CHAPTER IV
Beattie’s fiction focuses upon the generation that came to self-definition and self-realisation during the era of the 1960s, the “Woodstock generation.” Beattie did not set out to be a chronicler of the sixties and the baby boomer generation – a label she finds reductive and dismissive. She simply wrote about the people who surrounded her: educated New Englanders, some who’d participated in the counter culture of the sixties, languishing now in the ennui of the seventies, fighting vague disappointments and failures with impulsive acts and eccentric obsessions. Especially regarding relationships, Beattie was fascinated with examining people’s passivity – “this whole Becketian thing – I can’t stay and I can’t go” – but she chose not to excuse the circumstances in which her characters found themselves, or explicate how they got these. Instead she adopted the dead pan, stark style. “I think I was a kind of sponge,” Beattie says. “I soaked up all of the obvious weirdness that was around me, and I tended to be non-judgemental. That tone, apparently superimposed with the more outlandish things, was surprising to people.”1
Beattie in all her works has detailed the lives of characters caught in the ennui of lost idealism. Her search is for connectedness, for a way of making contact with a place, a relationship, or a philosophy that can bring meaning to their lives and passion to the circuit of their days. Largely unable to connect, Beattie’s characters drift-in and out of love, from job to job, from locale to locale. “Often they are cynical; more often than not, they are too burned emotionally even to search for a new dread to replace the dreams they have lost.”²

Beattie employs a prose style which parallels the listlessness of the characters through flat, declarative sentences and detached observations; she maintains an even tone whether describing a dinner party or a miscarriage. The crystalline quality of Beattie’s prose is praised and her dispassionate style is often considered unsettling.

Numbness pervades the parched, exhausted mood of her stories. Utterly toneless, she reads them herself into a plain, flat voice that suggests deadened feelings or, on occasion, a determined attempt to fight back-tears. Her wan sentences and neutral cadences follow one upon another with sharp, chill clarity. Wandering like their protagonists’ days, her stories have no resolution in part because their people cannot make sense of life, in part because nothing ends in any case. As if to invest the eventful frenzy and clamorous manic swings of the world according to
television, a Beattie story is naked of explosions or alarums. It has no strain, and no looseness; no lyricism or radiance or rhythm or hope. Reading it is like driving for mile after mile down a straight road through a snow covered desert.

Beattie’s deftest narrative tricks is to catch the blur of personal relations in today’s America by plunging her reader without any introduction or reference into a chaos of first names. Upon beginning one of her stories, it always takes a while to determine the relations between the floating soap bubbles: a child can easily be mistaken for a boy friend, a gay lover for a brother, or a son. For the family structure of middle class America has imploded, and domestic structures have been grotesquely distorted and distended. People seem to change spouses, disguises, even sexual preferences at random: “that children do not know their uncles, girls are older than their step-mothers and many need calculators to count their siblings or parents.” Everybody cares about relating to everybody else in part. Perhaps, because relatives are unknown. Nothing is quite as it seems or as it should be.

Beattie’s spare, soft-spoken prose is singularly observant. She can conjure up a dog without a single physical detail, so keen in her sense of gesture. She clearly knows the very pulse and heart beat of her dreamless drifters – indeed with her long fair hair, air of seraphic funkiness, and
apparently itinerant, make-shift life-style she seems to belong in their midst. She performs many tasks with unrivalled skill: conveying the weary braveness of children and their secret wish to be children again, or the poignancy of the grown men who try to entertain them, equally eager and equally desperate; pinning down voguish tastes, brand-name allusions and aimless dialogue; sketching pale, lead-coloured skies. "The transparency of her unblinking, unstinting realism seems almost photographic" and ultimately all these stories may be best regarded as a collection of photos in an album: each records a situation, revives a memory and redeems nothing. Reading them is like consulting a doctor's x-ray of contemporary America. But just as a doctor is vulnerable to the very disease he treats, the closeness of Beattie's manner to her matter can be suffocating. "Privy to anomie, her stories become party to it; faithful to the details of the world, they seem treacherous to the energy and heroic idealism that are America's saving grace."5

Beattie remains a severe stylist, allowing few metaphors, lulling rhythms, or rich sense appeals, and no verbal play. Beckett's prose has been thought an influence. In "Winter: 1978" the opening passage may be an unconscious Pinter-parody or a self-parody, but it's typical of the almost perverse way Beattie launches her stories:
Benton and Olivia had just arrived in L.A. Nick had gone to the airport to meet them. Olivia said she wasn’t feeling well and insisted on getting a cab to the hotel, even though Nick offered to drive her and meet Benton at Allen Tompkin’s house later.\(^6\)

