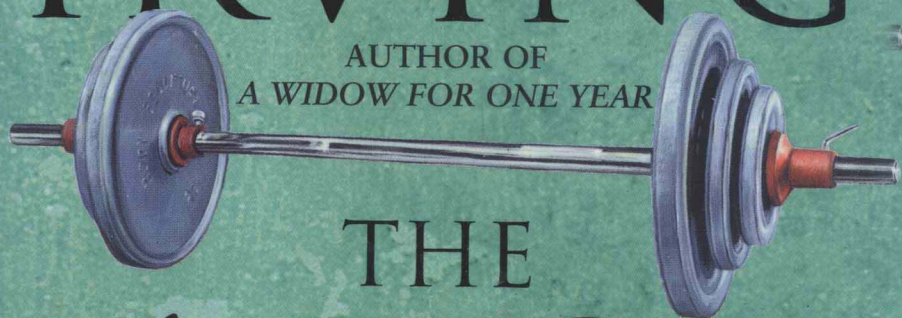




JOHN
IRVING

AUTHOR OF
A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR



THE
158-
POUND
MARRIAGE

The 158-Pound Marriage

John Irving



BLACK SWAN

Also by John Irving

SETTING FREE THE BEARS
THE WATER-METHOD MAN
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP
THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE
THE CIDER HOUSE RULES
A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY
TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED
A SON OF THE CIRCUS
THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND
A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR
MY MOVIE BUSINESS
THE FOURTH HAND

and published by Black Swan

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942, and he once admitted that he was a 'grim' child. Although he excelled in English at school and knew by the time he graduated that he wanted to write novels, it was not until he met a young Southern novelist named John Yount, at the University of New Hampshire, that he received encouragement. 'It was so simple,' he remembers. 'Yount was the first person to point out that anything I did except writing was going to be vaguely unsatisfying.'

In 1963, Irving enrolled at the Institute of European Studies in Vienna, and he later worked as a university lecturer. His first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, about a plot to release all the animals from the Vienna Zoo, was followed by *The Water-Method Man*, a comic tale of a man with a urinary complaint, and *The 158-Pound Marriage*, which exposes the complications of spouse-swapping. Irving achieved international recognition with *The World According to Garp*, which he hoped would 'cause a few smiles among the tough-minded and break a few softer hearts'.

The Hotel New Hampshire is a startlingly original family saga, and *The Cider House Rules* is the story of Doctor Wilbur Larch – saint, obstetrician, founder of an orphanage, ether addict and abortionist – and of his favourite orphan, Homer Wells, who is never adopted. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* features the most unforgettable character Irving has yet created. *A Son of the Circus* is an extraordinary evocation of modern day India. John Irving's latest and most ambitious novel is *A Widow for One Year*.

A collection of John Irving's shorter writing, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, was published in 1993; Irving has also written the screenplays for *The Cider House Rules* and *A Son of the Circus* and wrote about his experiences in the world of movies in his memoir *My Movie Business*.

Irving has had a life-long passion for wrestling, and he plays a wrestling referee in the film of *The World According to Garp*. In his memoir, *The Imaginary Girlfriend*, John Irving writes about his life as a wrestler, a novelist and as a wrestling coach. He now writes full-time, has three children and lives in Vermont and Toronto.

THE 158-POUND MARRIAGE
A BLACK SWAN BOOK : 0 552 99208 9

First publication in Great Britain

PRINTING HISTORY
Black Swan edition published 1986

15 17 19 20 18 16 14

Copyright © John Irving 1973, 1974

The right of John Irving to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

Condition of Sale

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This book is set in 11/12 pt Mallard
by Colset Private Limited, Singapore.

Black Swan Books are published by Transworld Publishers,
61-63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA,
a division of The Random House Group Ltd,
in Australia by Random House Australia (Pty) Ltd,
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney, NSW 2061, Australia,
in New Zealand by Random House New Zealand Ltd,
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand
and in South Africa by Random House (Pty) Ltd,
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire.

for JMF

There were four of us then, not merely two, and in our quarternion the vintage sap flowed freely, flowed and bled and boiled as it may never again.

