

JOHN'S WIFE



Once there was a man named John. John had money, family, power, good health, high regard, many friends. Though he actually worked hard for these things, he actually found it difficult not to succeed; though not easily satisfied, a man whose considerable resources matched his considerable desires. A fortunate man, John. He was a builder by trade: where he walked, the earth changed, because he wished it so, and, like as not, his wishes all came true. Closed doors opened to him and obstacles fell. His enthusiasms were legendary. He ate and drank heartily but not to excess, played a tough but jocular game of golf, roamed the world on extended business trips, collected guns, cars, and exotic fishing tackle, had the pleasure of many women, flew airplanes, contemplated running for Congress just for the sport of it. In spite of all that happened to his wife and friends, John lived happily ever after, as though this were somehow his destiny and due.

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

For Angela Carter, whose infamous illusionist Doctor Hoffman believed, like Ovid, that “the world exists only as a medium for our desires,” and that “Nothing ... is ever completed; it only changes.”

And for Ovid:

“Those two, with so much else in common, were models for me, masters, examples to follow, and not my justification.”

—TRISTIA, BOOK

Once, there was a man named John. John had money, family, power, good health, high regard, many friends. ~~Though he worked hard for these things, he actually found it difficult not to succeed~~ though not easily satisfied, he was often satisfied, a man whose considerable resources matched his considerable desires. A fortunate man, John. He was a builder by trade: where he walked, the earth changed, because he wished it so, and, like as not, his wishes all came true. Closed doors opened for him and obstacles fell. His enthusiasms were legendary. He ate and drank heartily but not to excess. He played a tough but jocular game of golf, roamed the world on extended business trips, collected guns and cars and exotic fishing tackle, had the pleasure of many women, flew airplanes, contemplated running for Congress just for the sport of it. In spite of all that happened to his wife and friends, John lived happily ever after, as though this were somehow his destiny and his due.

Floyd, less favored, worked for John. He managed John's Main Street hardware business, envied John's power, having none of his own, and coveted John's wife. "Covet" was Floyd's word, out of his respect for the Bible, and because he knew what an evil man he was. It embarrassed Floyd to speak of religion outside of Sunday school and at the bowling alley he swore his soul away to the dark powers with every split or spare he blew, but Floyd had come to this quiet prairie town on the run from a thieving and hell-raising past and had got the church between him and the forces—both vindictive and tempting—that pursued him, and so far it had served him well. He was thankful and taught the Bible to John's children at Sunday school, his voice trembling as he ticked off the Ten Commandments, potent with consequence. Floyd bowled in the winter leagues, toured distant national parks with his wife Edna in the summers, and ran the best hardware store for miles around. The nearest friend in town was old Stu the car dealer, the only person here they felt at home with, though they saw less of him after his first wife died. They never had a falling out, though, as Otis later claimed.

Now, Gordon was also attracted to John's wife, though not quite in the same way as Floyd. "Covet" was not his word, nor exactly his inclination. What engaged Gordon's attention were her fleeting glances and her subtle movements, somehow never quite complete. She seemed always to be at rest and not at rest at the same time. There was a stillness, a stateliness about her that gave her a kind of monumental grace—yet his photos of her, whether in the studio or out on the streets, never seemed quite able to capture this, no two alike, their infinite variety suggesting an elusive mystery that tested him and drew him on. Gordon sold film, albums, frames, and cameras in his photo shop, developed the snaps of others, took passport and wedding and news photos, and was locally famous for his studio portraits, but before all else, he was an artist. And John's wife, whom he associated with the intrinsic indwelling truth of the town, its very suchness, so to speak, was—though she was not entirely aware of this—his principal subject. He longed to do a complete study of her, in all her public and private aspects. John's wife stepping out of her car (he had this one). John's wife trying on a hat. John's wife dreaming. John's wife teeing off, walking her dog (this, too), combing her daughter's hair, combing her own hair, scratching an itch. He'd called her in the titles of his collection by many names but never her own—"Andromeda," "Eunomia," "Muse," "Princess," "Echo" (suggested to him by the story his friend Ellsworth had once told), "Beauty," "Woman," "Model," "Desire," "She"—but all of these names provoked private stirrings in him that he felt to be in conflict with his higher artistic aspirations, so in the end he chose the more professional and impersonal practice of considering his photos of her as subsets of his traditional studio family portraits and thence referred to her simply as "John's Wife." As in "John's Wife Taking Communion" (now in his collection). "John's Wife"

Pregnant” (missed it). “John’s Wife Emerging from the Morning Mist” (not yet). He wished to to her as Floyd might a national park, to explore her intimately, exhaustively, hour by hour, inch by inch—John’s wife on the telephone, John’s wife at a PTA meeting, on a swing, at the movies, John’s wife writing a letter, John’s wife examining her underwear, John’s wife in the supermarket, at the doctor’s office, at a dance, in the rain, in ecstasy, in doubt—until there was nothing left to see. It might be said that Gordon—whose passion was to capture the private gesture, the hidden surface, the vanishing secrets of the race, freeing them from time’s ceaseless violence—coveted stasis.

Something like this could be said of Otis as well, though Otis was no photographer. He had bought a camera once, but had felt clumsy with the thing in his hand, cheated by the little paper pictures: his wife had fattened, his children grown to brats, these lost shapes meant nothing to him. Otis was a man of the present, it was the community, here and now, that held his interest. The community Otis saw as a closed system, no less fixed by custom and routine than by its boundaries on the map, a clocklike mechanism if not perfect in its parts and movements, then at least perfectly adequate. Nothing upset him more than disruptions to the pattern of the daily round. He thought people should go out of town to get drunk, and stay out until they were sober. Parties were for Saturday nights; noise on other nights made Otis nervous. He distrusted all intrusions, all changes, strangers, big ideas: why mess with a good thing? Even unseasonable weather disconcerted him. John’s grand projects did, admire him though he might. Newsman Ellsworth’s wacky getup, kid dragracing over the humpback bridge out by Settler’s Woods or out at the malls, that spooky photographer with his secret albums, loitering strangers and cars with out-of-state plates. Otis thought of himself as a kind of guardian warrior, one eye on the periphery, one eye on the center. At the center lived John’s wife, whom he loved.

Floyd, Gordon, Otis, then: all with this in common. And others, too: Kevin, for example, late known as Patch, his eye on her shifting hips and stiffened elbow, or the embittered Nerd with the hallowed garter in his pocket, dreamy Ellsworth and scheming Rex, her pastor Reverend (“Let it happen”) Lenny, wistful old Alf with his finger up her, Fish and Turtle (“Got the hots,” said Fish, and Turtle blushed and grinned and got them, too)—what male in town was *not*, one way or another, fascinated by John’s wife? John was not. An irony. Or perhaps this is often the case. John was a busy man who liked to make money, see the world, have a good time while it lasted, and as for women, he used them as freely and unreflectively as he did men. And with much less hope of making money off them, though he often did. He supposed they had their problems, who did not? But he had a building construction firm to run, lands to master, malls and suburbs to build, as well as Barnaby’s lumberyard, a chain of stores, an airport and a budding cargo line, money in several national and local businesses and industries, everything from computer games and action toys to alarm systems and armaments, he had properties and ambitions (on his shortlist: a racetrack and a baseball team) and an appetite big as the prairie, and when he thought of his wife and children, he thought of them mainly in political and social assets, which he estimated once a year by means of Trevor’s tax returns and Gordon’s family portraits. Anyway, he disbelieved in love, at least between people. What John loved, as he told Nevada while doing a loop and roll at a thousand feet that made her wet her pants with excitement and terror, were the days of his life.

Gordon, gesture’s hunter, would have understood John’s view of love, though he didn’t know of it. As John loved life, Gordon loved form. People, intrinsically grotesque, were beautiful only (as he had put it many years ago, shocking his friend Ellsworth, who could not understand the photos he w

taking of his mother) as shapes frozen in space. Beyond his photographs, life was disintegration and madness, a meaningless frenzied blur. Birth, death, labor, love: he looked, blinked, and out of his accidents came a piece of time. Chosen by him, held by him. Forever his, while the world outside dissolved into obscene confusion, vaguely remembered, if at all. Some subjects—a child with its finger in its nose, a dead body, an empty swimming pool, crumpled metal, an intimate scar, reflection in a window—drew him toward a kind of interpretive engagement, in which the photographic form seemed to hold on to something not visible on the surface of his print. Others (which he thought of as somehow nobler)—John's wife, for example, uninhabited vistas, slanted light on bared flesh—released him from these worldly illusions into the freedom of pure but sensuous abstraction. Such moments, such photos, he could contemplate forever.