The listlessness of characters is clearly seen in the passage. Four characters have been mentioned so far, but there is a refusal to focus anything with a perceiver’s emotions or a narrator’s explanations. The passage continues:

The man who had also come to the airport to meet Benton was Tompkin’s driver. Nick could never remember the man’s name. Benton was in L.A. to show his paintings to Tompkins. Tompkins would buy everything he had brought Benton was wary of Tompkins, and of his driver, so he had asked Nick to meet him at the airport and to go with him.\(^7\)

The passage reads like a story problem in Algebra 1, a puzzle with a catch to it, nearly a farce. Yet such enigmatic openings are fundamental to Beattie’s story telling. “Stories that begin in bizarre tangles of ambiguous relationships and not with explanations or solutions but usually with clarified enigmas.”\(^8\) “Cindrella Waltz,” for example turns out to be almost
precise. It is not about the wife’s shocked discovery that her husband, Milo left her for a man named Bradley or that Milo is now dumping Bradley and his nine-year-old daughter for a new life on the West Coast. “It proves rather to be about the peculiar relationship that now exists between the wife and Bradley, less sympathy than identification.”

Beattie seems uneasy as a cartoonist, while her proven talents – as a fine-tuner of casual dialogue, an observer of post-sixties mores, and a collector of late-twentieth century artifacts are subverted by the distracting clamor all around, by the erosion of reader’s confidence in an over extended capricious narrator. Few readers, certainly, will be inclined to look for – or be much affected by the starker, quieter motifs that Beattie has rather elegantly laced through the novel *Love Always*. On its surface the novel would appear to be most seriously concerned with the ironic dynamics of loveless love and hollow ambitions. But there is also, barely discernible amid the narrative chaos, a potentially powerful, largely squandered counter theme: Maureen’s remembered miscarriage is the first in a series of references, throughout the book, to childless woman, and orphaned children – perhaps suggesting that the only love with an “always” guarantee is the link between parent and child. This hard working jumble of comic or portentous gestures becomes – like
most of the anecdotes Lucy Spenser knows — just “another story that made things tenuous and a bit ironic,”

Beattie’s power and influence, arise from her seemingly resistless immersion in the stoic bewilderment of a generation without a cause, a generation for whom love as well as politics is a consumer item too long on the shelves and whose deflationary mood is but dimly brightened by the background chirping of nostalgia — inducing postures and the faithful attendance of personable petdogs. She was the first to find the tone for the post-Vietnam, post-engage mood and remade reality out of short, concrete sentences and certifiable, if small sensations; in the absence of any greater good, the chronic appearance of food on the table becomes an event worth celebrating. Ann Beattie employs a much less minimalist style and achieves a new emotional depth as she explores themes that include the sadness of middle age and the alienation of characters whose relationships and very lives seem inevitably to falter.

She is one of the much celebrated and much maligned minimalists. Her first novel, Chilly Scenes of Winter, read like a minimalist manifesto, and established her as a minimalist. Ironic, exceedingly simple in plot and diction, the novel joined a Hemming Wayesque syntax to a hip me-decade vision of pop culture. The effect was like reading “Big two-hearted River” rewritten as a script for, say, Robert Altman. Above all,
the novel’s manner was beguilingly plain. Here is a good example of minimalist sentences in action on a random page of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*.

She’s very nice, Charles thinks. Why couldn’t you like her? He looks down at the piece of paper again and makes a notation on the pad. He has the eerie feeling that when he looks up Laura and Jim and Rebecca will be there. He throws his pen down. He gets up and picks up the pen, goes back to the desk and sits down. Lobster Newburg. That must have been delicious. That cheese-burger was awful.

After fifteen years Beattie still presents an array of standard minimalist props. Her pages are laden with brand names. Popular tunes float in the background. The TV is always on. And yet the sentences are radically different:

Without knowing much about him, without even knowing until they applied for a marriage licence, that he had been married before, without ever pausing to consider how strange, it was that he had no friends and that his own brother was mystified that he had been asked to attend the wedding without any knowledge beyond what she saw in his eyes and what she felt when she touched his body.
she was willing to leave behind worried friends, argue with and finally stop speaking to her parents, and view her own ambition with skepticism.\textsuperscript{12}

Chilly Scenes of Winter took up the lives of young people just out of school, unattached and on the move. Its sentences – even its pages, so full of white space – suggested the atomistic nature of its characters and their lives. Picturing Will, on the other hand is a meditation upon that most mysterious and profound of all human attachments – that of parent to child. Its language complicates itself accordingly.

