

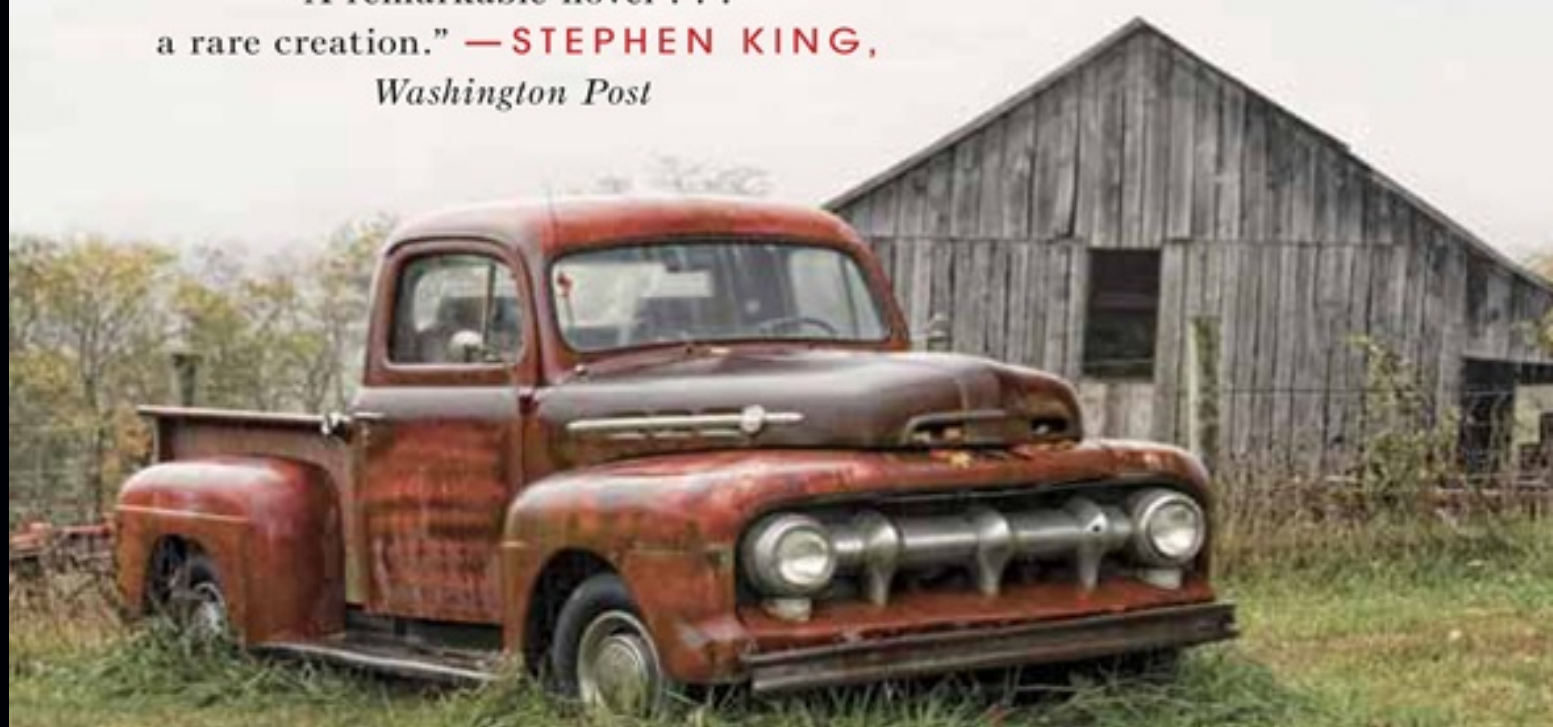
1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER

JOHN IRVING

A NOVEL

A Prayer for Owen Meany

"A remarkable novel . . .
a rare creation." —STEPHEN KING,
Washington Post



A Prayer for Owen Meany

JOHN
IRVING

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

DEDICATION

*This book is for
Helen Frances Winslow Irving and
Colin Franklin Newell Irving,
my mother and father*

EPIGRAPH

Have no Anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

—THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there was no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.

—FREDERICK BUECHNER

Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig.

—LEON BLOCH

CONTENTS

COVER

TITLE PAGE

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

1. THE FOUL BALL

2. THE ARMADILLO

3. THE ANGEL

4. THE LITTLE LORD JESUS

5. THE GHOST OF THE FUTURE

6. THE VOICE

7. THE DREAM

8. THE FINGER

9. THE SHOT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OTHER WORKS

CREDITS

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MEET JOHN IRVING

ABOUT THE BOOK

READ ON

AN EXCERPT FROM JOHN IRVING'S NEXT BOOK

CHAPTER 1

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

I

The Foul Ball

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother’s death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. I make no claim to have a life in Christ, or with Christ—and certainly not *for* Christ, which I’ve heard some zealots claim. I’m not very sophisticated in my knowledge of the Old Testament, and I’ve not read the New Testament since my Sunday school days, except for those passages that I hear read aloud to me when I go to church. I’m somewhat more familiar with the passages from the Bible that appear in The Book of Common Prayer; I read my prayer book often, and my Bible only on holy days—the prayer book so much more orderly.

I’ve always been a pretty regular churchgoer. I used to be a Congregationalist—I was baptized in the Congregational Church, and after some years of fraternity with Episcopalians (I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, too), I became rather vague in my religion: in my teens I attended a “nondenominational” church. Then I became an Anglican; the Anglican Church of Canada has been my church—ever since I left the United States, about twenty years ago. Being an Anglican is a lot like being an Episcopalian—so much so that being an Anglican occasionally impresses upon me the suspicion that I have simply become an Episcopalian again. Anyway, I left the Congregationalists and the Episcopalians—and my country once and for all.

When I die, I shall attempt to be buried in New Hampshire—alongside my mother—but the Anglican Church will perform the necessary service *before* my body suffers the indignity of trying to be sneaked through U.S. Customs. My selections from the Order for the Burial of the Dead are entirely conventional and can be found, in the order that I shall have them read—*not* sung—in The Book of Common Prayer. Almost everyone I know will be familiar with the passages from John, beginning with “... whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” And then there’s “... in my Father’s house are many mansions: If it were not so, I would have told you.” And I have always appreciated the frankness expressed in that passage from Timothy, the one that goes “... we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” It will be a by-the-book Anglican service, the kind that would make my former fellow Congregationalists fidget in their pews. I am an Anglican now, and I shall die an Anglican. But I skip a Sunday service now and then; I make no claims to be especially pious; I have a church-rummage faith—the kind that needs patching up every weekend. What faith do I owe to Owen Meany, a boy I grew up with. It is Owen who made me a believer.

In Sunday school, we developed a form of entertainment based on abusing Owen Meany, who was so small that not only did his feet not touch the floor when he sat in his chair—his knees did not extend to the edge of his seat; therefore, his legs stuck out straight, like the legs of a doll. It was as if Owen Meany had been born without realistic joints.

Owen was so tiny, we loved to pick him up; in truth, we couldn’t resist picking him up. We thought it was a miracle: how little he weighed. This was also incongruous because Owen came from a family in the granite business. The Meany Granite Quarry was a big place, the equipment for blasting and cutting the granite slabs was heavy and dangerous-looking; granite itself is such a rough

substantial rock. But the only aura of the granite quarry that clung to Owen was the granular dust, the gray powder that sprang off his clothes whenever we lifted him up. He was the color of a gravestone; light was both absorbed and reflected by his skin, as with a pearl, so that he appeared translucent at times—especially at his temples, where his blue veins showed through his skin (as though, in addition to his extraordinary size, there were other evidence that he was born too soon).

His vocal cords had not developed fully, or else his voice had been injured by the rock dust of his family's business. Maybe he had larynx damage, or a destroyed trachea; maybe he'd been hit in the throat by a chunk of granite. To be heard at all, Owen had to shout through his nose.

Yet he was dear to us—"a little doll," the girls called him, while he squirmed to get away from them; and from all of us.

I don't remember how our game of lifting Owen began.