One day, Waldo and Lorraine walked into Gordon's studio to order portraits of their two boys, and lying flat on the glass counter was a blowup of John's wife, taken from a group shot at a country club dance. Lorraine, who distrusted John's wife in the same way that she distrusted the heroines of all the novels she'd read, cast a suspicious glance at Gordon: who was this picture for? Couldn't be for John, what did he care for photographs, much less of his wife? Lorraine's husband Waldo said: "Hey! What a swell picture of John's wife!" She could have strangled him. Fat Gordon flushed and pushed the photo aside: Lorraine saw this and wondered if there was some kind of hanky-panky going on. She had heard about some of this clown's other photos. Lorraine had had a dream about him once in which he seemed to exist in or as a dirty puddle on the floor, and she'd awakened with the realization that there was something sinister about the photographer that generally went unrecognized. Waldo continued to beam happily, noticing nothing. Lorraine had married the most popular guy in college, but he was a complete corkhead, an imbecilic party boy—what she and the other girls used to call a windup talking dildo. John had brought her husband here as his Assistant VP, but, with his brain, he was more like an Assistant BB. Empty Wallets, they called him. When John asked her why she gave Waldo such a hard time, she'd replied: "Marry a prick with ears and soon all you've got left are the ears." John had grinned his grin and she'd felt her spine lock up. "Haw," said Waldo now as Gordon's wife Pauline came in with her blouse half-buttoned and her hair uncombed, and while Waldo ogled the little frum, Gordon said: "Where the heck's my schedule-book, Pauline?" She didn't know.

Why would Lorraine suspect hanky-panky where John's wife was concerned? Probably, her best friend Marge would say, because Lorraine was a constitutionally suspicious woman, made all the more so by her vulgar, butt-slapping, two-timing husband, and because, being a relative newcomer to town, Lorraine didn't know John's wife all that well. Marge could have told her: suspect John if you like, hanky-panky was that man's middle name (she would have been telling Lorraine nothing new) but not his wife. It would be like suspecting that the cornflowers in John's wife's garden got up at night and went out chasing bees. Marge had grown up here, a year behind John in school, a year ahead of his wife, and in an isolated little prairie town like this one they were all like siblings. They'd gone to birthday parties together, church picnics, field trips, high school and country club dances. They were in National Honor Society together, they'd exchanged valentines and May baskets, played hide-and-seek, colored Easter eggs in each other's kitchens, raced bicycles and had fights, popped one another's blackheads. The world had changed over the years since then and everything in it, but not John's wife, poor thing. Everybody's favorite Homecoming Queen. Period. Marge felt pity for her, but at the same time hated her for being pitiable, just as she despised John but admired him for having the power to be despicable. Marge and John had fought since grade school, were still fighting, mo-

recently over the brutal razing of the city park to build another of John's tasteless eyesores, this time concrete civic center and swimming pool, and most of the time John, more ruthless than she, and richer, too, had beat her, beat her badly. She'd never let that stop her, she had gone on standing up to him all her life, fighting back through defeat after defeat. Just as she was about to do again, so he better get ready. It was the only thing a man like that could respect, and truth to tell, Marge wanted that, John's respect, and knew that she deserved it.

The trouble was, she went about it backassward, and with an ass as ugly as hers, this was a big mistake, or anyway that was Lorraine's husband Waldo's opinion. Marge was a tedious busybody ("pissy-potty" was how Waldo pronounced it, never softly), a piece of cold "pushy" with an old axe in battle, a butt like a stop sign, and for tits nothing but knuckled nipples, hard as brass. It was her husband Trevor (Triv was Waldo's name for him, short for Trivial Trev) who wore the panties in the family, Waldo always said. He called Marge Herr Marge, sometimes Hairy Marge or Butch, Marge when she had her dander up, which was most of the time when Waldo was around, he gave her a little peace. Nor she him, it was disgust at first sight. When he and Lollie first came to town some years ago, thanks to his good old college pal and true-blue fraternity brother, Long John, Waldo had got paired up with Marge in a mixed-twosomes tourney at the club, and not only had she outscored him, he'd been too crooked on the back nine to do anything but slash wildly at his approach shots, even, what the hell, to see the goddamn greens he was supposedly aiming at, and so had blown the chances for the trophy, which she was apparently used to winning. Most of the time, she'd had to help him find his ball, which seemed always to be miles away from where he'd last seen it, and in even worsening circumstances, which for some reason tickled his funnybone. "Hoo-boy! Gone again! Catch, Marge!" The one time when he found it before she did, he stood on it, drinking from his pocket flask, and let her keep looking until she was frothing at the mouth, his stifled laughter pumping out a obstreperous rat-a-tat, itself not unlike stifled laughter, from the other end of his wind machine. Her Marge didn't think it was at all funny when he finally "discovered" the ball underneath his alligator golf shoe ("So that's what it was! Sumbitch! Thought my corns was acting up!"), but Waldo was having a terrific time. On the last hole, he just couldn't sink his putt, the goddamned green kept tipping and yawing on him, so after six or seven goofy tries, one from between his legs with the handle of the putter, the business end hooked in the fly of his checkered lavender golf pants, he just laid back and swatted the little booger out of sight, maxing out on that hole as a kind of fitting climax to a wonderful day. His partner, determinedly lining up her own putt, was muttering bitterly about his obnoxious drunken behavior, his boring vulgarity, and his basic inability to play this game, so he tossed down another ball, turned sober long enough to keep the green steady under his feet, and with a clean crisp stroke caromed his ball into hers, croquet-style, while she was still bent over it, sending it off into a sand trap, a brilliant shot that was widely admired at the nineteenth hole afterwards by just about everyone except Mad Marge and his own unloving wife Lorraine, who dragged him away, the mean old grouch, before he'd reaped his full rewards.

Well, they were new in town that summer and wholly dependent on the beneficence of good brother John, whose wife was close to that woman, or said to be, so Waldo's wife had her reasons for jerking the reins, but as to love, it was true, there was none of it in her heart, for—even though she had once guided her life by it, due, she now believed, to bad reading habits—Lorraine, like Gordon and John, disbelieved in love. A sales hook for the entertainment racket, meaningful as "lite" on diet foods, that was her opinion. Waldo, who had had few reading habits, good or bad, still did believe in love, even if he couldn't say what it was. He knew, though, it could get you in trouble, and if it could, it would. This view of love as an irresistible but chastising force would have been shared by many in town—by Veronica, for example, another schoolchum of John's wife and much chastised by the emotion to which she nevertheless wistfully clung—or by Otis, upholder of order, for whom love was

more or less the same thing as grace, though one could sometimes make you hot and foolish, while the other usually did not—or by Beatrice, the preacher's wife, who believed that all love came from the Creator, like her husband Lennox said on Sunday mornings, but that the Lord sometimes moved mysteriously distressing ways. As now, for example: how was it possible, dear God, her present plight? Kate the town librarian, referring to this sweet-joy/wild-woe power of love to overwhelm with delight, and then undo, liked to say that humankind's apprehensions of the divine and of the diabolic were equally love's delusions, while goodness, truth, and beauty, without love, were fantasies, idle fictions of a mind turned in on itself and meaningless as chicken scratchings. That is to say, Kate assenting but without illusions, also believed, much loved herself so long as she lived, in love. As did Dutch the motelkeeper, who nightly watched what he called meat fever erupt and die beyond his magic mirrors but scrupulously kept his distance from a force he thought of as anything but benign. And likewise Alf, he of the inquiring finger, for whom love was, unreasonably, reason's sedative, else best understood as a chemical reaction to certain neural stimuli, sometimes locally pleasurable but generally overrated. His nurse Columbia sympathized with this latter opinion, though more or less with but one exception, in the abstract, but did not trust her widowed colleague's pose of bemused detachment, especially with John's wife in the stirrups. For Clarissa, it was just great, love was "Intense" was her word for it. Like, wow. But for her granddad, Barnaby the builder, it only led to despair, pinning you to the earth and gnawing your heart out, without letting you die. If one could stop loving, there would be peace and death. Barnaby being yet another who, inconsolably, loved John's wife.