The novel sets forth a network of relationships centering on a young boy named Will. Jody, Will’s mother, lives with him in Virginia; she’s a wedding photographer who keeps wishing she could be marrying the men whose weddings she photographs. Mel, Jody’s New York boy friend wants her to marry him. He brings Will to the city, and takes up a life as a real photographer – that is as an artist. Wayne, Jody’s first husband and Will’s father, is a philanderer, who is living with his current third wife, Corky, in Florida, where his job as a delivery man provides ample opportunity to pursue his favourite hobby.

The narrative is well constructed, showing the reflections on parenting –
You have created the child, but you could not have anticipated the child’s power. Because the child’s presence and desires are so constant, it becomes the course of least possible pain to persuade yourself that being subsumed is synonymous with parenthood.¹³

These portentous observations form a kind of text of which the story itself seems to have been intended as an illustration. But that story, unfortunately is both fragmentary and tedious. Its events are desultory in the extreme. Mel arranges a show for Jody in a New York gallery. It succeeds, and Jody launches a new career. Will plays with his best friend, Wagoner. He asks a trip to Florida to see his father. Wayne has a torrid affair with a woman who turns out to be involved in cocaine deals. He gets arrested. Patsy Chine sings “You Belong to Me” as they take Will’s father away. Will goes back to New York; Jody marries Mel. Thus the novel ends.

_Picturing Will_ is a novel of pointless, annoying disgressions. The disgressive mode weakens the larger elements of the novel as well. Inquiring into every conceivable “story” leaping about among multiple points of view, burdening characters with their pasts as if with several layers of clothing, the narrative has trouble performing the simplest motion. There is a night marish quality to _Picturing Will_. Story opens into
story opens into story, and we forget where we started. In a certain sense, *Picturing Will* is the ultimate democratic narrative – it continually hands the microphone over to the audience; it lets every person’s story be told. One longs for a touch of the novelist’s benign authoritarianism. What has been minimised here is not prose but architecture; not the novel’s emotions, but its form.

Beattie understands and evokes the significance to an observing parent of something as small as a child’s tripping over a light cord and then fingering out what has happened.

He reaches down and puts the plug into the socket again and as he does that, you look at his quick concentration and know that you have lost him for all time.¹⁴

It is a virtue of *Picturing Will* to understand that a child can be lost to something as undramatic as competence. Ultimately however, such small revelations get lost in a flood of sentimental longing. Curiously, the object of everyone’s affection, the actual will, is not persuasively present in the novel. He is seen; we know a lot about him physically, but we don’t know much about him from the inside. In the mosaic of perspectives the novel attempts to paint, his is the least vividly done. And yet all the other
characters are set into action by their relation to him. The effect for the reader is a weird.

But as a young writer, Ann Beattie was rather more experimental than the mature. *In Distortions* she employs the flat style, a Beattie trade mark. The opening passage in “Hale Hardy and the Amazing Animal Woman” reveals the peculiar willlessness and passiveness of her characters:

Hale Hardy went to college because he couldn’t think of anything better to do, and he quit because he couldn’t see any reason to stay. He lasted one and a half years. He didn’t exactly quit; he was thrown out. When that happened he went to visit his sister Mary, who was living with another girl, Paula, who was being supported by some dude. Hale didn’t know the dude’s name, or why he was supporting her, or why his sister was living there. He just went.15

The passage reveals more than the style of Beattie. The characters do not act but are acted upon. The characters amazingly aim for grace at the end but very few can achieve it. They do not even aim for it carefully. Not much in life interests them. Thus in *The Burning House* the first story “Learning to Fall,” ends,
No hand-swinging like children – the proper gentleman and the lady out for a stroll. What Ruth has known all along: what will happen can’t be stopped, aim for grace.¹⁶

Politics doesn’t though they are all convinced that America is hopeless – neither conventional politics nor emotional politics. “There aren’t any answers,” says a Beattie character. “That’s what I’ve got against woman’s liberation. Nothing personal.” Although people have love affairs, once a couple moves in together, the end is in sight. Sex is no big deal. Beattie rarely describes it. Detailed description tends to be reserved for getting stoned. Few relationships endure. Work is pointless. Things fall apart; the center, hell, in Ann Beattie’s fiction not even the fringes seem to hold.

