



THE

BIG

TALESE



GAY TALESE

By CHIARA BARZINI
Photographs by LEIGH JOHNSON





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GAY TALESE

MANY TIMES

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in many different incarnations. The first Talese I knew was to have been one of the protagonists, alongside Joan Didion, Angela Carter, Nick Tosches, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and Susan Sontag, of a course I was going to teach in 2006 at Marymount College in New York called 'Creative non-fiction and imaginative journalism'. His essays 'Mr Bad News', a behind-the-scenes portrait of the *New York Times*' head obituary writer from 1966, and the satirical 'Vogueland', about the magazine's office life and the 'suave, wrinkle-proof' women who worked there, had jumpstarted the idea for the course. The syllabus asked: 'How do we turn our research process into an act of creation?'

Gay Talese's approach to inventive non-fiction, in landmark pieces such as 'Frank Sinatra Has a Cold' in 1966, was the reason why Tom Wolfe defined him as the founder of America's 'New Journalism'. As well as long, game-changing essays in *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, and *Harper's Magazine*, Talese has written 14 books. His latest, *The Voyeur's Motel*, the story of motel owner Gerald Foos, who installed vents in the ceiling and used them as private 'peeping booths' to spy on his customers, was excerpted in *The New Yorker* in 2016; the following year Netflix released *Voyeur*, a documentary by Myles Kane and Josh Koury about Talese's investigation into Foos' life.

I was in Rome when planning the course, waiting for my paperwork to come through so I could go back to New York and teach, and that's when I was commissioned to write a screenplay with the person who then ended up being my writing partner for many years and the father of my children. We wrote a film, and then another, and another. I never moved to New York and never taught the course, but in the years since I have not stopped asking myself that formative first question: 'How do we turn our research process into an act of creation?'

I had planned on inviting him to our class and for a long time I felt stunted, as if I'd missed an important imaginary date. Then last year



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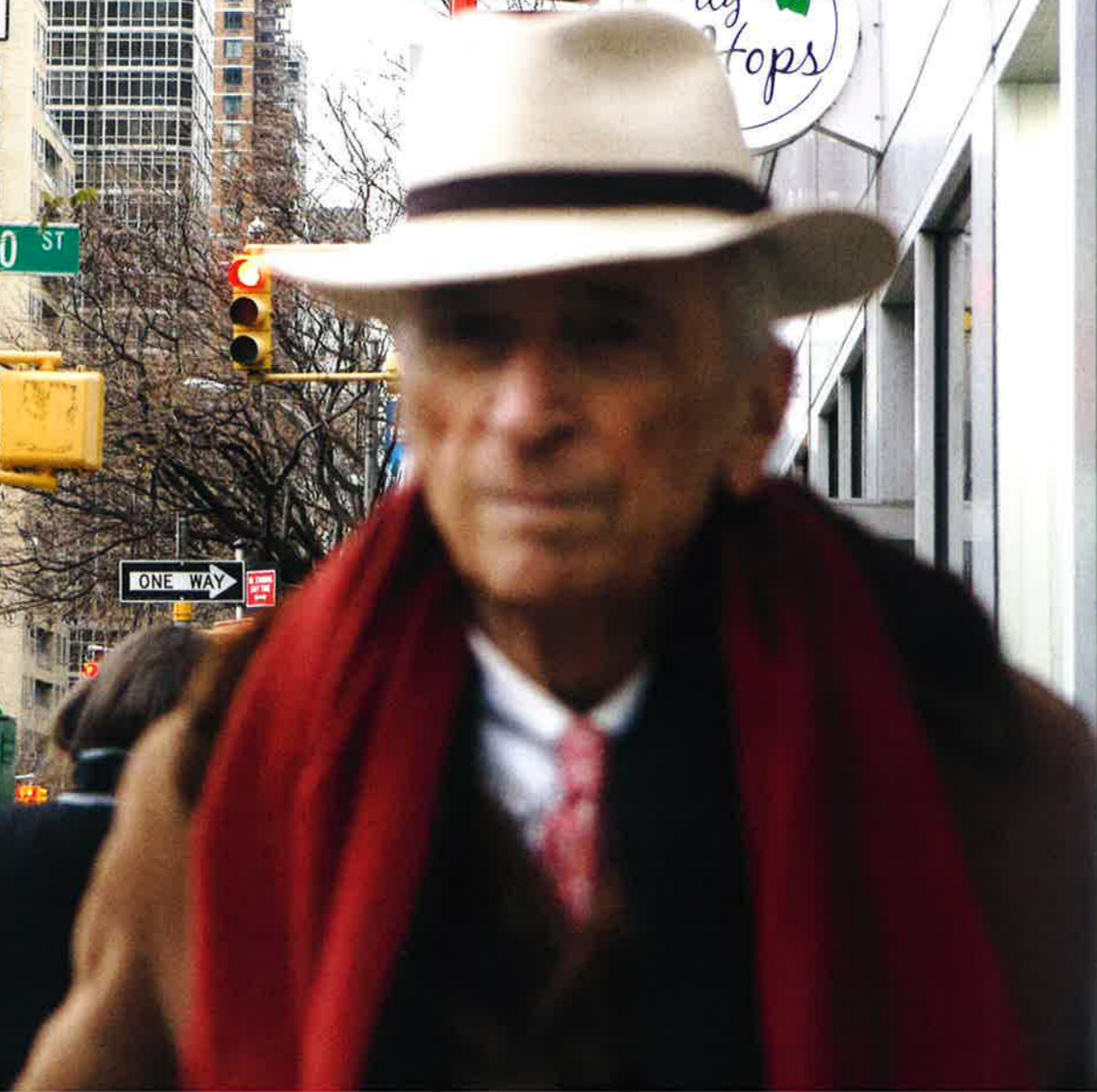
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I was doing research on early communes in California and discovered Talese again through his book *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, a wild, at times psychedelic journey into the sexual habits of pre-Aids era Americans.

