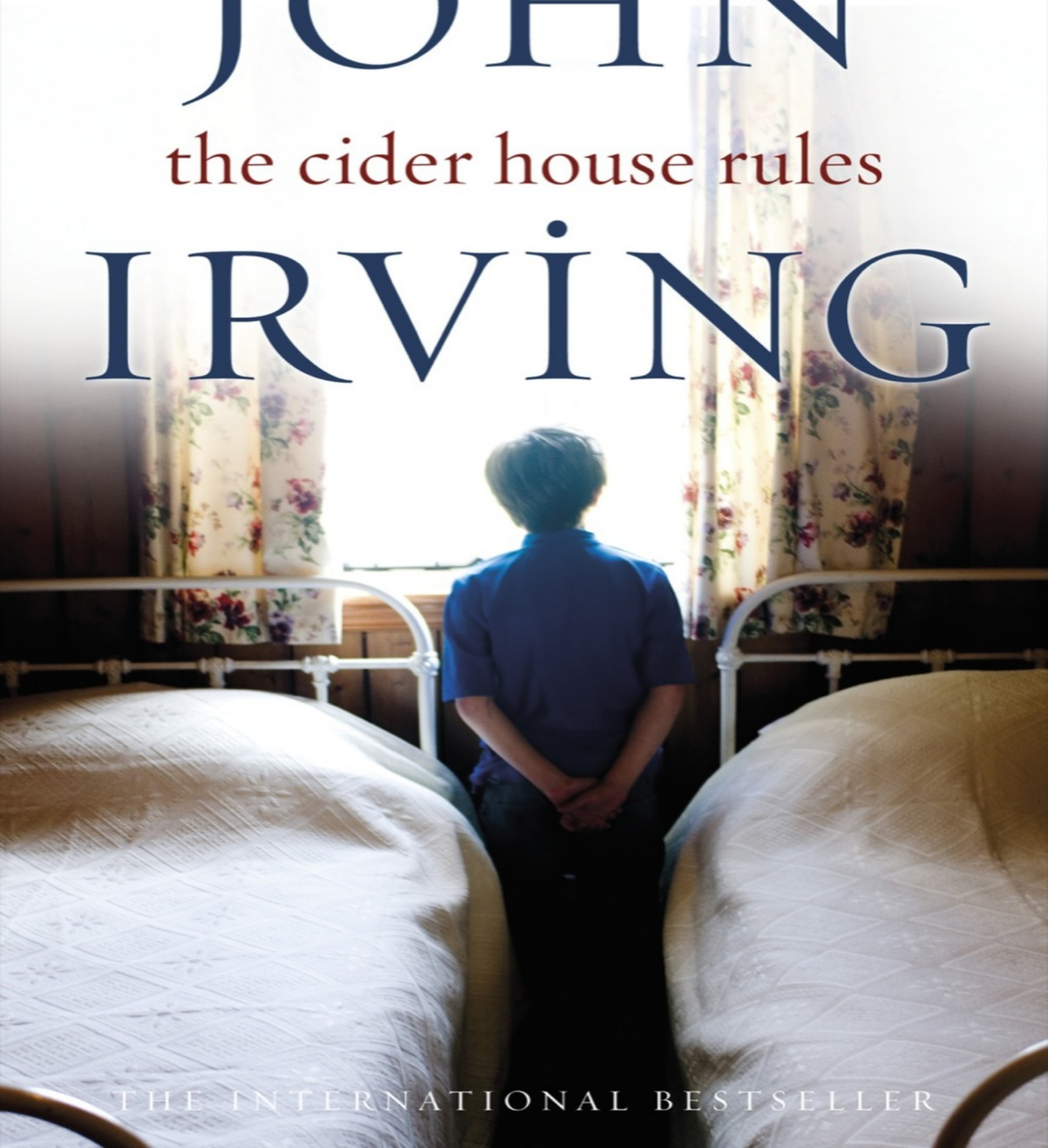
'Difficult to define, impossible not to admire'
Daily Telegraph

