RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

That Old Cape Magic

Richard Russo

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About the Book

Jack and Joy Griffin are back on Cape Cod – where they spent their hope-filled honeymoon – for a wedding. Cracks are begining to show in Jack’s peaceful family life and thirty-four year marriage. He’s driving round with his father’s ashes in an urn in the boot of his car, haunted by memories of bittersweet family holidays spent at the Cape, while his ascerbic mother is very much alive and always on his mobile. He’s spent a lifetime trying to be happier than his parents, but has he succeeded?

A year later, at a second wedding, Jack has a second urn in the car, and his life is starting to unravel.

About the Author

Richard Russo won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for his fifth novel *Empire Falls* (made into a TV miniseries, starring Paul Newman, Ed Harris, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Helen Hunt). He is also the author of *Mohawk*, *The Risk Pool*, *Nobody's Fool* (filmed with Paul Newman) *Straight Man* and *Bridge of Sighs*, as well as a collection of short stories, *The Whore's Child*. He has collaborated with Robert Benton on the screenplays for *Nobody's Fool, Twilight* and *The Ice Harvest*. His original screenplay is the basis for Rowan Atkinson's film *Keeping Mum*, with Maggie Smith and Kristin Scott Thomas. He lives with his wife in Maine and in Boston.

Also by Richard Russo

Mohawk
The Risk Pool
Nobody's Fool
Straight Man
Empire Falls
The Whore's Child
Bridge of Sighs

For Barbara, always

RICHARD RUSSO

That Old Cape Magic

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

Cape Cod

(First Wedding)

1

A Finer Place

THOUGH THE DIGITAL clock on the bedside table in his hotel room read 5:17, Jack Griffin, suddenly wide awake, knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. He'd allowed himself to drift off too early the night before. On the heels of wakefulness came an unpleasant realization, that what he hadn't wanted to admit yesterday, even to himself, was now all too clear in the solitary, predawn dark. He should have swallowed his petulance and waited the extra day for Joy.

It had been their long-established habit to flee the campus as soon as Griffin taught his last class. Usually, they hopped on the Freedom Trail (his term for I-95), drove to New York and treated themselves by checking into a good hotel. During the day he would evaluate his small mountain of student portfolios while Joy shopped or otherwise amused herself, and then, evenings, they'd catch up on movies and go to restaurants. The whole thing reminded him of the early years of their marriage back in L.A. It cost a small fortune, but there was something about spending money they didn't really have that made him optimistic about more coming in—which was how it had worked in L.A.—and it got him through the portfolios.

This year Kelsey's Cape Cod wedding had royally screwed up their plans, making New York impractical,

though he'd been willing to substitute Boston. But Joy, assuming that thanks to the wedding all the usual bets were off, had messed things up further by scheduling meetings on the day after his last class. "Just *go*," she said when he expressed his annoyance at the way things were working out. "Have a boys' night out in Boston and I'll meet you on the Cape." He'd squinted at this proposal. Didn't you need more than one to have a boys' night out? Or had Joy meant it to be singular, one boy celebrating his boyness? Was that how she'd understood the phrase all her life, as singular? Joy's relationship to the English language was not without glitches. She was forever mixing metaphors, claiming that something was "a tough line to hoe." Row to hoe? Line to walk? Her sisters, Jane and June, were even worse, and when corrected all three would narrow their eyes dangerously and identically. If they'd had a family motto, it would have been You Know Perfectly Well What I Mean.

In any event, his wife's suggestion that he go on without her had seemed less than sincere, which was why he decided to call her bluff. "All right," he said, "that's what I'll do," expecting her to say, *Fine, if it means that much to you, I'll reschedule the meetings*. But she hadn't said that, even when she saw him packing his bag, and so he'd discovered a truth that other men probably knew already—that once you'd packed a bag in front of a woman there was no possibility of unpacking, or of *not* going and taking the damn bag with you.

