




# CHEEVER

A LIFE

# BLAKE BAILEY


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*A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*

EDITED BY BLAKE BAILEY

*John Cheever: Complete Novels*

*John Cheever: Collected Stories and Other Writings*

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# CHEEVER

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A L I F E

Blake Bailey

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I've never intended to be patronizing. As a child I was told to remember, at all times, that I was a CHEEVAH. I thought this bullshit had cured me.

—*John Cheever to Frederick Exley*

Fred, remember you are a *Cheever*.

—*John Cheever's advice to his younger son*

I am nothing and everything is a nothing and I want to play out the role to the end; and if I am less than nothing I am a wayward boy, angry at Mummy and Daddy and a little queer to boot; and how does this square with the image of a cheerful man of forty-five who has been given everything in the world he desires but a degree of unselfconsciousness.

—*John Cheever, Journals*

... it is too much to ask that people who spend very much time in a world of their own, as all writers do, should immediately and invariably grasp what is going on in this one.

—*William Maxwell*

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## PROLOGUE

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ON APRIL 27, 1982, less than two months before his death from cancer, John Cheever appeared at Carnegie Hall to accept the National Medal for Literature. While his colleagues stood and cheered (“John had nothing but friends,” said Malcolm Cowley), Cheever hobbled across the stage with the help of his wife, Mary. Months of cancer treatment had left him bald and pitifully frail, shrunken, but his voice was firm as he spoke. In his journal he’d referred to this occasion as his “Exodus” and reminded himself that literature was “the salvation of the damned”—the lesson of his own life, surely, and the gist of what he said that day at Carnegie Hall. “A page of good prose,” he declared, “remains invincible.” As John Updike remembered, “All the literary acolytes assembled there fell quite silent, astonished by such faith.”

Seven years before—his marriage on the rocks, most of his books out of print—Cheever had tried drinking himself to death. He was teaching at Boston University, beset by ghosts from his awful childhood in nearby Quincy: “There were whole areas of the city I couldn’t go into,” he said later. “I couldn’t, for example, go to Symphony Hall because my mother was there.” Updike was living on the opposite end of Back Bay at the time, and when he’d visit the small furnished apartment Cheever had taken near the university (“no more lived-in than a bird perch”) he’d notice the first dusty page of *Falconer* stuck in the typewriter. One night he came to take Cheever to Symphony Hall, and was disconcerted when the older man emerged naked on his fourth-floor landing while the door swung shut behind him. Fortunately, there was no automatic locking mechanism, and Updike assumed the role of a dutiful if slightly exasperated son: “[Cheever’s] costume indicated some resistance to attending symphony but I couldn’t imagine what else, and I primly concentrated on wedging him into his clothes.” That winter Cheever went for long, staggering walks along Commonwealth Avenue, rarely wearing an overcoat despite freezing weather (his father had warned him that overcoats make one look Irish). Finally he sat next to a bum and the two huddled together, sharing a bottle of fortified wine. When a policeman threatened to arrest him, Cheever gave the man a look of bleary, aristocratic reproach: “My name is John Cheever,” he drawled (*Cheevah*). “You’re out of your mind.”

He came to himself in the Smithers Alcoholism Treatment and Training Center on East Ninety-third Street in Manhattan, where for twenty-eight days he shared a bedroom and bath with four other men. He couldn’t remember leaving Boston. As for Smithers, it was grim: he was told that a man had recently jumped out the window in the ward where he slept; he was taunted in group therapy for pulling a fancy accent. “Displaying much grandiosity and pride,” one of his counselors noted. “Denying and minimizing grossly.” The staff was particularly struck by Cheever’s tendency to laugh at “inappropriate” moments: little giggles would erupt while he recalled, say, a time he’d hurt his family. On the telephone with his daughter, however, Cheever would become tearful and say he couldn’t bear it another day. And yet he sensed that an early departure would amount to suicide—and he wanted to live, oddly enough; he wanted to finish *Falconer*. “Cheever’s is the triumph of a man in his sixties,” Bernard Malamud said of his colleague’s miraculous resurrection. “Here he’d been having a dreadful time ... but he stayed with it. And through will and the grace literature affords, he saved himself.” After his wife drove him home from Smithers on May 7, 1975, Cheever never took another drink.

Less than two years later, he appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* over the caption “A Great American Novel: John Cheever’s ‘Falconer.’” (He’d also been the subject of a 1964 *Time* cover story, “Ovid in Ossining.”) After reading *Falconer*, the article proclaimed, “one has the ecstatic confidence of finishing a masterpiece.” Large claims were made for Cheever’s place in world literature: “Long before Donald Barthelme, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon

began tinkering with narrative conventions, Cheever had unobtrusively disrupted the expected shapes of fiction. As was the case with Faulkner in France, Cheever has been unexpectedly recognized and honored in Russia for the corrosive criticism of American civilization his understated fiction implies.” The fact that all but one of Cheever's story collections were out of print was described as “a scandal of American publishing.”

This was remedied the following year, 1978, when *The Stories of John Cheever* became one of the most successful collections ever published by an American writer. The book remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for six months and won the Pulitzer, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the American Book Award. Cheever (appalled) was introduced as “the Grand Old Man of American Letters” on a Boston talk show. The bookish middle class, it seemed, identified en masse with Cheever's vision of suburban alienation; his “corrosive criticism” of their culture was mitigated, perhaps, by what the author himself wryly called his “childlike sense of wonder.”

Cheever was determined to put his resurgent celebrity to its best use. As Cowley observed, “Yankees are distinguished, and tormented as well, by having scruples.” Cheever—a consummately scrupulous, tormented Yankee—paid off old debts to the people and institutions that had been kind to him in harder times. He served on the board at Yaddo and, as chairman of the American Academy's grants committee, read at least a hundred new novels a year. He rarely declined offers to give readings, no matter how humble or remote the venue, though he'd despised such obligations in the past. “He was like a man who puts his affairs in order before setting out on a journey,” said Cowley.