This was Christ Church, the Episcopal Church of Gravesend, New Hampshire. Our Sunday school teacher was a strained, unhappy-looking woman named Mrs. Walker. We thought this name suited her because her method of teaching involved a lot of walking out of class. Mrs. Walker would read us an instructive passage from the Bible. She would then ask us to think seriously about what we had heard—"Silently and seriously, that's how I want you to think!" she would say. "I'm going to leave you alone with your thoughts, now," she would tell us ominously—as if our thoughts were capable of driving us over the edge. "I want you to think *very* hard," Mrs. Walker would say. Then she'd walk on to the next class on us. I think she was a smoker, and she couldn't allow herself to smoke in front of us. "When I come back," she'd say, "we'll talk about it."

By the time she came back, of course, we'd forgotten everything about whatever *it* was—because as soon as she left the room, we would fool around with a frenzy. Because being alone with our thoughts was no fun, we would pick up Owen Meany and pass him back and forth, overhead. We managed this while remaining seated in our chairs—that was the challenge of the game. Someone—forget who started it—would get up, seize Owen, sit back down with him, pass him to the next person who would pass him on, and so forth. The girls were included in this game; some of the girls were the most enthusiastic about it. Everyone could lift up Owen. We were very careful; we never dropped him. His shirt might become a little rumpled. His necktie was so long, Owen tucked it into his trousers—else it would have hung to his knees—and his necktie often came untucked; sometimes his change of pants would fall out (in our faces). We always gave him his money back.

If he had his baseball cards with him, they, too, would fall out of his pockets. This made him cross because the cards were alphabetized, or ordered under another system—all the infielders together, maybe. We didn't know what the system was, but obviously Owen had a system, because when Mrs. Walker came back to the room—when Owen returned to his chair and we passed his nickels and dimes and his baseball cards back to him—he would sit shuffling through the cards with a grim, silent fury.

He was not a good baseball player, but he did have a very small strike zone and as a consequence he was often used as a pinch hitter—not because he ever hit the ball with any authority (in fact, he was instructed never to swing at the ball), but because he could be relied upon to earn a walk, a base on balls. In Little League games he resented this exploitation and once refused to come to bat unless he was allowed to swing at the pitches. But there was no bat small enough for him to swing that didn't hurl his tiny body after it—that didn't thump him on the back and knock him out of the batter's box and flat upon the ground. So, after the humiliation of swinging at a few pitches, and missing them, and whacking himself off his feet, Owen Meany selected that *other* humiliation of standing motionless and crouched at home plate while the pitcher *aimed* the ball at Owen's strike zone—and missed it, almost every time.

Yet Owen loved his baseball cards—and, for some reason, he clearly loved the game of baseball itself, although the game was cruel to him. Opposing pitchers would threaten him. They'd tell him that if he didn't swing at their pitches, they'd hit him with the ball. "Your head's bigger than your strike zone, pal," one pitcher told him. So Owen Meany made his way to first base after being struck by pitches, too.

Once on base, he was a star. No one could run the bases like Owen. If our team could stay at bat long enough, Owen Meany could steal home. He was used as a pinch runner in the late innings, to pinch runner and pinch hitter Meany—pinch *walker* Meany, we called him. In the field, he was hopeless. He was afraid of the ball; he shut his eyes when it came anywhere near him. And if by some miracle he managed to catch it, he couldn't throw it; his hand was too small to get a good grip. But he was no ordinary complainer; if he was self-pitying, his voice was so original in its expression of complaint that he managed to make whining lovable.

In Sunday school, when we held Owen up in the air—especially, in the air!—he protested so uniquely. We tortured him, I think, in order to hear his voice; I used to think his voice came from another planet. Now I'm convinced it was a voice not entirely of this world.

"PUT ME DOWN!" he would say in a strangled, emphatic falsetto. "CUT IT OUT! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. PUT ME DOWN! YOU ASSHOLES!"

But we just passed him around and around. He grew more fatalistic about it, each time. His body was rigid; he wouldn't struggle. Once we had him in the air, he folded his arms defiantly on his chest; he scowled at the ceiling. Sometimes Owen grabbed hold of his chair the instant Mrs. Walker left the room; he'd cling like a bird to a swing in its cage, but he was easy to dislodge because he was ticklish. A girl named Sukey Swift was especially deft at tickling Owen; instantly, his arms and legs would stick straight out and we'd have him up in the air again.

"NO TICKLING!" he'd say, but the rules to this game were *our* rules. We never listened to Owen.

Inevitably, Mrs. Walker would return to the room when Owen was in the air. Given the biblical nature of her instructions to us: "to think *very* hard ..." she might have imagined that by a supreme act of our combined and hardest thoughts we had succeeded in levitating Owen Meany. She might have had the wit to suspect that Owen was reaching toward heaven as a direct result of leaving us alone with our thoughts.

But Mrs. Walker's response was always the same—brutish and unimaginative and incredibly dense. "Owen!" she would snap. "Owen Meany, you get back to your seat! You get *down* from up there!"

What could Mrs. Walker teach us about the Bible if she was stupid enough to think that Owen Meany had put *himself* up in the air?

Owen was always dignified about it. He never said, "*THEY* DID IT! *THEY ALWAYS* DO IT! *THEY PICK ME UP AND LOSE MY MONEY AND MESS UP MY BASEBALL CARDS—AND THEY NEVER PUT ME DOWN WHEN I ASK THEM TO! WHAT DO YOU THINK, THAT I FLEW UP HERE?"*

But although Owen would complain to us, he would never complain about us. If he was occasionally capable of being a stoic in the air, he was always a stoic when Mrs. Walker accused him of childish behavior. He would never accuse us. Owen was no rat. As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was.

It appeared there were no hard feelings. Although we saved our most ritualized attacks on him for Sunday school, we also lifted him up at other times—more spontaneously. Once someone hooked him by his collar to a coat tree in the elementary school auditorium; even then, even there, Owen didn't

struggle. He dangled silently, and waited for someone to unhook him and put him down. And after gym class, someone hung him in his locker and shut the door. “NOT FUNNY! NOT FUNNY!” I called, and called, until someone must have agreed with him and freed him from the company of his jockstrap—the size of a slingshot.

How could I have known that Owen was a hero?

Let me say at the outset that I was a Wheelwright—that was the family name that counted in our town, the Wheelwrights. And Wheelwrights were not inclined toward sympathy to Meanys. We were a matriarchal family because my grandfather died when he was a young man and left my grandmother to carry on, which she managed rather grandly. I am descended from John Adams on my grandmother’s side (her maiden name was Bates, and her family came to America on the *Mayflower*) yet, in our town, it was my grandfather’s name that had the clout, and my grandmother wielded her married name with such a sure sense of self-possession that she might as well have been a Wheelwright *and* an Adams *and* a Bates.

Her Christian name was Harriet, but she was Mrs. Wheelwright to almost everyone—certainly everyone in Owen Meany’s family. I think that Grandmother’s final vision of anyone named Meany would have been George Meany—the labor man, the cigar smoker. The combination of unions and cigars did not sit well with Harriet Wheelwright. (To my knowledge, George Meany is not related to the Meany family from my town.)

I grew up in Gravesend, New Hampshire; we didn’t have any unions there—a few cigar smokers but no union men. The town where I was born was purchased from an Indian sagamore in 1638 by the Rev. John Wheelwright, after whom I was named. In New England, the Indian chiefs and higher-ups were called sagamores; although, by the time I was a boy, the only sagamore I knew was a neighborhood dog—a male Labrador retriever named Sagamore (*not*, I think, for his Indian ancestry but because of his owner’s ignorance). Sagamore’s owner, our neighbor, Mr. Fish, always told me that his dog was named for a lake where he spent his summers swimming—“when I was a youth,” Mr. Fish would say. Poor Mr. Fish: he didn’t know that the lake was named after Indian chiefs and higher-ups—and that naming a stupid Labrador retriever “Sagamore” was certain to cause some unholy offense. As you shall see, it did.

