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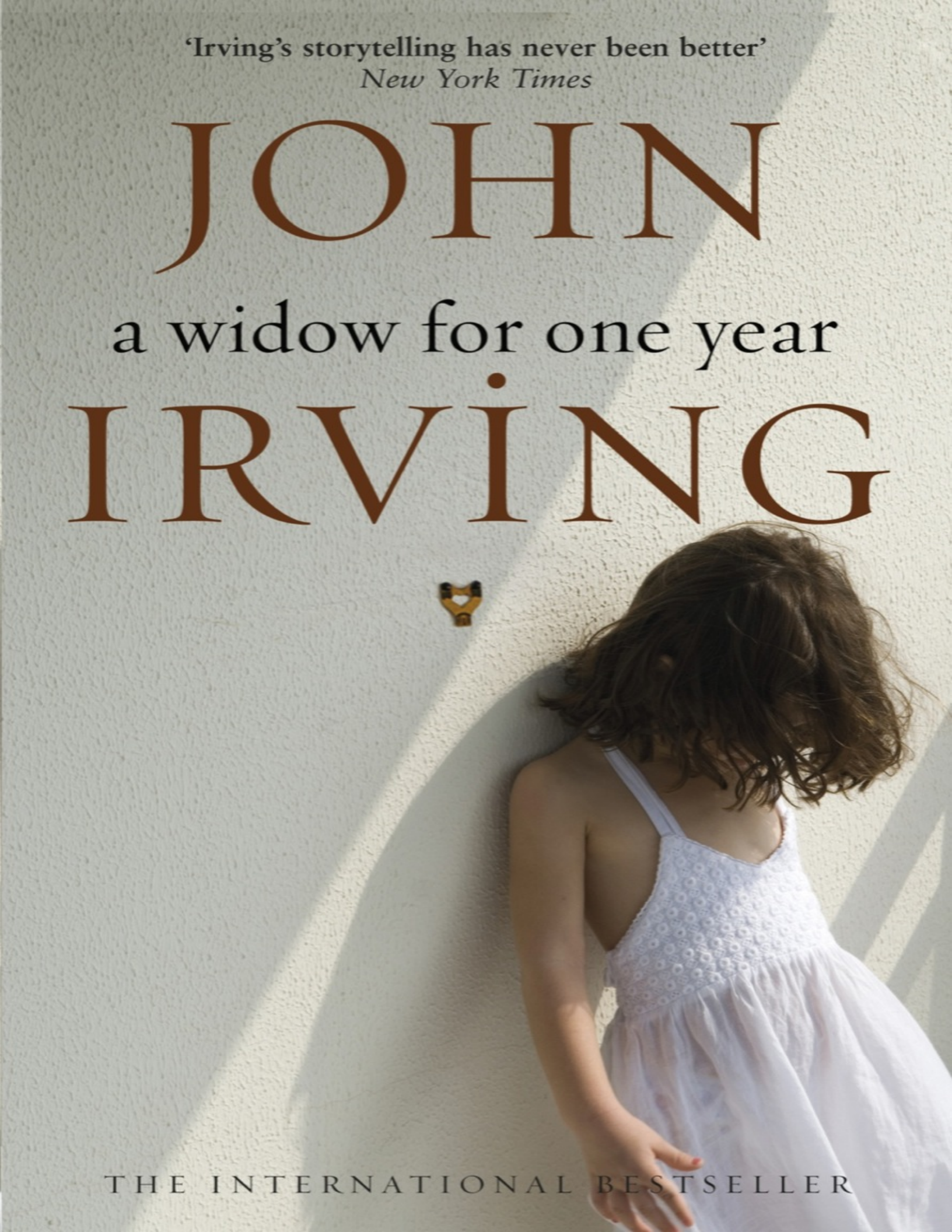
JOHN IRVING

a widow for one year



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

About the Book

‘One night when she was four and sleeping in the bottom bunk of her bed, Ruth Cole awoke to the sound of lovemaking – it was coming from her parents’ bedroom.’

This is the story of Ruth Cole. It is told in three parts: on Long Island, in the summer of 1958, when she is only four; in 1990, when she is an unmarried woman whose personal life is not nearly as successful as her literary career; and in the autumn of 1995, when Ruth Cole is a forty-one-year-old widow and mother. She’s also about to fall in love for the first time ...

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A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR

John Irving

For Janet,
a love story

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for my many visits to Amsterdam during the four years I spent writing this novel, and I'm especially indebted to the patience and generosity of brigadier Joep de Groot of the District 2 police; without Joep's advice, this book couldn't have been written. I'm also indebted to the help given me by Margot Alvarez, formerly of De Rode Draad – an organization for prostitutes' rights in Amsterdam. And most of all – for the time and care that he devoted to the manuscript – I want to thank Robbert Ammerlaan, my Dutch publisher. Regarding the Amsterdam sections in this book, I owe these three Amsterdammers incalculable thanks. For what I may have managed to get right, the credit belongs to them; if there are errors, the fault is mine.