He even seemed to come to terms, at long last, with what he called “the most subterranean eminence in [his] person”—a fear that he was a sexual (as well as social) impostor. “Here is some sort of conflict,” he wrote in 1963, though it might have been any year; “a man who has homosexual instincts and genuinely detests homosexuals. They seem to him unserious, humorless and revolting.” Thus, even at the best of times, a shadow was cast over his happiness, though he often tried counting his blessings with a sort of wan bemusement: a loving family, a beautiful house, friendly dogs, talent, fame, on and on. Still the shadow remained, whatever the surface facts of his life (“I wake from a dream”—he wrote in his journal—“in which I am committing a gross and compulsive indecency”).

*Falconer* had been a catharsis of sorts—the story of a man who makes peace with himself, partly in the form of a homosexual love affair—and shortly after he finished the novel, Cheever also seemed to find peace. While visiting the University of Utah Writing Program in 1977, he met a young man who had none of the attributes of a “sexual irregular,” as Cheever would have it: “His air of seriousness and responsibility, the bridged glasses he wore for his nearsightedness, and his composed manner excited my deepest love ...” The young man's name was Max, and, in some form or another, he remained in Cheever's life until the end. Cheever often wondered if he were being succored by the ghost of his beloved older brother, Fred, or some other long-lost friend; at any rate he seemed more inclined to accept his own nature, such as it was. “Life is an improvisation!” he liked to say, especially in later years.

Certainly life had turned out better than he ever could have hoped as a lonely, starving artist in the Depression, in flight from a family life that was “bankrupt in every way”: “I remember waking in some squalid furnished room,” he wrote, two years before his death, “probably with a terrible hangover and very likely with a stiff and unrequited prick.” At such times he used to comfort himself with dreams of future love and success—and now, fifty years later, it had all come true. “And so I woke ... with a wife and the voices of birds, dogs and children but what I had not anticipated was the sound of a brook. And so it seems to be more bounteous than once I could have imagined.” But then a curious afterthought: “It could, of course, be more horrifying.”

## CHAPTER ONE

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{1637-1912}

**M**ANY SKELETONS IN FAMILY CLOSET," Leander Wapshot wrote in his diary. "Dark secrets, most carnal." Even at the height of his success, Cheever never quite lost the fear that he "end up cold, alone, dishonored, forgotten by [his] children, an old man approaching death without a companion." This, he sensed, was the fate of his "accursed" family—or at least of its men, who for three generations (at least) had seemed "bound to a drunken and tragic destiny." There was his paternal grandfather, Aaron, rumored to have committed suicide in a bleak furnished room on Charles Street in Boston, a disgrace too awful to mention. One night as a young man, Cheever had sat by a fire drinking whiskey with his father, Frederick, while a nor'easter raged outside. "We were swapping dirty stories," he recalled; "the feeling was intimate, and I felt that this was the time when I could bring up the subject. 'Father, would you tell me something about your father?' 'No!' And that was that." By then Cheever's father was also poor and forsaken, living alone in an old family farmhouse on the South Shore, his only friend "a half-wit who lived up the road." As for Cheever's brother, he too would become drunken and poor, spending his last days in a subsidized retirement village in Scituate. No wonder Cheever sometimes felt an affinity to characters in Ibsen's *Ghosts*.

Despite such ignominy, Cheever took pride in his fine old family name, and when he was making light of the matter, he took pains to impress this on his children. "Remember you are a Cheever," he'd tell his younger son, whenever the boy showed signs of an unseemly fragility. Some allusion was implicit, perhaps, to the first Cheever in America, Ezekiel, headmaster of the Boston Latin School from 1671 to 1708 and author of *Accidence: A Short Introduction to the Latin Tongue*, the standard text in American schools for a century or more. New England's greatest schoolmaster, Ezekiel Cheever was even more renowned for his piety—"his untiring abjuration of the Devil," as Cotton Mather put it in his eulogy. One aspect of Ezekiel's piety was a stern distaste for periwigs, which he was known to yank from foppish heads and fling out windows. "The welfare of the commonwealth was always upon the conscience of Ezekiel Cheever," said Judge Sewall, "and he abominated periwigs." John Cheever was fond of pointing out that the abomination of periwigs "is in the nature of literature," and it seems he was taught to emulate such virtue on his father's knee. "Old Zeke C," Frederick wrote his son in 1943, "didn't fuss about painted walls—open plumbing, or electric lights, had no ping pong etc. Turned out sturdy men and women, who knew their three R's, and the fear of God." John paid tribute to his eminent forebear by giving the name Ezekiel to one of his black Labradors (to this day a bronze of the dog's head sits beside the Cheever fireplace), as well as to the protagonist of *Falconer*. However, when an old friend mentioned seeing a plaque that commemorated Ezekiel's house in Charlestown, Cheever replied, "Why tell me? I'm in no way even collaterally related to Ezekiel Cheever."

Cheever named his first son after his great-grandfather Benjamin Hale Cheever, "celebrated ship's master" who sailed out of Newbury-port to Canton and Calcutta for the

lucrative China trade. Visitors to Cheever's home in Ossining (particularly journalists) were often shown such maritime souvenirs as a set of Canton china and a framed Chinese fan—the while Cheever remarked in passing that his great-grandfather's boots were on display in the Peabody Essex Museum, filled with authentic tea from the Boston Tea Party. In fact, it is Leander Cheever of Danvers (no known relation) whose tea-filled boots ended up at the museum; and for Benjamin, he was all of three years old when that particular bit of tea was plundered aboard the *Dartmouth* on December 16, 1773. Also, there's some question whether Benjamin Hale (Sr.) was actually a ship's captain: though he appears in the Newbury Vital Records as “Master” Cheever, there's no mention of him in any of the maritime records; a “Mr. Benjamin Cheever” is mentioned, however, as the teacher of one Henry Pettingell (born 1793) at the Newbury North School, and “Master” might as well have meant *schoolmaster*. Unless there were two Benjamin Cheevers in the greater Newbury area at the time (both roughly the same age), this would appear to be John's great-grandfather.

The ill-fated Aaron was the youngest of Benjamin's twelve children, and it was actually he who had (“presumably”) brought back that ivory-laced fan from the Orient: “It has lain broken, in the sewing box for as long as I can remember,” Cheever wrote in 1966, when he finally had the thing repaired and mounted under glass.

My reaction to the framed fan is violently contradictory. Ah yes, I say, my grandfather got it in China, this authenticating my glamorous New England background. My impulse, at the same time, is to smash and destroy the memento. The power a scrap of paper and a little ivory have over my heart. It is the familiar clash between my passionate wish to be honest and my passionate wish to possess a traditional past. I can, it seems, have both but not without a galling sense of conflict.