JOHN IRVING

the cider house rules



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

About the Book

Homer Wells' odyssey begins among the apple orchards of rural Maine. As the oldest unadopted child at St Cloud's orphanage, he strikes up a profound and unusual friendship with Wilbur Larch, the orphanage's founder – a man of rare compassion and an addiction to ether. What he learns from Wilbur takes him from his early apprenticeship in the orphanage surgery, to an adult life running a cider-making factory and a strange relationship with the wife of his closest friend…

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THE CIDER HOUSE RULES

John Irving

For David Calicchio

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

—Charlotte Brontë, 1847

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

—H. J. Boldt, MD, 1906

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The Boy Who Belonged to St Cloud’s

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

The other nurse imagined herself to be in love with Dr Larch, and when it was her turn to name a baby, she frequently named him John Larch, or John Wilbur (her father’s name was John), or Wilbur Walsh (her mother’s maiden name had been Walsh). Despite her love for Dr Larch, she could not imagine Larch as anything but a last

name – and when she thought of him, she did not think of trees at all. For its flexibility as a first or as a last name, she loved the name of Wilbur – and when she tired of her use of John, or was criticized by her colleague for overusing it, she could rarely come up with anything more original than a Robert Larch or a Jack Wilbur (she seemed not to know that Jack was often a nickname for John).

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

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

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

For most of the orphans, of course, these nurse-given names were temporary. The boys' division had a better record than the girls' division at placing the orphans in homes when they were babies, too young ever to know the names their good nurses had given them; most of the orphans wouldn't even remember Nurse Angela or Nurse Edna, the first women in the world to fuss over them. Dr Larch made it a firm policy that the orphans' adoptive

families not be informed of the names the nurses gave with such zeal. The feeling at St Cloud's was that a child, upon leaving the orphanage, should know the thrill of a fresh start – but (especially with the boys who were difficult to place and lived at St Cloud's the longest) it was hard for Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, and even for Dr Larch, not to think of their John Wilburs and John Larches (their Felix Hills, Curly Maples, Joe Knots, Smoky Waterses) as possessing their nurse-given names forever.

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

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

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

constant mist. When the first woodcutters went to work there, the only impediments to their rape of the forest were the black flies and the mosquitoes; these infernal insects preferred the nearly constant cover of clouds in the stagnant valleys of inland Maine to the sharp air of the mountains, or to the crisp sunlight by the bright Maine sea.

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

There was never any spring in that part of Maine, expect that period of time in March and April distinguished by

thawing mud. The heavy equipment of the lumbering business was immobilized; the work of the town shut down. The impassable roads kept everyone at home – and the springtime river was so swollen, and ran so fast, that no one dared to travel on it. Spring in St Cloud's meant trouble: drinking trouble, brawling trouble, whoring and raping trouble. Spring was the suicide season. In spring, the seeds for an orphanage were planted and overplanted.

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

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

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

To Dr Larch, the enemy was paper – specifically, the Ramses Paper Company. There were enough trees for

lumber, Dr Larch imagined, but there would never be enough trees for all the paper the Ramses Paper Company seemed to want or to need – especially if one failed to plant new trees. When the valley surrounding St Cloud's was cleared and the second growth (scrub pine and random, unmanaged softwoods) sprang up everywhere, like swamp weed, and when there were no more logs to send downriver, from Three Mile Falls to St Cloud's – because there were no more trees – that was when the Ramses Paper Company introduced Maine to the twentieth century by closing down the saw mill and the lumberyard along the river at St Cloud's and moving camp, downstream.

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

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

In his *A Brief History of St Cloud's*, Dr Larch documented that at least one of these prostitutes knew how to read and write. On the last barge downriver, following the Ramses Paper Company to a new civilization, a

relatively literate prostitute sent a letter addressed to: WHICHEVER OFFICIAL OF THE STATE OF MAINE WHO IS CONCERNED WITH ORPHANS!

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

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

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

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

named after one of the world's coniferous trees? In his journal – as he was only beginning – Dr Larch wrote: 'Here in St Cloud's it is high time something was done for the *good* of someone. What better place for improvement could there be – for self-improvement, *and* for the good of all – than a place where evil has so clearly flourished if not altogether triumphed?'

