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JAMES SALTER
BURNING THE DAYS

James Salter is the author of *A Sport and a Pastime*, *Light Years*, *The Hunters*, *Solo Faces*, and *Dusk and Other Stories*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1988. He lives in Colorado and Long Island.



Also by JAMES SALTER

Dusk and Other Stories

Solo Faces

Light Years

A Sport and a Pastime

The Arm of Flesh

The Hunters

JAMES SALTER
BURNING
THE
DAYS

Recollection

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL
Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York



FIRST VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL EDITION, OCTOBER 1988

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Portions of this book, often in slightly different form, have been previously published in *Esquire*, *Grand Street*, and *The Paris Review*.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to New Directions Publishing Corporation for permission to reprint seven lines from “Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias” from *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca* by Federico García Lorca, translated by Stephen Spender and J. L. Gili. Copyright © 1955 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Random House edition as follows:

Salter, James.

Burning the days: recollection/James Salter.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-78171-0

1. Salter, James—Biography. 2. Authors, American—20th century—Biography. I. Title.

PS3569.A4622Z464 1997

813'.54—dc21 96-40452

[B]

www.randomhouse.com

v3.1

With deepest gratitude
to my wife, Kay, and Bill Benton
for their invaluable help

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DÎNERS EN VILLE

Certain names in this book have been changed to avoid possible embarrassment to individuals living or dead. The altered names are: (Chapter One) Faith; (Chapter Three) Anita; (Chapter Four) Miss Cole, Demont, Neal, Paula, Leland, O'Mara; (Chapter Five) Brax, Miles; (Chapter Six) Garland; (Chapter Nine) Ilena, Miss Bode, Edoardo; (Chapter Ten) the widow Woods, Sis Chandler.

PREFACE

This book is, to some extent, the story of a life. Not the complete story which, as in almost any case, is beyond telling—the length would be too great, longer than Proust, not to speak of the repetition.

What I have done is to write about people and events that were important to me, and to be truthful though relying, in one place or another, on mere memory. *Your language is your country*, Léautaud said, but memory is also, as well as being a measure, in its imprint, of the value of things. I suppose it could be just as convincingly argued that the opposite is true, that what one chooses to forget is equally revealing, but put that aside. Somehow I hear the words of E. E. Cummings in *The Enormous Room: Oh, yes, Jean*, he wrote, *I do not forget, I remember Plenty ...*

Apart from my own memory I have relied on the memories of others, as well as on letters, journals, and whatever else I could find.

If you can think of life, for a moment, as a large house with a nursery, living and dining rooms, bedrooms, study, and so forth, all unfamiliar and bright, the chapters which follow are, in a way, like looking through the windows of this house. Certain occupants will be glimpsed only briefly. Visitors come and go. At some windows you may wish to stay longer, but alas. As with any house, all within cannot be seen.

I was led to write this book by my editor, Joe Fox, who had read a kind of personal essay—not conceived of as a chapter—called “The Captain’s Wife” in *Esquire* in 1986, and urged me to write more. After some hesitation, I began.

I found it difficult, more perhaps than will be apparent, to write about myself. I had, as will be shown in the second chapter, come to believe that self was not the principal thing, and I lived that way for a long time. Also, to revisit the past was like constantly crossing a *Bergschrund*, a deep chasm between what my life had been before I changed it completely and what it was afterwards.

As a result, the writing was slow. Wearied by self-revelation, I would stop for months before starting in again. The sad part is that near the last, Fox, who had stood by loyally the entire time, died before seeing the concluding pages. It is to him that the book owes its existence.

In the past I have written about gods and have sometimes done that here. It seems to be an inclination. I do not worship gods but I like to know they are there. Frailty, human though it may be, interests me less. So I have written only about certain things, the essential, in my view, the world as it was, at least for me.