As for the numerous parts of this novel *not* set in Amsterdam, I have relied on the expertise of Anna von Planta in Geneva, Anne Freyer in Paris, Ruth Geiger in Zurich, Harvey Loomis in Sagaponack, and Alison Gordon in Toronto. I must also cite the attention to detail that was ably demonstrated by three outstanding assistants: Lewis Robinson, Dana Wagner, and Chloe Bland; I commend Lewis and Dana and Chloe for the irreproachable carefulness of their work.

An oddity worth mentioning: the chapter called 'The Red and Blue Air Mattress' was previously published – in slightly different form, and in German – in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 27, 1994, under the title 'Die blaurote Luftmatratze.'

J.I.

‘… as for this little lady, the best thing I can wish her is a *little misfortune*’

– William Makepeace Thackeray

I

Summer 1958

The Inadequate Lamp Shade

ONE NIGHT WHEN she was four and sleeping in the bottom bunk of her bunk bed, Ruth Cole woke to the sound of lovemaking – it was coming from her parents' bedroom. It was a totally unfamiliar sound to her. Ruth had recently been ill with a stomach flu; when she first heard her mother making love, Ruth thought that her mother was throwing up.

It was not as simple a matter as her parents having separate bedrooms; that summer they had separate houses, although Ruth never saw the other house. Her parents spent alternate nights in the family house with Ruth; there was a rental house nearby, where Ruth's mother or father stayed when they weren't staying with Ruth. It was one of those ridiculous arrangements that couples make when they are separating, but before they are divorced – when they still imagine that children and property can be shared with more magnanimity than recrimination.

When Ruth woke to the foreign sound, she at first wasn't sure if it was her mother or her father who was throwing up; then, despite the unfamiliarity of the disturbance, Ruth recognized that measure of melancholy and contained hysteria which was often detectable in her mother's voice. Ruth also remembered that it was her mother's turn to stay with her.

The master bathroom separated Ruth's room from the master bedroom. When the four-year-old padded barefoot through the bathroom, she took a towel with her. (When she'd been sick with the stomach flu, her father had encouraged her to vomit in a towel.) Poor Mommy! Ruth thought, bringing her the towel.

In the dim moonlight, and in the even dimmer and erratic light from the night-light that Ruth's father had

installed in the bathroom, Ruth saw the pale faces of her dead brothers in the photographs on the bathroom wall. There were photos of her dead brothers throughout the house, on all the walls; although the two boys had died as teenagers, before Ruth was born (before she was even conceived), Ruth felt that she knew these vanished young men far better than she knew her mother or father.

The tall, dark one with the angular face was Thomas; even at Ruth's age, when he'd been only four, Thomas had had a leading man's kind of handsomeness – a combination of poise and thuggery that, in his teenage years, gave him the seeming confidence of a much older man. (Thomas had been the driver of the doomed car.)

The younger, insecure-looking one was Timothy; even as a teenager, he was baby-faced and appeared to have just been startled by something. In many of the photographs, Timothy seemed to be caught in a moment of indecision, as if he were perpetually reluctant to imitate an incredibly difficult stunt that Thomas had mastered with apparent ease. (In the end, it was something as basic as driving a car that Thomas failed to master sufficiently.)

When Ruth Cole entered her parents' bedroom, she saw the naked young man who had mounted her mother from behind; he was holding her mother's breasts in his hands and humping her on all fours, like a dog, but it was neither the violence nor the repugnance of the sexual act that caused Ruth to scream. The four-year-old didn't know that she was witnessing a sexual act – nor did the young man and her mother's activity strike Ruth as entirely unpleasant. In fact, Ruth was relieved to see that her mother was *not* throwing up.

And it wasn't the young man's nakedness that caused Ruth to scream; she had seen her father and her mother naked – nakedness was not hidden among the Coles. It was the young man himself who made Ruth scream, because she was certain he was one of her dead brothers; he looked

so much like Thomas, the confident one, that Ruth Cole believed she had seen a ghost.

A four-year-old's scream is a piercing sound. Ruth was astonished at the speed with which her mother's young lover dismounted; indeed, he removed himself from both the woman and her bed with such a combination of panic and zeal that he appeared to be *propelled* – it was almost as if a cannonball had dislodged him. He fell over the night table, and, in an effort to conceal his nakedness, removed the lamp shade from the broken bedside lamp. As such, he seemed a less menacing sort of ghost than Ruth had first judged him to be; furthermore, now that Ruth took a closer look at him, she recognized him. He was the boy who occupied the most distant guest room, the boy who drove her father's car – the boy who worked for her daddy, her mommy had said. Once or twice the boy had driven Ruth and her babysitter to the beach.

