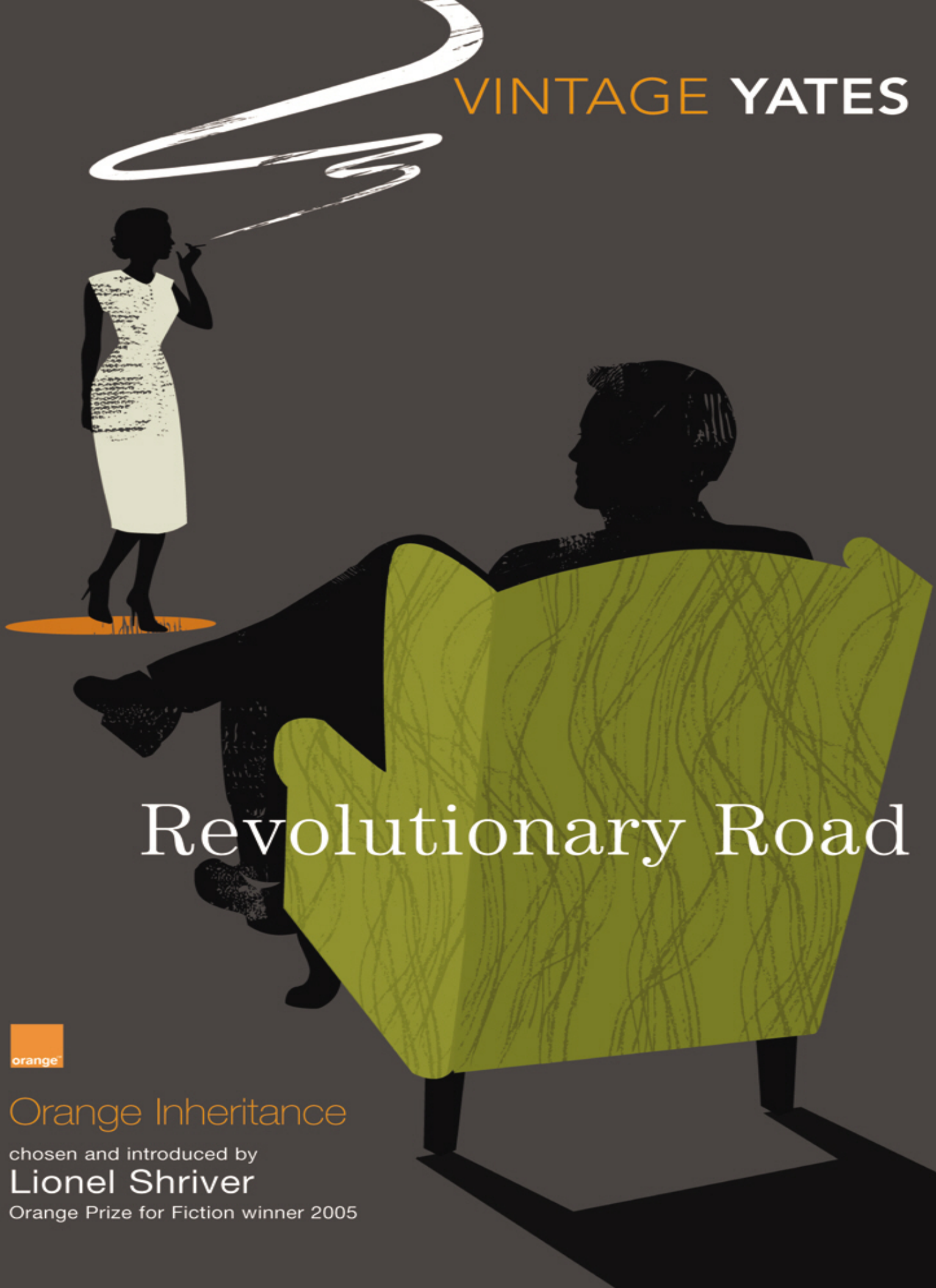
VINTAGE YATES



Revolutionary Road

orange

Orange Inheritance

chosen and introduced by

Lionel Shriver

Orange Prize for Fiction winner 2005

Contents

About the Book

THIS ORANGE INHERITANCE EDITION IS PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE ORANGE PRIZE FOR FICTION

Books shape our lives and transform the way we see ourselves and each other. The best books are timeless and continue to be relevant generation after generation. Vintage Classics asked the winners of the Orange Prize for Fiction which books they would pass onto the next generation and why. Lionel Shriver chose Revolutionary Road.

