Reading for Storyness

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In Carver’s “Cathedral,” the blind man asks the narrator whether he is going to remain in a job he dislikes, and he replies, “What [are] the options?” He means, of course, that there are none, or at least none that he can imagine or realize on his own. Compared with him, the majority of Ann Beattie’s characters have more education and better jobs; they have apartments in the city or houses in the country, and sometimes both. Typically, they have lovers, and/or their spouses have lovers and/or former spouses. It is a world full of options, but there is sometimes little difference among them, no permanent assurance of value, and often no will to make a decision. For many readers, loss and aimlessness are the dominant features of the Beattie universe.

The cliché about this writer is that she is the chronicler of her generation. As Pico Iyer memorably says, she is “perhaps the first and the finest laureate of that generation of Americans born to a society built on quicksand and doomed to a life in the long, ambiguous shadow of the sixties.”

Although the stories of her latest collection, *Perfect Recall* (2001), are more reflective and slightly more end-directed, it may still be fair to say that her fiction puts the notion of preclosure more severely to the test than does the work of any other writer discussed in this book. If the premise of the stories is that storyness is passé, if closure is a non sequitur, then how can a reader identify preclosure points?

Ann Beattie claims that she writes quickly and never knows where the stories are headed, or how they will end. “I’ve never in my life sat down
and said to myself, ‘Now I will write something about somebody to whom such-and-such will happen.’” As Carver had his minimalist editor in Gordon Lish, Beattie had hers in J. D. O’Hara: “It was really O’Hara who, in literally taking the scissors to my pages, suggested that more elliptical endings to my stories might be advantageous” (106). Whether or not we accept Beattie’s description of her work, and although surely the O’Hara blade was not wielded on all occasions, we can be forgiven for believing that preclosure study is a violation of the mindset and the aesthetic that produced these stories.

My decision to attempt it is partly for the sake of argument, to test the limits of the method. Partly, however, this is a way of teaching myself to appreciate stories I did not warm to at first glance, by an author who once sat beside me on the floor of a crowded auditorium and would not let me dislodge others from their seats, although she’d been the guest of honor in the same room the day before. By this reference I mean no sentimental praise of her modesty or collegiality, nor any self-congratulation at the propinquity to fame, although on other occasions I might recall the incident for just those reasons. No, what seems relevant here is the standpoint, or in this case, the sitpoint, she accepted in the visual and cultural space she had entered.

It was an evening of readings. John Barth, Jamaica Kincaid, and Robert Coover would stand at the podium. Because I’d had a hand in organizing the event, Beattie recognized me and stepped over other legs to stretch her elegantly booted calves beside my rumpled skirt. From this eye level, the room had no center, only an encroaching horizon of oversized bodies, around which she caught glimpses of the faces at the front of the room. She heard the drone of fortified voices—there was, of course, a microphone—and the rippling responses of laughter or applause. She was almost invisible. The rest of the overflow crowd either did not recognize her in the unusual role of floor-sitter or else were shyly pretending not to notice.

It is tempting to think she could have recalled, at a later time, the odd angles of vision: speakers severed at the neck by a looming audience; herself reflected in the iris of a gawker. This was, after all, Iowa City, town of burgeoning authors. Would she have sized up the room as a whole? “I don’t think I have an overall view of things to express,” she concluded in the interview I have been quoting (107). What she does have is an eye for anxiety. She discerned it in my face, I’m sure, for her smile kindly said, “This is fun.”
So is reading her fiction. I’ve settled in with “Weekend” (*Secrets and Surprises*, 1979) and “Where You’ll Find Me” (*Where You’ll Find Me*, 1986), both of which were reprinted in *Park City* (1998). As I’ve done occasionally before, I’ve used only myself as a reader, although it seems this time to be a deliberate choice of private engagement before public discussion. I had no desire to get to know the author better through her work, although it is often said that she is a “Beattie character” in the flesh. I did, however, want to get to know her stories better. Going into these reading experiments, I was familiar with only a few of her better-known tales. Beattieville is almost as far from my world as Carverdom, yet I felt more lost in her pages. I hoped that preclosure study would help me to share, once again, her line of sight.

“*Weekend*” (1979)

First published in the *New Yorker*, “Weekend” shows us a common-law marriage that has lasted for six years. Lenore, thirty-four, has had two children by George, a fifty-five-year-old former professor who was denied tenure and has created a fragile domain for his ego in a house he renovated in the woods. Lenore, the focal character, once overheard him referring to her as “simple,” and although hurt, she has closeted her pain in a home and a life she continues to find comfortable.

Every weekend George invites former students—young, pretty, unmarried women—to visit. They accompany him on walks, provide an adoring audience, and possibly gratify him sexually. A rather traditional expository opening lets us see George as vain, fashionably unconventional, and increasingly withdrawn, while Lenore appears vulnerable yet clear-sighted—a woman who has settled for a relationship that is strained but still viable. Whenever she raises the issue with George, he puts her off with cutting remarks or dismissive clichés she’d rather swallow than challenge.

