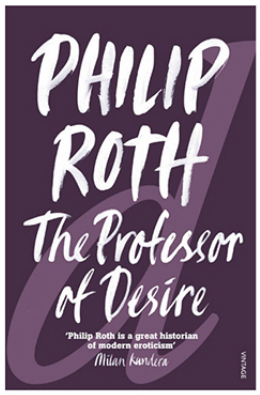
PHILIP ROTH

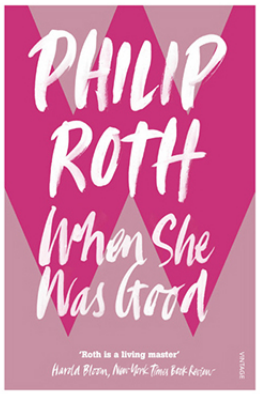
The Counterlife

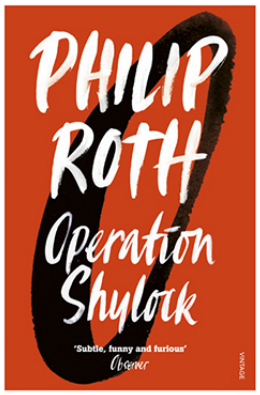
'Roth is a comic genius... In this book (wonderfully sharp, worryingly intense) he is an electrifier'
Martin Amis

VINTAGE

VINTAGE

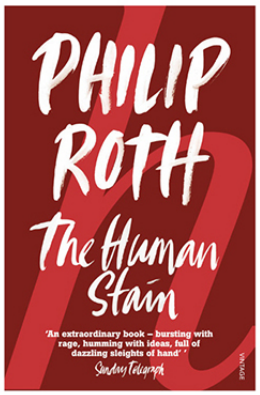

PHILIP ROTH
The Professor of Desire
'Philip Roth is a great historian of modern eroticism'
Milan Kundera
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
When She Was Good
'Roth is a living master'
Harold Bloom, New York Times Book Review
VINTAGE

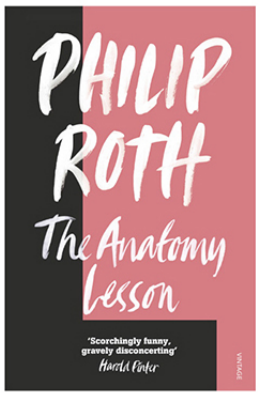

PHILIP ROTH
Operation Shylock
'Subtle, funny and furious'
Observer
VINTAGE

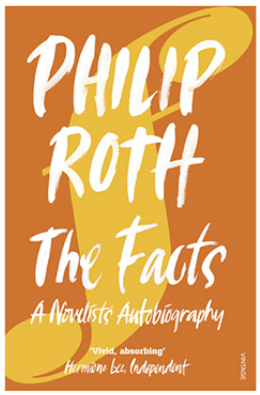

PHILIP ROTH
Letting Go
'Letting Go seethes with life'
New York Times
VINTAGE

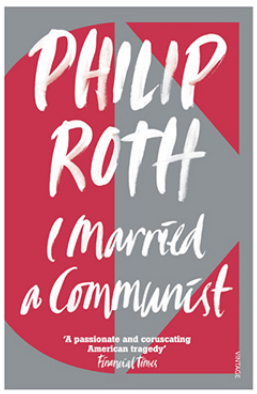

PHILIP ROTH
Our Gang
'The uncontested master of comic irony'
Time
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
The Human Stain
'An extraordinary book – bursting with rage, humming with ideas, full of dazzling sleights of hand' '
Sunday Telegraph
VINTAGE

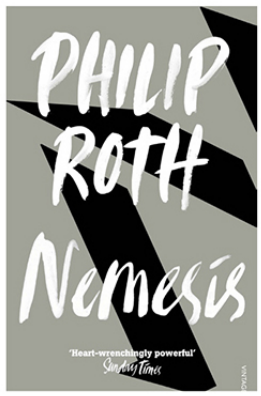

PHILIP ROTH
Portnoy's Complaint
'The most outrageously funny book about sex yet written'
Guardian
VINTAGE

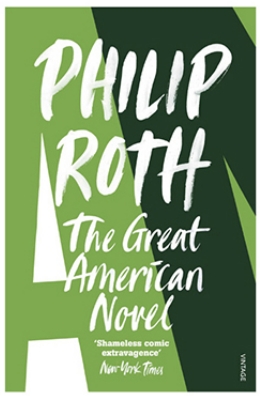

PHILIP ROTH
The Anatomy Lesson
'Scorchingly funny, gravely disconcerting'
Harold Pinter
VINTAGE

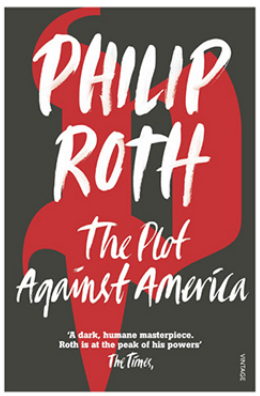

PHILIP ROTH
The Facts
A Novelist's Autobiography
'Vivid, absorbing'
Hermione Lee, Independent
VINTAGE

