

# The Old Man

Papa Hemingway was a star. He gambled on fame and mostly won. But the old American fear that luck might run out caught up to him, too, in the end.

by Michael Malone

*“Well, I don’t feel good never to have even visited the tomb of my grandfather.”*

*“We’ll have to go,” Nick said. “I can see we’ll have to go.”*

—“Fathers and Sons,”  
Ernest Hemingway

On a Fourth of July I found myself at Ernest Hemingway’s grave in Ketchum, Idaho, near Sun Valley. Decades earlier, in 1961, Hemingway had killed himself with a shotgun, two days before the Fourth, first morning back home away from psychiatrists. He’d come home to that resort in the Sawtooth Mountains where he and Gary Cooper had once leaned their long handsome heights on skis and laughed like stars into the photographs. He’d said that’s enough, and died.

Four tall spruce trees stand guard around Hemingway’s grave, but the marble slab lies on the ground flat as a big door and has nothing to tell us except

ERNEST MILLER HEMINGWAY  
JULY 21, 1898—JULY 2, 1961

So much was he a creator of, creature of, our culture that he was born and he died in the month of America’s birthday. So much was he a hero that there are dozens of pennies lying on his grave, as if he still had the power to make wishes come true. His grave lies beside Highway 93 in the small meadow of Ketchum’s town cemetery, near Hailey, where his onetime friend Ezra Pound was born but didn’t stay. (The Pound house is still

there, small and scruffy and unidentified.)

Hemingway grew up hunting and fishing in the Midwest, worshiping the most popular writer in America, good-looking journalist and novelist Richard Harding Davis, whose name has since faded like old bestseller lists. A war correspondent, Davis covered the Spanish-American War in Cuba with Stephen Crane, and that’s all anyone remembers about him today. If you saw his picture (he was a model for Charles Dana Gibson), you’d say the big handsome celebrity looked a lot like Hemingway.

It was not my particular plan to be at Hemingway’s grave on Independence Day. I was on a national pilgrimage that summer, paying homage at the homes of fictional fathers, visiting the birthplaces and resting places of famous writers (if not famous, who would know where to find the graves on which to leave fresh flowers, generation after generation?). It’s a little less true now, but there were in past centuries, like the 20th, novelists who were such celebrities that the country wept when they died. I was traveling down a landscape of their cemeteries. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott all together in Concord, Massachusetts. James Fenimore Cooper in Cooperstown, New York. Walt Whitman in New Jersey, with the great stone rolled away from his temple of a tomb, as if the Christ of Camden had risen and walked off. Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald under one gravestone in Rockville, Maryland, there beside the noisy beltway.



*Hemingway's Idaho grave, shaded by four spruce trees and topped by an empty bottle of Spanish wine.*

I headed west from Asheville, North Carolina, where I had paid tribute to two fellow Tarheels: Thomas Wolfe did go home again, and is buried close to O. Henry.

#### BELOVED WRITER

Wolfe's mother had engraved on his tomb.

#### LUKE OF LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL

says his brother's stone beside him, testifying to fiction's power.

I followed writers all the way across the land, stopped at the Pacific—in Salinas, California, where Dos Equis bottles with roses in them paid tribute on John Steinbeck's flat grave—and then headed back east. Coming over the Donner Pass to the old mining town of Nevada City, I spent the night there at the National Hotel, all gaudy red velvet and gilded chandeliers, because that's where Bret Harte and Jack London (Hemingway's fathers, and stars like him) had stayed, performing at the theater, signing autographs for the gold miners. And I decided to head for Hemingway's grave.

In Nevada's Great Basin, the rivers flow no place: They sink back in on themselves and evaporate. Off the highway, cheap casinos rise

in the dust like cement tombs over the carcasses of deserted boomtowns. Their builders, silver-and-gold-mad men like Mark Twain, left the towns behind, kept hurrying west to find the Big Bonanza. Here civilization could get no foothold, and today the empty earth stretches level and chalky forever. Speed is useless against the distance. The West is just too big. The sun slides down to the slot of the horizon endlessly, never slipping in.

