

City Hall and Other Stories

by

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City Hall

During a long courtship Andrea would listen to the stories of my growing up. I told her about boyhood fear and courage, and I did it way that she might see a rich soul, someone with both passion and kindness, someone with humor, a good father even. She showed her appreciation of my passage and of the result. I suppose that's what got us here.

At City Hall the main floor is a catacombs, dimly lit. The ceiling is arched and protective like a church. You can hear the sound of your heels reflect off the walls and roll into the ceiling. We looked for the Bureau of Marriages and found it beside the Recorder of Deeds, just down the hall from where births and deaths are recorded. Each office has a glass front with names stenciled in gold, with a drop shadow added to show the importance of the work done inside.

I had proof of the tests - a stamped receipt for payment of the blood we'd had taken separately, by our separate doctors on separate lunch hours, on separate days of the week, but still in plenty of time for this meeting. You see Andrea and I are good planners. We keep appointments, mark calendars and give plenty of warning if plans should change. I kept the band-aids from the blood tests and mounted them side-by-side on black cardboard. I imagine them framed on the wall in some den in some yet-to-be-bought house. One day, with a cocktail in hand, I'll point them out to a fellow or to his wife and see if they can guess what they might be. Later, maybe while driving home, the fellow might say to his wife, "He's a clever guy," or even better, "They're the perfect couple."

City Hall echoes as if it had nothing to hide. In the Department of Planning on the third floor they worry about things like street renewal and playground locations. They lean across big sheets of paper on a drafting table, looking at zones, pointing out inconsistencies and trying each to make their point, bargaining with one another, fat stretching their shirt buttons. They keep their eye on each other. Andrea is turned off by the idea that we need a license. She hates the cold formality of the thing, that we must now declare what has been held private between us. These things need to be made legitimate I tell her, and it's true enough. But there's one other thing that I've kept to myself, that I have not told

her – it's my belief that something declared, made public, can only end in a kind of disappointment. Secrets need to be kept.

On the bench outside the office we wait in line with other couples who have declared their intentions. Andrea is thumbing through *People Magazine*. When I'm left alone this way, my thoughts will slip off somewhere. Often to those boyhood days. Thoughts of hunting with my father and how my mother seemed disappointed by just about everything. These thoughts come carrying another glimpse of loyalties and contradictions, as if in the form of some final instruction. There was a wet Sunday; I was maybe ten years old, sitting in church beside my mother. I had promised to myself that morning to hear the minister's words. I would listen to every word and not let my mind wander to the corners it went to on other Sundays. Reverend Chisholm read from a prayer that I thought on, and believed I understood and then it suddenly slipped out of all meaning and I was lost again among his words. The minister's shoes were scuffed under the robes. He rocked back and forward on his heels and toes as he delivered the message that he repeated each week about sin and forgiveness. His soles were curled up from walking in the rain too many times without taking the care to cover them. He said God's name in the way of the pious that rhyme it with *awe*, as if theirs was a different God from mine whose name sounded more like *odd*. I knew that if I waited quietly on the unpadded pew God would come to me. But I needed to present both stillness and intention and needed to stay open to His coming. It required the same waiting stillness as in duck hunting. The same sort of patience as my father taught me in the grassy mud of the blind, where torn branches scratched at my face and at the gunstock. We'd watch the brightly lacquered decoys bob convincingly on the cold waves and waited quietly for the ducks to fly over. "They come to you," Dad would say. "That's the kind of hunting this is." He said it as if there was something bigger to be taken from what he said. He said in a way that Reverend Chisholm would have said it -- in words I knew, but whose meaning would be missing unless I allowed it in somehow. We have to be open to the coming.

It rained hard outside the church. The rain had started a little bit after the service began. Mother's still fresh face powder smelled sweet. The drops pounded the shingles, harder then softer, then again in a torrent, like the loud and the quiet parts of the hymns we sang, accompanied by the organ that wheezed a little on some of the notes. I thought about the puddles that would gather in the low spots and how we would need to walk around them on the way home. And then I paid for those thoughts by being lost again to the minister's words. When it was time for the money to be given I felt for the coins that were sealed into the small dated envelope. Then two men, my father and one I didn't

know, walked to the front, summoned by the minister. As they lifted the plates from the rail the velvet bottoms billowed open and they walked toward us carrying what seemed to be red crowns held upside down. Dad walked in measured steps with his shoulders held level. It was unlike he ever walked during the week. He started at the end of the first pew, and as the plate was passed he looked above the heads of the gathering. The coins and folded money and envelopes dropped into the plate. He was looking out of the window as thunder clapped and the rain pelted, and I wondered if he was thinking about ducks, and how the rain bounces off the barrel of a twelve gauge as we'd point and swing the guns slowly leading the birds in their flight. Mother watched my father move in and out of the rows. She showed a look that I later came to know as dubious. An expression that suggested she would not be fooled again.