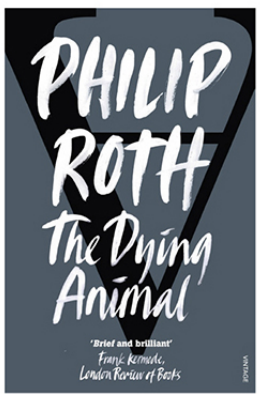

PHILIP ROTH
I Married a Communist
'A passionate and coruscating American tragedy'
Financial Times
VINTAGE

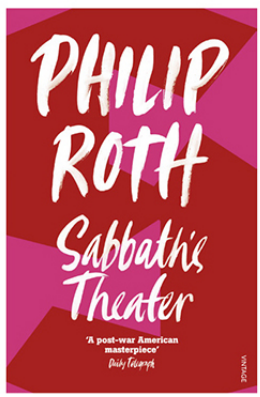

PHILIP ROTH
Shop Talk
'Riveting'
Sunday Times
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
Nemesis
'Heart-wrenchingly powerful'
Sunday Times
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
The Great American Novel
'Shameless comic extravagance'
New York Times
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
The Plot Against America
'A dark, humane masterpiece. Roth is at the peak of his powers'
The Times
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
The Dying Animal
'Brief and brilliant'
Frank Kermode, London Review of Books
VINTAGE


PHILIP ROTH
Sabbath's Theater
'A post-war American masterpiece'
Daily Telegraph
VINTAGE

Contents

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Counterlife **is about people living their dreams of renewal and escape, some of them going so far as to risk lives to alter their destinies. Wherever they find themselves, the characters of *The Counterlife* are tempted by the prospect of an alternative existence.**

Illuminating these lives in free-fall and transformation is the acrobatic mind of novelist Nathan Zuckerman. His is the sceptical, enveloping intelligence that calculates the price that's paid in the struggle to change personal fortune and reshape history, whether in a dentist's office in suburban New Jersey; a tradition-bound English village in Gloucestershire; a church in London's West End; or in a tiny desert settlement in Israel's occupied West Bank. Shot through with head-turning dualities, as daring as it is moving, *The Counterlife* reinvents the novel with style, grace and wit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House, and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction, previously awarded to John Dos Passos, William Faulkner and Saul Bellow, among others. He has twice won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 2005 *The Plot Against America* received the Society of American Historians' Prize for 'the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003–2004'.

Recently Roth received PEN's two most prestigious prizes: in 2006 the PEN/Nabokov Award 'for a body of work … of enduring originality and consummate craftsmanship' and in 2007 the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, given to a writer whose 'scale of achievement over a sustained career … places him or her in the highest rank of American literature'. In 2011 Roth won the International Man Booker Prize.

Roth is the only living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America.

ALSO BY PHILIP ROTH

Zuckerman Books
The Ghost Writer
Zuckerman Unbound
The Anatomy Lesson
The Prague Orgy

American Pastoral
I Married a Communist
The Human Stain

Exit Ghost

Roth Books
The Facts
Deception
Patrimony
Operation Shylock
The Plot Against America

Kepesh Books
The Breast
The Professor of Desire
The Dying Animal

Nemeses: Short Novels
Everyman
Indignation
The Humbling
Nemesis

Miscellany
Reading Myself and Others

Shop Talk

Other Books
Goodbye, Columbus
Letting Go
When She Was Good
Portnoy's Complaint
Our Gang
The Great American Novel
My Life as a Man
Sabbath's Theater

‘America’s greatest living novelist’
Sunday Times

‘There aren’t supposed to be degrees or intensities of uniqueness, and yet Roth is somehow inordinately unique. He is bloodymindedly himself, himself, himself’
Martin Amis

‘Opening the first page of any Philip Roth is like hearing the ignition on a boiler roar into life. Passion is what we’re going to get, and plenty of it’
Guardian

‘He is a writer of quite extraordinary skill and courage; and he takes on bigger enemies in every book he writes’
Frank Kermode

‘Philip Roth is a great historian of modern eroticism’
Milan Kundera

‘There is a clarity, almost a ruthlessness, to his work, which makes the experience of reading any of his books a bracing, wild ride’
The Times

‘He is skilled, witty, energetic and performs like a virtuoso’
Saul Bellow

‘Nobody writes about the American family with more tenderness and honesty’
New Statesman

‘Roth is a living master’
Harold Bloom

TO MY FATHER AT EIGHTY-FIVE

Philip Roth

THE COUNTERLIFE

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1. Basel

EVER SINCE THE family doctor, during a routine checkup, discovered an abnormality on his EKG and he went in overnight for the coronary catheterization that revealed the dimensions of the disease, Henry's condition had been successfully treated with drugs, enabling him to work and to carry on his life at home exactly as before. He didn't even complain of chest pain or of the breathlessness that his doctor might well have expected to find in a patient with advanced arterial obstruction. He was asymptomatic before the routine examination that revealed the abnormality and remained that way during the year before he decided on surgery—without symptoms but for a single terrible side effect from the very medication that stabilized his condition and substantially reduced the risk of a heart attack.

