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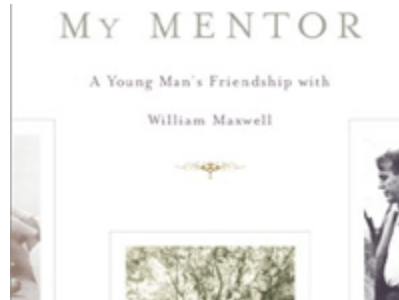
## Books

### **My Mentor: A Young Man's Friendship with William Maxwell**

**Alec Wilkinson**  
*Houghton Mifflin*

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Available for purchase at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

## Chapter One

William Maxwell and his wife, Emily, lived down the road from my parents, and Maxwell was my father's closest friend. My father was the art director of the magazine *Woman's Day*. Three days a week, Maxwell edited fiction at *The New Yorker*, and on the other four days he wrote novels and stories. My father drove to the train station by the Hudson River in a jeep he bought for twenty-five dollars from a dealer in Army surplus. On the mornings when Maxwell also took the train, my father stopped at the end of Maxwell's driveway and pressed on the horn. They were so comfortable with each other that if they spoke at all during the ride it was about the furnace not working properly, or the poison ivy taking over a stone wall, or how to keep a water pipe in the basement from freezing, or whether a woman who lived up the road was as pretty as my father insisted she was. Their intimacy was of the kind that excluded other people; a man who sometimes rode with them once said dismissively, "They're like an old married couple." When my father's first wife sat up late sewing a ruffle around the edge of the bed my father was trying to sleep in, Maxwell used it in a story, and when my mother, standing in his flower garden, remarked, "Children and roses reflect their care," he used that, too.

My father was an amateur photographer, and he took the portrait of Maxwell on the dust jacket of a novel he published in the nineteen-forties. He read Maxwell's books and was proud of their inscriptions to him and my mother on the flyleaves, and he clipped their reviews and stuck them between the books' pages, but he wasn't literary. He was impatient and earthy and impulsive. He was indifferent to social conventions, and his opinions were bluntly expressed—I doubt whether Maxwell ever said anything pointed without considering its effect on the feelings of the person he was talking to. My father was also unhesitating in his friendship. If the phone rang and it was Maxwell saying that a storm had blown a tree across his driveway or that his car wouldn't start, my father would stop what he was doing, find a saw or a gas can, and head down the hill to the Maxwells' house.

I was aware of Maxwell among my father's friends; he was quieter than the rest of them and his face tended to give away his feelings.

Maxwell and my father were introduced by a neighbor on a commuter train platform, before Maxwell was married and had a family. He lived by himself in a cottage that had been delivered to its acre of ground on a flatbed truck, and he grew roses, and my father and his first wife lived up the hill, in a house with a horse barn and horses. My father understood anything he could put his hands on. In his barn he had a room full of tools, and he was an accomplished carpenter. I can imagine him and Maxwell in a scene that Maxwell described to me. It is evening, and darkness has already fallen. Maxwell stands beside my father while he cuts on his jigsaw the façade for the dollhouse that Maxwell is building for his daughters at Christmas.

My father was robust, and Maxwell's frame was slight. My father spent hours on the weekends in the fields and the barn attending to chores, while Maxwell sat at his typewriter. He liked to write in his pajamas and bathrobe and not shave or put on his clothes until he was done for the day, usually around lunchtime, or whenever he thought that his judgment was no longer reliable. He felt unable to write when he was tired. If he accepted an invitation from a neighbor to dinner, he rose from the table in time to be in bed by ten-thirty, with the hostess sternly observing him.

My father was charming and blasphemous and subversive by nature, and Maxwell took pleasure in the way that he embraced life. Whereas Maxwell's emotions tended to show on his face, my father had a tendency to say whatever was on his mind. If the company he was among disappointed him, he looked for new company. Maxwell's nature was sedentary. He disliked change. He didn't especially care for new experiences or all that much for travel, which is unusual in a writer, but Maxwell was a profoundly original writer. Except when he was a young man and had the idea that he might find something to write about if he went to sea, he didn't feel obliged to look around in the world for material. He drew almost entirely for his writing on his childhood in a small town in central Illinois—the sky, the farmhouses, the shaded streets, the flat prairie land; his relatives and neighbors, including the ones in the cemetery he only heard talked about; the subjects he listened to the adults dispose of as he lay on the couch and pretended to be asleep.

Maxwell's dependence on my father was practical, and my father's dependence on Maxwell was emotional. He knew no one else like Maxwell—so receptive, so kind, so quick to respond to gestures of friendship. Maxwell's company was a comfort to him, and my father was affectionate with Maxwell in a way that I never saw him be with another man. On the other hand, I know of no other of his friends who offered the opportunity. It was possible with Maxwell because Maxwell was unafraid of emotion. What people felt is what drew his interest, and he was deeply sympathetic. The gentleness my father expressed in Maxwell's company was balanced, I think, by a feeling that he bore some responsibility for Maxwell's well-being as a householder, the way one farmer might feel toward another the kind of masculine affection that involves a deep acceptance of the other's nature while also being concerned that his friend didn't know enough to come in out of the rain.

I grew up with an awareness of Maxwell, his kindness, his eyes which were expressive of emotion and calm and love, the figure he cut, polished and unhurried and attractive. When he asked me a question he was interested in the answer and wasn't made impatient by the repetitions and false starts children specialize in. The dependence that he and my father shared was eventually passed on to me. When I was twenty-four I decided that I would try to become a writer, because it was clear to me that my hopes of being a rock-and-roll star weren't going to fly. I thought that by being a writer I could make a lot of money without working very hard; then I could go back to being a musician. What I planned to write about was the year I spent as one of nine policemen in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod.

I had become a policeman partly because I regarded myself as a failure, and when I read the advertisement for the position it occurred to me that I might still manage a future for myself if I was a policeman for a year and then went to law school. Also, in the manner of many young men, I thought that I was in need of an experience that was solemn and rigorous and maybe a little bit dangerous, too. I wanted to be in the company of men who knew when it was proper to speak and what to say, and when it was better to say nothing at all. Who carried themselves with an offhand physical well-being that I could only impersonate. Lady-killers. I meant to add myself to them and pay close attention.

In the winter of 1970, while I was in my first year of college, my father quit his job in New York, and he and my mother moved to the house in Wellfleet they had built twenty years earlier. They bought an art gallery, where my father showed his paintings and those of artists he knew, and my mother kept the books. Because I left college for a while to go to California and be a musician, I graduated in December of 1974. A few months later, I read on a sheet of the town's stationery, tacked to the bulletin board on Main Street, the announcement of the policeman's job. In those days, a person reached the police department, above the fire department garage, by means of a long outdoor staircase. When I went through the door with my résumé, one policeman was talking to another. He knew I was there, but he did not break off from his story.

"Guy had this gigantic house," he said. "He was probably, oh, seventy-five, seventy-six. Easily two hundred and fifty pounds. And stubby, not that tall. A fireplug. He knew he was going to die, had a bad heart, wasn't a secret, doctor had told him. He must have had a feeling about it, because what he does is, just before he dies, he decides to go upstairs, and he finds the smallest room he could find—just a cot, a window, and a bureau—and he sits down, takes off his shoes, opens the window, says his prayers, crosses himself, and keels over.

"It's the afternoon now and we get the call. Maid found him, or somebody. Go get him. It took us an hour and fifteen minutes to get him out of there. We pushed, we pulled, we tugged, we lifted. And there's three of us in there, mind you, plus the guy makes four, so you could barely stand, let alone move. August, and I ain't caught my breath lately. And right across the hall was a big master bedroom. He could have gone in there. Very thoughtless."

He turned to me then and said, "What can I do for you?"

I handed him my résumé and said that I wanted to be a policeman. Then I didn't know what else to do, so I held out my hand and he shook it and I left.

At my interview with the town's selectmen, I met the Chief. He was six feet tall, his face was fleshy and high-colored, and with his uniform he wore his policeman's hat. When he shifted in his chair, I could hear his holster creaking. One of the selectmen said, "This is Alec Wilkinson. He has a degree in music."

The Chief said, "Music, huh? That'll be a big help. You ought to fit right in on the department."

A few months later, I asked him why he had hired me, and he said, "Well, it happened like this: there was another fellow, and he was more similar to my way of thinking, but he was committed to a job somewhere else. That left you and another fellow, and he was unacceptable."

I went to work for the first time on a Saturday night at the end of May. The sergeant was waiting for me, with a patrolman named Paul Francis. We went into the Chief's office, which the sergeant used at night. In one of the drawers of the desk, he found a pair of pistols. He weighed them in his hands, then gave me one of them. It had a small patch of rust on the barrel. "I think this one jams," he said of the gun he held on to. Then, "Maybe it's that one. Let me see." He examined them again, then gave me the one he originally held back. It didn't occur to me to ask what kind of gun it was, but I eventually learned it was a .38. I asked another officer, because I noticed that everyone else's gun was much bigger than mine was and also shot flames.

The sergeant asked if I had ever fired such a gun before, and I said that I hadn't. Paul said he would take me out to the firing range, but I guess he forgot.

"Where's the safety?" I asked.

"No safety," the sergeant said.

"You mean it could just go off?"

"No," he said, giving me an estimating look. "I mean, if you drop it, I suppose it could go off."

I said I wouldn't drop it, and he said that would be a good start.

In a closet he found a gun belt for me and a holster and some bullets. Then he said, "All right, you're all set."

Paul and I went out to the police car. I was very excited. We drove along the inlet in back of the station and when we came to a stop sign, Paul turned his head to watch a car going past. "I'm always observing a vehicle going by," he said soberly. "You keep a mental notebook—the license plate, the color, the year, the condition, the type, the driver, the passengers, where it's heading, or where it's just come from. Anyone along the side of the road. You never know when you'll use it. Down in Provincetown they got murders. By Jesus, the guys that did it

drove through this town sure as hell. They could have done it right here and taken them to P-town, for all we know." He began moving the car slowly forward. "So murder could have happened here," he said, "and we don't know about it."

All but one of the other policemen were a few years older than I was. Most of them had been soldiers, and one or two had been to a war. Most of them were raising children. When I tried imitating the assurance they carried themselves with, I felt certain the effort was apparent. Twenty-five years later, I see them for what they were—intelligent and honorable young men at the beginning of lives that changed so substantially that some of them might be said to have collapsed. Several of their marriages dissolved. The Chief was unjustly fired and became a long-haul trucker and was changing a flat tire one night by the side of the road in Florida when he was struck by a car and killed. Another of them took a job with the post office. Another worked twenty years and retired; another drew disability payments because he had high blood pressure and a tendency to overexcitement, and now he drives a school bus. He also drove the school bus the year I was a policeman. One Saturday afternoon in the middle of the winter he walked down the aisle of the Catholic church, in the center of town, with a girl who had been on his route. I happened to pass by in the police car as the church doors opened and they came out and stood on the steps, having their picture taken. About being a policeman he liked to announce, "Your business is our business, and our business is none of your goddam business." Another was a fundamentalist Christian who ran his own trucking and hauling business. He would work from midnight to eight and go home and have breakfast and then haul brush or construction trash all day. His favorite maxim was "It's a great life if you don't weaken," which I didn't think much of at the time, but over the years it has struck me as more and more apt. Paul, someone told me, went over to the religious side of life. He had always been interested in Zen Buddhism and read whatever he could find on the subject. He thought that if he were in a state of enlightenment, he would probably be a better policeman. One night in the police car he told me that if his marriage ever broke up (it did), he would go to Japan and live in a monastery. "I'd hate like hell to do it," he said. "I mean my ego would. I'd think, How are you going to live without all the material things that seem so important to you, but I know you can." The others I have lost touch with.