Ah well, love: a profound subject. Back in his mayoral days, giving the traditional bandstand speech at the climax of the annual Pioneers Day parade one hot summer, John's wife still just a schoolkid then, Barnaby's old lawyer friend Maynard, thumbs hooked in the sleeveholes of his vest, speculated that it was love that had made and mapped the town: the original pioneers' love of adventure that brought them out here, the settlers' love of the land that caused them to stay and put down roots, the love of the early town planners for order and progress and the entrepreneurial spirit of those qualities that caused this great town center to rise so gloriously where nothing larger than teepees had ever been seen before, and the love of all those present for justice and prosperity and the good life and for one another. And also for God, he was quick to add. He evoked the time when the only sounds you would hear in these streets would be the clip-clop of horses in the dirt and mud, the lazy drone of bees and locusts, the clink of chopped ice in the lemonade pitchers and the creaking porch swings, and he said that these were the sounds of love. He spoke of the town as their common mother, the town limits as her loving embrace, and he compared the crisscross grid of the streets to the quilting of a mattress on which, he said, we were all one big loving family, causing his sister Opa John's mother, to pick up her paper fan and wave it in front of her face, perhaps finding this one metaphor too many and wishing to remind her brother it was time to have the preacher bless them and sit down. This Maynard was the father of John's garter-clutching cousin Maynard Junior, sometimes known as the Mange or the Nerd, for whom love was a singular obsession, otherwise a kind of dirty joke, and he in turn in time became the father of Maynard III, also called Turtle, who thought love was for wimps until his buddy Fish gave him a couple of new ideas a few weeks ago, which were exciting but not very clear.

Old silver-tongued Grandpa Maynard might still be around, but the city park and its quaint gazebo-like bandstand where he flaunted his rhetoric were forever gone, just a dimming memory now like the now-dimming ex-mayor's fondly remembered clinks, creaks, and clip-clops, public speaking of the all-community sort being performed in more recent times inside the new civic center or elsewhere until John created Peapatch Park, on temporary staging erected in the asphalt parking lot outside depending on the weather and the occasion. This starkly modern new edifice, named in honor of o

Barnaby the builder and built by his son-in-law, was generally held to be, though controversial, the town's major new construction of the decade, perhaps (some said) of the century, its most popular architectural innovation being its Olympic-sized swimming pool with retractable roof, famous throughout the state and written up in all the metropolitan Sunday papers. You could always count on John to make things happen. His old football, wrestling, and track coach Snuffy, one of the city councilmen most responsible for pushing the project through all its legal and political obstacles (always some soreheads opposed to progress), became, with John's blessing, the unopposed candidate for the mayoralty and was himself a public speaker of some renown, plain-talking but inspirational in his gruff straight-from-the-shoulder cut-the-crap way. Old Snuffy, as the townsfolk liked to put it, knew how to kick butt. Starting with his own teams. More than one young wiseass in this town had grown used in practice as a live tackling dummy until the message got through that when Snuffy talked about giving your all for the team, son, he meant *all*. Ever do two hundred push-ups with a foot in your back? In the mud? In full uniform? *After* a game? About love, though, this inveterate bachelor had little to say. He was better on grit and hustle and hanging tough. Had Snuffy known women in his time? Sure, plenty. And all kinds, too, from two-bit to fancy. But love, which he believed in like everybody else, was never a head-to-head body slam with some woman, or man or boy either, it was more abstract than that, more like an ideal form, to speak in the philosophizing manner, as in "I love this game!" or "Body contact! I love it!" To love was to play hard, and to be loved was to win.

God-fearing Floyd, who managed John's downtown hardware store and was a lifelong expert on butt kicking, mostly from the receiving end, had a more down-to-earth, one-on-one notion of what love was, having once loved his own wife Edna, and that was how he knew that what he now felt for John's wife was covetousness. He did not want to give himself to her, did not want to embrace her, care for her, adore her, live with her. He did not even want to make love to her. He wanted to throw her down on her fantastic ass and fuck the bejesus out of her. Praise the Lord, this had not yet happened. "Thou shalt not!" he roared at the giggling brats in Sunday school, his voice quaking with the conflict in his heart. He often imagined taking her right there, among the choir robes, something about the glossy feel of them, the range of murky body odors, the cheap lockerroom challenge of the church's damp back chambers with their un-painted cement walls, cold tile floors. Or else over the counter of carpet tacks, flare nuts, and auger bits down at the store on Main Street. On top of the lead float in the Pioneers Day parade. On the fancy lime green toilet in John's house between bridge hands (the toilet in Floyd's house was white with a pink terrycloth seat cover and a loose handle). Or, shock why not trump her right on the cardtable itself, frigging grand slam! Maybe his feelings toward John were mixed up in these stormy desires. Whenever the four of them played bridge or had dinner together, which was about once every three or four months, depending on John's sullen sense of duty (Floyd sensed this and it embittered him), Floyd contrived to sit so as to have his knee pressed against John's wife's knee. This recklessness: was it just another effort to emulate John?

John was a man often emulated, Floyd was not alone in this. Some men emulated his style, others his vocabulary, some his aggressiveness or his laugh. Alf emulated his golf swing, not that it did him any good, old Stu the car dealer his jokes and Hard Yard his derring-do, Lennox his cool acceptance of the way things were. When Lennox told his wife Beatrice, his children, his students, his congregation and most of all himself, "Let it happen," he was emulating John. For John's old high school coach Snuffy, entering politics, it was not so much the boy's fierce team loyalties that he emulated (these Snuffy shared and who knows but engendered) as his strategic use of them in others. In short, it was John's smarts he sought to emulate, just as for Dutch it was his friend's killer instincts, and for Marge's husband Trevor, aka Trivial Trev, his employer's respect for numbers, for statistics. "There's no such thing as money, Trev," John used to tell him, his reading spectacles halfway down his broken nose making him look mockingly professorial, "only the counting of it." Trevor also emulated John

attention to detail, his caution with money, his staying power, but he may have been misreading John seeing what he wanted to see. As all do. Lorraine's cork-head husband Waldo emulated everything about John, some even thought he was making fun of John, but in actuality Waldo thought John was emulating *him*. Perhaps Waldo was right, partly right anyway, they had been buddies since college, was a question of which came first, as Waldo liked to say: the chigger or the leg. Though they had often shared women in the past, Waldo even emulated John's attitude toward John's wife: utter disinterest. Anything else would have seemed like incest to him.

Otis, who emulated John's quiet force, something he had picked up from John back when they had played football here together, had been in love with John's wife since high school, though she was surely unaware of it. He had never gone out with her, hardly dreamed of it (in this respect, there was no emulating John, not for Otis), had rarely even spoken to her, but they had met a couple of times at high school parties, and one night at one of them she had taught him how to dance. He could still see as though in a dream, their four feet shuffling about below them, crisscrossing on the shiny hardwood floor of the school gym, their toes bumping, could still feel her soft hand on the back of his neck as she led him about. Though he was now married with four children and never danced, the warlike proximity and generosity of her young body that night in the high school gym was still his best and most magical knowledge of womanhood. Whenever Otis, self-styled guardian warrior, thought of the Virgin Mary, he thought of John's wife.

Whenever Pauline the photographer's wife thought of Otis, she thought of the way he cried the first time she sucked him off. She thought he should play James Cagney in the movies. Whenever she thought of Otis's cleft-chinned high school football coach Snuffy, she thought of a cartoon character in a dirty comicbook who wore his impotence on his face. Not surprising that her husband Gordon's campaign poster headshot of the squinty old geezer with the sausage nose had attracted so much graffiti. Whenever she thought of her husband, she thought of some kind of fat robot with a big glass eye and an exploding forehead. Once he had got the floodlamps so close to her thighs, he had burned them. This shot (what did he think he'd see?) had not turned out. Whenever Pauline thought of the three brothers from the drugstore, Harvard, Yale, and Cornell, she thought of a story about eating and bedding down she'd been told in the first grade. Would her life have been different had she been born with golden locks? It was not a question Pauline would ever have asked. Here's another: What is love? If pressed, she'd probably have said that it was something that ran over you like a devil train or a wild mule, knocking down all the walls, for that was pretty much what she thought of whenever she thought of love. Whenever Pauline thought of John's friend Waldo, she thought of a guy in a carnival who invited people in to see the loving couple two feet tall. His wife punched the tickets. With her teeth. Whenever she thought of John, she thought of a young magician (though he was no longer young) with his shadowed face ablaze at the edges with unnatural fire and his pants stuffed full of writhing copperheads. What a night that was. Or must have been: it was like a dream or an old movie. Whenever she thought of John's wife, she thought of her dead sister coming to her in a nightmare: she was taller than the doorframe, ten years old, wore a ragged white nightdress, and her breasts were dripping blood.