That summer, Ruth had three different nannies; each of them had commented on how pale the boy was, but Ruth's mother had told her that some people just didn't like the sun. The child had never before seen the boy without his clothes, of course; yet Ruth was certain that the young man's name was Eddie and that he *wasn't* a ghost. Nevertheless, the four-year-old screamed again.

Her mother, still on all fours on her bed, looked characteristically unsurprised; she merely viewed her daughter with an expression of discouragement edged with despair. Before Ruth could cry out a third time, her mother said, 'Don't scream, honey. It's just Eddie and me. Go back to bed.'

Ruth Cole did as she was told, once more passing those photographs – more ghostly-seeming now than her mother's fallen ghost of a lover. Eddie, while attempting to hide himself with the lamp shade, had been oblivious to the fact that the lamp shade, being open at both ends, afforded Ruth an unobstructed view of his diminishing penis.

At four, Ruth was too young to ever remember Eddie *or* his penis with the greatest detail, but he would remember her. Thirty-six years later, when he was fifty-two and Ruth was forty, this ill-fated young man would fall in love with Ruth Cole. Yet not even then would he regret having fucked Ruth's mother. Alas, that would be Eddie's problem. This is Ruth's story.

That her parents had expected her to be a third son was not the reason Ruth Cole became a writer; a more likely source of her imagination was that she grew up in a house where the photographs of her dead brothers were a stronger presence than any 'presence' she detected in either her mother or her father – and that, after her mother abandoned her *and* her father (and took with her almost *all* the photos of her lost sons), Ruth would wonder why her father left the picture hooks stuck in the bare walls. The picture hooks were part of the reason she became a writer – for years after her mother left, Ruth would try to remember which of the photographs had hung from which of the hooks. And, failing to recall the actual pictures of her perished brothers to her satisfaction, Ruth began to invent all the captured moments in their short lives, which she had missed. That Thomas and Timothy were killed before she was born was another part of the reason Ruth Cole became a writer; from her earliest memory, she was forced to imagine them.

It was one of those automobile accidents involving teenagers that, in the aftermath, revealed that both boys had been 'good kids' and that neither of them had been drinking. Worst of all, to the endless torment of their parents, the coincidence of Thomas and Timothy being in that car at that exact time, and in that specific place, was the result of an altogether avoidable quarrel between the boys' mother and father. The poor parents would relive the

tragic results of their trivial argument for the rest of their lives.

Later Ruth was told that she was conceived in a well-intentioned but passionless act. Ruth's parents were mistaken to even imagine that their sons were replaceable – nor did they pause to consider that the new baby who would bear the burden of their impossible expectations might be a *girl*.

That Ruth Cole would grow up to be that rare combination of a well-respected literary novelist *and* an internationally best-selling author is not as remarkable as the fact that she managed to grow up at all. Those handsome young men in the photographs had stolen most of her mother's affection; however, her mother's rejection was more bearable to Ruth than growing up in the shadow of the coldness that passed between her parents.

Ted Cole, a best-selling author and illustrator of books for children, was a handsome man who was better at writing and drawing for children than he was at fulfilling the daily responsibilities of fatherhood. And until Ruth was four-and-a-half, while Ted Cole was not always drunk, he frequently drank too much. It's also true that, while Ted was not a womanizer every waking minute, at no time in his life was he ever entirely *not* a womanizer. (Granted, this made him more unreliable with women than he was with children.)

Ted had ended up writing for children by default. His literary debut was an overpraised adult novel of an indisputably literary sort. The two novels that followed aren't worth mentioning, except to say that no one – especially Ted Cole's publisher – had expressed any noticeable interest in a fourth novel, which was never written. Instead, Ted wrote his first children's book. Called *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls*, it was very nearly not published; at first glance, it appeared to be one of those children's books that are of dubious appeal to parents and

remain memorable to children only because children remember being frightened. At least Thomas and Timothy were frightened by *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls* when Ted first told them the story; by the time Ted told it to Ruth, *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls* had already frightened about nine or ten million children, in more than thirty languages, around the world.

Like her dead brothers, Ruth grew up on her father's stories. When Ruth first read these stories in a book, it felt like a violation of her privacy. She'd imagined that her father had created these stories for her alone. Later she would wonder if her dead brothers had felt that *their* privacy had been similarly invaded.