In the 1970s he had embarked on a long research journey and at one point ended up moving to Sandstone, a community tucked into the always-mysterious Topanga Canyon, dedicated to people who aspired to reach self-discovery through open marriage and group-sex parties. Talese had reappeared in my life at the perfect time. I'd been in a committed relationship for over a decade and now, aside from further understanding his creative process, I was also going to get insights into the burning questions that were part of my new and sometimes confounding family life. I wanted to know whether it was possible to balance a life of creative ardour with the desire to have a stable family. As a writer, what was the link between sexuality and domesticity, adventure and commitment?

CLOSING THE CENTURY

Talese has been married since 1959 to the brilliant Nan Talese, publisher and editorial director of her own imprint, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. During his marriage he has lived in polyamorous communes in California, managed massage parlours in New York, and travelled away from his family for months at a time. How did he get to do that? As Jonathan Van Meter asked in *New York* magazine: 'Is Gay a philandering bastard, or a pioneering anthropologist? Is Nan a doormat, or a devoted wife with an unusually high tolerance for her eccentric husband's sex research?'

I burned through the pages of his book, seeking his signature great journalism and haunting character descriptions, but also (mostly) for marriage tips. I was inspired by him as a writer who was not afraid to blur the boundaries between the public and the private, but also envious. I wanted to know how a man leaving his home to lead a sexually liberated life for the sake of his work fitted into today's American culture. In a marriage, was it easier for men to negotiate that freedom than it was for women? If so, why?

Also, was Talese's writing at risk of becoming demonised by the feminist intelligentsia? During a conference in 2016, he had already been the target of internet venom for allegedly being unable to name any female non-fiction writers he'd been inspired by; elsewhere, a former teaching assistant of his had written an article in the *Washington Post* explaining how she quit her position at the University of Pennsylvania because she'd had enough of his sexism.

The day I stepped up the curved staircase of his Upper East Side townhouse was the same day that Bernardo Bertolucci died. On his death, the Italian writer Niccolò Ammaniti said that Bertolucci was a man of the 20th century, and his disappearance marked the definitive closure of that century. To me, in a sense, it also marked the end of a certain kind of debauchorous, pleasure-seeking, free, often arrogant, daring, adventurous, sensual, uncompromising way of being a male artist. I had taken part in Italy's #MeToo battle and written about it, attended feminist rallies, yet I had been starting to feel uneasy about the movement's direction. Some part of me also felt inexplicably sad, in a strange state of mourning for these men from the past century. When Gay opened the front door, slim and sharp in his signature bespoke three-piece suit, and welcomed Leigh (the photographer) and me into his beautiful house, I knew I would finally come full circle with the imaginary conversation I had opened with him 12 years earlier.







'WHEN I WENT TO ROME, I WAS WRITING A PIECE ABOUT FELLINI IN 1959 AND LA DOLCE VITA, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE. I MET ANOUK AIMEE, AND MARCELLO, AND THE MAN HIMSELF, AND THEN I CALLED NAN, AND SAID, BOY, WHAT A TOWN THIS IS, YOU'VE GOT TO COME OVER'



CB *The process of your work, the way that you've been dealing with research your whole life, is so interesting to me. In a sense, research itself becomes a character in the narrative of your stories. 'Who' is research to you?*

GT Well with any writer, whether you're fiction or non-fiction, curiosity is what drives you at the beginning. I meet someone and wonder what that person is like, and how I am different from that person and where are our experiences parallel. Now more than ever, we have become as people more insular, especially through technology. We tend to talk solely to those who are more like us, or have a lot in common with us, and that is contrary to everything I've always wanted to be as a journalist or as a person.

