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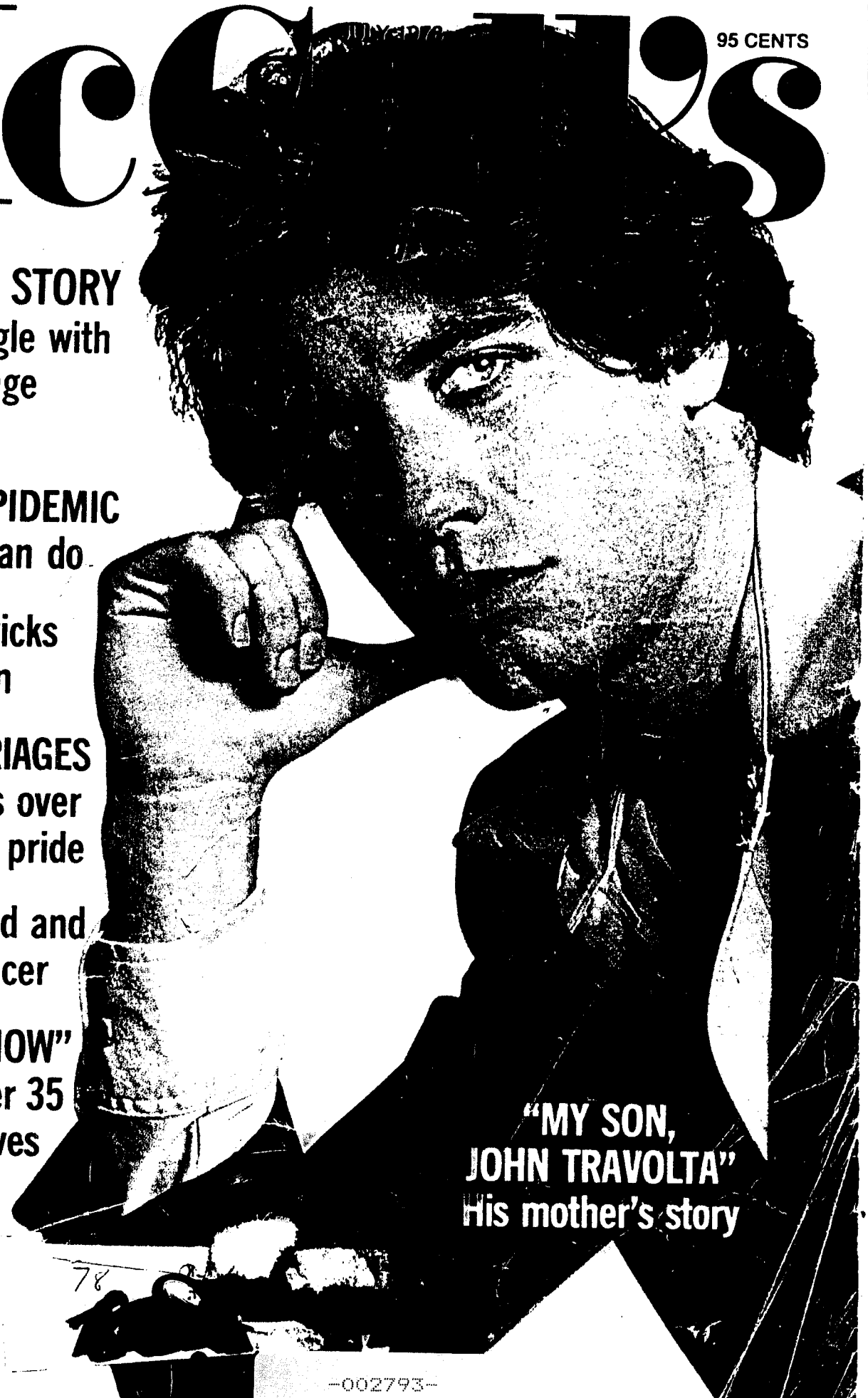

"MY SON, JOHN TRAVOLTA"
His mother's story

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JOHN TRAVOLTA: HIS MOTHER'S STORY

The young punk of *Saturday Night Fever* is really a nice boy from New Jersey whose large, loving family resembles the Waltons. "I am a woman blessed," his mother says. "I never expected a reward for bringing a baby into the world so late in my life"

BY BARBARA GRIZZUTI HARRISON

Who is John Travolta, and why are people saying such wonderful things about him?

