

# And God Laughs...

## The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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**“Insanity is hereditary, you get it from your children.”**

**Anon.**

*PICAYUNE, MISSISSIPPI, JUNE 30, 1965 . . .*

“But, at the moment, Joyce, I’ve got only three; these two and the one in Gulfport, but we don’t fly the one on the end, we just use it for spare parts.”

“But why bombers?”

“Oh, a number of reasons; they’re fast, and they carry a big load, and they’re cheap. I’d rather have a DC 6, but I can’t afford one; maybe, in a couple of years, if the prices keep coming down . . .”

“What do you do with them?”

“Well, we’ve been using this one on the South American trips, and I’ll probably take the one in Gulfport to Africa, if we go to Africa.”

*SLIDELL, LOUISIANA, LATER THAT NIGHT . . .*

“But you should know you can’t fool kids about things like that, Arthur.”

“Maybe you can’t, but I can, and so far I have, and I want to keep it that way; as far as the kids are concerned, Eliza’s an employee, nothing more and nothing less. She’s a good girl, Joyce, and I think you’ll like her, but some of the other people I’m involved with will cause trouble; Jesus Christ couldn’t get along with Bill Binnings, and you’ve got to be a combination saint and Devil to handle Herbert.”

“What does Herbert do, besides leave dead snakes in the bathtub?”

“Joyce, if that was the worst thing he’d ever done, I wouldn’t even bother to mention it to him; Herbert’s caused me more trouble than any other five people I ever knew, but he’s the best man that ever worked for me, too. Even if he is crazy.

“You still haven’t said what he does.”

“Well, it’s a bit difficult to explain, he does a lot of things; he’s an actor, and a damned good one, and he’s a film editor, probably the best one in the world, certainly the best one I’ve ever known, by far.”

“So why all the problems?”

“Oh, Joyce, it’s a long story, and most of it doesn’t make any sense at all, so I don’t really know where to start; Herbert first came to work for me in the summer of 1960, almost five years ago to the day, he was eighteen years old, fresh out of high school, tall, thin, and green as grass. I’ve never known a nicer boy than he was in those days; extremely intelligent, completely honest, and interested in almost everything.”

“Two years later, he was just as intelligent, far more experienced, but anything but honest; instead, he was hesitant, fearful, and suspicious. But it wasn’t a slow, gradual change, it came about overnight, literally; this reversal of character, and it was exactly that, occurred within less than twenty-four hours. Perhaps I’m responsible for it; certainly, at least, I was involved.”

“What happened?”

“He got married.

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“He and his wife even left for a while. But they’re back now, and Herbert’s working for me again, and I need him, he’s important to my business; but he’s not easy to get along with.”

“Don’t you ever get involved with any sane people?”

“Not often, I’ve never been able to find very many.”

“Where’s Herbert now?”

“He and his wife are visiting his parents in Pennsylvania; they dropped off Eliza and the kids in Florida and then drove up the east coast; but he won’t come back that way, so we’ll have to go after the kids in the plane.”

“Where’s the jaguar?”

“In Florida, with Eliza and the kids.”

“Now tell me about George.”

“Joyce, it’s four o’clock in the morning, right now I’m going to sleep.”

“Well, scoot over, you’re taking up the whole bed.”

“Joyce, will you be good enough to get to Hell out of here? You’re not going to sleep with me. Go sleep in Ya Ya’s room, that’s the one across the hall from the bathroom.”

“It smells too bad in there, it’s bad enough in here; when you opened that door, I thought you had a couple of dead people in there.”

“Then sleep in the room across the hall.”

“It’s worse in there; honestly, I don’t know how you can stand it. Mama told me not to be surprised by anything, but a bathtub full of dead snakes?”

“Joyce, I don’t like it any better than you do, those things just happen, and . . .”

“Yeah, sure, I guess all the tarantulas in the other bathroom just happened, too . . .”

*ENROUTE, PICAYUNE, MISSISSIPPI TO KISSIMMEE, FLORIDA, JULY 1, 1965 . . .*

“. . . oh, and another thing; don’t make any comments about his appearance, he’s damned sensitive about his looks.”

“What’s wrong with his looks?”

“Practically everything; his nose is mashed all over his face, his mouth’s twisted all out of shape, his ears would look better on a gorilla, and his whole body looks like it’s been run through a meat grinder, he’s got scars all over him, especially his left arm.”

“Did he work in a butcher shop?”

“Well, you might put it that way; he works for me.”

“I’m serious, Arthur.”

“I am too, you go around the jaguar while he’s eating and you’ll damned quick find out just what kind of a butcher shop we’re running.”

“Is that what happened to Herbert?”

“No, not the jaguar, not yet, anyway, but it’ll probably get him sooner or later; everything else has.”

“What happened to his arm?”

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“An alligator bit him, it just damned near tore his arm clear off.”

“Why?”

“It didn’t like him, I guess, alligators are like that.”

“What happened to his face?”

“Some kind of an accident when he was a kid; his nose is so crooked that he can’t breath through it, and his mouth got twisted out of shape by mouth breathing for so long. He keeps talking about getting plastic surgery, but I don’t think he ever will; and in any case, there’s nothing he can do about the shape of his head, or his ears.”

“What’s wrong with his ears?”

“Nothing, they’re perfectly normal, for a gorilla. Or they would be, if they were the same size; they don’t match, at least a gorilla’s ears are the same size.”

“Arthur, if he’s as bad as you say he is, who do you put up with him?”

