Chapter One

The Life of Raymond Carver

The mid to late 1970s was a hard time to be an American. A malaise seemed to have settled upon the country, "a general sense that things [had] not only gone wrong, but that they [would] never be right again." This feeling grew out of such events as the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the lingering effects of the debacle in Vietnam, and, as a kind of capstone, the Watergate scandal, which confirmed many of the public's worst fears about the possible misuses of power in the political system. Following the election of Jimmy Carter, moreover, the country moved into a prolonged period of economic hardship—symbolized by the energy crisis—followed by the national embarrassment of the Iranian hostage crisis. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 seemed to indicate a new start, and it was for some; for many others, however, trickle-down economics failed to materialize, and as the gap between the rich and the poor widened, the life of the blue-collar worker became increasingly stressful and difficult. For the generation that came of age during this period, "the common denominators of . . . experience [were] death, loss, and futility, and it is inevitable that the fiction that reflects that experience reveals in its tone the natural reaction to such a history: fatigue, depression, the loss of hope." Of the writers who attempted to depict the history of this "blue-collar despair," none did so as fully and accurately as Raymond Carver. His stories and poems brilliantly "reflected the downbeat mood, the sense of frustration and failure that worked its way into the fiber of individual lives."

In many ways, Carver was perfectly suited to the task. As William L. Stull has pointed out, "Carver was a belated child of the Great Depression." For him, the economic hardships his father endured in the 1930s were still weighing heavily in the 1970s, and his fiction naturally gave voice to those for whom the American Dream seemed more and more impossible. In many ways he lived the life of the down-and-out characters he wrote about. Like many of them, he drowned his problems in alcohol until alcohol became the only problem. What is fascinating about Carver's biography, however, refuting F. Scott Fitzgerald's dictum
that American literature has no second acts, is the abrupt and positive change that occurred in his life when he stopped drinking. By the time his writings struck a chord with the Reagan-era public, he had already moved beyond despair, “beyond Hopelessville.” Carver regarded his new life as a great gift, even when it took its final turn toward the cancer that would cause his death at the age of 50.

The Early Years

Raymond Clevie Carver, Jr., was born 25 May 1938 in Clatskanie, Oregon, although both of his parents had grown up in Arkansas. As Carver explains in his essay “My Father’s Life,” his father, Clevie Raymond Carver (“C.R.”), had “walked, hitched rides, and rode in empty boxcars when he went from Arkansas to Washington State in 1934, looking for work.” After finding employment building the Grand Coulee Dam, C.R. returned to Arkansas to relocate his parents, and while there he met Ella Beatrice Casey, whom he promptly married and took with him to Omak, Washington. After the dam was completed the family relocated again, this time to Clatskanie, where C.R. had gotten a job at a sawmill. In 1941, the family—now including four-year-old Raymond—moved to Yakima, Washington, another mill town, and it was here that the young writer spent his formative years.

Although the 1940s were years of relative prosperity for the Carver family, the end of World War II brought renewed hardships. The family continued to move around, but that did not mean moving up. Raymond would later recall his embarrassment about living in the last house in the neighborhood without indoor plumbing. What made the situation even worse was C.R.’s increasing dependence on alcohol. In “My Father’s Life,” Carver recalls a horrific scene in which his mother knocked his father out with a colander when C.R., having been locked out of the house, drunkenly tried to climb in a window. Carver also recalls that “I tasted some of his whiskey once myself. It was terrible stuff, and I don’t see how anybody could drink it” (F, 16), a consciously ironic statement in light of Carver’s own severe alcoholism later in his life. When C.R. moved his family again, this time to Chester, California, he became so sick that he had to be taken back to Yakima, institutionalized, and given electroshock treatments. After he was released, finding work was almost impossible, and Ella had to support the family by waiting tables and performing other low-wage jobs. By the early 1960s, C.R. had recovered somewhat and the family relocated to Klamath, California, where C.R. died in 1967 at the age of 53.
In many ways, "My Father's Life" reads like one of Carver's own short stories (and a very good one at that). What the essay also shows us is that certain negative elements in Raymond Carver, Jr.'s, life—his difficulty finding economic success, his peripatetics, his alcoholism—can clearly be traced to his father's influence. On the other hand, Carver also acknowledged on several occasions that it was the father who made the son want to become a writer. In several interviews Carver related that, as a boy, he had loved to listen to his father tell stories, either about how C.R.'s grandfather had fought for both sides during the Civil War, or about how C.R. himself had ridden the rails during the 1930s. Carver also recalled his father reading to him from Zane Grey novels, although he soon preferred Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mickey Spillane, and fishing magazines. At a young age, Carver, inspired by his father, began to dream of becoming a storyteller himself. He decided that he wanted to be a writer, although, as he would later point out, he "didn't know beans" about how to become one. There was no one to tell him what to read, for example, and so he read historical romances as well as Argosy, Rogue, and True magazines, and tried his hand at writing science fiction. He even enrolled in the Palmer Institute of Authorship, although he failed to complete the correspondence course.

