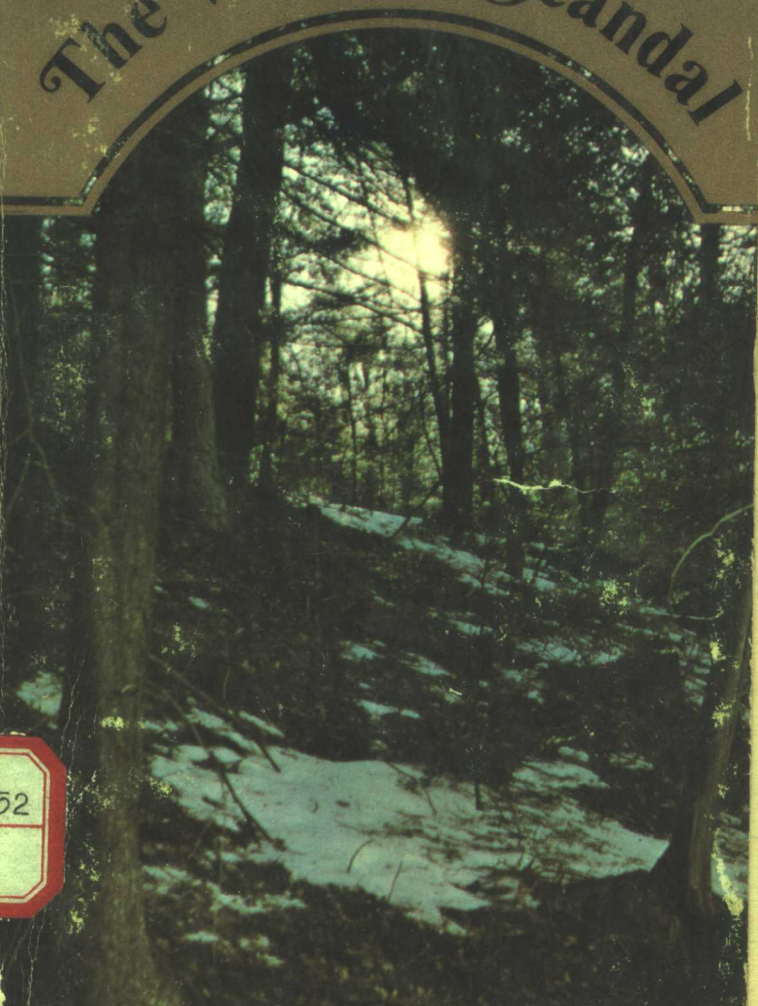


JOHN CHEEVER

The Wapshot Scandal



**THE
WAPSHOT
SCANDAL
JOHN CHEEVER**



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THE WAPSHOT SCANDAL.

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PART ONE



CHAPTER I



The snow began to fall into St. Botolphs at four-fifteen on Christmas Eve. Old Mr. Jowett, the stationmaster, carried his lantern out onto the platform and held it up into the air. The snowflakes shone like iron filings in the beam of his light, although there was really nothing there to touch. The fall of snow exhilarated and refreshed him and drew him—full-souled, it seemed—out of his carapace of worry and indigestion. The afternoon train was already an hour late, and the snow (whose whiteness seems to be a part of our dreams, since we take it with us everywhere) came down with such open-handed velocity, such swiftness, that it looked as if the village had severed itself from its context on the planet and were pressing its roof and steeples up into the air. The remains of a box kite hung from the telephone wires overhead—a reminder of the year's versatility. "Oh, who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?" Mr. Jowett sang loudly, although he knew that it was all wrong for the season, the day and dignity of a station agent, the steward of the town's true and ancient boundary, its Gate of Hercules.

