

H. R. W. Morrison

NOTES FROM A SUICIDE'S DIARY

TODAY I PURCHASED A .22 AUTOMATIC PISTOL and a five-cent notebook. I intend to end my life with the pistol, and I intend to record my last thoughts in this notebook. Since I plan to end my life by my own hand, as the popular phrase has it, I feel obliged to "put something in writing". Somehow, as I write these words I am seized by a feeling of embarrassment, as though in committing words to paper I am exposing my mind. If there were any aspect of greatness or tragedy in my mind, I would not feel embarrassed; indeed, I would in all likelihood continue to live. I feel that I am a mean man, a petty man, a despicable man; a man incapable of writing one line of poetry, incapable almost of making any humanistic gesture to my fellow men, incapable—even in the oldest cathedral with a background of organ music—of having any religious thought or half-affinity to God; a man who has succeeded in trampling down other men, and yet, a man who has won the respect of thousands, from scribbling clerks to clergymen. Having ultimate success in this world, I feel that I have nothing to live for, not at the present. A few days ago I had someone, or something to live for, but more of that later.

I am the president of a large manufacturing concern employing two thousand persons. My salary is \$25,000 a year plus bonuses and profits on stocks and bonds; I live in a \$45,000 home in Maple, and it's completely paid for; I own three cars—a Cadillac for myself, a Ford for my wife and daughter and a sports car for my son. I am—though I have had no religious feelings whatsoever—a regular church-goer and church elder; I belong to a variety of clubs and lodges at which I make token appearances and participate as sort of a grey eminence in a political party. I have been requested to run for parliament, and I assume that I could win, but I must confess that I could never heartily indulge in the vulgarities involved in running for public office. I am 46 years old, and in the 40-year history of my company, I am its youngest president. I don't know why I trouble to write all these things; whether or not I write them, they will be known. I could write that mother died

when I was eight years old, or that I was a bully in my youth or hundreds of other details about myself—but I haven't time. Within a few hours—or even minutes—I will kill myself. If there's a message in what I write, it has nothing to do with the psychological past of a man; rather, I hope to indicate that man must live honestly in this instant, in this present moment, knowing that he is a temporary being suspended between two eternities. My, that's a clever phrase I've written. If you think that's clever, you should read my business letters, my memorandums, my confidential reports—they are masterpieces! I stare at my hands. They tremble slightly, not from emotion, but from normal human tension. So much these hands could do! They could play a piano and re-create musical patterns that were formed in dead men's minds; they could wield a pick or shovel and perceptibly change the world, if even in an infinitesimal way; they could manipulate machinery and produce something; they could wield medical instruments and cure ailing humans. These hands have done none of those things, they have created nothing. They have played with telephones, dictating machines, bits of paper, forms, index cards and while they have indirectly caused things to be done, they have, by themselves, created nothing. Only in the next hours will they do something—no, that's not quite correct. One hand, one pull of the index finger will be sufficient to end my life. Hands are not enough to end one's life, they have to employ some tool, some device. Man can not strangle himself; the weakened body in turn weakens the hands. An idle thought, but I always think idle thoughts at the most unusual times. At the board of directors meeting yesterday I tried to imagine what everyone would look like in their coffins. Anyhow, I pull the trigger, a firing pin strikes a brass cartridge; the blow causes a miniature explosion forcing a small piece of lead through a barrel .22 inches in diameter, thence outward and into my brain. I suppose my brain, which surely knows what is going to happen, will nevertheless suffer an immense shock; the last air in my body will be expelled in a rattling way, and a death tremor will convulse my body. Then, what will happen to this mind that now makes symbols on paper? I don't know, and I don't care. I will die someday, and I might as well die while the advantage is on my side, while I am not afraid of death. How I am sickened by those old folks who cling to life like dead leaves on December trees. I will die someday, and even if I should elect to live for say another thirty years, I still wouldn't know what will happen to me after death. For the present time I am bored, terribly bored by this life.

How I am bored with the board of directors, with other executives, with financial reporters from the newspapers, with the people who want me to speak after their roast-beef dinners, with the thousand and one people I meet.