To be sure, it's possible that Aaron had sailed to China and retrieved that fan—as his son Frederick pointed out, most young men of the era went out on at least one voyage “to make them grow”—but his future did not lie with the China trade, which was effectively killed by Jefferson's Embargo Act and the War of 1812. By the time Aaron reached manhood, in the mid-nineteenth century, the New England economy was dominated by textile industries, and Aaron had moved his family to Lynn, Massachusetts, where he worked as a shoemaker. But he was not meant to prosper even in so humble a station, and may well have been among the twenty thousand shoe workers who lost their jobs in the Great Strike of 1860. In any event, the family returned to Newburyport a few years later and eventually sailed to Boston aboard the *Harold Currier*: “This, according to my father,” said Cheever, “was the last sailing ship to be made in the Newburyport yards and was towed to Boston to be outfitted. I don't suppose that they had the money to get to Boston by any other means.”

Frederick Lincoln Cheever was born on January 16, 1865, the younger (by eleven years) of Aaron and Sarah's two sons. One of Frederick's last memories of his father was “playing dominoes with old gent” during the Great Boston Fire of 1872; the two watched a mob of looters, the merchants fleeing their stores. The financial panic of 1873 followed, in the midst of which Aaron—driven by poverty and whatever other devils—apparently decided his family was better off without him. (“Mother, saintly old woman,” writes Leander Wapshott, “God bless her! Never one to admit unhappiness or pain ... Asked me to sit down. ‘Your father has abandoned us,’ she said. ‘He left me a note. I burned it in the fire.’”) After Aaron's departure, his wife seems to have run a boardinghouse to support her children, or so he

grandson suspected (“If this were so I think I wouldn't have been told”), though Aaron's fate was unknown except by innuendo. As it happens, the death certificate indicates that Aaron Waters Cheever died in 1882 of “alcohol & opium—del[irium] tremens;” his last address was 111 Chambers (rather than Charles) Street, part of a shabby immigrant quarter that was razed long ago by urban renewal.

According to family legend, Sarah Cheever was notified by police of her husband's death and arranged for his burial in stoic solitude, without a word to her son Frederick until after she'd served him supper that night. Among the few possessions she found in his squalid lodgings was a copy of Shakespeare's plays, which came to the attention of a young John Cheever some fifty years later, at a time when he himself was all but starving to death in a Greenwich Village rooming house. Noting that “most of the speeches on human ingratitude were underscored,” Cheever wrote an early story titled “Homage to Shakespeare” that speculates on the cause of his grandfather's downfall: “[Shakespeare's] plays seemed to light and distinguish his character and his past. What might have been defined as failure and profligacy towered like something kingly and tragic.” As a tribute to kindred nobility, the narrator's grandfather (so described in the story) chooses “Coriolanus” for his older son—William's middle name, rather as Aaron had named *his* older son—John Cheever's uncle—William Hamlet Cheever.

WHEN ASKED how he came to keep a journal, Cheever explained it as a typical occupation of a “seafaring family”: “They always begin, as most journals do, with the weather, prevailing winds, ruffles of the sails. They also include affairs, temptations, condemnations, libel, and occasionally, obscenities.” These last attributes were certainly characteristic of Cheever's own journal, though one can only imagine what other men in his family were apt to write; the few pages his father left behind were more in the nature of memoir notes, benign enough, some of them quoted almost verbatim in *The Wapshot Chronicle* as the laconic prose of Leander Wapshot: “Sturgeon in river then. About three feet long. All covered with knobs. Leap straight up in air and fall back in water.”\* When Cheever first encountered these notes, he found them “antic, ungrammatical and ... vulgar,” though later he came to admire the style as typical of a certain nautical New England mentality that “makes as little as possible of an event.”

During his hardscrabble youth, Frederick was often boarded out at a bake house owned by his uncle Thomas Butler in Newburyport, where he slept in the attic with a tame raven and relished the view from his window: “Grand sunsets after the daily thunder showers that came down the river from the White Mountains,” he recalled, with a lyric economy his son would be right to admire. Life at the bake house was rarely dull, as Uncle Thomas was a good friend of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and the house served as a station for the Underground Railroad. John Cheever often told of how pro-slavery copperheads had once dragged his great-uncle “at the tail of a cart” through the streets of Newburyport—though Cheever always saw fit to call this relative “Ebenezer” (a name he liked for its Yankee savor), and sometimes it was Ebenezer's friend *Villard* who was dragged, or stoned as the case may be. At any rate, the story usually ended with an undaunted “Ebenezer” refusing a government contract to make pilot biscuits for Union sailors—and indeed, as Frederick wrote in his notes, “[Uncle

Thomas] said [biscuits] not good enough for sailors of US to eat. Others did it made big coin  
John vastly improved that part of the story, too: “A competitor named Pierce,” he related  
a letter, “then accepted the [biscuit] contract and founded a dynasty” that became *Nabisco*, r  
less—which, for the record, was founded by Adolphus Green (not Pierce) in 1898.

“Bill always good to me,” Frederick wrote of his much older brother, who apparently filled  
the paternal vacuum, if only for a while. Bill “called [him] down” when Frederick stepped  
out of line, and paid a friend—Johnny O’Toole at the Massachusetts Hotel (“Very tough  
joint”)—to give Frederick haircuts as needed. John Cheever always used his uncle’s most  
evocative middle name, Hamlet, when referring to this rather romantic figure: “An amateur  
boxer, darling of the sporting houses, captain of the volunteer fire department ball-team”—  
man’s man, in short, who, like his namesake in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, went west for the Gold  
Rush. “[There] isn’t a king or a merchant prince in the whole world that I envy,” Hamlet  
writes his brother Leander in the novel, “for I always knew I was born to be a child of  
destiny and that I was never meant ... to wring my living from detestable, low, degrading  
mean and ordinary kinds of business.” By the time the real-life Hamlet arrived in California  
however, the excitement of 1849 had faded considerably, and he later settled in Omaha  
where he died “forgotten and disgraced”—or rather he died “at sea” and “was given to the  
ocean off Panama,” depending on which of his nephew’s stories one chooses to believe.  
Cheever invariably described his uncle as a “black-mouthed old wreck” or “monkey,” since  
their occasional meetings were not happy. “Uncle Bill, Halifax 1919,” John’s older brother  
noted beside a photograph of a prosaic-looking old man rowing his nephews around in a boat.  
“Bill Cheever came from Omaha for a visit—the only time I ever saw him. He wasn’t much  
fun.” A later meeting with John would prove even less fun.