As the line to get the documents to get married grows longer, some of the couples have gathered in groups. They strike up conversations. They talk in a familiar way, as if they had known each other forever. Just being in this line together makes them all friends. They exchange their personal secrets: how they met, how he proposed, where they will live. It's all smiles and excitement. The young men have hair slicked and have chosen their nice sweaters. The girls wear the still new sparklers that continue to call attention to their fingers. One of them suggests that they all get together sometime, *afterward*. Andrea took my hand in hers. Maybe she feels we need to contribute our share to the communal warmth. I take this as a good sign, for lately she's been turning away from me at night with the excuse of a busy day tomorrow or she jokes that I've turned into a maniac. On the other side of the hall standing in the shadows under a burnt out bulb a Mexican boy. He couldn't be more than twenty. He was dressed for a wedding today. He smoked a cigarette. He blew smoke in jets of exasperation. His girl, his intended, in a white dress and a small modern mantilla bowed her head and said nothing. She is with him in the way that she has learned to be with him in his moments of anger. He butted out his cigarette onto the concrete floor and the cleat on his shoe clicked and was heard again on the walls.

On Sunday afternoons when I was a boy, after church, after our family dinner, Dad and I went to the basement to load shot gun shells that one day, perhaps during a cold miserable rain, would bring ducks from the sky. The basement was a room that Mother never entered. She sat upstairs in the living room reading beside the large lamp. It was her Sunday habit to read there all afternoon and into the evening before going off alone to her room -- a room separate, even then, from his. In the basement, on the wall, above the bins of gunpowder and lead shot, hung on small spikes nailed into the cement, were two calendars with pictures of naked women. Dad or I never looked up at them. I was as

nonchalant as he. I took one of the empty shells from the sagging cardboard box where hundreds of red, green and blue casings lay disorderly. I added powder and wadding and shot. The air smelled of hot wax. Each dose of powder and shot was weighed precisely, in grams, in the reliable measure of science. We packed the finished shells into smaller boxes; faced opposite like sardines are fitted, head to tail. Later we oiled the guns, rubbing them lovingly, working the oil with our palms into the wood. Light danced inside the dazzling barrel when it was held pointing to the bulb on the ceiling. It was like staring at the sun. The calendar girls posed in wholesome ways, in settings made to look like *boudoirs*. They were alone among their perfumes and the sheer clothing. They posed in front of mirrors and looked as if, with closed lips bursting, they were about to smile. They were not coy or teasing. It was like you had come upon them while they were doing something else, something innocent and when they saw you, though they were naked, they were unashamed. They did not close their arms to hide themselves, but instead, trusted you. I don't know even now if they provided my father the same kind of comfort that they provided me. But, I doubt whether our needs were fundamentally different. When my father wasn't around, my basement was a popular gathering place for the other boys in the neighborhood. The reason for my popularity was not lost on me. But I felt superior to the childish leering of my friends who whispered and poked one another, greedily ruffling through the pages of the calendars. Each of my friends had their favorite. One of the months to which each had given his heart. Each swooned over a special girl from the calendars that they bragged about, defended to critics, and took home with them in their minds. The month of June was a bride in white shoes and a veil; with her hands raised she adjusted the tip of her tiara while looking in the mirror. It was as if I could see both sides of her at once. I wanted painfully to be the man she was thinking of.

Andrea is still reading *People Magazine*. She likes the popular news. Last night we watched *60 Minutes*. There was a feature on counterfeiting. And Andy Rooney did a piece on butchers who cheat you with inaccurate scales. He was stupid as always, with his ragging manner, demonstrating how meat scales are made to weigh false in many tricky ways. He got a joke out of it at the end. He said something about butchers getting licenses and how it's a "license to steal." But the other story, the one about counterfeiting – it talked about how the engravers were real artists. It showed how the counterfeiters, working in places with false fronts, like in the back of a bakery or upstairs of an insurance agency, would do their twenty-dollar art. They do it lovingly, chiseling and tooling the bills' webbed borders onto the printing plates. They interviewed some of the old master bill makers, a couple of them said that they never even thought to pass any of their work. They did it for

the joy of trying to make the perfect fake. One of the old guys said that there were times when money was a silver certificate, or when it represented a certain amount of gold that was on deposit with the Treasury. That the strength and the faith of the entire government and its promise stood behind it. Now it's just paper.