Worse, Joy, who preferred to watch movies on DVD rather than in a theater, as they were meant to be seen, had given him a list of films he was forbidden to see without her, and of course these were the only ones worth seeing. He'd spent an hour looking through the restaurant guides provided by the hotel, but couldn't decide on one, or even on what kind of food he wanted. Griffin had no trouble making these sorts of decisions when she was around, but

for some reason, when he had only himself to please, he often couldn't make up his mind. He told himself this was just the result of being married for thirty-four years, that part of the decision-making process was imagining what his wife would enjoy. Okay, but more and more he found himself stalled, in the middle of whatever room he happened to be standing in, and he realized that this had been, of course, his father's classic pose. In the end Griffin had ordered room service and watched a crappy made-for-TV movie, the kind he and Tommy, his old partner, had been reduced to writing that last year or two in L.A. before he'd gotten his teaching gig and moved back East with Joy and their daughter, Laura. He'd fallen asleep before the first commercial, confident he could predict not only the movie's outcome but also half its dialogue.

In order not to dwell on yesterday's mistakes, he decided to put today in motion by calling down to the bell captain for his car. Twenty minutes later, dressed and showered, he'd checked out of his Back Bay hotel. The whole of Boston fit neatly into the rectangle of his rearview mirror, and by the time the Sagamore Bridge, one of two that spanned the Cape Cod Canal, hove into view, the sky was silver in the east, and he felt the last remnants of yesterday's prevarications begin to lift like the patchy fog he'd been in and out of since leaving the city. The Sagamore arched dramatically upward in the middle, helping to pull the sun over the horizon, and though the air was far too cool, Griffin pulled off onto the shoulder of the road and put the convertible's top down, feeling truly off the reservation for the first time since leaving home in Connecticut. There was something vaguely thrilling about not being where his wife thought he was. She liked to know what people were up to, and not just him. She called Laura most mornings, her brain still lazy with sleep, to ask, "So … what's on the agenda for you today?" She also phoned both of her sisters several times a week and knew that June was

having her hair done tomorrow morning and that Jane had put on five pounds and was starting a diet. She even knew what new folly her idiot twin brothers, Jared and Jason, were engaged in. To Griffin, an only child, such behavior was well over the line that separated the merely inexplicable from the truly perverse.

Zipping along Route 6, Griffin realized he was humming "That Old Black Magic," the song his parents had sung ironically—both university English professors, that's how they did most things—every time they crossed the Sagamore, substituting *Cape* for *black*. When he was growing up, they'd spent part of every summer on the Cape. He could always tell what kind of year it had been, money-wise, by where and when they stayed. One particularly prosperous year they'd rented a small house in Chatham for the month of August. Another year, when faculty salaries were frozen, all they could afford was Sandwich in June. His parents had been less wed to each other than to a shared sense of grievance over being exiled eleven months of every year to the "Mid-fucking-west," a phrase they didn't say so much as spit. They had good academic careers, though perhaps not the stellar ones that might have been predicted, given their Ivy League pedigree. Both had grown up in the Rust Belt of western New York State, his mother in suburban Rochester, his father in Buffalo, the children of lower-middle-class, white-collar parents. At Cornell, where they'd both gone on scholarship, they'd met not only each other but also the kind of friends who'd invited them home for holidays in Wellesley and Westchester and for summer vacations in the Hamptons or on the Cape. They told their parents they could earn more money there, which was true, but in fact they'd have done anything to avoid returning to their parents' depressing upstate homes. At Yale, where they did their graduate work, they came to believe they were destined for research positions at one of the other Ivys, at

least until the market for academics headed south and they had to take what they could get—the pickings even slimmer for a couple—and that turned out to be a huge state university in Indiana.

Betrayed. That was how they felt. Why *go* to Cornell, to Yale, if Indiana was your reward? But they'd had little choice but to hunker down and make the best of their wretched timing, so they dove into teaching and research and committee work, hoping to bolster their vitae so that when the academic winds changed they'd be ready. They feared the Princeton and Dartmouth ships had probably sailed for good, but that still left the Swarthmores and Vassars of the world as safe if not terribly exciting havens. This much, at least, was surely their due. And before going up for promotion and tenure (or "promotion and tether," in their parlance) in the Mid-fucking-west, they'd each had opportunities—she at Amherst, he at Bowdoin—but never together. So they stayed put in their jobs and their marriage, each terrified, Griffin now suspected, that the other, unshackled, would succeed and escape to the kind of academic post (an endowed chair!) that would complete the misery of the one left behind. To make their unhappy circumstances more tolerable, they had affairs and pretended to be deeply wounded when these came to light. His father had been a genuine serial adulterer, whereas his mother simply refused to lag behind in this or anything else.