But Americans are not great historians, and so, for years—educated by my neighbor—I thought that sagamore was an Indian word for lake. The canine Sagamore was killed by a diaper truck, and I now believe that the gods of those troubled waters of that much-abused lake were responsible. It would be a better story, I think, if Mr. Fish had been killed by the diaper truck—but every study of the gods, of everyone’s gods, is a revelation of vengeance toward the innocent. (This is a part of my particular faith that meets with opposition from my Congregationalist and Episcopalian and Anglican friends.)

As for my ancestor John Wheelwright, he landed in Boston in 1636, only two years before I bought our town. He was from Lincolnshire, England—the hamlet of Saleby—and nobody knows where he named our town Gravesend. He had no known contact with the British Gravesend, although that is surely where the name of our town came from. Wheelwright was a Cambridge graduate; he’d played football with Oliver Cromwell—whose estimation of Wheelwright (as a football player) was both worshipful and paranoid. Oliver Cromwell believed that Wheelwright was a vicious, even a dirty player, who had perfected the art of tripping his opponents and then falling on them. Gravesend (the British Gravesend) is in Kent—a fair distance from Wheelwright’s stamping ground. Perhaps he had a friend from there—maybe it was a friend who had wanted to make the trip to America with

Wheelwright, but who hadn't been able to leave England, or had died on the voyage.

According to Wall's *History of Gravesend, N.H.*, the Rev. John Wheelwright had been a good minister of the English church until he began to "question the authority of certain dogmas"; he became a Puritan, and was thereafter "silenced by the ecclesiastical powers, for nonconformity." I feel that my own religious confusion, and stubbornness, owe much to my ancestor, who suffered not only the criticisms of the English church before he left for the new world; once he arrived, he ran afoul of his fellow Puritans in Boston. Together with the famous Mrs. Hutchinson, the Rev. Mr. Wheelwright was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for disturbing "the civil peace"; in truth, he did nothing more seditious than offer some heterodox opinions regarding the location of the Holy Ghost—but Massachusetts judged him harshly. He was deprived of his weapons; and with his family and several of his bravest adherents, he sailed north from Boston to Great Bay, where he must have passed by two earlier New Hampshire outposts—what was then called Strawberry Banke, at the mouth of the Piscataqua (now Portsmouth), and the settlement in Dover.

Wheelwright followed the Squamscott River out of Great Bay; he went as far as the falls where the freshwater river met the saltwater river. The forest would have been dense then; the Indians would have showed him how good the fishing was. According to Wall's *History of Gravesend*, there were "tracts of natural meadow" and "marshes bordering upon the tidewater."

The local sagamore's name was Watahantowet; instead of his signature, he made his mark upon the deed in the form of his totem—an armless man. Later, there was some dispute—not very interesting—regarding the Indian deed, and more interesting speculation regarding what Watahantowet's totem was an armless man. Some said it was how it made the sagamore feel to give up all that land—to have his arms cut off—and others pointed out that earlier "marks" made by Watahantowet revealed that the figure, although armless, held a feather in his mouth; this was said to indicate the sagamore's frustration at being unable to write. But in several other versions of the totem ascribed to Watahantowet, the figure has a tomahawk in its mouth and looks completely crazy—otherwise, he is making a gesture toward peace: no arms, tomahawk in mouth; together, perhaps, they are meant to signify that Watahantowet does not fight. As for the settlement of the disputed deed, you can be sure the Indians were *not* the beneficiaries of the resolution to that difference of opinion.

And later still, our town fell under Massachusetts authority—which may, to this day, explain why the residents of Gravesend detest people from Massachusetts. Mr. Wheelwright would move to Maine. He was eighty when he spoke at Harvard, seeking contributions to rebuild a part of the college destroyed by a fire—demonstrating that he bore the citizens of Massachusetts less of a grudge than anyone else from Gravesend would bear them. Wheelwright died in Salisbury, Massachusetts, where he was the spiritual leader of the church, when he was almost ninety.

But listen to the names of Gravesend's founding fathers: you will not hear a Meany among them.

Barlow

Blackwell

Cole

Copeland

Crawley

Dearborn

Hilton

Hutchinson

Littlefield

Read
Rishworth
Smart
Smith
Walker
Wardell
Wentworth
Wheelwright

I doubt it's because she was a Wheelwright that my mother never gave up her maiden name; I think my mother's pride was independent of her Wheelwright ancestry, and that she would have kept her maiden name if she'd been born a Meany. And I never suffered in those years that I had her name. I was little Johnny Wheelwright, father unknown, and—at the time—that was okay with me. I never complained. One day, I always thought, she would tell me about it—when I was old enough to know the story. It was, apparently, the kind of story you had to be “old enough” to hear. It wasn't until she died—without a word to me concerning who my father was—that I felt I'd been cheated out of information I had a right to know; it was only after her death that I felt the slightest anger toward her. Even if my father's identity and his story were painful to my mother—even if their relationship had been so sordid that *any* revelation of it would shed a continuous, unfavorable light upon both my parents—wasn't my mother being selfish not to tell me anything about my father?

Of course, as Owen Meany pointed out to me, I was only eleven when she died, and my mother was only thirty; she probably thought she had a lot of time left to tell me the story. She didn't *know* she was going to die, as Owen Meany put it.

Owen and I were throwing rocks in the Squamscott, the saltwater river, the tidal river—or, rather, I was throwing rocks in the river; Owen's rocks were landing in the mud flats because the tide was out and the water was too far away for Owen Meany's little, weak arm. Our throwing had disturbed the herring gulls who'd been pecking in the mud, and the gulls had moved into the marsh grass on the opposite shore of the Squamscott.

It was a hot, muggy, summer day; the low-tide smell of the mud flats was more brinish and morbid than usual. Owen Meany told me that my father would know that my mother was dead, and that—when I was old enough—he would identify himself to me.

“If he's alive,” I said, still throwing rocks. “If he's alive *and* if he cares that he's my father—if he even *knows* he's my father.”

And although I didn't believe him that day, that was the day Owen Meany began his lengthy contribution to my belief in God. Owen was throwing smaller and smaller rocks, but he still couldn't reach the water; there was a certain small satisfaction to the sound the rocks made when they struck the mud flats, but the water was more satisfying than the mud in every way. And almost casually, with a confidence that stood in surprising and unreasonable juxtaposition to his tiny size, Owen Meany told me that he was sure my father was alive, that he was sure my father knew he was my father, and that *God* knew who my father was; even if my father never came forth to identify himself, Owen told me *God* would identify him for me. “YOUR DAD CAN HIDE FROM YOU,” Owen said, “BUT HE CAN'T HIDE FROM GOD.”

And with that announcement, Owen Meany grunted as he released a stone that reached the water. We were both surprised; it was the last rock either of us threw that day, and we stood watching the circle of ripples extending from the point of entry until even the gulls were assured we had stopped.

our disturbance of their universe, and they returned to our side of the Squamscott.

For years, there was a most successful salmon fishery on our river; no salmon would be caught dead there now—actually, the only salmon you could find in the Squamscott today *would* be a dead one. Alewives were also plentiful back then—and still were plentiful when I was a boy, and Owen Meany and I used to catch them. Gravesend is only nine miles from the ocean. Although the Squamscott was never the Thames, the big oceangoing ships once made their way to Gravesend on the Squamscott; the channel has since become so obstructed by rocks and shoals that no boat requiring any great draft of water could navigate it. And although Captain John Smith's beloved Pocahontas ended her unhappy life on British soil in the parish churchyard of the original Gravesend, the spiritually armless Watahantowet was never buried in *our* Gravesend. The only sagamore to be given official burial in our town was Mr. Fish's black Labrador retriever, run over by a diaper truck on Front Street and buried—with the solemn attendance of some neighborhood children—in my grandmother's rose garden.

For more than a century, the big business of Gravesend was lumber, which was the first big business of New Hampshire. Although New Hampshire is called the Granite State, granite—building granite, curbstone granite, tombstone granite—came after lumber; it was never the booming business that lumber was. You can be sure that when all the trees are gone, there will still be rocks around; but in the case of granite, most of it remains underground.