Going around the edge of the station he could see the lights of the Viaduct House, where at the very moment a lonely traveling salesman was bending down to kiss a picture of a pretty girl in a mail-order catalogue. The kiss tasted faintly of ink. Beyond the Viaduct House were the rectilinear lights of the village green, but the village itself was circular and did not conform in any way to the main road that wound seaward to Travertine, or to the railroad track, or even to the curve of the river, but to the pedestrian needs of its inhabitants, putting them within walking

distance of the green. Thus it was the shape, really, of an ancient place, and seen from the air on a fairer day might have been in Etruria. Mr. Jowett could see into the windows, across from the Viaduct House and above the ship chandler's, of the Hastings apartment, where Mr. Hastings was decorating the Christmas tree. Mr. Hastings stood on a ladder, and his wife and children passed him ornaments and told him where to hang them. Then suddenly he bent and kissed his wife. It was the sum of his feeling for the holiday and for the storm, Mr. Jowett thought, and it made him very happy. He seemed to feel happiness in the stores and houses, happiness everywhere. Old Dog Tray trotted happily up the street, on his way home, and Mr. Jowett thought affectionately of the dogs of St. Botolphs. There were wise dogs, foolish dogs, bloodthirsty and thieving dogs, and as they raided clotheslines, upset garbage pails, bit the mailman and disturbed the sleep of the just, they seemed like diplomats and emissaries. They seemed, in their chaffing way, to keep the place together.

The last of the shoppers were going home, carrying a pair of mittens for the ash man, a brooch for Grandmother and a Teddy bear stuffed with sawdust for baby Abigail. Like Old Dog Tray, everybody was going home, and everybody had a home to go to. It was one place in a million, Mr. Jowett thought. Even with his pass, he had never wanted much to travel. The village, he knew, had, like any other, its brutes and its shrews, its thieves and its perverts, but like any other it meant to conceal these facts under a shine of decorum that was not hypocrisy but a guise or mode of hope. At that hour most of the inhabitants were decorating their Christmas trees. The druidical significance of bringing a green tree into the house at the solstice had certainly never crossed the minds of any of the natives, but they treated their chosen trees (at the time of which I'm writing) with more instinctive respect than is the case today. The trees were not, at the end of their usefulness, stuck into ashcans or fired into the ditch by the railroad tracks wearing a few strands of angel's hair. The men and boys burned them ceremoniously in the back yard, admiring the surge of flame and the smell of balsam smoke. People did not, as they presently would, say that the Tre-

maines' tree was skinny, that the Wapshots' tree had a bare place in the middle, that the Hastings' tree was stumpy and that the Guilfoyles must have suffered economic reverses, since they had only paid fifty cents for their tree. Fancy illuminations, competitiveness and disregard for the symbols involved would all come, but they would come later. The lights, at the time of which I am writing, were spare and rudimentary and the ornaments were commemorative like the table silver, and were handled respectfully, as if one were counting over the bones of the family. They were, naturally, in disrepair—the birds without tails, the bells without clappers and the angels sometimes without wings. It was a conservatively dressed population that performed this tree-trimming ceremony. All the men wore trousers and all the women wore skirts, excepting Mrs. Wilston, who was a widow, and Alby Hooper, who was an itinerant carpenter. They had been drinking bourbon for two days and wore nothing at all.

On the ice pond—Parson's Pond at the north end of town—two boys were struggling to keep clear enough ice for a hockey game in the morning. They skated back and forth, pushing coal shovels ahead of them. It was an impossible task. This was clear to both of them, and yet they continued to go back and forth, toward and away from the roar of the falls at the dam, with an unaccountable feeling of eagerness. When the snow got too deep for skating, they propped their shovels against a pine tree and sat down in its shelter to unlace their skates.

"You know, Terry, I miss you when you're away at school."

"They throw so much work at me in school that I don't have a chance to miss anyone."

"Smoke?"

"No, thanks."

The first boy took from his pocket a pouch full of sassafras root that had been ground in a clean pencil sharpener, poured some of this onto a square of coarse, yellow toilet paper, and rolled a loose cigarette that flared up like a torch, lighting his thin face, with its momentary look of suavity, and dropping embers all over his trousers. Drawing on his cigarette, he could taste its components—the raw