I thought that after paying my respects to Hemingway in Ketchum, I'd head on east through Idaho into Wyoming and Buffalo Bill's town of Cody. I'd sleep at the Irma Hotel, the showplace he named for his daughter, with the "\$100,000 Bar" of carved cherrywood that Queen Victoria had given him. Buffalo Bill was a Hemingway hero, a national treasure. He killed 6,570 buffalo in 18 months with a shotgun he called "Lucretia Borgia." After Bill, there was nothing left for the Indians to do but go perform in his rodeo. Bill tamed the Wild West and turned it into show business.

Hemingway used a shotgun too. Shot a lot of animals. Shot himself right between his eyes. "One of the simplest things and the most fundamental is violent death," he told us. No news to fast-shooting Buffalo Bill:





*Hemingway, Gary Cooper, and a Sun Valley tour guide relax during a successful bird shoot in 1942.*

the Great Depression, Averell Harriman and the Union Pacific built Sun Valley to get America skiing. They used celebrities as bait. (The resort is still showcasing celebrities; a few years ago, when I went skiing there, Bruce Willis and Demi Moore looped down the slopes beside me. They had bought real estate in the area; they had big plans.) Hemingway, literary superstar, let himself be photographed for Sun Valley's publicity campaign. He and his newest wife were given gratis the fanciest suite at the Lodge, number 206, where he wrote the snowy parts of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In those days there were casinos in Sun Valley, and he liked to gamble. He called his Sun Valley suite "Hemingstein's Mixed Vicing and Dicing Establishment." At night he shot craps in the suite with the coterie of pals and idolaters that always encircled him. During the day he shot pheasants, ducks, elk, deer. He shot coyotes out of a Piper Cub. It was part of his stardom that he was a sportsman and a hard-living cosmopolitan, that he was a good shot and a powerful drinker.

He believed in luck, carried lucky pieces with him, and was a lucky gambler,

unlike the hapless Dostoyevsky, who was an addict. Dostoyevsky once jumped off the train on his way to Paris and won the equivalent of \$10,000 at roulette in Wiesbaden; after that, he couldn't keep away from the tables, borrowing even from Turgenev, whom he despised, abandoning his pregnant wife in a foreign hotel room to go pawn her earrings to place another bet: "*Anna, Anna, you must understand I am a man devoured by the passion for gambling.*" Dostoyevsky couldn't stop losing. Fitzgerald understood, but couldn't stop drinking. "*I lost everything in the boom,*" he told us in "Babylon Revisited." Hemingway understood too. *Winner Take Nothing* he called one of his books. But he went to the racetrack and the casinos anyhow. He loved to win. When he was no longer the Champ, he shot himself. Grace under pressure deserted him. Maybe he convinced himself there was grace in bowing out.

Our admiration goes to winners in this country—to champions, survivors, millionaires, number ones, gold medals, triple crowns. But twisted in our puritan

hearts is a need to think that the winners deserve their prizes. And our certainty that the losers deserve their fates too, because anyone who tries hard enough *can* win, can be rich and famous. So those who fail—well, if they starve, it's their own damn fault. America, itself one big gamble with destiny, from freezing Pilgrims to ragtag revolutionaries to starving pioneers, has always pretended that the destiny is manifest. Such a belief makes Americans ambivalent about games of chance—which is why there are so few places in America to gamble. Hemingway would have loved the irony that Indians own so many of them, are now making billions from casinos on the little strips of land we left them as we made our destiny manifest from Atlantic to Pacific.

