Heavier than Heaven

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prologue HEAVIER THAN HEAVEN

NEW YORK, NEW YORK
JANUARY 12, 1992

Heavier Than Heaven
—A slogan used by British concert promoters to describe Nirvana's 1989 tour with the band Tad. It summed up both Nirvana's "heavy" sound and the heft of 300-pound Tad Doyle.

The first time he saw heaven came exactly six hours and fifty-seven minutes after the very moment an entire generation fell in love with him. It was, remarkably, his first death, and only the earliest of many little deaths that would follow. For the generation smitten with him, it was an impassioned, powerful, and binding devotion—the kind of love that even as it begins you know is preordained to break your heart and to end like a Greek tragedy.

It was January 12, 1992, a clear but chilly Sunday morning. The temperature in New York City would eventually rise to 44 degrees, but at 7 a.m., in a small suite of the Omni Hotel, it was near freezing. A window had been left open to air out the stench of cigarettes, and the Manhattan morning had stolen all warmth. The room itself looked like a tempest had engulfed it: Scattered on the floor, with the randomness of a blind man's rummage sale, were clumps of dresses, shirts, and shoes. Toward the suite's double doors stood a half dozen serving trays covered with the remnants of several days of room service meals. Half-eaten rolls and rancid slices of cheese littered the tray tops, and a handful of fruit flies hovered over some wilted lettuce. This was not the typical condition of a four-star hotel room—it was the consequence of someone

warning housekeeping to stay out of the room. They had altered a "Do Not Disturb" sign to read, "Do Not EVER Disturb! We're Fucking!"

There was no intercourse this morning. Asleep in the king-size bed was 26-year-old Courtney Love. She was wearing an antique Victorian slip, and her long blond hair spread out over the sheet like the tresses of a character in a fairy tale. Next to her was a deep impression in the bedding, where a person had recently lain. Like the opening scene of a film noir, there was a dead body in the room.

"I woke up at 7 a.m. and he wasn't in the bed," remembered Love. "I've never been so scared."

Missing from the bed was 24-year-old Kurt Cobain. Less than seven hours earlier, Kurt and his band Nirvana had been the musical act on "Saturday Night Live." Their appearance on the program would prove to be a watershed moment in the history of rock 'n' roll: the first time a grunge band had received live national television exposure. It was the same weekend that Nirvana's major label debut, *Nevermind*, knocked Michael Jackson out of the No. 1 spot on the *Billboard* charts, becoming the best-selling album in the nation. While it wasn't exactly overnight success—the band had been together four years—the manner in which Nirvana had taken the music industry by surprise was unparalleled. Virtually unknown a year before, Nirvana stormed the charts with their "Smells Like Teen Spirit," which became 1991's most recognizable song, its opening guitar riff signifying the true beginning of nineties rock.

And there had never quite been a rock star like Kurt Cobain. He was more an anti-star than a celebrity, refusing to take a limo to NBC and bringing a thrift-store sensibility to everything he did. For "Saturday Night Live" he wore the same clothes from the previous two days: a pair of Converse tennis shoes, jeans with big holes in the knees, a T-shirt advertising an obscure band, and a Mister Rogers–style cardigan sweater. He hadn't washed his hair for a week, but had dyed it with strawberry Kool-Aid, which made his blond locks look like they'd been matted with dried blood. Never before in the history of live television had a performer put so little care into his appearance or hygiene, or so it seemed.

Kurt was a complicated, contradictory misanthrope, and what at times appeared to be an accidental revolution showed hints of careful orchestration. He professed in many interviews to detest the exposure

he'd gotten on MTV, yet he repeatedly called his managers to complain that the network didn't play his videos nearly enough. He obsessively—and compulsively—planned every musical or career direction, writing ideas out in his journals years before he executed them, yet when he was bestowed the honors he had sought, he acted as if it were an inconvenience to get out of bed. He was a man of imposing will, yet equally driven by a powerful self-hatred. Even those who knew him best felt they knew him hardly at all—the happenings of that Sunday morning would attest to that.

