

SATIRE



John Irving

(1942-)

from *The World According to Garp* (1978)

...When the drooling sergeant was brought to Boston Mercy, Jenny Fields had trouble categorizing him. He was clearly an Absentee, more docile than a child, but she wasn't sure how much else was wrong with him.

"Hello. How are you?" she asked him, when they wheeled him—grinning—into the ward.

"Garp!" he barked. The oculomotor nerve had been partially restored, and his eyes now leapt, rather than rolled, but his hands were wrapped in gauze mittens, the result of Garp's playing in an accidental fire that broke out in the hospital compound aboard his transport ship. He's seen the flames and had reached out his hands to them, spreading some of the flames up to his face; he'd singed off his eyebrows. He looked a lot like a shaved owl, to Jenny.

With the burns, Garp was an External and an Absentee all at once. Also, with his hands so heavily bandaged, he had lost the ability to masturbate, an activity that his papers said he pursued frequently and successfully—and without any self-consciousness. Those who'd observed him closely, since his accident with the ship's fire, feared that the childish gunner was becoming depressed—his one adult pleasure taken from him, at least until his hands healed.

It was possible, of course, that Garp had Vital Organ damage as well. Many fragments had entered his head; many of them were too delicately located to be removed. Sergeant Garp's brain damage might not stop with his crude lobotomy; his internal destruction could be progressing. "Our general deterioration is complicated enough," Garp wrote, "without the introduction of flak to our systems."

There'd been a patient before Sergeant Garp whose head had been similarly penetrated. He'd been fine for months, just talking to himself and occasionally peeing in his bed. Then he started to lose his hair; he had trouble completing his sentences. Just before he died, he began to develop breasts.

Given the evidence, the shadows, and the white needles in the X rays, Gunner Garp was probably a Goner. But to Jenny Fields he looked very nice. A small, neat man, the former ball turret gunner was as innocent and straightforward in his demands as a two-year-old. He cried "Garp!" when he was hungry and "Garp!" when he was glad; he asked "Garp?" when something puzzled him, or when addressing strangers and he said "Garp" without the question mark when he recognized you. He usually did what he was told, but he couldn't be trusted; he forgot easily, and if one time he was as obedient as a six-year-old, another time he was as mindlessly curious as if he were one and a half.

His depressions, which were well documented in his transport papers, seemed to occur simultaneously with his erections. At these moments he would clamp his poor, grown-up peter between his gauzy, mittened hands and weep. He wept because the gauze didn't feel as good as his short memory of his hands, and also because it hurt his hands to touch anything. It was then that Jenny Fields would come sit with him. She would rub his back between his shoulder blades until he tipped back his head like a cat, and she'd talk to him all the while, her voice friendly and full of exciting shifts of accent. Most nurses droned to their patients—a steady, changeless voice intent on producing sleep, but Jenny knew that it wasn't sleep Garp needed. She knew he was only a baby, and he was bored—he needed some distraction. So Jenny entertained him. She played the radio for him, but some of the programs upset Garp; no one knew why. Other programs gave him terrific erections, which led to his depressions, and so forth. One program, just once, gave Garp a wet dream, which so surprised and pleased him that he was always eager to *see* the radio. But Jenny couldn't find that program again, she couldn't repeat the performance. She knew that if she could plug poor Garp into the wet-dream program, her job and his life would be much happier. But it wasn't that easy.

She gave up trying to teach him a new word. When she fed him and she saw that he liked what he was eating, she'd say, "Good! That's *good*."

"Garp!" he'd agree.

And when he spat out food on his bib and made a terrible face, she'd say, "Bad! That stuff's *bad*, right?"

"Garp!" he'd gag.

The first sign Jenny had of his deterioration was when he seemed to lose the G. One morning he greeted her with an "Arp."

"Garp," she said firmly to him. "G-arp."

"Arp," he said. She knew she was losing him.

Daily he seemed to grow younger. When he slept, he kneaded the air with his wriggling fists, his lips puckering, his cheeks sucking, his eyelids trembling. Jenny had spent a lot of time around babies; she knew that the ball turret gunner was nursing in his dreams. For a while she contemplated stealing a pacifier from maternity, but she stayed away from the place now; the jokes irritated her ("Here's Virgin Mary Jenny, swiping a phony nipple for her child. Who's the lucky father, Jenny?") She watched Sergeant Garp suckle in his sleep and tried to imagine that his ultimate regression would be peaceful, that he would turn into his fetus phase and no longer breathe through his lungs; that his personality would blissfully separate, half of him turning to dreams of an egg, half of him to dreams of sperm. Finally, he simply wouldn't *be* anymore.