Regarding Ruth's mother: Marion Cole was a beautiful woman; she was also a good mother, at least until Ruth was born. And until the deaths of her beloved sons, she was a loyal and faithful wife – despite her husband's countless infidelities. But after the accident that took her boys away, Marion became a different woman, distant and cold. Because of her apparent indifference to her daughter, Marion was relatively easy for Ruth to reject. It would be harder for Ruth to recognize what was flawed about her father; it would also take a lot longer for her to come to this recognition, and by then it would be too late for Ruth to turn completely against him. Ted had charmed her – Ted charmed almost everyone, up to a certain age. No one was ever charmed by Marion. Poor Marion never tried to charm anyone, not even her only daughter; yet it was possible to *love* Marion Cole.

And this is where Eddie, the unlucky young man with the inadequate lamp shade, enters the story. *He* loved Marion – he would never stop loving her. Naturally if he'd known from the beginning that he was going to fall in love with Ruth, he might have reconsidered falling in love with her mother. But probably not. Eddie couldn't help himself.

Summer Job

His name was Edward O'Hare. In the summer of 1958, he had recently turned sixteen – having his driver's license had been a prerequisite of his first summer job. But Eddie O'Hare was unaware that becoming Marion Cole's lover would turn out to be his *real* summer job; Ted Cole had hired him specifically for this reason, and it would have lifelong results.

Eddie had heard of the tragedy in the Cole family, but – as with most teenagers – his attention to adult conversation was sporadic. He'd completed his second year at Phillips Exeter Academy, where his father taught English; it was an Exeter connection that got Eddie the job. Eddie's father ebulliently believed in Exeter connections. First a graduate of the academy and then a faculty member, the senior O'Hare never took a vacation without his well-thumbed copy of the *Exeter Directory*. In his view, the alumni of the academy were the standard-bearers of an ongoing responsibility – Exonians trusted one another, and they did favors for one another when they could.

In the view of the academy, the Coles had already been generous to Exeter. Their doomed sons were successful and popular students at the school when they died; despite their grief, or probably because of it, Ted and Marion Cole had funded an annual visiting lecturer in English literature – Thomas and Timothy's best subject. 'Minty' O'Hare, as the senior O'Hare was known to countless Exeter students, was addicted to breath mints, which he lovingly sucked while reading aloud in class; he was inordinately fond of reciting his favorite passages from the books he'd assigned. The so-called Thomas and Timothy Cole Lectures had been Minty O'Hare's idea.

And when Eddie had expressed to his father that his first choice for a summer job would be to work as an assistant to

a *writer* – the sixteen-year-old had long kept a diary and had recently written some short stories – the senior O'Hare hadn't hesitated to consult his *Exeter Directory*. To be sure, there were many more *literary* writers than Ted Cole among the alumni – Thomas and Timothy had gone to Exeter because Ted was an alumnus – but Minty O'Hare, who had managed only four years earlier to persuade Ted Cole to part with $82,000, knew that Ted was an easy touch.

'You don't have to pay him anything to speak of,' Minty told Ted on the telephone. 'The boy could type things for you, or answer letters, run errands – whatever you want. It's mainly for the experience. I mean, if he thinks he wants to be a writer, he should see how one works.'

On the phone, Ted was noncommittal but polite; he was also drunk. He had his own name for Minty O'Hare – Ted called him 'Pushy.' And, indeed, it was typical of Pushy O'Hare that he pointed out the whereabouts of Eddie's photographs in the 1957 *PEAN* (the Exeter yearbook).

For the first few years after the deaths of Thomas and Timothy Cole, Marion had requested Exeter yearbooks. Had he lived, Thomas would have graduated with the class of '54 – Timothy, in '56. But now, every year, even past their would-be graduations, the yearbooks came – courtesy of Minty O'Hare, who sent them automatically, assuming that he was sparing Marion the additional suffering of asking for them. Marion continued to look them over faithfully; she was repeatedly struck by those boys who bore any resemblance to Thomas or Timothy, although she'd stopped indicating these resemblances to Ted after Ruth was born.

In the pages of the '57 *PEAN*, Eddie O'Hare is seated in the front row in the photograph of the Junior Debating Society; in his dark-gray flannel trousers, tweed jacket, regimental-striped tie, he would have been nondescript except for an arresting frankness in his expression and the

solemn anticipation of some future sorrow in his large, dark eyes.

In the picture, Eddie was two years younger than Thomas and the same age as Timothy at the time of their deaths. Nevertheless, Eddie looked more like Thomas than like Timothy; he looked even *more* like Thomas in the photo of the Outing Club, where Eddie appeared more clear-skinned and confident than the majority of those other boys who possessed what Ted Cole assumed was an abiding interest in the outdoors. Eddie's only other appearances in the '57 Exeter yearbook were in the photographs of two junior-varsity athletic teams – J.V. Cross-Country and J.V. Track. Eddie's leanness suggested that the boy ran more out of nervousness than for any apparent pleasure, and that running might possibly be his only athletic inclination.