Idaho long ago shut down any legalized gambling in the state, so I had to start my tribute to Papa's love of the game before I crossed the line out of Nevada. In the bright morning, passing under the arch that boasted "Reno, the Biggest Little City in the World," the razzle-dazzle caught me just right. I loved Reno's look of naive merriment, like a night at the Hollywood Bowl. Under the blue hemisphere of sky, white Cadillacs parked in front of tawdry pawnshops. Everybody was out in cowboy hats at eight in the morning to strike it rich. Everybody wanted to look like a cowboy, an outlaw hero, a gunslinging star—Buffalo Bill, Gary Cooper, Hemingway.

Jesus

*he was a handsome man  
and what i want to know is  
how do you like your blueeyed boy  
Mister Death  
—"Buffalo Bill's," e.e. cummings*

Harrah's, Sahara, Horseshoe—all the Reno casinos chinked their money as loudly as they could, boasting they had the loo-est slots in town. Come in and win! With whoops and bells and colored lights blinking, out rolled rivers of coins, to be scooped up and plunked back into the machines and, like the rivers on the endless empty land, to evaporate. It seemed a fine enter-

tainment to be playing poker with a noisy machine, to be cool and crowded and out of the hot beige stretch of highway between me and Idaho. As you looked down from the balcony of a place where the walls held thousands of the guns that won the West, young waitresses, dressed like Marilyn Monroe in *River of No Return*, offered free drinks at eight in the morning. All you had to do to get them was keep dropping silver dollars into the slots. Or even quarters. The house knows you're going to lose, but everybody pretends otherwise. At the slot machine next to me, a woman of 60 or 80, tanned leathery as a saddle, advised without removing the cigarette stuck to her lipstick, "Dump the ace, honey, go for the straight." She talked in a gravelly rumble, like John Wayne.

After I went for that straight and a few more and lost my money, I drove 90 miles an hour across the empty desert, no air conditioning, wind buzzing at my ear, 110° air beating down on me, thinking I would make Sun Valley in one push. But along the way they keep the casinos like ice water, and they keep them open all night, advertising insomnia ("Typically Nevada, Winnemucca never sleeps"). There are no days and nights in the Silver State, just as there are no seasons in Golden California. The bright cool lights are finally impossible to resist. I stopped at Winnemucca, where Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch, outlaw stars, broke the bank by robbing it. I stayed at Winners Casino till nearly dawn.



My father loved the stylishness of gambling—poker and roulette. Counting out even stacks of the red, white, and blue chips, he taught us young to play earnest hands of draw and stud, which he considered (a student of the culture's rules) the only real and manly games. My father, Irish lapsed Catholic from Pennsylvania coal mines, had beauty on his side, and a fine, if thin, feel for grace in this world. He got himself to college and graduate school and medical school and wanted to change the world, but in an innocent, grandiose kind of way, like Gatsby. Long before Ralph

Lauren and Martha Stewart were there to do it for us, my father trained himself in the accessories of stylish class, and he wanted his children to learn them too, so that we would do and know all things with ease, the way stars know and do them on the screen. He grilled us on the rules of bridge, recipes for cocktails, dance steps, song lyrics. A well-known psychiatrist back when psychiatrists made money, he bought us the culture's popular upscale skills, made us ride horses, play tennis and golf, dive from high boards, and dance after dinner at the club.

It was an awful grief to disappoint my father, to belly-flop, double-fault, falter in grace under the pressure, not of his criticism, which was never spoken, but of his desire for that incorruptible dream of perfection begun in Gatsby's notebook. "*Baseball and sports. . . 4.30–5.00 p.m. Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it. . . 5.00–6.00 p.m.*"

Style was only the visible sign of what my father wanted for us, which was nothing less than greatness. The night Robert Kennedy died, we drove, one brother and I, from Chapel Hill down to our heartbroken father in Atlanta. In his robe, Dad wandered the dark house, scotch in hand. "It's all right," he told us. "Bobby made a dent in the world. That's what's asked for. That's what's asked of us all." Well, it certainly was asked for by Bobby's father, certainly asked for by mine. Win, and make it look easy. Be a star. Change the world. Heavy burden, that. Impossible dream, the American Dream. If you fail, you have no one to blame but yourself. Fearing failure, Hemingway left us.