“Joyce, you always want quick, simple answers to everything, and sometimes that’s possible; but, usually, things are so interrelated and complex that no short, easy to understand, answer is possible, or meaningful. In Herbert’s case, I . . . “

“You want my impression of you, on the same subject?”

“All right, go ahead.”

“I think you take ten million words to say something that could be said, probably better, in ten words; I think it’s you that complicates things.”

“O. K., you want simple answers, right? You want to learn to fly, this is an airplane; take us to Florida, you’re the pilot.”

“But, but, I don’t know how.”

“Sure you do, there’s the throttle, that’s the wheel, and here’s a map; what more do you need? That’s Mobile coming up on the right.”

“Arthur, you’re being ridiculous.”

“No, I’m not; you know everything you need to know, now let me see you do it.”

“But I can’t fly this airplane.”

“Sure you can; maybe you can’t land it yet, but I’ll do that, you just get us there. Of course there are a few things that could cause trouble; for instance, if you don’t lean the mixture properly, we won’t have enough fuel to get there. But that’s a complicated subject, you wouldn’t want to hear about that, you’d be bored; it’s not something that’s quick and simple to explain, pilots, engineers, mechanics, engine manufacturers, airline operators and a Hell of a lot of other people have been arguing about it for years, and there’s still no real agreement on the subject, so I couldn’t give you just one opinion, one cold, hard fact.

“Then, of course, there’s the matter of power settings, but that’s too complicated, too; besides, if you make a mistake, you might ruin the engine, so you couldn’t take a chance like that.”

“Arthur, you’re being obnoxious.”

“No, Joyce, I’m not; I’m trying to make a point, things aren’t quite as simple as you think. The quicker you learn that, the better off you’ll be.”

“I just asked you a simple question, I didn’t ask for a lecture.”

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“Joyce, I put up with Herbert because he’s valuable to me, in spite of his problems, that much, at least, should be obvious; when he sticks to the things he’s good at, then I don’t have any trouble with him, but, like a lot of people, he wants to do things that he just can’t handle, and that always leads to trouble.

“He’s one of the greatest natural comedians in the world, but he can’t stand to be laughed at; so he wants to be a dramatic actor, and next to Bill Binnings, he’s probably the worst dramatic actor in the world. He’s the best film editor I’ve ever seen, but he doesn’t like it; so he wants to be a cameraman, and his eyes are so bad that he can’t even focus a camera. In short, he doesn’t want to do any of the things that he’s good at, and he sees everything else as a personal challenge.

“That’s why you’ll have trouble with him, and you will have trouble with him, no matter what you do, he’ll see you as a personal challenge. The first thing he’ll try to do is seduce you, but not for the obvious reason; Herbert’s got the biggest inferiority complex I’ve ever seen, and he thinks he can build himself up by tearing me down, so, if he could seduce my daughter, and then tell it all over town, which he would, then . . . “

“Arthur, if you expect him to try that, why don’t you warn him about it?”

“I already have, twice; I called him from Arkansas as soon as I knew you were coming down here, and I called him again this afternoon, while you were still asleep. But I don’t expect it to do any good; I’ve been warning him about things for years, so far without much success. That’s why I took the trouble to tell you all the things I have about him; if you know what to expect, then you can handle it, but it won’t be easy, even then.

“I made at least one terrible mistake with Herbert; I let him tell me about his problems with his wife Bea; then, when he decided to hang on to her, he started worrying about it, he was afraid I’d tell somebody. Joyce, nobody gives a damn about his wife’s sex life, except him, but to him it’s the most important thing in the world, and he honestly believes that he can somehow make up for it by making me look bad; so he’ll see you as a means to get at me, and he’ll try, believe me, he’ll try.

“But in George’s case, it’s not so simple, I don’t really know where to begin.”

“He works for you, doesn’t you? You pay him, don’t you?”

“Yes and no; he works for me, but I don’t pay him.”

“How does he live?”

“Oh, I feed him, and give him a place to stay, and he works a little, if he happens to feel like it, and when I’m watching him.”

“Why don’t you run him off?”

“He’s useful at times, and I’ve been teaching him to fly, and that’s what he’s really interested in.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“At the moment, he’s in South America, helping Raymond run the compound in Barranquilla. You’ll meet him when we go down there . . . “

“You said the engines in the bombers aren’t legal; why not?”

“Well, the whole damned thing’s illegal if you come right down to it, the engines, the propellers, the planes, and even the operation itself.”

“But why?”

“Joyce, the bombers are licensed under the so-called limited category of aircraft, and that means they’re legal only for the private use of their owner, not for hauling passengers or cargo for hire. But that’s just one more in a long list of regulations that we ignore; one way of getting around it is to own everything we haul, on paper, at least. That doesn’t fool anybody, of course, but it keeps the government off our neck.

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“Then there’s the matter of the planes; there were a lot of different models of the B 25 built during the war, but only a few of them were authorized for conversion to civilian use, which makes the illegal models cheaper. Besides, they’re the best ones, all the latest models, the most improved ones, are illegal; so, because they’re cheaper and better, we use the illegal models. Nobody in the government has even the slightest idea what the differences are anyway, all they can do is go by the serial numbers, so we just swap the serial number plates and they never know the difference, and the same thing applies to the engines and propellers. I honestly believe I could paint the proper numbers on the side of an elephant, call it a B 25, and get it licensed.