Some want advice, some want money, some want decisions and all of them bore me. They could make decisions by themselves, but they want to flatter me; they could get money elsewhere, but they want to impress on me the bigness of their charity, and as for advice—I wish people would use the libraries more often. I don't know which group is the worse, the old men who have been toadying all their lives, or the young men who dissemble, hide their true feelings and seek to better themselves under a camouflage of stupidity. I am bored with my home life. I am bored by a wife who frequently appears on the society pages of the newspapers; I am bored with my children—who are in their teens, singularly snobbish and who never seem to think that the rich material comfort they enjoy came to them through the accident of birth. I don't know how, but my family seems to be a thing apart from my existence. God knows I've tried to talk intimately with all of them lately, but it has proved to be an embarrassing experience for all of us. Husbands sleep with their wives, yet are always minds apart; they beget children who are separate entities from their fathers. It seems to me that I am in an uncompromising position with my work, my family and the world at large. I wish I knew some way to decently compromise. That's my trouble, of course; fresh out of compromises. Though I have felt apart from my family, I go to church with them every Sunday, and how bored I am by those never-ending sermons on ancient history. More and more, church services seemed like just another service club meeting to me.

I still haven't got on paper what I meant to say. I'll try again. For a thinking man, there are only three positions to take in this world: Art, Religion and Chaos. Only recently, I have truly begun to think, but I can not extricate myself from Chaos. For an unthinking man, there's always The Cause, which can include anything ranging from business to politics. I admit it, I was a thoughtless shallow man for years. I managed to graduate from high school, but owing to financial pressure was unable to go to a university. I started in the Purchasing Department of the company, saw advantages in Sales, and transferred to that department and became the youngest Sales Manager, thanks to my aggressiveness and the war. I was rejected by the army owing to a bronchial condition, and it seemed to me that the war effort took the able-minded as well as the able-bodied. Still, some men were exempted from the army and yet in a rough-and-tumble showdown—albeit in conferences and memorandums—I found that most of them had a weakness for any form of fighting. I married, the children came along and I found myself \$3,000 in debt. How staggering this obligation seemed to me! I remember solemnly vowing to clear up my obligations and to have some money behind me. I was convinced that money was the most important aspect of a man's security. I was partially

right. Having the security of money behind me, I began to make certain business gambles, knowing that I could afford to be off work for a while. Oddly enough, all of them paid off. One of the gambles included the use of plastic instead of metal in a certain product, another included a prolonged price-cutting war in which we suffered losses for a year, but succeeded in knocking out competition from other firms.

One day—was it weeks or months ago?—I found myself sitting in my office with nothing to do. I got out a few filing folders, cleared up some outstanding work, and then, I was struck by an utter feeling of loneliness. I looked about the office: there were leather side chairs, a rug on the floor, drapes, dark-panelled walls with the appropriate pictures of past presidents. I had worked in this office for years, and I seemed to be seeing it for the first time.

If only I could have found the old joy in my work, everything would have been all right, at least I think it would have been all right. Owing to the company's prosperity, I had been able to delegate my work to the point where I had no real work to do. Then, this strange feeling came over me. I am participating in a fraud. I do nothing, yet get paid an exorbitant wage. True, I made deals with other companies and corporations that not even a vice-president could make, and yet I felt as though my business life were a fraud, a sham ritual. I don't know what I found more disgusting, the deference of my juniors or the synthetic camaraderie of my equals. I was a High Priest of Business, yet at the same time, I was an unbeliever. I am no scholar, but let me remind you that in various ages certain institutions have dominated societies. In some ages it has been the army, in other ages it has been the church, and in this age it is Business. (I would say that Business could even destroy unions if it really wanted to; at the cost of a depression, by the way.) As for Business, from personal observation I would say that the real Men at the Top know it is a game, and they play Business as a game. For those men—their business powers were inherited, and in turn will be passed on to hand-picked successors—they can not lose. Men at the Top, Men of Power, they inherit the business structure. As for the managerial group, no one, least of all myself, was consulted in setting up the structure of Business and the attendant structure of society. When the thought first occurred to me that I had never been consulted in the setting up of Business and society, and yet was expected to adhere to its rules, I was quite angered. As for the managerial men, the organization men, the white collar men, they accept the structure as they find it. They accept the Kingdom of Business as it is on earth. That day, when I first felt alone, the thought occurred to me that it didn't matter whether or not I was in the office. Someone had to be

there. And all those people outside, they didn't defer to me, they deferred to the thing I was and represented; but that thing "president" was a temporary thing. All business has a terrible transitoriness about it, even though many firms are approaching the hundred-year mark of their existence. I was struck by the absurdity of clerks deferring to department heads who deferred to executives who deferred to me. I was shaken by the thoughts of the great books of rules and regulations that covered the operational procedures of the company; I thought of the thousands and thousands of sheets of paper that men spent their most fruitful years working on. All of the paper was filed, and in a month—or a year—it was forgotten. Again, I thought of the dozens and dozens of meetings that were held: board of directors meetings, executive meetings, department head meetings, and departmental meetings. Men talking, gesticulating, giving expressions, trying to make impressions . . . oh, the absurdity of it all! This I know: we all will die, and yet no one acknowledges death. To hear these men speak, one would think that this company, this world, will go on forever and forever, just the way it's going on now.