Frank and April Wheeler are a beautiful and talented couple whose empty suburban life is held together by the dream that greatness is only just round the corner. With heartbreaking compassion Yates shows how Frank and April mortgage their hopes and ideals, betraying in the end not only each other, but their own best selves.

“I can’t think of a better novel to hand on to readers growing up today” Lionel Shriver

About the Author

Richard Yates was born in 1926 in Yonkers, New York. After serving in the US Army during the Second World War, he worked as a publicity writer for the Remington Rand Corporation, and for a brief period in the sixties as a speech-writer for Senator Robert Kennedy. His prize-winning stories first appeared in 1953 and his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 1962. He is the author of eight other works, including the novels *A Good School*, *The Easter Parade* and *Disturbing the Peace*, and two collections of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *Liars in Love*. Richard Yates was twice divorced and the father of three daughters. He died in 1992.

Lionel Shriver was born in the United States and now lives in London. She is the author of *The Female of the Species*, *Checker and the Derailleurs, The Bleeding Heart*, *Ordinary Decent Criminals*, *A Perfectly Good Family*, *Double Fault*, *The Post-Birthday World* and *So Much for That*. Her seventh novel, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005.

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ALSO BY RICHARD YATES

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The Collected Stories of Richard Yates

To Sheila

REVOLUTIONARY ROAD

With an Introduction by
Lionel Shriver

Richard Yates

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

At literary festivals, I'm often asked which authors I admire. Almost always in Britain, and to my amazement often in America, my recommendation of Richard Yates had, until 2009, met a stony lack of recognition, a universally bewildered, 'Richard Who?'

Fortunately, the release of Sam Mendes's moving film version of *Revolutionary Road* at the end of 2008 has raised the profile of this classic novel worldwide. In elevating its late author's name into the realm of the faintly familiar, the film qualified as public service. Moreover, the script is rigorously faithful to the text. Virtually every line of dialogue originates from Yates himself. Oftentimes when a film hews too closely to a novel the results are flat, but in this case the film-makers' respect for the book was well placed; by the end, Mendes's luminous rendition made me cry. Nevertheless, no dedicated fiction reader will be surprised: the movie cannot substitute for the novel, which is *better*.

Writing about a 1950s America that bears less resemblance to *American Graffiti* than to the despairing film *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Yates was able to look at the disturbing underside of so-called ordinary life. Much like John Cheever, he exposed the angst and dissatisfaction that teems beneath the placid suburbs. No-one's life is simple or easy, even with enough food on the table, and Yates was depressive enough as a person to appreciate this fact. Like Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* and more recently Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*, the novel also takes on the desolation of corporate life for its lesser cogs –

although, in contrast to Heller and Ferris, the Yates version isn't funny.

Although I've never read a Yates book I didn't like, *Revolutionary Road* is my favourite, and it's certainly his most celebrated work. It was also the author's own favourite. Though one can hardly envy the man his conviction that he never quite surpassed his first book, his clarity and honesty in this assessment reflects the clarity and honesty of his work.

It is 1955. In the interests of raising their two small children in a family-friendly setting, young Frank and April Wheeler have moved to suburban Connecticut. All very standard, except that Frank and April feel superior to their dumpy, arid neighbours in Revolutionary Hill Estates.

But why do they feel superior? Frank has taken a job in New York at his father's old firm, Knox Business Machines, albeit in an anti-establishment, eye-rolling spirit. This tongue-in-cheek drollness first came into vogue with the Beat movement and blossomed into the chronic nudge-nudge wink-wink of the 1960s, when anything 'square' and conventional became one big ha-ha. Yet Frank's irony is strained. He may be working at a job he hates, but it is his job, and he doesn't aspire to any particular alternative calling.

Fair enough, April has trained as an actress. Thus in the first chapter we watch her perform in a community theatre production of *The Petrified Forest* on opening night. (The character she plays, a waitress in the desert who pines to move to Paris, deftly foreshadows the novel's plot.) Her performance is so dreadful that even April is aware she has disgraced herself: 'She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and white-knuckled immobility.' Cringing, we can't help but question her talent; even if she was once good, she is fragile, and she won't readily recover

from humiliation in an amateur drama. If April finds the life of a housewife tedious and unfulfilling, Betty Friedan would later document in *The Feminine Mystique* that just about every other housewife in that era found cooking, cleaning, and raising children tedious and unfulfilling, too.

