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I was standing outside the principal's door on a fall day in 1952, waiting to be introduced to the small faculty of Carlisle High School. A tall, lean, blonde fellow, wearing an ill-fitting jacket, frayed pants, pulling on a cigarette and waving it in the air, introduced himself.

"My name is Walter Tevis. I'm the new English teacher. Are you nervous?"

"Yes," I answered. "This is my first job. I just graduated from Eastern Kentucky in the spring, and I've come here to teach home economics."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," he assured me. "This is my third teaching job, so I'm not nervous."

Carlisle was a warm, friendly little Kentucky school, and we were made to feel at ease by the faculty and students. Being two of the three single people on the faculty in a small town, Walter and I saw a lot of each other. We sold coffee and popcorn at the football games and hung out at the drug store with the students. I walked around the block with him at lunch while he smoked, told me about his family, his experiences in the Navy, and how he was going to become a writer.

Walter explained that he was born in San Francisco in 1928, but his father's family was from Madison County, Kentucky. They were among the first to hold a land deed in that area. Walter's father, Walter Stone Tevis, Sr., married Betty Bacon, the daughter of a minister in upstate New York, and they went out to the West Coast, where he worked as an appraiser for a number of large companies. As the economy crumbled, the family developed financial problems, and young Walter took rheumatic fever. Leading physicians advised that they place him in their hospital for treatment. This incident made it into the novel *Queen's Gambit*. Walter later told an interviewer: "That was specifically from my childhood. I had a rheumatic heart condition and was put in a convalescent home in California on the campus of Stanford"
University, and they fed us phenobarbital. I was there in 1938, before tranquilizers were invented. ¹ He was in the hospital nine months, but he never got over the scars of the early experience with narcotics, or of the effects of the Great Depression on his family.

During the Depression father, mother, and daughter left Walter in California and drove back to Kentucky, hoping to find a living in Lexington. Walter arrived later by train, his fare paid by a family friend who accepted Mrs. Tevis's diamond ring (later redeemed) as security. They stayed with Walter's Aunt Sally on Franklin Avenue, and Mr. Tevis eventually found a job at the Ordnance Depot in Richmond. For a period, Walter attended the Model High School at Eastern Kentucky State College. In 1945, on his seventeenth birthday, he joined the navy as a carpenter's mate and was stationed near Houston and also in South America; this was right at the end of World War II, and he was discharged in August of 1946. He took a degree in English at the University of Kentucky in 1951 and between graduation and 1954 taught in a number of small high schools, including Science Hill, Hawesville, and Carlisle. Walter's father felt that his son was making poor use of his education by teaching in little Kentucky towns. Mr. Tevis lived long enough to see one of Walter's stories in Esquire, but he died before The Hustler came out and was reviewed in Time or made into a film.

One day, at Carlisle, Walter sent me a polished apple by way of one of the students we shared. I sent him a note on a small piece of folded paper saying, "Thank you for the big red apple"—only I drew the apple with my red marking pencil and sent it to him when the students changed classes. He kept the little note in his bill-fold for many years, until the paper wore out. That was the beginning of a relationship that lasted for twenty-seven years.

On week-ends we often rode the bus to Lexington, where Walter introduced me to his beloved home town. He took me to meet his Aunt Sally and led me to her basement to show me the makeshift living quarters of his student days. I was not impressed with the hot plate, cot, and temporary shower arrangements. This is where he lived while attending the University of Kentucky on the G. I. Bill. After tuition and books were paid, he had twenty dollars left for food, clothes, and spending money. He supplemented his income by working at Toby's pool room on South Limestone. Oatmeal cooked on the hot plate was his staple

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diet when funds ran out.

While in Lexington, we ate at his favorite inexpensive spots: Wings Chinese Restaurant on North Limestone; the White Castle on West Main, where he stopped for hamburgers (five cents each or six for a quarter) when on his paper route; and the Coney Island, run by the Levas family (the Levas brothers were friends from school days). We browsed in Joe Houlihan’s Morris Book Shop on Walnut Street and went to movies at The Kentucky, The Ben Ali, and The Strand. Walter was fond of popular films, as he later was interested in television.