In youth it feels one’s concerns are everyone’s. Later on it is clear that they are not. Finally they again become the same. We are all poor in the end. The

lines have been spoken. The stage is empty and bare.
Before that, however, is the performance.
The curtain rises.

J. S.

PRONAOS

THE TRUE CHRONICLER of my life, a tall, soft-looking man with watery eyes, came up to me at the gathering and said, as if he had been waiting a long time to tell me, that he knew everything. I had never seen him before.

I was in my fifties. He was not much older but somehow seemed an ancient figure. He remembered me when I was an infant riding in a horse-drawn carriage on Hope Avenue in Passaic. He named my birthday, “June tenth, 1925, am I right? Your picture was in *The New York Times* when you were a captain in Korea and had just shot down three planes. You married a girl from Washington, D.C. You have four children.”

He went on and on. He knew intimate details, some a bit mixed up, like a man whose pockets are filled with scraps of paper. His name was Quinton; he worked in a post office and was called, I learned later, the Historian, derisively, as if his passion were useless and even embarrassing. As if it were an attempt to try to be of some importance. “You went to Horace Mann,” he said. “The football coach was Tillinghast.”

In fact, the football coach was a bandy-legged, graying man named Tewhill. Tillinghast was headmaster. I felt it was a minor error.

There is your life as you know it and also as others know it, perhaps incorrectly, but to which some importance must be attached. It is difficult to realize that you are observed from a number of points and the sum of them has validity.

His wife was begging him to leave me alone. I was astonished at what he knew. “Forty-four State Street. That was your grandmother’s house, right? She served you lentil soup and steak when your father brought you to visit—he hired a cab once a month.”

The run-down frame house on the corner with cement steps going into the yard, and the unvarying meal of which I was fond, on a square table in the kitchen, followed by the hour afterwards when, with nothing to do, I sat on the back steps while my father talked to his mother, telling her of things he was doing and comforting her, I suppose. The driver sat silently waiting in the cab.

My father and I made these journeys together. My mother never came. Up the West Side of Manhattan along the river, vacant Sunday morning, looking out the window, the endless drab apartment buildings on one side and in the distance, gleaming, the new George Washington Bridge. Cigar smoke, fragrant and sickening, fled past the top of the glass near my father as he sat musing, sometimes humming softly to himself. Over the driver’s radio came the impassioned words of the fervent anti-Semitic priest who broadcast every Sunday, Father Coughlin. His repeated fierce phrases beat against me. These

were lean times. The driver was earning five dollars for the trip, including waiting for two hours before taking us back. It was a different driver always, the cab hailed on the street and quickly hired.

We passed beneath the great fretted tower at the east end of the bridge, always significant to me since the time my father said a restaurant had been planned for the very top of it. There was an elevator within the steel framework and we had once gone up in it, perhaps in my imagination, even the Olympian view.

The Hudson was the river of my youth, the river of sunset and wedding cake dayliners, my own river though I never so much as felt a drop of its water on my hand or brow. I had walked across the bridge more than once, leaning over the railing to look down at the dark water an infinite distance below, sometimes lucky enough to see a white excursion boat plow past, its sunny upper deck filled with chairs like an auditorium with the roof gone. Once a year in a long line towards the sea the fleet lay at anchor, cruisers named for distant cities and broad battleships later sunk at Pearl Harbor. From somewhere along the shore, launches took you out to visit them. I had gone several times, climbed the steel ladders and stood beneath the tremendous guns. The crew in their white, wide-bottomed trousers, the manly officers, the wooden decks—it was something of which to be proud, the sole defense of the innocent and unarmed republic in which I was born.

On the far side, above the green bulk of the Palisades, was another landmark, a nightclub called the Riviera—a gambling club I had heard, Le Corbusier-like and modern—that at one time burned to the ground and was rebuilt. It was related through its owner to an order of earlier, legendary places, the Silver Slipper, Cotton Club, and others.

