

# Of God and Warhol

IF MOST MAGAZINES ARE, BY THE tedious imperatives of the newsstand, tethered to celebrities like sleds pulled by deranged huskies, then *Interview* magazine in the mid-eighties was a sled hauled by the most rabid, psychotic dogs of all, a sled banging through a wilderness of banality from one insipid party to the next, Andy Warhol cracking his velvet whip, chanting, "Greeaat! greeaat!" as the dogs mushed madly along. It may be hard to believe that a voyage of profound spiritual discovery could begin at a rag that treated Liberace's musings with gospel reverence, but as Mark Matousek's exhilarating memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead Books), proves, disgust with and even terror at the hollowness of a life spent manufacturing glitz can send one screaming down the highway toward the holy even faster than doing time in an ashram.

Back in those frenetic *Interview* days, Matousek would shut himself in his office, devoting seventy hours a week to ghostwriting articles by the famous and gussying up the effluvia of eloquent conversationalists like Nancy Reagan. But sometimes, the Blurb King, as Matousek was known, would retreat to the bathroom, suffering the cold sweats of dread. Something was, as they say, bad wrong. Nights, he picked up Chinese food and porn videos, triple-locked his apartment, switched on the answering machine, and hunkered down alone until it was time to do it all over again the next day.

Then, by the grace of either God or Andy Warhol, he interviewed an Anglo-Indian writer of spiritual interests whom he calls Alexander Maxwell. "I don't really believe in God," Matousek told him. "Of course you don't, darling," Maxwell responded. "People like you

never do." In religious matters, Matousek was a skeptic. "I had a bar mitzvah," he says, "and never went to temple again." To this day, he believes in not believing in anything he hasn't experienced.

But before long, with Maxwell, who had become Matousek's lover and guide to the sacred, setting his travel itinerary, this downtown empiricist would find himself trekking from one Buddhist site to another in the Himalayas, weeping and praying in the snow of the German countryside, seeing visions of an Indian divine twirling in the air. He began to believe. He would also descend into the "sexually twisted part" of himself, the cool part of his heart that separated love from lust, that wanted simply "to hold people down and fuck them."

Not all of his travels were so spiritually exalted, however. Roaming through Ladakh with Maxwell, Matousek spent more of his time meditating about food than about the Absolute, and attained a kind of

ravenous ecstasy only upon discovering a can of tuna fish, which he tore open with his Swiss Army knife and devoured in the shop, to the clerk's horror.

Matousek's growing apprehension of the reality of spiritual life came just in time. Several of his friends were either dead or sick from AIDS, and the writer himself was worried that he may have contracted the virus. In fact, Matousek is HIV-positive. This has lent an extra urgency to his attempts to come to grips with life, although, as his soulful, charming book makes clear, we are all—sick or not—under comparable death sentence. But, as Matousek also reveals, that is only the first of many astonishing discoveries available to the openhearted, even those who work at (or read) slick magazines with celebrities on the cover.