Why did Otis cry when Pauline sucked him off that first time? Otis was a hard man, one of the hardest around. And Pauline was in her day the sweetest cock-sucker in high school, maybe the best the town had ever had. A cynic might suppose it was because John had married the girl that hard man loved. A romantic might say there was something wrong with him. Otis knew better than either: he

cried, he knew, for the loss of his freedom. He had taken this experience into his life, and now it would never let him go. He knew, even before he came, lying there in the back of the old panel truck in the Country Tavern parking lot, his knotted-up ass beginning to slap the cold metal floor, that there would be many nights in the years to come when he would need Pauline's mouth again, when he would roar the streets in a fever, unable to work, unable to go home to his wife and children, unable even to think clearly. As for John marrying the girl he loved, well, she was from a good family in town, Otis from a poor one, if you could even call it a family, and he was younger than she was, he couldn't blame her for failing to notice him, for marrying a guy who had everything like John, which anyway happened when he was far away at war, and in fact he wished them both well. He became, though at some distance, their friend and protector. John could leave home at any time and know that his wife would be safe. Yet, often, more often even than for Pauline's warm wet mouth around his cock, Otis the lawman longed for the touch of John's wife's hand on the back of his neck again.

Thus, the men of the town revealed themselves through their longings, Otis, Maynard, Floyd, and all the others. Women, too, Lorraine, Marge, Veronica, Beatrice, but in a different way: they were holding something together out here in this vast emptiness, themselves perhaps. The men were more audacious, risked more in their fantasies, as though they perceived this as a birthright. Death was the province of the women, and wisdom, and paradox—garbage left them by the men perhaps, but useful to them as they plotted out the terms of their survival after the cataclysm. Men ventured, but women prepared the field, spreading their skirts out over what ground they could hold (Lollie's image; her friend Marge, whom Waldo called Mad Marge, rarely wore skirts, saw it differently). The attention of John's wife, however momentary and enigmatic, was one of the laurels the town's men competed for while the women, contrarily, often felt threatened by John's wife, yet protected by her at the same time. Lorraine, having lost much, sometimes felt she hated her, yet had to admit she needed her as she needed Waldo's idiocy: one had to live with these strange forces. John's wife often called forth these ambivalent responses from the women around her. Trevor's wife Marge envied John's wife, pitied her. Little Clarissa felt a kind of sentimental rage toward her, Opal a jealous affection, Lumby an erotic disgust. Old Stu's wife Daphne loved her, more than anyone in the world really, but she could have expressed this better if John's wife were dead. Floyd's wife Edna watched her as one watched a cloud, perhaps it would rain; it didn't matter.

Daphne watched everything these days as one watched a cloud. Seeing and not seeing. John's wife was her best friend, had been, maybe still was, who could say? Things were pretty vague. Her memories, too, about as cloudy as the rest of it, thanks to Amazing Grace, but she could still recall sitting in the cold concrete stands of a university football game with John, drinking whiskey from a pocket flask. He had invited her up for a Thanksgiving weekend and she had brought her best friend from high school along, John fixing her up with one of his fraternity brothers. Daphne and John were under a blanket and he had his free hand in her pants and she felt very good. As she felt now, with her own hand in her pants, lacking any available other: funny how entangled the present was with the past, hard to tell them apart sometimes. Daphne's friend was there at the game that day with a comedian named Val or Vern, whatever happened to that guy, he had a missing molar he could whistle through and he sang like a tinny prewar radio crooner, you could even hear the static. How vivid it all was! She should write this up for Elsie's newspaper: "I Remember." The guy's favorite number was "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along," and while he warbled away, John thrummed her clitoris like a tuning fork. Magic. Like another dimension. It was cold. The sky was blue. The tea they were cheering won. Later, in some other memory, might have been the same weekend, more likely not (Christmas? Easter? some time that stank of festering happiness), her best friend had her head on John's shoulder in the front seat of John's new silver Mustang, while Daphne was getting mauled on the cramped bucket seats on the floor in the back by a guy with a flat-top haircut and a bo

on his nose, feeling not so good. Sort of like, she thought then, thought now, sniffing her fingers, ~~runner in a relay race, passing on the baton, not because she was ready to let go of it—not Daphne~~ hell's bells, are you kidding? give me that sucker!—but because she was supposed to. No wonder she'd been maid of honor at their wedding.

A remarkable event, that wedding, the best the town had seen in years and nothing like it in the nearly two decades since. As one might expect, of course, when Mitch's son married the builder's daughter, so dazzlingly beautiful on the day, people said the sight of her made their eyes smart. Her mother, too, was a looker in her day, as many present were reminded when the bride glided into view, though there was a mischievous fiery-eyed edge to Audrey's darker beauty that her gentle and radiant daughter, beloved by all who knew her as Audrey was not, did not possess. The church was wall-to-wall that memorable day with political bigwigs from the state capital and visiting business cronies from the two family patriarchs, together with all the schoolfriends of the bride, including a penpal all the way from Paris, France, a complementary pack of John's fraternity brothers down from the university whooping it up like puppies, Waldo among them, still unmarried then, a multitude of family, friends and employees, and a great congregation of ordinary townsfolk, young and old, enthralled witnesses to this grand and extravagant event, so full, it seemed, of meaning for them all. Kate the librarian, thoughtful soul, remarked to her friend Harriet on the occasion (Harriet had just expressed her disappointment that Oxford's and Kate's son Yale was not after all the groom, adding with a regretful sigh that the more things change, the more they stay the same, and this wedding just proved it) that yes, great ingatherings of this kind did indeed confirm the community's traditional view of itself, but confirmation was also a kind of transformation: this town, unchanging, would never be the same again. On the day, few would have read any but auspicious omens in such an oracle. Daphne, as the maid of honor, was paired with John's handsome fraternity brother Bruce, his best man: luck and sidekicks, everyone thought, headed for a Hollywood ending. Daphne thought so, too, and it might have happened, were it not, she supposed, for the penpal, and had Daphne behaved herself, too much perhaps to ask. Instead, it was John's cousin Maynard Junior who, aching rather for the leg that wore it, caught the bridal garter and paid the piper, a day he remembered as the morning after the last day of his life. Full of regret, Maynard. But years, wives, lives later: he still had the garter.

Daphne's fourth and most recent husband, old Stu, golfing buddy of the groom's father, supplier of Ford trucks to the bride's, and so an honored guest at the wedding, remembered it as a day of destiny helped along in this remembering, never good at it by himself, by one of Gordon's strangely prophetic photographs, the yellowed eighteen-year-old clipping of which from *The Town Crier* he kept as long as he lived, framed, on his office desk down at the car lot: "LET HIM EAT CAKE!" it said. "MAID OF HONOR NOURISHES WEDDING GUEST." That was at the reception, whiskey by then having eased his allergic reaction to the airless church, or anyhow made his suffering seem more remote. It was a real cattleyard in that church, to put a plain word on it, a perfumed crowd so thick you couldn't breathe and where there weren't people there were flowers, heaps of them everywhere, so piled up the bride walls seemed to fall away behind them, a delight to the eye maybe but not to Stu's tender passages: he had to load up on the antihistamines to keep from wrecking the service with his explosive country-boy sneezing, and even so spent half the ceremony with his head ducked, his wife Winnie, his wife back then, tut-tutting scornfully at his side while down in his lap he quaked and wheezed like an old hounddog with a bone in his throat. There were more flowers at the reception, too, bombing him afresh with their fragrant rot, Audrey must have bought out the whole damned county, but ice-cream and whiskey now as well to wash down the antihistamines and scour out the rust—a dangerous chemist, maybe, but by then Stu badly needed both and cared not a goose's fart for the consequences nor for the tedious Winnie's whiny scolding, ever the backseat driver. Crowds like these were typically just so many potential car buyers for Stu, and he had imagined, as he always did, moving at least half his

inventory in such a happy free-spending pack-up—mostly upmarket Lincoln-and-Merc trade at that, real high-class sale barn—but he couldn't even see their goddamn faces. When he did finally make pitch he found himself pushing a four-wheel-drive farm truck on the little girl from France who seemed to think he was telling her a naughty joke. She was peering up at him, all smiles, waiting for the punchline, so he shifted gears, leaned close, and rumbled melodically in her frail papery ear. “Hinky-dinky, par-lee-ffoo!” He winked, roared his big laugh, punched her softly in the shoulder, and thinking, well, the French they are a funny race, drifted off into the noisy blur, looking for the self-service pump: and the next thing he knew, Daphne's hand was on the throttle and her tongue was in his ear.