. . . [W]hen there is an answer—even his answer—it is usually easier to accept it and go on with things. She goes on with what she has always done: tending the house and the children and George, when he needs her. She likes to bake and she collects art postcards.³

Although she is living with a man who sees himself as a rusticated artist and local sophisticate, she sounds like a conventional homebody.
Enter: two girls, Friday night. The next morning, George takes Sarah for a walk to the nearby store, but as rain begins to fall and Julie takes the car to look for them without success, the implications seem glaring. Whether suspicious or just worried, Julie says, “Maybe something happened to them.” With characteristic plainness, Lenore replies, “Nothing happened to them . . . Maybe they took shelter under a tree . . . Maybe they’re screwing. How should I know?” She shrugs and pours her guest a cup of tea.

George and Sarah return later, and throughout dinner there are signs that Sarah feels awkward about her escapade with her host; Julie is embarrassed for Lenore’s sake, and George is pontificating about the famous scene of stalled cars in Godard’s film about stasis. This foursome is trapped in a social moment that disguises the sexual triangle. After dinner, George and Sarah go out again for a walk, leaving Lenore and Julie sitting by the fire, drinking wine and speaking with the frankness of those left behind. Julie admits her close friendship with Sarah but regrets that Lenore, “such a nice lady,” is being treated so badly.

Rejecting this view of herself, Lenore seems resigned to “giv[ing] up [her] weekends” (and her partner, at least temporarily?), noting that “it’s good to have something to do.” Throughout the story thus far, the question of what “to do” has been a refrain: “But what will she do for the rest of the day?” she wonders in the morning; “What am I going to do?” she shrugs at the likelihood of betrayal; “What can she do about it?” she asks herself, when she hears the story of another student who died in a car crash. She, herself, prefers sitting in stalled traffic. The routine of her life gives her something to do, and that is enough.

“For all I know,” she consoles Julie, “your friend is flattering herself, and George is trying to make me jealous” (207). Perhaps she is only playing the hostess at her own expense, offering her guest a more palatable scenario. Yet, we’ve seen that she readily accepts “answers” that, on some level, she knows are false. Now she gets up and adds wood to the fire, the hearth of domesticity. Talking to herself, she reaches a conclusion that felt, to me, like an ending:

When these [logs] are gone, she will either have to walk to the woodshed or give up and go to bed. (207)

This was my first preclosure point. Because this reading experiment is the most recent of those discussed in this book, I can no longer claim that my
response to preclosure “signals” is ingrained below the level of consciousness, as I believe is the case for the average reader. By virtue of having identified and discussed these triggers so often, I have either reinternalized them or, if you like, indoctrinated myself with them. I cannot sit next to a text and be innocent of assumptions about its operational strategies. So, in this case, I cannot say that I was not looking for time-shift words like when, or absolute-degree terms like either . . . or and gone. Surely my ear is by now sensitized to the closural force of serial repetition on the level of alliteration and assonance (walk to the woodshed; give up and go; shed; bed) and on the level of the phrase (to walk . . . [to] give up . . . to go).

If a car is caught in a traffic jam, does its failure to move mean it has reached a destination? Lenore entered her relationship with George apparently believing that they were genuinely in love. Now she is the keeper of the flame, literally and figuratively. Choices present themselves only in the minimal and resigned form of a decision about whether to get more firewood. There is no indication that Lenore is aware of the symbolic overtones of the choice she has posited: she can keep fueling the status quo; or she can “give up and . . .” do what? Leave? No. The alternative she imagines is simply a retreat to her bedroom. If the story were to end here, it would be an inverted fairy tale, in which the princess has become the drudge in her own castle.

If we read on, we discover that Lenore is almost dispassionately curious to know what Julie thinks of the predicament. This is a girl to whom Lenore feels akin. She has observed how attentive Julie is to what is happening around her, and how instinctively she plays the role of the domestic caretaker: earlier in the evening, she caught Sarah’s wineglass before it could spill. But Julie confides that she, herself, could never live under the conditions Lenore endures. Survivor of a failed marriage, she nevertheless believes she could not live with a man without being married to him. “I’m not secure enough,” she confesses. The answer has a familiar offhandedness:

“You have to live somewhere,” Lenore says. (207)

The story will go on to complicate this remark, but the line has a summary quality that brought me to rest again. The bitter wisdom is offered as a truism and may just prove that Lenore is “simple,” as George claims.
Maybe, however, it reveals a subtler tendency to use simple-sounding remarks as a deterrent to “too much communication” (208). Perhaps there’s a hint here of a dated and sexist assumption that women must live, whether they wish to or not, where they find male protection—although Lenore’s brother, who has continually urged her to leave, comes to mind as a refuge. Perhaps I simply want to credit Lenore with a deliberate if fake toughness, a blasé tone that conceals a duty to accept the consequences of her alliance. At this point, the story is emphatically hers, and despite the flaws in her arrangement with George, despite our resistance to such passivity, we may accept the tale that ends here as an existential parable, a distant echo of Godard’s.

