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Introduction

ONE VERSION: JOHN Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1912. He published his first short story in the *New Yorker* in 1935, at the age of twenty-two, the start of a lifelong association with the magazine. His literary reputation grew slowly, until in 1958 he won the National Book Award for his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*. In 1964 *Time* magazine put him on its cover – an accolade that brought coast-to-coast fame back then; zealously alliterative, it dubbed him ‘Ovid in Ossining’, after the town in New York State where he lived for many decades. The inside story describes the writer’s idyllic life with his wife Mary and three children in a beautiful house. The photograph of his wife is captioned, in reference to his highbrow uxoriousness and her cooking: ‘Sometimes a tribute in Latin to the quality of the roast.’ In a section subheaded ‘The Monogamist’ we are told that ‘Cheever, almost alone in the field of modern fiction, is one who celebrates the glories and delights of monogamy’; further, that ‘He delights in dancing, and enjoys his liquor with zest.’ Four years later, in 1968, his best-known story, ‘The Swimmer’, was made into a movie starring Burt Lancaster. His novels are good, but his art was made for the shorter form. *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), which won him the National Book Critics

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Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, are one of the high points of twentieth-century American literature. He used to say, ironically, to his children, 'I'm a brand name, like corn flakes, or shredded wheat.' But this was true, and when he died in 1982, he was full of honour.

Or: John Cheever was the son of a dominant mother and alcoholic father; he and his brother both grew up to be alcoholics. When the Army tested him, they found he had a low IQ; though when re-examined, he did adequately. Despite his early success, he feared that he wasn't in 'the big league' like Norman Mailer, and was equally daunted by the worldly baubles of Irwin Shaw and the brilliance of John Updike. Though he wrote around two hundred stories, there was no relaxed facility about his creative process: in 1947 he told a friend, 'I want to write short stories like I want to fuck a chicken.' Within that reportedly idyllic marriage he was often intensely lonely and sexually tormented; outside it, frequently unfaithful with both men and women. He and Mary had week-long stand-offs, and nearly split up countless times. 'I am so sensitive,' he wrote in his *Journal* in 1955, 'that I seem to be insane ... I have wept too many tears, gin tears, whiskey tears, tears of plain salt, but too many.' He suffered 'scrotum-tightening vertigo' on station platforms and bridges. His self-pity was accentuated by feeling that he was always the lover, never the beloved; nor could he ever admit his homosexuality, except to his private diary. He had sex with the photographer Walker Evans and an affair with the actress Hope Lange, who described him as 'one of the horniest men I've ever met'. Such revelations, which emerged after his death in his *Letters* (1988) and *Journals* (1991), foolishly blurred his literary reputation for some years.

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The writer with whom Cheever is most often lumped together in the general literary mind is Updike: both wrote novels and short stories about the East-Coast suburban middle-class, and both were star *New Yorker* names. Yet Updike, born in 1932, was a whole generation younger. In terms of simple years, Cheever was closer to Scott Fitzgerald (b.1896) or Hemingway (b.1899); or to the similarly underrated John O'Hara (b.1905). One writer born between Cheever and Updike, and who shared some of their world and their very male literary tradition, is the now rediscovered and revalued Richard Yates (b.1926). In his most famous novel, the exactly titled *Revolutionary Road*, Yates described how the American Dream had finally petered out in the backways of consumerist suburbia. Updike's Rabbit initially tries to flee just such a milieu, but soon returns to enjoy its offerings, and then – bought up as the rest of America has been bought up – becomes a Toyota dealer: his defeat is as much economic as spiritual. Cheever's world is pitched a little earlier, mainly in the Truman and Eisenhower years, before the Sixties took hold, when American expansionism and power seemed uncomplicated, and consumerism not just exciting, but in a way almost pure. As one husband puts it of his Westchester wife: 'You might say that she is prideful, but I think only that she is a woman enjoying herself in a country that is prosperous and young.' In 1956, in his *Journals*, Cheever refers to himself as being a member of 'this cheerful generation'. The Sixties made the Fifties look drab, but give any decade enough time and it can become glamorous again. It's no coincidence that in *Mad Men* Don Draper's creator decided that his ad man should live in Ossining.

