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The Cider House Rules

Written by John Irving

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The Cider House Rules

John Irving



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Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last.

– Charlotte Bronte, 1847

For practical purposes abortion may be defined as the interruption of gestation before viability of the child.

– H.J. Boldt, M.D., 1906

1 *The Boy Who Belonged to St. Cloud's*

In the hospital of the orphanage—the boys' division at St. Cloud's, Maine—two nurses were in charge of naming the new babies and checking that their little penises were healing from the obligatory circumcision. In those days (in 192–), all boys born at St. Cloud's were circumcised because the orphanage physician had experienced some difficulty in treating uncircumcised soldiers, for this and for that, in World War I. The doctor, who was also the director of the boys' division, was not a religious man; circumcision was not a rite with him—it was a strictly medical act, performed for hygienic reasons. His name was Wilbur Larch, which, except for the scent of ether that always accompanied him, reminded one of the nurses of the tough, durable wood of the coniferous tree of that name. She hated, however, the ridiculous name of Wilbur, and took offense at the silliness of combining a word like Wilbur with something as substantial as a tree.

The other nurse imagined herself to be in love with Dr. Larch, and when it was her turn to name a baby, she frequently named him John Larch, or John Wilbur (her father's name was John), or Wilbur Walsh (her mother's maiden name had been Walsh). Despite her love for Dr. Larch, she could not imagine Larch as anything but a last name—and when she thought of him, she did not think of trees at all. For its flexibility as a first or as a last name, she loved the name of Wilbur—and when she tired of her use of John, or was criticized by her colleague

for overusing it, she could rarely come up with anything more original than a Robert Larch or a Jack Wilbur (she seemed not to know that Jack was often a nickname for John).

If he had been named by this dull, love-struck nurse, he probably would have been a Larch or a Wilbur of one kind or another; and a John, a Jack, or a Robert—to make matters even duller. Because it was the other nurse's turn, he was named Homer Wells.

The other nurse's father was in the business of drilling wells, which was hard, harrowing, honest, precise work—to her thinking her father was composed of these qualities, which lent the word 'wells' a certain deep, down-to-earth aura. 'Homer' had been the name of one of her family's umpteen cats.

This other nurse—Nurse Angela, to almost everyone—rarely repeated the names of her babies, whereas poor Nurse Edna had named three John Wilbur Juniors, and two John Larch the Thirds. Nurse Angela knew an inexhaustible number of no-nonsense nouns, which she diligently employed as last names—Maple, Fields, Stone, Hill, Knot, Day, Waters (to list a few)—and a slightly less impressive list of first names borrowed from a family history of many dead but cherished pets (Felix, Fuzzy, Smoky, Sam, Snowy, Joe, Curly, Ed and so forth).

For most of the orphans, of course, these nurse-given names were temporary. The boys' division had a better record than the girls' division at placing the orphans in homes when they were babies, too young ever to know the names their good nurses had given them; most of the orphans wouldn't even remember Nurse Angela or Nurse Edna, the first women in the world to fuss over them. Dr. Larch made it a firm policy that the orphans' adoptive families *not* be informed of the names the nurses gave with such zeal. The feeling at St. Cloud's was that a child, upon leaving the orphanage, should know the thrill of a fresh start—but (especially with the boys who

were difficult to place and lived at St. Cloud's the longest) it was hard for Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, and even for Dr. Larch, not to think of their John Wilburs and John Larches (their Felix Hills, Curly Maples, Joe Knots, Smoky Waterses) as possessing their nurse-given names forever.

The reason Homer Wells kept his name was that he came back to St. Cloud's so many times, after so many failed foster homes, that the orphanage was forced to acknowledge Homer's intention to make St. Cloud's his home. It was not easy for anyone to accept, but Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna—and, finally, Dr. Wilbur Larch—were forced to admit that Homer Wells *belonged to* St. Cloud's. The determined boy was not put up for adoption anymore.

Nurse Angela, with her love of cats and orphans, once remarked of Homer Wells that the boy must *adore* the name she gave him because he fought so hard not to lose it.

St. Cloud's, Maine—the town—had been a logging camp for most of the nineteenth century. The camp, and—gradually—the town, set up shop in the river valley, where the land was flat, which made the first roads easier to build and the heavy equipment easier to transport. The first building was a saw mill. The first settlers were French Canadians—woodsmen, lumberjacks, sawyers; then came the overland haulers and the river bargemen, then the prostitutes, then the vagrants and the thugs, and (at last) there was a church. The first logging camp had been called, simply, Clouds—because the valley was low and the clouds broke up reluctantly. A fog hung over the violent river until midmorning, and the falls, which roared for three miles upstream from the site of the first camp, produced a constant mist. When the first woodcutters went to work there, the only impediments to their rape of the forest were the black flies and the mosquitoes; these infernal

insects preferred the nearly constant cover of clouds in the stagnant valleys of inland Maine to the sharp air of the mountains, or to the crisp sunlight by the bright Maine sea.