Travolta is the hottest thing in show business; and it is exactly at this point in his career, when he has reached the dizzy heights of superstardom, that one might expect the scandalmongers to start issuing sordid revelations. But thus far, nobody has had a bad word for him—except, perhaps, John himself, who has been known to ask reporters whether he is projecting a kind of cockiness. (The answer is always *no.*) Even among professional gossips, the consensus is that the 24-year-old who became a millionaire as a result of *Saturday Night Fever* is a nice boy from a nice New Jersey family who has deservedly made it.

Sam and Helen Travolta with their "baby." Superstardom has not loosened John's very close ties with his parents.

Both as Vinnie Barbarino in "Welcome Back, Kotter" and as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever,* the young man with the mean-pretty face played petulant, narcissistic, self-absorbed punks. Even so, a certain sweetness seemed to emanate from the boy who disco-danced his way to glory and strutted across the screen with peacock-vain bravado; Travolta managed to convince us, on screen, that the bravado covered some finer, deeper longings, disguised by his own inarticulateness. Offscreen, *everybody* calls him sweet.

If sweetness and energy are hereditary, John Travolta, the youngest of six children, owes much of his success to his father and mother, the most supportive and kindest of parents—the antithesis, in fact, of Tony Manero's Italian working-class family in *Saturday Night Fever,* who had nothing but scorn and disdain for their son's dreams, and toward whom, as a consequence, Tony expressed little more than bewildered rage. Sam Travolta, John's father, is working-class Italian, the son of Neapolitan and Sicilian immigrants; Helen, John's mother, is Irish and English. They have always had respect for their children's aspirations, nurtured their ambition, and even anticipated it. John has repaid his parents with tenderness and loyalty.

"I am a woman blessed," John's mother says. "I am a satisfied man," John's father says. "We let our kids do pretty much what they wanted to do: 'You want to go out? Okay, you don't have to tell me where you're going or when you'll be home—just don't get into any trouble.'... All my kids went out and got jobs as soon as they could. I had a tire shop; it didn't bring in a lot of money. They knew we didn't have much, and they didn't want to be burdens. Johnny was working in a supermarket when he was thirteen, fourteen. Our daughter Margaret made good money—a hundred dollars a week—as a waitress, and she gave ten dollars to Helen and ten dollars to me... and she knew she had to share with the little ones, too. We have a saying in Italian, 'Even the little ones want.' Margaret would slap a couple of dollars in front of Johnny, and say, 'Here you are, brat.' She loved the brat. None of them ever got into trouble."

Helen: "Half the people who see John act think he's Vinnie Barbarino or Tony Manero. Well, Johnny's not fresh. He would never answer us back, and he's not a sweathog. And when people think he is, I say, 'I once acted Mary Magdalene in a high-school play—what do you want to make of that?' "

Sam: "We never said to Johnny, 'Why don't you become a priest like your cousin / *turn to page 158*

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Frankie?' We never told him to be a doctor or a lawyer; we never wanted him to be anything but what he wanted to be. You know why so many stars don't seem to have any past or any parents? Because they never got permission to go out on their own. It takes a long time to make it in show business, and when a kid is out on the road making no money, his parents think he's a bum. We knew Johnny wasn't a bum. He knew he could always count on us. We looked after him even after he left home."

Helen: "Now he looks after us."

John dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, when he was 16—with his parents' approval. He promised Sam and Helen that if he didn't make his mark in show business in a year, he'd be back home. He shared a cold-water flat in New York's Hell's Kitchen with his sister Ann. Within a year John was making commercials. When he was 18, he landed a part in the road company of *Grease*.... And the rest, as they say, is history.

Outside the modest frame house where Travolta was raised, a group of youngsters waits, quietly and patiently, for something—anything—to happen. Their vigil is rewarded when Sam Travolta, a balding, paunchy, cigar-smoking, kind-looking man, greets them warmly before he steps into his battered pale-blue car to get a prescription filled for his wife. The kids—who'd been gratified, earlier, by the sight of 26-year-old Joey Travolta jogging his way around the peaceful suburban street—seem quite content. They respectfully greet Sam, pleased even to get this close to their skyrocketing hero.