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Cheever's suburbia has its full share of joyful Updikean adulteries: as another of his suburban husbands says of his wife, 'She knows that I fool around, but if I wasn't unfaithful ... I wouldn't be true to myself.' Yet its spiritual roots, and therefore spiritual malaise, lie much further back – way beyond the American Revolution – in the essential nature of man and woman. Ezekiel Cheever, the first Cheever in America, was a Puritan schoolmaster of the stern belief that 'man is full of misery and all earthly beauty is lustful and corrupt'. His descendant's view was more nuanced: beauty – which Cheever's characters, like Cheever himself, encounter mainly in nature, in woods and weather and sunsets and panoramas, but also in human beings – was not in itself sinful, though human beings, given their fallen natures, were always likely to contaminate it. So life was 'a perilous moral adventure', and spiritual peace is found less often in church (where a well-dressed woman is always likely to catch a male protagonist's eye) than in physical activity, especially when water, in its liquid or frozen forms, is concerned. In 1963 Cheever goes tobogganing 'to purify my feelings'; while shovelling snow moves him 'from despair into hopefulness'. Cheever characters, like the writer himself, find temporary redemption in seas and rivers and even in suburban pools. But it is frozen water that calms him, and them, even more; and his work contains many passages of joy, and even spiritual resolution, when a solitary figure skates on a frozen lake. Knowing, of course, that however deep the freeze, ice is always metaphorically thin. In 1979 he notes in his Journal: 'The motion of skating, and the lightness and coldness of the air involve quite clearly for me a beauty – a moral

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beauty. By this I mean that it corrects the measure and the nature of my thinking.'

Many novelists who write directly about the erotic life persuade themselves that they are doing so truthfully for the first time in literary history; also, that they have somehow taken the matter the full distance. Cheever was prepared to bow to the *New Yorker's* editorial prudishness when tactically necessary; but proud (in 1957, with *The Wapshot Chronicle*) of becoming the first writer to get the word 'fuck' into the Book-of-the-Month Club. Yet every literary pioneer finds successors who go farther: in Cheever's case, two in particular: Updike and Philip Roth. So a mere twelve years later, all of a sudden, what is he but a writer born way back in 1912:

John [Updike]'s new novel (*Couples*) has made him a millionaire ... It is obsessively venereal but the descriptions of undressed women are splendid. Great advances have been made here recently in writing about venereal sport. The pure, correct and ancient vocabulary is used freely, the techniques of masturbation are discussed and the sense is of freedom, discovery and newness. Phil Roth leads the group. While all my friends are describing orgasms I still dwell on the beauty of the evening star.

Cheever is being deliberately comic, and deliberately disingenuous (he carried on writing about sex, and Updike was similarly interested in the beauty of the evening star). But as he knew, 'The rivalry among novelists is quite as intense as that among sopranos.'

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Updike was bound to be edgy, given that to the casual eye, the younger man seemed to be taking over Cheever's turf. He often denounces the younger man in his letters, yet always in a self-aware fashion. 'I think his magnanimity specious and his work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism and a stony heart. I put all this down to show how truly innocent and generous I am.' Similarly: 'Updike and I spend most of our time back-biting one another. I find him very arrogant but my daughter tells me that I'm arrogant.' However, Cheever learned to separate the man from the work: he tells Updike that *Rabbit Redux* is 'great' – and 'Thinking that I might have deceived myself I read it again and came to the same conclusion'; while *Rabbit is Rich* is 'the most important American novel I have read in many years'. In 1981 the two men appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* and were asked to describe their differences. Cheever said that Updike was the only writer he knew who gave a sense of American lives being performed in an environment of a grandeur that escaped them. In reply and counter-praise, Updike emphasised that Cheever was a transcendentalist, feeling and conveying a radiance which he, Updike, was unable to feel and convey.