The trouble began after two weeks on the drug. "I've heard this a thousand times," the cardiologist said when Henry telephoned to report what was happening to him. The cardiologist, like Henry a successful, vigorous professional man not yet into his forties, couldn't have been more sympathetic. He would try to reduce the dose to a point where the medicine, a beta-blocker, continued to control the coronary disease and to blunt the hypertension without interfering with Henry's sexual function. Through a fine-tuning of the medication, he said, you could sometimes achieve "a compromise."

They experimented for six months, first with the dosage and, when that didn't work, with other brands of the drug,

but nothing helped: he no longer awakened with his morning erection or had sufficient potency for intercourse with his wife, Carol, or with his assistant, Wendy, who was sure that it was she, and not the medication, that was responsible for this startling change. At the end of the day, with the outer-office door locked and the blinds down, she worked with all her finesse to arouse him, but work it was, hard labor for both of them, and when he told her it was no use and begged her to stop, had finally to pry open her jaws to make her stop, she was even more convinced that the fault was hers. One evening, when she had burst into tears and told him that she knew it was only a matter of time before he went out and found somebody new, Henry struck her across the face. If it had been the act of a rhino, of a wild man in an orgasmic frenzy, Wendy would have been characteristically accommodating; this, however, was a manifestation, not of ecstasy, but of utter exhaustion with her blindness. She didn't understand, the stupid girl! But of course he didn't either, failed as yet to comprehend the confusion that this loss might elicit in somebody who happened to adore him.

Immediately afterward, he was overcome with remorse. Holding her to him, he assured Wendy, who was still weeping, that she was virtually all he thought about now every day—indeed (though he could not say as much) if Wendy would only let him find work for her in another dental office, he wouldn't have to be reminded every five minutes of what he could no longer have. There were still moments during office hours when he surreptitiously caressed her or watched with the old yearning as she moved about in her formfitting white tunic and trousers, but then he remembered his little pink heart pills and was plummeted into despair. Soon Henry began to have the most demonic fantasies of the adoring young woman who would have done anything to restore his potency being

overwhelmed before his eyes by three, four, and five other men.

He couldn't control his fantasies of Wendy and her five faceless men, and yet at the movies with Carol he preferred now to lower his lids and rest his eyes till the love scenes were over. He couldn't stand the sight of the girlie magazines piled up in his barbershop. He had all he could do not to get up and leave the table when, at a dinner party, one of their friends began to joke about sex. He began to feel the emotions of a deeply unattractive person, an impatient, resentful, puritan disdain for the virile men and appetizing women engrossed by their erotic games. The cardiologist, after putting him on the drug, had said, "Forget your heart now and live," but he couldn't, because five days a week from nine to five he couldn't forget Wendy.

He returned to the doctor to have a serious talk about surgery. The cardiologist had heard that a thousand times too. Patiently he explained that they did not like to operate on people who were asymptomatic and in whom the disease showed every sign of being stabilized by medication. If Henry did finally choose the surgical option, he wouldn't be the first patient to find that preferable to an indefinite number of years of sexual inactivity; nonetheless, the doctor strongly advised him to wait and see how the passage of time affected his "adjustment." Though Henry wasn't the worst candidate for bypass surgery, the location of the grafts he'd need didn't make him the ideal candidate either. "What does that mean?" Henry asked. "It means that this operation is no picnic in the best of circumstances, and yours aren't the best. We even lose people, Henry. Live with it."

Those words frightened him so that on the drive home he sternly reminded himself of all those who live of necessity without women, and in far more harrowing circumstances than his own—men in prison, men at war … yet soon enough he was remembering Wendy again,

conjuring up every position in which she could be entered by the erection he no longer had, envisioning her just as hungrily as any daydreaming convict, only without recourse to the savage quick fix that keeps a lonely man half-sane in his cell. He reminded himself of how he'd happily lived without women as a prepubescent boy—had he ever been more content than back in the forties during those summers at the shore? Imagine that you're eleven again … but that worked no better than pretending to be serving a sentence at Sing Sing. He reminded himself of the terrible unruliness spawned by unconstrainable desire—the plotting, the longing, the crazily impetuous act, the dreaming relentlessly of the other, and when one of these bewitching others at last becomes the clandestine mistress, the intrigue and anxiety and deception. He could now be a faithful husband to Carol. He would never have to lie to Carol—he'd never have anything to lie about. *They could once more enjoy that simple, honest, trusting marriage that had been theirs before Maria had appeared in his office ten years earlier to have a crown repaired.*