CB *You've often said that to understand your curiosity, one must look at your childhood, and your relationship with your mother.*

GT I am the son of a tailor from Calabria. The origins of Gay Talese really begin in 1932, when I was born into a family of two people: a father born in Calabria, who came at 17, alone, to the United States.

CB *Alone?*

GT Yes, he settled in a town near Philadelphia: Ocean City, New Jersey. My mother was born in Brooklyn but of Calabrian background, in a very insular part of Brooklyn where they were all Calabrians.

CB *What part of Brooklyn was it?*

GT Prospect Park!

CB *That's funny, I bet there is not one Calabrian living in Prospect Park today.*

GT They married in 1928, and she had worked for a department store in Brooklyn called Abraham & Strauss. She went to high school, but her college was the department store. There was a millinery department, a jewellery department, a dress department, a shoe department – everything! And there were different kinds of people. She met homosexuals who were milliners, and this opened her up. A little girl from Brooklyn of Calabrian origin having lunch with gay guys! Then this girl went to a wedding in Brooklyn

and met this tailor from Ocean City, New Jersey and they fell in love and he married her and she went to the department store to open a dress shop. So my parents were both in appearances.

I grew up in my mother's store. A store teaches you many things that are important in journalism. Number one: good manners. The customer is not always right, but the customer is to be respected. Second of all: observation. I observed customers. My mother made more money than my father, and the reason is she listened to her customers talk about themselves. I watched how she got them to tell stories. She was most of all interested, because she was not yet a fully assimilated American and was the daughter of foreigners who didn't speak English, in hearing English spoken by American women – the 'prominent' ones, the ones who had the money, the wives of the Cadillac dealer, of the mayor. I'd see her in the reflective glass of the fitting room, talking to them, working her magic: 'You look better in this Dorothy', or 'Charlotte, I think this is more your style'. I was an observant, voyeuristic kid, eavesdropping, and watching communication.

CB *I write in English, but it's not my first language, and I am always interested in the language that writers chose for themselves. Your parents would only speak Italian to each other behind closed doors, at night, and in whispers. What is your relationship with that language and identity? I heard you actually ended up despising Italian.*

GT To a person born of Italian heritage in 1932, and as someone who was a young teenager during the war, who had uncles in the Italian Fascist army – nothing about speaking Italian sounded appealing. My father wanted to be an assimilated Italian American, so why the hell would he have wanted to speak Italian? So that everyone could call him a Fascist? Why would anybody want to be Italian in a time like that? I was a fractional American: a mixed-up person who privately felt sad about the destruction of Italy, and at the same time as a 12-year-old didn't really know whose side to be on.

I was of two minds. I wished I didn't have an Italian father, I wished there wasn't so much fucking cheese in the house or spaghetti. But I also didn't want to be disloyal to my origins, so I was caught in wartime America with Italy on the wrong side of the war. Were I born in Boston, I am sure I wouldn't be a journalist – I'd be a





hoe maker, a clothing designer, a tailor at best. I wouldn't be who I am today: the only reason I am who I am is because I am split. Split from who I am. I don't know who I am, in fact.

But were you ever seduced by the Italian culture beyond being in conflict with its language? Did you ever have a longing for your roots?

Jo. In terms of language, I never had a relationship with any language other than English – determinately so, because I felt I had no future anywhere except in this country with this language. I did visit my native family in Italy once, in 1957. I was in the army for two years and was stationed in Frankfurt, and they allowed me to take trips around Europe, so I decided I'd go to Italy – and it was a disaster. My family came from Calabria and spoke no English. I spoke no Italian and had to go visit them with an interpreter to get a touch of my so-called roots.

I got to Calabria from Rome – the station master was also the cab driver, and he took me up the mountains in this old battered Fiat into a village near Catanzaro. The cab driver spoke a little English, and when we got to my town he called out: 'Talese! Talese!'.

The word spread like an echo over the hills. There were these little caves in the mountains, and out of the caves came various animals – sheep and pigs, hens by the dozen – and with the animals, the Talese people too. They looked at me as if I were Jesus Christ come to earth. It was a pivotal experience, a high mass, and totally embarrassing. They all came and they kissed me and hugged me around the neck. I just wanted to get the hell out of there on the first train.

