

YOU'LL NEVER WRITE ABOUT ME AGAIN

by Livia Manera Sambuy



THE SUBJECT



THE JOURNALIST

I know you may not care, but I do. I care about how to tell a personal story like the one I'm about to write, without falling into a million traps laid out in front of you. I'm thinking of the issues of trust and betrayal that come across between an author and his or her subject. The transfiguration that inevitably takes place in writing. And my friendship with Philip Roth: in which trust was the fundamental condition, despite ambiguity playing a subtler, if ever-present, role.

I should start by saying that the Philip Roth I first encountered, fourteen years ago, is not the same person who called yesterday from the isolation of his snowbound country house in Connecticut to tell me, "I'm a happy man. Want to know the secret of happiness? I don't do anything I don't want to do and I'm unburdened from the task of writing. Why I wasted my time with books and women is a mystery." And then burst out laughing.

Those two powerful driving forces—the writing life and the life of eros—played their parts in the story of our relationship, too. When people ask me how I managed to convince Philip Roth to work with me on a documentary film about him, I tell them that he volunteered. Many wonder how this famously reclusive and fiercely diffident writer said yes to me, a journalist, a woman, and not even an American.

The truth is that while we danced around each other for years, our way of relating to one another changed to a remarkable extent. Due, in part, to time and circumstances, there were two major shifts. The first is when our professional

relationship turned increasingly personal. And the other, when Roth decided it was time to stop writing fiction and live a more civilized life.

I should start by making it clear that our relationship had a bad start. In 2000, Roth accorded a single interview to the Italian press about *The Human Stain*, and I'd crossed the Atlantic to conduct it for my newspaper, the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. But when I called his agent, Jeff Posternak, to arrange the details, he told me, "Mr. Roth has changed his mind and will only do a telephone interview."

I was outraged. I turned the offer down and for two weeks held out, refusing to come to terms with this arrogant and capricious man who evidently thought nothing of humiliating a journalist. But in the end I had to give in. The paper had paid for my trip and I couldn't go back empty-handed. My two weeks in the United States were almost over when I reluctantly gave his agent my phone number in order for Roth to call me, as the reverse was not offered. Even more irritatingly, the day the interview was supposed to take place, I happened to be the guest of a writer friend, Alexander Stille, in his country house in the Berkshires, just forty minutes away from Roth's house in western Connecticut, where I could easily have met him in person.

When Roth called me at the established hour, I asked him my questions and the interview turned out acceptable, though he had planned what he wanted to say and I hadn't had much of a role in it. I was therefore taken aback

when, at the end of our conversation, he apologized and said he was willing to meet me for a drink over the weekend. My only guess is that he'd appreciated the fact that I'd read his books. Unfortunately, I was leaving for Italy the day after, I said, and that was that. He invited me to get in touch with him the next time I came to New York, but I didn't. I thought that his sudden openness was the caprice of a moment, and that if I had looked for him in three months, I would have wasted my time.

A year and a half later I was again at Alexander's Berkshires place when my host, returning from the grocery shop loaded with food on a Friday night, suggested: "Why don't you call Roth and invite him here for dinner tomorrow?" The two of them had met at the house of mutual friends in New York, where Alexander's intellectual curiosity and his books on Italian Jews and politics had found in Roth a keen interlocutor. And even if Roth and I hadn't yet met in person, I did have his home number then. So I thought, Why not? But when I called his house, he declined. Instead, he invited us to possibly visit him the next day. Only he wasn't sure. He wanted me to call him again in the morning. His back was hurting. I sensed boredom and a tease in his voice.

All this was getting on my nerves again. Nevertheless, the next morning I did call him, only to find out he was still playing. He said to call again at 1 p.m. He might be getting the flu. In the meantime Alexander's girlfriend, Lexi, had arrived from New York. Lexi Rudnitsky, a young poet full of life and expectations, immediately declared herself thrilled at the prospect of meeting a reclusive writer she so obviously

admired. It seemed unfair to disappoint my hosts for a mere matter of pride, so I dialed Roth's number again at the requested hour.

Roth finally said he wasn't getting the flu and therefore he was expecting us for tea.