Things are not always this quiet on the street in Englewood, New Jersey, where John, Joe, Margaret, Ellen, Ann and Sam, Jr., grew up. From time to time, teenagers descend on the elder Travoltas with demands for articles of John's clothing. John's gentle mother attempts to satisfy them with glossy photos of her six-foot-tall "baby," worrying all the time about the safety of her youngest—and most dazzling—child; she saw him mobbed by 4,000 kids during the filming of *Saturday Night Fever* in Brooklyn, and is still shaken by the experience.

Sam Travolta is both expansive and sensitive; his innate dignity and what Joey calls his "Italian presence and charisma" soon put a stop to the wilder shenanigans of local kids—but he recalls nights, after John exploded across the screen in *Saturday Night Fever*, when his son's fans came to "nibble at the house as if it were made of gingerbread." Shingles were pried loose; plastic flowers were removed from planters on the Travoltas' porch—anything that John's hand might have touched or his blue-eyed glance might have graced, anything detachable or removable, was attacked by infatuated predators.

"They meant no harm," says Mr. Travolta. "I'm not complaining. Helen and I are grateful people. Johnny's a good boy. He always says, 'Pa, please don't sell the house. I need a place to come home to.' Anyway, why should we want to sell the house? We only pay twelve hundred dollars a year in taxes—where could we live so cheap? Of course, if we auctioned the house off bit by bit, we'd probably make a million! 'John Travolta slept here.' "

The Travoltas' decision not to leave their lower-middle-class, interracial neighborhood is inspired not just by the frugality learned from years of scarcity or from their seeming inability to assimilate the fact that John is now a rich man (and anxious to share his new wealth with his parents), but from modesty and an unblushing sentimentality.

Sam Travolta's rocking chair has occupied the same place in his living room for more than 40 years. He has rocked all six of his children in that chair. He still rocks John in that chair: "When Johnny comes home, he sits on my lap and puts his arms around my neck and says, 'What do you think, Dad? Am I doing good? Do you think I'm making the right decisions?' "

"Ah," Helen says, "Johnny asks for our opinion—and then does exactly what he was going to do anyway. When he was a little boy, he used to say, 'Ma, which shirt should I wear to school today, the blue one?' 'I think the green one,' I'd say; and Johnny would say, 'Thank you; I think I'll wear the pink one.' And he's that way with lawyers and managers and agents. He wants their advice and their approval, but he's too smart to let other people control his life; he trusts his instincts."

Sam Travolta, who wishes that "all this" could have happened earlier—"when I was a younger man, so I could have looked forward to enjoying Johnny's success longer"—nostalgically remembers when the Travolta backyard was "the playground for the entire block. I used to buy hot dogs and sauerkraut and rolls for everybody, and all the neighborhood kids came to this yard. I built them a bowling alley down in the cellar. They played with plastic balls and old bottles. Johnny used to invite them down to bowl for two cents a game. He bought five-cent soda and sold it for ten cents—any kid who knocked down ten bottles got ten free sodas—only nobody could do it. Johnny always came out ahead of the game."

Helen Travolta, surrounded by thrift-shop antiques and the curios her kids have bought her over the years, has memories of another sort. By some loose definition, she might be called a Stage Mother—but with none of the aggressiveness that term implies. When the kids were growing up, Helen, who used to act in summer stock (and is still a wicked mimic), coached drama at the local high school. All her children came with her to evening rehearsals—and all were bitten with the desire to act. When, years ago, their daughter Ellen had a walk-on part in the road company of *Gypsy*, with Ethel Merman, six-year-old John came to see his older sister. It was an experience he never recovered from: "He played the music from *Gypsy* all the time." Helen says, "and sang and danced all the parts, male and female. He

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dragged all the dress-up clothes from my costume trunk—and he was tremendous even then; he had the timing and the talent. But shy.... He's still shy.... He'd act and sing and dance in the basement so none of the older kids would catch him at it. When my other children were away at school, Johnny would say, 'Ma, let's play-act.' Even before he went to kindergarten, he could get into the skin of any character—man or woman. I think I knew even before Johnny was born that he would become a performer. He danced in my womb."