“I got a whole sack full of serial number plates off of junked planes in Canada, and we just swap them around to suit ourselves; nobody’s hurt, and the government never suspects a thing, so what’s the difference? We did have a bit of bother one day, though, thanks to George. A government man came down to check one of my planes and it had three conflicting numbers; the number on the side was wrong for the serial number plate, and neither of those numbers matched the number on the instrument panel. George was supposed to change two of the numbers, but he got drunk and forgot about it.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, I took the inspector over to the restaurant for a cup of coffee, while George juggled the numbers around; it worked out all right in the end. Those guys don’t really give a damn, so long as we don’t ask them to ride in our planes . . .”

### *TWENTY MINUTES LATER*

“Joyce, I’ve tried to tell you about some of the people I’m connected with; and I saved the most difficult one until last. Binnings, all things considered, is probably the most difficult human on planet Earth.

“He’s outrageously boastful and arrogantly brave acting, safely away from even the remotest danger. He’s long-windedly expert on any subject, but misinformed and ignorant almost to the point of complete illiteracy. He seems friendly and helpful, but he’s actually extremely jealous and suspicious of everybody.

“Unfortunately, that description fits quite a few people, but nobody else I ever knew possessed those traits to the degree that Binnings does. And, in one way, he’s completely unique, he’s an absolute coward.

“Now, ‘absolute’ is a frequently used, and just as frequently misused word; but, in his case, it’s the only possible word. If Binnings is in one room of a house that he’s familiar with, in broad daylight, then it’ll take you twenty minutes to get him to go into another room. He isn’t quite sure just what might be in the other room and, since he feels safe where he is, he’d just rather avoid the possible danger that might be in the next room. To get him into or out of a car takes about ten minutes, for the same reason.

“He keeps a collection of several hundred guns, including machineguns. He’s the only man I know that keeps a heavy machinegun mounted on a tripod and aimed at the front door of his house. Since there are a few sane members of his family, the gun isn’t loaded, because the sane members of the family won’t let him load it.

“He claims to be a great pilot, but he’s terrified by flying, and in a constant state of mortal terror while he’s in a plane. His ability at flying is on a par with his other abilities, complete incompetence. No, worse, he’s just barely competent enough to get into the air, where he immediately becomes a danger to himself and everything else in the area.

“His father’s financed him in several business ventures, always with the same result, none. Bill’s been a private detective, and he couldn’t locate the continent of Africa if it was misplaced in a broom closet. He owned a crop dusting company, and he managed to trade all of his planes for one heavily damaged, worthless, ex-military trainer. He was a film producer for two years, at great expense to his father, with a total film production of zero.

“Eventually, after several years in various businesses, always with disastrous results, his father got him a job on the police force in his home town. I don’t know what arrangements Bill’s father made with the chief of police, but you can be damned certain they were odd to say the least.

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“A large, tough cop was assigned to Bill full time; he came to Bill’s house every day, spent several hours getting Bill out of bed and dressed, then took him to a quiet part of town and saw to it that Bill was never exposed to anything even remotely resembling danger of any kind. If a cat was chased up a tree by a dog in that end of town, the cop rushed Bill to the other end of town, and so on. Now, for the sake of honesty, I’ll admit that my description of Bill has been a bit colored, a little biased, but it’s been biased to his advantage, not to his detriment. Bill supplied this cop, and himself, with horses, with tailor-made, fancy uniforms resembling ‘Bat Man’ of the comic strip, matched pistols and holsters, and, in general, the most outrageous costumes ever worn by any human on the planet.”

“Arthur, if that’s true, why are you connected with him?”

“His father’s money, what else?”

“Oh.”

“Joyce, in my business, making films for television, enormous amounts of money are required, even the way we make our films, and we make films for a Hell of a lot less than anybody else in the world, a lot less. I just don’t have the kind of money that it takes to finance an operation like mine completely on my own, so I have to take in outside investors.

“Anyway, Bill’s problem is that he fears everything that he doesn’t understand, and he understands nothing. I have to cater to his fears constantly, and you’ll have to as well, no matter how much it bothers you at the time, and it will bother you, believe me. He’s not easy to get along with, and it’s even harder to keep him happy.”

“I understand, Arthur, and I understand about Herbert, too. I won’t have any problems, you’ll see.”

“I hope so, Joyce, I hope so.”

“You don’t sound very confident.”

“Joyce, these people are difficult, and they’ll try to cause trouble.”

“But why would they try to cause trouble?”

“Because, Joyce, they’re people. Because they’ll see you as a means to get at me. If they can make you look bad, then they’ll think that’ll reflect on me, so they’ll try to pull you down, literally, in an effort to get at me.”

“But I thought they were your friends.”

“They are, Joyce, but they’ve also got emotions, king-sized egos, and they’ll do anything they can to try to make me look bad; because they think they’ll look better by comparison. People are like that, Joyce, you better be learning it.”

“Oh, I’ve learned it.”

“Well, you haven’t learned it very well, not from the looks of the problems you’ve had during the last year.”

“Tell me about Eliza, I’m tired of hearing about Herbert and Bill.”

“Joyce, we’ll be there in about an hour; I’d rather let you meet her, and form your own opinion. If we stay at her mother’s house, and I always do, you’ll probably have to sleep with Eliza tonight; and knowing you, I imagine you’ll keep her awake the rest of the night talking.”

“What’s she intend to do with all those damned tarantulas?”

“Oh, she likes things like that, and they do make pretty good pets, believe it or not, but we got those to use in a film . . .”

