
CHAPTER 1

Johnnie's Voice

It was Friday, the day the residence halls opened for new students at my college, in California. All day, sophomore men had been weighing and measuring—“sizing-up”—the freshmen women as they were about to enter their dormitory. The “sizing-up” ceremony for women was one of a series of initiation rites for all incoming freshmen, men and women. I was a freshman myself, and, eager not to be left out of anything, I had a “dink” (a green beanie) on my head and, in my pocket, the student “Bible” (a handbook that listed the college organizations, set forth the college rules, and gave the words of the college songs and yells). Each of us “greenhorns” was required to wear a dink and carry the Bible at all times on the campus and in town, on pain of court-martial by the sophomores. With a great many other men, I was pushing and shoving to get near the front porch of the dormitory, where a scale had been set up. Sophomore men were milling

about up and down the street, to direct the stream of cars in which the women were arriving, with their parents, and to help unload and carry luggage, and escort the women to the scale.

During a lull in the general hubbub, there was clapping and cheering as a new arrival was swept up onto the porch, laughing and mildly protesting. The men pressed closer to the porch to get a better look.

“Step back, gentlemen, you’re crowding the lady,” a smooth-sounding man said. He was one of the Ghosts, who, I had just learned, were members of the most illustrious male honorary society on the campus, restricted to fifteen upperclassmen. They policed all the activities connected with our initiation.

“What’s your name?” someone asked the young woman.

“JoAn Johnstone,” she said.

“O.K., Johnnie, up on the scale.”

There was a clink as she stepped on the scale, still laughing, and a rattle as its measuring rod was adjusted to the top of her head.

“Johnnie’s weight?”

“A hundred and fifteen!”

“Johnnie’s height?”

“Five feet four inches!”

“Arms up, Johnnie! We have to get the measuring tape around you. It’ll only take a second.”

Several sophomore men of the campus-leader type were doing the weighing and measuring. As her statistics were shouted out, one of the sophomores

recorded them on a list of the incoming freshmen women. (The list was to be circulated through the men's dormitories.)

“Johnnie’s bust?”

“Thirty-four!”

“Waist?”

“Twenty-four!”

“Hips?”

“Thirty-seven!”

There was clapping, cheering, hooting, and laughing all around.

From the perspective of the nineteen-eighties, the sizing-up rite seems sexist and degrading, reminiscent of slave markets and cattle auctions, but in 1952, the year I was a freshman, the whole ceremony was conducted in a spirit of innocent fun.

“Hey, what do you think of your new nickname, Johnnie?” a man near me called out.

“I like it,” she said.

“It’s better than Mud,” a man at my elbow said. Maud Ching, a freshman who had arrived earlier, had received the nickname Mud.

“It certainly is!” Johnnie called back over her shoulder as she disappeared into the dormitory.

“That girl is going to be a homecoming queen,” someone said.

Another new arrival was escorted onto the porch.

The air was fresh with the scent of eucalyptus, which made me think of childhood colds back home in India and the eucalyptus leaves crushed

in a handkerchief which my mother would press against my nose. No matter how stuffed up my head was, it seemed, I could always smell the pungent, overpowering fragrance of eucalyptus. Johnnie's voice is just like the eucalyptus scent, fresh and heady, I thought. I'll never be able to get it out of my mind. It has a note of forced cheerfulness, as if she were always making the best of things—just like me.



It seemed I could hardly turn around without running into Johnnie, in classes and in the library, on college walks and in the quadrangles. She was always surrounded by friends, men and women, but she always greeted me as we passed. She had a sweet, singsong voice, was quick to laugh, and came across as an All-American girl. Johnnie was immediately elected a freshman-class officer, and she was featured in the "Frosh Show," where she danced the Charleston. She went to dances and football games and fraternity parties, to beach barbecues and ski weekends—all the things I would have liked to go to but somehow felt I couldn't. And she was smarter than practically all the other students who took part in such glamorous activities. In classes, when the professors asked questions she gave just about the best answers, and not in a pushy, forward way but tentatively and discreetly. Like most of the smart women, it seemed, she didn't want to show that she was smarter than men. She was also unusual

among us freshmen in knowing her own mind. She was planning to major in English literature, had taken an exam offered by the English Department, and, unlike the rest of us, had been allowed to skip the first semester of the freshman-composition class. In fact, it was obvious that the department rated her one of the freshman students most likely to do well.

