# The Man Who Became a Soprano

# John Updike

All things have a beginning and an end. The recorder group began in the domestic warmth of the Weisses’ marriage, a model marriage of dark and light, firmness and delicacy, shining on top of their little hill as if for all the town to see. Andrea was a slightly skinny blonde with ironed-looking long straight hair both before and after such hair was the fashion, and pale-blue eyes that developed pink lids when she was tired or emotionally stimulated. Fritz was a dark, almost heavy man with wide hairy-backed hands that, like his tenacious scientist’s mind, took up everything in a grip of steel. From a musical family of physicists, he had played the bass recorder since childhood, having been trained in this instrument to round out a quartet consisting of his father (tenor), mother (soprano), and sister (alto). But the bass was a doleful mumbly instrument played alone, and for their seventh anniversary he bought Andrea a quality soprano recorder, of dark-striped pale pearwood—a Moeck. Slowly, obediently, she learned to play it, her hesitant piping echoing through the boxy bare rooms of their white, clapboarded house—rooms rather underfurnished, their friends thought, with an austere mix of glass tables and Danish modern (Fritz’s taste) and imitation-Shaker chairs and handwoven wool rugs (Andrea’s). She owned a loom as big as a small room, and spent afternoons at it, before the three children (girl, boy, girl) came home from school. There was a shy and stubborn expertise to all she did, though on the soprano recorder she tended to panic at any note higher than the G at the top of the staff, and when a trill involved moving more than one finger on the stops, she fluttered off into blushing silence. When she blushed, her cheeks suddenly matched the tint of her lids and lips, and the rose color sank into her throat and the décolletage of her peasant blouse.

There is little music arranged for the bass and the soprano in duet, though some of the Bach fugues build to a certain passion without the middle voices. The Weisses’ three children, some nights, would be kept awake as the couple moved the theme back and forth, from low to high to low, and at intervals beat time in silence, or held harmonic whole notes, while the absent instruments possessed the melody. The sounds carried beyond the house. Another couple, the Bridgetons, had moved to town, and lived along the beach road at the base of the Weisses’ hill, close enough to hear them these spring nights, now that the storm windows were off. In the crowded high-school corridor as they waited to be checked in at the May town meeting, Terry Bridgeton mentioned the music to Fritz (they knew each other by sight, from the train platform and Little League games) and said how lovely it sounded from afar. Terry allowed that he was a musical ignoramus but his wife, Jessie, was a kind of marvel; she could play anything—piano, guitar, church organ, even the clarinet when she was a girl.

Fritz told him, “The recorder is the easiest instrument in the world to learn, next to the triangle and the tambourine. And I suppose the maracas.” There was a German pedantry to Fritz.

“Well,” Terry said, blushing with his own effrontery, or from the heat of the high-school hall, “we could both try to learn, if you’d tell us what instruments to get.”

“Alto and tenor,” Fritz said, firmly, then, suspecting he had allowed himself to get in too deep, added, “Of course, you and your wife may not take to the instruments.”

Jessie, an olive-skinned, short, plumpish, eagerly smiling woman in bangs, somewhat alarmingly clad in a fringed shawl and a tangle of gold and turquoise pendants, spoke up behind them. “Oh, we’ll take to them. We’re desperate to do *some*thing and meet some *peo*ple.”

It was high summer before the Bridgetons, having put themselves to school with Mario Duschenes’s *Method for the Recorder* and Marguerite Dubbé’s *First Recorder Book*, dared present themselves to the Weisses one agreed-upon evening; Andrea had suggested they come for dessert and coffee and then “give it a try.” The newborn quartet was able to make its way, with many halts and restarts, through a Bach fugue without flats and sharps, several Corelli gigues, and the first sheet of a Byrd fantasia before the clock struck ten and it was time for cigarettes and beer and a social exchange. After their immersion in music, a warmth remained. The two couples had more in common than their relaxed costumes—Terry was an artist in an ad agency, and dressed after work in frayed jeans and logo’d T-shirts. But, though they promised to meet again, and again, it was uncomfortable—somehow too naked. Each player, alone on his or her part, was embarrassed whenever he or she became lost and the whole quartet had to stagger to a halt. Musical Jessie, confidently warbling on her alto, rarely slipped and tried to keep the tempo up, and Fritz in his steely way persevered on the bass, which made so low and indistinct a noise that it scarcely mattered if he was in time with the others or not. But Terry, as he had admitted, was a musical novice, and sometimes intently went along measure after measure on his tenor without realizing that he was a beat behind and generating dissonance on every chord. Andrea, though more practiced than he, was almost too sensitive to play the soprano, which by virtue of its pitch had to carry the melody, and yet whose high notes she heard as painfully shrill, a wet strained squeaking she preferred to put out of its misery, lowering her recorder to her lap and enfolding it with her long, pale, pink-knuckled hands. Terry loved her in those moments, grateful that someone else was causing the quartet to founder. They had become the clumsy children, and their spouses the formidable parents.