So what distinction justifies this couple's arch condescension towards their neighbours?

It's circular logic, but what makes Frank and April superior is their sensation of being superior. For no tangible reasons, they are convinced they were meant for greater things than the corporate and domestic drudgery of suburban life, if only because they are *aware* of the narrow confines of this existence, while their docile neighbours are not.

'I had flattered myself that I was an exceptional person,' my own narrator in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* confesses. On the other hand, she realizes, 'Thinking of one's self as exceptional is probably more the rule than not.' That narrator, Eva Katchadourian, also feels contemptuous of her compatriots – better travelled, more cultured, with a loftier international perspective. She is typical of contemporary American liberals, who often regard their nationality with shame, and imagine that this enlightened embarrassment in and of itself allows them to opt out of being icky old Americans like everyone else. Eva Katchadourian would find her antecedents in Frank and April Wheeler.

Culturally, on this point Yates was prescient. Fifties America may have emphasised conformity, getting with the programme and embracing the 'American dream', often defined as having exactly what Frank and April have already got: a car, a house, children, and, for the man at least, a steady job. But by the 1960s when I was raised, much more emphasis was put on self-expression, on the uniqueness of every soul. By the 1990s, teaching that everyone was special had literally entered the curriculum. American school children are assured that they are remarkable on a daily basis. 'Self-esteem' has achieved the status of a goal in

itself, dissociated from any talent or mastery that might one might reasonably esteem one's self for. Thus feeling special – elect, meant for better things – has become the most ordinary sensation in the country.

The determination to distinguish one's self can foster hard work, great art and productive ambition, so long as aspiration takes a concrete form. Yet Frank and April's is an inert, amorphous sense of specialness, a belief in an entitlement that simply is and thus need not be earned. As far as Frank is concerned, 'in avoiding specific goals he had avoided specific limitations'.

But then, perhaps nursing the conviction that one is anointed, extraordinary in some way, isn't an exclusively American proclivity, but is a universal constant, and we all regard ourselves as the chosen people – which would help to explain why *Revolutionary Road* endures so many decades later.

Equally timeless is the novel's theme of the Valhalla. Her feverish enthusiasm soon overcoming Frank's initial reluctance, April seizes upon the notion that the couple should abandon their possessions, sell the house, take the children, and move to Paris. There she can get a lucrative job as a secretary for NATO and support her husband, while Frank discovers whatever greatness he is destined for.

The proposal rings hollow from the start. It conjures images of Frank knocking aimlessly around a small French flat in pyjamas, unable to read more than a few pages of philosophy that doesn't, secretly, interest him, incapable of conquering irregular French verbs. Yates doesn't fill this vision out, of course, but allows his readers to worry on the couple's behalf. Although April does take steps to manifest their grand plan – pressing the children to choose which toys to take with them – the reader is somehow certain from the plan's inception that they will never go. Paris as existential rescue recalls the role of a similarly grand, distant city in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, in

which sisters repeatedly opine, ‘To Moscow! To Moscow!’ Not only will Chekhov’s provincial exiles never make it to Moscow, but we rather get the impression they are lucky to stay home. The mirage of Valhallas only seems to function from afar.

The belief in somewhere else out there where all our problems dissolve, where we will finally be contented, where the cracks in our marriages will smooth, where all that dissatisfies us about our present circumstances will vanish – where we will at last be ourselves as we like to think we are most profoundly, where we will be truly free – is a recurrent premise in not only literature but in real life. For some, this elusory Neverland is sustaining; for others, a torture.

In the era of *Revolutionary Road*, Americans were wont to look to Europe as a redoubt of sophistication, where people genuinely knew how to eat, drink, reflect, read and enjoy life, just as war veterans like Frank were prone to nostalgia for the heightened intensity of their deployments overseas. These days, Americans are less likely to idealise Europe as the Promised Land, though some remnant of Frank and April’s longing for the Continent remains. In the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election, friends of mine in New York vowed that if George W. Bush won a second term they were moving to Italy. (He did. They didn’t.) Though the idea that mere relocation will wave a magic wand over all our cares is intrinsically dubious, I deliberately inverted this paradigm in my 2010 novel, *So Much for That*. Its protagonist Shep Knacker also yearns for his Valhalla: the spice island of Pemba off the coast of Zanzibar. Just as in *Revolutionary Road*, the reader is sceptical. Yet flying in the face of literary custom, Shep does get to Pemba, and Pemba is wonderful.