Of course all of this was adult understanding. As a boy, the reluctant witness to his parents' myriad quarrels and recriminations, Griffin had imagined that he must be the one keeping them together. It was his mother who eventually disabused him of this bizarre notion. At his and Joy's wedding reception, actually. But by then they had finally divorced—even spite, apparently, was not eternal—and she'd narrowly won the race to remarry. In an ecumenical mood, she ventured outside the English

department for her second husband, a philosopher named Bart, whom she'd quickly dubbed "Bartleby." At the reception, half in her cups, she'd assured Griffin, "Good heavens, no, it wasn't *you*. What kept us together was 'That Old Cape Magic.' Remember how we used to sing it every year on the Sagamore?" She then turned to Bartleby. "One glorious month, each summer," she explained. "Sun. Sand. Water. Gin. Followed by eleven months of misery." Then back to Griffin. "But that's about par for most marriages, I think you'll find." The *I think you'll find*, he understood, was of course meant to suggest that in her view, his own marital arithmetic was likely to be much the same. For a moment it seemed as if Bartleby might offer an observation of his own, but he apparently preferred not to, though he did sigh meaningfully.

Griffin was about to respond when his father reappeared with Claudia, his former graduate student and new wife. They'd disappeared briefly after the ceremony, to quarrel or make love, he had no idea. "I swear to God," his mother said, "if he buys that child a house on the Cape—and I do mean *anywhere* on the Cape—I may have to murder him." Her face brightened at a pleasant thought. "You might actually prove useful," she told Bartleby, then turned back to Griffin. "Your stepfather collects locked-room murder mysteries. Death by curare, that sort of thing. You can figure something out, can't you? Just make sure I'm in full view of everyone in the drawing room when the fat cow hits the deck, writhing in excruciating pain." She knew perfectly well, of course, that Griffin's father didn't have the money to buy Claudia (who was more zaftig than fat) or anyone else a house on the Cape, of course. She'd made sure of that by beggaring him in the divorce settlement, but the possibility—what of, that he might purchase a winning Lotto ticket?—still clearly worried her.

To Griffin, now fifty-seven, roughly the same age his parents had been when he and Joy married, the Cape place-

names were still magical: Falmouth, Woods Hole, Barnstable, Dennis, Orleans, Harwich. They made a boy of him again and put him in the backseat of his parents' car, where he'd spent much of his boyhood, unbelted, resting his arms on the front seat, trying to hear what they, who never made any attempt to include him in their conversations, were talking about. It wasn't so much that he was interested in their front-seat conversations as aware that decisions that impacted him were being made up there, and if privy to these hatching plans he might offer an opinion. Unfortunately, the fact that his chin was resting on the seat back seemed to preclude this. Most of what he overheard wasn't really worth the effort anyway. "Wellfleet," his mother might say, studying the road atlas. "Why haven't we ever tried Wellfleet?" By the time Griffin was a high school freshman, which marked the last of their Cape vacations, they'd rented just about everywhere. Each summer, when they handed over the keys at the end of their stay, the rental agent always asked if they wanted to book it for next year, but they always said no, which made Griffin wonder if the perfect spot they were searching for really existed. Perhaps, he concluded, just looking was sufficient in and of itself.

While he roamed the beach unattended, full of youthful energy and freedom, his parents spent sunny afternoons lying on the sand with their "guilty pleasures," books they'd have been embarrassed to admit to their colleagues they'd ever heard of. They were on vacation, they claimed, not just from the Mid-fucking-west but also from the literary canon they'd sworn to uphold. His mother's taste ran to dark, disturbing thrillers and cynical spy novels. "That," she would say, turning the book's last page with evident satisfaction, "was truly twisted." His father alternated between literary pornography and P. G. Wodehouse, enjoying both thoroughly, as if *Naked Lunch* and *Bertie*

Wooster Sees It Through were intended as companion pieces.

