

THE STREET WHERE I LIVE

Thomas Quiggle, award winner

WINTERS IN THIS part of Connecticut are hard and often very long. Being set somewhat inland, we are not harassed by the coastal gales which can toss a Cadillac on its side with ease and split whole houses in half with slightly more effort. But it is colder here, we get more snow. We do not get so much snow that we make jokes about it, nor in most events are we disposed to embrace much pleasure from it. We seldom pack it into icy missiles and lie in wait of a target, and many are the winters that have passed since I last steered the sharpened runners of an American Flyer down the steep hill at Haynes Park with my daughter screaming on my back.

Snow in this part of Connecticut is rather something we brush from the padded shoulders of our overcoats and hire enterprising youngsters to shovel off the sidewalks. It causes the trains into the city to run late and sometimes not at all. Snow here will reach in the winter to grasp at the windowsills of our houses. It smothers the azaleas and dogwoods in our yards while they sleep, and is abated only by the February thaw we hope for but cannot always expect. No compassionate thaw warmed Peapack in the February the author John Cheever read to us from his new book. We watched the news expecting a clip on him on television at night, but instead were told of record-setting low temperatures and of a blizzard that was forming in the Midwest. But we did not then, nor do we today, fear midwestern blizzards. The foliage and trees we planted have grown sturdy and thick with age. Our houses are tight as well—they were built solidly of stone and brick. We responded patriotically then, to the advertisements we saw in newspapers and on television for fiberglass insulation, and those of us who were smart switched to gas furnaces before the price of heating oil went up.

In the spring and summer, though, when it is green again and the azaleas and dogwoods compete for notice, the light itself here in Peapack becomes as warm and soft and almost as substantial to one's touch as polished brass. If not love, there is at least a tenderness in this air. We are kinder to our spouses. The little squabbles which seemed so acute in January—I'm out of shaving cream and, dammit, you left the lights on in the car again—are shameful to us now, a multitude of sins we know we can never correct, even

if we were still in love but for which we still ask forgiveness, and wonder as we look upon each other in admiration and repent, how did we manage so long?

We are kinder, too, to our neighbors, perhaps because we now are less reliant upon them for booster cables, pushes out of snow drifts, and firewood when we thought our supplies would last. We are inclined in the morning to walk to the train station, exclaiming along the way at Mrs. Sheble's hyacinths, and we pass along the jokes we heard yesterday at lunch as we wait on the platform. We are polite to delivery boys. We open our doors to the petitioners who roam the streets in search of signatures for referendums on clean water, proposed utility rates, and the purchase of a hook and ladder engine for the fire company. Even to the callers who interrupt us at dinnertime we are civil in declining their offers of three hundred percent returns on our investments or tickets for raffles to benefit freedom for whales.

We were fortunate to have escaped the epidemic of Dutch elm disease which two years ago savaged the towns of Wilton and New Canaan nearby. Our elms are intact. They rise with the vanity of good health above our houses, shading them during the hottest part of the day. Their shadows dial a perfect arc through the day, eventually stretching and converging into the evening, and in the evening now that my wife has left, I sit on the terrace out back, in the beaten old rattan rocker I like best, and I watch the last fire of the sun disappear through the trees behind Bob Foster's house.

The rocker I had shipped on a truck all the way from Michigan, after it had stood so long and solemnly on the porch of Grandfather Jessup's summer lodge on Mackinac Island, and is the one which no one in the family had wanted when he died. I myself did not consider it much of a prize, but oddly, I've come to regard it rather protectively. Not in some sentimental manner, for I truly did not like Grandy Jessup, and have no sterling reminiscences of my visits to Michigan when I was a boy. No, my motives are personal and entirely possessive. The rocker is mine. Or was. Barbara and I, we were at war for the better share of a winter over whether the cushions should be recovered—a notion which to me seemed as perverse as wrapping a mummy in fresh gauze to spruce it up for spring exhibition. That the work was necessary was not the question, for the chair had been done in a simple, green canvas duck, a hardy material which shows its age handsomely and would wear with no trouble at all into the next decade, which is more than I can say for myself, or Barbara. (But, you might say, this skirmish was merely symptomatic of further, hidden and volatile hostilities! And I would disagree.) The chair simply was there and my wife wanted it recovered. I am considered a large man (my tailor's eyes sparkle whenever I come into his shop), and were there a pistol at my head, I could still drop to the ground for thirty push-ups without cracking at the waist. But though we were at war, we had to get along, and so my not inconsequential haunches now are at

rest on a fabric of unnamable flowers brighter and more surprising than a paparazzi's flashbulb.