Gordon had taken the photo now sitting on the old car dealer's desk, but Ellsworth had cropped and capped it for his weekly newspaper, *Stu and Daph* in, their partners out. This was not the tongue-in-the-ear teaser, but her cake-in-the-kisser boffo, though Ellsworth had caught both acts. What hadn't? Daphne was pretty manic in those days, hard not to notice, and old Stu, sitting beside her, so drunk his weepy red eyes were crossed, had been an easy target. Earlier that day, or maybe it was later as she stretched for the bridal bouquet, her strapless bodice had pulled away and, instead of covering herself, Daphne had, whooping like a raffle-winner, grabbed the bouquet and held it to her face, her bare breasts bugging out over the fallen cups on either side of the clutched stems like startled cartoon eyes—another of Gordon's photos, one that failed to make *The Town Crier's* historic spread of course though it remained to this day a backshop favorite, even though the model herself had, as one might say, outgrown it. The wedding had excited Ellsworth as had little else in his four years back here, and he had front-paged it two weeks running, both before and after, with two inside photo pages in the second week's issue, he being yet another in this town with a special affection for John's wife, more than that really if truth be known, but motivated as well by his newsman's nose: this joining of the local fortunes made for a terrific story, he felt, just when the town most needed one. The entire area at the time was in something of a recession, lying dormant, waiting for something to come along and wake it up, and the wedding was like a fresh breath of life, a real pickup for everyone. Literally, as it turned out: for it was announced at the reception, like a gift from the good fairies, that the state highway commission had decided to route its four-lane north-south link to the new cross-county interstate highway—a sympathetic mating, as it were (Ellsworth's thought)—past the edge of town ensuring its continued prosperity. They all drank to the wedding couple's health and to their own. Ellsworth climaxing the occasion with the recital, by way of a toast to the bride, of his newest poem later to be published in *The Town Crier*:

It may have been the *Knave of Hearts*
Who stole the tarts away,
But after all had played their parts
'Twas *Beauty* stole the day!

Though this poem was a great success, both in performance and in print, Gordon disdained it. Indeed, it saddened him. Ellsworth was full of himself, proud of his worldly travels and his quirky bohemian ways, but it was Gordon who had kept alive, though he no longer painted, their youthful artistic principles. They had been pals since the days of toy soldiers and model airplanes, Ellsworth great with the stories that dramatized their play, creating trajectory, Gordon a stickler for the details that gave it its intensity, its *body*, as it were. Gordon could not remember when they “grew up,” if even they did, it was more like their playing simply ripened into something more profound somehow, all by itself, as though what was serious about it was there all along, down inside, just waiting to be revealed but however it happened, they found themselves suddenly so much *older* than anyone around them.

even the grown-ups, and certainly light-years beyond their classmates, fashion freaks and sexual athletes—maybe, but mentally still in diapers, penned up like driveling toddlers in the world's frivolous illusions. What Ellsworth liked to call "the show," a coining from their feverish years. Ellsworth was careful with his words then, respecting their shape and gravity. "*The show I know*," he wrote in one of his rhyming aphorisms, they were just high school sophomores at the time, reading passionately painting and writing, showing each other their best and worst efforts, laying plans deep into the night for their escape together, "*the real I feel*." The poet and the artist: they were inseparable. Until Ellsworth went off into the world to become famous and live the wandering minstrel's life, leaving Gordon behind to care for his invalid mother. Couldn't do that with a paintbrush, not in this town. He took up photography.

They were a pair, all right, Gordo and Elsie, as some folks called them, flamboyant but shy at the same time, always out in the middle of things but never part of them—they hardly seemed like real people at times—but one accepted them as one accepted a nervous tic or a sixth toe, as much part of the body politic in their loony way as John and his wife, and here as sure as warts, as Officer Otis liked to say, to stay. Okay, a bit off the wall maybe—Ellsworth in his cape and beret and long black hair hanging threadily from his bald patch, Gordon bobbing and waddling like a sweaty circus animal in his mute goggle-eyed search for the right angle—but harmless: they never gave Otis any trouble except for the way they poked their noses into everything, and they had always treated him with respect even though he was a lot younger than they were. Otis had barely begun high school when he first started turning up in the pages of *The Town Crier* as a freshman lineman on probably the best football team the school had ever had, the one that John captained, and for the Thanksgiving game he even got interviewed and Coach Snuffy introduced him as "a battling bulwark" and old fat Gordon took his photograph. Even Otis's old man was impressed and came to a game after that. Looking back he now knew that that was the first year of that newspaper's existence, Ellsworth having just come back to town, but at the time Otis had had the feeling it was history itself and had been there forever even before God, and that he was stepping out of nowhere into its pages, into its light, like one chosen or one touched by a sudden grace. There were more photographs and more interviews in the years that followed, but the coverage became more ordinary, or felt that way—of course the team without John and the rest of that great class of seniors was more ordinary, too: the light had dimmed. But had not gone out: the reporter and his photographer recorded his team captaincy, his graduation, his Purple Heart and then his marriage when he got out, his appointment to the force, his children, his investigations and arrests, his promotions, his attendance at civic functions, his league bowling scores. They missed a few things—like his fucking of the photographer's wife, for example—but Otis understood as well as did Ellsworth that some things were properly historical and some were not. Not all the photographer's photos, for example, had made the pages of *The Town Crier*, nor should they and some perhaps, including those Pauline had been telling Otis about, squirreled away at the back of the studio, should never have been taken.

These photographs that lay concealed from public view in over two hundred carefully maintained and catalogued albums shelved in the back room were, Gordon knew, his greatest achievements, but in the way that all artists are misunderstood (the ironies neither escaped him nor embittered him), what he was best known for in town were his commercial studio portraits. In the spring there were school class, club, and team photos, then graduation, first communions, and weddings in June, the Pioneer Day costumes, birthdays and anniversaries and new babies all year round, Christmas card family portraits in the autumn, club and company year-end galas to follow. There was hardly a household in town without at least one of his photographs, the only thing on most of their walls, buffets, or pianos resembling original art, and all the record most had of family history. Of course, Gordon was good at them as at everything else in what others called his job: they were sharply focused, majestically lit.

elegantly composed, ultimately flattering. They were even, for occasions so inherently formal and unusually expressive, something one might not have expected, knowing Gordon, a notoriously timid and solitary man, severe even and cold. Weird, some said. No “Hey there sourpuss watch the little saucer cheese birdie” from Gordon. But no matter how banal the occasion, he was determined to get each composition just right and his broad pantomimic gestures as he tacked and bobbed behind his light and camera, demonstrating the attitudes he wished his subjects to assume as they posed there on his little curtained stage, always brought a kind of theatrical gaiety to the otherwise awkward occasion. They loved him suddenly, not knowing why, nor did he understand this either, but it was the love or respect he felt (Pauline understood this) for a clown, and it showed in their faces.