- John Hawkes, *The Blood Oranges*

It was a most amazing business, and I think that it would have been better in the eyes of God if they had all attempted to gouge out each other's eyes with carving knives. But they were 'good people'.

- Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*

1: The Angel Called 'The Smile of Reims'

My wife, Utchka (whose name I sometime ago shortened to Utch), could teach patience to a time bomb. With some luck, she has taught me a little. Utch learned patience under what we might call duress. She was born in Eichbüchl, Austria - a little village outside the proletarian town of Wiener Neustadt, which is an hour's drive from Vienna - in 1938, the year of the Anschluss. When she was three, her father was killed as a Bolshevik saboteur. It is unproven that he was a Bolshevik, but he was a saboteur. By the end of the war, Wiener Neustadt would become the largest landing field in Europe, and the unwilling site of the German Messerschmitt factory. Utch's father was killed in 1941 when he was caught in the act of blowing up Messerschmitts on the runway in Wiener Neustadt.

The local SS Standarte of Wiener Neustadt paid a visit to Utch's mother in Eichbüchl after Utch's father had been caught and killed. The SS men said they'd come to alert the village to the 'seed of betrayal' which obviously ran thick in Utch's family. They told the villagers to watch Utch's mother very closely, to make sure she wasn't a Bolshevik like her late husband. Then they raped Utch's mother and stole from the house a wooden cuckoo clock which Utch's father had bought in Hungary. Eichbüchl is very close to the Hungarian border, and the Hungarian influence can be seen everywhere.

Utch's mother was raped again, several months after the SS left, by some of the village menfolk who, when

questioned about their assault, claimed they were following the instructions of the SS: watching Utch's mother very closely, to make sure she wasn't a Bolshevik. They were not charged with a crime.

In 1943, when Utch was five, Utch's mother lost her job in the library of the monastery in nearby Katzelsdorf. It was suggested that she might be foisting degenerate books on the young. Actually, she was guilty of stealing books, but they never accused her of that, nor did they ever find out. The small stone house Utch was born in - on the bank of a stream that runs through Eichbüchl - connected to a chicken house, which Utch's mother maintained, and a cow barn, which Utch cleaned every day from the time she was five. The house was full of stolen books; it was actually a religious library, though Utch remembers it more as an art library. The books were huge poster-sized records of church and cathedral art - sculpture, architecture and stained glass - from some time before Charlemagne through the late Rococo.

In the early evenings as it was getting dark, Utch would help her mother milk the cows and collect the eggs. The villagers would pay for the milk and eggs with sausage, blankets, cabbages, wood (rarely coal), wine and potatoes.

Fortunately, Eichbüchl was far enough away from the Messerschmitt plant and the landing field in Wiener Neustadt to escape most of the bombing. At the end of the war the Allied planes dumped more bombs on that factory and landing field than on any other target in Austria. Utch would lie in the stone house with her mother in the blacked-out night and hear the *crump! crump! crump!* of the bombs falling in Wiener Neustadt. Sometimes a crippled plane would fly low over the village, and once Haslinger's apple orchard was bombed in blossom time; the ground under the trees was littered with apple petals thicker than wedding confetti. This happened before the bees had fertilized the flowers, so the fall apple crop was ruined. Frau Haslinger was

found hacking at herself with a pruning hook in the cider house, where she had to be restrained for several days - tied up in one of the large, cool apple bins until she came to her senses. During her confinement, she claimed, she was raped by some of the village menfolk, but this was considered a fantasy due to her derangement at the loss of the apple crop.

It was no fantasy when the Russians got to Austria in 1945, when Utch was seven. She was a pretty little girl. Her mother knew that the Russians were awful with women and kind to children, but she didn't know if they would consider Utch a woman or a child. The Russians came through Hungary and from the north, and they were especially fierce in Wiener Neustadt and its environs because of the Messerschmitt plant and all the high officers of the *Luftwaffe* they found around there.