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

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

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

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

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

protesting that he was unfed and unattended. Homer's foster parents always suspected that he'd been awake, quietly suffering, for hours. They thought this wasn't normal.

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

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

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

If he'd proven himself to be stalwart at resisting tears, now when he saw that tears and howls and shrieks seemed to be what his foster family most desired of him, he tried to be of use and gave, with his whole heart, the lustiest wails he could deliver. He had been such a creature of contentment, Dr Larch was surprised to learn that the new baby from St Cloud's was disturbing the peace in the fortunately small and nearby town of Three Mile Falls. It's fortunate that Three Mile Falls was small, because the stories of Homer's cries were the center of the area's

gossip for several weeks; and it's fortunate that Three Mile Falls was nearby, because the stories found their way to St Cloud's and to Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, who had cornered the gossip market in all those river, wood, and paper towns. When they heard the tales of how their Homer Wells was keeping Three Mile Falls awake until the small hours, and how he would wake up the town before it was light, the nurses' good memories did not forsake them; they went straight to St Larch.

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

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

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

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

But the family from Three Mile Falls were not sadists of a very known kind. An older man and his younger wife lived with his grown-up children of a previous marriage; the young wife wanted a child of her own, but she couldn't get pregnant. Everyone in the family thought it would be nice for the young wife to have her own baby. What no one

mentioned was that one of the grown-up children from the previous marriage had had a baby, illegitimately, and she hadn't cared for it very well, and the baby had cried and cried and cried. Everyone complained about the baby crying, night and day, and one morning the grown-up daughter had simply taken her baby and gone. She left only this note behind:

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna about a year before Homer Wells stopped waking up with a scream or letting out a wail whenever someone crossed his field of vision, or whenever he heard a human sound, even a chair being dragged across the floor, or even a bed creak, a window shut, a door open. Every sight and sound connected with a human being who might possibly be headed in Homer's direction produced a high, stammering shout and such tearful blubbering that anyone visiting the boys' division would have thought that the orphanage was, in fairy-tale fashion, a torture shop, a prison of child molestation and abuse beyond imagining.

'Homer, Homer,' Dr Larch would say soothingly – while the boy burned scarlet and refilled his lungs. 'Homer, you're going to get us investigated for murder! You're going to get us shut down.'

Poor Nurse Edna and poor Nurse Angela were probably more permanently scarred by the family from Three Mile Falls than Homer Wells was, and the good and the great St Larch never fully recovered from the incident. He had met the family; he'd interviewed them all – and been horribly wrong about them; and he'd seen them all again on the day he went to Three Mile Falls to bring Homer Wells back to St Cloud's.

What Dr Larch would always remember was the fright in all of their expressions when he'd marched into their house and taken Homer up in his arms. The fear in their faces

would haunt Dr Larch forever, the epitome of everything he could never understand about the great ambiguity in the feelings people had for children. There was the human body, which was so clearly designed to *want* babies – and then there was the human mind, which was so confused about the matter. Sometimes the mind didn't want the babies, but sometimes the mind was so perverse that it made other people have babies they knew they didn't want. For whom was this insisting done? Dr Larch wondered. For whom did some minds insist that babies, even clearly unwanted ones, *must* be brought, screaming, into the world?

And when other minds thought they wanted babies but then couldn't (or wouldn't) take proper care of them … well, what were these minds thinking? When Dr Larch's mind ran away with him on the subject, it was always the fear in those faces of the family from Three Mile Falls that he saw, and Homer Wells's legendary howl that he heard. The fear in that family was fixed in St Larch's vision; no one, he believed, who had seen such fear should ever make a woman have a baby she didn't want to have. 'NO ONE!' Dr Larch wrote in his journal. 'Not even someone from the Ramses Paper Company!'

If you had an ounce of sanity, you would not speak against abortion to Dr Wilbur Larch – or you would suffer every detail there was to know about the six weeks Homer Wells spent with the family from Three Mile Falls. This was Larch's only way of discussing the issue (which was not even open to debate with him). He was an obstetrician, but when he was asked – and when it was safe – he was an abortionist, too.