The photographer’s circussy style was not lost on John’s young son Mikey, who used it for one of his famous wordless monodramas at his parents’ annual Pioneers Day barbecue the summer of the civic center controversy, an awkward occasion for Trevor whose wife Marge was leading the opposition to the building of the annoying thing, having even managed that very week to get a temporary restraining order (soon to be overturned, of course, no stopping John) to prevent the plowing up of the city park, and who, even at the barbecue, had trouble keeping her mouth shut. Well, nothing new there. Trevor was John’s personal accountant and a corporation officer, Marge the town’s most intransigent gadfly, there’d been embarrassing parties like this before. Fortunately John was a tolerant man with a good sense of humor, maybe he even got a kick out of Marge’s quixotic activism. They’d been at it since grade school after all, and—until now anyway—she’d not put Trevor’s business relationship with John at any serious risk. Trevor sipped his spring water and knocked on what he hoped was wood: John was about ninety percent of all the business relationships he had. Little Mikey had roped a pillow around his tummy, buttoned on one of his father’s trenchcoats, its tails dragging on the ground, and rigged a fanciful camera out of a video cassette, toilet paper tubes, plastic dishware from a child’s tea set, and a penlight which his sister Clarissa complained he’d stolen from her bedroom. Now he bobbed and waddled through the lawn party, taking everyone’s photo by switching the penlight on and off, organizing “family portraits” with broad ludicrous gestures, and, whenever she hove into sight, chasing his mother about with his peculiar apparatus, click-click-clicking away as though demonically possessed. Not everyone got the point of Mikey’s act, especially this last party even if they knew who was being mocked, but Trevor knew, he’d seen the photographer up to his tricks before. The first time, he’d been sitting in the Sixth Street Cafe on a crisp autumn day with a client, a farmer for whom he was setting up an improved health insurance policy with term life attached, when the photographer had come galumphing past the plateglass window, apparently on his way into the cafe. Suddenly, he’d pulled up short, his lashless eyes bulging, and then had hurried in his walrussy way across the street to the newspaper office and printshop and had ducked inside, reappearing behind the window over there a few seconds later, now hidden behind a camera with a long gleaming lens. He’d seemed to be aiming straight at Trevor, which had made him pull back a bit into the shadows, mildly alarmed. But then the true target of Gordon’s photographic attentions had come by, walking her dog. The dog had caught the food odors from the cafe and brought her to an abrupt stop, blocking Trevor’s view of the window across the street. When she had passed, the window was empty. Since then, more than once, he’d seen the fat photographer in timid clandestine pursuit and in turn, inexplicably amused, had begun quietly to pursue the pursuer.

Here is one of Gordon’s photos on the same theme, though not the one John’s personal accountant saw being taken: A slender woman in a white tennis costume, having emerged from the driver’s seat

of a Lincoln Town Car, is leaning back in to retrieve something from the front seat, her purse perhaps. The car is parked among many others in a vast blacktop lot in the middle of a modern shopping mall, and indeed the photo seems to have been taken from inside another car parked not far away. Has she surprised two young vandals? Dressed in studded leather jackets, printed tee shirts, and torn jeans, they seem to be fleeing from the far side of the Town Car as though to escape capture. Or, more likely, confinement: one of the two girls has her arm extended behind her as though she might have just pushed the backseat door shut, even as she rushes away. In the background, near the mock-arcade entrance to the mall with its automatic glass doors and rows of nested wire shopping carts, young out-of-focus dressalikes can be seen in studied poses—slouching, smoking, waving—vaguely reminiscent of smalltown photographs from generations past. Slanted sunlight falls on the driver's white tennis shorts, creating a kind of blurry nimbus or halo around her hips (the impression is that of having been stared at too hard and long), a seeming photographic flaw that was perhaps, through darkroom manipulation, intentional.

Clarissa, one of the secondary subjects in Gordon's parking lot photo of the radiant tennis shoe (part of a continuing series), was not at all happy with her stupid little brother's impersonation of the town photographer that afternoon at her daddy's annual summer barbecue, refusing to take part with the other kids in his pseudo family portraits and determined to find some way of sabotaging the little showboat. It was especially disgusting the way Mikey went scuttling after their mom with that dumb thingamajig every time she came outside—why did everyone think it was so funny? When Clarissa complained that he was going to use up her penlight batteries, they all just laughed. Even Uncle Bruce, who had flown in just for the day and on whom both she and Jennifer had a tremendous crush that summer, seemed amused by the little sicko, it was unbelievable. Uncle Bruce was not really her uncle as she had to keep reminding Jennifer all the time, Jennifer wanting Bruce all for herself and accusing Clarissa of what she called incestual madness. He and her father had both been in the same fraternity at college, and her father had told Clarissa years and years ago that since he called him "brother Bruce," she could call him uncle. Of course, Jen's father had also been in their fraternity, but that was different. Clarissa had dibs. Uncle Bruce was very sexy for an older man and tons of fun and Clarissa had made him promise a long time ago that when she grew up he would marry her, and she still meant it whether he did or not: she'd had it engraved in secret code on her love-slave ankle bracelet just to prove it. So, when Uncle Bruce not only let Mikey drag him into one of his ridiculous imitation studio photos, and one making fun maybe of her own family at that, but even with a big laugh and a hug pulled Jennifer along with him to be his pretend wife (Jen was really eating it up: come on! this was her best friend?), it was too much. She went looking for Jennifer's nerdy brother Fish, found him hiding in the garage, sucking on a snatched can of beer. "Hey, Creep, where are those firecrackers you told me you brought?"

These annual Pioneers Day barbecues were part of a year-round parade of social affairs lavishly hosted by John and his wife, including everything from bridge foursomes, cocktail parties, and state poker nights to bowl game gatherings, formal dinners, and kids' birthday parties, a festal sequence that gave incident and body to the evanescent flow, configuring the town's present as Ellsworth's weekly paper and Gordon's family portraits recomposed and fixed the past. The Christmas season did not really begin until their annual open house, the presidents' midwinter birthdays gave way to John's between, and their backyard barbecues were famous throughout the state, such wealth and power gathering there on those long summer days as to tickle all the senses: one could smell it suddenly in the rich sweet smoke, see it in the rugged smile of the handsome host, striding through the freshly mown grass in his tooled boots and brushed denims, taste it on the quickened palate, hear it in the squat tumblers of golden whiskey wherein ice tinkled like pockets full of fairy coins. Brother Bruce, a rare guest and ever rarer, called them milestones to oblivion, but was always cheerful when he said so.

often donning the chef's apron and pitching in, entertaining Clarissa with elephant jokes and funny riddles, showing Mikey magic tricks. Out-of-towners like Bruce were frequent guests, business cronies and college friends, clients, investors, politicians, all those who peopled John's wider world beyond, dropping into town to join the local cast of characters as though from out the clouds, sometimes literally so by way of John's airport, manifestations incarnate of the community's global connections and beaming witnesses to its calendric revels, as celebrated at the home of John and his wife, that consummate hostess. As Waldo, another of John's fraternity brothers and at the time his Assistant Vice President in Charge of Sales, put it that afternoon while John's funny kid was into his fat photogoofer number, clinking glasses in a toast to the pioneer spirit of exploration and new discoveries with a beautiful young woman whose name he couldn't remember (didn't matter, at that point in a party all young women were beautiful and had the same name): "Only thing wrong with John's parties, baby, is that, like life itself, they're fucking beautiful but they're too fucking short." He threw his arm around the woman and raised his glass to Mikey and hollered "Haw!" as the kid passed by, pointing his crazy gizmo at them, and the way her head bounced off his shoulder he definitely had the impression that she was at least as drunk as he was or else stoned, which meant she was quite possibly as much in love with him at that moment as he was with her, whoever the hell she was. "You gotta move fast, know what I mean? or before you can even get your ass into the swing of things, she's gone, baby, the show's over."