The group needed more players; and, magically, more did appear, like dewdrops on a spider web. Carolyn Homer, a tall auburn-haired woman who held aerobics classes in the parish hall of the Congregational church, turned out to have taught herself the recorder while enrolled, years ago, in a course at the New England Conservatory in Renaissance music; she brought a well-exercised alto instrument, the color worn from its mouthpiece and finger-holes, to the group. Dick McHoagland, the squat and scowling leader of the local high-school band (and the typing instructor as well), brought a tenor instrument; he and Fritz, both being martinets, hit it off well and played side by side, leaving Terry next to the alto section. Both Dick and Carolyn were married, to unmusical spouses, but the town was rich in divorcées and men on the loose, and now these began to adhere. Alice Arsenault, a nervous little rounded thing who for some reason had been married to Skip Arsenault, an uproarious town fireman, former athlete, and hard drinker, showed up one night in Carolyn’s shadow with a soprano recorder and an earnestly annotated copy of the Trapp Family Singers’ instruction manual. Maury Sutherland, a stooping, sexually undecided country gentleman (whom Terry had always supposed, from the way he tilted his head and spoke in cautious fragmented sentences, to be hard of hearing), produced from his inherited treasures an alto recorder acquired by his great-aunt Esther—on the Jekyll side—while sightseeing in Austria and northern Italy before the First World War. “Do tell,” he would say in response to a lengthy disquisition, with an expression of amiable bafflement. “Beats me.”

This made three altos, and soon there were three sopranos, since somehow in Maury’s orbit there materialized, one bitterly cold night just before Christmas, a vivid woman newly escaped from Boston, propelled into this far suburb by the repulsive force of the crack-up of her long-term relationship with an anchorperson whose handsome ochre visage was known from Provincetown to Pittsfield, from Salisbury to South Dartmouth. Toula Jaxon, as she presently called herself, had emerged with a cathode-ray glow from her discontinued relationship—a luminosity that made the men of the group stare and the women squint. She was a study in high contrast; her white forehead flashed between her eyebrows and hairline, her eyes were black lights encircled by ink, even the parting in her blue-black hair seemed incandescent. Her lips and fingernails were painted in slashes of purple. Her clothes, though she tried to tone them down as the sessions ensued through the drab winter, were city-slick—tight skirts well above the knee, and rippling silk blouses, and Hermès scarves swirled at the throat. As if colorized, she jarred among the earth-tones of the suburban women, and although there was something chastened and shyly willing to please about her social manner, she played the recorder the way she looked—loud and too expressive. Much defter than one would have thought possible from the length of her fingernails, Toula had no fear of high fast notes; her flair, mounted between Andrea’s perfectionist reserve and Alice’s novice awkwardness, seemed all too *displayed*. Her recorder, a stylish artifact of high-density plastic produced in Japan, didn’t sound like the other instruments and glistened above their resonant merge like oil making its rainbows on water.

