Prologue

August 31, 1971
"They Can't Take That Away from Me"

It was a fun funeral. people-watching. reminiscences. show tunes. Ask anyone who was there that day, and that's the first thing you'll be told. The second is that Bennett Cerf would have loved it—had it not, unfortunately, been his own. William Styron, Eudora Welty, John Hersey, and James Michener provided much of the script; *Sesame Street*'s young music director, Joe Raposo, played the tunes; Broadway's Tony Award winner Phyllis Newman sang a song, as a full house of more than six hundred mourners from near and far gathered in New York City to send Cerf off with a last good time.

Throughout most of his seventy-three years, this twentieth-century original had pursued happiness with all the restless energy an American could muster. Not for nothing did "Make Someone Happy" echo off the ivory keys. First and last a book publisher, one of the greatest, he also became, along the way, a radio and TV personality, newspaper and magazine columnist, anthologist, lecturer, and bon vivant. Some acquaintances, like *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown, regarded him as "the friendliest, smilingest, pleasantest, encouragingest man," whether to nobodies or somebodies. Others found him buffoonish, a faucet leaking a steady stream of puns and jokes. No one, though, disputed the place he occupied in his world and time; he was a cultural force beloved by many.

Cerf enjoyed one of Manhattan's truly fabulous bird's-eye views, and from the mid-1940s through the late 1960s, his perch was literal as well as figurative: a third-floor office in the northern wing of a beautiful Italianate brownstone palace on the corner of Fifty-First Street and Madison Avenue. Everyone knew it as Random House, the publishing company

he'd co-founded in the 1920s. It was a grand way to see the world, looking out on the lady chapel of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the soaring towers of Rockefeller Center in the distance, and his fellow New Yorkers hurrying about their business on the bustling avenue below. It was equally important to him that he be seen, and when he descended to the street—tall, well built, beautifully tailored, brown eyes bespectacled with bottle-thick lenses—he was very much part of that fine view.

They know me, he'd often say, explaining a daily phenomenon: he'd walk down the street—any street—and up they'd come.

"Hey, aren't you Bennett Cerf?" some would ask.

"I'd know you anywhere," others gushed.

His face and voice were familiar to just about every American. At 10:30 P.M. each Sunday night for sixteen years, millions of them welcomed him into their homes, sleek and smiling, a mainstay of a game show called *What's My Line?* The weekly half hour at weekend's close was part of the nation's routine, New York sophistication dressed up in tuxedos and gowns. He loved being "known," the recognition a necessary nourishment that seemed to give him a high-wattage glow. Bennett Cerf was almost always "on," the only U.S. publisher ever to be a truly public man. But as much as he loved being known, he loved his life in books. In 1925, when he was twenty-seven, he bought the Modern Library from its co-founder Horace Liveright; two years later, he started Random House. By the 1960s, it was the preeminent American book publisher.

Word had gone out on TV, radio, and the front pages of the Sunday papers: five minutes into Saturday, August 28, 1971, Bennett—he'd always insisted on being called that—had died in his bed at "The Columns," his weekend home in Mt. Kisco, an hour north of the city. Although that Friday afternoon he'd been released from a Manhattan hospital looking pale and drawn, no one had thought he was going to die. The news had come as a shock. Nobody knew what his health was; he hardly ever consulted a physician or complained. He always chose to look on the bright side. However, late in the fall of the previous year, a doctor had said he needed surgery on his gut; after that, he was never quite the same.

Bennett scrupulously kept a diary for most of his life. The pages are busy with *doing,* but rarely plumb any depths. Although his handwriting was tiny (chicken-scratch to the unfamiliar eye), anything major he noted

in block capitals the way a precocious child might, expressing excitement, triumph, anger, or amazement such things were happening in his life. During the eight months between the first operation and his death, the diary veered up and down. Tuesday, May 25, a good day: "Poor old Cerf is 73!" That evening, Styron, Richard Rodgers, Frank Sinatra, Truman Capote, Rosalind Russell, and the New York mayor's wife, Mary Lindsay, gathered for birthday commiserations, partying until the wee hours. But by August 2: "Trouble, trouble!" Something was wrong with his right leg. He'd developed phlebitis, a vein inflammation that can deposit clots in the legs. And on August 15: "Damn leg no better." It was the last entry he would record.