As it was, alas, for Kate the librarian, who, had she still been alive at the time of little Mikey miming of the town photographer at John's Pioneers Day barbecue that summer, might have remarked on the way that parody and performance focus the attention in a way that the everyday realities of existence cannot. "One drifts through daily life as in a dream," she once remarked to her friend Harriet, also, sad to say, deceased, "waking up only when things turn nightmarish, otherwise being carried along on a free association of images, faintly erotic maybe, faintly fearful, all of it blurring into a half-remembered past that's more like an imaginary space than some aspect of time." She had made this remark while sitting with Harriet and John's mother Opal on a bench in the old city park, not yet razed back then, and Opal remembered it to this day for precisely the reason that it did seem to parody the very moment in which they sat, dappled by the sunlight filtering through the leafy branches above as though sprinkled by that gold dust they sometimes used in the movies to indicate a magical moment isolated from the implacable flow of time. Since Opal was not one much given to such flights of fancy, she supposed the image had popped into her head because of Harriet's earlier remark that "Sometimes I feel more alive at the movies or in the middle of a good novel than I do on the streets of this damned town." Harriet had had a romantic past, she was probably just feeling restless as she often did, her restlessness making her the insatiable moviegoer and devourer of popular novels that she was. Kate now went on to say that while all novels lied about the past, simply by being things whose pages turned in sequence, life, as kept more loosely in the memory, was not a random shuffle either, but more like a subtle interweaving of mysteriously linked moments whose buried significance in effect defined the rememberer. Poor dear Kate, ever the one for the mind-boggling aphorism. She once, while at one of John's parties, described them as "cyclic rituals whose purpose was to deny the incorruptible innocence of time," though what Kate meant by that Opal could not even guess. Opal thought of her son's parties as themselves altogether innocent, not to say generous and spontaneous and celebrative, and she always looked forward to them, but she did understand how much more went on at them than any one person could know, each person's experience of such tangly gatherings being so different from all the others, until someone like little Mikey came along to give them all something at the center to share, even if that something was so frivolous as the playacting of a child.

For Reverend Lenny, another witness of Mikey's masque that afternoon in John's backyard, nothing in the world was frivolous, least of all a child's enactment of the adult world, or else it a

was, which he also accepted of course as a strong possibility. Lenny, yet another member of John's old college fraternity present that day and better known to his brothers up at State as Knucksie, sometimes Ob-knucks or Noxious to the pledges he mastered in those long-gone days, mostly happy, give or take a toga party and beer bust or two he'd rather not think about, and rarely did, had come here with his family—his wife Beatrice and their children Philip, Jennifer, and Zoe—nearly a decade ago, thanks to brother John's timely intervention, and, though not without some adjustment difficulties and unremitting ambivalence and self-doubt, Lennox had over the years come to accept his new vocation as a moral and spiritual leader of the community, and indeed to embrace it. When he first arrived and took up his new mission among, except for John, these total strangers, nothing was easy, but what was hardest were the Sunday sermons. It was like writing term papers all over again, something Lennox had always hated and rarely managed to accomplish without a little help from his friends. Now suddenly, he had to do one every week, no friends at hand, and for a while he fell back pretty heavily on stuff he stole out of books. Eventually, though, once he discovered that no one was grading him, and even for the most part listening, it became his favorite task. His own special thing, as his wife Beatrice (who strode past now in her fringed leather jacket, pleated skirt, and bright red boots, bearing a large plastic bowl of potato salad like the Holy Grail: she blinked at him as though in wonderment and smiled) liked to say. What amazed him was how everything worked; God—or the gods, any would do. Reverend Lenny was not a fundamentalist—was wonderful. Lennox found he could take any experience, news item, anecdote, whatever, abstract its essence (the fun part), link it metaphorically to some general aspect of the human condition (always plenty of opportunity for pathos, humor, compassion, rue), weave in any images that freely came to mind, toss in a Biblical passage or two (Second John, for example: “And now I beg you, lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another ... for he who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son”: that one was so brilliant it had caused John's lawyer cousin's wife to faint dead away), speak with conviction, gravity, and intensity, and shazam! another brilliant spellbinding supersermon. So much fun was it, he soon found himself testing God's limits, as it were, by attempting to convert the most unlikely material—a golf game, rock lyrics, a visit to the barbershop or a bellyflop at the country club pool, Saturday morning TV cartoons, dirty jokes, shopping at the malls, even the holes in doughnuts or the repairing of a clogged stool in the church basement—into Sunday morning classics of spiritual uplift and moral wisdom. Certainly *he* was uplifted if no one else was. It was nearly as good as turning on (and he had used that too, only lightly veiled: John had winked at him from the front of the congregation). So, while John's son was aping the town photographer at his parents' Pioneers Day garden party, Lennox was doing what he always did at such events: gathering images. He had decided it was time to take advantage of the hot topic of the day and preach on the doctrinal meaning of a “civic center”: What was it and why was it (in theory) so significant to us all? What did it mean that the beloved park with all its natural Edenic beauty had to be sacrificed so that that center of our civility could be, not found, but fashioned? He envisioned a link to the great themes of the settling of this nation, the New Jerusalem dream and all that, and thus (his wife's costume suddenly delighted him) to this weekend celebrations: hey, genius, right on! He watched John's little boy with his taped-junk “camera” bobbing about frenetically with a kind of despairing enthusiasm, a hopeful anguish, and thought: paradigm for our piteous effort to focus upon the real, to find that center. What *was* the real, and why was it so elusive? As though in reply, John's wife passed in her knee-length shorts and crisp cotton shirt, all eyes in the backyard upon her, and Lennox thought: whatever it is, it has substance. For God's Body. And bodily parts. For God so loved the world that he eschewed mere abstractions. But to accept the fleshly real (he was watching his old fraternity brother, once known as Loose Bruce, put his arm around his little pubescent daughter, Jennifer's face flushed with puppy love) was to accept pain and

(his son Philip—or his wife’s, anyway—and John’s daughter Clarissa came out of the garage together looking guilty) paradox. Irony. Was that not, in point of fact, the very message of the Cross? Yes, it was taking shape, the main themes were all there. All it lacked was a little spark and pop, a final kicker, a quote from the Good Book maybe, something with which to say: “This, my friends, this, *this* is real!”

When the firecrackers went off behind John’s screwy kid, Maynard II, he, whose wife had swooned during the preacher’s sermon, was just thinking about his cousin’s power and how, maybe with old Barnaby’s help, he was about to trounce that contemptible cocksucker at last, so he was both startled (dropped his goddamned paper plate of barbecue right down the front of his pants) and at the same time felt somehow confirmed in his hopes, as though that sudden explosive racket was a celebration (a sympathetic glance at his pants from John’s wife, looking down upon him from the back deck, added to his feeling of triumph; although, ever the languishing fool for love, he wished for more) she did send one of the kitchen help out with a wet towel) of his ineluctable and unprecedented victory. Yet another fucking illusion, as he was to find out soon enough, but at the time that summer it looked like a sure thing, so when wild applause followed the fireworks, Maynard embraced it as though they were for him, gave a whoop himself and winked across the lawn at his wife Veronica, who dropped her jaw and returned him a sneering hawk-nosed what-the-hell’s-the-matter-with-you-scumbag? look. It was a joy to be around, that girl. Should have sobered Maynard up, but it didn’t. He was feeling too damn cocky. Old Barnaby, pissed at the way his son-in-law had fucked him over and in a fit over the civic center outrage (and it *was* an outrage), had come to Maynard’s law firm with a sweet plan, well funded, and Maynard had put the final touches to it, it was beautiful. John’s ass was grass, he was sure of it. Not that that would be the end of it. His cuz was tough in the clinches and could play mean and dirty. You could sometimes take a point off him, but it was hard to win the game, Maynard knew that. When they were kids, their families used to do Thanksgivings together, and in and around the ritual gut-stuffing they’d get up all-day Monopoly games, which John always won, even if in the end he had to use strong-arm tactics. Everyone cheated of course, but it was Maynard who always got caught. One day John spied him palming an extra house onto Marvin Gardens and decided to call a kangaroo court. It was one of Maynard’s earliest and most enduring lessons in the way the law worked. He was introduced into the dock as “greasy Mayo Nerd” and his defense was met with wet Bronx cheers, especially from the younger shits, getting back at him with John’s protection. He was found guilty of course and his fine was that he had to wear his clothes backward and make a loud vomiting noise every time someone mentioned mincemeat pie. Aunt Opal, John’s mother, had brought the mincemeat pie that year so he took a terrific cuffing from his old man the first time he made that noise, John always getting someone else to do the dirty work for him. Maynard’s dad was the mayor back then and quick with his law-and-order swats across the side of his head, Maynard was always scared of him. Now the rheumy-eyed old fart was his law partner and pretty much did as he was told.