It was with feigned casualness that Ted Cole showed these pictures of young Edward O'Hare to his wife. 'This boy looks a lot like Thomas, doesn't he?' he asked.

Marion had seen the photographs before; she'd looked at all the photos in all the Exeter yearbooks very closely. 'Yes, somewhat,' she replied. 'Why? Who is he?'

'He wants a summer job,' Ted told her.

'With *us*?'

'Well, with *me*,' Ted said. 'He wants to be a writer.'

'But what would he do with you?' Marion asked.

'It's mainly for the experience, I suppose,' Ted told her. 'I mean, if he thinks he wants to be a writer, he should see how one works.'

Marion, who'd always had aspirations of being a writer herself, knew that her husband didn't work very much. 'But what exactly would he *do*?' she asked.

'Well.' Ted had a habit of leaving his sentences and thoughts unfinished, incomplete. It was both a deliberate and an unconscious part of his vagueness.

When he called back Minty O'Hare to offer his son a job, Ted's first question was whether Eddie had his driver's

license. Ted had suffered his second drunk-driving conviction and was without a driver's license for the summer of '58. He'd hoped that the summer might be a good time to initiate a so-called trial separation from Marion, but if he were to rent a house nearby, and yet continue to share the family house (and Ruth) with Marion, someone would have to drive him.

'Certainly he has his license!' Minty told Ted. Thus was the boy's fate sealed.

And so Marion's question regarding what Eddie O'Hare would *do*, exactly, was left standing in the manner that Ted Cole frequently let things stand – namely, he let things stand vaguely. He also left Marion sitting with the Exeter yearbook open in her lap; he often left her that way. He couldn't help noticing that Marion seemed to find the photograph of Eddie O'Hare in his track uniform the most riveting. With the long, pink nail of her index finger, Marion was tracing the borders of Eddie's bare shoulders; it was an unconscious but intensely focused gesture. Ted had to wonder if *he* wasn't more aware of his wife's increasing obsession with boys who resembled Thomas or Timothy than poor Marion was. After all, she hadn't slept with one of them yet.

Eddie would be the only one she *would* sleep with.

A Sound Like Someone Trying Not to Make a Sound

Eddie O'Hare paid little attention to the many conversations in the Exeter community concerning how the Coles were 'coping' with the tragic loss of their sons; even five years after the fact, these conversations were a mainstay of the faculty dinner parties given by Minty O'Hare and his gossip-hungry wife. Eddie's mother was named Dorothy, but everyone – except Eddie's father, who eschewed nicknames – called her 'Dot.'

Eddie was not a gossip maven. He was, however, an adequate student; the boy prepared himself for his summer job as a writer's assistant with the kind of homework he imagined was more essential to the task than memorizing the media accounts of the tragedy would be.

If Eddie had missed the news that the Coles had had another child, this news did not escape Minty and Dot O'Hare's notice: that Ted Cole was an Exeter alumnus ('31), and that his sons had both been Exeter students at the time of their deaths, was sufficient to give *all* the Coles an Exeter connection forever. Furthermore, Ted Cole was a *famous* Exonian; the senior O'Hares, if not Eddie, were egregiously impressed by fame.

That Ted Cole was among North America's best-known writers of *children's* books had provided the media with a specific angle of interest in the tragedy. How does a renowned author and illustrator of books for children 'deal with' the deaths of his own children? And with reports of such a personal nature, there is always the attendant gossip. Within the faculty families at Exeter, possibly Eddie O'Hare was the only one *not* to pay this gossip much attention. He was definitely the only member of the Exeter community to have read everything that Ted Cole had written.

Most members of Eddie's generation – and of a half-generation before and after his – had read *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls*, or (more likely) they'd had it read to them before they were old enough to read. And a majority of the faculty and most of the Exeter students had also read some of Ted Cole's other children's books. But truly no one else at Exeter had read Ted's three *novels*; for one thing, they were all out of print – in addition to being not very good. Yet, as a faithful Exonian, Ted Cole had given the Exeter library a first edition of each of his books and the original manuscript of everything he'd written.

Eddie might have learned more from the rumors and the gossip – at least ‘more’ in the sense of what might have prepared him for the labors of his first summer job – but Eddie’s appetite for reading was a testimony to the earnestness with which the boy studied to be a writer’s assistant. What he didn’t know was that Ted Cole was already becoming an *ex*-writer.

