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Cheever: A Life

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CHAPTER ONE

{ *1637–1912* }

"Many skeletons in family closet," Leander Wapshot wrote in his diary. "Dark secrets, mostly carnal." Even at the height of his success, Cheever never quite lost the fear that he'd "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 wasn't 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, a "celebrated ship's master" who sailed out of Newburyport 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—this 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 Lot Cheever of Danvers (no known relation) whose tea-filled boots ended up at the museum; as 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 *school*master. 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 Wapshot. "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 his 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 any 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 was 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 in a letter, "then accepted the [biscuit] contract and founded a dynasty" that became *Nabisco*, no 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

*The parallel passage in Frederick's notes reads as follows: "On the way [from Newburyport to Amesbury via horsecar] you 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 his son. Thus, from October 10, 1943: "Cold this AM 45 [degrees] Big wind from East No. East. Heavy overcoat—woodfire and oil kitchen."

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 more 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"—a 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 of 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 dotage 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 in 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*—a 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 big 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——l 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 happy, protracted bachelorhood in 1901.

. . .

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 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, lord 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

*"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.*

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 gentry 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!*"—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

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

water-colors of the Milton quarrys. They are so beautiful.' This 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 to 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 his 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 his 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").* 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, 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."

*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."