Dr. Wilbur Larch—who was not only the doctor for the orphanage and the director of the boys' division (he had also founded the place)—was the self-appointed historian of the town. According to Dr. Larch, the logging camp called Clouds became St. Clouds only because of 'the fervent backwoods Catholic instinct to put a Saint before so many things—as if to grant those things a grace they could never quite acquire naturally.' The logging camp remained St. Clouds for nearly half a century before the apostrophe was inserted—probably by someone who was unaware of the camp's origin. But by the time it became St. Cloud's, it was more of a mill town than a logging camp. The forest, for miles around, was cleared; instead of logs jamming the river, and the rough camp full of men lamed and crippled by falling from trees or by trees falling on them, one saw the high, orderly stacks of fresh-cut boards drying out in the hazy sun. Overall lay a silty sawdust occasionally too fine to see, but ever-present in the sneezes and wheezes of the town, in the town's perpetually itching noses and in its rasping lungs. The town's wounded now sported stitches instead of bruises and broken bones; they wore gashes (and found ways to flaunt their missing parts) from the mill's many saws. The keen whine of those blades was as constant in St. Cloud's as the fog, the mist, the humidity that overhangs inland Maine in the damp cold of its long, wet, snowed-in winters and in the fetid, stifling heat of its drizzly summers—blessed, only occasionally, by violent thunderstorms.

There was never any spring in that part of Maine, except that period of time in March and April distinguished by thawing mud. The heavy equipment of the lumbering business was immobilized; the work of the town shut down. The impassable roads kept everyone at

home—and the springtime river was so swollen, and ran so fast, that no one dared to travel on it. Spring in St. Cloud's meant trouble: drinking trouble, brawling trouble, whoring and raping trouble. Spring was the suicide season. In spring, the seeds for an orphanage were planted and overplanted.

And what of the fall? In his journal—his whatnot diary, his daily record of the business of the orphanage—Dr. Wilbur Larch wrote of the fall. Each of Dr. Larch's entries began, 'Here in St. Cloud's . . .'—except for those entries that began, 'In other parts of the world . . .' Of the fall, Dr. Larch wrote: 'In other parts of the world, fall is for the harvest; one gathers the fruits of spring and summer's labors. These fruits provide for the long slumber and the season of ungrowing that is called winter. But here in St. Cloud's, the fall is only five minutes long.'

What sort of climate would anyone expect for an orphanage? Could anyone imagine *resort* weather? Would an orphanage bloom in an *innocent* town?

In his journal, Dr. Larch was demonstratively conservative with paper. He wrote in a small, cramped hand, on both sides of the pages, which were absolutely filled. Dr. Larch was not a man for leaving margins. 'Here in St. Cloud's,' he wrote, 'guess who is the enemy of the Maine forests, the villainous father of the unwanted babies, the reason the river is choked with deadwood and the valley land stripped, unplanted, eroded by the river floods—guess *who* is the insatiable destroyer (first of a logger with his hands pitchy and his fingers mashed; then of a lumberman, a saw-mill slave whose hands are dry and cracked, with some fingers only a memory), and guess *why* this glutton is not satisfied with logs or with lumber . . . guess *who*.'

To Dr. Larch, the enemy was paper—specifically, the Ramses Paper Company. There were enough trees for lumber, Dr. Larch imagined, but there would never be enough trees for all the paper the Ramses Paper

Company seemed to want or to need—especially if one failed to plant new trees. When the valley surrounding St. Cloud's was cleared and the second growth (scrub pine and random, unmanaged softwoods) sprang up everywhere, like swamp weed, and when there were no more logs to send downriver, from Three Mile Falls to St. Cloud's—because there were no more trees—that was when the Ramses Paper Company introduced Maine to the twentieth century by closing down the saw mill and the lumberyard along the river at St. Cloud's and moving camp, downstream.

And what was left behind? The weather, the sawdust, the scarred, bruised bank of the river (where the big log drives, jamming, had gouged out a raw, new shore), and the buildings themselves: the mill with its broken windows with no screens; the whore hotel with its dance hall downstairs and the bingo-for-money room overlooking the rough river; the few private homes, log-cabin style, and the church, which was Catholic, for the French Canadians, and which looked too clean and unused to belong to St. Cloud's, where it had never been half as popular as the whores, or the dance hall, or even bingo-for-money. (In Dr. Larch's journal, he wrote: 'In other parts of the world they play tennis or poker, but here in St. Cloud's they play bingo-for-money.')