With Hamlet seeking his fortune a continent away, it was necessary for young Frederick to  
help support the household. From the age of ten or so, he “never missed a day” selling  
newspapers before and after classes at the Phillips School, where he graduated at the head  
his class on June 27, 1879, and was presented with a bouquet of flowers by the mayor of  
Boston. In later years he’d wistfully recall how the flowers wilted before he could take them  
home to his mother, and on that note his formal education ended: “Wanted to go to Boston  
Latin,” he wrote. “Had to work.” For so bookish a man (he spent much of his lonely days  
reading Shakespeare to his cat), the matter rankled, and he’d insist on sending his sons to  
good private schools while boasting—à la Leander (“Report card attached”)—of his own high  
marks as a boy.

For the next fifty years, Frederick Cheever worked in the shoe business, always bearing  
mind the fate of his poor father, whose life was “made unbearable by lack of coin”: “The  
desire for money most lasting and universal passion,” he wrote for his own edification and  
perhaps that of his sons. “Desire ends only with life itself. Fame, love, all long forgotten.”  
While still in his teens, he worked at a factory in Lynn for six dollars a week (five of which  
went to room and board) in order to learn the business; a photograph from around this time  
shows a dapper youth with a trim little mustache, his features composed with a look of high  
purpose, though its subject had glossed, “Look like a poet. Attic hungry—Etc.” John Cheever  
would one day find among his father’s effects a copy of *The Magician’s Own Handbook*—  
poignant artifact that brought to mind “a lonely young man reading Plutarch in a cold room  
and perfecting his magic tricks to make himself socially desirable and perhaps lovable.” In the

meantime, once he turned twenty-one, Frederick began to spend almost half the year on the road selling shoes (“gosh writer has sat in 1001 RR stations ... ‘get the business’ or ‘get out’” often bunking with strangers and hiding his valuables in his stockings, which he then wore to bed).

Apart from the pursuit of “big coin,” Frederick's early manhood was something of a lark. A great lover of the theater (“Powerful never forget it,” he wrote of Henry Montague's performance in *Romeo and Juliet*), he took extra or “supe” roles at Boston's Hollis Street Theatre for fifty cents a performance, wearing tights and carrying spears into battle for Broadway Shakespearean productions, and playing zany pranks on his fellow supes to pass time offstage: “Swiped the other chap's pants—left a bum pair—h——to pay—did not show up again second fellow, out a pair of trousers—but ‘actor's’ life, you know.” He not only saw James O'Neill's famous performance in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but swore that O'Neill had been a boon companion whom he, Frederick Cheever, had drunk under the table at the old Adams House (“a memory I'm inclined to believe,” his son remarked, “since I can drink Yevtushenko to the floor”). But his favorite recreation by far was the beach, for he always fancied himself a man of the sea: “On beaches the joy and gall of perpetual youth,” Leander rhapsodizes. “Hear Neptune's horn. Always raring to go.” For most of his life, Frederick kept a wide-waisted catboat and liked nothing better than sailing around Boston Harbor—preferably with a female companion—as a way of unwinding after grueling but increasingly lucrative sales trips. So things stood for Frederick Cheever until the end of a happily protracted bachelorhood in 1901.

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OF HIS MOTHER'S FAMILY CONNECTIONS Cheever also made a romance—much of which he evidently believed, since he wrote it down in his journal as fact: “The only photograph I have of my grandmother shows her in a long apron. Her father was knighted by Victoria and her Grandmother was (I think) friends of some ladies in waiting; but I think they had settled for a degree of plainness.” Cheever claimed his great-grandfather was Sir Percy Devereaux, long mayor of Windsor, who agreed to pay a remittance to his “bounder” son-in-law, William Liley, as long as the man left England and never returned.\* Liley, perhaps broken in spirit, died on a horsecar shortly after arriving in America, and so left his three young daughters fatherless and poor. But Cheever's mother, Mary Devereaux Liley, never forgot her family's genteel beginnings in Old Windsor (though she herself was born in the industrial city of Sheffield, well to the north), and kept a picture of Windsor Castle in her home. As for John Cheever, his wife and children sometimes mockingly referred to him as the Lost Earl of Devereaux: “He'd ask me if I wanted some cauliflower,” his daughter, Susan, recalled, “and I'd say, ‘Wow! What a lucky girl I am, to be served cauliflower by the *Lost Earl of Devereaux*.”

Cheever's maternal grandmother, Sarah, bristled at her poverty in the New World, proclaiming she was “a very well-educated English woman” who could hem a handkerchief and speak French, which she insisted her family practice each night at the dinner table. For the most part, though, she was glad to have left England, where there was little in the way of



women's rights and she was unable to pursue her dream of becoming a fireman. Whether she achieved that dream, to whatever degree, is unknown; with her friend and fellow feminist Margaret Deland—author of *John Ward, Preacher*, and other novels—she ultimately devoted herself to the rehabilitation of unwed mothers who had (or might have otherwise) turned to prostitution. Ultimately, the two women took as many as sixty outcast mothers into their homes and taught them basic housekeeping skills, helping them find work via advertisements in the *Boston Herald*. In the meantime, too, as Cheever liked to point out, his grandmother and Mrs. Deland “provided themselves with good maids,” and privately he was more rueful. “My mother's and my grandmother's houses,” he wrote, “were always full of strays—orphans, bastards, prostitutes.”

Two of Sarah Liley's daughters did not inherit her zest for good works, though both seem to have contributed something to their nephew John's personality. From his aunt Anne he might have derived some of the chilly hauteur he affected when threatened in certain ways, to say nothing of his wish for a “traditional past.” Anne comported herself like the displaced gentility she believed herself to be, dubbing her oldest son “Devereaux” and cultivating a clipped British accent. When, later in life, she returned to Windsor in hope of glimpsing the family demesne, her husband Jim Armstrong—an affable Scot who took pains to deflate his wife's pomposity—furtively bribed a cabbie to drive them to the grandest estate he could find. “Just as I remember it!” Anne sighed. “There was nothing slummy about Aunt Anne,” Cheever noted in 1968, by which time he hadn't spoken to the woman in over a decade—ever since she'd recognized herself in the quirky, imperious Honora Wapshot—though Cheever claimed she'd forgiven him once she remembered he was “a split personality.”