In the alto section, tweedy Maury Sutherland did indeed prove to be hard of hearing, or blunderingly insensitive, for his alto, fed out of his large male lungs, arrhythmically overpowered the instruments of the two females; Jessie had to sit next to him, since Carolyn from the start assumed the position of priority, next to the sopranos. Terry, glancing over past Maury, saw an expression of suppressed wincing on his wife’s usually cheerful face, with its long bangs and gypsy complexion. In the privacy of their home Jessie almost wept. “He just *blows*,” she complained, “every note, as loud as he can. Tonight, on the little Purcell, I *very* tactfully pointed out to him all the pianissimos and diminuendos, and he nodded, that obtuse handsome way he has of nodding, and then when the time came blasted away as if he was pouring buckshot into some poor trembling quail. And on top of everything else he’s a disgusting racist fascist!” During the beer and cigarettes tonight they had discussed politics; these after-sessions, as they all got to know each other, were getting longer and longer, so that sometimes they broke up not short of midnight, even though the recorder playing always ended on the stroke of ten, as chimed by the clock in the hall—a tall case clock of walnut and pine, with a pewter face, that Terry associated with Andrea’s half of the furnishings, and that he loved for having her quiet elegance and soft severity.

“Darling,” he said to Jessie, of Maury, “he’s just a small-town conservative—a good old boy, Yankee-style.”

She looked at him warily; ever since meeting at a Seabrook sit-in, they had always been in perfect political agreement. Now Terry found her, he was implying, priggishly liberal. And he had noticed that as they all played together he could distinguish the three sopranos—iridescently warbling Toula, fumbling Alice, and Andrea dropping away on the high notes, receding and vanishing into her seductive distance—and even hear Carolyn steadfastly keeping the alto beat amid Maury’s oblivious wandering, but he could never quite hear Jessie, his own wife, playing. He could see her lips prehensile on the fipple, her slightly protruding chocolate-colored eyes intent on the sheet music, her slightly thick coarse eyebrows arched in concentration, her stubby-nailed, practical fingers twitching on the stops, and not hear her. The effect was mysterious but not unpleasant. Caught between Maury’s alto and Dick McHoagland’s onrolling tenor, Terry felt inaudible himself. However, it was comforting to know that he could lose his place and Dick would march on; and when a third tenor joined them, a divorced accountant named Jim Keel, with a port-wine stain on the side of his face that Terry couldn’t see, Terry felt his own notes blending into an ecstatic whole, a kind of blessed nonexistence such as Buddhists talk about.

For what bliss, when all is said and done, and after its musical inadequacies are all confessed, the recorder group was! Arrival was bliss, especially on winter nights when it had been a slippery battle to get the car up the Weisses’ snowy driveway, and an exciting uncertainty obtained whether or not one could get safely down at midnight. Scarves, mittens, down vests piled up on the Shaker settee in the front hall; boots accumulated under it. Cold fingers unfolded the steel music stands and assembled the wooden flutes. Cork joints were rubbed with a dainty ointment kept in cannisters smaller than pillboxes; chilled mouthpieces were tenderly warmed, held in an armpit or against open lips. In a bliss of anticipation the players would settle into the arranged arc of dining-room chairs, while the Weisses’ wood stove cracklingly digested another log in its belly and the black night pressed on the frost-feathered panes and the footsteps of the Weisses’ three children scurried overhead, on the other side of the ceiling. Preliminarily, there were scales and little abortive riffs, impudent snatches of jazz tune and hymn picked out by ear; then, when all were in place, a fidgety cough, the crushing of a last cigarette, a nervous giggle, and a premature toot. Finally, at Fritz’s firmly whispered “*One*, two, three, four,” there was a unified intake of breath and the astounding manifestation, the mellow exclamatory blended upwelling, of the first note. They were off, stumbling, weaving, squinting, blowing, tapping time with feet no two of which tapped alike.

If you looked (and Terry, often lost and dropped out, did look), some feet kept time just by flexing the big toe (Carolyn, who wore sandals to minimize her height, favored this method), some by snapping the ankle sideways (gangly Jim Keel, right under Terry’s left eye), and some by stoutly, thumpingly bouncing the heel (Maury, and also, in her insecurity, Alice). During the universal rests that came in some dramatic codas, you could hear tapping feet like a shuffling of soldiers breaking stride across a bridge.