And the people who were left behind? There were no Ramses Paper Company people left behind, but there were people: the older, and the less attractive prostitutes, and the children of these prostitutes. Not one of the neglected officers of the Catholic Church of St. Cloud's stayed; there were more souls to save by following the Ramses Paper Company downstream.

In his *A Brief History of St. Cloud's*, Dr. Larch documented that at least one of these prostitutes knew how to read and write. On the last barge downriver, following the Ramses Paper Company to a new civilization, a relatively literate prostitute sent a letter addressed to: WHICHEVER OFFICIAL OF THE STATE OF

MAINE WHO IS CONCERNED WITH ORPHANS!

Somehow, this letter actually reached someone. Forwarded many times ('for its curiosity,' Dr. Larch wrote, 'as much as for its urgency'), the letter was delivered to the state board of medical examiners. The youngest member of this board—'a puppy, right out of medical school,' as Dr. Larch described himself—was shown the prostitute's letter as a kind of bait. The rest of the board thought that young Larch was 'the one hopelessly naïve Democrat and liberal' among them. The letter said: THERE SHOULD BE A GODDAMNED DOCTOR, AND A GODDAMNED SCHOOL, AND EVEN A GODDAMNED POLICEMAN AND A GODDAMNED LAWYER IN ST. CLOUD'S, WHICH HAS BEEN DESERTED BY ITS GODDAMN MEN (WHO WERE NEVER MUCH) AND LEFT TO HELPLESS WOMEN AND ORPHANS!

The chairman of the state board of medical examiners was a retired physician who thought that President Teddy Roosevelt was the only other man in the world besides himself who had not been made from a banana.

'Why don't you look into this mush, Larch?' the chairman said, little knowing that out of this invitation a state-supported facility—for orphans!—would soon develop. It would one day gain at least partial federal support, and even that most vague and least dependable support offered by 'private benefactors.'

Anyway, in 190–, as the twentieth century—so young and full of promise—blossomed (even in inland Maine), Dr. Wilbur Larch undertook the task of righting the wrongs of St. Cloud's. He had his work cut out for him. For almost twenty years, Dr. Larch would leave St. Cloud's only once—for World War I, where it is doubtful he was more needed. What better man could be imagined for the job of undoing what the Ramses Paper Company had done than a man named after one of the world's coniferous trees? In his journal—as he was only beginning—Dr. Larch wrote: 'Here in St. Cloud's it is

high time something was done for the *good* of someone. What better place for improvement could there be—for self-improvement, *and* for the good of all—than a place where evil has so clearly flourished if not altogether triumphed?'

In 192–, when Homer Wells was born and had his little penis snipped and was named, Nurse Edna (who was in love) and Nurse Angela (who wasn't) had in common a pet name of their own for St. Cloud's founder, physician, town historian, war hero (he was even decorated), and director of the boys' division.

'*Saint* Larch,' they called him—and why not?

When Wilbur Larch granted Homer Wells permission to remain at St. Cloud's for as long as the boy felt he belonged there, the doctor was merely exercising his considerable, and earned, authority. On the issue of belonging to St. Cloud's, Dr. Larch was an authority. St. Larch had found his place—in the twentieth century—to be, as he put it, 'of use.' And that is precisely how Dr. Larch instructed Homer Wells, when the doctor sternly accepted the boy's need to stay at St. Cloud's.

'Well, then, Homer,' said St. Larch, 'I expect you to be of use.'

He was nothing (Homer Wells) if not of use. His sense of usefulness appears to predate Dr. Larch's instructions. His first foster parents returned him to St. Cloud's; they thought there was something wrong with him—he never cried. The foster parents complained that they would wake to the same silence that had prompted them to adopt a child in the first place. They'd wake up alarmed that the baby hadn't woken them, they'd rush into the baby's room, expecting to find him dead, but Homer Wells would be toothlessly biting his lip, perhaps grimacing, but not protesting that he was unfed and unattended. Homer's foster parents always suspected that he'd been awake, quietly suffering, for hours. They thought this wasn't normal.

Dr. Larch explained to them that the babies of St. Cloud's were used to lying in their beds unattended. Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, dearly devoted though they were, could not be rushing to each and every baby the second it cried; crying was not of much use at St. Cloud's (though in his heart of hearts Dr. Larch knew very well that Homer's capacity for withholding tears was unusual even for an orphan).