Utch's mother took Utch to the cow barn. There were only eight cows left. Going over to the largest cow, whose head was locked in its milking hitch, she slit the cow's throat. When it was dead, she unfastened the head from the milking hitch and rolled the cow on her side. She cut open the belly of the cow, pulled out the intestines and carved out the anus, and then made Utch lie down in the cavity between the great cow's scooped-out ribs. She put as much of the innards back into the cow as would fit, and took the rest outside in the sun where it would draw flies. She closed the slit belly-flaps of the cow around Utch like a curtain; she told Utch she could breathe through the cow's carved-out anus. When the guts that had been left in the sun drew flies, Utch's mother brought them back inside the cow barn and arranged them over the head of the dead cow. With the flies swarming around her head, the cow looked as if she'd been dead a long time.

Then Utch's mother spoke to Utch through the asshole of the cow. 'Don't you move or make a sound until someone finds you.' Utch had a long, slim wine bottle filled with camomile tea and honey, and a straw. She was to sip it when she was thirsty.

‘Don’t you move or make a sound until someone finds you,’ said Utch’s mother.

Utch lay in the belly of the cow for two days and two nights while the Russians wasted the village of Eichbüchl. They butchered all the other cows in the barn, and they brought some women to the barn too, and they butchered some men in there as well, but they wouldn’t go near the dead cow with Utch inside her because they thought the cow had been dead a long time and her meat was spoiled. The Russians used the barn for a lot of atrocities, but Utch never made a sound or moved in the belly of the cow where her mother had placed her. Even when she ran out of camomile tea and the cow’s intestines dried and hardened around her – and all the slick viscera clung to her – Utch did not move or make a sound. She heard voices; they were not her language and she did not respond. The voices sounded disgusted. The cow was prodded; the voices groaned. The cow was tugged and dragged; the voices grunted – some voices gagged. And when the cow was lifted – the voices heaved! – Utch slipped out in a sticky mass which landed in the arms of a man with a black-haired mustache and a red star on his gray-green cap. He was Russian. He dropped to his knees with Utch in his arms and appeared to pass out. Other Russians around him took off their caps; they appeared to pray. Someone brought water and washed Utch. Ironically, they were the sort of Russians who were kind to children and in no way thought Utch was a woman; at first, in fact, they thought she was a *calf*.

Piece by piece, what happened grew clear. Utch’s mother had been raped. (Almost everyone’s mother and daughter had been raped. Almost everyone’s father and son had been killed.) Then one morning a Russian had decided to burn the barn down. Utch’s mother had begged him not to, but she had little bargaining power; she had already been raped. So she had been forced to kill the Russian with a trenching spade, and another Russian had been forced to shoot her.

Piece by piece, the Russians put it together. This must be the child of that woman who didn't want the barn burned down, and it was because . . . The Russian who'd caught the slimy Utch in his arms as the putrid cow was thrown up on a truck figured it out. He was an officer, too, a Georgian Russian from the banks of the eely Black Sea; they have queer phrases and lots of slang there. One of them is *utch* - a cow. I have asked around, and the only explanation is that *utch*, to various offhanded Georgians, imitates the sound a cow makes when she is calving. And *utchka*? Why, that is a calf, of course, which is what the Georgian officer called the little girl who was delivered to him from the womb of the cow. And it is natural, now, that a woman in her thirties would no longer be an *Utchka*, so I called her *Utch*.

Her real name was Anna Agati Thalhammer, and the Georgian officer, upon hearing the history of *Utch's* family in the good village of Eichbüchl, took his *Utchka* with him to Vienna - a fine city for occupying, with music and painting and theater, and homes for orphans of the war.

When I think of how often I told Severin Winter this story, I could break my teeth! Over and over again, I told him he must understand that, above all, *Utch* is loyal. Patience is a form of loyalty, but he never understood that about her.

'Severin,' I used to say, 'she is vulnerable for the same reason that she is strong. Whatever she puts her love in, she will trust. She will wait you out, she will put up with you - forever - if she loves you.'

It was *Utch* who found the postcards. It was the summer we spent, ill advised, in Maine, ravaged by rain and biting insects, when *Utch* was bitten by the bug of antiques. I remember it as a summer littered with foul furniture, relics of Colonial America - a kick which *Utch* was soon off.

