

# Heroic Indifference

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*The Man with No Name, or A Guy Named Joe?*

Lady, I don't have the time.  
—Charlie, *The Killers*

In 1964, while global apocalypse was well under way, a new kind of hero burst on the screen and did something to express, no doubt, the public's growing sense of cynicism and despair. Though it was not for several years that the anti-hero would totally supplant the old John Wayne/Gary Cooper straight-shooter,<sup>1</sup> the ruthless killer-as-leading-man was already staking his claims on the cinema screen. Ironically enough, he was really born in Italy, via a new (and generally reviled, though popular) subgenre, the "Spaghetti Western," and it was not until Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* that the anti-hero—in the inimitable form of Clint Eastwood—was officially unleashed on the American public. *A Fistful of Dollars*, though a huge success in Europe from the start, was not actually released in America until 1967 (the year of *Bonnie and Clyde*); in the meantime, however, Don Siegel, the man who would subsequently adapt the Eastwood mythos to urban Americana (with *Coogan's Bluff* and *Dirty Harry*) was working on a tidy little nihilist thriller to help pave the way.

*The Killers* (made for television but released theatrically) is a wonderfully sardonic, cynical crime movie with a collection of the most slimy and unethical characters ever assembled (at that time) for a Hollywood movie. The story of course is by Ernest Hemingway, and there was a film version made in the '50s also, with Burt Lancaster; it lacks the wit and the pugnacity of Siegel's version, however, and most crucially, it lacks Lee Marvin. Marvin plays one of two hit men (the other, Lee, is played by Clu Gulager) hired to kill Johnny North (John Cassavetes), a racing driver with a murky past. The film begins with the hit; when Charlie (Marvin) becomes curious about how resigned their victim is to his death, however, the two assassins begin to investigate the case. From here, the film cuts back and forth between past and present, as we discover the truth: that North was in on a grand heist and that the money (a million dollars) is "missing," or at least unaccounted for. Cassavetes for once plays the only sympathetic character in the film; the two hit men, Charlie and Lee, bring to mind what Gertrude Stein (in reference to Paul Bowles) called "manufactured savages": they are relentlessly brutal men with nothing resembling human feelings, and yet the film sets them up as a comedy duo from hell. Twenty years before *Pulp Fiction*, Siegel's film gives us a pair of wisecracking, deliciously droll hit men, making small talk as they slaughter and strong-arm their way through the movie (and through the cast). *The Killers* was one of the first films to give us "cool killers," to make the heavies into the protagonists, and it was accordingly one of the most hard-boiled works to come out of Hollywood at the time. On the other hand, the film comes off its rails entirely while setting up the romance between North and Sheila Farr, which takes up far too much screen-time and belongs in another movie (even if

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1. Robert Mitchum was something of a bridge between the old and the new, his world-weary cynicism being a harbinger of that of Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood.

it is essential to the plot). Marvin and Gulager are sorely missed whenever they are out of the film—they don't appear in any of the flashbacks, and the action slumps badly without them. But for at least half its length, *The Killers* is a pulp classic.

Both Marvin and Gulager are perfect in the roles, and, like Jules and Vincent of *Pulp Fiction*, they are far too appealing for us ever to hold their line of work against them. To Charlie and Lee, as much as to Jules and Vincent, murder seems to be a job like any other, only dirtier. As the real villain of the piece, Siegel, or someone, had a flash of pure genius, and cast the soon-to-be governor of California Ronald Reagan in the role. Reagan gives a restrained, modulated, and suitably rank performance as the wealthy, corrupt Jack Browning, the man behind all the events of the film, who seems motivated less by financial gain than by sheer nastiness. It's as if he just can't help himself—like the best of pulp movie villains, villainy is simply the bent of his nature, and we're not asked to understand him, only to loathe him. (The same is true of the foxy "heroine" Sheila—played by Angie Dickinson—who dallies with North but really belongs to Browning.) Reagan's presence in the film only makes the hit men even more sympathetic to us, but it also serves a far deeper function, one the filmmakers could hardly have been aware of at the time—it gives the film a certain historic, even mythic, significance. For Jack Browning represents corporate corruption, big banking, the Establishment, and what better actor could there possibly be to portray the corruption of modern American society than Ronald Reagan? (Reagan barely acts at all in the part, but he has one sublime moment, when he realizes that his number is up, and he raises a single, droll eyebrow, as if to say: what the hell, we all gotta go sometime. He appears to be cynically bored even by his own death.)

