# The World According to Garp

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Extract

# *The World According to Garp*

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# *Boston Mercy*

Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, was arrested in Boston in 1942 for wounding a man in a movie theater. This was shortly after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and people were being tolerant of soldiers, because suddenly everyone *was* a soldier, but Jenny Fields was quite firm in her intolerance of the behavior of men in general and soldiers in particular. In the movie theater she had to move three times, but each time the soldier moved closer to her until she was sitting against the musty wall, her view of the newsreel almost blocked by some silly colonnade, and she resolved she would not get up and move again. The soldier moved once more and sat beside her.

Jenny was twenty-two. She had dropped out of college almost as soon as she'd begun, but she had finished her nursing-school program at the head of her class and she enjoyed being a nurse. She was an athletic-looking young woman who always had high color in her cheeks; she had dark, glossy hair and what her mother called a mannish way of walking (she swung her arms), and her rump and hips were so slender and hard that, from behind, she resembled a young boy. In Jenny's opinion, her breasts were too large; she thought the ostentation of her bust made her look 'cheap and easy'.

She was nothing of the kind. In fact, she had dropped out of college when she suspected that the chief purpose of her parents' sending her to Wellesley had been to have her dated by and eventually mated to some well-bred man. The recommendation of Wellesley had come from her older brothers, who had assured her parents that Wellesley women were not thought of loosely and were considered high in marriage potential. Jenny felt that her

education was merely a polite way to bide time, as if she were really a cow, being prepared only for the insertion of the device for artificial insemination.

Her declared major had been English literature, but when it seemed to her that her classmates were chiefly concerned with acquiring the sophistication and the poise to deal with men, she had no trouble leaving literature for nursing. She saw nursing as something that could be put into immediate practice, and its study had no ulterior motive that Jenny could see (later she wrote, in her famous autobiography, that too many nurses put themselves on display for too many doctors; but then her nursing days were over).

She liked the simple, no-nonsense uniform; the blouse of the dress made less of her breasts; the shoes were comfortable, and suited to her fast pace of walking. When she was at the night desk, she could still read. She did not miss the young college men, who were sulky and disappointed if you wouldn't compromise yourself, and superior and aloof if you would. At the hospital she saw more soldiers and working boys than college men, and they were franker and less pretentious in their expectations; if you compromised yourself a little, they seemed at least grateful to see you again. Then, suddenly, everyone was a soldier – and full of the self-importance of college boys – and Jenny Fields stopped having anything to do with men.

'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'was a lone wolf.'

The Fields' family fortune was in shoes, though Mrs Fields, a former Boston Weeks, had brought some money of her own to the marriage. The Fields family had managed well enough with footwear to have removed themselves from the shoe factories years ago. They lived in a large, shingled house on the New Hampshire shore at Dog's Head Harbor. Jenny went home for her days and nights off – mainly to please her mother, and to convince the grande dame that although Jenny was 'slumming her life away as a nurse', as her mother remarked, she was not developing slovenly habits in her speech or in her moral person.

Jenny frequently met her brothers at the North Station and rode home on the train with them. As all members of the Fields family were bidden to do, they rode on the right-hand side of the Boston

and Maine when the train left Boston and sat on the left when they returned. This complied with the wishes of the senior Mr Fields, who admitted that the ugliest scenery lay on that side of the train, but he felt that all Fieldses should be forced to face the grimy source of their independence and higher life. On the right-hand side of the train, leaving Boston, and on the left as you returned, you passed the main Fields Factory Outlet in Haverhill, and the vast billboard with the huge work shoe taking a firm step toward you. The billboard towered above the railroad yard and was reflected in countless miniatures in the windows of the shoe plant. Beneath this menacing, advancing foot were the words:

*FIELDS* FOR YOUR FEET
IN THE FACTORY OR IN
THE FIELDS!

