

The Inner Circle

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Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

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PROLOGUE

Bloomington, Indiana

August 25, 1956

LOOKING BACK ON it now, I don't think I was ever actually "sex shy" (to use one of Prok's pet phrases), but I'll admit I was pretty naïve when I first came to him, not to mention hopelessly dull and conventional. I don't know what he saw in me, really—or perhaps I do. If you'll forgive me a moment of vanity, my wife, Iris, claims I was something of a heart-throb on campus, though I would have been the last to know of it because I wasn't dating and had always been uncomfortable with the sort of small talk that leads up to the casual inquiry about after-class plans or what you might or might not be doing on Saturday after the game. I had a pretty fair physique in those days, with a matching set of fullback's shoulders and a thirty-inch waist (I was first string on my high school team till I suffered a concussion midway through my junior season and my mother put a premature end to my career), and unlike most men at college, I was conscientious about keeping myself in trim—I still am—but that's neither here nor there. To complete the portrait, because already I've managed to get myself out on a limb here, I was blessed with what Iris calls "sensitive" eyes, whatever that might mean, and a thatch of wheat-colored hair with a natural curl that defeated any cream or pomade I'd ever come across. As for sex, I was eager but inexperienced, and shy in the usual way—unsure of myself and just about as uninformed as anyone you could imagine.

In fact, the first time I developed anything more than a theoretical grasp of what coitus involved—the mechanics of the act, that is—was during my senior year at IU, in the fall of 1939, when I found myself sitting in a lecture hall jammed to the rafters with silent, dry-mouthed students of both sexes as Prok's color slides played hugely across the screen. I was there at the instigation of a girl named Laura Feeney, one of the campus femmes fatales who never seemed to go anywhere without an arm looped through some letterman's. Laura had the reputation of being "fast," though I can assure you I was never the beneficiary of her sexual largesse (if, in fact, the rumors were true: as I was later to learn, the most provocative-looking women often have the most repressed sex lives, and vice versa). I remember being distinctly flattered when she stopped me in the corridor one day during fall registration, took hold of my arm at the muscle and pecked a kiss on my cheek.

"Oh, hi, John," she breathed, "I was just thinking about you. How was your summer?"

My summer had been spent back home in Michigan City, stocking shelves and bagging groceries, and if I had five minutes to myself my mother had me pruning the trees, reshingling the roof and pulling weeds in the vegetable garden. I was lonely, bored to tears, masturbating twice a day in my attic room that was like a sweatbox in a penal institution. My only relief derived from books. I came under the spell of John Donne and Andrew Marvell that summer, and I reread Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* three times in preparation for an English literature course I was looking forward to in the fall. But I couldn't tell Laura Feeney all this—or any of it. She would have thought me a washout. Which I was. So I just shrugged and said, "All right, I guess."

Voices reverberated in the stairwell, boomed in the corners and fled all the way down the corridor to where the registration tables had been set up in the gymnasium. "Yeah," Laura said, and her smile went cold a moment, "I know how you feel. With me it was work, work, work—my father owns a lunch counter in Fort Wayne, did you know that?"

I didn't know. I shook my head and felt a whole shining loop of my hair fall loose, though I must have used half a bottle of crème oil on it. I

was wearing one of the stiff new Arrow shirts my grandmother had sent me from Chicago and a glen-plaid tie I think I wore to class every day that year in the hope of making a good impression, my briefcase was in one hand, a stack of library books in the other. As I've said, the gift of small talk eluded me. I think I said something like, "Fort Wayne, huh?"

In any event, it didn't matter what I said, because she let her turquoise eyes go wide (she was a redhead, or a strawberry blonde, actually, with skin so white you'd think it had never seen the sun), gave my muscle a squeeze and lowered her voice. "Listen," she said, "I just wanted to know if you'd mind getting engaged to me—"

Her words hung there between us, closing out everything else—the chatter of the group of freshmen materializing suddenly from the men's room, the sound of an automobile horn out on the street—and I can only imagine the look I must have given her in response. This was long before Prok taught me to tuck all the loose strands of my emotions behind a mask of impassivity, and everything I was thinking routinely rushed to my face along with the blood that settled in my cheeks like a barometer of confusion.

"John, you're not blushing, are you?"

"No," I said, "not at all. I'm just—"

She held my eyes, enjoying the moment. "Just what?"