The neighborhood, the street where I live, too is at rest at this time of the day. Almost audibly it draws in its breath and is as silent and hopeful as a child on Christmas Eve. Harry Pomerantz next door is done with his mower, and has laid down his electric shears. Harry is in real estate, he knows the value of maintaining one's property, and there he goes—dashing across his yard, trying to out-run the sprinkler system he had installed that turns on automatically. From a dozen different kitchens I hear the gentle clash of dishes and cooking utensils, the painful sound of meat frying in a skillet, and from the smell of things, the Simpsons, who returned last week from their trip to India, will be eating curry tonight. The Simpsons are world travelers, and in September they will be going to Peru. They have transformed their Georgian-style house into an extravagant and cheerless museum displaying a frantic catalogue of batik prints, grave stone rubbings, Bambara warrior shields, Zuni spears, totems from the Congo, Bantu leopard skin wedding robes, Druid death masks, Egyptian scarabs and ceremonial daggers (no doubt cursed), Turkish water pipes, a Moroccan chalice, serapes, bolos, swords that were forged in Toledo, an assortment of picas shellacked in the dried blood of a bull, the bull's ear, medieval battle axes, a helmet once worn by a Visigoth, and chain mail suit copied from the Third Crusade. The Simpsons do not drink at parties, but nonetheless they require little prodding to demonstrate the shark dance they learned from Truk Islanders or the sound of a manatee in rut. We do not often see the Simpsons. Hardly ever are they at home. But when they are (to shower and equip for the next safari), it is not unusual to see him fetch the *Times* in the morning with nothing on but a fez and an India-print skirt around his waist. Mrs. Simpson is from a farm in Nebraska, and thus is a willful and self-sufficient woman, the sort who will bake twenty pies for the Policeman's Charity Bazaar at dawn, pattern a dress for herself by lunchtime, paint the livingroom in the afternoon, and crawl under the car to inspect a leaky exhaust before dinner. She is a tall woman, weathered-skinned and muscular the way a coyote is muscular, and once when I passed by as she weeded her vegetable garden, the grim smile I saw on her face was one of weary desperation.

Bang! The pretty young Hopewell girl is home again from college—I noticed her car turning into their drive the other day—and already she is in a whirl. The Hopewells, Carl and Judy, are famous for the regatta they put on every Fourth of July in their pool, the howitzer he touches off to start the races, and the tennis ball he sent through the Holling's bedroom window one morning years back. They otherwise live in a quiet fashion, are magnificently rich from her side of the family, and are unfortunately stricken with a daughter, Elizabeth, who is that combination of charm, beauty and popularity which reminds us that we are no longer young and brings tragedy to those who are. Wasn't it she last summer who drove the Topping boy's

new Land Rover off the pier at Sag Harbor to see if it would float? Or was it last summer that she and Russell Bagley's boy were arrested and charged with public exposure on a beach on Martha's Vineyard? The bang heard a moment ago, which was quite loud, was not Carl Hopewell's howitzer, but rather it was the slam of his front door, a vigorous accent to Elizabeth's departure for the River Club Young Members' Ball. I lift and cant my head at an angle to better absorb the full impact of the white satin gown she selected to wear to the dance, and despite my age and sensibilities, the chaste simplicity of its lines excites in me a sadness that is not new. She has her mother's sequined purse in her hand, and she kisses Jim Applewhite's boy lightly on the cheek before stepping into his car.