gassy flavor of burning toilet paper and the sweetness of sassafras. He shuddered as it touched his lungs, and yet he was rewarded by his smoke with a sense of wisdom and power. When their skates were unlaced and the fire in the cigarette had died, they started back toward the village. The first house they passed was the Ryders', distinguished in St. Botolphs because, for as long as anyone could remember, the parlor window shades had been drawn and the parlor door locked. What did the Ryders have hidden in their parlor? There was no one in the village who hadn't wondered. Was there a dead body there, a perpetual-motion machine, a collection of eighteenth-century furniture, a heathen altar, a laboratory for hellish experiments on dogs and cats? People had made friends of the Ryders in the hope of getting into their parlor, but no one had ever succeeded. The Ryders themselves, a peculiar but not really unfriendly family, were decorating their tree in the dining room, which was where they lived. Next to the Ryders' was the Tremaines' and, passing here, the boys could see a gleam of something yellow—copper or brass—a clue to the richness of color in that house. Traveling through Persia as a young man, Dr. Tremaine had cured the shah of boils and had been rewarded with rugs. The Tremaines had rugs on their tables, their piano, their walls and their floors, and the brilliant dyes could be seen through the lighted windows. Suddenly, for one of the boys—the smoker—the bitterness of the storm and the warmth of color in the Tremaines' house seemed to converge. It was like a discovery, and so exciting that he began to run. His friend jogged along beside him to the corner, where they could hear the bells of Christ Church.

The rector was about to bless the carolers who stood in his living room. A rancid and exciting smell of the storm came from their clothes. The room was neat and clean and warm, and had been—before they entered in their snowy clothes—fragrant. Mr. Applegate had cleaned the room himself, they knew, because he was unmarried and did not employ a housekeeper. He did not enjoy having women in his sanctuary. He was a tall man with an astonishing and somehow elegant curvature of the spine, formed by an enlarged lower abdomen, which he carried in a stately and

contented way, as if it contained money and securities. Now and then he patted his paunch—his pride, his friend, his solace, his margin for error. With his spectacles on he gave the impression of a portly and benign ecclesiastic, but when he removed his eyeglasses to clean them his gaze was penetrating and haggard and his breath smelled of gin.

His life was a lonely one, and the older he grew the more harried he was by doubts about the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and it was true that he drank. When he first took over the parish, the spinsters had embroidered his stoles and illuminated his prayer books, but when it appeared that he was not interested in their attentions, they urged the vestry and bishop to discharge him as a drunk. Drunkenness was not what infuriated them. His claim to be celibate, his unmarriedness, had offended their womanhood and they longed to see him disgraced, defrocked, scourged and harried down the Wilton Trace past the old pill factory to the village boundaries. On top of this, Mr. Applegate had recently begun to suffer from an hallucination. It seemed to him that as he passed the bread and wine he could hear the substance of his parishioners' prayers and petitions. Their lips did not move, so he knew this was an hallucination, a kind of madness, but as he moved from one kneeling form to another he seemed to hear them asking, "Lord God of Hosts, shall I sell the laying hens?" "Shall I take up my green dress?" "Shall I cut down the apple trees?" "Shall I buy a new icebox?" "Shall I send Emmett to Harvard?" " 'Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful,' " he said, hoping to scour his mind of this galling illusion, but he still seemed to hear them asking, "Shall I fry sausage for breakfast?" "Shall I take a liver pill?" "Shall I buy a Buick?" "Shall I give Helen the gold bracelet or wait until she's older?" "Shall I paint the stairs?" It was the feeling that all exalted human experience was an imposture, and that the chain of being was a chain of humble worries. If he had confessed to the vice of drinking and to his serious doubts about blessedness, he would end up licking postage stamps in some diocesan office, and he felt too old for this. "Almighty God," he said loudly, "bless these Thy servants in the task of celebrating the birth of Thine only Son, by

Whom and with Whom in the unity of the Holy Ghost all honor and glory be to Thee, O Father Almighty world without end. Amen!" The blessing smelled distinctly of juniper. They sang an Amen and a verse of "Christus Natus Hodie."

