or acquaintance my wife had was destined to betray her. Her pride and suspiciousness egged me on. Even when I took the baby out in the perambulator she kept her eye on me. She had good reason, I must admit, to be ever on the watch. Often I would leave the house, innocent like, with the baby carriage, to keep an appointment with one of her friends. Sometimes I’d park the carriage outside an apartment house and take her friend inside, under the stairs, for a quickie. Or, if there was a gathering at the house, I would go off with one of her friends to buy food or drink, and on the way I’d stand her up against a fence and do what I could. If I hadn’t finally been caught with my pants down I think I’d have driven the poor woman stark mad. It was truly abominable the way I treated her, but I was simply powerless to act otherwise. There was something about her which inspired the most contemptible conduct.

*The World of Sex*