After finishing "Saturday Night Live" and skipping the cast party, explaining it was "not his style," Kurt had given a two-hour interview to a radio journalist, which finished at four in the morning. His working day was finally over, and by any standard it had been exceptionally successful: He'd headlined "Saturday Night Live," had seen his album hit No. 1, and "Weird Al" Yankovic had asked permission to do a parody of "Teen Spirit." These events, taken together, surely marked the apogee of his short career, the kind of recognition most performers only dream of, and that Kurt himself had fantasized about as a teenager.

Growing up in a small town in southwestern Washington state, Kurt had never missed an episode of "Saturday Night Live," and had bragged to his friends in junior high school that one day he'd be a star. A decade later, he was the most celebrated figure in music. After just his second album he was being hailed as the greatest songwriter of his generation; only two years before, he had been turned down for a job cleaning dog kennels.

But in the predawn hours, Kurt felt neither vindication nor an urge to celebrate; if anything, the attention had increased his usual malaise. He felt physically ill, suffering from what he described as "recurrent burning nauseous pain" in his stomach, made worse by stress. Fame and success only seemed to make him feel worse. Kurt and his fiancée, Courtney Love, were the most talked-about couple in rock 'n' roll, though some of that talk was about drug abuse. Kurt had always believed that recognition for his talent would cure the many emotional pains that marked his early life; becoming successful had proven the folly of this and increased the shame he felt that his booming popularity coincided with an escalating drug habit.

In his hotel room, in the early hours of the morning, Kurt had taken

a small plastic baggie of China white heroin, prepared it for a syringe, and injected it into his arm. This in itself was not unusual, since Kurt had been doing heroin regularly for several months, with Love joining him in the two months they'd been a couple. But this particular night, as Courtney slept, Kurt had recklessly—or intentionally—used far more heroin than was safe. The overdose turned his skin an aqua-green hue, stopped his breathing, and made his muscles as stiff as coaxial cable. He slipped off the bed and landed facedown in a pile of clothes, looking like a corpse haphazardly discarded by a serial killer.

"It wasn't that he OD'd," Love recalled. "It was that he was DEAD. If I hadn't woken up at seven. . .I don't know, maybe I sensed it. It was so fucked. It was sick and psycho." Love frantically began a resuscitation effort that would eventually become commonplace for her: She threw cold water on her fiancé and punched him in the solar plexus so as to make his lungs begin to move air. When her first actions didn't get a response, she went through the cycle again like a determined paramedic working on a heart-attack victim. Finally, after several minutes of effort, Courtney heard a gasp, signifying Kurt was breathing once again. She continued to revive him by splashing water on his face and moving his limbs. Within a few minutes, he was sitting up, talking, and though still very stoned, wearing a self-possessed smirk, almost as if he were proud of his feat. It was his first near-death overdose. It had come on the very day he had become a star.

In the course of one singular day, Kurt had been born in the public eye, died in the privacy of his own darkness, and was resurrected by a force of love. It was an extraordinary feat, implausible, and almost impossible, but the same could be said for so much of his outsized life, beginning with where he'd come from.

1 YELLING LOUDLY AT FIRST

ABERDEEN, WASHINGTON
FEBRUARY 1967–DECEMBER 1973

He makes his wants known by yelling loudly at first, then crying if the first technique doesn't work.
—Excerpt from a report by his aunt on the eighteen-month-old Kurt Cobain.

Kurt Donald Cobain was born on the twentieth of February, 1967, in a hospital on a hill overlooking Aberdeen, Washington. His parents lived in neighboring Hoquiam, but it was appropriate that Aberdeen stand as Kurt's birthplace—he would spend three quarters of his life within ten miles of the hospital and would be forever profoundly connected to this landscape.