Absorbed and disarmed by the business of singing, their faces seemed unusually open, like so many windows, and Mr. Applegate was pleased to look into them, they seemed at that moment so various. First was Harriet Brown, who had worked for the circus, singing romantic music for the living statues. She was married to a wastrel, and it was she who kept the family together these days, baking cakes and pies. Her life had been stern, and her pale face was sternly marked. Next to Harriet stood Gloria Pendleton, whose father ran the bicycle-repair shop. They were the only colored family in the village. The ten-cent necklace that Gloria wore seemed to be of inestimable value, and she dignified everything she touched. This was not a primitive or a barbaric beauty, it was the extraordinary beauty of race, and it seemed to accentuate the plumpness and the paleness of Lucille Skinner, who stood on her right. Lucille had studied music in New York for five years. Her education was estimated to have cost in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars. She had been promised an operatic career, and wouldn't your head swim at the thought of San Carlo and La Scala, that uproarious applause that seems to be the essence of the world's best and warmest smile! Sapphires and chinchilla! But the field is crowded, as everyone knows, and dominated by unscrupulous people, and she had come home to make an honest living teaching the piano in her mother's front parlor. Her love of music—it was true of most of them, Mr. Applegate thought—had been a consuming and disenchanting passion. Next to Lucille stood Mrs. Coulter, the wife of the village plumber. She was Viennese, and she had been a seamstress before her marriage. She was a frail, dark-skinned woman with shadows like lampblack under her eyes. Beside her stood old Mr. Sturgis, who wore a celluloid collar and a brocade ascot, and who had sung in public whenever possible ever since he had been admitted to his college glee club, fifty years ago.

Behind Mr. Sturgis stood Miles Howland and Mary Perkins, who would be married in the spring but who had been lovers since last summer, although no one knew. He had first undone her clothes in the pine copse behind Parson's Pond during a thunderstorm, and after this they had thought mostly of how, where, when next—moving, on the other hand, through a world lit by the intelligent and trusting faces of their parents, whom they loved. They took a picnic lunch to Bascom's Island and didn't put their clothing on the whole day long. Lovely, it was lovely. Was this sinful? Would they burn in Hell, suffer agues and strokes? Would he be killed by a bolt of lightning during a baseball game? Later that same Christmas Eve, he would serve on the altar at Holy Communion, wearing fresh white and scarlet and raking the dark church, as he appeared to pray, for the shape of her face. In the light of all the vows he had taken, that was heinous, but how could it be, since if his flesh had not informed his spirit he would never have known this sense of strength and lightness in his bones, this fullness of heart, this absolute belief in the glad tidings of Christmas, the star and the kings? If he walked her home from church in the storm her kind parents might ask him to spend the night and she might come to him. In his mind he heard the creaking of the stairs, saw the color of her instep, and he thought, in his innocence, how wonderful was his nature that he could at the same moment praise his Saviour and see the shape of his lady's foot. Beside Mary stood Charlie Anderson, who had the gift of an unusually sweet tenor voice, and beside him were the Basset twins.

In the dark, mixed clothing they had put on for the storm, the carolers looked uncommonly forlorn, but the moment they began to sing they were transformed. The Negress looked like an angel, and dumpy Lucille lifted her head gracefully and seemed to cast off her misspent youth in the rainy streets around Carnegie Hall. This instantaneous transformation of the company was thrilling, and Mr. Applegate felt his faith renewed, felt that an infinity of unrealized possibilities lay ahead of them, a tremendous richness of peace, a renaissance without brigands, an ecstasy of light and color, a kingdom! Or was this gin! The carolers

seemed absolved and purified as long as the music lasted, but when the final note was broken off they were just as suddenly themselves. Mr. Applegate thanked them, and they started for his front door. He drew old Mr. Sturgis aside and said tactfully, "I know you enjoy very good health, but don't you think this snowstorm might be a little too severe for you to go out in? It said on the radio that there hasn't been such a snowstorm in a hundred years."

"Oh, no, thank you," said Mr. Sturgis, who was deaf. "I had a bowl of crackers and milk before I came out."

The carol singers left the rectory for the village green.

