1. **Roolette? A. Roolette?**

[**BY ADAM PRINCE**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/adam-prince)

**ON APRIL 18** at the Yarley-Woodward Country Club, we hold our fiftieth reunion. Seventy-three attend, half our original number. “Half,” we tell each other, proud of our longevity. “Half,” we say, to explain how important our identity as the South Pasadena High School Class of ’57 has always been. Waiting at the entrance are name tags that include our senior class photographs. We wear them good-humoredly, chuckling and shaking our heads at those former selves as we might at a kitten pouncing a sock.

The men of ’57 are broad in neck and chest and gut, with heads that bulge from buttoned collars like fingertips from tightly wrapped Band-Aids. Our faces, already pink with age, have gone sheepish red as the result of complaints we’d been making only fifteen minutes earlier about coming to this thing—complaints nearly forgotten now as we greet our equally hot-faced friends. We wear navy blue or gray sport coats; our ties are tasteful and subdued, except in the case of Class President Jerry Riggs, who sports a yellow tie with the word *Viagra* repeated hundreds of times in capitalized blue. And then there is John Mink, a small, chalky man who has just been saying to his young wife in the car that this ought to be a nice event but who now stands apart, ungreeted, running his hands over the jacket of his five-thousand-dollar black tailored suit as if to smooth it beyond what is possible.

The women are not as easily summed up as the men and never have been. Some of us wear black dresses, and others silvery red, some slacks and blouses, others sweaters baggy enough to hide everything except their own weave. Our hair is generally dyed to cover the gray and permed to compensate for the sparseness, but here is Darla Manning braving a clean, otherworldly white, and here Suzanne Straight, hair lush as it was at sixteen. And it isn’t only her hair that has kept its beauty, but the woman herself. The other women attribute this to posture; “Straight Suzanne Straight,” they whisper, echoing the old epithet. But Bill Archer asserts it’s because she’s been single all this time. “Marriage,” he says, not exactly *at* his wife, Caroline, but in her vicinity, “takes years off our lives.” The greatest uniformity among the women in the class of ’57 is in the ample use of makeup: heavy ruby lipstick and thick powder. But even still, we are far more variously expressive than our men. Compare, for instance, the red avalanche that is Bill Archer’s face to the lively alertness in the face of his wife, Caroline. She has just put her hand to the back of Phillip Hughes so that she might say hello, and now, as he turns around, her eyelids widen to let out just a little more blue, then flicker down to let out just a little less. But it is not Phillip Hughes after all. It is one of the husbands from another school, another class. And now her expression is a complex mix of disappointment, embarrassment, and cheery welcome.

In complement to the senior class photographs on our name tags, photos will be taken this evening too. The set consists of a solid black bench and a sky blue background. Most couples sit side by side, but sometimes the wife sits while the husband stands behind, hands on her shoulders—protectively, valiantly. For those of us arriving alone, the photograph is frightening. Tammy Hitchcock, for instance, works hard on assembling some kind of plausible smile while she squints into the eye of the camera as if into the eye of an old rival she can’t quite place. No one says that the black bench looks like a coffin, but seeing Tammy there, we begin to think it. This is the first hitch of the evening, the first reminder of regrets: a trip to Fresno that ended in divorce, a hard-line stance toward a daughter who now refuses to come to the house, the preschool teacher with the colorful shoes . . .

It is Forsythe Scott who lightens the mood. He wraps one arm around Tammy Hitchcock’s waist and the other around Suzanne Straight’s, plops onto that black bench with a woman on each knee, and winks into the camera like Hugh Heffner, so that we’re all laughing.