Finally, it's our turn -- Andrea and me -- at the license desk. The desk is tended by a man with a very pleasant smile, balding, except for a few fringes of gray tufted around his ears. He has the gift of one who is able to present a fresh face to a repeated occasion. He looks at the application on which I had filled out the details. Andrea and I sign on lines, one above the other, each using our own pens. I paid him in cash, with a crisp fifty. It caught his eye. He crumpled it a little to hear it pop in the proper way and as he did it he gave me one of those comic, suspicious looks out over the top of his glasses and all of the skin wrinkled up to the middle of his head. Then all three of us started laughing because I gave the look right back to him, leaning across the counter, dragging my thumb suspiciously over the corner of the license that he had dated and stamped with the official seal of the State.

Wade

"I'll have a Johnnie Walker on the rocks please," Wade Theodore said, and then he put his finger in the air and corrected himself. "On second thought, make that a thousand Johnnie Walkers on the rocks" and he laughed big, his head bouncing, his mouth full of teeth. The stewardess laughed along with him and, of course, I laughed too. Wade insisted we play Gin Rummy, so I put away the client papers I'd laid out on the tray table for us to discuss. Wade pulled a deck out from his coat pocket and did three kinds of shuffles all the while telling me about his favorite Manhattan restaurants, and stories of bar hopping with the boys from Philip Morris and the boys from General Foods. He chewed gum very fast as he talked. He sorted his cards loudly and sharply, snapping the corners. Next to his drinks and score pad on the tray table were half a dozen little crumpled Dentyne wrappers. Across the aisle from Wade was an old lady, a very old lady. Now and then the old lady looked over at me and Wade and smiled and nodded her head to us a little. The way she smiled made me think that maybe she had boys our age, or that maybe she liked her son-in-law. She'd gotten herself quite a proper set up. She was knitting. There were large piles of yarn and needlework on her lap. Next to her, at the empty seat by the window, she'd pulled down the tray table and made a neat little picnic layout - a tablecloth, a napkin, a glass with ice and two little bottles of Beefeater's gin. She had opened one of them and poured it over the ice. The screw top was replaced and put beside the other little soldier, one empty, and one full. She sipped at the gin while she knitted. Thinking of her boys, maybe? Wade kept chewing and talking and cracking his knuckles. I listened, and smiled and once in awhile said something to try to hold up my end. But I was as interested in the blackness outside. It was a clear night and you could see the lights of the little Ohio towns, and then the Pennsylvania towns. I thought about what was going on in those houses, under those lights. Surely lots of TV, and probably lots of drinking and some knitting too. Maybe some Gin Rummy even.

We're playing for only a half cent a point but Wade is beating the pants off me and I'm getting a little irritated with the way he shuffles and how aggressively he draws the lines under our two totals, his total growing faster than mine. I wonder about Wade and me sitting here and

wonder about which one of us, if she were to choose, which would the old lady like for a son-in-law. Which of us is her son; which of us is *her* boy. No one could love Wade just on the basis of what they saw here. I'm sure I made a much better impression. I leaned down and looked in front of Wade to see the old lady but she's sleeping now, her hands folded over her knitting, the peanuts unopened and the ice melting slowly in the glass.

The flight attendant hadn't been by for a while and the engines have changed their hum just a little bit and I think we might be coming down. When the flight attendant does show Wade says, "How about two more scotches, Honey. When you get a chance."

"I'm afraid we've had last call." She says that very officially so there won't be any argument. She goes back to the galley and continues the putting away, the bar paper work, the stowing of the meal stuff for landing. A chime sounds and a little light goes on over my head. Wade opens another stick of gum and bounces the wrapper off my cheek playfully. He chews the gum noisily and now and then let's it peek out between his teeth as he does the last totals. He's figuring up what I owe him. Then all of a sudden he's flipping up his tray table and he's out of his seat and standing in the aisle. He reaches across the old lady. He holds the end of his tie with his left hand so it doesn't fall onto her face and wake her. He leans across and sneaks the unopened bottle of Beefeaters off the lady's tray. He fills his glass quickly and hides the empty in the seat pocket. He looks at me and smirks and shrugs, as if to say, "Why not?"