After a forty-minute drive in Alexander's old car full of clutter and first editions of Roth's books he wished him to sign (but turned out to be too shy to ask), we arrived at Roth's isolated place, where two gigantic maple trees stood like sentinels at the sides of an eighteenth-century farmhouse painted light gray. The height of the ash trees surrounding the property and their spectacular foliage gave the place an air of majestic beauty that far surpassed anything I'd seen along the way. Roth, sixty-eight years old, tall and lean in a light blue shirt and khaki pants, was standing at the entrance. He greeted us with formality and took us to his studio, across the lawn from the main house. There, he invited us to sit on a sofa, chose an armchair for himself, and, showing no interest in small talk, almost immediately addressed the subject of books and writing. As the conversation took off, I was intrigued by the fact that he decided to tell us about a book project of his based on the true story of a troubled young man who had disappeared. At first I was surprised he would share something so private with strangers. Then I got it. He wasn't actually telling us anything special at all—it was a discarded project.

While he talked, sitting with his legs crossed, I noticed something impudent in his demeanor. His head was small in comparison with his long body, and his narrow aquiline nose and crown of

wavy gray hair gave him a remarkable virile grace. He seemed concentrated on his own stories, but I sensed that behind that mask he was observing us. Soon, he invited us into the main house—maybe we had passed a test—and we followed him onto a large, fresh veranda, with wicker sofas and armchairs, that communicated with the kitchen. He made us tea but there wasn't much time to drink it. Alexander and Lexi had to get back to the Berkshires, and I had to catch a bus to New York for an interview in the morning.

At this point what had been a cordial visit gave way to a comedy that, years later, Roth and I would remember, laughing and teasing each other about it. We were still on the veranda, immersed in a lively conversation, and he was pouring tea into our cups, when I raised the question of my bus. "Let's call the bus station and see at what time the next one is," he suggested. A moment later we could see him through the kitchen door taking on the phone. "Five minutes," he said, looking at his watch. "You'll have to rush to make it. Why don't we have dinner somewhere around here, instead? And Livia can take a later bus." The change in his mood was remarkable. He obviously wanted us to stay.

Lexi and Alexander agreed, and a euphoric Roth was hopping down the lawn in front of his studio. "Shall we go, then?" He opened the door of his Volvo to let me in. Alexander and Lexi followed us in their car. On the way to the restaurant he asked me if I was married (yes), if I'd read Saul Bellow's last novel, *Ravelstein* (yes), if I had liked it (no). "I got married very young," he said. His ex-wife had died many years

before in a car accident crossing Central Park. No mention of the fact that he'd been married again.

When we arrived at the restaurant of an elegant inn, the two of us stood at the entrance as my friends parked their car. A minute later we were in the dining room, where he picked a round table and ordered lobster and Burgundy wine. By now, everybody was in high spirits. Waiting for the food to arrive, we talked about Alexander's *Benevolence and Betrayal*, a portrait of five Italian Jewish families at the time of fascism and a book that had attracted Roth's curiosity. He wanted to understand how any Italian Jewish family could possibly have fallen for Mussolini to the point of supporting him until it was too late—until, that is, they were slaughtered.

On a lighter note, I raised the subject of *Goodbye, Columbus*, a favorite book of mine and Alexander's, too. We were surprised to hear Roth dismissing it as "a boy's book" and telling us that, in retrospect, those stories that had won him the National Book Award at twenty-seven seemed to him too thin and didactic. He was relaxed and fun and engaging, but I felt as if something else was going on between the two of us. It reminded me of a game I'd encountered before with men of power, who first come on to you, and then, once they've set their web of seduction, withhold because they expect you to make the decisive move. And I thought: I'll be damned if I'll do it.

After a good half-an-hour wait for our first course, I began again to worry about time. "What about my bus?" I asked. Roth said pleasantly: "Why don't you just take the last night train at the

railway station near my place? So we can go back there and have a drink after dinner." I complied, even though my four-hour trip back to New York was getting longer by the minute. What the hell, we were having fun. When the check arrived, he insisted on picking it up.

Back in Roth's living room, after more talk and drinks, I declared, "I have to go!" I was about to miss my last chance to get to New York that night, and Alexander and Lexi leaped to their feet. Roth remained in his armchair with his legs resting on an ottoman, smiling. "In case you miss the train, you can all come back," he offered. "I'll leave the kitchen door open. Now I'm going to bed. My bedroom is that one, up the stairs on the right. The guest rooms are on the left, there and there. The coffee is in the kitchen cupboard. And I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow morning."