Lee Marvin, on the other hand, represents (as usual) the maverick; a self-motivated, indifferent but somehow dignified loner, he's the rebel-outlaw who bucks the system, or at least *tries*—to ride it, oppose it, resist it or double-cross it, in a word, to *beat* it, and to get something out of it for *himself*.<sup>2</sup> In the process of his seeking, however, Charlie loses the one thing that separates him from the corporate killers—his autonomy; or perhaps better put, his indifference.

Charlie and Lee are mere hired hands, free-lance assassins. They get paid to do a job, clean and tidy, and to ask no questions. In all his years of "wet-jobs" (as they are known in the business), however, Charlie has never before seen a man just stand there and take it, and such a mystery disturbs Charlie—it nettles him, it piques his professional curiosity. He is as much driven to find the answer to this question as he is to get his hands on the million dollars. Charlie has certain rules, or codes, which he believes apply to all men. One is: everyone is afraid of death (unless, as he realizes by the end, they are already dead). Another is: everyone wants money, and the only people who aren't interested in a million bucks are the people who already have a million bucks. This assumption leads him and Lee eventually to Browning, who is by now the head of a large corporation. Browning is the man who originally hired Charlie and Lee, never suspecting that he was thereby unleashing the forces that would finally destroy him. (Everyone in the film, except for North's mechanic Earl and Browning's sidekick Mickey, ends up dead.)

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2. But, like the heroes of *Easy Rider*, Charlie is doomed for failure, and finally death, for the simple reason that, in his determination to beat the enemy, he has joined it. And so he must, according to Hollywood law at least, go down with it. (Even in *Pulp Fiction* Vincent pays the price of his vice, while Jules only survives in order to repent and seek a better life.)

The killers of the title are mere hirelings; they are the inevitable embodiment of the murderous instincts that pervade and possess the film (North is the only non-killer in the bunch, but that's because, as a racing driver, he's driven by *suicidal* urges). Ironically enough, because they are mere hirelings doing a job—professionals—Charlie and Lee are the most “innocent” (i.e., uninvolved) of everyone. When Charlie pits himself against the man who hired him, for “one last score” to retire on, he becomes an outlaw within his own profession—a hit man who hits his own employer; and, inevitably, who goes down with him, there being no way for a single individual, no matter how heroic, to take on a whole establishment.<sup>3</sup>

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Things always look different from higher up.  
—The Man with No Name

Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* was the first sustained burst of “ultra-violence” in American cinema.<sup>4</sup> In the long-standing samurai tradition of honor among warriors, the film gave us the beauty of carnage, not a foreign concept to the Japanese, and one that would soon enough become quite acceptable to Western tastes. *A Fistful of Dollars* was actually based on, or plagiarized from, Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, but Leone recognized a universal myth when he saw one, and astutely translated the story into a Western milieu, to which it was almost perfectly suited.

Much of “The Man with No Name's” resonance with the public is due to Eastwood's yawning embodiment of the strong, silent, tall-dark-and-handsome stranger archetype, so it is rather ironic to wonder just what would have become of American cinema if Leone had gotten the man he really wanted for the job: Charles Bronson (he's dark, all right, but that's about as far as it goes). The key to “No Name,” more than any other factor, is his *silence*. The essence of his power, his deadliness, seems to reside in this almost supernatural restraint—he's like a serpent that sleeps, or appears to sleep, until the moment it is trodden upon, at which point it turns and strikes, swift and deadly. But this taciturn, laconic nature is perhaps due, as much as anything, to the director Leone's poor command of English at the time. Reading over the original script, Eastwood unhesitatingly (so legend has it) tore out whole pages with a disdainful shake of the head. “Why's the guy talk so goddamn much?” we can imagine him growling (or words to this effect). However it came about, it seems undeniable that the character was every bit as much Eastwood's creation as Leone's (and Kurosawa's): between the three of them, they consolidated what was to become the central action hero (or anti-hero) for the '60s—a modern myth.