*KISSIMMEE, FLORIDA, JULY 2, 1965 . . .*

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“. . . so the damn fool put them all in one sack, and then put the sack in the bathtub. When I talked to him on the phone, he said he did so, ‘in case one of them dies, that way the juice won’t soak into the floor and stink up the whole house.’

“It never occurred to him, of course, that with all of them in one sack, one death would quickly lead to all of them dying; and that’s exactly what happened; the whole damned house smells like a morgue after a ten day power failure. I’m rather accustomed to smelling dead snakes, but it was almost more than I could stand; and it was a completely new experience for Joyce, one she could do without, she said.”

“Have you warned her about Herbert?”

“Liza, I’ve done the best I can; but it wouldn’t hurt if you have a go at it too, she thinks I’m exaggerating.”

“When are you going back to Slidell?”

“Tomorrow or the next day, I thought I’d take Joyce and the kids up to Silver Springs while we’re this close. There’s no hurry anyway, Herbert won’t be back for several days, and I can’t do much until he gets there. You’ll have to go back by airline, so you can stay here a few more days if you want to.

“Joyce’s mother and I were divorced in 1947, eighteen years ago, and I didn’t see her at all for over fifteen years. Then, about a year ago, when I went up to Seminole for my father’s funeral, I found out she was getting married; so I decided to go see her, and you know how that turned out.

“Then, a few months later, she called me in Slidell, and she was obviously speaking in front of, and for the benefit of, an audience of her friends; but the very fact that she felt called upon to make such a gesture merely indicated that she had mixed emotions about me as well.”

“Why? What did she say?”

“Oh, Liza, she was just trying to be cute, I don’t even remember what she said; but there was no doubt about what she meant, she was just showing off in front of her friends, or maybe her husband. I could hear somebody laughing in the background, and it sounded like several people.”

“But what did she actually say?”

“Liza, I told you, I don’t remember; she said a lot of things, I talked to her for about half an hour. She sounded like a ten-year-old, trying to be sarcastic; I was a bit surprised that she didn’t ask me if I had Prince Albert in the can. She said things like, ‘How’s the big shot movie producer these days?’”

“Why didn’t you just hang up on her?”

“I want to help her if I can, and I wanted to help her then, that’s why I went to see her when I found out she was about to get married; all she knows about me is what her mother told her, and the things Pearl told her, so I can’t blame her if she’s got a low opinion of me.”

“Who’s Pearl?”

“She was my father’s wife at the time he died; Joyce used to visit my father in Oklahoma, and Pearl spent about ten years brain washing her on the subject of me.”

“How long does she plan to stay with you?”

“Before she left Arkansas, her mother said it was a temporary arrangement, but that’s just so much hog wash; Gladys has given up on Joyce completely, that’s the only reason she let her go with me in the first place. So now it’s over to me, if I can’t help her, then nobody can. But it won’t be easy, that’s obvious already, and a lot of the load will fall on you.”

“Why? Where do I fit in?”



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“Liza, nobody in the history of the world ever kept two women in the same house without serious problems, no matter who they were, or how they were related. Women are natural rivals, that’s why you see so few women in business, or in politics; they all want to be boss, and they can’t work together, or they won’t. You ought to understand that, look at the way you acted when Mildred was visiting us.”

“Well, considering who she is, and . . . “

“Liza, that doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference. Maybe it should, but it doesn’t. You couldn’t keep a woman and a bronze statue of a woman in the same house; if you did, they’d fight, it’s just the nature of the beast. Your mother fights with your grandmother, and you fight with both of them, and if you put a female gorilla in your mother’s house, all three of you’d fight with it, with or without reason.”

“What does Joyce think of me?”

“What she thinks, and what she says, are two entirely different things. She was curious about you at first, which was only natural, and after she met you, she told me she liked you a lot. She also told me that she didn’t expect to like you, but that I’d never have known it if she didn’t. What did you talk about last night? She said you kept her awake nearly all night.”

“I kept her awake? Listen, she kept me awake, I don’t think I slept two hours.”

“So what did you talk about?”

“Oh, practically everything, about you, and about Herbert, and about the films, and about philosophy. She told me she didn’t want to come between you and me, and she said she’d leave if she caused any trouble. And I told her the same thing, I told her I didn’t want to come between you and her . . . ”

*SAME DAY, LATER*

“Do you intend to take Eliza back to Slidell when we go? Or just the kids?”

“The kids and the jaguar; Eliza’ll have to go back by airline, there won’t be enough room in the plane.”

“Where do you plan to put the jaguar?”

“In the baggage compartment to start with, that’s nearly as big as the back seat; but I’ll be surprised if he stays there very long, we’ll be lucky if he doesn’t end up sitting in our laps. What do you think of the jaguar? Is he as big as you expected?”

“He’s a lot bigger than I expected, I thought he was just a cub.”

“He is, he’s not even a year old yet; if you think he’s big now, just wait till he grows up. He’ll weigh over two hundred pounds by this time next year.”

“How much does he weigh now?”

“Oh, less than a hundred pounds; he weighed fifty pounds the last time I weighed him, but he’s nearly twice that size now.”

“Ya Ya told me they took him swimming in a lake; I thought cats didn’t like water.”

“Most cats don’t, but jaguars are an exception; he’s been bathing with Ya Ya ever since we got him, and he sleeps in the same bed with her.”

“Where did she get a name like Ya Ya? Is it Spanish?”

“No, that’s just a name Gary called her when he was a baby, he was too small to say Eva when she was born, so he called her Ya Ya, and the name just stuck.”

“Their mother was from Mexico, wasn’t she?”