**The country club** is dark wood and forest green, a style we had considered luxurious in the fifties but that feels outdated now, “old persony,” as Caroline Archer puts it. Round tables draped in white and seating six occupy a room about the size of our high school gym. Half the tables are unused, and that half of the room is left in the dark. The Archers share a table with Suzanne Straight and Forsythe Scott—these four what is left of a certain crowd. Under the table, Forsythe Scott is digging thumbs into his arthritic knees. His doctor had just warned him not to stress them, and here he has propped a woman on each. Back in high school, he had been so careful, a pessimistic romantic who for every hour he would spend imagining sliding an arm around the waist of the lovely Suzanne Straight would spend three more imagining all the ways she would reject him if he did. As a man too he has been that way—a buyer of warranties, a reader of contracts. But ever since the death of his wife two years ago, Forsythe Scott has changed. These days he finds himself taking bold, bounding action as if in ten-minute fits of drunkenness. The self-doubt only comes later. Yes, he thinks, Suzanne had laughed along with the others when he pulled her onto his lap, but he could feel her tightening and knows what she’s like. Even now, she eyes the waiter pouring her wine, stops him at a quarter glass. Forsythe Scott worries and tries to quit worrying. Then he yanks the bottle from the waiter’s hand and laughingly pours her glass full.

Two of the chairs at the table are still empty, though it isn’t long before John Mink and his wife stand behind them. “I’m sure you don’t mind,” says John with a false self-assuredness it has taken him decades to learn. “You’d have to ask my wife,” returns Bill Archer. “I think she’s waiting for someone else.” And it’s true; she’s still waiting for Phillip Hughes to arrive. Aloud, she says to John Mink, “It’s only one of Bill’s little jokes. Don’t listen to him. I never do.” The rest of the group smiles, nods, does what it can to make John and his wife feel welcome, the stinginess of fellowship so characteristic of high school having long been replaced by a generous “why not” approach. John introduces his wife to each, throwing their names out one after another with the indifference of a man dropping pennies into a tray of change. Nonetheless, he speaks without having to look at their name tags, while the four are still grabbing glances at his. Each knows the name, recognizes the photo of the withered boy that this withered man has become, but cannot quite place either one exactly—until it comes all at once. This is the kid who cried.

Mrs. Mink is twenty years younger than her husband and nice to look at but somehow mismatched. There is an awkward ratio between slim hips and full chest, and a frequent, jerking readjustment of body that makes her seem not quite up to the brazenness of that low-cut gown. She holds up her martini. “To John’s friends,” she says, and the group is too polite to correct her.

**The event is** being videotaped for posterity. In front of the camera, we are clownish and uncomfortable, feeling pressed to make accounts of ourselves and what we have accomplished in the past fifty years. We mention jobs, offspring, and how long we’ve been married, but then there is a tendency to trail off. And, certain there must be something left to add, we make jokes or offer silly, cheek-puffing faces. Three drinks in and feeling the camera on him, a class member whose son has been institutionalized because of a schizophrenic breakdown slaps a pat of butter on his forehead, looks around the table, and asks if someone could please pass the butter.

Dinner is roast chicken and steamed vegetables. We don’t have the appetite we used to, but Forsythe Scott might just compensate for us all. He sets both arms on the table, encircling his plate as if to ward off potential grabbers, and chomps openmouthed through everything, while Suzanne eyes him in disgust. “It isn’t worth it,” Caroline Archer is saying. “Three kids, five grandkids. You just worry, is all. As if your heart fell out of your mouth one day and grew into a whole other person. Three people. Eight. Spread all over the country, so when you’re done worrying about this one’s marriage, you start worrying about the dental surgery of another, and the whole result is that you can’t sleep for fifty years.”

For Suzanne Straight, it is almost too much to consider that this worried, boasting grandparent had once been Caroline Trill, whose hand used to disappear under the desk to pleasure her lab partner, Caroline Trill who was called the Girl in the Red Velvet Swing after having gone to three different boys’ cars during a single drive-in screening of that film, whereas she, Suzanne, had listened to her mother, gone to church, guarded her chastity, and cannot now imagine any good it has done her. Still, the moment passes. Over the years, the disappointment of having waited for a certain kind of man who never came has been replaced by a pride in her virginity, though she sometimes has to remind herself that this self-discipline will only be rewarded in the life to come. “Your first boy is nearly fifty now, isn’t he?” Suzanne asks Caroline Archer in order to remind everyone exactly who is innocent and who is not. “Roger, our first, is forty-nine,” returns Caroline, simply, cheerfully, as if no scandal ever existed.