John's ability to play male and female parts at a tender age may explain what critics have referred to as a kind of androgynous quality, a combination of street-smart virility and vulnerable sensuality that leaves men unthreatened and appeals enormously to women. Lily Tomlin, with whom Travolta will star in *Moment to Moment*, a film about a disenchanted Malibu housewife and a delivery boy, says John has "every dichotomy—masculinity, femininity, refinement, crudity. You see him, you fall in love with him a little bit." Tomlin is not the only performer who is overwhelmed by Travolta. Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli are said to be discussing movie deals with him. Fred Astaire, not generally regarded as an outgoing man, threw a party for Travolta after *Saturday Night Fever*, which, according to Helen, Astaire has seen three times. Astaire is touting Travolta as the best dancer-actor to come along since...well, Fred Astaire.

The names of all these famous people are spoken with deference and diffidence by Sam and Helen Travolta, whose natural modesty vies with their pride in their son's achievements. Travolta fever may have struck the nation, but the senior Travoltas remain as unchanged as their house, whose only addition is a huge poster of John Travolta dancing in *Saturday Night Fever*.

The kind of house the Travoltas live in owes something to the fact that Helen Travolta is as independent now as she was over 40 years ago when she swam across the Hudson River in record-breaking time. (When Helen tells the story of her athletic feat, she says, with fine good humor and anecdotal finesse, "I swam across that turbulent river with hordes of photographers waiting on the other side, and when I came home, my mother said, 'Why is your hair wet?' 'Because I swam across the Hudson.' 'Well,' my mother said, 'you'd better dry it before you catch cold.' ") Helen's energy—a gift she has passed on to her electrifying son—is somewhat diminished by age and ill health.

There are rayon curtains at the windows. There are plastic flowers and doilies and cut-glass bowls, a beautiful banjo clock, a 19th-century carved Czechoslovakian chest (gnawed at by the family dog, a mongrel called Bootsie), and the paintings John grew up with: a framed reproduction of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, a still life (roses) painted by Helen's father, an 18th-century English hunting print. There are photographs of the children everywhere. There is also a photograph of astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who appeared in John's celebrated TV movie, "The Boy in the Plastic Bubble"; it is inscribed, *To John—Enjoyed our ball in the bubble.*

The heart of the house is the huge oak dining-room table, covered with a crocheted cloth, where the Travoltas have had their meals for more than 40 years.

Sitting around that table, talking, drinking endless cups of coffee served to me by Sam Travolta and eating chocolate-chip cookies urged upon me by Helen Travolta, I was impressed by their lack of pretension and warmed by the way the members of this family love, protect, support and encourage one another. The Travolta children seem scarcely to have heard of sibling rivalry: Helen—whose mother helped her raise the kids—seemed never to doubt that a good mother could also do what she loved best: act and direct.

Sam has no trouble saying, "Once we had those kids, my life became unimportant; theirs were the important lives. Helen and I wore secondhand clothes. It didn't matter; we weren't out to make a show. The main thing was the kids saw Pop wasn't putting on a hundred-dollar suit while they went without. They knew nobody was getting more than anybody else; and they knew nobody was loved more than anybody else. One of us was always at home. I could have belonged to a dozen organizations; I didn't. I don't think I spent more than ten nights out all the time the kids were growing up. My own father and mother were always home when we came home from school. I've never forgotten how important it was for me to hear my parents' voices and to know they were always there... and Helen and I made up our minds that we'd be home for our kids. We believe that kids don't forget."

There is ample evidence that they don't. Thirty-eight-year-old Ellen, the Travoltas' oldest child, lives ten minutes away from John's penthouse in West Hollywood and, according to Helen, protects John "like he was her baby." Ellen was the first Travolta to perform publicly: When she was seven, she sang "If I Knew You Were Comin', I'd 'Ave Baked a Cake" on a TV program called "Star for a Day." She married a cattle rancher whom she met when she was performing in a Chicago nightclub, and retired to Wyoming. Many years and two children later, she was enticed by John to join him in a touring company of *Bus Stop*. She did it for a lark; but Ellen, her kids now ten and 13, found that she'd "gotten the bug" again. John encouraged her to resume her career. In her first television role, she played the mother of Arnold Horshack in "Welcome Back, Kotter." She has just made a TV pilot for a series of her own; and nobody is more pleased than her kid brother.