On the whole, Carver's youth and adolescence were uneventful. He was deeply in love with the land, and became an avid hunter and fisherman, avocations that would continue to appear in his fiction. He later stated that "My childhood was given over to fishing and hunting and baseball" (Con, 135). What differentiated him from everyone else was his desire to be a writer: "I wanted to be right in there with all the rest of the guys," he once said. "But I also wanted to write. I was the nerd who always hung around the library, half ashamed to be seen carrying books home." Despite his desire, the Carver family had not considered sending Raymond to college and had assumed that, after graduation from high school, he would join his father at the sawmill. Indeed, by the time Carver graduated from Yakima High School in 1956—the first person in his family to reach that educational benchmark—economic pressures were already beginning to assert themselves in his life. He immediately moved to Chester, California, and did indeed work with his ailing father for several months.

In 1955, when he was seventeen, Carver began dating Maryann Burk, who was three years his junior and attended a private girls' school. She encouraged his desire to obtain an education and become a writer, and she even introduced him to some writers he had not yet read but who would become important to his development: Tolstoy, Chekhov,
and Flaubert. Toward the end of 1956 he returned to Yakima to be closer to Maryann, and on 7 June 1957—four days after she graduated from high school—Carver, 19, and Burk, 16, were wed. In December of that year their first child, a daughter whom they named Christine LaRae, was born. Maryann was to have gone to the University of Washington to study law, but instead she took care of the baby. A son, Vance Lindsay, was born in October of the following year. At this time the family was living in an apartment attached to the office of their family doctor, and having their rent paid in exchange for housekeeping; Raymond was also attending Yakima Community College, as well as working as a part-time delivery boy for a local pharmacist. Before his twentieth birthday, then, Carver found himself responsible for supporting a family of four. The need to earn money began to wage a fierce battle with, and eventually would prevail over, his desire to be a writer. He would later note in his autobiographical essay “Fires” that “I really don’t remember much about my life before I became a parent. I really don’t feel that anything happened in my life until I was twenty and married and had the kids. Then things started to happen” (F, 32). Most of the “things” that Carver is referring to here are negative, as the rest of “Fires” goes on to show, and they would continue to trouble him for the next 15 long and difficult years.

The Years of Struggle

The impetus behind the writing of “Fires,” Carver explains in the afterword to the volume later published under that name, was “an invitation to contribute something to a book on ‘influences.’” He felt that his children had been the biggest influence on his life as a writer, an influence he had found largely “oppressive and often malevolent” (F, 28). His life had become a continual effort to keep the family afloat financially while he and Maryann also pursued their educational and career goals; for the next 13 years, one or both of them would be enrolled in a college or university while also holding a series of what Carver would later call “crap jobs” (F, 34). At various times he was employed pumping gas, sweeping hospital corridors and fast-food restaurants, managing an apartment complex, and even picking tulips. Inevitably, Carver’s family began to follow the pattern that C.R. had established of frequent relocations in search of work opportunities. Their first move, in 1958, was to Paradise, California, where Maryann’s mother and sister had moved, and where they could rent a house for twenty-five dollars a month. This relo-
cation would prove to be one of the most significant in Carver’s life, for he was able to enroll part-time at Chico State College. There he met the first person who would significantly influence his writing, the novelist John Gardner.

Gardner was teaching at Chico because, although he had written several of the novels that would later make him famous (Nickel Mountain; October Light), he had yet to publish any of them. Even so, he was the first real, practicing writer that the young and impressionable Carver got to know, and he was an impressive and inspiring figure. Carver’s style may not owe much of a debt to Gardner’s, but the apprentice did learn a number of important lessons from the older writer; he always credited Gardner as a mentor, most notably toward the end of “Fires” and in the essay “John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher,” which he wrote following Gardner’s death in 1982. One of the ways Gardner helped Carver was by sharpening his reading tastes, thereby introducing him to a number of important writers he had never heard of before. He also introduced Carver to the “‘little’ magazines,” telling him (and the rest of the class) that “this was where most of the best fiction in the country and all of the poetry was appearing” (F, 44). Moreover, Gardner was willing to sit down with the aspiring writer and go through his stories line by line, urging him to use the language of common people and to eliminate unnecessary verbiage. Carver notes in “Fires” that Gardner “made me see that absolutely everything was important in a short story. It was of consequence where the commas and periods went” (F, 38). Gardner also taught Carver the importance of revision, a lesson that the student never forgot.