I came to believe there was something special even about her nickname, Johnnie—something independent, mature, and serious, just as there was about the “Johnnies” who had spent two years fighting a war in Korea and were now freshmen with us. They and Johnnie had the same forced cheerfulness in their voices, but their cheerfulness just sounded strong and manly, whereas Johnnie’s cheerfulness sounded as if she were trying to hide some sadness that had touched her life. I found that sadness heartrending, and wanted to gather her up in my arms and comfort her. I felt that I alone sensed her sadness, and I secretly identified with it and thought of it as a bond between us. There was another, more apparent bond between us as well: like me, and in contrast to most of the other students, she seemed to be in want of money. She had no car, no strings of pearls or necklaces that she fingered noisily in class.

In the years that Johnnie and I were in college together, I never stopped thinking about her—almost to the exclusion of everybody else. When I read a novel, I saw her as its heroine—most of all as Catherine Earnshaw. I felt that if I had her

at my side I could do anything—cut quite a figure in the world. But although we came to be friends I never had a proper boy-girl date with her, never even kissed her on the cheek. And I never declared my love for Johnnie. Once or twice when I hinted at my feelings, she tactfully brushed them aside.

After college, we went our separate ways, and for thirty years I scarcely saw her. Now and again, I would hear something about her—that she had got a Ph.D., had married, had got divorced, had remarried, was tutoring law students in writing at Stanford. In the meantime, I had found my vocation in writing in New York City. I, too, had married, and I had a child. Then, in the autumn of 1985, I found myself in San Francisco, and I looked her up. Though so much time had passed, so much had happened to us, and we were living so far apart, we were able to rediscover the friendship of our college years. We spent a day together, sitting in the house of a friend in North Beach (where I was staying), and walking around, and going out to lunch. We had never talked so freely before.

At one point, I told her what she had meant to me in college. “I remember that time we went to see *Uncle Vanya* at Show Boat,” I said. “But I never got anywhere with you, JoAn. I mean, I was in love with you, as you probably knew.”

“As a matter of fact, until that moment I wasn’t particularly inclined to know,” she said. “I knew you liked me a great deal. But I didn’t put it to myself in terms of romantic love.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I always hoped you would form a romantic attachment with someone like Anne Lockwood. She always seemed to me an appropriate companion for you, because she seemed—here’s this silly word—an ‘intellectual,’ not only intelligent but devoted to the life of the mind, whereas I was always a highly ambiguous figure in that respect. It didn’t take much to really impress me in those days. Once, Anne and I were having hamburgers at a restaurant. It was someplace where they had a jukebox with classical music, and she said, ‘Oh, the “Brandenburg.” I’ve missed that record so much. I must hear it.’ And I didn’t know a ‘Brandenburg’ Concerto from anything, so I thought, Well, here’s a really serious intellectual. I always looked up to women like that. But I also thought that you got along with her very well—that she could be your girlfriend.”

“But she seemed mostly interested in politics—in social work instead of social life,” I said. “I wanted someone who was very literate and also very popular. I wanted to be a Ghost, and have the kinds of girls the Ghosts got to go out with, and she certainly wasn’t one of those girls.”

“Oh, those Ghosts! Yes, those Ghosts. Remember how public-spirited they were?” Her quick laugh erupted, and she said, a little tongue-in-cheek, “They were, oh, so friendly, genuine, enthusiastic, and sincere.”

“If I could have become a Ghost and married you, a belle of the campus, I would have been in seventh heaven—that was the ultimate achievement. I was doing all these intellectual things, like trying

to become a writer, and get to Oxford, just because I couldn't become a Ghost and couldn't marry you—the things I *really* wanted to do.”