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“Yes and no; she was born in Mexico, but her father’s family came from Georgia, and her maternal grandparents came from England.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Oh, as usual, it’s a long story; her main problem was drinking, she’s an alcoholic. I don’t drink at all, so that made a bad combination.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea.”

“Doesn’t she write the kids?”

“Not very often, and she never gives a return address.”

“Who looks after the kids when you and Eliza are away on a filming trip?”

“They’re never left by themselves, if that’s what you mean; Bea usually keeps them while we’re on a trip, but I’m with them most of the time.”

“You let Bea keep your kids? After the things you told me about her?”

“Bea’s a good girl, Joyce, she’s just not very smart; the problem’s Herbert, not Bea . . .”

*SLIDELL, JULY 5, 1965 . . .*

“ . . . and I want to teach you everything I can about our work, but you can’t learn anything from what I’m doing now, and you might cause me to make a mistake.”

“How do you expect me to learn, if you won’t even let me watch?”

“I want to teach you to fly, too, but I don’t intend to start you off in one of the bombers.”

“Where did you meet Eliza?”

“Let’s go in the kitchen, I’m not going to get any work done anyway, and it’s too cold in here if I’m not working.”

“You didn’t answer my question; I asked you . . . “

“I met her father in South America, about two years ago; he was a bush pilot for a gold mine in French Guiana. Eliza was there at the time, but I didn’t meet her until about six months later, in Florida.”

“How long have you been sleeping with her?”

“Joyce, I’m quite certain you’re the nosiest person I’ve ever known. What difference does it make?”

“Well, if you won’t tell me about your work, and if you won’t tell me about the people working for you, then how do you . . . “

“You know everything you need to know about the people working for me, and I fail to see where my personal sex life enters the situation.”

“Arthur, if I’m going to be living here, in the same house with Eliza, then I need to know as much as possible about her. You told me all about Herbert, and George, and Bill Binnings, but you didn’t tell me anything about Eliza, and she’s the one I’ll be around the most.”

“And she’s the one that’ll give you the least trouble. I told you about the others because they will cause trouble; especially Herbert, he’ll do any damned thing he can to cause trouble.”

“I know all about Herbert, down to and including his sex life, now I want to know about Eliza.”

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“Joyce, I told you about Herbert’s sex life for a reason, for an important reason; that’s the source of all his problems. And you don’t know all about him, either; I’ve known him for five years, and I don’t understand him half the time, and you haven’t even met him yet.”

“No, but I know his type, from what you told me about him.”

“Listen, fifty minutes with Herbert would have driven Freud up the wall; don’t overestimate your ability, girl, Herbert’s one of a kind. If I ever meet another one like him, I’ll probably shoot myself.”

“Then why do you keep him around?”

“I spent several hours explaining that to you the other night; I keep him for the same reason I’ve got the jaguar, he’s useful, in spite of the problems he causes. I don’t especially like feeding the furniture to the jaguar, either; but I can buy a whole damned warehouse full of furniture with the money I’ll make off of him, so, if he feels like eating the furniture, and he usually does, then I’ll feed it to him.”

“Is that what happened to all of the furniture?”

“Well, I hope you didn’t think I’d been chewing on it.”

“Why don’t you keep him in a cage?”

“Eventually, we’ll probably have to; but once we put him in a cage, then he won’t be worth a damn for film work.”

“But why? Other people keep animals in cages.”

“Very few people keep jaguars. Fifteen years ago, everybody thought it was impossible to tame a jaguar; since then, there have been about a dozen tame jaguars that I know of, but all of them were raised just like we raised this one.”

“I still want to know about Eliza.”

“Joyce, you know everything you need to know about Eliza; if you want to know anything else, then ask her.”

“I think you’re hiding something.”

“A lot of things you might accuse me of, but not that; I don’t hide things, Joyce, and I never did, maybe that’s why I’ve had so much trouble. I’ve done a lot of things I regret, but I’ve never done anything I’m ashamed of, not since I was a kid, anyway.”

“What did you do when you were a kid? That you’re ashamed of, I mean.”

“Nothing spectacular; no more than most kids, and a Hell of a lot less than some. Whatever I wanted to, if I thought I could get away with it.”

“Does Eliza do exercises for her breasts?”

“Good night, Joyce.”

*SLIDELL, JULY 6, 1965 . . .*

“Are you asleep?”

“Two more minutes and I would have been. What do you want now?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“I’m not surprised, you slept twelve hours yesterday. Go watch the late show, it won’t disturb Ya Ya if you keep the sound down.”

“...And God Laughs”

## The Arthur Jones Collection

“I don’t want to watch television, I want to talk. But I might as well try to talk to the jaguar; I don’t know why I came down here in the first place, you won’t even talk to me, all you want to do is work, or sleep.”

“If you want to talk, Joyce, you’re wearing the wrong costume, and if you don’t, you’re in the wrong room. Maybe you should try talking to the jaguar, he doesn’t believe in wearing clothes either.”

“Arthur, you’re my father, and . . . “

“That’s the point; I’m your father, not your husband.”

“Don’t even mention that son of a bitch, it makes me sick just to think about him. But I’ll fix that little . . . “

“Joyce, I’m not interested in hearing your plans for revenge on your husband.”

“You just don’t know what he did, he tore one of my . . . “

“Whatever you did, then and there, was enough. Revenge is never worth the . . . “

“Arthur, I don’t care what it does to me. I’ll get that son of a bitch if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

“Lower your voice, Joyce, the boys are trying to sleep right across the hall. Look, you accuse me of not caring what happens to you, and then you turn right around and say you’re prepared to throw everything away, even your life, just for revenge. Joyce, why should I care, if you don’t care yourself?”