My uncle was in the lumber business—Uncle Alfred, the Eastman Lumber Company; he married my mother's sister, my aunt, Martha Wheelwright. When I was a boy and traveled up north to visit my cousins, I saw log drives and logjams, and I even participated in a few log-rolling contests; I'm afraid I was too inexperienced to offer much competition to my cousins. But today, my Uncle Alfred's business, which is in his children's hands—my cousins' business, I should say—is real estate. In New Hampshire, that's what you have left to sell after you've cut down the trees.

But there will always be granite in the Granite State, and little Owen Meany's family was in the granite business—not ever a recommended business in our small, seacoast part of New Hampshire, although the Meany Granite Quarry was situated over what geologists call the Exeter Pluton. Owen Meany used to say that we residents of Gravesend were sitting over a bona fide outcrop of intrusive igneous rock; he would say this with an implied reverence—as if the consensus of the Gravesend community was that the Exeter Pluton was as valuable as a mother lode of gold.

My grandmother, perhaps owing to her descendants from *Mayflower* days, was more partial to trees than to rocks. For reasons that were never explained to me, Harriet Wheelwright thought that the lumber business was clean and that the granite business was dirty. Since my grandfather's business was shoes, this made no sense to me; but my grandfather died before I was born—his famous decision to *not* unionize his shoeshop, is only hearsay to me. My grandmother sold the factory for a considerable profit, and I grew up with her opinions regarding how blessed were those who murdered trees for a living, and how low were those who handled rocks. We've all heard of lumber barons—my uncle, Alfred Eastman, was one—but who has heard of a rock baron?

The Meany Granite Quarry in Gravesend is inactive now; the pitted land, with its deep and dangerous quarry lakes, is not even valuable as real estate—it never was valuable, according to my mother. She told me that the quarry had been inactive all the years that *she* was growing up in Gravesend, and that its period of revived activity, in the Meany years, was fitful and doomed. All the good granite, Mother said, had been taken out of the ground before the Meanys moved to Gravesend. (As for *when* the Meanys moved to Gravesend, it was always described to me as “about the time you were born.”) Furthermore, only a small portion of the granite underground is worth getting out; the

rest has defects—or if it's good, it's so far underground that it's hard to get out without cracking it.

Owen was always talking about cornerstones and monuments—a PROPER monument, he used to say, explaining that what was required was a large, evenly cut, smooth, unflawed piece of granite. The delicacy with which Owen spoke of this—and his own, physical delicacy—stood in absurd contrast to the huge, heavy slabs of rock we observed on the flatbed trucks, and to the violent noise of the quarry, and to the piercing sound of the rock chisels on the channeling machine—THE CHANNEL BAR, Owen called it—and the dynamite.

I used to wonder why Owen wasn't deaf; that there was something wrong with his voice, and with his size, was all the more surprising when you considered that there was nothing wrong with his ears—for the granite business is extremely percussive.

It was Owen who introduced me to Wall's *History of Gravesend*, although I didn't read the whole book until I was a senior at Gravesend Academy, where the tome was required as a part of a town history project; Owen read it before he was ten. He told me that the book was FULL OF WHEELWRIGHTS.

I was born in the Wheelwright house on Front Street; and I used to wonder why my mother decided to have me and to never explain a word about me—either to me or to her own mother and sister. My mother was not a brazen character. Her pregnancy, and her refusal to discuss it, must have struck the Wheelwrights with all the more severity because my mother had such a tranquil, modest nature.

She'd met a man on the Boston & Maine Railroad: that was all she'd say.

My Aunt Martha was a senior in college, and already engaged to be married, when my mother announced that she wasn't even going to apply for college entrance. My grandfather was dying, and perhaps this focusing of my grandmother's attention distracted her from demanding of my mother what the family had demanded of Aunt Martha: a college education. Besides, my mother argued, she could be of help at home, with her dying father—and with the strain and burden that his dying placed upon her mother. And the Rev. Lewis Merrill, the pastor at the Congregational Church, and my mother's choirmaster, had convinced my grandparents that my mother's singing voice was truly worthy of professional training. For her to engage in serious voice and singing lessons, the Rev. Mr. Merrill said, was as sensible an "investment," in my mother's case, as a college education.

At this point in my mother's life, I used to feel there was a conflict of motives. If singing and voice lessons were so important and serious to her, why did she arrange to have them only once a week? And if my grandparents accepted Mr. Merrill's assessment of my mother's voice, why did they object so bitterly to her spending one night a week in Boston? It seemed to me that she should have moved to Boston and taken lessons every day! But I supposed the source of the conflict was my grandfather's terminal illness—my mother's desire to be of help at home, and my grandmother's need to have her there.

It was an early-morning voice or singing lesson; that was why she had to spend the previous night in Boston, which was an hour and a half from Gravesend—by train. Her singing and voice teacher was very popular; early morning was the only time he had for my mother. She was fortunate he would see her at all, the Rev. Lewis Merrill had said, because he normally saw only professionals; although my mother, and my Aunt Martha, had clocked many singing hours in the Congregational Church Choir. My Mother was not a "professional." She simply had a lovely voice, and she was engaged—in her entire life—unrebellious, even timid way—in training it.

My mother's decision to curtail her education was more acceptable to her parents than to her sister; Aunt Martha not only disapproved—my aunt (who is a lovely woman) resented my mother,

only slightly. My mother had the better voice, she was the prettier. When they'd been growing up in the big house on Front Street, it was my Aunt Martha who brought the boys from Gravesend Academy home to meet my grandmother and grandfather—Martha was the older, and the first to bring home the "beaus," as my mother called them. But once the boys saw my mother—even before she was old enough to date—that was usually the end of their interest in Aunt Martha.

And now this: an unexplained pregnancy! According to my Aunt Martha, my grandfather was "already out of it"—he was so very nearly dead that he never knew my mother was pregnant "although she took few pains to hide it," Aunt Martha said. My poor grandfather, in Aunt Martha's words to me, "died worrying why your mother was overweight."

In my Aunt Martha's day, to grow up in Gravesend was to understand that Boston was a city of sin. And even though my mother had stayed in a highly approved and chaperoned women's residential hotel, she had managed to have her "fling," as Aunt Martha called it, with the man she'd met on the Boston & Maine.

My mother was so calm, so unrattled by either criticism or slander, that she was quite comfortable with her sister Martha's use of the word "fling"—in truth, I heard Mother use the word fondly.

"My fling," she would occasionally call me, with the greatest affection. "My little fling!"

It was from my cousins that I first heard that my mother was thought to be "a little simple"; it would have been from *their* mother—from Aunt Martha—that they would have heard this. By the time I heard these insinuations—"a little simple"—they were no longer fighting words; my mother had been dead for more than ten years.

Yet my mother was more than a natural beauty with a beautiful voice and questionable reasoning powers; Aunt Martha had good grounds to suspect that my grandmother and grandfather spoiled my mother. It was not just that she was the baby, it was her temperament—she was never angry or sulky; she was not given to tantrums or to self-pity. She had such a sweet-tempered disposition, it was impossible to stay angry with her. As Aunt Martha said: "She never appeared to be as assertive as she was." She simply did what she wanted to do, and then said, in her engaging fashion, "*Oh! I feel terrible that what I've done has upset you, and I intend to shower you with such affection that you'll forgive me and love me as much as you would if I'd done the right thing!*" And it *worked!*

It worked, at least, until she was killed—and she couldn't promise to remedy how upsetting *that* was; there was no way she could make up for that.

And even after she went ahead and had me, unexplained, and named me after the founding father of Gravesend—even after she managed to make all that acceptable to her mother and sister, and to the town (not to mention to the Congregational Church, where she continued to sing in the choir and was often a participant in various parish-house functions) ... even after she'd carried off my illegitimate birth (to everyone's satisfaction, or so it *appeared*), she *still* took the train to Boston every Wednesday, she *still* spent every Wednesday night in the dreaded city in order to be bright and early for her voice or singing lesson.

When I got a little older, I resented it—sometimes. Once when I had the mumps, and another time when I had the chicken pox, she canceled the trip; she stayed with me. And there was another time when Owen and I had been catching alewives in the tidewater culvert that ran into the Squamsco under the Swasey Parkway and I slipped and broke my wrist; she didn't take the Boston & Maine that week. But all the other times—until I was ten and she married the man who would legally adopt me and become like a father to me; until then—she kept going to Boston, overnight. Until then, she kept singing. No one ever told me if her voice improved.