But, of course, Beattie carries on—and so, therefore, does Lenore. Wanting Julie to accept the situation, she takes the girl into George’s study and shows her some hidden photographs. They are portraits that George took of himself, nakedly revealing his tortured soul. Or so the women believe. Julie whispers her amazement at the “photograph of a man in agony, a man about to scream” (208). Lenore, once again, shrugs. Interestingly, she is now playing George’s favorite role of the explicator with a captive audience. She says, “So I stay,” implying that she tolerates George’s infidelity because it stems from a primal anguish she can’t abandon. The women appear to share this recognition: “Julie nods. Lenore nods . . .” (208). Beattie underscores and recasts the significance of this moment by letting us know that

Lenore has not thought until this minute that this may be why she stays. (208)

If we accept this statement, we’ve reached the end of an epiphany story. The time shift is clear: “until this moment” she was in the dark; now she has seen the light. She has arrived at a new insight that explains her behavior—to Julie, to us, but most of all to herself. Like many preclosural sentences, it contains an equation: my reaction to these pictures = the reason why I stay. True, she may again be revealing her simplicity. How does she know that George was not indulging in yet another form of self-dramatization, hiding his petty failures behind a glorified imitation of the tragedian’s mask? Yet that very gesture might be the greater horror, and perhaps Lenore understands that duplicity is, as the saying goes, a cry for help.

As usual, the next line pulls back from completeness. Lenore admits
to herself that the pictures are only one of the reasons she stays in this relationship. Far from concentrating her thoughts, the pictures had originally scared and embarrassed her. “She had simply not known what to do” when she found them. They are a symptom, not an answer, although perhaps they prepare for the Dionysian scene that follows. George and Sarah return, soaked with rain and brandy. In front of Lenore and Julie, George grabs Sarah into his arms, spins her around, and proclaims that he loves her. It is one of the more dramatic turning points in Beattie’s stories. Everything that follows is a reaction to it.

Sarah rushes off to the guest room in tears. Lenore, in response to her son’s cry, leaves the room, comforts her baby, and goes directly to bed. Julie, in shock, has presumably followed Sarah to her room. Soon she knocks on Lenore’s door to announce that she and Sarah are leaving, and within moments their car can be heard on the gravel in the driveway. Lenore tries to fall asleep but cannot.

The only sound in the house is the electric clock, humming by her bed. (209)

Now will she leave? Or will she patch up her ruptured life with habitual compliance, self-sacrificing pity, or just plain inertia? When I came to the humming clock in the silent house, I heard it as a closural image. The absolute-degree term only had its effect, as did the buried equation (the only sound = the clock’s humming), and the keyword bed. George has insulted Lenore publicly, but in such a way as to make a fool of himself, alienating the girls he wanted to impress. He will try to pass off his outrageous behavior as a joke. What will Lenore do? Options come to mind. She could accept his phony excuses, make a scene, and/or take her children and depart, playing the wronged wife. In a somewhat coy yet academic way, the story could end here in an oh-so-telling image that leaves all these options open. This is the kind of ending that substitutes a mood for an action. It implies that ambiguity is artistically superior to resolution. It says that the love story is now the relationship story, and all that is required is to show the lay of the land.

My respect for Beattie was increased by her decision not to stop here. There is one more scene between the main characters, with a flashback in the middle. As an outcome, it beggars the options I have mentioned. Lenore gets out of bed and goes downstairs to find George, angry and
bedraggled, in front of the ashen fireplace. He spits out his animosity against the girls, calling Sarah a “damn bitch” and a “stupid girl.” Explains Lenore, “You went too far . . . I’m the only one you can go too far with” (209). It is another of those plainspoken truths that may finally prove George wrong: Lenore’s simplicity is not stupidity. Her statement has a clarity approaching the phlegmatic wisdom of a detached observer.

As many of Beattie’s characters do, Lenore remembers a scene from an earlier and warmer time. She and George were on a beach. He playfully ran off, inviting her to catch him, and when she did, he “turned on her, just as abruptly as he had run away, and grabbed her . . .” (210). As Lenore recognizes, the gesture is a precursor of his grab for Sarah, which had such different and disastrous results. Needing always to be the coveted prize, he must constantly restage and reenact his capture of a woman who pursues him. It is his script for cheating failure and old age. Lenore, I think, has intuited as much. Remembering his dash into the water, she wonders:

If she hadn’t stopped him, would he really have run far out into the water, until she couldn’t follow anymore? (210)

For all her understanding of the man, she can still ask herself this question. She may sense that his bravado, his vagrancy, is only a ruse to make her “save” him before he proves a coward. Or perhaps she thinks he might throw himself to his demons, if he should once succeed in “going too far” for her love to reclaim him. The story that ends here is an open-ended mystery, for we do not yet know whether he has crossed that line. Will she, or will she not, put out her hand one more time?