What was sad about it was that I realised that were it not for a father who had taken a trip, I would be there. Were it not for a man who left his family and said fuck you to Italy, I would have been one of them, tending the sheep in a grotto waiting for a fucking soldier to come and visit. So that is what Italy means to me: a fuck. Especially Calabria. Fuck Mussolini. Fuck my love. Fuck the Renaissance and fuck you too.

And back to finding a sense of identity, when you read Thy Neighbor's Wife, I felt you had opened me a lot of insights into what American materialism is and how it manifested in the country's relationship to sex. Your mother spoke to customers, but you spoke to the people you were trying to write about – you lived in a nudist commune, had multiple partners, discovered the wild side to California before the hippie movement. In a sense, you were at the centre of everything that mattered culturally at the time.

GT I admit my adulteries, my association with pornography, my involvement. I mean I'm essentially a pimp. I was a pimp, and I was also a customer, and you see the view of journalism is that you should not be involved – bullshit! You are involved, and I want to be involved if I am going to want to write about intimacy. You novelists, people that write fiction, capture private life, that's what your province is. Non-fiction writers – journalists, biographers, current events writers, historians – write about public life.

I didn't want to be that – I wanted to be a journalist who wrote about private life. The first rule to do that is use real names. I always insisted on real names, but it was hard because nobody wanted to talk on the record – why would they? Well, if you get into their confidence and convince them that they are important, and their story is far reaching and means something historically, they will finally give their names.

A lot of people have no sense of self-esteem. They don't think of themselves as worth writing about – especially some of the people I try to get to open up to me. If it's honestly done, journalism, non-fiction writing, can be a short story. But you have to know your people well, as my mother knew the customers well.

CB *Well you knew your 'customers' very intimately.*

GT A little bit of what you're having with your subjects is an affair. Journalism starts off with good manners, the first date, and later on it's the second date, and finally it's an affair. It's not an affair of betrayal, it's a relationship. What I want to have is a kind of affair with the people I'm writing about. I don't betray them – I want their names, but I never violate their confidences. With good writing, you can do a lot; with sloppy writing, you can hurt people and not tell the truth.

Caring about the people you write about is important. So much of journalism is a one-night stand – screwing people and fucking them, and leaving them, and not even having breakfast with them. One fuck and no breakfast – well, I have breakfast, and dinner.

CB *And lots of snacks in between. The story continues...*

GT The story doesn't end, and I go back and revisit sometimes. Like the Voyeur from *The Voyeur's Motel*, I wanted his name, and finally he gave it to me after 30 years and it made all the difference.

CB *Is it dangerous to be that person who fully immerses himself in a different life? What have you risked in doing that? Was it worth it for you?*

'I HAVE KNOWN A LOT OF WOMEN, I WAS ONLY 27 AT THE TIME, BUT I HAD SEVERAL EXPERIENCES, AND I NEVER FOUND A PERSON I WANTED TO MARRY. I FOUND PEOPLE I RESPECTED, BEAUTIFUL AND TALENTED, BUT NOBODY LIKE NAN'

GT I think you have to fully live the story you're writing; I believe you have no life outside of it. I believe you're like a great actor. Actors become the characters they interpret, and have a hard time slipping out of them when they are done. Daniel Day-Lewis did a film about clothing and became a tailor and shoemaker; well, that's what I do. You really can't just be a voyeur – you have to be a participant and a voyeur at the same time. You have to have a sense of separateness. You're schizophrenic: you have to be the journalist, but you're also a guy who says: 'I am Gay Talese, I'm in Topanga Canyon, I'm overlooking Malibu beach, and my clothes are off. I'm here with two people from Orange County – husband and wife, Republicans, right-wing swingers. I'm also here with Polly Bergen and a black dancer, and we're having an orgy. And I'm in the middle of it.'

CB *You did a lot of research on the history of American open sex communities, and in all your writing, there's always a charismatic male guru founder figure who everyone's turning to for answers. Have you, in your research, ever encountered any communities with female leaders?*

GT Well, Barbara Williamson was pretty much a co-leader at Sandstone – she really was more forceful than her husband was. I've never known a woman who was more aggressive than she was. She was the one and only, and she had power, but other than that I think it's just generally hard for men to have sex, to the degree that they would like to. So they need a structure that gets them into a more advantaged position.

CB *But then they're also disguising it as a higher form, they're talking about theory and enlightenment and reputation. You think the point of it was just 'let's get laid'?*

GT They try to create an atmosphere within which they can have a better chance at having sex. It's hard to have sex – I mean, really hard. And that's how we got to the tipping point of where we are

today. I think the reason I've been so blessed with so many women friends – some of them sexual partners, some of them not – is because I have good manners. Because my mother taught me about good manners, and my father too. I grew up in a family of good manners. They were very, very respectful people, never aggressive, never intrusive. If men would have good manners, God we'd be so much better off. Maybe in this #MeToo movement there'll be a cult of good manners coming out of it.