This basic model, the figure of the yawning apocalyptic warrior raising hell everywhere he goes with inhuman speed and heroic indifference, would become the basis for a thousand

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3. Siegel's *The Killers* not only makes a first-rate thriller several years ahead of its time, but, like his earlier film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, it serves also as a kind of cloaked joke/parable. In this case, the joke or the parable is on Hollywood itself—the land of dirty dealings and cutthroat businessmen and heartless vamps and fall guys, a land where the maverick agent will whore himself to the corporation only so long before his better instincts compel him to bite the hand that feeds him, even if to do so means starvation, or death. (In some ways, *The Killers* may be the greatest movie that Sam Peckinpah never made.)

4. All Leone's “spaghetti” Westerns were shot in Spain, with Italian money and supporting actors, who were subsequently dubbed into English for the U.S. market.

variations, the like of which continue to the present day. (*The Road Warrior* came perhaps the closest in recent years to returning to the mythic roots of the archetype.) Admittedly, the indifference is frequently replaced by a righteous wrath and moral indignation (as in *Dirty Harry* for example), but originally, the anti-hero's motive was wholly impersonal, as it is here. (No Name is apparently after "a fistful of dollars" only, though in actual fact, like Eastwood's later variations on a theme, *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*, he seems to be angelically, or demonically, inspired.) As time passed however, the anti-hero became somewhat less abstract in his motives; in a word, he lusted revenge. Even so, the basic type remained the same, and whether the anti-hero is indifferent to danger and suffering (both his own and that of his victims) because he is above such human concerns, or simply because he is beyond caring anymore, it's really six of one and half a dozen of the other. The point is, even the fire-breathing dragon-slayers of Stallone and his ilk tend to stop to yawn between eruptions; they seem to be only really at ease when they are killing and maiming people and blowing things to pieces—only at peace when they are at war, as it were. And although *The Man with No Name* resonated at a deeper level than this, his endurance and his influence are due to the fact that he resonated, first and foremost, at the box office.

Eastwood's appeal was attributed, then, not to his almost unearthly poise, his snakelike grace, or his angelic silence, but rather to his outstanding talent for creating mayhem. Indeed, there seems to be a direct, if inverse, relation between the two factors—the cooler Clint is, the wilder things get, the more he yawns, the faster the action whirls around him. He is the center of the cyclone where stillness is, the axis of the wheel as it were, the only thing that *does* hold. And by the end, of course, when the smoke clears and the dust settles, he is the only thing left standing.

A stranger rides into town, stops to drink some water from the well, and sees a small boy trying to get into a shuttered house. The boy is rudely ejected and two men come out and shoot at him in "play." The boy takes cover with his father, and a woman comes to the window to stare out. The stranger studies her closely. (This is Marie-Sol, the heroine, such as she is. His first contact with her will be when he punches her—accidentally—in the face). She stares back at him defiantly from the window, then slams the shutters on his smile. As he rides into town, widows all dressed in black scuttle for shelter and slam their doors and windows, while a crazy bell ringer prances about, telling the stranger: "You will get rich here, or you will be killed." A corpse, held upright on his mule by a tree branch, passes No Name from the other direction—a sign is pinned to his back, possibly meant for the stranger: "ADIOS AMIGO."

The very first thing that happens in town is, of course, a shoot-out (the structure of *A Fistful of Dollars* is a classic model of simplicity, and the basis for every action movie everywhere). A bunch of no-good gunfighters (on the side of the Baxters) shoot at the stranger's mule in order to scare it. The stranger, biding his time, goes to the local inn for some food, where he hears from the innkeeper about the Baxter-Rojos feud, and decides at once upon his course of action. He goes to the Rojos place and calls up to whoever is listening (the oldest of the Rojo brothers; there are three in all); he offers his services, and warns them: "I don't work cheap." He then takes his wounded pride back to the gun-happy Baxter boys, and, with an irony way beyond their capacity to grasp, takes up the part of his mule, who he insists is "all riled up" at their high jinks. The men laugh raucously to themselves at the stranger's remarks, and his