“And I had the same vision of the ultimate achievement, of course. I wanted to marry someone who would be not just a Ghost but the head Ghost, the lead singer in the ‘Torchbearers.’” The “Torchbearers” was our college anthem, and one of the qualifications for becoming a Ghost was the ability to sing it stirringly. “I was looking for someone who was a leader of the men, who could carry himself well in a well-cut suit and also had a certain degree of athletic ability—that mixture of sincerity and prowess—and had a good handshake, a good smile, and a lot of enthusiasm for outdoor life, and who was going to make a whole lot of money, too. Clearly, the future with you was not going to be a future with a lot of money. This, I think, was why you had trouble getting girls to go out with you. In fact, you were almost a scourge of that sort of future. I remember your being contemptuous of the secret dream of so many of our college classmates, the secret dream of all of us in Southern California (mine, too): to have fun at the beach, with everybody good-looking and properly tanned, to run free in the hills and drive a pickup truck across the desert, or perhaps an open-topped car, as fast as the wind on the freeway, but, no matter what, with a lot of laughter, and a lot of money right around the corner. I guess that swept us all up. Then what would you and I have done next? Live in Southern California in a ranch house?”

Her laughter was coming faster and faster.

“I never got that far. You had that social side I wanted, because you would have been an ultimate form of success, almost as if I weren’t blind.” I have been blind since the age of four, as a result of meningitis. “And you had that other side, too, which was apparent to me from discussing with you about stories—books we were reading for class. I remember talking about Lawrence’s ‘The Blind Man’ with you. Both of us were put off by his heavy prose. You tried to explain to me that this was a particular kind of style, but I didn’t have the patience for it. I was quoting sentences to you, or adjectives, or phrases, or something, and you were laughing. I remember talking about *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and reading about it in your senior thesis. I could see that you had not only a social side but also a powerful intellectual side. As for Anne, she was very outgoing and adventurous but basically she was melancholy. Even her laugh was subdued. I felt that with Anne I’d be dragged down. With you, I thought, I’d be flying high, I’d be up on a trapeze.”

“You and I would be world-beaters—beat the world at its own game,” she put in. “We could do anything we wanted. I think I represented a lot in the way of excitement, and vitality, and ‘let’s go.’ A lot of self-confidence.”

“You laughed very easily. It was as if your whole body were caught up in it in some way. Not convulsive, but it expressed your whole self.”

“Well, you made me laugh. We had some good

times together—good talks. It was so much fun discussing books with you. In retrospect, that was really one of the nicest things I did in college. I look back and think about sitting quietly and talking over the stories with you. You always had good things to say, and you used to think funny, humorous things. That was our version of about the best time we could have in college, you and I. But you just didn't seem to have all those other things, those college trappings. For a lot of people, including me, that was collegiate success—that façade of masculinity. Some sense of—I can't say a sense of direction, because those Ghosts didn't really have a sense of direction. Still, they could bring a presence to bear on a situation. The masculine presence. The masculine promise."

"Did you ever have any deeper feeling for me?"

"I had very deep affection for you. You could say that, in my way, I loved you—there's no reason not to say that. I think by our junior year I even recognized your feelings for me. They made me very uncomfortable. They worried me. I thought, Oh dear, if he has *those* feelings . . . Oh dear, what shall I do? Gee, there just isn't going to *be* any kind of—There's *no* sexual relationship between us possible. I will not *have* that. Our visions were in a way the reverse of each other, in that I was devoted to securing my future by marrying someone who would go to the Stanford Business School and make a lot of money. I wanted to live in a ranch house and have four or maybe six children, like my girlfriends.

Somehow, I didn't picture the private life between my husband and me at all. I imagined that most of the time I would just be a rich housewife, but that every once in a while I'd go off by myself and read, or write poems, or something. A ridiculous image, but it was what I pictured. But I also had a contradictory vision, which I thought at the time was a hopeless one, of falling in love with an intellectual, a kindred spirit, who might—who knows?—become a writer, a professor, a teacher, or something like that. But that was a dream too impossible even to contemplate."

"I once met somebody who knew you during your first marriage, and he told me that your husband was an intellectual," I said. "So you did find someone you had thought would be impossible to find. In fact, the man I met said your marriage was just like the marriage in *Portrait of a Lady*."