Later I realized that prior to our visit he must have spent days, if not weeks, alone, working in his isolated house. And even then—before I got to know him better—I sensed how fiercely he protected his solitude. In retrospect, the



mind goes to what Roth calls "the solitude without anguish," which his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman experiences for eleven years in *Exit Ghost* while writing books alone in the countryside, years during which he enjoys "the pleasures of being unanswerable and being free—paradoxically, free above all from oneself." Free, also, from what a few lines further on, Zuckerman calls "the tyranny of my intensity": five words that couldn't more efficiently capture one of the strongest traits of Roth's own personality.

I was to fall in love with that intensity. Not with the flirtatiousness in which I'd sensed a man fully conscious of his erotic power, nor with the playfulness of the puppeteer who invites you into becoming the complying end of his mercurial strings. What captivated me was Roth's capacity of being 100 percent in the moment and 100 percent with you, along with his insistence on facing reality head-on, understanding it and capturing it uncensored. These things always had a mysterious, reassuring effect on me. After more interviews brought us to meet again and after we started seeing each other outside work, arriving in New York from Italy and spending my very first night dining with him at the same Upper East Side restaurant became a pleasant ritual. It was a moment I looked forward to because it meant plunging into the hot bath of an intense conversation that would be as substantial in content—work, love life, readings, problems when there were—as it could be teasing in form. If I had to convey an image of those dinners à deux, it would be that of Roth sitting with his back to the wall—always

on the banquette because of his bad back—listening carefully to the good or not-so-good news I brought from Europe (about my personal life, about the craze of Italian politics, about the new life I had started in Paris in 2008), either with an air of affectionate concern or smiling with his lips pressed together as if barely suppressing his amusement.

On a particular night at the beginning of our friendship, though, I had rung the doorbell of his Upper West Side apartment, expecting to go out together, when I discovered he'd had an epidural shot to the spine at the hospital and had canceled the restaurant reservation. So while he was resting on his bed, I volunteered to have a look in the kitchen. As I was opening cupboards to look for a pan and something to cook, I heard him screaming from the bed: "Are you out of your mind?! It must be twenty years since someone lit that stove. It might explode!"

We laughed together, and, as we know, there is nothing like humor to burn the distance between two human beings. Laughter has the ability to trigger a thunderbolt of intimacy; you laugh at the same things and you're not alone anymore. Suddenly, you're also somewhere very special, on a planet of two. And if you go on laughing together—as we did as our relationship grew deeper, if guardedly, on both sides—you may get a sense that inhabiting that planet for even a fraction of time is something you may risk calling happiness: intense and short-lived though it may be.

On the night the stove might have exploded, our conversation turned

unexpectedly serious. We'd dined on some dull Greek food I'd bought at a place nearby, and Roth excused himself, saying he had to lie again on the bed in the main room of his studio apartment. He arranged two pillows behind his shoulders, and from that position, with his legs stretched out and his back semi-erect, he started asking me in a caressing voice a series of intimate questions that felt like rifle shots. I was so stupefied to find myself in a spotlight that lit me head to toe that instead of relaxing in my armchair I crossed my legs under the rim of my white summer dress and stiffened in the position of the human target. Was he taking notes? He asked me if I'd ever undergone psychoanalysis. I said I had. And what had brought me to seek it? This was more difficult to explain, since the reason I had sought analysis concerned a great love I wasn't ready to let go of, even if by then I feared it was doomed. While the inquiry went on, I couldn't help looking outside the large window at my right, at the nocturnal view of Manhattan's skyscrapers framing the horizon like huge black-and-white theater curtains falling from the indigo sky. I wanted to say: *Why*



don't we turn off the lights and let this landscape fill the room while we talk? But I didn't say it, for fear of appearing romantic.

Which brings us to another turning point. In early 2009, I sought Roth's advice about a TV project I was working on—a portrait of the American writers who'd supported Obama's election and shared his values. I hadn't been in New York for months, and I was looking forward to dining with him, when I entered the softly lit Upper East Side restaurant we had frequented together for years and saw him waiting at our table with his familiar air, halfway between an insolent boy and a man worried by age. He seemed in a good mood and I was as pleased as I could be to reconnect with him. We'd just ordered something and started updating one another on our lives as usual, when I raised the subject of the TV project and the authors I was inviting to be part of it, and the atmosphere changed. "Are you asking me?" he said glaring at me suspiciously, suddenly as distant as a planet from another galaxy.