At some point, Caroline mentions a grandson interested in writing screenplays, which gives John Mink an opportunity to tell all that his young wife is a Shakespearean actress at the Glendale playhouse. “Very talented,” he says. “It was how we first met. I saw her playing King Lear’s daughter, the youngest one, the neglected one. I don’t normally go to plays, but a client had tickets. Of course, she’s underappreciated in the troupe. The way it always is with talent.” Word for word, it is a speech he has given before, and though the speech itself ends in bitterness, though he lowers his head and starts adjusting the lay of a geometric cuff link, one might read on his face something close to satisfaction—not that anyone does. Caroline Archer, for her part, has hardly noticed him speak and continues on with her story. “Bill worries too,” she says, “even though he won’t admit it. Once our first grandkid came along, Bill was putting rubber on every corner of the house. He spent three thousand dollars on rubber. And now that the grandkids are older, he spends his golden years looking up the safety standards of cars they might drive and the suicide rates at colleges they want to attend.”

The group laughs, while Bill Archer answers with the blunt immobility of his hard-set frown. His is a face with a single expression but multiple uses: intimidation, irony, lack of surprise—and what other use might there be? For Bill Archer, there is none.

**While dessert is** being served, Class President Jerry Riggs takes up the microphone at the front of the room. “We’re gathered here tonight,” he says in imitation of a wedding, “to celebrate ourselves, our wonderful long-lived selves, who may be getting a little older, a little less effective in certain . . . areas”—here a comic eyeing of his Viagra tie—“but remain brilliant all the same.” He raises a glass of wine. “To us,” he says, and a toast ripples around the room. Jerry thanks all for coming, then makes some announcements on behalf of those who can’t be with us tonight. Mary Robinson, who used to be Mary Freely, welcomes the birth of her first granddaughter, a little late in coming but here all the same. Buck Reilly has recently retired from legal work in Boston and is loving his newfound freedom. Jack and Miriam Pearl say a big “aloha” from Maui and invite any and all ’57-ers to come visit their little piece of heaven.

Now a pause. And Class President Jerry Riggs says, “It’s never easy to do this part. I thought it would be good idea this time, if, when I call a name, someone could raise a hand to offer a short memory of the deceased. Something nice.” Jack Allen’s name is called first, and a story is told about the time he borrowed four dollars from the vice principal to bet on a horse through a bookie he knew. When the horse came in first at fifty-to-one odds, Jack kept insisting that he and the vice principal split the winnings. Chris Anderson is named next, and the woman who used to be little Rosie Grech talks about how the two of them used to read *East of Eden* to each other during lunchtime, how this was all their romance had ever consisted of but how she never could have become a sixth-grade teacher without it. Next it’s Joe Bran, whom we all knew as Heavy Duty, and Forsythe Scott tells the famous story of the time Heavy rode his motorcycle off the end of the Balboa Pier.

He had done it for Suzanne Straight, though she is the only one here who remembers. They had gone on a single date, at the end of which he’d presented her with an entire picture of their lives together. He had money from a dead uncle; they could get a house in Long Beach, start college. Suzanne refused him a second date right then and there. So Heavy spent the dead uncle’s money on a motorcycle. Every day after school for three weeks, he would ride up to the front of her house and rev it until her mother came out yelling. Then Heavy would rumble away, while Suzanne looked down from her window feeling something a little more than pity and a little less than love. Then one night, he rode the thing off the end of the pier. At the time, she thought of it as just more proof that he’d been unsuitable all along. She hasn’t thought of it often over the years, but every now and again, when a customer would call her *lady* without bothering to look at her name tag or face, the memory would barge through.

