John Updike

Made in Heaven

BRAD SCHAEFFER was attracted to Jeanette Henderson by her Christianity; at an office Christmas party, in Boston in the thirties, in one of those eddies of silence that occur amid gaiety like a swirl of backwater in a stream, he heard her crystal-clear voice saying, "Why, the salvation of my soul!"

He looked over. She was standing by the window, pinned between a hot radiator and Arthur Gleb, the office Romeo. Outside, behind the black window, it had begun to snow, and the lighted windows of the office building across Milk Street were blurring and fluttering. Jeanette had come to the brokerage house that fall, a tidy secretary in a pimento wool suit, with a prim ruffled blouse. For this evening's event she had dared open-toed shoes and a dress of lavender gabardine, with zigzag pleats marked at their points by flattened bows. The flush the party punch had put in her cheeks and throat helped him see for the first time the something highly polished about her compact figure, an impression of an object finely made, down to the toenails that peeked through the tips of her shoes. Her profile showed pert and firm as she strained to look up into Arthur's overbearing, beetle-browed face. Brad stepped over to them, into the steamy warmth near the radiator. The snow was intensifying; across the street the golden windows were softening like pats of butter.

Jeanette turned her face to her rescuer. She was lightly sweating. The excited blush of her cheeks made the blue of her eyes look icy. "Arthur was saying," she appealed, "that only money matters."

"Then I asked this crazy little gal what mattered to her," Arthur said, giving off heat through his black serge suit. A sprig of mistletoe, pale and withering, was pinned to his lapel.

"And I told him the first thing I could think of," Jeanette said. Her hair, waved and close to her head, was a soft brown that tonight did not look mousy. "Of course a lot of things matter to me," she hurried on, "more than money."

"Are you Catholic?" Brad asked her.

This was a question of another order than Arthur's badinage. Her face composed itself; her voice became secretarial, factual. "Of course not. I'm a Methodist."

Brad felt relief. He was free to love her. In Boston one did not love Catholics, even if one came from Ohio with the name of Schaeffer.

"Did I sound so silly?" she asked, when Arthur had gone off in search of another cup of punch and another little gal.

"Startling, but not silly." In his heart Brad did not expect capitalism to last another decade, and it would take with it what churches were left. He assumed that religion was already as dead as Marx and Mencken had claimed. There was a gloom in the December streets, and in the statistics that came to the office, that made the cheer of Christmas carols sound obscene. From the deep doorways of Boston's business buildings, ornamented like little Gothic chapels with carvings and ironwork, people actually starving peered out, too bitter and numb to beg. Each morning the Common was combed for bodies.

"I *do* believe," Jeanette said, as if in apology. The contrast between her blue eyes and rosy, glazed skin had become almost garish. "Ever since I can remember, even before anything was explained to me. It seems so natural, so necessary. Do you think that's strange?"

"I think that's lovely," he told her.

By Lententime they were going together to church. It was his idea, to accompany her; he loved seeing her in new settings, in the new light each placed her in. At work she was drab and brisk, a bit aloof from the other "girls," with a dry way of pursing her lips into crinkles that made her look older than she was. At her ancestral home in Framingham, with her parents and brothers, she became girlish and slightly drunk on family atmosphere, as she had been on punch; he greedily inhaled the air of this spicy old house, with its worn orientals and sofas of leather and horsehair, knowing that this was the aroma of her childhood. On the streets and in restaurants Jeanette was perfectly the lady, like a figure etched on a city scene, making him, in their scenic anonymity, a gentleman, an escort, a gallant. Her smiling face, and the satin lapels of her blue wool coat, and the pointed tips of her shiny black boots, all gleamed. Involuntarily his arm encircled her waist at street corners,

and he could not let go even when they had safely crossed the street. Her bearing was so nicely honed in every move — the pulling off, for instance, finger by finger, of her gloves in Locke-Ober's — that Brad would sometimes clown or feign clumsiness just to crack her composure with a blush or a grimace. He was afraid that otherwise he might slip from her mind. It did not occur to him, when, during a rapt *pianissimo* moment in Symphony Hall, he nudged her and whispered a joke, that he was rending something precious to her, invading a fragile feminine space. In church he loved standing tall at her side and hearing her frail, crystalline voice lift up the words of the hymns. He basked in her gravity, which had something shy about it, and even uncertain, as if she feared that an excess of feeling might leap from the musty old forms and overwhelm her. He knew the forms: he had been raised as a Presbyterian, though only his mother attended services, and then only on those Sundays when she wasn't needed in the fields or at the barn. Jeanette had at first resisted his accompanying her. It would be, she murmured, distracting. And it was true: her shy, uncertain reverence made him, perversely, want to turn and hug her and lift her up with a shout of pride and animal gladness.

He was twenty-eight, and she was twenty-five — old enough that marriage might have slipped her by. Her composure, the finished neatness of her figure, already seemed a touch old-maidenly. She shared rooms with another young woman on Marlborough Street; he lived on Joy, on the dark, Cambridge Street side of Beacon Hill. She had been going to church at the brick Copley Methodist over on Newbury Street, with its tall, domed bell tower and Byzantine gold-leaf ceiling. Brad found within an easy walk of his own apartment a precious oddity, a Greek Revival clapboard church tucked among the brick tenements of the West End. Built by the Unitarians in the 1830s and taken over by the Wesleyans during their post–Civil War resurgence, the little building had box pews, small leaded panes of gray glass, and an oak pulpit shaped somewhat like a bass viol. Brad was to remember with special fondness coming here with Jeanette for the Wednesday-night Lenten services. On these raw spring nights the east wind brought the smell of brine in from the harbor. The couple walked through dim-lit streets crowded with the babble and cooking odors of Jewish and Italian families, and then came to this closet of Protestantism, this hushed vacant space — scarcely a dozen heads in the pews, and the church so chilly that overcoats were left on. There

was no choir, and each shift of weight on a pew seat rang out like a cough. Perhaps Brad was still an unbeliever at that point, for he relished — as if he were whispering a joke to Jeanette — the emptiness, the chill, the pathos of the aged minister's trite and halting sermon as once again the old clergyman, set down to die in this dying parish, led his listeners along the worn path to the Crucifixion and the bafflement beyond. During these pathetic sermons Brad's mind would range wonderfully far, a falcon scouting his future, while Jeanette sat at his side, compact and still and exquisite. She would lift him up, he felt. In the virtual vacancy of this old meetinghouse she seemed most intimately his.

Roosevelt was newly President then, and Curley was still mayor; their boasts came true, the country survived. The precious little hollow church, with its wooden Ionic columns and viol-shaped pulpit, was swept away in the fifties along with the tenements of the West End. By this time Brad and Jeanette had moved with their children to Newton and become Episcopalians.

On their wedding night, hoping to please her, he held her body in his arms and prayed aloud. He thanked God for bringing them together, and asked that they be allowed to live fruitful and useful lives together. The prayer was, in time, answered, though on this occasion it did little to relax Jeanette. Always his love of her, when distinctly professed, made her a little reserved and tense, as if a certain threat was being masked and a trap might be sprung.

Their four children were all born healthy, and Brad's four years as a naval officer passed with no more harm to him than the devastating impression that the black firmament of spattered stars made when seen from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, in the middle of the Pacific. How little, little to the point of nothingness, he was under those stars! Even the great ship, the *Enterprise*, that held him a tall building's height above the monotonous swells was reduced to the size of a pinpoint in such perspective. And yet, it was he who was witnessing the stars. They knew nothing of themselves, so in this dimension he was greater than they. As far as he could reason, religion begins with this strangeness, this standstill; faith tips the balance in favor of the pinpoint. So, though he had never had Jeanette's intuitions or sensations of certainty, he became in his mind a believer.

Ten years later he suggested they become Episcopalians, because the

church was handier to the Newton house — a shingled, many-dormered affair with corridors for vanished servants and even a cupola. Narrow stairs wound up to a small round room that became Jeanette's "retreat." She installed rugs and pillowed furniture, did needlepoint and watercolors. From its windows one could see to the east the red warning light topping the spire of the John Hancock Building. Brad did not need to say that his associates and clients tended to be Episcopalian and that this church held more of the sort of people they would like to get to know. Although he never quite grew accustomed to the droning wordiness of the service and the awkward and repetitive kneeling, he did love the look of the congregation — the ruddy men with their blue blazers and ever-fresh haircuts, the sleek Episcopalian women with their furs in winter and in summer their wide pastel garden hats that showed the backs of their necks when they bowed their heads. He loved Jeanette among them, in her black silk dress and the strand of real pearls, each costing as much as a refrigerator, with which he had paid tribute to their fifteenth anniversary. Money gently glimmered on her fingers and ears. All capitalism had needed, it had turned out, was an infusion of war. The postwar stock market climbed; even plumbers and grocers needed a stockbroker now. Shares Brad had picked up for peanuts in the Depression doubled in value, and doubled again, and more.

Jeanette never took quite as active a role in the life of the church as he had expected. He himself taught Sunday school, passed the plate, sat on the vestry, read the lesson. It was like a playful extension of his business life; he felt at home in the committee room, in the linoleum-floored offices and robing rooms that mere worshippers never saw. He always found some practical reason to be at the church Sunday mornings, whereas in growing season Jeanette often stayed home to garden, much as Brad's mother had worked in the fields. Jeanette's body had added a sturdy plumpness to that polished, glossy quality that had first enchanted him. Her Christianity, as he imagined it, was, like water sealed in an underground cistern, unchangingly pure. Standing beside her in church, hearing her small, true voice lifted in song, he still felt empowered by her fineness, so that in the jostle after the service his hands involuntarily crept around her waist, and he would let go only to shake the minister's overworked hand.

"I wish you wouldn't paw me in church," she said one Sunday as they drove home. "We're too middle-aged."

"I wasn't so much pawing you as steering you through the mob," he said, embarrassed.

"I don't *need* to be steered," Jeanette said. She tried to stamp her foot, but the gesture was ineffectual on the carpeted car floor.

Here we are, Brad thought, in our beige Mercedes, coming home from church, having a quarrel; and he had no idea why. He saw them from afar, with the eyes of aspiration, like a handsome, mature couple in a four-color ad, and there was no imperfection in the picture. "If I can't help touching you," he said, "it's because I still love you. Isn't that nice?"

"It is," she said sulkily, then added, "Are you sure it's me you love, or some idea you have of me?"

This seemed to Brad a finicking distinction. She was positing a "real" her, a person apart from the one he was married to. But who would this be, unless it was the woman who took a cup of tea and went up the winding stairs to her cupola at odd hours? This woman disappeared. And no sooner did she disappear, when he was home, than two children began fighting, or the dry cleaner's delivery truck pulled into the driveway, and she had to be called down.

"Did it ever occur to you," she asked now, "that you love me because it suits you? That for you it's an exercise in male power?"

"My God," he said indignantly, "who have you been reading? Would you rather I loved you because it *didn't* suit me?"

"That *would* be more romantic," she admitted, in her smallest, tidiest voice, and he knew this was a conciliatory joke, and their mysterious lapse of harmony would be smoothed away.

He became head of the vestry and spent hours at the church, politicking, soothing ruffled feathers. After the last of their children had been confirmed and was excused from faithful attendance, Jeanette began to go to the eight o'clock service, before Brad was fully awake. She would return, shiny-faced, just as he was settling, a bit foggy and hung over, into a second cup of coffee and the sheaves of the Sunday *Globe*. She loved the lack of a sermon, she said, and the absence of that oppressive choir with those Fred Waring–like arrangements. She did not say that she enjoyed being by herself in church, as she had been in Boston twenty-five years earlier. At the ten o'clock service he missed her, the thin, sweet piping of her singing beside him. He felt naked, as when alone on the deck of the imperiled *Enterprise*. He explained to Jeanette that he would happily push himself out of bed and go with

her to the eight o'clock, but the committee people he had to talk to expected him to be at the ten o'clock. She relented and resumed her place at his side. But she complained at the length of the sermon and winced when the choir came on too strong. Brad wondered if their sons, who had become more or less anti-establishment, and incidentally anti-church, had infected her with their rebellion.

Ike was President, and then JFK. Joseph Kennedy, when Brad was young, had been a man to gossip about in Boston financial circles — a cocky mick with the bad taste not only to make a pot of money but also then to leave Boston and head up the SEC under Roosevelt and his raving liberals. The nuances of the regional Irish–Yankee feud escaped and amused Brad, since to his midwestern eyes the two hostile camps were very similar — thin-skinned, clubby men from damp green islands, fond of a nip and long, malicious stories. Though Brad had lived all of his adult life in and around Boston, he never could catch the accent, never could bring himself to force his *a*s and to say "Cuber" and "idear," the way the young President did so ringingly on television.

With their own young the Schaeffers were lucky — the boys were a little too old to fall into the heart of the drug craze, and the girls were safely married before just living together became fashionable. One boy didn't finish college and became a carpenter in Vermont; the other did finish, at Amherst, but then moved to the West Coast to live. The two girls, however, stayed in the area and provided new grandchildren at regular intervals. So Brad's wedding-night prayer was, to all appearances, still being answered.

As the sixties wore into the seventies, some misfortunes befell the Schaeffers as well as the country. Both daughters went through messy divorces, involving countersuing husbands, scandalous depositions, and odd fits of nocturnal violence on the weedless lawns and in the neo-colonial bedrooms of Wellesley and Dover. Freddy, the son on the West Coast, never could seem to get what would be called a job; he was always "in" things — in real estate, in public relations, in investments — without ever drawing a salary or making, as far as Brad could figure, a profit. Like Brad, Freddy had turned gray early, and suddenly there he was, well over thirty, a gray-haired boy, sweet-natured and with gracious, expensive tastes, who had never found his way into the economy. It worried Jeanette that to keep him going out there they were robbing the other children, especially the carpenter son, who by

now had become a condo contractor and part-owner of a ski resort. They were grieved but at some level not surprised when poor Freddy was found dead in Glendale, of what was called an accidental drug overdose. A cocaine habit had backed him, financially, to the wall. He was found neatly dressed in a blue blazer and linen slacks — to the end a gentleman, something Brad, in his own mind, had never become.

The Newton house huge and empty around them, the couple talked of moving to an apartment, but it seemed easier to turn off the radiators in a few rooms and stay where they were. Throughout the rooms of familiar furniture were propped and hung photographs of the children at happy turning points — graduations, marriages, trips abroad. This grinning, tinted population extended now into the third generation and was realer than the intermittent notes and phone calls from the children themselves. Brad knew in the abstract that he had changed diapers, driven boys to hockey and girls to ballet, supervised bedtime prayers, paternally stood by while tears were being shed and games played and the traumas of maturation endured; yet he could not muster much actual sensation of parenthood — those years were like a television sitcom in which he sat watching himself play the father. More vivid, returning in such unexpected detail that his eyes stung and the utter lostness of it all made him gasp, were moments of his and Jeanette's Boston days in the L-shaped apartment on St. Botolph Street and then in the fifth-floor Commonwealth Avenue place with its skylight and bird-cage elevator, and of old times at the firm, before it moved from the walnut-paneled offices on Milk Street to a flimsy, flashy new skyscraper on State. Certain business epiphanies — workday afternoons when an educated guess paid off a thousandfold, or a carefully cultivated friendship produced a big commission — could still put the taste of triumph in his mouth. Fun like that had fled the business when the sixties bull market had collapsed. The people he had looked up to, the crusty Yankee money managers, had all retired. Brad himself retired at the age of sixty-eight, the same summer that Nixon resigned. In his loneliness those first months, his guilty unease at not being in a suit, he would visit Jeanette in her cupola.

She did not say she minded, but everything seemed to halt when he climbed the last pie-slice-shaped steps, so the room had the burnished silence of a clock that has just stopped ticking. She sat surrounded by windows, lit from all sides, her soft brown hair scarcely touched by gray. The rug she had been hooking was set in its frame at the side

of her armchair, and a magazine lay in her lap, but she did not appear to be doing anything — so deeply engaged in gazing out a window through the tops of the beeches that she did not even move her head at his entrance. Her motionlessness slightly frightened him. He stood a second, getting his breath. Where just the tip of the old Hancock Building had once shown above the treetops, now a silvery cluster of tall glass boxes reflected the sun. He had always been nervous in high places, and as his eyes plunged down, parallel with her gaze, through the bare winter branches toward the dead lawn, three stories below, his thighs tightened and he shuffled self-protectively toward the center of the room.