From a bottle of scotch of an undistinguished blend that I have placed within easy grasp at my feet, I pour another measure over the remaining ice in my glass. I am, to the marrow of my bone, a scotch drinker. I have little confidence in, and indeed suspect the sincerity of those indecisive souls who ask the bartender for bourbon and soda in the winter and then Gibsons beginning in May. We have a station for cooking outdoors built to the side of our patio and just a moment ago I put a match to the charcoal. Sometimes, when it has rained and the charcoal is damp, the coals will take a little longer to turn gray, and when I get up to put the meat on I find that I have drunk more scotch than perhaps I was aware.

But tonight, as I reach to turn the steak in its marinate, I realize that I am more sober than I really want to be. Now, I have heard those threats issued by moral and good institutions—Excuses are a Poor Excuse to Drink—catchy little phrases that we are supposed to post in our minds the way a dieter will affix the picture of a pig to his refrigerator door, but I've thought it over a bit and have come to the conclusion that I, in this instant, have no compelling sorrows that I wish to see drowned at the bottom of an empty bottle. Tomorrow is Saturday and I will have no responsibilities except my shirts which need to be picked up at the cleaner. The Dow Jones finished the week on a positive note and at work we completed the acquisition of a large ceramics manufacturing firm, which will have incalculable effect on my company's performance in the longterm and my chances of being moved to the corner office on the fifth floor before I turn sixty. My wife is redecorating our bathroom in Nantucket (we are not now dressing for the Satterthwaites, who are wealthier, even, than the Hopewells but who tend to display their wealth with extraordinary taste, thus rendering their parties extraordinarily dull), and my daughter called from overseas yesterday to inform me that she'd broken off her engagement to the French Olympic fencing star. This last turn of events alone would be enough to make me a happy man. So why is it that my hand is searching again for the bottle which seems to have wandered on its own accord from the spot where I set it down a minute ago. What is my excuse?

Perhaps the answer is to be found in Andrea Rathbun, who has appeared on the patio next door. I see that her blonde hair has recently been curled, that she has on a light blue smock with a strawberry embroidered on its front, and there is a cat hanging miserably from her arms. She has come to join her mother, who is seated at a glass-topped table, intently cutting the stems of flowers from her garden, and is placing them, one at a time, into a clear vase of water. Sarah Rathbun turns for a moment to her child and together, mother and daughter, they complete a portrait of domestic (and, might I say, unbreachable) respectability, the sort of scene that is hand-painted onto those collector's plates one comes across in the back of *House and Garden*. Yet what is of course missing here is the husband, the father, Leonard Rathbun, who is connected with our trade delegation to the United Nations—though he once hinted boldly when he was drunk that there were aspects of his work which he could not discuss. "Now hold Lotus nicely, dear," I hear Sarah Rathbun tell her daughter as she turns to continue assembling her arrangement.

The child drops the cat. "Will Daddy be home for dinner?" she then asks. "You know Daddy's in Nigeria tonight, dear," the mother says, thrusting a zinnia blossom into the midst of a chorus of freesia.

Her voice is sensible and without emotion, as if this is what her husband had told her and this is what she believes. And maybe it is so. What if Leonard is right now in some conference room stifled with tension in Lagos.

The Government every morning dispatches a car for Leonard, so we do not see him at the train station. But on the odd weekend, the chance evening that he is at home, he prunes back his holly trees and clears out the rotted leaves from under the bushes as normally and ably as the rest of us. Still, Leonard Rathbun is an anxious little man. There is something of a preoccupied look to him, as though he were constantly listening for footsteps. Should his and mine cross at a party, in the buffet line, say, we will speak neighborly to each other about raccoons breaking into the garbage and the problem of roots coming up through the flagstone, but invariably he will take his ham from the bottom of the platter and select a dinner roll he has seen no one else touch.