If so, she might have been thinking of the side of her nephew's psyche that reflected the influence of her sister Florence, whom she sometimes cut dead in public because of the latter's incorrigible eccentricity. Florence was a painter who asked to be addressed as “Liley,” wore Spanish shawls, and smoked cigars. She became a rather notable illustrator of children's books as “Florence Liley Young,” though she regarded herself as a serious artist and was generous in sharing her enthusiasm. Cheever never forgot sitting on a riverbank watching his aunt Liley teach landscape painting to the cook—“*Cherchez le motif 7*”—and among his favorite mementos was her portrait of himself as a slouching, apple-cheeked young artist, which, years later, as a man of means, he framed in gilt and hung in his library at Ossining. “[Liley] interests me most,” he wrote, “because of the importance art played in her life as it does in mine. Shortly before her death she said—‘One thing I really must do is go to the museum and see the Sargent water-colors of the Milton quarries. They are so beautiful.’ That was exactly what she felt.”

Cheever liked to think he had somewhat less in common with his mother, who was altruistic like Sarah Liley and also had “settled for a degree of plainness.” In 1901, she graduated from the Massachusetts General Hospital School of Nursing, and she had already become a head nurse when she married Frederick Cheever. Where or how they met is not a matter of record, though it seems an unlikely alliance. For many years, Frederick had devoted himself to his mother while pursuing what his sons agreed was a robust love life. In his journal, Cheever wrote that his father had proposed out of pity (“a profound weakness”) because his mother was “expected to die of tuberculosis”—though Cheever's wife always insisted it was her mother-in-law who had married against her will: “He persuaded her



give up her career, which she loved, and marry him,” she said. “That’s what a woman was supposed to do (I did something like that myself).” The truth, perhaps, was somewhere in the middle. Her older son, Fred, described Mary Liley Cheever as “quite beautiful” in her youth, and John remembered his father as being powerfully attracted, at least for a while: “He was constantly kissing my mother and blowing down the back of her neck. I remember him exclaiming, at some rented summer house: Oh what a burden of light that cobweb holds! It was his style and also mine.”

Deprived of a nursing career, Mary Liley Cheever flung her astounding energy into all sorts of social-service endeavors. She was a “Madame President” type (as Cheever put it), who organized cultural events and raised money for libraries, progressive schools, and beautification projects; she cofounded the Woman’s Club and the Current Events Club, and as her star rose she was called upon to give public lectures on such topics as feminism and the Armenian famine—so often, in fact, “that the word *mother* evoked for [Cheever] a lectern and a large hat.” She rose to every challenge with an almost brazen level of commitment. When war was declared against Germany, she scooped up her husband’s beer steins and smashed them with a hammer; she plowed up her lawn to plant potatoes; she organized parties for rolling bandages and potting vegetables. In sum, she was the sort of “do-gooder” who “distributed skinny chickens to the poor”—a woman who, like Sarah Wapshot, “had exhausted herself in good works ... As a result of all these activities the house on River Street was always filled with dust, its cut flowers long dead, the clocks stopped.” Nor was this the only drawback, domestically speaking. As her husband would shortly learn, “a woman who has just attended a stirring lecture on hospital conditions ... [comes home] in a frame of mind that makes it difficult for her to be embraced.”

Looking back, Cheever wondered if there was maybe something a little mad about her mother’s zeal. As a boy he’d been mortified again and again by her “unseemly departures.” “She had marched out of church in the middle of a sermon on the vanity of good works,” Cheever wrote in his journal. “She marched up the aisle and out of the concert hall at the first notes of *Sacre du printemps*. She marched out of committee meetings, theaters, restaurants, and movie houses at the first hint of anything unsavory, daring or improper. The single memory [I] preserved of [my] mother was of a woman dressed in black, hastening up an aisle.” And though it was true that her sense of propriety was easily affronted, Cheever came to suspect her indignation was more a pretext for one of her various phobias. His mother would gasp for air if caught in a crowd or confined in any way, hence her pathological need to escape. Also, she had a “primitive horror of being photographed,” such that her own son had little idea what she’d looked like as a younger woman until, one day, he discovered her portrait in an old Woman’s Club program; when asked about it, she explained that her look of composure had been managed by holding her infant son—John himself—on her lap (“I was cropped”).<sup>\*</sup> At the time it might have seemed like so much winsome eccentricity, but it was less amusing later, when Cheever himself became a virtual prisoner of anxiety. “I blame her for what I do,” he wrote a week after her death in 1956, “for having conveyed some of her morbid fears to me.” But then, as he wrote of his fictional alter ego, “Poor Coverly blamed everything on Mrs. Wapshot. Had he seen a falling star he would have blamed his Mother.”

<sup>\*</sup> The parallel passage in Frederick’s notes reads as follows: “On the way [from Newburyport to Amesbury via horsecar] y

saw sturgeons leap out of river—they were 3-4 feet long—all covered with knobs.” One might add that, as Cheever suggests, ~~his father was quite diligent about noting the weather—always, for instance, in the top right corner of the letters he wrote to his son.~~ Thus, from October 10, 1943: “Cold this AM 45 [degrees] Big wind from East No. East. Heavy overcoat—wood-fire and kitchen.”

\*”Sir Percy Devereaux” did not exist, at least as lord mayor of Windsor; however, a Sir Joseph Devereux (born 1816) was indeed mayor of Windsor, and what's more was knighted by the Queen in 1883—but this man could not have sired Cheever's grandmother, whose full maiden name was actually Sarah Ann Devereaux *Bill*.

\* Florence also painted a companion portrait of Cheever's brother, Fred, as the sturdy young burgher he was then in the process of becoming.

\* A home movie survives from the thirties or forties in which Cheever's mother is seen walking briskly past the camera with a tight smile. When the photographer persists, she thrusts a hand toward the lens. One thinks of Honora Wapshot: “In all the family albums she appeared either with her back to the camera as she ran away or with her face concealed by her hands, her handbag, her hat or a newspaper.”