Ann Beattie is least interested in plot construction in the conventional sense. In some respects she works on anti-plot. Her fiction strives to achieve not in development of character, or accounts of motivation or moral resolution but in states of feeling. In the story “Greenwich Time” in The Burning House, a man is at the house of his former wife and her current husband; the house was one he once lived in with his wife. Now he is alone in it with his young son and the maid. His ex-wife and her husband are late unusually late. Generally they are home long before now. It is worrisome. Yet why they are late, whether they - eventually arrive home safely, these are things we never learn. Instead the
story ends with the maid telling the man that, though he may have been dispossessed from this house, she is still his friend.

Then they stood there, still and quiet, as if the walls of the room were mountains and their words might fly against them.\(^{17}\)

That is it. The End of story.

'Brevity' is another marked feature of Beattie's writing. A few of the stories in *Where You'll Find Me* pursue economy to the point of inconclusiveness, but most of them have the sensitive elegance one hopes far from Beattie. The cultivation of brevity, however, makes it hard to read as a book only two of the stories run to more than 11 pages, and a kind of vertigo sets in as one struggles to adjust to rapid changes of characters, settings and issues. In another novel *Love Always*, the impressive gravity of outlook has plenty of room for a large, outrageous comic inventiveness. "But there are few laughs or even smiles to be had in *Where You'll Find Me*, and few venturings beyond a rather buttoned-down obliquity and economy of means."\(^{18}\)

The act of speaking is the act of choosing speech over silence deciding where to begin and end. Beattie's female speakers are telling stories with value, self-assertion and closure. But they puzzle readers because they tell two stories at once: the open story of the objective,
detailed present is juxtaposed with a closed story of the subjective past, a story the speaker tries hard not to tell. In the space between these two narratives lies the point of the story.

Seymour Chatman makes a useful distinction between the closed and open narrative, which he calls the resolved plot and the revealed plot:

In the traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem solving... of a kind of ratiocinative or emotional teleology... “what will happen?” is the basic question. In the modern plot of revelation, however, the emphasis is elsewhere, the function of the discourse not to answer that question or even pose it... It is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically) but rather that a state of affairs is revealed.¹⁹

Unlike Chatman, Beattie does not distinguish between the two plots, but juxtaposes them. Trying to avoid telling the closed story, Beattie’s speakers create unintentional resolution as they tell stories of undesired revelation. This narrative reluctance results in a disembodied, objective voice whose analytical language and photographic descriptions – often using free indirect speech rather than a more traditional first or third person perspective – emphasize the disparity between the emotional past and the seemingly objective present between the closed story and the
open story. In “Waiting” a story from her collection *The Burning House*, for example the narrator talks about her husband’s leaving in terms of things, not emotions:

He forgot: his big battery lantern and his can opener. He remembered: his tent, the collar filled with ice,... a camera, a suitcase, a fiddle and a banjo.²⁰

The narrator herself is omitted from either list. Carolyn Heilbrun comments:

Women like children have told stories in which the details are more important than the plot, in which their own action is not possible, not imagined.²¹

For Beattie’s speakers, action seems impossible because the story has already ended; the details allow the narrator to objectify the present and disguise her emotional response to the past. For example, “Like Glass,” suspends the narrative present by beginning with a description of an old family photograph of a father, baby and dog that puzzles the narrator because the baby is “gazing into the distance.” When her husband explains the picture to her she says,
I was amazed that I had made a mystery of something that had such a simple answer. It is a picture of a baby looking at its mother.\textsuperscript{22}

But her original interpretation, based on what is missing in the photograph, reflects the complex juxtaposition of closed and open stories. What is absent may reveal what is present:

The coolie is dead. The man with a pampadour... was alive, the last time I heard. The baby grew up and became my husband, and now is no longer married to me.\textsuperscript{23}

Her narrative is motivated by the desire to reopen the past by describing two events – glass broken in celebration and glass broken in anger – and thus link “two things that are similar, although they have nothing in common” in order to create a happy ending. “The point is that broken glass is broken glass.” She tells her daughter, but her narrative connects these past events and the present failure of her marriage as resolution and revelation meet. “One mistake and glass shatters,” the narrator warns. And the story ends with the question “What do you do with a shard of sorrow?” What the narrator’s dual stories have in common is loss-focusing on details rather than on closure – “What’s new with me? My divorce is final” – the narrator still tells us, through the resolved tales she
tells her daughter and the revealed tale she tells us, that broken glass is more than broken glass.

