The background of the entire cover is a surreal, painterly landscape. At the top, a dark, starry night sky features a large, pale crescent moon in the upper center. In the top left corner, a small cluster of red roses is visible. The middle section contains the title and subtitle in white and gold text, separated by thin horizontal lines. Below the text, a three-tiered wedding cake, decorated with white frosting and pink roses, sits on a dark circular base. The cake is positioned in the center of a light-colored road that stretches towards the horizon. The road has two parallel yellow lines running down its center. On either side of the road are dark, rounded, moss-covered rocks. In the bottom right corner, the head and beak of a dark bird, possibly a crow or raven, are visible, looking towards the cake. The overall mood is dreamlike and mysterious.

# THE WEDDING CAKE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

## 23 VARIATIONS ON A THEME

EDITED BY SUSAN STAMBERG  
AND GEORGE GARRETT

THE WEDDING CAKE  
IN THE MIDDLE  
OF THE ROAD



# 23 VARIATIONS ON A THEME

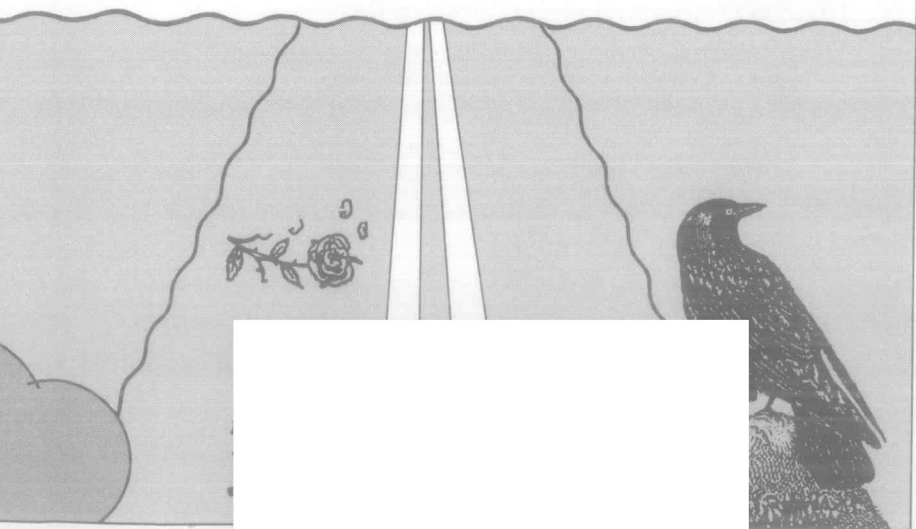
W·W·NORTON & COMPANY · NEW YORK · LONDON



THE WEDDING CAKE  
IN THE MIDDLE  
OF THE ROAD

271245  
SS

EDITED BY Susan Stamberg  
AND George Garrett



Copyright © 1992 by Susan Stamberg and George Garrett. *All rights reserved.*  
Printed in the United States of America.

The text of this book is composed in Electra, with the display type set in  
Bernhard Modern. Composition by PennSet. Manufacturing by  
The Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.  
Book design by Antonina Krass.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Wedding cake in the middle of the road : 23 variations on a theme  
/ edited and with introductions by Susan Stamberg  
and George Garrett.

p. cm.

1. Short stories, American. I. Stamberg, Susan

II. Garrett, George

PS648.S5W43 1992

813'.0108-dc20

91-16273

ISBN 0-393-03080-6

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10110

W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

For our spouses:

. . . Susan Garrett, who once bought a wedding dress in  
Filene's basement for \$11.

. . . Louis Stamberg, who knew enough to eat the roses.



## Contents

Introduction I • SUSAN STAMBERG	9
Introduction II • GEORGE GARRETT	14
Acknowledgments	21
STUART DYBEK • I Never Told This to Anyone	25
RICHARD BAUSCH • Tandolfo the Great	32
JOSEPHINE HUMPHREYS • Bells	48
GEORGE GARRETT • To Guess the Riddle, to Stumble on a Secret Name	58
MARY LEE SETTLE • Dogs	62
CHARLES BAXTER • Possum	69
MADISON SMARTT BELL • Pawnshop	75
BEVERLY GOODRUM • Icy Wires	80
RON CARLSON • A Kind of Flying	92



## 8 C Contents

PAM HOUSTON • Something Sweet and Wild	96
JOY WILLIAMS • Eternally Yours	104
KELLY CHERRY • The Wedding Cake in the Middle of the Book	107
GREGORY McDONALD • The Trial	110
ANN BEATTIE • Picture Perfect	124
DAVID LEAVITT • Route 80	128
MARITA GOLDEN • The Quality of Silence	131
BHARATI MUKHERJEE • The Time for Love	143
BRIAN KLAM • Take Me as I Am	155
HANNAH WILSON • Early Delivery	161
JUDITH GUEST • Dermot's Dream	164
AL YOUNG • The Subliminal Cakewalk Breakdown	167
ALLEN WIER • Hat Trick	179
R. H. W. DILLARD • Their Wedding Journey	189
Contributors' Notes	199