He'd at first been so thrown by the green silk jersey dress and the turquoise eyes and the European sophistication that he could hardly manage the small talk at which he was ordinarily so proficient, let alone make a pass while Maria sat in the chair obediently opening her mouth. From the punctiliousness with which they treated each other during her four visits, Henry could never have imagined that on the eve of her return to Basel ten months later, she would be saying to him, "I never thought I could love two men," and that their parting would be so horrendous—it had all been so new to both of them that they had made adultery positively virginal. It had never occurred to Henry, until Maria came along to tell him so, that a man who looked like him could probably sleep with every attractive woman in town. He was without sexual vanity and deeply shy, a young man still largely propelled

by feelings of decorum that he had imbibed and internalized and never seriously questioned. Usually the more appealing the woman, the more withdrawn Henry was; with the appearance of an unknown woman whom he found particularly desirable, he would become hopelessly, rigidly formal, lose all spontaneity, and often couldn't even introduce himself without flushing. That was the man he'd been as a faithful husband—that's why *he'd been a faithful husband. And now he was doomed to be faithful again.*

The worst of adjusting to the drug turned out to be adjusting to the drug. It shocked him that he was able to live without sex. It could be done, he was doing it, and that killed him—just as once being unable *to live without it was what killed him. Adjusting meant resigning himself to being this way, and he refused to be this way, and was further demoralized by stooping to the euphemism "this way." And yet, so well did the adjustment proceed, that some eight or nine months after the cardiologist had urged him not to rush into surgery before testing the effect of the passage of time, Henry could no longer remember what an erection was. Trying to, he came up with images out of the old pornographic funnies, the blasphemous "hotbooks" that had disclosed to kids of his generation the underside of Dixie Dugan's career. He was plagued by mental images of outlandish cocks and by the fantasies of Wendy with all those other men. He imagined her sucking them off. He imagined himself sucking them off. He began secretly to idolize all the potent men as though he no longer mattered as a man himself. Despite his dark good looks and tall, athletic physique, he seemed to have passed overnight from his thirties to his eighties.*

One Saturday morning, after telling Carol that he was going for a walk up in the Reservation hills—"to be by myself," he explained to her somberly—he drove into New York to see Nathan. He didn't phone ahead because he wanted to be able to turn around and come home if he

decided at the last minute it was a bad idea. They weren't exactly teenagers anymore, up in the bedroom trading hilarious secrets—since the death of their parents, they weren't even like brothers. Yet he desperately needed someone to hear him out. All Carol could say was that he must not even begin to think of surgery if that meant running the slightest risk of rendering fatherless their three children. The illness was under control and at thirty-nine he remained a tremendous success in every imaginable way. How could all this suddenly matter so when for years now they'd rarely made love with any real passion? She wasn't complaining, it happened to everyone —there wasn't a marriage she knew of that was any different. "But I am only thirty-nine," *Henry replied. "So am I," she said, trying to help by being sensible and firm, "but after eighteen years I don't expect marriage to be a torrid love affair."*

It was the cruelest thing he could imagine a wife saying to a husband—What do we need sex for anyway? *He despised her for saying it, hated her so that then and there he'd made up his mind to talk to Nathan. He hated Carol, he hated Wendy, if Maria were around he would have hated her too. And he hated men, men with their enormous hard-ons from just looking at* Playboy *magazine*.

He found a garage in the East 80s and from a street-corner box nearby dialed Nathan's apartment, reading, while the phone rang, what had been scribbled across the remains of a Manhattan directory chained to the cubicle: Want to come in my mouth? Melissa 879-0074. *Hanging up before Nathan could answer, he dialed 879-0074. A man answered. "For Melissa," said Henry, and hung up again. This time after dialing Nathan, he let the phone ring twenty times*.

You can't leave them fatherless.

At Nathan's brownstone, standing alone in the downstairs hallway, he wrote him a note that he

immediately tore up. Inside a hotel on the corner of Fifth he found a pay phone and dialed 879-0074. Despite the beta-blocker, which he'd thought was supposed to prevent *adrenaline from overcharging the heart, his was pounding like the heart of something wild on a rampage—the doctor wouldn't need a stethoscope to hear it now. Henry grabbed at his chest, counting down to the final boom, even as a voice sounding like a child's answered the phone. "Hullo?"*

"Melissa?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Who is this?"

He hung up just in time. Five, ten, fifteen more of those resounding strokes and the coronary would have settled everything. Gradually his breathing evened out and his heart felt more like a wheel, stuck and spinning vainly in the mud.

He knew he should telephone Carol so that she wouldn't worry, but instead he crossed the street to Central Park. He'd give Nathan an hour; if Nathan wasn't back by then, he'd forget about the operation and go home. He could not leave them fatherless.