By the time Homer was four he didn't have those dreams anymore – the ones that could awaken every living soul in St Cloud's, the dreams that caused one night watchman to resign ('My heart,' he said, 'won't take another night of that boy') and that resided so soundly in

the memory of Dr Wilbur Larch that he was known, for years, to hear babies crying in his sleep and to roll over saying, ‘Homer, Homer, it’s all right now, Homer.’

At St Cloud’s, of course, babies were always crying in everyone’s sleep, but no baby ever woke up crying in quite the manner that Homer Wells managed it.

‘Lord, it’s as if he was being *stabbed*,’ Nurse Edna would say.

‘As if he was being burned with a cigarette,’ Nurse Angela would say.

But only Wilbur Larch knew what it was really like – that way that Homer Wells woke up and (in his violent waking) woke everyone else. ‘As if he were being circumcised,’ Dr Larch wrote in his journal. ‘As if someone were snipping his little penis – over and over again, just snipping it and snipping it.’

The third foster family to fail with Homer Wells was a family of such rare and championship qualities that to judge humanity by this family’s example would be foolish. They were that good a family. They were that perfect, or Dr Larch would not have let Homer go to them. After the family from Three Mile Falls, Dr Larch was being especially careful with Homer.

Professor Draper and his wife of nearly forty years lived in Waterville, Maine. Waterville was not much of a college town in 193_, when Homer Wells went there; but if you compared Waterville to St Cloud’s, or to Three Mile Falls, you would have to say that Waterville was a community of moral and social giants. Though still inland, it was of considerably higher elevation – there were nearby mountains, and from these there were actual vistas; mountain life (like the life on an ocean, or on the plains, or on open farmland) affords the inhabitant the luxury of a view. Living on land where you can occasionally see a long way provides the soul with a perspective of a beneficially

expansive nature – or so believed Professor Draper; he was a born teacher.

‘Unfarmed valley land,’ he would intone, ‘which I associate with forests too low and too dense to provide a view, tends to cramp the uplifting qualities of human nature and enhance those instincts which are mean-spirited and small.’

‘Now, Homer,’ Mrs Draper would say. ‘The professor is a born teacher. You have to take him with a grain of salt.’

Everyone called her Mom. No one (including his grown children and his grandchildren) called him anything but Professor. Even Dr Larch didn’t know what his first name was. If his tone was professorial, at times even officious, he was a man of very regular habits and temperament, and his manner was jocular.

‘Wet shoes,’ the professor once said to Homer, ‘are a fact of Maine. They are a given. Your method, Homer, of putting wet shoes on a windowsill where they might be dried by the faint appearance, albeit rare, of the Maine sun, is admirable for its positivism, its determined optimism. However,’ the professor would go on, ‘a method *I* would recommend for wet shoes – a method, I must add, that is independent of the weather – involves a more reliable source of heat in Maine: namely, the furnace. When you consider that the days when shoes get wet are days, as a rule, when we don’t see the sun, you’ll recognize the furnace-room method as having certain advantages.’

‘With a grain of salt, Homer,’ Mrs Draper would tell the boy. Even the professor called her Mom; even Mom called him Professor.

If Homer Wells found the professor’s conversation abounding in pithy maxims, he didn’t complain. If Professor Draper’s students at the college and his colleagues in the history department thought that the professor was a sententious bore – and tended to flee his path like rabbits escaping the slow but nose-to-the-ground hound – they

could not influence Homer's opinion of the first father figure in his life to rival Dr Larch.

Homer's arrival in Waterville was greeted by the kind of attention the boy had never known. Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna were emergency providers, and Dr Larch an affectionate, if stern and distracted, overseer. But Mrs Draper was a mom's mom; she was a hoverer. She was up before Homer was awake; the cookies she baked while he ate his breakfast were miraculously still warm in his lunch bag at noon. Mom Draper *hiked* to school with Homer – they went overland, disdaining the road; it was her 'constitutional,' she said.

In the afternoons, Professor Draper met Homer in the school's playground – school's end seemed magically timed to coincide with the professor's last class of the day at the college – and they would tramp home together. In the winter, which in Waterville came early, this was a literal tramping – on snowshoes, the mastery of which the professor placed on a level of learning to read and write.