That's why I was born in my grandmother's house—a grand, brick, Federal monster of a house. When I was a child, the house was heated by a coal furnace; the coal chute was under the eel of the house where my bedroom was. Since the coal was always delivered very early in the morning, its rumbling down the chute was often the sound that woke me up. On the rare coincidence of a Thursday morning delivery (when my mother was in Boston), I used to wake up to the sound of the coal and imagine that at that precise moment, my mother was starting to sing. In the summer, with the windows open, I would wake up to the birds in my grandmother's rose garden. And there lies another of my grandmother's opinions, to take root alongside her opinions regarding rocks and trees: anyone could grow me flowers or vegetables, but a gardener grew roses; Grandmother was a gardener.

The Gravesend Inn was the only other brick building of comparable size to my grandmother's house on Front Street; indeed, Grandmother's house was often mistaken for the Gravesend Inn by travelers following the usual directions given in the center of town: "Look for the big brick place on your left, after you pass the academy."

My grandmother was peeved at this—she was not in the slightest flattered to have her house mistaken for an inn. "This is *not* an inn," she would inform the lost and bewildered travelers, who had been expecting someone younger to greet them and fetch their luggage. "This is my home," Grandmother would announce. "The inn is further along," she would say, waving her hand in the general direction. "Further along" is fairly specific compared to other New Hampshire forms of directions; we don't enjoy giving directions in New Hampshire—we tend to think that if you don't know where you're going, you don't belong where you are. In Canada, we give directions more freely—to anywhere, to anyone who asks.

In our Federal house on Front Street, there was also a secret passageway—a bookcase that was actually a door that led down a staircase to a dirt-floor basement that was entirely separate from the main basement where the coal furnace was. That was just what it was: a bookcase that was a door that led to a place where absolutely nothing happened—it was simply a place to hide. From *what?* I used to wonder. That this secret passageway to nowhere existed in our house did not comfort me; rather, it provoked me to imagine what there might be that was sufficiently threatening to hide *from*—and it was never comforting to imagine that.

I took little Owen Meany into that passageway once, and I got him lost in there, in the dark, and I frightened the hell out of him; I did this to all my friends, of course, but frightening Owen Meany was always more special than frightening anyone else. It was his voice, that ruined voice, that made his fear unique. I have been engaged in private imitations of Owen Meany's voice for more than thirty years, and that voice used to prevent me from imagining that I could ever *write* about Owen, because—on the page—the sound of his voice is impossible to convey. *And* I was prevented from imagining that I could even make Owen a part of *oral* history, because the thought of imitating his voice—public—is so embarrassing. It has taken me more than thirty years to get up the nerve to share Owen's voice with strangers.

My grandmother was so upset by the sound of Owen Meany's voice, protesting his abuse in the secret passageway, that she spoke to me, after Owen had gone home. "I don't want you to describe Owen to me—not ever—what you were doing to that poor boy to make him sound like that; but if you ever do it again, please cover his mouth with your hand," Grandmother said. "You've seen the mice caught in the mousetraps?" she asked me. "I mean *caught*—their little necks *broken*—I mean absolutely *dead*," Grandmother said. "Well, that boy's voice," my grandmother told me, "that boy's voice could bring those mice back to life!"

And it occurs to me now that Owen's voice *was* the voice of all those murdered mice, coming back

to life—with a vengeance.

I don't mean to make my grandmother sound insensitive. She had a maid named Lydia, a Prince Edward Islander, who was our cook and housekeeper for years and years. When Lydia developed cancer and her right leg was amputated, my grandmother hired two other maids—one to look after Lydia. Lydia never worked again. She had her own room, and her favorite wheelchair routes through the huge house, and she became the entirely served invalid that, one day, my grandmother had imagined she herself might become—with someone like Lydia looking after her. Delivery boys and guests in our house frequently mistook Lydia for my grandmother, because Lydia looked quite regal in her wheelchair and she was about my grandmother's age; she had tea with my grandmother every afternoon, and she played cards with my grandmother's bridge club—with those very same ladies whose tea she had once fetched. Shortly before Lydia died, even my Aunt Martha was struck by the resemblance Lydia bore to my grandmother. Yet to various guests and delivery boys, Lydia would always say—with a certain indignation of tone that was borrowed from my grandmother—"I am *not* Missus Wheelwright, I am Missus Wheelwright's former maid." It was exactly in the manner that my Grandmother would claim that her house was *not* the Gravesend Inn.

So my grandmother was not without humanity. And if she wore cocktail dresses when she labored in her rose garden, they were cocktail dresses that she no longer intended to wear to cocktail parties. Even in her rose garden, she did not want to be seen underdressed. If the dresses got too dirty from gardening, she threw them out. When my mother suggested to her that she might have them cleaned, my grandmother said, "What? And have those people at the cleaners wonder what I was doing in that dress to make it *that* dirty?"

From my grandmother I learned that logic is relative.

But this story really *is* about Owen Meany, about how I have apprenticed myself to his voice. His cartoon voice has made an even stronger impression on me than has my grandmother's imperious wisdom.

Grandmother's memory began to elude her near the end. Like many old people, she had a firm grasp of her own childhood than she had of the lives of her own children, or her grandchildren, or her great-grandchildren. The more recent the memory was, the more poorly remembered. "I remember you as a little boy," she told me, not long ago, "but when I look at you now, I don't know who you are." I told her I occasionally had the same feeling about myself. And in one conversation about her memory, I asked her if she remembered little Owen Meany.

"The labor man?" she said. "The unionist!"

"No, *Owen Meany*," I said.

"No," she said. "Certainly not."

"The granite family?" I said. "The Meany Granite Quarry. Remember?"

"Granite," she said with distaste. "Certainly not!"

"Maybe you remember his voice?" I said to my grandmother, when she was almost a hundred years old.

But she was impatient with me; she shook her head. I was getting up the nerve to imitate Owen Meany's voice.

"I turned out the lights in the secret passageway, and scared him," I reminded Grandmother.

"You were always doing that," she said indifferently. "You even did that to Lydia—when she still had both her legs."

"TURN ON THE LIGHT!" said Owen Meany. "SOMETHING IS TOUCHING MY FACE! TURN ON THE LIGHT! IT'S SOMETHING WITH A TONGUE! SOMETHING IS LICKING ME!" Owen

Meany cried.

“It’s just a cobweb, Owen,” I remember telling him.

“IT’S TOO *WET* FOR A COBWEB! IT’S A *TONGUE*! TURN ON THE LIGHT!”

“Stop it!” my grandmother told me. “I remember, I remember—for God’s sake,” she said. “Don’t ever do that again!” she told me. But it was from my grandmother that I gained the confidence that I could imitate Owen Meany’s voice at all. Even when her memory was shot, Grandmother remembered Owen’s voice; if she remembered him as the instrument of her daughter’s death, she didn’t say. Nevertheless, in the end, Grandmother didn’t remember that I had become an Anglican—and a Canadian.

The Meanys, in my grandmother’s lexicon, were not *Mayflower* stock. They were not descended from the founding fathers; you could not trace a Meany back to John Adams. They were descended from later immigrants; they were Boston Irish. The Meanys made their move to New Hampshire from Boston, which was never England; they’d also lived in Concord, New Hampshire, and in Barre, Vermont—those were much more working-class places than Gravesend. Those were New England’s true granite kingdoms. My grandmother believed that mining and quarrying, of all kinds, was *groveling* work—and that quarriers and miners were more closely related to moles than to men. As for the Meanys: none of the family was especially small, except for Owen.

And for all the dirty tricks we played on him, he tricked us only once. We were allowed to swim in one of his father’s quarries only if we entered and left the water one at a time and with a stout rope tied around our waists. One did not actually *swim* in those quarry lakes, which were rumored to be as deep as the ocean; they were as cold as the ocean, even in late summer; they were as black and still as pools of oil. It was not the cold that made you want to rush out as soon as you’d jumped in; it was the unmeasured depth—our fear of what was on the bottom, and how far below us the bottom was.