By roads then familiar we drove on, through grim Sabbath neighborhoods, my father towards the end telling the driver how to proceed, exactly where to turn, until we drew up beside the familiar two-story house. My grandmother, thin-faced and sad but for the moment smiling, came to the kitchen door. She lived with my great-grandfather, a fearsome old man in his eighties from the *shtetls* in Poland, unshaven and foul-smelling—it was probably incontinence—who mostly remained upstairs. Jacob Galambia was his name, probably a concoction given to him by an immigration officer. Columbia, the neighbors called him. He and my grandmother had come down from Canada, and she had gone to night school to learn English after her marriage and the birth of her children. What her father's livelihood had been I don't think I was ever told. He was too ancient to be affectionate and the cruel scratch of his beard burned my face. My father was polite but paid him small notice.

I am speaking offhandedly of a great span of time. This great-grandfather had been born in about 1850. I was taken, a small boy who knew nothing of him, to visit. I may eventually look with some wonder upon a grandchild born in the year 2000 or after. A hundred and fifty years. Worlds have disappeared ...

There was also, on this side of the family, a divorced husband—my

grandfather—and an aunt, my father’s sister, named Laura. It was at her funeral, years after the monthly visits to my grandmother had ended, that the bard, let me call him that out of respect, confronted and overwhelmed me with his recital of my years. I had watched him being led away from me, like a saddened child.

In old age my mother and her sister, widowed and living together, sorted the past, their girlhood in Washington, D.C., where they were born, as their mother had been, the house on Upsher Street, their strict father, the relatives who became rich, the suitors. Major Sledge, who had been in love with Selma, the oldest sister, before the First World War. He was on the White House staff, a major *in peacetime*, they emphasized. He wanted to marry her and take her to Chicago. Their parents would not give permission. What became of Major Sledge? Neither of them knew.

Of the four sisters, Mildred, my mother, was the most beautiful, also the youngest and most willful. She had a lively girlhood—the dreariness came later—the dances at the country clubs, the embassies, she went to all of them; the Argentine embassy was the best.

“French,” my aunt corrected.

“No, the Argentine.”

They begin talking about the family again, identifying branches on the tree of kinship. Their father had two brothers and a sister. One of the brothers was

“A photographer,” says my aunt.

“No, a dentist.”

“I thought he was a photographer.”

My aunt, the second youngest, was blonde and liked to laugh. She had been married twice, for a long time to an unsuccessful lawyer who was my favorite uncle. She shined his shoes and made sure he had a haircut. His clientele was impoverished. Counselor, they called him. He drew up contracts and leases, occasionally he handled a divorce. Some of his business was trying to collect rents.

“Who’s there?” they would shout through the door.

When he told them they would yell, “Get out or I kick your ass!”

Short, a bit heavysset, expert at cards and tricks, he also played the piano and wrote songs. His hair was dark and thinning. His fingers were stubby, the backs of them and his forearms rich with silky black hair. He had gone to dental school—it was there he had met my aunt, at the college clinic, while fixing her teeth—but eventually he switched to another field of extraction.

His patience and playfulness made me love him. He and Frances had no children. I was their substitute. My mother and I would take the Weehawken ferry, wide with curved galleries for passengers on either side, the smell of tar and brine in the air, the deck rhythmically rising and falling. My uncle would be waiting for us on the far side in his car, a secondhand sedan. In those years

there were factories along the river and farther up, perched on the heights, the sturdy framework of a great roller coaster in the center of an amusement park. We never went to the park but instead to one or another in a series of apartments in buildings of dark brick, often along a steep street. On a couch in the living room I sat entranced as coins which had disappeared with a twist of the fingers into thin air were pulled from behind my ear and aces rose magically to the top of a well-shuffled deck. The piano bench was stuffed with his songs and the magazine rack, I once discovered, had nudist magazines hidden by the *Saturday Evening Post*.