Like Hemingway, my father was never easy, despite the beautiful smile. It was from my mother's easy-going and going-nowhere southern family that I learned the game was play, all games were equal, there were no losers. (Regular five-card stud bored them. Their favorite poker game was Night Baseball. "Roll your own, threes and nines are wild, an extra card for a four, match the pot for a red three showing.") From these southerners, long ago defeated and complacently unvanquished, my siblings and I inherited an utterly unsupported sanguinity that made life feel lucky and

triumphs likely. All was possible: Someday the stranger would knock at the door with the big check, the committee would call with the great prize, the arrow would find its mark at the very center of the bull's-eye.

My realistic daughter was only five years old when she warned me that none of the soda bottle caps we were prying open was likely to announce that we'd won the touted \$100 prize. My realistic wife, a westerner, warned me before I set off to Nevada: "You know how you are. Watch out." Her doctor father had gambled, called Las Vegas "Lost Wages," left at his death a secret horde of casino silver dollars hidden in a crawlspace.

"What if I win?" I said.

"You won't," she told me. "But it could take a long time to lose."



Winnemucca, Nevada, was a one-street gambling town. A town for Doc Holliday and for Wild Bill Hickok, the star of Buffalo Bill's rodeo, who was shot in the back holding aces over eights, the dead man's hand. My motel, Winners, gave out at the desk a free roll of coins and a free dollar chip. My room, sage and orange with '50s white lamps, was clean and remarkably cheap. Through its door I could hear the clank and buzz of money. I put on new cowboy boots and a new cowboy shirt with little stars above the pocket flaps and joined in. A dozen people stood silently side by side dropping in their money, hoping the slots would give it back and more. I joined the line, lost my free roll and another \$40. On the sly, we all watched our neighbors' slots, where cherries and plums and watermelons seemed to be always popping into place and luck pouring out. As soon as their machines were emptied, we'd fill them back up, rewarded only by monotonous patterns of loud sounds. Nobody really expected to win. Nobody expected to turn into Hemingway or James Bond in his tux, effortlessly, inevitably lucky.

The street, just a highway through town, was empty when I walked to another casino, this one deserted, unfortunate in business. In a cage by the door stood a stuffed grizzly bear,

## Ernest Hemingway

mammoth, reared erect, a Civil War cap touching the high roof of his cage. His snout was pulled open to show his huge teeth, and in his long claws was a warning: "He tried to leave without paying his bill." I thought of Faulkner's masterpiece, *The Bear*, with its hero, the Indian hunter Sam Fathers, the good father, teacher of honorable skills. Impossible to imagine Sam Fathers killing himself like Hemingway, or drinking himself to death the way Faulkner did. And Fitzgerald. And my own father. So many of our American fathers. Bowing out.

At the Winners motel, I swam in the pool that nobody else was using. I called my wife. "Aren't casinos the saddest places?" she said to me.

"Listen, it's fun," I told her.

But it wasn't. It was as sad as despair.

I went back to the casino, down the long, orange-rug corridor curving through a hall of mirrors that made the place look crowded. I saw the same people at the slots who'd been there hours earlier. I joined them and began putting coins in machines I didn't even like, the ones with the drab black bars instead of bright fruits. The bartender watched us, listless. He had a cold eye for me, and I moved away to watch the craps table, where the croupier was in love with the art of his

hands, fanning out chips, pouring them through his long fingers like water. I wanted to take the dice and feel as sure of my luck as Hemingway felt swooping past the bull horns in Pamplona, wanted to feel so certain of grace that I would toss on the green felt all the money I owned and then roll seven after seven. But I didn't know the rules of the fast-moving game, not one my father had taught me, and so I just stood watching the shooters win and lose.