The names continue: Lacey Cole, Brian Cuddy, Abraham Dale. We find comfort in the heartwarming stories and in the capable leadership of our class president, the optimist with a nickname for nearly every one of us, who, despite what he said, really does make all this seem easy. Only John Mink is irritated, hot inside his suit. He doesn’t want to be irritated, not if no one else is, and this makes the irritation all the worse. “Don’t see why there has to be such a show,” he mutters to his wife. “Oh, John, it’s a nice thing to do for them,” she whispers back in a light singsong, as if the dead are not dead at all, only lacking the correct change to get on the bus. *She’s an idiot,* he thinks. It comes like a twitch, the quick release of a certain muscle usually held tight. “I’ll get you another drink,” he tells her, eager to get away both from his own angry thoughts and from the roll call of the dead.

The bar is not in a separate room, only in a corner of this one. “Martini,” John says to the bartender, “for my wife.” The clipped syntax, like the suit, serves to calm internal turmoil and to distance this man from the boy he used to be. The crying had begun during a freshman history filmstrip about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. John wasn’t even aware of it until the film ended, the lights went on, and Frank Hale was pointing at him: “Look, he’s crying.” And there were the tears, wet on his face. He wanted to explain himself, wanted to say it was something about their way of accepting the death sentence that made him see how people couldn’t seem to understand each other, but he didn’t know how to say it exactly, which only made him cry even harder, sobbing aloud. For weeks after, they would call him a Jew and a Red until he would start to cry again. Eventually, even those accusations were forgotten, along with his name, and he was only the kid who cried. Now he lays down two twenties for payment and tip on the single drink and carries it back to his wife with the care given to something holy. John rarely drinks himself but experiences the lift of a martini secondhand in the uncomplicated joy that takes over his wife’s face as he delivers one to her.

The names continue, and so do the stories. Caroline Archer keeps searching the room as Phillip Hughes’s slot approaches. She had understood he would be here, understood he had come to the fortieth reunion and that he lives only fifteen minutes away—that he lives. She keeps recalling the time she and Phillip had watched the sun set over the Pacific Ocean from the roof of Hoag Hospital when it was still under construction. She wants to get up, move through the crowd searching for him, one face at a time. She might have asked Class President Jerry Riggs to see the list of the dead, but then Bill would have made one of his jokes. So Caroline Archer can only sit there listening to a story about how Gary Holnick bowled a 200 and trying to figure out if, between Holnick and Hughes, there are any names left.

Bill Archer, in the meantime, is thinking about the day he agreed to marry his wife. It was the summer after they’d graduated, and he’d had a job moving furniture. She’d come to him on the street, told him she was pregnant. He said he was going to take a walk and would talk to her later. So the eighteen-year-old Bill Archer loped past the neighborhood’s squat California houses, each its own bundle of lives, and despite not knowing what to do, he wasn’t anxious. It was like moving a great dresser from truck to house, the weight made pleasant by an assurance that he could handle it. At each intersection, he luxuriated in the decision of whether to go left, right, or straight ahead. When, years later, Bill Archer began to suspect that Robert, their first, was not his, it wasn’t the betrayal that bothered him most, it wasn’t how he had to reexamine the woman he’d married or even how the suspicion threatened to twist the hard, simple love for the boy into something else. Instead, it was the way his suspicion cheapened that day, that walk, that memory. Like his wife, then, but for reasons of his own, Bill Archer listens for Phillip’s name. Still, he does so without agitation. He is calm behind his red, stone frown, almost cozy.

The name doesn’t come. There are others instead. Sarah Ick. George Jasperson. “Half,” says Bill Archer to Caroline. And whatever relief she had at not hearing Phillip’s name is replaced with something else. At our fortieth reunion, this list had taken up only a small part of the evening, just as the empty tables had taken up only a small part of the room. Now the list goes on. We can’t stop it, and it would hardly be respectful to cut our stories short. So we start embellishing to lighten the mood. Roger Neil is said to have shot five deer in a single hunting expedition. Grace Neckers spent every penny she had on starving children in Kenya, while eating only plain noodles herself. Susan O’Donnell is credited with the invention of the disposable razor. It’s a bit shameful, we know, and beneath us; still, it seems to work. We get through Brian Oscar, Jack Paulson, Celia Reserve.