I shrugged. "We were out in the sun—yesterday it was, yesterday afternoon. Moving furniture. So, I guess, well—"

Someone brushed by me, an undergraduate who looked vaguely familiar—had he been in my psych class last year?—and then she let the other shoe drop. "I mean, just for the semester. For pretend." She looked away and her hair rose and fell in an ebbing wave. When she turned back to me, she lifted her face till it was like a satellite of my own, pale and glowing in the infusion of light from the windows at the end of the corridor. "You know," she said, "for the marriage course?"

That was the moment it all began, though I didn't realize it at the time—how could I? How could I have foreseen that a shallow, manipulative girl I hardly knew would be the motive force that was to lead me to Prok and Mac, Corcoran, Rutledge, to the desk at which I'm now sit-

ting, trying to get as much of this out as I can before the world goes to pieces? I said, "Yes." I said, "Yes, all right," and Laura Feeney smiled and before I knew it I was on my way to becoming an initiate in the science of sex, abandoning the ideal for the actual, the dream of Stella ("True, that true beauty virtue is indeed") for anatomy, physiology and an intimate knowledge of the Bartholin's glands and the labia minora. All of it—all the years of research, the thousands of miles traveled, the histories taken, the delving and rooting and pioneering—spun out like thread from an infinite spool held in the milk-white palm of Laura Feeney on an otherwise ordinary morning in the autumn of 1939.

But I don't want to make too much of it—we all have our defining moments. And I don't mean to keep you in the dark here either. The "marriage course" to which Laura Feeney was referring—Marriage and the Family, properly—was being offered by Professor Kinsey of the Zoology Department and half a dozen of his colleagues from other disciplines, and it was the sensation of the campus. The course was open only to faculty and staff, students who were married or engaged, and seniors of both sexes. There were eleven lectures in all, five of them covering the sociological, psychological, economic, legal and religious facets of marriage, these to be delivered by faculty outside of the Zoology Department, and they were to prove to be informative enough, I suppose, and necessary, but if truth be told they were nothing more than window dressing for the six unexpurgated lectures (with audio-visual aids) Prok was scheduled to give on the physiology of intramari-tal relations.

Word was out on campus, and I suspect there were any number of junior girls like Laura Feeney shopping at the five-and-dime for rhinestone rings—maybe even sophomores and freshmen too. My guess is that Laura's lettermen were engaged to their fall sports, and, by extension, their coaches, and so she cast me in the role of prospective bridegroom. I didn't mind. I would say she wasn't my type, but then all women are every man's type, under the right circumstances. She was popular, she was pretty, and if for an hour or two a week people took her to be mine, so much the better. To this point, I'd been immersed in my

studies—I made dean's list five out of the first six semesters—and I barely knew any girls, either on campus or back at home, and to have her there at my side as other couples strolled by and the late-blooming sun ladled syrup over the trees and the apparent world stood still for whole minutes at a time was like no feeling I'd ever had. Was it love? I don't know. It was certainly something, and it stirred me—I could always hope, couldn't I?

At any rate, as I say, word was out, and the lecture hall was full to overflowing when we got there the first day. I remember being surprised at the number of younger faculty crowding the front rows with their prim and upright wives and how many of them I didn't recognize. There was a sprinkling of older faculty too, looking lost and even vaguely queasy, and their presence was a real puzzle—you would have thought people in their forties and fifties with grown children should be acquainted with the basic facts of life, but there they were. ("Maybe they need a refresher course," Laura said with half a grin and very much sotto voce, and even that, even the barest mention of what those couples must have done in private—or once have done—made me go hot all over.) But of course the real multitude was composed of students—there must have been three hundred or more of us there, crowded in shoulder to shoulder, all waiting to be scandalized, to hear the forbidden words spoken aloud and see the very act itself depicted in living color.

Dr. Hoenig, the Dean of Women, had been stationed at the door as we filed in, ready to pounce on anyone who wasn't on her list of registered students. She was a short, top-heavy woman in a dowdy dress and a gray cloche hat that seemed like an extension of her pinned-up hair, and though she must have been in her forties then she seemed to us as ancient and vigilant as the Sphinx, her spectacles shining as she bent to check names against the list and scrutinize the ring fingers of all the girls who claimed to be engaged. We passed muster, and sat through the preliminary lectures, biding our time until Dr. Kinsey took the stage. We'd seen him at the outset—he'd electrified us all in his introductory lecture by claiming that there were no abnormalities when it came to sex, save for abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage—but then he'd been suc-

ceeded by a doctor from the medical school whose voice was perfectly pitched to the frequency of sleep, and then a Methodist minister and a pinched little man from the Psychology Department who spoke ad nauseam on Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

It was raining, I remember, on the day we'd all been waiting for—the day of the slide presentation—and as Laura Feeney and I stepped into the anteroom with the mob of other students divesting themselves of umbrellas and slickers, I was struck by the deep working odor of all that massed and anointed flesh. Laura must have noticed it too, because the minute she ducked demurely past Dean Hoenig, she wrinkled up her nose and whispered, “Smells like somebody let all the tomcats loose.”