Entering the underpass back of the museum, he saw at the other end a big kid, white, about seventeen, balancing a large portable radio on one shoulder and drifting lazily into the tunnel on roller skates. The volume was on full blast—Bob Dylan singing, "Lay, lady, lay … lay across my big brass bed …" Just what Henry needed to hear. As though he'd come inadvertently upon a dear old pal, the grinning kid raised a fist in the air, and gliding up beside Henry he shouted, "Bring back the sixties, man!" His voice reverberated dully in the shadowy tunnel, and amiably enough Henry replied, "I'm with you, friend," but when the boy had skated by him he couldn't hold everything inside any longer and finally began to cry. Bring it all *back, he thought, the sixties, the fifties, the forties—bring back*

those summers at the Jersey Shore, the fresh rolls perfuming the basement grocery in the Lorraine Hotel, the beach where they sold the bluefish off the morning boats … He stood in that tunnel behind the museum bringing back all by himself the most innocent memories out of the most innocent months of his most innocent years, memories of no real consequence rapturously recalled—and bonded to him like the organic silt stopping up the arteries to his heart. The bungalow two blocks up from the boardwalk with the faucet at the side to wash the sand off your feet. The guess-your-weight stall in the arcade at Asbury Park. His mother leaning over the windowsill as the rain starts to fall and pulling the clothes in off the line. Waiting at dusk for the bus home from the Saturday afternoon movie. Yes, the man to whom this was happening had been that boy waiting with his older brother for the Number 14 bus. He couldn't grasp it—he could as well have been trying to understand particle physics. But then he couldn't believe that the man to whom it was happening was himself *and that, whatever this man must undergo, he must undergo too. Bring the past back, the future, bring me back the* present—*I am only thirty-nine!*

He didn't return to Nathan's that afternoon to pretend that nothing of consequence had transpired between them since they were their parents' little boys. On the way over he had been thinking that he had to see him because Nathan was the only family he had left, when all along he had known that there was no family anymore, the family was finished, torn asunder—Nathan had seen to that by the ridicule he'd heaped upon them all in that book, and Henry had done the rest by the wild charges he'd leveled after their ailing father's death from a coronary in Florida. "You killed him, Nathan. Nobody will tell you—they're too frightened of you to say it. But you killed him with that book." No, confessing to Nathan what had been going on in the office for three years with Wendy would only make the

bastard happy, *prove him* right—*I'll provide him with a sequel to* Carnovsky! *It had been idiotic enough ten years earlier telling him everything about Maria, about the money I gave her and the black underwear and the stuff of hers that I had in my safe, but bursting as I was I had to tell someone—and how could I possibly understand back then that exploiting and distorting family secrets was my brother's livelihood?* He *won't sympathize with what I'm going through—he won't even listen. "Don't want to know," he'll tell me from behind the peephole, and won't even bother to open the door. "I'd only put it in a book and you wouldn't like that at all."* And *there'll be a woman there—either some wife he's bored with on the way out or some literary groupie on the way in. Maybe both. I couldn't bear it.*

Instead of going directly home, back in Jersey he drove to Wendy's apartment and made her pretend to be a black twelve-year-old girl named Melissa. But though she was willing—to be black, twelve, ten, to be anything he asked—it made no difference to the medication. He told her to strip and crawl to him on her knees across the floor, and when she obeyed he struck her. That didn't do much good either. His ridiculous cruelty, far from goading him into a state of arousal, reduced him to tears for the second time that day. Wendy, looking awfully helpless, stroked his hand while Henry sobbed, "This isn't me! I'm not this kind of man!" "Oh, darling," she said, sitting at his feet in her garter belt and beginning now to cry herself, "you must have the operation, you must—otherwise you're going to go mad."

He'd left the house just after nine in the morning and didn't get home until close to seven that evening. Fearing that he was alone somewhere dying—or already dead—at six Carol had called the police and asked them to look for the car; she'd told them that he'd gone for a walk in the Reservation hills that morning and they said that they would go up and check the trails. It alarmed Henry to hear

that she had called the police—he had been depending upon Carol not to crack and give way like Wendy, and now his behavior had shattered her too.

He remained himself still too stunned and mortified to grasp the nature of the loss to all *the interested parties.*

When Carol asked why he hadn't phoned to say he wouldn't be home until dinner, he answered accusingly, "Because I'm impotent!" as though it was she and not the drug that had done it.

It was she. He was sure of it. It was having to stay with her and be responsible to the children that had done it. Had they divorced ten years earlier, had he left Carol and their three kids to begin a new life in Switzerland, he would never have fallen ill. Stress, the doctors told him, was a major factor in heart disease, and giving up Maria was the unendurable stress that had brought it on in him. There was no other explanation for such an illness in a man otherwise so young and fit. It was the consequence of failing to find the ruthlessness to take what he wanted instead of capitulating to what he should do. The disease was the reward for the dutiful father, husband, and son. You find yourself in the same place after such a long time, without the possibility of escape, along comes a woman like Maria, and instead of being strong and selfish, you are, of all things, good.