“A. Roolette?” says Jerry Riggs next. “It just says A. I don’t know why. Alexander, maybe? Adam? Ashley? Andrew?” He overwhelms the microphone with a sigh. “I’m hoping someone can help me here. . . . Who knows this A. Roolette?” He drops his smile. “Does anybody know?” he asks, with a hitch in his voice. We want to help him, to help ourselves. Those in front turn around in their seats, hoping to see a hand go up; those being looked back at turn around too—confusedly, stupidly, since there is nothing back there but the empty tables and the darkened half of the room.

**As soon as** the dancing begins with “Shake, Rattle and Roll,” Harry and Sally Baldwin charge the floor. They have money troubles, probably can’t even afford to be here, and yet you wouldn’t know it to see their West Coast Swing. He pulls her close, flings her out for a whip, then a left-side pass, while the rest of us look on with approving half-smiles, each thinking in his or her own way that those two are the very best of us. We are not, as a group, death obsessed or youth obsessed or apt to pine after more than the measure of life given us. When we say we wish to be young again, we mean only that we wish we had our young bodies back and maybe our full sets of choices, but never our entire young selves, so full of self-doubt and yet so full speed ahead. Still, that unknown name, that A. Roolette, has shaken us, and we are more searching than usual.

“These days there’s no restraint at all in the dancing,” says Suzanne Straight to Forsythe Scott. “It’s just a bunch of sweaty mashing.” She speaks with earnestness and a tight, sneaking anxiety. In some ways she speaks for all of us, since it is generally felt that an appreciation of restraint is what we as a generation have to offer the younger set, and the difficulty of having been so little taken up on this feels particularly hard to bear at the moment.

Forsythe Scott nods in vigorous agreement. “Yesh,” he says through a bite of cake. A smear of chocolate frosting has gotten onto his lopsided glasses.

“Didn’t your wife teach you any better than that?” Suzanne Straight asks, and then immediately regrets it. He has stopped midchew, his eyes gone soft, so that she sees in them the mild boy who used to drive her to school every day. “I’m sorry,” she starts. “I wasn’t . . .” she tries. And why, she wonders, are the most reckless men the most easily hurt? Like her young co-worker, who closed a file drawer on her fingers and then hated her forever after because she’d suggested that if he wouldn’t move so quickly such accidents might be avoided. These silly men, these infuriating men, strutters and grabbers and smearers of frosting, making *her* apologetic, *her* unsure, pressing her into wet, messy places she does not want to go. . . . “Your glasses,” she says and plucks them off his face, dips a napkin into ice water, and proceeds with a thorough cleaning.

After the first dance, the Baldwins are joined by others—the Princes, the Housers, both pairs of Johnsons, as well as Forsythe Scott and Suzanne Straight. The lights have been dimmed just enough to soften our edges, smooth us into a crowd. And after several protests, even John Mink allows his young wife to pull him onto the dance floor.

Caroline Archer pulls Bill up too. Marriage, she tells him, is a compromise, and he responds that it has certainly compromised him. He’s a good dancer, always has been, and as they move with a sweet, dignified fluency, the thought of Phillip Hughes slides away from them both. But minutes later, there is the face of Phillip Hughes himself only ten feet away, hovering over the white square of a clerical collar. He is not dancing, only standing, smiling, looking—Caroline can’t tell—either at the crowd in general or at her. Bill sees the man too and stops dancing midsong. He walks his wife over to Phillip, shakes the man’s hand, and announces, from somewhere behind his unreadable face, that he is heading over to the bar. Then he is gone, leaving the two of them there alone.