By contrast, Yates would never have considered such a fairytale ending, for this novel is steeped in fatalistic dread from its early pages. So of course Frank gets cold feet, and jumps at April’s unplanned pregnancy as an excuse to stay put. Nevertheless, might this couple have been better off

moving to France after all, even if it didn't work out the way they planned – even if Paris proved just one more busy city where they didn't speak the language, even if April's secretarial job, assuming she secured one, proved just as humdrum as Frank's work at Knox Business Machines in New York, even if they ended up hightailing it back to America in due course? Frank may scorn his suburban life, but he's not brave enough to leap into the unknown, which might have made him feel like more of a man, even if the fantasy materialised as folly. We may not have high hopes for Frank and April in Paris. But in this novel, the successful seduction of comfort and safety – the predictable, the conservative, the known – is lethal. Yates poses the question of whether what destroys Frank and April is their delusion of exceptionalness, or their inability to act on it.

John Givings performs the traditional function of Shakespearian fool, who articulates what none of the other characters wants to hear. A former mathematician and the son of the couple's estate agent, John is allowed out of his psychiatric ward for visits with his mother's friends. Probably a manic-depressive, he plays to the popular Sixties conceit that, when the world has gone crazy, only the lunatics are sane. Once the Wheelers' Paris bubble bursts, John instinctively locates Frank as the source of the pin: 'You decide you like it here after all? You figure it's more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all, or – Wow, that did it! Look at his face! What's the matter, Wheeler? Am I getting warm?' If Yates himself makes an appearance in this novel, it's in the guise of the nut-job.

For a book published in America in 1961, one shouldn't underestimate the authorial bravery entailed in including an abortion. Even contemporary films in the US are leery of terminations. (Film rights for my sixth novel *Double Fault* went begging if only because Hollywood wouldn't touch abortion with a barge pole.) These days in fiction and cinema women keep their babies (see *Knocked Up* or *Juno*).

But the opprobrium heaped on characters who had abortions, and on married women who dared to greet pregnancy as bad news, would have been more severe when this book was written. Yates puts April in danger of seeming, that dread pejorative in creative writing classes, *unattractive*.

Yet it may be the complexity of the author's relationship to his characters – a complexity readers share – that most distinguishes Richard Yates as a fiction writer. He combines a searing, sometimes brutal clear-sightedness with an equally devastating sympathy. We perceive these characters as full of hubris, riddled with self-deceit, but we're tempted not to denunciation but to compassion. We recognise in Frank and April our own flaws, our own illusions. Even minor characters like Mrs Givings, the estate agent (inclined to prattle, overly concerned with propriety), are portrayed with a measure of tenderness, of forgiveness. Which we could all use, real and imaginary people alike.

While often described as a 'writer's writer', Yates's prose style is surprisingly modest. The writing doesn't call attention to itself; it eschews poetic flourishes, arcane vocabulary, and bold formal experimentation. His focus is on character: how these people think, how (badly) they relate to each other, how they make terrible mistakes, how they got to where they are and how far they remain from where they'd like to be. In composing text that is translucent, so that the reader sees through the sentences to the people the words describe, Yates wrote in the same nefariously effective tradition of W. Somerset Maugham, or of William Trevor today.

Clear, straightforward writing doesn't date. Mores surrounding abortion may change, but that sensation of being elect, called, better than our brethren, while the details of our lives often confusingly suggest that we are just like everyone else, is a classic dissonance that readers of the future are certain still to recognise. Likewise, Valhallas

of one sort or another are bound to entice generations to come – in the form of foreign countries, environmental utopias, egalitarian communes, or, who knows, maybe even other planets. Every generation is torn between the frightening exhilaration of drastic change and the solace of the familiar; folks will eternally wonder if choosing the easier option of security is sensible or craven. Thus I can't think of a better novel to hand on to readers growing up today than *Revolutionary Road*.