The truth is, Ted was chronically attracted to younger women; Marion had been only seventeen, and already pregnant with Thomas, when Ted married her. At the time, Ted was twenty-three. The problem was, as Marion grew older – and although she would always be six years younger than Ted – Ted’s interest in *younger* women persisted.

The nostalgia for innocence in the mind of an older man was a subject that the sixteen-year-old Eddie O’Hare had encountered only in novels – and Ted Cole’s embarrassingly autobiographical novels were neither the first nor the best that Eddie had read on this subject. Yet Eddie’s critical assessment of Ted Cole’s writing did not diminish the boy’s eagerness to be Ted’s assistant. Surely one could learn an art or a craft from someone who was less than a master. At Exeter, after all, Eddie had learned a great deal from a considerable variety of teachers, most of whom were excellent. Only very few of the Exeter faculty were as boring in the classroom as Eddie’s father. Even Eddie sensed that Minty would have stood out as a representative of mediocrity at a *bad* school, let alone at Exeter.

As someone who’d grown up on the grounds and in the nearly constant environment of a good school, Eddie O’Hare knew that you could learn a lot from older people who were hardworking – and who adhered to certain standards. He didn’t know that Ted Cole had ceased to be hardworking, and that what remained of Ted’s questionable ‘standards’ had been compromised by the unendurable failure of his marriage to Marion – this in combination with those unacceptable deaths.

Ted Cole's children's books were of more intellectual and psychological (and even emotional) interest to Eddie than the novels were. A cautionary tale for children came naturally to Ted; he could imagine and express *their* fears – he could satisfy children. Had Thomas and Timothy lived into adulthood, they would doubtless have been disappointed in their father. And it was only as an adult that Ruth Cole would be disappointed in Ted; as a child, she loved him.

At sixteen, Eddie O'Hare was suspended somewhere between childhood and adulthood. In Eddie's opinion, there was no better beginning to *any* story than the first sentence of *The Mouse Crawling Between the Walls:* 'Tom woke up, but Tim did not.' In Ruth Cole's life as a writer – and she would be a better writer than her father, in every way – she would always envy that sentence. And she would never forget the first time she heard it, which was long before she knew it was the first sentence of a famous book.

It happened that same summer of '58, when Ruth was four – it was just before Eddie came to stay with them. This time it was not the sound of lovemaking that woke her – it was a sound that she'd carried into wakefulness from a dream. In Ruth's dream, her bed had been shaking; when she awakened, *she* was shaking – therefore, her bed seemed to be shaking, too. And for a second or more, even when Ruth was wide-awake, the sound from her dream had persisted. Then it abruptly stopped. It was a sound like someone trying not to make a sound.

'Daddy!' Ruth whispered. She'd remembered (this time) that it was her father's turn to stay with her, but her whisper was so soft that she couldn't hear her own voice. Besides, Ted Cole slept like a stone. Like most heavy drinkers, he didn't fall asleep, he passed out – at least until four or five in the morning, when he could never get back to sleep again.

Ruth crept out of her bed and tiptoed through the master bathroom to the master bedroom, where her father lay smelling of whiskey or gin – as strongly as a car smells of motor oil and gasoline in a closed garage.

'Daddy!' she said again. 'I had a dream. I heard a sound.'

'What sort of a sound was it, Ruthie?' her father asked; he hadn't moved, but he was awake.

'It got into the house,' Ruth said.

'The *sound*?'

'It's in the house, but it's trying to be quiet,' Ruth explained.

'Let's go look for it, then,' her father said. 'A sound that's trying to be quiet. I've got to see this.'

He picked her up and carried her into the long upstairs hall. There were more photographs of Thomas and Timothy in the upstairs hall than in any other part of the house, and when Ted turned on the hall lights, Ruth's dead brothers seemed to be begging for her attention – like a row of princes seeking the favor of a princess.

'Where are you, sound?' Ted called.

'Look in the guest rooms,' Ruth replied.

Her father carried her to the far end of the hall; there were three guest bedrooms with two guest bathrooms – each with more photos. They turned on all the lights, and looked in the closets and behind the shower curtains.

'Come out, sound!' Ted commanded.

'Come out, sound!' Ruth repeated.

'Maybe it's downstairs,' her father suggested.

'No, it was upstairs with us,' Ruth told him.

'I think it's gone, then,' Ted said. 'What did it sound like?'

'It was a sound like someone trying not to make a sound,' Ruth told him.

He put her down on one of the guest-room beds; then he took a pad of paper and a pen off the night table. He liked

so much what she'd said that he had to write it down. But he had no pajamas on – hence no pockets for the piece of paper, which he held in his teeth when he picked Ruth up again. As usual, she took only a passing interest in his nakedness. 'Your penis is funny,' she said.