I realize now that I became a writer partly from a love of music, partly from a sense of deprivation and the impulse to recover things I felt I had lost or never had, partly because it seemed to offer a means of finding order in the world, partly because a solitary childhood had accustomed me to observation and to isolation as a habit of work, and partly because I had something to write about. Driving around Wellfleet in the middle of the night and seeing whose lights were on because they couldn't sleep, or who walked the floors of their houses from night fears and anxiety. Picking up drunks on their way home in winter after the bars had closed and delivering them to their doors and having them fail to recognize me the next day when I stood behind them in line at the post office. Observing who waited until their husbands were away dragging nets on boats whose lights you could sometimes find at night on the horizon before bringing their lovers home. Arriving at someone's house after a child had called because his mother and father were arguing and he was afraid that one of them might reach for a kitchen knife or the shotgun or the pistol in the

closet. Standing beside the old man or woman who had died while watching television for comfort in the middle of the night and been found in the morning by a neighbor. Cutting down the beautiful young woman who had hanged herself from the rafter of her cottage on Christmas Eve. Watching the fishing fleet leave the harbor in a procession toward the horizon at dawn, or the snow fall into the ocean. Firing a shotgun for the first time, to see what it was like, into the sand on the beach in the darkness of a slack moon and having everything go blue around me. Sharing the company of eight other young men I looked up to who couldn't have been more different from me.

During the summer for several hours a night I walked up and down Main Street. This was a job that usually fell to the specials—the local men who were carpenters or members of the town highway crew or just friends of the Chief and were hired part-time to expand the department. The Chief decided that it would be a broadening experience for me, though. "You'll get knocked down a few times up there, I guess," is what he said. "One guy I remember, a special, had a terrible time. He was just about your size, maybe a little bigger. I guess a little bigger. Anyway, the kids walked all over him. Every time he came down on them—told them to move or something—they threw him in the bushes. They told us this; the guy never did. To this day I can't figure out why he kept coming back. I guess he just liked to walk up and down the street with the uniform on."

Every evening a group of teenagers in two or three cars pulled into the town's parking lot and took seats on the bench in front of town hall, like a sullen little flock coming to roost. They found people to buy them beer and hard liquor, which they drank from bottles in paper bags. One of them, a small, defiant, and cherubic boy with curly blond hair, used to wear blue jeans and a black T-shirt that had an obscenity printed on it in white letters and, beneath it, "I am not a tourist. I live here and I don't answer questions." The oldest ones were hands in the fishing fleet and were bigger than I was, and they could see that it made me uneasy to confront them. They delighted in taunting me. Once, after midnight, I was at one end of the street when I heard a car stop, a few hundred feet behind me. In a moment several high-pitched voices called, "Officer. Oh, Officer," and then the car took off. I ran up the street, and when I arrived in front of the two-cash-register grocery store I saw something that was like a vision. The kids had sprayed the picture window with lighter fluid and set a match to it, and what I saw were flames that appeared to be floating several feet above the ground, as if nothing were on fire but the air. In a few more seconds they were gone.

Because I was new and awkward and unreliable and had never been properly trained, I usually worked from midnight until eight in the morning. Over the winter I worked by myself from two o'clock on. Before the other patrolman went home, we parked the newer of the cruisers outside the trailer where the Chief and his wife lived, in the woods above the highway, so that he could drive it to work in the morning. From Paul and another officer, named Joe Hogan, I learned to occupy myself when I was working with someone else by playing spotlight tag: one cruiser hid and one was it, and you were tagged when the other driver shined his spotlight on you. I learned that when enough snow had fallen, I could race the police car nearly the length of the parking lot at Newcomb Hollow and then apply the brakes and spin the wheel and turn the car in circles. I learned to wait by the

Cumberland Farms for Clem Silva, who drove the Provincetown ambulance. When he made a night run to the hospital in Hyannis, he would stop afterward at the donut store and fill the back of the ambulance with the leftover donuts and distribute them to the policemen along his way home. I learned that sometimes I could drive the length of Route 6, the state road through town, seven miles, on the wrong side of the yellow line and not meet anyone. One night on the police radio I heard a dispatcher in another town call his cruiser and say, "Uh, EZ-7, you want to check a report of a car on its roof on Route 137."

The policeman in EZ-7 said, "Yeah, would that be an accident, or what?"

And the dispatcher said, "Unless he drives it that way, it is."

I loved driving the police car. I loved the sense of privilege it gave me, knowing that I could go anywhere I wanted to—down any private road, up any driveway, past any No Trespassing sign—and no one could tell me not to. I loved knowing my way around the interior—which switch turned on the roof lights and which disengaged the shotgun from its bracket. I loved having the lights and the siren going and driving as fast as I could and having people need to get out of my way. I loved being in it late at night when the town was quiet and peaceful and I felt like a big fish finning its way along the bottom of its home river. It was the only part of being a policeman that I never grew tired of, but I never got any good at it, either. Driving down a back road on my first night alone, I lost control of the car heading into a turn and torpedoed into the woods. Another time, on a sand road out by the ocean, I tried to drive under a tree limb and broke the lights on the roof. Another time, going faster than I should have down a different sand road, I hit an exposed root with one of the front wheels and cracked the ball joint, and the wheel caved in and the car would go forward only in a circle. Another time, in the parking lot of the post office, I was engaged in a reverie and I drove slowly into a cement retaining wall. For a long time the Chief forbade me to drive a car unless no one else was working.

During the winter from midnight to eight there wasn't really much for me to do. Turn the doorknobs on the town's businesses to make sure they were locked. Arrest drunk drivers. Accompany the school bus in the morning. When I couldn't think of anything else to occupy me, I sometimes found a place in the woods or down by the ocean and turned the radio all the way up so that I would hear the dispatcher if she called, and closed my eyes. The way the light came into the sky in the morning made me think of sediment settling in water until the water slowly turns clear again.

I did not read many books as a child, and I read only three or four in college. One of them was *The Godfather*, which I read because I had seen the movie. Another was *Look Homeward, Angel*, by Thomas Wolfe, from which I retained only the sentence "The night was a cool bowl of lilac darkness." I thought that if such an observation was writing, I couldn't be a writer. One regarded the world poetically, or one didn't.

I considered writing a book because when I told people the things that were happening to me as a policeman, they usually said, "You should write a book." I bought a tape recorder then, and every night by myself in the police car, when I should have been working, I tried to

describe what was happening to me, which was that I was sitting in the police car talking into a tape recorder. I now think it's strange that it didn't occur to me to write down the things that were happening, but it didn't. When the year was over, I sat at my typewriter. Nothing I wrote sounded genuine or convincing or even as if it had happened. I bought a ticket to Europe and stayed six months making money as a musician, and one night I stayed at a house in Paris, and from a shelf in the guest bedroom I took down a copy of *Across the River and Into the Trees*, by Ernest Hemingway. When I got to the end, I thought, I can do that. What gave me confidence was that Ernest Hemingway wrote very short sentences without flowery images, and he performed no pirouettes on the page. I didn't know there was more to writing than that. I also didn't know that the book is probably Hemingway's worst novel. I went home to Wellfleet with the plan of visiting my family at Thanksgiving and collecting the wardrobe I would need to write with pencils in notebooks in cafés in Paris, preferably at night, or maybe late in the afternoon, when the light would be perfect. For my picture on the dust jacket I was pretty sure I would wear a beret. I also thought I would include a preface, which I would sign, AW, Paris, France.

I don't remember why I gave up the idea of going back to Paris, but I did. I sat down in a room again and resolved to get to work. When I had completed two chapters, I sent them to a writer my parents knew. He showed them to the editor who published his books, and she wrote back, saying, "I cannot encourage this young man enough to abandon this project."

I persevered by thinking that I was the only young person in America writing a book. At least I didn't know anyone else who was writing a book. Anyway, I was the only one writing a book about being a small-town policeman.

It was my father's idea that I show what I was writing to Maxwell. I wouldn't have thought of it on my own. I didn't know the regard that serious writers had for Maxwell's work and his opinions. I saw his name on the spines of his books on my parents' bookshelves, but I hadn't read the books. I read books quickly and promiscuously then and without much appreciation for what the writer was up to. I was protected by my innocence from feeling self-conscious about the writing that I was showing to Maxwell, and he was not the sort of person who felt the need to impress people, to have an audience or acolytes; there was nothing in him of the self-inflater. A few years earlier he had retired from *The New Yorker*, after forty years, and was devoting himself to writing, and except occasionally, when a friend showed him a draft of a novel, no one was asking for his help. The writers who sometimes dedicated their books to him and who had relied on his judgment—Salinger, Nabokov, Cheever, Welty, Updike, John O'Hara, Frank O'Connor, Shirley Hazzard, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mavis Gallant, Larry Woiwode, Allan Gurganus, and Harold Brodkey among them—sent him what they had written in the hope that he would buy it, not that he would show them how to make it into something they might publish.

I'm sure that he never before saw writing as naïve as mine, unless it was during the period in his twenties when he taught writing to college freshmen. At *The New Yorker* a story in so unpromising a state wouldn't have come to his attention; someone would have seen it first and rejected it. What he saw that made him encourage me, I don't

know. All he said was that I learned quickly, which must at least have made him feel that he wasn't wasting his time. Undoubtedly he was helping me because of his feelings for my father.

For the last ten years of Maxwell's life—he was ninety-one when he died, in the summer of 2000—I tried to hold in mind the awareness that he wouldn't be here forever. He came close to dying on two occasions, from pneumonia, the old person's friend. The first time he got it, he misunderstood a doctor in the emergency room who asked whether he wished to have extraordinary measures taken to keep him alive. What he thought the doctor was asking was whether he wanted his life maintained by a machine if he had a collapse, and he didn't. The next morning he gave an account of things that had gone on in the intensive care ward during the night that couldn't possibly have happened, but in a few weeks he came home to his apartment on the Upper East Side and picked up his life again; that is to say, had people to tea, walked along the river, read, wrote.

His wife, whom he loved dearly, began a course of chemotherapy. In addition, a form of cancer he had suffered almost twenty years earlier appeared to be returning. He began to decline. I read his books again. I read letters I'd got from him. I talked to him almost every day on the phone, and I saw him as often as I could. He and his wife were no longer able to use the house in the country, the one on the road where I had grown up, and my wife and son and I went to it nearly every weekend. I worked at his desk. I watered the geraniums on the sill in his study. I wore his down jacket when I went for a walk. I wrote a piece about him for *The New Yorker*, and after it was published I decided that I wanted to write something more. Before I began, Mrs. Maxwell died, at seventy-eight, on July 23, 2000. Maxwell died eight days later. I wrote something to read at the memorial service Mrs. Maxwell planned with her daughters. Sometimes while I wrote, I felt tears prick the backs of my eyes and had to stop and brush them away. I was aware that Maxwell had wept while writing one of his novels that dealt with the death of his mother, and it made me feel as if I were imitating him, but I missed him so much that I didn't seem able to stop. Furthermore, I didn't care if I was imitating him. What difference would it make if I were.