It was almost like that. Garp's nursing phase became so severe that he seemed to wake up like a child on a four-hour feeding schedule; he even cried like a baby, his face scarlet, his eyes springing tears in an instant, and in an instant being pacified—by the radio, by Jenny's voice. Once, when she rubbed his back, he burped. Jenny burst into tears. She sat at his bedside wishing him a swift, painless journey back into the womb and beyond.

If only his hands would heal, she thought. Then he could suck his thumb. When he woke from his suckling dreams, hungry to nurse, or so he imagined, Jenny would put her own finger to his mouth and let his lips tug at her. Though he had real, grown-up teeth, in his *mind* he was toothless and he never bit her. It was this observation that led Jenny, one night, to offer him her breast, where he sucked inexhaustibly and didn't seem to mind that there was nothing to be had there. Jenny thought that if he kept nursing at her, she *would* have milk; she felt such a firm tug in her womb, both maternal and sexual. Her feelings were so vivid—she believed for a while that she could possible *conceive* a child simply by suckling the baby ball turret gunner.

It was almost like that. But Gunner Garp was not all baby. One night, when he nursed at her, Jenny noticed he had an erection that lifted the sheet; with his clumsy, bandaged hands he fanned himself, yelping frustration while he wolfed at her breast. And so one night she helped him; with her cool, powdered hand she took hold of him. At her breast he stopped nursing, he just nuzzled her.

"Ar," he moaned. He had lost the P.

Once a Garp, then an Arp, now only an Ar; she knew he was dying. He had just one vowel and one consonant left.

When he came, she felt his shot wet and hot in her hand. Under the sheet it smelled like a greenhouse in summer, absurdly fertile, growth gotten out of hand. You could plant *anything* there and it would blossom.

Garp's sperm struck Jenny Fields that way: if you spilled a little in a greenhouse, *babies* would sprout out of the dirt.

Jenny gave the matter twenty-four hours of thought.

"Garp?" Jenny whispered.

She unbuttoned the blouse of her dress and brought forth the breasts she had always considered too large. "Garp?" she whispered in his ear; his eyelids fluttered, his lips reached. Around them was a white shroud, a curtain on runners, which enclosed them in the ward. On one side of Garp was an External—a flame-thrower victim, slippery with salve, swaddled in gauze. He had no eyelids, so it appeared he was always watching, but he was blind. Jenny took off her sturdy nurse's shoes, unfastened her white stockings, stepped out of her dress. She touched her finger to Garp's lips.

On the other side of Garp's white-shrouded bed was a Vital Organ patient on his way to becoming an Absentee. He had lost most of his lower intestine and his rectum; now a kidney was giving him trouble and his liver was driving him crazy. He had terrible nightmares that he was being forced to urinate and defecate, though this was ancient history for him. He was actually quite unaware when he did those things, and he did them through tubes into rubber bags. He groaned frequently and, unlike Garp, he groaned in whole words.

"Shit," he groaned.

"Garp?" Jenny whispered. She stepped out of her slip and her panties; she took off her bra and pulled back the sheet.

"Christ," said the External, softly; his lips were blistered with burns.

"Goddamn shit!" cried the Vital Organ man.

"Garp," said Jenny Fields. She took hold of his erection and straddled him.

"Aaa," said Garp. Even the *r* was gone. He was reduced to a vowel sound to express his joy or his sadness. "Aaa," he said, as Jenny drew him inside her and sat on him with all her weight.

"Garp?" she asked. "Okay? Is that good, Garp?"

"*Good*," he agreed, distinctly. But it was only a word from his wrecked memory, thrown clear for a moment when he came inside her. It was the first and last true word that Jenny Fields heard him speak: good. As he shrank and his vital stuff seeped from her, he was once again reduced to Aaa's; he closed his eyes and slept. When Jenny offered him her breast, he wasn't hungry.

"God!" called the External, being very gentle with the *d*; his tongue had been burned too.