Rarely they made it to the end of a piece without falling apart and collapsing, as Toula, Carolyn, Fritz, and Dick, the last to give up, fluttered on for another stubborn, show-offy few measures. With Jim Keel’s arrival that second winter, they had become ten in number, and unwieldy; yet no one seemed disposed to drop out or even to miss a single evening. They met even though the day’s news had brought disasters (a Beirut massacre, the Challenger blow-up); they met during the seventh game of a Red Sox World Series, whose progress the men periodically checked on a television set chattering to itself in the kitchen. Once they convened on the fringes of a hurricane called Gayle; her winds stripped leaves from trees and lifted doghouses while the group generated its own breeze this side of the shuddering windows. Andrea, cleaning up afterwards, complained to Fritz of the fortnightly intrusion: “It’s become a brawl, and the beer and potato chips cost us twenty dollars every time.”

“Perhaps we could say different people should be the host. The group should rotate.”

“That’ll make it even more of a social brawl. I know *just* when the music stopped being the point. When Maury brought Toula, without even asking any of us first!”

“But Toula’s the only one of you sopranos willing to attack the high notes. If she’d just get rid of that futuristic Japanese piece of plastic—”

“No. It’s not that. She plays everything like a solo. I don’t feel I can *grow*, as long as she’s there, doing everything so flashily. And you love her. All the men love her.”

“*Liebchen*. Don’t cry. Recorders were meant to be *fun*.”

“They’re *not* fun and never were. They’re your attempt to make me something I’m not. I’ve never been an aural person, I’ve always been visual. You know that.”

He was abashed, by an unexpected emotion that seemed less a matter of cause and effect than of a simultaneous wave and particle, a single photon passing through two slits at once. “You didn’t have to try to learn to play,” he said.

“How could I *not?*” Andrea cried. “It was such a lovely anniversary present. So *visually* lovely. The sweet little phallic shape of it, and the stripes of the pearwood grain.”

Judging the curve of her tears to have peaked, Fritz’s mind slid off on a practical tack. “I’ve been thinking,” he said, “the sessions might go better if somebody could stand up to lead. The tempo tends to drag. Sometimes by the end of a piece it feels like the Doppler effect, we’ve all slowed down so.”

“You *can’t* stand up to lead. You’re the only bass.”

“Maybe we could convert another player to the bass.”

Andrea stared at her husband with narrowed blue eyes; her eyelids were pink. “Who?”

Fritz shrugged. “Toula might enjoy the challenge.”

Her eyelids flared open. “Darling!” she exclaimed. “You’re brilliant! Get her away from me!”

By the third winter, they were rotating houses and had acquired a leader—a barrel-shaped little spinster, Miss Eleanor Hart, whom Carolyn knew from the Congregational church. Also, Toula acquired a bass. She said, with her brave brightness, “It will suit me better, at this low time of my life,” and was undaunted by either the change of clef, from G to F, or the change of fingering system, from C to F. She took the chair next to Fritz, leaving him on the end in his traditional position of leadership, and separating Fritz and Dick. Miss Hart, scarcely five feet tall and quite waistless, and dolled up in lace-trimmed layers of velvet, would lift her stubby arms and the chattering row of players would grow silent; a curt clenched hand—she conducted with her fists—would descend, and that first marvellous upwelling note would be born, and another, and then many overlapping others. She kept a clear beat and seemed curiously engaged, like a mother with secret plans for her children. She had taught the piano for decades and for a mysterious period long ago had lived in Cairo—perhaps, Terry speculated one evening over beer after she had gone, as a member of King Farouk’s harem. “What does she see in us?” he asked aloud.

“An evening out,” said Andrea, after a silence. Terry had noticed that she often seemed the only one in the group listening to him. “Anything’s better than sitting home,” she added, she who had always seemed so ideally domestic. “Most people, when you come down to it, are lonely.”

Miss Hart always left after one drink of diet cherry Coke, a lone stray can of which the Weisses had found in the back of the refrigerator when she refused beer, the first time she came to lead them. This became, then, her drink, and as the group rotated from house to house each host or hostess went to the trouble of buying a six-pack of diet cherry Coke, of which only one can was drunk until Miss Hart came round again, in four months, and drank another.