The cardiologist gave him a serious talking-to the next time Henry came for a checkup. He reminded him that since he'd been on the medication his EKG had shown a marked diminution of the abnormality that had first signaled his trouble. His blood pressure was safely under control, and unlike some of the cardiologist's patients, who couldn't brush their teeth without the effort causing severe angina, he was able to work all day standing on his feet without discomfort or shortness of breath. He was again reassured that if there was any deterioration in his condition, it would almost certainly occur gradually and

show up first on the EKG or with a change of symptoms. Were that to happen, they would then reevaluate the surgical option. The cardiologist reminded him that he could continue safely along on this regimen for as long as fifteen or twenty years, by which time the bypass operation would more than likely be an outmoded technique; he predicted that by the 1990s they would almost certainly be correcting arterial blockage by other than surgical means. The beta-blocker might itself soon come to be replaced by a drug that did not affect the central nervous system and cause this unfortunate consequence—that sort of progress was inevitable. In the meantime, as he'd advised him already and could only repeat, Henry must simply forget his heart and go out and live. "You must see the medication in context," the cardiologist said, lightly striking his desk.

And was that the last there was to say? Was he now expected to get up and go home? Dully Henry told him, "But I can't accept the sexual blow." The cardiologist's wife was someone Carol knew and so of course he couldn't explain about Maria or Wendy or the two women in between, and what each of them had meant to him. Henry said, "This is the most difficult thing I've ever had to face."

"You haven't had a very difficult life then, have you?"

He was stunned by the cruelty of the reply—to say such a thing to a man as vulnerable as himself! Now he hated the doctor too.

That night, from his study, he again phoned Nathan, his last remaining consolation, and this time found him home. He was barely able to prevent himself from dissolving in tears when he told his brother that he was seriously ill and asked if he could come to see him. It was impossible living alone any longer with his staggering loss.

Needless to say, these were not the three thousand words that Carol had been expecting when she'd phoned the evening before the funeral and, despite all that had driven the two brothers apart, asked if Zuckerman would deliver a eulogy. Nor was the writer ignorant of what was seemly, or indifferent to the conventions that ruled these occasions; nonetheless, once he'd started there was no stopping, and he was at his desk most of the night piecing Henry's story together from the little he knew.

When he got over to Jersey the next morning, he told Carol more or less the truth about what had happened. "I'm sorry if you were counting on me," he said, "but everything I put down was wrong. It just didn't work." He supposed that she would now suppose that if a professional writer finds himself stymied by what to say at his own brother's funeral, it's either hopelessly mixed emotions or an old-fashioned bad conscience that's doing it. Well, less harm in what Carol happened to think of him than in delivering to the assembled mourners this grossly inappropriate text.

All Carol said was what she usually said: she understood; she even kissed him, she who had never been his greatest fan. "It's all right. Please don't worry. We just didn't want to leave you out. The quarrels no longer matter. That's all over. What matters today is that you were brothers."

Fine, fine. But what *about* the three thousand words? The trouble was that words that were morally inappropriate for a funeral were just the sort of words that engaged him. Henry wasn't dead twenty-four hours when the narrative began to burn a hole in Zuckerman's pocket. He was now going to have a very hard time getting through the day without seeing everything that happened as *more*, a continuation not of life but of his work or work-to-be. Already, by failing to use his head and discreetly cobbling together some childhood memories with a few conventionally consoling sentiments, he'd made it

impossible for himself to take his place with everyone else, a decent man of mature years mourning a brother who'd died before his time—instead he was again the family outsider. Entering the synagogue with Carol and the kids, he thought, "This profession even fucks up grief."

Though the synagogue was large, every seat was occupied, and clustered at the rear and along the side aisles were some twenty or thirty adolescents, local youngsters whose teeth Henry had been taking care of since they were children. The boys looked stoically at the floor and some of the girls were already crying. A few rows from the back, unobtrusive in a gray sweater and skirt, sat a slight, girlishly young blonde whom Zuckerman wouldn't even have noticed if he hadn't been looking for her—whom he wouldn't have been able to recognize if not for the photograph that Henry had brought along on his second visit. "The picture," Henry warned, "doesn't do her justice." Zuckerman was admiring nonetheless: "Very pretty. You make me envious." A little immodest little-brother smirk of self-admiration could not be entirely suppressed, even as Henry replied, "No, no, she doesn't photograph well. You can't really see from this what it is she has." "Oh yes I can," said Nathan, who was and wasn't surprised by Wendy's plainness. Maria, if not as astonishingly beautiful in *her* picture as she'd first been described by Henry, had been attractive enough in a sternly Teutonic, symmetrical way. However, *this* bland little twat—why, Carol with her curly black hair and long dark lashes looked erotically more promising. It was, of course, with Wendy's picture still in his hand that Zuckerman should have laid into Henry with all he had—that might even have been *why* Henry had brought the picture, to give him the opening, to hear Nathan tell him, "Idiot! Ass! Absolutely not! If you wouldn't leave Carol to run off with Maria, a woman whom you actually *loved*, you are not going into the hospital for dangerous surgery just because some broad at the office

blows you every night before you go home for dinner! I have heard your case for that operation and up till now haven't said a word—but my verdict, which is law, is *no*!"