smile falls from his face. We see his cool blue eyes, laced with danger. “I don’t think it’s nice you *laughing* . . .” he whispers, and the men’s smiles fade at the words. As Eastwood delivers his lines, the joke gradually becomes serious, and his words become steadily more menacing with each passing moment; it is his words themselves that force the situation on to its explosive resolution (he doesn’t speak much, but when he does, things invariably happen). His demand that the men apologize (to the mule) is just his way of entertaining himself, apparently, as he plainly intends to kill them all from the start, not so much out of revenge, but as his “audition” for the Rojo brother who is watching from the balcony. (No Name has more sense of humor than his mule, obviously.) This done, he returns to the Rojos’s place, and they give him an advance and show him to his room. He sneaks out and eavesdrops on the conversation between the two Rojo brothers, in which they deliberate whether or not to bump off this stranger, for simplicity’s sake. No Name gathers his things and leaves, saying he’ll find alternate accommodations, because, “I don’t find you men all that *appealing*.”

It’s a great line, and Eastwood delivers it with a wonderful touch of irony. Eastwood was a movie star before we’d ever even heard of him—he combines perfectly the sexy grace and noblesse of Cooper with the rugged toughness of Wayne, and then adds something entirely his own: an ironic cynicism, or worldliness, that comes from his superior intelligence.<sup>5</sup> The key to Eastwood’s appeal is in this inherent superiority. For me, as an adolescent and teenager, *The Man with No Name* was the impossibly perfect ideal of maleness to which, in fantasies at least, I aspired. Far beyond the various charms and virtues of Cary Grant or James Bond, or Redford and Newman, or even Hoffman, Pacino and Woody Allen, there was: Eastwood. Whether he could act was entirely besides the point—as a presence he commanded, with absolute authority, the very environment itself. He was like a grungy godling, or a fallen angel. But in order for him not to seem merely monolithic (like Wayne) it was essential that he remain somehow *apart* from the action, aloof, abstracted. This is what gives him his mythic poise, and it’s the only way for Eastwood’s style of non-acting to work for him (and for the movie)—as a counterpoint to the grunge and sweat and bloody chaos going on around him.

The real reason that *A Fistful of Dollars* and its two sequels (*For a Few Dollars More*, 1965, and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 1966) caused such a stir among audiences and filmmakers (the critics tended to ignore them) was not the intensity of the violence, so much as its apparent wantonness. The hero seemed not to abhor or even regret his brutality but to take a cool, professional satisfaction in it. This hero was “good” only and wholly in the traditional Irish sense of the word—he was good, damn good, at what he did. And what he did, most of all, was kill. As Pauline Kael wrote, the spaghetti Westerns “stripped the Western form of its cultural burden of morality. They discarded its civility along with its hypocrisy. In a sense, they liberated the form.”<sup>6</sup>

In the process, Eastwood and Leone introduced the rebel without a cause into the action film. Actually it was really Penn, with *The Left-Handed Gun*, who first transposed the angst-ridden youth from the social drama to the “existential” Western. But it was *A Fistful of Dollars*

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5. Yet Eastwood never really fulfilled the promise of this debut—the rest of his roles thereafter seemed mostly to be either halfhearted humanizations of the stranger, or else simply modern urbanizations, as in the *Dirty Harry* and other police films.

6. From her review of *Magnum Force*, “Killing Time,” in *Reeling*, p. 252.

that consolidated this movement, and gave us “the anti-hero,” in all his brutal glory. No Name is anything but angst-ridden, of course, but he shares certain features with James Dean’s oversensitive teenagers—a willingness to risk danger, a disregard for safety or comfort, a general contempt for conventions, and an obvious desire to oppose (or in No Name’s case to overcome) all authority whatsoever. *A Fistful of Dollars* is one of the first counterculture movies in which the violence seems entirely justified (even though it is largely gratuitous) because the hero, such as he is, stands alone against a corrupt and insensitive “establishment” that has no redeeming features, with nothing but brute force and unscrupulousness to sustain it.