Although making connections between a writer's fiction and personal life is a rather pointless game, for the curious: Yates himself worked for a typewriter company, Remington Rand. He also had two children, and suffered two failed marriages, divorcing his first wife in 1959. Like Frank, Yates served in the Army in World War II, and fought in France.

A rather dyspeptic fellow by all accounts, Yates was critically acclaimed during his lifetime, and *Revolutionary Road* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1962. But he never quite achieved the status of, say, a Philip Roth. His hardback editions sold no more than a meagre 12,000 copies. Criminally, after his death in 1992, all of his novels were allowed to go out of print. It wasn't until 2005 that *Time* magazine got around to listing this novel as one of the best English language books written from 1923 to the present.

The release of *Revolutionary Road* as a film has revived interest in Richard Yates's work to a degree that seems sad, considering that the author himself never saw the day his novels were all reissued in beautifully covered Vintage Classic paperbacks with matching crimson spines. At long last, I lionise Richard Yates at festivals, and a subsection of the audience knows the name.

Yet public recognition engenders a surprisingly mild pleasure – a quiet smile – and accolades by their nature go

to ash. A proper fiction writer's satisfactions comprise crafting single lines that ring true, building characters so real that they strike up arguments in your study, and finally finishing off a novel you've been toiling on for years with the sudden certainty that it succeeds. In that sense, Richard Yates would have enjoyed his life as richly as any man on Earth, and there's no need to feel sorry for him.

Lionel Shriver, 2011

Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!
—John Keats

Part One

Chapter One

THE FINAL DYING SOUNDS of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium. They hardly dared to breathe as the short, solemn figure of their director emerged from the naked seats to join them on stage, as he pulled a stepladder raspingly from the wings and climbed halfway up its rungs to turn and tell them, with several clearings of his throat, that they were a damned talented group of people and a wonderful group of people to work with.

"It hasn't been an easy job," he said, his glasses glinting soberly around the stage. "We've had a lot of problems here, and quite frankly I'd more or less resigned myself not to expect too much. Well, listen. Maybe this sounds corny, but something happened up here tonight. Sitting out there tonight I suddenly knew, deep down, that you were all putting your hearts into your work for the first time." He let the fingers of one hand splay out across the pocket of his shirt to show what a simple, physical thing the heart was; then he made the same hand into a fist, which he shook slowly and wordlessly in a long dramatic pause, closing one eye and allowing his moist lower lip to curl out in a grimace of triumph and pride. "Do that again tomorrow night," he said, "and we'll have one hell of a show."

They could have wept with relief. Instead, trembling, they cheered and laughed and shook hands and kissed one another, and somebody went out for a case of beer and they all sang songs around the auditorium piano until the time came to agree, unanimously, that they'd better knock it off and get a good night's sleep.

"See you tomorrow!" they called, as happy as children, and riding home under the moon they found they could roll

down the windows of their cars and let the air in, with its health-giving smells of loam and young flowers. It was the first time many of the Laurel Players had allowed themselves to acknowledge the coming of spring.

The year was 1955 and the place was a part of western Connecticut where three swollen villages had lately been merged by a wide and clamorous highway called Route Twelve. The Laurel Players were an amateur company, but a costly and very serious one, carefully recruited from among the younger adults of all three towns, and this was to be their maiden production. All winter, gathering in one another's living rooms for excited talks about Ibsen and Shaw and O'Neill, and then for the show of hands in which a common-sense majority chose *The Petrified Forest*, and then for preliminary casting, they had felt their dedication growing stronger every week. They might privately consider their director a funny little man (and he was, in a way: he seemed incapable of any but a very earnest manner of speaking, and would often conclude his remarks with a little shake of the head that caused his cheeks to wobble) but they liked and respected him, and they fully believed in most of the things he said. "Any play deserves the best that any actor has to give," he'd told them once, and another time: "Remember this. We're not just putting on a play here. We're establishing a community theater, and that's a pretty important thing to be doing."