The only thing they both read—indeed, studied as intently as each year's Modern Language Association job listings—was the real-estate guide. Unwilling to give the other a first look, they always picked up two copies as soon as they arrived and wrote their names on the covers so they'd know which was which and whose fault it was if one got lost. A house here was part of their long-range, two-part plan to escape the Mid-fucking-west. First they would find real jobs back East, where they'd locate a suitable apartment to rent. This would allow them to save money for a house on the Cape, where they'd spend summers and holidays and the occasional long weekend, until of course they retired—early if they could swing it—and lived on there full-time, reading and writing op-eds and, who knew, maybe even trying their hand at a novel.

A single day was usually all it took for each of them to plow through the hundreds of listings in the fat real-estate guide and place each into one of two categories—Can't Afford It or Wouldn't Have It As a Gift—before tossing the booklet aside in disgust, because everything was more expensive this year than last. But the very next day his father would set Jeeves aside and take another look. "Page twenty-seven," he'd say, and Griffin's mother would set down her Ripley and rummage for her copy in the beach bag. "Bear with me, now," he'd continue. Or, "Some things would have to go right"—meaning a big merit raise or a new university-press book contract—"but …" And then he'd explain why a couple of the listings they'd quickly dismissed the day before just maybe could be made to work. Later in the month, on a rainy day, they'd go so far as to look at a house or two at the low end of the Can't Afford It category, but the realtors always intuited at a glance that Griffin's parents were just tire kickers. The house they wanted was located in a future only they could see. For

people who dealt largely in dreams, his father was fond of observing, realtors were a surprisingly unromantic bunch, like card counters in a Vegas casino.

The drive back to the Mid-fucking-west was always brutal, his parents barely speaking to each other, as if suddenly recalling last year's infidelities, or maybe contemplating whom they'd settle for this year. Sex, if you went by Griffin's parents, definitely took a backseat to real estate on the passion gauge.

What he'd do, Griffin decided, was take Route 6 all the way to Provincetown, have a late breakfast there, then poke back up the Cape on tacky old 28. He wondered if it would still be lined with flea markets, as it had been when he was a kid. His father, an avid collector of political ephemera and an avowed Democrat, could never pass one without stopping to make sure there wasn't an old Wendell Willkie campaign button its owner didn't know the value of lying at the bottom of a cardboard box. Republican artifacts were another of his guilty pleasures. "All your father's pleasures are guilty," his mother claimed, "and deserve to be." Of course Route 28 would take twice as long, but there was no hurry. Joy wouldn't arrive until evening, probably late, and the sooner he got to the B and B where she'd booked a room for the wedding, the sooner he'd feel compelled to open the trunk of the convertible, which contained, in addition to his travel bag and his bulging satchel, the urn bearing his father's ashes, which he'd pledged to scatter over the weekend. He wasn't sure that disposing of cremated midwestern academics in Massachusetts waters was strictly legal, and would have preferred that Joy be there for moral support (and as a lookout). Still, if he happened upon a quiet, serene and deserted spot, he might just do the deed by himself. Hell, maybe he'd dump the portfolios in as well—an idea that made him smile.

Pilgrim Monument had just appeared on the horizon when his cell phone vibrated in the cup holder, and he pulled over to answer it. In the last nine months, since his father's death, he'd been in several minor but costly fender benders, so this seemed safer than talking and driving at the same time, though there wasn't as much room on the shoulder as he would've hoped for. A truck roared by, too close for comfort, but no one else was coming. He'd just have to make it quick.

He assumed the caller, at this hour, had to be Joy, but it wasn't. "Where *are* you?" his mother wanted to know. Lately, she didn't bother saying hello or identifying herself. In her opinion he was supposed to know who it was, and thanks to her tone of perpetual annoyance and aversion to preamble, he usually did.

"Mom," he said, not all that anxious to testify to his present whereabouts. "I was just thinking about you." A lone gull, perhaps concluding that he'd pulled over to eat something cheesy, circled directly overhead and let out a sharp screech. "You and Dad both, actually."