Perhaps Gardner’s most helpful act, however, was extracurricular: He knew that Carver, in the midst of family and work responsibilities, was having a hard time finding a peaceful place to write, and so he lent him the key to his office to use on weekends. One result of this gift proved to be an embarrassment to the young writer: Carver snooped in Gardner’s manuscript boxes, stole titles he liked, and affixed these to his own work, which he resubmitted to Gardner. The older writer promptly reprimanded him, and then explained the concept of authorial proprieties. A more positive aspect of Gardner’s gift to Carver of a room of his own, though, and the reason he later called it “a turning point in my life” (Con, 77), is that that room was where Carver completed his first serious story, “The Furious Seasons.” He would later include this story in Selection, the college literary magazine he had founded, and a revised version of it would eventually serve as the title story of his second collection.
Above all, Carver learned “a writer’s values and craft” (F, 45) from Gardner, and these were fundamentally important lessons indeed. Throughout his writing career, even after Gardner’s death, Carver “felt Gardner looking over his shoulder when he wrote, approving or disapproving of certain words, phrases and strategies.”

After Carver had spent two years at Chico State, however, economic reasons again forced him to relocate. Although he had been sweeping floors and working in the school library, and although Maryann was working for the telephone company, they couldn’t manage to make ends meet in Chico, and so they moved to Eureka, California, where Carver had gotten a job through his father at a Georgia-Pacific sawmill. He began to work at the mill at night (Maryann still worked for the phone company) and take classes at nearby Humboldt State College during the day. There he fell under the sway of another important writing teacher, Richard C. Day, and his craft continued to advance. Day was very impressed with the first story Carver showed him, the vignette “The Father” (later included in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?), and Day published it in Toyon, the college’s literary magazine. In the spring of 1962, Carver received a boost when, on the same red-letter day, he received notification that his story “Pastoral” had been accepted by the Western Humanities Review and that his poem “The Brass Ring” had been accepted by a small journal called Targets. By this time he had been able to stop working at the mill, having gotten a job in the college’s library, and Maryann had started to attend Humboldt as well. Carver graduated in February 1963, and that spring he edited an issue of Toyon in which he included three of his stories and one of his poems; two of the pieces appeared under the pseudonym John Vale, which Carver used so as not to seem immodest.

After graduation, Carver moved to Berkeley, where he had a job in the University of California’s biology library. When Maryann finished her Humboldt semester in June, she and the children joined him. In the fall, however, they were on the move again, this time to far-off Iowa City. Day, who had studied at the famous Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, encouraged Carver to attend the school and even managed to get him a small grant. Although the experience did help Carver as a writer—while there he wrote several of the stories that would appear in his first collection—financial problems again complicated his life. It was in an Iowa City laundromat that he realized the full impact his children were having on his life, causing him to feel, he writes in “Fires,” “that my life was a small-change thing for the most part,
chaotic, and without much light showing through" (F, 33). The five
hundred dollars the workshop had given him didn’t go far, and even
with his working in the university library and Maryann’s waiting tables
at the University Athletic Club they had trouble getting through the
first year of what was a two-year master’s program. The workshop
offered him a grant for the second year, but the situation was impossible,
and so the family moved again, this time to Sacramento, where C.R. and
Ella were living.

Life in Sacramento proved to be at least as hardscrabble as it had been
in Iowa City. Carver couldn’t find steady work, and was employed as,
among other things, a hotel desk clerk and a stockboy. Moreover, he was
becoming increasingly depressed over the family’s financial situation; as
he wrote in “Fires”: “For years my wife and I had held to a belief that if
we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right things would
happen. It’s not such a bad thing to try and build a life on. Hard work,
goals, good intentions, loyalty, we believed these were virtues and would
someday be rewarded. But, eventually, we realized that hard work and
dreams were not enough. Somewhere, in Iowa City maybe, or shortly
afterwards, in Sacramento, the dreams began to go bust” (F, 34–35).
When Carver got hired as a custodian at Mercy Hospital, he was glad
for the job. He was even more pleased when he was able to transfer to
the night shift, which would afford him more time to write. All in all,
Carver worked at Mercy Hospital for three years, while Maryann worked
in door-to-door sales, and later for Parents magazine. He continued to
write during this period—several of the stories would later appear in his
first collection—and he also enrolled in Dennis Schmitz’s poetry-writing
class at Sacramento State College.

After he had been working at the hospital for a while, however, his
routine began to change, and instead of going home to write after he got
off his shift he would go out for a drink. He would later explain that “I
was just too young to be a father with much too much responsibility to
keep the family going. Those needs kept me doing odd jobs which didn’t
fit my personality at all. When all I really wanted to do was write. So
that’s why drinking took hold at a certain point in my life” (Con, 74).
Whatever the reasons, alcohol itself got to be a problem—Carver later
said that he “took to full-time drinking as a serious pursuit” (Con, 37)—
and, with debts mounting, the Carvers opted for declaring bankruptcy
in 1967. It was also in 1967 that C.R. died.