Thirty-three-year-old Sam, Jr., who was Helen's "stage manager" in the days when Mrs. Travolta was putting on plays at Dwight Morrow High School in Englewood, lives in Ridgefield, New Jersey. The father of three children, he is trying to put a band together. When he staged a fund-raising revue for Ridgefield's Little League, Joey Travolta emceed and John flew in from California to make a surprise guest appearance that Helen says triggered off a "Fourth of July madness" in that small community.

Margaret Travolta, who is 31 and the mother of two kids, makes $80,000 a year doing TV voice-overs in Chicago. She is also beginning to do TV commercials.

Twenty-nine-year-old Ann Travolta, for whom John has found parts in summer-stock productions in which he has played, is beginning to work in films. She had one line in *Saturday Night Fever*, in a pizza parlor: "How many slices?" Helen had a tiny walk-on in *SNF*, too, as a customer in the paint store where Tony Manero worked. The Travoltas believe in keeping it all in the family. They have been called, only half in jest, the Barrymores of Bergen County.

As we sit around the dining-room table, photographs of all the Travoltas spread around us, an apparition appears: A blue-eyed, six-foot-tall young man in a jogging outfit that shows his sinewy body to good advantage. But that beautiful face and that windswept hair, while startlingly familiar, turns out to be Joey Travolta, who looks enough like John to make the collective hearts of Paramount's executives skip several beats. Joey is under contract to the studio that produced *Saturday Night Fever*, for $50,000 a year—for doing absolutely nothing. He is in protective custody, as it were: Paramount doesn't want anybody else courting him.

Joey Travolta hugs his father, kisses his mother and inquires after her health as solicitously as if he'd been away for months instead of hours. He unabashedly checks me over. Helen has complained that a lot of "strange people—journalists, they call themselves—come here and ask me strange questions about John." When she assures him that I am not "strange," he relaxes and raids the fridge: Coke, milk, poundcake and cookies. "Johnny ate more junk food than any living person," he says. "He has a love affair with Mars Bars." "Johnny's the baby," Helen says, indulgently. "You're supposed to baby babies." Joey has written a script based on his experience teaching emotionally disturbed and retarded children; a singer, he has also written the theme song for the movie, which he is about to present to Hollywood executives. He has complete confidence in what he is doing.

While his mother beams at the child she describes as her "outgoing kid," Joey says, "Film people don't intimidate me. I learned from Ma that you may have to deal with people who aren't nice, but you don't have to be like them. And I learned from my father that you can deal with anybody and just be yourself—Dad's the same way he is wherever he is.

"Am I afraid I'm going to be compared to my brother? I probably will be, by the same people with no imagination who think Johnny is Vinnie Barbarino or Tony Manero. Johnny isn't 'like' anybody else. He's Johnny. And he's versatile; he can stretch to do any part—right, Ma? If we have one thing in

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common, besides the good things our parents gave us, it's that we're street wise. I taught tough kids, and Johnny and I went to a tough school. The best actors come from the streets, not from Hollywood studios. That's what De Niro and Pacino have, and what Garfield and Bogart had. You can't get that sense of real life under the palm trees. That's why Johnny has to keep coming home, and why I'll always come back, too: This is where my life is."

When John Travolta commutes to Real Life nowadays, it's usually in one of his two planes—a single-engine Aircoupe and a DC-3. His apartment is full of model planes; he is forbidden by the studio to pilot his planes or ride his Honda when he's acting, so he has to make do with a new Mercedes. On a recent coast-to-coast flight, John packed his whole family into the DC-3, and used it like a taxi to drop various members off in Chicago and New York.

The inside of that plane is like a living room," Helen says. "Every time we stopped, caterers came on; Johnny thinks of everything. I fell asleep for a while, and when I woke up, Johnny was gone and the two pilots were sitting in the cabin. I ran to the cockpit, and there was Johnny flying that thing, and singing and looking so gorgeous in a white turtleneck and a scarf—it was just like a movie. 'Johnny,' I said, 'you *can't* fly this.' 'Come on, Ma,' he said, 'I'll give you a lesson.' I took the wheel—Johnny can make me do anything—and the plane shot up in the air. Everybody thought the world had ended."

