# Friends from Philadelphia

# John Updike

IN THE MOMENT before the door was opened to him, he glimpsed her thigh below the half-drawn shade. Thelma was home, then. She was wearing the Camp Winniwoho T-shirt and her quite short shorts.

“Why, my goodness: Janny!” she cried. She always pronounced his name, John, to rhyme with “Ann.” Earlier that summer, she had visited New York City, and tried to talk the way she thought they talked there. “What on earth ever brings you to me at this odd hour?”

“Hello, Thel,” he said. “I hope—I guess this is a pretty bad time.” She had been plucking her eyebrows again. He wished she wouldn’t do that.

Thelma extended her arm and touched her fingers to the base of John’s neck. It wasn’t a fond gesture, just a hostesslike one. “Now, Janny. You know that I—my mother and I—are always happy to be seeing you. Mother, who do you ever guess is here at this odd hour?”

“Don’t keep John Nordholm standing there,” Mrs. Lutz said. Thelma’s mother was settled in the deep-red settee watching television and smoking. A coffee cup being used as an ashtray lay in her lap, and her dress was hitched so that her knees showed.

“Hello, Mrs. Lutz,” John said, trying not to look at her broad, pale knees. “I really hate to bother you at this odd hour.”

“I don’t see anything odd about it.” She took a deep-throated drag on her cigarette and exhaled through her nostrils, the way men do. “Some of the other kids were here earlier this afternoon.”

“I would have come in if anybody had told me.”

Thelma said, “Oh, Janny! Stop trying to make a martyr of yourself. Keep in touch, they say, if you want to keep up.”

He felt his face grow hot and knew he was blushing, which made him blush all the more. Mrs. Lutz shook a wrinkled pack of Herbert Tareytons at him. “Smoke?” she said.

“I guess not, thanks a lot.”

“You’ve stopped? It’s a bad habit. I wish I had stopped at your age. I’m not sure I’d even begun at your age.”

“No, it’s just that I have to go home soon, and my mother would smell the smoke on my breath. She can smell it even through chewing gum.”

“Why must you go home soon?” Thelma asked.

Mrs. Lutz sniffled. “I have sinus. I can’t even smell the flowers in the garden or the food on the table any more. Let the kids smoke if they want, if it makes them feel better. I don’t care. My Thelma, she can smoke right in her own home, her own living room, if she wants to. But she doesn’t seem to have the taste for it. I’m just as glad, to tell the truth.”

John hated interrupting, but it was close to five-thirty. “I have a problem,” he said.

“A problem—how gruesome,” Thelma said. “And here I thought, Mother, I was being favored with a social call.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Mrs. Lutz said.

“It’s sort of complex,” John began.

“Talk like what, Mother? Talk like what?”

“Then let me turn this off,” Mrs. Lutz said, snapping the right knob on the television set.

“Oh, Mother, and I was listening to it!” Thelma toppled into a chair, her legs flashing. When she pouted, John thought, she was delicious.

Mrs. Lutz had set herself to give sympathy. Her lap was broadened and her hands were laid palm upward in it.

“It’s not much of a problem,” John assured her. “But we’re having some people to dinner from Philadelphia.” He turned to Thelma and added, “If anything is going on tonight, I can’t get out.”

“Life is just too, too full of disappointments,” Thelma said.

“Look, is there?”

“Too, too full,” Thelma said.

Mrs. Lutz made fluttery motions out of her lap. “These Philadelphia people.”

John said, “Maybe I shouldn’t bother you about this.” He waited, but she just looked more and more patient, so he went on. “My mother wants to give them wine, and my father isn’t home from school yet. He might not get home before the liquor store closes. It’s at six, isn’t it? My mother’s busy cleaning the house, so I walked in.”

“She made you walk the whole mile? Poor thing, can’t you drive?” Mrs. Lutz asked.

“Sure I can drive. But I’m not sixteen yet.”

“You look a lot taller than fifteen.”

John looked at Thelma to see how she took that one, but Thelma was pretending to read a rented novel wrapped in cellophane.

“I walked all the way to the liquor store,” John told Mrs. Lutz, “but they wouldn’t give me anything without written permission. It was a new man.”

“Your sorrow has rent me in twain,” Thelma said, as if she was reading it from the book.

“Pay no attention, John,” Mrs. Lutz said. “Frank will be home any second. Why not wait until he comes and let him run down with you for a bottle?”

“That sounds wonderful. Thanks an awful lot, really.”

Mrs. Lutz’s hand descended upon the television knob. Some smiling man was playing the piano. John didn’t know who he was; there wasn’t any television at his house. They watched in silence until Mr. Lutz thumped on the porch outside. The empty milk bottles tinkled, as if they had been nudged. “Now, don’t be surprised if he has a bit of a load on,” Mrs. Lutz said.