Still lost in anger, George “wouldn’t care” if the girls died in a car crash, like the student they had talked about at dinner. Lenore rejects this cruel wish but seats herself on the floor, joining him in listening to the rain. Actual closure is reached in the following sentence:

She slides over closer to him, puts her hand on his shoulder and leans her head there, as if he could protect her from the awful things he has wished into being. (210)

Her decision is made. There will always be “awful things” in her life with George because he will always be selfish and tyrannical. The irony,
whether tender or harsh, is that he cannot protect her from himself, but she will make it seem “as if he [can],” and by that very gesture she will save him from the undertow of self-destruction—and herself from the empty beach.

Is she a passive female, trapped by fear of independence, or is she a survivor, a woman dominated by a weak man but stronger than she realizes? Commanded to look the other way as George flaunts his infidelity, is she the browbeaten hausfrau, or the grownup who abides? By leaving questions like these open, Beattie moves the story beyond a feminist parable, giving us some options for our behavior as critics.

Like Lenore’s brother, we may chafe at her failure to challenge the demeaning aspects of her life. Like George, we may find her a little boring. What we should not do—and what the above preclosure analysis may help us to avoid—is dismiss the vagaries and mysteries of love, or impose a model of female self-fulfillment that shortchanges Lenore, regrettable as her life may be. We must remember that George’s failings are revealed to us through Lenore’s observations. Glaring as those faults may be, they are human weakness writ large. Vanity. Failed ambition. Self-deception. Fear of old age and death. Anxiety expressed as cruelty. Who has not a tincture of these sins? In a secular world, who will forgive us for these failings?

Those who love us, answers the completed story. In Beattie’s world, there is precious little honor and fidelity, but there can be a mutual neediness that fills in for loyalty. What we have in the end, then, is a story that includes and progressively transmutes an inverted fairy tale courtesy of Cinderella, an existential parable à la Godard, an epiphany story in the modernist vein, a relationship story with textbook savvy, and the open-ended mystery of the sexual power game. None is a model for the final story, yet their presence, in tandem, creates a distinctive fusion of the blasé and the wishful. From the angle they provide, we get an unforeseen glimpse of a revisionist love story. It is a tale without sentiment or precept, but not without beauty.

“Where You’ll Find Me” (1986)

“Where You’ll Find Me,” appearing nearly a decade later, is another story about a visit, told this time from the guest’s point of view. With an injured arm confined to her side like “a broken wing,” the narrator arrives at her brother’s house in Saratoga for the Christmas holiday. Howard, a veteran
of two failed marriages to “pale” women, is living with the more colorful and decisive Sophie, whose ex-husband sends their children large stuffed animals to add to “Mom’s zoo.” After noting Sophie’s somewhat feckless behavior, the narrator admits she isn’t in a position to “stand in judgment.”

I am a thirty-eight-year-old woman, out of a job, on tenuous enough footing with her sometime lover that she can imagine crashing emotionally as easily as she did on the ice [when she broke her arm].

. . . I am insecure enough to stay with someone because of the look that sometimes comes into his eyes when he makes love to me. I am a person who secretly shakes on salt in the kitchen, then comes out with her plate, smiling, as basil is crumbled over the tomatoes.4

Compared with Lenore in “Weekend,” this narrator is less rooted; she has no real sense of home, and her lover, although important to her emotional equilibrium, is tangential to her life. Her relationship with Howard, like some other brother-sister pairings in Beattie’s work, seems more durable and appealing than many a love affair.

With deft realism, Beattie creates the scene in this Saratoga kitchen. In preparation for a Christmas party, there are “mushrooms stuffed with pureed tomatoes, [and] tomatoes stuffed with chopped mushrooms” (388). Sophie, the sister-in-law, is amused by the culinary joke, afraid it will go unnoticed, not realizing that she has created a parody of her mate-swapping generation, who are endlessly recycling the same hopes and disillusionments. Sophie’s young daughter, Becky, enters on the fly and is scolded for bad manners. She ought to have said hello to those present. Whether we’re in polite society or just Sophie’s “zoo,” her notions are the rule.

Sidelined, Howard chats in a desultory way. The conversation takes a somber turn, and suddenly he begins talking about Dennis Bidou, a boy who once picked on his sister. Howard recalls standing up for her but remaining frightened of Dennis. Later, after learning that Dennis had been killed in Vietnam, Howard was haunted by images of the boy that are now resurfacing. To put these dreary thoughts behind him, Howard proposes a trip to the Christmas tree lot. His sister agrees to go with him. Although Beattie doesn’t say so, perhaps the errand offers a faint suburban echo of the masculine roles of protector and forager. Because of the narrator’s injured arm, her brother helps her into her coat and poncho, safety-pinning
her attire as if she were a child he is bundling up. She feels like a bird in a cage, covered up for the night. Protected or enshrouded? The bittersweet images trigger emotion:

This makes me feel sorry for myself, and then I do think of my arm as a broken wing, and suddenly everything seems so sad that I feel my eyes well up with tears. (392)

*Lacrimae rerum*, the Virgilian “tears of things,” the melancholy that arises from the knowledge that time breaks all wings—these are the pervading feelings in my first preclosure point. The story that ends here is an *elegy*.