Updike is suaver and more celebratory; Cheever is edgier, odder and more pessimistic. There are other significant differences. Updike's *Rabbit* quartet is built upon the armature of American public events; whereas Cheever – despite the times he lived through – was, according to his son Benjamin, 'as uninvolved in politics as it is possible for a literate man to be'. The daily news forms little part of his stories. Nuclear war may be alluded to, but it is felt more as a bad dream or a lingering migraine than a thermonuclear reality.

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‘The Brigadier and the Golf Widow’ turns on a kerfuffle over access to a domestic nuclear shelter; Cuba and Russia are mentioned, but are mere words put into the comic mouth of a golf-club bore. Meanwhile, in the non-fiction world of Cheever’s Letters, a rare geopolitical prediction, in March 1943, turned out to be deliriously wrong: ‘I think Churchill’s exaggerating when he says it’s going to take another two years to win the war.’

In life, Cheever was an excellent dreamer: pithy, witty and to the point. Among the dreams noted in his Journals are the following:

- ‘I dream about the White House. It is after supper in a bedroom that I have seen on postcards. Ike and Mamie are alone. Mamie is reading the *Washington Star*. Ike is reading *The Wapshot Chronicle*.’
- ‘I dream that my face appears on a postage stamp.’
- ‘I dream that I am walking with Updike. The landscape seems out of my childhood. A familiar dog barks at us. I see friends and neighbours in their lighted windows. Updike juggles a tennis ball that is both my living and my dying. When he drops the ball I cannot move until it is recovered, and yet I feel, painfully, that he is going to murder me with the ball. He seems murderous and self-possessed. Here is a museum with a turnstile, a marble staircase, and statuary. In the end I do escape.’
- ‘I dream that a lady, looking at my face, says, “I see you’ve been in the competition, but I can’t tell by your face whether or not you’ve won”?’

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- ‘Last night I had a dream that a brilliant reviewer pointed out that there was an excess of lamentation in my work.’
- ‘I go to bed at half past eight and have a horrendous dream in which Mary is made president of the college. There is a hint of ruthlessness here. I remember watching her father seize a position of power. I retaliate by having a homosexual escapade, unconsummated, with Ronald Reagan.’

Shortly after that last nocturnal invention (of 1966), Cheever notes: ‘I have dreams of a density I would like to bring to fiction.’ When we say ‘dreamlike’ we often mean ethereal, woozily enjoyable. ‘Dreamlike’ for Cheever means something else: density, as he says, but also an internal logic that seems completely unarguable at the time, but only half-cogent when we wake; further, an ability to change register suddenly without announcing the change, and without our being troubled by it. ‘The Death of Justina’, one of his most famous stories, moves, in the space of fewer than twenty pages, through grave reverie on the hazard of life, puckish reflections on the state and origin of America, satirical business about office life and zoning regulations, pathetic details of the death of an elderly aunt, comic details about the same, wry thoughts on giving up smoking, a phantasmagorical dream, and angry expostulation on the nature of death and the unwillingness of others to spot it. The story switches from one tone to another with the untroubled transitions of dreaming, though we never doubt that this is a string of real events.

Or take ‘The Swimmer’. Neddy Merrill, a man in early middle age, at a Sunday afternoon neighbourhood party,

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decides to swim the eight miles home via all the private (and one public) pools he knows. It sounds like a harmless suburban whim and perhaps a picaresque short story. This first pool he dives into, that of his hosts, is fed by an artesian well: 'To be embraced and sustained by the light green water was less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition.' To begin with, the day is sunny and the neighbours welcoming; but gradually pool-owners become more indifferent, the summer seems to turn to autumn, Neddy's memory of his friends and acquaintances becomes less reliable, he encounters unexpected hostility and enigmatic remarks about his own life; his muscles seem to grow weaker, his stroke feebler, and when finally he arrives home, he discovers that his house is dilapidated, locked and abandoned. Is he swimming from a 'natural condition' to a social one; is he swimming from the present into his future life, or into a gradual realisation of the truth about his existing life? Is he swimming from metaphor into truth, or from truth into metaphor? Something transcendent is going on, though if transcendence means spiritual enhancement, perhaps it is a reverse transcendence that he is swimming into. Here, certainly, is the density that Cheever sought.