Owen’s father, Mr. Meany, insisted on the rope—*insisted* on one-at-a-time, in-and-out. It was one of the few parental rules from my childhood that remained unbroken, except once—by Owen. It was never a rule that any of us cared to challenge; no one wanted to untie the rope and plunge without hope of rescue toward the unknown bottom.

But one fine August day, Owen Meany untied the rope, underwater, and he swam underwater to some hidden crevice in the rocky shore while we waited for him to rise. When he didn’t surface, we pulled up the rope. Because we believed that Owen was nearly weightless, we refused to believe what our arms told us—that he was not at the end of the rope. We didn’t believe he was gone until we had the bulging knot at the rope’s end out of the water. What a silence that was!—interrupted only by the drops of water from the rope falling into the quarry.

No one called his name; no one dove in to look for him. In that water, no one could *see*! I prefer to believe that we *would* have gone in to look for him—if he’d given us just a few more seconds to gather up our nerve—but Owen decided that our response was altogether too slow and uncaring. He swam out from the crevice at the opposite shore; he moved as lightly as a water bug across the terrifying hole that reached, we were sure, to the bottom of the earth. He swam to us, angrier than we’d ever seen him.

“TALK ABOUT HURTING SOMEONE’S FEELINGS!” he cried. “WHAT WERE YOU WAITING FOR? BUBBLES? DO YOU THINK I’M A *FISH*? WASN’T ANYONE GOING TO *TRY* TO FIND ME?”

“You scared us, Owen,” one of us said. We were too scared to defend ourselves, if there was anything to be gained from defending ourselves—ever—in regard to Owen.

“YOU LET ME DROWN!” Owen said. “YOU DIDN’T DO ANYTHING! YOU JUST WATCHED

What I remember best is Sunday school in the Episcopal Church. Both Owen and I were newcomers there. When my mother married the *second* man she met on the train, she and I changed churches; we left the Congregational Church for the church of my adoptive father—he was, my mother said, an Episcopalian, and although I never saw any evidence that he was a particularly serious Episcopalian, my mother insisted that she and I move with him to *his* church. It was a move that disturbed my grandmother, because we Wheelwrights had been in the Congregational Church ever since we got over being Puritans ("ever since we *almost* got over being Puritans," my grandmother used to say, because—in her opinion—Puritanism had never entirely relinquished its hold on us Wheelwrights). Some Wheelwrights—not only our founding father—had even been in the ministry; in the last century, the Congregational ministry. *And* the move upset the pastor of the Congregational Church, the Rev. Lewis Merrill; he'd baptized me, and he was woebegone at the thought of losing my mother's voice from the choir—he'd known her since she was a young girl, and (my mother always said) he'd been especially supportive of her when she'd been calmly and good-naturedly insisting on her privacy regarding my origins.

The move did not sit well with me, either—as you shall see. But Owen Meany's manner of making and keeping a thing mysterious was to allude to something too dark and terrible to mention. *He* was changing churches, he said, TO ESCAPE THE CATHOLICS—or, actually, it was his father who was escaping and defying the Catholics by sending Owen to Sunday school, to be confirmed, in the Episcopal Church. When Congregationalists turned into Episcopalians, Owen told me, there was nothing to it; it simply represented a move *upward* in church formality—in HOCUS-POCUS, Owen called it. But for Catholics to move to the Episcopal Church was not only a move *away* from the hocus-pocus; it was a move that risked eternal damnation. Owen used to say, gravely, that his father would surely be damned for initiating the move, but that the Catholics had committed a UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE—that they had insulted his father and mother, irreparably.

When I would complain about the kneeling, which was new to me—not to mention the abundance of litanies and recited creeds in the Episcopal service—Owen would tell me that I knew nothing. Not only did Catholics kneel and mutter litanies and creeds without ceasing, but they ritualized any hope of contact with God to such an extent that Owen felt they'd interfered with his ability to pray—to talk to God DIRECTLY, as Owen put it. And then there was confession! Here I was complaining about some simple kneeling, but what did I know about confessing my sins? Owen said the pressure to confess—as a Catholic—was so great that he'd often made things up in order to be forgiven for them.

"But that's crazy!" I said.

Owen agreed. And what was the cause of the falling out between the Catholics and Mr. Meany? Owen always asked. Owen never told me. The damage was irreparable, he would repeat; he would refer only to the UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE.

Perhaps my unhappiness at having traded the Congregational Church for the Episcopal—combination with Owen's satisfaction at having ESCAPED the Catholics—contributed to my pleasure in our game of lifting Owen Meany up in the air. It occurs to me now that we were all guilty of thinking of Owen as existing only for our entertainment; but in my case—especially, in the Episcopal Church—I think I was also guilty of envying him. I believe my participation in abusing him in Sunday school was faintly hostile and inspired by the greatest difference between us: he believed more than I did, and although I was always aware of this, I was most aware in church. I disliked the Episcopalians because they appeared to believe more—or in more *things*—than the Congregationalists believed; and

because I believed very little, I had been more comfortable with the Congregationalists, who demanded a minimum of participation from worshipers.

Owen disliked the Episcopalians, too, but he disliked them far less than he had disliked the Catholics; in his opinion, both of them believed *less* than he believed—but the Catholics had interfered with Owen's beliefs and practices *more*. He was my best friend, and with our best friends we overlook many differences; but it wasn't until we found ourselves attending the same Sunday school, and the same church, that I was forced to accept that my best friend's religious faith was more certain (if not always more dogmatic) than anything I heard in either the Congregational or the Episcopal Church.

I don't remember Sunday school in the Congregational Church at all—although my mother claimed that this was always an occasion whereat I ate a lot, both in Sunday school and at various parish-house functions. I vaguely remember the cider and the cookies; but I remember emphatically—with a crisp, winter-day brightness—the white clapboard church, the black steeple clock, and the services that were always held on the second floor in an informal, well-lit, meetinghouse atmosphere. You could look out the tall windows at the branches of the towering trees. By comparison, the Episcopal services were conducted in a gloomy, basement atmosphere. It was a stone church, and there was a ground-floor or even underground mustiness to the place, which was overcrowded with dark wood bric-a-brac, somber with dull gold organ pipes, garish with confused configurations of stained glass—through which not a single branch of a tree was visible.

When I complained about church, I complained about the usual things a kid complains about: the claustrophobia, the boredom. But Owen complained *religiously*. “A PERSON'S FAITH GOES AT ITS OWN PACE,” Owen Meany said. “THE TROUBLE WITH CHURCH IS THE SERVICE. A SERVICE IS CONDUCTED FOR A MASS AUDIENCE. JUST WHEN I START TO LIKE THE HYMNS EVERYONE PLOPS DOWN TO PRAY. JUST WHEN I START TO HEAR THE PRAYER EVERYONE POPS UP TO SING. AND WHAT DOES THE STUPID *SERMON* HAVE TO DO WITH GOD? WHO KNOWS WHAT GOD THINKS OF CURRENT EVENTS? WHO CARES?”

To these complaints, and others like them, I could respond only by picking up Owen Meany and holding him above my head.

“You tease Owen too much,” my mother used to say to me. But I don't remember much teasing, not beyond the usual lifting him up—unless Mother meant that I failed to realize how serious Owen was when he was insulted by jokes of any kind. After all, he did read Wall's *History of Gravesend* before he was ten; this was not lighthearted work, this was never reading that merely skipped along. And he also read the Bible—not by the time he was ten, of course; but he actually read the whole thing.

And then there was the question of Gravesend Academy; that was the question for every boy born in Gravesend—the academy did not admit girls in those days. I was a poor student; and even though my grandmother could well have afforded the tuition, I was destined to stay at Gravesend High School—until my mother married someone on the academy faculty and he legally adopted me. Faculty children—faculty brats, we were called—could automatically attend the academy.

What a relief this must have been to my grandmother; she'd always resented that her own children couldn't go to Gravesend Academy—she'd had daughters. My mother and my Aunt Martha were high school girls—what they saw of Gravesend Academy was only at the dating end, although my Aunt Martha put this to good use: she married a Gravesend Academy boy (one of the few who didn't prefer my mother), which made my cousins sons of alumni, which favored their admittance, too. (My only female cousin would not benefit from this alumni connection—as you shall see.)