The scene changes to a short time before the Christmas party. Howard is giving his sister a rundown on the guests. The gossip about lovers and husbands may remind the reader of the interchangeable hors d’oeuvres. Abruptly, the child Becky and her friend pass by again, all giggles and confidences, with an “Oh, hel-lo” in mocking obedience to the social decorum the grownups maintain while their lives go to pieces. The narrator draws a distinction between the intimacy of girl talk and the casualness of boy talk. Restless and nostalgic, Howard urges his sister to recreate yet another sort of warmth from the past—by treating him, in effect, like a girlfriend. “‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Confide something in me’” (394).

She does. She’s had an adventure in San Francisco. In a restaurant, she repeatedly locked eyes with a man sitting with another woman. Afterwards, he found an indirect way to give her his business card and ask her to call. Howard becomes engaged in the story, wanting to know if she ever called (she has not), and then urging her to take steps to reconnect with her mysterious admirer. On a whim, she had sent the man a photograph of herself with a stranger hanging around her neck, a “punk” kid who posed with tourists in a New York street, but she had not included a return address. With surprising insistence, Howard presses her to get in touch with the man. “‘Do it,’ Howard says. ‘I think you need this,’ and when he speaks he whispers—just what a girl would do. He nods his head yes.”

“Do it,” he whispers again. (397)

The story that ends here—and I had a strong feeling of closure at this point—is a bit of a tease. The close repetition of the keywords *do it* have a subversive if unfocused power, made girlishly conspiratorial and yet un-
nervingly urgent by the whispered delivery. Perhaps he is simply getting into character, playing the role of the little-girl chum. Can such a gambit be innocent? If we had nothing further to read, we might find ourselves recycling through the previous pages, looking more closely at Howard’s behavior.

Suddenly a spotlight might be cast on his brief stint as a screenwriter in Laguna Beach, his own California story. Does he wish he’d never left? During the kitchen discussion, he’d suddenly said he was “depressed” and recounted a memory from his boyhood. “What’s wrong with me,” he’d wondered, and Sophie had told him to “snap out of it” (389). He’d wanted to know whether his sister keeps reliving her fall on the ice, and he’d wondered what his stepdaughter’s little friend was “going to do” about the fact that a pen pal of hers turned out to be in prison. So, when he tells his sister to just “do it,” to take a risk, to change her life—is he venting frustrations of his own? Is he hoping for vicarious happiness? The narrative that ends here is a mid-life crisis story, in which the happy husband is secretly discontented.

Indeed, the hints of trouble in Howard’s marriage are significant. He and his sister go on another errand, this time to buy ice cubes for the party. The frozen element that caused her to slip and break her arm is tamed here for use in people’s drinks. But danger remains in another form, as Howard drives the narrator on a detour to a pond. There he reveals that he has fallen in love with a graduate student, a girl he has met only a few times. “There was so much passion, so fast,” he says. He is completing the circle of confidence, telling her a secret.

He and the girl, Robin, have had some chilly picnics in the winter weather, and, with the help of a stray dog who adopts them, they have found a surrogate domesticity that offers everything his home with Sophie does not: romance, youth, and freedom. As an old, old story, this confession has its absurd, even pathetic aspects. Yet, because it is confided in good faith, it may earn from us, as it does from the narrator, a sober consideration. Robin is scheduled to leave town in January, and apparently no plans have been made for continuing the love affair. It is a more fully realized idyll than the stalled romance between his sister and her San Francisco admirer, and yet the parallels explain why he so urgently wanted her to trust the “kinetic energy” she felt between herself and the stranger. If she could be persuaded to take the leap, perhaps he, too, could shake himself free from his current entanglements.
Younger readers might urge him to do so. Older ones might shake their heads knowingly. He has already had two wives before moving in with Sophie. Ultimately, none of his liaisons have given him what he is looking for. Perhaps none could, but his relationship with the girl did give him a “feeling” that was “real.” He threw rocks for the dog’s amusement. He called the dog Spot, and the girl called him Rover. They—but wait a minute. What kind of scene is this? Sketched by Norman Rockwell—a boy and a girl and a dog and a pond—it has an air of old-fashioned wholesomeness.

It is nostalgia incarnate, at least for those old enough to recognize the clichés and to long for what they promised. Howard insists that the feelings were real, although poignantly fleeting. He would like to believe that his experience with Robin is a genuine alternative to his life with Sophie. We have, of course, no confirmation that Robin exists. It is possible that Howard has conjured up his little romance, playing a game of “me too!” with his sister, although such a reading seems unnecessarily precious. In either case, we must remember that Beattie chose the sister, not the brother, for her focal character.