The service was held on a mild afternoon in the fall at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Hundreds of people came. Afterward, as Mrs. Maxwell had specified, there was a horse to take the children on rides and ice cream for everyone. Even so, I found it a difficult experience. The formality of the occasion and its somber purpose insisted that I accept that they were gone, and I wasn't prepared to.

I had expected that when the memorial passed, I would return to writing about Maxwell. No other subject meant anything to me. To my surprise, I found I could write nothing about him except generalities. Years ago I had shown Maxwell a draft of a story I was trying to write about my mother that had come to a dead end. He read it and said, "Is that all you have to say about your mother?" I knew that there was a lot more that I wanted to say about Maxwell, but when I tried to write, I felt as if I couldn't remember what it was, or, when I could, that it didn't amount to much after all. It was as if I hadn't known him as well as I thought I had. I was grateful for Maxwell's friendship and influence. I knew that he didn't care to be grieved over, and that he had lived a long and happy life. "Who ever would have thought," he

once said, "that the fragile little boy from Lincoln would have had such a time of it." And I knew that he had accomplished something very few writers in his century had: he had written books that lasted. But even so I felt an immobility that kept me from doing what I wanted to do.

I decided that it was one thing to write about Maxwell when he was alive, and, by writing, not only hope superstitiously to keep him alive but also to declare my feelings for him, and that it would be another to write about him if he had been dead for several years and I had had time to become reconciled. It was different, though, to write about him while I felt so bereft. It was probably not possible. I could not, apparently, make the portion of me that was resistant take part if it wasn't inclined to.

A few weeks after the service, I was awake in the middle of the night. After the Second World War, the Maxwells spent four months traveling in France, where Mrs. Maxwell had been as a child and Maxwell had never been. They intended to look for two things she remembered: a church at the end of a streetcar line, and a chateau with a green lawn in front of it. At the sight of the coastline through the porthole of their cabin, Maxwell felt a stirring in his heart that was wholly unexpected. Every town they saw, every street, every experience, even the weather and the brightness of the air, made an impression on him. They stayed until their money ran out. As I lay awake, I remembered his saying that when he walked in the door of the house in the country, before he took off his coat or his hat, he rolled a piece of paper into his typewriter and wrote down all the things that he hoped to include in a novel about an American couple making a tour of France. The Chateau took him more than ten years to write. It was his way, he said, of not coming home, of creating a facsimile of France in his imagination and inhabiting it. As I thought of this, something within me relaxed its grip, and I knew that when I sat down to work the next morning, I would be able to write.

To console, on the occasion of the death of her mother, the daughter of a young woman who had grown up with Mrs. Maxwell, Maxwell wrote to her, near the end of his life, "I see no reason to doubt that people have souls, and animals too, and what happens when the soul and the body part company, if they do, is anybody's guess, but over our hearts, death has no dominance."

This account of my friend and what he taught me is my means of refuting his death.

Having my most intimate friend be nearly twice my age did not seem unusual to me, partly because I am no longer captivated by things that younger people are concerned with. I attribute this to having been the youngest by far in a family of four brothers. Every privilege, every opportunity, every excitement and pleasure appeared to be reserved for people older than I was. When I arrived at a landmark I had seen on the horizon, my brothers had given it up for another that was just as remote. What was behind me didn't seem valuable. I also don't much care what younger people are interested in because I was young, and I remember what it was like. I have no desire to have the same experiences, or to reenact them at second hand through the experiences of people who now are young. Popular culture tirelessly celebrates excess, outrage, and adolescent beauty, none of which appeals to me anymore. To have too close an interest in the lives of

young people at this point in my life would amount nearly to a perversion. Furthermore, it seems unnatural to me to be unwilling to get older. It takes courage, of course, but the pleasures only deepen, and the most fortunate of us achieve some sort of wisdom.

A few years ago, Knopf published a volume of letters exchanged by Maxwell and Frank O'Connor, the Irish writer whose real name was Michael O'Donovan. It is called *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right*. Maxwell describes being awakened at night by his daughters when they were little, or the difficulty he is having making a piece of writing come out, or a trip to his in-laws on the Oregon coast, and I read the letters closely because, except for the material about his childhood that appears in his books or that he described in interviews, I knew hardly anything about his life when he was young. He was a figure from my childhood, and whatever daydreams I had then didn't include imagining what older people were doing when I didn't see them or who they might have been when they didn't look exactly as I was accustomed to having them look.

It is not my plan to write a literary biography. Someone else will do that; I haven't got either the objectivity or the critical equipment the project requires. If I am to persuade you, though, of why Maxwell meant so much to me, I have first to give an account of what he was like and a suggestion of what made him that way. Style is character. Over time we cannot help revealing ourselves to anyone who is paying close attention. It doesn't even require from them much in the way of a talent for awareness. What depth we might have, the complexity of our natures, our capacities for sympathy, and a mature relation to self-interest. Whether or not we can be trusted, not only with secrets but to regard another person's existence with the same importance we view our own with.

As briefly as I can, then, and before I take up the education he gave me, I would like to tell what I know of Maxwell's past and to describe him. When we are young, the world seems full of great men and women, and as we grow older we lose them. He was the greatest man I ever knew, and there will be, I hope, if I manage it accurately, some benefit—something sustaining and inspiring—in recalling him. The worst I can be, after all, is wrong.

Maxwell was an elderly man when his older brother died, and he realized, he told me, that "no one any longer remembers the things that I do," meaning the house in Lincoln, Illinois, where they lived with their mother and father, and which they left for an apartment in Chicago when their younger brother was two. Toward the end of his life it was borne in on me that if I didn't ask him about his past, there would be no one to enlighten me once he was gone.

He was born on August 16, 1908. As a child he heard horses pulling wagons up the street past his parents' house. Twelve thousand people lived in Lincoln, many of them farmers or coal miners or the descendants of such people. Maxwell's father was the species of traveling businessman called a drummer—someone whose responsibility, that is, was to drum up work for his company. He loved nothing more than being home. Here are some sentences about him from Maxwell's story "The Front and Back Parts of the House," written when he was in his eighties and his father had been dead for thirty years:

"Though it took me a while to realize it, I had a good father. He left the house early Tuesday morning carrying his leather grip, which was heavy with printed forms, and walked downtown to the railroad station. As the Illinois state agent for a small fire and windstorm insurance company he was expected to make his underwriting experience available to local agents in Freeport, Carbondale, Alton, Carthage, Dixon, Quincy, and so on, and to cultivate their friendship in the hope that they would give more business to his company. I believe he was well liked. Three nights out of every week he slept in godforsaken commercial hotels that overlooked the railroad tracks and when he turned over in the dark he heard the sound of the ceiling fan and railway cars being shunted. He knew the state of Illinois the way I knew our house and yard."

Maxwell's attachment to his mother was such that when some instinct told him that she was no longer in the room, he would often pick himself up and go looking for her. These sentences are from his novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, published in 1980:

"My younger brother was born on New Year's Day, at the height of the influenza epidemic of 1918. My mother died two days later of double pneumonia. The worst that could happen had happened, and the shine went out of everything. Disbelieving, we endured the wreath on the door, and the undertaker coming and going, the influx of food, the overpowering odor of white flowers, and all the rest of it, including the first of a series of housekeepers, who took care of the baby and sat in my mother's place at mealtime."

And: "My mother's sisters and my father's sisters and my grandmother all watched over us. If they hadn't, I don't know what would have become of us, in that sad house, where nothing ever changed, where life had come to a standstill. My father was all but undone by my mother's death. In the evening after supper he walked the floor and I walked with him, with my arm around his waist. I was ten years old. He would walk from the living room into the front hall, then, turning, past the grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the living room. Or he would walk from the library into the dining room and then into the living room by another doorway, and back to the front hall. Because he didn't say anything, I didn't either. I only tried to sense, as he was about to turn, which room he was going to next so we wouldn't bump into each other. His eyes were focused on things not in those rooms, and his face was the color of ashes."

Maxwell's father was handsome and fond of the company of women. He had three small children to take care of, and no one expected he would live out his life as a widower. Having observed a period of mourning that lasted several years, he remarried, and two years after that was promoted to a position that required him to move to Chicago. Maxwell wrote poetry in high school, and to illustrate posters for the drama society made pen-and-ink drawings in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. Answering a questionnaire for an academic when he was eighty-nine, Maxwell wrote that he didn't really think that he could say what were the most exciting moments of his career, there had been so many. Looking through a porthole at the age of forty and seeing the coast of France, the day his wife agreed to marry him, the days on which his two daughters were born, reading Tolstoy's *Master and Man* for the

first time. "Perhaps," he also wrote, "it was my meeting with the Wisconsin novelist Zona Gale when I was seventeen."

Maxwell had gone to Wisconsin for the summer with a friend who had talked a man there into giving him and Maxwell jobs at a lake near Portage. "The man who gave us the job had got drunk and agreed to it with my friend," Maxwell told me, "and when I showed up, I weighed a hundred and twelve pounds and was frail. They were dismayed, but I was stronger than I looked. My friend became a lifeguard, and I worked on cleaning out a basement, but there wasn't enough for me to do. There was a woman in the town named Mrs. Green, who was of an enthusiastic nature and took crushes on people, and she gave me a job on her farm, and the day I arrived, her older daughter said, 'I have some strawberries to give to Mr. Gale.' She took me with her, and while she was talking to Mr. Gale, who sat in a chair on the porch with a blanket over his knees, Zona showed me around the house. She was more than thirty years older than I was and soft-spoken, and we talked only about me, which at that age was something. She treated me as her intellectual equal, and I was by no means that. I had just finished my junior year of high school.

"The next day I was pulling weeds in the vegetable garden when I heard the phone ringing. A few minutes later Mrs. Green came out on the porch and said, 'That was Miss Gale. She said come to dinner Wednesday and bring the little Maxwell.' She was not quite of her time; she was a mistake. No one much reads her now or even knows who she is, but in those days there was a good chance that if you picked up a magazine you might find a story of hers in it, and her play *Miss Lulu Bett* won the Pulitzer Prize. She wrote for ladies' magazines for money and then she wrote serious books, and sometimes the two got mixed up, especially toward the end of her life. She was absolutely angelic to me. She once wrote me a letter from Japan to say that after a dinner at which she had been the guest of honor, four hundred fireflies had been let loose in the garden for their amusement. Which was what any adolescent would like to hear, that life was not flat."

Maxwell planned to study painting at the Chicago Art Institute. What happened instead is that the friend he had gone to Wisconsin with came down with pleurisy while working as a lifeguard. The boy's parents thought his health wasn't good enough to allow him to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana, but Maxwell said he would help him do what was necessary, and his parents agreed. Maxwell liked the campus and enrolled. "If my friend hadn't got pleurisy," he said, "I would have enrolled, as I'd planned to do, in the Chicago Art Institute and perhaps not have been a writer at all but some hack artist, for I wasn't all that talented."

Maxwell graduated second in a class of twelve hundred. Among the honors he collected was a scholarship to graduate school offered by the Harvard Club of Chicago. In those days, a doctorate in English required a reading knowledge of German. Maxwell had taken two years of German as an undergraduate, but something happened to him over the summer so that when he got to Harvard all German words looked alike, including the prefixes and suffixes. Since he had had no trouble in college with Latin, French, Greek, or Italian, he assumed the difficulty was the result of the political cartoons he had seen as a boy in the pages of the *Lincoln Evening Herald*—Huns with babies spitted on their bayonets and Belgian women with their hands cut off. He thought

that the textbooks' being printed in Gothic letters may have contributed to the problem.