'Use the body, use the mind, Homer,' the professor said.

It's easy to see why Wilbur Larch was impressed with the man. He vigorously represented usefulness.

In truth, Homer liked the routine of it, the *tramp, tramp* of it, the utter predictability of it. An orphan is simply more of a child than other children in that essential appreciation of the things that happen daily, on schedule. For everything that promises to last, to stay the same, the orphan is a sucker.

Dr Larch ran the boys' division with as many of the simulated manifestations of daily life as are possible to cultivate at an orphanage. Meals were promptly served at the same time, every day. Dr Larch would read aloud at the same evening hour for the same length of time, even if it meant leaving a chapter in midadventure, with the boys shouting, 'More, more, just read the *next* thing that happens!'

And St Larch would say, ‘Tomorrow, same time, same place.’ There would be groans of disappointment, but Larch knew that he had made a promise; he had established a routine. ‘Here in St Cloud’s,’ he wrote in his journal, ‘security is measured by the number of promises kept. Every child understands a promise – *if* it is kept – and looks forward to the next promise. Among orphans, you build security slowly but regularly.’

Slow but regular would describe the life that Homer Wells led with the Drapers in Waterville. Every activity was a lesson; each corner of the comfortable old house held something to be learned and then counted upon.

‘This is Rufus. He’s very old,’ the professor would say, introducing Homer to the dog. ‘This is Rufus’s rug, this is his kingdom. When Rufus is sleeping on his kingdom, do not wake him – unless you are prepared for him to snap.’ Whereupon the professor would rouse the ancient dog, who would *snap* awake – and then appear to puzzle over the air he had bitten, tasting in it the Drapers’ grown-up children, now married and with children of their own.

Homer met them all for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving with the Drapers was an experience in family guaranteed to make other families feel inferior. Mom would outdo herself at momness. The professor had a lecture ready on every conceivable subject: the qualities of white meat, and of dark; the last election; the pretension of salad forks; the superiority of the nineteenth-century novel (not to mention other aspects of that century’s superiority); the proper texture of cranberry sauce; the meaning of ‘repentance’; the wholesomeness of exercise (including a comparison between splitting wood and ice skating); the evil inherent in naps. To each laboriously expressed opinion of the professor’s, his grown children (two married women, one married man) would respond with a fairly balanced mixture of:

‘Just so!’

‘Isn’t that always the way?’

‘Right again, Professor!’

These robotlike responses were punctuated, with equal precision, by Mom’s oft-repeated, ‘Grain of salt, grain of salt.’

Homer Wells listened to these steady rhythms like a visitor from another world trying to decipher a strange tribe’s drums. He couldn’t quite catch on. The seeming constancy of everyone was overwhelming. He wouldn’t know until he was much older just which it was that didn’t set well with him – the implicit (and explicit) and self-congratulatory do-gooderism, or the heartiness with which life was tediously oversimplified.

Whichever it was, he stopped liking it; it became an obstacle in the path he was looking for that led to himself – to who he was, or should be. He remembered various Thanksgivings at St Cloud’s. They were not so cheery as the Waterville Thanksgiving with the Draper family, but they seemed a lot more real. He remembered how he had felt of use. There were always babies who couldn’t feed themselves. There was the likelihood of a snowstorm that would knock out the electricity; Homer was put in charge of the candles and the kerosene lamps. He was also in charge of helping the kitchen staff clear, of helping Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna comfort the crying – of being Dr Larch’s messenger: the most prized responsibility that was conferred in the boys’ division. Before he was ten, and long before he would be given such explicit instruction from Dr Larch, Homer felt full of *usefulness* at St Cloud’s.

What was it about Thanksgiving at the Drapers’ that contrasted so severely with the same event at St Cloud’s? Mom had no match as a cook; it couldn’t have been the food – which, at St Cloud’s, suffered from a visible and seemingly terminal grayness. Was it the saying of grace? At St Cloud’s, grace was a rather blunt instrument – Dr Larch not being a religious man.