A friend of mine, child of a big Hollywood star, told me that John Wayne had once walked past her in a casino when she, teenaged, was standing beside a slot machine, waiting for her parents. Wayne stopped beside her, dropped in a silver dollar, told her to pull the handle. The bells and lights went off. Coins by the hundreds shot out of the machine, clattering to the floor. Wayne, the Ringo Kid, grinned at her. "There you go, honey," and he walked on. "It was," my friend said, "like he already knew it was going to happen." Like he could make wishes come true. That's it, the magic of stardom, the grace and luck of it. For someone like Hemingway, with so many gifts of art and nature, how scary when the gifts were



*Like a cross atop a church, the outsized rifle crowns a sports store in Cody, Wyoming.*

gone, evaporated. How scary the crackup or the crash, the shock treatments (they gave Hemingway plenty of them), the drying-out they tried on Fitzgerald and Faulkner, old age, eclipse.

For no reason except a sudden swelling in me of the *lacrimae rerum*, I bought a pack of cigarettes and started to smoke after having quit for almost three years. I got in the car and drove toward Hemingway's grave, hung-over and sleepless and sad at heart. I made one last stop. He had liked a town called Jackpot, right on the border. So I pulled into a stucco and neon casino there, with a jackpot glittering on a high pole outside, in the middle of nowhere. Gritty and dull with the heat, I went inside to win a fortune. It got sadder and sadder.



When I drove through Hailey, Idaho, the Fourth of July flags were out. There was a parade and a shoot-out in the streets called "Days of the Old West." Ezra Pound's dad had run the land office in Hailey. Hard to imagine Ezra growing up in such a place. "Ezra thought fishing was a joke," wrote Hemingway, incredulous. But in Paris, the two young expatriates liked each other. And Pound was a generous friend, a steppingstone. "He taught me how to write, and I taught him how to box." In the end, Pound was locked up in an insane asylum, and Hemingway, in his red Emperor robe, tripped both triggers of a Boss shotgun pressed above his eyebrows into his brain.

The Hemingway house, in nearby Ketchum, is a hillside chalet, big, poured concrete, with large windows for looking out at the aspens and the bends of the Big Wood River where the trout wait. It's not far from the cemetery. Driving toward the grave, I was stopped by a big deer standing right in the middle of the highway. It was an indisputable big deer with antlers, and a brave or foolhardy one too. It just stood there. I laughed out loud and yelled out the car window, "Come on! I just want to look at your grave!" The deer shook his head at me, then flung away into the woods.

I saw no one else in the cemetery, and

although it was small and opened flat as a book, at first I couldn't find Hemingway's grave among the bland markers. As I searched, the sprinkler system suddenly shot on, lashing high-arching water from side to side, idiotically Freudian. "Come ON!" I said, laughing, soaked wet. I ran from the spray, and then there he was, under the four big spruce trees. Fresh flowers, dozens of coins on his name, ERNEST MILLER HEMINGWAY.

I didn't have much to say, but that was all right. He also thought it better not to talk about things. I left him a piece of gravel I'd carried from Faulkner's grave, a dandelion from Fitzgerald's.

Late in his life he was asked, "Herr Hemingway, can you sum up your feelings about death?" "Just another whore," he said.

*"Don't worry, darling," Catherine said. "I'm not a bit afraid. It's just a dirty trick."*



The big event that night, the Fourth of July, at the Elkhorn Lodge in Sun Valley, was, I saw on placards, "José Feliciano, Live at the Saloon." ("When the Sun Goes Down in Sun Valley, the Stars Come Out at Elkhorn.") The show was almost over when I asked the bouncer standing guard at the door whether I could go inside for a drink. He told me with great solemnity that he was going to let me in for free. "I hope you realize how lucky you are, because everybody in there but you paid \$20 to hear José. So listen, I'm going to put it to you like this, you leave that bartender a big tip, you hear me? Real big."