Actually, he didn’t act at all drunk. He was like a happy husband in the movies. He called Thelma his little pookie-pie and kissed her on the forehead; then he called his wife his big pookie-pie and kissed her on the mouth. Then he solemnly shook John’s hand and told him how very, very happy he was to see him here and asked after his parents. “Is that goon still on television?” he said finally.

“Daddy, please pay attention to somebody else,” Thelma said, turning off the television set. “Janny wants to talk to you.”

“And I want to talk to Johnny,” Thelma’s father said. He spread his arms suddenly, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was a big man, with shaved gray hair above his ears, which were small and flat to his head. John couldn’t think of the word to begin.

Mrs. Lutz explained the errand. When she was through, Mr. Lutz said, “People from Philadelphia. I bet their name isn’t William L. Trexler, is it?”

“No. I forget their name, but it’s not that. The man is an engineer. The woman went to college with my mother.”

“Oh. College people. Then we must get them something very, very nice, I should say.”

“Daddy,” Thelma said. “Please. The store will close.”

“Tessie, you hear John. People from college. People with diplomas. And it is very nearly closing time, and who isn’t on their way?” He took John’s shoulder in one hand and Thelma’s arm in the other and hustled them through the door. “We’ll be back in one minute, Mamma,” he said.

“Drive carefully,” Mrs. Lutz said from the shadowed porch.

Mr. Lutz drove a huge blue Buick. “I never went to college,” he said, “yet I buy a new car whenever I want.” His tone wasn’t nasty, but soft and full of wonder.

“Oh, Daddy, not this again,” Thelma said, shaking her head at John, so he could understand what all she had to go through. When she looks like that, John thought, I could bite her lip until it bleeds.

“Ever driven this kind of car, John?” Mr. Lutz asked.

“No. The only thing I can drive is my parents’ Plymouth, and that not very well.”

“What year car is it?”

“I don’t know exactly.” John knew perfectly well it was a 1940 model, bought second-hand after the war. “It has a gear shift. This is automatic, isn’t it?”

“Automatic shift, fluid transmission, directional lights, the works,” Mr. Lutz said. “Now, isn’t it funny, John? Here is your father, an educated man, with an old Plymouth, yet at the same time I, who never read more than ten, twenty books in my life … It doesn’t seem as if there’s justice.” He slapped the fender, bent over to get into the car, straightened up abruptly, and said, “Do you want to drive it?”

Thelma said, “Daddy’s asking you something.”

“I don’t know how,” John said.

“It’s very easy to learn, very easy. You just slide in there—come on, it’s getting late.” John got in on the driver’s side. He peered out of the windshield. It was a wider car than the Plymouth; the hood looked wide as a boat.

Mr. Lutz asked him to grip the little lever behind the steering wheel. “You pull it toward you like that, that’s it, and fit it into one of these notches. ‘P’ stands for ‘park’—for when you’re not going anywhere. ‘N,’ that’s ‘neutral,’ like on the car you have, I hardly ever use it, ‘D’ means ‘drive’—just put it in there and the car does all the work for you. You are using that one ninety-nine per cent of the time. ‘L’ is ‘low,’ for very steep hills, going up or down. And ‘R’ stands for—what?”

“Reverse,” John said.

“Very, very good. Tessie, he’s a smart boy. He’ll never own a new car. And when you put them all together, you can remember their order by the sentence ‘Paint No Dimes Light Red.’ I thought that up when I was teaching my oldest girl how to drive.”

“Paint No Dimes Light Red,” John said.

“Excellent. Now, let’s go.” He reached over and put the car key in the ignition lock, his other keys dangling.

A bubble was developing in John’s stomach. “What gear do you want it in to start?” he asked Mr. Lutz.

Mr. Lutz must not have heard him, because all he said was “Let’s go” again, and he drummed on the dashboard with his fingertips. They were thick, square, furry fingers.

Thelma leaned up from the back seat. Her cheek almost touched John’s ear. She whispered, “Put it at ‘D.’ ”

He did, then he looked for the starter. “How does he start it?” he asked Thelma.

“I never watch him,” she said. “There was a button in the last car, but I don’t see it in this one.”

“Push on the pedal,” Mr. Lutz sang, staring straight ahead and smiling, “and away we go. And ah, ah, waay we go.”

“Just step on the gas,” Thelma suggested. John pushed down firmly, to keep his leg from trembling. The motor roared and the car bounded away from the curb. Within a block, though, he could manage the car pretty well.

“It rides like a boat on smooth water,” he told his two passengers. The simile pleased him.