‘Let us be thankful,’ he would say, and then pause – as if he were truly wondering, What for? ‘Let us be thankful for what kindness we have received,’ Larch would say, cautiously looking at the unwanted and abandoned around him. ‘Let us be thankful for Nurse Angela and for Nurse Edna,’ he would add, with more assurance in his voice. ‘Let us be thankful that we’ve got options, that we’ve got second chances,’ he added once, looking at Homer Wells.

The event of grace – at Thanksgiving, at St Cloud’s – was shrouded with chance, with understandable caution, with typically Larchlike reserve.

Grace at the Drapers’ was effusive and strange. It seemed somehow connected with the professor’s definition of the meaning of ‘repentance.’ Professor Draper said that the start of real repentance was to accept yourself as vile. For grace, the professor cried out, ‘Say after me: I am vile, I abhor myself, but I am thankful for everyone in my family!’ They all said so – even Homer, even Mom (who for once withheld her recommended grain of salt).

St Cloud’s was a sober place, but its manner of giving what little thanks it could seemed frank, sincere. Some contradiction in the Draper family occurred to Homer Wells for the first time at Thanksgiving. Unlike St Cloud’s, life in Waterville seemed good – babies, for example, were wanted. Where did ‘repentance’ come from, then? Was there guilt attached to feeling lucky? And if Larch (as Homer had been told) was named from a tree, God (whom Homer heard a lot about in Waterville) seemed to be named from even tougher stuff: maybe from mountain, maybe from ice. If God was sobering in Waterville, the Draper Thanksgiving was – to Homer’s surprise – a drunken occasion.

The professor was, in Mom’s words, ‘in his cups.’ This, Homer deduced, meant that the professor had consumed more than his normal, daily amount of alcohol – which, in Mom’s words, made him only ‘tipsy.’ Homer was shocked to

see the two married daughters and the married son behave as if they were in their cups, too. And since Thanksgiving was special and he was allowed to stay up late – with all the grandchildren – Homer observed that nightly occurrence he had previously only heard as he was falling asleep: the thudding, dragging, shuffling sound, and the muffled voice of reason, which was the professor slurring his protest of the fact that Mom forcibly assisted him upstairs and with astonishing strength lifted him to and deposited him upon the bed.

'Value of exercise!' shouted the grown and married son, before toppling from the green chaise and collapsing upon the rug – beside old Rufus – as if he'd been poisoned.

'Like father, like son!' said one of the married daughters. The other married daughter, Homer noted, had nothing to say. She slept peacefully in the rocking chair; her whole hand – above the second knuckle joints – was submerged in her nearly full drink, which rested precariously in her lap.

The unmanaged grandchildren violated the house's million rules. The professor's passionate readings of various riot acts were seemingly ignored for Thanksgiving.

Homer Wells, not yet ten, crept quietly to his bed. Invoking an especially sad memory of St Cloud's was a way he frequently forced sleep upon himself. What he remembered was the time he saw the mothers leaving the orphanage hospital, which was within view of the girls' division and which adjoined the boys' division – they were architecturally linked by a long shed, formerly a storage room for spare blades to the circular saw. It was early morning, but it was still dark out and Homer needed the coach lights in order to see that it was snowing. He slept badly and was often awake for the arrival of the coach, which came from the railroad station and delivered to St Cloud's the kitchen and cleaning staff and the first hospital shift. The coach was simply an abandoned railroad car; set on sled runners in the winter, it was a converted sleigh,

pulled by horses. When there wasn’t enough snow on the dirt road, the sled runners struck sparks against the stones in the ground and made a terrible grating noise (they were reluctant to change the runners for wheels until they knew the winter was over). A bright light, like a flare, sputtered by the heavily blanketed driver on the makeshift carriage seat; softer lights winked inside the coach car.