We were invited to have Sunday dinner with the Kavanaugh family on Ashland Avenue, and there I met his longtime friend, Toby. They had become comrades in the sixth grade, when Walter
first came to Ashland School, and they had gone through Ashland, Morton Junior High, and Henry Clay High School together. After dinner, Toby showed me the pool table in the basement that his father, a physician and amateur photographer, had bought the boys “to keep them out of trouble.” Walter and Toby filled me in on the history of their early pool-playing days.

Their pool careers had begun there in the Kavanaughs’ basement. As young boys, Walter and Toby watched the pros play billiards for big money at the Phoenix Hotel, downtown at the corner of Main and Limestone streets. Then, at the pool table on Ashland Avenue, they practiced the shots they had learned from the big-time players. Walter was a fair player, but not as good as Toby; Walter’s playing suffered from a hand-to-eye coordination problem. When they thought they were ready, they took their game to small towns such as Georgetown, Paris, and Winchester and hustled “the locals.” This was in the days before pool halls were respectable—“a way for boys to break from their mothers,” Walter said later of these experiences.

Walter and I married before school was out and set up housekeeping in Carlisle in a two-room apartment, upstairs in the house of a pleasant local lady. We cooked on a hot plate, got water from the bathroom for dishes, and took showers by going through the lady’s bedroom. We painted the kitchen wall flame red, and Walter decorated it with fairies peeping around the door facing. We thought it a wonderful, cozy place.

Although Walter had a degree, he had no teaching certificate. Consequently, his teaching contract could not be renewed until the first day of school, in case someone with certification would show up and apply for the job. So, we decided to take our last meager teaching paychecks and the money from wedding gifts and enroll in graduate school at the University of Kentucky for the summer term. I got pregnant, money ran out, and we had little choice but to go to my parents on a farm near Richmond. My parents were not very pleased that they had sent a daughter out into the world to support herself, only to come home broke and pregnant at the end of summer with no job and an unemployed husband waiting for the opening of the next school term.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to be a writer and sell short stories that bring thousands of dollars,” Walter told my mother.

“And I was going to be a missionary to China,” I thought.

Walter did get a job at yet another small Kentucky town—
Irvine—in September. Walter loved the movies, and when we walked into the little mountain town for the first time he exclaimed, “This is the biggest town I have taught in—it has two movie theatres!”

In the spring a letter came that was the beginning of his professional writing career. The summer before we met, Walter had been enrolled in a writing class at the University of Kentucky. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., winner of a 1950 Pulitzer Prize for *The Way West* and the Hollywood screenwriter for *Shane*, was a speaker in the class. He read the story that Walter was working on at the time and sent it to an agent, Littauer and Wilkinson, in New York. The letter, received in April of 1953, was as follows:

Dear Walter,

At last the news is pretty good. *Esquire* has accepted “The Best in the Country,” and will pay the miserable sum of $350 for the rights.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Littauer

This sale did not make us rich, but it meant that Walter had broken into the magazine market and that he now had an agent. I framed the letter and hung it where all could see, especially my parents. (For years Walter never passed the mailbox without looking into it for a letter from Mr. Littauer. “Maybe I missed it,” he would say.) To celebrate, Walter invited his classes and our single faculty member friend for a picnic. It rained, and we had potato chips and hot dogs on the living room floor. The sophomores, who called Walter Ichabod Crane behind his back, began to take him more seriously and worked a little harder on their essays. My parents began to take a different view of the unemployed young man their daughter had brought home.

Irvine was a lovely small town, and in the fall the hills around us were beautiful. Here our son Will was born. Walter came home every day at mid-morning for coffee and to see if he had a letter from his agent. He sometimes got letters of encouragement, and in 1955 he sold a story to *Collier’s* magazine. We left the baby with my mother as soon as school was out in the spring and Toby Kavanaugh took us to the airport for a trip to New York. It was our first plane ride and my first trip to the “big city.” Many years later we would return for the movie openings of *The Hustler* and
The Man Who Fell to Earth.

In the plane, Walter told me about his other trips to New York. In the summer when Walter and Toby were schoolboys they had worked at the stock yards, driving sheep and sometimes paying the lead goat with cigarettes to get her to assist them. With the money he earned, he rode the bus to New York to spend a few weeks before school began, visiting his Aunt Myra in her apartment on Park Avenue.