It was in Bath, Maine, that she found the postcards in some grimy warehouse advertising 'Rare Antiques'. It

was near the shipyard; she could hear riveting. The owner of the antique shop tried to sell her a buggy whip. Utch implied there was a look in his old eyes that begged her to use it on him, but she's European, and I don't know if many Americans go that way. Perhaps they do in Maine. She declined the whip and kept herself near the door of the warehouse, browsing warily with the old man following behind her. When she saw the postcards in a dusty glass case, she immediately recognized Europe. She asked to see them. They were all of France after World War I. She asked the old man how he got them.

He had been an American soldier in World War I, a part of the army which celebrated the victory in France. The postcards were the only souvenirs he had left - old black-and-white photographs, some in sepia tones, poor quality. He told her that the photographs were more accurate in black and white. 'I remember France in black and white,' he told Utch. 'I don't think France was in color then.' She knew I'd like the photographs, so she bought them - over four hundred postcards for one dollar.

It took me weeks to go through them, and I still go through them today. There are ladies with long black dresses and gentlemen with black umbrellas, peasant children in the traditional costumes bretons, horse carriages, the early auto, the canvas-backed trucks of the French Army and soldiers strolling in the parks. There are scenes of Reims, Paris and Verdun - before and after the bombardments.

Utch was right; it's the kind of thing I can use. That summer in Maine I was still researching my third historical novel, set in the Tyrol in the time of Andreas Hofer, the peasant hero who turned back Napoleon. I had no use for World War I France at that time, but I knew that one day I would. A few years from now, perhaps, when the people in the postcards - even the children in *costumes bretons* - will be more than old enough to be dead, then I might take them up. I find it's no good

writing historical novels about people who aren't dead; that's a maxim of mine. History takes time; I resist writing about people who are still alive.

For history you need a camera with two lenses - the telephoto and the kind of close-up with a fine, penetrating focus. You can forget the wide-angle lens; there is no angle wide enough.

But in Maine I was not pondering France, I was nursing infected fly bites and worrying with the peasant army of Andreas Hofer, the hero of the Tyrol. I was despairing over Utch's despair at the jagged Maine cliffs, the hazards of Maine water; our children were then in dangerous phases (when are they *not*?) - they were both nonswimmers. Utch felt they were safest in the car or in antique shops, and I would not encourage another bite from a black fly, a greenhead or a salt-water mosquito. A summer on the Maine coast, spent hiding indoors.

'Why did we want to come here?' Utch would ask me.

'Why did we want to come here,' I'd correct her.

'Ja, why did we want to?' Utch would say.

'To get away?' I'd venture.

'From vut?'

It's ironic to think of it now, but before we met Edith and Severin Winter there was really nothing we needed to get away from. That summer in Maine we did not know Edith and Severin.

An example of the close-up lens occurs to me. I have several before-and-after photographs of the Cathedral of Reims. There are two close-ups, from the left doorway of the western porch, of the angel called 'The Smile of Reims'. Prior to the shelling of the cathedral, the angel was indeed smiling. Next to her, a forlorn Saint Nicaise held out his arm - his hand gone at the wrist. After the bombardment the angel called 'The Smile of Reims' was headless. Her arm was gone at the elbow and a chunk of stone was fleshed out of her leg from thigh to calf. The forlorn, forewarning Saint Nicaise lost another hand, one leg, his chin and his right cheek. After the blasting,

his wrecked face described them both, much as her smile had once outshone his gloom. After the war, there was a saying in Reims that the *joie de vivre* in the angel's smile had actually attracted the bombs to her. More subtly, the wise people of Reims implied, it was her morose companion, that sour saint, who could not abide glowering alongside such ecstasy as hers; it was he who drew the bombs to them both.

It's commonly said in that part of France that the moral of 'The Smile of Reims' is that when there's a war on, and you're in it, don't be happy; you insult both the enemy and your allies. But that moral of 'The Smile of Reims' isn't very convincing. The good people of Reims haven't got eyes for detail like mine. When the angel has her smile and head intact, the saint beside her is in pain. When her smile and the rest of her head leave her, that saint – despite new wounds of his own – seems more content. The moral of 'The Smile of Reims', according to me, is that an unhappy man cannot tolerate a happy woman. Saint Nicaise would have taken the angel's smile, if not her whole head, with or without the help of World War I.