Anyone looking out from Grays Harbor Community Hospital that rainy Monday would have seen a land of harsh beauty, where forests, mountains, rivers, and a mighty ocean intersected in a magnificent vista. Tree-covered hills surrounded the intersection of three rivers, which fed into the nearby Pacific Ocean. In the center of it all was Aberdeen, the largest city in Grays Harbor County, with a population of 19,000. Immediately to the west was smaller Hoquiam, where Kurt's parents, Don and Wendy, lived in a tiny bungalow. And south across the Chehalis River was Cosmopolis, where his mother's family, the Fradenburgs, were from. On a day when it wasn't raining—which was a rare day in a region that got over 80 inches of precipitation a year—one could see the nine miles to Montesano, where Kurt's grandfather Leland Cobain grew up. It was a small enough world, with so few degrees of separation that Kurt would eventually become Aberdeen's most famous product.

The view from the three-story hospital was dominated by the sixth busiest working harbor on the West Coast. There were so many pieces of timber floating in the Chehalis that you could imagine using them to walk across the two-mile mouth. To the east was Aberdeen's downtown, where merchants complained that the constant rumbling of logging trucks scared away shoppers. It was a city at work, and that work almost entirely depended on turning Douglas fir trees from the surrounding hills into commerce. Aberdeen was home to 37 different lumber, pulp, shingle, or saw mills—their smokestacks dwarfed the town's tallest building, which had only seven stories. Directly down the hill from the hospital was the gigantic Rayonier Mill smokestack, the biggest tower of all, which stretched 150 feet toward the heavens and spewed forth an unending celestial cloud of wood-pulp effluence.

Yet as Aberdeen buzzed with motion, at the time of Kurt's birth its economy was slowly contracting. The county was one of the few in the state with a declining population, as the unemployed tried their luck elsewhere. The timber industry had begun to suffer the consequences of offshore competition and over-logging. The landscape already showed marked signs of such overuse: There were swaths of clear-cut forests outside of town, now simply a reminder of early settlers who had "tried to cut it all," as per the title of a local history book. Unemployment exacted a darker social price on the community in the form of increasing alcoholism, domestic violence, and suicide. There were 27 taverns in 1967, and the downtown core included many abandoned buildings, some of which had been brothels before they were closed in the late fifties. The city was so infamous for whorehouses that in 1952 *Look* magazine called it "one of the hot spots in America's battle against sin."

Yet the urban blight of downtown Aberdeen was paired with a close-knit social community where neighbors helped neighbors, parents were involved in schools, and family ties remained strong among a diverse immigrant population. Churches outnumbered taverns, and it was a place, like much of small-town America in the mid-sixties, where kids on bikes were given free rein in their neighborhoods. The entire city would become Kurt's backyard as he grew up.

Like most first births, Kurt's was a celebrated arrival, both for his parents and for the larger family. He had six aunts and uncles on his mother's side; two uncles on his father's side; and he was the first grand-

child for both family trees. These were large families, and when his mother went to print up birth announcements, she used up 50 before she was through the immediate relations. A line in the *Aberdeen Daily World*'s birth column on February 23 noted Kurt's arrival to the rest of the world: "To Mr. and Mrs. Donald Cobain, 2830½ Aberdeen Avenue, Hoquiam, February 20, at Community Hospital, a son."

Kurt weighed seven pounds, seven and one-half ounces at birth, and his hair and complexion were dark. Within five months, his baby hair would turn blond, and his coloring would turn fair. His father's family had French and Irish roots—they had immigrated from Skey Townland in County Tyrone, Ireland, in 1875—and Kurt inherited his angular chin from this side. From the Fradenburgs on his mother's side—who were German, Irish, and English—Kurt gained rosy cheeks and blond locks. But by far his most striking feature was his remarkable azure eyes; even nurses in the hospital commented on their beauty.

It was the sixties, with a war raging in Vietnam, but apart from the occasional news dispatch, Aberdeen felt more like 1950s America. The day Kurt was born, the *Aberdeen Daily World* contrasted the big news of an American victory at Quang Ngai City with local reports on the size of the timber harvest and ads from JCPenney, where a Washington's Birthday sale featured $2.48 flannel shirts. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had received thirteen Academy Award nominations in Los Angeles that afternoon, but the Aberdeen drive-in was playing *Girls on the Beach*.

Kurt's 21-year-old father, Don, worked at the Chevron station in Hoquiam as a mechanic. Don was handsome and athletic, but with his flattop haircut and Buddy Holly–style glasses he had a geekiness about him. Kurt's 19-year-old mother, Wendy, in contrast, was a classic beauty who looked and dressed a bit like Marcia Brady. They had met in high school, where Wendy had the nickname "Breeze." The previous June, just weeks after her high-school graduation, Wendy had become pregnant. Don borrowed his father's sedan and invented an excuse so the two could travel to Idaho and marry without parental consent.

At the time of Kurt's birth the young couple were living in a tiny house in the backyard of another home in Hoquiam. Don worked long hours at the service station while Wendy took care of the baby. Kurt

slept in a white wicker bassinet with a bright yellow bow on top. Money was tight, but a few weeks after the birth they managed to scrape up enough to leave the tiny house and move into a larger one at 2830 Aberdeen Avenue. "The rent," remembered Don, "was only an extra five dollars a month, but in those times, five dollars was a lot of money."

If there was a portent of trouble in the household, it began over finances. Though Don had been appointed "lead man" at the Chevron in early 1968, his salary was only $6,000 a year. Most of their neighbors and friends worked in the timber industry, where jobs were physically demanding—one study described the profession as "more deadly than war"—but with higher wages in return. The Cobains struggled to stay within a budget, yet when it came to Kurt, they made sure he was well-dressed, and even sprang for professional photos. In one series of pictures from this era, Kurt is wearing a white dress shirt, black tie, and a gray suit, looking like Little Lord Fauntleroy—he still has his baby fat and chubby, full cheeks. In another, he wears a matching blue vest and suit top, and a hat more suited to Phillip Marlowe than a year-and-a-half-old boy.

In May 1968, when Kurt was fifteen months old, Wendy's fourteen-year-old sister Mari wrote a paper about her nephew for her home economics class. "His mother takes care of him most of the time," Mari wrote. "[She] shows her affection by holding him, giving him praise when he deserves it, and by taking part in many of his activities. He responds to his father in that when he sees his father, he smiles, and he likes his dad to hold him. He makes his wants known by yelling loudly at first, then crying if the first technique doesn't work." Mari recorded that his favorite game was peekaboo, his first tooth appeared at eight months, and his first dozen words were, "coco, momma, dadda, ball, toast, bye-bye, hi, baby, me, love, hot dog, and kittie."

Mari listed his favorite toys as a harmonica, a drum, a basketball, cars, trucks, blocks, a pounding block, a toy TV, and a telephone. Of Kurt's daily routine, she wrote that "his reaction to sleep is that he cries when he is laid down to do so. He is so interested in the family that he doesn't want to leave them." His aunt concluded: "He is a happy, smiling baby and his personality is developing as it is because of the attention and love he is receiving."

Wendy was a mindful mother, reading books on learning, buying

flash cards, and, aided by her brothers and sisters, making sure Kurt got proper care. The entire extended family joined in the celebration of this child, and Kurt flourished with the attention. "I can't even put into words the joy and the life that Kurt brought into our family," remembered Mari. "He was this little human being who was so bubbly. He had charisma even as a baby. He was funny, and he was bright." Kurt was smart enough that when his aunt couldn't figure out how to lower his crib, the one-and-a-half-year-old simply did it himself. Wendy was so enamored of her son's antics, she rented a Super-8 camera and shot movies of him—an expense the family could ill afford. One film shows a happy, smiling little boy cutting his second-year birthday cake and looking like the center of his parents' universe.