In 1975 Cheever examined a short-story anthology 'from which I have been conspicuously excluded', and agreed with the editors: what they had chosen was 'more substantial and correct than my flighty, eccentric, and sometimes bitter work, with its social disenchantments, somersaults, and sudden rains'. Sometimes Cheever appears to be writing satire, and sometimes he is. But he reserves the right to shift register and tone at will, if only for a sentence. And, often, something weirder is going on. Stories may end with

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a shimmer of the fantastical or the otherworldly. ‘The Country Husband’, for example, is a seemingly realistic story of disharmony, rage and sin among a typical suburban family. After a catalogue of disruptive and potentially lethal events, the family arrives back to (almost) the moral place where it was at the beginning; and everybody retires to bed. Whereupon the final sentence erupts: ‘Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains.’ And is that just another dream? It is certainly much more than an authorial whim: Cheever had the line in his head before he even had the story.

In 1972 Cheever, then teaching at the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa, flew home via Chicago with a Pan Am stewardess either seated beside him or in close attendance: ‘At the end of the flight she embraced me ardently and said: “You are one of the most charming and interesting men I have ever met and by far the craziest.” She wore a red cape.’ A lesser writer might have started off with ‘a Pan Am stewardess in a red cape’; Cheever delays this sartorial detail until after the anecdote’s supposed kicker, which turns it into a poignant and amusing detail. As his children testified, he was always – in life as in fiction – a comic and subversive presence. He once described himself as ‘the sort of iconoclast ... who will ridicule the establishment endlessly and expect to be seated at the head of the table’. In 1977 the *New York Times* asked him to comment on the 100th anniversary of Peter Rabbit. Cheever replied, ‘My money has always been on Mr McGregor.’

Cheever’s restless, divided spirit, which caused him much grief, sought the usual sources of temporary escape and

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temporary coherence: sex and drink. But for the longer term? In 1955 he wrote of his life: 'It seems to me that I try to repair a web that is always broken; that with every reparation I find that a new part has been broken or kicked loose.' If you have violent thesis and antithesis in your life, where do you find synthesis? In one of two ways: you hope for it in God, or you create it for yourself in art. Cheever was a diligent social churchgoer rather than a writer with an active theology. So for him, the saviour and the synthesis could only be literature:

I know almost no pleasure greater than having a piece of fiction draw together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another and confirm the feeling that life itself is a creative process, that one thing is purposefully put upon another, that what is lost in one encounter is replenished in the next, and that we possess some power to make sense of what takes place.

Cheever hoped, in the final words of the final story in his collection *Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel*, 'to celebrate a world that lies about us like a bewildering and stupendous dream'. The same story features 'my laconic old friend Royden Blake', a writer who in mid-life finds, and is spoiled by, success and money. As a result, 'In his pages one found alcoholics, scarifying descriptions of the American landscape, and fat parts for Marlon Brando. You might say that he had lost the gift of evoking the perfumes of life: sea water, the smoke of burning hemlock, and the breasts of women. He had damaged, you might say, the ear's innermost chamber, where we

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hear the heavy noise of the dragon's tail moving over the dead leaves.'

Writers often invent other writers who exemplify their own secret fears; and Cheever was no exception. He certainly had more than a quorum of alcoholics in his fiction, and though he wrote no fat parts for Marlon Brando, he found that he had, without knowing it, written a fat part for Burt Lancaster. But for all his chaotic life and self-destructive drinking, his working brain retained a sober clarity: he never harmed the ear's innermost chamber, and he always heard the swish of the dragon's tail.