She was silent for a moment, and then said, "It's true. It was. But at our age, Ved, when we were in college together, I could not reconcile demands of friendship with demands of the heart. I very seldom had the luxury of being friends with any of the fellows I thought were my proper sexual partners. I don't mean that we were having sex—no, I wasn't doing that with anybody. Too risky. But I grew up thinking that it's better not to love someone who belongs to a different church, a different Protestant sect. That's how provincial my upbringing was—how darned American it was. The American culture dictated that what you were supposed to do was to go out with boys of a certain mold, which was

athletic, Waspish, very materialistic—What I mean is that you, Ved, just didn't rate. And, besides, you were"—she took a deep breath—"Indian!" I was born in India, and came to this country at the age of fifteen. "You were Indian—think of that! That seemed so unreal, alien. You were so exotic. You came from a different culture. The difference between us was just so great—I thought it was insuperable."

"How did you view me? What picture did you have of me? I mean, if I was so unreal to you, what kinds of things struck you about me?"

"Well—" She paused, as if she were reaching back into her memory. "You were so thin, Ved. You were just so thin. That was very touching. And along with that great slenderness there was a great poise. My image of you was of someone standing, very nicely balanced, on slightly larger, slightly outsize feet, and then tapering up to a very, very slender waist and slightly curving back. The contrast was these big, solid shoes and a very delicately poised curve atop the shoes. What size shoe do you wear? I see now, not that big. Maybe it was that you wore dress shoes and the others wore tennis shoes, loafers—whatever. But there was a contradiction between the size of your feet, marching along very firmly—as though you were, in fact, not exactly *in* your shoes but *on* them—and your backward curve, as though you were sailing along in your shoes. Perhaps it was because you stood up so straight that when you walked you almost seemed to be leaning back. You walked so erect that we were afraid if you

relaxed, if you let down your guard, you would break—simply fall apart. Other boys could be very clumsy, rough in their movements and their walk, but you never were. You were a much more delicate person. It was a more androgynous image, partly because you were put together more the way the girls were. And, perhaps because of your blindness, your movements were more circumscribed, more confined, and so, in a way, more feminine. And, with your great poise, you proceeded with such confidence. It was one of the strongest impressions I had—an impression other people had—that you were so brave.”

I said to myself, *Not brave, really. Just trying to go about my business—get through the day—like everyone else.*

“You always seemed to be in danger, from the point of view of the rest of the world—to be in an enormous amount of physical danger. Everyone who saw you walking from a class upstairs to a class downstairs or from building to building, or, sometimes, running like a madman, thought something terrible was going to happen to you at any moment. As far as we could see, you were always going to walk into a bush or a puddle, run into a lamppost or a tree. It was always remarkable that you got through all right. However well we got to know you, however often we saw you avoiding obstacles, never falling down, we would stand and watch. We’d think, *Is he going to run into something? Is he going to miss a step? Is he going to make it, or is he going to go down the stairs headfirst? And if*

he makes this one will he miss the top step of that little flight going down to the door? Actually, we saw you guiding other people around. You know, it was like being with someone who was set very far apart, in some very different realm, and who could yet be—‘Condescending’ is the right word but has the wrong connotations. Who could yet extend his own graciousness to bridge the distance between the two realms. What I’m saying is that it was you who had to help other people over the distance of their fears for you and their sense of your differentness. It was obvious—at least, to me—that, without knowing it, you were creating a wonderful tension around yourself and then crossing over it. It was a little bit like watching a king, or some member of the royal family. We think, If he makes a mistake, what a terrible thing that will be. What if he drops his glove? He can’t pick it up. He can’t admit to doing anything wrong. You carried yourself so independently, seemed so aloof, that people were afraid to approach you, to help you in any way.”

Not a king—just afraid of seeming like a helpless blind beggar. I must have used dignity as a shield.

“And then to find that this person who is in such a risky position is able to be outgoing, gracious, and so on, and is not really bothered by the situation that seems to desperate to everybody else. Not desperate because it’s pitiable but desperate because this person is so open to danger—so vulnerable.”

We stopped at an Italian restaurant for lunch.

“I remember you eating,” she said. “I remember that you spilled more than other people did—things

fell off your fork. But it wasn't so much that you were sloppy, because there were people whose table manners were worse—you know, they ate with their mouths open, or bent over their food, or shovelled it in. I think the reason it was hard for us to watch was that it made us nervous. Is the fork going to get to his mouth all right, and what's going to be on it when it gets there? Some things we were served in the dining hall were so hard to manage. There was chicken to cut up, chops—things with bones in them—and all that kind of thing. It seemed to us that every food that was served to you presented some kind of problem. But you probably didn't see it that way. If you'd been eating in the West Point style—raise the fork straight up, bring it straight across to the mouth—I think the effect would have been the same, because we'd have thought, Is he going to be able to make the turn of the fork at the right moment? What I'm trying to say is that your eating in the dining hall, like your walking around the campus, created psychological problems for us.