The music could be heard in the feed store, where Barry Freeman was closing up. Barry had graduated from Andover Academy, and during Christmas vacation of his senior year he had worn his new tuxedo to the Eastern Star Dance. There was general laughter as soon as he appeared. He approached one girl and then another, and when they all refused to dance with him he tried to cut in, but he was laughed off the floor. He stood against the wall for nearly half an hour before he put on his coat and walked home through the snow. His appearance in a tuxedo had not been forgotten. "My oldest daughter," a woman might say, "was born two years after Barry Freeman wore his monkey suit to the Eastern Star Dance." It was a turning point in his life. It may have accounted for the fact that he had never married and would go home on Christmas Eve to an empty house.

The music could be heard in Bryant's General Store ("Rock Bottom Prices"), where old Lucy Markham was talking on the telephone. "Do you have Prince Albert in the can, Miss Markham?" a child's voice asked.

"Yes, dear," Miss Markham said.

"Now, you stop hectoring Miss Markham," said Althea Sweeney, the telephone operator. "You're not supposed to use the telephone for hectoring people on Christmas Eve."

"It's against the law," said the child, "to interfere in private telephone conversations. I'm just asking Miss Markham if she has Prince Albert in the can."

"Yes, dear," said Miss Markham.

"Then let him out," said the child, her voice breaking with laughter. Althea turned her attention to a more inter-

esting conversation—an eighty-five-cent call to New Jersey, made from Prescott's drugstore.

"It's Dolores, Mama," a strange voice said. "It's Dolores. I'm in a place called St. Botolphs. . . . No, I'm not drunk, Mama. I'm not drunk. I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas, Mama. . . . I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. And a Merry Christmas to Uncle Pete and Aunt Mildred. A Merry Christmas to all of them . . ." She was crying.

"'. . . on the Feast of Stephen,'" sang the carolers, "when the snow lay round about . . ." But the voice of Dolores, with its prophecy of gas stations and motels, free-ways and all-night supermarkets, had more to do with the world to come than the singing on the green.

The singers turned down Boat Street to the Williamses' house. They would not be offered any hospitality here, they knew—not because Mr. Williams was mean but because he felt that hospitality might reflect on the probity of the bank of which he was president. A conservative man, he kept in his study a portrait photograph of Woodrow Wilson framed in an old mahogany toilet seat. His daughter, home from Miss Winsor's, and his son, home from St. Mark's, stood with their father and mother in the doorway and called "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" Next to the Williamses' was the Brattles', where they were asked in for a cup of cocoa. Jack Brattle had married the Davenport girl from Travertine. It had not been a happy marriage, and, having heard somewhere that parsley was an aphrodisiac, Jack had planted eight or ten rows of parsley in his garden. As soon as the parsley matured, rabbits began to raid it, and, going into his garden one night with a shotgun, Jack blew an irreparable hole in the stomach of a Portuguese fisherman named Manuel Fada, who had been his wife's lover for years. He stood trial on a manslaughter charge in the county court and was acquitted, but his wife ran off with a yard-goods salesman, and now Jack lived with his mother.

Next to the Brattles were the Dummers, where the carol singers were passed dandelion wine and sweet cookies. Mr. Dummer was a frail man who sometimes did needle-

work and who was the father of eight. His enormous children ranged behind him in the living room, like some excessive authentication of his vigor. Mrs. Dummer seemed pregnant again, although it wasn't easy to tell. In the hallway was a photograph of her as a pretty young woman, posed beside a cast-iron deer. Mr. Dummer had labeled the picture "Two Dears." The singers pointed this out to one another as they left the house for the storm.

Next to the Dummers were the Bretaignes, who ten years ago had been to Europe, where they had bought a crèche, which everyone admired. Their only daughter, Hazel, was there with her husband and children. During Hazel's marriage ceremony, when Mr. Applegate asked who gave the girl away, Mrs. Bretaigne got up from her pew and said, "I do. She's mine, she's not his. I took care of her when she was sick. I made her clothes. I helped her with her homework. He never did anything. She's mine, and I'm the one to give her away." This unconventional behavior did not seem to have affected Hazel's married happiness. Her husband looked prosperous and her children were pretty and well behaved.