If Carver’s personal life was failing, his writing career was beginning
to succeed. His story “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,” which had
originally been published in the small journal *December*, was selected to appear in the *Best American Short Stories* annual, edited by Martha Foley. This was his first national honor, and he reveled in it. Carver later recalled that he was so excited when he received his copy of the book that he took it to bed with him. Foley’s selection of the story was at least as big a turning point in his life as Gardner’s bestowal of the key had been. In 1968, moreover, Carver’s first book, a collection of poems entitled *Near Klamath*, was published, albeit by the English Club of Sacramento State College.

Encouraging though these events were, the problem of earning a living remained foremost in Carver’s mind, giving him very little time to write. Shortly after he left his job at Mercy Hospital—and after an abortive stay in Iowa City, studying library science at the university there—Carver was hired as an editor by Science Research Associates (SRA), a textbook publishing firm. It was his first white-collar job, and it was something of a step up when the family moved to Palo Alto. Since he was making decent money, and Maryann had left a good job in Sacramento, she returned to school at San Jose State, and in 1968 she applied for and received a scholarship from the California State College Study Abroad Program. Given their choice of destinations, the Carvers picked Tel Aviv over Uppsala and Florence because it offered an additional five hundred dollars. Carver, granted leave from SRA, eagerly anticipated the trip; the family had been promised a villa on the Mediterranean, and he had idyllic dreams of living the writer’s life. The trip, however, proved to be a disaster, with the accommodations much less luxurious than promised and the children placed in a non-English-speaking school. Carver would later look at the trip “as a low point, a final straw” (*Con*, 91). Although the Carvers were supposed to be in Israel for a year, they ran out of money after four months and returned to California, this time to Hollywood, where Carver began selling theater programs. What the failed sojourn signaled to Carver was that his life was over, that he would never get the Mediterranean villa, that “the world wasn’t my oyster” (*Con*, 91). On returning from Israel, he turned to drinking once again. He would later say that “I began to drink heavily once I realized that the things which I wanted most in my life, writing and having a wife and kids, were not lined up neatly waiting to be had” (*Con*, 75). He had received such knowledge in Iowa City, and again in Sacramento, but he seemed to take the insight gained in Tel Aviv as a third strike. In 1969 Carver returned to his job at SRA, where he would remain for almost two years. His promotion to advertising director—complete with expense account—only led to further alcohol abuse.
Throughout this bleak period, however, Carver continued to write, and to gain further recognition. Several more of the stories that would eventually make up *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* appeared in little magazines, and one of them (“Sixty Acres”) was chosen for *The Best Little Magazine Fiction, 1970* anthology. *Winter Insomnia*, a second volume of poems, was published, this time by Kayak, a commercial press. Carver was also awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Award for poetry, which brought him a bit of money. He planned to quit his job at SRA, but instead, due to a corporate reorganization, he was fired, which proved to be a fortunate occurrence since it allowed him to draw both severance pay and unemployment. For the first time in his life, Carver had enough money so that he didn’t have to work, and he would spend most of the next year writing while Maryann finally finished her undergraduate degree and began a high-school teaching career. Carver marked his being fired from SRA as another turning point in his life, for it was during the period of his NEA fellowship in 1970 and 1971 that he completed the bulk of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, many of which would be published in magazines and journals over the following six years until the collection as a whole was finally issued.

Another milestone was reached in 1970 when “Neighbors” became the first of Carver’s stories to be accepted by a major magazine, *Esquire*. The fiction editor there, Gordon Lish, would soon rival John Gardner as an influence in Carver’s writing career, as he acknowledges in “Fires,” and their association would last for over a decade. Carver had in fact first met Lish while he was working for SRA in Palo Alto, and Lish was working for a different textbook publisher across the street. The two would frequently get together for lunch. When Lish became the fiction editor at *Esquire*, Carver sent him some stories; Lish rejected them, but he encouraged the young writer to submit more, and he finally accepted “Neighbors.” Lish did more than just publish Carver’s work—he began to have an effect on the work itself, moving Carver towards an even more pared down style; where Gardner had urged him to use 15 words instead of 25, Lish told him to use 5 instead of 15. When Lish left *Esquire* it was for a job at the McGraw-Hill publishing firm, and it was through this association that *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was eventually accepted and published. More than anything else, Carver came to appreciate the fact that Lish “was a great advocate of my stories, at all times championing my work, even during the period when I was not writing, when I was out in California devoting myself to drinking, Gordon read my work on radio and at writers conferences and so forth” (*Con*, 234–35). Lish believed in Carver when no one else did, and it was
largely through his efforts that the wider world began to become aware of Carver’s skills. *Esquire* went on to publish several more of Carver’s stories (and James Dickey, the poetry editor there, printed several of his poems) during the early 1970s, as did other mass media magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar*. Carver’s stories continued to garner acclaim, as evidenced by the inclusion of “A Night Out” (later “Signals”) in *The Best Little Magazine Fiction, 1971*.