"Oh," she said. "Him."

"I'm not supposed to think about Dad?"

"Think about whomever you want," she said. "When did I ever pry into your thoughts? Your father and I may not have agreed on much, but we respected your intellectual and emotional privacy."

Griffin sighed. Anymore, even his most benign comments set his mother off, and once she was on a roll it was best just to let her finish. Their respect for his privacy had been, he knew all too well, mostly disinterest, but it wasn't worth arguing over.

"I have my *own* thoughts, thank you very much," she continued, implying, unless he was mistaken, that he wouldn't want to know what these were, either. "And they are full and sufficient. I can't imagine why your father

should be occupying yours, but if he is, don't let me interfere."

The circling gull cried out again, even louder this time, and Griffin briefly covered the phone with his hand. "Did you call for a reason, Mom?"

But she must've heard the idiot bird, because she said, her voice rich with resentment and accusation, "Are you on *the Cape*?"

"Yes, Mom," he admitted. "We're attending a wedding here tomorrow. Why, should I have alerted you? Asked permission?"

"Where?" she said. "What part?"

"Near Falmouth," he was happy to report. The upper Cape, in her view, was strictly for people who didn't know any better. You might as well live in Buzzards Bay, drive go-carts, play miniature golf, eat clam chowder thickened with flour, wear a Red Sox hat.

"Marriage," she sneered, what he'd told her apparently now registering. "What folly."

"You were married twice yourself, Mom."

When Bartleby died several years back, she'd hoped there might be a little something in it for her, at least enough to buy a small cottage near one of the Dennises, maybe. But an irrevocable trust let his rapacious children take everything, and they'd been unrepentant in their greed. "You made our father's final years a living hell," one of them had had the gall to tell her. "Did you ever hear such nonsense?" she'd asked Griffin. "Did they even *know* the man? Could they imagine he'd *ever* been happy? Was there ever a philosopher who *wasn't* morose and depressed?"

"The bride's Kelsey," Griffin told her. "From L.A., remember?"

"Why would I know your California friends?" This was no innocent question. Though she wouldn't admit it, his mother was still resentful of the years he and Joy and then Laura had spent out West, out of her orbit. And she'd

always considered his screenwriting a betrayal of his genetic gifts.

"Not *our* friend. Laura's." Though it was entirely possible, now that he thought about it, they'd never met. It had always been Griffin's policy not to inflict his parents on his wife and daughter, who'd really gotten to know her grandmother only after they moved back East.

"How does it look?"

"How does what look?"

"The Cape. You just told me you were on the Cape, so I'm asking how it looks to you."

"Like always, I guess," he said, not about to confess that his heart had started racing on the Sagamore Bridge, that he still loved something that she and her hated husband also loved.

"They say it's too crowded now. I guess we had the best of it. You, me, the man occupying your thoughts."

"Again, what were you calling about, Mom?"

"Fine," she said. "Change the subject. I need you to bring me some books, and I'll e-mail you the titles. I assume you'll be visiting at some point? Or have I seen the last of you?"

"Are these books I'll be able to find? For instance, are they in print, or is this yet another fool's errand you've designed for me?" Since Bartleby's death, Griffin had become the man in his mother's life, and she enjoyed nothing more than setting him the sort of impossible task, especially of the academic variety, that would've been easy if he'd done with his life what she'd intended instead of what he himself had preferred.

"Just because you can't find what I ask for doesn't mean it's a fool's errand. You belong to a generation that never learned basic research skills, who can't even negotiate a card catalog."

"They don't have those anymore," he said, for the pleasure of hearing her shudder.

Which she denied him. “You think typing a word into Google and pressing *Go* is research.”

There was, he had to admit, some truth to this. Back in his screenwriting days, he’d always happily delegated research to Tommy, who was genuinely curious if easily distractible. Confronted with his own ignorance, Griffin preferred to just make something up and move forward, whereas his partner, not unreasonably, preferred making sure their narrative had a sturdy, factual foundation. “You *do* know that when the cameras roll they’re going to be pointing at something in the real world, right?” he’d asked. To which Griffin would reply that the cameras were never going to roll if they kept getting bogged down in background.