But inasmuch as Henry wasn't dead then but alive—alive and outraged that a man with his moral credentials should be thwarted in this single, small, harmless transgression—inasmuch as he had already accepted the compromise of Wendy when what he had dreamed of and denied himself was to be remade in Europe with a European wife, to become in Basel an unfettered, robust, fully grown-up American expatriate dentist, Zuckerman had found his thoughts moving more along these lines: "This is his rebellion against the deal he's made, the outlet for what's survived of brutish passion. He surely hasn't come to me to be told that life obstructs and life denies and there's nothing to do but accept it. He's here to argue it out in my presence because my strong point isn't *supposed* to be a talent for self-denial—I, in their lore, am the reckless, freewheeling impulsive, to me they've assigned the role of family id, and he is the exemplary brother. No, a certified irresponsible spirit can't now come on in fatherly tones, gently telling him, 'You don't need what you want, my boy—relinquish your Wendy and you'll suffer less.' No, Wendy is his freedom and his manhood, even if she happens to look to me a little like boredom incarnate. She's a nice kid with an oral hang-up who he's pretty sure will never phone the house—so why *shouldn't* he have her? The more I look at this picture, the more I understand his point. How much is the poor guy asking for?"

But you reason differently so close to the coffin of your only brother that you can practically rest your cheek on the shining mahogany wood. When Nathan made the inevitable effort to imagine Henry laid out inside, he did not see, silenced, the unmanned, overheated adulterer who had refused to be resigned to losing his potency—he saw the boy of ten, lying there wearing flannel pajamas. One

Halloween when they were children, hours after Nathan had brought Henry home from trick-or-treating in the neighborhood, after the whole family had long been in bed, Henry had wandered out of his room, down the stairs, out the door, and into the street, heading for the intersection at Chancellor Avenue without even his slippers on and still in his sleep. Miraculously, a friend of the family who lived over in Hillside happened to be driving by their corner as Henry was about to step off the curb against the light. He pulled over, recognized the child under the street lamp as Victor Zuckerman's little son, and Henry was safely home and back beneath the covers only minutes later. It was thrilling for him to learn the next morning of what he'd done while still fast asleep and to hear of the bizarre coincidence that had led to his rescue; until adolescence, when he began to develop more spectacular ideas of personal heroism as a hurdler for the high-school track team, he must have repeated to a hundred people the story of the daring midnight excursion to which he himself had been completely tuned out.

But now he was in his coffin, the sleepwalking boy. This time nobody had taken him home and tucked him back into bed when he went wandering off alone in the dark, unable to forswear his Halloween kicks. Equally possessed, in a Herculean trance, carried along by an exciting infusion of Wild West bravado—that's how he'd struck Nathan on the afternoon he arrived at his apartment fresh from a consultation with the cardiac surgeon. Zuckerman was surprised: it wasn't the way he would have imagined walking out of one of those guys' offices after he'd told you his plans for carving you up.

Henry unfolded on Nathan's desk what looked like the design for a big cloverleaf highway. It was the sketch that the surgeon had made to show him where the grafts would go. The operation sounded, as Henry described it, no trickier than a root-canal job. He replaces this one and this

one and hooks them up here, bypasses three tiny ones feeding into the one back there—and that's the whole shmeer. The surgeon, a leading Manhattan specialist whose qualifications Zuckerman had double-checked, told Henry that he had been through quintuple bypass surgery dozens of times and wasn't worried about holding up his end; it was Henry who now had to squelch all his doubts and approach the operation with every confidence that it was going to be a hundred percent success. He would emerge from the surgery with a brand-new system of unclogged vessels supplying blood to a heart that was itself as strong still as an athlete's and completely unimpaired. "And no medication afterwards?" Henry asked him. "Up to your cardiologist," he was told; "probably something for a little mild hypertension, but nothing like the knockout drops you're on now." Zuckerman wondered if, upon hearing the marvelous prognosis, Henry's euphoria had prompted him to present the cardiac surgeon with a personally signed 8½ × 11 glossy of Wendy in her garter belt. He seemed loopy enough for it when he arrived, but probably that was how you had to be to steel yourself for such a frightening ordeal. When Henry had finally mustered the courage to stop asking for reassurance and get up and go, the confident surgeon had accompanied him to the door. "If the two of us are working together," he told him, shaking Henry by the hand, "I can't foresee any problems. In a week, ten days, you'll be out of the hospital and back with your family, a new man."