Julian Barnes

The Enormous Radio

JIM AND IRENE Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were the parents of two young children, they had been married nine years, they lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they went to the theatre on an average of 10.3 times a year, and they hoped someday to live in Westchester. Irene Westcott was a pleasant, rather plain girl with soft brown hair and a wide, fine forehead upon which nothing at all had been written, and in the cold weather she wore a coat of fitch skins dyed to resemble mink. You could not say that Jim Westcott looked younger than he was, but you could at least say of him that he seemed to feel younger. He wore his graying hair cut very short, he dressed in the kind of clothes his class had worn at Andover, and his manner was earnest, vehement, and intentionally naïve. The Westcotts differed from their friends, their classmates, and their neighbors only in an interest they shared in serious music. They went to a great many concerts – although they seldom mentioned this to anyone – and they spent a great deal of time listening to music on the radio.

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Their radio was an old instrument, sensitive, unpredictable, and beyond repair. Neither of them understood the mechanics of radio – or of any of the other appliances that surrounded them – and when the instrument faltered, Jim would strike the side of the cabinet with his hand. This sometimes helped. One Sunday afternoon, in the middle of a Schubert quartet, the music faded away altogether. Jim struck the cabinet repeatedly, but there was no response; the Schubert was lost to them forever. He promised to buy Irene a new radio, and on Monday when he came home from work he told her that he had got one. He refused to describe it, and said it would be a surprise for her when it came.

The radio was delivered at the kitchen door the following afternoon, and with the assistance of her maid and the handyman Irene uncrated it and brought it into the living room. She was struck at once with the physical ugliness of the large gumwood cabinet. Irene was proud of her living room, she had chosen its furnishings and colors as carefully as she chose her clothes, and now it seemed to her that the new radio stood among her intimate possessions like an aggressive intruder. She was confounded by the number of dials and switches on the instrument panel, and she studied them thoroughly before she put the plug into a wall socket and turned the radio on. The dials flooded with a malevolent green light, and in the distance she heard the music of a piano quintet. The quintet was in the distance for only an instant; it bore down upon her with a speed greater than light and filled the apartment with the noise of music amplified so mightily that it knocked a china ornament from a table to the floor. She rushed to the instrument and

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reduced the volume. The violent forces that were snared in the ugly gumwood cabinet made her uneasy. Her children came home from school then, and she took them to the Park. It was not until later in the afternoon that she was able to return to the radio.

The maid had given the children their suppers and was supervising their baths when Irene turned on the radio, reduced the volume, and sat down to listen to a Mozart quintet that she knew and enjoyed. The music came through clearly. The new instrument had a much purer tone, she thought, than the old one. She decided that tone was most important and that she could conceal the cabinet behind a sofa. But as soon as she had made her peace with the radio, the interference began. A crackling sound like the noise of a burning powder fuse began to accompany the singing of the strings. Beyond the music, there was a rustling that reminded Irene unpleasantly of the sea, and as the quintet progressed, these noises were joined by many others. She tried all the dials and switches but nothing dimmed the interference, and she sat down, disappointed and bewildered, and tried to trace the flight of the melody. The elevator shaft in her building ran beside the living-room wall, and it was the noise of the elevator that gave her a clue to the character of the static. The rattling of the elevator cables and the opening and closing of the elevator doors were reproduced in her loudspeaker, and, realizing that the radio was sensitive to electrical currents of all sorts, she began to discern through the Mozart the ringing of telephone bells, the dialing of phones, and the lamentation of a vacuum cleaner. By listening more carefully, she was able to distinguish doorbells, elevator bells, electric razors, and

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Waring mixers, whose sounds had been picked up from the apartments that surrounded hers and transmitted through her loudspeaker. The powerful and ugly instrument, with its mistaken sensitivity to discord, was more than she could hope to master, so she turned the thing off and went into the nursery to see her children.