"Seat belts, gentlemen," the stewardess says. "Finish up please." I look at the black ground coming closer to us while Wade continues the pencil work. He swallows the last of the gin. Our stewardess has returned for the glasses and she's nudging the old lady, telling her it's time for the seatbelt. The entire frame of my window now is filled with lights, strings of lights, strung in grids - streets where people live, streets that meet at right angles. Ranks and files of streets cut now and then by a diagonal street, a street so important that it doesn't have to follow the rules of direction. Manhattan is off on the other side of the plane. On my side there are other strings of lights, strings of cars that gather to line up at tollbooths and bridges, I wonder which bridge is which - the Tappan Zee, the Whitestone, which is the George Washington? I look back at Wade, but Wade's not doing his paper work any longer. Standing in the aisle right next to Wade is the Captain. He has a little bit of a potbelly but with his white shirt and gold and black epaulets he still appears to be very much in charge. He even has his hat on. The overhead lights of the Fasten Seat Belts sign reflects in the hard plastic of his visor. He's standing next to the stewardess and they are bent over

the little old lady. Wade's head is bobbing around, trying to pop in between their hips or under an arm to see what's going on. Him trying to see makes it even harder for me to see. After a minute, the Captain tips back his cap and he opens the overhead compartment and pulls a blanket down. The stewardess turns to me and Wade. She doesn't say anything; she just purses her lips, resignedly. The Captain opens the blanket and lays it over the old lady, over her face, and her knitting. Wade Theodore looks over at me and says, "Jesus Christ." Wade looks really nervous. This lady has died and he looks really upset.

"Jesus Christ," he says again.

After the plane lands we all have to wait in our seats while someone from the Port Authority comes on board. Then they let us out and everyone in back of us files past this dead lady. We go down the escalator and I go to the car rental and fill out the forms and Wade gets the bags. All the way up the Merritt Parkway he's quiet. Finally he mutters, "Jesus," I drank a dead lady's booze." I just keep driving and wondering about her, about the old lady. I wonder how they handle things like that. Who makes the calls, etc? "I drank a dead lady's booze," Wade says again, several times, under his breath.

We checked in at the hotel in White Plains and Wade looked pale as a sheet and seemed like he was going to be sick. Just before we went to our rooms he said to me, looking me right in the eye, he said, "Hey, don't tell anybody about this, okay? I'm really uncomfortable."

"Okay," I said. "It's okay."

I didn't tell anyone. Not a soul. Then a couple of weeks later I'm having coffee with this guy who handles the plastic sandwich bag account. He laughs and he says, "Didja hear about Theodore? About Wade Theodore and the dead old lady." He proceeded to tell me the story the way it was told to him and there were little bits that made you laugh. Little bits that made you think what a joker, what a character, Wade Theodore was.

"Where did you hear about this?" I said to the guy.

He said, "I heard it from Wade. He had a whole table full of us at the Oak Bar last week. He had the whole bunch in stitches." And then the man repeated the line, the thing that Wade said that night, Wade's punch line. "'I drank a dead lady's booze,' he said, laughing loudly the way Wade would, his head bouncing. 'I drank a dead lady's booze.'"

Golden Times

Part 1

My father took pictures. He made movies too, records of our being at certain places at different times in our lives. He liked us to look at these pictures together so it would be like we were all somewhere else again, together. There was a night we looked at the vacations again. We ate peanuts from large bags, the broken shells piled up in front of each of us. The film canisters were stacked like saucers on the table next to Dad's cigarettes and lighter. Most of the tins were marked with masking tape printed with fountain pen ink in his blocky style – Lake Chippewa '57; Boil's Resort '58; Christmas '58/'59; Hayward 1960. Our lives were stacked in tins -- the lives of the fives of us. The five of us watched and listened to the metal pegs pop free of the sprocket holes. The light funneled us onto the screen, spilling pictures of my sisters and me splashing and clowning. The girls flat-handed the lake water into one another's face. My mother waded nervously into the scene behind my sisters. Her blue bathing suit was made two-tone by the water that came only to the middle of her belly that curved slowly away and slipped between her legs which were stippled with tree branch shadows blown lightly by the wind. There was a little chop and she raised up on her toes to avoid higher water. She held her hands on top of her head to keep her hair safe from the splashing. Then the camera tightened on Margaret and Francis, cutting my mother out of the scene. My father was always looking for simpler composition, all the time trying to keep things simple. He sat beside the projector staring at the film he'd seen dozens of times. The smoke from his cigarette passed through the funnel of light moving from one shore of darkness to another, twirling a little, tumbling, the heavier concentration falling under the thinner wisps. The Chesterfield's red ash dazzled like a kaleidoscope. It roared hot as he took the last and longest draw before crushing it out.