'My penis *is* funny,' her father agreed. It was what he always said. This time, with a piece of paper between his teeth, the casualness of his remark seemed even more casual.

'Where did the sound go?' Ruth asked him. He was carrying her through the guest bedrooms and the guest bathrooms, turning off the lights, but he stopped so suddenly in one of the bathrooms that Ruth imagined that Thomas or Timothy, or both of them, had reached out from one of the photographs and grabbed him.

'I'll tell you a story about a sound,' her father said, the piece of paper flapping in his teeth. He immediately sat down on the edge of the bathtub, still holding her in his arms.

The photograph that had caught his attention was one that included Thomas at the age of four – Ruth's age exactly. The photo was awkwardly posed: Thomas was seated on a large couch upholstered in a confused floral pattern; the botanical excess appeared to completely overwhelm Timothy, who, at the age of two, was unwillingly being held in Thomas's lap. It would have been 1940, two years before Eddie O'Hare was born.

'One night, Ruthie, when Thomas was your age – Timothy was still in diapers – Thomas heard a sound,' Ted began. Ruth would always remember her father in the act of taking the piece of paper from his mouth.

'Did they both wake up?' Ruth asked, staring at the photograph.

And that was what set the memorable old story in motion; from the very first line, Ted Cole knew this story by heart.

‘Tom woke up, but Tim did not.’

Ruth shivered in her father’s arms. Even as a grown woman, and an acclaimed novelist, Ruth Cole could never hear or say that line without shivering.

‘Tom woke up, but Tim did not. It was the middle of the night. “Did you hear that?” Tom asked his brother. But Tim was only two. Even when he was awake, he didn’t talk much.

‘Tom woke up his father and asked him, “Did you hear that sound?”

‘“What did it sound like?” his father asked.

‘“It sounded like a monster with no arms and no legs, but it was trying to move,” Tom said.

‘“How could it move with no arms and no legs?” his father asked.

‘“It wriggles,” Tom said. “It slides on its fur.”

‘“Oh, it has fur?” his father asked.

‘“It pulls itself along with its teeth,” Tom said.

‘“It has teeth, too!” his father exclaimed.

‘“I told you – it’s a monster!” Tom said.

‘“But what exactly was the sound that woke you up?” his father asked.

‘“It was a sound like, in the closet, if one of Mommy’s dresses came alive and it tried to climb down off the hanger,” Tom said.’

For the rest of her life, Ruth Cole would be afraid of closets. She could not fall asleep in a room when the closet door was open; she did not like to see the dresses hanging there. She didn’t like dresses – period. As a child, she would never open a closet door if the room was dark – out of fear that a dress would pull her inside.

‘“Let’s go back to your room and listen for the sound,” Tom’s father said. And there was Tim, still asleep – he still hadn’t heard the sound. It was a sound like someone pulling the nails out of the floorboards under the bed. It was a sound like a dog trying to open a door. Its mouth was

wet, so it couldn't get a good grip on the doorknob, but it wouldn't stop trying – eventually the dog would get in, Tom thought. It was a sound like a ghost in the attic, dropping the peanuts it had stolen from the kitchen.'

And here, the first time she heard the story, Ruth interrupted her father to ask him what an attic was. 'It's a big room above all the bedrooms,' he told her. The incomprehensible existence of such a room terrified her; there was no attic in the house where Ruth grew up.

'"There's the sound again!" Tom whispered to his father. "Did you hear that?" This time, Tim woke up, too. It was a sound like something caught inside the headboard of the bed. It was eating its way out – it was gnawing through the wood.'

And here Ruth had interrupted her father again; her bunk bed didn't have a headboard, and she didn't know what 'gnawing' was. Her father explained.

'It seemed to Tom that the sound was definitely the sound of an armless, legless monster dragging its thick, wet fur. "It's a monster!" Tom cried.

'"It's just a mouse, crawling between the walls," his father said.

'Tim screamed. He didn't know what a "mouse" was. It frightened him to think of something with wet, thick fur – and no arms and no legs – crawling between the walls. How did something like that get between the walls, anyway?

'But Tom asked his father, "It's just a mouse?"

'His father thumped against the wall with his hand and they listened to the mouse scurrying away. "If it comes back again," he said to Tom and Tim, "just hit the wall."

'"A mouse crawling between the walls!" said Tom. "That's all it was!" He quickly fell asleep, and his father went back to bed and fell asleep, too, but Tim was awake the whole night long, because he didn't know what a mouse was and he wanted to be awake when the thing crawling between the walls came crawling back. Each time he

thought he heard the mouse crawling between the walls, Tim hit the wall with his hand and the mouse scurried away – dragging its thick, wet fur and its no arms and no legs with it.