When Jim Westcott came home that night, he went to the radio confidently and worked the controls. He had the same sort of experience Irene had had. A man was speaking on the station Jim had chosen, and his voice swung instantly from the distance into a force so powerful that it shook the apartment. Jim turned the volume control and reduced the voice. Then, a minute or two later, the interference began. The ringing of telephones and doorbells set in, joined by the rasp of the elevator doors and the whirl of cooking appliances. The character of the noise had changed since Irene had tried the radio earlier; the last of the electric razors was being unplugged, the vacuum cleaners had all been returned to their closets, and the static reflected that change in pace that overtakes the city after the sun goes down. He fiddled with the knobs but couldn't get rid of the noises, so he turned the radio off and told Irene that in the morning he'd call the people who had sold it to him and give them hell.

The following afternoon, when Irene returned to the apartment from a luncheon date, the maid told her that a man had come and fixed the radio. Irene went into the living room before she took off her hat or her furs and tried the instrument. From the loudspeaker came a recording of the 'Missouri Waltz.' It reminded her of the thin, scratchy music from an old-fashioned phonograph

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that she sometimes heard across the lake where she spent her summers. She waited until the waltz had finished, expecting an explanation of the recording, but there was none. The music was followed by silence, and then the plaintive and scratchy record was repeated. She turned the dial and got a satisfactory burst of Caucasian music – the thump of bare feet in the dust and the rattle of coin jewelry – but in the background she could hear the ringing of bells and a confusion of voices. Her children came home from school then, and she turned off the radio and went to the nursery.

When Jim came home that night, he was tired, and he took a bath and changed his clothes. Then he joined Irene in the living room. He had just turned on the radio when the maid announced dinner, so he left it on, and he and Irene went to the table.

Jim was too tired to make even a pretense of sociability, and there was nothing about the dinner to hold Irene's interest, so her attention wandered from the food to the deposits of silver polish on the candlesticks and from there to the music in the other room. She listened for a few minutes to a Chopin prelude and then was surprised to hear a man's voice break in. 'For Christ's sake, Kathy,' he said, 'do you always have to play the piano when I get home?' The music stopped abruptly. 'It's the only chance I have,' a woman said, 'I'm at the office all day.' 'So am I,' the man said. He added something obscene about an upright piano, and slammed a door. The passionate and melancholy music began again.

'Did you hear that?' Irene asked.

'What?' Jim was eating his dessert.

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‘The radio. A man said something while the music was still going on – something dirty.’

‘It’s probably a play.’

‘I don’t think it *is* a play,’ Irene said.

They left the table and took their coffee into the living room. Irene asked Jim to try another station. He turned the knob. ‘Have you seen my garters?’ a man asked. ‘Button me up,’ a woman said. ‘Have you seen my garters?’ the man said again. ‘Just button me up and I’ll find your garters,’ the woman said. Jim shifted to another station. ‘I wish you wouldn’t leave apple cores in the ashtrays,’ a man said. ‘I hate the smell.’

‘This is strange,’ Jim said.

‘Isn’t it?’ Irene said.

Jim turned the knob again. “‘On the coast of Coromandel where the early pumpkins blow,’” a woman with a pronounced English accent said, “‘in the middle of the woods lived the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò. Two old chairs, and half a candle, one old jug without a handle ...’”

‘My God!’ Irene cried. ‘That’s the Sweeneys’ nurse.’

“‘These were all his worldly goods,’” the British voice continued.

‘Turn that thing off,’ Irene said. ‘Maybe they can hear *us*.’ Jim switched the radio off. ‘That was Miss Armstrong, the Sweeneys’ nurse,’ Irene said. ‘She must be reading to the little girl. They live in 17-B. I’ve talked with Miss Armstrong in the Park. I know her voice very well. We must be getting other people’s apartments.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Jim said.

‘Well, that was the Sweeneys’ nurse,’ Irene said hotly. ‘I know her voice. I know it very well. I’m wondering if they can hear us.’

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Jim turned the switch. First from a distance and then nearer, nearer, as if borne on the wind, came the pure accents of the Sweeneys' nurse again: "*Lady Jingly! Lady Jingly!*" she said, "*sitting where the pumpkins blow, will you come and be my wife?*" said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò ..."

Jim went over to the radio and said 'Hello' loudly into the speaker.