Bennett didn't believe in organized religion; rather, he said, he believed in being good. Many didn't realize he was Jewish. His wife, Phyllis, raised Catholic, later adopted some habits of Christian Science. To make matters even more ecumenically confusing, they'd raised their two sons Presbyterian. A traditional religious ceremony wouldn't do. Phyllis traced her husband's horror of funerals to the minister never seeming to know the person he was burying, so when Random House's co-founder—Bennett's elegant business partner and long-avowed best friend, Donald Klopfer—drove over that Saturday morning from his country house in Greenwich, Connecticut, she asked him to preside.

"I can't, I just cannot do it," came the unexpected, blunt reply. Donald had never liked the limelight, to be sure, but much had also come between these two, who'd once been so inseparable. When the phone rang and John Daly, the former host of *What's My Line?,* wondered if there were any way he could help, Phyllis asked if *he* would do the honors, and Daly agreed. But Random House, not TV, had always been the center and heart of Bennett's life, and his first son, thirty-year-old Christopher, who'd worked there until joining the fledgling *Sesame Street* a year earlier, made sure Random was integral to the rites, soliciting from several authors brief remembrances for Daly to read aloud.

Richard Rodgers, who'd met Bennett when they were boys growing up in Jewish Harlem, helped the family choose the music. The songs would be by Rodgers, the Gershwins, and other friends of the American songbook that Bennett had loved. They would linger in the mourners' minds; even in the heyday of the Stones and the Dead, Broadway's ballads could speak across every generation and class.

Bennett's younger son, the shy, handsome Jonathan, and his wife,

Rosanne—they'd married just the previous year—asked that the funeral not occur on their wedding anniversary, Wednesday, September 1. The family agreed that it would take place on the Tuesday instead. Phyllis, whom Bennett had nicknamed "the General" for her ability to take charge of any situation, took charge now, and chose to hold the service at Frank E. Campbell's on Madison Avenue, the non-denominational way-stage to eternity for New York's famous and rich. Robert L. Bernstein, however, who'd succeeded Bennett as president of Random House in 1966, realized that a man who'd been supremely talented at collecting people would require much more space for his final goodbye.

"Is she out of her mind?" he asked Christopher. "Campbell's can't possibly hold enough people." Like any well-connected New Yorker, Bernstein picked up the phone. Fred Friendly, a pal, had spent years running CBS News and was now a professor at the Columbia Journalism School, Cerf's alma mater. After several more calls, it was agreed: the rites would take place at St. Paul's, the university chapel, at 11 A.M. on Tuesday.

Phyllis plunged into arrangements for the post-funeral feeding and watering of friends. Condolences poured in to the Cerf home and to Random House. As soon as the death was announced, Mayor John V. Lindsay had issued a statement calling it "a tragic loss," and proclaiming Bennett "one of the great men of the literary world, who made New York City the leader in books, art and communications." William Faulkner's widow and daughter wired from Mississippi. Robert Penn Warren, crediting his publisher as having the "very great gift" of making others feel good, wrote from France. Broadcaster Alistair Cooke, that quintessential British transplant, declared: "I can't possibly imagine New York without him."

But New York, without him, had managed to arrive at the last day of August in the troubled year of 1971. The city was going down a precipitous road that would stop just short of bankruptcy. Battles over desegregation and integration were being fought in North and South. Richard Nixon was invoking executive privilege to hide his military plans from Congress. People were worried, because for the fourth month in a row, the nation was buying more than it was selling abroad, the very first time such a prolonged trade imbalance had been recorded. American soldiers were dying, every day, in Vietnam.