"No, because I think I already know the answer," I said, somewhat embarrassed and annoyed that I should feel that way. As he did not comment, I continued, placing my list of writers on the table for him to review. Focusing on every name, he offered the thoughtful advice I was seeking—in his opinion some publicity-shy writers were likely to make an exception for a European audience. And half an hour later we were finished. Then he went right back to his question.

"When are you asking me?"

Well, never, I wanted to say, already exhausted by the cat-and-mouse game I could see coming. But he relaxed back in his chair and with a thoughtful gaze said, “I would do it.” He must have noticed I had a hard time believing him, because a moment later he was extending his hand over my glass of red wine to reinforce his statement: “It’s a deal.”

A deal?

A day later, we met again at his Upper West Side apartment to do an interview for *Corriere della Sera* about *The Humbling*, the novel he was about to publish. Everything about that conversation followed a scheme that was familiar from the years of our interviews. Roth was sitting in the black Eames armchair he favors because of his back, I on the sofa across from him, my recorder resting on a pile of books and DVDs on the coffee table between us. We’d been talking about the trials of old age in reference to the protagonist of his book, an old actor who has suddenly “lost his magic,” when he answered a few questions about his age with straightforward honesty, saying, among other things, that after much looking he had found the perfect grave for himself, at Bard’s university graveyard, where he wouldn’t be too far from New York and therefore wouldn’t “feel alone.” Then, as I was checking through my notes to see if I’d forgotten anything, I inquired offhandedly if he had ever suffered from memory problems. “Sometimes,” he said. “But only of recent memory.”

“For instance?” I said, without raising my eyes from my notes.

“For instance, I know last night we had dinner together, but I don’t remember anything we talked about.”

I looked up, expecting laughter. But he wasn’t even smiling. He had the patient, serious, and slightly bored expression of someone just waiting for the next question. And that is how I found myself in the bizarre position of having to remind Philip Roth—not my friend, confidant, improbable existential ally, and accomplice, but the very impatient writer who’d spent half a century protecting himself from publicity—that the night before he had granted me something as out of his line as the right to do a documentary film on him. While I spoke, carefully choosing every word, I watched him listening with the dour expression he reserved for unwelcome demands. I can’t say he seemed pleased. But he didn’t take his word back.

When Roth signed a contract that stated he would not interfere with the content of the film, many questions remained dangerously hanging. Could our friendship—between an author and a journalist—survive the emotional and professional confusion we’d created by crossing the line, years earlier, and becoming close?

In time, I would realize that those thorough dinner conversations that gave me so much pleasure and reassurance also had a negative side, as any journalist who has crossed the line would know. The result was that I’ve always known more about Philip Roth than I could or would want to write in an article.

To give you an example, when I interviewed him about *The Humbling*, in which the protagonist commits suicide, I refrained to put on record what he had confided to me just the night before at dinner: that in the ’90s he

went through such a severe depression, brought on by nine months of continuous back pain, that he contemplated taking a swim in the middle of a big nearby lake and letting go. If censoring myself to protect him made a bad journalist of me, I didn’t care. Who would know, anyway? Even he wouldn’t: I wrote in Italian.

But I knew. I realized that by omitting information I possessed, I was to some degree fictionalizing Roth, and would go on doing so because my commitment to his trust was the unspoken pact I’d entered into with him. This didn’t bother me. What really bothered me was the swamp of ambiguity that surrounded us because of the fact that I was the journalist and he was one of my subjects.

Anyone who writes stories, whether in fiction or journalism, is naturally hungry for ideas, suggestions, and anecdotes that may or may not be turned into gold. This is so obvious that we never discussed it. But I still remember Roth implicitly joking about it during one of our dinners, saying, “I’ll make you Portuguese!” and laughing at the mere thought. As for myself, I always felt like a potential Judas and strongly resented the feeling. After twenty years of working in literary journalism, I knew that writing about living subjects required a measure of betrayal, and that all writers are fundamentally immoral creatures, as Janet Malcolm reminded us in *The Journalist and the Murderer*. Would I be able to avoid betrayal and still produce serious work? I wasn’t sure I possessed that “chip of ice” that Graham Greene said writers must have in their hearts.