In the movie, everyone seemed to act differently when the camera was pointed at them. Margaret did a mocking of a Marilyn Monroe walk. She puckered her lips to the camera sensually, moving her eleven-year-old hips in a way that was something more than mere imitation. There was something instinctive. We did the same goofy mugging each year, the same lakeshore hyjinx. The cottages in the background never

changed, the swings all hung by ropes from the tree branches, it all seemed the same from one canister of film to the next. Only the bodies of the kids changed -- always growing taller, always covered in a different colored swimsuit.

I look for my mother in the scenes. She shows up quickly in the corners and then the camera darts away from her. Or sometimes she's passed by in a pan, she waves, but my father never settles on her. The camera stops for only a second and I can see that she's just getting comfortable, feeling a part of the composition, when my dad moves to focus instead on my sister or me, or to the trees changing color the autumn, or to a chipmunk jumping for marshmallows that we'd hung by strings from the low branches. We would laugh at them when they jumped vertically and, just missing, fell on their striped backs, sometimes falling so hard they were stunned by the shock. Mother never had center stage.

There must have been no Christmas in 1960, because we have no movies of it. The reel ended with the fall lake scene. Dad reached in the dark for another reel. He never bothered with the lights; to raise the lights would invite someone to leave. My mother left anyway. The metal canister fell on the floor and gave a ringing sound, spinning ellipses as it settled to rest. "One more, then to bed," he said. His stubby fingers stitched film between interfacing wheels and over apertures, opening and closing little gates, hooking the holes onto the sprocket points. He worked with a single stream of smoke bothering his eyes. He squinted and with a contortion of his mouth moved the cigarette to a different plane. He finished threading the projector and started it rolling, the screen was brilliant white, it sparkled and you had to shade your eyes. Dust motes floated up and down and in and out of the tunnel of light. There were numbers that started to count down from eight. His cigarette pack was empty and he crushed it into a ball. He left the projector running and went into the kitchen to get another pack. The numbers changed within the sweeping circle, from seven to six, to five. The movie started. There was a room I'd never seen. There was no lake. It wasn't Christmas. There was a door with frosted glass and writing and it looked like a doctor's office and a lady sat in the waiting room reading a magazine. She was dressed up to be very pretty but she wasn't. She wasn't from our family and she wasn't one of the neighbors. She had on a red dress that was short and the camera looked closely at where the dress was just covering her. My mother had gone upstairs and was in the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush and the water was running in the sink. The lady in the red dress stood up and a man walked into the scene. He was wearing a white coat and he had a light strapped to his forehead. He led the lady into a room with a black dentist's chair. She

ducked under the hanging drills and sat down. She put her finger in her mouth, pointing to a tooth, making a painful face. The dentist never looked inside, he put a mask on the lady's face and the camera showed her eyes close then flutter. Then the dentist quickly opened the buttons on the front of the red dress. He tore off her underwear and began rolling his face all over her chest. He turned to the camera and smiled and wiped his mustache and went back to what he was doing. My sisters' mouths just hung open as they stared at what was on the screen. The front of their faces were bright and shining like bright moons in the reflected light of the screen. The backs of their heads and the whole rest of the room was black as outer space.

The three of us sat cross-legged on the floor in the same way we watched the films of the vacations at the lake. Mother's shoes clicked on the stairs and when she got to the middle of the room she stopped dead. "No!" she said, in the way she said it when one of her friends told her something unbelievable. "No," she said again, but this time it was kind of a scream. She ran for the projector fumbling for the switch in the dark. My sisters' faces were still locked on the screen. She slapped her hands all over the top and sides of the machine but couldn't find the button. In the kitchen my father was closing the refrigerator, then I heard him going into the cabinet for another pack of cigarettes. Mother's fingers made a scratching sound, like a cat, on the metal of the projector. Then she ran around in front of the screen and she stood between the three of us and the screen with her arms spread apart like the patrol lady who watches the busy corner near our school. She started shouting, "Get down here, Allen." She sounded very angry like someone in the movies, in the movies we see at the theatre. She screamed and waved her arms and the film kept running. The dentist and the lady, who was awake now and was very cooperative with the dentist, were now showing on the front of my mother's dress. They rolled on the floor beneath the dentist's chair, rolling onto my mother's face and then back onto her dress. "They found your goddamn movies, Allen. Get down here and turn off your goddamn movies."