But Owen Meany was a legitimate Gravesend Academy candidate; he was a brilliant student; he was the kind of student who was *supposed* to go to Gravesend. He could have applied and got in—and got a full scholarship, too, since the Meany Granite Company was never flourishing and his parents could not have afforded the tuition. But one day when my mother was driving Owen and me to the beach—Owen and I were ten—my mother said, “I hope you never stop helping Johnny with his homework, Owen, because when you’re both at the academy, the homework’s going to be much harder—especially for Johnny.”

“BUT I’M NOT GOING TO THE ACADEMY,” Owen said.

“Of course you are!” my mother said. “You’re the best student in New Hampshire—maybe, in the whole country!”

“THE ACADEMY’S NOT FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME,” Owen said. “THE PUBLIC SCHOOL IS FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME.”

I wondered for a moment if he meant, *for small people*—that public high schools were for people who were exceptionally small—but my mother was thinking far ahead of me, and she said, “You’ll get a full scholarship, Owen. I hope your parents know that. You’ll go to the academy absolutely free.”

“YOU HAVE TO WEAR A COAT AND TIE EVERY DAY,” Owen said. “THE SCHOLARSHIP DOESN’T BUY THE COATS AND TIES.”

“That can be arranged, Owen,” my mother said, and I could tell that she meant *she’d* arrange it—no one else would, she’d buy him every coat and tie he could possibly have use for.

“THERE’S ALSO DRESS SHIRTS, AND SHOES,” Owen said. “IF YOU GO TO SCHOOL WITH RICH PEOPLE, YOU DON’T WANT TO LOOK LIKE THEIR *SERVANTS*.” I now suppose that my mother could hear Mr. Meany’s prickly, working-class politics behind this observation.

“Everything you need, Owen,” my mother said. “It will be taken care of.”

We were in Rye, passing the First Church, and the breeze from the ocean was already strong. A man with a great stack of roofing shingles in a wheelbarrow was having difficulty keeping the shingles from blowing away; the ladder, leaning against the vestry roof, was also in danger of being blown over. The man seemed in need of a co-worker—or, at least, of another pair of hands.

“WE SHOULD STOP AND HELP THAT MAN,” Owen observed, but my mother was pursuing another theme and, therefore, she’d noticed nothing unusual out the window.

“Would it help if I talked to your parents about it, Owen?” my mother asked.

“THERE’S ALSO THE MATTER OF THE BUS,” Owen said. “TO GO TO HIGH SCHOOL, YOU CAN TAKE A BUS. I DON’T LIVE RIGHT IN TOWN, YOU KNOW. HOW WOULD I GET TO THE ACADEMY? IF I WAS A DAY STUDENT, I MEAN—HOW WOULD I GET THERE? HOW WOULD I GET BACK HOME? BECAUSE MY PARENTS WOULD NEVER LET ME LIVE IN A DORMITORY. THEY NEED ME AT HOME. ALSO, DORMITORIES ARE EVIL. SO HOW DO THE DAY STUDENTS GET TO SCHOOL AND GET HOME?” he asked.

“Someone drives them,” my mother said. “I could drive you, Owen—at least until you got your driver’s license of your own.”

“NO, IT WON’T WORK,” Owen said. “MY FATHER’S TOO BUSY, AND MY MOTHER DOESN’T DRIVE.”

Mrs. Meany—both my mother and I knew—not only didn’t drive; she never left the house. And even in the summer, the windows in that house were never open; his mother was allergic to dust. Owen had explained. Every day of the year, Mrs. Meany sat indoors behind the windows bleared and streaked with grit from the quarry. She wore an old set of pilot’s headphones (the wires dangling unattached) because the sound of the channeling machine—the channel bar, and the rock chisels—

disturbed her. On blasting days, she played the phonograph very loudly—the big band sound, the needle skipping occasionally when the dynamite was especially nearby and percussive.

Mr. Meany did the shopping. He drove Owen to Sunday school, and picked him up—although he did not attend the Episcopal services himself. It was apparently enough revenge upon the Catholics to be sending Owen there; either the added defiance of his own attendance was unnecessary, or else Mr. Meany had suffered such an outrage at the hands of the Catholic authorities that he was rendered unreceptive to the teachings of *any* church.

He was, my mother knew, quite unreceptive on the subject of Gravesend Academy. “There is the interests of the town,” he once said in Town Meeting, “and then there is the interests of *them!*” This regarded the request of the academy to widen the saltwater river and dredge a deeper low-tide channel at a point in the Squamscott that would improve the racing course for the academy crew; several shells had become mired in the mud flats at low tide. The part of the river the academy wished to widen was a peninsula of tidewater marsh bordering the Meany Granite Quarry; it was totally unusable land, yet Mr. Meany owned it and he resented that the academy wanted to scoop it away—“for purposes of recreation!” he said.

“We’re talking about mud, not granite,” a representative of the academy had remarked.

“I’m talkin’ about us and *them!*” Mr. Meany had shouted, in what is now recorded as a famous Town Meeting. In order for a Town Meeting to be famous in Gravesend, it is only necessary that there be a good *row*. The Squamscott was widened; the channel was dredged. If it was just mud, the town decided, it didn’t matter whose mud it was.

“You’re going to the academy, Owen,” my mother told him. “That’s all there is to it. If any student ever belonged in a proper school, it’s you—that place was made with you in mind, or it was made for no one.”

“WE MISSED DOING A GOOD DEED,” Owen said morosely. “THAT MAN SHINGLING THE CHURCH—HE NEEDED HELP.”

“Don’t argue with me, Owen,” my mother said. “You’re going to the academy, if I have to adopt you. I’ll *kidnap* you, if I have to,” she said.

But no one on this earth was ever as stubborn as Owen Meany; he waited a mile before he said another word, and then he said, “NO. IT WON’T WORK.”

Gravesend Academy was founded in 1781 by the Rev. Emery Hurd, a follower of the original Wheelwright’s original beliefs, a childless Puritan with an ability—according to Wall—for “Oratorical on the advantages of Learning and its happy Tendency to promote Virtue and Piety.” What would the Rev. Mr. Hurd have thought of Owen Meany? Hurd conceived of an academy whereat “no vicious laborer who is liable to contaminate his associates, is allowed to remain an hour”; whereat “the student shall bear the laboring oar”—and learn heartily from his labor!

As for the rest of his money, Emery Hurd left it for “the education and christianization of the American Indians.” In his waning years—ever watchful that Gravesend Academy devote itself to “pious and charitable purposes”—the Rev. Mr. Hurd was known to patrol Water Street in downtown Gravesend, looking for youthful offenders: specifically, young men who would not doff their hats to him, and young ladies who would not curtsy. In payment for such offense, Emery Hurd was happy to give these young people a piece of his mind; near the end, only pieces were left.

I saw my grandmother lose her mind in pieces like that; when she was so old that she could remember almost nothing—certainly not Owen Meany, and not even me—she would occasionally reprimand the whole room, and anyone present in it. “What has happened to tipping the hat?” she

would howl. "Bring back the bow!" she would croon. "Bring back the curtsy!"

"Yes, Grandmother," I would say.

"Oh, what do you know?" she would say. "Who are you, anyway?" she would ask.

"HE IS YOUR GRANDSON, JOHNNY," I would say, in my best imitation of Owen Meany's voice.

And my Grandmother would say, "My God, is *he* still here? Is that funny little guy still here? Do you lock him in the passageway, Johnny?"

Later, in that summer when we were ten, Owen told me that my mother had been to the quarry to visit his parents.

"What did they say about it?" I asked him.

They hadn't mentioned the visit, Owen told me, but he knew she'd been there. "I COULD SMELL HER PERFUME," Owen said. "SHE MUST HAVE BEEN THERE QUITE A WHILE BECAUSE THERE WAS ALMOST AS MUCH OF HER PERFUME AS THERE IS IN YOUR HOUSE. MY MOTHER DOESN'T WEAR PERFUME," he added.