I didn't know what to say to that, so I gave her a faint smile—it wouldn't do at all to look as if I were enjoying myself, because this was education, after all, this was science, and every face had been ironed sober—and allowed my right hand to rest lightly at her waist as I guided her through the crush and into the semi-darkened hall. We were fifteen minutes early, but already all the aisle seats had been taken and we had to edge awkwardly through a picket of folded knees, book bags and umbrellas to reach the middle of one of the back rows. Laura settled in, shook out her hair, waved to thirty or forty people I didn't recognize, then bent forward over her compact and stealthily reapplied her lipstick. She came up compressing her lips and giving me the sort of look she might have reserved for a little brother or maybe the family dog—she was a junior from Fort Wayne and I was a senior from Michigan City and no matter how much I wanted to believe otherwise there was nothing, absolutely nothing, between us.

I gazed down the row. Nearly all the girls were glancing round them with shining eyes while the men fumbled with loose-leaf binders and worried over the nubs of their pencils. A man from my rooming house—Dick Martone—happened to glance up then and our eyes met briefly. Both of us looked away, but not before I could read his excitement. Here we were—he wedged in between two other senior men, I with Laura Feeney preening at my side—about to see and engage what we'd been hungering after for the better part of our lives. I can't begin to

describe the *frisson* that ran through that hall, communicated from seat to seat, elbow to elbow, through the whole yearning mass of us. Over the course of the past weeks we'd been instructed in the history and customs of marriage, heard about the emotions evoked, the legal ramifications of the nuptial bond and even the anatomy of the structures involved in reproduction, heard the words "penis," "nipple," "vagina" and "clitoris" spoken aloud in mixed company, and now we were going to see for ourselves. I could feel the blood pounding in my extremities.

Then the side door swung open and Dr. Kinsey was there, striding purposefully to the podium. Though a moment before he'd been slog-ging across campus in galoshes and southwester, you would have thought he'd just stepped out of a sunlit meadow, the sheaf of his bris-tling flat-topped pompadour standing upright from the crown of his head as if it had been pressed from a mold, his dark suit, white shirt and bow tie impeccable, his face relaxed and youthful. He was in his mid-forties then, a looming tall presence with an oversized head, curiously narrowed shoulders and a slight stoop—the result of the rickets he'd suffered as a child—and he never wasted a motion or a single minute of anybody's time either. The anticipatory murmur fell off abruptly as he stepped up to the lectern and raised his head to look out on the audi-ence. Silence. Absolute. We all became aware of the sound of the rain then, a steady sizzle like static in the background.

"Today we shall discuss the physiology of sexual response and or-gasm in the human animal," he began, without preliminary, without notes, and as his equable, matter-of-fact tones penetrated the audience, I could feel Laura Feeney go tense beside me. I stole a glance at her. Her face was rapt, her white blouse glowing in the dimness of the lecture hall as if it were the single radiant point in the concave sweep of the audi-ence. She was wearing knee socks and a pleated skirt that pulled tight to reveal the swell of the long muscles of her thighs. Her perfume took hold of me like a vise.

Professor Kinsey—Prok—went on, with the help of the overhead projector, to document how the penis enlarges through vasocongestion and at orgasm releases between two and five million spermatozoa,

depending on the individual, and then turned his attention to the female reproductive organs. He talked at length about vaginal secretions and their function in easing intromission of the penis, spoke of the corresponding importance of the cervical secretions, which, in some cases, may serve to loosen the mucous plug that ordinarily lies in the opening—the os—of the cervix, and can prevent fertilization by blocking movement of the sperm into the uterus and subsequently the Fallopian tubes. We bowed our heads, scribbled furiously in our notebooks. Laura Feeney swelled beside me till she was the size of one of the balloons they floated overhead during the Macy's parade. Everyone in the place was breathing as one.