Since she said nothing, he asked, "Do you feel all right?"

"Of course," Jeanette answered, firmly. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know, my dear. You seem so quiet."

"I like being quiet. I always have. You know that."

"Oh, yes." He felt challenged and slightly dazed. "I know that."

"So let's think of something for you to do," she said, at last turning, with one of her usual neat motions, to give him her attention. And she would send him back down, down to the basement, to reglaze, say, a storm window that a neighbor child had broken with a golf ball. It was strange, Brad reflected, that in this room of her own Jeanette had hung no pictures of the children or of him. But then, there was little wall space between the many windows, and the cushioned window seats, two thirds of the way around the room, were littered with old paintings, needlepoint cushions, and books whose cloth covers the circling sun had bleached. He thought of it as her meditation room, though he had no clear idea of what meditation was; his own brain skidded off, in even the silent seconds inserted between rote petitions at church, into that exultant plotting that divine service stimulated in him.

Her illness came on imperceptibly at first, and then with devastating speed. They were watching television one night — the hostages had been taken in Iran, and every day, it seemed, something *had* to happen. Suddenly Jeanette put her hand on his wrist. They were sitting side by side on the red upholstered Hepplewhite-style settee, or love seat, that they had impulsively bought at Paine's in the late forties, during a blizzard, before the move to Newton. Because of the storm, the vast store had been nearly empty, and they had felt they must do something to justify their presence, to celebrate the weather. His love for her always returned full force when it snowed. "What?" he asked now, startled by her unaccustomed gesture.

"Nothing." She smiled. "A tiny pain."

"Where?" he asked, monosyllabic as if just awakened. On the news at that moment a reporter was interviewing a young Iranian revolutionary who spoke fluent, midwestern-accented English, and Jeanette's exact answer escaped Brad. If in the course of their marriage there was one act for which he blamed himself, could identify as a sin for which he deserved to be punished, it was this moment of inattention, when Jeanette first, after weeks of hugging her discomforts to herself, began to confide, in her delicate voice, what she would rather have kept hidden.

The days that followed, full of doctors and their equipment, lifted all secrecy from the disease and its course. It was cancer, metastasizing from the liver, though she had never been a drinker. For Brad, these days were busy ones. After five years of retirement, of not knowing quite what to do with himself, he was suddenly housekeeper, cook, chauffeur, switchboard operator, nurse. Isolated in their big house, while their three children anxiously visited and then hurried back to their own problems, and their friends and neighbors tried to tread the thin line between kindness and interference, the couple that winter had a kind of honeymoon. An air of adventure, of the exotic, tinged their excursions to clinics and specialists tucked into sections of Boston they had never visited before. They spent all their hours together and became, more than ever, one. His own scalp itched as her soft hair fell away under the barrage of chemotherapy; his own stomach ached when she would not eat. She would greet with a bright smile the warmth and aroma of the food he would bring to the table or her bed, and she would take one forkful, so that she could tell him how good it was; then, with a magical slowness meant to make the gesture invisible, Jeanette would let the fork slowly sink back to the plate, keeping her fingers on its silver handle as if at any moment she might decide to use it again. In this position she sometimes even dozed off, under the sway of medication. He learned to treat her refusal to eat as a social lapse he must overlook. If he urged the food upon her, sternly or playfully, real irritation broke through her stoical, drugged calm.

The other irritant, strangely, seemed to be the visits of the young Episcopalian clergyman. He had come to their church this year, after the long reign of a hearty, facetious man no one had had to take seriously. The new man had a self-conscious, honey-smooth voice and curly blond hair already receding, young as he was, from his temples. Brad, who of course knew of the infighting among the search-commit-

tee members that had preceded the rector's selection, admired his melodious sermons and his conservative demeanor; ten years ago a clergyman his age would have been trying to radicalize everybody. But Jeanette complained that his visits to the house tired her, though they rarely lasted more than fifteen minutes. When she became too frail, too emaciated and constantly drowsy, to leave her bedroom and the young man offered to bring Communion to her, she asked Brad to tell him, "Another time."