“Just got here,” Phillip says. “There was some roadwork. It’s good to see you.” He is older, of course; we all are. He’s acquired a hearing aid and the generous weight of a well-lived life. His smile to her is the same he has just given Bill, the same he has on offer to anyone in the room. She takes his hand, and the two dance. He has no sense of it, keeps wanting to follow the upbeat instead of the down, which gets her giggling. “You better not let me fall, you Phillip!” she shouts. “You better keep an eye on me!” It is the same thing she said to him fifty years ago climbing the skeleton of Hoag Hospital in a loose-fitting skirt and scandalous underwear. Seventy stories up, past where the lift could take them, was a staircase—open and incomplete. Caroline had insisted on going ahead of him, and that’s when she had said this about keeping an eye. She knew what she was doing. Caroline Trill was a late bloomer who seemed to burst forth with all the more lushness because she had been held in so long. And the power she suddenly held over high school boys and their fathers, checkout clerks, policemen, even her family doctor was heady and addictive. Yet this one boy, this Phillip Hughes, seemed not to notice; climbing the stairs with his head level to her full and infamous behind, the only desire he expressed was for the sunset. “Hurry up,” he kept saying, “or we’re going to miss it.”

They didn’t. The sunset spilled gold all over the ocean, and Caroline Trill scooted in close, determined to see just how far this boy’s defenses would go.

**The bar is** a classic—oak encased in a thick coat of lacquer—and Bill Archer settles into it with satisfaction. The female bartender is a bit big for his taste but young enough to carry it. Youth blazes from her green eyes, and the thick, kinky hair could be a living thing in its own right. *Ellen,* her name tag reads, an old-fashioned name. “How many of these things do you do in a year?” Bill asks her.

“ ’Bout twenty,” she tells him. “Are they pretty much the same?” he asks. “I’d say you’ve got a pretty spunky group here.” “Well, I appreciate your lying to me.” “Anytime,” Ellen says. He orders a Johnny Walker, tall and neat.

In the mirror behind the bar, he catches a glimpse of his wife and Phillip Hughes dancing. It isn’t the dancing itself that bothers him so much as the way her imagination must be unspooling some alternate version of her life, a life without squabbles over air-conditioning or whether to put the honey in the cupboard or the refrigerator, a life without insinuations and jabs. But she is forgetting, Bill is sure of it, that there would be other irritations. If not the air then the coffee. If not insinuations, then honest rage. So maybe it hardly makes a difference, Bill thinks. The choices we make. When we were young it had all felt so important. We had assumed that one date, one night, could determine a life, but the truth is that we’d all get old, all look across a kitchen counter convinced that we deserved better.

Bill feels a hand on his back and turns to recognize Class President Jerry Riggs. “Evening, Bill-o. Not up for dancing?” “I only ever did it to meet girls,” says Bill, “and I guess I got there long since.” He has always liked Jerry and orders him a drink.

Ellen the bartender’s dark green button-up shirt is not as buttoned up as it might be. And the shift of this shirt, the spills of her hair over those breasts swelling from a white bra could mesmerize Bill all night. He is imagining her nipples, has been told that a woman’s nipples are always the same color as her lips, and this woman’s lips have a certain shock in their pink. “Are you wearing lipstick?” he asks. “No,” she says, but with humor in the smile, referencing, he thinks, what they’d just said about lying.

**The first slow** dance of the evening is “Put Your Head on My Shoulder,” and all the women on the dance floor do, except for Mrs. Mink, who steps back from her husband and spreads her arms out in a slow-motion arc at the perimeters of her reach. She’s drunk, John thinks, making a spectacle. “That’s not . . .” he says. “Here,” reaching to grab those hands out of the air, pull his wife back toward him. “Damnit, John, I don’t wanna,” she says and starts spinning away. He grabs again. She slips. Her dress flings up; a meaty bare thigh hangs in the air, exposed as she totters for balance, graceless and ugly, jerking the parts of herself back into upright. “I stumbled, is all,” she says to John, who has a sudden impulse to slap her across the face but leads her back to the table instead.

Forsythe Scott helps him. He’s almost glad for the interruption, the relief from that rocking motion that grinds his arthritic knees. He’s never been a good slow dancer, never known what to do with his body, and Suzanne Straight is too stiff to be easily led. Still, he asks her to wait for him, and she does, turning down other offers, so that on returning, he feels himself relieved, indebted. A look passes between them, a naked look that reminds him of the days in his car when she, whose parents wouldn’t let her listen to rock music at home, would chirp along to the radio the whole way there. And Forsythe Scott wouldn’t need to say anything on those drives, just listen, just smell the peppery sweetness that blew off her skin; it blows off her skin now. And he wants to tell her something, give her something, explain why he is different from how he used to be. “My wife,” he says, “was afraid of everything. Sharks, break-ins, freeways. When she got cancer, I think she was proud to be right.”

Suzanne Straight jerks her head back, intending to chastise him for speaking of his deceased wife that way, but then she sees that his face has gone soft again; he’s stuttering some qualification about how he did *love* his wife, it wasn’t that . . . And all this somehow bothers Suzanne even more, makes her even more indignant because of the other feelings that come along with it: pity or gratitude, an impulse to make some confession of her own, to apologize for who she has become, to say that her prudishness, like her posture, was a thing instilled so early she’d never had any choice in it, to say that she spends a lot of time watching television alone but never eats in front of it, will not bow to that and so eats alone at the dining room table. Instead she returns her head to his shoulder and makes a humming sound that might signal understanding or even contentment. Instead she softens herself against him—just a little.

Forsythe Scott feels that softening and is touched, bemused; he thinks about the way she had plucked and cleaned his glasses and wants to ask her to marry him. Ask her tonight. Right now. It’s a silly thought, he knows, and yet it butts at him hard.

Nearby, Caroline Archer is wondering whether Phillip Hughes can even hear her. His responses keep arriving at odd, approximate angles, so that, for example, when she tells him she’s missed him, he says back, “We’ve got a good thing going over at St. James. Full house. You should come sometime. You and Bill.” His slow dance is formal, friendly. And when it ends, he introduces her to an old woman in a daisy-print dress. “My wife,” says Phillip Hughes. “Margie.”

All at once, Caroline understands that she had pushed that first dance on Phillip and then assumed the second, understands that this woman has been patiently watching the whole time and that she is probably not, in truth, any older than Caroline herself. She has simply given herself over to age more gracefully; she wears no makeup, only kindness, on her face. “Such a pleasure,” she tells Caroline. “Phillip says you were a good friend to him back in the days before he met his best.” And with a sly, almost mischievous grin, Margie points a finger up at the ceiling, so that Caroline understands that by “his best” she means not herself but God.

When the young Phillip Hughes sat next to the young Caroline Trill on the roof of the construction site that would be Hoag Hospital, most of what he did was talk. It was something lifted from Mr. Yarb’s science class about how the light breaks up in the ozone to create all those sunset colors. He did not scoot closer to Caroline, did not touch her, and she almost told Phillip that if she wanted to hear all that sciency stuff she would have invited Mr. Yarb up here himself, and he’d have been happy to come too, she knew he would. . . . But Phillip was talking with such breathless urgency that interruption was impossible. “It’s like,” he said, “when Lewis and Clark came here the whole goal was to get to the ocean, and that’s an amazing accomplishment, right, but there’s something sad about it too, because it means you’ve run out of land. But then there’s the sunset on the water, which sort of looks like this whole other land, this perfect land that you can walk out onto. So you look at this, this right now and because the journey’s over, it’s gotta be enough.”

At the time Caroline Trill thought this right now would be enough if only he’d stop talking and turn his head toward her. But he didn’t. He never did. They hadn’t even kissed that sunset. And why she went on letting Bill suspect that their son Roger might actually belong to Phillip is a thing she has never explained to herself. It has something to do with the frown that began to settle on his face so soon after their marriage and something to do with the way he just walked away from her on the dance floor without any sign of jealousy. It has to do with needing Bill to believe—needing herself to believe—that she had had choices, while in truth Phillip Hughes was never one of them. On that roof talking of Lewis and Clark, Phillip was everything he ever would be, a lover less of people than of ideas. And maybe she was all she ever would be too—already dating Bill, already two weeks pregnant and sensing it. Still, what she remembers most about that moment on top of Hoag Hospital, what she has chosen to remember, is not the implicit rejection from Phillip Hughes or the way her life was narrowing so sharply already, but that golden ocean in front of her. That promise of a whole new land.