The trouble was that from the very beginning they had been afraid they would end by making fools of themselves, and they had compounded that fear by being afraid to admit it. At first their rehearsals had been held on Saturdays – always, it seemed, on the kind of windless February or March afternoon when the sky is white, the trees are black, and the brown fields and hummocks of the earth lie naked and tender between curds of shriveled snow. The Players, coming out of their various kitchen doors and hesitating for a minute to button their coats or pull on their gloves, would

see a landscape in which only a few very old, weathered houses seemed to belong; it made their own homes look as weightless and impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on. Their automobiles didn't look right either – unnecessarily wide and gleaming in the colors of candy and ice cream, seeming to wince at each splatter of mud, they crawled apologetically down the broken roads that led from all directions to the deep, level slab of Route Twelve. Once there the cars seemed able to relax in an environment all their own, a long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel – KING KONE, MOBILGAS, SHOPORAMA, EAT – but eventually they had to turn off, one by one, and make their way up the winding country road that led to the central high school; they had to pull up and stop in the quiet parking lot outside the high-school auditorium.

"Hi!" the Players would shyly call to one another.

"Hi! . . ." "Hi! . . ." And they'd go reluctantly inside.

Clumping their heavy galoshes around the stage, blotting at their noses with Kleenex and frowning at the unsteady print of their scripts, they would disarm each other at last with peals of forgiving laughter, and they would agree, over and over, that there was plenty of time to smooth the thing out. But there wasn't plenty of time, and they all knew it, and a doubling and redoubling of their rehearshal schedule seemed only to make matters worse. Long after the time had come for what the director called "really getting this thing off the ground; really making it happen," it remained a static, shapeless, inhumanly heavy weight; time and again they read the promise of failure in each other's eyes, in the apologetic nods and smiles of their parting and the spastic haste with which they broke for their cars and drove home to whatever older, less explicit promises of failure might lie in wait for them there.

And now tonight, with twenty-four hours to go, they had somehow managed to bring it off. Giddy in the unfamiliar feel of make-up and costumes on this first warm evening of the year, they had forgotten to be afraid: they had let the movement of the play come and carry them and break like a wave; and maybe it sounded corny (and what if it did?) but they had all put their hearts into their work. Could anyone ever ask for more than that?

The audience, arriving in a long clean serpent of cars the following night, were very serious too. Like the Players, they were mostly on the young side of middle age, and they were attractively dressed in what the New York clothing stores describe as Country Casuals. Anyone could see they were a better than average crowd, in terms of education and employment and good health, and it was clear too that they considered this a significant evening. They all knew, of course, and said so again and again as they filed inside and took their seats, that *The Petrified Forest* was hardly one of the world's great plays. But it was, after all, a fine theater piece with a basic point of view that was every bit as valid today as in the thirties ("Even more valid," one man kept telling his wife, who chewed her lips and nodded, seeing what he meant; "even more valid, when you think about it"). The main thing, though, was not the play itself but the company – the brave idea of it, the healthy, hopeful sound of it: the birth of a really good community theater right here, among themselves. This was what had drawn them, enough of them to fill more than half the auditorium, and it was what held them hushed and tense in readiness for pleasure as the house lights dimmed.

The curtain went up on a set whose rear wall was still shaking with the impact of a stagehand's last-minute escape, and the first few lines of dialogue were blurred by the scrape and bang of accidental offstage noises. These

small disorders were signs of a mounting hysteria among the Laurel Players, but across the footlights they seemed only to add to a sense of impending excellence. They seemed to say, engagingly: Wait a minute; it hasn't really started yet. We're all a little nervous here, but please bear with us. And soon there was no further need for apologies, for the audience was watching the girl who played the heroine, Gabrielle.

Her name was April Wheeler, and she caused the whispered word "lovely" to roll out over the auditorium the first time she walked across the stage. A little later there were hopeful nudges and whispers of "She's *good*," and there were stately nods of pride among the several people who happened to know that she had attended one of the leading dramatic schools of New York less than ten years before. She was twenty-nine, a tall ash blonde with a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, and she seemed ideally cast in the role. It didn't even matter that bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs, for she moved with the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood; anyone happening to glance at Frank Wheeler, the round-faced, intelligent-looking young man who sat biting his fist in the last row of the audience, would have said he looked more like her suitor than her husband.

"Sometimes I can feel as if I were sparkling all over," she was saying, *"and I want to go out and do something that's absolutely crazy, and marvelous . . ."*

Backstage, huddled and listening, the other actors suddenly loved her. Or at least they were prepared to love her, even those who had resented her occasional lack of humility at rehearsals, for she was suddenly the only hope they had.