"*I am tired of living singly,*" the nurse went on, "*on this coast so wild and shingly, I'm a-weary of my life; if you'll come and be my wife, quite serene would be my life ...*"

'I guess she can't hear us,' Irene said. 'Try something else.'

Jim turned to another station, and the living room was filled with the uproar of a cocktail party that had overshot its mark. Someone was playing the piano and singing the 'Whiffenpoof Song,' and the voices that surrounded the piano were vehement and happy. 'Eat some more sandwiches,' a woman shrieked. There were screams of laughter and a dish of some sort crashed to the floor.

'Those must be the Fullers, in 11-E,' Irene said. 'I knew they were giving a party this afternoon. I saw her in the liquor store. Isn't this too divine? Try something else. See if you can get those people in 18-C.'

The Westcotts overheard that evening a monologue on salmon fishing in Canada, a bridge game, running comments on home movies of what had apparently been a fortnight at Sea Island, and a bitter family quarrel about an overdraft at the bank. They turned off their radio at midnight and went to bed, weak with laughter. Sometime in the night, their son began to call for a glass of water and Irene got one and took it to his room. It was very early. All the lights in the neighborhood were extinguished, and from

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the boy's window she could see the empty street. She went into the living room and tried the radio. There was some faint coughing, a moan, and then a man spoke. 'Are you all right, darling?' he asked. 'Yes,' a woman said wearily. 'Yes, I'm all right, I guess,' and then she added with great feeling, 'But, you know, Charlie, I don't feel like myself any more. Sometimes there are about fifteen or twenty minutes in the week when I feel like myself. I don't like to go to another doctor, because the doctor's bills are so awful already, but I just don't feel like myself, Charlie. I just never feel like myself.' They were not young, Irene thought. She guessed from the timbre of their voices that they were middle-aged. The restrained melancholy of the dialogue and the draft from the bedroom window made her shiver, and she went back to bed.

The following morning, Irene cooked breakfast for the family – the maid didn't come up from her room in the basement until ten – braided her daughter's hair, and waited at the door until her children and her husband had been carried away in the elevator. Then she went into the living room and tried the radio. 'I don't want to go to school,' a child screamed. 'I hate school. I won't go to school. I hate school.' 'You will go to school,' an enraged woman said. 'We paid eight hundred dollars to get you into that school and you'll go if it kills you.' The next number on the dial produced the worn record of the 'Missouri Waltz.' Irene shifted the control and invaded the privacy of several breakfast tables. She overheard demonstrations of indigestion, carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair. Irene's life was nearly as simple and sheltered as it appeared to be, and the

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forthright and sometimes brutal language that came from the loudspeaker that morning astonished and troubled her. She continued to listen until her maid came in. Then she turned off the radio quickly, since this insight, she realized, was a furtive one.

Irene had a luncheon date with a friend that day, and she left her apartment at a little after twelve. There were a number of women in the elevator when it stopped at her floor. She stared at their handsome and impassive faces, their furs, and the cloth flowers in their hats. Which one of them had been to Sea Island? she wondered. Which one had overdrawn her bank account? The elevator stopped at the tenth floor and a woman with a pair of Skye terriers joined them. Her hair was rigged high on her head and she wore a mink cape. She was humming the 'Missouri Waltz.'

Irene had two Martinis at lunch, and she looked searchingly at her friend and wondered what her secrets were. They had intended to go shopping after lunch, but Irene excused herself and went home. She told the maid that she was not to be disturbed; then she went into the living room, closed the doors, and switched on the radio. She heard, in the course of the afternoon, the halting conversation of a woman entertaining her aunt, the hysterical conclusion of a luncheon party, and a hostess briefing her maid about some cocktail guests. 'Don't give the best Scotch to anyone who hasn't white hair,' the hostess said. 'See if you can get rid of that liver paste before you pass those hot things, and could you lend me five dollars? I want to tip the elevator man.'

As the afternoon waned, the conversations increased in intensity. From where Irene sat, she could see the open sky

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