In 1971, moreover, the year “Neighbors” appeared in *Esquire*, Carver—whose combined severance pay/unemployment/grant money had almost expired—took up a new form of employment: teaching. Although Carver would become a good teacher, and although there were certain appealing aspects to the job—it was a lot easier than working at the sawmill, for example, and gave him a lot more time to write—it was not something that came naturally to him. He would later tell an interviewer, in fact, that teaching was “a terrifying prospect” (*Con*, 6), since he had always been “the shyest kid in class” (*Con*, 219). Because he was uncomfortable in this new role, he began to drink even more heavily; Maryann Carver actually dates the severe change in his drinking pattern to his first teaching job. The jobs were also always temporary, and as such necessitated an additional series of relocations, although these moves took place largely within the San Francisco area. Carver’s first one-year visiting lecturer position, for example, was at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and so the family moved from Sunnyvale (where they had been living for the past year) to Ben Lomond; his second position, for the 1972–73 academic year, was at the University of California, Berkeley, causing the family to move again, this time to Cupertino, where they bought a house. During that year he was also studying at Stanford University under a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship. For the 1973–74 academic year, Carver was appointed to a visiting lecturer post at the Iowa Writers Workshop, where he had formerly been a student, and so he moved to Iowa City (although his family stayed behind). John Cheever, a writer whom Carver greatly admired, was also teaching at Iowa that year, and the two of them, as Carver later recalled, “did nothing but drink. . . . I don’t think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters,” he noted, but “we made trips to the liquor store twice a week in my car” (*Con*, 40). On top of this, Carver was trying to maintain a teaching job in California (at UC Santa Cruz) and was commuting between the two schools without either one being aware of it. The craziness of this life-style led to further alcohol abuse. Carver’s next job was at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the 1974–75 school
year, but by that point his alcoholism had gotten so bad that he rarely met his classes and was forced to resign in December, after which the Carvers filed for their second bankruptcy. For the next two years Carver lived in Cupertino and primarily drank.

Between 1971 and 1976, then, Carver did little writing, for he did not write when he was drunk and, according to Maryann, "for five years Ray didn’t draw a sober breath." Nevertheless, many of the stories that would later appear in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* continued to be published and to gain recognition; Carver had works included in *Prize Stories*, the O. Henry Awards annual, in 1973 ("What Is It?"); 1974 ("Put Yourself in My Shoes," which had previously appeared in a limited edition chapbook from Capra Press), and 1975 ("Are You a Doctor?"). Despite this string of publications, Carver was unable to find a publisher for the collection as a whole, a situation that no doubt exacerbated his other problems. It was not until the spring of 1976, with the aforementioned urging of Gordon Lish, that McGraw-Hill finally issued *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, which collected most of the fiction Carver had written during the previous fourteen years. The book received almost unanimously favorable reviews, and was even nominated for the National Book Award the following year, although the collection failed to sell many copies. A story not included in the collection, "So Much Water So Close to Home," was included in the first *Pushcart Prize* anthology. A third book of poetry, *At Night the Salmon Move*, was also brought out in 1976, again by Capra Press.

Such achievements and accolades failed to quiet Carver’s personal demons of economic hardship and alcoholism, however, and the 1976–77 period was in many ways the low point of his life, a time when he felt that "the only light at the end of the tunnel was an oncoming train" (*Con*, 19). Between October and January he was hospitalized for acute alcoholism on four separate occasions, and one doctor even told him that his next drink would likely be his last. The house in Cupertino had to be sold to try to cover some of the debts and, more significantly, Carver and Maryann, whose marriage had managed to survive up to this point, began to live separately. Carver would later say of this period in his life that "I made a wasteland out of everything I touched," and that "toward the end of my drinking career I was completely out of control and in a very grave place. Blackouts, the whole business... I have an image of myself sitting in my living room with a glass of whiskey in my hand and my head bandaged from a fall caused by an alcoholic seizure. Crazy!... I was dying from it, plain and simple, and I’m not exaggerating" (*Con*, 38).
It seemed as though Carver’s promising career was already over, even as it was (to the wider public) just beginning. He would later explain at the end of “Fires” that following the 1970 publication of “Neighbors” in Esquire his life “took another veering, a sharp turn, and then it came to a dead stop off on a siding. I couldn’t go anywhere, couldn’t back up or go forward.” Even after the long-awaited publication of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, Carver “was still off on the siding, unable to move in any direction. If there’d once been [an artistic] fire, it’d gone out” (F, 39).