"Piss!" snarled the Vital Organ man.

Jenny Fields washed Garp and herself with warm water and soap in a white enamel hospital bowl. She wasn't going to douche, of course, and she had no doubt that the magic had worked. She felt more receptive than prepared soil—the nourished earth—and she had felt Garp shoot up inside her as generously as a hose in summer (as if he could water a lawn).

She never did it with him again. There was no reason. She didn't enjoy it. From time to time she helped him with her hand, and when he cried for it, she gave him her breast, but in a few weeks he had no more erections. When they took the bandages off his hands, they noticed that even the healing process seemed to be working in reverse; they wrapped him back up again. He lost all interest in nursing. His dreams struck Jenny as the dreams a fish might have. He was back in the womb, Jenny knew; he resumed a fetal position, tucked up small in the center of the bed. He made no sound at all. One morning Jenny watched him kick with his small, weak feet; she imagined she felt a kick *inside*. Though it was too soon for the real thing, she knew the real thing was on its way.

Soon Garp stopped kicking. He still got his oxygen by breathing air with his lungs, but Jenny knew this was simply an example of human adaptability. He wouldn't eat; they had to feed him intravenously, so once again he was attached to a kind of umbilical cord. Jenny anticipated his last phase with some anxiousness. Would there be a struggle at the end, like the sperm's frantic struggle? Would the sperm shield be lifted and the naked egg wait, expectantly, for death? In little Garp's return trip, how would his *soul* at last divide? But the phase passed without Jenny's observation. One day, when she was off duty, Technical Sergeant Garp died.

"When *else* could he have died?" Garp has written. "With my mother off duty was the only way he could escape."

"Of course I *felt* something when he died," Jenny Fields wrote in her famous autobiography. "But the best of him was inside me. That was the best thing for both of us, the only way he could go on living, the

only way I wanted to have a child. That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn't respect the rights of an individual."

It was 1943. When Jenny's pregnancy was apparent, she lost her job. Of course, it was all that her parents and brothers had expected; they weren't surprised. Jenny had long ago stopped trying to convince them of her purity. She moved through the big corridors in the parental estate at Dog's Head Harbor like a satisfied ghost. Her composure alarmed her family, and they left her alone. Secretly, Jenny was quite happy, but with all the musing she must have done about this expected child, it's a wonder she never gave a thought to names.

Because, when Jenny Fields gave birth to a nine-pound baby boy, she had no name in mind. Jenny's mother asked her what she wanted to name him, but Jenny had just delivered and had just received her sedative; she was not cooperative.

"Garp," she said.

Her father, the footwear king, thought she had burped, but her mother whispered to him, "The name is *Garp*."

"Garp?" he said. They knew they might find out who this baby's father was, this way. Jenny, of course, had not admitted a thing.

"Find out if that's the son of a bitch's first name or last name," Jenny's father whispered to Jenny's mother.

"Is that a first name or a last name, dear?" Jenny's mother asked her.

Jenny was very sleepy. "It's Garp," she said. Just Garp. That's the whole thing."

"I think it's a last name," Jenny's mother told Jenny's father.

"What's his *first* name?" Jenny's father asked crossly.

"I never knew," Jenny mumbled. This is true; she never did.

"She never knew his first name!" her father roared.

"Please, dear," her mother said. "He *must* have a first name."

"Technical Sergeant Garp," said Jenny Fields.

"A goddamn soldier, I knew it!" her father said.

"Technical Sergeant?" Jenny's mother asked her.

"T. S.," Jenny Fields said. "T. S. Garp. That's my baby's name." She fell asleep.

Her father was furious. "T. S. Garp!" he hollered. "What kind of a name for a baby is *that*?"

"All his own," Jenny told him, later. "It's his *own* goddamn name, all his own."

"It was great fun going to school with a name like that," Garp has written. "The teachers would ask you what the initials stood for. First I used to say that they were *just* initials, but they never believed me. So I'd have to say, 'Call my mom. She'll tell you.' And they would. And old Jenny would give them a piece of her mind."

Thus was the world given T. S. Garp: born from a good nurse with a will of her own, and the seed of a ball turret gunner—his last shot.

John Irving
excerpt from the end of Chapter 1
The World According to Garp
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The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner (1945)

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly til my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrell

