

Excerpt from *Happenstance*

The Husband's Story

Chapter One

At the restaurant Jack wanted to tell Bernie about Harriet Post, a girl he had once been in love with. He wanted to put his head down on the table and moan aloud with rage. Instead he placed his fork into a square of ravioli and said in a moderate tone, "History consists of endings."

Bernie was not really listening; he was removed today, empty-eyed and vague, pulling at a dry wedge of bread and looking out the window on to the street, where a cold rain was falling. For almost a year now the topic of their Friday lunches had been the defining of history; what was it? What was it for? It occurred to Jack that perhaps Bernie had had enough of history. Enough is enough, as Brenda, his wife, would say.

"History is eschatological," Jack said. He stabbed into his small side salad of lettuce, onions, celery, and radishes. "History is not the mere unrolling of a story. And it's not the story itself. It's the end of the story."

"Uhuh." Bernie's eyes turned again toward the curtainless square of window, made double opaque by the streaming rainwater and by the inner coating of cooking grease. "And when," he asked, chewing on a wad of bread, "did you decide all this?"

"Yesterday. Last night. About midnight. It came to me, the final meaning of history. I've finally stumbled on what it's all about. Endings."

"Endings?"

"Yes, endings."

"A bolt out of the blue?" Bernie said.

"You might say that. Or you could call it an empirical thrust."

Bernie smirked openly.

"Go ahead," Jack said. "Laugh if you want to. I'm serious for a change."

"For a change."

"History is no more than the human recognition of endings. History -- now listen, Bernie -- history is putting a thumbprint on a glass wall so you can see the wall. The conclusion of an era which defines and invents the era."

"I get the feeling you've rehearsed this. While you were shaving this morning, maybe."

"Let me ask you this, Bernie. What do we remember about history? No, never mind us -- what does the man on the street remember about the past?"

"I am a man on the street. You tell me."

"We remember the treaties, but not the wars. Am I right? Admit it. We remember the beheading, but not the rebellions. It's that final cataclysmic act that we instinctively select and store away. You might say," he paused, "that the ends of all stories are contained in their beginnings."

"It's already been said, I think. Didn't Eliot --?"

"But the ending *is* the story. Not just the signature. Take the French Revolution --"

"We've taken that. A number of times." Bernie sat back, groggy after his veal and noodles. "We took the French Revolution last week. And the week before that. Remember that session you gave me about the French Revolution two weeks ago? About the great libertine infusion? Rammed into Europe's flabby old buttocks?"

"Not true." Jack pushed his plate away, belching silently; a gas pain shot across his heart. After twenty years the food at Roberto's was worse, not better -- it was a miracle they'd managed to stay in business -- and the old neighbourhood around the Institute, with its knocked-apart streets and boarded-up shirt laundries and hustling porn shops, was shifting from the decent shade of decay that had prevailed during the sixties to something more menacing. These days violence threatened, even in the daytime; and disease too -- someone or other had told him at a party the weekend before that you could get hepatitis from eating off cracked plates, and God knows what else. Furthermore, Jack

had grown to dread the starchy monotony of Italian food; everything about it now, its wet weak uniformity of texture and its casual, moist presentation -- the sight and smell of it made his heart plunge and squeeze. Was there really a time, he asked himself -- of course there had been -- when Italian food, even the fake Chicago variety, had seemed a passport to worldliness? Worldliness, ha! When the mere words -- cannelloni, gnocchi, lasagna -- had brimmed with rich, steamy eroticism? All you had to do was plunge your fork through the waiting, melting mozzarella and you were there, ah!

The Wife's Story

Chapter One

Every morning Brenda wakes up, slips into her belted robe, and glides -- glides -- down the wide oak stairs to make breakfast for her husband and children. The descent down the broad, uncarpeted stairs has something of ceremony about it, it has gone on so long. She and Jack have lived in the Elm Park house for thirteen years now; Rob was a baby when they moved in; Laurie, twelve last October, has never lived anywhere else.

In the kitchen she reaches for the wall switch. It's seven-thirty, a January morning, and the overhead fixture blinks once, twice, then pours steady, lurid light down onto the blue countertops, causing her to reel slightly. Her hands set out plates, reach into the refrigerator for frozen orange juice and milk, into the cupboards for Raisin Bran and coffee beans. Her husband, Jack, has given her a new coffee-grinder for Christmas, a small Swedish toy of a machine which is still a little unfamiliar to the touch. A button on its smooth side sets a tiny motor whirring, a brief zzzz which releases a pleasing instantaneous cloud of coffee smells. "Philadelphia," Brenda murmurs into the coffee-softened air of the kitchen.

She boils water, pours it carefully. "Philadelphia." Her voice is low and so secretive she might be addressing a priest or a lover.

For a month now, ever since she decided to go to Philadelphia, she has had her flight schedule thumbtacked in the lower right-hand corner of the kitchen bulletin board. Departure time, arrival time, flight number -- all printed in her own hand on one of Jack's three-by-five index cards.

Above where the card is pinned there are a number of other items. It seems to Brenda, yawning and retying the belt of her robe, that some of them have been there for weeks. Months. She tells herself she could get busy and weed out a few, but the confusion of notices and messages mainly pleases her. She likes to think of herself as a busy person. Brenda Bowman -- what a busy person!

The clutter on the brown corkboard speaks to her, a font of possibility, firmly securing her, for the moment at least, against inactivity. On the other hand, she sometimes feels when she glances at it a stab of impatience; is there no end to the nagging of details? Appointments. Bills. Lists.

Announcements. Furthermore, these small reminders of events past and present carry with them a suggestion of disappointment or risk. That old theatre programme, for instance, the one from the Little Theatre production they'd gone to -- when was that? last November? The Duchess of Malfi. She had hated The Duchess of Malfi. So, surprisingly, had Jack.

Someone -- Jack, of course, who else? -- had pinned up a newspaper cartoon about the School Board scandal, two pear-shaped men balancing on penny-farthing bicycles and grappling over a sack labelled \$\$\$\$. The point of the bicycles, though Brenda has been following the scandal with some interest, escapes her.

And there, snugged cleanly in the corner -- she has cleared a small area around it -- is her flight schedule. It looks purposeful and bright, winning from the welter of other items its small claim to priority. Brenda glances at it every morning when she comes downstairs to make breakfast. It is the first thing to catch her eye, and even before she plugs in the coffee-grinder and starts the eggs, she examines and is reassured by her own meticulous printing, Flight 452, United Airlines, departing Chicago at 8:35. Tomorrow morning, Saturday. Arrival at Philadelphia at 1:33.