I Am Charlotte Simmons

Tom Wolfe

1. THAT SINGLE PROMISE

Alleghany County is perched so high up in the hills of western North Carolina that golfers intrepid enough to go up there to play golf call it mountain golf. The county's only big cash crop is Christmas trees, Fraser firs mostly, and the main manufacturing that goes on is building houses for summer people. In the entire county, there is only one town. It is called Sparta.

The summer people are attracted by the primeval beauty of the New River, which forms the county's western boundary. Primeval is precisely the word for it. Paleontologists reckon that the New River is one of the two or three oldest rivers in the world. According to local lore, it is called New because the first white man to lay eyes on it was Thomas Jefferson's cousin Peter, and to him its very existence was news. He was leading a team of surveyors up to the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which form part of the Continental Divide. He reached the top, looked down the other side, and saw the same breathtaking sight that enchants outdoorsy outlanders today: a wide, absolutely clear mountain stream flanked by dense, deep green stands of virgin forest set against the immense ashy backdrop of the Blue Ridge, which from a distance really does look blue.

Not all that long ago the mountains were a wall that cut Alleghany County off from people in the rest of North Carolina so completely, they called it the Lost Province, when they thought of it at all. Modern highways have made the county accessible, but an air of remoteness, an atmosphere primeval, remains, and that is what the summer people, the campers, the canoers, the fishers, hunters, golfers, and mountain crafts shoppers love about it. There is no mall, no movie house, and not one stockbroker. To the people who lived in Sparta, the term ambition didn't conjure up a picture of harddriving, hard-grabbing businessmen in dull suits and "interesting" neckties the way it did in Charlotte or Raleigh. Families with children who were juniors or seniors in the one high school, Alleghany High, didn't get caught up in college mania the way families in the urban areas did—college mania being the ferocious, all-consuming compulsion to get one's offspring into prestigious universities. What parents in Sparta would even aspire to having a son or daughter go to a university like Dupont? Probably none. In fact, when word got out that a senior at the high school, a girl named Charlotte Simmons, would be going to Dupont in the fall, it was front-page news in The Alleghany News, the weekly newspaper.

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A month or so later, one Saturday morning at the end of May, with the high school's commencement exercises under way in the gymnasium, that particular girl, Charlotte Simmons, was very much a star. The principal, Mr. Thoms, was at the podium up on the stage at one end of the basketball court. He had already mentioned, in the course of announcing the various citations for excellence, that Charlotte Simmons had won the French prize, the English prize, and the creative writing prize. Now he was introducing her as the student who would deliver the valedictory address.

". . . a young woman who—well, ordinarily we never mention SAT scores here at the school, first, because that's confidential information, and second, because we don't like to put that much emphasis on SATs in the first place"—he paused and broke into a broad smile and beamed it across the entire audience—"but just this once, I have to make an exception. I can't help it. This is a young woman who scored a perfect sixteen hundred on the SAT and perfect fives on four different advanced-placement tests, a young woman who was chosen as one of North Carolina's two Presidential Scholars and went to Washington, to the White House—along with Martha Pennington of our English department, who was honored as her mentor—and met with the ninety-eight students and their mentors representing the other forty-nine states of our nation and had dinner with the President and shook hands with him, a young woman who, in addition, was one of the stars of our cross-country team, a young woman who—"

The subject of all this attention sat in a wooden folding chair in the first row of the ranks of the senior class, her heart beating fast as a bird's. It wasn't that she was worried about the speech she was about to give. She had gone over it so many times, she had memorized and internalized it just the way she had all those lines when she played Bella in the school play, Gaslight. She was worried about two other matters entirely: her looks and her classmates. All but her face and hair were concealed by the kelly-green gown with a white collar and the kelly-green mortarboard with a gold tassel the school issued for the occasion. Nevertheless, her face and hair—she had spent hours, hours, this morning washing her long straight brown hair, which came down below her shoulders, drying it in the sun, combing it, brushing it, fluffing it, worrying about it, since she thought it was her strongest asset. As for her face, she believed she was pretty but looked too adolescent, too innocent, vulnerable, virginal—virginal—the humiliating term itself flashed through her head . . . and the girl sitting next to her, Regina Cox, kept sighing after every young woman who. How much did Regina resent her? How many others sitting beside her and behind her in their green gowns resented her? Why did Mr. Thoms have to go on with so many young woman whos? In this moment of stardom, with practically everybody she knew looking on, she felt almost as much guilt as triumph. But triumph she did feel, and guilt has been defined as the fear of being envied.

". . . a young woman who this fall will become the first graduate of Alleghany High School to attend Dupont University, which has awarded her a full scholarship." The adults in the rows of folding chairs behind her murmured appreciatively. "Ladies and gentlemen . . . Charlotte Simmons, who will deliver the valedictory address."