By his second Christmas, Kurt was already showing an interest in music. The Fradenburgs were a musical family—Wendy's older brother Chuck was in a band called the Beachcombers; Mari played guitar; and great-uncle Delbert had a career as an Irish tenor, even appearing in the movie *The King of Jazz*. When the Cobains visited Cosmopolis, Kurt was fascinated by the family jam sessions. His aunts and uncles recorded him singing the Beatles' "Hey Jude," Arlo Guthrie's "Motorcycle Song," and the theme to "The Monkees" television show. Kurt enjoyed making up his own lyrics, even as a toddler. When he was four, upon his return from a trip to the park with Mari, he sat down at the piano and crafted a crude song about their adventure. "We went to the park, we got candy," went the lyrics. "I was just amazed," recalled Mari. "I should have plugged in the tape recorder—it was probably his first song."

Not long after he turned two, Kurt created an imaginary friend he called Boddah. His parents eventually became concerned about his attachment to this phantom pal, so when an uncle was sent to Vietnam, Kurt was told that Boddah too had been drafted. But Kurt didn't completely buy this story. When he was three, he was playing with his aunt's tape machine, which had been set to "echo." Kurt heard the echo and asked, "Is that voice talking to me? Boddah? Boddah?"

In September 1969, when Kurt was two and a half, Don and Wendy bought their first home at 1210 East First Street in Aberdeen. It was a two-story, 1,000-square-foot house with a yard and a garage. They paid $7,950 for it. The 1923-era dwelling was located in a neighborhood

occasionally given the derogatory nickname "felony flats." North of the Cobain house was the Wishkah River, which frequently flooded, and to the southeast was the wooded bluff locals called "Think of Me Hill"—at the turn of the century it had sported an advertisement for Think of Me cigars.

It was a middle-class house in a middle-class neighborhood, which Kurt would later describe as "white trash posing as middle-class." The first floor contained the living room, dining room, kitchen, and Wendy and Don's bedroom. The upstairs had three rooms: a small playroom and two bedrooms, one of which became Kurt's. The other was planned for Kurt's sibling—that month Wendy had learned she was pregnant again.

Kurt was three when his sister Kimberly was born. She looked, even as an infant, remarkably like her brother, with the same mesmerizing blue eyes and light blond hair. When Kimberly was brought home from the hospital, Kurt insisted on carrying her into the house. "He loved her so much," remembered his father. "And at first they were darling together." Their three-year age difference was ideal because her care became one of his main topics of conversation. This marked the beginning of a personality trait that would stick with Kurt for the rest of his life—he was sensitive to the needs and pains of others, at times overly so.

Having two children changed the dynamic of the Cobain household, and what little leisure time they had was taken up by visits with family or Don's interest in intramural sports. Don was in a basketball league in winter and played on a baseball team in summer, and much of their social life involved going to games or post-game events. Through sports, the Cobains met and befriended Rod and Dres Herling. "They were good family people, and they did lots of things with their kids," Rod Herling recalled. Compared with other Americans going through the sixties, they were also notably square: At the time no one in their social circle smoked pot, and Don and Wendy rarely drank.

One summer evening the Herlings were at the Cobains' playing cards, when Don came into the living room and announced, "I have a rat." Rats were common in Aberdeen because of the low elevation and abundance of water. Don began to fashion a crude spear by attaching a butcher knife to a broom handle. This drew the interest of five-year-old Kurt, who followed his father to the garage, where the rodent was

in a trash can. Don told Kurt to stand back, but this was impossible for such a curious child and the boy kept inching closer until he was holding his father's pant leg. The plan was for Rod Herling to lift the lid of the can, whereupon Don would use his spear to stab the rat. Herling lifted, Don threw the broomstick but missed the rat, and the spear stuck into the floor. As Don tried in vain to pull the broom out, the rat—at a calm and bemused pace—crawled up the broomstick, scurried over Don's shoulder and down to the ground, and ran over Kurt's feet as he exited the garage. It happened in a split second, but the combination of the look on Don's face and the size of Kurt's eyes made everyone howl with laughter. They laughed for hours over this incident, and it would become a piece of family folklore: "Hey, do you remember that time Dad tried to spear the rat?" No one laughed harder than Kurt, but as a five-year-old he laughed at everything. It was a beautiful laugh, like the sound of a baby being tickled, and it was a constant refrain.