Eastwood’s ostensible motivation (a fistful of dollars) is merely symbolic of his contempt, his lack of affiliation with the world in which he moves. He’s in it, all right, but he certainly isn’t *of* it. And this is his one, all-essential advantage, both *against* his adversaries (within the film itself) and *with* the cinema audience, in a larger cultural context: they can root for him as the one remaining vestige of nobility, or “cool” (which was the new youth’s equivalent) in a corrupt and ugly world. He comes about as close as any actor ever had to what Pauline Kael called “an American teen-ager’s ideal. To be hard and cool as a movie gangster yet not stupid or gross like a gangster—that’s the cool grace of the privileged, smart young.”<sup>7</sup>

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The heart, Ramon, don’t forget the heart. Aim for the heart or you’ll never stop me.  
—Joe, *A Fistful of Dollars*

*A Fistful of Dollars* is a smart, tidy, crude and pugnacious piece of filmmaking, with a peculiar majesty all its own (much of which can be credited to Ennio Morricone’s score). It strips down the Western to its barest essentials—stranger, with mule and pistol, rides into a town divided between warring families to make a little not-so-easy money, and gets tangled up in local politics, ends up acting as a one man holocaust. No Name, despite his apparent indifference and amorality, acts more or less as your standard moral avenger, like the lonely marshal determined to “clean up this damn town if it kills him.” The irony of the movie is that we are told that No Name really *was* just passing through, hoping to earn a little dough, when circumstances took over and he found himself unable to restrain his natural tendencies. Yet he warms to the occasion so quickly, so readily, and with such cunning and wiles (and so little fuss) that we half suspect that this is what he does for a living—roam from town to town and massacre the bad guys. (The stranger in *High Plains Drifter* of course was just this—an avenging angel from Hell.)

The most appealing thing about No Name however is not his brutality or even his speed, but his intelligence. His silence seems not to be mere surliness or boredom, but rather the silence of a thoughtful and calculating mind, busy at all times, carefully observing everything. No Name works out, in no time at all, the best way to turn this curious situation to his advantage. And in the best tradition of Machiavelli (we can almost imagine the stranger carrying a beat-up old copy of *The Prince* in his saddlebag) he proceeds to divide and conquer the town. Actually, it’s already divided (in the standard feudal manner), but No Name realizes at once how to make

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7. Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, review of *Band of Outsiders*, p. 114.

this work for him—he gets himself on the payroll of *both* sides (they snatch him up at once, of course, if only to make sure the other side doesn't) and then sows discord among the separate factions, bringing their feuding to its inevitable climax. He then steps in to pick up the pieces (or pick off the survivors). He even gets the Mexican army (or rather two of their dead) to work for him, and so creates still more confusion, suspicion, and antagonism, from which he invariably manages to emerge more or less impeccably. His plan finally falls afoul however when he temporarily forgets himself, and becomes personally involved in the plight of three of the characters.

These three characters are peripheral to the action of the film but central to its meaning. Maria, the first person No Name sees on arriving in town, is the forced companion of the repugnant (though quite handsome, as played by Gian Maria Volonte) Ramon, who is threatening to murder her husband and child if she ever tries to see them again. The scenes involving this curiously emotional subplot, are the most affecting (though not necessarily the most effective) in the film, and proved, early in his career, that Leone was capable of moments of sensitivity, and even of pathos. When No Name—in the act that finally undoes his otherwise perfect plans—reunites the divided family, gives them the fistful of dollars he has so painstakingly (albeit swiftly) earned himself and sends them on their way, he effectively defies all the assumptions that the film, and we, have up until now made about him. He becomes, for a mere instant at least (but it's an instant that alters everything we have seen), a true hero. Yet we know that this is in fact a moment of weakness on his part, a moment when his inner compassion surfaces and gets the better of his calculatingly ruthless facade. And he very nearly pays for this “mistake” with his life.