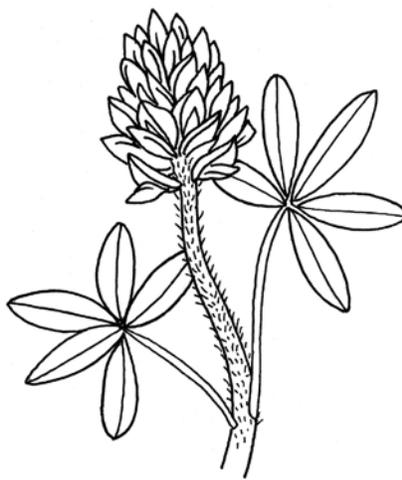
We had an unexpected confrontation on this subject many years before he agreed to be in my film. He'd just come home from the hospital, where he'd had back surgery, and needed, I suppose, to feel less lonely, when he called me in Milan—something he had never done before. "I happened to see your number in my address book..." I remember him saying, sounding like a shy adolescent. We talked for an hour or so; I recall leaving the desk where I'd been working and lying down on a couch. He'd taken me aback with his vulnerability. How strange, I thought, and how interesting. Then, just when we were about to say goodbye and gently put an end to a most unexpected moment of verbal intimacy, he said: "You'll never write about me again." And hung up.

It felt like a slap. His words upset me, not so much because I'd had any intention to write about what he had confided, but because he was giving me an order that was an unacceptable assault on my individual freedom. So the next day I called him back to say that he'd had no right to tell me what to do with my life. He knew perfectly well that I was a literary journalist and if he wanted to take the risk of talking to me, well, it was his business.

I was offended, and I thought for certain that our relationship would end there, but I was wrong. The telephone calls continued, then stopped for a while, then started again, with the same intensity and honesty. "I hope you're taking notes," a friend told me. I never did, out of loyalty and out of laziness. But reading Roth's last four books, I sometimes had the impression that it was he who had taken a few notes.

It only was after we finished shooting the documentary that I found something illuminating in some notes he let me read—something that shed a much more nuanced light on his process of living and writing. He wrote, "A writer is someone who knows nothing about his life or about the life of anyone else, until he has not only imagined it, but has discovered, through writing, how to imagine it." A statement so true that I wonder if it wouldn't be a fair way to describe what I am trying to do here.

As time passed, I realized the Philip Roth I'd known before the two documentaries we ended up doing was in the process of transformation. The Roth I'd known for many years was an obsessively committed writer who, in the terrifying limbo between one book and another, could fall victim to a storm of depression or be spent to the point of looking as if his blood had been drained from his veins. That Philip Roth was a man who couldn't survive without writing, as our closest friends knew and feared. This Philip Roth seemed to be discovering



new, unexpected pleasures in life, like spending time in bed reading in the morning or inviting friends to his home to share with him the meals prepared each night by his newly hired, young and lovely cook.

By the time Roth told me—halfway through the making of our films—that he felt "quite ready to shut down the shop," I had begun to realize that the transformation I'd been witnessing in him for a while had a name: freedom. And that freeing himself from the hard-earned rewards of writing prose had been like kicking over a lamp and liberating a genie that would bestow on him the gift to lower his guard toward the pleasures of generosity, gratefulness, and even tenderness.

Last March, the day after we attended the premiere of *Philip Roth: Unmasked* at New York's Film Forum along with some of his closest friends, I was in a taxi crossing Manhattan when my cell phone rang and his name appeared on the display. No jokes this time; no singing "Oh Lydia, oh Lydia, my encyclopedia," the musical score inspired by Groucho Marx's "Tattooed Lady" he'd amuse himself with when hearing my voice. This time he was serious, and soft, and grave, and had such loving words of appreciation that all I could do was listen and take them in silently while staring out of the cab's window at the blurred lights of cars stuck in traffic. Then, startling me like he'd done ten years before when he'd ordered me never to write about him again, he chose to end his call by saying: "We should have met twenty-five years ago. It would have changed our lives." ☆