The narrator asks Howard more or less the same question he asked her, although his case is more immediate and consequential. “What are you going to do?” she wonders. “Get ice,” he replies.

He backs up, and as we swing around toward our own tire tracks I turn my head again, but there is no dog there, watching us in the moonlight. (400)

There are many preclosure signals here. The backing movement of the car reverses the forward movement that carried them to the pond, and the image of retracing their “own tire tracks” underlines this closure. The alliterating ts—four in close sequence—adds a note of finality. More emphatically, there is the repetition of the keyword dog and a reprise of the closural image of a dog watching a car disappear down a road. The absolute-degree negative—“no dog”—is, of course, the salient point here. It may be an example of the absence-as-presence so beloved by deconstructionists, but here it signifies more narrowly as the inversion of the scene Howard has just described to his sister. What he has said about the dog suggests that its presence made the liaison seem innocent and conventional—legitimate in some fashion. When the lovers leave the pond, they have to abandon the vision of themselves as a grown-up Dick and Jane playing with a dog named Spot. The dog’s steady farewell gaze is senti-
mental—the dog is losing his idyll, too—and paradigmatic. It signifies the return gaze of one’s remembered and idealized self. Howard mentions that his girlfriend did not look back at the receding image of the dog. Yet his sister does look back, even though she “knows” there is no dog at the pond now. Why does she half expect—or want—to catch its eye?

There are many ties between Harold and the narrator. The parallel between their secrets is underscored and revised by the parallel between his last visit to the pond with Robin and his visit there with his sister. As I’ve been suggesting, Howard is in the grip of a discontent that looks rather like a mid-life crisis. His sister’s presence has triggered various throwbacks, involving youthful issues of masculinity, an eagerness for the illicit collusions of childhood, and some mildly manic-depressive mood swings. What he wants is a rejuvenated emotional life. Whether or not Robin is a figment of his imagination, the longing for what she represents is patently “real,” it is backward-looking, and it is agitated by the presence of someone who has known him since boyhood. Perhaps what Howard wants, what he has been searching for as he has moved from woman to woman, and what a psychiatrist could diagnose all too handily, is a relationship that combines adult sex (“so much passion, so fast”) with childhood innocence, with the time-defying simplicity and trust of fraternal companionship.

When his sister asks him what he’s going to do, and when he says he’s going to “get ice,” he may be switching off the fantasy, although he acknowledges that her question is really about his future. We’ve seen that ice is associated with the ordinary round of social life in Saratoga and with the slick pavement that caused his sister to break her arm as she was running after a bus. Although he urged her to take a risk and run after the man in San Francisco, maybe he is accepting the fact that life breaks arms and spirits and all one can do is fantasize or confide. Perhaps the sister looks back over her shoulder, as if the dog might be there, because she, too, is aware that something was left behind. Maybe she can almost believe that what’s missing from their lives could materialize as a dog. Perhaps she is just that much more hopeful than Robin. But. The conjunction can hardly convey surprise, but it does seem to carry a burden of regret. We may wish, we may hope, “but there is no dog there.” To use a label from the Cisneros discussion, this is a reality-check story.

There is a break in the text at this point, underscoring the preclosural force of the departure from the pond. If Beattie were a different (and per-
haps lesser) artist, the story would have ended with the image of the electric clock “humming” in Lenore’s bedroom. Both of these preclosure points contain salient and resonant images that beg for New Critical exegesis, such as I’ve been guilty of initiating. Newer paradigms—most notably psychoanalytic and feminist—have their own templates for decoding these images. Perhaps I am reflecting only my own limitations, but I believe that such analysis leads typically toward the meticulous hairsplitting and ready-made sophistication, the postmodern chic, of much that is intelligent—but also predictable and artificial—in contemporary criticism.

So it was with relief that I followed Beattie beyond this point. Howard and his sister return from their errand, she trying to avoid slipping once again on the ice underfoot, he wielding two bags of ice, looking—she suddenly realizes—like “the statue of a blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice . . . but there’s no blindfold” (399). Here is another image that rings with implications. These two people know that there was “no dog” at the pond they’ve just visited, and perhaps that is because they are now wearing “no blindfold.” They arrive at a flagrantly ordinary scene of partying adults, sleepy children, cigarette smoke. Howard’s little stepson makes a dash for the open air, but Howard and his sister move into the enclosed space—a crisscrossing of generations that is echoed in other scenes throughout the story.

Entering the room, the narrator hears that “Sophie’s choice of perfect music for the occasion,” Handel’s Messiah, has been displaced by the sappy and nostalgic “Over the Rainbow” from the Wizard of Oz. Brother and sister hear Judy Garland singing, “That’s where you’ll find me.” Readers with good memories will also “hear” the surrounding lyrics, invoking a land mentioned in lullabies, a place “over the rainbow,” where dreams will come true. Bluebirds can reach this land, and so, wonders the singer, why can’t she? Perhaps the adult yearning for an idealized love affair is no more than infantilized wishfulness. As such, maybe it is rendered harmless and yet eternally available in this fragment of pop culture. A conclusion something like that may have prompted me to choose the next sentence as a preclosure point.