This was unnecessary to tell me. Not only did Mrs. Meany not go outdoors; she refused to look outdoors. When I saw her positioned in the various windows of Owen's house, she was always in profile to the window, determined *not* to be observing the world—yet making an obscure point: by sitting in profile, possibly she meant to suggest that she had not entirely turned her back on the world either. It occurred to me that the Catholics had done this to her—whatever it was, it surely qualified for the unmentioned UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE that Owen claimed his father and mother had suffered. There was something about Mrs. Meany's obdurate self-imprisonment that smacked of religious persecution—if not eternal damnation.

"How did it go with the Meanys?" I asked my mother.

"They told Owen I was there?" she asked.

"No, they didn't tell him. He recognized your perfume."

"He would," she said, and smiled. I think she knew Owen had a crush on her—all my friends had crushes on my mother. And if she had lived until they'd all been teenagers, their degrees of infatuation with her would doubtless have deepened, and worsened, and been wholly unbearable—both to them and to me.

Although my mother resisted the temptation of my generation—that is to say, she restrained herself from picking up Owen Meany—she could not resist touching Owen. You simply had to put your hands on Owen. He was mortally cute; he had a furry animal attractiveness—except for the nakedness of his nearly transparent ears, and the rodentlike way they protruded from his sharp face. My grandmother said that Owen resembled an embryonic fox. When touching Owen, one avoided his ears; they looked as if they would be cold to the touch. But not my mother; she even rubbed warmth into his rubbery ears. She hugged him, she kissed him, she touched noses with him. She did all these things as naturally as if she were doing them to me, but she did none of these things to my other friends—not even to my cousins. And Owen responded to her quite affectionately; he'd blush sometimes, but he'd always smile. His standard, nearly constant frown would disappear; an embarrassed beam would overcome his face.

I remember him best when he stood level to my mother's girlish waist; the top of his head, if he stood on his toes, would brush against her breasts. When she was sitting down and he would go over to her, to receive his usual touches and hugs, his face would be dead-even with her breasts. My mother was a sweater girl; she had a lovely figure, and she knew it, and she wore those sweaters of the period

that showed it.

~~A measure of Owen's seriousness was that we could talk about the mothers of all our friends, and Owen could be extremely frank in his appraisal of my mother to me; he could get away with it because I knew he wasn't joking. Owen never joked.~~

"YOUR MOTHER HAS THE BEST BREASTS OF ALL THE MOTHERS." No other friend could have said this to me without starting a fight.

"You really think so?" I asked him.

"ABSOLUTELY, THE BEST," he said.

"What about Missus Wiggin?" I asked him.

"TOO BIG," Owen said.

"Missus Webster?" I asked him.

"TOO LOW," Owen said.

"Missus Merrill?" I asked.

"VERY FUNNY," Owen said.

"Miss Judkins?" I said.

"I DON'T KNOW," he said. "I CAN'T REMEMBER THEM. BUT SHE'S NOT A MOTHER."

"Miss Farnum!" I said.

"YOU'RE JUST FOOLING AROUND," Owen said peevishly.

"Caroline Perkins!" I said.

"MAYBE ONE DAY," he said seriously. "BUT SHE'S NOT A MOTHER, EITHER."

"Irene Babson!" I said.

"DON'T GIVE ME THE SHIVERS," Owen said. "YOUR MOTHER'S THE ONE," he said worshipfully. "AND SHE SMELLS BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE, TOO," he added. I agreed with him about this; my mother always smelled wonderful.

Your own mother's bosom is a strange topic of conversation in which to indulge a friend, but my mother was an acknowledged beauty, and Owen possessed a completely reliable frankness; you could trust him, absolutely.

My mother was often our driver. She drove me out to the quarry to play with Owen; she picked Owen up to come play with me—and she drove him home. The Meany Granite Quarry was about three miles out of the center of town, not too far for a bike ride—except that the ride was all uphill. Mother would often drive me out there with my bike in the car, and then I could ride my bike home; or Owen would ride his bike to town, and she'd take him *and* his bike back. The point is, she was so often our chauffeur that he might have seemed to her like a second son. And to the extent that mothers *are* the chauffeurs of small-town life, Owen had reason to identify her as more *his* mother than his own mother was.

When we played at Owen's, we rarely went inside. We played in the rock piles, in and around the pits, or down by the river, and on Sundays we sat in or on the silent machinery, imagining ourselves in charge of the quarry—or in a war. Owen seemed to find the inside of his house as strange and oppressive as I did. When the weather was inclement, we played at my house—and since the weather in New Hampshire is inclement most of the time, we played most of the time at my house.

And *play* is all we did, it seems to me now. We were both eleven the summer my mother died. It was our last year in Little League, which we were already bored with. Baseball, in my opinion, is boring; one's last year in Little League is only a preview of the boring moments in baseball that lie ahead for many Americans. Unfortunately, Canadians play and watch baseball, too. It is a game with a lot of waiting in it; it is a game with increasingly heightened anticipation of increasingly limited

action. At least, Little Leaguers play the game more quickly than grown-ups—thank God! We never devoted the attention to spitting, or to tugging at our armpits and crotches, that is the essential expression of nervousness in the adult sport. But you still have to wait between pitches, and wait for the catcher and umpire to examine the ball after the pitch—and wait for the catcher to trot out to the mound to say something to the pitcher about how to throw the ball, and wait for the manager to waddle onto the field and worry (with the pitcher and the catcher) about the possibilities of the next pitch.

That day, in the last inning, Owen and I were just waiting for the game to be over. We were so bored, we had no idea that someone's life was about to be over, too. Our side was up. Our team was far behind—we had been substituting second-string players for first-string players so often and so randomly that I could no longer recognize half of our own batters—and I had lost track of my place in the batting order. I wasn't sure when I got to be up to bat next, and I was about to ask our nice, fat manager and coach, Mr. Chickering, when Mr. Chickering turned to Owen Meany and said, "You bat for Johnny, Owen."

"But I don't know when I bat," I said to Mr. Chickering, who didn't hear me; he was looking off the field somewhere. He was bored with the game, too, and he was just waiting for it to be over, like the rest of us.

"I KNOW WHEN YOU BAT," Owen said. That was forever irritating about Owen; he kept track of things like that. He hardly ever got to play the stupid game, but he paid attention to all the boring details, anyway.

"IF HARRY GETS ON, I'M ON DECK," Owen said. "IF BUZZY GETS ON, I'M UP."

"Fat chance," I said. "Or is there only one out?"

"TWO OUT," Owen said.

Everyone on the bench was looking off the field, somewhere—even Owen, now—and I turned my attention to the intriguing object of their interest. Then I saw her: my mother. She'd just arrived. She was always late; she found the game boring, too. She had an instinct for arriving just in time to take me and Owen home. She was even a sweater girl in the summer, because she favored those summery-weight jersey dresses; she had a nice tan, and the dress was a simple, white-cotton one—clinging about the bosom and waist, full skirt below—and she wore a red scarf to hold her hair up, off her bare shoulders. She wasn't watching the game. She was standing well down the left-field foul line, past third base, looking into the sparse stands, the almost-empty bleacher seats—trying to see if there was anyone she knew there, I guess.

I realized that everyone was watching her. This was nothing new for me. Everyone was always staring at my mother, but the scrutiny seemed especially intense that day, or else I am remembering it acutely because it was the last time I saw her alive. The pitcher was looking at home plate, the catcher was waiting for the ball; the batter, I suppose, was waiting for the ball, too; but even the fielders had turned their heads to gape at my mother. Everyone on our bench was watching her—Mr. Chickering the hardest; maybe Owen, the next hardest; maybe me, the least. Everyone in the stands stared back at her as she looked them over.

It was ball four. Maybe the pitcher had one eye on my mother, too. Harry Hoyt walked. Buzzy Thurston was up, and Owen was on deck. He got up from the bench and looked for the smallest ball. Buzzy hit an easy grounder, a sure out, and my mother never turned her head to follow the play. She started walking parallel to the third-base line; she passed the third-base coach; she was still gazing into the stands when the shortstop bobbled Buzzy Thurston's easy grounder, and the runners were safe all around.

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