**Back at the** bar, Class President Jerry Riggs orders another round for himself, for Bill Archer, and for John Mink, who’d been walking by in pursuit of his wife’s coat, wearing a smile like wet cardboard when Jerry Riggs intercepted him. “Minkerbean,” Jerry had said, “come have a Scotch.” And because his wife was passed out on the table after having embarrassed him, because he was asked so chummily, John Mink did. He could hardly get the first Scotch down but would not betray that in front of these two men. The second went more easily.

Now the men are on the third, raising glasses in a toast. “To young, beautiful bartenders who never gave us the time of day,” Bill proposes. “To distinguished gentlemen who never asked for it,” returns the young Ellen, raising a glass of her own. Bill wonders if she means it, then decides it doesn’t matter. He will take the compliment all the same.

“If she were a bimbo,” John Mink is saying of his wife, “but she isn’t even a bimbo. And to tell you guys the truth I’m . . . not sure what she is. Even though I married her.” He hadn’t planned to say all that. It has leaked from him like a long sigh, and like a long sigh it feels good. He drinks down more Scotch, snaps free the top button of his shirt. “I appreciate this, gentlemen,” he says, “this drinking with you. I looked up to you in high school, Bill. And so this is appreciated, because,” he says, trying to keep focused on the warbling thought. “As you get older, things get . . . I never had children. I could have been that A. Roolette. I almost was. But now I’m not. You just gave me that nickname, Jerry. I haven’t had one, except the kid who cried, and that’s not a nickname, that’s not right. I’m. I’m. I’m Minkerbean.”

The truth is that John Mink hasn’t cried since high school—not at his wedding, not when his father died. But now, when he says his newly acquired name, the tears come. Quiet tears, but plenty. Tomorrow, he will wake up and hate himself. But for now, at least, it feels like a triumph—the best thing he’s ever done.

Class President Jerry Riggs thumps him manfully on the back, and the three sit in silence for a while. Then Jerry asks Ellen, the bartender, “How many of these reunions can there possibly be?” “I’ve seen sixtieth.” “How many people were at the sixtieth?” “Not very many,” she says to Jerry, to whom, unlike Bill, she’s under no obligation to lie. “And after that,” says Jerry, “there’s just no point, is there? You call around, and there’s no one left to call.” “Or else,” she says, “you don’t call around.” “Right,” says Jerry and takes a drink. “Because you’re dead.” He orders another round, proposes another toast. “To what’s left,” he says.

**Two years from** now, a heart attack will knock Class President Jerry Riggs off the swim step of a friend’s boat, and he will drown. Over time, John Mink’s wife will smooth out her awkwardness and come into her own, brash and elegant with lovers rattling behind her like the empty cans we used to tie to wedding cars. And in the half-decade of dementia that will finally result in his death, John will see her alternately as his nurse, his prison guard, and the daughter he never had. The Archers will manage much as they have; she will die first, in Hoag Hospital, and he, romanticizing her far more than he does now while she is living, will follow soon after.

The fifty-fifth will be here at the Yarley-Woodward Country Club too. There will be no dancing. Our number will be halved again, and more.

The sixtieth reunion will be held in an old tearoom, where pieces of sunlight squeeze through the windows. Seven people is all, none of whom had known one another in high school, none of whom remember Heavy Duty riding his motorcycle off the Balboa Pier or the sunset on the water from the top of Hoag Hospital or who John Mink was.

But some, at least, will remember this, this right now: out on the dance floor in the middle of “The Monster Mash,” the sixty-eight-year-old Forsythe Scott steps back to look the sixty-eight-year-old version of his high school crush full in the face. Then slowly, slowly—shaking in pain, stiffness, and determination—he kneels down onto one arthritic knee