To overcome his deficiency, Maxwell enrolled at Harvard in an advanced undergraduate course on the works of Goethe, which he memorized in English so that when they appeared on his graduate exams he could recognize them and remember what they were about. Day after day he set his alarm clock for five in the morning in order to have more hours to study. By February he was so tired that one morning when the alarm went off, he couldn't get out of bed. He lay in the dark with tears running down his face. Finally he summoned the memory of his father's father, who as a young man walked from Ohio to Illinois looking for a job teaching school. He died before Maxwell was born, but Maxwell asked for his help and felt that he got it. He ended up with a B in the course when a C would have been failing. With so undistinguished a showing, he couldn't expect further scholarship.

In the fall he went back to the University of Illinois and for two years taught writing to freshmen and graded papers for a course on Tennyson. That without a reading knowledge of German he would be unable to get a Ph.D. at Urbana or anywhere else and become a professor of English or even be allowed to go on indefinitely grading freshman papers was a fact that he somehow concealed from himself.

As is common in university towns, people with big old houses rented rooms to students. Maxwell lived in the house of a retired banker whose daughter, Garreta Busey, was a member of the English department. She had been on the staff of the New York Herald Tribune weekly book section. The paper sent her books to review and once, when there was a death in the Busey family, she turned the job over to Maxwell. After that, the paper sent books to both of them. "Garreta was several years older than I was," Maxwell told me, "and I have never had a better friend. She was strikingly beautiful, with her dark hair, braided, worn in a crown around her head. She was highly intelligent, humorous, witty, generous, and with literary aspirations of her own. She published a novel, *The Windbreak*, about Illinois farm life, and a volume of her poetry was published after she died."

A professor at Yale asked Busey to turn a two-volume life of Thomas Coke of Holkham into forty pages. Coke was an agriculturist of the late eighteenth century. Busey wrote about his farming innovations and gave Maxwell the parts that dealt with his social life, the parties and balls, and especially his aunt, Lady Mary Coke, who refused to live with her husband, who was boorish, dressed her servants in pea-green and silver, fished in her ornamental goldfish pond when she was melancholy, corresponded with Horace Walpole, suffered from the delusion that the Empress Maria Theresa was trying to hire away her servants, and in old age slept in a dresser drawer.

"All this gave me such delight," Maxwell said, "that when the job was done, I turned to and wrote a novel, so I could go on making sentences. Up to that time I had written poetry exclusively, but I was not actually a poet. Anyway, it didn't end there. I had a vision of the course of my life, through the various stages of advancement until I became a professor emeritus and was carried out in a wooden box. I didn't want to know what my life was like before I led it, so one day I went into the office of the chairman of the English department and resigned. In the year 1933, the worst period of the Depression, it

would be hard to think of anything more foolhardy."

To finish his novel, which he first called Snake-Feeders, then Thundercloud, and finally Bright Center of Heaven, Maxwell moved to Mrs. Green's farm in Wisconsin and did work around the place in exchange for meals and a place to sleep. This is from a story, written when he was nearly ninety, called "The Room Outside":

"When I was in my middle twenties, I spent a winter on a farm in southern Wisconsin. There it was much colder than it was in Illinois, where, with the wind coming down from Lake Michigan, God knows it is cold enough. Bales of hay were banked all around the foundations of the farmhouse, which was heated by two sheet-iron wood-burning stoves, one upstairs and one downstairs in the room next to my small bedroom. And, of course, the cookstove in the kitchen. In the morning when I woke I sometimes saw a broad band of yellow light in the sky that I have never seen anywhere else, and before I could wash my face I often had to break a thin glaze of ice in the water pitcher on my dresser. The window had to be propped open, by a wooden spool in ordinary weather, a smaller spool if the temperature was twenty below, and if it was colder than that I didn't open the window at all. It was up to me to see that the woodbox in the kitchen was never empty and fill the reservoir on the side of the stove. The air was usually so dry you could run out of the house in your shirtsleeves and fill a bucket of water at the pump but you couldn't touch the pump handle with your bare hands. I also had to keep a patch of ground bare and sprinkled with corn for the quail. If it rained when the temperature was hovering around thirty-two degrees their feathers froze and they couldn't fly into the shelter of the woods.

"Eventually there was so much snow on the roads that the snowplow couldn't get through and we were snowbound. One evening after supper the telephone rang, and it was a neighbor saying that the mailman had got as far as the Four Corners, where our mailbox was. I put on extra-heavy underwear and, bundled to the eyes in sweaters and woolen scarves, I started to ski to the Four Corners. The snowdrifts were higher than the horse-and-rider fences, obliterating the divisions between the fields, and I saw what nobody in the family and none of the neighboring farmers had ever seen: a pack of wild dogs running in a circle in the bright moonlight."

When the book was done, he took it to Zona Gale and asked her not whether it was any good, but whether it was a novel. She said that it was. In late 1933, before it had been accepted by a publisher, Maxwell went to New York. On the dust jackets of the period the author had commonly been to sea, and Maxwell hoped that if he found a ship in the harbor that would take him aboard, it would give him something to write about. He was twenty-five years old. At a party he met a man who wrote popular sea stories and who gave him a letter of introduction to the captain of a four-masted schooner that belonged to J. P. Morgan and was anchored in Gravesend Bay, off Staten Island. Maxwell hired a rowboat to take him out to the ship, where he found that the man his letter was addressed to had left the day before. The only member of the crew was a sailor chipping rust, with a police dog beside him. The new captain read Maxwell's letter and then explained that the ship had not left anchor in four years and was not likely to. A family friend had also arranged an interview for Maxwell at B. Altman's, a department store, where there was an opening for an elevator boy,

but the personnel manager decided he was too well educated. "After a week," he said, "you'd be insulting the customers."

Maxwell was living in the Railroad Men's YMCA on Lexington Avenue at Forty-ninth Street, and in their library he came on a book by Lafcadio Hearn about the beautiful city of St. Pierre, Martinique. He decided to go there but discovered that it had been destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1902. Even so, he thought, there must be vestiges of it still, and he booked passage on a small, dingy freighter, in February. The decks were covered with temporary stables to accommodate a cargo of Missouri mules. There were six passengers in the dining salon. One was a British novelist who dressed for dinner as if she were on the Mauritania. Two Y-shaped scars on her cheeks suggested an inept face-lift. She said she was a countess, and the crew were seen everywhere reading copies of her books. Maxwell was reading *War and Peace*, and she asked him if he was traveling incognito. In the end she overcame his snobbish resistance, and they became friends. He got off the boat at Trinidad and stayed there several days. On one of them he went to the races. In the evening, when they were over, immigrants from India set up card tables all around the track and gambled by candlelight.

From Trinidad he took a boat to Martinique, where the next morning there was a double rainbow over the harbor at Fort-de-France, and the purser gave him the name of a good pension. In an effort to gather material he wandered through the streets. The women wore the costume Hearn had described—a madras turban and a dress with a small bustle—but nothing else was recognizable. It was carnival time, and he was sometimes accosted by two or three towering young black men dressed in baby clothes, who demanded small sums of money. And there was a man with a lion's mane with little bells in it who roamed the streets with fifty little boys following him chanting antiphonally. The movies in the theaters he had already seen. The gray volcanic sand made the beaches uninviting. At nine o'clock the light went on in the kitchen of the pension, and at ten food began to appear on his table, in an open courtyard. It was better food than he had ever had anywhere. At midnight he drew the mosquito netting around him as he fell into bed, drunk from the wine in his carafe. In the crotches of the trees orchids bloomed, and sewage ran down the gutters. He sometimes stood in the door of a dance hall. The music consisted of a single phrase repeated endlessly. The dancers, without moving their feet, ground their pelvises together. The book he had hoped to write eluded him. He sat on a bluff looking out to sea. For the first time in his life he was homesick. A month in Martinique, where he went days at a time without speaking to anyone, seemed like a year in America. One night when he sat down to dinner he found a letter telling him that Harper and Brothers was seriously considering publishing his novel, and he went back on the same freighter he had arrived on.

When the novel appeared, Maxwell was hoping the newspapers would carry large ads. On the day of publication, the publicity director took him to lunch and said, "Now we must pray." The reviews said "promising," and the first edition of a thousand copies sold out, the second didn't, and it is now a collector's item. The central character is a flighty woman who, in the incessant pursuit of order, induces disorder instead. She is reduced to taking paying guests, and when she invites a distinguished black man for the weekend it is more than the social fabric can bear, and there is a partly comic and

unmanageable situation. Maxwell never allowed it to be republished.

From photographs kept in a cabinet in the study of the Maxwells' house in the country, I know that as a boy his features were so finely drawn that he looked almost like a girl. As a young man he had a narrow face, full lips, and a wide, thin mouth. He had brown hair, and his eyes were dark and watery and expressive to the point of radiance, and they remained so all his life. At parties, which he wasn't especially fond of, he tended to find one person whom he could talk to. His voice was whispery, and in order to be heard he sometimes drew a breath and paused or hunched his shoulders and leaned forward. The remarks he made in a tone of voice slightly clearer than his usual one were things you knew he felt strongly about. His posture was slightly stooped from years of sitting at the typewriter. He was about five feet eight inches tall and so slender as to be nearly delicate. His skin toward the end of his life was like paper. His health was always robust, and he had surprising strength, but he was never an athlete.

When you looked into his eyes you felt you were looking into the eyes of someone who understood and accepted you. And didn't require from you something more than you could provide. Or that you be anyone but yourself. Unlike my father's, his attention was not restless. His acceptance made you feel valued. His friends often felt that no matter what they did, he was unlikely to view their behavior judgmentally. It is not that he was without opinions concerning right conduct, or that his moral standards were elastic; it is that once he regarded someone as a friend, he was likely to consider his or her actions sympathetically, as a response to the complications of life or as understandable within the context. He was aware that people don't always act in their best interests, and often make choices that appear to work against them. Self-destructive behavior has its allure and is not easily resisted. When he was in college and distraught over the loss of his closest friend, he cut his wrists with a razor; the event is the climax of *The Folded Leaf*. So far as I know, it is the only act of violence he ever committed.

In his thirties he lived in the country with an elderly French housekeeper. When a neighbor asked about him she said, "He reads, he writes. He writes, he reads." Something in her tone conveyed a mild disapproval. He had read everything worth reading and knew the value of it, and was unmoved by the accepted wisdom or pieties. He was fiercely literate and yet never made a show about it—he had none of the complacency of the academic, and nothing of the critic. That is, he did not try to understand writing by means of the history of the writer, or from what other people said about the writer, or the circumstances of the writer's social life, or whether he had honored certain conventions, or the impression he made at a dinner party, or his appearance in photographs; he knew instead whether the writer had managed what he was attempting in a manner that was dramatic and consistent with the weight of his material and was brilliant or not, or was overwritten, or thought into being rather than felt. Writing that is brought into being by means of thought—that is, writing that draws on what a writer has read and absorbed and has not changed or affected him but made him feel he has capital to spend on advancing himself, that is done without the engagement of the emotions, or in imitation of writing that has been done before, or that is secondhand, or that observes customs—left him unmoved, no matter how popular it might be. The writer's name on a story, known or not, had no influence on his opinion. The writing engaged him or it didn't. His judgment was

acute and penetrating. This is from a letter written when he was in middle age, during the sixties: "Perhaps if I read the poems that are being published in *The New Yorker* just now more conscientiously I would enjoy them, but I tend not to, and I have just begun to see why. They seem as often to be concerned with unconscious rather than conscious feelings, and unconscious feelings can only be expressed, it would appear, by a display of virtuosity in arranging objects and disconnected glimpses of experience." Far better writers than I thought his estimation was unfailingly reliable.