In September 1972, Kurt began kindergarten at Robert Gray Elementary, three blocks north of his house. Wendy walked him to school the first day, but after that he was on his own; the neighborhood around First Street had become his turf. He was well-known to his teachers as a precocious, inquisitive pupil with a Snoopy lunchbox. On his report card that year his teacher wrote "real good student." He was not shy. When a bear cub was brought in for show-and-tell, Kurt was one of the only kids who posed with it for photos.

The subject he excelled in the most was art. At the age of five it was already clear he had exceptional artistic skills: He was creating paintings that looked realistic. Tony Hirschman met Kurt in kindergarten and was impressed by his classmate's ability: "He could draw anything. Once we were looking at pictures of werewolves, and he drew one that looked just like the photo." A series Kurt did that year depicted Aquaman, the Creature From the Black Lagoon, Mickey Mouse, and Pluto. Every holiday or birthday his family gave him supplies, and his room began to take on the appearance of an art studio.

Kurt was encouraged in art by his paternal grandmother, Iris Cobain. She was a collector of Norman Rockwell memorabilia in the form of

Franklin Mint plates with *Saturday Evening Post* illustrations on them. She herself recreated many of Rockwell's images in needlepoint—and his most famous painting, "Freedom From Want," showing the quintessential American Thanksgiving dinner, hung on the wall of her doublewide trailer in Montesano. Iris even convinced Kurt to join her in a favorite craft: using toothpicks to carve crude reproductions of Rockwell's images onto the tops of freshly picked fungi. When these oversized mushrooms would dry, the toothpick scratchings would remain, like backwoods scrimshaw.

Iris's husband and Kurt's grandfather, Leland Cobain, wasn't himself artistic—he had driven an asphalt roller, which had cost him much of his hearing—but he did teach Kurt woodworking. Leland was a gruff and crusty character, and when his grandson showed off a picture of Mickey Mouse that he'd drawn (Kurt loved Disney characters), Leland accused him of tracing it. "I did not," Kurt said. "You did, too," Leland responded. Leland gave Kurt a new piece of paper and a pencil and challenged him: "Here, you draw me another one and show me how you did it." The six-year-old sat down, and without a model drew a near-perfect illustration of Donald Duck and another of Goofy. He looked up from the paper with a huge grin, just as pleased at showing up his grandfather as in creating his beloved duck.

His creativity increasingly extended to music. Though he never took formal piano lessons, he could pound out a simple melody by ear. "Even when he was a little kid," remembered his sister Kim, "he could sit down and just play something he'd heard on the radio. He was able to artistically put whatever he thought onto paper or into music." To encourage him, Don and Wendy bought a Mickey Mouse drum set, which Kurt vigorously pounded every day after school. Though he loved the plastic drums, he liked the real drums at his Uncle Chuck's house better, since he could make more noise with them. He also enjoyed strapping on Aunt Mari's guitar, even though it was so heavy it made his knees buckle. He'd strum it while inventing songs. That year he bought his first record, a syrupy single by Terry Jacks called "Seasons in the Sun."

He also loved looking through his aunts' and uncles' albums. One time, when he was six, he visited Aunt Mari and was digging through her record collection, looking for a Beatles album—they were one of his favorites. Kurt suddenly cried out and ran toward his aunt in a panic.