## CHAPTER TWO

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{1912-1926}

CHEEVER ONCE WROTE, “I have no biography. I came from nowhere and I don't know where I'm going.” He put a slightly finer point on this when he remarked to an interviewer that he had “no memory for pain,” which effectively eliminated a large part of whatever biography he had. Which is not to say he wouldn't talk about the past—on the contrary, he was forever telling stories about himself. “From somewhere—” said Updike, “perhaps a strain of sea-yarning in his Yankee blood—he had gotten the authentic archaic storytelling temper, and one could not be with John Cheever for more than five minutes without seeing stories take shape: past embarrassments worked up with wonderful rapidity into hilarious fables”—the main point of which was that life (his life) was a parlous but giddy affair. However, if one asked him to elaborate, a curious thing was apt to happen: suddenly Cheever would talk about something else—indeed, before one had even realized that the subject had been changed. “I always felt there was a blank behind John,” said the writer Hortense Calisher. “For an anecdotal man, he'd skip over his background.”

Cheever was at once the most reticent and candid of men. “Life is melancholy,” he said, “which isn't allowed in New England.” Mortality and bodily functions and so forth were not big topics of conversation in Cheever's childhood home, nor was anything else that adverted to human frailty or might lead to a quarrel: “Feel that refreshing breeze,” his mother would say when the mood turned tense, or perhaps she'd call attention to the evening star. “If you are raised in this atmosphere,” remarks the narrator of “Goodbye, My Brother,” “I think it is a trial of the spirit to reject its habits of guilt, self-denial, taciturnity, and penitence, and it seemed a trial of the spirit in which Lawrence [the narrator's brother] had succumbed.” One part of Cheever had succumbed as well, while another part roared its defiance to the world. On sexual matters especially, Cheever was almost insistently forward. He would answer fan mail with ribald anecdotes of the most intimate nature, and rarely hesitated to discuss his mistress or some other indiscretion with his children. At the Iowa Workshop, the sixty-one-year-old Cheever positively accosted colleagues to let them know that, the night before, he had had a nosebleed and an orgasm at the same time! With a twenty-two-year-old girl! “[W]ith what delight, and agony, I read about [Boswell's] pursuit of Louisa,” he wrote in his journal. “And how troubled I am by the intensity of my feelings. It may be no more than the reaction of a man who was raised, let us say, where the subject of food was overlooked. ... So it is with joy, with glee, perhaps with boorishness that we can at least admit our appetites and the deep pleasure of requiting them.”

But it was one thing to admit his appetites, another to discuss the “intensity of [his] feelings.” As his daughter observed, “He focused on the surface and texture of life, not on the emotions and motives underneath.” With family and friends in particular, Cheever was obliged to show a brave, jovial face—though strangers and chance acquaintances were, again, something else. “I am quite naked to loneliness,” he announced to a startled journalist, and

that sort of thing was typical. “[W]ith dad our sense of his past pain comes mostly from inference,” said his son Federico, “and from observation of oddities in his behavior—fear and disgust turned up in the oddest places. ... If the problems he died with were, in fact, the same ones he left Quincy with at 17, then they followed him through more twists and flips than anyone could have expected.”

FREDERICK LINCOLN CHEEVER, JR., was born on August 23, 1905—almost seven years before his only brother, John—and he often spoke of his happy childhood. Both parents adored him: his mother grew plump and stayed that way because Fred had weighed only three pounds at birth, and she'd had to eat and eat to feed him; his father called him Binks because he resembled a cherubic little boy in an advertisement with that name.\* Father and son were sailing together in Quincy Bay for many years while John was either unborn or too small to join them. He would always be too small. Meanwhile Fred grew into a manly, likable fellow whose athletic prowess was his father's greatest pride. “Everybody loved [him],” Cheever wrote of Coverly's older brother, Moses, “including the village dogs, and he comported himself with the purest, the most impulsive humility. Everybody did not love Coverly.”

By the time John was born, his parents' marriage had become strained at best, and his conception was the result of some rare, tipsy lovemaking after a Boston sales banquet. “As my mother often pointed out,” Cheever said, “she drank two Manhattan cocktails that evening. Otherwise I would have remained unborn on a star.” His father—whose heart was already filled by Fred and the everyday joys of commerce—did what he could to dissuade his wife from having another child, even inviting an abortionist to dinner. It was a story that haunted Cheever the rest of his life, such that he couldn't help mentioning it time and again (often with a slight chuckle), and finally wrote it into *Falconer*. Not surprisingly, he saw fit to blame his mother for having the bad taste to tell him of the episode—this, as he wrote in his journal, by way of “seiz[ing] the affections of her son”: “[Your father] comes from very bad stock [she said]. It isn't his fault that he doesn't love you. He doesn't know anything about love. He didn't want you to be born.’ ... And what sense can the boy make of these lies? Most of the time, though, Cheever found it all too plausible: “I remember my father's detestation of me as I feel the roots of some destructive vine—the vine, of course, being my bewildering love.” His lifelong need to requite this love would lead him to “invent a father” in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, but still his eyes smarted with tears (“oh foolishness”) when he observed some chance tenderness between a father and son.

With whatever reluctance on his parents' part, John William Cheever† was born on March 27, 1912, in a two-story clapboard house at 43 Elm Avenue, near the trolley tracks. Within a few years, the family entered the period of its greatest affluence, ascending Wollaston Hill to an eleven-room Victorian house on Winthrop Avenue. Leather prices spiked during the war, and by his own recollection Frederick Cheever sold five hundred thousand dollars' worth of elegant, handmade shoes in a single six-month period of travel—“night after night in the stifling coffin of a Pullman berth,” as his son later imagined it, “because he had traveled all over a broad country selling shoes so they could join the golf club and buy gasoline for the cars.”\* John remembered a milestone day when his father (“pleased and embarrassed”) picked him up at school in a brand-new Buick sedan of robin's-egg blue, complete with

flower vase and silk curtains. Such a powerful machine went well with the man's bespoke clothing, his Masonic finery, not to mention the other posh cars parked outside the Unitarian church where Frederick attended services as a matter of demonstrating prosperity rather than piety.