CB *Time to mention the elephant in the room. Can we introduce your wife to the picture now?*

GT I'm 60 years married come June 10. I had a marriage that allowed me to do what I would have wanted to do were I not married – how many people have that kind of wife? Especially now, oh my God.

My initial fear of marriage was based on the fact that if I wanted to be the kind of reporter or writer I wanted to be, I didn't want to be limited, held back, or in any way restricted. I didn't want to lose the capacity to be impulsive, or to be free to do what I wanted to do. What I really wanted to do was to write intimately. I had no hesitations, no guilt, but there was never any bullshit or lies. I didn't do that. Orgies? Yes, I'd get on the phone and call Nan when I was at Sandstone. I'd say 'You won't believe it, I'm over here, we've got 6 people. As I talk to you on the phone, Nan, I'm looking at all these bodies.' And I'd give a first-hand account, as if I was a sports announcer covering a horse race. What does this mean? It means that, number one I'm fucking well married, cause anyone else would be six times divorced.

CB *When you left for Sandstone, did you already know that that's what was going to happen there? That you were going to be participating?*

GT No! I had a different idea for the book in the beginning – I wanted to write about massage parlours, that was what I wanted to do. And now



idea was I would write about two generations, the generation of my age, these old post-World War II men who discovered massage parlours in the Seventies. Prostitution had moved away from the Tenderloin district, away from the shadows of the city, onto the main streets of the city, into private massage parlours that were advertised in newspapers.

I was fascinated. I thought I was going to write a whole book that took place in a massage parlour. My characters were – I always think in terms of fiction – three or four masseuses, the manager of the massage parlour, and the customers. You see, customers again – like my store situation, it keeps visiting me no matter what I'm doing. First of all I became a customer – I got jerked off by all these people, and then I'd take them to dinner, have my wife meet them, bring them home, masseuses, bring their boyfriends, get them to tell me where they came from, what their story was. Then I became a manager, and the people that promised me I could use their names lost their nerve. Years of lost material...

I didn't want to just have composite characters. Either you write fiction, or write non-fiction, but if you're going to use composite characters it's fake. I want real names, and they backed out on me. So that's when I discovered Sandstone. I was in California with Sally Hansen, who was breaking up with her husband. She was the one who told me about the place. We drove up to Topanga Canyon in her convertible silver Rolls Royce, and when we got to the mansion, we had to take our clothes off. The first time it is awkward – have you ever done this? You ever go to a nudist beach?

CB *Yes, I grew up with nudist parents.*

GT So the first time it's awkward, but the second time, you take your clothes off and have sex with people and you sit around talking afterwards. There's an innocence to it – it's like being a child. After you've gotten over the curiosity of sex, after the barrier of sex is no longer a barrier, then you become very normal and relaxed and tranquillised, like you've been on some kind of drug. It was very interesting. I lived there as a nudist for about six weeks or so. At certain times I wanted to put my clothes on, go down to Beverly Hills, and hang out with my Hollywood friends, get away from all that. I wanted to be dressed! So I had this double life between Sandstone and Hollywood.

CB *Triple life. Let's not forget New York.*

GT Of course I had my life here, married with two daughters, nine and 11 years old. I had no guilt, but I had no feeling, in a weird way, that I was betraying my wife, because I only loved my wife – I loved people, but not like I loved my wife. Women who might be reading what I'm telling you right now will say 'I would never put up with it', and they shouldn't put up with it – but we could do it. I could do it, and I had a wife who could tolerate it, and I didn't lie, I didn't blab about it. And so, my life as a participatory journalist – if that's what it is – was the idea. No less than a creative actor, no less than Daniel Day-Lewis making suits. When I hung around with gangsters, I wasn't killing people, but I was certainly not avoiding danger. I felt I wanted to know first hand.

CB *I think it's amazing you were able to find this agreement and this common ground, and to find a partner who understood that, but my question for you is: do you think you would have been able to do that for Nan, had she been someone who needed to get away from domestic life in order to fulfil her creative ambitions?*