It seems to me that Leonard was away much of the time when the embassy was seized in Iran, but he is in Nigeria tonight, possibly talking through an interpreter about the precise wording of a grain contract. The fact is that his wife Sarah, who appears to me to be not much older than my daughter and is as innocently beautiful as Elizabeth Hopewell is tempting, she will never know for sure. And maybe this is why the buckles on her daughter's shoes are fastened, why the dress is so clean and pressed, even the delicate frill around the hem. Perhaps the mysteries, the things her husband cannot discuss cause Sarah Rathbun to concentrate so fervently on a floral bouquet which no one will ever compliment. And I do not want to think it was a mistake last fall when she let her robe fall away from her at the kitchen window as she rinsed out her hair in the sink.

I want to believe, too, that our neighborhood has changed, evolved, grown perhaps, since Cheever's time, since the famous author was here last. I'd like to drive him by the new shopping mall on the edge of our town, strung along one side of which is a large banner advertising the grand opening next month, and beneath this: SPACE FOR RENT. He would be interested, I am sure, in the library we floated a bond for, and nodding to the bare slab of cement sunken into the lawn, I would explain to him that this is where the Sherman tank will take up its final position once the National Guard is through attacking it on maneuvers. Down the street, he would recall, is Grigg's pharmacy, where he'd wanted to stop as we drove him in from the airport, to buy some medicine for his cold, and I believe he would note—the way an author does—the brand-new patrol car which sits parked out front. As we pass the corner of Hayes and Johnson streets, I would sadly have to tell him that the old Peapack Inn where he'd stayed (he was an exceedingly polite man and refused to bother us by staying at our house) had burned to the foundations two winters ago. Which is truly a shame because he had liked the Inn (we thought he would), and had gone out of this way to mention that rarely did he put up in a hotel in which the fireplaces really worked. But I think he would be at home in Peapack, still, if he could come again. He would recognize the streets and know where things were. Mostly, though, I believe he would remember us. He would ask about the Pomerantzses, in whose living room he'd coughed out the chapter of his latest book and then apologized that he could read no further. He would say, testing his powers of recollection, that he still to this day savored the taste of the sweet and sour shrimp which a filipino servant offered on a tray at the Satterthwaites' reception after the reading—and I know he would be lying on this one, because with the cold he had I doubt that he could have tasted much of anything.

The scotch in my glass is nearly gone now, it is mostly flavored ice-water. I swirl it about holding the glass before my eyes, and then I look beyond, at Sarah Rathbun. She pauses, with a pair of snippers in one hand the long stalk of an iris in the other. She senses, I think, that I am staring at her, but she finishes the cut and is done with her arrangement. She holds the vase up for her daughter's approval, but Andrea is occupied with tormenting the cat with the stem of a flower. "Come inside and help mother set the table," Sarah Rathbun says to her as she rises from the table, and she carries the vase away from her as if she were bearing a holy gift. Andrea Rathbun hauls Lotus into her arms and follows her mother inside, and then there is the noise of a spoon falling to the floor, the sound of water running in the sink.

My thoughts turn to my daughter Margaret, who has become the pretty image of my wife when she was a young woman, and who last semester finally succeeded in flunking out of Skidmore, as a reward for which my wife sent her to Europe. I am called upon to wire money at regular intervals to the American Express offices in London, Geneva, Paris, Milan, and it seems

almost fated to me that these were the cities which Barbara and I visited on our honeymoon. My mind travels swiftly, and perhaps in comparison, to the image of my wife as she is now—a bit grayer is the picture I have before me, though a swishy man named Rick, who all the women of Peapack go to, dyes her hair—and I wonder, on whose dark cloud of temper, mine or hers, was it that she flew to Nantucket to open the cottage early this year?

Ha! Barbara's parting words, as I left her at LaGuardia, were that she would phone when she'd got everything in order, and three weeks ago she did, wanting to know what color I thought the new vanity in the downstairs bath should be. I was flattered that she should ask my opinion, though I didn't remember there being anything wrong with the old vanity, but I told her that the old fixture had been white and that suited me. But then she said that harvest gold would be more appropriate for the orange-patterned wallpaper she planned. It was, I recall, a polite conversation between a husband and wife with a decision to make. Yet I don't believe that one was ever reached here concerning the vanity or the wallpaper. I suppose that if I come up the downstairs bath will be her little surprise.