On the surface, at least, it was an idyllic time—and so Cheever was likely to describe it. “They were kindly and original people,” he said of his parents some fifty years later, and like the writer John Hersey he spoke of his childhood as “extremely sunny.” But privately he found a lot of “disorder and blindness” in his own memories: “If I were writing about someone else I could say honestly I think that he was well-fed, fair, blue-eyed, tanned from summer at Dennisport or in some third-string white mountain hotel ... believing that he loved and was loved by everyone in the world. To recall those years as an orderly development from youth to manhood does not come naturally to me at all.” The idealized New England of St. Botolphs in the Wapshot novels (“an old place, an old river town”) might suggest a desire to return to this happier time, or else to create a happiness that never existed. Whatever the case, Cheever was a little bemused by his own aversion to revisiting his “sunny” childhood in terms of reality rather than myth, and only seldom would he pick through the actual details—as nearly as he could recollect them—and wonder at the seeming innocence of it all. Each day had been pretty much like the next: his father always rose at six and took a cold bath (“howling like a walrus”), then played a few holes of golf before a hearty breakfast of fish hash or chops. And so it went:

I and the dog walk with him to the station, where he hands me his walking stick and the dog's leash, and boards the train among his friends and neighbors. The business he transacts in his office is simple and profitable, and at noon he has a bowl of crackers and milk for lunch at his club. He returns on the train at five, and we all get into the Buick and drive to the beach. We have a bathhouse, a simple building on stilts, weathered by the sea winds. ... We change and go for a long swim in that green, dark, and briny sea. Then we dress and, smelling of salt, go up the hill to have supper in the cavernous dining room. When supper is over, my mother goes to the telephone. “Good evening, Althea,” she says to the operator. “Would you please ring Mr. Wagner's ice-cream store?” Mr. Wagner recommends his lemon sherbet, and delivers a quart a few minutes later on a bicycle that rattles and rings in the summer dusk as if it were strung with bells. We have our ice cream on the back lawn, read, play whist, ... kiss one another good night, and go to bed.

Cheever described the Quincy of his childhood as a “pleasant, relaxed” middle-class suburb where all the women had gardens and everybody went to the more or less democratic “Neighborhood Club” for black-tie dances. There was a social hierarchy, of course, but it was relatively flexible: “[W]e were always allowed to play touch football with the Winslows and the Bradfords,” Cheever remembered in the *New York Times*, adding that his family's maid had been no less than the daughter of “an Adams coachman and she once ate all the brandied sugar lumps around the plum pudding and was found on the wooden floor of the kitchen (there was before linoleum) dead drunk, giggling helplessly and contributing a bearing or milestone for our recollections.” An examination of this chestnut vis-à-vis the journal gives a little insight into Cheever's methods as a raconteur. It was true his family occasionally hired the coachman's daughter for “large family dinners,” though usually their maids were “girls sent out on probation from some reform school,” and it was almost certainly such a girl who pilfered those sugar lumps, as Cheever recalled a “violent scene” when a girl was sent back

the reformatory for that very offense: "She gathered me in her arms, crying despondently. My mother pried me out of her embrace. I expect I was about five." Whenever such "breakdown in service or finance" occurred, it fell mostly to Cheever's grandmother Sarah to take up the household chores until another waif could be supplied. And while the old woman was nothing but bitter toward the men of the family for using her as a menial ("we had failed her, not only as providers but as men"), she was most displeased by the conduct of her youngest daughter, whom she called a "cretin," thereby winning her grandson's lasting regard. When she lay dying of a stroke, the seven-year-old John sat at her bedside reading aloud from *David Copperfield*.

Thanksgiving was a great event in the Cheever home—the sort of thing for which the coachman's daughter was presumably pressed into service. What Cheever particularly remembered was his mother's habit of collecting "strays" for the table. For weeks ahead of time—on beaches and buses, in train stations or "the lobby at Symphony Hall during the intermission"—his mother would approach whosoever seemed lonely, poor, infirm, or preferably all three, and invite them to the stately house on Winthrop Avenue for the annual feast. The mellow Cheever who waxed reminiscent for the *Times* viewed his mother's motivation as a poignant blend of noblesse oblige ("pride and arrogance") and "her respect and knowledge of the cruelty of loneliness." When the holiday arrived, the children of Wollastone played touch football or hockey on the millpond, then repaired to their homes at noon. This was a day when gluttony was forgiven even by the Cheevers, since an overloaded table was one way of expressing "sentiments that were ... too profound and tender ever to be mentioned." Finally, once the guests had departed, Frederick Cheever stood by the door and declared, "The roar of the lion has ceased! The last loiterer has left the banquet hall!"

By far the most memorable Thanksgiving was not a happy one, though it offers a useful glimpse at the ethos in which Cheever was raised. One of the strays invited for that year's feast was Miss Anna Boynton Thompson, a cousin of Cheever's father and one of the most celebrated spinsters in nearby Braintree. A classical scholar who received her doctorate from Tufts, Thompson taught at Thayer Academy for almost fifty years and had startled her neighbors during the Great War by standing on her balcony each night and appealing loudly to the heavens for peace. "She thought of all sensuality as a mode of ignorance," Cheever observed. In 1922, Miss Thompson was fretful over the Armenian famine, and so became incensed at the sight of the Cheevers' laden table: "*How can you do this when half the populations of this world are starving?*" she exclaimed. "Anna departed," wrote Cheever (of whom she made such an impression that he'd pause guiltily over his meat during the lean years of World War II). "Six weeks later she was found in her cold, classical library in Braintree, Massachusetts, dead of starvation."\*

One might bear in mind a curious affinity between the dour Miss Thompson and her cousin John—who combined, as Updike put it, "the bubbling joie de vivre of the healthy sensitive man and the deep melancholy peculiar to American Protestant males." Born under the sign of Gemini, the heavenly twins Castor and Pollux, Cheever considered his own nature to be "truly halved," and his aunt Anne Armstrong was hardly alone in supporting this view: "What you have to remember," his wife, Mary, insistently repeated, "is that John was a split personality." Though the words "boyish" and "pixie" are constantly used to evoke the giddy, hilarious Cheever, he could also be curt, cruelly sarcastic, relentlessly harsh in judging friends



and family and especially himself. Henry Adams thought a divided nature was the inevitable result of growing up in New England and Quincy in particular (“the stoniest glacial and tidal drift known in any Puritan land”): “The chief charm of New England,” he wrote in his *Education*, “was harshness of contrasts and extremes of sensibility—a cold that froze the blood, and a heat that boiled it—so that the pleasure of hating—one's self if no better victim offered—was not its rarest amusement. ... Winter and summer, then, were two hostile lives and bred two separate natures.”