“Arthur, I do care, I . . . “

“Ten seconds ago, you said you didn’t. Let me tell you something else, too; do you know how much my time’s worth?”

“No, I never really thought about it. Why?”

“About a thousand dollars a day, at least a thousand dollars a day, so, according to that, and that’s conservative, I’ve already devoted about eight or nine thousand dollars worth of my time to talking to you, in less than two weeks.”

“Is that all you think about, money? Is that what you do with the kids, devote so many dollars worth of time to them a year? What does that work out to, about two minutes apiece?”

“Joyce, I’m trying to tell you that I do care. Maybe that was a poor example, I wanted . . . “

“No, it was a damned good example; you really think like that. Maybe Mama was right about you, maybe you are some kind of a monster; you think more of that damned jaguar than you do of your own kids. You treat him better too. How many dollars worth of your time does he get? More than the kids, or the same amount?”

“Joyce, I told you to lower your voice.”

“Arthur, let’s don’t fight. I just want to talk to you, I’ve got nobody else to talk to. You don’t go any place, and I have to stay cooped up in this damned house all the time, so just talk to me a little while, please?”

“You’ve done more traveling in the last week than you have during the rest of your life; do you really call that being cooped up?”

“Well, I was cooped up in that damned airplane, and that’s worse than being in the house, but the house is bad enough; I can’t even go to the toilet without risking my life, you’ve got one bathroom full of tarantulas, and the damned jaguar’s in the other one, and I can still smell those damned dead snakes. If Mama ever saw this place, she’d jerk me out of here so fast you wouldn’t even see me go.”

“If you’d clean up a few of your messes, Joyce, the place would look a lot better, you scatter your clothes around like a tornado’s been through the house.”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault? Listen . . . “

## The Arthur Jones Collection

*LATER THAT SAME NIGHT . . .*

“ . . . and Pearl told me all kinds of things about you, Arthur. She got her information from your wife, she said. According to Pearl, you favored Gary over the other two kids, but she said you treated them all like dogs; that’s exactly what she said, ‘like dogs.’

“Arthur? Arthur, are you listening to me?”

“No, Joyce, I’m sound asleep, and I damned near was too. Why don’t you get out of here and let me sleep? I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“That’s what you always say, and then you don’t do it. Anyway, as I was saying, apparently your wife, Eva, wrote these long sad letters to your father, and, of course, Pearl had to stick her nose into it, and don’t think that didn’t just tickle her pink. Honestly, she’s the most despicable person I ever met, and believe me, that’s saying quite a lot, after some of the people I’ve known.

“According to your wife’s letters, or, at least, according to what Pearl told me about your wife’s letters, you treated her and the kids something awful; you beat her up, and you sent the kids to school in rags, and you didn’t even feed them properly. Pearl said your father was thinking about trying to get the State to take the kids away from you, but he was afraid of you, so he didn’t do it, but he wanted to, Pearl said.

“Frankly, when I saw the kids, I was surprised; they’re good kids, Arthur, real good kids, and they damned sure don’t look like they’ve been mistreated, and they don’t act like it, either. I love the kids, Arthur, you’ll never know how much I love them, and especially Ya Ya, she’s a doll. She’s going to be a damned good looking girl, too. She’s pretty right now, but just wait till she starts filling out; you’ll have to sit on the front porch with a shotgun to keep the boys away. But you won’t have any trouble with her, she’s a good girl, and I’ll see to it that she stays that way. I learned my lesson the hard way, but just let some son of a bitch try to put his hands on my little sister and I’ll kill him, and I will, too.

“But I hate that bitch Pearl. The things she told me about you, and the things she told your father, and that’s the worst part, at least I got a chance to find out the truth, but he never did. He probably died believing the things Pearl told him, and the things your wife wrote him. I’ll fix the bitch for that, you see if I don’t.

“You’re not the only one she lied about either. I’ll never know what she told your father about me, but it wasn’t good, it damned sure wasn’t good. That’s why I never went back up there to see your father after I was about fifteen; Pearl told him something about me, and then she told Mama the same thing, but I never could find out what it was. That little sissy ass grandson of Pearl’s, though, the queer son of a bitch, he could do no wrong, but that was her grandchild, so that was different.

“Then they wouldn’t let me go to your father’s funeral, and that was Pearl’s fault, too; she told Mama you’d be there, and she said it might cause trouble if I was there too. The bitch. I loved your father, Arthur, and I wanted to go to his funeral. I cried for two solid weeks, and it was all her fault. Oh, I’ll fix the bitch for that, if for nothing else, you see if I don’t.

“Arthur? Arthur? Are you really asleep?”

“Don’t play games with me, Arthur. Are you really asleep?”

“Joyce, are you completely out of your mind? Get out of my bed, and out of my room. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“Arthur, I just . . . “

“Joyce, we’re through talking for the moment. Don’t press your luck, or I’ll put you on a plane for Arkansas tonight . . .”

*SLIDELL, JULY 7, 1965 . . .*

“...And God Laughs”

## The Arthur Jones Collection

“Where are the kids?”

“I took them to a show; I wanted to have a chance to talk to you, without them here.”

“I thought you wanted to work on the film?”

“I do, but I think we need to have a talk first.”

“O. K., what do you want to talk about?”

“Joyce, why do you think I invited you down here? Do you honestly think I was looking for a bed partner?”