There was a Fields line of nursing shoe, and Mr Fields gave his daughter a free pair whenever she came home; Jenny must have had a dozen pairs. Mrs Fields, who insisted on equating her daughter's leaving Wellesley with a sordid future, also gave Jenny a present every time she came home. Mrs Fields gave her daughter a hot-water bottle, or so she said – and so Jenny assumed; she never opened the package. Her mother would say, 'Dear, do you still have that hot-water bottle I gave you?' And Jenny would think a minute, believing she had left it on the train or thrown it away, and she'd say, 'I *may* have lost it, Mother, but I'm sure I don't need another one.' And Mrs Fields, bringing the package out from hiding, would press it on her daughter; it was still concealed in the drugstore paper. Mrs Fields would say, '*Please*, Jennifer, be more careful. And *use* it, please!'

As a nurse, Jenny saw little use for the hot-water bottle; she assumed it to be a touching, odd device of old-fashioned and largely psychological comfort. But some of the packages made it back to her small room near Boston Mercy Hospital. She kept them in a closet, which was nearly full of boxes of nursing shoes – also unopened.

She felt detached from her family, and thought it strange how they had lavished so much attention on her, as a child, and then at some appointed, prearranged time they seemed to stop the flow of

affection and begin the expectations – as if, for a brief phase, you were expected to absorb love (and get enough), and then, for a much longer and more serious phase, you were expected to fulfill certain obligations. When Jenny had broken the chain, had left Wellesley for something as common as nursing, she had dropped her family – and they, as if they couldn't help themselves, were in the process of dropping her. In the Fields family, for example, it would have been more appropriate if Jenny had become a doctor, or if she'd stayed in college until she *married* one. Each time she saw her brothers, her mother, and her father, they were more uncomfortable in one another's presence. They were involved in that awkward procedure of getting to unknow each other.

That must be how families are, thought Jenny Fields. She felt if she ever had children she would love them no less when they were twenty than when they were two; they might need you more at twenty, she thought. What do you really need when you're two? In the hospital, the babies were the easiest patients. The older they got, the more they needed; and the less anyone wanted or loved them.

Jenny felt she had grown up on a large ship without having seen, much less understood, the engine room. She liked how the hospital reduced everything to what one ate, if it helped one to have eaten it, and where it went. As a child she had never seen the dirty dishes; in fact, when the maids cleared the table, Jenny was sure they were throwing the dishes away (it was some time before she was even allowed in the kitchen). And when the milk truck brought the bottles *every* morning, for a while Jenny thought that the truck brought the day's dishes, too – the sound, that glassy clatter and bang, being so like the sound of the maids in the closed kitchen, doing whatever they did to the dishes.

Jenny Fields was five before she saw her father's bathroom. She tracked it down one morning by following the scent of her father's cologne. She found a steamy shower stall – quite modern, for 1925 – a private toilet, a row of bottles so unlike her mother's bottles that Jenny thought she had discovered the lair of a secret man living undetected in their house for years. In fact, she *had*.

In the hospital, Jenny knew where everything went – and she was learning the unmagical answers to where almost everything

came from. At Dog's Head Harbor, when Jenny had been a girl, the family members had their own baths, their own rooms, their own doors with their own mirrors on the backs. In the hospital, privacy was not sacred; nothing was a secret; if you wanted a mirror, you had to ask a nurse.

The most mysterious thing she had been allowed to investigate on her own, when Jenny was a child, had been the cellar and the great pottery crock which every Monday was filled with clams. Jenny's mother sprinkled cornmeal on the clams at night, and every morning they were rinsed in fresh sea water from a long pipe that ran into the basement from the sea itself. By the weekend the clams were fat and free of sand, they were growing too big for their shells, and their great, obscene necks lolled on the salt water. Jenny would help the cook sort through them on Fridays; the dead ones did not retract their necks when touched.

Jenny asked for a book about clams. She read all about them: how they ate, how they bred, how they grew. It was the first live thing she understood completely – its life, its sex, its death. At Dog's Head Harbor, human beings were not that accessible. In the hospital, Jenny Fields felt she was making up for lost time; she was discovering that people weren't much more mysterious, or much more attractive, than clams.

'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'was not one for making fine distinctions.'