I was alone.

These thoughts troubled me: who am I? What am I? What do I stand for? What marks me as something different and apart from the several hundred presidents scattered throughout North America? Take away my telephone, dictating machine, letters and memorandums, and conference-attending and what useful function did I serve? I produced nothing. I wasn't related to a machine, or the soil! I was almost a thing suspended in space. I had been led to understand that "I" was the only "I" to happen throughout the entire history of Man and that "I" would never happen again.

My secretary buzzed, and reminded me that I had a board of directors' meeting at 2:30 p.m. that afternoon. I went.

Next day, at an executives' meeting I found that everyone had decided that the Assistant Sales Manager would have to be fired owing to conduct prejudicial to the good order of the company. I was handed a dossier, topped with a letter for my signature, that documented his case-history with the company. The entire situation seemed to hinge on a clash of temperament with the Sales Manager, who had been promoted over his head. He was also son of the vice-president. The man's offences included an unpleasant scene in the general office, plus a chain of events caused by disobedience. The man had been with the firm for five years. Without a thought, I signed the letter advising him of his dismissal. You must bear in mind, it seemed to be a trifle to me at the time.

The next day, that man committed suicide by ramming his car into a bridge

abutment on the 401 Highway. I was shocked, deeply shocked. The letter I had signed was found in the car, the newspapers mentioned it. I spoke to the executives about it next day, and I was surprised by their lack of emotion and my excess of it. Then, I knew: they were morally unconcerned because I had signed the letter. I dismissed them. I tried to pray, but found this impossible. How could I pray? I had only a minister's word for its efficacy plus some historical texts. Besides, my reverting to prayer, wasn't it a way of externalizing the situation? I talked to my wife about the situation, and I have her assurances that it wasn't my fault; I talked to our minister, and he too exclaimed that it wasn't my fault. Damn it all, I know I'm guilty, but no one will allow me the luxury of being guilty. I want to be accused, condemned, indicted for this monstrous act of passing judgment on a man without consulting him beforehand. Truly, I should have heard his story.

I went to see his widow with the hopes that she would indict me for the death of her husband. She was a woman in her late 20's and her beauty was enhanced by mourning. I told her who I was, and then offered my consolations. She broke down, sobbed, and said that her husband's death was all her fault. She poured out a story of how she had goaded him for letting himself be passed over and how she alone was responsible for his behaviour. At this point, I told her the reason why I had visited her. When I had done, she stared blankly at me. I know what you're thinking, I said. You're thinking what I was thinking when you told me your side of the story. I'm not guilty of his death, you're thinking. When I came here, both of us felt guilty; I should leave now, and both of us will feel not guilty. Of course, perhaps we're not guilty. The guilty persons may well have been his parents. If they had raised him properly, had given him the love, affection and security he needed, he would have had the emotional strength to weather this storm. Well, now that the whole issue was settled, I was going to go back to my office, she could go back to counting her insurance money and business would go on as usual. "Money!" she screamed. "I don't want it! I don't want it! It means nothing to me. I can buy clothes, I can buy a car and all the things I wanted before, but they mean nothing to me by themselves", she said. "I'm lonely", she cried.

I took her into my arms and I was shocked by the personal emotion with which I held her, and by the trembling with which she drew herself to me. These stupid writers who describe the relationships of men and women in the manner that reporters describe auto collisions! I felt that my justification in life in that moment was the consoling of another troubled human being. Our embrace was beyond all passion, and encompassed our sorrow.

I returned to see her. I returned again and again. In my new relationship

I was not categorized as a "husband", "father", or "president". I was treated as an individual man who had brought meaning into another person's life, and in doing so, had brought meaning into my own. I spoke to her fully of my doubting mind, of my loneliness and of the sickening at heart I felt about my present existence. She confessed that her religious attitude was one of hope: that the saying of prayers and the making of certain gestures had eternal meaning. She still felt guilty about her husband's death, particularly since she was so insensitive to the condition of his mind. She mentioned too, that despite her fervent prayers, she really had not spiritual assurance in any way as to where he was.