He was sometimes difficult to talk to, because he had no interest in facile or socially polite conversation, lunch party talk. His conversation was about things that mattered to him, and he was not made uncomfortable by hesitations or breaks in an exchange. His silences appeared to be measuring and sometimes made me anxious. It was years before I understood that his habit was to brood until he felt moved to respond. No one's conversation was more literate or informed or compressed. His remarks had the candor and perception and quality of profound thought. Often he said no more than a sentence. In general, as people get older they talk more and become insensitive. As Maxwell got older he talked less and listened more, a form of kindness and an expression of his never-ending interest in the world.

Many of his observations were succinct and subtle and inherently dramatic. As an elderly man, he was driving once in a heavy rain. The turn he made—near the top of a hill, across a lane of traffic onto a road that led to the one where he and his wife lived—was tricky, even in good weather. The car whose path he turned into he never saw. At eighty-seven he walked away from a head-on car crash. The other driver turned out to be a fortune hunter. Deposing Maxwell, the driver's lawyer asked, "How long did the accident take?" Maxwell said, "I thought to myself, you must accept whatever happens." The lawyer complained that it was pointless talking to Maxwell; he clearly didn't understand the questions. His mind was not elegant enough to apprehend that Maxwell had given him a literal answer.

He was essentially shy. He said that you never lose people you love when they die, because you incorporate parts of their personalities into your own as a means of keeping them alive. It was in his mother's nature to be interested socially in the lives of other people, and when he found himself taking pleasure in talking to strangers at parties, he was aware that the impulse could be traced to her.

He had been mindful since childhood of his differences from other people—his sensitivity, his social awkwardness, his preference for reading over being outdoors, his slight frame, his partiality for solitude, his love of classical music and especially opera, the way that having lost his mother left him with a mark that seemed visible to other people. The couple in *The Chateau*, Harold and Barbara Rhodes, resemble the Maxwells. Of Harold Rhodes, Maxwell wrote, "He was thin, flat-chested, narrow-faced, pale from lack of sleep, and tense in his movements. A whole generation of loud, confident Middle-Western voices saying: Harold, sit up straight . . . Harold, hold your shoulders back . . . Harold, you need a haircut, you look like a violinist had had no effect whatever. Confidence had slipped through his fingers. He had failed to be like other people."

It is hard to be an original person, an individual. No one cares for it,

really. Very few people will congratulate you on the accomplishment. At close hand a truly original person is almost always disturbing. Indulgent and self-consciously outrageous behavior, show business boy and girl behavior—attitudes and mannerisms summoned in the attempt to bring notice to a negligible personality—is not the same as being original, because it is necessarily in response to something. A reaction to someone else's point of view. Someone's standards have to be outraged, and once you figure out what they consist of, it's simple to come up with a means of insulting them. It's a tactic for drawing notice, of not being overlooked, and the people who engage in it generally have little of what is required to hold one's attention once they have it. Anyone who is truly original is likely to be taunted, made fun of, his point of view being so divergent from the ordinary, the accepted. An easy mark for torment. He is likely to be to one side or the other of your awareness, not directly in front of anyone's gaze, unless he wasn't able to move out of the way quickly enough. His appearance probably does not matter much to him. His mind is too preoccupied to care about his clothes or whether his haircut is fashionable. He is not likely to care for having people know too much about him, preferring to operate as a subversive. His intentions surely undermine those of the common grain. They don't embrace the rule, the popular or the conventional, and he only feels the restraints such considerations impose.

Maxwell never made a gesture to bring himself or his writing to anyone's notice, and he didn't allow any to be made on his behalf. Such behavior would have pained him.

From his daughters, I know that Maxwell had a temper, but I never saw it. Somewhere he says that it was of the annihilating kind, and that in his heart he knew he was capable of murder. When he was a boy, he grabbed a golf iron and ran after his older brother who had teased him one time too many, and was intercepted before he could lay him out. If he said no, you knew the decision was final, and that it was worthless to try to dissuade him. He did not waste anyone's time and did not like having his wasted, although he was tolerant and so considerate of another person's feelings that he often ended up doing something he didn't want to in order to avoid causing someone discomfort or unhappiness.

Maxwell wrote his second novel, *They Came Like Swallows*, in several places: Mrs. Green's farm in Wisconsin, the MacDowell Colony, and in an upstairs bedroom of the Buseys' house in Urbana, where he graded papers in exchange for room and board. He finished the book when he was twenty-eight and then went back to New York, in 1936, to look for a job.

"My father had given me a hundred dollars, and I had another hundred I didn't tell him about," he said. "I went to a friend of his, the president of an insurance company, to get the check cashed. He had always before been friendly and fatherly to me, and this time he surprised me by being harsh and telling me I had no business trying to get a job in New York, that I wouldn't make it here, and had better get back to my long-haired friends in Wisconsin. About whom he actually knew nothing. From someone at MacDowell I had been given letters of introduction to *The New Republic* and to *Time*, and my editor at Harper had called Katharine White at *The New Yorker* and asked if she would see me. I went first to *The New Republic*, and it took them

only a few minutes to realize that I didn't have a political thought in my head. And it took three weeks to receive an appointment with the personnel office at Time. Meanwhile, my father's friend had made me so furious that I talked myself into a job reading novels for Paramount Pictures. The first book they gave me was called Lady Cynthia Candon's Husband. It was seven hundred pages, and they wanted my account to be five pages long—single- or doublespaced I don't remember—with five carbons. It took me two days to read the book and another day to summarize the action, and then I took it to be typed, since there was very little time left, which cost five dollars. Because it was a long book they gave me a special price of seven-fifty, leaving two-fifty in the clear for three days' work. Then they gave me a second book, which I remember nothing about, and then I went for an interview with Katharine White.

"Wolcott Gibbs, an editor involved with both writers and artists, had grown weary of part of his job, and they were looking for somebody to take his place in the art meeting and convey to the artists, who came in the next day, that their covers and drawings and spots had been bought—which meant usually that there were suggestions for the picture or the caption and sometimes meant that the drawings had to be done over because of some detail that could not be corrected otherwise. Or that they were rejected. And this, nobody needed to tell me, had to be done in such a way that they were not unduly discouraged.

"I hadn't been reading The New Yorker at all. The fact that I had published a novel and had another ready to be published and had had a story in The Atlantic must have worked in my favor. I was twenty-eight and straight out of the Middle West. I don't really remember how I conducted myself; I was interested, leaned forward in my chair, what you do in interviews. Instinct made me keep silent about a significant part of my past; teaching school, I somehow knew, would not be a mark in my favor. At the end of the interview, Mrs. White asked how much I would want in the way of a salary. I had been told by a knowledgeable friend that I must ask for thirty-five dollars, that they wouldn't respect me unless I did. So I took a deep breath and said thirty-five dollars, and she smiled and said, 'I expect you could live on less.' I could have lived nicely on fifteen. I couldn't make out whether the interview had been favorable or not. The thought of reading manuscripts for the movies didn't make me cheerful. I was living on the top floor of a brownstone rooming house on Lexington and Thirty-sixth Street, or thereabouts. I remember the mattress was lumpy, and there were bedbugs. I went down to the Village and wandered around and decided to eat dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Eighth Street, and though there were empty tables, they made me sit with another person. In a bottomless depression I said to myself, there is no place for me anywhere in the world. And after dinner came home and under my door was a telegram from Mrs. White that read, 'Come to work on Monday at the price agreed upon.'"

The New Yorker was eleven years old and had got itself out of financial difficulties and was one of the few places in New York that were untouched by the Depression. "There was a shortage of office space at the time," Maxwell said, "and my desk, in a corner of the rather large outer office where Mrs. White's secretary cracked the whip on a couple of unfortunate stenographers, was right next to Mrs. White's door, which remained open until she had a visitor, in which case she would

rise from her desk and, while talking, release the catch. There were quite a number of visitors, and between the arrival of the visitor and the closing of the door my education into the workings of the magazine advanced at an interesting pace."

On Mondays there was nothing for Maxwell to do. He sat at his desk and looked at a self-portrait by James Thurber drawn in pencil on the wall in front of him. Thurber's drawings were all over the premises. By a water cooler in a corner of a hallway was a drawing of a man walking along in a carefree way and around the corner was a woman waiting for him with a baseball bat held above her head.

"On Tuesdays," Maxwell told me, "the artists—as they were called; actually they were cartoonists—brought their work in, and Tuesday afternoon the art meeting took place, in a room large enough to hold a big table and four chairs. The drawings were propped up so that they could be seen, and everybody had knitting needles, of plastic, to point to details of the drawings. I had one, but didn't use it. Harold Ross was in charge. By common agreement 'roughs,' that is, drawings that indicated what the picture would be like but were only sketches, were rejected or approved—if approved, the artist would make a finished drawing and submit it the following week. Though it was still the best period of New Yorker cartoonists, more often than not the ideas were forced. Since they were one-line jokes, Ross was concerned that the speaker be immediately identifiable. Sometimes the captions were changed. Or if there was a good drawing with a bad caption, it was sent to E. B. White, who was responsible for some of the most famous lines. Most of the ideas were so forced that I found the meeting deadly. Also, I suffered from insomnia and was afraid if I didn't sleep the night before the art meeting I wouldn't know whether something was funny or not. I would look into the mirror at home while I shaved and say, I hope I will recognize what's funny. There're two kinds of humor, the spontaneous, which I am able to get, and the manufactured kind, Perelman, which does nothing for me."

On Wednesdays Maxwell sat beside Rea Irvin, the art editor, while he looked at the spot drawings. "If I liked a drawing," Maxwell said, "he good-naturedly put it in the yes pile." On Thursdays the artists retrieved their drawings, and Maxwell spent the day with one after another of them. "What was odd was that the artists all put themselves in their pictures, so that when they arrived for the first time I was perfectly familiar with them."

Since Maxwell's job took only a day and a half, mercy suggested that a way be found to keep him busy. Mrs. White told him to read the magazine's scrapbooks, and not long after that he was given some manuscripts to read and express his opinions about. "Then I was told I could write some letters of rejection, which I was to leave with Mrs. White's secretary. The next day she called me into her office and closed the door and said, indicating the letters of rejection, 'Mr. Maxwell, did you ever teach school?' Without realizing I was doing it, I had betrayed my secret. I had to confess that for two years I taught freshman composition at the University of Illinois while working toward a Ph.D. that I never got. Very kindly she explained there was a difference between writers, good or bad, and students, and I must not seem, in my letters, to be telling writers how to write."

Mrs. White also encouraged him to submit stories to the magazine.

Being on the inside and seeing the opinion sheets accompanying the manuscripts sent to Ross, Maxwell felt he fairly well understood the sort of material the magazine was looking for and was able to give them what they wanted—"Valentines that arrived on the wrong day, that sort of thing," he said. When he was happy for the check but felt that the story seemed slight or involved people who might recognize themselves when he didn't want them to, he published the story as Jonathan Harrington or as Gifford Brown.