Toula’s brilliance was suitably muffled in the bass section, though she had found an eccentric instrument of bleached mahogany with aluminum fittings. She and Fritz became a musical pair; their hands in synchrony roamed the length of the romantic instruments, and with identical vigorous gestures, between numbers, they shook the spit from their tubular curved mouthpieces. Without Toula, Andrea and Alice did not quite blossom, however; their timidity of attack truncated, as it were, the rising climaxes that Bach and Pachelbel had so methodically arranged, and drained some of the Renaissance dances of lilt and verve. And now that they had a leader—an authority figure, a focus for their arc of chairs—a restless chemistry possessed the group. As it met in one house after another (even Jim Keel played host when his turn came, in his bachelor condo on the river, with its purple shag rug, triangular kitchenette, and bedroom that his surprisingly ambitious bed, a four-poster, entirely filled) the old chair arrangements seemed no longer sacred. Dick McHoagland, his he-man, can-do solidarity with Fritz broken by Toula’s appearing at their end of the arc, moved around Terry and Jim in the tenor section (leaving Jim next to Toula, on the side with his port-wine stain) to sit next to Carolyn, who in an answering move had jumped over Jessie and Maury, rendering Jessie even less audible to Terry and her pained expression even richer in accumulating grievance against male afflatus.

“I can’t *stand* it another night,” she told Terry in the privacy of their home. “Every time he blasts in my ear I think of his position on the Contras and I could scream.”

“He wouldn’t hurt a fly, really,” Terry said, ostensibly by way of comfort but really to irritate her, to provoke her to greater, more alienating fury.

“*Pfou*,” she said, expelling smoke; she had taken up smoking again, claiming she was becoming too fat without it. “He has this complacent image of himself as a New England gentleman but in fact he’s a lowbrow klutz who if he hadn’t been born with money would have no idea how to make it. He can’t even talk in complete sentences. ‘That so?’ he says, and ‘Do tell?’ The whole recorder group irritates me, in fact. Everybody’s gotten silly and full of secrets, somehow.”

“What’s *your* secret?” Terry innocently asked.

“I just told you. I don’t like anybody.”

“Not even me?”

“Less and less,” Jessie rather surprisingly confessed, bringing tears to her eyes and a twinkle of gratification to his.

He drew her closer to him on the sofa where they had been talking. “Tell you what,” he said, letting his voice, *largo*, deepen and resonate. “I’ll give you my tenor. Come join the boys.”

“You’ll swap for my alto?” she asked. “There’re already too many, with Maury playing loud enough for two.”

“Carolyn has the alto part under control, and anyway I’m not musical enough to go from a C-instrument to an F-one. I’ve been thinking of becoming a soprano. They need rescuing.”

From within his accustomed arms Jessie looked up askance out of her slightly protuberant chocolate eyes, from beneath her long bangs and thick brows, and asked, perhaps innocently, “You sure you’re up to it?”

Terry bought himself not a Moeck but, less expensively, an Adler, a smooth small instrument that felt in his hands like his tenor transposed to a daintier scale. It responded much more readily to his breath, with what seemed a certain excitement, especially when he set his nail in the thumb-hole and attacked a note above G, where Andrea tended to give out, and shy Alice never aspired. He became a specialist in high notes. The secret was to pinch the thumb-hole truly small, as if closing it with the back of the thumbnail, and to blow into the mouthpiece quickly and sharply, like checking when skiing on ice. Hit it, and ski on. Don’t panic or look too far ahead. It also helped to pronounce *tu* instead of *du* into the mouthpiece, and to think of your mouth as tiny and dry. The high A was easy, involving only two closed finger-holes, and the B not too bad, since to these two the right hand merely added two more, and the C possible, subtracting merely one, but the high D, using four fingers spaced apart, was a note he had never struck to his own satisfaction. Nor had he ever seen it called for in a piece of recorder music.