The words hang in the air like smoke. (400)

Stasis (words suspended in air) and evanescence (like smoke) come together in these eight monosyllables. Beattie’s often noted “flatness” and
low “affect” prove deceptive in a line like this, which is clearly elegiac. The story that ends here is a *lyrical lament*.

Actual closure bursts upon the scene with Becky’s final salvo. Gleefully, she embroiders on her own inflation of adult etiquette: “‘Hello, hello, hello, hello,’ Becky calls, dangling one kneesocked leg over the balcony . . . ”

“To both of you, just because you’re here, from me to you: a million—a trillion—hellos.” (400)

It seems appropriate that the last words should come not from the mid-life adults, not from Judy Garland, but from a child. Half on, half off the balcony, she is hovering between socialized behavior and self-performing anarchy, but she has an orientation. Her greeting links the brother and sister with each other (“both of you”) and speaks to them from the lost standpoint of childhood (“from me to you”); it denies any evaluative structure (“just because you’re here”—in my house, in this universe); and it has an antic energy, a spontaneous absurdity, even a songlike cadence, that becomes the warmest of welcomes. The little girl is the reminder of Christmas past, the greeter of Christmas present, and perhaps the guide to a more relaxed and free psyche.

Hanging in the air is the afterimage of the narrator as a child, a free-spirited little girl whom Howard projects into Robin, and who speaks through Sophie’s daughter. In a way, this tale is a *postmodern ghost story*. Whatever the characters decide to do, even if they let circumstances choose their options for them, such outcomes are less important than the haunting of the present by the past.

By labeling the putative stories I have found, I am, of course, borrowing a series of frames through which to view the story. Before I discuss this series, I want to acknowledge the special importance critics have given to cultural framing in Beattie’s work. One essay in particular helps me situate my method in relation to more prevalent critical approaches. In “Frames, Images, and the Abyss: Psychasthenic Negotiations in Ann Beattie,” Sandra Sprows highlights the two modes of modern perception discussed by Celeste Olalquiaga: “obsessive compulsive disease” and “psychasthenia.” The first involves the endless repetition of cultural frames and formulas, while the latter denotes fusion with the surrounding milieu, or, as Sprows defines it for her purposes, a slippage between frames re-
quiring negotiation at the borders between images or formulas provided by the culture.

She points out that the narrator and Howard in “Where You’ll Find Me” “constantly see themselves and others through photographic or filmic frames, constituting their place in each other’s lives through a series of images.” The Judy Garland song evokes another set of ready-made images.

Yet, the only way to live with these American movie ideals and often tyrannical images is to appropriate them and live on the borders between the images, in the slippages where movement is possible, rather than remaining inside any one pre-fab frame and fearing movement . . . [I]n the end, it is the daughter Becky who enacts the positive and possibly empowering use of a cultural image as she plays with the guests, and the narrator glimpses this as a transgressive move which can make the place “over the rainbow” work as a discursive strategy by recognizing it as illusory, fabricated, and clichéd but still usable in some way. (151)

I suspect that Sprows would agree that she, herself, has deployed a number of frames that have wide currency today, although she might not see them, as I do, as the “popular culture” of academic humanism in the 1980s and 1990s. Slippages, empowering, transgressive move, discursive strategy—these words tag her own discourse, suggesting Foucault (whom she lists in her bibliography) but more loosely the systemic linking of linguistic codes and social power structures to be found across the board in “culture”-based criticism of literary works. As a result, her essay on Beattie inserts this author into the canon of writers to be admired for subverting outmoded conventions of meaning.

The rescue mission is clear from an earlier statement in Sprows’s essay:

Rather than indicting a weakness due to a lack of depth or breadth (as many critics contend), the much-noted “flat” quality of Beattie’s texts is important precisely because it denies the traditional depth or causal scenarios which enable the very American notion of the autonomous individual hero . . . Those who would criticize Beattie’s stories for lacking any ultimate meanings or messages immediately set up a privileging of the systematicity of coherent narratives. (141)
Disputing these points is the farthest thing from my mind. On its own terms, Sprows’s argument is not only valid but persuasive. Here and now, I’m adding the notion of “psychasthenia” to my critical understanding of Beattie’s work, and I am very grateful for the insight. However, I do not find it as comprehensively useful as the tone of the essay suggests it should be. I do not, for example, believe that Beattie’s subversion of “the systematicity of coherent narratives” means that narrative coherence is foregone. What I have proposed instead—recasting the surface narrative as a sequence of putative stories with recognizable shapes—yields, I think, a richer, more fully articulated model for the narrative complexity and thematic range of a story like “Where You’ll Find Me.”