'And *that* …' Ruth's father said to Ruth, because he ended all his stories the same way.

'And *that* …' Ruth said aloud with him, 'that is the end of the story.'

When her father stood up from the edge of the bathtub, Ruth heard his knees crack. She watched him stick the piece of paper back between his teeth. He turned out the light in the guest bathroom, where Eddie O'Hare would soon be spending an absurd amount of time – taking long showers until the hot water ran out, or some other kind of teenage thing.

Ruth's father turned out the lights in the long upstairs hall, where the photographs of Thomas and Timothy were perfectly all in a row. To Ruth, especially in that summer when she was four, there seemed to be an abundance of photographs of both Thomas and Timothy at about the age of four. She would later speculate that her mother might have preferred four-year-olds to children of any other age; Ruth would wonder if that was *why* her mother had left her at the end of the summer when she was four.

When her father had tucked her back into her bunk bed, Ruth asked him, 'Are there mice in this house?'

'No, Ruthie,' he said. 'There's nothing crawling between our walls.' But she lay awake after he'd kissed her good night, and although the sound that had followed her from her dream didn't return – at least not that same night – Ruth already knew there was *something* crawling between the walls of that house. Her dead brothers did not restrict their residence to those photographs. They moved about, and their presence could be detected in a variety of unseen ways.

That same night, even before she heard the typewriter, Ruth knew that her father was still awake and that he wasn't going back to bed. First she listened to him brushing his teeth, then she heard him getting dressed – the *zip* of his zipper, the *clump* of his shoes.

'Daddy?' she called to him.

'Yes, Ruthie.'

'I want a drink of water.'

She didn't really want a drink of water, but it intrigued her that her father always let the water run until it was cold. Her mother took the first water that ran from the tap; it was warm and tasted like the inside of the pipe.

'Don't drink too much or you'll have to pee,' her father would say, but her mother would let her drink as much as she wanted – sometimes not even watching her drink.

When Ruth handed the cup back to her father, she said, 'Tell me about Thomas and Timothy.' Her father sighed. In the last half-year, Ruth had demonstrated an unquenchable interest in the subject of death – little wonder why. From the photographs, Ruth had been able to distinguish Thomas from Timothy since she'd been three; only their pictures when they were infants occasionally confused her. And, by both her mother and her father, Ruth had been told the circumstances surrounding each of the photos – whether Mommy or Daddy had taken this one, whether Thomas or Timothy had cried. But that the boys were *dead* was a concept that Ruth was newly trying to grasp.

'*Tell* me,' she repeated to her father. 'Are they dead?'

'Yes, Ruthie.'

'And dead means they're *broken*?' Ruth asked.

'Well … their bodies are broken, yes,' Ted said.

'And they're under the ground?'

'Their bodies are, yes.'

'But they're not all gone?' Ruth asked.

'Well … not as long as we remember them. They're not gone from our hearts or from our minds,' her father said.

‘They’re kind of inside us?’ Ruth asked.

‘Well.’ Her father left it at that, but this was more than Ruth would get, in the world of answers, from her mother – her mother would never say ‘dead.’ And neither Ted nor Marion Cole was religious. Providing the necessary details for the concept of heaven wasn’t an option for them, although each of them, in other conversations with Ruth on this subject, had referred mysteriously to the sky and to the stars; they had implied that *something* of the boys lived somewhere other than with their broken bodies, under the ground.

‘So …’ Ruth said, ‘tell me what *dead* is.’

‘Ruthie, listen to me …’

‘Okay,’ Ruth said.

‘When you look at Thomas and Timothy in the photographs, do you remember the stories of what they were doing?’ her father asked her. ‘In the pictures, I mean – do you remember what they were doing in the pictures?’

‘Yes,’ Ruth answered, although she wasn’t sure she could remember what they were doing in *every* picture.

‘Well, then … Thomas and Timothy are alive in your *imagination*,’ her father told her. ‘When you’re dead, when your body is broken, it just means that we can’t see your body anymore – your body is gone.’

‘It’s under the ground,’ Ruth corrected him.

‘We can’t *see* Thomas and Timothy anymore,’ her father insisted, ‘but they are not gone from our imaginations. When we think of them, we see them there.’

‘They’re just gone from *this* world,’ Ruth said. (For the most part, she was repeating what she’d heard before.) ‘They’re in *another* world?’

‘Yes, Ruthie.’

‘Am I going to get dead?’ the four-year-old asked. ‘Will I get all broken?’

‘Not for a long, long time!’ her father said. ‘*I’m* going to get broken before you are, and not even I am going to get