And then, abruptly, the first of the slides appeared, a full-color, close-up photograph of an erect, circumcised phallus, followed by a shot of the moist and glistening vagina awaiting it. "The vagina must be spread open as the erect male organ penetrates," Dr. Kinsey went on, as the next slide dominated the screen behind him, "and thus the female has employed two fingers to this end. You will observe that the clitoris is stimulated at this point, thus providing the erotic stimulation necessary for the completion of the act on the part of the female." There was more—a very detailed and mechanical account of the various positions the human animal employs in engaging in coitus, as well as techniques of foreplay—and a teaser (as if we needed one) for the next lecture, which was to focus on fertilization and (here the whispers broke out) how to circumvent it.

I heard it all. I even took notes, though afterward I could make no sense of them. Once the slides appeared I lost all consciousness of the moment (and I can't overemphasize the jolt they gave me, the immediate and intensely physical sensation that was like nothing so much as plunging into a cold stream or being slapped across the face—here it was, here it was at long last!). I might have been sitting there upright in the chair, Laura Feeney swelling at my side, and I drew breath and blinked my eyes and the blood circulated through my veins, but for all intents and purposes I wasn't there at all.

Afterward—and I can't for the life of me recall how the lecture concluded—people collected their things in silence and moved up the

aisles in a somber processional. There was none of the jostling and joking you would normally expect from a mob of undergraduates set loose after an hour's confinement. Instead, the crowd shuffled forward listlessly, shoulders slumped, eyes averted, for all the world like refugees escaping some disaster. I couldn't look at Laura Feeney. I couldn't guide her with a hand to her waist either—I was on fire, aflame, and I was afraid the merest touch would incinerate her. I studied the back of her head, her hair, her shoulders, as we made our way through the crowd toward the smell of the rain beyond the big flung-open doors at the end of the hallway. We were delayed a moment on the doorstep, a traffic jam there on the landing as the rain lashed down and people squared their hats and fumbled with umbrellas, and then I had my own umbrella open and Laura and I were down the steps and out into the rain.

We must have gone a hundred yards, the trees flailing in the wind, the umbrella streaming, before I found something to say. "Do you—would you like to take a walk? Or do you need to, perhaps—because I could take you back to the dorm if that's what you—"

Her face was drawn and bloodless and she walked stiffly beside me, avoiding body contact as much as was possible under the circumstances. She stopped suddenly and I stopped too, awkwardly struggling to keep the crown of the umbrella above her. "A walk?" she repeated. "In this? You've got the wrong species here, I'm afraid—I'm a *human animal*, not a duck." And then we were laughing, both of us, and it was all right.

"Well, how about a cup of coffee then—and maybe a piece of, I don't know, pie? Or a drink?" I hesitated. The rain glistened in her hair and her eyes were bright. "I could use a stiff one after that. I was—what I mean is, I never—"

She touched my arm at the elbow and her smile suddenly bloomed and then faded just as quickly. "No," she said, and her voice had gone soft, "me either."

I took her to a tavern crowded with undergraduates seeking a respite from the weather, and the first thing she did when we settled into a booth by the window was twist the rhinestone band off her finger and secrete it in the inside compartment of her purse. Then she unpinned

her hat, patted down her hair and turned away from me to reapply her lipstick. I hadn't thought past the moment, and once we agreed on where we were going, we hadn't talked much either, the rain providing background music on the timpani of the umbrella and plucking the strings of the ragged trees as if that were all the distraction we could bear. Now, as I braced my elbows on the table and leaned toward her to ask what she wanted to drink, I realized that this was something very like a date and blessed my luck because I had two and a half dollars left in my wallet after paying out room and board from my scant weekly paycheck (I was working at the university library then, pushing a broom and reshelving books five evenings a week). "Oh, I don't know," she said, and I could see she wasn't quite herself yet. "What are you having?"

"Bourbon. And a beer chaser."

She made a moue of her lips.

"I can get you a soft drink, if you prefer—ginger ale, maybe?"

"A Tom Collins," she said, "I'll have a Tom Collins," and her eyes began to sweep the room.

The lower legs and cuffs of my trousers were wet and my socks squished in my shoes as I rose to make my way to the bar. The place was close and steaming, shoulders and elbows looming up everywhere, the sawdust on the floor darkly compacted by the impressions of a hundred wet heels. When I got back to the table with our drinks, there was another couple sitting opposite Laura, the girl in a green velvet hat that brought out the color of her eyes, the man in a wet overcoat buttoned up over his collar and the knot of his tie. He had a long nose with a bump in it and two little pincushion eyes set too close together. I don't remember his name—or hers either, not at this remove. Call them Sally and Bill, for the purposes of this account, and identify them as fellow students in the marriage course, sweethearts certainly—worlds more than Laura and I were to each other—though not yet actually engaged.