We had our problems, and we also had each other. How ardently we held each other, as though the firmness of an embrace was a guarantee that nothing should happen to us. We live in an instant, but always there was the instant I had to leave. The strain of carrying on a triple life was too much for me. Despite her protestations, I vowed that I would tell my wife, would resign from the firm and we could start our life together. I had money, we could go to Europe, and our child could be born there. . .

Such a situation as viewed in a television play, a movie, or a novel, would be clearly marked off as a "fall". Ours is a society that takes a perverse interest in decadence, alleged decadence, decay, falling from grace and so on. Actually, it would have been no fall. For me, it would have been a beginning, a start of an authentic existence, a shuffling off of the false values through which I had gained success, which had proved to be no success at all. For once, I could face my wife and talk to her honestly. My dear, I would say, we have been living a terrible lie, these past few years. I have been acting like a husband, you have been acting like a wife, and this home has been an enormous stage. I would be honest and harsh. For to be honest alone would stir up and increase her love for me, thus making a separation troublesome. As for my resignation, I would make it verbally to the board of directors. Then, I would invite all the executives to my office one by one, and tell them exactly what I thought of them. Perhaps they would also tell me what they thought of me, and how delighted I would be, knowing that I was destroying the person they would talk about.

My life, I thought, was taking on the aspect of a genuine love story. For many weeks I had thought that I would spend the rest of my life as an embittered and lonely man, living a life of absurdities. Now, there seemed to be a pattern developing. I had a genuine relationship with another person, we could go abroad, live our own life free from status and caste. I would wear open-neck shirts, sports jackets and slacks in defiance of the last twenty years of my life in which I wore

suits and ties daily. There is no pattern to life. The individual staggers from a series of incidents like a drunken man rebounding off randomly-placed lamp-posts on a crooked street. I was going to leave my wife, I was going to resign as president—until she died. By *she*, I don't mean my wife. Ironically, she was killed by an immigrant driver who knew enough to stop at red-and-white "stop" signs, but not at the black-and-white "stop" signs, of which a few remain in Toronto.

My wife was most understanding when I told her, though I omitted references to the unborn child. Not bitter at all, she advised that it was one of those things that most men go through sooner or later, and that she was happy that I hadn't let this situation affect my work, or standing in the community. Perhaps I was overdramatizing the matter owing to the woman's death. All the same, it was perhaps a criticism of her as my wife, and she felt some guilt at having let me down. I was made wretched. If only she had lost her temper, if only she had cried, screamed, become emotionally upset—anything! Her reasonableness was crushing. I felt as though I counted for nothing—merely an out-of-order husband in need of repair.

As for me, I returned to the agony of my lonely office and the companionship of strangers. In the days that followed I became cantankerous and arrogant. I indiscriminately brow-beat and bullied everyone. I longed for one man to jump up and say, "See here, you're not going to talk that way to me. You're president of this company, and I'll obey your business orders, but I won't allow you to trample on my self-respect." Again, I longed to be confronted, accused—even to be made to appear ridiculous. I continued to be respected. Lately, too, I have spoken at a variety of meetings and banquets. Time and again I have tried to expose the corruption in myself and the subservience in those about me. I have said that individually, men have won freedoms from the state, only to cast them away in Business. I have said that any man who submits himself to psychological tests in applying for a job is not worthy of being a caretaker. I have said these, and many other things, and the newspapers have duly reported them. I have won fame and respect, so I've been told. Today, I was advised that I am to be appointed vice-chairman of the board of directors, and that I may look forward to being chairman. This statement is dust in my mouth.

I am sick at heart.

I am still in Chaos. I have tried to take a religious position, but I have failed. If there is a God, we are creatures of God's creation and can do nothing else, except that which he wishes us to do. I know, suicide is supposed to be a great sin in many faiths. I can't make any definite pronouncement on it, other than my present frame of mind which demands suicide as a way of ending this meaningless exist-

ence. I mean, to end it, is to give it meaning. No, I have no worries about meeting God. If there is a God, he must answer to me.

The pistol is cold to my touch.

EPILOGUE

From a Toronto newspaper

MAPLE, June 6. R—M—, president of the D— Co. Ltd., was found shot through the head last night, apparently while practising how to load a newly-purchased pistol. He died in a Toronto hospital today without regaining consciousness.

Investigating Provincial Police said he obtained a pistol permit a matter of hours before the fatal shooting and gave "defence of home" as the reason for taking out the permit. This district has been subject to a rash of break-ins recently.

His wife, attending a charity bazaar at the time of the shooting, returned home to find him slumped over a table in the recreation room, a .22 pistol at his side. Only one bullet had been fired.

Mr. M— was well-known in the business world

(cont. on col. 1, page 3)