For a while Maxwell worked under Gibbs, preparing authors' proofs, getting rid of what copy editors had added when they were being too pedantic, and removing some of the less sensible queries. "Ross was perceptive about fiction," he said, "and his few comments on a given manuscript were usually to the point. But when he read the story again in galleys, it was quite a different matter. Having the whole magazine to read, he read too fast, misread, or misremembered details and then tried to make things consistent with what the author hadn't, in fact, written. His proofs usually had fifty or sixty queries, of which four were inspired, and the rest were a waste of time. The proofreader's pedantries would have outraged the authors, if they had been permitted to see them, so I was given the job of screening the proofs to save Mrs. White and Gibbs from having to deal with the authors, and by observing how they dealt with the queries, I began to learn what editing was.

"The pieces given to me to edit were usually slight entertaining ones for the back of the book—the kind of thing people liked to read before falling asleep. The writers were seldom accomplished. The most prolific was Joseph Wechsberg, who was European and had been a ship's violinist and had a seemingly endless background to draw on, but his understanding of English syntax was imperfect, and turning his sentences into acceptable prose was backbreaking work."

Gibbs's mind worked quickly, and Maxwell hardly ever finished a question before Gibbs had already answered it. "He was always patient with me," Maxwell said, "and flared up only once, over a detail about a cocktail. I said I didn't know anything about such drinks, and he took it, for a second, as a criticism of him until he realized it was only the simple truth.

"Anyway, when I began dealing with galley proofs, they gave me an office at last. Somewhere along in the first three months I felt I was going to be fine, and sent back my father's hundred dollars. When he got it, my stepmother said, he wept. He was a businessman. The concept of literature was outside his experience and beyond his understanding, so he had no idea really what I was up to. It had been the great fear of his life that I would be financially irresponsible and sponge off other people."

After Maxwell had been at The New Yorker for a year or so, he went to dinner at the Plaza Hotel with a cousin from the Midwest who was two years older than he was. The cousin was married and had a twelve-year-old daughter and was a stockbroker—that is, his life was very different from Maxwell's. They knew each other only slightly. The cousin asked questions that Maxwell answered politely but sententiously, leaving the cousin to choose between asking another question or having the two of them eat in silence. Maxwell was under the impression that the cousin had invited him to dinner because he

felt that he ought to, "whereas in fact," Maxwell writes in *Ancestors*, his family history, "it was because something—that I was a misfit introverted child, that he was fond of my mother and father, that I represented the younger brother he wished he had had—made him interested in me. All I know for sure, and I wish I had known it on that occasion, is that he was immensely pleased and proud of me because I had published a couple of novels."

*Ancestors* was written twenty-five years later, and in it Maxwell describes the dinner with his cousin and allows himself to say what he might have if he hadn't held himself back.

"I was living in a rooming house on Lexington Avenue and I had dinner with somebody from the office who said there was a vacant apartment in the building where he lived, so I went home with him, and the door was unlocked but there weren't any light bulbs, and I took it because I liked the way it felt in the dark. The rent is thirty-five dollars a month. You go past an iron gate into a courtyard with gas streetlamps. It was built during the Civil War, I think. Anyway, it's very old. And my apartment is on the third floor, looking out on a different courtyard, with trees in it. Ailanthus trees. I like having something green to look at. Technically it's a room and a half. The half is a bedroom just big enough for a single bed, and I never sleep there because it's too like lying in a coffin. I sleep on a studio couch in the living room. The fireplace works. And once when I had done something I was terribly ashamed of, I went and put my forehead on the mantelpiece. It was just the right height.

"The kitchen is tiny, but it has a skylight that opens. And by putting one foot on the edge of the sink and the other on top of the icebox I can pull myself up onto the roof, and I sit there sometimes looking at the moon and the stars. In the morning, when I'm shaving, I hear the prostitutes being brought to the women's prison. Shouting and screaming. Though I'm on a courtyard, it's never really quiet in New York the way it is in the country. Just as I'm drifting off at night I hear a taxi horn. Or I hear the Sixth Avenue El, and try to fall asleep before the next one comes. The building directly across from my windows is some kind of a factory, and in the daytime when the workmen come out and stand on the fire escape talking, and when the doors are open, I can hear the clicking of the machinery. At night there is a cat that sits on the fire escape and makes hideous sounds like a baby having its throat cut, until I get up and throw beer bottles at it. If I don't get any sleep I'm no good at my job. It's an interesting job and I like it and I'm lucky to have it, but I have to deal with so many people all day long that when night comes I don't want to see anybody. When the telephone rings, which isn't very often, I don't answer it. I let it ring and ring and finally it stops, and the silence then is so beautiful. I read, or I walk the streets until I'm dead tired and come home hoping to fall asleep. At the far end of the courtyard there's an intern from St. Vincent's Hospital who never pulls his shades. I see his light go on about eleven. He has a girl—she is so nice—she brought him a balloon when he was sick. But there is another girl she doesn't know about who sleeps with him too. Next to the factory, on the second floor, there is a young married couple. In the morning when I'm drinking my coffee by the window, the sunlight reaches far enough into their apartment for me to see the shapes of their bodies under the bedclothes. Sometimes she comes to the window in her nightgown or her slip and stands brushing her hair. You can tell they're in love because their

movements are so heavy. As if they were drugged. And once I saw him sitting in his undershorts putting on his socks. Everything they do is like a painting.

"I tried to get a job in New York once before, in 1933, before my first book was published, and couldn't. It was like trying to climb a glass mountain. The book had two favorable reviews, but it didn't cause any commercial excitement whatever, so I went home and started another novel, and when that petered out, I started another, and made my savings stretch as far as possible, and took help from my friends. Not money. Room and board, in exchange for doing things for them that they were perfectly able to do for themselves. This was so I wouldn't feel obligated. When I finished the second book I came back here and this time I managed to stay. But my job takes up so much of my energy that I write less and less. I can do stories, but that's all. And not many of them.

"I've fallen in love three times in my life, and each time it was with someone who wasn't in love with me, and now I can't do it any more. I have friends. There's a place uptown where I can go when I feel like being with people, and the door is never locked; you just walk in and go through the apartment till you find somebody, and they set an extra place at the dinner table for me without asking, and so I don't feel nobody cares if I live or die. But I can't sleep at night because when I put out my hands there isn't anybody in the bed beside me, and it's as if I'd exchanged one glass mountain for another, and I don't know what to do . . ."

Gibbs withdrew more and more from his editing job into profile writing and also from the art meeting and insofar as Maxwell was able to he took his place. "With a raise," Maxwell said. "Every time I was promoted I would go to him and ask how much I should ask for, and he always told me the right answer. When I went to Bermuda for my vacation and came back wearing loafers and a sport jacket I bought and with dark glasses on, he passed me in the hall and said, not unkindly, 'The shoes or the jacket but not both.' The people who made the magazine were half a generation older than I was, and they came of age in the twenties. And I came of age in the thirties, it was a much more serious period, so though I was not uncomfortable with them, I didn't belong to them. I was extremely naïve, and they all seemed so sophisticated. They all talked about Noël Coward openings every night at seven-thirty. It was not that they were more sophisticated; I just didn't share their interests.

"Somewhere along about my second year I had a telephone call from my editor at Harper saying that *They Came Like Swallows* had been chosen as a dual selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the initial payment was eight thousand dollars. It was so much money, in 1937, I had to lean against the wall for support. I went and told Gibbs. And then I invited the Whites to dinner and the theater. I asked Gibbs where to take them, and he told me. It was small and the most elegant restaurant by far that I had ever been in. I took what was the most imaginable cash to pay for it—thirty-five dollars and that's exactly what it came to."

Around that time Maxwell was taken out of the fiction department and made A-issue editor, which meant that he worked with Ross on assembling each week's issue. "I loved working with him," Maxwell said.

"He was very funny and not the bore that he is sometimes made out to be. I had been told that in a fit of temper he once threw a telephone at Mrs. White, but he never even raised his voice at me. Once I told him something that I thought was correct only to find, when I left his office, that I should have given him the exact contrary advice. I remember leaning against the door and thinking I can't go in and tell him my answer was wrong. Then my upbringing asserted itself and I went in and told him I had given him the wrong information, and he didn't turn a hair. He wasn't interested in my mistake, only in the right answer."

Gibbs was made the magazine's theater critic, which meant that his job working with Mrs. White in the fiction department was open, and Maxwell took it, which allowed him to return to editing manuscripts. "Then Andy White began to be restless and went to live in Maine," Maxwell said, "which meant that Katharine had to leave the job she had created and was very happy in. The New Yorker hired a friend of Andy's, Gus Loblano, who was working on Town and Country, and I took him into my office to break him in, and we became friends. I suppose this was around 1942. I assumed I would replace Mrs. White as fiction editor, which was pure foolishness on my part, because the job was just as much a matter of dealing with humorists, perhaps more so, than fiction writers. When my uncle died, in Illinois, and I went to the funeral, I came back to find that Loblano had been moved into Mrs. White's office, which meant he was slated to become her successor. I thought, The hell with them, I will become a writer if that's the way things are. So I asked for an appointment with Ross to tell him I was resigning, and he invited me, for the first time, to lunch at the Algonquin. We sat down to a table and I told him I wanted to leave, and he said, 'I was going to offer you the job of second-in-command of the magazine.' Which rocked me a little, but he didn't urge me to reconsider, and if I had it would have meant that very soon I wouldn't have been working for the magazine at all, because the second-in-command always got blamed for whatever went wrong and sooner or later was fired."

When Maxwell quit The New Yorker, he went to New Mexico with a friend, Morris Birge, who had taken a house for the summer in Sante Fe. Birge was engaged to a woman there and was very social, but Maxwell asked not to be introduced to anyone, and over the course of the summer he recovered himself.

As to how he passed the time, one day he sat down at the typewriter and wrote:

"Almost no sleep last night, though I didn't mind. I lay on one side and then the other and eventually, as I thought I might, dreamt of home. The Rio Grande flows through the front yard but it is smaller than the creek where we used to go fishing, when I was a child. The geography books didn't say it would be like that, hemmed in by mesas, and likely before the summer comes to be even smaller . . .

"Yesterday morning the Spanish-American gardener cleaned out the winter's dust and rotting leaves from the fishpond, and while Morris and I sat on our haunches, watching him catch the big gold fish and the five little ones that had no color, in a white granite pan, I thought what a good beginning page for a book. I still think in beginnings, like a man forever putting on his hat. To think of the end instead of the

beginning has been for a long time—I don't know how long, twenty years perhaps—to think of death. And because I don't want to think of it, or write of it, not through fear but now, I think, merely from choice, my direction is toward the beginnings of things. But it is an obvious kind of nearsightedness, and there must obviously be exercises to correct it. When I raised my eyes a minute ago I saw a windmill a hundred yards away, and it was revolving steadily in the sunlight, without any beginning and probably, for years to come, without any end. The air is never quite still here, and the windmill may slow up—is now—but I don't think it will stop. But how to do that? How to write a book that will go round and round, faster or slower, without a beginning or an end, but only night and day and night and day. The windmill is absolutely still. Now it is going quite fast again, proving that an end which is followed immediately by a beginning is neither end nor beginning but a continuity of a different kind, a rhythm that is more accurate, as an analogy, to living, than continuous revolving, which can only have a single meaning.