One striking difference she might have seen between clams and people was that most people had some sense of humor, but Jenny was not inclined toward humor. There was a popular joke among the nurses in Boston at that time, but it was not funny to Jenny Fields. The joke involved one of the other hospitals in Boston. The hospital Jenny worked in was Boston Mercy Hospital, which was called Boston Mercy; there was also Massachusetts General Hospital, which was called the Mass General. And another hospital was the Peter Bent Brigham, which was called the Peter Bent.

One day, the joke goes, a Boston cab driver had his taxi hailed by a man who staggered off the curb toward him, almost dropping to his knees in the street. The man was purple in the face with pain; he was either strangling or holding his breath, so that talking was clearly difficult for him, and the cabby opened the door and helped

him inside, where the man lay face down on the floor alongside the back seat, tucking his knees up to his chest.

'Hospital! Hospital!' he cried.

'The Peter Bent?' the cabby asked. That was the closest hospital.

'It's worse than *bent*,' the man moaned. 'I think Molly bit it *off*!'

Few jokes were funny to Jenny Fields, and certainly not this one; no peter jokes for Jenny, who was staying clear of the issue. She had seen the trouble peters could get into; babies were not the worst of it. Of course she saw people who didn't want to have babies, and they were sad that they were pregnant; they shouldn't *have* to have babies, Jenny thought – though she mainly felt sorry for the babies who were born. She saw people who wanted to have their babies, too, and they made *her* want to have one. One day, Jenny Fields thought, she would like to have a baby – just one. But the trouble was that she wanted as little to do with a peter as possible, and nothing whatsoever to do with a man.

Most peter treatment that Jenny saw was done to soldiers. The U.S. Army would not begin to benefit from the discovery of penicillin until 1943, and there were many soldiers who didn't get penicillin until 1945. At Boston Mercy, in the early days of 1942, peters were usually treated with sulfa and arsenic. Sulfathiazole was for the clap – with lots of water recommended. For syphilis, in the days before penicillin, they used neoarsphenamine; Jenny Fields thought that this was the epitome of all that sex could lead to – to introduce *arsenic* into the human chemistry, to try to clean the chemistry up.

The other peter treatment was local and also required a lot of fluid. Jenny frequently assisted with this method of disinfecting, because the patient required lots of attention at the time; sometimes, in fact, he needed to be held. It was a simple procedure that could force as much as one hundred cc's of fluid up the penis and through the surprised urethra before it all came back, but the procedure left everyone feeling a bit raw. The man who invented a device for this method of treatment was named Valentine, and his device was called the Valentine irrigator. Long after Dr Valentine's irrigator was improved, or replaced with another irrigation device, the nurses at Boston Mercy still referred to the procedure as the Valentine

treatment – an appropriate punishment for a lover, thought Jenny Fields.

'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'was not romantically inclined.'

When the soldier in the movie theater first started changing seats – when he made his first move for her – Jenny Fields felt that the Valentine treatment would be just the thing for him. But she didn't have an irrigator with her; it was much too large for her purse. It also required the considerable cooperation of the patient. What she *did* have with her was a scalpel; she carried it with her all the time. She had not stolen it from surgery, either; it was a castaway scalpel with a deep nick taken out of the point (it had probably been dropped on the floor, or in a sink) – it was no good for fine work, but it was not for fine work that Jenny wanted it.

At first it had slashed up the little silk pockets of her purse. Then she found part of an old thermometer container that slipped over the head of the scalpel, capping it like a fountain pen. It was this cap she removed when the soldier moved into the seat beside her and stretched his arm along the armrest they were (absurdly) meant to share. His long hand dangled off the end of the armrest; it twitched like the flank of a horse shuddering the flies away. Jenny kept her hand on the scalpel inside her purse; with her other hand, she held the purse tightly in her white lap. She was imagining that her nurse's uniform shone like a holy shield, and for some perverse reason this vermin beside her had been attracted by her light.

'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'went through her life on the lookout for purse-snatchers and snatch-snatchers.'