Of course, the story types I identify are also examples of “frames and formulas” available in the culture outside the given story. The difference is that Sprows identifies schemata from the popular culture of contemporary media, reference points that are overtly mentioned within the story, while I posit the immanence of subgenres from the traditions of narrative fiction, reference points that are not identified within the story, and for which I have no authority other than my own reading. Perhaps it is time to say again that the experiments documented in this book are demonstrations of an interactive process each critic—and, indeed, each reader—would perform differently, with differing results. All of those results would have validity as reading experiences. The only privilege I accord my own findings is their heuristic value as demonstrations. Their only authority derives from what they are seen to add to an understanding of a given text.

Sprows’s interpretation of “Where You’ll Find Me” accounts for the frequent use of the constitutive “gaze,” the clichéd quality of the two potential romances, the performative role of Becky’s hellos, and the replacement of the Messiah, a staple of traditional “high” culture, with a Judy Garland song from the Wizard of Oz, an outtake from the media-saturated culture of contemporary society. What she does not account for are the importance of the sibling relationship between the two main characters, the link between Becky and the narrator herself as a child, or the particular relevance of this Judy Garland song. These are all aspects of the story that come to the fore in the preclosure study above.

While the putative stories may exist only in my mind, they are derived from a close interaction with the text. In contrast, Sprows approaches the story with certain convictions—and concepts—borrowed from Olalquiaga
and Foucault. Skimming for pop-culture frames, she “reads” that Howard met “Kate” in Laguna Beach, whereas it was Sophie. At least once, she attributes the narrator’s words to Howard. She “reads” that the narrator is carrying the bags of ice at the end, whereas it is Howard who is doing so. She “reads” that, in the final party scene, “a young boy in his mother’s arms ‘makes a lunge . . . ,’” whereas it is “the woman with red hair [Mrs. Janson] holding Todd [who is Sophie’s son, not hers].” Do any of these glitches matter?

By Sprows’s own lights, it is important who is carrying the ice and who is looking at the carrier, but the other errors are mere accidents, the kind any of us could make. I do not mention them to start a nitpicking contest, nor to play games with Sprows’s own concept of “slippage.” My point is that reading for storyness starts with attentiveness to every single word of an unfolding story. It is a bottom-up rather than a top-down form of processing, and as such it maintains a tighter and more replete relationship between particulars and generalities, between the reading-of and the reading-out.

So we are back, now, to my list of familiar story-types. They include the static and the disruptive: elegy, mid-life crisis story, reality-check story, lyrical lament, and postmodern ghost story. Are they so different from the frames Sprows identifies? Mine, too, point to popular culture. However, they place that relevance within a complicated narrative progression rather than a matrix of allusions to stock images, movies, or songs. She seems to believe that cultural frames are the key determinants of psychological behavior within the story world, but I disagree. The putative stories make a different case. They suggest that we still encode our discontents by storying them. No doubt my list of putative tales would never have occurred to Beattie; however, they highlight, for our consideration, the human struggle to adapt past childhood. Those putative stories sensitise us to the prevalence—but also the failure—of gossip and nostalgia as scripts for adult life. They remind us of the human yearning to stop or reverse time. I am not arguing for a hidden traditionalism within Beattie’s work. Perhaps I am simply revising another popular song lyric: everything new is old again. Everything, that is, that survives as literature.

Undoubtedly, Sprows would be delighted with my opening image of Ann Beattie—sitting on the floor at the edge of an auditorium as a not-quite audience member at the standard campus cultural (in both senses) event of a literary reading. Psychasthenia may be an apt model for a mo-
ment that is freeze-framed in my memory. Quite literally, Beattie was inserting herself on a border between the expectant listeners and the performing artist, filling neither frame completely, yet defining herself via both. Unfreeze the moment, and story can happen. Beattie’s characters are often adrift between normative life choices, but that does not mean their experience is too amorphous to be chunked in narrative arcs. It means—and here I am quite close to Sprows—that no one plot can do the job alone.

I could say that “meaning” resides in the spaces between the putative stories, but I have made a different argument in this book. I’ve urged you to look for meaning in the metanarrative these stories create. Beattie’s characters may be trapped or confused, they may be unsure of what they want, or betrayed in their reach for it, but they still have something at stake. They are oriented toward what lures them. Stories tell us whether they find, lose, or revise what they want.

Before slipping out of the frame myself, I notice, with a backward look, that the putative stories in “Weekend” and “Where You’ll Find Me” create sequences that turn on a point of stasis (the hum of the clock) or denial (the absence of the dog). These preclosure points highlight the deflation of meaning, the “flat,” almost programmatic acceptance of postmodern anomie and disillusionment. Yet, given their place in the series, these moments become actively and richly transitional—in other words, anything but empty or defeatist. Haunted by story types that used to deliver meaning, like fairy tales, parables, and epiphanies, they are pregnant with others, like love stories and ghost stories, almost wistfully reimagined. When Ann Beattie got down on that dirty floor and craned her neck, her gaze was on the podium, not the exit.