That Tuesday morning, the overcooked air that habitually wraps it-

self around late-summer Manhattan lifted, and the sky above St. Paul's—a compact, new-world version of Italian Renaissance grandeur—was blue and clear. A hubbub surrounded the redbrick chapel, as cameramen and reporters milled about its white-columned portico while mourners streamed inside. The first two rows at the front on the left were reserved for Phyllis; Chris and his girlfriend, Genevieve; Jonathan and Rosanne; and the most elect and intimate of friends. A grand piano stood a few feet away. Several shallow steps led to two banks of choir stalls facing each other, perpendicular to the main body of the church.

At 10:45 A.M., the corps of ushers assembled. They were Random House men, along with Jon and Chris's best friends and Bennett's Hollywood pals Freddie Brisson (Rosalind Russell's husband) and the producer/director/screenwriter Joseph Mankiewicz. Their job was to identify the RH staff and funnel them to the choir stalls, and also to seat the first few rows of the main body of the church.

The honorary pallbearers were to be in front at the right, across the aisle from the family. First among them was Donald Klopfer, who had played the wise father in contrast to Bennett's role as the shining star in their long partnership. Others in the cadre included old Alfred Knopf, who'd sold his firm to Bennett in 1960; Sinatra, who'd showed his buddy "the Bookie" lots of good times during the past half dozen years; and *What's My Line?* producer Mark Goodson, the game show king. Bennett's old fraternity brother Horace Manges, now RH's attorney and the co-founder of a powerful New York firm, and Albert Erskine, his favorite editor, also did the honors. Truman Capote, seated in the chapel, had chosen not to be a pallbearer. He'd sent white roses and a note. As it happened, white roses covered the foot of the coffin that day.

Daly stood at the pulpit, glancing at his introduction and the authors' eulogies, waiting for the overflow crowd to settle and the music to stop. Then he spoke, declaring his friend "a glorious amalgam of pragmatist and leprechaun." Understanding that his main role was to share what others had written, he moved on. William Styron, sitting tall and somber beside his wife, Rose, and teenage daughter, Susanna, listened as his hastily composed words began to resonate in Daly's precise baritone.

Bennett might have appreciated that a few years earlier, Styron and Philip Roth were walking along a beach, "loftily pigeon-holing people into three categories—the well-poisoners, the lawn-mowers [most people], and the life-enhancers." Bennett, of course, belonged to that "rare

and precious species," the life-enhancers, his vital force "so powerful, so seemingly indomitable, that he appeared virtually deathless." Styron recalled a night flight with his publisher "through a dark, lovely, star-crowded sky over Pennsylvania. The clear light of the cities below seemed to merge with the glittering stars, creating a wonderful radiant effect that touched us both deeply." Suddenly Bennett said something that from another man might seem odd, but expressed his essence. "Ah, Bill," he exclaimed, "I love being alive so much!"

Looking across the pews, it was also clear how Bennett had loved company. Eudora Welty, a Southerner like Styron, had taken up that theme in her reminiscence: Bennett's "keenness of mind," Daly read, "had so much gentleness of heart to go with it. I wonder," Welty had asked, "if anyone else of such manifold achievements in the publishing world could ever have had so many friends?"

Certainly, the world of books was there in force. Styron and Capote were joined by Ted Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss; Rod McKuen, whose pop poetry had gained a huge following; Edgar Doctorow, just starting on the Random list; Ira Levin, progenitor of *Rosemary's Baby;* and Philip Roth, chronicler of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Distinguished publishers and editors had come from virtually every major house in the city, and some from further afield. Harper & Row's aged former president, Cass Canfield Sr., represented them all, the only other speaker besides Daly.

"I loved this man," he began in a quavering voice. "Bennett was gay, generous and charming. . . . He had the courage to defend our freedom to publish without government censorship. . . . He was a man with a quality of greatness."

Phyllis wept silently between her sons, who looked stunned and terribly young.

It was easy to recognize movie and television faces in the crowd. Bennett's fellow *What's My Line?* panelist Arlene Francis and her actor husband, Martin Gabel; *Love Story*'s Ali MacGraw; musical comedy star Danny Kaye, whose cheeks glistened with tears. Bennett had adored the theater—Eugene O'Neill was the first major author he'd signed—and Broadway sent playwrights, producers, composers, lyricists, and their partners to his last goodbye, among them Dick and Dorothy Rodgers and Kitty Carlisle. *Act One,* the memoir by Kitty's late husband, play-

wright/director Moss Hart, had been a number-one bestseller for Random. Bennett had loved Moss more than just about anyone.