The Years of Recovery

On 2 June 1977 Raymond Carver took his last drink. He would later state that he considered regaining his sobriety to be his “greatest achievement” (Con, 69), “the most profound thing that ever happened to [him]” (Con, 247). He looked at that day in 1977 as “the line of demarcation” (Con, 89) between his two very different lives. Earlier that spring, Carver—separated from his wife, estranged from his children, unemployed, broke, and drinking again following his fourth stay at a detox center—had moved to a small house in McKinleyville, California, near Humboldt. Richard Day, Carver’s former teacher, had made the arrangements and looked after the troubled writer. Carver stayed sober for a few weeks in February and again in April, but when he went to a San Francisco publishers convention in May he began to drink again, and to experience blackouts. He returned drunk to McKinleyville, but after a few days he didn’t drink again, and then those days became weeks, and then months; along with frequent trips to AA meetings, Carver was able to break the habit that had held him under its sway for 10 years and had very nearly killed him. Although he was never fully able to account for his strength to remain sober, Carver later explained that he realized first that he “was not going to be able to drink like a normal person,” and second that he “wanted to live” (Con, 90). During the disastrous trip to San Francisco Carver had secured an advance to write a novel that he described as an epic set in “German East Africa during World War I, involving . . . patrician German military officers” (Con, 6), and which, it seems safe to assume, he never had any intention of writing. With this money he was able to continue living in McKinleyville. When Maryann rejoined him in the fall it was clear that his life was at last taking a positive turn.

In November 1977, Carver’s second collection of short stories, entitled Furious Seasons, was published by Capra Press. This volume included
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all of Carver's writings that had not appeared in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, with the exception of the early *Toyon* pieces. At this time, however, there were no new stories forthcoming (although Carver did write a few poems during this period, most notably "Rogue River Jet-boat Trip, Gold Beach, Oregon, July 4, 1977"); he later explained that "it was so important for me to have my health back and not be brain-dead any longer that whether I wrote or not didn't matter any longer. I just felt like I had a second chance at my life again. But for about a year or so, I didn't write anything" (*Con*, 236). By early 1978 Carver was feeling well enough to return to teaching, though, and he moved to Plainfield, Vermont, where he taught a brief course at Goddard College. Among the other teachers there were Tobias Wolff and Richard Ford, two men of whom Carver would later fondly write in an essay entitled "Friendship" (*NHP*, 217–22). Around this time he was also awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and that spurred him to begin writing again. His first post-alcohol stories, "Why Don't You Dance?" and "Viewfinder," signaled that he had indeed returned from the brink. In the spring of 1978 Carver returned to Iowa City, where he and Maryann were again reunited, for what would prove to be the last time (although they would not officially divorce until 1982). In the summer he moved again, this time to El Paso, Texas, where he had been appointed visiting distinguished writer-in-residence for 1978–79 at the University of Texas, El Paso.

In El Paso, Carver became reacquainted with Tess Gallagher, a poet whom he had met briefly at a writers conference in Dallas the previous year, the first such gathering he attended after he stopped drinking. Gallagher was attending another writers conference, this one at UTEP, and the two writers discovered that they had much in common. She, too, had grown up in the Northwest (in Port Angeles, Washington) where her alcoholic father had relocated from Missouri to find work during the Great Depression. Having escaped that life to pursue her education and to fulfill her desire to become a writer, she had fallen on hard times as well, and was recovering from her second divorce while living alone in Port Angeles and writing. Gallagher and Carver struck up an instant rapport, and, following a series of visits and phone calls, she returned to El Paso where, on New Year's Day 1979, the two began living together, an arrangement that continued until Carver's death. Over the next decade Tess Gallagher became as prominent a figure in Carver's life and writing career, as important a "help and inspiration" (*Con*, 49), as Maryann Burk, John Gardner, and Gordon Lish had been earlier. She
Raymond Carver does, as she has written, "bear a special relationship to his writing" (NHP, 15). Her diligent example sparked a renewal of Carver's interest in producing creative work, and she became the first person to read and critique his new stories and poems as he wrote them. He would frequently tell interviewers that they "influence[d] each other's work" (Kellerman, C17); following his death she wrote that "we helped, nurtured and protected each other... He gave me encouragement to write stories and I gave him encouragement to write his stories and poems." Their collaboration as writers and companions would prove to have a vital impact on Carver's greatest works.