The profound ambivalence with which Cheever beheld the world was even more pronounced in regard to his birthplace. On the one hand, it was “a red-blooded and a splendid inheritance” to grow up in such a “powerfully sensual” environment, where one was barraged by the smells of wood smoke and flowers and the sea. “I've often wondered what makes our old Quincyites so randy,” Cheever wrote a stranger who was trying to sell him insurance. “Must be the sandy clams we dug at Wollaston Beach in those wonderful days of our youth.” Cheever made much of the fact that he'd lived less than a mile from Merrymount, where Morton had erected his Maypole and “jollity and gloom [had contended] for an empire,” as Hawthorne would have it. “[T]he difference between the legend and the present has always been amusing,” Cheever wrote in 1934, shortly after leaving Quincy for good. “It is now the most despicable, contrite tract of Dutch Colonial Houses I have ever seen. I've always wanted to go down there with a jug of firewater and a couple of sluts and raise a maypole.”

TO CHEEVER'S MIND, Anna Boynton Thompson “in her cold, classical library” served as an emblem for the “Athenian twilight years” of fin-de-siècle Boston, when even provincial families of the South Shore placed a high premium on culture. This was particularly true in Cheever's household where reading aloud (“All of Dickens, from beginning to end, read and reread”) was the chief entertainment and a successful novelist (Mrs. Deland) often paid visits. Indeed, the entire extended family cultivated a certain artistic and intellectual flair. There was the painter Aunt Liley, of course, whose pianist son Randall studied at the Eastman Conservatory, while even the snobbish Aunt Anne founded a Shakespeare Society, and Frederick Cheever “could be called on to recite ‘Casey at Bat.’” (Frederick, again, was a great fan of Shakespeare in his own right, though perhaps defensive about his lack of formal education. In any event, he disliked arty pretentiousness, and tended to play the rube when things got thick. “If you want to hear the *pianer-player* you'd better come in,” he said when the great Rudolph Ganz came for tea. “Mr. Ganz is about to tickle the ivories.”) As for Cheever's mother, she took a particular hand in her sensitive younger son's education. Even when pregnant—“casting around for some way of improving the destiny of an unwanted child”—she made a point of attending every concert of the Boston Symphony,\* and later took John to the theater, though an especially good play would make him almost ill with excitement. After a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, the eleven-year-old dismayed his parents by rushing downstairs the next morning to get started on the rest of Shakespeare; and one time, too, his mother brought him to see *Hedda Gabler*, thinking it a musical, and was unable to budge her son once she'd been hideously disabused.

Cheever's precocity as a storyteller became something of a local legend. His fourth-grade teacher at Wollaston Grammar, Miss Florence Varley, never forgot the first time John “ro-

glibly to the occasion”: “To my utter surprise,” she recalled half a century later, “he told a fairy tale that lasted about ten minutes. His classmates listened as avidly as they do whenever I found time to read to them from Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*.” She refrained from praising the boy, because she assumed he was simply repeating something “he had read or heard sometime;” but soon John convinced her he could make up such stories on the spot. For his part, Cheever never had any clear idea what he was going to say when asked (more and more often) to tell his classmates a story—but once he opened his mouth, a beguiling fabric of “exaggeration” and “preposterous falsehoods” never failed to synthesize. Miss Varley thought it a gift from “departed spirits,” whereas the writer Wilfrid Sheed observed that, in Cheever’s case, memory and imagination were “not two faculties but one mega-faculty,” such that his everyday experiences were “improved” as soon as they happened and “halfway to being publishable” within a week—or, as Cheever himself liked to say (claiming to quote Cocteau), “Literature is a force of memory that we have not yet understood.”† It was around this time, at any rate, that Cheever decided to make a career of his uncanny knack and told his parents as much: “It’s all right with us if you want to be a writer,” they replied, after some deliberation, “so long as you are not seeking fame or wealth.”

Writing was a suitable occupation for a pudgy, unathletic boy who preferred to stay home playing with his puppet theater. If other children visited, they often found themselves on the opposite side of the proscenium while John manipulated the puppets from above and provided their voices, or, if he had a more elaborate show in mind (for which he’d invite the whole neighborhood and charge a penny per), he’d put his visitors to work making sets and dyeing materials for the costumes. His friend Rollin “Tifty” Bailey got the impression that John was wholly absorbed in his own world, that he hardly noticed others, and was therefore startled when he read “Goodbye, My Brother” some twenty-five years later in *The New Yorker*. Cheever, it seemed, had paid better attention than Bailey thought—appropriating not only his nickname “Tifty” for the “rather undesirable” Lawrence Pommeroy, but also the relevant backstory. As Bailey explained, “When I was small, the sound of my little shoes on the runner carpet in the upper hall sounded to my father like *Tifty-Tifty-Tifty* ...” And finally, for what it’s worth, Bailey had to admit he rather identified with his fictional namesake: “I *did* tend to see the bad side,” he said. “If you know what’s bad, you can face it.”

Cheever’s public manners were pleasant enough, for his mother’s strict sense of propriety was “rigidly observed” by the family. At the end of any social event, he always made a point of bowing to the hostess and thanking her for a good time—though occasionally (if he had a large audience) he might add a puckish “My mother told me to tell you so.” Such little rebellions were subtle, and no wonder. It was ill-advised to trifle with his “impetuous” mother, who abruptly defenestrated the puppet theater when it caught fire one day (“It was the intelligent thing to do,” Cheever mused in retrospect, “but I was shocked”). “You sweep like an old woman!” she berated him, yanking a broom out of his hands, whereupon he carved his name on the cover of her sewing machine—a rare and probably unrepeated act of (over)retaliation, since afterward “she trashed [him] with a belt until [he] bled.” The woman’s vigor was nowhere in evidence, however, when it came to showing affection. “My mother was not demonstrative in any way,” said Cheever, who came to emulate such restraint toward his own children, though he was, arguably, free enough with his feelings otherwise. He often signed letters with “Love” even to casual friends—usually “Best” or “Yours, John” to his



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