This marvelous uncle, when I was no longer a child and had gone off to school, came home one day complaining he was dizzy and was put to bed. He was sent to the hospital—"I don't think they operated," my aunt said vaguely—and a month or so later he ran off with his secretary. My mother, telling me the news, explained that he was ill, had a brain tumor, and had been taken to an asylum. In fact he and the secretary were in his mother's house on the shore, though not long afterwards, perhaps in some way close to the invented story, he died. I do not know where he is buried.

Families of no importance—so much is lost, entire histories, there is no room for it all. There are only the generations surging forward like the tide, the years filled with sound and froth, then being washed over by the rest. That is the legacy of the cities.

"You know what Poppa's father was?" my mother asks.

"He had a linen factory," replies my aunt.

"He was a brewmaster."

No, no. They argue on about him and the uncle, the dentist or photographer, who came to visit in the early 1900s but didn't like America and went back to Europe.

"To Frankfurt," my aunt says.

"Moscow," corrects my mother.

The tree is only dimly outlined, the *arbor consanguinitatis*. Their father as a youth lived with his grandmother because his parents were divorced, and he was sent to America because of some business with the serving girl. And so, blindly, he escaped the wars and the wave of unparalleled destruction that came with them. In America he married a woman whose mother, my great-grandmother, had been married to a Polish prince named Notés.

"A prince?"

"Maybe he was a general," my mother concedes. "Anyway he was important." In her seventies she was still handsome and haughty, woe to the unsuspecting waiter or shopgirl. A stylish charcoal portrait done when she was in her forties—fine features, faint rings below the eyes, long graceful neck—was still very close to her appearance. She read the newspaper every day, including all the advertisements. Each day she walked two miles.

My mother first saw my father, a photograph of him, at any rate, in the newspaper. She was eighteen. Later, entirely by chance, they were introduced. Her parents liked him very much, her mother especially. They were married

in Baltimore in 1924. It was in the morning. They came back to Washington and had lunch and the new groom left for New York to go back to work. He returned a month later.

I was the only child, born early on a June morning of the hottest day imaginable and delivered by a doctor who I later fantasized might have been William Carlos Williams—the time and location are about right—but who was in fact named Carlisle. The evening brought relief from the heat in the form of a terrific storm. I would like to think I somehow remember it and that my love of all storms proceeded from that first one, but more likely I was sleeping, wearied from the passage, my young mother—she was twenty-one—wary too, but immensely happy for everything that was over and all that lay ahead. Thunder shook the windows, the rain rattled down. The year was 1925, the hospital, Passaic General.

Among my other uncles, one owned a factory that made acoustic materials. This uncle, Maurice, was tall and sardonic and had a waxed moustache. At one point he also had a racy convertible, a Cord, parked, in my memory, at an angle to the curb on the street in New York where we lived, a crosstown street, then as now exceptionally wide. He was an engineer of some kind. He and my aunt Sylvia had met in Atlantic City, but the factory, which failed in the Depression, was near Philadelphia and it was there that they lived. They had a house, a maid, cars. They went away every summer. The sisters never visited, they hated him so.

“He never really did anything after 1932,” my aunt said of him.

“A lowlife,” my mother commented.

In old age, widowed, Sylvia went mad. In her daughter’s house she would rise in the middle of every night to pack, and in the end got on a train alone at three in the morning. She was settled afterwards in a small apartment but people were robbing her there, she complained. A woman had gotten in and stolen everything, her money, checkbook, keys. She had once again called the police.

“How did she get in?” my mother asked.

“She got in.”

“But the door was locked and just had a new lock put on.”

“She came through the ceiling,” Sylvia explained calmly, “the thieving whore.”

The money and keys were found stuffed under a sofa, together with underclothes. The checkbook was wedged behind the back leg of a chest.

They went walking for an hour afterwards. Sylvia was calm and lucid. She had the vast patience of the insane. Her daughter refused to look after her. Her sisters, by means of long bus rides, took over the task.