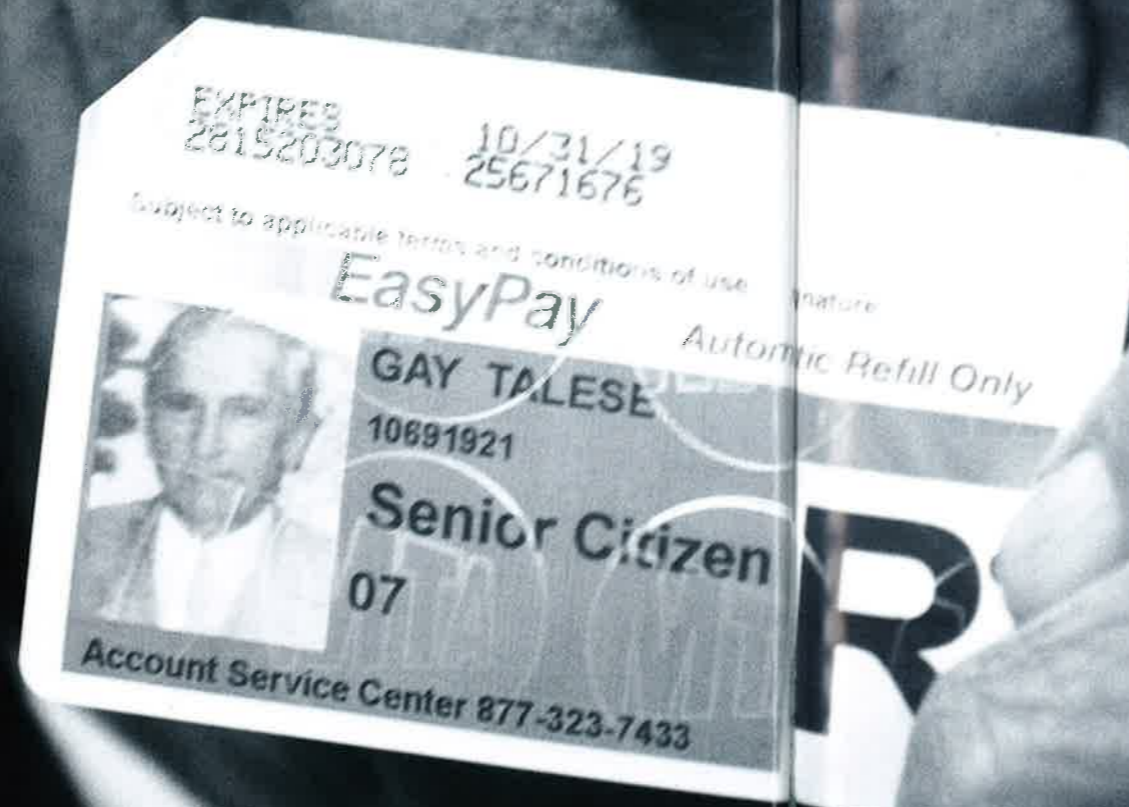
GT When I was running the massage parlours, Nan's office at Random House was a block away from one of the parlours. I came to like very much, personally, some of the masseuses, and I did have Nan come join us for dinner. I wanted her to meet the masseuses – I wanted her to come to the massage parlour with me, and she would not do it. I said: 'But these are interesting people, don't you want to see them? Does everybody have to be out of a book by Margaret Atwood, does everybody have to be Ian McEwan, why can't you be physically aware of a different world? You can't get everything out of a book!' When I went to Sandstone, I asked her if she'd come with me, but she didn't. Now you'd say 'Well you're fucking lucky she didn't'.

CB *Yes, I would.*

GT Well I don't know, because when I'd see Sally Hansen having sex with somebody, next to me, in a big bed, and then we'd go off and be as intimate as ever, it was really interesting.

CB *That's true, but Sally wasn't your wife. How would it have gone if Nan had been you, if she'd said 'Look, you know what, I need to go and do this – I need to go sleep with all these guys, because that's what I'm doing'. If her thing had not been literature, but your style of investigative journalism. Have you ever thought about it?*





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**SO MUCH OF
JOURNALISM
A ONE-NIGHT STAND —
SCREWING PEOPLE
AND FUCKING THEM,
AND LEAVING THEM,
AND NOT EVEN
HAVING BREAKFAST
WITH THEM.
ONE FUCK AND
D BREAKFAST — WELL
HAVE BREAKFAST,
AND DINNER**

GT If Nan were... I'm trying to think... not Joan Didion, someone like Erica Jong for example, I could have had an open marriage, a swinging marriage. I would have tried it.

I would have tried it with Nan. When I went to Rome, I was writing a piece about Fellini in 1959 and *La Dolce Vita*, for the *New York Times* magazine. I met Anouk Aimee, and Marcello, and the man himself, and then I called Nan, and said 'Boy, what a town this is, you've got to come over'. So she took time off at Random House, called my father, and asked him for my birth certificate. She came over and said she was gonna marry me, and I cried, and she cried, and I said 'Jesus Nan, I don't want to be married, I can't be married'. She said 'Well OK, then I'm not going to see you any more'. I couldn't live without her. I have known a lot of women — I was only 27 at the time, but I had several experiences, and I never found a person I wanted to marry. I found people I respected, beautiful and talented, but nobody like Nan.