Alice or Andrea would turn to him afterwards and say, “You’re wonderful.” “Wonderful” was not in their leader’s vocabulary, but when the treble part began to move above the staff Miss Hart’s neckless, many-chinned head turned with a touching expectancy toward the end of the arc where Terry sat, on the extreme right, and in the lower left corner of his vision he could see Andrea’s blurred white hands docilely lower to her lap. Only a maestro could have hit the high notes softly, so Terry’s single instrument had volume enough for these dizzying moments when he strained alone at the top of the scale. For all his androgynous name and diffident slouching slenderness, there was a sharp passion in him, which the high notes now expressed. As they rang in the drum of his skull his senses were besieged by the shine of Andrea’s fair hair in the side of his vision, the scent of her shampoo and bath gel in his nostrils, the rustle of her sheet music and scuffle of her feet in his ears. In the summer, that third summer after the summer of the group’s beginning, he was aware of the scent of her sun-tan lotion, of the salt and chlorine dried in her hair, of an ice-creamy, cottony, dusty essence of summer rising from her, even of the musk from between her legs. Perhaps her musk was on his fingers as they twiddled on the stops; by August he and she had become lovers, and sometimes on the day of a recorder session would have met at a beach or motel halfway to Boston, in a storm of bodily fluids, including tears. But long before her surrender he had felt her body beside him like an immense word on the verge of being spoken, while they played in unison or whisperingly compared trill fingerings. When they went to bed together the first time, she instinctively lay on his left, and he on her right. Ever since he had taken up the soprano, he had felt her peripheral presence pull at him like a vacuum. Men and women in need distort the space around them, and Terry near Andrea in any circumstance, even at a May town meeting or accidentally met in the gourmet section of the supermarket on Saturday with their children in tow, felt marvellously enlarged—his voice resonant, his aura extended as if in a wavy mirror.

Nor was theirs the only warping within the group. The spectacular and able Toula, shining among them like an electronic wraith, had imperceptibly turned from Fritz, whose hairy, metallic nature did indeed have something repulsive about it, to the vividly stained face on her other side; both she and Jim Keel were excessively vivid, out of sync, singled out. And Jessie, guilty Terry observed, now that Carolyn had abandoned her to be next to Dick McHoagland (both of them married and doomed to respectability but nevertheless touching elbows and interpenetrated by their alto/tenor harmonies), was trying with a certain maternal breadth to suffer Maury’s primitive political views during the beer-and-chitchat part of the evening, when his musical squalling had died down; she seemed to look upon him a bit tenderly, her wounded dark eyes shining, as on some rough beast who was nevertheless *there*, as Terry was never there for her any more. But Maury, deaf to this change of emotional tune, was tipping his big, primly combed head with old-fashioned gallantry to catch what soft-voiced little Alice Arsenault, beaten and abandoned by one of the town’s agents of protective order, was shyly offering to say. “Do tell? That so?” They were all trying to listen to one another. It seemed to Terry—inflamed by love and distress as his psyche was—that they were making music even without the recorders and in their interaction catching at something splendid, just as individual notes, bare of nuance, in combination gain meaning and mount to an expression of otherwise inexpressible completeness and resolve. He hated to go home and face the tired babysitter, and the poor children lying sprawled in the muss of sleep, and Jessie in her ghastly aggrieved silence.

Whichever house they played in now, the trees at the windows were blood and brass; New England’s autumnal climax swelled and faded. Miss Hart was excited and proud; the Golden Agers of her church had invited the group to give a Christmas concert. They must do it, they all agreed in furtive phone conversations; she had been so kind. Andrea and Jessie, Terry and Fritz had stopped speaking but communicated through others. The affair, which had burned through to common knowledge, cast over their rehearsals a pall of which only their stout leader was oblivious; her stubby arms lifted again and again in a flurry of yellowed lace as the group repeatedly flubbed the difficult time-change into 9/8 and then 6/4 toward the end of “The Leaves Be Green.” Adson’s “Courtly Masquing Ayres” had two soprano parts, and Alice was in a panic over holding down the second descant line by herself while the lovers clung to the same part. Her former husband, the fireman and athlete, was paying her ardent attentions again and had expressed nothing but blazing scorn for the recorder group and its snobs like Maury Sutherland; drunk, Skip Arsenault once with a contemptuous laugh tossed her instrument into the fireplace, and the acrid taste of char wouldn’t leave the fipple. Every time she put it in her mouth, Alice felt a sexual shudder of ambivalence.