The room at Mass. General Hospital to which she was eventually moved overlooked, across a great air well, a brick wall of windows identical with hers. The wing was modern, built on the rubble of the old West End. It was late March, the first spring of a new decade. Though on sunny days a few giggling nurses and hardy patients took their lunches on cardboard trays out to the patio at the base of the air well, the sky was usually an agitated gray and the hospital heat was still on full blast. During his visits Brad often removed his suit coat, it was so hot in Jeanette's room.

Dressed in a white hospital johnny and a pink quilted bed jacket with ribbons, she looked pretty against her pillows. Her cheeks still had some plumpness, and her fine, straight nose and clear eyes and narrow, arched brows — old-fashioned eyebrows, that looked plucked though they weren't — still made the compact, highly finished impression that had always kindled pride within him. Her hair was growing back, a cap of soft brown bristle, now that chemotherapy had been abandoned. Only her hands, inert and fleshless on the blanket, betrayed that something terrible was happening to her.

One day she told him, with a touch of mischief, "Our young parson was in from Newton this morning, and I told him not to bother anymore."

"You sent the priest away?" Brad's aged voice seemed to rumble and crackle in his ears, in contrast to Jeanette's, crystalline and distant as wind chimes.

"Priest, for heaven's sake," she said. "Why can't you just call him a minister?" It had been a joke of sorts between them, how High Church he had become. When on occasion they had visited the Church of the Advent, on Brimmer Street, she had scorned the incense, the robed teams of acolytes. "He makes me tired," she said.

"But don't you want to keep up with Communion?" It was his

favorite sacrament; he harbored an inner image, a kind of religious fantasy, of the wafer and wine turning, with a muffled explosion, to pure light in the digestive system.

"Like keeping up an insurance policy," she sighed, and did sound tired, tired to death. "It seems so pointless."

"But you *must*," Brad said, panicked.

"I must? Why must I? Who says I must?" The blue of her challenging eyes and the fevered flush of her cheeks made a garish contrast.

"Why, because . . . you know why. Because of the salvation of your soul. That's what you used to talk about when I first met you."

She looked toward the window with a faint smile. "When I used to go alone to Copley Methodist. I loved that church; it was so bizarre, with its minaret. Dear old Doctor Stidger, on and on. Now it's just a parking lot. Salvation of the soul." Her gaunt chest twitched — a laugh that didn't reach her lips.

He lowered his eyes, feeling mocked. His own hands, an old man's gnarled, spotted claws, were folded together between his knees. "You mean you don't believe?" In his inner ear he felt all the height of space concealed beneath the floor.

"Oh, darling," she said. "Doesn't it just seem an awful lot of bother?"

"Not a bit?" he persisted.

Jeanette sighed again and didn't answer.

"Since when?"

"I don't know. No," she said, "that's not being honest. We should start being honest. I do know. Since you took it from me. You moved right in. It didn't seem necessary for the two of us to keep it up."

"But —" He couldn't say, so late, how fondly he had intended it, enlisting at her side.

She offered, to console him, "It doesn't matter, does it?" When he remained silent, feeling blackness all about him, to every point on the horizon, as on those nights in the Pacific, she shifted to a teasing note: "Honey, why does it matter?"

She knew. Because his death was also close. He lifted his eyes and saw her as enviably serene, having wrought this vengeance. A nurse rustled at the door, her syringe tingling in its aluminum tray, and across the air well, in the blue spring twilight, the lights had come on, rectangles of gold. Snow, a few dry flakes, had begun to fall.

Though she had asked that there be absolutely no religious service,

Brad and the young minister arranged one, following the oldest-fashioned, impersonal rite. Jeanette would have been seventy-one in May, and he was three years older. He continued to go to the ten o'clock service, his erect figure carrying his white hair like a flag. But it was sheer inert motion; there were no falcon flights of his mind anymore, no small, true voice at his side. There was nothing. He wished he could think otherwise, but he had believed in her all those years and could not stop now.

GOD

STORIES

EDITED BY

C. Michael Curtis



A MARINER ORIGINAL
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK
1998