At one time Aunt Myra had been married to a millionaire. She had played bridge with such figures as Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound. During the Depression she lost her money. At the time Walter visited her, she was permitted to live in the maids’ quarters on the whole top floor of the apartment building she had once owned. Aunt Myra was quite happy, wearing overalls and working as a riveter in a defense plant during World War II. In spite of her reduced standard of living, she introduced Walter to the pleasure of eating in good restaurants and gave him a taste of what money could buy.

On our visit, we did not have the money to live in high style. We ate our meals at dreary Child’s restaurants and the Automat and stayed at the relatively inexpensive Plymouth Hotel. Walter could not wait a minute to show me New York. Immediately on arrival, we left our bags at the Plymouth and set out on foot to see the sights. We were walking against the shoulder-to-shoulder rush hour traffic. Too, no one had prepared me for stepping over the homeless people lying on the street. To get out of the traffic we went into Hector’s Cafeteria. The line was moving a mile a minute, and the people behind the counter did not understand my Kentucky accent. Walter would try to tell the waiters what I wanted, and they barked back, “The lady will have to speak for herself.” My first meal in New York was a glass of iced tea with bread, but no butter.

Walter took me to the regular attractions—the Rockettes, the Statue of Liberty—but the part I enjoyed most was Broadway. The plays I remember best are The Solid Gold Cadillac, Teahouse of the August Moon, and Tea and Sympathy. The most exciting part of the trip for Walter, however, was having lunch with Mr. Littauer, his agent. Mr. Littauer encouraged Walter to enlarge his story “The Best in the Country” into a novel.

When my parents picked us up at the airport with the baby, we had one nickel between us. Life with Walter was full of adventure.
It was a bit risky for my tastes, and I felt guilty, too, about having left a new baby. I decided that my role in the marriage would have to be that of the heavy, responsible character. When we went to see The Hustler, years later, there was Walter in a subtle transition to the character of the pool sharp. But more surprisingly, I discovered myself on the screen in the character of Bert. I wanted to crawl under the seat. I felt exposed.

With encouragement from Mr. Littauer, Walter gave up teaching and went back to the University of Kentucky as a graduate student and teaching assistant in the English Department. At graduation he was hired as an editor for the Kentucky Highway Department. Between editing assignments he had time to work on his own. He enlarged "The Best in the Country" into The Hustler and wrote a number of short stories that sold to such magazines as Cosmopolitan, Playboy, and The Saturday Evening Post. These supplemented his salary from the Highway Department and the cost of having our second baby, Julie.

Walter always did his writing at the typewriter, not in pen or pencil drafts. He typed at a table, on a chair, or even on the bed if it was late at night, so the landlady would not hear. He wrote fast and furiously, made few rewrites, and sold almost everything he wrote. He would often bring me a page at a time to read and ask me if it was clear.

"I'm no critic," I would say.

"But you read, and you are an average reader. If it makes sense to you it can be understood by others," he would reply.

In the beginning Mr. Littauer helped him edit. Sometimes, for example, Walter would have to shorten something for a magazine to make it fit space needs. The journal might want a short, one-page narrative. Sometimes he talked about a story before he wrote it. However, when he began working hard on something, he no longer talked about it. He just submerged himself in the process, typing swiftly with two fingers. When his head was clear and he was at his peak he could put words on paper in a short time, and when at his best his typescripts needed little rewriting. In later years, however, writing did not come so easily. There were long dry spells when he seemed to be unable to write anything.

Teaching sustained him during these times. "I love to lecture. I love the sound of my voice," he once related to the press.