CB *So that's how your pact was made. They say you must put everything on the table at the beginning of a relationship. It seems like you did.*

GT She let me have my freedom, but I always respected her. Nan had such qualities — as a literary person, as an honorable, honest person — that her fundamental values would not be found by me anywhere.

CB *For decades, journalists, friends, acquaintances all felt like they could have a say in your marriage arrangement. That must have been heavy.*

GT I never felt I could find someone that would have the same qualities as my wife — that's what's been true for 60 years. At the same time, if I had someone like Nora Ephron... fucking Nora Ephron. She was married to my cousin Nick Pileggi for 25 years, and because he's my closest friend — he's my double first cousin, our mothers were sisters and our fathers were first cousins — I had to put up with her for 25 years, and had to be careful not to say something that would offend her and get Nick Pileggi upset. She said Nan should be tougher on me. Well Nan wasn't tougher on me. Obviously, Gay Talese would not have been married to Nora Ephron long.

CB *Yes, I can't really see the chemistry there. Nora Ephron is probably as a writer, thinker, person the exact opposite of Gay Talese. I can't really see her accepting an open marriage.*

GT But I wouldn't want to marry Nora Ephron anyway. I never saw another woman that

I wanted to marry. So that's really all I can say about that.

CB *I do wonder how you've been able to slip in and out of so many side stories. You don't think sex creates a deep alliance with someone?*

GT Sex is the first door to open, and then the first door opens and it closes, or another can open that can lead somewhere. The only word that matters is respect. One of the reasons I could never leave Nan is because I respected her, and she respected me. Does it mean I didn't have respect for other people? Yes, but not like this respect. I have friends — my affairs are never one-night stands. You need to have some outside energy, otherwise you become really fucking old and dull. I go out every night and meet other people, not sexually any more: one of the tragedies of when you get old is that you outlive your lovers.

CB *So how do you place yourself in the contemporary dialogue that is happening about sexual politics? Do you feel like you have to say something? You've been defined as the voice of America's sexual habits, but life now — for better and worse — seems far from those nudist, sexy, swinging, orgiastic 1970s.*

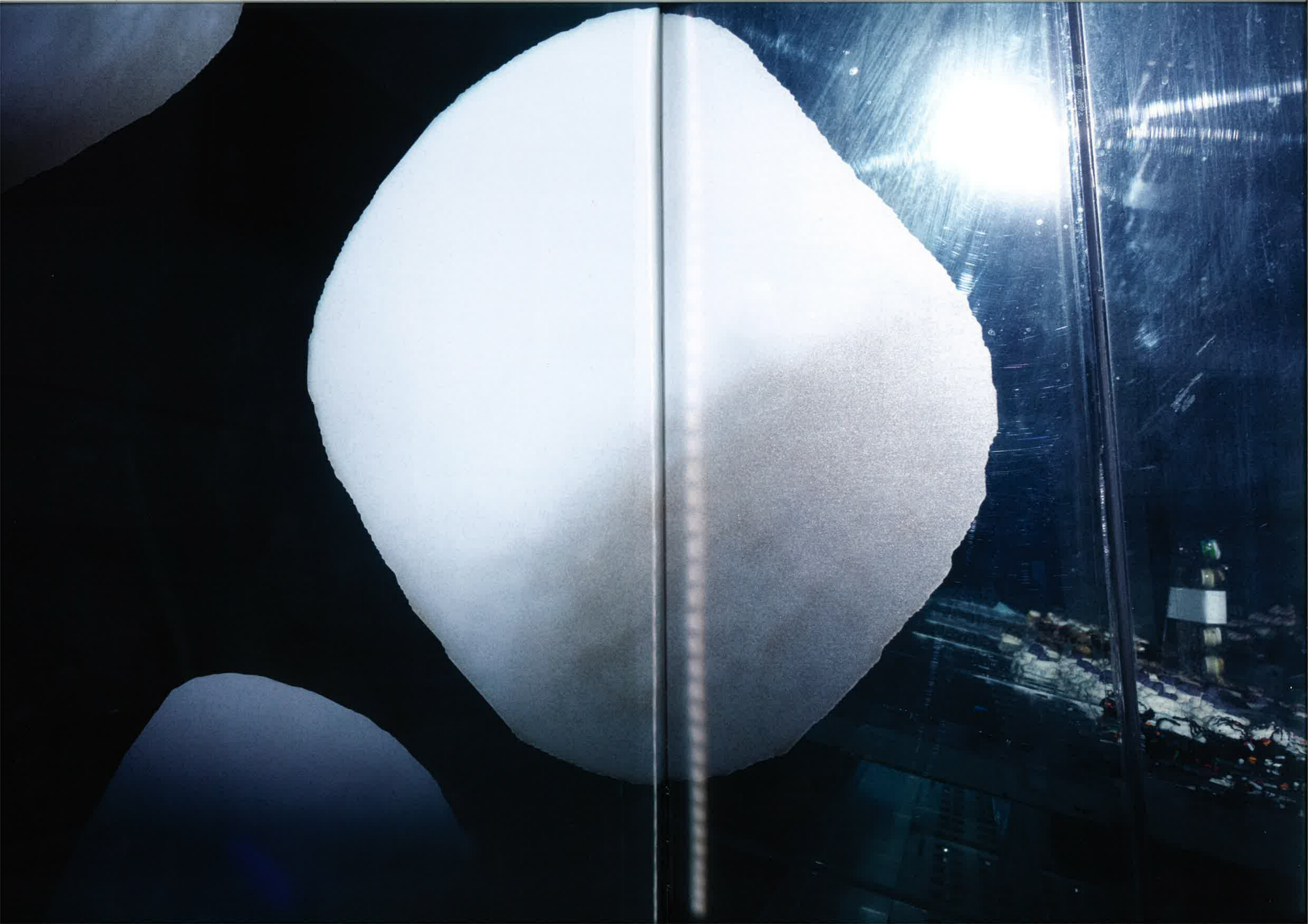
GT Well I've been so crucified by this fucking social media, things have been interpreted the wrong way or taken too literally, but what can I say. Many of the people who are 'banned' are people I know very well. Some of them, like Woody Allen, I know in different ways. Charlie Rose I know him very well. I didn't know Weinstein, but a lot of these people I know, and I'm not sorry for them. I think about myself — if I had a television show or if I was head of a company, what would be the knock on me? And you know, I've never disrespected a woman — I've never gone to bed with a woman that didn't want to go to bed with me. I never hit on people.