Tremendous ovation. As Charlotte stood up to head for the stairs to the stage, she became terribly aware of her body and how it moved. She lowered her head to indicate modesty. With another twinge of fear of being envied, she found herself looking down at the gold of her academic sash, which went around her neck and down to her waist on either side, showing the world or at least the county that she was a member of Beta, Alleghany High's honor society. Then she realized she didn't look so much modest as hunched over. So she straightened up, a motion that was just enough to make her mortarboard, which was a fraction of an inch too big, shift slightly on top of her head. What if it fell off? Not only would she look like a hopeless fool but she would also have to bend way over and pick it up and put it back on her head—doing what to her hair? She steadied the board with one hand, but she was already at the stairs, and she had to use that hand to gather up her gown for fear of stepping on the hem as she ascended, since she held the text of her speech in the other hand. Now she was up on the stage, and the applause continued, but she was obsessed with the notion that the mortarboard might fall off, and she didn't realize until too late that she should be smiling at Mr. Thoms, who was stepping toward her with a big smile and an outstretched hand. She shook his hand, and he put his other hand on top of hers, leaned toward her, and said in a low voice, "We love you, Charlotte, and we're with you." Then he half closed his eyes and nodded his head several times, as if to say, "Don't worry, don't be nervous, you'll do fine," which was her first realization that she looked nervous.

Now she was at the podium, facing everybody sitting in folding chairs on the basketball court. They were still applauding. Right before her was the green rectangle formed by her classmates, the seniors in their caps and gowns. Regina was clapping, but slowly and mechanically and probably only because she was in the front row and didn't want to make her true feelings entirely obvious, and she wasn't smiling at all. Three rows back, Channing Reeves had his head cocked to one side and was smiling, but with one corner of his smile turned up, which made it look cool and sarcastic, and he wasn't clapping at all. Laurie McDowell, who had a gold Beta sash, too, was clapping enthusiastically and looking her right in the face with a genuine smile, but then Laurie was her friend, her only close friend in the class. Brian Crouse, with his reddish blond bangs—oh dear, Brian!—Brian was applauding in a way that seemed genuine, but he was staring at her with his mouth slightly open, as if she weren't a classmate, much less anything more than that, but some sort of . . . phenomenon. More applause, because all the adults were smiling and beaming at her and clapping for all they were worth.

Over there was Mrs. Bryant who ran the Blue Ridge Crafts shop, Miss Moody who worked in Baer's Variety Store, Clarence Dean the young postmaster, Mr. Robertson the richest man in Sparta, owner of the Robertson Christmas-tree farm, beaming and clapping wildly and she didn't even know him, and over on that side in the second row Momma and Daddy and Buddy and Sam, Daddy in his old sport jacket it looked like somebody had wrestled him into, with the collar of his sport shirt pulled way out over the collar of the jacket, Momma in her short-sleeved navy dress with the white bows, both of them suddenly looking so young instead of like two people in their forties, clapping sedately so as not to seem possessed by the sin of pride, but smiling and barely holding back their overflowing pride and joy, and, next to them, Buddy and Sam, wearing shirts with collars and staring at their sister like two little boys in a state of sheer wonder. In the same row, two seats beyond the boys, sat Miss Pennington, wearing a dress with a big print that was absolutely the wrong choice for a sixty-some-year-old woman of her ungainly bulk, but that was Miss Pennington, true to form—dear Miss Pennington!— and in that moment Charlotte could see and feel that day when Miss Pennington detained her after a freshman English class and told her, in her deep, gruff voice, that she had to start looking beyond Alleghany County and beyond North Carolina, toward the great universities and a world without limits because you are destined to do great things, Charlotte. Miss Pennington was applauding so hard that the flesh of her prodigious bosom was shaking, and then, realizing that Charlotte was looking at her, she made a fist, a curiously tiny fist, brought it almost up to her chin, and pumped it ever so slightly in a covert gesture of triumph, but Charlotte didn't dare respond with even so much as a smile—

—for fear that cool Channing Reeves and the others might think she was enjoying all the applause and might resent her even more.

Now the applause receded, and the moment had come.

"Mr. Thoms, members of the faculty, alumni and friends of the school"—her voice was okay, it was steady—"parents, fellow students, fellow classmates . . ."

She hesitated. Her first sentence was going to sound awful! She had been determined to make her speech different, not merely a string of the usual farewell sentiments. But what she was about to say—only now did she realize how it would sound—and now it was too late!

