

In Which Raymond Carver Leaves Us For Another Woman

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Alex in BOOKS, gordon lish, john gardner, maryann carver, paul engle, raymond carver

This is the first in a two part series about the American writer Raymond Carver.



The Other Raymond Carver

by ALEX CARNEVALE

Raymond Carver was born on May 25th of 1938 in Clatskanie, Oregon. His parents moved to Yakima, Washington, where his father worked a saw in a series of factory jobs. Young Raymond Jr. was stumpy and fat for his age, and his parents took measures to slim their young son down to a manageable weight. A series of amphetamine injections eventually gave way to Carver picking up smoking as a habit. So he wouldn't steal their cigarettes, his parents opted to get him a monthly carton of his own.



Ray as a boy Carver's father was a garden variety alcoholic. His mother Ella often became incensed by her husband's alternately lively and depressed moods, which brought out the full spectrum of her anger. A happy marriage it wasn't. In her husband's absence she focused her attention on the son who desperately needed her, often offering him an elaborate choice of breakfast. The two were very close, and like most boys who are never without their mothers, Ray's life consisted of a series of mostly monogamous relationships.



with his brother

james on christmas

Since Carver's fiction necessarily glamorizes the austerity of poverty in 20th century America, it's worth noting his life was anything but a stellar exemplar of the phenomenon. Carver's biographer Carol Sklenicka uses as an epigraph a line from William O. Douglas' "Of Men and Mountains" that "the desert hills of Yakima had a poverty that sharpened perception." (Douglas was a Supreme Court Justice and the second most famous person to attend Yakima High School after Raymond.) Poverty may have altered the Carvers' perceptions, but only for the worse.



hunting at 16

Sensing his family situation wasn't helping his young, fat son, the elder Carver had a friend take the teen hunting and fishing. This is where Carver got the idea he was a naturalist-woodsman type. His Arkansas-raised father knew enough to take the boys fishing, but little beyond that. Carver began writing stories about his travels with his father's friend. His group of buddies picked up his passion, and they went from anonymous youths to aspiring writers, donning Salvation Army flannel as an affectation for the first time in recorded history.



with his mother and brother in later years

Carver met his first wife when she was fourteen. **Maryann Burk** was immediately entranced by the young mood swing. She was tall, 5'8", and it was the first real relationship for both of them. They had sex for the first time when she was fifteen, and although they attended different high schools, they wrote to each other every day.



Ray and Maryann in love as teens

With the Korean War on the horizon, Ray enlisted in the California National Guard. He trained on weekends and found that work in a sawmill didn't suit him. Maryann became pregnant when Ray was 20, and the two were married. A friend described the event as "the saddest, most poignant wedding I have ever been to in my life." Although she was several months pregnant, few suspected it. Ray's father did not even attend, and shortly thereafter failing mental and physical health forced

him to be hospitalized. Six weeks after the Carvers welcomed their first daughter, Christine, into the world, Maryann became pregnant *again*. She was only eighteen.



at the birth of his first child in 1958

Spurred on by her mother and sister, the Carvers relocated to California. Ray enrolled at Chico State College with the money from a clerking job at a local pharmacy. (Tuition was \$90 a semester in 1958.) Through a stroke of luck, Ray's creative writing instructor was the twenty-six year old **John Gardner**. Gardner was a step above the usual creative writing teacher, and he was also a stringent practitioner of craft, later writing *The Art of Fiction* and the ironic *On Becoming A Novelist*. Most importantly he was a writer in italics, someone who could infect his students with the kind of pretentiousness they would come to expect from higher education.

Of his first mentor, Carver told an interviewer that

I was simply electrified. He was cut out of a different cloth from anyone I'd ever met. He was very helpful...and I was at that particular point in my life where nothing was lost on me.



ray and maryann

in the early 60s

The couple moved to Eureka, and Maryann took on a series of oddjobs to support her husband, daughter and son Vance. Both of their tastes grew more eclectic, with Ray penning a stage adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* about a resurrected Christ living among us. In August of 1963 Ray and Maryann headed to Iowa, where a recommendation from Richard Cortez Day secured a place for Carver in the Iowa Writer's Workshop.



in 1963

headed to Iowa City

New to a stuffy college town, the Carvers didn't fit in particularly well. They lived in a tiny trailer while other students occupied houses and apartments and the condition of Ray's teeth astonished teachers and students alike. Although the academic environment was extremely competitive, drinking had yet to become a major problem for Ray. Once they moved into spartan married student housing, things began to improve for the young family, but Carver's work still had yet to garner the attention it deserved.

The Carvers' ways were viewed as brusque in contrast to the Midwestern elitism of the Iowa program; their clothes and young family said the same. Once, Maryann took all of Ray's manuscripts and dumped them on the desk of **Paul Engle**, the head of the program, to get them to offer her husband a stipend. They would have received it gratefully, but Maryann's father died and she returned to California. In all, they lasted only a year during their first stay in Iowa.



Iowa Writer's Workshop

socializing at the

The couple continued to struggle along, with Ray working as an editor at Science Research Associates (he was eventually fired for his "unconventional" writing style) and Maryann enrolling in school in San Jose. During their most despairing time, she took the children to stay with her mother and Ray had to live with his parents. His work as a night janitor at Mercy Hospital allowed him to spend much of each night in front of a typewriter. When the opportunity to take the family abroad came about, they chose Israel over Florence because of a larger stipend.



Ray's young family

Tel Aviv in July of 1968 reminded Ray of summer in the Midwest. Never hearing the sweet sounds of the English language left Carver depressed, and the open display of kosher meat warded him off the substance. He resented not being able to buy cigarettes on the Sabbath, and his disgust with the constant serving of wine instead of more effective poison fueled the beginnings of his alcoholism further. His children attended a Catholic school founded by Scottish missionaries.