Laura made the introductions. I nodded and said I was pleased to meet them both.

Bill had a pitcher of beer in front of him, the carbonation rising up from its depths in a rich, golden display, and I watched in silence as he

tucked his tongue in the corner of his mouth and meticulously poured out half a glass for Sally and a full one for himself. The golden liquid swirled in the glass and the head rose and steadied before composing itself in a perfect white disc. "You look like you've done that before," I said.

"You bet I have," he replied, then lifted his glass and grinned. "A toast," he proposed. He waited till we'd raised our glasses. "To Professor Kinsey!" he cried. "Who else?"

This was greeted with a snicker from the booth behind us, but we laughed—all four of us—as a way of defeating our embarrassment. There was one thing only on our minds, one subject we all were burning to talk of, and though Bill had alluded to it, we weren't quite comfortable with it yet. We were silent a moment, studying the faces of the people shuffling damply through the door. "I like your ring, Sally," Laura said finally. "Was it terribly expensive?"

And then they were both giggling and Bill and I were laughing along with them, laughing immoderately, laughing for the sheer joy and release of it. I could feel the bourbon settling in my stomach and sending out feelers to the distant tendrils of my nerves, and my face shone and so did theirs. We were in on a secret together, the four of us—we'd put one over on Dean Hoenig—and we'd just gone through a rite of initiation in a darkened hall in the biology building. It took a minute. Bill lit a cigarette. The girls searched each other's eyes. "Jeez," Bill said finally, "did you ever in your life see anything like that?"

"I thought I was going to die," Sally said. She threw a glance at me, then studied the pattern of wet rings her beer glass had made on the table. "If my mother—" she began, but couldn't finish the thought.

"God," Laura snorted, making a drawn-out bleat of it, "my mother would've gone through the roof." She'd lit a cigarette too, and it smoldered now in the ashtray, the white of the paper flecked red from the touch of her lips. She picked it up distractedly, took a quick puff, exhaled. "Because we never, in my family, I mean never, discussed, you know, where little boys and girls come from."

Sally raised a confidential hand to her mouth. "They call him 'Dr. Sex,' did you know that?"

"Who does?" I felt as if I were floating above the table, all my tethers cut and the ground fast fading below me. This was heady stuff, naughty, wicked, like when a child first learns the verboten words Dr. Kinsey had pronounced so distinctly and disinterestedly for us just an hour before.

Sally raised her eyebrows till they met the brim of her hat. "People. Around campus."

"Not to mention town," Bill put in. He dropped his voice. "He makes you do interviews, you know. About your sex life"—he laughed—"or lack of it."

"I would hate that," Sally said. "It's so . . . *personal*. And it's not as if he's a medical doctor. Or a minister even."

I felt overheated suddenly, though the place was as dank as the dripping alley out back. "*Histories*," I said, surprising myself. "Case histories. He's explained all that—how else are we going to know what people—"

"The human animal, you mean," Laura said.

"—what people do when they, when they mate, if we don't look at it scientifically? And frankly, I don't know about you, but I applaud what Kinsey's doing, and if it's shocking, I think we should ask ourselves why, because isn't a, a . . . a *function* as universal as reproductive behavior just as logical a cause for study as the circulation of the blood or the way the cornea works or any other medical knowledge we've accumulated over the centuries?" It might have been the bourbon talking, but there I was defending Prok before I ever even knew him.

"Yes, but," Bill said, and we all leaned into the table and talked till our glasses were empty, and then we filled them and emptied them again, the rain tracing patterns in the dirt of the window, then the window going dark and the tide of undergraduates ebbing and flowing as people went home to dinner and their books. It was seven o'clock. I was out of money. My head throbbed but I'd never been so excited in my life. When Bill and Sally excused themselves and shrugged out the door and into the wafting dampness of the night, I lingered a moment, half-drunk, and put an arm round Laura's shoulders. "So we're still engaged, aren't we?" I murmured.

Her smile spread softly from her lips to her eyes. She plucked the

maraschino cherry from her glass and rotated it between her fingers before gently pressing it into my mouth. "Sure," she said.