For Sam and Helen Travolta, a new world of luxury living has begun. As soon as John began to make real money, he took them to Hawaii. This past Christmas he rented a mansion in Connecticut so the whole family could be together for the holidays. Sam and Helen went to England with him when *Saturday Night Fever* opened there, and then to the South of France. John worked—he gave interviews to the European press from seven A.M. to nine P.M.—and his parents played, somewhat guiltily. Sam was so appalled at the price he had to pay in England for his favorite cigars that he decided to ration himself. John had to tell the hotel manager to send up boxes of cigars, and then he checked daily to see that his father was smoking them.

Helen was so overwhelmed at the price of an American breakfast in a European luxury hotel that she ordered one breakfast and split it between her and Sam. John said to her, to no avail, "Think of this money like Monopoly—the studio's paying"; then he sat and watched them eat, worried that Helen wasn't getting enough nourishment: "Spoil yourself a little, Ma." "All in all," Helen says,"we'd have been happier in a small second-class hotel; that's where people like us belong. But that would have hurt Johnny's feelings. Johnny deserves all the fuss; I haven't done anything to deserve this."

Of course they went to the Academy Awards. They did not, they say, expect John to win; they—and John—wanted Burton to win... Burton, who'd said jokingly to Travolta, "If you take it from me, big boy, I'll bust your beautiful chops."

Helen, who is frail, found sitting through the five-hour award ceremonies excruciating. John, alert to his mother's pain, spent hours during the ceremony massaging her numb knees in front of 3,000 people, grinning all the time for the cameras. He tried, Helen said, to persuade her to leave, and was prepared to go with her; but nothing could induce her to absent herself from what might have been John's victory.

It was not the first time he'd acted as a nurse. When John was 17, Helen had a serious operation, and it was her youngest son who changed her bandages, applied salve to an open wound. He did it without embarrassment; his concern was that *she* might be embarrassed. Helen says: "I was forty-two when Johnny was born. I never expected a reward for bringing a baby into the world so late in my life. I took what God sent me. But if I'd listened to the people who said it was 'disgusting' to have a child at my age, I wouldn't have had Johnny. I can't imagine my world without Johnny."

John wasn't repulsed by his mother's illness; he embraces responsibility. Helen and Sam do not find it at all remarkable that he behaved with similar sensitivity and tenderness toward Diana Hyland, the 40-year-old actress who played his mother in *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*. Diana was 18 years older than John; she had a four-year-old son and a history of medical problems. They became lovers and spent six happy months together. Diana Hyland had had a mastectomy, and while John was filming *Saturday Night Fever*, she died of cancer. John turned his grief into energy. Some of his best work in *Saturday Night Fever* was done, his friends say, when he was suffering most.

Helen is eager to disabuse John's admirers of the notion that he chose Diana because of her sickness: "He didn't know Diana was sick when he fell in love—but he stuck with her when he did know, and managed to convince his associates that her frequent visits to the hospital were because of 'back trouble.' Sometimes he even managed to convince himself that they were."

Raised a Catholic by Catholic parents, John, after several months of therapy, turned to Scientology. As far as devout, churchgoing Sam is concerned, this couldn't matter less: "What matters is that it makes Johnny happy and that Johnny's a good boy. What religion is about is love; and Johnny's a loving son....I have no bad kids."

John Travolta's history did not begin with "Welcome Back, Kotter" or with *Saturday Night Fever*. It began even before Helen and Sam met and fell in love when they were 17 (and waited, because of Depression hard times, till they were 25 to marry). It began with the traditional values Sam and Helen grew up with and honored. It began when Sam's parents and Helen's parents made sacrifices—not in a spirit of renunciation, but of love—for *their* children. John grew up listening to Sam and Helen's family histories. He knows all about his paternal grandmother, who worked in a sweatshop and made all the clothes for her four boys. He knows about the times when his grandfather—who managed to scrape up enough money to start a tire shop—didn't have money to buy Easter clothes for his kids. He knows about the time when they *did* have $25 to buy suits for Sam and his three brothers, but gave it instead to a distant cousin who lived in a rat-infested tenement. He knows that he comes from a family of workers and sharers.

These stories are commonplace enough—most of us who are the children or the grandchildren of immigrants have heard similar ones. But Sam and Helen, who have held these people up to John as models, hope that they will help him keep his equilibrium. So far their hopes have been satisfied: John has taken easily to his new money, but his fame hasn't spoiled him.

"Am I good enough, Ma?" he asks. "Pa, what do you think? Am I doing good"