I'm a literary being, but I don't enjoy the process of writing.
It’s lonely work and I’m essentially an outgoing person. I don’t write as much as I should, probably because I’m not hungry enough.²

We never depended on the writing income for living expenses but bought special things with it—with one exception. Walter had a great fondness for good shirts and jackets. He stopped shopping at Ben Snyder’s and began shopping the sales at Meyers’ and Wolf Wile’s. With two children and a job to get to, it also seemed the time had come to get a car. We went to the used car lot and picked out a dull green Studebaker with a pointed nose for $350. Neither one of us had a license to drive, although I had driven machinery on the farm. The salesman parked our car in front of the house on Kentucky Avenue, and after the baby was asleep we took practice trips around the block. One night Walter got too close to a fire hydrant and scraped some paint off the door. With his driving permit and a new delight in his driving skills he invited another family to go with us to Herrington Lake. He managed to get the Studebaker’s front tires in the lake, and the reverse gear stubbornly eluded him. Each time he accelerated we went a little further into the water. Eventually, both of us became competent drivers.

Walter had been given an advance on The Hustler and felt he could afford to have the final manuscript typed. One day we loaded the children into the Studebaker and went for a long ride into the country to the place where a good typist had been recommended. We returned to pick the typescript up on the agreed date, and the house was empty—typist and manuscript gone—with no note telling of a forwarding address. A couple of months later, with no advance notice, she brought the completed project to our house. I was quite worried, but Walter didn’t seem to let it bother him. I think he lacked enough faith in his creation to be overly concerned.

The Hustler was published by Harper in 1959, and we bought a big twenty-one inch blond television set to celebrate. Every night there were live dramas, and we were thrilled to watch one of Walter’s stories on the Loretta Young show. The Hustler has since been printed in seven editions and translated into Italian and Spanish. Hollywood’s Twentieth Century Fox made a screen adaptation of the novel—starring Jackie Gleason, Paul Newman, and George C. Scott—and it won three academy awards and
received the Screen Writers' Guild Award for Best Written American Drama of 1961. Years later, Walter said of his work, "I made two words popular in folk culture—'born loser' and 'Minnesota Fats.'" 3 In fact, an impostor turned up as "Minnesota Fats," a fat pool player who had read Walter's book, took the name, and made quite a bit of money boosting his reputation on the story. Walter thought about suing him, but never did.

When the movie rights for *The Hustler* were sold several years after the novel appeared, Walter received $25,000. For a man with a sickly, unhappy youth and scars from the Depression, success had its frightening aspects. Could he write another novel? Had he used his best material? While we waited for the movie money to come we pursued Walter's original plan of getting a doctorate from the University of Iowa, where *The Hustler* would be used as his thesis. There was a foul-up with the language requirements, so he got a second master's degree in 1960, in creative writing.

It was the style of the times to go anywhere but home to write novels. Europe was too far, so Walter chose a writing colony in Mexico to complete his second novel, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. We rented our house in Iowa, loaded Will and Julie and enough belongings to last a year into our used 1955 Chevrolet, and set out for San Miguel. Back in Hollywood the Actors Union went on strike, so no money was forthcoming. Family savings did not allow enough for new tires before we began our journey. Our trip through the desert was something like the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The four of us lived on the rent money from the Iowa house, and we all got hepatitis. San Miguel was a community where there was no discipline in the writing society, and liquor was cheap. Writers of the time were fashioning themselves after Hemingway—crew neck sweaters, lots of late-night talk, and heavy drinking. It was here that Walter began his own serious drinking. A month before we returned, a part of the movie royalty came through. We flew to Puerto Vallarta and lived like movie stars for a week.

*The Man Who Fell to Earth* was hastily completed in the last weeks of our stay in Mexico, and Fawcett Publications brought it out in paperback in 1963. Although it was named the best science fiction novel of the year, it never got the recognition that came to *The Hustler*. Nevertheless, several years after publication, it, too, was made into a movie, starring David Bowie. In a newspaper interview Walter is quoted as saying, "When I was five years old I
became disillusioned with the world and escaped into science fiction. Had television been around I probably would have been a television freak." Extraverted as he seemed, Walter knew well the character of Thomas Jerome Newton, the lonely alien from outer space who was never completely at ease with the world. Between 1954 and 1963 Walter published two novels as well as nineteen short stories in major magazines. Then, over the following fifteen years, he created nothing.