When the husband demands to know why he is helping them, No Name is reticent—here again Eastwood stripped the dialogue down to the minimum—and says simply: “Because I knew someone like you once and there was no one there to help.” In this moment, the stranger suddenly acquires a past, and a whole new dimension along with it: in a word, humanity. Yet it is also here that the film kicks into high gear and begins to take on something approaching a mythic grandeur (and where it comes closest I think to its source material, Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, in spirit if not letter). Because, following the violent beating he receives at the hands of Ramon's gang, and his subsequent escape (he crawls off and hides in a coffin, truly more dead than alive), No Name at last becomes emotionally involved in what is happening (as the saying goes—now it's personal!). His human side is finally showing, much to his regret. And once exposed, it seems there is no way for him to resume his old armor of indifference—until the grand finale, that is; by which time he (and the film) has achieved his destiny, and been “reborn” as a purely mythical figure.

Ironically enough, then, it is only by first of all becoming fully human (and thereby vulnerable) that the character can take on all the force and the majesty of a true myth.

After the period of recuperation (rebirth) No Name returns to San Miguel for the showdown with the Rojos. He uses the dynamite he has been given by the coffinmaker not for offensive but for purely strategical purposes: it supplies him with a smoke screen by which he can get close to his opponents. At the same time, it allows him to appear before them as it were like an angel, emerging from a cloud. (Leone himself refers to No Name as “an incarnation of the angel Gabriel.”) It's as if he were following Bruce Wayne (a.k.a. The Batman)'s advice here: “criminals are a cowardly superstitious lot”; his strategy is entirely dependent on a precise

awareness of the adversary's psychology. He knows that, first of all, the other men will stand by and allow Ramon, their leader, to shoot first; and he also knows that Ramon will only aim for his heart (Ramon having bragged earlier about his "technique"). And so he has dressed accordingly: fully armored, with a steel chest-plate tied under his poncho. He also knows that in the heat of the moment the truth will not occur to Ramon, that he will be temporarily disoriented by intimations of the supernatural; in other words: "criminals are a cowardly, superstitious lot"! It is a masterful strategy, both on the part of No Name and of Leone (significantly, this the film's last, and best, scene is one that does not derive from Kurosawa), and it serves to throw the whole genre off-balance. All of a sudden we are thrown into a mystery play: a myth. For an instant, the stranger becomes what we have always suspected him to be: something more than human.

The confusion over the character's name, or lack of it, would seem to effectively encapsulate this dichotomy at the heart of the film: man or myth? Of course, the character who made Clint Eastwood world famous is and always shall be known as "The Man with No Name," and there are those who would fight to the death to defend the sanctity of this title. And yet, in all three films in which the character appears, there is no doubt that he *does* have a name, of sorts, albeit a different one each time. In *A Fistful of Dollars*, it is not until the very last reel that the coffinmaker, surveying the carnage and mayhem caused by the stranger, murmurs (with a mixture of amusement, despair, and admiration), "Listen Joe. . . oh Joe, Joe, ah Joe" (four times in all, as if purposely to dispel all the silly rumors that were even then beginning to circulate!).<sup>8</sup> The Man with No Name, then, is actually just a guy named Joe. At the same time, he is really not the wholly selfish, amoral mercenary we tend to think of him as, either (he gives all his dollars to the family). But this is how the public chose to remember him, this being the archetype that they apparently wanted, or needed. Or deserved.

So whence came the *myth* (to use the word in its modern and profane sense) of The Man with No Name? It's an ironic and rhetorical question of course, because the myth is always in a sense self-created—it must spring, as it were whole, from the collective unconscious of the race (or the audience), like a child, born with its boots on.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Then again, in *For a Few Dollars More*, before Clint even appears, we hear him referred to (by the sheriff who is informing Lee Van Cleef) as "Monco." (The name—which is Italian for "Monk"—never surfaces again however.) Finally, in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the angelic attributes of Eastwood are finally acknowledged and he is referred to (by Van Cleef) as "a golden-haired angel," and thereafter addressed (by Eli Wallach's Tuco) as "Blondy."

9. There's a sort of inadvertent play upon this idea when we see No Name, after a night's sleep(?) pull back his blanket, and the innkeeper asks. "Do you always sleep like that?" He's wearing everything but his hat! Of course, as *For A Few Dollars More* made explicit, No Name in long johns is simply unthinkable.