The leading man had come down with a kind of intestinal flu that morning. He had arrived at the theater in a high fever, insisting that he felt well enough to go on, but five

minutes before curtain time he had begun to vomit in his dressing room, and there had been nothing for the director to do but send him home and take over the role himself. The thing happened so quickly that nobody had time to think of going out front to announce the substitution; a few of the minor actors didn't even know about it until they heard the director's voice out there in the lights, speaking the familiar words they'd expected to hear from the other man. He was doing his fervent best and delivering each line with a high semi-professional finish, but there was no denying that he looked all wrong in the part of Alan Squiers – squat and partly bald and all but unable to see without his glasses, which he'd refused to wear on stage. From the moment of his entrance he had caused the supporting actors to interrupt each other and forget where to stand, and now in the middle of his important first-act speech about his own futility – "*Yes, brains without purpose; noise without sound; shape without substance* –" one of his gesturing hands upset a glass of water that flooded the table. He tried to cover it with a giggle and a series of improvised lines – *"You see? That's how useless I am. Here, let me help you wipe it up* –" but the rest of the speech was ruined. The virus of calamity, dormant and threatening all these weeks, had erupted now and spread from the helplessly vomiting man until it infected everyone in the cast but April Wheeler.

"Wouldn't you like to be loved by me?" she was saying.

"Yes, Gabrielle," said the director, gleaming with sweat. *"I should like to be loved by you."*

"You think I'm attractive?"

Under the table the director's leg began to jiggle up and down on the spring of its flexed foot. *"There are better words than that for what you are."*

"Then why don't we at least make a start at it?"

She was working alone, and visibly weakening with every line. Before the end of the first act the audience could tell as well as the Players that she'd lost her grip, and soon they

were all embarrassed for her. She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility; she was carrying her shoulders high and square, and despite her heavy make-up you could see the warmth of humiliation rising in her face and neck.

Then came the bouncing entrance of Shep Campbell, the burly young red-haired engineer who played the gangster, Duke Mantee. The whole company had worried about Shep from the beginning, but he and his wife Milly, who had helped with the props and the publicity, were such enthusiastic and friendly people that nobody'd had the heart to suggest replacing him. The result of this indulgence now, and of Campbell's own nervous guilt about it, was that he forgot one of his key lines, said others in a voice so quick and faint that it couldn't be heard beyond the sixth row, and handled himself less like an outlaw than an obliging grocery clerk, bobbing head, rolled-up sleeves and all.

At intermission the audience straggled out to smoke and wander in uncomfortable groups around the high-school corridor, examining the high-school bulletin board and wiping damp palms down their slim-cut trousers and their graceful cotton skirts. None of them wanted to go back and go through with the second and final act, but they all did.

And so did the Players, whose one thought now, as plain as the sweat on their faces, was to put the whole sorry business behind them as fast as possible. It seemed to go on for hours, a cruel and protracted endurance test in which April Wheeler's performance was as bad as the others, if not worse. At the climax, where the stage directions call for the poignance of the death scene to be *punctuated with shots from outside and bursts from* DUKE'S *Tommy gun*, Shep Campbell timed his bursts so sloppily, and the answering off-stage gunfire was so much too loud, that all the lovers' words were lost in a deafening smoky shambles. When the curtain fell at last it was an act of mercy.

The applause, not loud, was conscientiously long enough to permit two curtain calls, one that caught all the Players in motion as they walked to the wings, turned back and collided with one another, and another that revealed the three principals in a brief tableau of human desolation: the director blinking myopically, Shep Campbell looking appropriately fierce for the first time all evening, April Wheeler paralyzed in a formal smile.

Then the house lights came up, and nobody in the auditorium knew how to look or what to say. The uncertain voice of Mrs. Helen Givings, the real-estate broker, could be heard repeating "*Very* nice," over and over again, but most of the people were silent and stiff, fingering packs of cigarettes as they rose and turned to the aisles. An efficient high-school boy, hired for the evening to help with the lights, vaulted up onto the stage with a squeak of his sneakers and began calling instructions to an unseen partner high in the flies. He stood posing self-consciously in the footlights, managing to keep most of his bright pimples in shadow while proudly turning his body to show that the tools of the electrician's trade – knife, pliers, coils of wire – were slung in a professional-looking holster of oiled leather and worn low on one tense buttock of his dungarees. Then the bank of lights clicked off, the boy made a pale exit and the curtain became a dull wall of green velvet, faded and streaked with dust. There was nothing to watch now but the massed faces of the audience as they pressed up the aisles and out the main doors. Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives; as if, in fact, they wouldn't be able to begin to live at all until they were out beyond the rumbling pink billows of exhaust and the crunching gravel of this parking lot, out where the black sky went up and up forever and there were hundreds of thousands of stars.