"Realized yesterday, watching through binoculars a gardener mowing grass that the reality we accept through the senses is almost never perceived by one sense alone. A man mowing grass should be accompanied by the sound of a lawnmower, to be believed. Because the air is thin and clear, and because of the binoculars one can separate the sense of sight and the sense of hearing from their usual union. And then merely by closing one's eyes the man mowing the lawn becomes an idea only, and one has to look to the mind for confirmation of his actuality, not to the senses. Which may account for the inward look on the faces of the blind, and the strained expression of the deaf. With the failure of sight and hearing to confirm one another, both the blind and the deaf must depend upon general knowledge, must go continually to the mind for evidence, rather than for the meaning of the evidence they have received through sensory perception. And the boundary between the natural and the supernatural (which is mostly suspected by the fact that the senses don't jibe) must be far less, though to a different degree, the blind falling back upon the sense of touch, the deaf making the eyes do the work of both seeing and hearing. To both a great many things cannot exist.

"And in one way or another, for large sections of all time, we are either blind or deaf, sometimes both. A man passed the house this morning, and I saw him out of the bathroom window; saw him returning with a little girl in blue overalls. And even so I failed to perceive that his wife had died this morning. A blind man might have heard it in his step, a deaf person in the way he turned his face to the sun. But all I saw was a man getting older and heavier before it was time for him to get old and heavy."

When Maxwell got back to New York, Lobrano called and said it was lonely at the office without him and could he send some manuscripts to him for his opinion. After about a month of this arrangement, Maxwell decided it would be easier to go to the office to read them, so he began working there three days a week.

If we live long enough, our lives make some sort of sensible pattern. For much of his life, Maxwell had friendships with older women, such as Zona Gale, Garreta Busey, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, which gave him a steadying guidance. The poet Louise Bogan was The New

Yorker's poetry critic and dealt with Mrs. White. When she expressed admiration for one of Maxwell's stories, Mrs. White introduced them. Bogan was fifteen years older than Maxwell and had stopped writing poetry after a severe mental breakdown. Maxwell admired her immensely. He went to see her in her apartment, and she played songs of Mahler and Hugo Wolf, music he didn't know, and they talked about Yeats and Rilke. Maxwell showed her the manuscript of a story about some boys in a high school swimming pool, and she said that he should continue with it—that it was a novel. It became *The Folded Leaf*, and the story became the novel's first chapter. He did four versions, which he sent, chapter by chapter, to Bogan, and she made very few criticisms but simply wrote back, "Keep on."

The notes he made in New Mexico found a place in the novel's pattern.

Maxwell's years on the Wisconsin farm left him with a love of country living. A friend visiting his apartment noticed the geraniums on the windowsill and suggested that Maxwell find himself a house. He had a chance to rent an 1840 saltbox house on the quiet road in northern Westchester where my father lived, and he gave up his apartment, on Patchin Place, and commuted to the office. The house had been rented by a Southern family whose habits of housekeeping were so slovenly that the insurance on the house had been canceled and they were evicted. To move out, they placed open suitcases on the lawn and threw shoes and clothes out the second-floor window into them. Maxwell painted the trim and began planting flowerbeds, and the house was sold out from under him. Then he bought the house down the road from the house my parents lived in.

When he was nearly through *The Folded Leaf*, he was drafted. "I didn't want to go to war," he said. "I was a pacifist, and I didn't want to get shot. The Army didn't recognize pacifism unless it was attached to some church. So I went to a psychiatrist and got a letter. What the letter said was that I had an anxiety neurosis. I waited around and nobody read it. I got on the boat to Governors Island and went to the induction center. I went through every step except the psychiatrist. Finally, when I was all but inducted, someone was willing to read my letter. He was a European and he said, "'Sweet are the uses of adversity.'" Who said that?' and I said, 'Shakespeare, but I don't know where,' and he said, 'As You Like It,' and stamped my papers, and that was that."

One day in early 1945 Lobrano came into Maxwell's office and told him that Ross had heard that Maxwell was halfway through a novel he had been working on for several years and was having difficulty finishing, with all that was expected of him at the office, so Ross was sending him home for six months on full pay. Ross was in the habit of doing kind things and then disclaiming them. Maxwell eventually asked why he had done him such a favor, and Ross said that he played poker with another writer who was always talking about never having the time to finish anything, and he had merely been thinking of that.

Once the book had been handed in to the publisher, Maxwell returned to the office. Ross asked whether he would read unsolicited manuscripts, the slush pile, and though it was a wearing job, Maxwell felt he could hardly say no. He usually found one story a month that the magazine could print.

A year or so before Maxwell died, I said to him, "You seem so untroubled," and he said, "I am now." In his early thirties, unhappy at having such a solitary life, he went, on the advice of a friend, to see the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, who had studied with Freud. "I had too great a sense of my own difference from other people," he said. "After about a year of talking to Reik five days a week, and hearing his voice occasionally respond from behind my shoulder, the whole first part of my life fell away, and I had a sense of everyone's similarities. I had a feeling of starting again. Instead of being recessive and introverted, I suddenly had a clue to what other people are like. Given the situation, you can pretty much figure out what they're going through, and it's usually something that involves sympathy and understanding. You can't possibly have a sense of understanding somebody without feeling sympathetic.

"After I stopped talking to him and felt the need for it, I sat down for two days at the typewriter, and what came out was very strange. I decided that I was so angry at my parents for having another child—why aren't they satisfied with me—that I thought they should die and then be brought back. I damn near accomplished it with my father, who also got the flu, but I lost my mother. So I was a murderer. And what do you do with murderers? You put them in a cell. I was in a cell—no wife, no family. I was in a prison cell, and there was Reik saying, You're in a prison cell, but the door's not locked."

Lying awake one night in the house in Westchester, Maxwell remembered a young woman who had come to his office a year and a half earlier, looking for a position in the poetry department. "She wore her hair piled on top of her head," he said, "and she had a hat with a fur piece—it was winter, I suppose—and I thought I had never seen anyone so beautiful, but I did nothing about it. It was as if I was in a deep sleep."

The next day he looked for her name—Emily Noyes—in the phone book, and it wasn't there, but she had left her number with the magazine's personnel office, and on the disingenuous pretext of wanting to talk to her about her poetry, he asked her for a drink at the Algonquin. She was from a prosperous family in Portland, Oregon; she was teaching two-year-olds at a nursery school on the Upper East Side; and she lived in a room on the top floor of the building. Maxwell was thirty-six, and she was twenty-three, tall and thin, with black hair and a wide face and dark eyes so lively that people often took her and Maxwell for sister and brother. It was the fall, and he invited her to a party at the house of a friend, and they talked all evening, and when he took her home he asked her to marry him. He hadn't planned on saying it; the words simply came out of his mouth. She said that she didn't want to get married and that she wouldn't be able to see him again until after the first of the year, but he could telephone her at the nursery school between four-fifteen and four-thirty. After that she would be dealing with parents.

At four-fifteen Maxwell closed the door of his office and began dialing. More often than not the school line was busy, but sometimes he got through to her. In January he closed his house and rented a one-room apartment that had been converted from a doctor's office, and began courting her. They were married in May of 1945, in the chapel of the Presbyterian Church at Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street.

When Maxwell brought her home to Illinois so that his father and stepmother could meet her, his father took him aside after a few days and said, "There has been no one like her in our family for generations."

Someone with her radiance is what he meant. Also, her graceful and unassuming way of conducting herself. Also, her fine carriage, which I think of as having been molded in childhood by holding herself upright on horseback. As a child she rode a horse to school.

She was nearly always the most beautiful woman of any age in a room of other women, although I am not aware that she ever made any effort to be. Her face was suffused with an illumination that seemed to concentrate itself in her eyes. I am reminded of the labels at the Frick Museum that mention the illusion that Rembrandt's portraits appear to be lit from within.

With his wife in mind, Maxwell wrote of Barbara Rhodes in *The Chateau*: "Because she came of a family that seemed to produce handsomeness no matter what hereditary strains it was crossed with, the turn of the forehead, the coloring, the carving of the eyelids, the fine bones, the beautiful carriage could all be accounted for by people with long memories. But it was the eyes that you noticed. They were dark brown, and widely spaced, and very large, and full of light, the way children's eyes are, the eyebrows naturally arched, the upper eyelids wide but not heavy, not weighted, the whites a blue white. If all her other features had been bad, she still would have seemed beautiful because of them. They were the eyes of someone of another Age, their expression now gentle and direct, now remote, so far from calculating, and yet intelligent, perceptive, pessimistic, without guile, and without coquetry."

And: "As a rule, the men who turned to stare at Barbara Rhodes in public places were generally of a romantic disposition or else old enough to be her father. Even more than her appearance, her voice attracted and disturbed them, reminding them of what they themselves had been like at her age, or throwing them headlong into an imaginary conversation with her, or making them wonder whether in giving the whole of their affection to one woman they had settled for less than they might have got if they had had the courage and the patience to go on looking. But this was not true here. In the eyes that were turned toward her, there was no recognition of who she was but only of the one simple use that she could be put to."

I never heard from my father that Maxwell had stood over another man's chair at a dinner party and said, "Will you leave now?" but there must have been occasions when other men stared too fixedly at her or kept her on the dance floor longer than was polite.

I can imagine two empty chairs at a table set for dinner and someone's asking, "Who else are we waiting for?" and the hostess replying, "The Maxwells. He's a writer, and an editor at *The New Yorker*, and their daughters are at school with Jessica (or, We were introduced to them this summer on the Vineyard; or, Emmy goes to the Art Students League with Rachel), and I've wanted you to meet them." And the Maxwells arriving, with apologies for being late (the difficulty of getting a taxi in the East Eighties at the hour when everyone is heading to the theater), and the men, having been impatient and distracted, sitting suddenly straighter in their chairs.

She was long-limbed and lean and girlish. Seated on a couch, she had a way of pulling her knees up beneath her and gathering her skirt around them that was like the gesture of an adolescent.

I have photographs of her, taken by my father, at parties on the road where the Maxwells and my parents lived, when she was perhaps twenty-four, just married, and smoking a cigarette and leaning back on the couch, wearing a sweater and a skirt to just below her knees—New Year's, I think it was, or someone's birthday. She is wearing a particular high-heeled black shoe that has a strap around her ankle, and her hair is black and her eyes are shining, and I think, There would be a problem taking her out in public. Men would want to steal her away, might even resolve to. Everyone else in the photographs is older, and much as she liked them, I also imagine she was a little restless in their company. She had a great enthusiasm for fun and was of an age to embrace it. She once told my wife that she spent a lot of her first year married alone in the house in the country while Maxwell was at his office in the city, and that she taught herself to cook by reading cookbooks to pass the time. It was not likely the life she had come East for. The photographs of her in scrapbooks from her childhood show her as a girl surrounded by boys with strong jaws and physiques that I associate with the phrase physical culture. The sort of boys who came home in the 1940s wearing soldiers' outfits.

For a while before she met Maxwell, she was involved with the writer James Agee. Smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey and talking late into the night is how I imagine them, his eyes falling on her and him finding it difficult to believe his luck.