"Then shouldn't we—or don't we have an obligation, to, to—"

"Sure," she said, and she leaned forward and gave me a kiss, a kiss that was sweetened by the syrup of the cherry and the smell of her perfume and the proximity of her body that was warm now and languid. It was a long kiss, the longest I'd ever experienced, and it was deepened and complicated by what we'd seen up there on the screen in the lecture hall, by the visual memory of those corresponding organs designed for sensory gratification and the reproduction of the species, mutually receptive, self-lubricated, cohesive and natural. I came up for air encouraged, emboldened, and though there was nothing between us and we both knew it, I whispered, "Come home with me."

The look of Laura's face transformed suddenly. Her eyes sharpened and her features came into focus as if I'd never really seen them before, as if this wasn't the girl I'd just kissed in a moment of sweet oblivion. We were both absolutely still, our breath commingling, hands poised at the edge of the table as if we didn't know what to do with them, till she turned away from me and began to gather up her purse, her raincoat, her hat. I became aware of the voices at the bar then, someone singing in a creaking baritone, the hiss of a newly tapped keg. "I don't know what you're thinking, John," she said, and I was getting to my feet now too, rattled suddenly, flushing red for all I knew. "I'm not that kind of a girl."

BUT LET ME step back a moment, because I don't want to get off on the wrong foot—this isn't about me, this is about Prok, and Prok is dead, and I'm sitting here in my study, the key turned in the lock, the sorry tepid remains of a Zombie cocktail at my elbow, trying to talk into this machine and sort out my thoughts while Iris paces up and down the hall in her heels, stopping on every third revolution to rattle the door-knob and remind me in a muffled shout that we're going to be late. Late for what, I'd like to know. Late for tramping through the funeral home with a mob of newspaper reporters and the rest of the curiosity seekers?

Late to show our support? Or dedication? Is it going to do Mac any good? Or the children? Or Corcoran, Rutledge, or even my own son, John Jr., who locked himself in his room at the top of the stairs two hours ago because he's had enough of death and sorrow and mourning, because unlike the ghouls and the carrion sniffers and all the rest he hasn't the faintest desire to look on the empty husk of greatness? The corpse, that is. The mortal remains. Prok in his casket, propped up like a wax effigy, drained and flushed and pumped full of formaldehyde, the man who had no illusions, the scientist, the empiricist, the evolutionist, Prok. Prok is dead, is dead, is dead, and nothing else matters.

"John, goddamn you, will you open this door?" Iris is abusing the doorknob, she's pounding with a balled-up fist at the oak panels of the door I myself stripped and varnished. And who took us to look at this house, who loaned us the money for it? Who gave us everything we have?

"Okay, okay!" I shout, and then I'm up from the desk, forcing down the dregs of the joyless drink and shuffling across the carpet to twist the key in the lock and fling open the door.

Iris is there, her face blotted with anger, with exasperation, stalking into the room in her black dress, her black stockings and heels, the hat and the veil. My wife. Thirty-six years old, the mother of my son, as slim and dark and wide-eyed and beautiful as the day I met her. And angry. Deeply, intensely angry. "What are you doing?" she demands, crowding into me, her hands windmilling in my face. "Don't you realize we're twenty minutes late *already*?" And then, catching sight of the glass in my hand: "Are you drinking? At two o'clock in the afternoon? Jesus, you make me sick. He wasn't God, you know."

I'm feeling hollow, a cane with all the pith gnawed out of it. I don't need prodding, don't need anything but to be left alone. "Easy for you to say."

I don't know what I expect, the baring of the talons, the first superficial swipes of the marital row that has been going on here now for the past fifteen years, and then the rending of the deeper wounds, the ones that fester. I'm ready for it, ready to fight and throw it all back at her, be-

cause she's wrong and we both know it, but she surprises me. Her hands go to her hips, then drop to her side, and I watch her take the time to compose her face. "No, John," she says finally, and she puts all the bruising power of the years into the sad low hopeless cadence of her voice, "it's not easy. It's never been easy. You know what I wish?"

I won't answer, won't give her the satisfaction.

"I wish I'd never met him, never heard of him. I wish he'd never been born."

I can hear our son moving around in his room overhead, the dull reverberation of his feet like distant thunder. Iris's jaw is set, her shoulders thrown back in full martial display, and she's already dismissed me, moving toward the door now in her brisk chopping strides. "Get your tie on," she snaps over her shoulder, and she's gone. But no. She's back suddenly, on the rebound, her head framed in the doorway, her eyes slicing from me to the tape recorder and back again. "And shut that damn thing off, will you?"