Chapter Two

FRANKLIN H. WHEELER was among the few who bucked the current. He did so with apologetic slowness and with what he hoped was dignity, making his way in sidling steps down the aisle toward the stage door saying “Excuse me . . . Excuse me,” nodding and smiling to several faces he knew, carrying one hand in his pocket to conceal and dry the knuckles he had sucked and bitten throughout the play.

He was neat and solid, a few days less than thirty years old, With closely cut black hair and the kind of unemphatic good looks that an advertising photographer might use to portray the discerning consumer of well-made but inexpensive merchandise (Why Pay More?). But for all its lack of structural distinction, his face did have an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression. Smiling, he was a man who knew perfectly well that the failure of an amateur play was nothing much to worry about, a kindly, witty man who would have exactly the right words of comfort for his wife backstage; but in the intervals between his smiles, when he shouldered ahead through the crowd and you could see the faint chronic fever of bewilderment in his eyes, it seemed more that he himself was in need of comforting.

The trouble was that all afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call “the dullest job you can possibly imagine,” he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight: himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand (“If only I weren’t so *nervous*, Frank!”); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and

disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss (“Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?”); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. Nowhere in these plans had he foreseen the weight and shock of reality; nothing had warned him that he might be overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn’t seen in years, a girl whose every glance and gesture could make his throat fill up with longing (“*Wouldn’t you like to be loved by me?*”), and that then before his very eyes she would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew as well and as painfully as he knew himself, a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell.

At the door he paused to withdraw and examine the pink-blotched hand from his pocket, half expecting to find it torn to a pulp of blood and gristle. Then, pulling his coat straight, he went through the door and up the steps into a high dusty chamber filled with the raw glare and deep shadows cast by naked light bulbs, where the Laurel Players, ablaze with cosmetics, stood talking to their sallow visitors in nervous, widely spaced groups of two and three around the floor. She wasn’t there.

“No, I mean seriously,” somebody was saying. “Could you hear me, or not?” And somebody else said, “Well, hell, it was a lot of fun anyway.” The director, in a scanty cluster of his New York friends, was pulling hungrily on a cigarette and shaking his head. Shep Campbell, pebbled with sweat, still holding his Tommy gun but clearly himself again, was standing near the curtain rope with his free arm around his small, rumpled wife, and they were both demonstrating their decision to laugh the whole thing off.

“Frank?” Milly Campbell had waved and risen on tiptoe to shout his name through cupped hands, as if pretending that the crowd were thicker and noisier than it really was. “Frank! We’ll see you and April later, okay? For a drink?”

“Fine!” he called back. “Couple of minutes!” And he winked and nodded as Shep raised his machine gun in a comic salute.

Around the corner he found one of the lesser gangsters talking with a plump girl who had caused a thirty-second rupture in the first act by missing her entrance cue, who had evidently been crying but now was hilariously pounding her temple and saying “God! I could’ve *killed* myself!” while the gangster, tremulously wiping grease paint from his mouth, said “No, but I mean it was a lot of fun anyway, you know what I mean? That’s the main thing, in a thing like this.”

“Excuse me,” Frank Wheeler said, squeezing past them to the door of the dressing room that his wife shared with several other women. He knocked and waited, and when he thought he heard her say “Come in,” he opened it tentatively and peeked inside.

She was alone, sitting very straight at a mirror and removing her make-up. Her eyes were still red and blinking, but she gave him a small replica of her curtain-call smile before turning back to the mirror. “Hi,” she said. “You ready to leave?”

He closed the door and started toward her with the corners of his mouth stretched tight in a look that he hoped would be full of love and humor and compassion; what he planned to do was bend down and kiss her and say “Listen: you were wonderful.” But an almost imperceptible recoil of her shoulders told him that she didn’t want to be touched, which left him uncertain what to do with his hands, and that was when it occurred to him that “You were wonderful” might be exactly the wrong thing to say – condescending, or at the very least naïve and sentimental, and much too serious.