I don't know when Margaret will return from her adventures in Europe, but by the time she does, I suspect she will have lunched at the palace at Monaco, made love to a Grand Prix driver, been turned down by a Chilean tennis pro, drunk too much wine in the Bordeaux Valley and gotten into trouble with the Gendarmes. She will have run an Italian prince's Alfa Romeo into an olive tree outside of Florence, after which he again will offer his hand in marriage, to which after thinking it over my daughter will have again said no, breaking the prince's heart but sparing the Ferrari. Margaret gave no impression to me on the phone that she was growing tired of the four-star hotels at which she was staying or the rough toilet paper, and I imagine that by the time she does come home, she will have spent a major portion of the money I'd been saving to buy myself a boat. Yet she has my blessing. Barbara and I somehow never found the time to take her to Europe, and perhaps I simply am jealous that I never rode side-saddle with Lady Katherine of Kent. The charcoal is not yet ready and I am not yet drunk, but there are two photographs which keep reappearing in my mind as though they were printed on the sides of weighted dice. The first is a good representation of what my backside must look like. I am captured stooping in my garden and have a shovel in my hands. It is October, I can tell, because I'm caught in the frozen motion of turning over the soil. My head is raised slightly, and seems to be directed at the Rathbun house. In the second photograph I am standing erect. It is the same scene, only I am holding the shovel at an odd angle and I know what it is I am looking at.

So what have we all in common here in Peapack? Is it that we went to the same good private schools and universities? That we were taught when we were very young to dance the waltz and the rumba, by the same embittered Grande Dame who had us shine our pumps if they were scuffed, boys

and girls alike, as everyone in the ballroom looked on? And that none of us ever learned to carry a beat except crazy old Charlie Simpson, who hates to dance anyway. It is no well-kept secret that we would like our sons and daughters to attend the schools we did, that we want them to do better than we could, but that we hope they would one day join us in membership to the River Club, where we play gentlemanly games of golf and tennis and croquet, roll dice in the Men's Grill afterwards to determine who signs the chit, and then go home and kick over a table if we lose.

Perhaps what calls us together is the common rumor that Bob Foster, who is an alcoholic, recently lost his job and will soon have to sell his house behind which the sun finally has set. Or our knowledge that Satterthwaite's money was made through stock manipulations while the Hopewell's funds really are old, and our awareness that in spite of this, Judy Hopewell is dying of cancer. What would the author John Cheever have made of this? And what would his judgement be, of the uncontrollable Hopewell girl, Elizabeth, who is not destined to outlive her mother. (For it will be in the paper tomorrow, for all to read, that the Applewhite boy drank too much and on his way home from the dance drove his red Triumph head on into a stone wall.)

And I wonder what advice Cheever would offer concerning my daughter Margaret. Would he tell me to send her to U-Conn to teach her a lesson? Or would he suggest that she go ahead and marry the Italian prince because he really does love her more than she thought. The more difficult case is of course my wife, who can't alter the evidence affirming that her family could not afford the debutante ball, and that I haven't the determination, the will to command, or the desire to be named president of the company I work for and never will. Which brings me to Sarah Rathbun and her husband Leonard. Should I wish that he be sent on an assignment from which he won't return? Should I, rather, throw my empty glass into the ivy dramatically, burst through their front door, fling the wailing child Andrea aside with the back of my hand, and ask Sarah to her face—is yours a happy marriage, too? Is it? Will I then take Andrea on my knee, dry her tears, and say over the dining room table to the late Leonard Rathbun's wife that her roses are beautiful, even though I've noticed that some of the edges of the petals are brown? The author John Cheever is dead, but he left behind, I think, his opinion. We are not the dramatic sort, and Sarah Rathbun was not yet born when Barbara and I were married. I will call my wife, then, and tell her the flight number and the arrival time of the plane I will catch to Nantucket in the morning. I will move the rattan rocker inside, turn off the air-conditioning and lower the thermostat of the water heater. I'll make sure that all the windows are locked, and fall into bed and asleep early, expecting it to be a long, hot, and pleasant summer.