## Introduction I

SUSAN STAMBERG

This book began with a radio program. Not such an unlikely genesis. Radio plays music, gives weather, follows sports, delivers news. But radio is most powerful when it tells stories. Maybe it has something to do with the mother's voice—that first storyteller in our lives. Or, more primal, the hunters' tales, around the fire, when prehistory was written in the smudge of palms on cave walls. Anyway, storytelling is radio's art; tales told on the air as compelling, often, as those on the printed page.

In 1987 we were creating a new National Public Radio program. As host, I wanted to include writing, storytelling. My reasons were purely personal. The program aired on Sunday mornings—the most stay-at-home time of the week. To me, staying home with the radio meant staying home with a roomful

of fabulous visitors. In the radio days of my childhood I loved nothing more than being home with a head cold and having the stories of *Stella Dallas* or *Our Gal Sunday* spin out just for me, from the little box on the kitchen table. Those visits—those storytelling visitors—were so addictive I almost hated getting better. Nothing in second or fifth grade could have been as remotely compelling as the dilemmas of Stella's daughter Lollie or the adventures of an orphan girl from a small mining town in the West. I absorbed their stories in the kitchen over bowls of steaming chicken soup or in bed (the radio moved to my room, a very special concession), propped up with extra pillows, nose drops and tissues at hand. My mother—my first storyteller, with her lilting voice and her flair for reading aloud—presided over the sickroom, heating soup, plumping the pillows, enjoying with me the soap opera stories. Somehow, being cared for and cared about got caught up with stories on the radio. So when the time came to do radio myself, I knew storytelling had to be part of it.

*Weekend Edition's* first Sunday broadcast included Chapter One of what I believe is the first radio equivalent of the chain novel. It was soap-opera-like in inspiration. Each Sunday we presented a new chapter, written and read aloud by a different author. A kind of literary relay race, it was a way to get good writing on the air, satisfy my storytelling predilections, and build an audience for a new program. The chain novel created continuity. Listeners tuned in week after week to hear the story unfold. David Leavitt wrote the first chapter, and the literary baton was passed, most hilariously and circuitously, to, among others, Russell Banks, Richard Bausch (you'll notice that he and David Leavitt are also in this collection), Lorrie Moore, Stanley Elkin, Meg and Hilma Wolitzer.

After the chain novel came a chain mystery (Gregory McDonald, in this volume, took part in that one). Again, an exercise in

literary fellowship. Sixteen different writers, including Tony Hillerman, Mary Higgins Clark, and Donald E. Westlake, amplified or completely sandbagged one another's plot lines and characters Sunday morning after Sunday morning.

The chain books were fun, and wonderfully written. They kept listeners near the radio. But they weren't exactly belles-lettres. Too many bumps in the plots, too many different voices. Then Stacey Freed, a young student of creative writing at George Mason University who'd been following our various literary capers on *Weekend Edition Sunday*, suggested that instead of asking a group of writers to link together a single long story, we should give them the same image and ask each to do a separate, very short story, based on the image.

A cake, a wedding cake, was our starting point. And not just any wedding cake. Location was important. This was a wedding cake in the middle of the road. George Garrett chose the image itself. A few pages from now he will describe its origin and his own history with a similar literary exercise. Garrett's singular roadside attraction was presented to six writers along with an invitation to work with it, for radio. The assignment was no piece of cake: write two and a half pages (all right, four if you insist), typewritten, double-spaced, a complete short story, incorporating that strangely perched cake. The image is distinctive. It's vivid. We asked the six authors to take it somewhere for us, please. See what it attached itself to, in their imaginations.

To me, it's a funny picture. I envisioned the cake falling off the back of a pickup truck en route to a ceremony in Thonotsassa, Florida. No one did that. To Judith Guest, it was a sad image; she produced an old-fashioned love story around it. Joy Williams made the wedding cake the basis of a Doomsday scenario. Of the rest of the original six who wrote for radio, Ann Beattie had a cake without a wedding, Ron Carlson looked back

on a twenty-year marriage, George Garrett found a new relationship shadowed by divorce, and Stuart Dybek created an entire coming-of-age novel in three and a half pages. Their stories are scattered throughout this collection, in the same short form in which they were written for broadcast.

And here too, off the air, are stories solicited expressly for this book from a range of writers of varying ages, backgrounds, and literary bents. With great good nature and commendable generosity, these authors agreed to participate in this literary exercise. Their replies—RSVPs that run from three to twenty-one pages—take the cake in many directions.