The rare ability to unite different worlds and the disparate factions within them was one of Bennett's gifts. From politics came a Republican New York senator, Jacob Javits, and the city's Republican–turned–Liberal Party mayor, John Lindsay (who that year became a Democrat). Henry Kissinger, but also Hubert Humphrey; J. Edgar Hoover, but also George McGovern, sent condolences. Lady Bird Johnson's press secretary, Liz Carpenter, declared herself to have been, like many, "a little bit in love" with Bennett. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, owner of *The New York Times,* and Dorothy Schiff, owner of the (then liberal) *New York Post,* were among the mourners, as was café society chronicler Suzy Knickerbocker, noting the presence of Gloria Vanderbilt and Walter Cronkite.

Novelist James Michener noted in his eulogy that Bennett could be counted on for some "outrageous pun," for "the involved yarn, narrated impeccably," or for "the classy one-liner." His jokes "were never vicious, nor at the expense of another man or another group"; rather, "they seemed to bubble up from the wellspring of humor itself," as if he were "attuned to some cosmic sense of the ridiculous, unknown to the rest of us."

John Hersey, best known for *Hiroshima,* recognized the "restless multiplicity" of Bennett's yearnings, and the "incongruity" defining his life. He took "great pride" in the *Ulysses* censorship fight, but also "in posing for an after-shave" ad; in "yachting with Frankie and owning Alfred"; in confiding what the mayor had told him the previous night, and in entering a friend's kitchen "to talk with the help" about *What's My Line?* The incongruities were "a unity" and the yearnings part of "the one great life-feeding desire: to be loved. . . . His entire life . . . was one long, zestful, ravenous boyhood."

Bennett *had* craved love, and wanted more of everything—attention, friendship, fun—not always wisely, but in whatever he did. Many responded to that need, and to the tremendous energy, warmth, boyish charm, and joyful enthusiasm that made him the world's best fan. That day, Random editor Nan Talese glanced around and marveled at such an outpouring of love. Then she looked over at Alfred Knopf, whom Bennett had considered the greatest publisher. "You will never have this outpouring," she predicted.

The fame and insatiable appetite for life, however, didn't endear Cerf to everyone. It was a different era, in which the power of celebrity hadn't yet overwhelmed so much of American life. In rushing to embrace the role of "TV personality," he'd anticipated the direction the culture would take, and helped make Random House and its books known in a way no other publisher could. But by going on TV—to play a game show, at that—and grinding out popular columns and joke books, he'd forfeited the right to be taken seriously by high-church worshippers at the literary altar.

Bill Styron and others close to Bennett recognized his duality and accepted it, knowing the "strange dichotomy" was something uncomfortable their publisher had had to deal with; but some intellectuals saw him as having "sold out." They thought he should have "been more dignified and given literature a better name." That paradox—of being both the famous, fun-loving, ultimately fleeting TV personality *and* the driven, dead-serious publisher-for-the-ages—defined him. Decades later, it would render him largely invisible and forgotten, which is the nature of modern celebrity itself. Yet it's in the power of funerals to try to reconcile all things, and for a brief time that August day, all were.

Thirty minutes after the funeral had begun, Bennett's friend Phyllis Newman got up to say goodbye. She took the microphone and sang:

"The way you wear your hat . . ."

"As I listened to the jokes," James Michener had written in his eulogy, "I never forgot that this unusual man had put together one of the strongest and most adventurous publishing houses in American literary history. He assembled a group of distinguished editors and notable writers who made Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes the habit. When the echo of the laughter is forgotten, that excellent row of books will be remembered."

Philip Roth agreed. Bennett had "fathered the Modern Library and ran a first-rate publishing house. That's all that mattered," he would later say.

"No, no, they can't take that away from me."