We lived in New York from the time I was two years old, first in a rented room in some woman’s apartment on Ninety-eighth Street, then a few blocks away in our own apartment on West End Avenue, a wide, faceless street of

middle-class families. My father had built some houses, without much profit, in New Jersey. In New York his ambition found its place.

In the city that first took shape for me there were large apartment buildings stretching as far as one could see in either direction. On the side streets were private houses, many of which had been divided into rooms. Along Riverside Drive stood unspoiled mansions, stranded, as if waiting for aged patriarchs to die. In the bleak back courtyards men with grinding wheels sometimes still appeared, ringing a bell and calling up to housewives or kitchen maids for knives and scissors to sharpen. Nature meant the trees and narrow park along the river, and perhaps one of the rare snowstorms, with traffic in the streets dying and the silence of the world wrapping around. Newsboys, so-called though they were men, often walked along late in the day shouting something over and over, *Extra! Extra!*, someone murdered, something collapsed or sunk. A block away, around the corner, the police suddenly formed in front of a brownstone and sealed off the street expecting a gun-fight with a famous criminal they had cornered, Two-Gun Crowley.

Still, I was allowed to walk to school alone, beginning with the first or second grade, and to play outside afterwards. The classrooms were presided over by invincible white-haired women: Miss Quigley—perhaps it was she who taught me to read—Miss McGinley.

We sat in rows according to merit, the best pupils in front. Marks were given monthly in both schoolwork and conduct. We were made, a little later, to stand and recite poems from memory. A kind of anthology was thus provided and from it one learned the heroic language.

Much of childhood remains everlastingly clear, the first telephone number, the name (Tony) of the feared elevator man, the pure sound—when I lay in bed bored and sick—of the key in the apartment door, which meant my mother was returning at last with the book, mostly pictures, I so wanted.

Looking back, it can be seen that my life was an obedient one. I was close to my parents and in awe of my teachers. I had no crude or delinquent companions. The tyrannical doormen, Irish and Italian, together with the superintendents, undershirted men with strange accents, were my only enemies. There was no heaven but there was a nether region with dark basement corridors and full ashcans where I feared to go. I was a city child, pale, cared for, unaware.

I barely remember that first apartment, in which we lived for years. The streets outside are clearer to me, the children's group I was enrolled in, run by a young woman whose pleasant features I cannot quite make out and who was called Mademoiselle, the friend named Junior who lived in what I could see were lesser circumstances on the side street but who owned something unthinkable, a huge dog, a German shepherd.

We had neither dog, cat, nor family gatherings. My father had friends, usually one or two at a time, and I remember them, the homely, bald-headed

builder with steel-rimmed glasses, the city judge, and others, large, jovial men with crushing handshakes and a confident air. Some owned cars. Usually when I saw them they were on their way to or coming back from playing golf.

My mother had friends, as well, Ann, Harriet, Eileen, Rose. Afternoon women. Perhaps they went to lunch. All of them were married, but their husbands, with one or two exceptions, I rarely saw. The women were warm and easy, pleasant to be around. They were still in their twenties, with silken legs and bright smiles. Perhaps they went dancing in the evening. My parents never did and seldom went to parties.

I knew nothing, really, of the lives of these women. I was a little boy, a kind of pet. I did not even know, in most cases, where they lived. I was sometimes put together with their children, but friendships did not result.

In New York in those days, the endless days, you were shaved each morning in a barbershop; suits and shoes came from De Pinna, and mistresses from women who worked in the office or the garment district. At least this was how my father and his closest, lifelong friend, a cousin, Berry, lived. Handsome though completely bald, Berry was a bachelor who had been a boxer in the navy. He lived in a residential hotel near the corner of the park and unselfconsciously wore a beret. Seated at my father's funeral, expressionless and faithful, he had unexpectedly burst into tears as the coffin was lowered, crying my father's name. "George," he sobbed, "George ..."