“The things I require are all at Sterling,” his mother continued. “I still have privileges there, you know.”

It was entirely possible, Griffin knew, this was the real reason she’d called: to remind him of who she was, who she’d been, that she still had privileges at the Yale library. She might not actually need any books.

“There are some journal articles, too. Those you can just photocopy. The library offered to provide that service, but it would be cheaper for you to do it. I’m not made of money, as you know.”

As he had excellent reason to. Her TIAA-CREF retirement and university insurance covered a good chunk of her assisted-living facility, but Griffin made up the difference.

“You can pick them up on your way here. Are we talking June, this impending visit?” she wondered. And clearly they’d better be.

“I can come for a couple of days near the end of the month, if you need me to.”

“Not until then?”

“I haven’t even turned in my final grades yet. The trunk of my car’s full of student portfolios.” *Not to mention Dad’s*

ashes, he almost added.

"You actually read them?"

"Didn't you read yours?"

"We had no *portfolios*, your father and I," she reminded him. "We had exams. Our students wrote papers with footnotes. We taught real courses with real content." Their metaphorical cameras had also been pointed, in other words, at something that actually existed. "Assigned readings. Rigor, it was called."

A car blew by, its Dopplering horn loud enough to startle him. "Are you sure I'm qualified to do your photocopying? What if I screw up?"

"So, what were you thinking … about your father and me?"

For a moment he considered telling her he feared he was becoming his father, that this was what his recent bouts of indecision, not to mention the fender benders, might be about. But of course it would anger his mother, and prolong the conversation, if he suggested he was more like his father than her. "I thought you didn't want to pry, Mom. Isn't that what you just said, that my thoughts are my own?"

"They are, of course. Still, as a personal favor, couldn't you arrange to think about your father and me separately?"

"I was remembering how happy you both got on the Sagamore Bridge, how you sang 'That Old Cape Magic'?" *And how miserable you both were in the same spot going the other direction*. "As if happiness were a place."

But she wasn't interested in this particular stroll down memory lane. "Speaking of unhappy places, when you visit, I want you to look at this new one I'm at." Her third assisted-living facility in as many years. The first was connected to the university and full of the very people she'd been trying to escape. The second was home to mid-fucking-western farmwives who read Agatha Christie and couldn't understand why she turned up her nose at the

Miss Marples they thrust at her, saying, “You’ll like this one. It’s a corker!”

“I mean *really* look at it,” his mother continued. “It’s certainly not what we imagined.”

“What did we imagine, Mom?”

“Nice,” she said. “We imagined it would be nice.”

Then she was gone, the line dead. The whole conversation had been, he knew from experience, a warning shot across his bow. And his mother was, after her own fashion, considerate. She never badgered him during the last month of the semester. A lifelong academic, she knew what those final weeks were like and gave him a pass. But after that, all bets were off. The timing of today’s call suggested she’d been on his college’s Web site again and knew he’d taught his last class. He knew it was a mistake to get her a laptop for her birthday even as he bought it, but in her previous facility she’d been accused of hogging the computer in the common room. Also of hogging the attentions of the few old men there, a charge she waved away. “Look at them,” she snorted. “There isn’t enough Viagra in all of Canada.” Though she did admit, as if to foreshorten ruthless interrogation on this subject, that there *was* more sex in these retirement homes than you might imagine. A *lot* more.

He supposed it was possible she really did need the books from Sterling. At eighty-five, her physical health failing, she was still mentally sharp and claimed to be researching a book on one of the Brontës (“You remember books, right? Bound objects? Lots and lots of pages? Print that goes all the way out to the margins?”). But he made a mental note to check her list to make sure he couldn’t find them in his own college library.

When a semi roared by, he noticed a foul odor and wondered what in the world the trucker was hauling. Only when he turned the key in the ignition did he see the

viscous white glob on his shirtsleeve. The gull had shit on him!

His mother had made him a stationary target, and this was the result.