“Arthur, let’s talk about something else. I’m not even awake yet, I don’t want to argue with you again tonight; I don’t ever want to argue with you again.”

“I’m not trying to start an argument; I’m trying to hold a reasonable discussion; there’s a difference, you know.”

“There’s nothing to discuss; you made your position quite clear last night. But that doesn’t change my feelings, not in the slightest.”

“And just exactly what are those feelings?”

“I love you, Arthur, I guess I always did, even when Mama was trying to make me hate you. But I didn’t really understand it until you came to the house a year ago; that’s why I hardly spoke to you on the phone that day, I was too disturbed to even talk.”

“Joyce, I . . . “

“Just wait, you asked me to describe my feelings, so give me a chance to do it. O. K.?”

“All right, go ahead.”

“After you left, I was almost crazy for days; I couldn’t think about anything else, even with my wedding only a few days away. I almost ran away from home. I even went so far as to pack my bag. I was getting my stuff together to move, after the wedding, so Mama didn’t even notice; she thought I was just packing for the wedding. But I wasn’t, I was fixing to leave; I didn’t want to marry that son of a bitch, not even then, and I damned near didn’t.

“Arthur, for a few days, after you came there the first time, I hated you; I hated you more than I ever hated anybody else in my whole life. But it wasn’t really hate, it was love; I hated you for leaving me there, because you didn’t take me away from that place.

“You know what Mama’s like, and you’ve seen Jerrel, can you just imagine what I had to go through living with them? Then you came, and I had a chance to get away, without marrying that God damned animal, but you didn’t take me, you left me there. Hell, you didn’t even talk to me; you spent the whole damned time talking to Mama and Jerrel in the kitchen. I heard what you said, I was listening at the door; but you were talking to them, and you should have been talking to me. That’s why you came in the first place, to talk to me, not to them. They hated your guts, and they still do, even if Mama did let me come down here with you.

“You should have heard the things they said after you left. Jerrel, that little dried up bastard, he was strutting around like a rooster, talking about throwing you out on your ass. Oh, he was the big man, after you left. But you should have heard him talk. I felt like laughing right in his fact, and I damned near did.

“I wanted to go with you, Arthur, but you didn’t take me, and I hated you for that. That’s why I called you that time, later on; just to show you what I really thought. But I didn’t really hate you, Arthur, I loved you; that’s why it hurt so much when you didn’t take me away. You’ll never know how much I loved you when I was little; you were practically all I thought about. I used to daydream about you coming back. I knew you’d come back someday, but I always thought you’d take me away when you did.”

## The Arthur Jones Collection

“Joyce, just let me cut in for a minute. When I called you from the airport, I didn’t call your mother; I called you, and I asked you to call me back, and you said you would. But you didn’t; instead, your mother called me. I didn’t call to speak to her, I wanted to talk to you, and you had the chance if you really wanted it.”

“Arthur, when you called that day, I felt like I’d been struck by lightning; I was shocked clear out of my mind. I wanted to call you back, and I wanted to see you, but I promised Mama years ago that I’d tell her if you ever tried to contact me.

“She used to be afraid you’d come to school and take me away, ‘kidnap me,’ she called it. She said you were just crazy enough to try something like that, and she made me promise not to ever go anyplace with you. So I promised her, Hell, she made me promise her, she’d have beat me to death if I hadn’t promised her. But a promise is a promise, even if it’s a forced promise, and I don’t break my promises, especially not to Mama. So I called her at the office as soon as you hung up.

“Then, when you came to the house, you didn’t even talk to me, and that hurt, that hurt real bad. When you left, when you walked out and left me there, I just felt like dying. I didn’t think you cared what happened to me, and that’s just the way you acted, too. I could almost read your mind, ‘The dear little girl is in good hands, and now she’s getting married, to a nice, respectable, very religious boy, and everybody lived happily ever after.’ That’s what you thought, too, that’s exactly what you thought.”

“Joyce, that’s about as far from being what I thought as you can get; in fact, that’s almost the opposite of what I thought.”

“All right, what did you think?”

“Joyce, I’m not sure I can explain it to you, but I’ll try. I’ve already explained why I avoided you all those years, or I tried to explain it, at least, so I’ll skip that entirely. Shortly before I called you from the airport that day, I was in Oklahoma, and Pearl told me you were getting married. She also hinted around about a lot of trouble you’d been in, but she never would come right out and say what she meant. You know how she is.”

“I know, all right, the gold-digging bitch.”

“Anyway, I thought you might be getting married just to get away from home, so I decided to contact you. I wanted to find out what was happening, and if you were getting married just to get away from home, then I thought I’d offer you another choice. So that’s why I called you. Kindly note, Joyce, that’s why I called ‘you,’ not your mother. I had a pretty good idea what she thought, and I wasn’t interested in talking to her, but I did want to talk to you.

“Then, when I went to the house, I never got the chance. The whole damned tribe was there, your mother, Jerrel, and his mother. Joyce, you said you felt like a goat in the pig pen in that house; well how do you think I felt? I hadn’t seen your mother in fifteen years, I’d never seen Jerrel before, and I wasn’t even sure who his mother was, nobody even bothered to introduce me, in case you didn’t notice. But they all knew me, all right, or, at least, they thought they did. I felt like the Devil in church, with my hand in the poor box.

“Jerrel’s mother was knitting, or crocheting, or some damned thing, and she looked like she was on the bare edge of control; I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d tried to throw me out on my ass, and I’m damned sure she was thinking about it. She reminded me of Whistler’s Mother.