Mr. Lutz squinted ahead. “Like a what?”

“Like a boat.”

“Don’t go so fast,” Thelma said.

“The motor’s so quiet,” John explained. “Like a sleeping cat.”

Without warning, a truck pulled out of Pearl Street. Mr. Lutz, trying to brake, stamped his foot on the empty floor in front of him. John could hardly keep from laughing. “I see him,” he said, easing his speed so that the truck had just enough room to make its turn. “Those trucks think they own the road,” he said. He let one hand slide away from the steering wheel. One-handed, he whipped around a bus. “What’ll she do on the open road?”

“That’s a good question, John,” Mr. Lutz said. “And I don’t know the answer. Ninety, maybe.”

“The speedometer goes up to a hundred and ten.” Another pause—nobody seemed to be talking. John said, “Hell. A baby could drive one of these.”

“For instance, you,” Thelma said. That meant she had noticed how well he was driving.

There were a lot of cars at the liquor store, so John had to double-park the big Buick. “That’s close enough, close enough,” Mr. Lutz said. “Don’t get any closer, whoa!” He was out of the car before John could bring it to a complete stop. “You and Tessie wait here,” he said. “I’ll go in for the liquor.”

“Mr. Lutz. Say, Mr. Lutz,” John called.

“Daddy!” Thelma shouted.

Mr. Lutz returned. “What is it, boys and girls?” His tone, John noticed, was becoming reedy. He was probably getting hungry.

“Here’s the money they gave me.” John pulled two wadded dollars from the change pocket of his dungarees. “My mother said to get something inexpensive but nice.”

“Inexpensive but nice?” Mr. Lutz repeated.

“She said something about California sherry.”

“What did she say about it? To get it? Or not to?”

“I guess to get it.”

“You guess.” Mr. Lutz shoved himself away from the car and walked backward toward the store as he talked. “You and Tessie wait in the car. Don’t go off somewhere. I’ll be only one minute.”

John leaned back in his seat and gracefully rested one hand at the top of the steering wheel. “I like your father.”

“You don’t know how he acts to Mother,” Thelma said.

John studied the clean line under his wrist and thumb. He flexed his wrist and watched the neat little muscles move in his forearm. “You know what I need?” he said. “A wristwatch.”

“Oh, Jan,” Thelma said. “Stop admiring your own hand. It’s really disgusting.”

A ghost of a smile flickered over his lips, but he let his strong, nervous fingers remain as they were. “I’d sell my soul for a drag right now.”

“Daddy keeps a pack in the glove compartment,” Thelma said. “I’d get them if my fingernails weren’t so long.”

“I’ll get it open,” John said. He did. They fished one cigarette out of the old pack of Old Golds they found and took alternate puffs. “Ah,” John said, “that first drag of the day, clawing and scraping its way down your throat.”

“Be on the lookout for Daddy. They hate my smoking.”

“Thelma.”

“Yes?” She stared deep into his eyes, her face half hidden in shadow.

“Don’t pluck your eyebrows.”

“I think it looks nice.”

“It’s like calling me ‘Jan.’ ” There was a silence, not awkward.

“Get rid of the rette, Jan. Daddy just passed the window.”

Being in the liquor store had put Mr. Lutz in a soberer mood. “Here you be, John,” he said, in a businesslike way. He handed John a tall, velvet-red bottle. “Better let me drive. You drive like a veteran, but I know the short cuts.”

“I can walk from your house, Mr. Lutz,” John said, knowing Mr. Lutz wouldn’t make him walk. “Thanks an awful lot for all you’ve done.”

“I’ll drive you up. People from Philadelphia can’t be kept waiting. We can’t make this young man walk a mile, now can we, Tessie?” Nobody knew what to say to this last remark, so they kept quiet all the way, although several things were bothering John.

When the car stopped in front of his house, a country house but close to the road, he forced himself to ask, “Say, Mr. Lutz. I wonder if there was any change?”

“What? Oh. Goodness. I nearly forgot. You’ll have your daddy thinking I’m a crook.” He reached into his pocket and without looking handed John a dollar, a quarter, and a penny.

“This seems like a lot,” John said. The wine must be cheap. Maybe he should have let his mother call his father at school to pick it up, like she had wanted to.

“It’s your change,” Mr. Lutz said.

“Well, thanks an awful lot.”

“Goodbye, now, my friend,” Mr. Lutz said.

“So long.” John slammed the door. “Goodbye, Thelma. Don’t forget what I told you.” He winked.

The car pulled out, and John walked up the path. “Don’t forget what I told you,” he repeated to himself, winking. The bottle was cool and heavy in his hands. He glanced at the label; it read Château Mouton-Rothschild 1937.