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The Misfits

Arthur Miller



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Clark Gable in Nevada for the location filming of *The Misfits*, 1960. Photo by
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THE MISFITS





AUTHOR'S NOTE

A glance at *The Misfits* will show that it is written in an unfamiliar form, neither novel, play, nor screenplay. A word of explanation is perhaps in order.

It is a story conceived as a film, and every word is there for the purpose of telling the camera what to see and the actors what they are to say. However, it is the kind of tale which the telegraphic, diagrammatic manner of screenplay writing cannot alone convey because its sense depends as much on the nuances of character and place as on the plot. It therefore became necessary to do more than merely indicate what happens and to create through words the emotions which the finished film should possess. It was as though a picture were already in being, and the writer were recreating its full effects through language, so that as a result of a purely functional attempt to make a vision of a film clear to others, a film which existed as yet only in the writer's mind, there was gradually suggested a form of fiction itself, a mixed form if you will, but one which it seems to me has vigorous possibilities for reflecting contemporary existence. Movies, the most widespread form of art on earth, have willy-nilly created a particular way of seeing life, and their swift transitions, their sudden bringing together of disparate images, their effect of documentation inevitable in photography, their economy of storytelling, and their concentration on mute action have infiltrated the novel and play writing—especially the latter—without being confessed to or, at times, being consciously realized at all. *The Misfits* avowedly uses the perspectives of the film in order to create a fiction which might have the peculiar immediacy of image and the reflective possibilities of the written word.



THE MISFITS

ONE

There is a permanent steel arch across Main Street bearing a neon sign which reads, WELCOME TO RENO THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD.

It is a quiet little town. We can see through our windshield almost to the end of Main Street, a dozen blocks away. Everything is sharp to the eye at this altitude, the sky is immaculate, and the morning jazz coming from the dashboard is perky. It is a clean town. The great gambling palaces are modernistic, battleship gray, and all their neon signs are lit in the sunshine. The traffic light changes and our vehicle moves cautiously ahead. But a block on we are halted by a policeman who steps off the sidewalk, stops a truck coming the other way, and escorts an old lady slowly across the street. She goes into the sedate bank and trust company next to which is an elegant women's clothing store and next to that a store with "Craps" in gold letters on its windows. Some stores feature "Horse Betting," others "Casino," and others "Wedding Rings." In this momentary halt a loud buzzing draws our attention. A gambling emporium on the left, glistening inside, is broadcasting the buzzing noise into the street and flashing a sign over the sidewalk which says "Jackpot," indicating that somewhere within a customer has struck the full count.

The policeman, who wears gold-framed eyeglasses, waves us on, but a woman steps up to the side window of our vehicle. She is carrying a three-month-old baby on her arm, and a suitcase.

The woman: "Am I headed right for the courthouse, mister?"

Driver's voice: "Straight on one block and then two left."

The woman: "Thank you kindly. It's awfully confusin' here."

Driver's voice: "It sure is, ma'am."

She steps back to the sidewalk. There is a rural pathos in her eyes, an uprooted quality in the intense mistrust with which she walks. She is thin, and her polka-dot dress is too large. She is clutching the baby and the suitcase as though she were continuously counting them.

Our vehicle moves again, keeping pace with her for a moment. The morning jazz from the dashboard remains bright and untroubled. The neon signs flash in the sunlight. The few people on the sidewalks are almost all women, and women who are alone. Many of them are strolling with the preoccupied air of the disconnected, the tourist, the divorcée who has not yet memorized the town. The jazz number ends and a hillbilly disc jockey greets his listeners. As he drawls we continue on down Main Street. Through the window of a supermarket we see a woman holding a large bag of groceries on one arm while with the other she is pulling down the arm of a slot machine; not even looking at the revolving drums, she walks away and out the door, hoping to be stopped by the crash of money which does not come. Farther on, a couple-in-love stares at bridal gowns in a store window. There is a door next to the store and a sign on it, reading "Divorce Actions One Flight Up." It is a prospering town with one brand-new hotel facing the Truckee River, a gray facade covered with cantilevered balconies. Beyond it rise the dry brown mountains capped with snow. One can see immense distances here, even boulders sticking out of the mountains' face. The disc jockey, in a baritone drawl, says, "Weel, folks . . ." and for a moment there is only the sound of rustling paper coming through the radio as he evidently searches for the commercial. Two Indian young men in dungarees stand on a corner watching us pass by; their faces are like the faces of the blind, which one cannot look at too long.

The commentator chuckles. "Folks? Here's somethin' to think about while you're a-waitin' for your vacuum-packed Rizdale Coffee to come to a boil. For the third month a-runnin', we've beat out Las Vegas. Four hundred and eleven divorces have been granted as

of yesterday compared to three hundred and ninety-one for Vegas. No doubt about it, pardners, we are the Divorce Capital of the World. And speakin' of divorce, would you like to cut loose of a bad habit? How about rootin' yourself out of that chair and gettin' over to Haber's Drug Store and treat yourself to a good night's sleep with good old Dream-E-Z?"

We are going down a tree-lined street, almost suburban, the houses very small, some of them frayed and nearly poor. Here is a peaceful, almost somnolent quality of a hot Nevada day. As we turn . . .

"Now naturally we don't claim to provide you with any special type of dream, friends. Dream-E-Z's only one of them names they made up back East in New York. But it does work. I can rightly swear your sleepless nights are over; you get the dream ready, and we'll give you the sleep. Dream-E-Z's a real little bottle of rest, folks, and relaxation, and peace. Put that burden down, Mother. Daddy? Let yourself go. Dream-E-Z. Come on, folks, let's get together here. . . . Say it with me now like we always do . . . all together. . . ." A school of violins soars into a music of wafting sleep. "Dream-Eeeeeee-Zeeeeee."

The vehicle comes to a halt at the curb and the engine is shut off and the radio with it.

Guido hops out of what we now see is a tow truck and comes around and lifts a battery out of the back. He walks up the driveway with it. The legend on the back of his jumper reads, "Jack's Reno Garage."

He goes behind the house, where a new Cadillac convertible stands with its hood open. The car is banged up all around, its fenders dented. He is resting the battery on the fender to get a new grip on it before lowering it into place when he hears a plane overhead. He looks up.

A great jet liner roars over, flying quite low. Guido watches it until it disappears toward the mountains, a certain longing and expert appraisal in his eyes. Then he lowers the battery into its rack and works at connecting it. He is about forty—it is hard to tell precisely because he is tanned and healthy, with close-cropped hair, strong arms, and a wrestler's way of moving his neck; from the rear