1972

When three bombs exploded in a Tel Aviv bus station, Carver immediately packed up the group and returned to America. He had been promised a villa on the Mediterranean during his time there, only to find it occupied with a mass of other students and he and his wife forced to more modest quarters. Their stay in Israel had occupied four months. Although Maryann had thought the place a refuge from Carver's darker drinking with friends and colleagues, his passion for alcohol was exacerbated into illness for the first time. Ray kept the tiny bottles of liquor the Carvers received on airplanes in a special suitcase for the purpose.



Maryann graduating

at 30

Upon their return to the states, they stayed in Los Angeles with Maryann's sister. They moved upstate, to San Jose, with Ray keeping a rented room in Palo Alto for his writing. They were so poor they applied for a community chest food basket from the neighborhood and were rejected because they had not been in country for sixty days. Ray's poetry was published for the first time, a small chapbook titled *Winter Insomnia*. He was still diligently refining **the same stories** that would allow him, in time, to drive a Mercedes and divorce his wife.

Alex Carnevale is the editor of This Recording. He tumbles [here](#) and twitters [here](#). He last wrote in these pages about [the life and art of Fairfield Porter](#).





wauna, oregon

"Half Moon" - Iron & Wine (mp3)

"Godless Brother in Love" - Iron & Wine (mp3)

"Rabbit Will Run" - Iron & Wine (mp3)



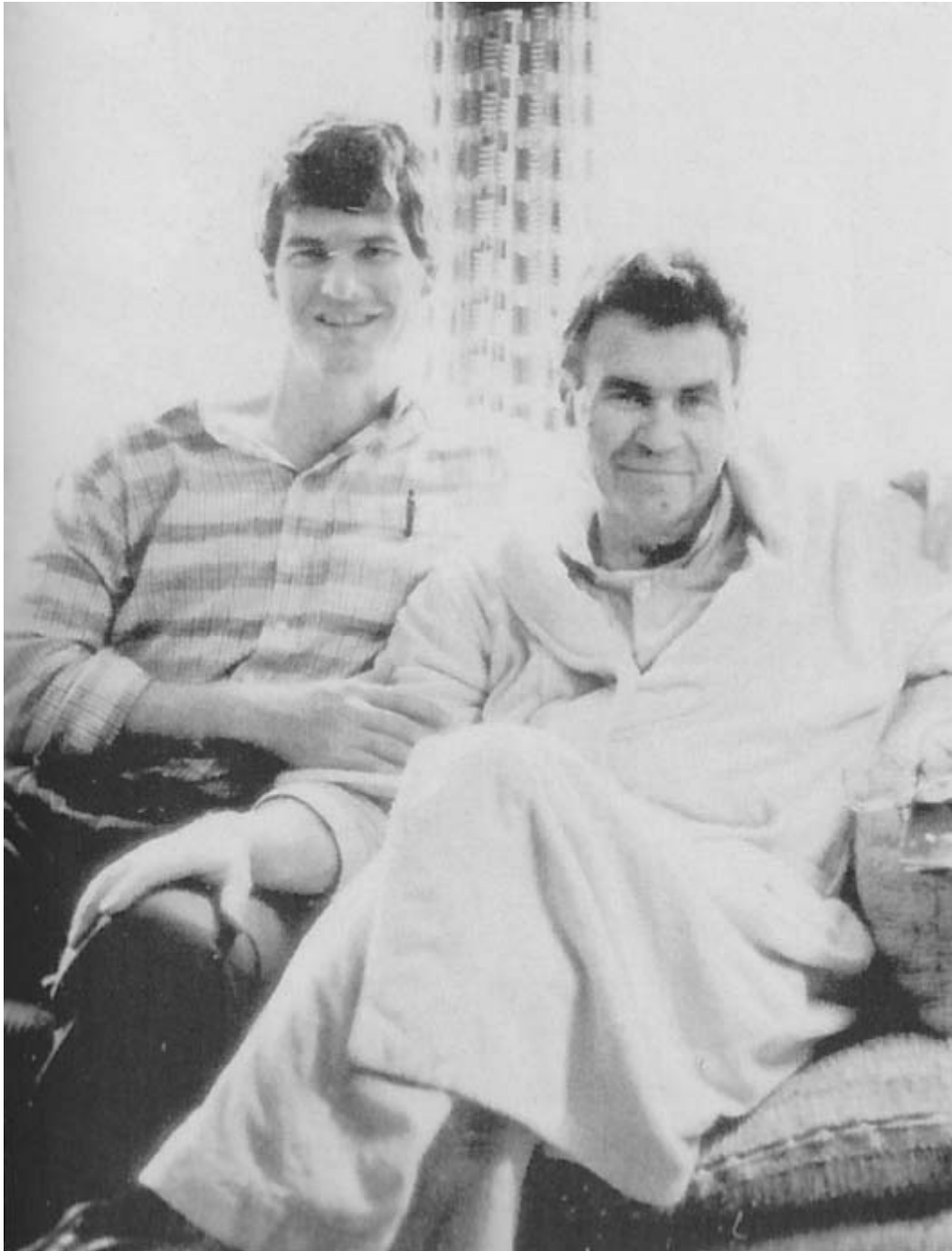
gray in the summer

of 1969, photo by gordon lish **All Her Life**

I lay down for a nap. But everytime I closed my eyes,
mares' tails passed slowly over the Strait

toward Canada. And the waves. They rolled up on the beach
and then back again. You know I don't dream.
But last night I dreamt we were watching
a burial at sea. At first I was astonished.
And then filled with regret. But you
touched my arm and said, "No, it's all right.
She was very old, and he'd loved her all her life."

Raymond Carver



ray with his
son Vance

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