

4 Febbraio 1968

2030 Via Taormina  
Monterey, Calif. 93940

Dear Marge:

It was so  to get your last great letter and to know that you had quickly taken root in that peculiar dirt known as California. I'm not going into a lot of symbolism about tumbleweeds and that kind of literary drek. I'll simply get around the implication of a quickly transplantable kid by saying there are some people who travel already potted and don't have to be planted - and please there are no puns buried in the earlier part of my sentence. 

All goes on serenely here after a three-week visit by the flu. We spend most of our time it seems with the Loeb's and for some reason have managed not to bore each other too much. Barbara, Harold's 44-year-old English, South African, originally Scottish wife, is a good sport and so logs the requisite amount of time with that good sport known as my wife, Ruth, while Harold and I talk Hemingway. For a non-Hemingway man he can really talk a long time on the subject and very little, actually, is anti. I think he just loves that period and the friends he had in those days and feels at home on the subject. I asked him if in all the intervening years he had ever been embarrassed by the Robert Cohn characterization in THE SUN ALSO RISES and he rather reluctantly answered that he hadn't. It didn't change his life, nor the love of his friends. The only real hurt came when he first read the book in France and had to get used to the idea that he was supposed to be Robert Cohn. Harold particularly loathes the way Cohn spoke and since Harold is a little antisemitic himself he loathed the obnoxious Jewishness of the character. He was hurt, that was it, and, as he says, what hurt most was not the public image but the treachery implicit in the characterization. "Hem was one of my very best friends," he says. "Nothing could have been harder for me to believe." About the possible embarrassment of the Robert Cohn figure, that is to what extent the character stuck to him over the intervening 43 years, he said only three men ever approached him about the subject: Judge Voeker (Anatomy of a Murder) and Philip Young (top Hemingway critic) and - brace yourself - me. The others he met at the Pen Club in N.Y. Me he met by mail. He thinks it strange that only Hemingway men looked him up. "There don't seem to be any Loeb or Cohn men," he complains, "although one phd wrote a paper once defending Cohn!" We go on this way and then he will suddenly turn to me patiently and say, "I must remind you, St. John, that I am not a Hemingway man." But I kid him back and I swear I have him half believing he is now. At least he admits Hem was one of the world's greatest stylists. He attacks mostly Hem's inability to write about abstract matters and the general nature of his subject matter. But his chief and overweening criticism, of course, is that Hem turned on his friends.

As I told you before you never come into the subject except when mentioned by Harold when he is listing people attacked by Hem - and when this happens I remain mute. You see Harold is a kind of public figure who has written one book virtually identifying himself as the Robert Cohn of SUN and, more recently, an article in the Conn. Review entitled Hemingway's Bitterness. So Harold invites discussion. He has come forward. You never have, and never will want to. That is the difference. So don't think I'm some old gossip, because I am not.

Harold's oldest son, Jimmy, 53, a ww2 dive bomber pilot, visited us here in Taormina with his wife. Nice youngish fellow who calls his father, father. Once we were talking about a Leon Fleischman, who figured in Harold's Hemingway story. Hem had called him a kike or something. Harold turned to Jimmy and said, "Fleischman was your father you know."

"Don't remind me," Jimmy said, "mother could sure pick them - all except you that is."

It seems that both Harold and his first wife have been married four times. Jimmy's mother, Marjorie Content, divorced Harold, then married a Michael Carmichael Car, then Fleischman and finally, a Jean Toomer, who happened to be a Negro. "Strange thing," Harold said, "when he married Marjorie he went to bed and didn't get up for 20 years."

Harold had two wives between Marjorie and Barbara - so you see what life is like on Mount Parnassus.

It's been terribly cold here and really remains essentially cold, although the sun has been shining a bit now and then. Today it rains bleakly. Ruth and Barbara have gone to Catania in a chartered bus to see the opera Rigoletto. Later, I will go over and visit with Harold and take him out to dinner. He is 77 and very sharp but a bit on the fragile side. He has angina and occasionally has to gulp glycerine tablets. Our dog Danny is well. We are totally unaffected by the terremoto except that our heart bleeds at the misfortune of our hotel friends who are suffering ruinous cancellations from Scandinavia, Europe and America because of the misconception re the earthquake. It is centered in southwest Sicily over 100 miles from here. Even the refugees don't pass this way. But the popular impression is that Sicily is one tumbled mass of blood and masonry. Too bad.

Great news re Mexico. No never heard of Watts.

I like the idea of our two Taorminas.

Give Georgie my best. Think I'm going to like her. I know I owe to her your first letter. Your latest Hem remarks very very welcome to me. I think I'll be glad to get home actually - in time for the summer riots. But my God the news is depressing lately. The other day the only thing I found in the papers to cheer me up was that Mrs. Billie Jean King had won a tennis match in Australia. We talk to young service men here back from Vietnam - their morale is good but I don't know why it should be; most seemed headed back that way; but their stories of VietNam nonsupport and corruption are hard to endure. I think this is the most hateful war our country has ever been embroiled in. But don't get me wrong I'm not a Vietnick. All the best to you and G.

Love,