In the theater, it was not her purse that the soldier wanted. He touched her knee. Jenny spoke up fairly clearly. 'Get your stinking hand off me,' she said. Several people turned around.

'Oh, come on,' the soldier moaned, and his hand shot quickly under her uniform; he found her thighs locked tightly together – he found his whole arm, from his shoulder to his wrist, suddenly sliced open like a soft melon. Jenny had cut cleanly through his insignia and his shirt, cleanly through his skin and muscles, baring his bones at the joint of his elbow. ('If I'd wanted to kill him,' she told the police, later, 'I'd have slit his wrist. I'm a nurse. I know how people bleed.')

The soldier screamed. On his feet and falling back, he swiped at Jenny's head with his uncut arm, boxing her ear so sharply that her head sang. She pawed at him with the scalpel, removing a piece of his upper lip the approximate shape and thinness of a thumbnail. ('I was not trying to slash his throat,' she told the police, later. 'I was trying to cut his nose off, but I missed.')

Crying, on all fours, the soldier groped his way to the theater aisle and headed toward the safety of the light in the lobby. Someone else in the theater was whimpering, in fright.

Jenny wiped her scalpel on the movie seat, returned it to her purse, and covered the blade with the thermometer cap. Then she went to the lobby, where keen wailings could be heard and the manager was calling through the lobby doors over the dark audience, 'Is there a doctor here? Please! Is someone a doctor?'

Someone *was* a nurse, and she went to lend what assistance she could. When the soldier saw her, he fainted; it was not really from loss of blood. Jenny knew how facial wounds bled; they were deceptive. The deeper gash on his arm was of course in need of immediate attention, but the soldier was not bleeding to death. No one but Jenny seemed to know that – there was so much blood, and so much of it was on her white nurse's uniform. They quickly realized she had done it. The theater lackeys would not let her touch the fainted soldier, and someone took her purse from her. The mad nurse! The crazed slasher! Jenny Fields was calm. She thought it was only a matter of waiting for the true authorities to comprehend the situation. But the police were not very nice to her, either.

'You been dating this guy long?' the first one asked her, en route to the precinct station.

And another one asked her, later, 'But how did you know he was going to *attack* you? He says he was just trying to introduce himself.'

'That's a real mean little weapon, honey,' a third told her. 'You shouldn't carry something like that around with you. That's asking for trouble.'

So Jenny waited for her brothers to clear things up. They were law-school men from Cambridge, across the river. One was a law student, the other one taught in the law school.

'Both,' Garp wrote, 'were of the opinion that the *practice* of law was vulgar, but the *study* of it was sublime.'

They were not so comforting when they came.

'Break your mother's heart,' said one.

'If you'd only stayed at Wellesley,' said the other.

'A girl alone has to protect herself,' Jenny said. 'What could be more proper?'

But one of her brothers asked her if she could prove that she had not had previous relations with the man.

'Confidentially,' whispered the other one, 'have you been dating this guy long?'

Finally, things were cleared up when the police discovered that the soldier was from New York, where he had a wife and child. He had taken a leave in Boston and, more than anything else, he feared the story would get back to his wife. Everyone seemed to agree that *would* be awful – for everyone – so Jenny was released without charges. When she made a fuss that the police had not given her back her scalpel, one of her brothers said, 'For God's sake, Jennifer, you can steal another one, can't you?'

'I didn't *steal* it,' Jenny said.

'You should have some friends,' a brother told her.

'At Wellesley,' they repeated.

'Thank you for coming when I called you,' Jenny said.

'What's a family for?' one said.

'Blood runs thick,' said the other. Then he paled, embarrassed at the association – her uniform was so besmirched.

'I'm a good girl,' Jenny told them.

'Jennifer,' said the oldest one, and her life's earliest model – for wisdom, for all that was right. He was rather solemn. He said, 'It's best not to get involved with married men.'

'We won't tell Mother,' the other one said.

'And certainly not Father!' said the first. In an awkward attempt at some natural warmth, he winked at her – a gesture that contorted his face and for a moment convinced Jenny that her life's earliest model had developed a facial tic.