It was Dr. Larch's experience that foster parents who could so easily be deterred from wanting a baby were not the best parents for an orphan. Homer's first foster parents were so quick to assume they'd been given a wrong one—retarded, a lemon, brain-damaged—that Dr. Larch didn't extend himself to assure them that Homer was a very fit baby, bound to have a courageous long haul in the life ahead.

His second foster family responded differently to Homer's lack of sound—his stiff-upper-lip and bite-the-bullet-while-just-lying-there placidity. His second foster family beat the baby so regularly that they managed to get some appropriately babylike noise out of him. Homer's crying saved him.

If he'd proven himself to be stalwart at resisting tears, now when he saw that tears and howls and shrieks seemed to be what his foster family most desired of him, he tried to be of use and gave, with his whole heart, the lustiest wails he could deliver. He had been such a creature of contentment, Dr. Larch was surprised to learn that the new baby from St. Cloud's was disturbing the peace in the fortunately small and nearby town of Three Mile Falls. It's fortunate that Three Mile Falls was small, because the stories of Homer's cries were the center of the area's gossip for several weeks; and it's fortunate that Three Mile Falls was nearby, because the stories found their way to St. Cloud's and to Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, who had cornered the gossip market in all those river, wood, and paper towns. When they heard the tales of how their Homer Wells was keeping Three Mile Falls

awake until the small hours, and how he would wake up the town before it was light, the nurses' good memories did not forsake them; they went straight to St. Larch.

'That's not *my* Homer!' Nurse Angela cried.

'He's not a *natural* at crying, Wilbur,' Nurse Edna said—taking every opportunity she had to pronounce that name so dear to her heart: Wilbur! It always made Nurse Angela cross with her (whenever Nurse Edna indulged her desire to call Dr. Larch a *Wilbur* to his face).

'*Doctor* Larch,' Nurse Angela said, with pointed and excessive formality, 'if Homer Wells is waking up Three Mile Falls, that family you let have him must be burning that boy with their cigarettes.'

They weren't *that* kind of family. That was a favorite fantasy of Nurse Angela's—she hated smoking; just the look of a cigarette dangling from anyone's mouth made her remember a French-speaking Indian who'd come to see her father about digging a well and had stuck his cigarette in one of her cat's faces, burning its nose!—the cat, an especially friendly spayed female, had jumped up in the Indian's lap. That cat had been named Bandit — she'd had the classic masked face of a raccoon. Nurse Angela had restrained herself from naming any of the orphans after Bandit—she thought of Bandit as a girl's name.

But the family from Three Mile Falls were not sadists of a very known kind. An older man and his younger wife lived with his grown-up children of a previous marriage; the young wife wanted a child of her own, but she couldn't get pregnant. Everyone in the family thought it would be nice for the young wife to have her own baby. What no one mentioned was that one of the grown-up children from the previous marriage had had a baby, illegitimately, and she hadn't cared for it very well, and the baby had cried and cried and cried. Everyone complained about the baby crying, night and day, and one morning the grown-up daughter had simply taken her

baby and gone. She left only this note behind:

> I'M SICK OF HEARING FROM ALL OF YOU ABOUT HOW MUCH MY BABY CRIES. I GUESS IF I GO YOU WON'T MISS THE CRYING OR ME EITHER.

But they *did* miss the crying—everyone missed that wonderful, bawling baby and the dear, dim-witted daughter who had taken it away.

'Be sure nice to have a baby crying around here again,' someone in the family had remarked, and so they went and got themselves a baby from St. Cloud's.

They were the wrong family to be given a baby who wouldn't cry. Homer's silence was such a disappointment to them that they took it as a kind of affront and challenged each other to discover who among them could make the baby cry first; after first they progressed to loudest, after loudest came longest.

They first made him cry by not feeding him, but they made him cry loudest by hurting him; this usually meant pinching him or punching him, but there was ample evidence that the baby had been bitten, too. They made him cry longest by frightening him; they discovered that startling babies was the best way to frighten them. They must have been very accomplished at achieving the loudest and longest in order to have made Homer Wells's crying a legend in Three Mile Falls. It was especially hard to hear anything in Three Mile Falls—not to mention how hard it was to make a legend out of anything there.

The falls themselves made such a steady roar that Three Mile Falls was the perfect town for murder; no one there could hear a shot or a scream. If you murdered someone in Three Mile Falls and threw the body in the river at the falls, the body couldn't possibly be stopped (or even slowed down, not to mention found) until it went three miles downriver to St. Cloud's. It was therefore all the more remarkable that the whole town heard the kind of crying Homer Wells made.