He was holding a copy of the Beatles' *Yesterday and Today*, with the infamous "Butcher cover," with artwork showing the band with pieces of meat on them. "It made me realize how impressionable he was at that age," Mari remembered.

He was also sensitive to the increasing strain he saw between his parents. For the first few years of Kurt's life, there wasn't much fighting in the home, but there also hadn't been evidence of a great love affair. Like many couples who married young, Don and Wendy were two people overwhelmed by circumstance. Their children became the center of their lives, and what little romance had existed in the short time they'd had prior to their kids was hard to rekindle. The financial pressures daunted Don; Wendy was consumed by caring for two children. They began to argue more and to yell at each other in front of the children. "You have no idea how hard I work," Don screamed at Wendy, who echoed her husband's complaint.

Still, for Kurt, there was much joy in his early childhood. In the summer they'd vacation at a Fradenburg family cabin at Washaway Beach on the Washington coast. In winter they'd go sledding. It rarely snowed in Aberdeen, so they would drive east into the small hills past the logging town of Porter, and to Fuzzy Top Mountain. Their sledding trips always followed a similar pattern: They'd park, pull out a toboggan for Don and Wendy, a silver saucer for Kim, and Kurt's Flexible Flyer, and prepare to slide down the hill. Kurt would grab his sled, get a running start, and hurl himself down the hill the way an athlete would commence the long jump. Once he reached the bottom he would wave at his parents, the signal he had survived the trip. The rest of the family would follow, and they would walk back up the hill together. They'd repeat the cycle again and again for hours, until darkness fell or Kurt dropped from exhaustion. As they headed toward the car Kurt would make them promise to return the next weekend. Later, Kurt would recall these times as the fondest memories of his youth.

When Kurt was six, the family went to a downtown photo studio and sat for a formal Christmas portrait. In the photo, Wendy sits in the center of the frame with a spotlight behind her head creating a halo; she rests on an oversized, wooden high-backed chair, wearing a long white-and-pink-striped Victorian dress with ruffled cuffs. Around her neck is a black choker, and her shoulder-length strawberry blond hair is parted

in the middle, not a single strand out of place. With her perfect posture and the manner in which her wrists hang over the arms of the chair, she looks like a queen.

Three-year-old Kim sits on her mom's lap. Dressed in a long, white dress with black patent leather shoes, she appears as a miniature version of her mother. She is staring directly at the camera and has the appearance of a child who might start crying at any moment.

Don stands behind the chair, close enough to be in the picture but distracted. His shoulders are slightly stooped and he wears more of a bemused look than a legitimate smile. He is wearing a light purple long-sleeved shirt with a four-inch collar and a gray vest—it's an outfit that one could imagine Steve Martin or Dan Aykroyd donning for their "wild and crazy guys" skit on "Saturday Night Live." He has a far-off look in his eyes, as if he is wondering just why he has been dragged down to the photo studio when he could be playing ball.

Kurt stands off to the left, in front of his father, a foot or two away from the chair. He's wearing two-tone, striped blue pants with a matching vest and a fire-truck red long-sleeved shirt a bit too big for him, the sleeves partially covering his hands. As the true entertainer in the family, he is not only smiling, but he's laughing. He looks notably happy—a little boy having fun on a Saturday with his family.

It is a remarkably good-looking family, and the outward appearances suggest an all-American pedigree—clean hair, white teeth, and well-pressed clothes so stylized they could have been ripped out of an early seventies Sears catalog. Yet a closer look reveals a dynamic that even to the photographer must have been painfully obvious: It's a picture of a family, but not a picture of a marriage. Don and Wendy aren't touching, and there is no suggestion of affection between them; it is as if they're not even in the same frame. With Kurt standing in front of Don, and Kim sitting on Wendy's lap, one could easily take a pair of scissors and sever the photograph—and the family—down the middle. You'd be left with two separate families, each with one adult and one child, each gender specific—the Victorian dresses on one side, and the boys with wide collars on the other.