After living in El Paso the pair followed teaching jobs to Tucson, Arizona, and Syracuse, New York, where Carver began his first permanent teaching job at the University of Syracuse in 1980. More importantly, he continued to write and publish at an ever-increasing pace. He began work on a novel, The Augustine Notebooks, although the project was scrapped following the appearance of one chapter in the Iowa Review in 1979. His short story "The Calm" also appeared in 1979, with "Gazebo," "A Serious Talk," "Want to See Something?" (later "I Could See the Smallest Things"), and "Where Is Everyone?" (also known as "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit") following in 1980, and "One More Thing" in 1981. With Gallagher's encouragement Carver also began to write book reviews and essays, such as the aforementioned "Fires," and he received another National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, this time for fiction. In 1981 What We Talk about When We Talk about Love appeared, his second collection of stories to be issued by a major publishing house. The text was once again edited by Gordon Lish, who moved Carver toward an extreme conciseness; several of the stories from Furious Seasons appeared in radically pared-down versions, for example. This style gave rise to Carver's work being labelled minimalist, a slippery and controversial critical term that will be examined more closely in the next chapter. The collection received a great deal of praise, including a glowing front-page assessment in the New York Times Book Review and the statement from Robert Towers in the New York Review of Books that the author was "one of the true contemporary masters of an exacting genre." This was to be the volume that would firmly establish Carver as an important writer, "a major force in contemporary fiction."

Although Carver previously had trouble getting Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? published because "editors found the stories too depressing, or not in tune with what the culture wanted to read" (Halpert, 53), it now seemed that the "culture [had] finally caught up [and] the disillusionment of the seventies and eighties now suddenly found itself reflected
in his work” (Halpert, 70). Carver would later tell an interviewer that, “after the reception for What We Talk about, I felt a confidence that I’ve never felt before. Every good thing that’s happened since has conjoined to make me want to do even more and better work” (Con, 49). By the end of 1981 “The Bath” had been awarded Columbia magazine’s Carlos Fuentes Fiction Award and “What We Talk about When We Talk about Love” had been included in the Pushcart Prize anthology. “Chefs House,” a story too new to be included in the collection, appeared in the New Yorker, Carver’s first publication in the country’s most prestigious magazine for short stories. Not only was Carver back, but he was now in a position of eminence that had seemed improbable if not impossible during the dark days of his drinking. His recovery was now complete, and his life and career continued to move steadily forward.

The Years of Triumph

Following the publication of What We Talk about When We Talk about Love, Carver again found himself in a period in which he did not write. After a few months, however, he began to work again, and the first story he produced, “Cathedral,” marked a significant departure in his work. He would later explain to an interviewer that the story was “totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before. I suppose it reflects a change in my life as much as it does in my way of writing. . . . There was an opening up when I wrote the story” (Con, 44). His life had moved in a positive direction—he felt more hopeful and more optimistic since he was no longer drinking and had become involved with Tess Gallagher—and such a change was naturally reflected in his fiction, which became open, expansive, and generous, rather than rigorously pared down. During the next eighteen months he produced a dozen new stories, many of which continued the trend toward fullness and affirmation. John Gardner, editing the Best American Short Stories, 1982 anthology, chose “Cathedral” to be the leadoff story. Another of the new stories, “A Small, Good Thing” (a revised and expanded version of “The Bath” from What We Talk about When We Talk about Love), was awarded first place in the O. Henry Awards’ Prize Stories, 1983 collection and was included in the eighth Pushcart Prize anthology; the story “Where I’m Calling From” was included in The Best American Stories, 1983, edited by Ann Tyler.

Nineteen eighty-three was in many ways a banner year for Carver. In the spring, Capra Press published Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories. This volume included the titular essay and a piece called “On Writing” that had orig-
inally appeared as "A Storyteller's Notebook" in the *New York Times Book Review*; selected (and frequently revised) poems from Carver's first three small-press collections, as well as some newer verse; and a group of stories, several of which had appeared in *Furious Seasons* and, in minimalized versions, in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, and which were now restored to their fuller forms in keeping with Carver's new direction. Later that spring, Carver was awarded, from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, one of the first Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings, a fellowship that guaranteed an annual stipend of $35,000, with the requirement that the recipient have no other job. Carver promptly resigned his position at the University of Syracuse and was able to devote himself entirely to writing without having to worry about economic survival. The stories that had been pouring out of him during the previous year and a half were collected and, in the fall, Carver's third major-press book, *Cathedral*, was published. *Cathedral* is undoubtedly Carver's masterpiece, and it was greeted with widespread and glowing critical acclaim, including Irving Howe's front page analysis in the *New York Times Book Review*. With the volume's nomination for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Carver's triumph was complete and he had clearly arrived at the forefront of American letters.