Bringing the gifts of their story-making, a total of twenty-three writers, from the best-known to the brand-new, come up with a breathtaking range of responses. Each one is distinctive, fully realized, rich in voice and characterization.

A disproportionate number of Southerners populate these pages. Possibly because Southerners are so good at telling stories. In the South, the untruth is less a sin than an opportunity for fabulism. “Storying” there is what we Northerners call, less gracefully, lying. But surely the best writers are the most glorious fabricators. It’s one of the things that separates them from journalists.

The anthology is, finally, a testimonial to the literary imagination. In addition to being a gathering of marvelous stories, the collection is, implicitly, about how the imagination works and how it can work, in its infinite variety. As these authors stretch their talents around the same central image, and are inspired by it to such various ends, they remind us of why storytelling has always been so compelling, whether written or spoken.

The radio connection remains for some of the original writers, possibly because they were writing for the medium, possibly because it had transfixed them, once, as it has me. “Calla lilies

look like microphones” on the cake in Ann Beattie’s story. Stuart Dybek’s young protagonist says of Trish, the wedding-cake bride who brings such magic to her husband’s life, that “the most beautiful songs on the radio came after she turned it on.”

Perhaps this printed anthology keeps the songs coming.



## Introduction II

GEORGE GARRETT

In the beginning was the girl in the black raincoat. Now that was long ago in the early 1960s at Mr. Jefferson's university in Virginia, a place which had not yet seen the light or seen fit to admit young women, coeds, to its lawn and grounds, its halls and colonnades. All that would change soon enough, and high time, too; but then there were only a few young women who, for one complicated reason or exception, were being permitted to study at the university. One of these, over from Mary Washington, where she couldn't find the advanced philosophy courses she needed, was Kelly Cherry. Kelly came to my creative writing class, shy and soft-voiced and gifted and quite beautiful, and

more than a little mysterious in the long black buttoned-up raincoat she wore always and everywhere, its hem barely revealing the blue sneakers she also always had on. Long before punk, her hair was an extravagantly artificial red. And, needless to say, all of the young men in my class those days, still coat-and-tie days (though some of them affected early signs of rebellion from dress codes and other authoritarian impositions by going barefoot or, anyway, without socks), all of them were madly, possessively, irrepressibly in love with her. So was I, I reckon, a little. So was everybody.

One day for some reason she dropped out of the university. Was gone out of our lives for good and all, it seemed. In her absence a student in the class, Henry Taylor, a poet who one day would win for himself the Pulitzer Prize, wrote a story about her called, as I recall, "And Bid a Fond Farewell to Tennessee." As was the custom of that class, he read the story aloud and then, as it happened, took any amount of loud and vociferous criticism, flak really, from all the other students in the class. They easily recognized Kelly as the "Tennessee" in his story and clearly resented his fictional claim to her life and times. Jealousy, no matter how pure, is an awkward argument; so the voiced complaint was that you should never use "real" people and events in fiction. Pedagogically the answer to all this was the requirement that *everybody* in class should go and write something about a girl in a black raincoat. The idea was, of course, to let them learn by doing some of the ways and means by which fiction can shape and transform the factually "real" into something else, another kind of truth.

That might have been that, the end of it, except that there were a couple of writers visiting Virginia at the time, who, hearing about the exercise and intrigued by the evocative pos-



sibilities of the image, joined in. Soon, without plan and organization or serious intention, manuscripts of stories and poems about girls in black raincoats began to come to me. As if I had some plan or idea what to do with them. Eventually, thanks to the adventurous interest of an old-fashioned publisher, the late Charles Duell of Duell, Sloan & Pearce, there was a book, composed of some of this material and including, by editorial design and in almost equal proportion, fine professional writers (some already well known, some soon to be) as well as beginners. Among the latter, Kelly Cherry herself. And Henry Taylor and Annie Dillard and others. Among the former were folks like Leslie Fiedler and Shelby Foote, May Sarton and Mary Lee Settle, William Jay Smith and Donald Justice and Mark Strand.

*The Girl in the Black Raincoat* appeared in 1965 and was very widely reviewed; and the best part of all that unanticipated attention was that sooner or later, each and every single contributor to the book was declared by some critic or reviewer somewhere or other to be the creator of the best thing in the whole book. No matter how they felt about the work itself (reception was mixed and a good many of the big-time people in the big-time places felt it was all a little too frivolous), reviewers always found something worthy of notice and admiration; and I could send a clipping to the contributor.

Cut directly to 1989 and the next phase. Which Susan has already described and which calls for only a few more words from me. Once Susan had challenged me to come up with another image, one which might possibly arouse the interest, imaginations, and energies of other writers in somewhat the same way that the black raincoat had, all this for a “literary game” on *Weekend Edition*, I found myself looking, weighing and sifting,