"John, Viscount Morley of Blackburn"—why had she started off with such a snobby name!—"once said, 'Success depends on three things: who says it, what she says, and how she says it. And of these three things, what she says is the least important.' "

She paused, just the way she had planned it, to let the audience respond to what was supposed to be the witty introduction to the speech, paused with a sinking heart, because her words had all but shrieked that she was an intellectual snob—

—but to her amazement they picked up the cue, they laughed appropriately, even enthusiastically—

"So I can't guarantee this is going to be a success."

She paused again. More laughter, right on cue. And then she realized it was the adults. They were the ones. In the green rectangle of her classmates, a few were laughing, a few were smiling. Many—including Brian—looked bemused, and Channing Reeves turned to Matt Woodson, sitting next to him, and they exchanged cool, cynical smirks that as much as said, "Vie count wha'? Oh gimme a break."

So she averted her eyes from her classmates and looked beyond to the adults and soldiered on:

"Nevertheless, I will try to examine some of the lessons we seniors have learned over the past four years, lessons that lie beyond the boundaries of the academic curriculum—"

Why had she said lie beyond the boundaries of the academic curriculum, which she had thought was so grand when she wrote it down—and now sounded so stilted and pompous as it fell clanking from her lips—

—but the look on the faces of the adults was rapt and adoring! They looked up in awe, thirsty for whatever she cared to give them! It began to dawn on

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her . . . they saw her as a wonder child, a prodigy miraculously arisen from the rocky soil of Sparta. They were in a mood to be impressed by whatever she cared to say.

A bit more confident now, she continued. “We have learned to appreciate many things that we once took for granted. We have learned to look at the special environment in which we live, as if it were the first time we had ever seen it. There is an old Apache chant that goes, ‘Big Blue Mountain Spirit, the home made of blue clouds, I am grateful for that mode of goodness there.’ We seniors, centuries later, are grateful, too, grateful for the way . . .”

She knew it all so completely by heart, the words began to roll out as if on tape, and her mind began to double-track . . . Try as she might to avoid it, her eyes kept drifting back to her classmates . . . to Channing Reeves . . . Why should she even care what Channing and his circle of friends and admirers thought of her? Channing had come on to her twice, and only twice—and why should she care? Channing wasn’t going to any college in the fall. He’d probably spend the rest of his days chewing and spitting Red Man while he pumped gasoline at the Mobil station or, when he lost that job from shiftlessness, working out in the Christmas-tree groves with the Mexicans, who did all the irksome toil in the county these days, a chain saw in his right hand and the nozzle of a fertilizer spreader in his left, bent from the weight of the five-gallon tank of liquid fertilizer strapped on his back. And he’d spend his nights rutting around after Regina and girls like her who would be working in the mail room at Robertson’s . . .

“We have learned that achievement cannot be measured in the cold calculations of income and purchasing power . . .”

. . . Regina . . . she’s pathetic, and yet she’s part of the “cool” crowd, the “fast” crowd, which shuts Charlotte Simmons out because she’s such a grind, such a suck-up to the faculty, because she not only gets perfect grades but cares about it, because she won’t drink or smoke pot or go along for drag races at night on Route 21, because she doesn’t say fucking this and fucking that, because she won’t give it up . . . above all, because she won’t cross that sheerly dividing line and give it up . . .

“We have learned that cooperation, pulling together as one, achieves so much more than going it alone, and . . .”

But why should that wound her? There's no reason. It just does! . . . If all those adults who were now looking up at her with such admiration only knew what her classmates thought of her—her fellow seniors, for whom she presumed to speak—if they only knew how much the sight of all those inert, uncaring faces in the green rectangle demoralized her . . . Why should she be an outcast for not doing stupid, aimless, self-destructive things?

". . . than twenty acting strictly in their own self-interest . . ."

. . . and now Channing is yawning—yawning right in her face! A wave of anger. Let them think whatever they want! The simple truth is that Charlotte Simmons exists on a plane far above them. She is not like them in any way other than that she, too, happened to grow up in Sparta. She will never see them again . . . At Dupont she will find people like herself, people who actually have a life of the mind, people whose concept of the future is actually something beyond Saturday night . . .

". . . for as the great naturalist John Muir wrote in John of the Mountains, 'The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thoughts and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains—mountain-dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest trees in Nature's workshops.' Thank you."

It was over. Great applause . . . and still greater applause. Charlotte remained at the podium for a moment. Her gaze swept over the audience and came to rest on her classmates. She pursed her lips and stared at them. And if any of them was bright enough to read her face—Channing, Regina, Brian . . . Brian, from whom she had hoped for so much!—he would know that her expression said, "Only one of us is coming down from the mountain destined to do great things. The rest of you can, and will, stay up here and get trashed and watch the Christmas trees grow."

She gathered up her text, which she hadn't looked at once, and left the stage, and for the first time she let herself bathe in the boundless admiration, the endless applause, of the adults.