"I hear you," I said. But, suspicious, he came over to me again at the bar with a reminder. "And I mean big," he whispered, staring into my eyes like a gunslinger or a gangster, like John Wayne. "Real big." I gave him my word.

Longhaired, small, sweaty, blind, the star José Feliciano was running down his hits for the audience, who applauded as soon as they recognized each song. He grinned, reaching out to them with his tilted chin, like a flower turning to a sun of sound. "Oh say can you see," he sang, "with two plastic eyes?" Everybody laughed. He talked about the Fourth of July. How he had come to America with his father,



and how his father had taught him that America was the biggest and bravest and richest country in the world, the luckiest of countries, and how it certainly had been lucky for him and had made him a star. “I want you to remember,” he told the audience, “how lucky you are to be Americans.” Then he started singing “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” and asked us to join in. When he finished, a few of the women stood to clap and tried to pull their escorts up with them, but mostly they failed. The bouncer who had let me in for free bounded onto the little stage and led Mr. Feliciano away till the next show.

Outside my hotel, buzz bombs and bursts of red and blue stars shot across the big western sky. In my room, Gary Cooper was on the late show, doing what a man has to do. When Coop learned he was dying of cancer, he made a wager with Hemingway. “Bet I beat you out to the barn,” he said. And so he did, though only by months. Two earlier stars of ours, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both died on the Fourth of July, only hours apart, each asking whether the other was alive or dead. All our fathers, founding nations, writing dreams, failing us by leaving.

“We owe God a death,” the white hunter tells the luckless Francis Macomber in Hemingway’s famous story. When I saw the film—Hemingway was always being filmed—it struck me as odd how much the star, Robert Preston, who played Macomber, resembled Hemingway himself, even to the cut of the moustache. But then, Hemingway always looked like a movie star.

His own father had the same handsome moustache and chose the same suicidal death.

“Is dying hard, Daddy?”

“No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.”



My father didn’t recognize me when I sat with him the day he died. But he asked me for a scotch and clapped his hands when I said I’d just finished a new novel, and told me that his eldest son was a fine novelist. In the end, everything falls away but the love.

His father, Pop, a tiny, hard-drinking Irish immigrant, unsuccessful, gentle-hearted, and dreamy, couldn’t bear to punish my dad, the bad boy of four sons, a fighter flailing to get out of his way whatever was between him and the green light at the end of the dock. My dad’s mother would send her meek husband off to beat the wildness out of him, but each time Pop would try to trick her by slapping his belt against the bed, whispering to my father to cry out as if in pain. My father told me that Pop once took him out into their backyard, a cramped square of dirt on a dark gray street. Pop knelt down, fumbled off my father’s shoes, and began in the cold dark to press earth with soft pats around his son’s feet until he covered them. My father, only 10, was horrified to have his own father groveling at his feet and asked him to stop what he was doing.

“And your grandfather said to me, ‘No. I’m planting your feet here in the earth so you’ll grow. You stay here, son, and grow in the earth. This is American earth. You stand here and you grow tall.’”

I imagine my father and his father now grown into forests, my grandfather buried in the Catholic cemetery of the little Pennsylvania coal town, my father’s ashes feeding Georgia pines. I remember Fitzgerald’s cool wet tombstone in the soft rain, the warmth of Faulkner’s marble in the Mississippi sun. I look westward from North Carolina on this summer’s night and I see Hemingway’s ghost smiling his large beautiful grin beneath the four spruces in the hills of Idaho.

I imagine Hemingway grinning tonight at the news that the original manuscript of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, one of his long-dead sons, was just auctioned at Christie’s for \$2.43 million, a new world record for the sale of a literary work. James Irsay, owner of the Indianapolis Colts football team, bought the 120-foot-long roll of paper filled with what Truman Capote called “typing, not writing.” Mr. Irsay hopes to display the manuscript in a case right next to the Vince Lombardi Trophy, that famous symbol of victory in the Super Bowl.

Winners take all, and nothing. □