My father was rising in the world. He was usually in a good mood, singing a song as he dressed—"Otche Chornia" was one he particularly liked, "Dark Eyes." He made up words of his own, knowing only the first few, "Otche chornia, I prekrasnia ...". Often he was gone in the evening, on business. There were arguments. With me he was friendly, affectionate, but not in any true sense intimate. Childish things were beneath him, and he was indifferent to athletics. I never felt the absence of love, only of his interest. My mother may have felt the same.

As long as I can remember he was self-involved. Even as he walked down the street he was seeing only occasional things while thinking. One thing he was certain of: he would succeed. Pieces were already falling into place, he was gaining a reputation and meeting important men. He introduced me once to Jack Dempsey, the dark-jawed champion who in those days was the image for the sport, stalking, lean. My father had arranged a lease for him and they were on good terms. Dempsey must have been in his early forties when I met him and more popular even than he had been in the ring when, humming a death-song to himself and punching powerfully to its rhythm, he had brought down giants, Willard and Firpo, in fights that became legend. He was big, with the cheekbones of an Indian. His hands were enormous and strong. I was ten or eleven years old and remember him towering above me. I would be bigger than Dempsey, my father told me when we walked away. I would have a left like his. Pal, he used to call me. Then his mind went off to other things, various prospects and dreams.

He had dealings with someone named Lignante, a charming man with

European manners who had married a judge's daughter. Lignante was building Hampshire House, a gleaming edifice on Central Park South, and my father lent him a large amount of money, seventy-five thousand dollars, with no collateral but against a promised share in the completed building. This was in 1929. The crash ruined Lignante, who eventually died in Italy. The money, a huge sum at the time, was never repaid. There were to be other calamities but none of such proportion.

In my father's papers when he died there was still the promissory note, almost the exact size of a check, that Lignante had signed. It was like the bundles of rubles I once saw in the bedroom trunk of a schoolmate, Azamat Guirey, whose mother was a Georgian princess and whose parents had fled Russia after the revolution. Despite all one knows, something clings to paper that once had value.



As a boy I knew none of this. In the summer we went to the beach, Atlantic City, and stayed with my maternal grandparents: my mother, cousins, aunts, and I. Across the bright flatlands and bridges, the earth of the roadside losing its color, we drove, children in a separate compartment, the rumble seat, in back, hair blowing, arms waving in happiness. There was sea smell in the air and sun in the bedroom windows. The rhythm of life was set by adults but the carefree joys were ours.

We played all day in the sand, down where it was smoothest, the green sea hissing at our feet. Not far offshore was the black wreckage of a small coastal steamer. We were unable to go near it but it is stuck there in memory, the sea swelling over it and then pouring away, the water dropping in sheets from its sides. A few years later, but not when we were there, the *Morro Castle*, a cruise ship, burned on the horizon nearby with great loss of life.

The taste of early things lives on. In my mouth I feel the freshness of farm tomatoes and salt, the scrambled eggs my grandmother made, the unexpected gulps of sea. In my heart there remains childish love for those cousins, whom I saw only seldom and who later drifted away entirely.

In the summers that followed I was sent to camp. Cordial men, the owners, brought a movie projector to the apartment during the winter to show baseball games, hilltop dining halls, and small boys diving from a six-meter board. With an unheard click of a switch the boys magically left the water, feet first, sailing up to stand on the board again. "We teach that, too."

The camps were always on a lake, a lake with leeches. The grass was worn and dry, the counselors not reluctant to fix character with praise or a fatal nickname. One night a week the flat wooden benches were arranged in a rectangle—the boxing ring—with spectators' benches behind. You were chosen to fight once or twice during the summer. There in the opposite corner, skinny arms ending in oversized gloves, was the grim opponent. Sometimes the outcome was already revealed in his face, victory or certain defeat. Three rounds amid the yelling, the corner shouting instructions. The