Well, from where Zuckerman was sitting it looked as though on the operating table Henry hadn't been pulling his weight. Whatever he was supposed to do to assist the surgeon had apparently slipped his mind. This can happen when you're unconscious. My sleepwalking brother! Dead! Is that you in there, really, an obedient and proper little boy like you? All for twenty minutes with Wendy before hurrying home to the household you loved? Or were you

showing off for me? It cannot be that your refusal to make do with a desexed life was what you thought of as your heroism—because if anything it was your *repression* that was your claim to fame. I mean this. Contrary to what you thought, I was never so disdainful of the restrictions under which you flourished and the boundaries you observed as you were of the excessive liberties you imagined me taking. You confided in me because you believed I would understand Wendy's mouth—and you were right. It went way beyond the juicy pleasure. It was your drop of theatrical existence, your disorder, your escapade, your risk, your little daily insurrection against all your overwhelming virtues—debauching Wendy for twenty minutes a day, then home at night for the temporal satisfactions of ordinary family life. Slavish Wendy's mouth was your taste of reckless fun. Old as the hills, the whole world operates this way … and yet there must be more, there *has* to be more! How could a genuinely good kid like you, with your ferocious sense of correctness, wind up in this box for the sake of that mouth? And why didn't I stop you?

Zuckerman had taken a seat in the first row, on the aisle, next to Bill and Bea Goff, Carol's parents. Carol sat at the center of the row, beside her mother; on her other side she had placed the children—her eleven-year-old daughter, Ellen, her fourteen-year-old son, Leslie, and nearest the far aisle, Ruth, the thirteen-year-old. Ruth was holding her violin on her knee and looking steadily at the coffin. The other two children, nodding silently while Carol spoke to them, preferred looking into their laps. Ruth was to play a piece on the violin that her father had always liked, and at the conclusion of the service, Carol would speak. "I asked Uncle Nathan if he wanted to say anything, but he says he's a little too shaken up right now. He says he's too stunned, and I understand. And what I'm going to say," she explained to them, "isn't going to be a eulogy, really. Just a

few words about Daddy that I want everyone to hear. Nothing flowery, but words that are important for me. Then we're going to take him up to the cemetery by ourselves, just Grandma and Grandpa, Uncle Nathan, and the four of us. We're going to say goodbye to him at the cemetery, as a family, and then we're going to come back here and be with all our relatives and friends."

The boy wore a blazer with gold buttons and a pair of new tan boots, and though it was the end of September and the sun had been in and out all morning, the girls were in thin pastel dresses. They were tall, dark children, Sephardic-looking like their father, with rather prepossessing eyebrows for such innocent, coddled kids. They all had beautiful caramel eyes, a shade lighter and less intense than Henry's—six eyes, exactly alike, liquidly shining with amazement and fear. They looked like little startled does who'd been trapped and tamed and shod and clothed. Zuckerman was particularly drawn to Ruth, the middle child, diligently at work emulating her mother's calm despite the scale of the loss. Leslie, the boy, seemed the softest, the most girlish, the closest to collapsing really, though when, a few minutes before they left for the synagogue, he took his mother aside, Zuckerman overheard him ask, "I've got a game at five, Mom—can I play? If you don't think I should …" "Let's wait, Les," Carol said, one hand lightly brushing down the back of his hair, "let's see if you still want to then."

While people were still crowding into the back of the synagogue and bridge chairs were found to seat some elderly latecomers, while there was nothing to do but sit in silence only feet from the coffin deciding whether to keep looking at it or not, Bill Goff began rhythmically to make a fist and then undo it, opening and closing his right hand as though it were a pump with which to work up courage or to drain off fear. He barely resembled any longer the agile, sharp-dressing, spirited golfer that Zuckerman had first

seen some eighteen years before, dancing with all the bridesmaids at Henry's wedding. Earlier that morning, when Goff had opened the door to let him in, Nathan hadn't even realized at first whose hand he was shaking. The only thing about him that looked undiminished was the full head of wavy hair. Inside the house, turning sadly to his wife—and sounding just a bit affronted—Goff had said to her, "How do you like that? He didn't even recognize me. That's how much I changed."

Carol's mother went off with the girls to help Ellen settle for a second time on which of her good dresses was right to wear, Leslie returned to his room to buff his new boots again, and the two men walked out back for some fresh air. They looked on from the patio while Carol clipped the last of the chrysanthemums for the children to take with them to the cemetery.

Goff began telling Nathan why he'd had to sell his shoe store up in Albany. "Colored people started to come in. How could I turn them away? That's not my nature. But my Christian customers of twenty and twenty-five years, they didn't like it. They told me right out, no bones about it, 'Look, Goff, I'm not going to sit here and wait while you try ten pairs of shoes on some nigger. I don't want his rejects either.' So one by one they left me, my wonderful Christian friends. That's when I had the first attack. I sold and got out, figuring the worst was over. Get out from under the pressure, the doctor told me, so I cut my losses, and a year and a half later, on my holiday, down in Boca playing golf, I had the second attack. Whatever the doctor said, I did, and the second attack was worse than the first. And now this. Carol has been a fortress: one hundred pounds soaking wet and she has the strength of a giant. She was like that when her brother died. We lost Carol's twin brother his second year in law school. First Eugene at twenty-three, now Henry at thirty-nine." Suddenly he said, "What'd I do?" and took from his pocket a small plastic prescription vial.