The real reason that day for the burst of enthusiastic lawn-wide applause, which whooping Maynard in his willing self-delusion accepted as celebration of his own imminent victory, was the spectacular conclusion to little Mikey’s mimed performance, a bit of improvisational showmanship that even Lorraine, once a serious student of such matters and no fan of John’s youngest brat (the little weirdo clearly had a serious oedipal problem, for one thing), had to admire. Lorraine, whose dopey husband Waldo, he of the corked head and wayward prick, was one of those who did John’s dirty work nowadays in his grown-up Monopoly games, had, like the lawyer Maynard, been thinking other thoughts when the firecrackers went off: to wit, where have all the flowers gone? How had Sweet Lorraine, the fraternity world’s favorite party girl and teacher’s petted pet of the English department, got transformed into this shapeless old bag drinking beer from a can in the backyard of a hick town bullyboy, standing in crushed buns and dogshit and wondering what griefs the dolts she was living

with had in store for her next? Her helpmeet Waldo was drunkenly hustling one of the local housewives while the bimbo's husband snarled nearby, Lollie's halfwit sons were getting dragged around by John's boy like trained bears, and she herself, watching John's wife temporarily distract attention from her own son's popular dumb show (the kid's act was easy, that crazy photographer was a clown, and like all clowns, no joke) simply by passing by, felt near to tears. Damn it, it wasn't fair! They'd promised her a happy ending! Whereupon, Mikey's bitchy big sister Clarissa snuck up behind him while he was concentrating on trying to balance his goofy apparatus on a tripod made of three golfclubs and lit a tin bucket full of firecrackers at his feet. Everyone jumped when they went off, even Lorraine who had seen it coming, everyone except Mikey, who merely pointed his "camera" in different directions and pushed the penlight button as though each pop were the taking of a shot. He dropped the contraption to his side when the explosions stopped, then slowly lifted it again as though guessing there must be more to come, or maybe he peeked. He pivoted, pointed the toilet-roll tube lens at his shocked sister, and—*POP! POP!*—snapped her turning on her heel in frustration and rage and stomping away. It was a sensation. Lorraine felt, just for a moment (much worse was to happen, she knew that), reconciled to the goddamned world once more, and even laughed and applauded with the others as the little photographer-clown took his waddling exit by chasing his mother up onto the deck and into the house again.

Beatrice's perspective on this Pioneers Day barbecue in John's backyard, not sharing Lorraine's chronic vexation, was that smalltown life out here on the prairie was pretty crazy (a couple of years later it would be her turn back here, no hosts but the children—what curious times lay ahead!—to be popping her own cracker, the star attraction), but what the heck, God was good and a generous know-it-all who cared for the little sparrow even, so, as her husband would say, chirp chirp, Trix, let it all happen. After the fireworks (where did John get those things? it was fun but was it legal? or did it matter, John being who he was, even matter? not to Trixie did it), Lenny was looking positively beatific, and that made Beatrice, who was cheerful by nature, even more cheerful, for in truth she worshiped her goofy husband, only wishing that he, like she, might have some notion of what worship might be. She would watch him in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, delivering his famous sermons, everybody talked about them, and she would know, even if no one else did, that he was just pretending, like with everything else. He pretended to be a preacher, a father, a friend, a lover, the cosmos as unreal to him as a B movie, but he was a good pretender, so what difference did it make? Well, one. Beatrice felt certain that Lenny'd never had, though he'd pretended to, a really great orgasm, and this made her feel somehow inadequate and caused her to wonder sometimes what it was they really shared. Beatrice believed, with all her heart, in the mystical power of the orgasm, it was what linked you to everything else in the whole universe, and she surrendered to it wherever and whenever it came upon her just as a saint would do when God called, for that was exactly how she saw it, and no matter what it might cost her, sometimes quite a lot. But saints suffered, too, didn't they? Just look at Jesus: he had it about as rough as it could get, but in the end he ascended, an experience Beatrice herself had enjoyed, it was great. As a little girl, she got off all the time on Jesus, just thinking about him and his spacey life, so weird and beautiful, and she still could and did, though she no longer needed him or anybody else, she was directly wired now, she could turn ecstasy on like flipping a light switch, and maybe it was just as well that cool Lenny was there to switch it off when she'd been gone too long and lovingly bring her home again.

Her mother's freaky ways embarrassed Jennifer, but intrigued her, too: grownup life might not be as boring as it mostly seemed in this nowhere place. Everything was so desperately flat and common here, you knew just what was going to happen every minute—even out at the malls and the pool, the only halfway exciting places around, you could guess what people were going to say as soon as they opened their mouths, it was like they were all in a play or something, just reading their lines, it was

very depressing—but it didn't need to be that way, and her unpredictable mother was at least, spook as she was, a case in point. Bruce was another and a more reassuring one than her mixed-up mom. He flew in and out at will, this town having no claim on him, nor any other either, he was as free as the wind like everyone should be, like Jennifer would be when she got out of here, she could hardly wait. Bruce seemed to know and do or have done everything, he was very wild and very wise at the same time, and yet somehow tragic, too, like those beautiful guys in the movies who always died young. Though Bruce would not die young, he was already too old for that, and a good thing, too, because Jennifer loved him madly and wanted him around when she was ready to escape this dump, before. After she finished high school, she really didn't care, what was all that junk good for anyway? Bruce had lots of lovers, Jennifer knew that, but unlike her best friend Clarissa who, when she wanted something, wanted all or nothing, Jennifer did not mind sharing. Clarissa was a real problem. Bruce was a college friend of both their fathers, Clarissa having always called him Uncle Bruce, though they weren't related, which Jennifer thought was childish, especially now after she'd got her period, but for Clarissa it was a way of trying to own him somehow, and teasing her about it only tended to make things worse. She and Clarissa were the closest of friends, they went everywhere together, planned to leave here together, too—bosom pals, they once joked when they went to buy their first bras together, and in truth, no joke, they were—but because of Clarissa's possessive attitude, Bruce stood between them. That afternoon at the barbecue, for example, when she and Bruce posed for Clarissa's little brother's make-believe camera and Bruce was hugging her in a way that sent a tingling all the way to her toes, she knew it was making Clarissa mad as all get-out and Jennifer was sorry about that, but she just couldn't help it. She could only hope he wouldn't let go, it was magic.

John's friend Bruce, who so willingly joined in little Mikey's play that day, was perhaps the only person out there who did not know who was being caricatured, and so missed half the point, or more, but then no one got it all, not even Trevor who knew what no others present knew but who had never put it being against his wife Marge's principles, posed for a family portrait, much nuance thus lost on him, as well, this being, as Gordon himself would say, the fate of all art, even of the amateur backyard variety: to become, stripped of nuance, a caricature of itself. Gordon's wife Pauline, who knew what Trevor knew but was not so curious about it (that lady was the main attraction around here, why shouldn't Gordon take her picture?), but who was not present in John's backyard on that day, or on any other day for that matter, would not have known what nuance was, though she would have enjoyed the little boy's portrait of her portraitist husband as clown and taken it in whole, feeling flattered that something of her private world had been so publicly noticed. But then: had Pauline fallen in love with a clown? No, nor, whatever others might think, married one either, though that was another story. Love was for heroes, giants, and wizards, of whom she'd had some in her mouth maybe, between her breasts even, and up her Sodom-and-Gomorra, as Daddy Duwayne called it, but none in her life, the strange thing that went on outside the holes in her body. When it came to romance, that old true-love lottery, Pauline had drawn the short straw: suck *that*, kid! as her fairy godfather was wont to put it in his pedagogical sessions on the floor of their filthy trailer. Where, many years ago, in the scattered iconography ripped from stolen magazines that aroused her crazy tutor's red-eyed zeal, she had glimpsed a way out. She was nineteen when she finally approached old Gordon and asked him to help her. She knew him only by his shop window with all the glitzy photographs of make-believe families and fairytale weddings, his moony face in the dim shadows behind it, but she assumed he had a swollen spunk-sack that needed relief like any other man and they could strike a deal. Her best years were over, had been since her sixteenth birthday, she knew that—reality-training was one deprivation Pauline had not suffered—but she felt she had one last chance to make her fortune, or the nearest thing to it she could ever hope for, before she turned twenty and it was all over. Her body was ripe enough, a bit beat up (you could brush that out) and she had no pride, but she needed a photographer and

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