And that goddamn Severin Winter would have done what he did to Edith, with or without me!

'Haf patience,' Utch used to say, in the early rounds of her bouts with English.

OK, Utch. I see the close-ups of the shelling of Reims. The telephoto is still unclear. There's a long, broad view taken from the cathedral of the fired quarters of the city, but neither I nor the clever people of Reims have extracted a moral from it. As I advised, forget the wide-angle. I see Edith and Severin Winter only in close-ups, too. We historical novelists need time. Haf patience.

Severin Winter – that simple-minded ego, that stubborn Prussian! – even had some history in common with Utch, for all that it mattered. History occasionally lies. For example, the decapitation of the angel called 'The Smile of Reims', and the rest of the damage done to the great Reims cathedral, are considered among the

human atrocities of World War I. How flattering to an angel! How bizarre for sculpture! That the loss of art should be considered as similar to the rape, mutilation and murder of French and Belgian women by the Boche! The damage to a statue called 'The Smile of Reims' doesn't quite compare to the shish-kebabbing of children on bayonets. People regard art too highly, and history not enough.

I can still see Severin Winter - that schmaltz lover, that opera freak - standing in his plant-festooned living room like a dangerous animal roaming a botanical garden, listening to Beverly Sills singing Donizetti's *Lucia*.

'Severin,' I said, 'you don't understand her.' I meant Utch.

But he was only hearing Lucia's madness. 'I think Joan Sutherland carries this part better,' he said.

'Severin! If those Russians had not tried to move the cow, Utch would have stayed inside her.'

'She'd have gotten thirsty,' Severin said. 'Then she'd have climbed out.'

'She was already thirsty,' I said. 'You don't know her. If that Russian had burned the barn down, she would have stayed.'

'She'd have smelled the barn burning and made a break for it.'

'She could have smelled the cow cooking,' I said, 'and Utch would have stayed until she was done.'

But Severin Winter did not believe me. What can you expect of a wrestling coach?

His mother was an actress, his father was a painter, his coach said he could have been great. More than ten years ago Severin Winter was runner-up in the 157-pound class at the Big Ten Championships at Michigan State University in East Lansing. He wrestled for the University of Iowa, and runner-up in the Big Ten was the closest he ever came to a major conference or national championship. The man who beat him in the finals of the Big Ten tournament was a lean, slick, leg wrestler from Ohio State named Jefferson Jones; he was a black with a

knuckle-hard head, bruise-blue palms and a pair of knees like mahogany doorknobs. Severin Winter said Jones put on a figure-four body scissors so hard that you were convinced his pelvis had that strange spread of two sharp bones like a woman's pelvis. When he rode you with a cross-body ride - your near leg scissored, your far arm hooked - Severin said Jones cut off your circulation somewhere near your spine. And even Jones wasn't good enough for a national championship; he never won one, though he was the Big Ten champion for two consecutive years.

Severin Winter never came close to a national title. The year he was runner-up in the Big Ten, he was placed sixth in the national tournament. He was pinned in the semifinals by the defending national champion from Oklahoma State, and pinned again in the second round of the consolation matches by a future geologist from the Colorado School of Mines. And in the wrestle-off to decide fifth from sixth, he lost another convincing decision to Jefferson Jones of Ohio State.

I once spent some time trying to interview the wrestlers who had beaten Severin Winter; with one exception, none of them remembered who he was. 'Well, you don't remember everyone you beat, but you remember everyone who beat you,' Winter was fond of saying. But I discovered that Jefferson Jones, the wrestling coach at a Cleveland high school, remembered Severin Winter very well. Altogether, over a three-year period, Winter had wrestled Jefferson Jones five times; Jones had beaten him all five.

'That boy just couldn't get to me, you know,' Jones told me. 'But he was one of those who kept coming. He just kept coming at you, if you know what I mean. You'd break him down on his belly and he'd work like a stiff old dog to get back up to his hands and knees again. You'd just break him down on his belly again, and he'd get up again. He just kept coming, and I just kept taking the points.'

'But was he, you know, any good?' I asked.