2

Slippery Slope

BY THE TIME Griffin's parents got divorced, each claiming they should've cut the cord sooner, that they'd made each other miserable for too long, he was in film school out West, and he'd thought it was probably for the best. But neither had prospered in their second marriages, and their careers suffered, too. Together, or at least voting together, they'd been a force to reckon with in English department politics. Singly, often voting against each other, they could be safely ignored, and the worst of their enemies now sniped at both with impunity. Of the two, his mother seemed to fare better at first. Openly contemptuous of the young literary theorists and culture critics when she was married to Griffin's father, she'd reinvented herself as a gender-studies specialist and became for a time their darling. One of her old "guilty pleasures," Patricia Highsmith, had become respectable, and his mother published several well-placed articles on her and two or three other gay/lesbian novelists. Panels on gender were suddenly all the rage, and she found herself chairing several of these at regional conferences, where she hinted to her large and largely lesbian audiences that she herself had always been open, in both theory and practice, as regards her own sexuality. And perhaps, he supposed, she was. Bartleby, who'd begun their marriage preferring not to

argue and ended it preferring not to speak at all, remained philosophical when these innuendos were reported back to him. Griffin had assumed his mother was exaggerating his withdrawal from speech, but a few months before his unexpected death (going to the doctor was something else he preferred not to do), he'd paid them a quick visit and they'd all gone out to dinner and the man hadn't spoken a word. He didn't seem to be in a bad mood and would occasionally smile ruefully at something his wife or Griffin said, but the closest he came to utterance was when a piece of meat lodged in his windpipe, turning his face the color of a grape until a passing waiter saw his distress and Heimliched him on the spot.

But his mother's self-reinvention, a bold and for a time successful stroke, had ultimately failed. When the university, mostly at her suggestion and direction, created the Gender Studies Program, she of course expected to be named as its chair, but instead they'd recruited a trans-gendered scholar from, of all places, Utah, and that had been the last straw. From then on she taught her classes but quit attending meetings or having anything to do with departmental politics. Unless Griffin was mistaken, her secret hope was that her colleagues, noticing her absence, would try to lure her back into full academic life, but that hadn't happened. Even Bartleby's passing had elicited little sympathy. While she continued to publish, run panels and apply for chairperson positions at various English departments, her file by this time contained several letters suggesting that while she was a good teacher and a distinguished scholar, she was also divisive and quarrelsome. A bitch, really.

Despite deep misgivings, Griffin had accepted the university's invitation to attend his mother's retirement dinner. (Joy had volunteered to go as well, but he insisted on sparing her.) There happened to be a bumper crop of retirees that year, and each was given the opportunity to

reflect on his or her many years of service to the institution. He found it particularly disconcerting that his mother was the last speaker on the program. He supposed it was possible the planners were saving the best, most distinguished retirees for last, though more likely they shared his misgivings about what might transpire, and putting her last represented damage control. When it was finally her turn, his mother rose to a smattering of polite applause and went to the podium. That she was wearing an expensive, well-tailored suit only deepened apprehension. “Unlike my colleagues,” she said directly into the microphone, the only speaker of the evening to recognize that fundamental necessity, “I’ll be brief and honest. I wish I could think of something nice to say about you people and this university, I really do. But the truth we dare not utter is that ours is a distinctly second-rate institution, as are the vast majority of our students, as are we.” Then she returned to her seat and patted Griffin’s hand, as if to say, *There, now; that wasn’t so bad, was it?* What she actually said in the stunned silence was, “Here’s something strange. For the first time in over a decade, I wish your father were here. He’d have enjoyed that.”

His father had fared even worse after the divorce. He, too, had attempted reinvention by attaching himself to the new American Studies major. He’d always been at least as interested in politics and history as literature, and the university had been willing to lend half of him to American Studies provided his colleagues in English had no objections (they certainly didn’t). His new office was one floor down in the Modern and Classical Languages Building, and Claudia, a big strapping graduate student, had offered to help him move his seventy or so boxes of books and periodicals. A lot of bending over was required and she wasn’t wearing a bra. Though he hadn’t really noticed her before, he did now, and his colleagues noticed him notice, remarking that it was clear which half of him