“And there you sat, on the couch, and you didn’t say a damned word; you just sat there and pouted. And that was the biggest problem; nobody said a damned word, they just sat there and stared. So what the Hell do you say to a stare, anyway? So I sat there and stared back. We probably sat there about five minutes, maybe less, but it seemed like five years. I’ll tell you one thing for sure: I’ve been in gun battles where I felt a Hell of a lot more relaxed than I did sitting in that house.

“I wanted to talk to you, Joyce, but it was completely impossible, and I realized it as soon as I walked in the door. So there was nothing I could do; I didn’t like it, but it was completely out of my control. Maybe that’s why Jerrel acted so cocky after I left; maybe he expected me to beat the Hell out of him, and when I didn’t, he figured he’d frightened me off.

“...And God Laughs”

## The Arthur Jones Collection

“Joyce, that part’s easy to describe, but trying to describe my feelings about you is something else. Quite frankly, I was somewhat disappointed in your appearance, you look a lot better now than you did then, in spite of all the trouble in the meantime. You looked like, and you acted like, an average, middle class girl, but I was expecting a great deal more than that.

“About an hour before that, when I called you from the airport, I didn’t really know what sort of a reception to expect; but you sounded like you were pleased to hear from me, even if it was a bit of a shock. Then, when I got to the house, you were almost hostile, so I was surprised.”

“Arthur, Mama wouldn’t let me talk to you, she was afraid to let me talk to you. When I called her at the office, she rushed home like the house was on fire, and she told me to say ‘hello’ and ‘good-bye’ and to keep my damned mouth shut the rest of the time, no matter what you said. And that’s what I did. But I had to, I couldn’t do anything else, not with her sitting there looking down my throat.”

“Joyce, I’m not a mind reader; I could only judge by the way you acted, and you acted hostile; no, suspicious, that’s a better word, you acted suspicious. Anyway, I was in the same position you were; your mother was in control of the situation, and there was simply nothing I could do about it, so I left as quick as I could.

“When I left, my feelings were mixed, and that’s the part I’m not sure I can explain properly. As long as there’s hope, Joyce, then there’s worry, but, when all hope is gone, then the worry goes with it. Or, at least, it should. I worried about you for fifteen years, but, when I walked out of that house, I was no longer worried. It hadn’t turned out the way I wanted it to, but it was completely out of my control, and I knew it; so my feelings were compounded of disappointment, sadness, and relief. Can you understand that, Joyce?”

“Maybe I do, maybe that’s the way I felt about you. But my feelings were a different mixture; I hated you, and I loved you, and I was disappointed that you didn’t take me away from there when you left. But I didn’t love you right then, I hated your guts, and just a few days before that, I was planning to run away from home and try to find you. If you hadn’t come when you did, I might have done it, too. I didn’t know where you lived, but I figured I could find you if I went to New Orleans. What would you have done, if I’d just walked up and knocked on the door?”

“Well, I guess I’d have been surprised.”

“Arthur, I’m serious; would you have called Mama, or what?”

“Joyce, that’s an impossible question. I’d have been glad to see you, but I can’t say what I would have done. Three years ago, I held the premier of a feature film that I made in Africa, and I wanted to bring you down for that; so I suggested it to my father, because I wanted him to contact your mother first. But he said it was a waste of time; he said your mother wouldn’t let you go, so I dropped the idea. Then, about a year later, I was in Little Rock, so I went by to see your mother’s brother, Cecil, and I’ve talked to him on the phone several times since then. Indirectly, he’s responsible for you being down here now; he told me you broke up with your husband, and that you were back with your mother. Did he ever tell you that he saw me in Little Rock?”

“Oh, he told me all right, the miserable horse’s ass. Oh, yes, he told us all about it, in great detail. He hates your guts too, you know, but that’s not surprising; Cecil hates the whole damned world, and everybody in it, and he especially hates me. I started to kill that swine, and I’d have done it, too. He told Granny he was going to beat me up so bad I wouldn’t even be able to see, and he might have done it, if Pop hadn’t run him out of the house.”

“Joyce, you told me that all of my associates are a bunch of maniacs, or words to that effect, yet, according to you, practically everybody you ever met wanted to hurt you. You hate Cecil, and Pearl, and your husband, and his whole damned family, as you put it, and Jerrel, and even your mother, and . . . “

I don’t hate my mother, I love my mother. I love my mother better than anybody else in the world, except you; but that’s different, I love you in a different way.”

“Now we’ve come full circle, but I’ll skip over that for the moment. Joyce, if you really do love your mother, then you’ve got a mighty strange way of showing it. Give me a one word definition of ‘love.’”



## The Arthur Jones Collection

“Oh, trust, I guess, that’s about as close as I can come.”

“That’s good enough, that’s about as close as you can get. O. K., Joyce, do you trust your mother, and does she trust you?”

“Arthur, I don’t want to talk about Mama. You said you wanted to talk about us; so let’s talk about ourselves, I don’t even like to think about other people, not even Mama.”

“You spend at least half your time talking about other people, why the sudden hesitation?”

“Arthur, I don’t care about other people, I care about you, and I care about me, to Hell with everybody else. Can’t you understand that, Arthur? I love you, and I want you to love me. That first night we got here from Arkansas, I wanted you so bad I almost died, I wanted you to take me to bed, and I wanted you to love me, and all you did was chase me out of the room, and you did the same thing last night . . .”

“...And God Laughs”