CB *But has something about this movement clicked something with you, and made you think about anything in a different way?*

GT Yes, I think this movement's a good thing. I endorse it. I have two daughters and a wife. I feel ferociously protective of them, and I do feel that men are crude, unkind, and aggressive. That should stop — there should not be bad manners. I don't think anybody should have to tolerate the abusiveness or the aggressiveness in the office, outside the office, or trading off — I think that's disgusting.

My mother taught me how to behave. I learned in the store about good manners.







AND IT WAS TRUE – WATCHING GAY

move around the house or the city did feel like witnessing the end of bad manners. When you are with him, it feels as though bad manners never even existed. We took a walk around his neighbourhood to take some pictures. Leigh and I thought Gay would get wiped out, that he'd want to go home, but he moved briskly across the sidewalks and streets, a wide-eyed kid, in awe of every manhole, noticing details of the new construction sites.

He walked ahead of us and led us to the Roosevelt Island cable car. The elevator was broken, so he skipped up the stairs. When we got to the other side to take photos, we had a view of a quieter Manhattan. Gay leaned over to look at the East River and I sat on a railing, thinking that was exactly the poetic moment we needed. After a brief moment of quiet, he looked up at me: 'Did you get what you wanted? Let's get out of here.'

On our way back to the cable car, a beautiful blonde woman came over to him. 'I like your hat,' she told him, and furrowed her brow – like she was trying to figure out exactly who this man was. She didn't know what to make of him, but she was completely entranced: 'And what do *you* do?' she asked him. Gay, with great poise, replied that he was into real estate, and had just visited Roosevelt Island to look at some properties. When we got off the car in Manhattan, she wouldn't let him go. And I knew why. He was the one asking questions now, few but incisive ones – and, like Joe DiMaggio and Muhammad Ali and mobsters and cab drivers before her, she clearly loved being listened to by him. The woman spoke about her house in New Jersey, about her daughters and holidays. He made her laugh, made her feel special. Her whole demeanour changed.

As we walked back to Gay's apartment, Leigh and I laughed and teased him about not having lost his charm. "At 86, I don't feel I'm any different than I was at 76, 66, 26," he said. "I work the same way – I go out to see people, I like hearing stories, I go out every night. I mean, I'm amazed that I can go out every night and have a martini. I don't want to stay home! I always wanted to have a big life. When I was a little boy in Ocean City, New Jersey, going to the movies and watching Tyrone Power pictures, I knew I wanted something bigger. I didn't want to be a movie star, but I wanted to be an actor, of some kind, that had a larger than ordinary life.' ■