This morning, Homer noted, there were women waiting in the snow to be picked up by the coach. Homer Wells didn’t recognize the women, who fidgeted the whole time it took the St Cloud’s staff to unload. There seemed to be a certain tension between these groups – the women waiting to board appeared shy, even ashamed; the men and women coming to work seemed, by comparison, arrogant, even superior, and one of them (it was a woman) made a rough remark to the women waiting to leave. Homer couldn’t hear the remark, but its effect drove the waiting women away from the coach like a blast of the winter wind. The women who boarded the coach did not look back, or even at each other. They didn’t even speak, and the driver, who struck Homer as a friendly man who had something to say to nearly everyone in any weather, had no words for them. The coach simply turned around and glided across the snow to the station; in the lit windows, Homer Wells could see that several of the women had their faces in their hands, or sat as stonily as the other kind of mourner at a funeral – the one who must assume an attitude of total disinterest or else risk total loss of control.

He had never before seen the mothers who had their unwanted babies at St Cloud’s and then left them there, and he didn’t see them very clearly this time. It was unquestionably more meaningful that he first saw them as they were taking their leave rather than arriving, full-bellied and undelivered of their problems. Importantly, Homer knew they did not look delivered of *all* their problems when they left. No one he had seen looked more

miserable than those women; he suspected it was no accident that they left in darkness.

When he tried to put himself to sleep, Thanksgiving night with the Drapers in Waterville, Homer Wells saw the mothers leaving in the snow, but he also saw more than he'd actually seen. On the nights he couldn't sleep, Homer rode in the coach to the station with the women, he boarded the train with them, he went to their homes with them; he singled out *his* mother and followed *her*. It was hard to see what she looked like and where she lived, where she'd come from, if she'd gone back there – and harder still was to imagine who his father was, and if she went back to *him*. Like most orphans, Homer Wells imagined that he saw his missing parents often, but he was always unrecognized by them. As a child he was embarrassed to be caught staring at adults, sometimes affectionately, other times with an instinctual hostility he would not have recognized on his own face.

'You stop it, Homer,' Dr Larch used to say to him at those times. 'You just cut it out.'

As an adult, Homer Wells would still get caught staring.

But on Thanksgiving night in Waterville, he stared so hard into his *real* parents' lives that he almost found them before he fell asleep, exhausted. He was abruptly awakened by one of the grandchildren, an older boy; Homer had forgotten he was going to share his bed with him because the house was crowded.

'Move over,' the boy said. Homer moved over. 'Keep your pecker in your pajamas,' the boy told Homer, who had no intention of taking it out. 'You know what *buggering* is?' the boy asked, then.

'No,' Homer said.

'Yes, you do, Pecker Head,' the boy said. 'That's what you all do at Saint Cloud's. You bugger yourselves. All the time. I'm telling you, you try to bugger me and you'll go

back there without your pecker,' the boy said. 'I'll cut off your pecker and feed it to the dog.'

'You mean Rufus?' Homer Wells asked.

'That's right, Pecker Head,' the boy said. 'You want to tell me again you don't know what buggering is?'

'I don't know,' Homer said.

'You want me to show you, don't you?' the boy asked.

'I don't think so,' Homer said.

'Yes you do, Pecker Head,' the boy said, and he then tried to bugger Homer Wells. Homer had never seen or heard of anyone being so abused at St Cloud's. Although the older boy had learned his style of buggery at a private school – a very good one – he had never been educated in the kind of crying that Homer Wells had been taught by the family from Three Mile Falls. It seemed to Homer that it was a good time for crying, loudly – if one wanted to escape the buggery – and his crying immediately awakened the one adult in the Draper household who had merely gone to sleep (as opposed to passing out). In other words, Homer woke Mom. He woke all the grandchildren, too, and since several of them were younger than Homer, and all of them had no knowledge of Homer's capacity for howls, his crying produced sheer terror among them – and even aroused Rufus, who snapped.

'What in Heaven's name?' Mom asked, at Homer's door.

'He tried to bugger me, so I let him have it,' said the private school boy. Homer, who was struggling to get his legendary howls under control – to send them back to history – didn't know that grandchildren are believed before orphans.

'Here in St Cloud's,' wrote Dr Larch, 'it is self-defeating and cruel to give much thought to ancestors. In other parts of the world, I'm sorry to say, an orphan's ancestors are always under suspicion.'

Mom hit Homer as hard as any representative of the failed family from Three Mile Falls ever hit him. She then