Beside the brothers was a mailbox with a poster of Uncle Sam. A tiny soldier, all in brown, was climbing down from Uncle Sam's big hands. The soldier was going to land on a map of Europe. The

words under the poster said: SUPPORT OUR BOYS! Jenny's oldest brother looked at Jenny looking at the poster.

'And don't get involved with soldiers,' he added, though in a very few months he would be a soldier himself. He would be one of the soldiers who wouldn't come home from the war. He would break his mother's heart, an act he once spoke of with distaste.

Jenny's only other brother would be killed in a sailboat accident long after the war was over. He would be drowned several miles offshore from the Fields' family estate at Dog's Head Harbor. Of his grieving wife, Jenny's mother would say, 'She's still young and attractive, and the children aren't obnoxious. At least not yet. After a decent time, I'm sure she'll be able to find someone else.' It was to Jenny that her brother's widow eventually spoke, almost a year after the drowning. She asked Jenny if she thought a 'decent time' had passed and she could begin whatever had to be begun 'to find someone else'. She was anxious about offending Jenny's mother. She wondered if Jenny thought it would be all right to emerge from mourning.

'If you don't *feel* like mourning, what are you mourning for?' Jenny asked her. In her autobiography, Jenny wrote: 'That poor woman needed to be told what to *feel*.'

'That was the stupidest woman my mother said she ever met,' Garp wrote. 'And she had gone to Wellesley.'

But Jenny Fields, when she said goodnight to her brothers at her small rooming house near Boston Mercy, was too confused to be properly outraged. She was also sore – her ear, where the soldier had cuffed her, hurt her; and there was a deep muscle cramp between her shoulder blades, which made it hard for her to sleep. She thought she must have wrenched something in there when the theater lackeys had grabbed her in the lobby and pulled her arms behind her back. She remembered that hot-water bottles were supposed to be good for sore muscles, and she got out of bed and went to her closet and opened one of her mother's gift packages.

It was not a hot-water bottle. That had been her mother's euphemism for something her mother couldn't bring herself to discuss. In the package was a douche bag. Jenny's mother knew what they were for, and so did Jenny. She had helped many patients at the hospital use them, though at the hospital they were not much

used to prevent pregnancies after lovemaking; they were used for general feminine hygiene, and in venereal cases. To Jenny Fields a douche bag was a gentler, more commodious version of the Valentine irrigator.

Jenny opened all her mother's packages. In each one was a douche bag. 'Please *use* it, dear!' her mother had begged her. Jenny knew that her mother, though she meant well, assumed that Jenny's sexual activity was considerable and irresponsible. No doubt, as her mother would put it, 'since Wellesley'. Since Wellesley, Jenny's mother thought that Jenny was fornicating (as she would also put it) 'to beat the band'.

Jenny Fields crawled back to bed with the douche bag filled with hot water and snuggled between her shoulder blades; she hoped the clamps that kept the water from running down the hose would not allow a leak, but to be sure she held the hose in her hands, a little like a rubber rosary, and she dropped the nozzle with the tiny holes into her empty water glass. All night long Jenny lay listening to the douche bag leak.

In this dirty-minded world, she thought, you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore – or fast on your way to becoming one or the other. If you don't fit either category, then everyone tries to make you think there is something wrong with you. But, she thought, there is nothing wrong with me.

That was the beginning, of course, of the book that many years later would make Jenny Fields famous. However crudely put, her autobiography was said to bridge the usual gap between literary merit and popularity, although Garp claimed that his mother's work had 'the same literary merit as the Sears, Roebuck catalog.'

But what made Jenny Fields vulgar? Not her legal brothers, not the man in the movie theater who stained her uniform. Not her mother's douche bags, though these were responsible for Jenny's eventual eviction. Her landlady (a fretful woman who for obscure reasons of her own suspected that every woman was on the verge of an explosion of lasciviousness) discovered that there were nine douche bags in Jenny's tiny room and bath. A matter of guilt by association: in the mind of the troubled landlady, such a sign indicated a fear of contamination beyond even the landlady's fear.