I pulled the black cord that went from the projector to the wall. The room was all black and my mother stopped yelling in the same instant. Everything was silent for a second, as if the pulling the cord cut off all the power in the universe. Dad ran in and flipped on the lights. He was holding a sandwich. He didn't look at us or at Mother; he just started to dismantle the screen. No one said a word. Everyone began doing a little job, doing what he or she thought they should do, as if it all had been practiced, like a fire drill. I headed up to brush my teeth and my sisters went straight to their bedrooms. Mother was scraping the peanut shells into the glass ashtray and my dad worked on the snaps and the swivels to get the screen locked away.

Part 2

The doorbell rings again and in come more well wishers. Friends and neighbors, cousins, great nieces and nephews. There are handshakes and hugs and over modulated hellos and back slapping. Downstairs, there were more people now than when I left. They kept coming. Neighbors who felt familiar walked through the door not bothering to ring. Dave, my sister's husband, is in the living room weaving in and out of the people who stand in pairs and threes, holding their cocktails, chatting. Dave and his confederate try to get people to say a few words into the microphone for the occasion. You can see that Dave is proud of the new video cam. He holds it in his palm, the strap wrapped over his knuckles. He moves through the crowd with his right arm crooked like a hod carrier, looking with one eye into the lens for composition and avoiding traffic with the other. My nephew walks along side him, attached to him by a cord. The nephew is junior in Communications at Cornell; he wants to do TV news. He slides onto the couch next to two older women; Dave squats into position in front of them. The kid gets them talking about marriage and what are the makings of a long and happy relationship.

My wife, Joanie, is across the room talking to my sister. I wonder whether Joanie has told my sister any of our new secrets, like how I've been invited to move out of the bedroom. They are leaning against the table where the gold wrapped gifts are stacked and the greeting cards stand open. Joanie is wearing a white blouse, just half buttoned, taunting. My sister and my wife, now they are the middle agers. They are going through that very confused time. The younger women at the party, the daughters of the older ones and the girls brought by my nephews as dates, have soft curves, innocent features. They are less aggressive about being attractive since it comes to them more naturally. The smallest children run in and out between the stands of adults, in and out the door attacking the plates of cookies that are everywhere and unregulated. They take hands full and run into the yard.

My mother and father move around the room as a pair, like a couple of puppets joined together the way they would be if a steel bar had been bolted onto their backs. He leads her from one conversation to the next. These two, in the home stretch now, are headed for some strange end. One leading the other into the final stage of being together. How long can it be now before one of them is found by the other laying

face up one morning on the kitchen floor? My parents, now, are both noticeably smaller than me. They both somehow survived the fat years and now, as if the film had been reversed, they have begun to shrink to a smaller size. Both are round shouldered, bent. They talk through perfectly alienated, over-white teeth about their new diets and their power walking each morning with hand weights. They tell the neighbors about the vacation we've given them. My father is proud that he has children with means. My sisters and I are sending them floating off somewhere on the waves to be entertained by orchestras in tuxedos and comedians who either never were or never will be good enough to do more than cruise ships.

The young girls at this party stay close to the boy friends and they get their young men to play with the little children. The girls also make sure that their young men see all the adorable babies that are here tonight. I watch these women. I've gotten so that I can get my imagination to do the work of undressing them. I know by the way their clothing lays on them, pretty much the manner in which their hips flare, the fall of their breasts, the square ness or the soft slope of their shoulders. In my mind I add little marks, apply discolorations and moles randomly. I use the flesh tones from the arms and the backs of their hands, never from their faces which are colored with make up and are therefore deceptive. I love this little game. But, I confine it to the visitors, those who are not family -- girlfriends of the nephews maybe, nothing closer than cousins.

Mom and Dad continue to work the room. They accept the congratulations as if they'd done something, made some sort of Olympic team. My father pulls my mother at the waist, closer to him as the kid with the microphone slides up beside them and poses a rambling question. They teach this in his classes. How to set up the answer by the way you ask the question. He's looking to get a response that speaks to the question of a lifetime that can be fitted into a single, simple answer. My father speaks. "The trick," he says, gazing into the camera, giving that thoughtful look of his, a man skilled at knowing what looks good on film, he says that "the trick is to just live long enough to get through to the point that the things that might pull you apart just don't matter anymore." My father smiles at the camera for a second more and then places his hand softly on my mother's back and leads her out of the frame.