Toula was moving back to the city, where Jim was also thinking of getting an apartment, and they began to miss rehearsals. Maury went off on a two-week sailing trip to Bermuda, and Dick became preoccupied by the football season and the needs of marching bands. The Weisses had considered themselves a perfect couple and held true to their perfectionism to the end. The idea that they were now flawed and must be divorced had been taken up by Fritz’s mind in a grip of steel. No legal steps were to be initiated until after the concert. Since the other players were nervously shying away, the Weisses steadfastly hosted the meetings, as they had at the beginning. On these terminal evenings, before the other players arrived, Andrea would try, across the chaste space of their underfurnished living room, as Fritz fetched in the dining-room chairs, to punish herself by feeling some tenderness for her husband; but the very rigor with which he arranged the chairs in a mathematical arc, and the grim ironic courtesy he had shown her ever since the night when she had revealed her secret in a flood of tears, merely confirmed her in her bleak coldness. “Stop acting so righteous,” she might blurt out, maddened by his calm. “You began it, enticing Toula into the basses. I was so insulted and upset, and you never noticed.”

“That was a sound move,” Fritz would insist. “It gave us much better balance.”

“It meant Terry had to become a soprano, for everybody’s good.”

“He didn’t at all. You could have carried the section if you’d tried.”

“I did try,” she said, “I *did*,” happy to feel tears coming again—her eyelids were always pink these days—for their blinding action seemed to absolve her. On recorder evenings, Fritz always changed out of his professorial clothes into corduroy pants, the same cardigan sweater with elbow patches, and a pair of green espadrilles such as old European men wear; the sight of these espadrilles senilely shuffling on the striped carpet her young fingers had once woven seemed to absolve her further.

The concert consisted of the well-worn Byrd; two surefire Bach fugues; “My Robin Is to the Greenwood Gone” and “And Will He Not Come Again?” from Kenneth Meek’s contemporary setting of Ophelia’s songs; “Patourelles Joliettes” and “Je l’Ay, Je l’Ay la Gente Fleur,” by Claude Le Jeune (1528–1601); three of the “ayres” by John Adson (b. ?, d. 1640); a bit of Bartók and Hindemith to wake the crowd up; and, perhaps ill-advisedly, some Purcell “Music to Dioclesian,” chock-full of flats and dotted sixteenths. The program was too ambitious; Miss Hart flailed away at the spottily attended rehearsals sensing that the glue had gone out of her group but not knowing why. Jessie, catching a glimpse of, just beyond Alice, Andrea’s pink-and-white profile next to her animatedly bobbing husband’s, would find her lips trembling and her breath raw in her throat like vomit. Grimly Fritz clamped down on the stops and puffed wind into his metal mouthpiece as if pinching curses from the side of his mouth. By unspoken agreement, the Bridgetons would leave the Weisses’ house early, before the beer, even before Miss Hart had downed her diet cherry Coke.

Yet the concert was a success. The elderly crowd in the Congregational church’s parish hall didn’t know what recorders were supposed to sound like, and accepted the dissonance and awry counterpoint as one more proof that music, like everything else in this world, has progressed. What they heard was what the group itself had heard on all those evenings of gathering: the sudden stunning beauty of the first note, blown through a little forest of wooden flutes. And the players, the men in gray suits and the women in formal dresses, looked so relatively young, so handsome and vital and pretty, and were so obliging to be here, under poor dear Eleanor’s direction, that the applause thundered in. The group played all the encores it had prepared—“Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes,” a saucy Handel bourrée, and, finally, “Silent Night.”

Infected by the warmth of the audience, the ten members of the group joined their sweaty hands and bowed. In front of these old faces, and amid the crowd afterwards, they felt cherished as children are cherished, just for being themselves. Jessie gave Andrea, over by the bowl of pink punch, a curious hysterical kiss; neither had slept much last night. In their crisis Andrea had become skinnier and Jessie plumper. Terry felt hot and exhausted and exalted, on the eve of a new life. Nobody peeking in the tall parish-hall windows at the performers and listeners mingling in a steamy atmosphere of congratulation and relief beneath the mistletoe and red and green streamers would have guessed that the recorder group was dead.