Beattie’s stories use images of physical suspension, like characters ascending in glass elevators in “The Cindrella Waltz,” treading water in “Afloat” in “the desire, for one brief minute, simply to get off the earth,” and “looking down … from space” in “The Burning House.” In “Down Hill,” a story from her first collection Distortions, Beattie’s narrator describes this suspension:

As he leads he tilts me back and suddenly I can’t feel the weight of his arms anymore. My body is very heavy and my neck stretches farther and farther back until my body seems to stretch out of the room, passing painlessly through the floor into blackness.24

This narrative disembodiment is physical, emotional and verbal, creating a subtle interpretive suspension. In “Gravity” from The Burning House, the narrator thinks of astronauts and feels –

The lightness of a person who isn’t being kept in place by gravity, but weightlessness has been from sadness and fear.25

Margaret Atwood compares a Beattie narrator to a “climber seizing the next rung on the ladder without having any idea of where he’s going or
wants to go,” and in “Sunshine and Shadow” a professor ridicules a student’s interpretation by asking her if she would “also climb a ladder using the spaces between rungs.”

In their desire to speak themselves into silence, Beattie’s narrators try to erase their individuality by comparisons and doublings. They always fail. “People often mistake us for sisters,” brags the narrator in “Play back,” but her story is really about their differences: “Simple, fortune-cookie fact: some one loved Holly more than any one had ever loved me” and “that went a long way toward explaining why we looked so much alike, yet she was more beautiful.” In “Afloat,” the narrator explains to her stepdaughter “that there should be solidarity between women, but that when you look for a common bond you’re really looking for a common denominator, and you can’t do that with women.” Even so she claims that “our common denominator is that none of us was married in a church and all of us worried about the results of the blood test we had before we could get a marriage licence.” “Most of these things have to do with love, in some odd way” admits the narrator in “Running Dreams,” and in these stories love and its failure inevitably reinforces individuality rather than commonality.

In Beattie’s world of multiple divorce and infidelity, these speakers dream of conventional romance and its happy ending to disguise
the failure of love in their individual stories. Repeatedly, Beattie’s speakers seek “erotic texts,” in Nancy K. Miller’s phrase, in which the “heroine” Will not just triumph “in some conventionally positive way but ... will transcend the perils of plot with a self exalting dignity” and marry the man she loves. Repeatedly Beattie women fail to find such endings. Beattie’s narrators dream of the happy ending even as they speak its sad revision in their own lives. They seek fairy tales, but “was my persistence willfulness, or belief in magic?” asks the narrator in “The Cindrella Waltz”, who could really believe that there was some way to find protection in this world – or someone who could offer it?” asks the bereaved mother in “In the White Night.” “What happened at random, and one horrible thing hardly precluded the possibility of other happening next.” And the narrator of “Learning to Fall” ends her story with a sort of moral: “What will happen can’t be stopped. Aim for grace.”

Beattie’s story “In the White Night” ends with this grace. Although the story employs the narrative doubling it is unusual in Beattie’s works because there is a reconciliation between the open and closed stories.

Beattie’s narratives surprise us because they demand the sort of double vision and it is no small adjustment. Anatole Broyard claims in the New York Times that Beattie causes “the shock of unrecognition”. After reading Beattie’s stories he admits that “I felt like a psychiatrist at the end
of a hard day. I would like to run out and hug the first stodgy person I can find. I am beginning to feel like an alarmed ecologist of personality.\textsuperscript{27}

But like any good analyst, like any careful reader, we must listen to the tale not being told in order to understand Beattie’s narrative acts. Fortunately for readers, Beattie’s speakers do not choose silence.

Thus Beattie has become perhaps our most authoritative translator – transcriber of the speech patterns, non-verbal communications, rituals, and tribal customs of those white, largely middle class members who came up age around 1970 – who attended or dropped out of college, smoked dope, missed connections, lived communally, and drifted in and out of relationships with a minimum of self-recognised affect or commitment.
References

4. Ibid.
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7. Ibid.
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