



Vanitas

ON THE
SCENE
WITH

Louis Begley

THE LAWYER-CUM-AUTHOR REVEALS THE SECRETS OF HIS BRILLIANT SECOND CAREER—AND MIXES US A SUBLIME MARTINI.

LOUIS BEGLEY wants to watch *60 Minutes*. This is a problem. I've just finished interviewing the 73-year-old author, and the photographer needs to shoot his portrait before we leave. But Begley is adamant about seeing BARACK OBAMA, his fellow Harvard Law School grad, and the show airs in 15 minutes.

Begley walks quietly around the Park Avenue home he's lived in with his second wife, Anka, since 1974—slightly hunched, pale blue eyes watching his guests. He picks up the lowball glasses we sipped whiskey from during our chat and takes them to the kitchen.

His movements are slow and methodical—and the same could be said of the way Begley writes. It's a quality he no doubt learned from nearly 30 years in international law before he published his

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 18)



Louis Begley chats with author Porter Fox in the living room of his Upper East Side duplex. Begley's son Peter painted much of the art that hangs on the walls.

first book at the ripe age of 57.

"There is a poem by Rilke that quite suddenly ends with 'You must change your life,'" Begley says of his metamorphosis into a writer. "Something changed in my life. I had been very unhappy and I got to be happy. Many things that I could not touch I became able to confront."

The result is a career that turned out eight novels, including *About Schmidt* and his latest, *Matters of Honor*. Begley speaks of the three Harvard students in his new book as if they were sitting in the Viennese leather chairs in his

study. As with many of his characters, the students spend much of the book struggling to reinvent themselves and are a pastiche of Begley and his imagination. Begley's childhood in wartime Poland as a Jew, youth at Harvard College and Harvard Law as a scholarship student, career with a white shoe New York law firm, and move from Flatbush, Brooklyn to Park Avenue have informed almost all of his books. In writing *Matters of Honor*, Begley says he wrestled with the writer who emerged in him in middle age.

Anka yells down the stairs that the show

starts in eight minutes and Begley leads me around his home as the photographer and his assistant scramble to set up their gear. Begley says he's not a collector, but each room is chock full of art and European furniture. The study is framed by three walls of books. "Only special ones," Begley says. "The rest I read and give away." Oil paintings and sculptures from his oldest son, Peter, crowd the living room walls. "I'm his biggest collector," Begley proudly quips.

Begley often laughs as he talks, especially when he's being self-deprecating. Like when

he professes that his wife is a wonderful cook, but that he keeps to "lazy man dinners" of hamburgers, liver, and Polish hunter's stew. He says he listens to classical music and Dixieland jazz, that Wynton Marsalis is somehow "not quite authentic, too smooth at the edges." He tells me the poet DONALD HALL is one of his readers, and that right now he's mired in writing a biography of Kafka. Nonfiction, he says, is the worst kind of torture. "I am in Egypt and I need someone to lead me," he says as Anka yells down that Barack is on. "I need Moses."

We all march upstairs to a tiny study crowded by a NordicTrack exercise machine. ("You can see how much T.V. we watch," Begley says.) Begley and Anka seem tickled by Barack's innocence and charm and giggle when the

senator's wife teases him about smoking.

When the show is over, we march back downstairs to take Begley's portrait. The photographer sets up in the kitchen and asks Begley to create one of the martinis that often pop up in his books.

"It's in the flick of the wrist," Begley laughs as he splashes vermouth into a ceramic pitcher filled with gin and ice, then quickly stirs the concoction with a spoon. The photographer and his assistant look on and snap photos, then Begley hands them two drinks.

It's an odd moment, with the author seemingly handing the cocktails right out of a story. In fact, Begley says, mixing fact and fiction is how he writes about his life.

"They began to fade, those memories, relatively fast I think because my life changed so many times so drastically after the war that they were just crowded out," he says. "I had to imagine, to invent, to fill in the blanks. So it was fortunate that my only ambition was to write a novel." Porter Fox



"Something changed in my life. I had been very unhappy and I got to be happy. Many things that I could not touch, I became able to confront."