At the foot of the street was old Honora Wapshot's house, where they knew they would get buttered rum, and in the storm the old house, with all its fires burning, all its chimneys smoking, seemed like a fine work of man, the kind of homestead some greeting-card artist or desperately lonely sailor sweating out a hangover in a furnished room might have drawn, brick by brick, room by room, on Christmas Eve. Maggie, the maid, let them in and passed the rum. Honora stood at the end of her parlor, an old lady in a black dress that was sprinkled liberally with either flour or talcum powder. Mr. Sturgis did the honors. "Say us the poem, Honora," he asked.

She backed up toward the piano, straightened her dress, and began:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight; the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river and the heaven,
And veils the farmhouse at the garden's end. . . .

She got through to the end without making a mistake, and then they sang "Joy to the World." It was Mrs. Coulter's favorite, and it made her weep. The events in Bethlehem seemed to be not a revelation but an affirmation of what she had always known in her bones to be the surprising abundance of life. It was for this house, this company, this stormy night that He had lived and died. And how wonderful it was, she thought, that the world had been blessed with a savior! How wonderful it was that she should have such a capacity for joy! When the carol ended she dried her tears and said to Gloria Pendleton: "Isn't it wonderful?" Maggie filled their glasses again. Everyone protested, everyone drank a cup, and going back into the snow again they felt, like Mr. Jowett, that there was happiness everywhere, happiness all around them.

But there was at least one lonely figure on the scene, lonely and furtive. It was old Mr. Spofford, moving with the particular agility of a thief, down the path to the river. He carried a mysterious sack. He lived alone at the edge of town, supporting himself by repairing watches. His family was formerly well-to-do, and he had traveled and been to college. What could he be carrying to the river on Christmas Eve in an epochal snowstorm? It must be some secret, something he meant to destroy, but what documents might a lonely old man possess, and why should he choose this of all nights to hide his secret in the river?

The sack he carried was a pillowcase, and in it were nine live kittens. They made a lumpy burden, mewling loudly for milk, and their mistaken vitality distressed him. He had tried to give them away to the butcher, the fish man, the ash man and the druggist, but who wants a stray cat on Christmas Eve, and he couldn't take care of nine himself. It was not his fault that his old cat conceived—it was no one's fault, really—and yet the closer he got to the river, the heavier was his burden of guilt. It was the destruction of their vitality, their life, that pained him. Animals are not supposed to apprehend death, and yet the struggle in the pillowcase was vigorous and apprehensive; and he was cold.

He was an old man, and he hated the snow. Pushing on toward the river, he seemed to see in the storm the mortal-

ity of the planet. Spring would never come again. The valley of the West River would never again be a bowl of grass and violets. The lilacs would never bloom again. Watching the snow blow over the fields, he knew in his bones the death of civilizations—Paris buried in snow, the Grand Canal and the Thames frozen over, London abandoned, and in the caves of the escarpment at Innsbruck a few survivors huddled over a fire of chair and table legs. This cruel, this dolorous, this Russian winter, he thought; this death of hope. Cheer, valor, all good feelings had been extinguished in him by the cold. He tried to cast the hour into the future, to invent some gentle thaw, some clement southwest wind—blue and moving water in the river, tulips and hyacinths in bloom, the plump stars of a spring night hung about the tree of heaven—but he felt instead the chill of the glacier, the ice age, in his bones and in the painful beating of his heart.

The river was frozen, but there was some open water along the banks where the current turned. It would be easiest to drop a stone into the pillowcase, but this might hurt the kittens that he meant to murder. He knotted the top of the sack, and as he approached the water the noise in the pillowcase got louder and more plaintive. The banks were icy. The river was deep. The snow was blinding. When he put his sack into the water, it floated, and in trying to submerge it he lost his balance and fell into the water himself. "Help! Help! Help!" he cried. "Help! Help! Help! I'm drowning!" But no one heard him, and it would be weeks before he was missed.

Then the train whistle sounded—the afternoon train that had pushed its cowcatcher through the massive drifts, bringing home the last to come, bringing them back to the old houses on Boat Street, where nothing was changed and nothing was strange and nobody worried and nobody grieved, and where in an hour or two the souls of men would be sifted out, the good getting toboggans and sleds, skates and snowshoes, ponies and gold pieces, and the wicked receiving nothing but a lump of coal.