On Self-Respect
by Joan Didion
from Slouching Toward Bethlehem

Once, in a dry season, I wrote in large letters across two pages of a notebook that innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself. Although now, some years later, I marvel that a mind on the outs with itself should have nonetheless made painstaking record of its every tremor, I recall with embarrassing clarity the flavor of those particular ashes. It was a matter of misplaced self-respect.

I had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. This failure could scarcely have been more predictable or less ambiguous (I simply did not have the grades), but I was unnerved by it; I had somehow thought myself a kind of academic Raskolnikov, curiously exempt from the cause-effect relationships which hampered others. Although even the humorless nineteen-year-old that I was must have recognized that the situation lacked real tragic stature, the day that I did not make Phi Beta Kappa nonetheless marked the end of something, and innocence may well be the word for it. I lost the conviction that lights would always turn green for me, the pleasant certainty that those rather passive virtues which had won me approval as a child automatically guaranteed me not only Phi Beta Kappa keys but happiness, honor, and the love of a good man; lost a certain touching faith in the totem power of good manners, clean hair, and proved competence on the Stanford-Binet scale. To such doubtful amulets had my self-respect been pinned, and I faced myself that day with the nonplussed apprehension of someone who has come across a vampire and has no crucifix at hand.

Although to be driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best, rather like trying to cross a border with borrowed credentials, it seems to me now the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect. Most of our platitudes notwithstanding, self-deception remains the most difficult deception. The tricks that work on others count for nothing in that well-lit back alley where one keeps assignations with oneself; no winning smiles will do here, no prettily drawn lists of good intentions. One shuffles

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1 *Phi Beta Kappa*: an honorary society of college and university students to which members are elected on the basis of high academic achievement. New members traditionally receive a symbolic key at the induction ceremony.
2 *Raskolnikov*: a fictional character in Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* who kills an old woman because he believes he is beyond the bounds of good and evil.
3 *Stanford-Binet scale*: a measurement of intelligence for a test commonly administered to children; the scale on which an IQ measure is based.
4 *amulets*: ornaments or small pieces of jewelry thought to give protection against evil, danger, or disease.
5 *vampire/crucifix*: vampires are characters from European folklore who leave their graves at night to drink the blood of the living by biting their neck with long, pointed canine teeth. Legend has it that potential victims can protect themselves by holding up a crucifix, a representation of a cross with a figure of Jesus Christ on it.
6 *platitudes*: a remark or statement, especially one with a moral content, that has been used too often to be interesting or thoughtful.
7 *assignations* (*a sig nay’shun*): appointments to meet someone in secret, typically made by lovers.
flashily but in vain through ones’ marked cards⁸ – the kindness done for the wrong reason, the apparent triumph which involved no real effort, the seemingly heroic act into which one had been shamed. The dismal fact is that self-respect has nothing to do with the approval of others – who are, after all, deceived easily enough; has nothing to do with reputation, which, as Rhett Butler told Scarlett O’Hara⁹, is something people with courage can do without.

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⁸ *marked cards*: playing cards that have been altered or marked in such a way that the suit, rank or both can be discerned on the obverse side by the person doing the marking; marked cards are used to cheat when gambling or performing magic tricks.

⁹ *Rhett Butler/Scarlett O’Hara*: the two main character’s in Margaret Mitchell’s epic Civil-War-era story *Gone with the Wind*. Their tempestuous love affair was interspersed with tenderness, but ended in tragedy. Their common ground was based on negativity: both were cold-blooded, opportunistic, selfish and arrogant, but commanded admiration based on their good looks and charismatic personalities.