Because she ran the household, and because she loved reading, especially poetry—Rilke and Neruda and Roethke above all—going to museums and movies, and conversation, the dance classes she took at her ladies club, and the company of her family and friends, it was difficult for her to spend as many hours in her studio as she wanted to. She began drawing as a young woman, and when her daughters were grown she turned seriously to painting. She matured quickly, and in the last years had a breakthrough. She favored a dark and luxurious palette. Her attention was meticulous. A still life depicting a hand of solitaire, interrupted; the phone rang, or the person playing heard his name called. Or lost interest. Something took him away, anyhow, and the painting records the way things looked in the interval before he returned, when they were suspended, like a chord in music waiting to be resolved.

The one I am most drawn to is an oil crayon drawing of an old fish that was too crafty to be caught, remembered, I think, from her childhood, a legendary trout. Under the river, with the trees on the banks and the water flowing around him, and him flipping his tail exuberantly. It was, I think, a study for a painting that was never made.

She once said that she planned to spend her old age having two drinks at lunch at the Cosmopolitan Club and falling asleep afterward in one of the club's chairs, with her mouth open. She had a spiritual side, and Maxwell didn't believe in God. She wanted to work for the Partisan Review, and she liked William Burroughs—The Naked Lunch, anyway. She loved the faux cowboy song "Don't Fence Me In." She used to play it on the jukeboxes in Third Avenue saloons where Maxwell followed her

when they were courting. Dropping coins into the slots, she must have wondered why this man with his own beautiful eyes pursued her so ardently, as if his life depended on it. I don't think he ever felt truly happy until he married her.

They loved each other in a way that most of us cannot appreciate at first hand—that is, a marriage of fifty-five years as intimate as theirs was is not something most people will experience. They were like two trees whose roots have grown together.

Maxwell once dreamed that he flew to Paris in a box, and when he saw how beautiful Paris was he flew back to get her.

Years ago, to my father, Maxwell wrote: "Emmy's father had a slight stroke, complicated or rather followed by pneumonia and pleurisy, which is surely enough, with emphysema and a not too good heart, to do any ordinary man of almost 92 in, but he isn't ordinary, and has recovered from worse. Anyway, she went off to Oregon this morning . . . She left at 9:15 and it is now 3:25 p.m. and you can hear a pin drop. Only there is nobody to drop it. Ordinarily I am home alone all day and never feel that the apartment is queer or empty because I know Emmy will be home from the Art Students League at six o'clock. But because she is somewhere in the air over I suppose Montana this place is uninhabitable."

On his desk in the country Maxwell kept a small painted box, a present from her on his ninetieth birthday. On the cover of the box she painted a lion lounging in the branches of a tree. On the bottom of the box she wrote, "Each day I am as glad to see you as I am to see the sun rise in the morning and the moon cross the sky at night."

Saintly is what I sometimes thought they were, but they weren't, of course. Maxwell occasionally affected a saintly manner to deflect attention he wasn't interested in. What was so admirable to me about the manner in which they conducted their lives—the courtesy to others, the care for other people's difficulties, and their belief that we should do what we can to help each other—was that the way they acted, the gestures they made, were choices and decisions arrived at in an atmosphere of distractions and social considerations and awareness of consequences and opportunities passed on and perhaps lost. When a choice was to be made, it seemed to me, so far as I knew, that the Maxwells always made one that demonstrated character and judgment and the restraint of self-interest, and that was likely to have been influenced by a concern for someone else's feelings. Out of a desire to protect them, I often urged them to be more cold-blooded, but they wouldn't be.

They were everything that ordinary life is not. Not envious. Not resentful, not trivial, not obstructive of other people's happiness. Not shrill in their enthusiasms. Not strident, mean, or coarse in their sentiments. Not indifferent to suffering. Their lives had no fewer difficulties than anyone else's, and yet they gave the appearance that everything came effortlessly to them. No gesture they made was performed for effect. They had no personas. They were not calculating. Neither of them had an impulse toward self-inflation. They had no social ambitions beyond the company of people they admired and cared for. They were handsome but not vain. They loved expressions of enthusiasm. Although they were prosperous, they weren't

materialistic, and they were always mindful of how money might ease a difficulty in someone's life or bring them some happiness. Checks now and then left the household in amounts that substantially changed the circumstances of the people who cashed them. Once, in the manner of Elvis Presley, Maxwell gave one of my brothers a car.

In 1947, Maxwell sent to Cyril Connolly, the British critic and editor of the magazine *Horizon*, a story he had written about a family of Southerners who paid a visit during the summer of 1912 to their Northern relatives. Connolly wrote to him: "Dear Maxwell: After considerable thought I returned your ms. to your agent here because I decided the story you sent me was really a very exciting beginning to a novel, especially as the period was 1912, and you simply couldn't leave things where they were. One wants another thirty chapters, and I hope you will do it that way.

"It was the Emperor Augustus whose last words were something like 'Do you think I have played out the comedy correctly?' I can't quote the Latin, which you will find in Suetonius' life of Augustus.

"Please understand that I mean exactly what I say about the story, and I am not being polite. It is too good a situation to leave in the air. Continue!

My regards to your beautiful wife . . ."

A few months later, Maxwell wrote to his father-in-law: "I took an important step yesterday that I want to tell you about. For the last six months I have been straining against the burden of a double life, of working at a somewhat demanding job and trying to write a novel. It is never easy to give half your heart to one thing and half to another, and after a good deal of thought I have told *The New Yorker* that I want to leave, the first of May . . ."

"We have put aside a sum of money for emergencies, and we ought to be able to live essentially as we do now, on the money I make from writing. If not, I can always go back to *The New Yorker*, where I am useful both as an editor and as a writer. During the last two years I have made as much from writing as I have from my job . . ."

He stayed away less than a year. "I had thought I would write more and better if I did nothing but write," he told me, "and I was selling enough stories to live on, and I had some savings, and I thought we could skid by, and the first thing that happened was we needed a new refrigerator, and the second thing that happened is that the stories I wrote weren't being taken. It helped to know what the magazine wanted, but not infallibly. Even though I saw what they wanted, I didn't necessarily want to give it to them. I had more serious things on my mind. But then I looked at my fortieth birthday approaching and I thought I ought to insinuate myself back onto the staff."

The academic who asked Maxwell about the most exciting moments of his career also asked what moment was the most disappointing. Maxwell answered, "Pass." I never heard him express envy for the sales or prizes of another writer. The Chateau was nominated for the National Book Award, which was won by Walker Percy, for *The Moviegoer*. Maxwell attended the reception after the ceremony, and Percy endeared himself to him by saying, when they met, "My wife has

been reading me passages from your novel all afternoon in our hotel room."

Because Maxwell lived so long, he continued into what might partly have been his posterity, so he got to see the wide and widening appreciation of his work, but if his books had been less admired, he might have been forced to face their oblivion. Maxwell's success was more literary than commercial, and the two don't often intersect. In *The Enemies of Promise*, Cyril Connolly wrote that a classic is a book that remains in print for ten years. *They Came Like Swallows* has been more than sixty years in print. After Maxwell died, I had a letter from the novelist Shirley Hazzard in which she mentioned the disparity between his literary standing and his commercial accomplishments. "Only a saint could have borne with complete equanimity the inadequate recognition he had for years to endure," she wrote. "He knew it was incommensurate, unjust. He stayed with the truth that was in him, developing it throughout his life."

It would only have been natural for him to have felt discouraged by *The New Yorker's* not buying the stories he hoped that they would. The story Connolly admired became *Time Will Darken It*. A few years later, in 1955, Maxwell went through what I think was the only period of resignation he experienced; at least he never told me about another. "It was when Kate"—his older daughter—"was a baby," he said. "I thought, I might just as well stop writing and be a full-time editor. I guess I hadn't any novel on hand that interested me, and I did fewer and fewer stories. It looked as if I was running dry, but I wasn't. I needed a little public encouragement."

"I had set my heart a few years before on the Pulitzer Prize for *Time Will Darken It*, and the National Book Award, if there was such a thing then, or its equivalent. I wanted to clear the deck and sweep everything before me, but it wasn't like that. I wanted to be appreciated as a major novelist, and the book was respected, but not embraced. This was all because of Reik. He was Germanic, and had convinced me that I should be a person of stature in the world, and he was thinking of Europe, where it was possible to have that kind of career, but in America, if you insist on having it your own way, it takes a lot longer."

Around this time Maxwell accepted an invitation from Smith College to take part in a seminar on writing that included Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison. Having decided to give up writing, he went to Pennsylvania Station and took a seat on the train to Northampton, Massachusetts, and began making notes for a speech he had agreed to deliver.

The speech begins with Maxwell's description of a Chinese scroll in the possession of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The scroll depicts the spring festival on the river, a standard motif of Chinese painting. "It has three themes woven together:" he said, "the river, which comes down from the upper right, and the road along the river, and the people on the riverbanks. As the scroll unwinds, there is, first, some boys who cannot go to the May Day festival because they have to watch their goats. Then there is a country house, and several people starting out for the city, and a farmer letting water into a field by means of a water wheel, and then more people and buildings—all kinds of people all going toward the city for the festival. And along the riverbank there are various entertainers—a magician, a female

tightrope walker, several fortunetellers, a phrenologist, a man selling spirit money, a man selling patent medicine, a storyteller."

As a writer, Maxwell said, he felt that he belonged among "the shoddy entertainers earning their living on the riverbank on May Day," because "writers—especially narrative writers—are people who perform tricks."

He described several versions of what he was talking about: "Before I came up here, I took various books down from their shelf and picked out some examples of the kind of thing I mean. Here is one:

'I have just returned this morning from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbor that I shall be troubled with . . .'

"One of two things—there will be more neighbors turning up than the narrator expects, or else he will very much wish that they had. And the reader is caught; he cannot go away until he finds out which of his two guesses is correct. This is, of course, a trick . . .

"Here is another trick: 'Call me Ishmael . . .' A pair of eyes looking into your eyes. A face. A voice. You have entered into a personal relationship with a stranger, who will perhaps make demands on you, extraordinary personal demands; who will perhaps insist that you love him; who perhaps will love you in a way that is upsetting and uncomfortable . . ."

He suggested a pattern for a story: "It would help if you would give what I am now about to read to you only half your attention. It doesn't require any more than that, and if you listen only now and then, you will see better what I am driving at. Begin with breakfast and the tipping problem. Begin with the stealing of the marmalade dish and the breakfast tray still there. The marmalade dish, shaped like a shell, is put on the cabin-class breakfast tray by mistake, this once. It belongs in first class. Begin with the gate between first and second class . . ."

He discussed the working habits of a specimen writer and the complications and obstacles and setbacks and victories of his working day:

"But what, seriously, was accomplished by these writers or can the abstract dummy novelist I have been describing hope to accomplish? Not life, of course; not the real thing; not children and roses; but only a facsimile that is called literature. To achieve this facsimile the writer has, more or less, to renounce his birthright to reality, and few people have a better idea of what it is—of its rewards and satisfactions, or of what to do with a whole long day. What's in it for him? The hope of immortality? The chances are not good enough to interest a sensible person. Money? Well, money is not money anymore. Fame? For the young, who are in danger always of being ignored, of being overlooked at the party, perhaps, but no one over the age of forty who is in his right mind would want to be famous. It would interfere with his work, with his family life. Why then should the successful manipulation of illusions be everything to a writer? Why does he bother to make up stories and novels? If you ask him, you will probably get any number of answers, none of them straightforward. You might as well ask a sailor why it is that he has chosen to spend his life at sea."

Some time before the train arrived, he realized that he loved writing so

much that he could never give it up.

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