Not only was Carver acknowledged as a master within the literary world, but his awards made him something of a celebrity as well, evidenced by profiles in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, and even *People* magazine. Finding it increasingly difficult to work amid the hubbub in Syracuse, Carver removed to Gallagher's house in Port Angeles in early 1984. He intended to continue writing fiction—he was again at work on a never-to-be-completed novel—but instead he found himself writing poetry, something he hadn't done for several years. In the space of two months, he had produced enough material for a new collection, which would be titled *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* when Random House published it in 1985, and which would be awarded *Poetry* magazine's Levinson Prize. In the summer of 1984 Carver and Gallagher traveled to South America, and when they returned he began writing poems again. Another collection, *Ultramarine*, was published in 1986. During this time Carver was also publishing book reviews and essays, as well as an unproduced screenplay about the life of Dostoevsky on which he and Gallagher had collaborated for director Michael Cimino; Carver also wrote another screenplay for Cimino, "Purple Lake," about juvenile delinquents, but it was neither produced nor pub-
lished. During this period Carver became an editor and anthologizer as well, compiling a special issue of the journal Ploughshares, guest editing The Best American Short Stories, 1986, judging American Fiction, 88, and collaborating with Tom Jenks on a volume entitled Short Story Masterpieces. He and Gallagher divided their time between Port Angeles and Syracuse, where she was still teaching; they also traveled to England and Europe to promote editions of his books that were being published there.

Two years after the publication of Cathedral Carver finally returned to writing fiction. In the space of a few months he produced seven new stories, beginning with “Boxes.” Once again he told an interviewer that “these new stories are different from the earlier ones in kind and degree” (Con, 186). Between February 1986 and June 1987 these stories appeared in the New Yorker, Esquire, and Granta. “Boxes” was included in The Best American Short Stories, 1987, edited by Ann Beattie, while “Errand,” which would prove to be Carver’s last story, was awarded first place in the O. Henry Prize Stories, 1988 and included in Best American Short Stories, 1988, edited by Mark Helprin. In 1988, more significantly, Atlantic Monthly Press published Where I’m Calling From: New and Selected Stories, a collection that represents the best of Carver’s fiction. The volume once again received outstanding notices—the poet Hayden Carruth, for example, pronounced it “the only certifiable masterpiece produced in the United States during the past quarter-century” (Stull 1989, 212)—and it firmly cemented Carver’s position as the most significant short story writer of the day. Later in the year, in conjunction with his fiftieth birthday, he received a Creative Arts Award Citation for Fiction from Brandeis University, an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Hartford, and induction into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. By this point in time Carver had unquestionably become “as successful as a short story writer in America can be,” 18 as well as the most influential writer of his generation; it was only fitting that, in Esquire magazine’s depiction of the Literary Universe in 1987, Carver was placed at the red-hot center. Unfortunately, these awards and honors were to be his last triumphs.

The Final Years

In the fall of 1987, Carver, who had always been a heavy smoker (he had once called himself “a cigaret with a body attached to it” [Con, 4]), was diagnosed with lung cancer. On 1 October doctors in Syracuse removed
two-thirds of his left lung. Carver remained optimistic about his prognosis, but in March 1988 a new tumor was detected, this time in his brain, and he began a series of radiation treatments in Seattle. By June, when the cancer reappeared in his lungs, it became clear that the disease was going to be fatal. Nevertheless, Carver pressed on, working on another volume of poems, *A New Path to the Waterfall*, which would be published posthumously. Later that month he and Tess Gallagher were married in Reno, Nevada. In July the couple made a brief fishing trip to Alaska. On the morning of 2 August 1988 Raymond Carver died in his home in Port Angeles.

During this period of illness Carver refused to pity himself. He steadfastly maintained, even in interviews conducted a few weeks before his death, that he was going to recover, since he had “fish to catch and stories and poems to write” (Kellerman, C17). In any event, he asserted (echoing Lou Gehrig) that “I feel—I think I’m one of the luckiest men around” (*Con*, 249). As he noted in one of his final poems, after he had stopped drinking the rest of his life—“these past ten years. / Alive, sober, working, loving and / being loved by a good woman”19—had been pure gravy, a gift that he hadn’t counted on and that was better than he had any right to expect. Carver certainly enjoyed the recognition he received, but he wore his honors lightly and remained humble in the face of such accolades, surprised that, after his life’s struggle, he had finally arrived at the place he had set out to reach. Following his death a number of friends and fellow writers paid tribute to him in the form of such touching memoirs as Tobias Wolff’s “Raymond Carver Had His Cake and Ate It Too” in *Esquire* and Jay McInerney’s “Raymond Carver: A Still, Small Voice” in the *New York Times Book Review*, but the greatest testament to his indomitable spirit will remain the writings that he left behind. Small though his oeuvre may be, it is sure to last, to be read and appreciated for generations to come.