When we returned to the states from Mexico, Walter supported his family by teaching at Southern Connecticut College in New Haven and at Ohio University in Athens. The academic life was a pleasant one—a wonderful place for me and the children, and for Walter for a time. Although Walter tried teaching during the school year and writing in the summers, alcohol sapped his creative energy, and the writing all but ceased for many, many years. This was a difficult time for all writers, because television greatly cut into the short story market. But Walter was not a disciplined person. He was a talented person who sometimes made use of his talents. He was never concerned about "publish or perish" pressures or the rancor of departmental squabbles. He enjoyed his students and his academic colleagues. He was pleased to be a faculty celebrity with a well-known novel and movie to his credit, and would give his time to anyone who asked for it, down to the Fuller brush salesman. He was not research-oriented, and he neither went to the library nor developed a good library of his own. He spent a good bit of departmental time reading student manuscripts, and he grew tired of this. His real interest was in the field and market of contemporary creative literature as entertainment. Accordingly, he watched a good bit of television and followed current movies. He unfailingly read Time magazine and The New Yorker, and every night until about 2:00 A.M. he read magazines and novels. He remembered nearly everything he read, and was happy to recall and share information. He was a "one man show" at parties and gatherings, and he was sought out, too, for lectures and workshops.

Walter, consequently, was not a private person. Talking all the time—in the faculty lounges, and to students who were not worthy of his time—he failed to hold aside time to write. As he got older he realized that time was running out, and he was not becoming what he had dreamed of being—a significant, well-established writer. Because he essentially quit writing and had nothing to send
to Mr. Littauer, they lost track of each other. Mr. Littauer, an older man, had once given Walter the approval his father was not able to give. This person, who had once been so important to him, had been dead for some years before Walter knew of it. Walter’s life became more and more meaningless.

Finally, he stopped drinking, began a new novel called Mocking Bird, and got a new agent, Robert Mills. The arrangement with the new agent never worked very well, chiefly because Walter was not writing. When his new agent’s secretary said, “Come on up to New York, and I will help you write,” the offer was too great to let pass. Fast Eddie, in The Hustler, found that he had to continue to play pool to be happy. In 1978, Walter left behind the security of the teaching profession, his friends, and his family, and went to New York to see if he could support himself by writing. There he finished Mocking Bird and wrote The Queen’s Gambit, the story “Far From Home” (called the best science fiction story of 1958 and included in Doubleday’s Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction), the volume Far From Home (a collection of thirteen short stories), Steps of the Sun, and The Color of Money.

The Queen’s Gambit is from Walter’s early experience with drugs—the phenobarbital given to him at the convalescent home at Stanford—and his knowledge of chess. When he was not reading or drinking, he loved to play chess at night. We had once attended a pool tournament where a teenage girl beat out the old-time pool players and hustlers. For his story, Walter simply changed the game from pool to chess.

Hollywood saw potential in The Color of Money for a popular sequel to The Hustler. Walter was hopeful that this would make him rich. He met with Paul Newman in New York and persuaded him to make the movie. Walter’s work once again was adapted for the screen, and Tom Cruise was added to the cast. But while Walter received some compensation, his screen play was not used in production, and he was just paid for the title and the idea of the story.

Walter lived only six years in New York before all those cigarettes he had smoked led to lung cancer and to his death in 1984. He was fifty-six. When I heard he was dying I sent him a note saying, “Your children are populating southeastern Ohio with beautiful grandchildren. [Three at that time, now six.] We love you very much.”

I asked his companion, who was with him when he died, if he
got the note in time. "Yes," she said, "and I read it to him. He said, 'Oh, yes.'"

Walter's body was cremated and the remains buried under a tree in the family plot in the cemetery at Richmond, Kentucky, his family's native soil. Toby Kavanaugh and a few friends from school and pool hall days, a few friends from the University of Kentucky in Lexington, his family, his children, and three grandchildren were there to take part in the ceremony. The minister who conducted the service called Walter an "ornery lover," his teachers called him "brilliant—lazy—erratic." His sophomore high school students called him "interestingly different." Walter Tevis, fascinating and complicated, was certainly all of these and more.

NOTES

2Frederic Kelly, New Haven Register, 16 May 1965.
3Robin Stahl, "Tevis Not Just Pool Player (He Also Writes A Little)," Greenburg Tribune Review, 6 November 1977.
4Ibid.