“I also remember being aware that you didn't like the things you were eating, so perhaps it was partly a question of: The poor guy, he's here all the way from India—why does he have to eat this food? Why can't he have something that he would eat in India? It used to make me self-conscious about how funny our food must seem to someone who wasn't used to it. It had probably been a long time since you'd had any Indian food, but even so it seemed that the diet was not natural to you.”

Parathas cooked with sugar on them, kofta curry,

pea pilaf, mint chutney, and a hundred other foods not tasted or smelled in all my high-school or college years.

“It would have been the same if you’d been Chinese. I had the impression that in China they ate very different food.”

A girl who was born and raised in a small town in Oregon, then moved to Washington State, who had met hardly any foreigners, never once eaten Indian food, and here I’d been dreaming of dating her, taking her home to India, making her a member of my family. No wonder she ran in the opposite direction if I as much as hinted about what was in my heart.

“I would have felt sorry for somebody from China who was sitting down in the dining hall to mashed potatoes, gravy, peas, and breaded veal cutlet. What a sorry thing! What I’m trying to say is that I remember you as extremely foreign, completely out of context. That is what was striking, what was distancing. If it had been just your blindness, I think we all might have handled it. I don’t mean to say that your blindness didn’t set you apart. All those special activities, like signing your name against the edge of a piece of cardboard, keeping track of your notes and papers, figuring out which book was which—these uncanny ways might have been interesting, might have piqued our curiosity, if we had been older, but, oh, we were all so young, so young. Now that I think about it, there was still another thing that set you apart—the purposeful, determined way you did everything, the purposeful way you walked, went about your work. Yes, the

purposeful way you got through your food, and even the way you listened to—concentrated on—lectures and conversations. You always knew what the next thing you were going to do was. It always seemed to me that you had some plan to fulfill. I never stopped to ask what plan, whose plan. It was just the impression of being purposeful that you gave. It somehow doesn't fit anybody else. There can't have been very many other people who were purposeful in our day."

We finished our lunch and were back out on the street. "You were also remarkable because you talked. Other people didn't complete their sentences, and you did. You could talk about public affairs. You talked about history—things you were studying. I remember that you could carry on a conversation, present a whole different point of view. You had a whole background of information, ideas, values in your brain. All this set you apart. You did have some funny sides to you, you know. You were capable of getting on a number of high horses. One was the religion high horse, of attacking the absurdities of Christianity. And I believe you had a diatribe or two against the materialism of American culture."

We spent the rest of the afternoon walking and talking. I told her how I had pictured her, and asked her questions about her family, about what she was doing. We talked about how different her life had turned out to be from her college expectations of it—how much fuller and happier. Then I walked her to her car. We lingered, reluctant to say goodbye, overwhelmed by our meeting, by the past.

“I remember you as such a gentle person,” she said. “But the gentleness was often combined—again, like the big shoes and the slender body—with a real anger inside, an enormous anger, almost a frightening irritability. These two things were at odds. I myself thought it very charming, because a person never knew whether you were going to be angry and fierce or get to laughing and be sweet. So there was a lot of variation of moods in you. I didn’t know anybody else whose feelings I could chart the way I could yours: ‘Now he’s very angry . . . Now he’s very kind . . . Now he’s very sweet . . . Now he’s happy.’ I think it’s because most other people didn’t have such strong, almost palpable emotions. It seemed to me that you had more emotions than we had. You were different in that way, too—as though you had come from a place in which people had stronger feelings.”

Now, after the passage of thirty years, we could comfortably kiss each other goodbye on both cheeks. I waited for her to drive away, and then walked back to the house where I was staying. She had started the process of thawing my college past for me, her warmth had started a flow of associations that had been frozen in some benumbed part of my mind. The return of feeling to that mental numbness was already beginning to hurt.

How many of us ever have the chance to know how even one other person really sees us, I thought. We both yearn for and dread such knowledge, and rightly so.